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Hard Touch: Gore Capitalism and Teresa Margolles's Soft Interventions

Toque duro: capitalismo *gore* y las intervenciones suaves de Teresa Margolles

Tato duro: capitalismo *gore* e as intervenções macias de Teresa Margolles

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Abstract

This text approaches Teresa Margolles's textile works through the lens of gore capitalism, a concept theorized in Sayak Valencia's important 2018 book. Gore capitalism, according to Valencia, is the inevitable extension of globalization leading to the use of extreme violence in order to gain economic power and status. In 2009, Margolles was chosen to represent Mexico at the Venice Biennale, and her installation included a number of large cloths that had been used to clean up scenes of narco-violence in northern Mexico. In 2012 and 2015, Margolles gave bloody textiles to groups of embroiderers who embroidered directly onto the cloths. In these and other works, Margolles's stained textiles index violent death in a range of global contexts, staging "soft interventions" that I interpret as political acts of resistance against gore capitalism, violent crime related to narco-empowerment, and femicide. The modernist framing of textiles as excessive is also interrogated, and it is argued that what Margolles's textile artworks unveil is not the innate excessiveness of textiles, but rather the excessiveness of violence.

Keywords:

Violence, touch, textiles, skin, femicide, Mexico, excess, blood.

Resumen

Este texto aborda las obras textiles de Teresa Margolles a través del lente del capitalismo *gore*, un concepto teorizado en el importante libro de Sayak Valencia de 2018. El capitalismo *gore*, según Valencia, es la extensión inevitable de la globalización que conduce al uso de la violencia extrema para ganar poder y estatus económico. En 2009, Margolles fue elegida para representar a México en la Bienal de Venecia, y su instalación incluyó una serie de grandes paños que se habían utilizado para limpiar escenas de narcoviolencia en el norte de México. En 2012 y 2015, Margolles dio textiles ensangrentados a grupos de bordadores que bordaban directamente sobre las telas. Los textiles manchados de Margolles operan como índices de la muerte violenta en una variedad de contextos globales, y dan espacio a "intervenciones suaves" que el texto interpreta como actos políticos de resistencia contra el capitalismo *gore*, contra los crímenes violentos relacionados con el narco-empoderamiento y contra el feminicidio. La comprensión modernista de los textiles como algo excesivo también se cuestiona, y se argumenta que lo que revelan las obras de arte textil de Margolles no es el exceso innato de los textiles, sino más bien el exceso de la violencia.

Palabras clave:

Violencia, tacto, textiles, piel, feminicidio, México, exceso, sangre.

Resumo

Este texto se aproxima ao trabalho têxtil de Teresa Margolle através do lente do capitalismo *gore*, um conceito apresentado no livro do mesmo nome por Sayak Valencia (2018). O capitalismo *gore*, após Valencia, é a extensão inevitável da globalização na que se utiliza a violência extrema para obter poder económico e status. Os têxteis manchados de Margolle indexam as mortes violentas numa série de contextos globais. Em 2009, Margolle foi escolhida para representar México na Bienal de Venécia, e a sua instalação incluiu telas grandes que tinham sido utilizadas para limpar cenas de narco-violencia no norte de México. Em 2012 e 2015, Margolle entregou telas e têxteis ensanguentados a grupos de tecedores que teceram diretamente nos têxteis. Eu apresento estas "intervenções macias" como atos políticos de resistência frente ao capitalismo *gore*, os crimes relacionados com o empoderamento narco e o feminicídio. O enquadramento modernista dos têxteis como excessivos é, mesmo, questionado, e se propõe que o que os trabalhos têxtes de Margolle develam não é a excessividade inata das telas, mas a excessividade da violência.

Palavras chave:

Violência, tato, têxtil, pele, feminicídio, México, excesso, sangue.

Teresa Margolles and Gore Capitalism

Mexican artist Teresa Margolles's death-related artworks have usually been described as either minimalist or post-minimalist because of how her spare installations employing materials such as vapour, cement, and string encourage a phenomenological approach to embodied spectatorship. In this text I analyze some of Margolles's collaborative textile works through the lens of gore capitalism. I also argue that the violence that Margolles is indexing—specifically narco-violence and femicide—with her blood-stained textile works can be theorized as "hard touch." The hard touch is touch in excess, or put another way, excessive touch. I am not the first to discuss Margolles's work in terms of excess. In the exhibition catalogue for *What Else Could We Talk About?*, Margolles's contribution to the 2009 Venice Biennale, Mariana Botey labels the works that Margolles produced as part of the anarchist art collective SEMEFO[1] in the 1990s as "extreme and excessive." The work she is specifically referring to here is *Dermis* (1996), which was comprised of a set of couches and sofas covered in horse entrails. Botey describes the work as a "monstrous mocking of upholstery."[2] Amy Sara Carroll, on the other hand, has remarked that "[d]eath and femininity, in Margolles's solo transitional pieces [after leaving SEMEFO], operate as *excesses* that haunt the expanding circles that constitute the works' publics."[3]

