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Globalization, Violence against Women in Border Communities and Cultural Studies

Jeanne Armstrong

I teach an advanced research and writing course for American Cultural Studies majors. Because most of these students are engaged in community service or activism in the campus or in the community, I am often challenged to assist them with research and theory that is relevant to their activism. Thus this paper is, in part, concerned with the role of cultural studies as a lens through which to understand and address forms of oppression and exclusion based on racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and other forms of discrimination.

When globalization brings minority communities or developing world countries into abrasive contact with dominant countries or hegemonic cultures, the effect on gender roles can produce a backlash that severely impacts the status of women in these communities or countries. The focus of this paper on violence against women is two sites of 'borderland' cultural contact, the ghettoized North and Sub-Saharan African suburbs or neighborhoods of Paris and other French cities, and the Mexican border city, Ciudad Juárez. The similar issues in these border zones are conflicting sets of gender roles and inadequate, or non-existent, legal protection for victims of violence.

Gloria Anzaldúa has described the United States border with Mexico as

'an open wound where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds'
(quoted in Gaspar de Alba 2005, epigraph). Border towns are typically viewed as places where social and legal norms are ignored, and crime and corruption are allowed to flourish. When characters in *Desert Blood*, Gaspar de Alba's novel about the Ciudad Juárez murders, discuss the unusually high number of registered sex offenders released in El Paso just across the border from Ciudad Juárez, one of them remarks, 'Isn't the border the dumping ground for all forms of pollution?' (2005, p.310).

While globalization is the inevitable result of capitalism's impetus to be the world economic system, this tendency for economies and cultures to cross national boundaries has intensified since the late twentieth century, resulting in the 'formation of ethnic-minority 'enclaves' within the nation-states of the West' and a 'pluralization of national cultures and national identities' (Hall 1996, p.627). However, as Hall (1996, p.628) notes, this trend can produce defensive reactions by the dominant culture as well as by marginalized minority communities who may revive 'cultural traditionalism, religious orthodoxy, and political separatism' in response to racism and exclusion. Globalization can also destabilize local gender orders. Disruption of male authority within the culture may generate a backlash of masculine fundamentalism that tries to reestablish traditional gender hierarchies (Connell 2000). These processes play a role in the violence against women in both Ciudad Juárez and the ethnic ghettos of French cities.

From 1993 to 2005, approximately 450-500 young women have been

brutally murdered and many more have disappeared in Ciudad Juárez, a border city whose factories, known as *maquiladoras*, attract women laborers from small towns throughout Mexico (Flores 2005). Many of the murdered women were brutally and repeatedly raped, horribly mutilated, and their bodies discarded in dumps. Last seen in February 2001, Lilia Andrade's body was found days after police ignored calls of a woman seen being raped and beaten in a dump (Osborn 2004a). The women workers are poorly paid, live in shanty towns with inadequate street lighting, and may be targeted while walking to or from work in the dark.

Families of victims identify many possible suspects from the drug underworld to the bus drivers and security guards employed by *maquiladoras*, and the corrupt police, who have contaminated and destroyed evidence even burning all the clothing collected from victims (Portillo 2001). However, the violence against women in Ciudad Juárez is even broader than these horrible and highly publicized murders. In the first nine months of 1998, for example, women in Ciudad Juárez reported 'eight hundred cases of rape and over nine thousand cases of violence, including kidnapping and domestic violence' (Livingston 2004, p.59). In 2004 an editorial in the *National Catholic Reporter*, 'In Latin America the Gender Gap Kills,' claimed that feminism in places like Ciudad Juárez is not just about equality but can be a matter of staying alive (Fraser 2004).

