

INVISIBLE BODIES ON THE BORDERS OF WAR:
THE HIDDEN ROLE OF NATIONAL SECURITY IN RAPE CULTURE

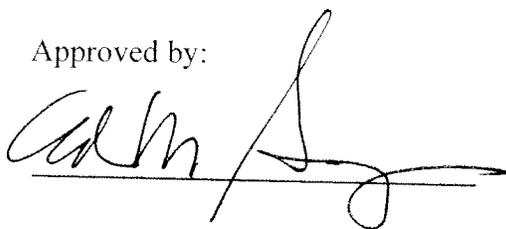
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A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree
With Honors in

Gender and Women's Studies
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

MAY 2012

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Abstract

The social construction of immigration as question of national security has led to the criminalization of immigration. Criminalization has encouraged the idea that greater security is needed, spiraling into the characterization of the US/Mexico border as a war zone. This is seen through the greatly increased military presence along the border as well as the militarization of the Border Patrol. This war is being waged against women's bodies, both through assaults committed by US officials and by systematically preventing immigrants from accessing resources for survivors of sexual violence. The structural and institutional causes of this sexual assault epidemic cannot be explained by current feminist frameworks for understanding sexual assault. In order to prevent future assaults, we must restructure our immigration policies and separate immigration from the Department of Homeland Security and the privatized prison-industrial complex.

Introduction

Located in a South Tucson community center along with a health clinic, recreation center, and adult education facilities, the Su Voz Vale office is unmarked. Even upon entering the small lobby, there are no striking indicators of its purpose. The only indicators are the brochures on the side tables advertising the group support meetings like the Cafecita program, as well as pamphlets about sexual assault. Su Voz Vale, a satellite organization of the Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault (SACASA), is a bilingual and bicultural support network for survivors of sexual violence. Its advocates are trained not only in sexual assault laws, but also in the tangled web of immigration law.

It is fitting that this easily overlooked facility serves primarily Latina and Chicana women, as well as some men, because its clients are so easily overlooked by mainstream white America. The Su Voz Vale office is invisible by design, as they must be in order to provide services to this community. This is both due to the harassment many Latinos experience from law enforcement and the stigma against sexual assault. Since the center's location and purpose is primarily transferred through word-of-mouth, it is able to provide services to people regardless of immigration status with little fear of repercussions to the survivor.

This community is rendered invisible because of their ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender, as well as survivors of sexual violence. While this invisibility is useful in the practical world of prevention services, feminist activists and theorists must overcome it in order to challenge the structures that specifically impact immigrant women. Currently, immigrant women are only briefly mentioned as a special concern to sexual assault prevention work. Even within the confines of academic research into sexual violence, women of color are ignored and

whiteness presumed. Regardless of actual citizenship status or country of origin, their actual stories are obscured by the racist rhetoric of the xenophobic politicians and pundits.

“In contemporary American society, having a voice reflects empowerment, whereas those who are silenced are powerless” (Ullman, 3). Immigrant women have been repeatedly silenced by legislation that dehumanizes and criminalizes their existence. This has contributed to the creation of rape-supportive immigration policies and allowed our country’s hostility towards immigrants to be enacted upon the bodies of women. However, the institutions at play in this particular side of rape culture have been overlooked by mainstream feminist scholarship on sexual assault.

I. The Gaps in Feminist Scholarship on Sexual Assault

Feminist theory frames sexual assault as a symptom of the larger cultural subjugation of women, not as the errant act of an individual. The United States has an insidiously prominent rape culture, defined as a “pathological social environment” which “in effect condones rape” (Ullman, 7). Feminist scholars outline three major contributing factors to rape culture: rape myths, gender socialization, and the objectification of women by the media and the sex industry (Ullman, 9; Jackson, 19). These are social elements that encourage a rape-supportive environment, but they are problematically whitewashed and ignore the significant role played by bigger institutions.

While social discourse claims to condemn sexual violence and promotes criminal justice efforts at prosecuting rapists, the ongoing subjugation of women works against this. Rape myths fuel this fire, as does the image of the “ideal victim” (Randall, 414). According to public perception, the ideal victim behaves appropriately: she does not engage in casual sex, she had not been drinking heavily when she was assaulted, and she is not married to or involved with her

rapist (414). Furthermore, the ideal victim fights back because “a woman who is truly unwilling will vigorously verbally and/or physically resist the attack or the coercive or unwanted sex” (415). The ideal victim reacts to her assault with emotional distress and is “shaky” and “crying” (427). This portrait is not only sexist and racist, but is also based in several extremely problematic assumptions.

