

A View from Northern Mexico: Abortions before *Roe v. Wade*

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On October 31, 1968, *Accion: Diaro Independiente's* front page seared with the headline “Murió una Norteamericana al provocarle un aborto,” a North American woman dies after an abortion. Alongside the headline, the newspaper published a picture of the eighteen-year-old woman, Jo Anne Homann. Lying on a steel counter at the local mortuary, Homann's long dark hair adrift on the mortician's table, eyes closed, pale youthful face turning, her features revealed the onset of rigor mortis, her mouth slightly agape.¹ Mexican newspapers in Nogales, Sonora, offered neither Homann nor her family any privacy or decorum in its reporting. Anonymity and privacy worked along a complicated continuum in Mexico. Doctors, attorneys, and abortion referral services sought to protect the identity of people providing and seeking services. Mexican news media and law enforcement demanded the opposite.

Mexican authorities and politicians pushed back against racialist images of Mexico as a sanctuary for “back alley” abortionists by exposing those who sought abortions and those who provided them. No person's identity was above publicity. The death of Jo Anne Homann, from Hemet, California, brought this issue into stark relief.² Early reports printed the macabre picture of Homann's corpse lying “on a cold slab” in the Nogales funeral home, as other news media printed her full name and home address.³ Meanwhile, journalists sought to present law enforcement efforts in the best light possible, stating that Mexican officials counted on the “support

1. “Murió una Norteamericana al provocarle un aborto,” *Accion: Diaro Independiente*, October 31, 1968, “Mexican Clippings, 1967–1970,” folder 182o, M-100, MC 289, Records of the Society for Humane Abortions, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute Repository; “California Teenager's Death Uncovers Giant Border Abortion Mill,” *Nogales Herald*, November 1, 1968. I also mention the death of Jo Anne Homann in my forthcoming article “Espanta Cigüeñas: Race and Abortion in the US-Mexico Borderlands” in *Signs*.

2. “Murió una Norteamericana al provocarle un aborto” (n. 1).

3. *Ibid.* Author translation; the headline states, “En la plancha fria.”

of the brave police officers from the United States, [and] agents from the Department of Investigations, directed by Chief Rafael Torres Montaña, [who were able] to identify the deceased.”⁴ Highlighting the collaboration of transborder law enforcement efforts to end the scourge of illegal abortion provision in the region, Mexican newspapers made clear the local Mexican government’s position that it was neither lenient nor negligent in its stance on abortion in the borderlands.

The history of abortion before *Roe* has been central to the history of reproduction in the twentieth-century United States. *Roe v. Wade* became a watershed moment in U.S.-centered reproductive rights legislation. This U.S.-centric view, however, has for too long obscured how criminalization in the United States pushed abortion across national borders before the landmark ruling.⁵ In other places, I have argued that U.S.-based activists and doctors deployed the back-alley butcher myth to refer to Mexican abortion providers, racializing Mexico as an inherently dangerous place and Mexican providers as innately dangerous people. This tactic hastened U.S. courts’ liberalization of abortion laws in places like California and New Mexico, setting the foundations for *Roe*, in the name of protecting U.S. women from potential butchery in Mexico.⁶

In this essay, I examine the view from Mexico of Mexican providers and of U.S. women crossing the border for abortions. While historians have studied at length the stigma women confronted in a U.S. context before *Roe*, there remains a dearth of information about the ways in which Mexican and other borderland periodicals described those in search of reproductive health care in Mexico.⁷ Given the rhetoric of danger and filth associated with medical care in Mexico, stories like the one of Jo Anne Homann reinforced narratives of Mexico as a dangerous place to seek

4. “Misteriosa Muerte de una Mujer en el Sanatorio Municipal,” *El Noroeste*, October 31, 1968, “Mexican Clippings, 1967–1970,” folder 182o, M-100, MC 289, Records of the Society for Humane Abortions, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute Repository. Author translation: “Contando con la valiosa ayuda de la policia norteamericana, los agentes del Departamento de Investigaciones al mando de su Jefe Rafael Torres Montaña lograron saber la identidad de la hoy occisa.”

5. Steven Bender, *Run for the Border: Vice and Virtue in U.S.-Border Crossings* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 81; Leslie Reagan, “Crossing the Border for Abortions: California Activists, Mexican Clinics, and the Creation of a Feminist Health Agency in the 1960s,” *Fem. Stud.* 26 (2000): 325; Alicia Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border: Criminal Abortion in California, 1920–1969* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020).