Where my analysis departs from Botey's and Carroll's is in my concern with the material and symbolic specificities of textiles, and with the ways in which textiles have been discursively constructed as excessive in the context of western art history. I also want to engage more critically with the concept of "excess" than either Botey or Carroll do in their respective texts. As I have argued elsewhere, excess is culturally contingent; it is culturally and socially constructed.[4] Thus, to get a precise grip on Margolles's doings with excess, I want to think through what this concept unveils in and around her textile works. I contend that in entering the global art circuit with her bloody textiles, Margolles has exposed the global epidemic of violence against women. Further to this, and despite insightful critiques regarding the ethics of Margolles's use of bodies and body parts in her work, it bears examining the ways in which her work interrogates—rather than simply contributing to—"gore capitalism." As Carroll has noted, Margolles's work "raises ethical, political, and aesthetic questions that resonate across her oeuvre, including: Does a remembrance and deployment of dead bodies in artwork give anonymous victims voice, or does it exact further violence, this time epistemic, against them?"[5] In a similar vein, Julia Banwell has remarked:

1. SEMEFO stands for ("Servicio Médico Forense").

2. Mariana Botey, "Toward a Critique of Sacrificial Reason: Necropolitics and Radical Aesthetics in Mexico,", in *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could We Talk About?* (Barcelona: RM Verlag, 2009), 133.

3. Amy Sara Carroll, "Muerte Sin Fin: Teresa Margolles's Gendered States of Exception". *TDR* 54, nº 2 (2010), 110. Emphasis added.

4. Julia Skelly, "Introduction: The Uses of Excess", in *The Uses of Excess in Visual and Material Culture, 1600-2010, edited by Julia Skelly* (Aldershot: Asghate, 2014), 1-18.

5. Amy Sara Carroll, *REMEX: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 130.

> Some works by Margolles occupy an uneasy space in relation to ethical issues [...]. The first is the ethically thorny issue of permission to use human corpses and body parts to produce works of art [...]. The artistic context within which Margolles works is a country with a history of using bodies in artworks. Mexican visual culture has long displayed real bodies and body parts in religious and spiritual artworks.[6]

The ethical difference between Margolles's stained textiles and earlier works that either represent corpses in photographs (as in her series of morgue self-portraits produced in 1998) or involve the display of body parts (such as the pierced tongue of a young male heroin addict in *Lengua* [2000]), is that the textiles frustrate the viewer's (perhaps unconscious) desire to have visual access to a dead body. In other words, the bloody textiles *index* violent death without presenting it directly. Moreover, in Margolles's textile works cloth signifies the vulnerability of skin. Indeed, the fluid identity of textiles as skin and skin as textiles run throughout Margolles's body of work, where it acquires a politically charged significance. As Anne Anlin Cheng has observed, this is a space of signification that cannot be comfortably inscribed within the parameters of modernism:

> The racial fetish, metonymized as animal or Papuan skin in Loos's work, provides the pivot on which Modernist aesthetic values turn: essence versus veneer, plainness versus excess, utility versus waste, taste versus vulgarity. Yet, as we have started to see, the pivot—the haunting skin—is itself already contaminated.[7]

Accordingly, when we look closely and rigorously at Margolles's textiles, what we might see is the "haunting skin" of murdered women of colour and other victims of violence.

In the terminology outlined by transfeminist activist and scholar Sayak Valencia, gore capitalism refers to the inevitable extension of globalization under which violence becomes the means to gain economic power. Valencia defines gore capitalism as "the undisguised and unjustified bloodshed that is the price the Third World pays for adhering to the increasingly demanding logic of capitalism."[8] In the context of gore capitalism, life does not matter as much as money; therefore, murder becomes rampant. Valencia argues for a transfeminist approach to resisting gore capitalism, writing that "by making the violence visible, we might create a critical consciousness and resistance that could lead to active engagement and the joint creation of responsible intersubjective agreements, endowed with agency."[9] I propose that Margolles's bloody textiles are making violence visible without further spectacularizing the violated bodies of

6. Julia Banwell, *Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death* (Cardiff: The University of Wales Press, 2015), 49.

7. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33.

8. Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism,* translated by John Pluecker (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 3018), 19. Valencia acknowledges the problematic nature of the term "Third World," writing that she is using it critically: "Above all, we will use the term Third World to refer to a world that, given its conditions, maps out its own distinct strategies for empowerment" (301 n2).

9. Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 288.

women and victims of narco-violence. Our responsibility as intersectional feminist scholars is thus to engage critically with these textile works, from a range of disparate but interconnected perspectives, in order to further illuminate the violence they are indexing. As Valencia importantly remarks:

> As a movement guided by a critique of both oppression and the violence of a hegemonic, (hetero)patriarchal system, it would be impossible for feminist discourse not to theorize or take actions against the dynamics of gore capitalism. From our multiple and distinct feminist positions, it is urgent to situate ourselves in a critical posture vis-à-vis this system. We need to open to internally-focused criticality and redefinition in order to confront the variety of issues of concern to both first feminisms and to new feminisms and post-feminisms rooted in the specific contexts of our contemporary realities. These realities have their own subtleties and particularities, and yet they are all impacted by the physical, psychological, and mass-media ramifications of the increasing globalization of gore violence and its very real effects on gender.[10]

