

Machos y Putas: Masking Mexico's Violence



A street vendor in the Sinaloan state capital of Culiacán reads the daily newspaper *El Sol de Culiacán*, in June 2009. The headline reads: "They Execute' Another One." The paper's front page is devoted to violent crime; the back page, to half-naked women.

By Michelle García

HE'S DEAD AND SHE'S HALF NAKED. TWO IMAGES I encounter at every newspaper stand in Mexico City—*machos y putas*. A marijuana leaf and stiletto heel in the shape of a pistol adorn one magazine cover. Several newspapers regularly divide their front pages between a preening, bikini-clad woman and cadavers. Sex and violence in the media isn't new, but in the case of Mexico, fantasy serves as a mask that distorts the real violence that has left some 40,000 people dead since President Felipe Calderón launched his "war on the cartels" shortly after taking office in December 2006. Newspaper vendor Víctor Luna tells me the pairing is meant to catch readers with a double-

barrel shot—the violence of "daily life" and sex, for a touch of "glamour." One, the sex or the violence, is sure to hit.

I interpret the sexy images as diminishing the violence suffered by Mexican women. By now most U.S. and Mexican readers are familiar with the hundreds of unsolved murders in Ciudad Juárez, a wave of killings that began in the early 1990s that women's rights groups have denounced as "femicide." Lesser known, less publicized, and less sexy is the rampant domestic violence in Mexico—an average 1,000 women are killed every year, most of them by their domestic partners, according to a 2007 BBC report, and in a 2003 Mexican government

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survey, almost 8% of Mexican women over the age of 15 said they had suffered sexual violence in the previous 12 months. Human Rights Watch reported in 2006 that on average a Mexican woman is raped every four minutes.¹

When the Mexican news media do cover this daily violence against women, they generally present women as mere decorative features, according to a report published in 2009 by a Mexican women's media watchdog group. Some 83% of female-focused stories depicted women as victims of violence, but rarely did journalists allow them to express their opinions about violence in print or on the air.² The violence against women becomes merely a spectacle, and their voice, simply a means for adding detail.

Any journalist covering the border or the violence in Mexico is performing one of the most dangerous and heroic jobs in journalism right now. The complexity of violence is often obfuscated with a framing that too neatly draws lines and provides a familiar narrative. For the most part the story of border violence is framed as a man's story, and in a man's story, men kill men while women wail on the sidelines. The steady stream of bloody images mixed with the scintillating at times borders on morbid fascination, a kind of pornography of violence. The coverage usually leaves readers with a narrow understanding of the complex factors that feed the violence.

Once in New York I feel around for a deeper understanding of the media messages, which I couldn't quite decipher. Debra Castillo, director of the Latin American Studies Program at Cornell University, tells me there is more to the media's images than the tint of blood: the tint of class. "Los apetezibles cuerpos de la miseria," she says, invoking the words of the Mexican writer José Joaquín Blanco: the delectable bodies of misery.³ "I don't think it's just the sexy women and the male violence," she says. "I think it's the way it plays out in terms of class. Upper-class people can get certain kinds of vicarious titillation from the spectacle of lower-class violence." The images reframe the violence to make it tolerable, even palatable; they are then sold to the same working class and people living in misery who have suffered the brunt of the violence to begin with.

Not only the news media but now movies have become central to perpetuating this kind of imagery. Mexico's B-movie industry, known as "narco cinema," produces films that center on macho capos and sexualized young women who desire men for their money and power. According to photojournalist Fabio Cuttica, who won a World Press Photo Award in February for his image of an actor on set in Tijuana as a machine-gun-wielding narco, the films originate from news "reports" and treat the violence similarly.

"The news doesn't treat it very differently than the film," Cuttica says. "There is little follow-up to extraordinary cases, there is a superficiality like the film. And impunity is never mentioned." Cuttica adds that the films are marketed not only in Mexico but to Mexicans in the United States, who are removed, at least geographically, from the violence that has consumed their homeland. In essence, the films traffic in desensitizing clichés among both those who are removed from the violence and among those who suffer it, glorifying their "new reality." In the pages of some newspapers and broadcast news, the very poison that kills people is served it to them as if it were theirs.

The U.S. version of the delectable bodies of misery is reflected in a fantasy of the border region as a place imbued with lustful fascination. *The New York Times* lamented that the violence has ruined a place "once thought of by Americans as just a naughty playland," adding: "It is a place that is neither completely Mexico nor completely El Norte. And a dollop of danger, a quest for sin, was always part of its charm."⁴ Fantastical imagery is made easy with the details of Mexico's almost surreal violence—heads rolling onto dancefloors (a detail repeated ad nauseam) and decapitated bodies dangling from bridges, plus the Santa Muerte phenomenon, in which Death has become the so-called patron saint of drug traffickers. It's all so . . . sexy.

While some in the press remain preoccupied and morbidly fascinated with violence, they often neglect to scrutinize the role of government and security forces in the violence. For example, when 72 migrants were killed in August 2010 on a Mexican ranch across the border from Brownsville, Texas, the seemingly wanton brutality seized press and public attention. Few, most notably Dudley Althaus of the *Houston Chronicle*, bothered to ask why, after a survivor notified the military about the massacre, officials did not arrive on the scene until a full 24 hours later.⁵ Mexican journalist Alma Guillermoprieto expanded on this and other examples of police negligence in her article "The Murderers of Mexico."⁶

Newspaper readers in the United States are too often left with a narrow understanding of the complex factors that feed the violence while contributing to the menacing image of the Mexican man as the wanton killer, the gruesome dead, but always, always exceptionally macho, except when he's an illegal border crosser or the leering day laborer, then he's emasculated and pitiful.

