Many of us call Mexico City ‘The Monster’. Tenderly. As in, when we are abroad and homesick, and all I want is to spend an afternoon hanging out at the apartment where my parents live in the northwest periphery of the city, reading the newspaper or a book in my favourite corner of their home studio, watching the hovering hummingbirds through the window, conversing with my mum and planning with my sweet-toothed dad about which delicious treats we can get at the nearby market and street-vending stands. We call it The Monster, but proudly. As in, when we realize we are extremely resourceful people under strenuous circumstances, and I am reminded of how fortunate and privileged I am for having grown up in such a heavily-peopled valley, now spreading furiously beyond its edges and into some of the surrounding mountains. We call the city this in deep awe. As in when we fly into The Monster by plane, especially at night, and see the immensity of the boundless lights everywhere we turn, and I am under the impression that poetry, theatre, fiction, chronicles, music, film, and ethnography can only ever capture a fragment, for a few instants, of its enormous beauty and its acute shifting complexity and contradictions. We name it with irritation towards its monstrosity too. As in, when we are caught in the now only euphemistic ‘rush hour’ traffic — which has lately gone from somewhat distinctive morning and afternoon hour chunks (around the beginning and end of the children’s school day or adults’ working day) to an all-day affair — and I pray strongly for the other drivers’ widespread impatience not to impair my concentration so that no other person ends up like my grandfather, shattered literally to pieces under a car’s wheel. For many of us, The Monster’s sociopolitical, cultural, economic, and historical entanglements embroil their thousand-fold tentacles with the joys and dramas of our own and our loved ones’ lives.

Mexico’s Federal District, what is known as Mexico City proper, was founded by decree in 1824, three years after the independence from Spain. It was established in a region of about 2 leguas (Spanish leagues), or about 8.3 km radius (Hernández Franyuti 2008). It initially encompassed municipalities, cities, towns, and villas as geopolitical units, but since 1978 Mexico City has been comprised of 16 boroughs (delegaciones) that spread out across a surface of about 1,500 km² (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011b). In early 2016, the legal-political configuration of the Federal District changed, becoming officially named ‘Mexico City’, and since 2018, the 16 borough geopolitical jurisdictions, each headed by elected government representatives, became municipal administrative entities (alcaldías) with greater fiscal autonomy and citizens’ participation and accountability (Romero and Vargas 2016).

Despite its formal geopolitical divisions, Mexico City appears not to know of official boundaries within the Valley of Mexico, where it is located 2240 m above sea level and across a surface of over 9,500 km (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011b). The metropolitan area within the larger Valley of Mexico (zona metropolitana) spreads out into two geopolitical divisions:
Mexico City proper and the State of Mexico, the state wrapping around all of the Federal District except to the south. The greater Mexico City (*área conurbada*) extends across all 16 municipalities of the former Federal District, and across 18 municipalities of the State of Mexico. Due to its porous ability to sprawl continuously out into newer areas, Mexico City is also colloquially called ‘the urban stain’ (*la mancha urbana*). Its ‘monstrosity’ would appear to leak its contours out into new, seemingly ever-expanding areas. Some locals also call it ‘the DeFectuoso’, an acronym-inspired designation for the Federal District — the D.F. in Spanish — conjuring up, with both affection and frustration, the many DeFects of a ruthless ‘concrete jungle’ (*selva de concreto*) that, despite its shortcomings, as writer Christina Pacheco (1986, 2013 [1998]) observes, is the site where they live and they know best. Between May and June of 2010, Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics and Geography dispatched over 106,000 people across the country to collect, door-to-door, statistical information for the most recent National Census (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística 2011a, 2011c). At that point, the then-Federal District had about 1,800 neighbourhoods and 40 *pueblos originarios* (ancestral towns), and the population of the greater metropolitan area of Mexico City, including both the Federal District and the State of Mexico, was close to 20 million (Instituto Electoral del Distrito Federal 2010).

In broad strokes, Mexico City is symbolically and materially split along a north–south divide. The north has historically been an industrial area associated with poorer and less educated people. The south, in contrast, has generally been clearly delineated to be a more middle-class, residential, touristic, and cultural area of the city, especially since the construction in the early to mid-1950s of the *Ciudad Universitaria* (University City), the main campus of the public National Autonomous University of Mexico, and in the mid-1960s of the Olympic Village for the 1968 Olympic Games. The geographic distribution of bookstores in Mexico City — a sign of ‘culture’ and education among the population — provides a glimpse of some of these symbolic and material distinctions. The northern part of Mexico City only has one large bookstore (Zahar Vergara 1995). This is a Catholic parish bookshop established in 1964 that mostly sells religious books, brochures, and stamps. The rest of the bookstores are still located in the centre and southern parts of the city.

