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19. The Esther Chávez Cano Collection: An Archival Record of Violence against Women in the U.S.-Mexico Border and a Tool for Scholars and Activists

Charles Stanford
Molly Molloy

The Chávez collection is a unique representation of social justice and women’s rights activism in Ciudad Juárez, a city whose notoriety for violence has greatly increased since the early 1990s when Esther Chávez Cano began keeping track of cases of murdered women. Her work became known to academics and activists on the U.S. side of the border in the late 1990s, and by that time she had already been working for nearly a decade to document the violent changes in Ciudad Juárez that often crept into the pages of Mexican newspapers with notices of young girls and women missing, or found dead, in the vacant lots of the sprawling desert city. It was late into the NAFTA decade before these events made it into the English-language press, and even as the real body count rose, those in power sought to diminish the significance, or even the reality, of the deaths of women and men in the border region. In addition to her work as a journalist and activist, in 1999, Chávez founded Casa Amiga Centro de Crisis, the only crisis center providing medical, psychological and legal services and shelter to women and families victimized by violence in Ciudad Juárez. Casa Amiga now provides treatment and services to more than 30,000 women every year.

Charles Bowden, a writer who has covered events in Juárez and other areas of the U.S.-Mexico border for more than 20 years, says something like this about what happens in Mexico: First, something happens (perhaps a crime, a murder, or another newsworthy event). Then, in the second stage, people create a lot of stories about what happened and theories circulate to try to explain it. In the third and final stage, the event disappears from the news, from the official accounts, even from the historical record…as if it never happened at all.¹

Back in 1996, in the first article in the mainstream English-language press (Harper’s December 1996) about the violence in Juárez, including the first real notice in our media of the murders of young women, Bowden wrote:
We have models in our heads about growth, development, and infrastructure. Juárez doesn’t look like any of these images, and so our ability to see this city comes and goes, mainly goes. A nation that has never hosted a jury trial, that has been dominated by one party for most of this century, that is carpeted with corruption and poverty and pockmarked with billionaires is perceived as an emerging democracy marching toward First World standing. The snippets of fact that once in a while percolate up through the Mexican press are ignored by the U.S. government and its citizens.2

While researching a book about Juárez and the violence of the drug trade back in 1995, Charles Bowden went to the offices of El Diario looking for the negative of a photograph he had seen of a missing young woman. He met photojournalist Julián Cardona, and since that time they have collaborated on several books dealing with Juárez, the border, violence, and migration. Cardona wrote about the photo archive at the newspaper where he worked as a photographer and Esther worked as a columnist for some years:

Archive is a pretentious word to describe the narrow room where our work ended up after an intense day on the street, days when some of us might have risked our lives for the perfect shot. In order to make room for new material, the guy in charge of the archive or one of his assistants would periodically destroy original negatives no longer considered necessary. As time passed, most of the new stuff would also end up in the garbage. I once searched for slides that had been taken of a case of anencephaly in a child born to a maquiladora worker—probably caused by inhaling toxic fumes on the job. I found that they had all been thrown away because “they were no longer of any use.” In 1996, when “Los Rebeldes” (a gang accused of the murders of several women) were arrested, I photographed their mothers confronting the state governor after a public event. Since I was the only photographer there, I had doubts about turning them in, thinking that I should keep them—no one would know. It was a feeling I had at various times, not from fear of censorship or criticism—rather, negligence and incompetence were the more formidable rivals. In the end, these images were all lost.3

To most information professionals, the importance of archival records need not be stressed, and many know the difficulties of collecting materials from places like Juárez, and the added difficulties of dealing with sensitive materials that may threaten structures of power.

However, thanks to Esther Chávez Cano, the reality of the violent changes in her city cannot be denied. Journalists from all over the world began to visit Esther in the late 1990s and she would share with them her files and talk to them about the interlocking crises of uncontrolled growth with no economic and social infrastructure for the people living and working in the city that led to such violence. Her files document crimes that in many cases have never been
solved and have essentially disappeared from the justice system as completely as the young lives disappeared from the streets of Juárez.

