

Femicide and the Aesthetics of Violence in *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*: An Interview with Charles Bowden

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American non-fiction author Charles Bowden has written and reported extensively on violence in Juárez, Mexico. In the past decade he has published three influential works of non-fiction about the city: *Down by the River: Drugs, Money, Murder, and Family* (2002), *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields* (2010), and a collaboration with artist Alice Leora Briggs: *Dreamland: The Way Out of Juárez* (2010). In 1996 Bowden was awarded the Lannan Literary Award for Nonfiction. In his work, he pursues the gritty reality of crime and death produced by the capitalist ethos, international corporations, and the drug trade in Ciudad Juárez.¹

The photo essay *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* (1998) includes a preface by cognitive scientist Noam Chomsky, an afterword by Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, and photographs by several renowned photographers from Ciudad Juárez.² Mexican author Sergio González Rodríguez, who wrote *Huesos en el desierto* (2002) about femicide in Ciudad Juárez, believes that *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* 'es un libro importante por el testimonio que ofrece' (personal interview). Bowden is darkly poetic in his descriptions of the economic and physical violence of the city, and his apocalyptic vision provides a nuanced look at the host of problems plaguing Ciudad Juárez. He addresses subjects that no one — neither the government of Mexico nor that of the US — wants to discuss. Although the photo essay

¹ The term *femicide* was coined by Diana E. H. Russell in 1975 to refer to the murder of women motivated by misogyny. Current use of the word has been made less clear due to the interchangeable use of the terms *femicide* and *feminicide*. However, academics Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (2010: 5) clarify that, 'Building on the generic definition of *femicide* as "the murder of women and girls because they are female"' (Russell, 2001a: 15), we define *feminicide* as the murders of women and girls founded on a gender power structure'. Fregoso and Bejarano (2010) had not been published at the time I conducted this interview, but I support use of the term *feminicide*.

² In addition to Ciudad Juárez photographers Jaime Murieta and Julián Cardona, *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* featured the photography of Javier Aguilar, Jaime Bailleres, Gabriel Cardona, Alfredo Carrillo, Raúl Lodoza, Miguel Perea, Margarita Reyes, Ernesto Rodríguez, Manuel Sáenz, Lucio Soria Espino, and Aurelio Suárez Núñez.

addresses the issue of femicide, it focuses more generally on Ciudad Juárez as a locus of ever-multiplying forms of horror. Bowden takes risks by compiling and narrating images that few want to recognize or take responsibility for.

I interviewed Bowden on 22 August 2010 via Skype at home in his bird-watching sanctuary in Patagonia, Arizona. His face was cloaked in the fading light of dusk, and his gravelly voice, like something coming from beyond the grave, carried an intensity that was fitting for a conversation that reflected on both the similarities between vultures and humans and on the escalating violence in Ciudad Juárez.

Bowden: I just came in the door. I've been sitting outside watching hummingbirds for three hours.

Driver: Hummingbirds appear a lot in *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*.

Bowden: Well, I'm a birdwatcher. I've been spending my summers the last few years in one of the hotspots in the United States in Patagonia, Arizona.

Driver: I'm not familiar with that area.

Bowden: The good news is very few people are. This afternoon the Rufous [hummingbirds] returned from their migration to Alaska, and I started seeing Plain-capped Starthroats which are found almost nowhere in the United States. For a birder, hell, this is like a hit of cocaine or something. It's an odd pastime. You look at a bird, identify it, and feel like you're a better person. I knew something was going on because I've been going through one and a half quarts of sugar water a day and suddenly it leapt to three quarts and then today to four quarts. Can you hear me all right?

Driver: Yes.

Bowden: Ok, God help you then. I start speeches that way. I ask the audience if they can hear me, and they all say 'yes'. Then I say: 'I'm sorry'. They relax.

Driver: It's always good to begin with humour.

Bowden: You should diminish yourself to relax an audience. It's self-deprecation. I think that because of our culture we all have this terror that we're back in church and there's some moron up in the pulpit, and we don't like reliving that experience. I certainly don't. I never have to do this with birds. They never look up to you.

Driver: They don't require any maintenance.

Bowden: No, I feed ravens here and vultures.

Driver: Vultures?

Bowden: Yes, they roost across the creek, and I throw out bones and tripe every few days. I sit there with coffee, and they all gather around. It's like a little coven of black birds.

