

## DIRECTOR'S COMMENTARY

# *Feminism's Faults*

## *Beyond the Maternal Metaphor!*

**Fissures run all through feminist** movements, often articulated as faults—of vision, judgment, inclusion, respect. This October, Susan Faludi published an article in *Harper's*, titled “American Electra: Feminism’s ritual matricide,” finding significant fault in feminist generation. In it, she states:

A generational breakdown underlies so many of the pathologies that have long disturbed American feminism—its fleeting mobilizations followed by long hibernations; its bitter divisions over sex; and its reflexive renunciation of its prior incarnations, its progenitors, even its very name. The contemporary women’s movement seems fated to fight a war on two

fronts: alongside the battle of the sexes rages the battle of the ages.

Faludi couches her observations in the rhetoric of reproduction, birthright, and heritage—though the movement is “fruitful,” it harbors a “perpetual barrenness.” She wants “lines of descent” and instead sees only lines of dissent. One has to wonder, as Katha Pollitt has, whether maternity and reproduction are the best frameworks within which to understand a political movement founded, among other things, to resist the codes of nice—the nurturing, self-abnegating, warm, nonaggressive behaviors expected of women. Faludi acknowledges the point but counters with example after example of feminists, old and young, white, black,

Latina, queer, lesbian, academic, and activist who relentlessly invoke the mother/daughter relationship to characterize feminist conflict, no matter what their position or stake. There is no doubt that conflict is a powerful generator and feminism’s faults have produced insights for decades upon decades. Perhaps we need a new metaphor that does not formulate feminist conflict in the most familiar of relationships, but instead imagines it in the most hard fought and won political engagements.

- Kathleen McHugh



**december 2010**

**CSW**update

**Director's Commentary**  
BY KATHLEEN MCHUGH

**Gloria Wekker** BY HEATHER  
COLLETTE-VANDERAA

**Reflections on  
Mothering in Santiago  
de Cuba**  
BY HANNA GARTH

**From Misogyny  
to Murder**  
BY GILDA RODRÍGUEZ

**becoming transreal**  
BY LINZI JULIANO

**Keep it Green!**

**Staff**



# CSWupdate

december 2010



Gloria Wekker

**Wekker's study of mati work in Suriname is a major contribution to the study of human sexuality and the social structural and cultural contexts in which it is expressed.**

**— Claudia Mitchell-Kernan  
Vice Chancellor of Graduate Studies at UCLA**

# Innocence Unltd.

**GLORIA WEKKER VISITS UCLA TO DISCUSS HER CURRENT WORK ON GENDER, RACE AND SEXUALITY IN THE DUTCH CULTURAL ARCHIVE**

**BY HEATHER COLLETTE-VANDERAA**

**T**he feminist project has always had an agenda of upsetting and breaking through received inequalities,” Gloria Wekker asserted in her article “Still Crazy After all Those Years: Feminism for a New Millenium,” published in the 10th anniversary edition of the *European Journal of Women’s Studies*.<sup>1</sup> Her scholarship—on gender and sexuality, “ethnicized knowledge

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1. “Still Crazy After all Those Years: Feminism for a New Millennium,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13 (August 2006): 211-228.



systems,” Afro-Surinamese working-class women’s culture, and women’s movements in the Netherlands—has significantly contributed to this agenda. A scholar of exceptional intellect and eloquence, Wekker will be giving a talk sponsored by the UCLA Center for the Study of Women on January 6, 2011, in Royce Hall 314. The talk, entitled “Innocence Unltd.: Exploring Dutch Diaspora Space,” will focus on her current research and forthcoming book: *Innocence Unltd. Intersections of Gender, Race and Sexuality in the Dutch Cultural Archive*. About this topic, Wekker says, “Elsewhere in the world, too, Islam often is the scapegoat, but in the Netherlands a special characteristic is that gender and sexuality have become the litmus test for who can belong and who cannot: ‘We’ are tolerant, in favour of women’s emancipation and gay rights and who cannot underwrite that program, does not belong to ‘us.’”

Residing in the Netherlands, Wekker holds multiple positions as Aletta<sup>2</sup>-chair on Gender and Ethnicity at the Faculty of the Arts of Utrecht University and coordinator of the one-year MA program “Comparative Women’s Studies in Culture and Politics.” In addition, she is the director of GEM, the expertise center on Gender, Ethnicity and Multiculturality in higher education at Utrecht University.

Wekker’s visit to UCLA represents a homecoming in a way: She received her Ph.D. in Sociocultural Anthropology at UCLA in 1991 with a dissertation entitled “I Am Gold Money (I Pass Through All Hands, But I Do Not Lose My Value): The Construction of Selves, Gender and Sexualities in a Female, Working-class, Afro- Surinamese Setting.” Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Vice Chancellor of Graduate Studies at UCLA and Wekker’s doctoral

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2. Aletta, named after Aletta Jacobs (1854–1929), the first medical doctor, also feminist, in the Netherlands, is the new name of the IIAV, the International Information Center and Archives of the women’s movement, located in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

**Elsewhere in the world, too, Islam often is the scapegoat, but in the Netherlands a special characteristic is that gender and sexuality have become the litmus test for who can belong and who cannot: ‘We’ are tolerant, in favour of women’s emancipation and gay rights and who cannot underwrite that program, does not belong to ‘us.’**

— Gloria Wekker

**By examining the everyday realities of Afro-Surinamese women, Wekker demonstrates the fluidity and mutability of sexuality that is not restricted to Western binary structures of homosexuality or heterosexuality and challenges the way race and class have been deployed to reinforce a dominant mythic norm of white, middle-class female (hetero)sexuality.**

advisor, asserts that “Wekker’s study of *mati* work in Suriname is a major contribution to the study of human sexuality and the social structural and cultural contexts in which it is expressed.”

