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Author

Rodriguez, Gilda

Publication Date

2010-12-01



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PARA LAS MUJERES DE JUAREZ

To our daughters

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JUAREZ

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MUJERES
JUSTICIA

From Misogyny to Murder

Everyday Sexism and Femicide in Cross-Cultural Context

BY GILDA RODRÍGUEZ

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE MONTREAL MASSACRE OF 1989, in which Marc Lépine killed fourteen women—after ordering men out of the room and claiming he was “fighting feminism”—Jane Caputi and Diana Russell coined the term “femicide” to describe the killing of women qua women. The original definition emphasizes that femicide is only the most extreme form in a continuum that includes the many forms of violence against women, ranging from rape and sexual abuse to forced sterilization.¹ However, femicide is not only related to other forms of explicit violence against women but also to everyday acts of misogyny that contribute to the creation of a culture of sexism and devalorization of women and their lives. These everyday sexist acts are often ignored or minimized, in such a way that their connection to large-scale forms of violence against women is obscured. The disconnect between everyday misogyny and femicide in much of popular and media discourse is problematic on two counts. First, it contributes to

1. Jane Caputi and Diana E.H. Russell, “Femicide: Speaking the Unspeakable,” *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, ed. Jill Radford and Diana E.H. Russell (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 15.

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the mischaracterization of gender-based murder as simple killing, without a misogynistic component, which makes it difficult to address the root causes of such violence. Secondly, when “small” incidences of sexism occur, they are more easily dismissed as inconsequential and even harmless. My argument is that commonplace sexist practices lay the conditions for femicide and for the political discourse that surrounds it. To this end, I examine two case studies: the over five hundred femicides that have occurred in the border city of Juárez, Mexico, since 1993, and George Sodini’s murder of three women in a gym in a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in August of 2009. Though different in both scale and duration, among other factors, these gendered crimes in Mexico and the United States show how pervasive the link is between everyday sexist practices and femicide across cultural contexts.

Since early 1993, over 500 Mexican women have been killed in the industrial border city of Juárez, in the state of Chihuahua. A majority of the victims are poor or working-class girls and young women. Their bodies are found in remote areas, often bearing signs of sexual abuse and other physical violence. Although several arrests have been made in connection to the murders, the crimes continue. The inability of the authorities to solve the murders, the result of both incompetence and corruption, has made Juárez an extremely dangerous place to be a woman. More importantly, the lack of value accorded to the lives of women in Juárez has made it possible for the murders to go on with impunity.

A great number of the femicide victims were employed in Juárez’s maquiladoras,

foreign-owned assembly plants that are a major economic force in the area. Maquiladoras predominantly seek female employees because of their overwhelming need for unskilled labor that is inexpensive, easy to train and unlikely to file complaints about workplace conditions. A stereotyped view of “the malleable working woman”² shaped the maquiladoras’ policy of hiring women, whose very femininity supposedly made them docile, more apt for tasks requiring a high level of dexterity, and far less likely to be demanding that their male counterparts.

Very often, maquiladora workers and job applicants are subjected to pregnancy

2. Leslie Salzinger, “From High Heels to Swathed Bodies: Gendered Meanings under Production in Mexico’s Export-Processing Industry,” *Feminist Studies*, 23.3 (Autumn 1997), 549–574.

tests³ and lengthy questioning about marital status and personal plans, because employers favor young, single women who are less likely to miss work due to domestic responsibilities.⁴ The maquiladora model is built on a conception of its workers as disposable. The hard physical labor makes it impossible for most women to work in the industry for more than a few years, when their bodies can no longer keep up. The restrictions on pregnancy and marriage, and the lack of accommodations for women with children, make it so the realities of these women's lives are often in conflict with their employers' expectations, and thus the turnover rate is high. However, the labor supply is plentiful,⁵ and, aware of this competition, maquiladora workers often prefer not to speak up when overworked or abused, and go to great lengths to hide pregnancies and find alternative childcare arrangements.

3. A federal anti-pregnancy discrimination law was only passed in 2003, and its enforcement is lax, particularly in the maquiladora sector. Emily Miyamoto Faber, "Pregnancy discrimination in Latin America: the exclusion of 'employment discrimination' from the definition of 'labor laws' in the Central American Free Trade Agreement," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, 16 (2007), 307.

4. Patricia Fernández-Kelly, "Maquiladoras: The View from the Inside," *The Women, Gender, and Development Reader*, ed. Nalini Visvanathan et al (London: Zed Books, 1997), 208; Melissa Wright, "The Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women and Maquiladoras," *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, eds Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001), 140.