First, this myth presumes that the assault presumes the classic yet statistically less likely scenario of a man raping a random (or carefully selected) woman. This neatly sidesteps the issue of intimate partner violence, as well as the sexual exploitation of women by those with more power, like human traffickers, Border Patrol agents, or immigration officials. Additionally, it places a burden on the survivor to prove their victimhood because so few people actually fit the narrow mold of the ideal victim.

Rape myths reveal the strong racial bias in conceptions of sexual assault. They assume equal access. Some books and articles pay lip service to the racism in second wave feminism, and may even go so far as to acknowledge how intersectional factors like race, sexual orientation, and class challenge the “mainstream” white understanding of how and why sexual assault occurs as well as who qualifies as a “real victim.” Ullman argues that some theories of rape and sexual assault “depoliticize rape” by ignoring large social factors in favor of the rhetoric of individual responsibility. She calls for a shift in theoretical focus to “the social context of rape” (35). She makes the following key “intervention recommendations”:

- The social context of rape should be addressed.
- The media should help the public identify and counter aspects of rape-supportive culture.

- Media outlets, formal service providers, and institutions should be held accountable for any rape supportive actions.
- The culture of victim blaming in the legal system should be changed.
- Restorative justice approaches should be considered.
- Racism, Classism, and other social biases should be considered.

(pgs 150-165)

In her final suggestion, she acknowledges that “it is critical to fight against inequalities...that leave the most vulnerable victims trapped in violent situations” and that “increased attention to communities of color... [and] women who are immigrants...is warranted,” she does not discuss how the social context of rape changes for these communities, especially in the case of immigrant women (164).

However, the main understanding of rape culture in the United States, even within feminist theory, only brushes the surface.

A staggering amount of whitewashing occurs within the theoretical conception of sexual assault and rape culture. The statistics about sexual violence in the United States are shockingly grim, affecting over 20% of women (Ruggiero & Kilpatrick, 2003). However, these numbers do not tell the whole story, often leaving out already marginalized groups. The terms “rape” and “sexual assault” tend to be used somewhat interchangeably, but they have different legal meanings. The idea of “rape” implies penetration, while sexual assault encompasses a wider variety of nonconsensual activity. In Arizona, the legal definition of sexual assault is “intentionally or knowingly engaging in sexual intercourse or oral sexual contact with any person without consent of such person” (AZ Statute 13-1406). This law is relatively inclusive, and its gender-neutral language does not limit the category of assault survivor to cisgender women.

Feminist scholars studying sexual assault have created a framework for understanding how this violence is approached. They argue that the social and legal characterizations of sexual violence fall into two main categories. In the first, sexual violence is understood as a violation of the survivor's chastity. In the second, it is viewed as a violation of autonomy. This fundamental difference in the framework of sexual violence has extensively impacted national narratives about sexual assault from both legal and social perspectives. It also has implications for feminist approaches to sexual assault prevention and justice.

While the media has been devoting more time to coverage of sexual violence, it has focused on survivors who are more “ideal,” like college women and young girls. Vice President Joe Biden spoke on college campuses about the disturbing frequency of sexual assaults on campus. Television shows like *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* call public attention to issues of sexual violence, but still within a criminal justice framework. While this coverage might help mitigate some of the problems of rape culture, it fails to expose other types of sexual violence. This is evident in scholarship on sexual violence. While there are hundreds of articles and studies addressing sexual violence, the scholarship is problematic. There is a general tendency to whitewash sexual assault survivors and gender them female. This reflects a trend in the criminal justice system where white women survivors are most likely to be believed and the most likely to see their perpetrator brought to justice.

The construction of sexual violence as a violation of chastity promotes a misogynist and racist view of sexual violence. It is inherently sexist because it promotes the view that women should be chaste, i.e. their sexuality should be strictly controlled and limited to certain forms and expressions. In addition, it is inherently racist. Non-white women are frequently portrayed as being hypersexual, and the real impact of this is visible in sexual assault cases where the survivor

is an African-American woman. A study of sexual assault trial outcomes found that “jurors were less likely to judge a man guilty when the complainant was a black woman” (Lafree, Reskin, and Visher 399). They speculated that this was because of the racist stereotyping of African-American women as unchaste. This sexualized racism is not limited to African-Americans, as images of Native American and Latina women are also hypersexualized in the media. It is important to consider how race and ethnicity play into the public perception of sexual assault and the survivors’ ability to access services and justice.