Margolles's status as a Mexican feminist artist is sometimes obscured in the scholarship that focuses on an account of her work as post-minimalist.[11] As Carroll has also noted, the "gendered dimensions of Margolles's work" are rarely if ever considered, despite the fact that in an interview with Carroll in 2000 Margolles stated: "Of course, my status as a woman in relation to what's been termed an all-male aesthetic [that is, post-minimalism] has affected my artistic practice. Of course, my status as a woman in the world affects the ways in which I work."[12] The historical and ongoing denigration of textiles as "women's work" has also had consequences for the scholarship on Margolles's output. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Margolles's many works involving cloth and embroidery have received less scholarly attention than her installations involving materials such as concrete, vapour, and body parts.

Margolles's Textiles: An Overview

Margolles uses textiles that bear material traces of violence, whether drug-related violence, suicide, or femicide. Her first engagement with textiles appears to have been *Dermis* (1995), a white hospital sheet bearing the bloody silhouettes of two human figures, collected, as in much of her early work, from the morgue in Mexico City.[13] According to Rubén Gallo, the silhouettes in *Dermis* belong to two gay men who had died by suicide together.[14] Margolles's 2009 exhibition

10. Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 256-57.

11. See, for example, Edward Bacal, "Pervasive Death: Teresa Margolles and the Space of the Corpse." *Human Remains & Violence* 4, no. 1 (2018): 25-40. An exception is Jamie L. Ratliff's PhD dissertation "Visualizing Female Agency: Space and Gender in Contemporary Women's Art in Mexico" (University of Louisville, 2012), in which Ratliff explicitly identifies Margolles as a feminist Mexican artist, focusing on her bodily interventions in the streets of Mexico, which he claims "draw upon a long tradition of the street as a space of public protest and social critique in Mexico" (189).

12. Carroll, "*Muerte Sin Fin*", 107 n10.

13. Margolles's early textile works consisted of white sheets used to absorb the imprints of body parts in the morgue. The technique was later used to create imprints of full bodies. The artist proceeded with the making of "collective imprints," where several bodies appeared in a single work. "Her work *Lienzo* (*The Shroud*) (1999-2000) consists of a blanket nine meters long (nearly thirty feet) that holds the bodily fluids of nine corpses". Patrice Giasson, "Introduction: Images on Stains: Violence and Creation in Teresa Margolles's Textiles", in *Teresa Margolles: We Have a Common Thread*, edited by Patrice Giasson (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art Purchase College, State University of New York, 2015), 14.

14. Rubén Gallo, *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 117. "*Dermis* [...] consists of the impression left by corpses on white sheets. During one of her routine visits to the morgue, Margolles stumbled upon two young men, lying side by side, covered in blood: Gay lovers who had taken their lives in a double suicide. She put a white sheet over the bodies to create a ghostly imprint of the men's silhouettes, and then placed the imprint on a stretcher. The result is an eerie, *indexical* representation of the corpses, one that—like footprints or plaster casts—bears the physical trace of its referent" (122, Gallo's emphasis). Gallo's use of the terms "indexical" and "referent" point to the possibility of reading textiles employing semiotics as a methodology, which, building upon Claire Pajaczkowska's development of a "semiotics of textiles" in "Tension, Time and Tenderness: Indexical Traces of Touch in Textiles," I undertake later in this article.

for the Venice Biennale, *What Else Could We Talk About?*, is, as I discuss below, comprised of many textiles, all of which Margolles, joined by several groups of volunteers, had used to clean up scenes of narco-violence in northern Mexico.

In Margolles's video work *Mujeres bordando junto al Lago Atitlán* (2012), a group of Mayan female activists (Lucy Andrea Lopez, Silvia Menchu, Bonifacia Cocom Tambriz, Maria Josefina Tuy Churunel, Marcelina Cumes, Rosamelia Cocolajay, Alba Cocolajay, and Cristina Lopez) are shown embroidering brightly coloured images onto a stained white sheet. The sheet is stained with blood from an incident during which a woman was murdered in Guatemala City. A high percentage of women murdered in Guatemala as a result of domestic violence come from indigenous communities living in rural areas or on the urban periphery.[15] While they embroider, the women in the video discuss domestic violence in Guatemala and around the world, pointing to the intersubjective nature of collective crafting and the potential for change when women speak openly about intimate violence. As feminist craft historian Janis Jefferies has written more than once, "To craft is to care."[16]

The embroidered cloth that resulted from this gathering—*Tela bordada* (2012; Img. 1)—was included in the exhibition *Mundos*, which was on display

15. Giasson, "Introduction: Images on Stains," 12.

16. Janis Jefferies, "Loving Attention: An Outburst of Craft in Contemporary Art", in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art, edited by Maria Elena Buszek,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 222-240.

