

Melissa W. Wright

Public Women, Profit, and  
Femicide in Northern Mexico

Since 2002, a social justice movement called Ni Una Mas has brought international attention to the violence that, over the last decade, has claimed hundreds of women's lives in the northern Mexican cities of Chihuahua and Ciudad Juárez. Many of the victims have been tortured, mutilated, and dumped, like garbage, around the city. After twelve years of documented violence, only one person has been convicted for one murder, and at this writing, these "most intolerable crimes," as Amnesty International has described them, continue along with the lack of convictions.<sup>1</sup> Activists and scholars have called this violence *femenicidio*, or "femicide," in reference not only to the crimes but to the impunity that surrounds them.<sup>2</sup>

Ni Una Mas, which means "not one more," consists of diverse domestic and international organizations and individuals, and their demands are plain: one, that the state implement strategies for preventing further deaths and kidnappings; and two, that the state conduct competent investigations into the crimes already committed. Far from being simple, however, these demands have provoked a high-stakes con-

trovery over the meaning of women's economic, political, and human rights in a neoliberal and democratizing Mexico.

The controversy stems from the declarations of political and corporate elites that the victims are not legitimate victims and that the Ni Una Mas participants are not legitimate activists, due to their allegedly illicit activities as "public women." The "public woman" referred to here is the woman who is found on the street, in the office, at political events, and any other place construed as "nondomestic." According to the dominant discourse of "public woman" still pervasive in Mexico (among other places), the public woman has her most famous representative in the figure of "the prostitute," the consummately public woman who makes her living by selling her body on the street. This discourse also draws a link between public women-prostitutes and social decay: The former are said to lead to and reflect the latter.<sup>3</sup>

In calling them "public women" who, as the discourse of the "prostitute" would have it, taint the social movement known for them, the governing elites deploy a powerful set of discursive tools that threaten not only the women of this movement but any woman who dares to venture into Mexico's public sphere. The sexism within the language of this public woman discourse is blatant, particularly when contrasted to the concept of "public man" (*hombre público*), which is one way of saying "citizen" or "politician." Yet the Ni Una Mas participants have no choice but to engage with it because the discourse draws upon old beliefs that strike a chord with many. The power of this discursive practice, as with others, lies in the familiarity borne of its repetition.<sup>4</sup> It draws upon an idea familiar around the world: that women who occupy public space should be regarded with suspicion.<sup>5</sup> It draws upon several other familiar ideas: that women who engage in the public economy are somehow contaminated; that female sexuality is dangerous and that women who sell sex are threats to society;<sup>6</sup> and that profit is another form of opportunism and exploitation. All of these ideas are so well-rehearsed through discourses common around the world that they seem normal and sensible. They are, therefore, quite powerful.

When Ni Una Mas was initially formed, its participants confronted the discursive strategy of political elites to use the prostitute-as-contaminant connection as a way to blame the victims for the violence they had suffered. As this familiar tactic goes, any woman who is a prostitute or who resembles one does not represent a legitimate victim of violence because she, through her immoral activities, caused her own problems. In other words, she has

no right to justice because she is not a justifiable (i.e., “innocent”) victim. Political and corporate leaders alike have repeatedly deployed this blame-the-victim account as a means of both discounting the crimes and claiming that the victims are not worthy of all this attention.<sup>7</sup>

Yet over years of dedicated events and organization, the Ni Una Mas activists have been successful in exposing such claims for what they are: a smokescreen for distracting attention from the political and economic policies that contribute to the violence and the impunity enjoyed by its perpetrators. In effect, the activists have turned a regional civil rights dispute into an international human rights campaign. Amnesty International has adopted this dispute as one of its prominent campaigns and in 2003 issued a blistering critique of regional political and economic leaders for their responsibility in relation to the crimes.<sup>8</sup> The United Nations has also criticized regional and federal officials and called for immediate action. Political leaders, activists, artists, academics, and journalists from around the world have brought attention to the unsolved murders and to the socioeconomic factors that contribute to them.

In the face of Ni Una Mas’s success in internationalizing the movement, regional elites have been on the defensive in both international and national circles. They have had to respond to questions regarding the region’s economic and social stability from potential investors who note how the violence reveals problems associated with the maquiladora development model and inadequate urban infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> Regional political elites have also had to address the issue of violence against women within American political campaigns, as different political parties claim that “the other party” has done nothing to make the border more secure.<sup>10</sup> Essentially, regardless of political party and because of Ni Una Mas, regional political elites have had to address the significance of the violence against women for their own political programs and for the region’s economic future as a manufacturing base for foreign investors.

