

Forgotten: Women of Juárez – My Notes

Women have been disappearing in and around Ciudad Juárez, a city in northern Mexico opposite the United States border from El Paso, Texas at an alarming rate for 30 years. Different sites provide different estimates. One says that more than 2,300 women have been murdered there. Another says that around 4,000 women have gone missing in and around Juárez since 1993. Regardless of the number, you get the idea. This podcast series is about these murders.

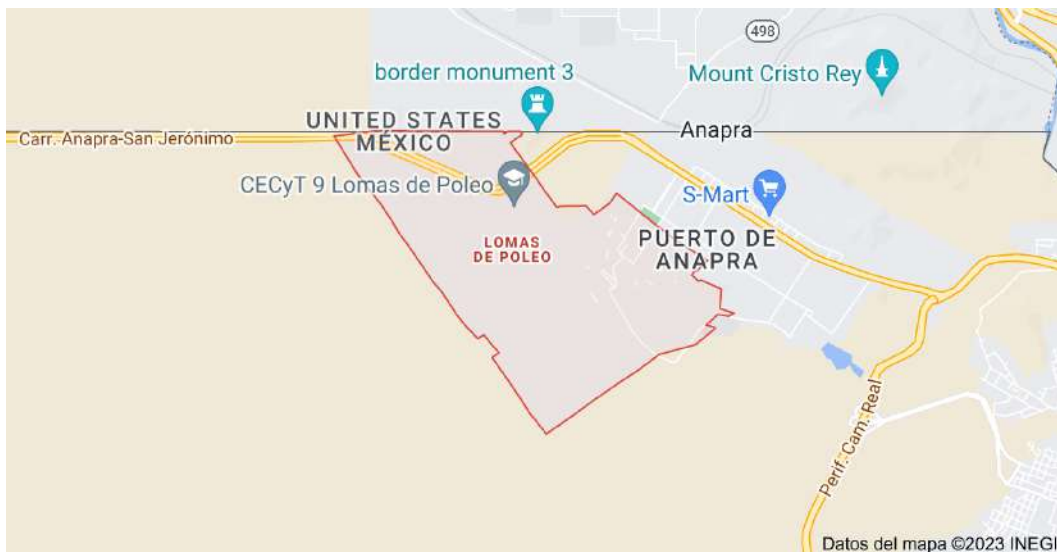
Episode 1

- **Feminicidio:** The murder of a woman because of her gender, or misogynistic reasons.
- **Lomas de Poleo:** This is a small border community in northern Mexico outside of Juárez where in 1996 between March and April eight bodies were found.

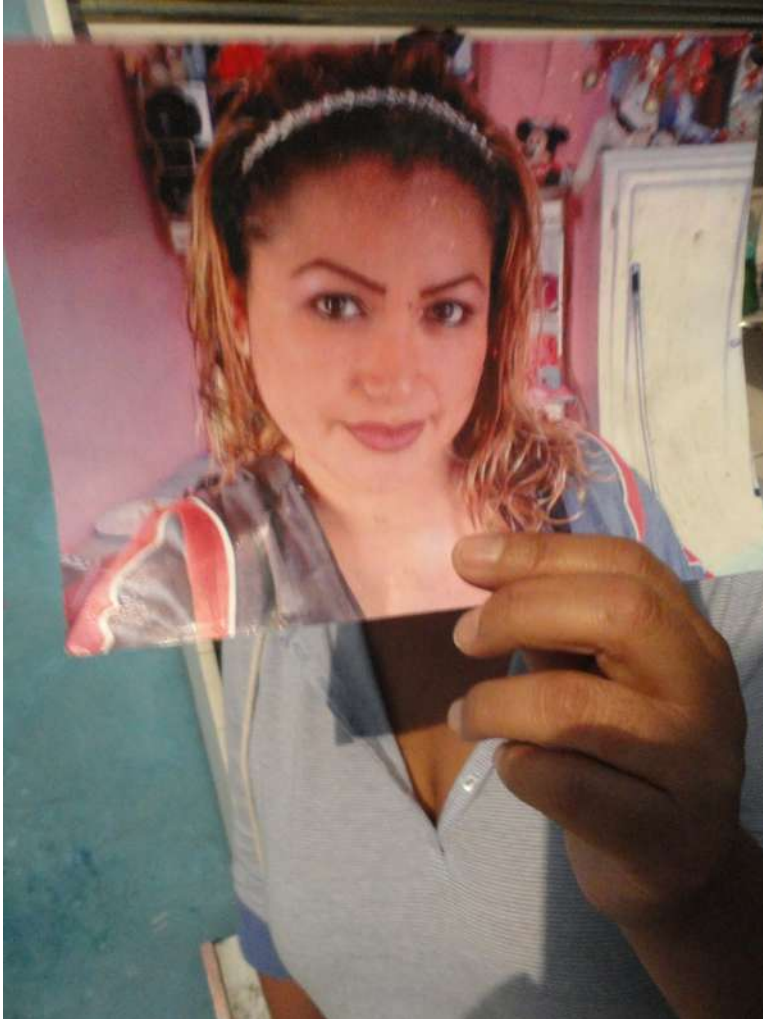
It seems that the femicides started in 1993. This report details the timeline really well:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/amr410262003en.pdf>