However, even the framework of sexual assault as a violation of autonomy has its limitations. Not all persons have the same degree of autonomy, which calls the concept into question. Characterizing sexual assault as a violation of a person’s control over their own body and their independence fails to consider how people act upon and are acted upon by larger systems and superstructures, like economic policies and national perceptions of immigration:

Sexual autonomy, respect for one’s body, and diversity are all well and good but do not serve women in economically vulnerable situations, who do not have the freedom to make decisions for themselves, who face the obstacles of oppression from various fronts. (Pérez, 149)

As Pérez states, not all people are autonomous. For some people, immigration status imposes draconian limitations on their ability to access prevention or survivor services. It may make them more vulnerable to assault, as they could be threatened with deportation. Thus, the promotion of women’s sexual autonomy does not adequately address sexual violence against immigrant women.

II. The Role of Sexual Assault in the Border War

One of the challenges that sexual assault against immigrant women poses to feminist conceptions of sexual violence is that it is the product of a specific kind of war zone. The sexual violence on the border is part of a broader picture of human rights abuses that the Border Patrol and other immigration officials commit against immigrants. These abuses are ignored and excused because of the way the media and the government portray the border between the United States and Mexico as a war zone. There are three major moments when immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to assault: while crossing the border, during interactions with Border Patrol agents, and in detention facilities.

ICE is not only responsible for the violence committed by its agents, but also for sexual assaults that occur during border crossings. The US immigration policies that led to its development and the social construction of our border are also responsible for this violence. Because of the draconian limitations imposed on immigration, some women rely on human traffickers in order to enter the United States. This exposes them to the danger of being raped by one of the traffickers or other people being smuggled into the country. Sexual assault during a border crossing is so common that many women use preemptive birth control to avoid potential pregnancy (Pérez, 141). This situation represents a clear violation of human rights. It is the direct result of United States immigration policy, and therefore we as a nation are responsible for every one of these assaults.

The situation has been exacerbated by the perception of the border as a war zone. Sexual violence against immigrants is one of many consequences of the militarization of the United States' border with Mexico. As demonstrated by many feminist scholars (Enloe, Allen), women are assaulted in the name of national security as a way of "psychologically [debilitating]" a group (Falcón, 120). Battles over territory are waged on women's bodies as a way of deterring

further immigration and punishing those already in the United States, citizen or not. Militarizing the US/Mexico border has effectively created a war zone, one in which rape is an all too common weapon.

Immigration law renders immigrants more vulnerable to sexual assault. There are many documented cases of Border Patrol agents abusing their authority and power to coerce or force women into sex (Falcón). The agents may threaten either the woman or her family with deportation, or they might claim to be able to influence the decision of a deportation hearing in order to extort sexual favors from a woman. These agents are able to get away with sexual assault because of the vulnerability of the survivors. Survivors may fear retaliation if they report the assault, from harassment to deportation to further assaults. Additionally, language barriers and unclear reporting guidelines make it extremely difficult to report violence. The power imbalance built into the immigration system makes immigrant women extremely vulnerable during interactions with immigration officials and Border Patrol agents.

The final theatre of vulnerability is within detention facilities. Detention has become the mandate of the Border Patrol; they detain anyone suspected of being in the United States without proper documentation (Manning lecture). This detention is largely wasteful and needless. Many of these women are escaping gender violence and may be seeking asylum in the US. Even if they are not, it is important to note that many of the women detained by ICE do not pose a threat to the community, nor are they considered flight risks (SIROW, 5). These women are separated from their families, which is particularly problematic for those with children. Furthermore, these detention facilities lack any independent oversight. No More Deaths/No Mas Muertes documented cases of abuse against detained persons, including depriving them of food or water

(25). It is extremely difficult to study the frequency of sexual assault within detention facilities because of how exceptionally vulnerable the women are.

Sexual assault against immigrant women is completely disregarded because of the way society perceives them. Immigrant women are viewed as criminals or freeloaders. As a result, our nation's hostile xenophobia is enacted upon their bodies in violent ways. This stems directly from immigration law, which I will examine in the next section.

III. Immigration Policy and the Militarized Border

Immigration has not always been a national security concern, but it is now heavily controlled by the militarized Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and its associated prison-industrial complex. The militarization of the border is a relatively new development in response to the social construction of immigrants as a threat to national security and, subsequently, of the border as a war zone.