Image 1. Teresa Margolles, *Tela bordada*, 2012. Embroidered fabric with blood stains. 202 × 206 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in 2017. The work was also singled out by curator Greg Hill in the afterword to the exhibition catalogue for *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art* (National Gallery of Canada, 2013), where he provided an extended description of the work as well as a meditation on violence against indigenous women in global contexts, including the murdered indigenous women and girls of Canada.[17] As Hill observes, "Margolles creates a tension between beauty and death that enhances both. The women's handwork, the labour and the sense of community that comes through in the creation of the embroidery take the work far beyond decoration to enter the realm of ritual and transformation."[18]

Tela bordada anticipated the 2015 exhibition *Teresa Margolles: We Have a Common Thread* (Neuberger Museum of Art Purchase College, State University of New York), curated by Patrice Giasson, which was comprised of six textiles that were stained with the blood of victims of violent crime. Margolles collected the textiles from morgues in Panama, Nicaragua, Mexico, Brazil, the United States, and Guatemala, and then gave the textiles to groups of embroiderers in each of those countries. All of the victims of violence were anonymous, except for Eric Garner, an African American man who died while being arrested as a result of police brutality.

As I have mentioned, Margolles's textiles have received less attention than her other death-related works. In her monograph *Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death*, Julia Banwell does note the fact that Margolles engages with "materials [such] as air, water, and cloth, that have been used as carriers to transport the bodily remains between sites of collection and exhibition,"[19] and the textile works produced for the 2009 Venice biennial, but overall analyses of her work typically focus on Margolles's "hard" materials , as in Edward Bacal's 2015 article about concrete and the abstract, where he argues that Margolles and Colombian artist Doris Salcedo "specifically use concrete to depict what [he calls] 'abstract bodies': absent, invisible, or otherwise virtual bodies which have disappeared from the scene of the work but nevertheless leave their impression on it."[20] As Bacal fails to note, Margolles's stained textiles also do this indexical work, as the bloodstains index bodies that have disappeared violently.

In working with blood-stained textiles, Margolles illuminates the powerful and contradictory symbolism of textiles: neither simply "excessive" nor safely "domestic," textiles can evoke a range of different affects and reveal a range of different kinds of touch. In what follows I engage critically with the ostensible relationship between textiles and excess. On the one hand, I want to show what might be useful or productive, from a feminist perspective, in considering what is "excessive" about Margolles's bloody textiles; on the other, I want to use these textile works as a test case, demonstrating how they undermine the modernist

17. Greg Hill, "Afterword: Looking Back to *Sakahàn*", in *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*, edited by Greg A. Hill, Candice Hopkins, and Christine Lalonde (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2013), 136-40.

18. Hill, "Afterword", 138.

19. Julia Banwell, *Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death* (Cardiff: The University of Wales Press, 2015), 1.

20. Edward Bacal, "The Concrete and the Abstract: On Doris Salcedo, Teresa Margolles, and Santiago Sierra's Tenuous Bodies." *Parallax*, 21, nº 3 (2015), 259. In this thoughtful essay, Bacal concludes: "While I am ultimately skeptical that a medium specificity for concrete art ultimately exists, concrete nevertheless commands a certain sense of physicality that, more than simply signifying its tangible weight, carries the affective sense of its embodied use (certainly, one can readily imagine the sensation of touching and lifting it, or of walking upon it and living inside it)" (268).

categorization of textiles as innately excessive. Margolles's embroidered, stained textiles open space to interrogate the discursive framing of textiles as excessive and marginal. Like a Trojan horse, Margolles's textile works have entered western art institutions as artworks that continue a legacy of women artists, and women artists of colour, using soft materials to engage in socio-political critique.[21]

The language of textiles is one that is usually associated with domesticity, but Margolles's textile works undermine this association. In her early death-related works, Margolles worked with materials that she found in the morgue, using cloth sheets that could absorb bodily fluids. In 2009, as Cuauhtémoc Medina has observed, Margolles moved from the morgue into the streets, using cloths to clean up mud, blood, and broken glass from crime scenes in Mexico.[22] Using "domestic" textiles in public spaces associated with violent death transforms the textiles into uncanny materials that are no longer safely domesticated. This concern with undermining the domestic has been identified by Marci R. McMahon as a characteristic of many female Mexican artists and writers. She argues that these authors and artists enact "domestic negotiations" that both "challenge and reinforce geographical, racial, gendered, and national borders."[23] While McMahon does not discuss Margolles, the phrase "domestic negotiations" fits her way of rejecting the traditional domestic associations of textiles by employing blood-stained textiles to illuminate the notion that the domestic is not always a safe space for women.[24]

Textiles and Excess

It is only through art-historical ideology that textiles have come to be conceptualized as excessive, but rather than viewing this excessiveness as a negative thing, as Adolf Loos (in "Ornament and Crime," 1908) and other modernists would have us do, I want to suggest that such excess is a potentially powerful site of resistance for those deemed "other" in art history and in lived experience. Several feminist scholars have commented on the (ostensible) excessiveness of textiles. For instance, feminist art historians Janice Helland and Bridget Elliott have stated:

> The gendered conflation of textiles—particularly embroidery—with the feminine suggest that somewhere within the softness of fabric and the intricacy of stitching lies an inherent relationship that cannot be signified or secured: it is always "excess" and therefore external to more easily and rigorously defined concepts. Excess is elusive, defies categorization and thus, according to psychoanalytic theorists like Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva, occupies the margins, but, particularly following Kristeva, it is precisely in this marginal

21. As a case in point, one may refer to Julia Bryan-Wilson's discussion of *arpilleras*, hand-stitched tapestries that are appliqued onto a coarse piece of thin burlap material. They employ "eye-catching," "vibrant fabrics" that have been affixed with cross-stitches of matching thread. According to Bryan-Wilson, these "small tapestries [were] made by Chilean women who by and large were not invested in the category of 'art' but who were [...] using cloth and thread as a form of making to tell urgent stories and to push at the boundaries of textile politics." Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 143.

22. Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Materialist Spectrality," in *Teresa Margoles: What Else Could We Talk About?*, (Barcelona: RM Verlag, 2009), 23.

23. Marci R. McMahon, *Domestic Negotiations: Gender, Nation, and Self-Fashioning in US Mexicana and Chicana Literature and Art*, (London: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 3.

24. Jamie Ratliff has discussed other contemporary Mexican artists who "negotiate domesticity" in their work, including Polvo de Gallina Negra and Daniella Rossell. See Ratliff, "Visualizing Female Agency," especially chapter 4, 130-87.

25. Bridget Elliott and Janice Helland, "Introduction," in *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts, 1880-1935: The Gender of Ornament, edited by Bridget Elliott and Janice Helland*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 5.

> space that disruption ferments, always ready to dislodge the symbolic order and its dominant discourses.[25]

As Helland and Elliott argue, excess is a label or a concept that is bestowed by those with the power to do so; something that is labeled as "excessive" is often then shoved to the margins, dismissed, and denigrated. But there it "ferments," grows, mutates, and potentially becomes a a powerful source of subversion, even while what is expected is silence, submission, and softness. There is a slippage here, of course, between textiles and the individuals, often women, who are imagined to create those textiles.

British craft historian and feminist artist Janis Jefferies has also underscored the constructed nature of this marginalization, highlighting modernism as the discursive mode and temporal context that engendered a writing off of textiles as excess:

> The taste for the decorative was pathologized as feminine, as embellishment, as style, as frivolous, as excessive, and was therefore constantly repressed within the rhetorical devices of Modernism. Detail and fabric were viewed as decorative extras and excluded from the rigid confines of regularly ordered space in the pictorial plane. Once released, detail and pattern become excessively magnified and erupted, even exceeding the borders which once tried to contain them.[26]

According to these feminist scholars, masculine art history has determined textiles as something that exceeds what is perceived as "high art." They are marginal, outside of, external to the category of "high art," and they have been described accordingly as "low art" and, of course, craft or handicraft. Yet textiles not only *threaten* to erupt, as Jefferies claims; they *do* erupt, exceeding the borders and categories that have discursively been put in place to contain them. As Jefferies and others have suggested, textiles *are not innately excessive:* they have been discursively constructed as such through the machinations of (masculine, western) art history. As Mary Russo has stated in *The Female Grotesque*, the "grotesque [...] is only recognizable in relation to a norm and [in the awareness that] that exceeding the norm involves serious risk."[27] To observe that textiles are not innately excessive may seem obvious, but it bears emphasizing, because describing textiles as excessive without critical discussion risks re-entrenching the modernist vision of textiles as excessive in relation to the masculine norm of flat painting or modernist design. The concept of excess as contingent—that is, in need of a norm to exceed—is also crucial in my theorization of hard touch or violent touch *as excessive*. Within this altered framework I would like to reformulate

26. Janis Jefferies, "Contemporary Textiles: The Art Fabric", in *Contemporary Textiles: The Fabric of Fine Art, edited by Nadine Monem* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2008), 46. Emphasis added.

27. Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 10.

the question about the excessive character of textiles, and examine how reframing this excessiveness might help us to illuminate the affective work that Margolles's textiles do.

Textiles, Touch, and Violence

Craft historians have demonstrated again and again how textiles have intersected with affective labour, usually through the hands of women. Quilting bees, temperance banners, suffrage banners, and funeral shrouds: textiles have long served affective and political purposes, and Margolles's collaborative textiles are part of this legacy.[28] Many textile scholars have identified the haptic nature of textiles as a strength; as Jessica Hemmings has observed:

> While touch is central to our understanding of textiles, writing and reading about textiles tend to be considered, in an academic context, to make a greater contribution to our understanding of cloth. "Reading" the textile, rather than "feeling" the textile, means the textile is judged against a value system that does not always respond to its strengths.[29]

In response to such omissions, Claire Pajaczkowska has endeavored to establish a semiotics of textiles, turning to this methodology in order to illuminate the affective work that textiles do. Although Pajaczkowska's essay fails to engage with violent touch, her approach lays out a useful point of departure for my reading of Margolles's textile works. As Pajaczkowska suggests, semiotics is a useful methodology for examining textiles because it can explain

