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Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba, Ignacio Corona, eds. *Gender Violence at the U.S.–Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010. vii + 200 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-2712-0.

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Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response

Unless one lives or works along the U.S.-Mexico border or deals with gender issues specifically, one probably isn't likely to think much, or long, about the staggering number of women who have disappeared (and likely been murdered) in Ciudad Juarez since the early 1990s: current estimates put this number beyond 4,000. Over 400 women's bodies have been discovered here since 1993, raped, mutilated, tortured, burned.[1] Border studies have gained increasing prominence at U.S. universities located in the borderland states of Texas, California, and New Mexico as well as at research institutes in the northern tier of Mexico. Research focuses on exposing the corruption of the Mexican judicial system; detailing the frequent complicity of state authorities, including the police; and the multinational corporations that contribute through the *maquiladora* system, which employs primarily poor women who have been disproportionate victims of gender violence. This important collection of essays by scholars and researchers on both sides of the border brings a much-needed multi-disciplinary set of methods to bear on how the media–broadcast and print journalism, film, television series, and fiction–participate in (re)presenting discourses of violence in the daily life of those living in the borderlands. Particularly at such a volatile moment in U.S.-Mexican relations–tensions over immigration reform, NAFTA, and other economic agreements, and this being a U.S. presidential election year are only the most obvious reasons–this volume presents a timely and compelling message for anyone working in media today. By utilizing media and critical theory, communication studies, gender studies, sociology, political science, anthropology, and literary studies, the contributors document and analyze how these narratives of violence create a culture of fear, "non-knowledge" (see chapter 5), and civic paralysis.

Emerging from a 2005 symposium at the University of Texas at Austin ("Dialogues on the U.S.-Mexico Border Violence") coordinated by Dominguez-Ruvalcaba (who teaches there) and Corona (who teaches at Ohio State), which highlighted the roles of gender, ethnicity, and place in border violence, this volume expands that focus to include violence against sexual minorities as well as women, and analyzes oral testimony of many of the mothers of the femicides for the ways in which their subjectivity is altered by the discourse of violence. As the editors acknowledge in their introduction to the collection, such violence is neither new nor uncommon, and the contributors seek to "resist the fascination of explanatory arguments that favor geographic exceptionalism" (p. 2). Even more importantly, the editors seek to *intervene* in this tragedy. "Our proposal's centerpiece is a strategy for 'building bridges': between public and private entities, national and local communities; all sorts of secular and religious organizations and institutions, the academia and the media; and civil society and the government," they state (p. 6). The editors organize the essays around what they name "four ways of enunciation" (p. 10)–oral testimonies (of sexual minorities in Tijuana, and of the mothers of murdered women in Juarez); television and film; journalism and literature; and legal studies that focus on the status of femicide cases in international courts. This allows the volume to provide a compelling, and humane, analytical constellation addressing the myriad, frequently embedded ways in which media promote violence in the social and institutional imagination, while offering suggestions for how these same media can also, potentially, contribute to fundamental changes in Mexican society.

By taking such a multidisciplinary set of critical approaches, the collection joins other groundbreaking volumes in media studies such as *De-Westernizing Media Studies,* edited by James Curran and Myung-Jin

Park (2000, which contained an important essay on the uniqueness of the Mexican media system by Daniel C. Hallin in chapter 7), and the work of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, co-editors of *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* (2003). Such collections bring the theoretical force of multiple disciplines to bear on the intricate, complex discourses of media to create social reality, moving beyond the typical communication studies data collection strategy. In the present volume, the work of Ignacio Corona in chapter 5, "Over Their Dead Bodies: Reading the Newspapers on Gender Violence" is of particular note along these lines. Examining major newspapers from several major cities in the north of Mexico, Corona demonstrates, with data and analysis, how ostensibly objective journalism helps to collectively promote the "predominant perception of a violent reality and the encoding of an entire narrative of violence for social consumption" (p. 113). Linking the inverted pyramid format of the news story to the erasure of responsibility for this culture of violence, Corona suggests that while such a format may be conventional, it is also culturally hegemonic. That hegemony determines reality for its readers by determining what "news" is relevant and newsworthy, whose perspectives are offered to substantiate that reality, and whose are erased or delegitimized. Corona's examples support his assertion that in the absence of credible "official information"–legitimate investigations, prosecutions, etc.–the print media rely on the tradition of objectivity that minimizes the need for context, dismisses alternative sources of information (in favor of predictable, official ones, however inefficient), and omits deeper sources for the ongoing violence. To supply the public's desire for information, in other words, the media will frequently invent a social reality that continues to feed the perception that reality is always violent, rather than devoting the necessary resources to investigate how such a situation has been created and maintained by the structures of power. In their pursuit of objectivity and unambiguous causal relations, the reporter and the newspaper editors may reproduce a vision of social reality that refuses to examine the roots of the problem and the basic structures of patriarchal society and its relationship to the economy, the use of urban space, political power and class privilege, the role of the authorities, the professional preparation of the security forces–all of which are important in the string of unsolved femicides" (p. 118).

Two additional chapters likely to be of particular interest to media scholars continue this line of analysis, focusing on television series and popular films that saturate everyday life. Dominguez-Ruvalcaba's individual contribution (chapter 3) explores "Death on the Screen: Imagining Violence in Border Media," providing an astute theoretical critique of the patriarchal logic that structures violence as a "bloody spectacle where the border's inhabitants play the role of either perpetrators or victims" (p. 61). Chapter 4, "Representations of Femicide in Border Cinema," offers a complex and thoughtful analysis of how depictions of masculinity and the family shape the patriarchal narrative at the heart of border representations of gender violence.

Each contributor to this volume elucidates an important facet of a complex media construction of gender violence in the border region. The collective experience of reading the collection is a disturbing but ultimately empowering one for those wishing to gain a more critical understanding of problems that, while not unique to Mexico, have become synonymous with its image. The final two chapters offer strategies for breaking down these narratives of violence in particular ways. Miguel Lopez-Lozano analyzes three contemporary novels in chapter 6 that link the dehumanization of women by global capital in the *maquiladoras* with the femicides, thus presenting counter-examples to the typical media narratives of gender violence. With protagonists who are human rights workers and journalists, such fictions help reposition the responsibility of the media and the international community in resolving the violence along the border. In the concluding chapter, James C. Harrington details possible legal actions for the victims and their families through various international courts and treaties. He offers yet another discursive opportunity to think about how media can participate, not in promoting a culture of violence, but helping to re-imagine a society based on civic responsibility and justice. Following this chapter, he lists an appendix of "legally binding applicable international human rights instruments to which Mexico is a party," of great use for researchers and investigators pursuing this set of problems. References at the end of the volume include a wealth of informative sources–books, journals, and newspaper articles, as well as interviews (for the oral testimony chapters), legislation and legal cases, and a selected videography. The book thus provides a rich set of resources for tackling the multiple dimensions of this problem, the effects of which reach far beyond the border.

Note

[1]. "Femicides of Juarez Fact Sheet," National Organization for Women, http://www.now.org/issues/global/juarez/femicide.htm See also Jenny Karubian, *Representing Femicide at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, Kindle eBook (Seattle: Amazon Digital Services, 2011), http://www.amazon.com/Representing-Femicide-U-S-Mexico-Border-ebook/dp/B006KLYIHO.

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