Detailed in *The Politics of Passion: Women’s Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (Columbia University Press, 2006), Wekker’s scholarship on the *mati* work of Afro-Surinamese working-class women identifies the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexual orientation in the formation of alternative structures of kinship and family, as well as individual identity. In academic prose that is poetic as much as it is political, complex, and compelling, Wekker explores the sexual, spiritual, and emotional bonds women have with other women. In a review, Jacqueline Nassy Brown called the study “a fine ethnography of passion.” According to Mitchell-Kernan, the book “is a pioneering work in gender and sexuality studies in which Wekker illuminates how same and cross sex sexual relations not only co-exist but provide different types of gratification to women.” By examining the everyday realities of Afro-Surinamese women, Wekker demonstrates the fluidity and mutability of sexuality that is not restricted to Western binary structures of homosexuality or heterosexuality and challenges the way race and class have been deployed to reinforce a dominant mythic norm of white, middle-class female (hetero)sexuality. She asserts that, “Studies of black working-class life in the hemisphere have overwhelmingly targeted the family system, notably the ‘oddness’ and undesirability of matri-focality, and have thus focused on the trials and tribulations in the relationships between men and women. By contrast, this book addresses the meaningful, nurturing, sexual and emotional relationships that Afro-Surinamese women carve out for themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

3. Gloria Wekker. 2006. *The Politics of Passion: Women’s Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 256.

For the study, Wekker received the Ruth Benedict Prize of the American Anthropological Association, which is presented annually to acknowledge excellence in scholarly work on lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered topics.”

Wekker’s work also strives to undo naturalized assumptions of race by consistently demonstrating the constructedness of racial identity: “When ‘race’ and ethnicity can continue silently to operate as organizers of our realities, they continue to construct the dominant ethnic position in society, as emptiness, as invisibility, as insignificant, in short as a non-ethnicity. This silent ethnic positioning holds enormous power within a racialized hierarchy.”<sup>4</sup> Whether stemming from Dutch postcolonial discourses in the public sphere or in women’s studies within the academy, Wekker asserts that the habitually uncontested use of race as a demarcation of identity, or an “ordering principle,” has deleterious consequences for women of color individually and collectively, and poses obstacles to contemporary feminist projects that aspire to acknowledge difference along more reflexive, productive, and intersectional vectors.

**Heather Collette-VanDeraa is a doctoral student in the Cinema and Media Studies Program at UCLA**

**Note:** For more information on Gloria Wekker and her work, visit <http://www.let.uu.nl/~gloria.wekker/personal/>

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4. “Still Crazy After All Those Years...” p. 495

The poster features a dark blue background with a yellow border. At the top, the title "Innocence Unltd.: Exploring Dutch Diaspora Space" is written in a light blue, sans-serif font. The name "GLORIA WEKKER" is prominently displayed in the center in large, yellow, outlined letters with a red shadow effect, slanted upwards. In the bottom right corner, the event details "THURSDAY JANUARY 6 4 to 6 pm ROYCE 314" are written in a bold, red, sans-serif font.





**“Toward Being a Complete Woman”:  
REFLECTIONS ON MOTHERING IN SANTIAGO DE CUBA**

**BY HANNA GARTH**



# Studying women, work, and household life in contemporary Cuba

**O**N A HOT SUMMER AFTERNOON as I sat in a typical Santiago de Cuba living room sharing the electric fan with five family members spanning four generations, Cori ran up the stairs, burst into the living room, and exclaimed, “You are not an anthropologist!” Everyone in the room looked to me for an answer, but I just had a puzzled look on my face. Cori continued, “Anthropologists study artifacts and bones; they study things of the past that already happened; they try to piece together how the past made us who we are today. You say that you study food and household life today, but that can’t be anthropology. You can’t study the food consumption of today and be an anthropologist.”

Still sitting by the fan, Abuela Carla, a self-identified mulatta woman in her late sixties who has lived in Santiago de Cuba all of her life, said to me, “He is crazy, don’t listen to him,” as she tried to calm down her feverish great grandson, Obalo. Just as Obalo was falling asleep his mother, Abuela Carla’s granddaughter Yaicel, returned from her temporary summer job at Carnival museum to breastfeed him. Her

own mother, Gema, also sitting with us by the fan, moving slowly in the rocking chair shook her head and said:

*It is time for that boy to get off the tit, what are you going to do when you have a real job you cant just be coming home to give your babies the tit. He is 18 months old, it's time.*

Yaicel looked at me, rolled her eyes, and pulled down her shirt to breastfeed Obalo. Her mother retorted, “Don’t look to her, she comes from a developed country where women work and children learn independence. She doesn’t even live with her mother anymore!” Gema stood up, buttoned her pants, slipped on her house shoes and stomped upstairs to watch the afternoon telenovela.

The connections between development, sovereignty, and women working outside the home are central to the Cuban state ideology since the 1959 revolution, which lifted formal and informal constraints on women’s lives. Fidel Castro described the

changes that were taking place in women’s private and public lives as a “revolution within a revolution.” The revolutionary Cuban government adopted the standard position of Marxism that true sexual equality can be established only through a socialist revolution—thus, for Cuban women gender parity was not gained through a women’s movement but a socialist movement. Although it took some time before there were observable differences in women’s lives, by the mid 1980s there were clearly substantial benefits of the 1959 revolution for Cuban women, especially regarding employment opportunities.