> why the trace of the hand within representation is capable of signifying memories of profoundly affective states. The semiotics of 'the textile' is needed in order to show how the specifically material meaning in textiles is founded on embodied knowledge and affect, and that these exist as indexical traces of the touch, handling, and holding that are the presence of an absence of the body.[30]

It is worth noting here that this could be said for both textiles and violence: bruises, cuts, and other wounds on the skin are indexical traces of excessive, violent touch. Pajaczkowska also remarks that "[o]ne reason for the relative absence of textiles from the semiotic field is the paradoxical status of cloth as simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible," so that "cloth and its component element, thread, have a cultural position that has endowed them with both an

28. See Patricia Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art," in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 331-46; see also Julia Skelly, "Object Lessons: The Social Life of Temperance Banners", *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, 14, nº 3 (2016): 268-93; and Lisa Tickner, "Banners and Banner-Making," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przblyski (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 341-48.

29. Jessica Hemmings, "Introduction", in *The Textile Reader, edited by Jessica Hemmings* (London and New York: Berg, 2012), 3.

30. Claire Pajaczkowska, "Tension, Time and Tenderness: Indexical Traces of Touch in Textiles", in *Digital and Other Virtualities: Renegotiating the Image*, edited by Antony Bryant and Griselda Pollock (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 134.

31. Pajaczkowska, "Tension, Time and Tenderness", 135. Emphasis added.

excessive materiality and an almost irrational immateriality."[31] As is often the case in discussions of textiles, and in spite of her conceptually nuanced approach, Pajaczkowska does not elaborate here on the ostensible excessiveness of cloth, although she does note that "the individual body is usually covered in cloth, which is for most of the time in contact with the surface of the skin," making explicit the almost constant touch between skin and textiles in our day-to-day lives.[32] Thus, there is an interesting blind spot when it comes to violent touch in Pajaczkowska's text, apparent, for instance, when she writes:

> The absorbent quality of cloth is also part of its capacity to signify as iconic, seen in the way that stains which indicate the capillary action of fibres retain the meaning of mark-making. The body as topos of conflict between nature and culture is, traditionally, prevented from staining fabric. There are many examples of the capacity of textile to signify through its use as symbol. Because textile absorbs liquid, it can be dyed to hold colour.[33]

Despite a reference to the "capillary action of fibres" and the "body as topos of conflict," there is a clear erasure, in these lines, of violent touch and blood stains as indexes of violence. One possible explanation for the lack of attention to violence in feminist scholarship on textiles is the fact that textiles, and craft more broadly, are still marginalized in western art history, leading perhaps to the ongoing perception that textiles must be celebrated, rather than complicated, in feminist texts.

Violence, theorized as hard touch or excessive touch, is touch in excess, touch that bruises and breaks skin. Pajaczkowska herself notes the way in which the "stitch pierces, punctuates, penetrates, as it unites separate edges, and within a single gesture it combines both aspects of the paradox of destruction and creation,"[34] adding that the "temporality of the tactile, haptic quality of the textile as sign depends on a paradox of presence and absence."[35] These descriptions are undoubtedly relevant to an understanding of Margolles's textiles, which function as memories of violence, as their stains index the presence, and then the absence, of the person who experienced violent touch. Then again, near the end of her article, Pajaczkowska discusses tenderness as an affect that might be considered productively in relation to textiles, arguing that the "meaning of tenderness is experienced as a property of the textile itself," and that this "semiotic quality is responsible for the attribution of a protective agency to cloth and textiles."[36] Thus, the limits of Pajaczkowska's project come again into view in light of Margolles's textile works, for here the idea of cloth and textiles as having a

32. Pajaczkowska, "Tension, Time and Tenderness", 135.

33. Pajaczkowska, "Tension, Time and Tenderness", 141.

34. Pajaczkowska, "Tension, Time and Tenderness", 143.

35. Pajaczkowska, "Tension, Time and Tenderness", 141.

36. Pajaczkowska, "Tension, Time and Tenderness", 144.

37. Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 3.

"protective agency" becomes an empty claim, even dangerous and naïve, as cloth proves unable to protect bodies from violence.

Jill Bennett argues in *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* that a politics of testimony "requires of art *not* a faithful translation of testimony; rather, it calls upon art to exploit its own unique capacities to contribute actively to this politics."[37] I in turn want to argue that Margolles is exploiting, in a range of different ways, the "unique capacities" of cloth and thread—to absorb, to stain, to invite touch, to touch (or to *move*, affectively speaking)—in order to contribute to a politics of testimony specifically concerned with violence against women.