In response, again across party lines, they have sharpened their strategies for applying the discourse of the contaminated whore, via the euphemism of “public women,” by focusing on the economic activities of the nonprofit organizations that participate in Ni Una Mas and the women who work in them. In this application of the “whore” discourse, the elites claim that Ni Una Mas participants are “selling family pain” (particularly that of victims’ mothers) to an international market (of journalists, activists, academics, artists, and the like) always looking for juicy stories about the border that

can generate sales for their own goods (newspapers, organizations, publications, performances, and so on). Even though within this discursive scenario, Ni Una Mas activists are not selling sex, they are, as it goes, “like prostitutes,” contaminating the integrity of their communities, their families, and their nation with their sleazy activities.<sup>11</sup> Political elites have been particularly critical of Ni Una Mas participants for selling family pain as a way to tarnish the region’s economic image at a time when competition from China is seriously threatening the industrial base.<sup>12</sup> They charge, in effect, that the activists are tainting the region’s international reputation by selling tawdry stories of sex, rape, and murder to a lascivious global public.

In this essay, I combine a Marxian critique of value with a Foucauldian analysis of discursive production to expose how the elites’ deployment of the public woman discourse is dangerous for women, as citizens and as human beings, in contemporary Mexico. I use Marx’s insight that all profit under capitalism (as a form of surplus value) derives from the exploitation of underpaid labor to illustrate how the elites’ accusation of profiteering public women targets the Achilles tendon of the Ni Una Mas movement. Its leaders and the nonprofit organizations that constitute it are unable to deny that many of them do, in some sense, “profit” from the publicity generated by their movement. Many do indeed fund their projects by writing grants (i.e., selling their causes) to an international public (including other NGOs) that provides donations via tax write-offs; some NGOs receive grants for their activities, while others do not; some activists receive salaries, while others do not.<sup>13</sup> In short, the need to compete and survive within a capitalist economy means that NGOs and their employees must compete against each other for the economic resources that allow them to survive. This competition leads to divisions among them as well as to an exacerbation of existing class and other tensions that afflict the movement.

By subsuming this accusation of exploitation within the discourse of the public woman (as troublesome whore), regional elites create an even more poisonous attack on the movement by claiming that Ni Una Mas leaders are prostituting family pain and thereby exploiting unpaid victims’ families who work in the protest. In this sense, the discourse functions as *techné*, as defined by Foucault: a tactic for rendering a set of beliefs into practical and effective strategies for governing via exclusions of particular subjects.<sup>14</sup> The *techné* behind the public woman discourse is to dismiss Ni Una Mas as an illegitimate movement via the discursive production of its participants as illegitimate women-citizens who contaminate community and country by

profiting from the prostitution of family pain on the international market. Ni Una Mas activists have little option but to take on this *techne* as they fight not only for the rights of women to participate in Mexico's public sphere but also for the rights of women to exist in public space without endangering their very lives.

### The Public Woman

For most of the twentieth century, Ciudad Juárez has been known as a city bursting with public women. During the Prohibition era in the United States, women could find work on Ciudad Juárez streets by selling sex or companionship to men who were looking for the entertainment and alcohol prohibited in their own country. The internal migration of Mexican men who sought work across the border as part of the Bracero Program (which ended in 1965) also contributed to the growth of Ciudad Juárez as a place providing unregulated sexual services. With such changes, Ciudad Juárez became famous within and beyond Mexico as a city full of "public women." Furthermore, Ciudad Juárez is one of the few places in Mexico where prostitution is legal throughout the city.

This city's reputation for "public women" grew even more with the inauguration of the maquiladora industry in the mid-1960s and its famous "feminization of the international division of labor," which was accompanied by an even further feminization of Ciudad Juárez streets as thousands of women poured in from the Mexican interior to find jobs in the manufacturing sector. Images of the city, teeming with young women, unaccompanied by their families, who worked long shifts and then shopped and danced at all hours, further fueled claims that Ciudad Juárez was a den of public women and their many iniquities.<sup>15</sup> When the murders and kidnappings first became known in Ciudad Juárez in 1995, with early reports of some fifty victims, political and business elites found themselves having to answer hard questions about how their economic and political programs have contributed to the city's growing violence problems. For instance, between the passage of NAFTA in 1994 and the year 2001, the homicide rate for men increased by 300 percent, while for women it increased by 600 percent.<sup>16</sup> An early example of how regional elites deployed the discourse of the "public women" to dispel such questions is found in a 1999 interview with the then-spokesperson for the Ciudad Juárez Maquiladora Association (AMAC) that was aired on ABC's 20-20. When asked why the violence was

occurring, the spokesperson responded: “Where were these young ladies when they were last seen?” he queried. “Were they drinking? Were they partying? Were they on a dark street?”<sup>17</sup> Similar responses have rolled off the tongues of two Chihuahua state governors, of city mayors, of business leaders, and others who represent political incumbents and corporate interests in the region.<sup>18</sup> In blaming the victims for provoking the violence that they have suffered and, thereby, for not being “innocent” victims, these leaders reproduce the subject of the public woman as the source of the problem; for this reason, they suggest, no one should be surprised when a prostitute is raped, beaten, or murdered.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, this discourse normalizes such violence by producing the prostitute as the site of normalized rape, torture, and murder.<sup>20</sup> She is guilty of her own crime. She, not the perpetrator, is in fact the criminal.

