Governing through the mutilated female body: corpse, bodypolitics and contestation in contemporary Guatemala¹

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Introduction

This chapter examines the brutal killing of women in post-war Guatemala, the interpretations that these murders engender and the place of the dead bodies in the country's contestations over sovereignty. It grows out of having lived and worked (with other issues) in the country 2005–9 and by being horror-struck by Guatemala's ever present perverse blend of beauty and terror: The breath-taking range of landscapes, architectural wealth and colourful clothing displayed against a nagging background of genocide and unresolved problems of poverty, abuse and generalised violence. Like other newcomers to the country, I was struck by homicide rates resembling the most violent years of the armed conflict, by rising incidents involving the killing of women and girls, and by the shocking brutality with which the killings often were carried out. Today violence and horror continue to haunt Guatemala as does a generalised climate of fear and impunity. Despite the tireless peace-work of thousands of Guatemalans and considerable sums pumped in by international donors, the violence that ravaged the country during the thirty-six-year-long armed conflict (1960–96) is not over. Why is it that the years following the peace accords may turn out to be the most violent in Guatemala's recent history? What explains that the atrocities 'pile up like pages in a book', that 'everything goes unpunished'² and that state authorities

seems unable or unwilling to stop the killings? And what explains the gendered forms the 'eternal tyranny'³ in Guatemala take?

During Guatemala's armed conflict state sponsored campaigns of terror and mass killings left a death toll of approximately 200,000 and an additional 40,000 forced disappearances. Some 440 villages were razed to the ground and over a million refugees were displaced (Sanford 2003; Schirmer 1998). Peace agreements were signed in 1996. These agreements were meant to trigger democratisation and to end extreme violence and killings. However, while political violence decreased, social and criminal violence rose to the extent that Guatemala today is among the most violent countries in the world.⁴ Homicide rates are higher than during the most violent civil war years and rates are rising. So are violent killings of women. Teenagers, college students, housewives and *maquila* workers have disappeared and later been found naked, disembowelled, sexually mutilated, strangled, beheaded and dumped like garbage in abandoned lots. Sometimes insults are carved into their flesh. The extreme level of violence, in turn, is fed by a weak or overwhelmed judicial system, inadequate institutional structures and a general lack of state capacity or will to manage these multiple, complex and interconnected challenges. A law condemning femicide was passed in 2008, but the killings continued after the introduction of the law. All the while Guatemalans keep talking of their nation as a 'wounded body' and of failed attempts to reconcile the country's extreme social and ethnic inequalities as 'a finger in the wound' (Nelson 1999), I argue that the politics involved in the interpretation of contemporary violence, in particular the incomprehensibly cruel violence directed towards women and girls, must be understood in relation to a patriarchal ideology that governs through gendered violence.

Various national NGOs and commissions have put the issue of violent killings of women on the agenda and begun to search for explanations as to why, and why with such brutality, as well as what can be done to prevent these killings in the future. This is important and relevant work to which I will be referring throughout the chapter. What concerns me here, however, are not so much the killings in themselves as how societies like Guatemala are governed through the violated and mutilated female body.

Throughout the chapter I use the Guatemalan culture of silence (Wilkinson 2002) and its extension to the silencing of feminicide as a metaphor for Guatemala's failure to confront the disaster of everyday violence. I do not take my point of departure in the atrocities

carried out during the prolonged armed conflict. I write about the present. The forms of governance developed prior to and during the civil war, as well as the struggle to commemorate the victims and reinstall dignity in the survivors through exhumations of mass graves and legal persecution of the perpetrators, are important historical contexts, while small arms proliferation, organised criminal networks, drug trafficking, human trafficking and the infiltration of the state by parallel, clandestine structures are highly significant contemporary contextual factors. For this reason, the analysis here relies on the significance and gendered meanings of mutilated female bodies in the present process of state formation in Guatemala, on the role they play in the making and territorialisation of political communities and on how struggles and contestations over sovereignty and state formation are represented in particular inscriptions on female bodies.

The chapter is divided into five sections. In the first I introduce the terms and definitions utilised in debates over violence towards and mass killings of women. In the second I present the state of affairs in Guatemala through numbers and statistics. I then turn to descriptions of the brutality with which the murders are committed and the body(parts) displayed. In the fourth section the killing of Guatemalan women is placed in historical context, including the legacy of the armed conflict. The fifth section discusses what Nelson (1999) has termed 'the splattered body politics' in processes of state formation in Guatemala.

Gendering the corpse: homicide, femicide and feminicide

Sexual violence against women is known in almost all corners of the world, but systematic violent killings of women seem to be concentrated in specific areas. The border town of Ciudad Juarez in northern Mexico is perhaps the best-known case, but other areas in the world also show high incidence of violent killings of women (Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA 2009). The systematic and violent killing of women is generally termed 'femicide', when distinguishing the victim of the homicide as female, or 'feminicide', when stressing that these women are killed because of their sex, and that not only the male perpetrators but also the state and its judicial structures are responsible for the insecurity of female citizens and the impunity following acts of violence against them.