As time went on, Esther found that her files sometimes disappeared also, as she would generously loan things to reporters and researchers who might not always return them. In 2006, she contacted New Mexico State University Criminal Justice Professor Cynthia Bejarano who has worked with many families of victims and with activist groups in Mexico and the United States. Professor Bejarano contacted Molly Molloy at the New Mexico State University Library and we worked with the NMSU Rio Grande Historical Collections (RGHC) to secure Esther’s documents. In late 2006, we brought seven large plastic file boxes from Esther’s house to the Library, but it was not until Archivist Charles Stanford joined the faculty in the fall of 2007 that the collection was processed and made available to the public.

The newspaper clippings that make up the bulk of the Chávez collection trace the stories of individual victims, the growing public attention to murders of women over the years, arrests of suspects, government statements, and the activist groups that Sra. Chávez was involved in. Records from these activist groups give a glimpse into the workings of these groups, as well as the external challenges and internal struggles that they have faced in pursuing their missions.

Other documents show the efforts of international organizations and scholars to rally support and raise awareness of the murders of young women in Juárez and to increase understanding of the sociological factors caused by Juárez’s unpleasant economic and social realities, and the efforts of journalists to bring the stories of the murders to the attention of more people.

The collection also touches on other matters like factory conditions; women’s rights, including questions of sexual abuse and freedom and reproductive choice; and the politics of activist groups, including the controversies and rifts that occur.

Making these documents available on this side of the border opens them up to access by researchers and activists in the United States. Mexican activists have called for help from U.S. agents in investigating some of the murder cases and have sought to draw awareness to the Juárez murders throughout the whole world. A recently received modest grant will enable the digitization of the collection. Already several researchers have used it for various purposes, some coming from as far away as Yale University. A promotional spot on NMSU’s KRWG-TV program Aggie Almanac has brought in at least one researcher, and it is expected that over time more researchers will come to use these records.

This collection is rather unusual in comparison to the others in the RGHC, which although it does already include some eyebrow-raising stuff, it still has historically focused on the normal course of late 19th- and 20th-century mainstream Anglo culture in New Mexico. The majority of the holdings in the RGHC are genteel and safe—safe if for no other reason than that so many of the people represented in them died a while ago, often of natural causes, or
because so many of our holdings come from peaceful or common economic and cultural pursuits: ranching, mining, civic and service clubs, farming, and raising families. The Chávez collection comes into such an environment telling of unspeakable and ongoing tragedy.

Traditionally, the RGHC has been a historical repository. Even though people come to consult the material the organization holds on notorious incidents of violence like the Lincoln County War and criminals like Billy the Kid, there is that safe distance of time between the events represented by pieces of paper with picturesque old handwriting or type, and the present. The tragedy and violence that make for dramatic history can be enjoyed because the events represented by most of the holdings happened long enough ago. Having a collection like this disturbs the traditional concept of a place like the RGHC, introducing not only the unpleasant realities of recent murders but also the uncomfortable questions of current political power structures illustrated in the collection, including evidences of attempts to discredit and silence Esther Chávez and other activists and journalists, and in the very story of why this collection came here instead of staying in Juárez.

For whom is this collection held? Archives have been resources for academic historians for a long time now and that is all very well; this commercially-driven society greatly needs the clear eyes and level heads of responsible and well-trained historians. But one of the goals here has been to increase visibility and use throughout the entire public. Not everyone can be a specialized historian, but everyone can learn some basics about how to interpret and think about records and evidence. Everyone can be taught the importance of not shrinking from the problems of life and of recognizing the unpleasant things that may be going on close to their homes. But one of the most fruitful uses of collections that come from activist activity is as a resource for activists in plotting the course of their missions.