This discourse threatens to dominate public conceptions of the activists, functioning as a *techne* that participants of Ni Una Mas have had to confront at every step of their campaign. Victims’ families and the activists working with them have had to make the case that their private pain about the loss of a loved one represents a public injustice and not merely a “family” or “personal” problem. For instance, family after family confronting public officials and the state police has encountered the attitude that the brutal murders and kidnappings represent problems internal to the families and are not public crimes requiring state intervention. Upon reporting a murder or disappearance, families have had to field the following question: “Did she [the woman/girl in question] lead a ‘double life’?” A woman who leads a “double life,” within this formulation, is a woman who has a public persona in addition to the private one defined by her familial relationships. As such, this question, which has been asked of victims’ families since the crimes began, hinges on the binary of the public and private woman. The former is the woman who via her own activities on the street invites the violence she suffers; she is not an innocent victim of a public crime. Instead, her suffering indicates a moral breakdown of the family from which she emerged. The problem therefore resides within the family and does not represent a matter of state. If the victim did not lead a “double life”—that is, if she were undeniably private—then perhaps a crime has been committed. But as the pervasiveness of the question indicates, the Chihuahua state police insist on first making a determination of the victim’s status: Was she a public woman?

The Ni Una Mas activists have made this “double life” question the focus of their activities, arguing, in effect, that the victims, no matter their public

or private lives, are innocent women who deserve public justice. Via street protests, marches, occupations of public buildings, press conferences, and public confrontations with elected officials, they have presented this argument in the public arena so that the international and domestic media will gain awareness of their cause and circulate the story as evidence of a social injustice. For this reason, Ni Una Mas participants have employed dramatic gestures designed to attract media attention. Many of them wear black garments with pink hats to symbolize the figure of a “mother in mourning.” Others have worn grisly masks to represent the “silent screams” of the victims. They have erected crosses adorned with mangled mannequin figures and nails to bring attention to the suffering of the victims, many of whom were sexually tortured, burned, and dismembered before their deaths. They carry posters of victims’ faces and paint pink crosses on telephone polls. They have held funerary processions at international conferences attended by public officials and have draped public offices with funeral wreaths and veils. They hold public events during which family members dispute portrayals of their lost loved ones as “whores who deserved what they got.” And they repeatedly talk of their loss, pain, and anger.

At one such event in August 2003, when Ni Una Mas activists met with members of a United Nations special delegation, some mothers and fathers of the victims spoke about their suffering and frustration. The audience was shaken by the emotionally wrenching stories of their experiences, of realizing that a loved one was missing and then discovering the horrible details of the death or of not receiving any police assistance to locate the family member. Several people cried with the parents who exposed their emotions in the hopes that they would have some impact. Local media covered the event; stories circulated internationally; the UN special delegation promised to write a report and make it available to other NGOs; and several academics, including me, took notes with the idea of writing articles. As one Ni Una Mas participant told me at a Ciudad Juárez march in February 2004, “Our only hope for justice is for public outrage and support. We need media attention. We need donations to pay for the events.” With these words, this activist was explaining how through this publicity, Ni Una Mas enters the circuits of resource production and consumption that connect NGOs to international media and to their donor base.

In the most basic sense, Ni Una Mas activists use family stories of their loss and suffering and of the victims’ good characters to attract the interest of journalists, academics, artists, and women’s rights and human rights

organizations, who in turn use these stories to generate their revenues, through the selling of newspapers or the raising of donations. These activities generate profits that are distributed to shareholders, owners, and self-employed individuals through the complicated networks of nonprofit organizations that continually recycle and distribute “profits” as part of their self-sustaining operations. As a result of such activities, Ni Una Mas participants have had to respond to the accusations that they, as a spokesperson for the Mexican Department of Commerce recently put it, “have profited too much from the pain that we all feel.”<sup>21</sup>