Driver: That's a bit of a dark pastime.

Bowden: Actually it's not. I've lived with vultures. Ravens are super. Everybody that spends time around them becomes enamoured of their incredible intelligence and

sense of mischief. Vultures live in family groups, and are extremely benign. It's like knowing a bunch of Quakers. They get this awful reputation because they share a trait with human beings — they eat dead things after they get warm.

Driver: That's true.

Bowden: You know their bodies can't really break down the tissue and so it rots a little. We turn on the oven. It's the same reason. They're very friendly. They live in a hierarchy. I once was at a desert water hole sixty miles from anywhere (Christ, they're coming in to roost now) and they spent a week living about twenty-five yards from me disassembling a coyote. Every day they'd show up at the water hole at the same time, and they'd all line up like penguins to drink in this pecking order, and then they'd go back to the coyote. After a while, you know, we were just like neighbours. I got to observe them up close. It's not a full-time job being a vulture. It's not like they work all day. They spend a lot of time playing with each other and shooting the shit. Then I had the same experience with rattlesnakes.

Driver: I grew up with rattlesnakes in Arkansas.

Bowden: What part of Arkansas?

Driver: The Ozark Mountains in North-west Arkansas.

Bowden: I was on the delta for about four weeks this spring, working on a story. It's like another state down in Lee County and Forest City. I have a friend just outside of Little Rock, and he considers it no man's land. Where I'm hanging out it's 60–70 per cent black. It's just like Mississippi. It's the same geography, the same economy, the same guys who have recently retired from wearing white sheets, but everything's so bad now they've sort of gotten past it. I don't mean harmony, but if they don't do something economically there isn't going to be anything. The out migration is big. These counties have lost half or more of their population.

Driver: It makes me think of Juárez, Mexico. They haven't lost that much of their population, but they are losing significant numbers.

Bowden: I've seen these estimates that go anywhere from 50,000 to 400,000, and there are two problems. One, I don't think anyone is capable of doing an accurate census. Nobody was before. People that were quite knowledgeable have varied the population of the city from 1.5 to 2 million. The *colonias* are never mapped.³ The only thing that it's safe to say is that it's shrinking. You don't get all these businesses closing just because of extortion. It's also evident in the abandonment of housing.

Driver: What were your practical goals when you started to write *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*? Did you think you were going to change opinions through photography? Would seeing graphic violence influence people?

Bowden: It starts with the *Harper's* piece [Bowden, 1996]. I arrived in Juárez and El Paso for a completely different story. I started seeing tombstone adds of missing girls.

³ *Colonias* are sectors of informal housing built from disposable materials. In Ciudad Juárez they exist mainly on the margins of the city.

I'm talking to people I've met in Juárez, and they don't seem very concerned or alarmed, the people at *El Diario*. It struck me more than it probably would most people, because I spent years on a daily newspaper covering such crimes. I've been to prison rape therapy. I've been to paedophile therapy. I've interviewed victims for days. When I went to construct the article, what really interested me was the level of violence and poverty in the city. The city was then kind of a poster child for the new free trade policy. Then I made a decision like everybody does, and that was to tell the story. I thought if I used photography readers would identify more because it is an art form, and that if I used dead girls instead of dead boys that they'd pay more attention. That's it. I had all these photos that I gave to *Harper's*. They picked the ones in the magazine. That's it.

Driver: Were you worried about issues of respect in showing dead bodies?

Bowden: No, frankly. The commodification of death? I've been on so many killing sites that I find that a piety. As far as the photos that were in the book and in the magazine — I didn't pick those.

Driver: You didn't pick the photos in the book that accompany your writing?

Bowden: No. I was in New York, and I sat down with Melissa Harris, the then head of *Aperture's* publications. She had 3000 negatives from the people in Juárez, and I sat there for hours while she flashed them on the screen, and told her what they were. Of course, the curious thing is that when the book came out photographer Julián [Cardona] and all these people thought I'd whitewashed the city.⁴ Twenty per cent of the photos in the book were of dead people. Over 50 per cent of the 3000 negatives were of dead people. I was dealing with two guys that were about thirty and had shot photos of 600 corpses. So I go back there and the photographers are like: 'Jesus, we go to all this trouble and you put out this *Alice in Wonderland* version or Pollyanna version'. The reason behind the photography was simple — otherwise the viewer just becomes numb.