6. Lina-Maria Murillo, “Espanta Cigüeñas: Abortion in the Borderlands,” *Signs* (forthcoming).

7. For discussions of the medicalization of abortion in Mexico, see Elizabeth O’Brien, “‘A Tacit Pact with the State’: Constrained Choice and the Politics of Abortion in 1930s Mexico,” *J. Women’s Hist.* 34, no. 2 (2022): 53–75.

abortion care or any kind of health care. Mexicans, however, held their own strong views about the thousands of American women seeking abortions in Mexican clinics and those who provided the procedure. Assessing Mexicans' perspective helps us view Mexico not merely as a passive extension of the U.S. reproductive landscape but as an important and active player in reproductive health care in the borderlands.

In addition, the underground abortion business changed "traditional" streams of migration as mostly American women traveled south beyond U.S. borders for access to reproductive services in the 1950s and 1960s. While scholars of abortion history have foregrounded the denial of human rights of those forced to migrate for reproductive health care, the politics of specific borders should not go unrecognized in such discussions.⁸ Mexicans migrating to the United States have been met with U.S.-sponsored violence, militarization, detention, and death since 1848. Since the establishment of the U.S.-Mexico border over 170 years ago, each country has envisioned the movement of peoples across the national divide in different ways. By inverting a nationalist gaze and examining the weary sojourners crossing the border south, mostly American women of differing racial groups, in search of abortion care in the years before *Roe*, we can learn much about the hostilities women faced when they crossed for care. We can also observe how Mexico understood its relationship to illegal abortion provision services along its northern border. This new perspective provides greater insight into the racial and gendered dynamics at play in the history of abortion in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands.

Defamation of abortion seekers and providers increased in the days after Homann's death, when a massive raid, this time in the Ciudad Juárez–El Paso corridor, shocked the transnational abortion network in the region. Local police officials raided the Sanatorio Davalos clinic, one of the largest and most well-respected abortion providers on the Society for Humane Abortion (SHA) list—an organization of feminist activists in San Francisco, California, dedicated to providing vetted information about abortion providers outside of the United States.⁹ Reports declared that local police along with federal public health officials in Mexico had worked together to dismantle the "most powerful mafia of international abortion providers" in the region.¹⁰ Although the physicians in charge

8. See Cristabelle Sethna and Gayle Davis, eds., *Abortion across Borders: Transnational Travel and Access to Abortion Services* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); Leslie Reagan, "Abortion Travels: An International History," *J. Mod. Eur. Hist.* 17, no. 3 (2019): 337–52.

9. "'The List' of Abortion Providers circa 1968," MC 935, unprocessed box, folder "The List," Society for Humane Abortion Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

10. "Clausurado un Antro de Espantacigüeñas," *El Fronterizo*, November 10, 1968, "Mexican Clippings, 1967–1970," folder 1820, M-100, MC 289, Records of the Society for

of the hospital, many of them abortion providers, managed to escape, the police captured dozens of people, including patients of the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS), the Mexican institute responsible for public health and social security, and women seeking abortions.

The Mexican newspapers framed the situation as one caused by “purulent, defective” physicians and “irresponsible foreign women” who were polluting their border city with this heinous vice.¹¹ Dozens of photographs of patients being led to the city’s jail ran beside headlines that made sure to signal the “North American women” caught in the racket.¹² After the raid, more reports emerged declaring that “many artists and starlets have come to the clinic on Constitution Street to put themselves in the hands of a medical mafia of abortionists.”¹³ Newspapers condemned what they called an “incessant” advertising campaign by abortion providers in Northern Mexico and their U.S.-based sympathizers in states like California who supposedly preyed on young women’s hopes to become Hollywood entertainers.¹⁴

Mexican newspapers correctly pointed to Mexican abortion providers advertising their services abroad. Even as providers in the borderlands welcomed continued bonds with organizations such as SHA and other referral services, some providers found other means to advertise their services. *Medical World News*, a magazine directed at U.S. medical professionals, led an investigation of abortion doctors on the border exposing the story with international repercussions. Sending letters like the one shown above, abortion providers in Ciudad Juárez sought to create private networks with doctors in the United States. The magazine’s investigation went as far as to have a doctor from Massachusetts contact Dr. Humberto Ortega (Figure 1) and set up an appointment to meet in

Humane Abortions, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute Repository. Original: “La Inspección de Policía mancomunadamente con Salubridad Federal desintegro ayer ponderosa mafia internacional de espantacigüeñas que tenía como centro de operaciones el Sanatorio Davalos.”