### **The Commodity of Family Pain**

On February 23, 2003, I interviewed Alma Gomez, a participant in one of the civil associations, Las Barzonistas, that had been active since the inception of the Ni Una Mas movement. Like many of the other NGOs in Ni Una Mas, Las Barzonistas (a woman-run legal aid association in Chihuahua City) had joined the campaign out of a sense of civic duty, and its members participated in marches and protests along with other groups, such as Mujeres por México, La Comisión de Solidaridad y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, El Grupo 8 de Marzo, La Red Nacional de Abogadas Femenistas, among others. On the morning of my scheduled interview with Alma in Chihuahua City, the city’s daily, *El Heraldillo de Chihuahua*, ran the headline “NGOs Profit with Deaths” (“Lucran ONGS con las Muertas”). The corresponding article explained that this accusation stemmed from the then-State’s Attorney General, Jesús Solís Silva, that the NGOs within Ni Una Mas were profiting, politically and economically, by effectively “selling [*vender*]” the pain of victims’ families, and of their mothers in particular, to an international market, eager for stories that would sell newspapers and other sorts of media.<sup>22</sup> When I asked Alma about this accusation, she replied: “The question that we should be asking ourselves is: What do we mean by ‘profit’ [*lucrar*]?”

This same question arose in an analysis made more than a century before by Karl Marx as he sought to explain the fundamental principles of capitalism. Rather than accept profit as a fair reward for good investments,<sup>23</sup> he urged his readers to explore the origins of profit so that they would see the injustice, misery, and exploitation at its core. Profit, according to Marx, is nothing more and nothing less than unremunerated labor, such that the people who profit are, in his analysis, stealing resources from workers.<sup>24</sup> Even though Alma was not thinking about Marx when she inquired into

the meaning of profit, a Marxian analysis can help explain how the accusation that she and others are “profiting by selling family pain” has proven so effective in challenging the integrity of the Ni Una Mas movement in contemporary Mexico. To illustrate this point, I will begin, as Marx did, with a brief description of “the commodity” to demonstrate how family pain, under the capitalist conditions in which Ni Una Mas operates, does indeed circulate as a commodity that generates profit and, as Marx would have it, perpetuates injustice.

A commodity, says Marx, is something that produces value (abstract labor) as it flows through the capitalist circuits of production and consumption. Abstract labor consists in the vision, energy, creativity, patience, and all of the other qualities that go into a human being’s ability to transform material life through work. The worker, as Marx shows, receives wages in exchange not for the “abstract labor” (or the stuff of value) but instead for “labor power,” the potential to work during a determined period of time, and the wages represent the magnitude of time (what Marx calls the “socially necessary labor time”) required to socially and physically reproduce the worker’s ability to work at a certain level of skill. In other words, the value consumed by the laborer to reproduce herself is not the same magnitude of value produced by the laborer during the labor process. If all things go as planned and as they must in order for a capitalist enterprise to flourish, the amount of value consumed by labor must be less than the amount of value produced by labor, such that the laborer receives less value than the value that she provides to the enterprise.<sup>25</sup> Only then does profit emerge. For this reason, Marx argues that profit is nothing but unpaid labor that reveals the injustice in capitalism’s foundation.

This Marxian exegesis about profit and the accusation of profit used to attack Ni Una Mas are connected in that the activists face the task of producing social justice out of the private pain of the victims and their families. The movement can be likened to a productive system that requires labor (social activism) to turn its raw materials (family pain, in this case) into a product that is packaged and presented—or in short, transformed—as a form of injustice. The movement’s goals are thus to transform private pain into a public injustice, a process that requires labor at all stages. Part of this labor involves publicizing the injustices surrounding the murders so the international market of media consumers will want to read or hear about the events (and purchase newspapers or attend films) and also so that international organizations see the relevance of these crimes for their own

causes, such as human rights, women's rights, and civil rights. To make this publicity, people have to work. They have to organize events, attend them, speak at them, and so forth. They have to raise money, pay expenses, make posters, stand in the street, and yell at officials. This is labor—energy, vision, dedication, patience—as various organizations and individuals collaborate on the project of attracting public attention so that justice can be had. The victims' families were the first to engage in this project in the 1990s, and out of their frustration, as well as evidence of their success in gaining some public attention, they formed family organizations or sought the help of existing NGOs who could help them by providing some of the labor required for their project of making these crimes known around the world. By and large, the victims' families have few economic resources, and they have struggled to meet the inevitable expenses, such as travel costs or lost wages, of participating in the movement. Most of their labor remains unpaid. Many NGOs also have had a hard time finding the resources to participate. However, others within the movement, such as those from middle-class backgrounds or those who work with well-financed NGOs, have clearly had more resources, via fund-raising, or have even been remunerated for their activities within Ni Una Mas. Undoubtedly, the movement has indeed succeeded in selling the story of injustice, as international newspapers, television news shows, filmmakers, novelists, artists, and academics have generated revenues and profits through its circulation.

