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Souk Ukaz, Spring 2009, Fez, Morocco

We were fourteen participants from eleven countries (if you count by country of origin), gathered to talk about the idea of the city. We talked the way poets, fiction writers, essayists, educators, editors, and publishers talk—about texts and ideas; about philosophy, craft, and emotion; about history and art; about architecture and city planning; about politics and justice; about ourselves and our work. We talked about desire—the desire to be true to whatever vision of the city was meaningful to each of us and the desire to share and to be enlightened. We were earnest, joyful, challenging, frustrated, comic, pensive, articulate, and occasionally, though not often, at a loss for words. As a native speaker of English and because English was the language of our symposium, I’m grateful to the majority who spoke my language as non-native speakers, and I thank them for their eloquence and fluency.

Recalling those days together—impossible really to forget given their vibrancy and passion—I ponder the number of cities each of us carried inside. I wish now that we had made a list of, say, twenty cities (or villages in the case of Güegenç Korkmazel, no lover of cities) that each of us held most dear. Such a list would have contained new revelations. It would have also contained the cities that participants revealed in their papers and their comments: Katie Ford’s New Orleans after Katrina; Carlos Gamerro’s Maliheul, the small Argentine town, invented at a scale allowing “the demon of totality”; Alberto Ruy-Sánchez’s Mogador, a meeting place of cultures on the Moroccan coast and the setting of three of Alberto’s novels; Michal Hvorecky’s Bratislava, capital of Slovakia, whose new name (in a history of many names) was “an artificial creation by the new city’s officials to sound Slavic”; Kyoko Yoshida’s Tokyo, which “ceased being a city in 1943” and is now a prefecture that embraces wards, cities, and suburbs with an overall population “exceeding 12 million in two thousand kilometers.”

Our list would have included cities in which we fell in love. Cities where someone cherished had died. Cities we were born to. Cities we fled. And of course it would have included cities from books that came up repeatedly in our conversations—Joyce’s Dublin in *Ulysses*, the *Invisible Cities* of Italo Calvino, Borges’s Buenos Aires, and on and on.¹

¹ Krzysztof Czyżewski gave participants of the Souk Ukaz an interesting tour of Gdańsk, from the perspective of writers—Günther Grass, Pawel Huelle, and Stefan Chwin. In terms of the politics of the actual city, as opposed to the city vividly portrayed in novels, it wasn’t surprising, but nonetheless dismaying, to hear Czyżewski’s appraisal that “the very fact of the books’ existence does not influence

Our list would have created a great constellation covering the map of the globe. Cities on the page and in the mind as real as Fez, the seductive, timeless, mysterious city that sheltered us for those days under its blue sky (who could be in Morocco without thinking of Paul Bowles?) and whose labyrinthine passageways we explored alone and in groups, sometimes lost, sometimes found.

A number of the participants – perhaps most? – wrote about a city he or she had known first hand. Since I chose to write about a city I’ve never set foot in, my journalistic piece on Ciudad Juárez was an exception to the rule. Did I make that choice because as a poet I contend less with setting than my fiction writer colleagues? Or is it because—I just this minute did the tabulation for the first time—I’ve lived in more than a dozen cities in my sixty years. Maybe that I’ve never tallied them up before reveals something profound about my psychology. Who knows? What is true is that I didn’t feel compelled to write about any of the cities to which I have strong personal ties. Rather, I felt compelled to bear witness to events happening in Ciudad Juárez, horrific events that have gone unpunished.

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Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, more than 500 miles from where I live in San Antonio, borders another Texas city, El Paso, at the extreme western corner of the state. Despite my geographical distance, the cultural divide, and how physically—and safely-- removed I am from the violence in Ciudad Juárez, I feel psychically affected by what’s been

directly the reality of the city, the meetings of the municipal council, or the day-to-day life of the modern inhabitants of Gdańsk.” Even in the city’s bookstore, Czyżewski could find no one knowledgeable about the great writers about Gdańsk.. Nonetheless, Czyżewski acknowledges that “this story must be continued,” and he speaks about how the past and the present point the way to the future. Throughout the Souk Ukaz, participants raised compelling questions and posed possible answers to what the future holds for inhabitants and writers who want to plumb the mysteries of cities.

happening to the women there and motivated to share a story that ought not to be ignored.

