MUSIC AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Series Editors: William Cheng and Andrew Dell'Antonio

From Plato to Public Enemy, people have debated the relationship between music and justice—rarely arriving at much consensus over the art form's ethics and aesthetics, uses and abuses, virtues and vices. So what roles can music and musicians play in agendas of justice? And what should musicians and music scholars do if—during moments of upheaval, complacency, ennui—music ends up seemingly drained of its beauty, power, and even relevance?

Created by editors William Cheng and Andrew Dell'Antonio, this endeavor welcomes projects that shine new light on familiar subjects such as protest songs, humanitarian artists, war and peace, community formation, cultural diplomacy, globalization, and political resistance. Simultaneously, the series invites authors to critique and expand on what qualifies as justice—or, for that matter, music—in the first place.

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For the Culture

Hip-Hop and the Fight for Social Justice

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THIRTEEN | Public Grief and Collective Joy

Feminicide, Solidarity, and Feminist Rap in Ciudad Juárez

BRITTA L. ANDERSON

"You thought you were here to listen, but we're all going to write, then put our poetry to a beat. The theme is sisterhood. What happens when women stop competing with each other? Start brainstorming." A Hip-Hop workshop in a sunny field in Chiapas, Mexico, began with these words. Within the hour, indigenous women in brightly colored skirts and Zapatista ski masks were performing with fists raised, alongside nonprofit workers in their sixties and university students in heavy eyeliner. I stumbled with the group through our rhymes, pulsing joyful and imperfect with women I had just met. The Hip-Hop workshop's participants came from Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Los Angeles, Lima, and beyond, answering an invitation to the women of the world to come together for three days of song, sport, and testimony at an encampment in Chiapas. The First International Political, Artistic, Athletic, and Cultural Encounter of Women was a gathering of over five thousand women from around the world in the autonomous Morelia Caracol from March 8 to March 10, 2018, hosted by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, a revolutionary leftist movement that fights for indigenous dignity and autonomy. Batallones Femeninos, a feminist Hip-Hop collective that has transformed the male-dominated rap scene of Ciudad Juárez into an activist platform, led the workshop and performed at the gathering. In a demonstration of the ethics that they bring to their prac-

tices, they decentered their own art at the workshop to instead facilitate other women's connection and creativity. Sharing the stage, we laughed at our own inexperience, as we joined in the collaboration that the members of Batallones Femeninos model. Under the stars that night, their voices echoed into the mountains; their amps shook the wood planks of the hand-built stage; the thousands of women before them stirred the dust with their dancing.

The members of Batallones Femeninos have a presence that communicates a joyful exuberance, an assertive confidence. With wide stances and practical shoes, they're ready to move. With squared shoulders and a level gaze, they're ready to get in the way. The fourteen women in the collective perform in public and activist spaces such as festivals and protests, and their songs address menstruation, street harassment, beauty standards, worker's exploitation, police violence, migration, and feminicide. Poliester Kat, an emcee from Ciudad Juárez who believes that Hip-Hop can be an activist tool, explains the group's content choices: "When we were standing there listening to the male rap groups, we knew we had much more important things to say . . . we need to own our own voices, as a tool to express our strength" (Amezcua, 2017, p. 2). The group originated in 2009 in Ciudad Juárez through an act of cross-generational solidarity, when participants marched alongside mothers of feminicide victims, and organized to complement their motherhood-based protest with one grounded in the aesthetics of rap (Amezcua, 2019, p. 2). The collective arose as an effort to demonstrate the creative and political possibilities of female collaboration.

In the following pages, I will show the ways in which Batallones Femeninos enacts solidarity with the most vulnerable women of Ciudad Juárez. I will look first at the logic of the disposability of female assembly workers, generated through managerial practices in Juárez's border factories, and extending to the state's attitude of fatal indifference to feminicide. Through an analysis of the Hip-Hop group's anticapitalist and collaborative processes, and of their song "Así era ella," which narrates the disappearance of a maquiladora worker, I will demonstrate how the collective performs solidarity. While Batallones articulates a clear opposition to the neoliberal practices that commodify women's bodies and work, they also connect with audiences by building coalitions of women. The solidarity that they enact is as much about whom they stand for and with as it is about whom they oppose. Through their performance of multiple affective modes, they engage a range of feelings that move audiences, in order to compel political action.