New arrangements constantly emerge in a city of this size. One of the most visible is the emergence since the early 2000s of a secluded, in some parts gated, wealthy area in the western part of the city. More recently — most intensely since 2007 under the then-local Marcelo Ebrard administration — the revamping of certain areas of the downtown core has involved a shift from a primarily low-income commercial area to a lower-to middle-class entertainment district, where people who once did not feel safe to set foot there have started spending social time. One can find pockets of wealth within poor northern neighbourhoods, and there have always been irregular and underserviced neighbourhoods in the southern parts of the city. Deprivation and affluence often converge. Yet, the north–south symbolic and material divide still persists today. With such an extensive number of people seeking to make a living and going about their daily lives in this corner of the planet, it is certainly an understatement to say that Mexico City is filled with all the imaginable and unimaginable, multi-coloured edges of humanity. With such a large metropolitan surface and many geopolitical, symbolic, and material divisions, in this place it is
entirely possible to encounter any experience any person could ever hear of, read about, witness, experience, endure, or be blessed with.

The joint celebrations of the centennial of the Mexican Revolution and the bicentennial of the Independence from the Spanish colonial rule took place throughout 2010. These were most commonly referred to as ‘the bicentennial’ and echoed similar celebrations held in other countries of Latin America. In Mexico, there were parades, public events, and historical film and TV productions. The federal government made funding available for research projects and book publications speaking to the occasion. A major thoroughfare in Mexico City was renamed the ‘Bicentennial Freeway’, as were a few public parks and smaller streets. Bicentennial paraphernalia proliferated. ‘The Comer’, one of the leading chain supermarkets in Mexico City, advertised, ‘We celebrate the Bicentennial’, and in their printed product catalogues offered discounted prices for national beers and tequilas. The tortillería (tortilla shop) inside this chain would wrap tortillas in ‘100% biodegradable recyclable Made in Mexico’ paper. It was imprinted with ‘1810–2010 Bicentenario’ (Bicentennial) and ‘1910–2010 Centenario’ (Centennial) phrases, and with iconic images of key figures of the independence movement and of Mexican Revolution leaders. Similarly, the pink-coloured ‘bus de las mujeres’ (women’s bus) — an initiative of the local Passengers’ Transportation Network aimed at providing public transportation exclusively for women, started in 2008 but more visible since mid-2011 — donned brief biographical blurbs of women of the Independence and the Revolutionary period on its sides. There was one about Benita Galeana, ‘1907–1955, feminist and social fighter’, which stated in big letters that, ‘for her commitment to the peasant, worker, and feminist struggles and to guerrilla movements, she was incarcerated 58 times’. The bus campaign was said to be a ‘Homage to the Women of the 1810–2010 Bicentennial’.

In the lead up to September 2010, the month when Mexicans celebrate Independence Day, an 80 by 40 cm long Mexican flag arrived by mail to many households across the country. It was accompanied by a printed letter signed by then-President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, in which he compelled us, Mexicans, to admire the national flag and always be reminded of the historical meaning of its three colours — green standing for ‘the hope that there will be a better Mexico’, white for ‘the peace that we have achieved’, red for the ‘spilt blood of our ancestors in the struggle for the highest ideals of our Nation’ — and shield, the symbol that Mexicans would be ready to face rising challenges.

While the flag’s red colour was said to symbolize the blood spilt by the nation’s forbearers, by 2010 discontent had grown about the blood that was currently flowing across the country since then-President Calderón had launched a state campaign against ‘organized crime’, and more particularly against local cartels supplying drugs for consumption, at the time, mainly in the United States. Calderón’s ‘War on Drugs’ — a state-led strategy launched in 2006 — consisted of deploying the Mexican military into regions in the country where drug production had been (until then) concentrated, and targeting the leaders of cartels. However, Calderón’s militarization strategy had the unintended effect of generating and aggravating violence, increasing the number of organizations dedicated to criminalized activities, and helping diffuse their
geographical reach across the country. Former President Calderón’s strategy drew widespread criticism, even among the ranks of his own right-leaning political party, the National Action Party. While the demand for drugs increased across the country during this process, this continued to be a largely export-driven industry. With no legal decriminalization and public health frameworks in place, by 2011 an estimated 40,000 people had been murdered in the country as a direct or collateral result of the ‘war on drugs’ (Raney 2011).