Since 1993 more than "430 women and girls have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez and in the city of Chihuahua," according to a 2003 report by Amnesty International, which goes on to say, "A third of those murdered have shown signs of some form of sexual violence." In response to the rampant killings, political activists coined the new term *femicide* to describe these crimes against women.

Few, if any, of the murders have been solved, and police have been slow to investigate and quick to obscure or repress facts surrounding the cases. What is known is that in the past decades Ciudad Juárez has seen a rise in population, drugs, violence, lawlessness, and impunity, together with an influx of maquiladoras (factories owned by global corporations), whose arrival was facilitated by the passage of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement. Globalized commerce has made Ciudad Juárez a place where maximizing industrial efficiency in the pursuit of profit takes precedent over human lives and justice. Though it's dangerous to generalize, this Mexican border town may have some disturbing lessons to teach us about the fate of women in a globalizing world, since women are the recruits of choice world-wide to provide a workforce in factories run by multinational corporations.

To understand Ciudad Juárez, some history is in order. When Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, its territory encompassed a large part of what is now the Southwestern United States. Together, the cities of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso formed a single community, divided by the Rio Grande and connected by a historic path called El Paso al Norte (the path to the north), a pass between the surrounding mountains that offered a natural route for trade and travel.

When the United States annexed the Republic of Texas as a state in 1845, President James K. Polk wanted to acquire lands beyond Texas's boundaries, lands that belonged to Mexico. When Mexico refused to cede its territory, hostilities escalated until the United States declared war in 1846. By 1848 Mexico was defeated, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. As the victor, the United States dictated the terms, redefining borders to acquire 500,000 square miles of Mexican land, thereby

appropriating half of its territory. The treaty established the Rio Grande as the border between the two countries, severing El Paso from its sister city, Ciudad Juárez, to the south.

Policy makers in the United States had Manifest Destiny on their side—a doctrine that declared it was righteous and just to expand the United States into new lands in order to bring the benefits of democracy and liberty to whomever they considered inferior people in need of civilizing. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the U.S. expansion determined that thereafter Mexico would be the lesser country. The balance of power tipped wildly in favor of the United States, disadvantaging Mexico economically, militarily, and politically. A war fought more than 150 years ago has left its scars along the border, and those scars continue to fester with violence and injustice.

To understand land ownership in Mexico, we need to go further back in history to 1821, when Mexico won its independence from Spain. As the new nation defined itself, it instituted sweeping reforms to redistribute land from the wealthy elite, who controlled the majority of Mexico's territory, to poor landless peasants. Article 27 of the Constitution, which instituted this reform, gave parcels of land called *ejidos* to rural indigenous people located primarily in southern Mexico. Article 27 provided that *ejidos* would be owned collectively by local farmers. To protect these lands from exploitation, titles to the *ejidos* were held by the Mexican government, preventing the indigenous collectives from selling or using their lands as collateral for loans. Indians held the land, cultivating the soil, and cherishing the earth for its blessings. In their belief systems, not unlike pre-industrialized societies around the world, Mexican indigenous peoples regarded the land as sacred, and they felt bound to it through profound spiritual connections.²

For generations they farmed, their principal crop being corn, and despite poverty and hardships, their

² How intriguing that one of us at the Souk Ukaz, Güegenç Korkmazel, spoke passionately of rituals and shamanistic practices relating to nature in his own childhood. Güegenç was a vital counterpoint to our focus on the city, reminding us of our connections to nature, no matter where we live.

traditional cultures endured. Their societies remained intact, and their land-based economies supported their families and their lives.³

The lifeways of the *ejido* farmers changed in 1992, when Mexican president Carlos Salinas Gotari initiated far-reaching legal restructuring, whereby collectives could borrow against and sell their land holdings. For the first time since Article 27 of the Constitution was written into law to protect unsophisticated indigenous farmers from land-grabbing and exploitative maneuvers, peasant owners of land became vulnerable to parties with destructive agendas. Under the new laws, peasants could sell their lands, and they could migrate to cities to take manufacturing jobs that held out promises of steady wages and a better life. Simultaneously, lands previously locked into ownership by *ejidos* became available for the commercial sector to develop for industry and other uses. President Bush (the first) applauded Mexico's step toward the future. Salinas's amendment to the constitution enabled global enterprises to gain a foothold in Mexico by providing an opening for foreign ownership of Mexican land and qualifying Mexico for participation in NAFTA. To pave the way for NAFTA, Mexico had to restructure its land laws to release farmers from their land. "Prior to Salinas's amendment," according to Global Exchange, "70% of all Mexican farmers worked on *ejido* lands." NAFTA would soon put an end to traditional farming.