In this sense, while Ni Una Mas is not reducible to a capitalist labor process, it does contribute to the generation of profits from the circulation of a commodity formed during the labor process for publicizing injustice. In this sense, "publicized injustice" takes the form of a commodity: something that is exchanged and generates profits. As such, this commodity operates according to the capitalist laws that Marx identified: This commodity of public injustice must produce more value than is returned to those people whose labor generates it out of the raw material of private pain. It is to this kind of social justice-as-commodity that political and business elites turn their attention to argue, in much the same way as Marx, that the profit generated via its circulation accrues to some at the expense of others. Many people feel the pain; many contribute to its circulation as evidence of injustice; but not all profit from this circulation. Again, as the spokesperson for the Mexican Department of Commerce said: Ni Una Mas activists "have profited too much from the pain that we all feel."

So the next question is: Who profits at whose expense?

### The Profit of the Nonprofits

In today's world, even though nonprofit organizations are not organized around the aim of making profit, it does not follow that they are organized *against profit*.<sup>26</sup> The most successful nonprofit NGOs often have fund-raisers whose job is to figure out ways to tap into the profits of companies, individuals, and other NGOs that are distributed around the world and that yield tax breaks for the donors. Under such a system, philanthropy does not require benevolence as much as it requires good business sense and some familiarity with the relevant tax code, and NGOs have proliferated over the last two decades as the Internet and other communication technologies have facilitated their ability to connect with an international donor base.

In Mexico, these changes have had enormous impact on the country's civil sector. Unlike, say, those in the United States, NGOs in Mexico have not been able to rely upon a domestic donor pool that provides funds through mail solicitations or other anonymous fund-raising strategies. Instead, donations are obtained through personal networks, which are much more limited in scope than an anonymous donor base. Since the early 1990s, therefore, Mexican NGOs have increasingly sought support for their activities from international donors, including large transnational NGOs such as the Ford and Kellogg Foundations, and from individuals, particularly in the United States, where there is a growing base of support for human and civil rights movements in Mexico.<sup>27</sup>

Over this same period of time, NGOs have proliferated in Mexico in response to two interrelated events that have transformed Mexico's political economy. One has been the embrace since the early 1980s by Mexican political and economic elites of neoliberal reforms that have focused on privatization, particularly of utilities, and on the cutback of subsidies for housing and food. These policies accelerated under the Carlos Salinas administration (1988–94), which combined privatization schemes with an opening of the Mexican economy to foreign investors, a process culminating in the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). With privatization and subsidy reductions, combined with a devastating currency devaluation in 1995, community organizations emerged around the country to help fill the gaps and provide social and economic support at the local level. Ciudad Juárez, for example, saw a sizable increase in the number of its NGOs in the mid-1990s as more people created organizations oriented toward community education, youth programming, violence prevention, family health, and economic development. Access to the

Internet and to international NGO Web sites and grant programs helped many of these local groups get off the ground. When news broke in the mid-1990s about the violence against women in Ciudad Juárez, some pre-existing NGOs, particularly anti-privatization, community development, and women's rights organizations located in Ciudad Juárez and in Chihuahua City, added this issue to their programming. They were later joined by family-support groups, such as Voces Sin Eco and Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, which were organized specifically in response to the violence.

A second event that has directly influenced the trajectory of Mexico's NGOs and of those participating in Ni Una Mas has been the political transition of the country's governance from a corporatist to a multiparty electoral system. Since the early 1980s, the state of Chihuahua had taken a lead as a state with strong political opposition to the PRI Party, which had governed the country autocratically since 1929. Women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City were especially active in the democratization movement, monitoring polls and calling for an international media presence during elections through the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>28</sup> Through such efforts, northern Mexico became a base for the opposition PAN Party, which in 2000 successfully dethroned the PRI in the country's first multiparty federal election and assumed the presidency under the leadership of Vicente Fox. This political transition was a watershed moment for NGOs; it opened space for organizations that were not allied with the PRI to assume a greater presence in the country's political landscape. Again, many of the NGOs participating in Ni Una Mas emerged as part of this democratization, and several of their leaders were prominent protagonists in the efforts to diversify the country's electoral system. Ni Una Mas, therefore, represents a convergence of diverse organizations that have formed around numerous issues, ranging from political and economic reform to women's rights to family support groups. Their international support base has grown with them over the years, such that people around the world have heard about the crimes in northern Mexico as a result of the networks that link local NGOs to media and to NGOs in other countries.