Derealization, Feminicide, and the Maquiladora Industry

The maquiladora, or assembly plant industry, arose out of the Border Industrialization Program in the 1960s, which allowed multinational companies to import materials tax-free for assembly in factories in Mexico's northern border region. After NAFTA further deregulated trade, Ciudad Juárez became an international leader in low-cost, labor-intensive manufacturing. Corporations seeking to cut costs targeted women for essentialized traits of patience, submissiveness, dexterity, and docility, leading to a rise of women migrating northward and entering the labor force. A manager explained to sociologist Melissa Wright (2006) the typical gendered division of labor: "Women in assembly and men in supervision. It's how it is in Mexico" (p. 61). In the maquiladora, overwhelmingly, male supervisors, who are treated as highly specialized and trainable, watch and correct the gestures of female workers, who are constructed as essentially unskilled and untrainable. A supervisor explains, as if it were inevitable, "None of these girls will be here in three years" (Wright, 2006, p. 57). Wright (2006) argues that maquiladora administrators' turnover story functions as a discourse that frames the Mexican woman as inherently disposable, declining in value from the moment she is hired (p. 2). The maquiladora management remains invested in the idea of their workers' unskilled status and replacement as natural and inevitable in order to justify high turnover rates and absolve corporations from taking responsibility for their workers' well-being. The same view of female workers as of waning value, as expendable, appears outside the factory, through corporations' and the state's inept responses to feminicide.

Femicide is the murder of women and girls because they are female. This label—"murder"—is limited in scope, while the term "feminicide" takes into account the gendered power structures underneath each act of violence. Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (2010) define feminicide as "gender-based violence that is both public and private, implicating both the state (directly or indirectly) and individual perpetrators (private or actors); it thus encompasses systemic, widespread, and everyday interpersonal . . . feminicide is systemic violence rooted in social, political, economic, and cultural inequities" (p. 5). While this type of systemic violence takes place globally, the scope of women violently murdered in Ciudad Juárez since 1993 and the lack of accountability for these crimes reaches the level of an epidemic. At least 1,141 women were brutally murdered in Ciudad Juárez between 1993 and 2013 (Geneva, 2015, p. 62). The death toll varies enormously between state and external

counts, indicating a lack of government attention to the issue, and the fact that the government has not invested resources in effective investigations or accurate counts of victims. Human rights and religions organizations and families have often taken upon themselves the task of scouring the city's desert outskirts to search for the young women who disappear, often when commuting to and from work in maquiladoras. Half of the confirmed deaths occurred in public spaces such as the streets, and another 7 percent in commercial areas. The female homicide rate in Ciudad Juárez has dropped from the 2010 high, when it was roughly twenty times the global average, but the rate there is still higher than the national average, prompting investigators to call Juárez "a lethal city for women" (Geneva, 2015, p. 69).

The reasons behind such large-scale, senseless violence cannot be logically explained. However, researchers such as Elvira Arriola (2010, p. 28) and Christina Iturralde (2010, p. 250) point to variables such as the region's role in a rapidly shifting globalized economy, in which women became primary wage earners in many families and quickly entered the workforce in large numbers, circulating in new public spheres. Researchers speculate that the rise in violence against young, working-class women during these years could be linked to men's resentment toward this population's newfound mobility.

While failing to identify perpetrators in the vast majority of cases, the government's investigative efforts have tended to focus on individual, high-profile, serial-killer suspects, such as the Egyptian engineer Abdul Latif Sharif, who was sentenced to twenty years in prison in 2003. Authorities focused on the fact that he was a foreigner, suggesting that once he was removed, the city could return to its normal order. While he was in prison, however, the bodies of sexually assaulted and murdered women continued to appear throughout the city. The police continued to search for psychopathic outliers who could be excised from society, rather than approaching the issue as pervasive. The majority of the government's response to the violence has focused on victims rather than perpetrators. Government officials have suggested that many of the victims were sex workers, fomenting a double life or "maquiloca" narrative that portrays assembly plant workers as leading wild lives and engaging in transgressive sexual behavior after their shifts, and therefore somehow being at fault in their own murders. State prevention campaigns imply that women can avoid violence simply by controlling their sexuality and their movements, mandating preventative gestures that women should perform in order to protect themselves. Their directives include:

Avoid dark streets and miniskirts; "If you think someone is following you, turn around and look"; "Leave the lights on in your home"; and "Carry a whistle" (Tabuenca Córdoba, 2010, p. 101). The absurdity and inefficacy of such state recommendations reflect the way in which women are constructed as disposable, both in the maquiladora and in the public space of the city.

Despite the devastating normality of these occurrences, the maquiladora officials claim no responsibility to protect the life of their workers or to prevent kidnappings and murders, and there is no legislation or state controls that obligate them to do so. When Juárez activists met with the Association of Maquiladoras to ask for assistance in curbing violence, the director denied any relation between the maquilas and the murders. "Therefore, even though thousands of workers have to cross unlit, unpatrolled, and remote stretches of desert as they make their way to the buses that stop only on main thoroughfares, and even though many victims disappear while on such commutes, there is nothing that the industry can do to stop the violence" (Wright, 2006, p. 189). By rejecting any connection between the violence and the maquila-produced landscape, the corporations absolve themselves of any duty to fund security personnel, street lighting, or changes in production schedules. None of these actions, by their logic, would help. Arriola (2010) points to Mexican state officials' complicity with corporations in neglecting the health and safety needs of maquila operators, and calls this "systemic, structural disregard by corporations and their agents for the humanity of the laborer" "fatal indifference" (p. 33). By failing to take any action to preserve the lives of their workers, maquiladora officials reduce their value to that of replaceable, disposable labor.

The discourse that justifies high turnover rates absolves the maquilas of responsibility for preserving workers' lives. The population most vulnerable to exploitation in the factory is also the group most directly impacted by feminicide, as murderers disproportionately target the economically insecure population of women who live in the *colonias* surrounding Ciudad Juárez. The rapid expansion of the factories physically transformed the urban geography, which produced new zones of marginality and increased danger for populations of women with no choice but to navigate unlit, unpatrolled, and remote neighborhoods (Volk and Schlotterbeck, 2010, p. 128). By failing to take action to preserve the lives of their workers, maquiladora officials, like perpetrators of feminicide, produce a society in which assembly plant workers' humanity is constructed as expendable, reduced to the instrumental value of their labor.

The maquiladoras' failure to recognize workers' worth beyond the goods they produce informs the state's failure to recognize or effectively respond to feminicide. Judith Butler (2006), in *Precarious Life*, examines the processes through which marginalized populations are imagined by dominant groups as outside of "culturally viable notions of the human" (p. 33). She calls this primary violence "derealization," and argues that any further violence perpetrated against the derealized does not register as harm. "If someone is lost, and that person is not someone," she asks, "then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place?" (Butler, 2006, p. 32). This loss of the apprehension of loss, present in the reduction of maquiladora worker's lives to replaceable labor, is as much an economic, political, and bodily crisis—that of the absent, fatally indifferent state—as it is a crisis of affect, a failure to register emotion, which negates workers' humanity.

Processes of derealization also occur within today's global Hip-Hop scene, through the racialized commodification of artists' labor. Norman Kelley critiques the dehumanizing impact that rap's commercialization has on artists: "Black bodies are valued only insofar as they represent potential to create products that can be transformed into capital via marketing and sales; outside of that process those bodies are dispensable" (2005, pp. 23–24). While the labor of music production and assembly plant work are distinct, a similar profit-driven logic of human disposability operates in both spaces. The lives of maquiladora workers, and often those of rap artists, are constituted as mattering only in relationship to the goods they produce. While rap's conversion into a commercial product can result in the derealization of its artists, the genre can also function as a site of protest against that very commodification.