11. “Les Dieron el Pitazo,” *Correo Diario Independiente al Servicio de Juarez*, November 11, 1968, “Mexican Clippings, 1967–1970,” folder 182o, M-100, MC 289, Records of the Society for Humane Abortions, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute Repository. Original: “. . . irresponsables mujeres, principalmente de nacionalidad extranjera, ha sido detenidos . . . con esta purulenta lacra que de tiempo atrás agola a la cuidad.”

12. “Jublio en el Vecindario por la Clausura de la Funesta Clínica ‘Doctor’ Davalos,” *Correo Diario Independiente al Servicio de Juarez*, November 11, 1968, “Mexican Clippings, 1967–1970,” folder 182o, M-100, MC 289, Records of the Society for Humane Abortions, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute Repository.

13. “Como Opera La Mafia,” *El Fronterizo*, November 11, 1968. “Mexican Clippings, 1967–1970,” folder 182o, M-100, MC 289, Records of the Society for Humane Abortions, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute Repository. Original: “Muchas artistas y aspirantes a artistas ‘en cinta’ han venido a ponerse en manos de la mafia de médicos aborteros que tenían como centro de operaciones la clínica de la calle Constitución.”

14. *Ibid.*

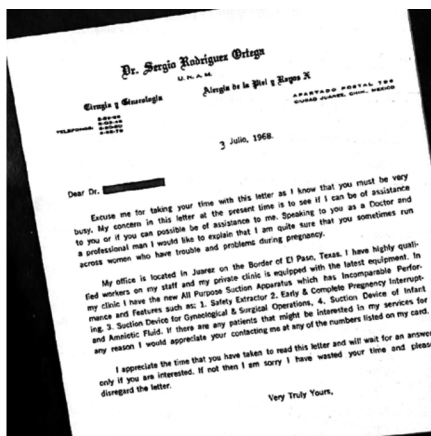


Figure 1. “Letter from Dr. Sergio Rodriguez Ortega to U.S. Doctor,” *Med. World News*, October 11, 1968.

El Paso, but upon arrival the staff, suspicious of the visit, refused the final meeting in Juárez.¹⁵ Less than a month after *Medical World News* published the story, law enforcement stormed the Davalos clinic.

Mexican reporters sensationalized the supposed emotional and psychological reasons why women crossed the border for abortions. Among these “young and attractive women,” the papers explained, were those who were from good, moral families and those who wanted to continue conserving their figures to triumph in the film business. Abortions, reporters claimed, helped women hide their “shame,” namely having sex before marriage. These “loose women” were willing to go to the vilest lengths “including killing the fruit of their loins as long as they got theirs.”¹⁶ While news media on both sides of the border suggested women who crossed the border for abortions were likely in the entertainment industry, SHA archival materials show that women from various economic and racial backgrounds used the service.¹⁷ By no means was the abortion business in Ciudad Juárez, or elsewhere along Mexico’s border, simply an issue of Mexican immorality and lawlessness, but, according to Mexican newspapers, it demonstrated

15. “Mass Mailing for Dangerous Abortions,” *Med. World News* 9, no. 41 (October 11, 1968): 25.

16. “Como Opera La Maffia,” *El Fronterizo*, November 12, 1968, “Mexican Clippings, 1967–1970,” folder 1820, M-100, MC 289, Records of the Society for Humane Abortions, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute Repository. Original: “Y ante todo, estan dispuestas hasta lo peor, incluso matar al fruto de sus entrañas, con tal de salirse con la suya.”

17. Reagan, “Crossing the Border for Abortions” (n. 5), 329; Murillo, “Espanta Cigüeñas” (n. 6).

a moral failure of individual people (providers) incited by an onslaught of supposedly corrupt foreign women from the United States.

