

Poem memorializes women and calls us to action

Demetria Martinez | Jan. 12, 2011 NCR Today

The catastrophe of Mexico's current *narcotraficante* violence has diverted attention away from a travesty that began years ago: the Femicide, as it is known -- the murder and torture of young women, mostly maquiladora factory workers -- near the U.S.-Mexico border. Now an opportunity has arisen to refocus U.S. citizens on the women's fate, thanks to the work of Valerie Mart'nez, a New Mexico author who gives us a book that is at once a lyric poem in 72 parts and an organizing tool for activists.

In this slender volume, *Each and Her* (University of Arizona Press), Mart'nez draws from news clips and human rights reports, among other documents, folding these into a poem that educates the reader and resurrects the memory of the women, holding out the hope that in solidarity with Mexican activists, we can bring these horrors to an end.

Mart'nez pulls us into the lives of the women, their passionate dream that work in the maquiladoras will give them a crack at a decent life. "They pack what they have/travel north ... *papa/hay muchos empleos all'*," so many jobs there, writes the author toward the beginning of the book. Little do they imagine that they might become one of the 450 women and girls who have been murdered since 1993 (with many more still missing) in the Juárez and Chihuahua areas, who slaved away for 50 cents an hour in the post-NAFTA maquiladora industry that employs upward of 472,000 females.

"Imagine/*bastante para todos*," enough for everyone, they insist, in their harsh but beautiful country, a beauty symbolized by the bread of life, a "stack of warm/and freckled tortillas."



But the dreams grow dark as bodies turn up, often mutilated and with

evidence of rape. "Nearly all of the victims were poor/young, and slender, with dark flowing hair/and warm reddish brown complexions," Mart'nez writes, citing one of many sources she documents at the end of the book. Meanwhile, an indifferent government withholds the necessary resources to get to the bottom of the murders; criminals act with impunity. Mothers plaster fences with pictures of their disappeared children. Theories abound about the perpetrators. Could it be one madman? Copycat murderers? Organ harvesters? Satanic cults? Drug gangs?

Of course the women themselves are suspect: The patriarchal charge, old as history, rules the day. The victim brought it on herself, she was a prostitute, or stayed out too late or wore revealing clothing. Mart'nez quotes a

letter from the Chihuahua State attorney general who blames: 'You/Parents/for raising up daughters/whose conduct does not confirm/to the moral order.'

Yet the women live on, *presente*, as Martinez recites their names in the tradition of Latin American political activists: 'Mar'a Agustina Hernandez/Mar'a Ascensión Aparicio Salazar ...' Martinez lists the names of 64 dead women named Mar'a, a reminder of Mexicans' profound faith in Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Indeed, Guadalupe appears in the poem, a sign of hope. She appears to a Mexican Indian laborer, lovingly calling out, 'juanito-juan/dieguito /juantzin/my little son.' She miraculously causes roses -- a symbol of womanhood that Mart'nez also explores in the poem -- to grow in the dead of winter so that he can take them to the bishop as proof that the Blessed Mother has revealed herself to one of the poorest of the poor, the disdained Indian.

In this encounter, beautifully rendered by Mart'nez's poetic gifts, we too are touched, we too yearn to take roses to the authorities, proof that the murdered women live on and that we will not rest until we learn the full truth about their plight. For now, Mart'nez has done a masterful job of giving voice to the voiceless, women we shall never again forget.

[Demetria Martinez is a writer based in Albuquerque, N.M. Her new children's book, coauthored with Rosalee Montoya-Read, is called *Grandpa's Magic Tortilla*.]

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