Over the past 50 years the Cuban government has implemented many programs designed to improve women’s rights and expedite women’s participation in the workforce. Article 44 of the Cuban constitution states that “men and women have equal rights in economic, political, cultural and social endeavors as well as within the family. The Cuban state guarantees women the same opportunities and possibilities as men, so that women can achieve

full participation in the development of the country” (Gaceta Oficial). Since the mid 1970s, the government has stressed the nuclear family as normative. The 1975 family code upholds the family as the singular “base cell of society” (Bengelsdorf 1997). An official program to support the proclamation of the family as the base cell of society was established in 1992 to help ease of process childbearing for working women by covering their salaries 3 months prior to and 3 months after the birth of a child. An additional unpaid 6 months of leave may be taken and mothers are guaranteed the right to return to their jobs. Such benefits are seen as part of state efforts to “create conditions that accomplish equality” (Gaceta Oficial; Miller 2002). The state childcare system is another way that the state attempts to create conditions that accomplish equality. Currently there are approximately 1,000 state subsidized, full-day childcare programs in Cuba, providing care for 184,000 children.

Despite these government programs, women have not achieved parity in many arenas of work and household life in contemporary Cuba. While it is true that the role of men in household work varies widely along social and class lines, men are still generally conceived of as breadwinners whose primary work is outside the home. As Pertierra notes, typically the male contribution to the household will consist of “generating income to cover domestic







expenses, organizing house and furniture repairs, and running errands requiring lifting (Pertierra 2008: 746).” Reza and colleagues found that in Havana 81% of women surveyed did most of the household work, a proportion that increases moving eastward across the country, in Cienfuegos it was 83% and in Guantanamo 96% (Bengelsdorf 1997: 231).

In my own research on the daily processes of household food acquisition and consumption, I have observed that women are almost always in charge of the time-consuming household work of standing in line for rations and household goods, going from market to market looking for the most affordable foods, or waiting by the door for street vendors to come by with the day’s fare (Garth 2009). Although the state has upheld the nuclear family as normative, I have found that Cuban families tend to consist of extended kin, and include fictive kin and multiple generations within one household. Rather than the state daycare centers, it is often this extended family that helps to raise children in contemporary Cuba. Grandmothers, aunts, and cousins are charged with the primary caregiving for babies and toddlers while their young mothers work and uncles, brothers, cousins, and neighbors might watch children briefly while mothers or other caregivers run errands and conduct the work necessary to run the household. Children tend to be cared for by kin both because the state-

subsidized services are somewhat difficult to procure and because this seems to be preferred over such services. This is certainly the case with Abuela Carla's house.

On that same hot summer day, after Yaicel breastfed Obalo, Carla put him down for a nap. While smoking unfiltered Cuban cigarettes beside the fan Carla confided in me:

*I have worked my whole life. Since I finished the 4th grade, which was the last year of school I did before working as a domestic in people's houses. I worked in houses before the revolution, and after, nothing changed. I always had to come home after cooking and cleaning on the other side of town to do the same thing in my house. I worked for them all day long and then I would sew for extra money at home at night. I raised my own five children without any help, and then I raised all of their children, and now I am raising their children. Their father was in the street. It was really hard, but I worked, I worked for everything. I went to the market, I made the food, I raised pigs and chickens to sell for us. Now I am almost 70 years old and I don't work outside the home anymore but I still do everything around here. The only reason I had to quit doing other work is because of my eyes, my glaucoma; otherwise I would have worked until I died. But you see,*

*I'm still working, I am raising my grandkids and great grandkids—they are here all the time and do you see their mothers? Even if they [their mothers] were here they wouldn't know what to do. I work and work and work. I am tired, but I know that I will raise these babies until I die.*

Carla's story is typical of many of the women from her age range, skin color, and class background who have participated in my research thus far. Her household consists of four generations of women still living under one roof. Carla clearly stresses that her efforts within her household to care for her family should be viewed as work. Indeed she reiterates that the work was hard, enduring, and ultimately tiring for her. Carla's work outside the home, as a "domestic" in the homes of Santiagueros with more financial means has historically been a typical job for women of her background. Through working as a "domestic" she honed the skills necessarily for maintaining a household and childrearing that she would later use to raise her own children, their children, and now their children.

Carla notes that her own children, now grandmothers themselves, and their children, now mothers, "wouldn't know what to do" to maintain a household and raise a family. This reference requires some contextual explanation. Carla's children grew up in the midst of Cuba's transition to







socialism. Her children and grandchildren have always lived under the socialist system that encouraged women's work outside the home and supported this with the childcare programs described above. From Carla's point of view, these efforts to bring women into the workforce were the reason that her daughters never learned how to mother.

A few days later I was walking with Yai-cel from a drum and dance performance in the park back to her house. She had to go back to breastfeed and lamented that she couldn't stay and drink rum with her friends. She and I are the same age but she has two children and two marriages already and I have had none. As we are walking up the hill she sighs and says:

*You are so lucky that you get to live on your own with your own apartment. You get to travel, be independent. I wish that I could live alone like you, with just my husband and my children, but I don't think it will ever happen. I will always be like a child living with my grandmother and mother, I will never be a complete woman—just the husband and the kids that's all that I have toward being a complete woman.*

She paused and continued:

*Why don't you have children yet? I know you said that you wanted to fin-*



ish school but you are so old. How do you do it? You must feel so strange.

Yaicel, after thinking through her own desires to become a more “complete woman,” realized that I, the one lucky enough to live on my own, did not have the other elements she considered necessary to be a “complete woman”—a family of my own. By asking, “how do you do it?” she was empathizing with my own situation. I realized that from her perspective we both lacked something crucial to becoming adults, to becoming “complete women.” For her, it was the lack of independence and the lack of a space for her own family in which she could develop her skills for maintaining a household and mothering her children.