To understand the violence of men, it must be scrutinized in all of its forms, including that suffered by women who raise the boys who become the men we fear. The experiences of women are critical in the border narrative because women round out the story and add depth

REPORT: MEXICO



Las Guerreras, a group of Mexican women who ride pink motorbikes, in Ciudad Juárez in January. The group delivers donated supplies to violence-ravaged communities, projecting “a less threatening, feminine image” than that of the hit men known for striking their marks from motorcycles.

to a seemingly simple narrative of trigger-happy, narco-corrido-listening macho men run amok. With a focus on the complex relationship between women and violence, attention shifts from the man-killing-man image to government accountability and prioritizing the preservation of life. Readers gain a clearer understanding of how Mexican officials have addressed, or failed to address, violence in all of its forms, as well as the social attitudes toward “acceptable” forms of violence.

It’s true, women occupy roles as perpetrators of violence—there are female drug traffickers and assassins. But the story of women in some of the most violent areas of Mexico reveal the multiple social influences that make for a fertile killing ground. Consider this: Ciudad Juárez is home to one of the highest concentrations of single-female-headed households in Mexico, in part because the city has long taken in drifters, migrants, and people out to start a new life, including women fleeing poverty or abuse elsewhere.

Women in Ciudad Juárez who single-handedly raise their children struggle with a shortage of social services, schools, and infrastructure. Less sexy but critically important reports explain the phenomenon of the tens of thou-

sands of *ninis* (*ni estudian ni trabajan*), that is, the some 33% of kids in Juárez who don’t study or don’t work, the result of a massive shortage of schools, rampant domestic violence, and official indifference. In addition these women face pervasive discrimination; violence that goes uninvestigated, unresolved, and unpunished; and the harassment by the police and military officers who are supposed to protect them.⁷

The small but significant story of L.R. illustrates this. L.R. is a Mexican woman and domestic violence survivor whose request for asylum in the United States based on her fear that her common-law husband would murder her was, in an unusual outcome, approved. The special prosecutor for crimes against women in Mexico said in an affidavit that victims face “enormous social and cultural tolerance of this abuse, resulting in the virtual complicity of authorities who should prevent and punish these violent acts.”⁸ Such tolerance is fed by the babe-and-blood images in Mexico, and in the United States through simple neglect of women. The result is a perspective rooted in a “good guys vs. bad guys,” “let’s send in the heavy armor” narrative.

Without a lens that includes the lives of women, the press runs the risk of promoting strategies that make for exciting Western-style gunfights but does little to address the powerful forces of impunity, corruption, and rigid social immobility that fail people. And in this so-called war, perception dictates policy. With the United States supporting the Mexican government's "drug war" with the \$1.4 billion Merida Initiative—which is heavy on artillery and technology but light on judicial reform and building infrastructure—policy becomes the extension of perception.

Less sexy and all too critical are the rare reports of women attempting to piece together a country torn apart by men: for example, women leading caravans to take supplies to violence-ravaged villages. The band of women riding pink motorcycles, Las Guerreras (Warrior Women), roll into neighborhoods in Juárez burdened with the overlooked poverty that fuels the violence and lives in its shadow. Pink, the women told Reuters, is meant to project "a less threatening, feminine image" than that of the hit men who strike their marks from motorcycles.⁹ But there is yet another telling image, of women confronting the nation's leaders, of defending their communities in the face of neglect.

In December I traveled to Ciudad Mier, a colonial village and my ancestral home near the border in South Texas that attracted worldwide attention as the first "abandoned" town after the local officials, followed by most of the villagers, fled after a nine-month battle between the Zetas drug gang and the Gulf Cartel. The faces of homes and businesses were scarred with bullet holes, the streets lined with burned-out cars, and soldiers carrying automatic weapons swept through the overgrown backyards of abandoned private homes. Ciudad Mier, legendary for its lively local culture, seemed a comatose, bombed-out mess, except there, on a street corner where I spied two women sweeping away the fallen leaves and trash—a noble but the least heralded of the responses to the "war."

Two days later state governor Eugenio Hernández Flores and the federal minister of the interior, Francisco Blake Mora, arrived, promising much needed additional security and investment, and denouncing the *malos* for their violence. They confronted pleas and cries from women who accused the government of abandoning them, sacrificing them to a violence that shut down nearly all social services. No pharmacies, no stores, no water. Nothing! In the face of these women, the governor looked away and smirked. In scanning the coverage of the high profile visit, I came across one Mexican news website, *El Chilito*, that in a surprising departure deemed this event news and posted a video of it. The video included a written report that described Ciudad Mier as a place where men believe there are only two types of women, "the brave and the braver."¹⁰ 

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No End in Sight

1. For the sake of readability, the author has omitted copious references to the massive reportage about the Juárez situation. But he would like to express his gratitude to others who have studied or written about the city and border issues, including Rico Ainslie, Cecilia Ballí, Eduardo Barrera, Charles Bowden, John Burnett, Julian Cardona, Alfredo Corchado, Gustavo de la Rosa, Richard Dugan, Josiah Heyman, Alejandro Lugo, Molly Molloy, Rafael Nuñez, Tony Payan, Alfredo Quijano, Sandra Rodríguez, David Shirk, Kathy Staudt, Pablo Vila, Ed Vulliamy, and Melissa Wright.
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