While there was much media coverage about the underlying problems that

caused young men of North and West African descent to burn cars in several cities in France during November 2005, there is little coverage of the conditions for young women in these ghettos. Although the women sympathize with the young men's frustration, it is culturally unacceptable for them to participate in public protests. In addition to the discrimination and unemployment experienced by neighborhood men, young women are often victims of violence, including violent thefts, gang rape, and even murder. From 2003 to 2004, 'male violence against women. . . claimed the lives of 163 women' in France, but certainly not only in the ethnic suburbs (Samuel 2005, p.014). On November 13, 2005 while the riots were occurring, Chahrazad Belayni was severely burned by a man that she refused to marry (Samuel 2005, p.014). Sohane Benziane was burned to death in Vitry-sur-Seine near Paris in October 2002 for not submitting to neighborhood norms (Amara 2006, p.16). In 2004 a Tunisian woman in Marseille was found stoned to death in a dump after refusing to go out with a man (Clarke 2006, p.7). Stories were heard about gang rape 'perpetrated by groups of young men against women who had refused to hide their femininity' but these young women are usually afraid to speak about the rapes (Amara 2006, p.36). In 2002 Samira Bellil published *Dans l'Enfer des Tournantes*, an account of her gang rape experience and her subsequent abandonment by her parents (Amara 2006, p.36).

In her book, *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies*, Sue Thornham (2000) addresses the absence of any discussion of women's status in the early

discourse of cultural studies. Subsequent engagement of feminist scholars in cultural studies has attempted to redress this omission. Angela McRobbie's study of the oppression experienced by working class girls reported that 'It has always been on the street that most sub-cultural activity takes place, but the street remains in some ways taboo for women' (quoted in Thornham 2000, p.63). Indeed the violence against women in these border zone contexts has been explained by some males in both communities as a consequence of the women being on the street or in the public domain of work and social life instead of the private domain of home and family. An Algerian butcher in a Muslim ghetto stated that, 'If a girl goes out she's going to get into trouble, especially with Arabs and Blacks who are not used to seeing girls outside...this world is not like France' (Sciolino 2003, p.1). A similar statement was made by Arturo González Rascón, Attorney General of Chihuahua, when he suggested that the victims are at fault since they risk violence by being on the street just as someone who goes out in the rain should expect to get wet (Benítez et al. 1999, p.81).

The Ciudad Juárez murders are sometimes referred to as *feminicidio*, or genocide against women, a term taken from *Femicide*, the title of a book by two Canadian women. The Ciudad Juárez murders, the gang rapes and murder of Muslim women in France, and the indifference of police and local officials in both regions have catalyzed local women activists and feminists in Mexico and France. Violence against women is certainly not unique to these two regions as the authors of *Femicide* confirm when they refer to the 1989 murder of fourteen

women at the University of Montreal. Radford and Russell (1992, p.14) claim that

Most people today understand that lynchings and pogroms are forms of politically motivated violence, the objectives of which are to preserve white and gentile supremacy. Similarly, the goal of violence against women-- whether conscious or not --is to preserve male supremacy.

However, while the problem of violence against women is universal, it has intensified in certain regions where local cultural norms and male supremacy are challenged by changes in the labor force and exposure to less patriarchal gender norms.

While historical and cultural differences exist between the women in ethnic ghettos of French cities and the women in Ciudad Juárez, some similarities are significant. The culture of these North and West African enclaves in France, which subordinates women and tolerates gendered violence, is similar to the machismo culture in Mexico. Citing Germain Tillion's *The Republic of Cousins*, Ana Castillo argues that Mexican machismo is indebted to the culture of the Maghreb that spread a patriarchal attitude toward women throughout the Mediterranean region. She believes that the Arab and Islamic conquest especially embedded this machismo culture in Spain and then Spanish colonization spread it to Mexico (1995).

Challenges to these cultural norms of North and Sub-Saharan Africans began when immigration into France from its colonies increased after the Second World War. Due to post war economic growth combined with a work force

depleted by war, France needed guest workers. While it was expected that North African guest workers would be temporary residents, the population of North and Sub-Saharan immigrants and their descendants has continued to increase.

Some estimate that there are about five million Muslims in France (Kaminski 2006, p.D6). By 1990 unemployment among the population of French origin was 10.4% while it ranged from 25.4% to 27.5% among those of North African origin (Hargreaves 1995, p.41). Young men compete with fathers for scarce jobs, thus undermining the father's authority.