Even as newspapers printed salacious renderings of the women caught in the crosshairs of the Davalos raid, Mexican law enforcement seemed to take a gentler position toward abortion seekers. Rather than take the six women captured to jail, authorities brought them to a local hotel where they were given “all kinds of accommodations” according to newspaper accounts. After the judge in the penal case found out about these arrangements, he directed his ire toward law enforcement officials. “Who gave the orders for these foreigners to be taken to a hotel, fed restaurant food, and not taken to the local jail?,” the judge demanded.¹⁸ The agents involved offered tepid excuses. Newspaper headlines screeching “Yankees stay in Hotel!” offered possible motives for law enforcement’s compassionate treatment. The young women were not just any foreigners; they were *Americans*. The media surmised that the women’s status as U.S. nationals afforded them protection from harsher punishment. Nonetheless, the Mexican press printed the women’s pictures and their names in various local papers. In contrast, El Paso, Texas, newspapers removed any mention of the women’s identities other than to confirm their U.S. citizenship and assure readers none were residents of El Paso proper.¹⁹

Newspapers’ treatment, on both sides of the border, of the doctors and patients at the Davalos raid and subsequent raids of other clinics revealed the misogynistic and racist discourses that informed the social milieu of the borderlands. Mexican newspapers did little to avoid chauvinist phrases and commentaries, such as “irresponsible women” and “denaturalized mothers” describing the women caught at the clinic, reinforcing stereotypical visions of those who might seek to end their pregnancies.²⁰ Mexican reports made sure to underscore that the women were *extranjeras* (foreigners) and when possible assured readers that these women were *norteamericanas* (from the United States), calling them *Yanquis* in attempts to try to deflect from incriminating Mexican women in illegal and supposedly immoral behavior. Sources suggest, however, that women on both sides of the line sought abortions at the Davalos clinic.²¹ Although

18. “Pasaron a un Hotel a las Yanquis,” *El Fronterizo*, November 14, 1968, “Mexican Clippings, 1967–1970,” folder 182o, M-100, MC 289, Records of the Society for Humane Abortions, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute Repository.

19. “American Clients of Abortion Mill Jailed in Juarez,” *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 14, 1968; “Order Release Two Charged with Abortion,” *El Paso Times*, October 21, 1968.

20. “Les Dieron el Pitazo” (n. 11); “Como Opera La Mafia” (n. 13); “Pasaron a un Hotel a las Yanquis” (n. 18). Original: “irresponsables mujeres,” and “madres desnaturalizadas,” as well as “matar al fruto de sus entrañas, contal de salir con la suya.”

21. Interview with Patricia Maginnis, April 24, 2015; “Letter from Gurner to Dr. #30,” MC 289, box 5, folder 86, Society for Humane Abortion Collection.

difficult to know the exact ethnic, racial, and class makeup of those using the underground providers, sources suggest that women from across the socioeconomic and racial spectrum from the United States and Mexico used these abortion clinics.²² Still, the women caught in the Davalos raid, from pictures and names, appeared to be white.

Never one to shy away from a fight, Patricia Maginnis, one of SHA's leaders, hit back. After countless attacks in the media, she responded with a letter to the editor of *El Fronterizo* in Ciudad-Juárez. She sent copies of the letter to *El Continental* (a Spanish-language newspaper in El Paso) as well as the American Medical Association, California Medical Association, San Francisco Medical Society, and Board of Medical Examiners. Maginnis first lashed out at the medical community in the United States for its hypocrisy:

This organization [medical profession] has no "hands off" policy on the abortion underground; its members can and do utilize the Mexican underground regularly to get abortion-seeking women off their hands. . . . Sadly enough, this politically powerful institution (the American Medical Association) has never leveled with the public about our archaic abortion laws. Instead, it chooses to put the practice of medicine into the hands of politicians who, God help us, have seen fit to continue to ram obsolete and unfair legislation down the throats of the citizenry rather than remove these silly, unenforceable laws.²³

Maginnis struck at the heart of reports from news media that presented abortion providers as seedy, pushy Mexican outlaws and U.S. medical professionals as innocent lambs. The *Medical World News* report seemed to suggest as much when it published its investigation of Mexican abortion providers "mass mailings" to U.S. colleagues.²⁴ According to reports, Mexican abortionists, ravenous for more clients, hounded U.S. physicians as though U.S. doctors were not central to the border business either by supporting referral services or by actively refusing to work toward the liberalization of abortion laws in the United States. Maginnis reminded the medical community that "approximately one of three who avail themselves of our free service comes to us through a U.S. physician's office."²⁵

Maginnis blamed not only U.S. medical professionals for making the borderlands the epicenter of abortion provision but also stringent U.S.