Rap as Protest

The participants of Batallones Femeninos demonstrate a structural understanding of the logics of capitalism, and outline a critique that draws parallels between their own experiences as women and the dehumanizing framework that constructs maquiladora laborers as disposable goods. Obeja Negra, an imposing activist in Juárez and one of the four founding emcees of the collective, states: "The bodies of women are the commercialized spoils of war, and when they no longer serve, they're thrown out like styrofoam cups" (Llorens, 2016, p. 2). In response to this reality, she asserts, "We need more disobedient voices" (Ureste, 2016, p. 4). The group's disobedience to the logic of productivity and female

expendability is evident in their content choice, but also in their creative practices that reject competition and ownership. They do not sell their music, but rather distribute it on open-access forums. They collectively write and learn their songs, alternating roles to reject the notion of individual property. Their collective ownership, free distribution, collaborative construction, and interchanged parts pose a challenge to the culture of competition embedded in Ciudad Juárez's rap scene. Dilema, also one of the initial four emcees of the group, shares: "The songs stopped being anyone's and became everyone's. The men didn't get it because they'd say: 'But why sing someone else's song? Those aren't yours.' And we'd say to them: 'No, no, no, Batallónes' songs are all of ours, and we can all sing any part" (Londoño, 2017, p. 164). By establishing a space of experimentation, trust, and collaboration between women, they model a horizontal sharing of power.

While the collective's intentional commitment to an anticapitalist ethics is unique, the broader Hip-Hop scene in Ciudad Juárez is not a commercial industry. When rap entered northern Mexico in the early 1990s, it remained local, with music produced in private homes and distributed primarily on social media sites such as Soundcloud, Bandcamp, and YouTube (Sánchez, 2014, p. 8). While there is very little commercial circulation, the city does boast a large presence of emcees (Londoño, 2017, p. 155). In its migration into northern Mexico, Hip-Hop has on a local level avoided conversion into a commodity, and thus resembles its origins in the Bronx, as a tool for denouncing economic and racial marginalization and conditions of inequality.

In her examination of debates over the potential of Hip-Hop to function as progressive political or feminist practice, Whitney Peoples (2008) argues that Hip-Hop can operate as a "culturally relevant vehicle" of empowerment that can make large systemic issues intelligible to young black women and girls (p. 47). She recognizes that "female rappers can be both complicit with and disruptive of racism and sexism" (p. 31). In his book on gender and violence in Chicano Hip-Hop, Pancho McFarland (2008) similarly identifies Chicana women's rap as a practice that can perpetuate misogyny, but that is more often characterized by bold sexual and political politics, and by "agency, creativity, and control over one's self (in other words, out of male control)" (p. 79). Regardless of a musician's gender, the use of rap as a route toward liberation requires conscious choice and ongoing negotiation.

The members of Batallones Femeninos understand rap as a political tool, a means of protest and defense, as Obeja Negra states: "Our way of defending women is through words. By rapping, screaming that they are killing us, they are disappearing us just for being women" (Ureste, 2016, p. 4). Señora de Xibalba, a more recently joined member of the collective who is known for her long sets, explains that "rap is a weapon *for* women's empowerment" (Ureste, 2016, p. 5). The artists oppose violence and machismo with the creative, generative acts of rapping and rhyming, screaming and singing. The emphasis, in their discussion of rap as a weapon or political force, is less on what they are combating than on what they are creating. Obeja again blends vocabulary of defense and affirmation: "We have opted to use the weapons of words, culture, art, and love" (Llorens, 2016, p. 4).

Challenging Gendered Scripts

As the only all-female Hip-Hop group in Ciudad Juárez, Batallones Femeninos reimagines the roles for women in Hip-Hop, not as secondary accompanists or passive fans, but as their own protagonists. Obeja explains: "We are not content with just singing back-up, as women have traditionally done in this male-dominated scene, where women have only been decorative or sexy objects" (Londoño, 2017, p. 164). Their insistence on creating collaborative all-female creative spaces within Hip-Hop invites other women's active participation, establishing a culture of solidarity over one of competition. While women have always been integral to Hip-Hop culture (Peoples, 2008, p. 21), the hostility that members of the collective have received from male Hip-Hop artists demonstrates the continued dominance of men in the industry, and the ways in which the group's success threatens male control. Men have disconnected the women's microphones and drowned out their tracks at festivals, and Obeja Negra was even physically assaulted by a rapper who was angry about a women's liberation song (Ureste, 2016, p. 5). The women's participation in rap not only undermines male power over the scene, but also challenges traditional constructions of femininity.

