

8th Annual Sister Sally Furay Lecture: Murders in Ciudad Juárez Dr. Irasema Coronado, University of Texas-El Paso



Dr. Irasema Coronado & Sister Sally Furay

On Wednesday, May 5th, the Trans-Border Institute (TBI) held its final public lecture for academic year 2003-04, in collaboration with the University of San Diego Social Issues Committee. Each year, this special lecture is co-sponsored in honor of former Provost, Sister Sally Furay, to bring attention to the role of women as leaders in our society. Sister Furay helped lead the efforts in 1994 that created TBI, helping to bring greater attention and involvement at the University of San Diego in issues related to the U.S.-Mexican border. The 8th Annual Sally Furay lecture focused on the serial murders and disappearances of over 370 women and girls in the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez.

To address this complex and tragic issue, Dr. Irasema Coronado was invited to speak to over 90 faculty, students, and community members at the Joan B. Kroc Peace and Justice theater. Dr. Coronado is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Academic Advisor for the Center for Inter-American and Border Studies at the University of El Paso (UTEP), as well as the President elect of the Association for Borderlands Studies. Dr. Coronado began her remarks by noting that she considers herself both a scholar and an activist, since she has a strong commitment to research that has an impact on public policy. Accordingly, her recent co-authored books –*Fronteras No Más: Toward Social Justice at the U.S.-Mexico Border* and *¡Dígame!: Policy and Politics on the Texas Border*– are focused on strategies and recommendations for more effective policy on the U.S.-Mexican border. Dr. Coronado further noted that she is committed to feminist research principles, which emphasize a commitment to social justice and attention to the inequalities that plague women worldwide.

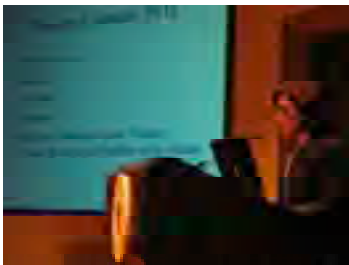
According to Dr. Coronado, understanding the complexity of the Juárez murders begins with the “numbers game” involved in tallying the victims. Estimates from government officials (as low as 90) are in sharp contrast to those of the media and non-governmental organizations (which range as high as 4,000 disappearances). On the one hand, many government officials and prominent figures in Ciudad Juárez have tried to downplay the number of victims to prevent a negative image for the city or their particular administrations or businesses; on the other hand, reporters and activists, frustrated by the lack of information and poor investigations of the killings, have generated much larger figures. Dr. Coronado noted that the best estimates by scholars investigating the murders suggest that the actual number of known victims is somewhat greater than 370. The first murders were detected in 1993, though there is speculation that the murders began much earlier. Most of the victims share common characteristics: most are poor, young, dark-skinned (*morenas*) attractive women and girls, many of whom worked in in-bond assembly plants (*maquiladoras*). Furthermore, many of the victims were photographed by their employers prior to their murder or disappearance, giving rise to speculation that the murderers selected women through some system of prior identification. The patterns of violence, sexual assault, mutilation, and discarded bodies have generated a wide range of theories that the murders are linked to one or more of the following: a psychopathic killer, underground pornography rings, human trafficking/sexual slavery, organ harvesting, recreational killing by wealthy “*juniors*,” victory celebrations by drug-traffickers, or satanic cult rituals.



Dr. Coronado noted that several factors contributed to the murders and to the failure to resolve the situation. The poverty of the victims and their families presents a huge barrier, since many do not have adequate education, information, or other basic necessities (transportation and telephones) to fully access the justice system. The very fact that the victims are poor also contributed to the initial lack of concern about the problem. Meanwhile, the political manipulation of this issue by officials from the major political parties in the state of Chihuahua has clouded the lines of accountability and downplayed the extent of the problem. Further, the challenges and lack of resources of the non-governmental organizations working to combat the problem are compounded by tensions between them (often because of different domestic or

international political affiliations). In particular, Dr. Coronado made special note of the lack of professionalism and the pervasive corruption found in Mexican law enforcement. On the one hand, insufficient training, ineffective identification of victims, the lack of DNA testing facilities, and the excessive caseloads of investigators point to pervasive problems of police training and resource capacity; on the other hand, the covering up of evidence and the lack of political will are illustrative of the pervasive problems of corruption and impunity that plague both law enforcement and government in Ciudad Juárez. Dr. Coronado made special note of a particular case where a poor family was taken advantage of by a corrupt police officer who promised to take “an extra careful look” into their daughter’s case in exchange for \$100.