Under the terms of NAFTA, signed on December 17, 1992, in San Antonio, by heads of the United States, Canada, and Mexico—President George H.W. Bush, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, and President Carlos Salinas—agricultural imports could flow freely from one country to another. The United States began exporting corn to Mexico at prices 50% below

³ Alberto Ruy-Sánchez and others made an important distinction between poverty and misery, one that certainly applies to the conditions of Mexican peasants leaving rural land for the lure of the city that I'm discussing here. In traditional agriculturally based societies, people have work, cultural traditions, community. Their lives possess dignity and purpose. When they leave rural communities, they arrive in cities, where they are reduced to living in shanty towns in deplorable conditions and where they compete with millions of other newcomers for nonexistent jobs and scarce resources. Thus, they exchange poverty for misery.

As Eliot Weinberger writes, "Now something has happened to the city, most visible in the Third World, as migrants from the countryside flood in, and metropolis becomes megalopolis. . . . Many of the major cities are now nowhere."

market prices, made possible by government subsidies to U.S. agricultural production. Mexican farmers couldn't compete with these prices, and their staple crop for centuries became a useless commodity. Before NAFTA, only 20% of the country's corn was imported. After NAFTA, corn imports totaled 50%, essentially devastating Mexican farmers. Without markets for their crops, and given the devil's bargain to sell off their lands, indigenous farmers began abandoning their traditional way of life. Some estimates say that 300 people a day are leaving the countryside for Mexican cities. It's worth noting that this is a trend common worldwide. Not just in Mexico, but around the globe, farming economies have been disrupted, largely by trade imbalances that favor subsidized crops moving from the North to the South. As a result, cities worldwide are growing at alarming rates, disenfranchised refugees from the countryside have moved to cities to live in squalor and often literally on top of garbage heaps, while the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen.

Meanwhile in Mexico, NAFTA's friendliness to global corporations opened the floodgates for maquiladoras to set up shop on the U.S. Mexican border, promising to improve Mexico's circumstances by introducing industries that would free poor peasant farmers from their ties to the land and provide a consumer economy that would benefit all its citizens.

Not surprisingly, the grandiose promises of NAFTA proved to be as substantial as the toxic fumes spewed out of maquiladoras operating with impunity to environmental controls. Maquiladoras lured peasants from the countryside, creating a pattern of migration that fit in neatly with the need for cheap labor on the borderlands, including labor for the 300 factories operating in Ciudad Juárez by 1991. These maquiladoras belonged to international corporations, ready to take their profits out of Mexico, while exploiting its cheap labor force. These laborers, under NAFTA, had no OSHA rights, no rights to form labor unions, and essentially no rights to protest their inhumane treatment and low wages.

Hiring practices by the maquiladoras ensured optimal manufacturing operations and maximum profits for their

foreign owners. They targeted young women and girls newly arrived from the countryside--young women and girls because they would be more docile than men, work hardest for the lowest pay--\$5 a day for an eight-hour shift. The maquiladoras run twenty-four hours a day, requiring its employees to travel, often alone, from home to work along dark roads at night. Soon they would become easy victims to predators.

Though seduced by the promise of a new life and a steady income, women working in the maquiladoras found that \$5 per day barely covered daily food requirements for themselves and their children, who were often left at home unattended. Many of the men in the families had previously fled--driven by poverty and unemployment--al Norte, north to the United States. The families employed by maquiladoras and left behind could find no affordable housing in Ciudad Juárez, and like displaced rural people all over the world, the maquiladora workers built shanty towns, called *colonias*, on the outskirts on the city. These *colonias* were often far from bus routes and required women to walk in the dark for an hour or more to go to and from their jobs.