Yaicel’s reflections complement Carla’s notion that her own daughters and granddaughters have not been socialized into the same practices of mothering and running a household. However, although they do not share the *same* mothering practices both have their own unique ways of mothering. Nevertheless the local notion of what it means to be a mother and a “complete woman” do not coincide with Yaicel’s practice of mothering. Both of these women tend to foreground the drawbacks of intergenerational mothering, but they would certainly recognize that there are benefits to this arrangement as well. Mothering is not a static, ahistorical prac-

tice and it is true that changes in the state do affect mothering and the status of women, however as this case reveals economic and political changes do not necessarily change local notions of gendered divisions of labor, rights, or social status even from women’s perspectives. Following Sherry Ortner’s (1974) argument that the transformation of the status of women cannot be achieved solely through changes in social institutions, I have shown here that despite strong state efforts toward gender parity in the workplace local sociocultural ideologies of mothering are still conflated with womanhood, it is even seen to be critical to the local concept of “complete woman[hood].”

My work shows how state policy and programming may have achieved the intended consequences—getting more women into the workforce. However, in order to achieve this more household work was shifted onto grandmothers leaving a generation of women with the notion that womanhood is conflated with motherhood but without the skills and space for their own mothering.



**Hanna Garth is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at UCLA. Her research centers on processes of food acquisition and consumption in the context of everyday household life in Santiago de Cuba. This research was**

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NUESTRAS HIJAS.

PARA LAS MUJERES DE JUAREZ

To our daughters

MUJERES DE JUAREZ

400+  
M.U.J.E.R.E.S  
JUSTICIA

# From Misogyny to Murder

## Everyday Sexism and Femicide in Cross-Cultural Context

BY GILDA RODRÍGUEZ

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE MONTREAL MASSACRE OF 1989, in which Marc Lépine killed fourteen women—after ordering men out of the room and claiming he was “fighting feminism”—Jane Caputi and Diana Russell coined the term “femicide” to describe the killing of women qua women. The original definition emphasizes that femicide is only the most extreme form in a continuum that includes the many forms of violence against women, ranging from rape and sexual abuse to forced sterilization.<sup>1</sup> However, femicide is not only related to other forms of explicit violence against women but also to everyday acts of misogyny that contribute to the creation of a culture of sexism and devalorization of women and their lives. These everyday sexist acts are often ignored or minimized, in such a way that their connection to large-scale forms of violence against women is obscured. The disconnect between everyday misogyny and femicide in much of popular and media discourse is problematic on two counts. First, it contributes to

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1. Jane Caputi and Diana E.H. Russell, “Femicide: Speaking the Unspeakable,” *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, ed. Jill Radford and Diana E.H. Russell (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 15.



**...femicide is not only related to other forms of explicit violence against women but also to everyday acts of misogyny that contribute to the creation of a culture of sexism and devalorization of women and their lives. These everyday sexist acts are often ignored or minimized, in such a way that their connection to large-scale forms of violence against women is obscured.**

the mischaracterization of gender-based murder as simple killing, without a misogynistic component, which makes it difficult to address the root causes of such violence. Secondly, when “small” incidences of sexism occur, they are more easily dismissed as inconsequential and even harmless. My argument is that commonplace sexist practices lay the conditions for femicide and for the political discourse that surrounds it. To this end, I examine two case studies: the over five hundred femicides that have occurred in the border city of Juárez, Mexico, since 1993, and George Sodini’s murder of three women in a gym in a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in August of 2009. Though different in both scale and duration, among other factors, these gendered crimes in Mexico and the United States show how pervasive the link is between everyday sexist practices and femicide across cultural contexts.

Since early 1993, over 500 Mexican women have been killed in the industrial border city of Juárez, in the state of Chihuahua. A majority of the victims are poor or working-class girls and young women. Their bodies are found in remote areas, often bearing signs of sexual abuse and other physical violence. Although several arrests have been made in connection to the murders, the crimes continue. The inability of the authorities to solve the murders, the result of both incompetence and corruption, has made Juárez an extremely dangerous place to be a woman. More importantly, the lack of value accorded to the lives of women in Juárez has made it possible for the murders to go on with impunity.

A great number of the femicide victims were employed in Juárez’s maquiladoras,

foreign-owned assembly plants that are a major economic force in the area. Maquiladoras predominantly seek female employees because of their overwhelming need for unskilled labor that is inexpensive, easy to train and unlikely to file complaints about workplace conditions. A stereotyped view of “the malleable working woman”<sup>2</sup> shaped the maquiladoras’ policy of hiring women, whose very femininity supposedly made them docile, more apt for tasks requiring a high level of dexterity, and far less likely to be demanding that their male counterparts.

Very often, maquiladora workers and job applicants are subjected to pregnancy

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2. Leslie Salzinger, “From High Heels to Swathed Bodies: Gendered Meanings under Production in Mexico’s Export-Processing Industry,” *Feminist Studies*, 23.3 (Autumn 1997), 549–574.



tests<sup>3</sup> and lengthy questioning about marital status and personal plans, because employers favor young, single women who are less likely to miss work due to domestic responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> The maquiladora model is built on a conception of its workers as disposable. The hard physical labor makes it impossible for most women to work in the industry for more than a few years, when their bodies can no longer keep up. The restrictions on pregnancy and marriage, and the lack of accommodations for women with children, make it so the realities of these women's lives are often in conflict with their employers' expectations, and thus the turnover rate is high. However, the labor supply is plentiful,<sup>5</sup> and, aware of this competition, maquiladora workers often prefer not to speak up when overworked or abused, and go to great lengths to hide pregnancies and find alternative childcare arrangements.