But, this is where the podcast story seems to start.



- **Rosario Garcia Leal:** One of the eight women found dead in Lomas de Poleo in spring 1996. She was 17-years-old. She was strangled. Six of the other victims could not be identified.



- **Pedro Zaragoza Fuentes:** The story of Lomas de Poleo is sad. The community is known not only as the place where some of the first Juárez femicide victims were discovered, but also for its ties to this man. Pedro Zaragoza Fuentes is a Juárez businessman who claims ownership of Lomas de Poleo. He claims that his father purchased the land in 1963 (despite being unable to prove so in court) and that he now owns it through inheritance. He tries to run the place as if it were his own country by trying to pass his own laws, enforce them with his own police force, etc. This “police force” is most likely local gang members.

Here, Lomas de Poleo shows up on a human rights watch blog:

<https://hrbriefblog.wordpress.com/2010/02/12/more-violence-for-the-people-of-lomas-de-poleo/>

This is him:



- **Zaragoza Fuentes Family of El Paso and Juárez:** Pedro Zaragoza Fuentes belongs to this family. They are one of the Juárez Cartel's five main families. They have allegedly run a number of real and sham companies in Mexico and the United States. Many pages/sites note that they run a milk supply company.

This article provides a lot of detail: <http://www.streetgangs.com/billboard/viewtopic.php?t=41106>

- ***El Señor de los Cielos:*** Do you remember this guy from the Netflix series *Narcos: Mexico*?



This is Amado Carillo Fuentes, a.k.a. “Lord of the Skies,” who was a one-time leader of the Juárez Cartel. He earned his nickname because he was a pilot. His ability to fly planes was obviously convenient for the transportation of product and enabled him to rise through the ranks of the Mexican drug trade.

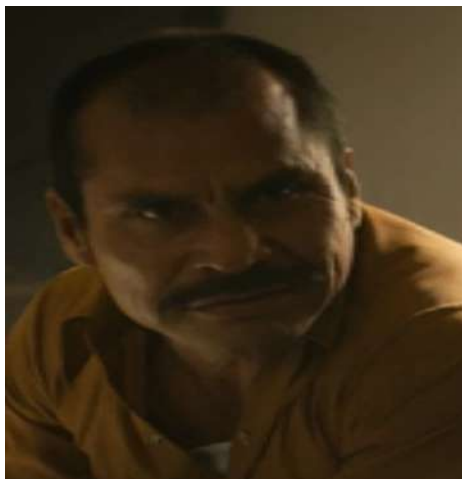
This is what he looked like in real life:



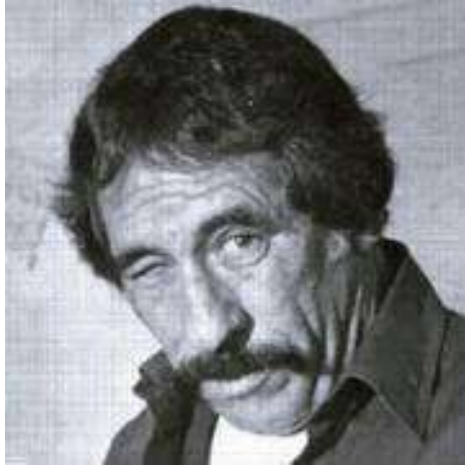
Amado Carillo Fuentes was related by blood to the Zaragoza Fuentes family—the same one to which Pedro Zaragoza Fuentes, the “owner” of Lomas de Poleo, belongs.