5. Althea J. Cravey, *Women and Work in Mexico's Maquiladoras* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 72.

Melissa Wright links the disregard for the value of women in the maquiladora environment to the devaluing of women's lives implicit in the murders. She conceptualizes the high rates of turnover as a corporate death of sorts, in which the women's labor is more valued than the women themselves. As long as the plants produce goods cheaply and efficiently, the owners do not care about who is producing them. As Wright explains, "turnover itself [...] is not necessarily a waste but the by-product of a process during which human beings turn into industrial waste."⁶ The maquiladora workers are disposable and always replaceable. The basic human rights of a woman, like that of privacy, can be violated because if she resists such a violation, there will be another worker eager and ready to take her place.

The disposability of the women, and more specifically their bodies, then, is common to both the murders and maquiladora work. Despite the efforts of local and international nongovernmental organizations, the murders continue, and the gendered basis for the violence is often ignored. The already-high incidence of crime in Juárez—much of it related to the drug trade—has escalated in recent years, making it difficult to distinguish, in media and political narratives, the gender-based murders from ones motivated by other causes.

6. Melissa Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 83.

Caputi and Russell argue that "[m]isogyny not only motivates violence against women, but distorts the press coverage of such crimes as well. [...] The police, media and public response to crimes against women of color, poor women, lesbians, women prostitutes, and women drug users is particularly abysmal—generally apathy laced with pejorative stereotyping and victim-blaming."⁷ The discourse around the Juárez femicides follows this pattern: the dark-skinned, working-class female victims receive little attention in the Mexican national media, and, when they do, they are often accused of being "loose," as if their perceived morality in some way makes their deaths acceptable. A prosecutor for the state of Chihuahua famously suggested implementing a curfew to stop the murders, because it would keep "good people" off the street at night⁸—implying that the lives of so-called loose women were expendable. The current president, Felipe Calderón, has remained tight-lipped on the subject, while devoting considerable energy (and several trips to Juárez) to drug-related violence. In 2005, his predecessor, Vicente Fox, accused the media of sensationalizing crimes that, he claimed, had been solved and were no longer a problem. At the same time, the maquiladoras, which deny any connection

7. Caputi and Russell, 15.

8. Lourdes Portillo, *Señorita Extraviada* (New York, NY: Women Make Movies, 2002).

“Sodini,” said a member of the Allegheny County Police Department, “just had a lot of hatred in him, and he was hellbent on doing this act.” The gunman chose the aerobics class, he said, simply because it had a lot of women in it.

between their practices and the femicides, continue to be an important player in the city’s economy.⁹

Meanwhile, in the summer of 2009, George Sodini opened fire on a women’s aerobics class in Pittsburgh, killing three women and injuring nine more before committing suicide. The victims were all strangers to Sodini, who maintained a blog that revealed his intent to commit the crime and included several misogynistic rants (the word “ho” features prominently). Sodini, whose romantic advances had been rejected by women for years—he claimed that “30 million women” had turned him down—and had not had sex in decades, decided to take revenge by

opening fire in a female space in the gym where he was a member. In this case, the mainstream media, including the Associated Press and the New York Times, and local authorities were quick to recognize the gendered nature of the murders. “Sodini,” said a member of the Allegheny County Police Department, “just had a lot of hatred in him, and he was hellbent on doing this act.”¹⁰ The gunman chose the aerobics class, he said, simply because it had a lot of women in it.

The narrative is also strikingly devoid of the sort of victim-blaming we often encounter in the case of the Juárez women. Sodini’s victims—all white and middle-class—were not doing anything they were not “supposed” to do, and were in fact

following a script of conventional femininity by exercising in that environment. The amount of press coverage, including the pictures of the murdered women, contrasts starkly with the few, short mentions, rarely including any pictures, of the Juárez killings in the local daily, *El Norte de Juárez*. In many ways, the discourse surrounding the femicides in Pittsburgh succeeds at overcoming the challenges outlined by Caputi and Russell and clearly identifies the gendered basis of the violence without incurring in minimization or victim-blaming.