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3. A federal anti-pregnancy discrimination law was only passed in 2003, and its enforcement is lax, particularly in the maquiladora sector. Emily Miyamoto Faber, "Pregnancy discrimination in Latin America: the exclusion of 'employment discrimination' from the definition of 'labor laws' in the Central American Free Trade Agreement," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, 16 (2007), 307.

4. Patricia Fernández-Kelly, "Maquiladoras: The View from the Inside," *The Women, Gender, and Development Reader*, ed. Nalini Visvanathan et al (London: Zed Books, 1997), 208; Melissa Wright, "The Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women and Maquiladoras," *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, eds Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001), 140.

5. Althea J. Cravey, *Women and Work in Mexico's Maquiladoras* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 72.

Melissa Wright links the disregard for the value of women in the maquiladora environment to the devaluing of women's lives implicit in the murders. She conceptualizes the high rates of turnover as a corporate death of sorts, in which the women's labor is more valued than the women themselves. As long as the plants produce goods cheaply and efficiently, the owners do not care about who is producing them. As Wright explains, "turnover itself [...] is not necessarily a waste but the by-product of a process during which human beings turn into industrial waste."<sup>6</sup> The maquiladora workers are disposable and always replaceable. The basic human rights of a woman, like that of privacy, can be violated because if she resists such a violation, there will be another worker eager and ready to take her place.

The disposability of the women, and more specifically their bodies, then, is common to both the murders and maquiladora work. Despite the efforts of local and international nongovernmental organizations, the murders continue, and the gendered basis for the violence is often ignored. The already-high incidence of crime in Juárez—much of it related to the drug trade—has escalated in recent years, making it difficult to distinguish, in media and political narratives, the gender-based murders from ones motivated by other causes.

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6. Melissa Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 83.

Caputi and Russell argue that "[m]isogyny not only motivates violence against women, but distorts the press coverage of such crimes as well. [...] The police, media and public response to crimes against women of color, poor women, lesbians, women prostitutes, and women drug users is particularly abysmal—generally apathy laced with pejorative stereotyping and victim-blaming."<sup>7</sup> The discourse around the Juárez femicides follows this pattern: the dark-skinned, working-class female victims receive little attention in the Mexican national media, and, when they do, they are often accused of being "loose," as if their perceived morality in some way makes their deaths acceptable. A prosecutor for the state of Chihuahua famously suggested implementing a curfew to stop the murders, because it would keep "good people" off the street at night<sup>8</sup>—implying that the lives of so-called loose women were expendable. The current president, Felipe Calderón, has remained tight-lipped on the subject, while devoting considerable energy (and several trips to Juárez) to drug-related violence. In 2005, his predecessor, Vicente Fox, accused the media of sensationalizing crimes that, he claimed, had been solved and were no longer a problem. At the same time, the maquiladoras, which deny any connection

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7. Caputi and Russell, 15.

8. Lourdes Portillo, *Señorita Extraviada* (New York, NY: Women Make Movies, 2002).

**“Sodini,” said a member of the Allegheny County Police Department, “just had a lot of hatred in him, and he was hellbent on doing this act.” The gunman chose the aerobics class, he said, simply because it had a lot of women in it.**

between their practices and the femicides, continue to be an important player in the city’s economy.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, in the summer of 2009, George Sodini opened fire on a women’s aerobics class in Pittsburgh, killing three women and injuring nine more before committing suicide. The victims were all strangers to Sodini, who maintained a blog that revealed his intent to commit the crime and included several misogynistic rants (the word “ho” features prominently). Sodini, whose romantic advances had been rejected by women for years—he claimed that “30 million women” had turned him down—and had not had sex in decades, decided to take revenge by

opening fire in a female space in the gym where he was a member. In this case, the mainstream media, including the Associated Press and the New York Times, and local authorities were quick to recognize the gendered nature of the murders. “Sodini,” said a member of the Allegheny County Police Department, “just had a lot of hatred in him, and he was hellbent on doing this act.”<sup>10</sup> The gunman chose the aerobics class, he said, simply because it had a lot of women in it.

The narrative is also strikingly devoid of the sort of victim-blaming we often encounter in the case of the Juárez women. Sodini’s victims—all white and middle-class—were not doing anything they were not “supposed” to do, and were in fact

following a script of conventional femininity by exercising in that environment. The amount of press coverage, including the pictures of the murdered women, contrasts starkly with the few, short mentions, rarely including any pictures, of the Juárez killings in the local daily, *El Norte de Juárez*. In many ways, the discourse surrounding the femicides in Pittsburgh succeeds at overcoming the challenges outlined by Caputi and Russell and clearly identifies the gendered basis of the violence without incurring in minimization or victim-blaming.