Driver: Don't you think the viewer becomes numb seeing that? I know that in the US we don't necessarily show photographs like that, but in Juárez in the news you see dead bodies all the time.

Bowden: Who does? You do?

Driver: I do when I look at the Juárez news.

Bowden: I don't see dead bodies all the time in the US press. In the war in Iraq there's almost total censorship to that kind of imagery. I'm referring to the Iraq war and a deliberate censorship of that kind of imagery — dead soldiers. The question would obviously be irrelevant in Mexico since they commonly print these things in tabloids and papers. In the US it was a jolt because they're shielded. In any event, it wasn't my decision. It certainly was a decision that didn't bother me. The way magazines and books operate is that people that write don't get to determine those things. If I got to determine those things there would have been a hundred photos in *Murder*

⁴ For more on information on Ciudad Juárez photographer Julián Cardona, see Bowden, 2000.

City instead of thirty or forty, but because it's a high expense reproduction, it's limited. Frankly, most publishers wish they'd never seen a photographer because of the expense and because very few people buy photo books. I happen to do it, but I'm kind of strange, I guess. The book went on to get the International Center of Photography Award. It kind of amazed everybody. *Aperture* came out all right because they sold 8000 copies.

You're asking me, 'Does it worsen things to show corpses or does it help things?' No one earth knows. I thought that in this instance it helps things. I thought people needed a wake-up call since the press then and for years afterwards kept talking about Juárez as this wonderful success story with gleaming *maquiladoras*. The *New York Times* consistently printed wages in the factories that were preposterous. They were counting all the alleged benefits as wages. Where you're working you're probably getting paid 50 per cent or 60 per cent of what would be called a wage by them. Until about 2000 or about a little bit after, they would report on the wages in the *maquiladoras*, and they would never do that reporting on a tyre worker in Akron.

I remember the regular business journals attacked the book: 'Free trade is wonderful. This guy is full of shit'. It didn't surprise me. I had friends and activists who attacked me. I told them the same thing. Since you're saying I'm wrong, 'Why don't you go get a job in a *maquiladora* for a week, and I'll pick you up afterwards'.

Driver: They criticized you for what you said about the *maquiladoras*?

Bowden: Yes, they said: 'These things are wonderful'. I said: 'Well, fine. Why don't you go work in one for a week and write a story and totally refute me'. They didn't like that idea.

Driver: I have a question about some of your use of language. In relation to prostitutes you almost always refer to them as 'whores'; I don't understand that choice.

Bowden: Why? You don't like pre-Latin words? As you know, our language is controlled by the Norman invasion. Almost every forbidden word is pre-Norman because the Normans came with the French language. 'Prostitution' is obviously of Latin origin. 'Whore' is Anglo-Saxon. The same with the word 'fuck'. That's why it's forbidden, and you can say fornicate in the public media. The fact is that I don't think that if you talked to those women they would use the equivalent in Spanish of 'prostitute' to say what they were.

Driver: I don't know that I agree with that.

Bowden: I don't think it's equivalent to describing a homosexual as a faggot.

Driver: 'Prostitution' is a job. It's something that someone does to make money. 'Whore' is an insult. If I say, 'She's a whore', that is me making a judgement. It is a strong term. There is no explanation of your use of the word in the book.

Bowden: I don't agree with you, frankly. If you look at the use of the word in history, I don't agree with you at all. Under Charles II, when he had these various mistresses and the mob attacked the carriage of one to do her harm, she climbed up on top and yelled: 'I'm the Protestant whore'. They went away because it was a religious issue then. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. I don't agree with you.

Driver: In the beginning of the book, you talk about wanting to know Juárez ‘to know the taste of the whore under the streetlight’. Is that true? Do you really want to know the taste of a whore under a streetlight?

Bowden: Do you mean do I employ prostitutes? No. What I meant there, and, of course you don’t understand it, is that I wanted to know their lives as well as the other lives.

Driver: In what sense did you want to know their lives? It brings up questions of exploitation.

Bowden: How is it exploitation to want to know how a prostitute lives?

Driver: It doesn’t say how a prostitute lives, you say how she ‘tastes’.

Bowden: Do you think when Emerson wrote ‘Brahma’ and ‘I turn and pass and kill again’ that he wanted to know about killing?