The concept of femicide is attributed to Diane Russell, who initially defined femicide as 'the killing of women because they are women'. She later sharpened the definition to 'the murder of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership over women' (1990: 34). In order to recognise that girls and female babies are also among the victims, 'women' was replaced by 'females', resulting in a definition of femicide as 'the killing of females by males because they are females' (Russell and Harmes 2001). In Russell's view, femicide is on the extreme end of a continuum of misogynist or anti-female terror that includes a wide variety of verbal and physical abuse. Whenever these forms of terrorism result in death, they become femicides (Russell 2008).

The case of Mexico's Ciudad Juárez, where close to 500 murders of women took place between 1993 and 2009, led Marcela Lagarde (2006) to introduce the term 'feminicide' to emphasise government impunity and negligence in investigating the murder of women.⁵ Other distinctive marks related to feminicide are initial reactions of denial, particularly at the local level, lack of proper investigation and the lack of willingness to detain and bring to justice those responsible for the murders and discriminatory and disrespectful attitudes towards family members of the victims, if not outright blaming of the victims themselves (European Parliament 2006).

Along these lines Rita Laura Segato has refined and developed the concept. She defines feminicide as the assassination of a generic woman, just because she is a woman and belongs to this type of human beings, much in the same way as genocide is a generic and lethal aggression directed towards all those belonging to a certain ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious or ideological group. Both crimes are directed towards a category, not a specific subject. Feminicides are *not* ordinary crimes, sexually motivated gender crimes or crimes related to domestic violence, as often asserted by law enforcers, authorities or some activists. Like other forms of violence, feminicide has an expressive dimension. According to Segato, however, the prevalence of the expressive dimension of the violence also makes feminicides 'crimes of corporation'. The corporative dimension is important to Segato's definition, as 'corporation' is understood to entail the group or network that administers the resources, rights and duties of a parallel state (Segato 2005).⁶

In Guatemala, women have been among murder victims for a long time. However, the violence that was previously directed at the internal subversive enemy has been displaced to other sectors of society, including women. The working definitions of femicide and

femicide have facilitated an understanding of how the murder of Guatemalan women is tied to racism, paternalism and corruption and how the levels of impunity are connected to the corrupt hidden powers in the country. A law against femicide was approved by Congress in April 2008. The law was the result of lengthy negotiations between representatives of civil society and the state and entails preventive measures, definitions of crimes and mechanisms of punishment, meant to guarantee women the right to a life free from physical, psychological, sexual or moral violence. Perpetrators of femicide can be punished with twenty-five to fifty years' imprisonment.

Most women's and human rights organisations view the law as a positive gain, some find it regrettable that the term adopted is femicide, not feminicide, while a few find the law extremely problematic and yet another sign of the inferior status of women in society.⁷ How come, they ask, that Guatemala needs a law against femicide when it is already against the law to kill any human being? And how can a law that limits the penalty for femicide to fifty years be considered a victory, if the penalty for assassination (§162 penal law) can be a life sentence or even death? A few organisations even point to the danger of augmenting the number of violent killings of women as a result of the law. Non-deathly violence against women can be punished with five to twelve years in prison. Will Guatemala see more violent killings of women if released perpetrators of violence look for vengeance upon leaving prison? The most severe critiques point to the fact that Guatemala does not lack laws or penal codes but rather compliance with them.⁸ And as for the knowledge of the law, a survey carried out by the Center for Women's Research, Training and Support (CICAM) among justice operators, health workers and civil society in September 2008 found that not one (of 220) respondents could come up with correct answers as to what the law is all about.

'Femicide' and 'feminicide' have entered the vocabulary of Guatemalan women's and human rights organisations and progressive feminist parliamentarians. Outside these circles, the violent killings of women are often silenced. During and right after the violent conflict Guatemalans – for very good reasons – were struck by what Wilkinson (2002) has termed a culture of silence. I prefer to call this culture of silence a conversational art form of selective forgetting or collective amnesia since violence as such no longer is silenced. Guatemalans, of all social strata, talk a lot and at length about it. Lunch conversations often revolve around the issue of who has been mugged when and where, where the most violent killings have taken place over the last twenty-four hours, whether or not *los narcos*, the

police or the government are involved, how the government is doing absolute nothing about it, and how corruption and impunity have become so widespread that nobody is left with any expectations that anyone will actually do something about it. Strangely enough – and even if the newspapers spread out on the lunch tables will have their fair share of press photos showing half-naked female corpses found and photographed the previous day – state responsibility towards violent killings of women and mutilated female bodies are seldom part of the daily ‘blame-it-all-on-the-state-game’. Why is this? Even if rape and sexual violence are silenced in most societies, why is it that the violent killings of women are not included in everyday conversations on generalised violence but relegated to the realms of justice or feminist NGOs? Paraphrasing Uribe (2004) one may speculate that the fear of contagion in feminicised spaces – of being ‘rapable’, ‘mutilable’ and ‘body partable’ – has become so extreme that any type of exchange is dangerous. It may even be argued that fear of contagion becomes more important in situations of contested sovereignty, i.e. when the state no longer has monopoly on violence, or when state discourse of feminicide rests on a blame-the-victim strategy that relies on a gendering of the public sphere.