- **Rafael Aguilar Guajardo:** The connections between powerful people throughout the history of Juárez are really interesting. I’m sure that investigating these is a whole other rabbit hole that you could go down.

Anyway, do you remember this guy from *Narcos: Mexico*?



This is Rafael Aguilar Guajardo, one of the leaders and co-founders of the Juárez Cartel. This is what he looked like in real life:



He and Pedro Zaragoza Fuentes were brothers-in-law. They married sisters.

Here is an article that tells the whole story of Lomas de Poleo and Pedro Zaragoza Fuentes:

<https://vanguardia.com.mx/noticias/nacional/2822398-lomas-de-poleo-un-campo-de-concentracion-en-la-frontera-ACVG2822398>

It is also here in Lomas de Poleo where one of the first of many dead female bodies is discovered throughout the greater Juarez region during the 1990's and 2000's. The body belonged to 17-year-old Rosario García Leal. She was strangled.

Episode 2

- There is a trend of Mexican people moving to Juárez for better opportunities.
- **Maquiladora:** A *maquiladora*, also known as a “maquila,” is a (normally) duty/tariff-free factory where raw materials are assembled or processed to make a variety of “final products. These factories are common throughout Latin America, especially Mexico.



- **El Norte:** An informal term for the geographical region Northern Mexico



- **Norteño culture:** Historically, due to its remoteness, northern Mexico had been disconnected from and neglected by Mexico City, the capital of New Spain under the Spanish Empire and eventually the independent country of Mexico. Over time, this region developed on its own and resulted in what we now know as *norteño* culture that exists in northern Mexico (El Norte) and the southwestern United States.

Source: *American Nations* by Colin Woodward

- **PRONAF (*Programa de Industrialización Fronteriza*):** In 1961, Mexico's federal government started this program, which is known in English as the Border Industrialization Program (BIP). It was meant to develop the various communities in Mexico along the country's northern border with the United States. These border communities were very poor with high rates of unemployment. Historically, they had been disconnected and neglected, but PRONAF was an effort to develop these communities and reintegrate them into the country.

Source: [American Utilization of the Mexican Border Industrialization Program](#).