In 1965 *maquiladoras* were started near Mexico's border with the United States after Mexico formed a special commercial zone on the border (Tiano 1994). The Border Industrialization Project allowed U.S. companies to import parts duty-free and export products back to the United States. The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 further facilitated these arrangements. 'Over the past four decades, Ciudad Juárez's population has nearly quadrupled, from 400,000 to about 1.5 million,' augmented by migrants from impoverished rural areas of Mexico coming there for work (Fraser 2004, p.9). The uncontrolled growth of Ciudad Juárez has resulted in new neighborhoods appearing without any basic services. According to Melissa Wright (2006, p.685), 'Between the passage of NAFTA in 1994 and 2001, the homicide rate for men increased by 300 percent while for women it increased by 600 percent'. Originally *maquiladoras* employed mainly women as a cheap and disposable reserve army of labor, earning only '\$4-\$5 dollars for a 9-12 hour

work day' (Flores 2005, p.7A). Since the family or domestic sphere is still considered to be women's primary obligation, their wage work is seen as temporary.

As well as influencing shifts in migration and employment patterns, global capitalism has caused shifts in gender roles that threaten male dominance. Modernization and globalization impact traditional gender roles by drawing women out of the home and into schools, factories, and offices. Exposure to Republican France's ideals of universal rights and access to public education has caused young Muslim women in France to show their independence by going out with friends, dressing in jeans and not wearing the veil. Family honor is related to female purity so when young women are seen publicly, this damages their reputation and the honor of their families. Rebelliousness or disobedience may be punished by forced marriage or forced return to the country of origin. Trica Danielle Keaton, who studied Muslim girls of African origin in French cities, discusses the patriarchal attitudes and punitive use of violence against girls, but at the same time emphasizes that the majority of these fathers 'supported their families . . . provided for their children, despite poverty and social rejection, and contributed to a nurturing family structure' (Keaton 2006, p.171). When unemployed fathers have lost authority however, brothers and young men of the neighborhood may police the young women and enforce gendered behavior codes (Amara 2006).

Young women come to Ciudad Juárez for the freedom to socialize and

earn money. The lack of work for men often makes the women primary wage earners. Through their economic contributions to the home, women have more say over the budget; however, they may be socially chastised for wearing short skirts or dressing attractively. Since Ciudad Juárez female assembly plant workers are viewed as disposable bodies, there is a lack of official concern about the murders and disappearances. Violence against women is often tolerated due to cultural attitudes. When any woman is found murdered, officials discredit her by implying that she lived a double life by practicing prostitution on the side. In Matthew Gutmann's study, *The Meanings Of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (1996, p.210), he emphasizes that most Mexican men are not engaging in domestic abuse and that men who attended CAVI (Centro de Atención a la Violencia Intrafamiliar) 'identified *la cultura machista* in which they had grown up as the primary culprit of their violent tendencies'.

Because Sohane Benziane was burned to death, Fadela Amara founded *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, literally neither whores nor submissives, in order to end the silence about violence against women by men who consider themselves the guardians of family honor. Amara and other NPNS members organized a march around France, which ended in Paris on International Women's Day, 8 March 2003 (Amara 2006, p.16). She intended her book entitled *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (translated in English as *Breaking the Silence*) as a report on the problems of violence against women and the response of NPNS, especially this important march. This organization has grown to '6000 members and 60 local committees'

around France (Samuel 2005, p.014). Their goal is to ensure women's freedom of movement and safety in public spaces. More radical than similar activist groups, Amara's organization supports sex education and the right of a woman to control her own body, and opposes forced virginity and forced marriage. This program obviously clashes with Muslim fundamentalist assertions of male authority in the family.

Fadela Amara¹ views the veil as a visible symbol of oppression and the sequestering of women. She removed *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* from the Comité National des Femmes, a coalition of French women's rights groups, and accused some CNF members of cultural relativism (George 2006, p.18). Amara complains that such feminists define liberty and equality according to skin color and won't denounce forced marriages or female genital mutilation.