Quantifying the corpses: homicide and feminicide rates in Guatemala

Although political violence in Guatemala has decreased with the peace accords, human rights defenders, union leaders, environmentalists, corruption fighters, judges and indigenous community leaders continue to carry out their work under threats and at risk of getting killed. It is not uncommon that police investigations conclude that the killing of a trade union leader turned out to be a crime of passion, committed by an ex-partner or *la otra mujer*, hereby resisting the idea that the violence represents a political problem. But violence has also become generalised. Ordinary citizens, especially those who cannot afford private cars and secure housing and who work odd hours far away from home, risk getting robbed and killed on public busses or on the streets. The rich and the middle classes may be targeted in their cars on in public places such as restaurants or super markets. Generalised crime and violence affects everyone. As statistics are poor and contradictory, a ‘war of interpretation’ revolves around the story told by governing elites versus the one told by human and civil rights activists critical of the

Table 11.1 Homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants and by sex of victim. Central America

Country	Count	Rate	Male %	Female %	Year
Belize	130	41.7	92.5	7.5	2010
Costa Rica	527	11.3	88.2	11.8	2008
El Salvador	4,085	66.0	87.4	12.6	2008
Guatemala	5,960	41.4	88.9	11.1	2009
Honduras	6,239	82.1	93.1	6.9	2009
Nicaragua	766	13.2	92.1	7.9	2008
Panama	759	21.6	91.3	8.7	2009
Mexico	20,585	18.1	89.8	10.2	2008

Source: UNODC 2011.

government's interpretation of the violence, the corpses it produces and their political significance (Wright 2011: 719).

Different government bodies and NGOs present contradictory numbers. Underreporting results from the existence of barriers to reporting, not from a lack of will on the part of the victims and their families. Apart from the obstacles presented by a misogynous regime, lack of confidence in an effective response from state institutions, fear of additional violence, concerns regarding stigmatisation and the prospect of loss of economic support, have been pointed out as an explanation for contradictory reports (Musalo *et al.* 2010: 175). Most agree that even the statistics that report higher numbers suffer from severe underreporting. The figures presented are those frequently referred to by national and international observers. They generally exclude persons who die later of their wounds in hospitals.

Underreported or not, the figures in Table 11.1 clearly show that on a national basis there is a higher risk of getting killed in Honduras and El Salvador than in Guatemala. Women are slightly more at risk in El Salvador and Costa Rica, but both homi- and femicide rates in Guatemala are above those of Mexico, which have made international headlines. Disaggregated data from Guatemala (Table 11.2) additionally show that certain areas of the country, in particular the departments of Guatemala City, Escuintla, Izabal, Santa Rosa, Petén, Zacapa, Chiquimula and Jalapa, present homicide statistics above the national average and the average of the neighbouring countries. Departmental statistics do not differentiate between male and female murder victims. The Presidential Secretariat of Women (SEPREM) only keeps records of reported (not all committed) femicide. The human rights organisation *Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo*

Table 11.2 Homicide rates in Guatemalan departments, 2009

Department	Population	Homicides	Homicide rate	Reported femicide	Violent deaths of women, 9 months, 2010
Alta Verapaz	1,078,942	160	14.82	2	5
Baja Verapaz	264,019	72	27.27	0	9
Chimaltenango	595,769	110	18.46	0	7
Chiquimula	362,826	223	61.46	4	4
El Progreso	155,596	87	55.91	0	–
Escuintla	685,830	516	75.24	0	17
Guatemala	3,103,685	2,644	85.19	29	175
Huehuetenango	1,114,389	189	16.96	4	4
Izabal	403,256	291	72.16	3	16
Jalapa	309,908	187	60.34	2	3
Jutiapa	428,462	220	51.35	2	0
Petén	613,693	420	68.44	4	13
Quetzaltenango	771,674	162	20.99	4	5
Quiché	921,390	76	8.25	7	1
Retalhuleu	297,385	83	27.96	1	2
Sacatepéquez	310,037	73	23.54	0	13
San Marcos	995,742	236	23.70	5	19
Santa Rosa	340,381	239	70.21	8	3
Sololá	424,068	52	12.26	1	2
Suchitepéquez	504,267	196	19.04	8	13
Totonicapán	461,838	18	3.4	4	5
Zacapa	218,510	144	65.90	2	8
TOTAL	14,361,666	6,398	44.55	95	332

Sources: population statistics, Instituto Nacional de Estadística; homicides, Policía Nacional Civil (PNC); homicide rate calculated by author; reported femicide, SEPREM 2010; violent death of women, GAM 2010.