A Stain on the Country: Femicide in Mexico

In her discussion of gore capitalism, Valencia focuses on Mexico, and while her investigation is primarily concerned with narco-violence, she makes the important point that the logic of gore capitalism results in an overall unconcern for life, which "also reflects a gender bias, particularly evident in the scarce interest the government has shown in the *feminicidios* in Ciudad Juarez."[38] According to Alice Driver, "[s]ome [commentators] say that [femicide] in Juarez began in 1993. Others say it began earlier, perhaps in 1991 or 1992."[39] In fact, Driver concludes that it is impossible to pick a single date to mark the beginning of femicide in Mexico:

> Monarrez Fragoso, who studies gender and violence, has been writing about femicide for more than two decades. She notes that any such artificial start date ignores the deep roots of the problem of violence against women and the lack of institutional rights afforded to them, which has led to the escalation of femicide in Juarez. Perhaps hundreds of impoverished young women, perhaps thousands, have been victims of femicide since the early 1990s.[40]

Margolles's textile works are stained/tainted by blood, but there are no bodies represented. In this way, her works can be compared to the feminist works of the 1980s and 1990s that eschewed the body in attempts to avoid accusations of essentialism, on the one hand, while deliberately refusing the viewer access to the female form, whether naked or clothed, on the other.[41] This strategy is remarkable precisely because Margolles was known for her use of dead bodies in her early work, whether photographed, slathered in fat, or fragmented.[42] In her turn to textiles, Margolles ceased to represent dead bodies or use specific body parts, thus adopting a feminist strategy that refuses to give the viewer access to

38. Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 304 n8.

39. Alice Driver, *More or Less Dead: Feminicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 5.

40. Driver, More or Less Dead, 5.

41. For example, Barbara Kruger's *Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face* (1981), Harmony Hammond's *Kudzu* (1981), Jenny Holzer's text-based work, and Mira Schor's *Light Flesh* (1994).

42. For more on this see Carroll, "*Muerte Sin Fin*", and Banwell, *Teresa Margolles and the Aesthetics of Death*.

the violated female body. In textile works such as *Tela bordada* and the embroidered sheets of the 2015 exhibition *We Have a Common Thread*, the bloodstains index instances of femicide not only in Mexico, but in a range of global contexts, by doing which Margolles unveils the fact that femicide is not only a problem of Mexico's gore capitalism; rather, violence against women and other marginalized groups is an ongoing global epidemic. In Margolles's textile works, blood-stained cloth stands in for skin, so that the colourful, embroidered designs on *Tela bordada*—which include birds, flowers, candles, crosses, leaves, female figures in dresses, and a radiant sun—function as tattoos on dead, murdered, bloody, metonymic skin. Some viewers may well find hope or solace in the bright colours and icons of birds and flowers, but for other spectators these textile works will more likely illuminate the futility of these palimpsest textiles to bring back the dead or to provide closure for the living.

Gore Capitalism Unveiled in Venice

Margolles is part of what has been called the globalization of Mexican art in the post-1994, post-NAFTA global art world.[43] In 2009 Cuauhtémoc Medina curated a show of her work for the 53rd Venice Biennale, a show that represented Margolles's artistic transition from the morgue to the streets. Like many of her earlier works, those included in Margolles's exhibit at the Mexican Pavilion were concerned with the drug trade and so-called "narco-murder" in Mexico City.[44] According to Valencia's analyses, narco-violence is central to the concept of gore capitalism, and thus Margolles's Venice works may productively be considered through this theoretical framework.

One thing to note is that the textile works included in *What Else Could We Talk About?* are not textile artworks in the traditional sense. That is, unlike *Tela bordada* and the textiles produced for the 2015 exhibition *We Have a Common Thread*, the textiles featured in the Venice show were, for the most part, not embroidered. The exception was *What Else Could We Talk About? Embroidery*, one of the "extramural actions" or "joint activities in the streets of the city of Venice," which involved "people embroidering with gold threads fabrics with blood collected from execution sites in the north border of Mexico."[45] These actions resulted in cloths entitled *Narcomessages, as* the bloody textiles were embroidered with messages left by the drug cartels at crime scenes as warnings to their perceived enemies. The embroidered textiles were then hung on the walls of the Mexican Pavilion like medieval tapestries or paintings. In a carnivalesque gesture, Margolles hung stained, sullied, contaminated, and threatening textiles where paintings would have traditionally been displayed.

43. Carroll, *REMEX*, 130.

44. See, for example, Beto O'Rourke and Susie Byrd, *Dealing Death and Drugs: The Big Business of Dope in the U.S. and Mexico: An Argument for Ending the Prohibition of Marijuana* (El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2011); Miguel L. Rojas-Sotelo, "Narcoaesthetics in Colombia, Mexico, and the United States: Death Narco, Narco Nations, Border States, Narcochingadazo?" *Latin American Perspectives* 41, nº 2 (2014): 215-31.

45. *What Else Could We Talk About?*, 70.