Until not long ago, Mexico City was proudly depicted by local government officials as a ‘protected bubble’ where no drug cartels operated like they did in other areas of the country. To many, this idea appeared to be accurate since, until then, there had not been many of the visible ‘signs’ of drug cartel presence that could be seen in other regions, such as public shootings, tied bodies hanging from bridges, or dismembered corpses with ‘narco’ messages inscribed on them (Enrique 2014). Whether or not there were drug cartels in Mexico City, by the early 2010s, it was clear that certain everyday things had been transformed. The quotidian atmosphere had rapidly and visibly changed. Some people would make their way through low- to middle-income neighbourhoods with a megaphone mounted on the roof of a car, announcing violent incidents and selling red press (nota roja) newspapers about them. Going through neighbourhoods with speakers had earlier been reserved for those collecting used mattresses and home appliances for resale. Mexico City inhabitants had grown worried about giving out their phone numbers to new acquaintances for fear of being blackmailed or taken advantage of. We grew aware, for the first time, of civilians who owned firearms despite this being illegal across the country. More often, irascibility would appear to shape the interactions between people on the streets. A growing suspicion, particularly strong among educated people, of anything and everything that government officials did or said, or that appeared in mainstream media, and sometimes even that people told each other, had sunk in.

In May 2011, a nationwide Caravan for Peace with Justice and Dignity marched across the country, rallying thousands of people, and ending in the northern city of Ciudad Juárez, the city that was then said to be the most violent in the country. Moreover, Ciudad Juárez had become known abroad for the systemic disappearances and murders of women since the 1990s (Portillo 2001). Many feminist activists and mothers of these young women had sought to attract attention to these femicides and seek justice for the many unsolved legal cases. Marisela Escobedo and Susana Chávez, for example, were themselves brutally murdered in December 2010 and January 2011 for speaking up. There had been a feminist, women-led campaign organized around the slogan ‘Not One More’ in January 2011 to protest these murders. Ironically, it had been renowned male poet Javier Sicilia who, positioning himself as the father of a murdered son, succeeded in drawing large numbers to the cause. These kinds of ironies and complexities were also picked up by mothers and fathers of other murdered or disappeared people in Mexico. Once the Caravan had made its way through Mexico City in early April 2011, a poignant placard was left on an impromptu memorial made of photos, drawings, candles, and letters for the disappeared and murdered and placed on the ground of the downtown plaza. It read: ‘Some parents are poets, but all our children are poetry’ (Figure 1).
The presidential administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) of the centre-leaning party continued the militarizing and criminalizing strategy of his predecessor Calderón. In 2015 alone, it was estimated that about 17,000 people died as a result of the war against narco-trafficking. At some point, the British International Institute for Strategic Studies deemed the conflict intensity in Mexico to be ‘high’, comparable to the war in Syria (AFP 2016). It was estimated that more than 150,000 people had been murdered and more than 40,000 people had been disappeared in Mexico between 2006 and 2016 (Pardo Veiras 2016). And we are still counting heartbreaks.

In the fall of 2014, Mexico was undergoing yet another of the sociopolitical phases overwhelmed by upheaval and unrest that appear to have become so characteristic of contemporary Mexican history. The National Polytechnic Institute’s students went on a major strike to protest the deskilling of degrees and decision-making processes in the higher university ranks (Sánchez Jiménez 2014). Forty-three indigenous and peasant students from the rural teachers’ college of Ayotzinapa went — and remain to this day — missing (Tuckman 2016). Then-President Peña Nieto’s ‘Casa Blanca’ (White House) scandal involving conflicts of interest and nepotism was
uncovered in the media (Tuckman 2014). These are events that continue to have lingering repercussions for politics and freedom of the press today. These events also laid bare the existing rifts among different societal sectors about access to public education, governmental corruption and favouritism, and the ever-present undercurrents of racialized, gendered, and class inequalities in the country.