(GAM) provides statistics of violent deaths of women based on newspaper monitoring. Even if severely underreported, the figures provided by SEPREM and GAM suggest an interesting connection: The departments with the highest homicide rates are predominantly ladino;⁹ the predominantly indigenous departments (e.g. El Quiché, Suchitepéquez and Totonicapán) have considerably lower homicide rates, but women also remain targets of gendered violence in indigenous communities.

Table 11.3 Violent deaths in Guatemala, 2001–2012^a

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Total	3,230	3,630	4,236	4,507	5,338	5,885	5,781	6,292	6,498	5,960	5,681	5,174
Men	2,927	3,313	3,849	4,010	4,820	5,282	5,191	5,605	5,778	5,265	5,050	4,614
Women	303	317	387	497	518	608	590	687	720	695	631	560
% women	9.3	8.7	9.1	11.0	9.7	10.3	10.2	10.9	11.1	11.7	11.1	10.8

Note: ^a Homicide and femicide rates reported by PNC are slightly lower than rates recorded by local and regional human rights organisations. I use PNC figures as they allow for comparison over an eleven-year period. Source: homicide rates according to the Guatemalan National Civilian Police (PNC). See <http://centralamericanpolitics.blogspot.com/2012/02/femicide-in-guatemala-2001-2011.html>.

The homicide and femicide figures provided in Table 11.3 show that murder rates have risen between 2001 and 2009 and fallen slightly over the last two years of this period. The number of femicides doubled in the period 2001–7 and has remained around 11 per cent of the total murder rate ever since.

The numbers reveal the magnitude and rise in murders during the 2000s. They confirm what UN special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions, Philip Alston, concluded after his visit to Guatemala in 2006: ‘Guatemala is a good place to commit a murder, because you almost certainly get away with it.’ They tell little, however, about the extreme cruelty, total lack of respect for life and the human body and the at times ritualistic form of performing the killings and staging the corpses.

Mutilating the female body in acts and discourse

Only three weeks into 2013 the government tallied 33 feminicides. Six women and girls were killed in one day alone. Two of the girls were strangled to death in a street in the capital Guatemala City wearing their pyjamas.¹⁰

Gender-based violence is manifesting itself all over Latin America, but most alarmingly in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Torture and bodily mutilation are often perpetrated as ‘semantic operations permeated with enormous metaphorical force that dehumanises the victims and their bodies’, as Uribe writes in the case of violence in Colombia (Uribe 2004). In Guatemala, where on average two women are killed each day, the killings are committed with extreme brutality, including sexual violence, torture and mutilations, before the bodies are left or dumped in public places. The injured bodies and shattered body parts provide insights into what Achille Mbembe (2003) has defined as necropolitics and Melissa Wright (2011) has shown to unfold through the gendering of space, violence and subjectivity.

Manuela Sachaz was a babysitter, newly arrived from the countryside to Guatemala City to take care of a ten-month-old baby. Returning from work her employers found Manuela in their apartment in a pool of blood. The baby son was propped up in a high chair, his breakfast before him. Both had been decapitated, Manuela further raped and mutilated, her breasts and lips had been cut off, her legs slashed. The crime remains unsolved.¹¹ The body of sixteen-year-old María Isabel Franco, raped, stabbed and strangled, was

completely coiled with barbed wire, when she was found in 2001. She died of an axe blow to her head. Nancy Peralta, a thirty-year-old accountancy student kidnapped in 2002, died from forty-eight stab wounds and a broken neck. Her killers had tried to cut off her head. The crimes remain unsolved.¹² Other victims killed over the previous years include Astrid Marilú Villagrán Estrada, whose body appeared in three different parts of the city (head, extremities and torso); Lesley Eugenia del Valle, killed in front of her children by several punches; Lourdez Johana Villalta Pineda, assassinated with a bullet in her head, also in front of her children; Yiar Arqueta López, choked by ski-masked men; and Yelsmi Lilibeth Lara Miranda, who was beheaded. As a warning, the head was later sent to another woman, the ears to a local store owner in Zona 11 of Guatemala City. María Ester Soto Ruíz was found strangled and decapitated within a vehicle. Cindy Marlene Hernández was violated, tortured and strangled. The crimes remain unsolved.¹³

More recent atrocities include the 2008 rape and murder of three-year-old Sofía Juárez: her body remained missing for two days. The dismembered bodies of six women found scattered throughout Guatemala City in March 2009: one of the murdered women, Ingrid Cruz, was videotaped as her body was being mutilated. Her murderers uploaded the video to YouTube, from where it was later removed because of its content. The Suruy daughters, Heidi, Diana and Wendy, aged seven, eight and twelve, were killed with extreme brutality on their way to school in a smaller village of San Lucas Sacatepéquez, their throats cut and their school uniforms messed up. Their killers turned out to be intimately related to the murdered girls. At the time of writing no final verdict has been given.¹⁴ Another little girl, only three years old, was raped and killed by three men hoping to rise in the ranks of their gang. Her father found her dead, naked and beaten after searching for her for hours. Two of her killers were later stoned to death by the community and then set on fire. Afraid of revenge, the girl's family had to flee the community. The crime remains unsolved.