These documents not only help increase awareness of the violence in Juárez through the information contained in some of the material, but can facilitate scholarly study of an important activist project and serve as a resource for current and future activists in identifying problems they will face and strategies to use in carrying out their own missions. For this collection is principally the record of an activist project, reflecting the attitudes, ideals and purposes of Esther Chávez and her allies. It would be impossible for one person to put together an adequate archive of the violence in Juárez.

For activists to begin using the repository in greater numbers opens up questions that have the potential to disturb the quiet comfort that I think has been associated with this repository and others like it.

There is an attitude that archivists, especially those in academic institutions, must be neutral and impartial, whatever that is supposed to mean. To accept and house such a collection as this does seem more neutral at NMSU
than it would in Juárez. Maybe that is a good reason for them to come here, so a semblance of neutrality is preserved, enough to keep everyone out of trouble.

Out of trouble beyond the troubling questions this collection has already opened, as do any records of political activism: once these records are taken, what other records of what kind of activism along the border is the organization willing to collect? How will it negotiate between the requests and expectations of cool, methodical scholars and passionate activists in appraisal, description and access?

Part of the hope for this collection has been to open up the door not only to more documentation of border problems, but also to the Hispanic culture of New Mexico and to provide greater access to Spanish-speaking researchers. It will not be possible to pursue this without confronting the history of power and dominance of culture and language in New Mexico since 1850. The RGHC has reflected this dominance, though not maliciously, naturally attracting the records of the powerful and influential. Facing up to this, and acting on intent to extend the scope beyond its historical core, will mean negotiating with that expectation of neutrality and re-investigating the philosophies and goals of the RGHC and repositories like it—challenging tasks that unfortunately do not tend to shine out in performance or use statistics.

So bringing in the Chávez collection does introduce some trouble into an institution—and a profession—that is not only expected to be neutral, but has often been seen as sedate, oriented towards antiquities, even dry and boring. But in going through any records people leave behind or consciously gather together, one catches glimpses of the range of human nature and experience. We see the complexity of life and are often brought face to face with things we would rather not think about. It is unpleasant to confront the countless newspaper articles telling of murders, abuse, oppression and violence that happen so close to home. But this collection is important precisely because so much of what it contains is unpleasant. And the trouble that such current records of such shocking events introduce is a stirring up that is greatly needed. Besides the increased number and wider scope of researchers it brings in, and in addition to the very important perpetual witness that it bears of violence and tragedy as well as grace, hope and dedication, it forces us to face up to questions of appraisal and documentation that defy easy answers, and for that we should be grateful, since archivists no longer have an excuse to avoid confronting these questions and holding their working answers under constant examination.

Despite the sporadic media attention to the sensational sexual aspects of some of the crimes occurring in Juárez throughout the 1990s and later, Esther Chávez has consistently maintained that the great majority of the 400-500 murders of women resulted from domestic violence or from the general situation of poverty and lack of social infrastructure in the city and the influence of the drug trade that has resulted in the deaths of at least ten times as many men as women during the same span of time. The Esther Chávez
Cano collection provides important documentation as to the true nature of this violence and has the potential to help establish this truth that may have been obscured by sensational press coverage.

The Chávez collection has already been used by at least one researcher who analyzed the various statistical sources on the murders of women in Juárez. Yale history student Erin Frey, in a paper not yet published, gathered information from this collection (in addition to numerous interviews with activists, reporters, scholars and others) to support her thesis that may prove quite controversial in the literature on “femicide.” Her thesis is that attention in foreign media and from activists and some feminist scholars that emphasizes the more sensational “gendered” aspects of the killings (characteristics that at most apply to 70-80 out of 400-500 cases) has diverted attention from the real causes of murder and violence in Juárez: the lack of adequate living wages in the maquiladora sector, the lack of social infrastructure for those poor men and women who migrate to the border, the huge and violent influence of the drug trade in the city—not only the business aimed at crossing drugs into the United States, but also the explosion in the local domestic retail drug market. In Juárez, most men and women lack the economic means and social resources to maintain a stable and safe society. Exotic explanations are not needed to explain the murders of women. Both women and men face danger and mortality every day, as a byproduct of the social conditions in the border city.4