Corinne Melis discusses other activist groups that support immigrant or Muslim women in France, including *Nana Beurs*, slang for North African girls, *Voix d'Elles Rebelles* [female] Rebel Voices, and *Voix des Femmes*, Women's Voices (2003). These groups usually focus on a single issue such as forced

¹Some French Muslims have criticized Fadela Amara for being anti-Islam; splitting the Muslim community; and fuelling the media stereotypes of young Arab men. However her political engagement, which includes SOS Racisme, has been both feminist and anti-racist. Amara has accepted a position as the new Junior Minister for Urban Policy in Nicholas Sarkozy's government, which has intensified the debate about her (Kwan 2007). For additional discussion of the controversy surrounding Amara, see Eloi Laurent's guest post on Art Goldhammer's blog, <http://artgoldhammer.blogspot.com/2007/08/fadela-amara-guest-post-eloi-laurent.html>.

marriage. The Association against Violence in Saint-Denis (<http://www.acvsd.asso.fr/>) was formed by two women who were victims of aggressive thefts in this suburb of Paris.

In 1999 in Ciudad Juárez, Esther Chavez Cano, a feminist in her late 60s, opened a rape and assault center called Casa Amiga, a shelter which offers educational and prevention workshops (Osborn 2004b). Cano has organized rallies and published articles in local papers. Many activists in Ciudad Juárez are mothers of victims, like Norma Andrade. *Voces sin Eco*, Voices without Echo, is a group composed of the family members of victims, who have covered the city with black crosses (Fregoso 2000). Activists have gone to Mexico's President Fox, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, Washington, D. C. and the United Nations to bring attention to the murders (Osborn 2004b). In 2003, the Association of Family and Friends of Disappeared Persons marched from the border to Mexico City.

Mujeres de Negro, Women in Black, formed in Chihuahua City in 2001, declares the right of women to participate in the public sphere as citizens entitled to be free from violence (Wright 2005). On International Women's Day 2002, they marched from Chihuahua City to Ciudad Juárez naming their campaign *Éxodo por Vida*, Exodus for Life, and in November 2002, they led a march in Mexico City chanting *Ni Una Mas*, Not One More (Wright 2005). Some have accused these middle class women of exploiting the suffering of victims' families or of damaging the reputation of Ciudad Juárez, thus causing a loss of business.

These activists have received threats, phone taps, and intimidation by men who follow them. The discourse of the prostitute is used to discredit the activists for being public women just as it was used to discredit the victims; hence the women counter this with the discourse of the victims as daughters and the activists as mothers (Wright 2005).

Although globalization brings modernizing forces into conflict with local traditions, it can also create the opportunity for international coalitions and support, such as the intervention of Amnesty International against the Ciudad Juárez murders. As local groups draw the attention of middle class women in the region and around the world, the complex issues of representation and appropriation and who should speak for the victims can surface² (Wright 2006). With access to the Internet as a major force of communication and organizing, local groups can expand and have a visible presence. *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* has a website (<http://www.niputesnisoumises.com/>) that gives voice to the women in France's ethnic ghettos. *Mujeres de Juárez*, Women of Juárez, a group of family and friends of the murdered women, has a website called, *Nuestras Hijas de Regeso a Casa*, May Our Daughters Return Home, (<http://www.mujeresdejuarez.org/>) which allows mothers or family members to speak on behalf of their murdered or disappeared relatives.

On February 1, 2007, a new law supporting women's right to a life free of violence was signed by the president of Mexico (Cevallos 2007, p.1). While

² As Alcoff states, 'Feminist scholarship has a liberatory agenda which almost requires that women scholars speak on behalf of other women, and yet the dangers of speaking across differences of race, culture, sexuality, and power are becoming increasingly clear to all' (1995, p.98).

women's organizations herald this law as progress toward protecting women from violence, some activists have observed that the commitment or training necessary for enforcement remains inadequate.

The global crisis of capitalism has ended the ability of the corporate state to continue covering social costs for workers and forced it to seek ways of balancing costs through downsizing and outsourcing jobs. This can increase exploitation of labor and exportation of jobs to border zones where workers can be paid poverty wages in order to protect profits. While the deteriorating economic and social climate of border zones, combined with increased independence of women in these communities, may intensify male violence toward women, there are more deeply rooted causes of violence against women on a global scale. So-called democratic nations have not only failed to provide women with protection, but also have made them more vulnerable by encouraging predatory capitalist practices that further the exploitation and disenfranchisement of marginalized populations. The United States' economic practices on the border with Mexico and in the Arab world have certainly contributed to a climate of despair that encourages the intensification of religious and masculine fundamentalism.

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