Driver: I think my question is relevant, and it is an issue that has been brought up before.

Bowden: I don’t agree with you. I mean, I want to know everything in the end. That’s why I spent days talking with a *sicario* [a hired killer]. I’m not a killer. I certainly talk to people that are prostitutes. That’s what interests me.

Driver: I’m not saying you can’t talk to prostitutes.

Bowden: Then it’s a misunderstanding. It’s more meant in a Whitmanesque sense, which apparently wasn’t understood. If you read *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wants to devour everything, including the Mississippi River.

Driver: There’s a section where you describe Juárez as being ‘the most exciting city in the world’. Could you explain what you mean by that?

Bowden: I meant that it’s the laboratory of the future, and if you go there you can see the future.

Driver: It’s hard to take that, if you consider that all the photos you look at when you read that phrase are either dead bodies or scenes of economic hardship.

Bowden: Twenty per cent are dead bodies. That is one out of five, not most.

Driver: The photos depict destitute situations, so to describe it as the most exciting city in the world makes it seem as if it were exciting to witness crime.

Bowden: I don’t know how you could read the book and think that I thought it was exciting because of crime. What I say in the book is that this is the laboratory of the future, and things are being decided there. That’s why I got the introduction by Chomsky and I wanted the afterword by Galeano. That was my motivation. If you’re asking me, ‘Is it exciting because of murder?’ No. I’d covered so many murders before I ever got to Juárez that I never wanted to see another one. I covered homicides for three years on a daily paper, too. That’s why I quit newspapers. I couldn’t take it any more — the rapes and murders. You do it on a daily basis. It’s not fun. I went to Juárez for something else. I got sidetracked.

Driver: How did you get sidetracked?

Bowden: I wanted to explain the war on drugs, which I thought was creating great carnage and was being ignored except in agency reports. I tried to cut a deal with the DEA. I drove over there because their world intelligence centre is in El Paso. Everything after that was an accident. Look, I only went to Juárez because I needed one negative, which I never got. Life has a kind of serendipity.

Driver: What did you mean when you wrote, ‘I think that they [the photographers] are capturing something [. . .], the look of the future, and the future to me looks like the face of a murdered girl’?

Bowden: You’re seeing it now in Juárez. If people look at these thousands of people — over 6000 — that have died since 1 January 2008, then I don’t agree with the Mexican government and the US government. I don’t think they are part of criminal organizations. I think they’re average people just like the girls that were getting killed. The official explanation then was that these were wanton, loose women or something. They didn’t catch anyone then — not that it much matters since there is no death sentence for that. Yes, that’s what I meant by ‘it looked like a girl’. The city killed people carelessly and didn’t care.

Driver: When you wrote me an email you said, ‘I question both the category of “femicide” and the focus by media on the murder of women in Juárez’, but it is a strong theme in your book.

Bowden: *The Laboratory of Our Future* doesn’t question it at all. Frankly, the book invented the subject inadvertently. When I told you that I questioned the use of the term ‘femicide’, it’s just that I don’t find it a very good analytical term. You do, use it.

Driver: What would be more appropriate?

Bowden: Homicide works pretty well. It’s like I’m sceptical of the use of the term hate crime. I don’t think it’s a useful distinction. Now there are things I think are useful. I’ve read a lot of southern history, and the subset of lynching is useful because it was deliberately used as a form of social control, and we can watch its increase and then decline.

Driver: Would rape be comparable to lynching in terms of distinguishing violence against women?

Bowden: Well, look at it. I didn’t cover rapes and murders of women for three years in the United States without learning that it was a kind of way to terrorize women. Now I don’t think it was a social policy, but if you’ve sat down with rapists like I have in these classes, then you know that these guys don’t like women. No matter what they think, they hold them in contempt. When I go to prison — that’s where they hold the rape therapy for the rapists — I don’t like prison, but I thought it would be good for me since I was covering those crimes. Tell me what you mean by ‘femicide’.

Driver: The definition that I work with was coined by Diana Russell and on a basic level it is a crime of hate against women. It does create grey areas.

Bowden: The first ten or thirteen years, the 140 girls, the ones who were abducted, raped, and murdered — I think it's pretty fair to say that whoever did that hated them. Now, having covered a lot of domestic violence, that's not always true.

Driver: The term includes domestic violence.