22. Reagan, "Crossing the Border for Abortions" (n. 5).

23. "Letter to the Editor, *El Fronterizo*, August 22, 1968," MC 289, box 4, folder 73, Society for Humane Abortion Collection.

24. "Mass Mailing for Dangerous Abortions" (n. 15), 24.

25. "Letter to the Editor, *El Fronterizo*," MC 289, box 4, folder 73, Society for Humane Abortion Collection.

laws. Inverting the discourse of Mexico as dirty, diseased, and potentially deadly to those in search of care, Maginnis wrote that the “abortion-seeking female herself who haunts Mexico like the plague” did so because of the United States’ “grave lack of social responsibility” toward its citizenry.²⁶ Maginnis continued, “The establishment institutions of organized law, medicine, and religion have dispossessed abortion-seeking women, yet they are talented opportunists at dumping the United States’ dirty wash into the lap of Mexico.” She ended her rebuttal with this blistering *mea culpa*: “It is with embarrassment and shame that we apologize for our own backward professions, i.e., law, medicine, and religion.”²⁷ Unlike others in the movement to liberalize abortion laws, Maginnis was careful not to denounce Mexican abortion providers because she knew they were doing the work many U.S. doctors refused to do. Although she directed her ire and sardonic tone toward the Mexican press, Maginnis’s message was clear: the proliferation of “abortion mills” in Mexico was no fault of those advertising abortion care or those seeking the service; rather blame lay in the punitive laws supported by the political and medical classes, in both countries, denying pregnant people control over their bodies.

Most of the reporting about Jo Anne Homann’s tragic death not only revealed the media and law enforcement’s complete disregard for individuals’ privacy and grief but was meant to steer critiques away from law enforcement and legal strictures in Mexico. Much like those in the United States, Mexican newspapers characterized the need for abortion as something only “immoral foreign” women sought, and unprincipled providers offered. At the same time, Mexican officials confronted unrelenting attacks from medical providers in the United States that blamed Mexico and Mexicans for the rise of the illegal and dangerous procedure in the border region. U.S. reports focused exclusively on botched abortions in Mexican border cities. Physicians in El Paso, like Dr. Donald Knaut at Hotel Dieu Sisters’ Hospital, and the chief resident at Thomason General Hospital noted that women were being exposed to rudimentary procedures across the border and thus returning to the United States with incomplete or botched procedures. Knaut claimed to see “at least three to five cases a month,” a seemingly low figure given the large number of abortions provided at the Davalos Clinic alone, approximately fifteen to twenty a day.²⁸ Yet Knaut insisted that “if they do clean jobs over there we aren’t aware of them.”²⁹

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. “Clausurado un Antro de Espantacigüeñas” (n. 10).

29. “Mass Mailing for Dangerous Abortions” (n. 15), 25.

As media reports racialized abortion providers and shamed patients in the United States, Mexico tapped into similar stereotypes and tropes to disparage those that sought abortions and performed the procedure along its northern border. Mexican newspapers used abortion raids to cultivate notions of Mexican morality and superiority, framing the capture of abortion providers and seekers as a win for human decency, which in turn supported national narratives of strength and progress in Mexico. This is especially important considering the international scandal caused by Mexico president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's government as it brutally smashed student uprisings, killing an estimated three to four hundred people, in Tlatelolco in the run-up to the Summer Olympics less than a month before Homann's death.³⁰

Examining the history of abortion in a transnational context reveals the way borderland newspapers deployed racism and sexism, vilifying those caught in the crosshairs of unjust laws in both countries while also promoting nationalist narratives of decency, law, and order. Given the long history of racial formation in this region, especially violence against Mexican migrants through brutal immigration regimes and discourses of a lawless Mexico, Mexican reporters attempting to protect the Mexican state redirected derogatory language about Mexico and Mexicans toward abortion-seeking American women and Mexican providers. Those who paid the highest price for nationalist-driven indignation were those least deserving of its rage, abortion providers and abortion-seeking women, like Jo Anne Homann.



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30. See Victoria Carpenter's *The Tlatelolco Massacre, Mexico 1968, and the Emotional Triangle of Anger, Grief, and Shame: Discourses of Truth(s)* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018); Kate Doyle, "The Dead of Tlatelolco," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book no. 201 (National Security Archive, October 1, 2006), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB201/index.htm>.