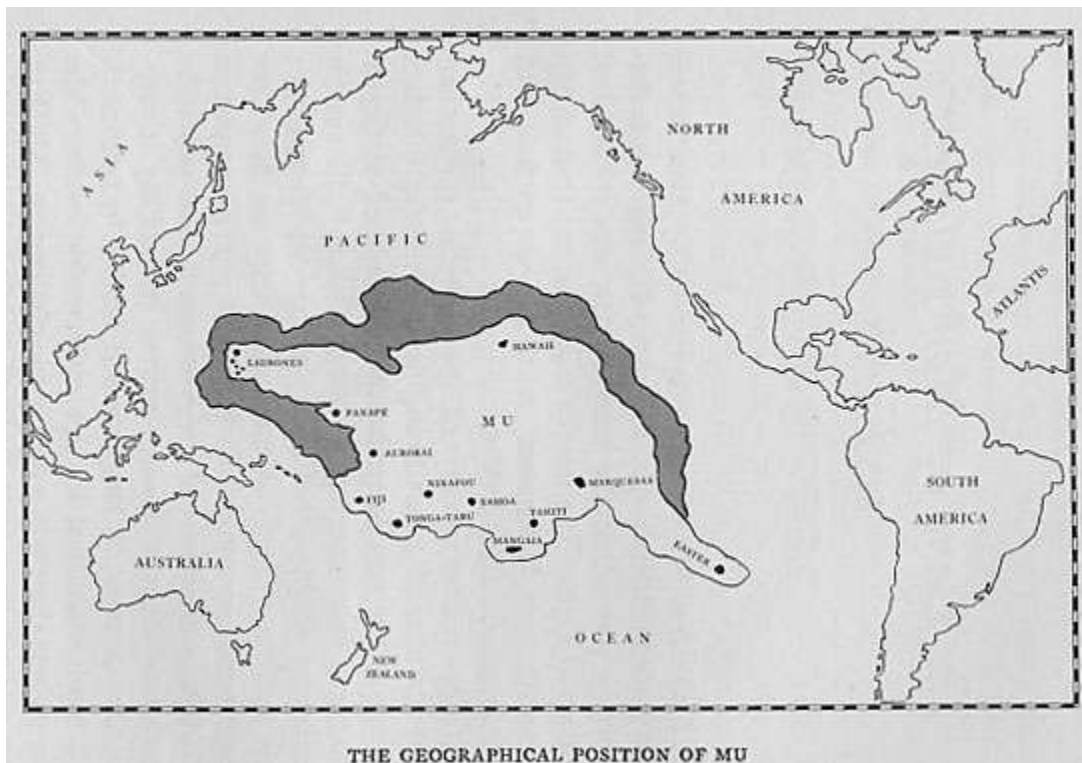
Through PRONAF, the government sponsored all sorts of infrastructure developments—roads, parks, electricity, plumbing, and most notably, pertaining to this particular story, factories. PRONAF then tried to incentivize foreign companies to operate in these factories by offering them tax relief in hopes that they would be able to provide work for local families. Many companies accepted the opportunity and began importing materials to their *maquiladoras* in northern Mexico where they could employ Mexican laborers who were willing to work for 1/3 of the U.S. hourly rate to assemble the materials into finished products.

- **NAFTA (*North American Free Trade Agreement*):** An agreement reached in 1994 between the United States, Mexico, and Canada that reduced trade barriers in order to increase commerce among the three countries. NAFTA exacerbated the trend of international companies operating *maquiladoras* on cheap labor in *El Norte*. As a result, northern Mexico has become an export processing zone. The *maquiladoras* are a massive part of life here.

- **Sagrario Gonzalez:** A 17-year-old girl who lives in Lomas de Poleo, works at a maquiladora making electrical capacitors for refrigerators and air conditioning systems, and is murdered randomly in April 1998. Her family had moved to Juárez from Durango in search of better opportunities. Sagrario had to take two buses to get to work. The podcast says that one day when she arrived ten minutes late, she was refused entry to work. It was on this day that she vanished. Her body was discovered three weeks later.

Here is her story: <https://laprensa.org/familys-20-year-quest-truth-justice-and-border-dream>

- **Augustus Le Plongeon:** A British-American archaeologist and photographer who studied pre-Columbian ruins of America, particularly those of the Maya civilization on the northern Yucatán Peninsula.
- **Mu:** A mythical lost continent introduced by Augustus Le Plongeon.



- **Heaven Mu:** A symbol “of the lost continent of Mu” that is believed to have originated as a hieroglyph. It consists of a triangle that represents heaven with an eye inside that represents a deity looking out from heaven. Nowadays, the symbol is often associated with Mayan culture, hence the connection to Mu and Le Plongeon.



- Dead bodies start showing up with triangles and maps marked on them, indicating that the murders are connected. Still, though, authorities deny that there is a connection.
- **Las Escuelas ECCO de Juárez y Chihuahua:** ECCO was the name of a computer school that seems like it may have been used to identify targeted women of the femicides. Remember that many people in and around Juárez are in search of work opportunities. ECCO would advertise their school to local women. There eventually showed a trend of women on their “sign-up sheet” also happening to disappear.

This article explains it well: <https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/2005/5/8/modus-operandi-21911.html>

- **Incomex Mediante:** In 2003, ECCO was transferred to new ownership. The name of the school is Incomex Mediante.