As mentioned, all of the Venice textiles had previously been used to clean up crime scenes in northern Mexico, an action that points to the traditional use of cloth in domestic labour, both paid and unpaid. Margolles's acts of cleaning resulted in large cloths covered and saturated with blood, mud, and debris. The cloths used to clean up the streets are rust-coloured and often streaked with white blotches. The exhibition catalogue for *What Else Could We Talk About?* frequently describes these fabrics as being "impregnated with blood," a significant feminization of the textiles that anticipates the blood covered embroidered sheets of *We Have a Common Thread* that index incidents of femicide in Mexico and Guatemala, among other global contexts. It is worth pausing here to query: What, if anything, is excessive about the textile works included in *What Else Could We Talk About?* I argue that in these works textiles are not "excessive" in the modernist sense, as something that can be displaced from the site of "properly artistic" materials. Rather, what these "impregnated fabrics" show is the excessiveness of violence, of the violent touch that literally ruptures the skin of human beings causing blood to overflow the boundaries of the body and to run in the streets. These works could also, perhaps, elicit shame; not the shame of the murdered, but rather the shame of those who have engaged in violent acts. As craft scholar Jenni Sorkin has observed, referring to self-inflicted stains: "*Stains elicit shame: [...]* The self-stain renders the body uncontrollable: both capable and culpable of transmission, transgression and impurity, exceeding the acceptable, surpassing *the boundaries of the skin*."[46] These bloody sheets and textiles have absorbed blood that resulted from violence index acts of gore capitalism, and what Margolles's work with textiles does is both to unveil *and* to resist gore capitalism. Returning once more to Sayak Valencia's important and timely book, I will quote at length:

> We are interested in developing a discourse with the explanatory power to help us interpret the reality produced by gore capitalism, founded in violence, (drug) trafficking and necropower, while at the same time presenting the dystopias of globalization and its imposition. We are also interested in following the multiple threads that give rise to the capitalist practices underpinned by extreme and ultra-specialized forms of violence—practices that in certain geopolitical locales have become established as everyday forms of violence used to obtain recognition and economic legitimacy. The raw nature of this violence obeys a logic born out of structures and processes planned in the very heart of neoliberalism, globalization, and politics. We are talking about practices that are transgressive solely because their forcefulness makes the vulnerability of the human body clear, in how it is mutilated and desecrated. These practices constitute a scathing critique of the society of

46. Jenni Sorkin, "Stain: On Cloth, Stigma, and Shame," *The Textile Reader*, 60. Emphasis added.

47. Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 21-22.

> hyperconsumption, at the same time as they participate in it and in capitalism's inner workings.[47]

As noted at the outset of this text, Margolles has often been critiqued on ethical grounds for creating artwork out of dead bodies and body parts, which might lead one to argue that she is a participant in the strategies of gore capitalism, which turns bodies into commodities. While I think this ethical dilemma is not one to be ignored, I do want to underscore once again that Margolles's turn to stained textiles allowed her to gain further visibility, on a global stage, for the epidemic of femicide in Mexico and elsewhere. While these textiles frustrate the viewer's visual mastery over the dead body,[48] they also interrogate gore capitalism by making violence visible. As a Mexican artist, Margolles is undoubtedly inside the monster that is gore capitalism, but if we heed the message of her collaborative textiles, we must recognize that the monster does not live in Mexico alone.

Conclusion: On Purity and Impurity

One of the threads running through all of Margolles's textile works is that they are dirty and stained. If we refer to anthropologist Mary Douglas's definition of dirt as "matter out of place,"[49] we see that Margolles's textiles force us to think about those individuals who are deemed "out of place" and who are, as a result, more vulnerable to violence and dispossession. I use the term "force" advisedly, because there is something forceful and aggressive about Margolles's textile artworks, something that destabilizes the usual association of textiles with softness, gentleness, femininity, and safety. Margolles's textiles are affectively effective, in large part, precisely because they undermine these associations: they draw attention to violent touch against female bodies and they index domestic violence rather than signifying safe domesticity. Their message is excessive in that it exceeds what textiles have traditionally signified: docile femininity, unobtrusive materials, habits, hobbies, and habitats. The textile-as-skin is both fragile and resilient, a border and a boundary that is permeable and vulnerable.

These textiles are stained and dirty and bloody. Margolles cleans up streets only to unveil the violence that dirtied them in the first place. The dirt, blood, and stains force (white, privileged) viewers to face the lived realities of vulnerable individuals, particularly Indigenous women and women of colour. In her book *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, Alexis Shotwell writes:

> Concepts and practices of purity and impurity, in relation to dirt as well as other things understood as dirty, tell us something about how people understand the world they live in, and thus how they can imagine the world

48. For an excellent discussion of this, see Andrea D. Fitzpatrick, "Reconsidering the Dead in Andres Serrano's 'The Morgue': Identity, Agency, Subjectivity." *Revue d'art canadienne/Canadian Art Review*, 33, nº 1 and 2 (2008): 28-42.

49. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

50. Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 13-14.

51. Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 15.

> becoming. In other words, purity practices are also productive normative formulations—they make a claim that a certain way of being is aspired to, good, or to be pursued.[50]

Shotwell adds: "To be against purity is, again, not to be for pollution, harm, sickness, or premature death. It is to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous."[51] In the context of Margolles's stained textiles, one could argue that the unstained, unembroidered cloth is "pure" in the sense of unsullied, clean, and untouched by both violence and artistic intervention. The bloody textiles, on the other hand, are impure. Dirty, yes, but not "taboo" in the sense that Mary Douglas means, or even "shameful" in the way that Sorkin has theorized. Rather, they are impure in the sense that Shotwell means: as something that demands attention because it illuminates the often painful co-existence of peoples both locally and globally. The affective demands of Margolles's bloody textiles remind us that as global citizens we are all ethically entangled. It is up to each of us to decide what we do with that knowledge.

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