It was feminist bloggers, not the police or media, who made the connection between other sexist practices and femicide. As Amanda Marcotte put it,

Today, women will be raped or beaten or maybe even killed for choosing to do differently than a

9. “Fox says media ‘reheating’ Mexico women’s murders,” Reuters, May 30, 2005. <<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N30619597.htm>>

10. Sean D. Hamill, “Blog Details Shooter’s Frustration,” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2009.

man desired of them—everything from screwing up the household chores to being deemed a tease to thinking they had a right to go to this party/walk down this alley to leaving a man who wants them to stay. But most people won't see Sodini's crime as different by degree, but by kind, because unlike most men who commit this kind of hate crime against women, Sodini didn't know his victims.<sup>11</sup>

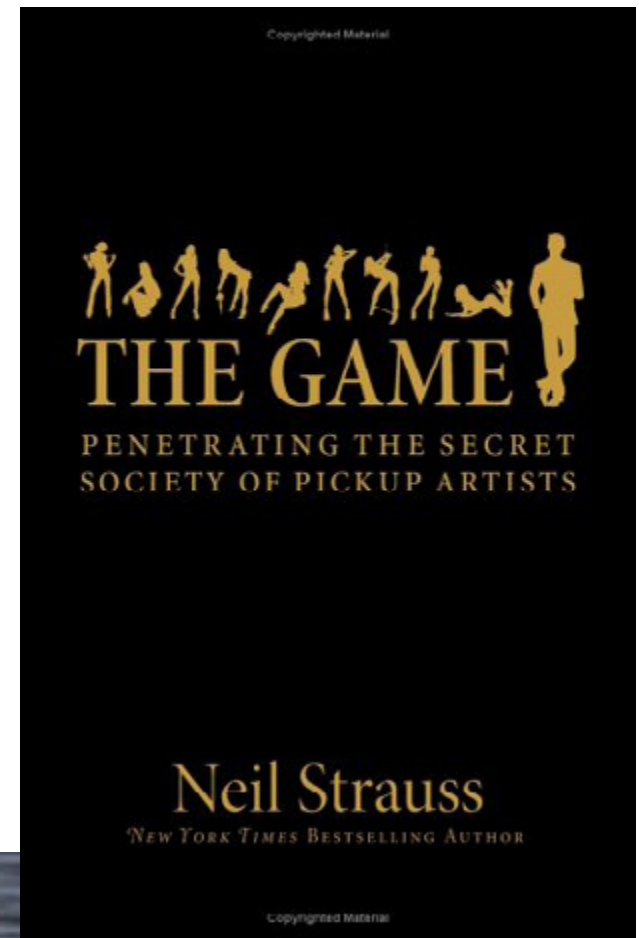
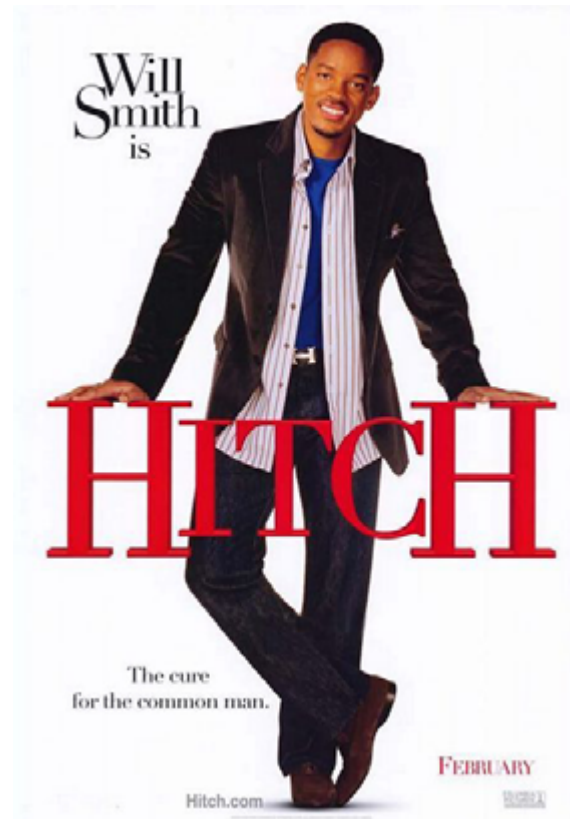
Much like in the case of Marc Lépine of the Montreal Massacre, certain discourses understand Sodini as “crazy” or “demented”—an anomaly, rather than the most extreme form of a kind of violence that happens every day, thanks to a culture that allows and supports it.<sup>12</sup> Anne Applebaum, for example—also writing online—said that it was a “ludicrous proposition” to believe that “we are all so inured to the victimization of the female half of the population that we don't even notice it anymore.”<sup>13</sup>

It is precisely this sort of contention that I attempt to argue against in this paper. There is, in fact, in many contexts, a

11. Amanda Marcotte, “These Crimes Don't Happen in a Vacuum,” *Pandagon*, August 5, 2009. <[http://www.pandagon.net/index.php/site/comments/these\\_crimes\\_dont\\_happen\\_in\\_a\\_vacuum](http://www.pandagon.net/index.php/site/comments/these_crimes_dont_happen_in_a_vacuum)>

12. A writer for the *Calgary Herald* attacked exactly the proposition I am putting forth here: “OK, ladies [...] let's not go there. Let's not turn George Sodini into the new Marc Lepine, the next poster boy for those who insist that these sick individuals represent the violence that lives in all men's hearts,” Naomi Lakritz, “One killer a whole gender does not damn,” *Calgary Herald*, August 7, 2009.