They don't seem to have much of an Internet presence. The article above says that this is their address: 16 de Septiembre 138. Centro.. Juárez - Chihuahua, Chihuahua

<https://juarez-chihuahua.infoinfo.com.mx/ficha/ecco/2949598>

Episode 3

- **Halcones:** The vigilantes of a cartel. (The word means “falcons” in English.) They are charged with spying and reporting back to superiors. They may spy on anyone depending on what is needed—Police, opposing cartels, journalists, etc. Often, *halcones* are young children who are vulnerable and easily coerced into the job.

Here is a story that talks about young boys being made *halcones* in Michoacan Mexico from 2021:

<https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/narcos-obligan-a-jovenes-michoacanos-a-ser-halcones/1454788>

- **Calle Mina:** A street in downtown Juárez where halcones are most active.



- **Diana Washington Valdez:** An award-winning reporter who has spent a significant portion of her career investigating the Juárez murders and was featured in this podcast.



- **El Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN):** The intelligence agency of the Mexican government from 1989-2018. The organization has since been replaced by the CNI (Centro Nacional de Inteligencia). During this episode of the podcast, Diana Washington Valdez reveals that during her reporting she received a random phone call one day that was meant to be threatening. It was largely static, but in the background she could hear the sounds of chainsaws and women screaming. When she traced the call, it traced back to CISEN.

It has since been discovered that CISEN used the Israeli spyware Pegasus during the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto and was used to spy on civilians, journalists, human rights advocates, etc.

Source: <https://therecord.media/mexican-army-spyware>

Episode 4

- **Campo algodonero:** Campo algodonero literally means “cotton field.” It refers to the cotton field where the bodies of eight dead women were found in 2001. This cotton field is the site of the “pink cross memorial” that has come to represent the Juárez murders and inspired the cover picture of this podcast.

“Campo algodonero” also represents the court case that was brought against the State of Mexico by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Caso González y otras vs. México).



- **Victor Javier Garcia Uribe, aka “El Cerillo”:** One of two bus drivers who was determined to have been forced into confessing to the cotton field murders. He was detained in 2001 and later freed from prison in 2005.
- **Gustavo González Meza, aka “La Foca”:** The second bus driver who was also determined to have been forced into confessing alongside El Cerillo. He died in prison before his innocence was realized of strange circumstances—an unauthorized surgical operation.

Source #1:

<https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Amid-skepticism-2-men-confess-to-8-Juarez-2066206.php>

Source #2: https://aserto.mx/nota/justicia_retardada_en_el_caso_del_campo_algodonero

Episode 5

- **Mario Escobedo Anaya:** A 29-year-old defense lawyer in Ciudad Juárez who was killed in a police chase on February 5, 2002 while representing Gustavo González Meza, one of the bus drivers accused of committing the cotton field murders. Escobedo and González maintained that González had been tortured into giving a false confession. Days before his death, Escobedo announced that he would file a criminal complaint against state officials for allegedly kidnapping and torturing González.

Police recorded officially that Escobedo had died from a vehicle crash. It was later revealed that he died of a gunshot wound to the head.

Source #1: <https://www.lwrc.org/mario-cesar-escobedo-anaya-lawyer/>

Source #2:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/02/12/in-mexico-police-error-or-political-execution/cc2a82bb-5a91-4950-aba3-40cbd6440cb9/>

Source #3: <https://www.borderlandbeat.com/2010/01/juarez-femicides-lawyer-murdered.html>

- **Mario Escobedo Salazar:** The father of Mario Escobedo Anaya, who was assassinated outside his workplace in 2009.
- **Edgar Escobedo Anaya:** Another son of Escobedo Salazar, who was assassinated alongside him in 2009.
- **Abogado del Diablo:** His real name was Sergio Dante Almaraz Mora, or more simply, Dante Almaraz. He knew the dark arts of Juárez. The podcast portrays him as knowledgeable and connected, but politically savvy and knowing which buttons not to press until the police’s murder of Mario Escobedo Anaya propels him to begin working in support of the Escobedos while calling for justice and denouncing the authorities. Eventually, he, too, is murdered in 2006.