Diana Silva Londoño (2017) examines the ways in which the acts of Hip-Hop performance—assertively taking the mic, occupying the stage, and going out at night—are coded as male within a northern Mexican context (p. 148). By engaging in these actions, women emcees interrupt gendered behavioral expectations, and put dominant conceptions of femininity into question. When Batallones Femeninos performs, they're unwieldly and unpredictable, noncompliant and loud. They take confident stances, maintain a level gaze, and gesture confrontationally and

erotically. Their body language demonstrates the antithesis of the docility and submissiveness that maquiladora managers associate with femininity, and of the repetitive gestures required of workers.

Batallones Femeninos' disruption of gendered scripts extends into their clothing choices, which draw on elements of Hip-Hop culture to emphasize comfort and mobility. They choose sneakers over high heels, wide pants and large coats over tight dresses. Objections to their attire often come from family members. At a group interview, Murder recounted an exchange: "[My mother] asks me, 'why don't you dress more feminine?' And I asked her 'What is that?' 'Skirt, heels, hair done, things like that . . . you are not a man.' I said, 'I already know I'm not a man" (Londoño, 2017, p. 161). Upon hearing the story, fellow emcee Dilema proposes the retort: "I have a delicious clitoris, mama" (Londoño, 2017, p. 161). Dilema's joke suggests a gender expression based on pleasure rather than garments and grooming. The collective members reject externally imposed notions of femininity, whether they come from their families or the beauty industry, as Obeja complains: "Corporations are always there bugging us with models of how to be a woman" (Llorens, 2016, p. 3). In this way, Batallones connects systems of commodification with personal experiences of gender policing.

Occupying public space is among the acts often coded as male within Ciudad Juárez. In the context of the threatening reality of feminicide, women's right to exist in public is at stake in Batallones' performances. While the home can also be a site of violence, Julia Monárrez Fragoso (2009) points to the increase of young women who list staying home as a survival strategy (p. 48). The rise of the maquiladora industry and its targeting of a female labor force prompted a migratory shift of women moving north for work, out of the home and into the public sphere. This shift, through which women threatened dominant gender norms by becoming the primary wage earners in many families, corresponded with the rise in brutal violence against women. Batallones Femeninos' takeover of the stage, then, is not only a disruption of a male-dominated musical scene; it is also an assertion of women's right to the public sphere: to work, take up space, and be loud in public. In a place where women's bodies are brutalized and systematically rendered disposable, the physicality of the collective's embodied performances declare the women's vital presence, working to reclaim public space. Several of the Batallones Femeninos emcees are also graffiti artists, who leave visible marks on public spaces that assert their right to exist beyond the home.

Mourning, Joy, and Solidarity

Through their embodied presence, Batallones Femeninos makes the missing women of their city symbolically present. Obeja states, "Rap, rhymes, and our voices represent the disappeared women, the murdered women, and our rage at all violence against women" (Llorens, 2016, p. 2). In "Así era ella," Batallones Femeninos narrates the story of a maquiladora worker who is kidnapped, tortured, and murdered: "Big, luminous, dark eyes . . . full lips, medium height . . . dark skin, thin, hair to her shoulders." They honor the dignity of each victim by emphasizing her individuality, while at the same time noting the traits that characterize a majority of the victims.

Mourning is incomplete in many cases of feminicide and disappearance, given the absence of answers, bodily remains, or accountability. In her discussion of derealization, Butler (2016) proposes that mourning, rituals of grief that acknowledge loss and our collective vulnerability to it, can be a basis for political community. "Grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters," she writes, articulating a core element of solidarity: recognition of another's humanity through a shared vulnerability to loss, which carries an ethical imperative to oppose conditions in which some people are more vulnerable to violence than others. (Butler, (2016), p. 14).