With such international support, the Ni Una Mas NGOs have been able to fortify their presence at the local level, and their leaders have increasingly emerged as spokespeople with access to and notoriety on the international stage. That most of these spokespeople are women (*voceras*) should not come as a surprise, given the traditional preponderance of women in non-profit and philanthropic organizations.<sup>29</sup> In Mexico, particularly, middle-class women who are able to volunteer their time represent what is at

least perceived to be the principal social segment that shoulders the work of community and philanthropic groups.<sup>30</sup> Within Ni Una Mas, as international interest in the violence against women has grown, and as international resources have supported the local campaign, more of the participating NGOs have been able to access international donations to cover equipment costs and events. A few of the Ni Una Mas NGOs have been able to raise funds for paying salaries and increasing staff size, so that formerly unpaid volunteers have been able to earn salaries for their work. This confluence of events, with more women gaining international standing as *vocer*as who are sometimes paid, has added fuel to the claims that they are “public women”—that is, women who earn a living in the public sphere and are therefore not motivated by their commitment to family and other domestic concerns.

Certainly, since 2001, when the many organizations of Ni Una Mas coordinated several highly publicized events, political elites have responded to the increased international pressure for an end to the violence by attacking the *vocer*as as “public women” who, by seeking to “profit” economically and politically, directly contribute to the violence. For example, this strategy for disqualifying the activists as “public women” has been used to great effect by the former governor, Patricio Martínez, and his state’s attorney general, who accused the activists of causing “social disintegration” by “selling the pain of families” to the international media.<sup>31</sup> With these words, the governor’s office and its supporters essentially accused the activists of seeking to fill their own pockets and satisfy their own political ambitions by exposing families, weakened by their painful ordeals, to a rapacious international media that makes money from selling sensationalist stories of sex and violence along the border. This accusation proliferated through numerous public accusations that the “public women” of Ni Una Mas were provoking a “denigration” of the family, of the nation, and of the border economy and were also inciting youth to engage in socially destructive events, such as graffiti and vandalism.<sup>32</sup>

The NGOs have not been able to dispel the accusation of profit because they are indeed competing in a global market for resources that derive from profit. As Alma Gomez defiantly said to me, “If they say we are profiting because we write grants and pay our workers with them, well, then, we are profiting. That is how we survive.”<sup>33</sup> While the strategy for criticizing Ni Una Mas for producing profits does exacerbate existing class tensions within the movement by exposing the reality that all profits derive from unpaid labor, the accusation is further strengthened by linking these profits to “public

women” and the social problems linked to them. The force of this accusation as part of a governing *techne* for discrediting Ni Una Mas was made clear when Alma told a newspaper reporter that the government had “declared civil war” against the movement.<sup>34</sup>

The corrosive effects of this discourse are evident within the movement itself, as some organizations within the network have picked up this line in order to distinguish themselves from the “profiteering” public women. For instance, Astrid González of Lucha Contra Violencia announced in an article that appeared in the *Heraldo de Chihuahua* on February 25, 2003 (two days after the initial “profit” accusation by the state’s attorney general), that—in an echo of the governor’s words—the “social decomposition of Ciudad Juárez” had penetrated the nongovernmental organizations. She said, “There are pseudo-organizations and pseudo-leaders who profit [*lucran*] not only politically, but also with the donations that they receive in bank accounts in the name of women assassinated in Ciudad Juárez.”<sup>35</sup> She continued, “The time has come to identify a difference, in order to clean up the image of the NGOs.” Again, this call to “clean up” the movement by distinguishing the “public women” from the ones with “purer” or “nonpublic” intentions rests upon that old story of the dirty whore who sullies all that she touches. Within such logic, to “clean up” the movement is to get rid of such women.

However, while the Ni Una Mas movement has been weakened by the “profiting public woman” accusation, some of the NGOs are fighting back and finding that the contradictions raised by this discourse open some new opportunities for their movement and for women’s political and economic participation more generally. By way of a conclusion, I turn my attention to some of these recent strategies.

### **The Politics of Public Women**

In February 2004, more than a dozen NGOs from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua City, and El Paso, Texas, along with individuals from other areas, organized an antiviolenza march in Ciudad Juárez. Several hundred people gathered at midday on the Mexican side of the international bridge that connects downtown Ciudad Juárez to downtown El Paso. Dozens of activists had walked across the bridge from El Paso to join the group. Most activists wore black and held signs, either in English or Spanish, to protest the violence against women and the lack of adequate response. The event was a col-

laborative event of Ni Una Mas and the V-Day social movement, which was started initially by *Vagina Monologues* author Eve Ensler to raise awareness and funds and provide support for organizations that fight violence against women around the world. Through her V-Day Foundation, Ensler helped fund the Ciudad Juárez march; she had previously given grants primarily to a sexual assault center in Ciudad Juárez. Among several other prominent women artists, politicians, and actresses, Ensler spoke at the Ciudad Juárez event. “We needed them for the publicity,” one of the organizers told me.