Here is a nice blog post about him:

<http://juarezenlasombra.blogspot.com/2011/01/asesinado-pero-no-su-mensaje-el-abogado.html>

Here is his picture:



Episode 6

- **Coyotes:** A person who smuggles immigrants across the Mexico-United States border.
- **Manuel Lillo:** A teenage boy who was the boyfriend of Sagrario González. He was also a coyote. He confessed to murdering Sagrario, although there are a number of clues hinting to the strong possibility that this confession was coerced.
- **Narcos del Valle**
- **Plaza:** A drug marketplace or smuggling point.
- **Operation Plaza Sweep (Barrida de Plaza):** An investigation in 1999 by the FBI and Mexican officials into the mysterious murders in and around Juárez. Mexican officials took FBI agents and forensic experts to the grave sites where they could collect DNA samples. They also took bodies of U.S. citizens who had been murdered back to the United States for further analysis.
- **Abdul Latif Sharif:** An Egyptian born American chemist who moved to Mexico in 1994 and became a prime suspect in the Juárez killings. His past was littered with sexual abuse charges against him by various women. Sharif was arrested in 1995 for the Juárez killings that had occurred up to that point. Given his past, it was easy to assume his guilt. However, while Sharif was in prison, dead bodies continued to show up in and around Juárez. He and his lawyer referenced this fact as they continued to argue for his innocence. Sharif eventually died in prison.



- **Los Rebeldes de Ciudad Juárez:** A name of a group of Mexican serial killers who were active in Ciudad Juárez between 1995 and 1996. They claimed that they were hitmen working for Abdul Latif Sharif, but the podcast implies that these claims may likely have been made up in order to continue framing Sharif for the murders.



- **Alejandro and Melchor Máñez:** Two alleged Mexican serial killers who Abdul Latif Sharif claimed was responsible for some of the Juárez murders. The Máñez brothers may be responsible for anywhere between two and 50 femicides in Juárez.

Episode 7

- At this point, it is believed that people are killing women in Juárez as a ritual. Not only do the killers get some sort of satisfaction from committing the acts, but doing it, and the fact that they are sworn to secrecy for each other, also brings them closer together and strengthens the bonds between them.
- **La línea:** The nucleus, leading faction, and most ruthless sect of the Juárez Cartel.

- **The gatekeepers / los porteros:** The name by which the FBI knew La línea.
- **Plata o Plomo:** Meaning “silver or lead,” in other words, “money/bribe or death/bullet,” this was a policy used by many gangs throughout Latin America, including La Línea. You either take money to do what they want, or they kill you. Sometimes, you don’t even get the option. La Línea, the podcast says, would kill to silence.
- The FBI stamped out Miami as a place for importing drugs into the USA in the 1980’s. After that, activity around the United States-Mexico border, which had always been used to traffic drugs, increased drastically. Juarez became a place of murders in the 1990’s.
- **La 16 de Septiembre:** The main street of Ciudad Juárez. It is the only one in the city that connects south to north and east to west.

This page summarizes the history of the street:

<https://diario.mx/juarez/16-de-septiembre-calle-con-historia-20191219-1602941.html>

Episode 8

- **El Paso = The Pass:** The modern day city has evolved at its current site in this general area (of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez) that Spanish explorer Juan de Oñate recognized as “the pass” while traveling through it in 1598. Oñate was traveling north along the Rio Grande River towards northern New Mexico. He called this area “the pass” because it was located where the Rio Grande River turns north and passes through the Franklin Mountains. El Paso has always been a place through which traffic goes.





- **Metido:** When someone is “metido,” they are “stuck” in the cartel’s world. They are compromised. They are in for one reason or another—Either they participated in some sort of event or exchange with a gang member, or they coincidentally know something that “they shouldn’t,” for example, and they can’t get out either because they now are committed to doing what the gang says or they will be killed.
- **Nos gusta el caldo frío o caliente:** “We like the soup cold or hot,” in other words, “We will take it either way,” or “We will get what we want.”
- **La Nacha:** The nickname of Ignacia Jasso, the godmother of drug trade in Ciudad Juárez. In the 1930’s, Jasso and her family established one of the first major drug cartels in northern Mexico. She is credited with inventing many of the current tactics used by modern drug cartels in Mexico, including infiltrating intelligence services, bribing public agencies, guarding supply routes, orchestrating escapes from prison, etc.