Three 2010 cases, committed on the same day (21 September), share a similar and widespread characteristic. All cases were preceded by death threats that were reported to the police. In none of the cases did the police taken any protective measures: Veronica Ofelinda Jiménez, a thirty-three-year-old street fruit-juice vendor, was killed by several shots early in the morning. Her killers left a note saying 'this is what happens to informers and dirty bitches'. Her husband suspected a fellow street vendor to be behind the

earlier death threat. At 10.30 a.m. Rosa Bernabé Bautista, a poor forty-five-year-old woman, was killed by seven bullets to the head when she left a social organisation distributing food aid to the poor. In Señora Bautista's case, a member of the infamous Mara 18 was behind the earlier death threats. Finally, sixteen-year old Sonia Karina Estrada López was shot two corners away from her school. Her family was told that fifteen days prior to the murder she had been assaulted by a gang member, who threatened to kill her because she refused to give him her cell phone.¹⁵

A few studies have examined the profile of the perpetrators. Although based on rather small available samples, these studies indicate that many perpetrators are known, most often intimately, to the victims. Around a quarter of the perpetrators may be partners (husbands, boyfriends and ex-partners), another 11 per cent fathers of the victims, 5 per cent other family members, and 36 per cent neighbours or male acquaintances (Svendsen 2007). In such cases, the violation and/or killing of women and girls are often explained by authorities as caused by 'affect', 'love problems' or jealousy; too much alcohol, too little personal dignity and over-exaggerated machismo. Other studies point to the involvement of 'narco-cults' or killings related to the drug wars permeating the region (Bunker *et al.* 2010). In these cases the killings are not explained as 'crimes of passion' but rather as carefully planned, staged and executed in struggles over territorial control. As in regular war, violence against women serves a highly symbolic purpose in the war on drug trafficking: it creates cohesion within armed groups, reaffirms masculinity and is a form of attacking 'the enemy's morale' (Toledo 2011).

The BBC documentary *Killer's Paradise*, based on several of the cases mentioned above, was broadcast worldwide in May 2006.¹⁶ What shocked the world most was the matter-of-fact and trophy-like explanations given by the young male assassins interviewed. In the words of one of them, 'It is the fashion in Guatemala to kill women.' 'Many of them we killed for fun, it felt good seeing the blood flow.' 'Others with whom I had had relations, I killed because I feared they would leave me. One of the worst I cut up in pieces with a machete, it involved a lot of violence.' When asked why, he answered: 'I partly did it because I had to, because of the hatred I felt towards them, their life, their mind, their heart. I did it because it excited me, the blood; it attracted me to see the blood flow on the floor, to me that was something beautiful.'

The documentary also takes issue with the way state officials deal with the victims. In the case of the victim Claudina Velasquez Paiz,

a young law student, the police report mentioned that she had a belly ring and was wearing sandals, meant to indicate that she was a gang member or a prostitute and that killing her did not therefore deserve investigation. Former president Oscar Berger also linked the killing of women to their involvement in youth gangs and organised crime. By doing so he resisted the idea that Guatemalan femicide represented a political problem while simultaneously insinuating that the victims were not worthy of too much attention, that they must have been criminals in the first place, and that their death therefore could be seen as a form of public cleansing by 'the removal of troublesome women restor[ing] the moral and political balance of society' (Wright 2011: 713).

Local media portrayal generally relies on blood, gore, nudity and torture. When not involving minor children, accompanying newspaper photos often bear resemblance to pornography, and headlines and reporting often indicate some sort of victim responsibility for the killings, either because they wore improper dress or makeup or simply for being in public places without proper escort, without permission. The reporting of female corpses found in the streets, in the rivers or in the garbage dumps is often relegated to short paragraphs of the inside pages of the national newspapers. They are considered insignificant. And to the justice system impunity is the order of the day. Less than 10 per cent of the murders of women are investigated. In addition to severe underreporting, around 98 per cent of the reported killings are never solved.¹⁷

Governing through necropolitics and narcopolitics

In a recent article, Melissa Wright (2011) compares Mexican discourses on femicide to discourses on drug violence in Ciudad Juarez and argues that the politics over meaning in both cases must be understood in relation to gendered violence and its use as a tool for securing the state. By gendering Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, she highlights how the politics of gender and the politics of death go hand in hand: Official state discourses on the violent killings of women have maintained that these women have been out of their proper place (the domestic sphere), have been contaminated by their activities in the public sphere and ultimately constituted a contamination risk for their families, communities and nation. Hereby state discourse has positioned the young murdered women in the political order, as a 'pillar of the necropolitics demonstrating that the publicness of the

victims, as evidenced by the corpses' location in public places and the mutilation of their raped bodies, disrupting the social order and political peace of northern Mexico (Wright 2011: 715).