13. Anne Applebaum, “America Is ‘Saturated With Misogyny’? Oh, Please,” *Slate*, August 10, 2009. <<http://www.doublex.com/blog/xxfactor/america-saturated-misogyny-ohplease>>



**Pickup artistry might seem like a harmless way for unlucky-in-love men like George Sodini to get a date, but it is also part of an increasingly prominent subculture where women matter only insofar as they satisfy a man's desires, and where they are interchangeable with one another.**

generalized culture of disregard, and even hatred, for women that makes it difficult for us to understand that femicide does not happen in vacuum, but is rather just one—if extreme—manifestation in an environment that accepts and fosters, to varying degrees, behaviors that are degrading and detrimental to women, including many forms of violence. In the case of the Sodini femicides, bloggers have identified a particularly insightful connection between his crime and the culture of the so-called “seduction community,” which attempts to increase men’s sexual and romantic conquests through techniques allegedly derived from social psychology. “Pickup artists” are men who have developed skills with the end of successfully seducing women—the goal is to seduce as many women as possible. This subculture has

grown and gained much attention in recent years, with best-selling books including Neil Strauss’ *The Game*, and a reality show on VH1, *The Pickup Artist*, that ran for two seasons (2007–2008); it is also the inspiration for Will Smith’s movie *Hitch*. In the aftermath of the Sodini murders, some members of the pickup artist community wrote about how if the gunman had followed their rules of seduction, he would not have had the sexual frustration that led to the shooting spree:

If Sodini had learned game he would have been able to find another woman and gotten laid after his ex dumped him. He wouldn’t have spent the next 20 years steeped in bile and weighed down by his Sisyphean [sic] blue balls, dreaming of vengeance. Game could have saved the lives of the women Sodini killed.<sup>14</sup>

14. Game Can Save Lives,” *Roissy in DC*, August 5,

Underlying this sort of claim are two problematic assumptions: the first, that frustration at the lack of attention from women is, if not justifiable, at least an understandable reason for unleashing this sort of violence; the second has to do with the presumption that women are highly manipulable—and in fact should be manipulated to fulfill men’s desires. Pickup artistry might seem like a harmless way for unlucky-in-love men like George Sodini to get a date, but it is also part of an increasingly prominent subculture where women matter only insofar as they satisfy a man’s desires, and where they are interchangeable with one another. The goal of the pick-up artist, as one of them, David DeAngelo, puts it, is to talk to “any

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2009. <<http://roissy.wordpress.com/2009/08/05/game-can-save-lives/>>



woman” (emphasis mine); another, Mike Pilinski, suggests in the title of his popular e-book, *She’s Yours For the Taking*,<sup>15</sup> that his audience can make proprietary claims on the women they desire. The language of the seduction community further objectifies women: the woman the artist wants to talk to is the “target,” while the friend she is with is the “obstacle.” With growing media attention on pick-up artists and their techniques also grew outrage, in certain sectors, about their treatment of women.<sup>16</sup> However, the dominant media discourse suggests that pick-up artistry is harmless and, at best, gives socially awkward men a leg up in interactions with the opposite sex. The *Los Angeles Times* put it thusly: “You may not like Neil Strauss’ new book, *The Game*, but he’s a hero to men seeking women.”<sup>17</sup>

The two case studies I present here might seem mismatched in the magnitude of both the femicides and the sorts of “everyday” acts of misogyny I associate with each of them. However, I believe that, read against each other, the femicides of Juárez and Pittsburgh reveal the deep relation-

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15. David DeAngelo Communications, Inc., *Double Your Dating* <<http://www.doubleyourdating.com>>; Mike Pilinski, *She’s Yours for the Taking* (West Seneca, NY: Kipling Kat, 2009).

16. See, for example, Andrew Johnson, “Passing on ‘foolproof’ pick-up tips. Is this ‘grooming’ for adults?” *The Independent*, August 28, 2005.

17. Deborah Netburn, “Danger: Pickup Artists Ahead,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 2005.

ship that exists, even in markedly different contexts, between the pervasive, but small-scale, misogyny that people in a particular society might be inclined to ignore, and monumentally barbaric acts that, to many, seem to defy explanation. The murders in Juárez and Sodini’s shooting are out of the ordinary, but they are not anomalies or aberrations: they are simply the most gruesome examples.

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**Photo credit:** On page 15, photo, “Pink crosses in Olvera street, Los Angeles, as remembrance for the murdered women of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, on the Day of the Dead, by Jim Winstead Jr., [trainedmonkey.com/](http://trainedmonkey.com/)

## Some Feminist Blogs

<http://pandagon.net>

<http://feministblogs.org/>

<http://www.feministe.us/blog/>

<http://feministing.com/>

<http://thefbomb.org/>

<http://www.ourbodiesourblog.org/>

<http://www.jezebel.com/>

<http://www.salon.com/life/broad-sheet/>

<http://finallyfeminism101.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.wimnonline.org/WIMNs-VoicesBlog/>

<http://www.ihollaback.org/>

<http://bitchmagazine.org/blogs>

<http://www.mediagirl.org/>

<http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/>



becoming transreal



# becoming transreal

## ***Micha Cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand mix first life with Second Life***

**BY LINZI JULIANO**

“What if you could become anything? What happens after species-change surgery becomes a reality?” These questions open Micha Cárdenas’ blog post advertising announcing her November 3<sup>rd</sup> event at UCLA, entitled “becoming transreal.” This piece is a continuation of “becoming dragon,” a 365-hour piece referencing the 365 days of “real-life experience” a transgender or transsexual person must live through before beginning hormone therapy and/or undergoing a sex-change operation. Hosted by the Center for Performance Studies and cosponsored by the Center for the Study

of Women, “becoming transreal” also exposed relationships among various technologies of the body, from hormone therapy to online role-playing games.

Audience members donned 3D glasses because the performance was streamed live into Second Life, an online universe in which users can create their own avatar with almost limitless options. These avatars can talk, chat, shop, get married—virtually everything present in “first life” is available in “second life.” “becoming transreal” took place before two audiences: physically present and virtual. The first life (physically present) audience could see both the live performance and the

second life (virtual) audience watching the virtual performance. The setting for the first life audience was a dark room, while the setting for the second was a remote, barren environment. The 3D glasses made the virtual audience even more “present” for the piece, pulling their bodies from the realm of the two-dimensional into holographic bodies seemingly stood alongside the live performers.