It was feminist bloggers, not the police or media, who made the connection between other sexist practices and femicide. As Amanda Marcotte put it,

Today, women will be raped or beaten or maybe even killed for choosing to do differently than a

9. “Fox says media ‘reheating’ Mexico women’s murders,” Reuters, May 30, 2005. <<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N30619597.htm>>

10. Sean D. Hamill, “Blog Details Shooter’s Frustration,” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2009.

man desired of them—everything from screwing up the household chores to being deemed a tease to thinking they had a right to go to this party/walk down this alley to leaving a man who wants them to stay. But most people won't see Sodini's crime as different by degree, but by kind, because unlike most men who commit this kind of hate crime against women, Sodini didn't know his victims.¹¹

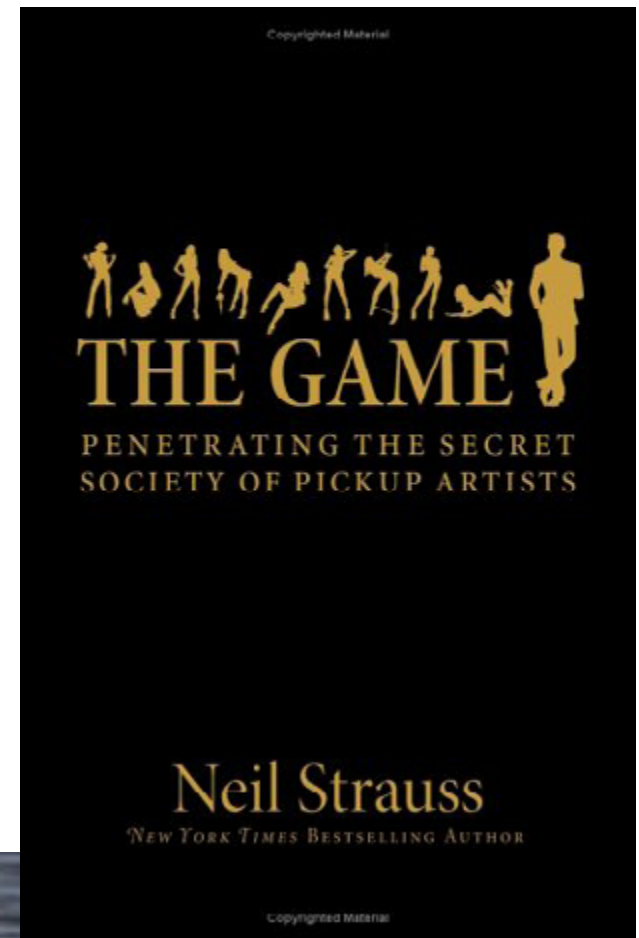
Much like in the case of Marc Lépine of the Montreal Massacre, certain discourses understand Sodini as “crazy” or “demented”—an anomaly, rather than the most extreme form of a kind of violence that happens every day, thanks to a culture that allows and supports it.¹² Anne Applebaum, for example—also writing online—said that it was a “ludicrous proposition” to believe that “we are all so inured to the victimization of the female half of the population that we don't even notice it anymore.”¹³

It is precisely this sort of contention that I attempt to argue against in this paper. There is, in fact, in many contexts, a

11. Amanda Marcotte, “These Crimes Don't Happen in a Vacuum,” *Pandagon*, August 5, 2009. <http://www.pandagon.net/index.php/site/comments/these_crimes_dont_happen_in_a_vacuum>

12. A writer for the *Calgary Herald* attacked exactly the proposition I am putting forth here: “OK, ladies [...] let's not go there. Let's not turn George Sodini into the new Marc Lepine, the next poster boy for those who insist that these sick individuals represent the violence that lives in all men's hearts,” Naomi Lakritz, “One killer a whole gender does not damn,” *Calgary Herald*, August 7, 2009.

13. Anne Applebaum, “America Is ‘Saturated With Misogyny’? Oh, Please,” *Slate*, August 10, 2009. <<http://www.doublex.com/blog/xxfactor/america-saturated-misogyny-ohplease>>



Pickup artistry might seem like a harmless way for unlucky-in-love men like George Sodini to get a date, but it is also part of an increasingly prominent subculture where women matter only insofar as they satisfy a man's desires, and where they are interchangeable with one another.

generalized culture of disregard, and even hatred, for women that makes it difficult for us to understand that femicide does not happen in vacuum, but is rather just one—if extreme—manifestation in an environment that accepts and fosters, to varying degrees, behaviors that are degrading and detrimental to women, including many forms of violence. In the case of the Sodini femicides, bloggers have identified a particularly insightful connection between his crime and the culture of the so-called “seduction community,” which attempts to increase men’s sexual and romantic conquests through techniques allegedly derived from social psychology. “Pickup artists” are men who have developed skills with the end of successfully seducing women—the goal is to seduce as many women as possible. This subculture has

grown and gained much attention in recent years, with best-selling books including Neil Strauss’ *The Game*, and a reality show on VH1, *The Pickup Artist*, that ran for two seasons (2007–2008); it is also the inspiration for Will Smith’s movie *Hitch*. In the aftermath of the Sodini murders, some members of the pickup artist community wrote about how if the gunman had followed their rules of seduction, he would not have had the sexual frustration that led to the shooting spree:

If Sodini had learned game he would have been able to find another woman and gotten laid after his ex dumped him. He wouldn’t have spent the next 20 years steeped in bile and weighed down by his Sisyphean [sic] blue balls, dreaming of vengeance. Game could have saved the lives of the women Sodini killed.¹⁴

14. Game Can Save Lives,” *Roissy in DC*, August 5,

Underlying this sort of claim are two problematic assumptions: the first, that frustration at the lack of attention from women is, if not justifiable, at least an understandable reason for unleashing this sort of violence; the second has to do with the presumption that women are highly manipulable—and in fact should be manipulated to fulfill men’s desires. Pickup artistry might seem like a harmless way for unlucky-in-love men like George Sodini to get a date, but it is also part of an increasingly prominent subculture where women matter only insofar as they satisfy a man’s desires, and where they are interchangeable with one another. The goal of the pick-up artist, as one of them, David DeAngelo, puts it, is to talk to “any

2009. <<http://roissy.wordpress.com/2009/08/05/game-can-save-lives/>>

woman” (emphasis mine); another, Mike Pilinski, suggests in the title of his popular e-book, *She’s Yours For the Taking*,¹⁵ that his audience can make proprietary claims on the women they desire. The language of the seduction community further objectifies women: the woman the artist wants to talk to is the “target,” while the friend she is with is the “obstacle.” With growing media attention on pick-up artists and their techniques also grew outrage, in certain sectors, about their treatment of women.¹⁶ However, the dominant media discourse suggests that pick-up artistry is harmless and, at best, gives socially awkward men a leg up in interactions with the opposite sex. The *Los Angeles Times* put it thusly: “You may not like Neil Strauss’ new book, *The Game*, but he’s a hero to men seeking women.”¹⁷

The two case studies I present here might seem mismatched in the magnitude of both the femicides and the sorts of “everyday” acts of misogyny I associate with each of them. However, I believe that, read against each other, the femicides of Juárez and Pittsburgh reveal the deep relation-

15. David DeAngelo Communications, Inc., *Double Your Dating* <<http://www.doubleyourdating.com>>; Mike Pilinski, *She’s Yours for the Taking* (West Seneca, NY: Kipling Kat, 2009).

16. See, for example, Andrew Johnson, “Passing on ‘foolproof’ pick-up tips. Is this ‘grooming’ for adults?” *The Independent*, August 28, 2005.

17. Deborah Netburn, “Danger: Pickup Artists Ahead,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 2005.

ship that exists, even in markedly different contexts, between the pervasive, but small-scale, misogyny that people in a particular society might be inclined to ignore, and monumentally barbaric acts that, to many, seem to defy explanation. The murders in Juárez and Sodini’s shooting are out of the ordinary, but they are not anomalies or aberrations: they are simply the most gruesome examples.

Gilda Rodríguez is a doctoral student in the Political Science department. She specializes in political theory and race, ethnicity, and politics, and is a Women’s Studies concentrator. Her dissertation focuses on the practices of political membership of indigenous Mexican migrants to the United States. She received a CSW travel grant, which that enabled her to present her paper “From Misogyny to Murder: Everyday Sexism and Femicide in Cross-Cultural Context” at the 2010 meeting of the Western Political Science Association.

Photo credit: On page 15, photo, “Pink crosses in Olvera street, Los Angeles, as remembrance for the murdered women of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, on the Day of the Dead, by Jim Winstead Jr., trainedmonkey.com/

Some Feminist Blogs

<http://pandagon.net>

<http://feministblogs.org/>

<http://www.feministe.us/blog/>

<http://feministing.com/>

<http://thefbomb.org/>

<http://www.ourbodiesourblog.org/>

<http://www.jezebel.com/>

<http://www.salon.com/life/broad-sheet/>

<http://finallyfeminism101.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.wimnonline.org/WIMNs-VoicesBlog/>

<http://www.ihollaback.org/>

<http://bitchmagazine.org/blogs>

<http://www.mediagirl.org/>

<http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/>