

# Finding Missing Latinas

February 6, 2012

by Theresa Delgadillo

Over the past decade, there has been significant attention focused on the murders and disappearances of Mexican women in Juarez, Mexico. The public protests and demands for justice directed at local, state and national government bodies by the families of the missing women have been joined by international women's organizations, grassroots feminist campaigns, and several books and films about these events. A recent issue of the MALCS Journal, *Chicana and Latina Studies*, features a critical scholarly essay that compares cinematic treatments of the violence against Mexican women in Juarez, Mexico. However, few people know that similar violence against women on this side of the border, in this case against Latinas, proliferated in Albuquerque, New Mexico over the past decade.

In the fall, I caught a re-broadcast of a *Dateline* program that originally aired in December 2010 titled "Somebody's Daughter." This episode of the Friday night television news magazine dealt with the discovery of the serial murders of Latinas in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2006. As in Juarez, the women's remains were discovered buried in the desert, in this case on the mesa, just beyond a newly developed housing tract. The program did not use the term "Latina," or say much directly about the ethnicity of the missing young women. Instead, the program featured photos of the missing young women and told us their names — allowing these facts, as well as interviews with family members to make plain the ethnicity and race of the victims. The Latina ethnicity of most of the missing women was further highlighted when one of the victims found in the desert was identified as a young African American woman from another state, a departure from the profile of most of the missing women.

*Dateline* and shows like it often present violence against women as spectacle, frequently, it seems, featuring stories about women murdered by their husbands in which the recurring image of the happy wedding picture is juxtaposed to images of violence and death. The myth or illusion at the heart of a flawed relationship will be exposed by the show, most importantly by the presentation of a careful police investigation, one that proceeds only because someone in law enforcement has taken a particular interest in the case. It's a curious formula. It might seem to be a formula for championing the victims of domestic violence, except that it also murder-as-entertainment. These stories feature heavy-handed and titillating narration, a focus on unanswered questions and doubts, employment of a deficit theory focus on victim's lives, and the always flawless police work.

It was disturbing to see one of these shows focused on the serial murder of Latinas. At the heart of this story was another story: the Latina detective. Assigned to the "backwater" job of finding persons reported missing, Detective Ida Lopez identifies a pattern in the profiles of missing young women. Lopez is the only person assigned to these cases, and only part-time. The show takes Detective Lopez seriously, and reveals that for her "everybody counts or nobody counts," that is, for Lopez, a woman who might be sick with addiction or desperate for money is not a disposable human being. Yet her investigation into the missing women doesn't get any traction until "something turns up" — that is, until remains are discovered not by detectives trying to find the missing women but by construction crews called out to take care of flooding problems created for the residents of a new suburban development on the mesa. Michelle Valdez. Anna Vigil. Evelyn Salazar. Anna Herron. Angelina Guerra. The names of the missing women appear on the placards made by family members demanding an investigation.

At one point, Josh Mankiewicz interviewing a police officer, asks whether they wouldn't have acted sooner if the victims were young, white women to which the officer answers that in some cases it's months before these women were reported missing because of the nature of the supposed lives they lead, and in that broad stroke he, once again, dismisses them, and their demands on his time. Some family members are interviewed, but it would have been good to hear more from more of the families of the missing young women in Albuquerque, New Mexico; to learn more about the state of Latina life there; to see more of the investigation into the many other still missing young women in Ida Lopez's case file, and to feel assured that there was a commitment to finding them. The television program wants to end on the note that the mystery is solved. But it isn't. The violence against women in Albuquerque, New Mexico mirrors the violence against women in Juarez, Mexico and the killers continue to roam free. What other kinds of violence against Latinas are we not hearing about? Is there a way to make this news known that doesn't turn Latina death into spectacle? Can popular television programs effectively tell our stories? What does the handling of the disappearances and murders of Latinas in Albuquerque, New Mexico say about the value of Latina life?

### **Comments:**

1. *Anonymous* February 14, 2012 at 1:23 PM

Thanks for watching and for asking some difficult questions- Josh Mankiewicz/Dateline NBC

2. *Mujeres Talk Moderator* March 22, 2012 at 8:01 AM

Dear Josh Mankiewicz/Dateline NBC, Many thanks for your work on bringing this to light, and for the respect you showed to Latinas and their families in this episode.

This entry was posted in [Gender and Sexuality](#), [Social Justice](#) and tagged [Albuquerque missing women](#), [Dateline](#), [Disappeared women](#), [Juarez](#), [Theresa Delgadillo](#), [violence against Latinas](#), [West Mesa missing women](#) on [February 6, 2012](#) by [mujerestalk](#).