Bowden: I know, but when you read these articles you get the impression that it was a bunch of people abducted by strangers and murderers. Of course, in domestic violence that isn't true.

Driver: I think that is an issue.

Bowden: I think if anyone wants to use the term 'femicide' with domestic violence they have to make sure the reader or audience knows that. I don't care if you want to call it something different. I'm just saying because of the way it's used, that's one problem I have. Then people are consistently saying that these crimes against women in Juárez weren't investigated, when they have to know that the murders of the men aren't investigated either.

Driver: I don't understand. No one is saying that the men's crimes are investigated. That is not the implication.

Bowden: What is peculiar about the women not being investigated?

Driver: It's not peculiar.

Bowden: It is implied. You can correct me, but why don't they say that crimes aren't investigated in Mexico?

Driver: Most of the people writing about violence against women are activists who work with women's rights or building shelters for women. Their focus just happens to be women.

Bowden: The police don't investigate murders in Mexico as a rule. Most murderers get off scot-free.

Driver: The academic books written on femicide definitely include the figures about men. It's not like they're whitewashing what's happening to men.

Bowden: I have a mystery you can solve for me. I travel around the country sometimes, giving interviews and speeches. Without exception people tell me that over half the people killed in Juárez are women.

Driver: That's not true, obviously.

Bowden: Well, I know it's not true. If you find 'femicide' a useful term in your work, use it. To understand what's going on in Mexico, it's not very useful. What *is* useful is the attitudes towards women there. There's an acceptance of violence against women. It's not considered bizarre or odd if you beat your wife.

Driver: One of the things that I talk about in my work is that not enough focus has been put on the fact that a lot of the murders are domestic violence. It's not all a mystery.

Bowden: That was my only point. Christ, I've covered enough murders that were domestic violence, and it's not pleasant. I'm just saying that the other term, the way the public seems to understand 'femicide', they seem to think the missing girls are mysteries. In two-thirds to three-fourths [of the cases] that's not true. Whether or not there's a prosecution and a settlement in court I agree with, nobody's wondering who killed this person.

Driver: One of the photos that was hard for me to look at in *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* was the face of a dead woman with the caption 'a raped and murdered woman'. I think a photo like that merits a lot more of a caption.

Bowden: Well, fine. I didn't write it, and I didn't have any control over it. I didn't do the layout either. I was out of the game, but I actually didn't want to be in the book.

Driver: You didn't?

Bowden: No. It was a condition of getting the photographers published.

Driver: How did Noam Chomsky and Eduardo Galeano become involved?

Bowden: Because I asked. Well, actually I asked *Aperture* because I knew both pieces [of writing]. I said: 'Look, with Chomsky this is about as concise a critique as you're going to get of free trade, and I think Galeano raises really good questions'. When we got them I said: 'Let's get rid of me. I'm a pigmy between two giant redwoods. You don't need me'. They wouldn't go for it. I spent a lot of time on this book because I had to deal with the photographers. I knew that for the photographers this would be very good for their careers. *Aperture* is like God in the photo world. It's a way to get your ticket punched. I don't know if you've ever seen *Aperture* magazine.

Driver: I read the article you wrote about Julián Cardona.

Bowden: They don't pay photographers. They use the most famous photographers in the world, and they don't pay them. They just want to be in there. I know a guy who gets \$30,000–\$40,000 a print. I wrote a piece on him for *Aperture* (Roger Ballen, he lives in South Africa). When he was published in *Aperture* he called me up from South Africa to tell me this was the dream of his lifetime. Now this guy has a \$30,000–\$40,000 print in the highest-end galleries in New York. That's the power of the magazine, its cachet. These guys were all pretty happy. It was a seal on their work.

Face it; with captions they're always brief. The only way to give full captions is with a dual system, where you have a short 'give you a notion' caption and then paginate everything and in the back you have full captions. Otherwise it breaks narrative flow. That's why they don't do it.

Driver: Given the gravity of some of the photos, it feels like they need more of a caption.

Bowden: I couldn't argue with you. Obviously, I would never know that. I'm not you. I'm not the viewer that opens the book. That's why when you write books editors usually ask for more amplification on points that would never occur to you because

they're so obvious. Invariably, at least in my case, it never occurred to me. It's a given. I don't know how much of it occurred to the photographers. All I know is that they went back and forth. They went to a lot of trouble.