Actually the event had already received much publicity, but not, however, of the sort desired by its organizers. A couple of days before the march, one of the Ni Una Mas NGOs, a prominent family organization, announced that it would not participate in the V-Day march but would instead organize an alternative protest on the same day in Ciudad Juárez. The group wrote a letter to Ensler, which was translated into English and posted on the Internet,<sup>36</sup> claiming that “American activists” were changing the nature of the Ni Una Mas struggle by focusing on domestic violence and feminist issues at the expense of keeping attention on the murders and the impunity. This letter followed on the heels of accusations by the splintering organization that the Mexican organizations participating in the V-Day event were, again, “profiting” by effectively selling out to these American activists.

The other family organizations did not support this faction, nor the accusations of “profit” and misguided feminism in its complaint, and they, along with hundreds of others, marched in the V-Day event through downtown Ciudad Juárez and held a rally at the city’s central plaza. Perhaps in response to the factionalism that was on the minds of many that day,<sup>37</sup> the marchers seemed to find a consolidated voice in their response to the accusations that they were “prostituting” the movement. As groups lined up behind their banners calling for justice, for peace, for an end to impunity and violence, and as people held up their signs with victims’ faces, a new chant grew across the crowd. “Justicia para todas, para obreras, estudiantes, prostitutas, madres, hijas . . .” (Justice for all women, for workers, students, prostitutes, mothers, daughters). “We have to fight the idea that any woman, a prostitute, a worker, anyone does not deserve justice,” said one activist. “And we have to fight the idea that we, as women, do not have the right to demand justice. This is our struggle now.” “Am I a public woman?” replied one marcher, who was dressed in a black tunic and carrying a sign with a victim’s face on it, in response to my question. “Yes. I am a public woman. And I am proud of it.”

In the wake of the V-Day event, several Ni Una Mas NGOs have renewed their vow to continue the campaign by countering the discourse of “the public woman.”<sup>38</sup> Said another activist during the V-Day march, “They say that we can’t be on the street. Well, that’s where we are now. This is a democracy. And we are in the street because we are citizens. We have rights.” “This is my country,” said another, “and I won’t let them shut me up.”

In their refusal to shut up or to stop marching, the Ni Una Mas activists are demonstrating the significance of the governing strategy, the *techne*, for silencing them. They show how this discourse takes direct aim at women’s worth as citizens, as community members, as human beings. Every time someone claims that prostitutes and any women resembling them are social contagions, this person is participating in the devaluation of women across the spectrum. Ni Una Mas participants have no choice but to confront this practice head-on as they seek the international resources they need to bring attention and pressure to regional elites, who are responsible for public safety, and as they seek the social and economic resources to do their work. In their activism, they are rearticulating the *techne*, defining new modes of governance that incorporate the public woman.

Since the 2004 V-Day march, dozens more women and girls have been murdered in northern Mexico. Ni Una Mas activists have held more press conferences, marches, and public confrontations with elected officials. They continue, in other words, to step out as “public women” despite the attacks against them. As they do so, they expose the despotism behind the discourse that degrades women for participating in the public sphere, whether to sell their bodies or to sell a cause. As they venture out into the streets, into public office buildings, and into the media, these women are engaged in the radical project of rearticulating the discourse of the public woman that has long disqualified women’s political and economic activism around the world. Understanding the complicity binding the discourse of the contaminated-contaminating woman to the impunity surrounding the violence against women and girls in northern Mexico is essential to understanding what these activists face as they try to produce justice. Only then can we appreciate what it means to be a “public woman” in northern Mexico.

#### Notes

My thinking in this article reflects many conversations with Guadalupe de Anda, Arminé Arjona, Sarah Hill, Rosalba Robles, Socorro Tabuenca, Julia Monárrez, and Clara Rojas. I would like to thank them for their insights and comments regarding my argument.