The performance of "*Así era ella*" stands in for the missing processes of mourning. The performers enact solidarity by affirming the maquiladora worker's humanity, and by apprehending and grieving her loss. As they collectively narrate this crime, they shift from the third person to the first person, increasingly identifying with the woman's experience. Silence interrupts the song in its final minute, as the beat ends abruptly and the rappers raise their fists. This gesture communicates anger, strength, and a recognition of loss. The collective then creates a space of honor on the stage for an extended voice-over from a mother of a victim of feminicide, recorded at a protest. She points to the incomplete or impossible mourning of her daughter, given the failure on the part of the state or society to acknowledge her losses. They're out there, the mother cries, "without flowers, without altars, without graves; without age, relatives, or names." Not all victims can be named or even found. Unable to say their names, the mother in this performance calls them instead by the names of the locations where bodies were found: "Her name is Juárez, her name is Samalayuca, her name is El Capulín, her name is Guadalupe, her name is México." The song's expression of grief

enacts a solidarity that does not offer completion or answers, but does apprehend and center the humanity and grievability of lost lives.

The song does not stop at grief. Even through this surrogate mourning ritual, we also see the joy of women coming together to create. This is essential because mourning alone does not mobilize. Rebecca Solnit (2016) writes that "joy doesn't betray but sustains activism. And when you face a politics that aspires to make you fearful, alienated, and isolated, joy is a fine initial act of insurrection" (p. 24). The seriousness of the performers' outrage, communicated through their songs' content, is not lessened with the underlying joy of their collaboration. In the face of extreme violence, and even in the act of protesting it, their joy, their insistence in pleasure, is as much an act of transgression as direct critiques of state indifference. Obeja expresses the joy of making music in public spaces with other women: "We love to live and want to live, and we *like* Hip-Hop, we *like* to dance, paint, and live . . . this is part of the resistance, to keep rapping, to keep going out into the streets, to keep painting" (Ureste, 2016, p. 5). Through gesture, embodiment, sound, and lyrics, Batallones Femeninos achieves a breadth of affective modes that invites solidarity. Mourning and joy, anger and aggression show up alongside humor and levity. They blend outrage and grief with vitality and delight. In response to the murder of six-year-old Airis Estrella, Obeja shares, she simultaneously wept, rapped, and recognized Hip-Hop as the sustaining source of her happiness (Londoño, 2017, p. 158). The generation of joy coexists with the task of mourning loss.

This joy and range of feeling pose a challenge to a system that, according to Obeja Negra, "wants us dead: silent, submissive, and devoted," traits associated with femininity by maquiladora hiring managers (Llorens, 2016, p. 5). With their bold affirmation of life, the women of Batallones refuse the homogenizing label of *las muertas de Juárez* (the dead women of Juárez) applied to victims of feminicide in national and international media coverage. The rallying cry of Battallones Femeninos' performances and the title of their recent album is Vivas Nos Queremos, which translates as "We want to live," but also, "We love ourselves, we affirm ourselves." They position themselves against a system that does nothing to protect women from death, but more than that, they stand *for* life, for collective vitality, for embodied joy, for explosively loud voices and wildly unpredictable gestures. Through their performances, Batallones Femeninos make their personal grief and joy public; they build a collective through shared emotion.

Originally arising out of a cross-generational act of protest—

marching against the lack of accountability in response to the epidemic of feminicide—and later incorporating the voices of grieving mothers into their high-volume performances, the collective effectively bridges spaces of levity and loss, entertainment and political engagement, positioning their art as praxis, as politically engaged and relevant intervention in the brutality of reality. They mobilize their songs as tools of social transformation. While rituals of grief build solidarity through the recognition of loss, the joy of making music in this all-female political community builds momentum toward action. The movement that Batallones Femeninos is leading, toward a world in which women can move freely without fear of violence, is fundamentally collaborative. They demonstrate that solidarity is as crucial as opposition to the creation of change. With their seamless coexistence of extreme joy and loss, their wry undermining of gendered scripts, and their distinctly anticapitalist and feminist ethics, Batallones Femeninos offers a model for coalition building to women in spaces beyond Hip-Hop.

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