- **Border Families:** All around the world there are families who have just happened to live in an area where an arbitrary line was drawn as a border dividing two countries.

There is a really cool mini-series by The Compass of the BBC World Service called “On The Border” that highlights a few “frontier communities” around the world:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w27vqj2c>

No area better highlights how an international border can shape the lives of people living near it better than **Juárez-El Paso metropolitan area**, also known as the **Borderplex**.

Control of this area has been ever changing for the last few hundred years—First, part of New Spain before being partially taken by the United States. The border here has been redrawn multiple times due to natural and manmade shifts of the Rio Grande River, the body of water that for years has been meant to mark the border.

For years, the border really was just a line. Extended Mexican-American families had lived on either side of the border for years and would cross without a problem to visit each other, work, and conduct other daily affairs. However, as violence has increased in Juárez over the past 30 years, security has been increased and it has become significantly more burdensome and time-consuming to cross. Life has changed greatly for the people living in this region. Their movement is significantly more restricted and cross-border families struggle to maintain unity like before.

This podcast tells the story of the El Paso-Juárez region and how the lives of border families there have changed through the lens of Victoria, a woman who grew up in a “border family” in El Paso:

<https://radioambulante.org/transcripcion/una-ciudad-en-dos-transcripcion>

- **Hardrick Crawford:** A former head of the FBI’s El Paso office from 2001 to 2003 who was dismissed and sent to prison for six months for lying to investigators about his relationship with a Mexican businessman who authorities suspected of having links to drug traffickers. Crawford arrived in El Paso outspoken about and motivated to address the Juárez murders. While in El Paso, he accepted gifts, including a country club membership and weekly lawn service at his home, and his wife accepted a job at a racetrack in Juárez. The podcast allows Crawford to imply that he was set up. In other words, the podcast seems to wonder if giving Crawford gifts was a way to make him look bad and get him out of El Paso because he, as a United States government official, could not be killed.

Source: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna12292463>

Episode 9

- **Bracero Program:** *Bracero*, which includes the Spanish word for arm, *brazo*, means “manual laborer,” or “one who works using his arms.” These programs allowed workers from Mexico to come temporarily to the United States to work on farms. In the early 1940’s, farms throughout the United States were struggling with a shortage of workers because so many men had left to go fight in World War II. In response, in 1942 the United States and Mexican governments signed the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, which resulted in the Bracero Programs.

Do you remember PRONAF (the Border Industrialization Program that tried to incentivize United States companies from operating in the maquiladoras of northern Mexico in order to provide people there with work)? I read that this idea of an “international solution” was influenced by the Bracero Programs

started two decades prior, but set up in the opposite way—Instead of companies coming to provide people with work, people are now moving the opposite way across an international border to provide companies with employees.

- **Antonio Bermúdez:** A Mexican businessman and politician who essentially created the idea of PRONAF. He realized that he could manufacture in Juárez for US needs. Outsourcing the labor would escape labor unions and rely on low wages, while still selling goods for a premium price in the United States. There is a massive industrial park in Juárez that bears his name.



Here is the industrial park's website: <http://parqueindustrialbermudez.com/>

- ***Ni una mas:*** This is the slogan of the movement that seeks justice for the Juárez femicides. It means, “not one more.”

My Conclusion: The podcast seemed to finish without many conclusions, which was disappointing, but I guess represents the reality of the situation in Juárez: The murders truly are a complicated mystery. Clearly, there are many layers to the situation. There isn't just one killer. There seem to be multiple killers, some known, others unknown, with no official tally or record that will ever be able to exhaustively say who killed who—The killers of some women are known, others will never be known, and some may be mistakenly known. It seemed that a climate where men could kill women and get away with it organically developed in and around Juárez over a period of time. These men transcend all groups, organizations, and industries. There are police officers, gang leaders, politicians, petty criminals, and other types of people who are all *metido*. As a result, there are a number of institutional and cultural layers that prevent any investigator from completely getting to the bottom of and solving the problem.