The discourse on drug violence, on the other hand, while reflecting the same blame-the-victim strategy, has represented violence as aimed at targets within the drug industry rather than innocent civilians. Drug violence is seen as the outcome of disputes internal to the drug trade, in response to competition over markets, resources, alliances and political protection. It is perpetrated by men who are more 'business-like' than typical homicidal maniacs, with logical mindsets reminiscent of rational-choice actors (Wright 2011: 719). In sum, official state discourse has portrayed femicide and drug killings around a binary femininity–masculinity rationality, spatially organised around women's proper domestic activities and men's violent business on the streets.

From another vantage point, Posel and Gupta (2009) suggest that the place of death and the corpse – which at the same time may repulse and lure, disgust and fascinate – is a pre-eminent site for the identification of symbolic boundaries between a nation and its other or between the sovereign and the governed. They foreground what they call 'the dualistic life of the corpse': on the one hand the corpse is a material object, while on the other hand it is a signifier of wider political, economic, cultural, ideological and theological endeavours. Whereas sovereign practice establishes who is disposable and who is not, the power to dehumanise the disposable lies in the power to reduce bodies to undignified trunks of flesh (Posel and Gupta 2009). This conceptual set-up provides a powerful means of exploring corpses, bodypolitics and contestation in contemporary Guatemala.

In Guatemala violence against women is habitually explained as a contemporary effect of conquest and colonial ills; of civil war; or lately of violent competition between drug cartels and gangs for control over narcotics, territory and trafficking routes. Much in the same way as the civil war left the Mayan culture broken, mutilated and atomised – a culture in pieces, a wounded body politic (Nelson 1999: 131) – the practices of destruction inherent in the present moment are leaving their deadly mark on Guatemalan society. But what is it that makes the mutilated female body such an effective form of governing, what is the effect of the mark and what does it tell us about sovereignty and state formation in Guatemala?

The Guatemalan civil war was marked by pervasive state-sponsored violence including physical, psychological and sexual torture, disappearances and massacres of entire communities. The

Guatemalan Army used an extremely effective campaign of terror that consisted in killing not only guerrillas, but also their potential or perceived supporters within the civil population, and 'by doing so in such an arbitrary and vicious fashion that people in the region came to feel an intense and overwhelming fear, not merely of supporting the guerrillas, but of doing anything that might suggest they sympathised with the guerrillas' cause – such as denouncing the army's methods or giving voice to their own fear' (Wilkinson 2002: 351). During incursion, sexual violence was used as a tool of warfare. Soldiers would often rape any lone woman they stumbled across, murder them afterwards and dump the body (Manz 2004). Women suffered 99 per cent of reported sexual attacks (CGRS 2006).

Many of those who took part in the counter-insurgency campaigns were trained in sadistic methods of utterly destroying the enemy. During the most violent years of the armed conflict soldiers often cut open the wombs of pregnant women and hung the foetuses up in trees or smashed them against rocks. In addition, thousands of indigenous women were the victims of mutilations and sexual violence. Upon the signing of the peace accords, many former members of the security forces joined the police or were hired by private security companies. Corrupt police officers and private security forces are thus well equipped to commit attacks on women by use of former counter-insurgency tactics. In 2006 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that the lack of prosecutions of atrocities committed by high-level officials had 'encouraged the current crime wave sweeping Guatemala' (CGRS 2006). The demobilisation of former members of the security forces without any programme for their reinsertion into society along with the fact that an estimated 2 million firearms are in the hands of the civilian population, may be factors that play a role in the wave of brutal murders of women.¹⁸ However, another important factor is the explosive cocktail in which soaring crime rates, drug trafficking and the proliferation of narco-violence and *maras* (youth gangs) combine with a *machista* male-dominated society, domestic violence and a patriarchal state.

The fact that sexual violence was used as a weapon of domination and social power over the female body during the war (CALDH 2005), and that contemporary femi[ni]cides have much in common with the methods applied against women during the armed conflict (Svendsen 2007), easily lead to the conclusion that feminicide is a legacy of the armed conflict and hence a question of continuity in terms of deeply rooted misogyny and a dominant

patriarchal ideology expressed in family values politically sanctioned by the state. However, we may also interpret today's femicide as pertaining to a different context in which the attempts of the state to relegate femicide to domestic violence, crimes of passion or youth gang feuds can be read as a sign of contested sovereignty. As Segato observes in the emblematic case of Ciudad Juárez, there is 'a direct relation between capital and death, between accumulation and unregulated concentration and the sacrifice of poor, dark-skinned mestiza women, swallowed up by the cracks in which monetary economy, symbolic economy, control of resources and power of death articulate' (Segato 2005: 265–6). I suggest that in Guatemala, as in Ciudad Juárez, the mutilated female body has become central to the making and territorialisation of overlapping, partially sovereign bodies – or political communities – at the local, regional or national level.