- 1 Amnesty International, *Muertes Intolerables — México: 10 años de desapariciones y asesinatos de mujeres en Ciudad Juárez y Chihuahua* (London: Amnesty International, 2003).
- 2 Juliana Monárrez Fragoso, "Feminicidio Sexual Serial en Ciudad Juárez: 1993–2001," *Debate Feminista* 25 (2001): 279–308.
- 3 D. Castillo, M. Rangel Gómez, and B. Delgado, "Border Lives: Prostitute Women in Tijuana," *Signs* 24.2 (1999): 387–422. Women who work in the sex industry have long encountered this discourse around the world, and many have organized against it and its logical implications. For instance, Ciudad Juárez sex workers have had to organize against a police effort to "clean up" the city by removing them from the downtown; see Melissa Wright, "From Protests to Politics: Sex Work, Women's Worth, and Ciudad Juárez Modernity," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94 (2004): 369–86. Nevertheless, the discourse that the public woman qua prostitute represents social contamination (and its many problems) remains alive and well around the world. When I refer to the "public woman," I refer to this discourse and not to the actual experiences of women who define themselves as public women within and outside the sex industry.
- 4 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 5 J. Landes, ed., *Feminism, the Public, and the Private* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 6 Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- 7 M.W. Wright, "The Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women, and the Maquiladoras," *Public Culture* 29 (1999): 453–73.
- 8 Amnesty International, *Muertes Intolerables*.
- 9 C. Cruz Sáenz, "Negro Panorama Para Maquiladoras," *El Diario de Ciudad Juárez*, April 6, 2003.
- 10 Heriberto Barrientos Marquez, "En 10 años la PGR No Ha Detenido Ni Un Homicida: Patricio," *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*, March 13, 2003.
- 11 Benjamin Martínez Coronado, "Desintegración sociofamiliar, germen de crímenes: Patricio," *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*, February 20, 2003.
- 12 Cecilia Guerrero and Gabriela Minjárez, "Hacen Mito y Lucro de Los Feminicidios," *El Diario de Ciudad Juárez*, July 22, 2004.
- 13 Mexico has a legal distinction between "civil" and "social" associations. The former are "nonprofit" organizations; the latter are not. In this essay, I follow the common usage in Mexico, using NGO (*organización no gubernamental*) as a reference for "civil" associations. Although the term could cover "social associations," NGO usually refers to nonprofit organizations, particularly within the Ni Una Mas disputes.
- 14 M. Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect*, ed. G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87–104; A. Barry, T. Osborne, and N. Rose, introduction to Barry, Osborne, and Rose, eds., *Foucault and Political Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 15 Debbie Nathan, "The Missing Elements," *Texas Observer*, August 30, 2002, available at [www.womenontheborder.org/articles\\_resources.htm](http://www.womenontheborder.org/articles_resources.htm).
- 16 Adam Jones, "The Murdered Men of Juárez," April 2004, available at <http://adamjones.freesevers.com/juarez.htm> (accessed May 8, 2006).

- 17 John Quiñones interview with Robert Urrea, 20/20, January 20, 1999.
- 18 Socorro Tabuena Córdoba, "Día-V permanente en Ciudad Juárez," *El Diario de Ciudad Juárez*, March 2, 2003.
- 19 The theorization behind my logic here derives from my use of Judith Butler's theory that discursive repetition produces material reality, such that repetitions of the discourse of the whore-as-contaminant is, in fact, a practice aimed at producing this subject out of the bodies of real, living women. See her argument in *Bodies That Matter*.
- 20 Wright, "From Protests to Politics."
- 21 M. Orquiz, M. Cruz, and A. Mena, "Basta de denigar a Juárez: Sectores," *El Diario de Ciudad Juárez*, April 22, 2004.
- 22 David Piñon Balderrama, "Lucran ONGs con Muertas," *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*, February 23, 2003.
- 23 In the *Grundrisse*, Marx explains that profit is simply one form of surplus value, which is the actual topic of his analysis. I refer to "profit," rather than "surplus value," for the sake of simplicity. See Marx, *Grundrisse* (1857–58; reprint, London: Penguin, 1993).
- 24 *Ibid.*, 376–86.
- 25 Again, here I use a Marxist analysis: in *Capital*, vol. 1 (1867; reprint, London: Penguin, 1990), Marx demonstrates how all inputs represent versions of labor, or what he calls living and dead labor.
- 26 Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
- 27 This information comes from interviews I conducted with NGOs in Mexico City, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and Morelia, from 2000 to 2004.
- 28 Elsa Patricia Hernández Hernández, "La participación política de las mujeres en el gobierno local: El caso de las regidoras de Juárez, 1980–2001," master's thesis, La Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez.
- 29 Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*.
- 30 Interviews by author, February–April 2003, in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua City, and Mexico City.
- 31 Edgar Prado Calahorra, "Reiniciarán campaña Mujeres de Negro," *El Norte de Ciudad Juárez*, July 9, 2003.
- 32 Orquiz, Cruz, and Mena, "Basta de denigar a Juárez"; Edgar Prado Calahorra, "Protestan Mujeres Ante Procurador," *El Norte de Ciudad Juárez*, August 14, 2003; Martínez Coronado, "Desintegración sociofamiliar."
- 33 Interview by author, February 23, 2003, in Chihuahua City.
- 34 Enrique Perea Quintanilla, "Declaró PGJE la Guerra Sociedad Civil," *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*, February 25, 2003.
- 35 Froilan Meza Rivera, "Sí Reciben Donativos las ONGs," *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*, February 25, 2003.
- 36 "The Mothers of Juarez's Letter to Eve Ensler," available at <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-0401/msg00055.html>, accessed April 18, 2006.
- 37 Clara E. Rojas Blanco, "The V Day March in Mexico: Appropriation and (Mis)Use of Local Women's Activism," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 17.2 (2005): 217–27.
- 38 Interviews by author, February–April 2004.