Finally, Dr. Coronado observed that the deprecation of women generally as a contributing factor to the violence against women along the border. Negative and misogynistic portrayals of women in popular and traditional culture –in both Mexico and the United States– have perpetuated the idea that the women are victims of their own choices; some police and government officials suggested to families that their daughters were inappropriately dressed or otherwise prone to promiscuous behavior. In Ciudad Juárez, and elsewhere along the border where prostitution and vice were major industries for many years (and where *maquiladoras* primarily employ women today), local sayings note that the city “was built on the backs of women.”



Dr. Coronado discussed the activist role that she and her colleague, Dr. Kathleen Staudt, have taken in promoting attention to the murders. From the beginning of her talk, Dr. Coronado made the disclaimer that she uses the word “activist” with caution, out of recognition that there are varying degrees of activism; many other people are more active and have committed themselves much more deeply to this issue, often at great personal risk or even loss of life. However, Dr. Coronado made note of the importance and rewards of scholarly activism, which helps to disseminate information through publication and lecturing, educate and place students in positions where they can make a difference, promote connections between people and policy makers, and make policy

recommendations that will help to address problems such as the Juárez murders. Dr. Coronado noted that there are those who “comfort the afflicted, and those who afflict the comforted.” She and her colleagues have worked to form a coalition of activists who seek to do the latter, by raising this issue among politicians and influential citizen groups such as the Association of Maquiladoras and the Maquiladoras Wives Association.

Dr. Coronado also pointed to the positive steps that have been taken recently to address the problem. In March 2003, the issue was addressed at the United Nation’s 47th Annual Commission on Women, and was soon followed by a major report by Amnesty International. In October 2003, a Congressional delegation visiting Ciudad Juárez was able to collect testimony from NGO activists and victims families about the killings that may prove useful. In California, Congresswoman Hilda Solis has also taken an active role in raising this issue, due to the high number of migrants from Ciudad Juárez in her district. Dr. Coronado encouraged audience members to become involved by protesting to their local Mexican consulate, supporting resolution 466 by writing letters to their local congressional representative, contributing money to non-profit organizations working on this problem (such as *Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez* in Las Cruces, NM), and promoting greater respect for women in general. Dr. Coronado also noted that international interest has grown and that some *maquiladoras* have been working very actively to try to educate their workers about the problem and to support investigations into the killings. She believes that international collaboration to promote a human rights agreement between Mexico and the United States could help to address this and other problems along the border, including the treatment of undocumented migrants.

Finally, Dr. Coronado ended by encouraging USD faculty and staff to become more involved in border issues by joining the Association for Borderlands Studies, the leading international scholarly association dedicated the study of international borders. Dr. Coronado thanked TBI Assistant Director Stephen R. Elliott for his tremendous efforts as ABS Executive Secretary.

Speaker Biography

Dr. Irasema Coronado is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Academic Advisor for the Center for Inter-American and Border Studies at the University of Texas-El Paso. She is also President elect of the Association for Borderlands Studies <www.absborderlands.org>, currently based at the University of San Diego. Dr. Coronado is an expert on a wide range of border policy issues, including water and environmental protection. She served as a Presidential Appointee to the Good Neighbor Environmental Board and helped to create the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission and the North American Development Bank. Dr. Coronado’s recent co-authored works include *Fronteras No Más: Toward Social Justice at the U.S.-Mexico Border* ed. with Kathleen Staudt (2002) and *¡Dígame!: Policy and Politics on the Texas Border*, ed. With Christine Thurlow Brenner and Dennis L. Soden (2003). Dr. Coronado grew up in Nogales, AZ, received her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona, and has taught in U.S. and Mexican institutions along the border, including the University of Arizona, the University of Texas-San Antonio, University of the Incarnate Word, and the Colegio de la Frontera Norte.