The extreme impunity surrounding the killing and mutilation of women as well as the smokescreens put out by authorities and others involved in shaping public opinion in Guatemala indicate that drug cartels (including the Zetas and their Guatemalan counterparts involving former elite soldiers, the Kaibiles), law enforcement officials and economic and political elites are somehow involved in femicide. Impunity and the involvement of state as well as parallel corporate powers should warn us against accepting often heard individualised explanation for the killings as grounded in sexual or emotional motives. According to Segato's investigations in Ciudad Juárez, violent killings of women are not the work of deviant individuals, the mentally ill or other social anomalies. Often the perpetrators act collectively. They share the same gender imaginary, speak the same language and thus understand one another perfectly. The violation is directed towards the annihilation of the victim's will with the purpose of denying her control over her body, and is as such an allegorical example of a sovereign practice, in this case the pointing to the sovereignty of the perpetrator.

But sovereign power is never only physical. Without the psychological and moral subordination of 'the other', the only power left is the power of death, which according to Segato can never be sovereign. A war leading to total extermination cannot constitute a victory. The victory lies in the power to colonise, to exhibit the dead corpses to those destined to stay alive. And if sovereignty and control only can be performed in front of a living community, femicide has more in common with the idea of colonisation than that of extermination. Therefore, femicide is not about an utilitarian

end – the extermination of women – but must be understood in its expressive (and, I would add, performative) dimension. Like any other act of violence, feminicide is a discursive gesture with a particular signature, and violence read as a text will lead us not only to the perpetrator, but to the perpetrator as author, as an author with a message (Segato 2005).

Some crimes, Segato continues, are not only communicated vertically between perpetrator and victim (e.g. through a punitive fist meant to contain, reduce and install discipline and censorship in, the victim). They are also communicated horizontally. Horizontal (and spectacular) communication is directed towards the surrounding community and is often expressing an attempt at seeking permission to enter into this community. Seen from this perspective, the violated and mutilated female body can be read as a sacrifice or as an initiation ritual: in competition with other men, the perpetrator shows that he deserves to become a member of the virile brotherhood because of his aggressiveness and power of death. As masculinity is a status conditioned on being earned, it needs regular (re)confirmation throughout life (Segato 2005). It is in the tension between Segato's two coordinates – a vertical axis constructing the victim and a horizontal axis conditioned by the status earned by paying tribute to a brotherhood or criminal organisation – that the more fundamental and societal aspects of feminicide can be found. Thus, it may be reductionist to interpret the killing and mutilation of female bodies as crimes based in hatred to women if those dominating the scene are not the victims but rather men who are bonding in a patriarchal regime of a Mafioso order.

In the Guatemalan case, struggles over sovereignty simultaneously lead to alliances and contestation between the state and criminal state and non-state actors. Alliances are formed when organised criminal networks infiltrate the state apparatus and (some) state representatives join forces with criminal networks (illegal groups and clandestine security organisations) to further their politics or to enrich themselves. Competition takes place in the instances in which (some) state authorities attempt to keep or regain control over territories and bodies. The simultaneous enactment of alliance-making and competition testify to a divided state apparatus. Meanwhile, local drug cartels lose territory to Mexican business competitors who find the Guatemalan levels of impunity and state fragility an attractive business environment for their operations. Returning to the Central American homicide and femicide rates of Tables 11.1–11.3 it may even be argued that different rates

pertain to different realities. Violence associated with the drug war and organised crime – including state corruption – appears to have specific effects for women. Mutilating the female body creates cohesion within armed groups, reaffirms distorted forms of masculinity, becomes a form of attacking ‘the enemy’s’ morale and establishes sovereignty over territories. It even restores the traditional *machista* spatial order of a male public space (*la calle*) by relegating women to the domestic sphere (*la casa*).

Conclusion

In October 2011, President Otto Pérez Molina, a retired general, presented his plan to reduce violence against women and improve the investigation of femicide in Guatemala. During the same meeting, his vice-presidential candidate, Roxana Baldeti, promised to provide more resources for and institutionalise the Presidential Secretariat for Women (SEPREM) and the Coordinator for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Violence against Women (CONAPREVI).¹⁹ In November 2012, the Molina government introduced several new measures to address violence against women, including a special tribunal to process femicide, while simultaneously, however, disbanding the national coordination body CONAPREVI, thus limiting the participation of NGOs in the process. Given that Pérez Molina was elected on strong *mano dura* (hard-handed) principles, including a remilitarisation of policing and governance, one could ask whether institutionalised policies would lead to a decrease in perpetrations of femicide and whether state practices of impunity could end?

Sceptics would maintain that post-war Guatemala has become a dehumanised social space, similar to what Lowe (2008) with reference to the US–Mexican border has called a gendered necrospace of complex and pervasively gendered violence. In this social space both the state and the illicit drug cartels have (and use) the capacity to dictate who matters and who is dispensable. Claiming ultimate authority to govern the dead – either by perpetrating femicide or by tacitly embracing ‘the new judicial category of life devoid of value’ by maintaining extremely high rates of impunity (Agamben 1998) – remains in contest. On the one hand the penetration of organised transnational drug cartels means that several regions of Guatemala have become *de facto* governed by criminal networks that both hold entire communities in thrall to their extreme violence and fuel the culture of silence by their dehumanising practices of decapitation

and the cutting off of gendered body parts such as breasts and lips. By using feminicide and other violent killings as messages to de(a)monstrate their potency (Bunker and Sullivan 2010), the cartels carefully craft the myth of being vigilantes standing up to competitors and a corrupt state. On the other hand the 'insufficient efforts to conduct thorough investigation, the absence of protection measures for witnesses, victims and victims' families, and the lack of information and data regarding cases, causes of violence and profiles of the victims' (CEDAW 2006) suggest state responsibility.