Driver: The photographs that Julián Cardona oversaw had complete captions with time, names, and dates. Just a few didn't.

Bowden: I think some of these guys wouldn't even know. Jaime Murietta rolls around like a war machine all night just snapping photos. I mean it. I don't think he keeps records of real consequence. When I knew him he had a bunch of negatives piled up like spaghetti in a box, not even in jackets. They had to go to a lot of trouble in that book to restore negatives that were all scratched. It's a photo-driven book. Why would they bother with me?

Driver: Given that it's a photo-driven book, what are your ethics in terms of the representations of violence? Do you think everything should be shown — every dead, mutilated, beheaded body?

Bowden: It depends. I already told you earlier that you don't know and I don't know. We don't know the consequences of that. Look, it depends on the moment, the time, and what you're trying to say. That's why every human being is in a theatre or in a play. You make decisions about cutting scenes or adding scenes. There are no rules on that. People may make up rules.

Driver: At what point does it become exploitation?

Bowden: Let me get this straight: how could I exploit violence? Do you think I get rich off a book like this? Do you think I actually wound up getting more money than I spent?

Driver: No, it's not about money. It's more about exploitation of an image in terms of asking if it is sensational. It's a question that I have. I'm not saying that I can answer it or that you can either.

Bowden: It's like 'What is pornography?', as Potter Stewart famously said. 'I can't define it. I know it when I see it'.

Driver: That is a good question because there is a term for this kind of imagery — porno-misery. It's a term that's been used in Colombian cinema to discuss the voyeuristic exploitation of misery.

Bowden: Porno-misery I find more useful. When the term is used, it means that you use it so much it deadens people. The assumption is that pornography is deadening. That's why we have a distinction in language between eroticism and pornography. Eroticism is supposed to stir people, whether you approve of it or not. Pornography is absolutely redundant imagery. Porno-misery exists when you produce enough of these images that people don't react to them. It's kind of like somebody in a bar having one too many drinks. There isn't a rule. It's a judgement. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is about an hour and a half long. It's far longer than his other symphonies, but it doesn't deaden you. It's the right length. Certainly, if you read the tabloids in Mexico you don't think: 'This is going to stir people to action'. I'm not defending the

book, but people had a real reaction to it. I think it's that they hadn't seen anything like it.

Driver: Yes, I know. In the academic world, what's been written about it includes the following comments by Rosa-Linda Fregoso: it is 'titillation' that 'crosses the line' and participates in 'the production of the border woman as a fetish'.

Bowden: Yes, I know, but that's her judgement. I don't agree. If I thought that, I would have written a different book. I know you don't know my history, but trust me: when I arrived in Juárez I never needed any more violence. I'd seen a lot. That's why I'm sitting here with hummingbirds. You know, if somebody thinks its titillation that's their judgement. It wasn't my intent.

Driver: Thinking of different representations of Juárez and the ethics of violence: is there any definition of what is respectful to victims and families of the dead?

Bowden: I don't know. You could defend the military for trying to spare the Tillman family by lying to them. If you're looking for rules, you won't get them from me.

Driver: No, but I think it is important to examine what is being represented.

Bowden: When I worked on a daily paper we went through this every morning. We'd have our photos and discuss how to play it and when not to. It was a gut feeling. I didn't really get to make those decisions because I was just the working stiff — the reporter — but sometimes they'd call me in and ask me questions. My job was to find things out. I often found out more than they could bear. They'd call me in and say: 'We're going to ratchet this back'. I got started on these sex crimes. They had a take back the night march, you know with candles and all that.⁵ This seven-year-old girl was watching and going down this big main street. She was grabbed out of the crowd, raped, murdered, and eviscerated. We never published 'eviscerated'. The reason I'm bringing this up is that we thought that word didn't add anything and would just devastate too many people. Sometimes I'd argue against it. I wanted people to be upset. Those arguments, as I remember them, were good arguments. Nobody was trying to be sensational.

Driver: You published two books this year on Juárez, *Murder City* [Bowden, 2010] and *Dreamland: The Way out of Juárez* [Bowden & Leora Briggs, 2010]. Have you done any work in Juárez? Has any of your work expanded into activism in any traditional sense?