In the *colonias*, houses were built out of scavenged materials--old tires, cardboard, scrap metal, and wooden pallets. A nail driven through a bottle cap created a makeshift bolt to join disparate parts together. The *colonias* had no addresses or any street plans. They sprang up in a dangerous hodge-podge, makeshift buildings, each like a house of cards, stuck into any available land. Without running water, women get water from trucks, often using discarded containers that had previously held toxic chemicals. Without electricity, people in the *colonias* use candles for lighting and cook on open fires on dirt floors. Sometimes inhabitants tap into existing electrical lines, sapping illegal electricity through jerry-rigged wiring. Whether from candles or bad wiring, fires in the *colonias* are common. Once started, they race uncontrollably through highly combustible materials, destroying fragile homes along with their scant contents.⁴

⁴ Carlos Gamerro talked about how the literature of the shanty town had been mostly written from the outside, by middle-class writers looking in. He drew our attention to an exception, the case of Brazil, where "the novel *Cidade di Deus (City of God)* by Paulo Lins . . . was written by a man who grew up in the *favela* and somehow, miraculously, acquired the education to write a complex literary text. The odds against this happening often, or even more than once, are so staggering that it is no wonder

Besides the hazards of the colonias, there is more to fear in Ciudad Juárez and its surroundings. Murder, abduction, and rape have terrorized the women and girls working in maquiladoras, bars, and elsewhere. Victims' bodies have been found in shallow graves on the outskirts of town, sometimes in mass graves, or in city dumps.⁵ Examination of their bodies reveal horrific facts. Many of the murdered women and girls had been held captive for days, during which they were tortured, subjected to brutal sexual assault, and beaten before they died. The most common causes of death: strangulation and bludgeoning. Many of the bodies have been found strangled by their own shoelaces. The women and girls range in age. One of the youngest victims was eleven.

The Mexican police treated the abductions and murder with indifference or disdain. If a woman or girl was raped, police figured she was probably asking for it by wearing provocatively short skirts or working in bars at night. As one former state public prosecutor said, "Women with a nightlife who go out very late and come into contact with drinkers are at risk. It's hard to go out in the street when it's raining and not get wet." Clearly, young women, maquiladora workers, students, and waitresses possess no

there are no more examples of the same." To my knowledge, there are no literary works by inhabitants of Ciudad Juárez's colonias, though many works by —fictional, cinematic, and journalistic—document the human rights abuses happening in the border town.

Despite the dedicated attention of outsiders, there are no writing projects involving people in Ciudad Juárez —as far as I know—comparable to the extraordinary workshops in war-ravaged Beirut, which Roseanne Saad Khalaf described. It's impossible to say whether someone writing from the inside of the Ciudad Juárez experience would galvanize public opinion to the city's atrocities. A question without an answer: Can *any* new atrocity galvanize public opinion? *Slumdog Millionaire*, winner of the 2009 Oscar for Best Picture and a draw for attention worldwide, has had little affect on its child stars, let alone the city of Mumbai. According to an AP report filed on April 28, 2009: "The 9-year-old picked up a plastic bucket Monday and began to scoop, but it was hopeless. 'There are a lot of rats,' she told the Associated Press with a shudder, standing in water above her ankles. 'In the night also.' . . . Eight Oscars and \$326 million in box office receipts have so far done little to improve the lives of the film's two impoverished child stars."

⁵ Eliot Weinberger reminded us about Mesoamerican cities, where pyramids and temples were erected to a god above, while "directly below the city was another city, the underworld, the city of the dead." While Eliot was speaking about pre-conquest civilizations, his comment had an eerie resonance for me, given the many bodies buried in shallow graves in Ciudad Juárez, constituting another kind of "city of the dead."

power in the face of authorities who place no value on their lives.⁶

Complicating the crimes against women—now at such a scale that the new term *femicide* has been coined to call attention to the crisis—is the highly concentrated and violent drug trafficking taking place in Ciudad Juárez and other border cities. Drug dealers came to these cities in part because of the population booms, which simultaneously created a market for drugs and massive unemployment. Working in the drug trade offered an attractive, if life-threatening, option for men out of work. As a result of the drug trade, more than 400 gangs have formed in the absence of law enforcement by the police. Drug traffickers benefitted from NAFTA's easing of trade restrictions, enabling trade of many kinds to cross borders now made more permeable by international accords. The influx of drug and drug money have bred a climate of lawlessness and police corruption in Ciudad Juárez.⁷ If at first police were negligent in investigating and prosecuting the murders of young women and girls, they grew even more reluctant when suspicions pointed to the drug dealers as possible perpetrators of the crimes.