Given the extensive technical and financial support the Guatemalan justice system has received over the past sixteen years, the question is, as noted by Special Rapporteur Philip Alston, 'less what should be done than whether Guatemala has the will to do so' (Alston 2007). The fact that the state for decades failed to properly investigate and prosecute the pattern of feminicide in Guatemala cannot and should not be explained by reference to incompetence or shortages in human, financial and technical resources as is often the case in UN reports (see e.g. Musalo *et al.* 2010). A far more critical question regards the function of feminicide in society.

Guatemalan women face systematic gender-based violence so prevalent that they have broken new legal frontiers to establish gendered violence as grounds for asylum in the United States (Bateson 2010). The most salient impact of this development is that while state-crafting through what we conventionally understand as political violence has decreased, other forms of violence have entered the art of governing. That some of this violence has invaded the domestic sphere should not lead us to think that it is less political; that some of it resembles the past should not lead us to look for explanations only in the armed conflict. Rather, as underscored by Angelina Godoy (2006), the perverse blend of violence and repressive authority goes hand in hand to maintain class power and masculinist control through the enactment of *mano dura* policies.

Notes

- 1 This chapter was written in 2010, revised in early 2013, and does therefore not reflect recent positive changes introduced by Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz, including the effects of the joint task force for crimes against women established in 2012.
- 2 Paraphrasing Daniel Hernández-Salazar's text from the 2000 exhibition 'Memoria de un angel' (The Memory of an Angel).

- 3 I borrow this phrase from North American photographer Jean-Marie Simon (2010).
- 4 For recent reports on the Central American/Guatemalan crime and violence levels, see: Dudley 2010; Finlay 2010; International Crisis Group 2011. For reports on feminicide in Guatemala, see: Carcedo 2010; CCPDH 2006; Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2009, Musalo *et al* 2010; Sanford 2007, 2008; Shepard-Durini 2008; Svendsen 2007.
- 5 The hitherto highest murder rate was reported for 2010, when 304 women were killed.
- 6 This dimension is firmly established in and around Ciudad Juárez and with tentacles in the provincial capitals of Mexico.
- 7 During August 2010 I interviewed the following Guatemalan NGOs and government offices on the issue of femicide: Fundación Sobrevivientes, Instituto de Estudios Comparados de Ciencias Penales (IECCPG), The Human Rights Ombudsman Institution (PDH), Fundación de Antropología Forense (FAFG), La oficina Nacional de la Mujer (ONAM), Centro para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos (CALDH), Secretaría Presidencial de la Mujer (SEPREM), Coordinadora Nacional para la Prevención de la Violencia (CONAPREVI), and Red NO a la violencia. I thank representatives for their time and valuable contributions, and I thank programme assistant María Sofía Villatoro, the Guatemala office for Danish Development Assistance to Central America, for helping me set up the interviews. Because of constant threats against activists I do not name my informants.
- 8 A lively debate containing the many different views (and the usual suspects) can be seen in the internet comments following *El Periodico's* coverage of the law, e.g. www.elperiodico.com.gt/es/20080410/pais/52254/.
- 9 'Ladino' is the category used in Guatemala for 'mestizos', people of mixed descent.
- 10 Anastacia Moloney, 'Guatemala's feminicides show no signs of letting up', 22 January 2013, www.trust.org/item/?map=guatemalas-feminicides-show-no-signs-of-letting-up.
- 11 *The Sunday Times*, 28 August 2005.
- 12 For more information on these cases, see Sanford 2007.
- 13 For more information on these cases, see Svendsen 2007.
- 14 Various news clips, *La Prensa Libre* and *Nuestro Diario*, 2008 and 2009.
- 15 These three cases were covered in *Nuestro Diario*, 22 September 2010, pp. 4–5.
- 16 *Killer's Paradise* explores the high murder rate of women that has persisted unsolved in Guatemala since the end of the Guatemalan Civil War. The film is a co-production of the National Film Board of Canada and the BBC and was directed by acclaimed Toronto-based journalist and filmmaker Giselle Portenier. Clips and trailers can be found at www.videosurf.com/killer-s-paradise-79593.
- 17 Interview with CICIG representative.
- 18 See One World Net, 'Guatemala: murders of women recall counter-insurgency techniques', <http://archive.oneworld.net/article/view/113856>.
- 19 See PrensaLibre.com, 'Pérez Molina promete una fuerza de tarea contra el femicidio', 21 October 2011, www.prensalibre.com/decision_libre_-_actualidad/Elecciones_Guatemala-pp-organizaciones_de_mujeres-otto_perez_molina-partido_patriota_0_576542472.html.

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