Bowden: No, if it has, not to my knowledge. I help people there, but that has nothing to do with what you're referring to. I usually get involved with people I write about. I helped Esther Chávez and Casa Amiga.⁶ That was secondary. That's not why I knew her. It was something I did. I helped Pastor Galván.⁷ That's secondary. I don't

⁵ A take back the night march is a yearly march organized all over the country in the US to raise awareness of sexual violence and abuse against women.

⁶ Esther Chávez Cano was a tireless human rights activist and the founder of Casa Amiga, the first rape crisis centre in Ciudad Juárez. She died in 2009, but Casa Amiga continues to operate as a non-profit organization.

⁷ Pastor José Antonio Galván is an evangelical preacher who runs a shelter for the mentally ill in Ciudad Juárez.

know if you've ever been out there to the asylum. Basically you're dealing with 120 destroyed people who, for various reasons, are not going to come back. This is not 'give them a little medicine' or 'send them to a therapist'. They're destroyed. Somebody has to feed them and take care of them. The only thing I've written that's had consequence in Mexico is a book that was instrumental in creating the first Federal Reserve in Sonora. I wrote it with a friend who was a Pulitzer-Prize-winning photographer. We gave away the royalties to scientists. I've done stuff and written things that have gotten things made into national monuments. I don't know — 750,000 acres. I'm not a Mexican citizen. There's not much I can do there except give money. In the end nothing fixes Mexico except Mexicans. They'll have to do it. I wish the United States wasn't an agency to make it worse. The war on drugs and the free trade policies have done harm and not helped.

Driver: Do you see yourself continuing to work and write about Juárez?

Bowden: No. When I finished *Down by the River* I never intended to write another word about the place.

Driver: How did *Murder City* come about?

Bowden: Julián Cardona and I were sitting and having coffee. It was the middle of January 2008, and I went into my little room there and checked the Internet. These *comandantes* had all been mowed down, and we didn't know what was going on because they worked for the Juárez Cartel. I mean why are you killing the help? We were in Tucson and got in my truck and drove back to Juárez. Both of us realized that whatever we may have thought we understood, we didn't understand. We had no plan to do a book. As the violence kept growing there was a sense that something had to be recorded. You have to understand that it wasn't getting much press in the US at that time. Both of us kept trying to quit, Julián and me. We both broke down in early June. I remember Julián putting down his camera and saying: 'I can't do this anymore'. That's after a twelve-year-old girl got killed. That was the genesis of it. It was kind of an accident.

Driver: What about the title of *Murder City*?

Bowden: It wasn't my title. That's how it works. It's done by marketing. I had nothing to do with the title. They picked the title and the subtitle. I could have objected. They didn't call it *The Diary of Anne Frank*. They have these meetings, and basically the titles that books get are the titles that marketing departments like. You know, I'm making a living. That's true of most books in commercial publishing. Now they're obsessed with getting lots of little words in the subtitles because of Google — *Fat Left-Handed Ukrainians That Believe in Christ*, you know. No, I'm serious. That's exactly how they think. I don't agree with them. I keep telling them: 'You guys would have always rejected *War and Peace* in a meeting, or *Crime and Punishment*. They seem to have done pretty well'.

Driver: Do you feel like *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* has taken on new meaning in light of what has happened?

Bowden: Well, certainly I thought that I could see this coming to a bad end. I've had this conversation with Julián [Cardona]. When the violence started in 2008, I wasn't

surprised. I didn't know what had started it, but I knew this thing was going to crash. What has happened in the last three years, I never saw it coming. I never saw violence of this dimension. I never saw things getting this bad, but this is a jolt to me. It's like with the Soviet Union — if you're a Sovietologist you'd still be stunned in 1989 or 1991 when things just fell over like a dead horse in the street. Even if you had predicted this failure, I think that Kremlinologists were struck by the rapidity of it. All I can tell you is that when I wrote that book I saw it coming, and my view of what I saw coming was extremely naïve compared to what has happened. I didn't see 30,000 dead Mexicans in this carnage. I didn't see the rapidity in which it seems the state is dwindling in its ability to control the country.

Driver: If you're not near it, what can you do?

Bowden: There's nothing you can do even if you're in it. If you were standing in Juárez on a day they kill twenty-odd people, there's not much you can do.

I'll go out now and catch the last bit of the dusk. I like the ending of the light because you see colour and then you see it disappear as the photons decline. This is my sanctuary.

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1 There is only one ref to Russell 2001 – should note here be changed, or is there meant to be another entry in the biblio?