Beginning in the 1990s, statistics show that about 10 percent of the murders in Juárez were of women. On average, throughout the 1990s, nine men were killed for every one woman. However, during the wave of killings from January-September 2008, based on the statistics from the Subprocuraduría de Justicia del Estado (PGJE), the number of women killed was about 3 percent of the total. These current figures are by no means complete and rely on the data reported from the PGJE. Homicide investigations in Juárez are handled by two different offices: the Unidad Especializada para la Investigación de Delitos Contra la Vida-Special Unit for the Investigation of Crimes Against Life (UEIDCV) and the Fiscalía Especial para la Investigación de Homicidios de Mujeres-Special Prosecutor for the Investigation of Women’s Homicides (FEIHM). As of September 16, 2008, the UEIDCV had undertaken the investigation of 939 victims; the FEIHM was investigating 22 cases.5 A quick calculation shows that the women’s murders under investigation from January-September this year made up about 2.4 % of the total. This in no way should minimize the horror of gender violence and domestic violence in Juárez—women are the great majority of victims in these cases. But attention must be focused on the totality of the violence—unprecedented in the history of the city and in the border region. As of October 30, 2008, the number of homicides in Juárez was already triple the number from the previous annual record of 309 in 2007.6

Since this paper’s original presentation in June 2008, the death toll from homicide in Juárez has continued to climb. The monthly death tolls range from...
45 in February to a high of 217 in August. On average, there were 4-5 murders per day in 2008. On August 13, eight people were shot to death at a drug rehabilitation center. On November 13, the main crime reporter for *El Diario*, Armando Rodriguez, was assassinated in front of his home. Other reporters have received death threats and the newspapers have replaced reporter bylines with the anonymous label “Staff” or “Redacción” on all crime stories. On November 19, 2008, it was reported that murder would surpass diabetes as the major cause of death in the city. On November 29, eight men who worked in a Juárez maquiladora were gunned down while dining in a restaurant together. Another daily paper, *El Norte de Ciudad Juárez*, reported on November 29 that a total of 130 women had been killed violently thus far in 2008, raising the percentage of women to 9.2 percent of the total murder victims so far that year. The murders of women include at least two U.S. citizens shot on Juárez streets in November and December. And the papers continue to report that almost none of these cases have been solved. As of the end of November, *El Diario* reported a total of 1,407 homicides. Nearly 40 more people were murdered during the first five days of December, including the assassination of the head of the Federal Prosecutor’s office in Juárez. In all, 65 law enforcement officers have been murdered so far in 2008.

On the Saturday morning after the events to honor Esther Chávez in November 2007, she was escorted to the archives stacks so that she could see her collection in its new secure location in Branson Hall. All of us who worked with Esther on this project have been inspired by her courage and her good humor. For the past several years, she has fought her own battle against cancer, while continuing to work at Casa Amiga and to tell all who will listen about the struggles of women, children and families in Juárez. As she said to those assembled to honor her on November 9, 2007,

> We have much work left to do, the road ahead is long and hard. There will come a time when my voice becomes silent so that new voices can be heard to carry on the struggle for the rights of women, which, as I have said, is also for the rights of men, because it is the struggle for a more just and democratic society for all.

It is an honor to be trusted with this collection and to help keep the stories of these women of Juárez—the victims and their advocates, the dead and the living—from being silenced or fading into comfortable ignorance. In late November, it was also reported that Esther Chávez Cano would receive Mexico’s National Human Rights Award for 2008 for her distinguished work over the past 16 years for the promotion and defense of women’s rights and her continuing struggle to draw attention to violence against women in Mexico and the world.

It is our hope that the Esther Chávez Cano Collection will be the seed to grow a more extensive archive of documentation of social justice organizations,
The Esther Chávez Cano Collection

public records, newspapers and other primary sources that will preserve the record of this violent and difficult time in the U.S.-Mexico border region.

NOTES


REFERENCES


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