Cárdenas wore a bra, underwear, high heels, and a virtual reality headset. Her partner, Elle Mehrmand, was also a very visible and integral part of the performance, coordinating avatars on screen and running sound. While Cárdenas flatly



read facts about her mother's illness, her own hormone therapy, the promises of virtual communities and newfound lesbianism, Mehrmand inserted sound effects and repeated certain words and sounds into a microphone, thereby emphasizing them for both audiences. This echolalia, as panelist Amy Sara Carroll later noted, added to an atmosphere of the transreal because the voices blended and overlapped each other in varied forms.

As Cárdenas spoke, she intermittently stood and walked to center stage. Once there, Elle would meet her with a nipple suction machine. Using cups and a suction device, she would restrict the air around Cárdenas' nipples until she made an audible moan, indistinguishable between pleasure and pain. Watching her breasts being pumped into being (a technique used to encourage breast growth for transsexuals) elicited a visceral reaction in some of the audience members: an older male twisted and grabbed protectively at his own breasts. This sexualized pain, as well as Elle's shifting between conductor and echo arguably provided a more stimulating visual than the screen image with its barren landscape and generally respectful inhabitants.

In this piece, Cárdenas addressed three main themes: becoming a lesbian, the failure of the biotech industry to help her mother, and the transreal aspects of her performance that "mixed" the virtual

## ***"transreality" is a "post-post-modern" medium to explore the "mysteries and complexities of the flesh, the poetry of the flesh."***

with the material body. She suggested that "transreality" is a "post-post-modern" medium to explore the "mysteries and complexities of the flesh, the poetry of the flesh." Technology has provided a tool to explore flesh, but people also sustain it with their own data input: "Everything we feel is immediately sent into the network." When Cárdenas explored her lesbianism in bed with Mehrmand ("this is what it's like for lesbians") or performed femininity while with friends, she asserted that she felt like an overexcited tourist—trying on identities—instead of someone living in the liminal spaces between social constructs. Cárdenas ended the piece stating that she was "fleeing the regimes of identification...[the idea of a] real woman is fantasy."

The panel discussion after the performance featured Ricardo Dominguez, Amy Sara Carroll, and Sandy Stone. Referencing his own work in the 1980s with the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) and the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), Dominguez noted the "rudimentary forms of a performance matrix that brings data [digital bodies] and real bodies together." This performative matrix was imagined as a counter to imagined future bodies or bodies given over to a kind of pure machinic. Bodies that fail to be fully machinic add another level of disturbance. Creating disturbance and disturbing traditional notions of body and self were objectives for groups like CAE and EDT, who imagined the performance matrix as being a configuration between bodies with organs, bod-

ies without organs, and organs without bodies. Transreal performance is a space not only in which these various configurations of bodies and organs could appear but also a way to find organs outside of the previous three. Transreal performance seeks “the surprising organ, the surprising organism.” Pieces such as “becoming transreal” and “becoming dragon” create a discourse for a new corporeal perspective: the data body and real body encountering itself. Dominguez also suggested that becoming transreal—or acknowledging the transreal aspects of participating within an economy of virtual capital (things like credit cards, online spaces such as *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* as hubs of fake currency with very real counterparts)—would allow for different shapes and gestures to appear and interact with themselves.

The second respondent, Sandy Stone, stated that as performances incorporating new media have become more sophisticated, they approach a point where the discourse itself becomes more palpable. This discourse takes on a life of its own that is partially grounded in the performance. Incorporating the “real body” and the techno/digital body through motion-sensor capture resulted in a digitized puppetry (the body with organs, alongside the body without). Engaging in and engaging with these performances, whether in first or *Second Life*, takes the “audience”

into a different form of viewing/participating and altering notions of what constitutes bodies. Stone introduced the three Cs: Code Creates Community. “Code” does not connote social code but programming code (“digital aura and manipulation”) that creates environments such as *Second Life*. The three Cs represent the actual making of the world through imperative gestures, which lead to multiple worlds, as well as their organic and inorganic dimensions.

Amy Sara Carroll, the final respondent, discussed the use of echo in the piece. Echolalia is the automatic and immediate repetition of vocalizations made by another person; in this case, Mehrmand’s echo of Cárdenas represented the fluctuating power and control over voice. Using echo and silence and capitalizing on technical difficulties, the performers called attention to the subtle distinctions between ordinary voice and transreal voice. Carroll suggested that the text itself moved between various voices and realms (the medical, the public, the private) and between different realities. Cárdenas’ relationships with her mother and with Mehrmand, which might be considered “private,” were made public, transversing those boundaries.

In the final question and answer portion of the event, Cárdenas responded to the possible conflation of her transsexual transformation with her projects in *Sec-*

*ond Life*. To this, Cárdenas answered that her idea of transreal is “responding to the criticism.” Although some claim that Cárdenas’ body or gender is not real, she responds, “Well, neither is theirs. It is totally constructed...real bodies don’t exist.”

The question remains, What if you could become anything?

**Linzi Juliano is a PhD student in the department of Theater and Performance Studies. She is interested in gender and sexuality in relation to information science.**

**Author’s Note: Thanks to Areum Jeong for her aid in cross-checking panel quotes.**





# Keep it Green!

## SUSTAINABILITY TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

### Use virtual file cabinets and file folders!



*Instead of printing out emails and other documents, save PDF copies onto a flash drive. You'll have a backup if you need to consult it or print it out later. Use a virtual file cabinet (a network drive) to store documents for shared use.*

– Brenda Johnson-Grau



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