Yet, this is mostly a bleak picture of what Mexico is, or could be. It would be mistaken to think that everything always went wrong in Mexico and with Mexicans. Or, as journalist Alma Guillermoprieto (1992) notes, that there is no music, affection, or joy. For some ethnographers, Mexico City is a ‘field site’. For me, Mexico City is the place where I grew up, where my parents and extended family live. It is the place where my older brother is buried, and where I hope I, too, will be buried when the time comes. This is a land and a group of people that hurt and still hurt in more unimaginable ways than many of us ever felt possible, especially when so much blood, inequality, and preventable suffering has shattered our lives and the lives of many of our own-skinned ones in recent years. This is also the place where we have rejoiced in occasional mid-night poetry, frequent fits of laughter, and even an unfaftering sense of belonging and tender connection.

Many of the existing ethnohistories and ethnographies of Mexico City unerringly capture many of the human-made heartaches occurring in this place. Not entirely surprisingly, in the well-researched and inspiring work of anthropologists and historians, a colossal picture of Mexico City as a delirious, insurmountable leviathan comes about (Gallo 2004). The challenge, however, is to provide ethnographic snapshots of what Leslie Bird Simpson (1966 [1941]) aptly called, back in the 1940s, Mexico’s ‘many Mexicos’ — a portrait of the multifaceted dynamics and histories coming together in one place, among a particular group of people, at a specific time. Mexico City is certainly more than a land subsumed within a polluted smoke cloud, as some non-locals would sometimes have it. Ethnographers are well positioned to help reshape such views — even if just a little — by providing some observations about the varied textures of human life encountered in Mexico City, and some insights about the many layers of complexity — tensions, contradictions, people’s resilience, life’s poetry — converging in this place.

As of late, a rising anti-Mexico and anti-Mexicans rhetoric has renewed in intensity in North America (Dreyfuss 2015; Neate 2015), and selective racialized, classed, sexualized, and gendered narratives about ‘Mexico’ and ‘Mexicans’ continue to be fuelled through hatred and division, and recycled for political purposes in the global space (Mendoza-Denton 2017). In times like ours, where mystical ideas of radical difference persist, we must contribute to the ongoing effort to write against culturalism and against exoticism. I ask, has there been an Edward Said (1978) of Mexico, someone who has taken grand, persistent, and pernicious othering depictions of Mexico and Mexicans to task? What would an intersectional feminist lens, I wonder, bring to bear on this anti-essentialist critique? What would a Lila Abu-Lughod (1991, 2008 [1993]) kind of intervention concerning Mexico and Mexicans look like?
My own miniature answer to these questions rests in seeing the central role of a feminist ethnographer as someone who seeks to be an accurate interpreter, a thoughtful translator. Yet, such Spanish-to-English, Mexico-to-Canada, Global-South-to-Global-North translations are not straightforward. They remain on shaky ground. How could daily love and friendship be translated without trivializing the fact that Mexico and Mexicans are undergoing a terrible time when hope and justice seem so far off? How could class-based symbolic and material distinctions and unequal racial and gender configurations be at the forefront of ethnographic works without erasing the heartfelt musicality that surrounds Mexico City? As other feminist anthropologists have expressed, anthropology seems to be a discipline that bleeds into one’s life (Rapp 1999). As in, when our fieldwork takes us into emplaced and embodied situations that unfold our deeply-held affections and commitments before our own eyes. And still, others have called ethnography a practice that breaks your heart (Behar 1996). As in, when seeking to convey ethnographic empathy stretches us hard. With no firm answer to these quandaries, all I entertain to ask is for ethnographers and readers of ethnographies of Mexico City to interpret and read softly.

About the Piece

‘Beloved Monster’ seeks to engage with the complexities of depicting Mexico City as both a disheartening and treasured site of ethnographic research. For some scholars, this metropolis is a ‘field site’: a setting where they can accurately and justly document some of the injustices facing humans, but also a place they may leave when their fieldwork is completed or if things suddenly go sideways. For some others, this is a beloved monstrous place where many of us loved and were loved for the first time, a piece of land that saw our hearts beat for the first time. This piece is an attempt to find an anti-racist, anti-essentialist way to portray a site where tragedy strikes. Numerous injustices and socioeconomic disparities occur every day in this place while, simultaneously, an everlasting anti-Mexico and anti-Mexicans rhetoric has regained traction in North America. Ethnographic creative nonfiction, attuned to the sounds and textures of tenderness amid misfortune, helps me grapple with these contradictions and oppose fossilized, culturalist explanations of the many events that take place in Mexico City. Funding for the fieldwork behind this piece was provided by Canada’s Social Science and Humanities Research Council, the University of British Columbia’s Liu Institute for Global Issues, the Office of Vice-President Research and International, Go Global, the Faculty of Arts, and the Department of Anthropology.

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