As local activism and international attention to the femicide in Ciudad Juárez increase, the police have begun investigating according to their own means. Often this means they pick up gang members or random "suspects" and torture them into confessions. At the same time, human rights groups and families of the victims have been attacked for raising their voices. Mexico has the highest murder rate for reporters in Latin America and is in the

⁶ More than once in our discussions, participants brought up the indifference of governments to human tragedy—even on a hideous scale. It was devastating to learn from Michal Hvorecký that cities, like people, can disappear. He cited the city of "Pripjat in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialistic Republic. The explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant released nearly forty times more fallout than the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, leading to the evacuation and resettlement of over 335,000 people." In that instance, like so many others, people in the government covered up the fatalities and the full accounting of the event, making it difficult to determine cause and effect, responsibility and consequences.

⁷ Members of our group who had traveled to Mexico spoke about seeing entire towns transformed by drug money. They described how an initial incident—a peasant suddenly employed in the drug trade either by producing or selling—could earn enough money to build a mansion. Subsequently by that individual's patronage—or by others following his example—an entire community would be involved, in one way or another, in narcotrafficking, changing a functioning civil society into one controlled by drug lords.

top fourteen worldwide. Who will call the murderers to account? Ciudad Juárez has spawned a system of lawlessness and corruption, one that holds an ugly mirror up to the parallel practices of multinational corporations that operate at another level with equal impunity and injustice.

What will stop the gruesome crimes being committed against young women and girls in Ciudad Juárez? Who knows why these grisly murders and sexual assaults continue to happen? No one knows. Multiple theories exist. Kathleen Staudt reports in her book, *Violence and Activism at the Border*, that theories about the killings abound, some pointing to "psychopathic serial killers and gangs Others decry organ harvesting. . . . Still others claim that drug traffickers enjoy gang sport after profitable sales. The 'sons of the rich' . . . have been implicated. And activists persistently raise questions on binational dimensions of the crimes: snuff filmmakers selling to wealthy men in the United States." Though activists have increased international attention to the crimes, no solution—and no consistent motive—has been identified.

Ciudad Juárez was named after Benito Juárez, a Zapotec Indian from the state of Oaxaca. Juárez, the only full-blooded Indian to hold the presidency in Mexico, created great reforms to lift up the peasantry and separate the powers of church and state. How ironic that in the city named after him, young women and girls, many of them from indigenous groups themselves, some of them from his own state of Oaxaca, are dying horrific deaths. A city named for a great liberator has now fallen into a dystopia where femicide and other violence has made Ciudad Juárez into a city characterized by misery.⁸

⁸ So many participants—Anastassis Vistonitis and Eliot Weinberger, in particular, spoke about the future city becoming a megalopolis. Anastassis writes: "Modern metropolises, which constantly extend their limits, leave the writer powerless in the face of the swelling of magnitudes. This is, then, another expression of the inexpressible, since no text is capable of elevating itself to the order of magnitude of the metropolises." Eliot writes: "World literature has become a kind of megalopolis, with millions of practitioners and publications. . . And the reader today is like the inhabitant of a megalopolis, following a familiar routine of the same routes and the same colleagues and friends, almost entirely ignorant of the rest of the city."

What is the literature of the megalopolis and who will write it? These were questions we discussed, questions with no answers. As I revise my piece on Ciudad Juárez, I'm slightly overwhelmed by contemplating these questions, especially in light of the vast majority of the world's population, for whom literacy and literature take a back seat to the fundamental necessities of life. With natural

According to activist and filmmaker Barbara Martinez Jitner, the maquiladoras are now departing Ciudad Juárez, moving further south, where they have found a new work force in Guatemala, women and girls willing to work for \$3.50 to \$4.00 a day. What will happen to them?

disasters like climate change and water scarcity looming so large and menacing, and with humanity proving its inhumanity in wars, genocide, and the unconscionable, and apparently uncontrollable, practices of corporations, the idea of the megalopolis as a livable place seems almost untenable.