(De)Constructing the US/Mexico Border

Historians have noted that the US/Mexico border is unique in several ways, all of which contribute to the ongoing conflict along its length. The length of the border is one of the ways: the border stretches around 2,000 miles from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. It traverses desolate and treacherous deserts in California, Arizona, and New Mexico before following the course of the Rio Grande in Texas. The last major change to its geographic location was when the United States gained territory in southern Arizona and New Mexico through the Gadsden Purchase of 1853.

Additionally, the border separates two countries with starkly disparate economic conditions and political power. This has promoted immigration from Mexico to the United States. Furthermore, US corporations have encouraged the production of cash crops in Mexico,

which has destabilized communities and uprooted people. Logically, these people move where they can support themselves. This frequently means migrating to the US, where there is an increased demand for unskilled labor (Massey et al, 15).¹ However, immigration to the United States from Mexico was not a political concern until the twentieth century.

For many decades, the border was only loosely monitored. The Border Patrol was not formed until 1924, 76 years after the border was established by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, and initially was a very small agency (Massey et al, 26). This symbolized the first shift towards viewing the border between the United States and Mexico as a site to be policed.

After thirty years of promoting public unease against immigrant scapegoats, Congress passed three pieces of legislation over the course of ten years that contributed to the criminalization of immigrants in the name of increased national security, which in turn is necessitated by the alleged threat of undocumented immigrants. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was the first major legislative step towards the criminalization of immigration and the militarization of the border. While it did grant amnesty to some immigrants, its primary aim was to prevent undocumented migration. It sought to deter employers from hiring undocumented immigrants through sanctions and increased the political and physical presence of the Border Patrol (Massey *et al*, 90). The Immigration Act of 1990 expanded on this and instituted a cap on immigration based on country of origin (Massey *et al*, 92). This legislation was racially motivated, as it punished immigrants from Central and South America much more harshly than others.

In 1996, Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). This legislation built on the IRCA and Immigration Act of 1990 to further

¹ For a thorough discussion of the different causes of international migration, see Massey et al, Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration (2002).

criminalize immigration and establish an even more punitive border regime. It homogenized immigrants into the specter of a dangerous, diseased person coming to the United States to traffic drugs and siphon money off the taxpayers. It normalized the detention of immigrants, which benefited the privatized prison-industrial complex (Manning lecture). All of this contributes to a societal mistrust of suspected immigrants (regardless of actual status), which in turn results in clamoring for ever-stricter policies and greater enforcement. The positive feedback loop is encouraged because corporations stand to profit.

The Department of Homeland Security was established in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Border Patrol and its parent organization, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, became part the Department of Homeland Security in 2003 (USA.gov). This solidified the militarization of the border and cemented the public's perception of immigration as a question of national security rather than of economics and labor. By framing immigration as an issue of security, Homeland Security can capitalize on the public's fears and violate the rights of immigrants without any real concern about fallout.

As Border Patrol agents gained more independence and freedom from supervision, the judges working in immigration court found their hands increasingly tied and lost most of their power to exercise judicial discretion. This contributed to the homogenization of immigrants as judges were no longer as able to consider the details of an individual's case. The judges who serve on the Court of Immigration Appeals have been carefully screened for any advocacy, which includes supporting immigrant rights as well as certain types of academic backgrounds (Manning lecture). This has enhanced the punitive and anti-immigrant nature of the Court of Immigration Appeals. It is important to note that it is primarily immigration from Central and South America that has been criminalized. This is partially due to the large economic disparity

between the United States and countries like Mexico and Guatemala. Immigrants from this area are viewed as problematic and dangerous. This is because of both racism and the political and diplomatic aims of the United States.

Cultivating a Climate of Terror

Immigration laws and their enforcement make it more difficult for survivors of assault, especially the men and women who are sexually assaulted within immigration detention facilities. Over 30,000 people are being held across the country right now, with around 10% in Arizona (No More Deaths, 42). There are five of these detention facilities in Arizona, concentrated about 45 minutes north of Tucson in Florence and Eloy. At least two of these are operated by a for-profit organization under contract with ICE, while another is a county jail. ICE has recently consolidated all of its female detainees to one private facility run by the Corrections Corporation of America.

ICE has a goal of 400,000 deportations outlined in its budget. If a person is stopped by Border Patrol or another agency, they must only be suspected of being eligible for deportation to be detained. ICE presumes guilt until innocence can be proven. This is clear in that the ICE case workers are called “deportation officers” (Manning lecture). Those seeking asylum are detained until their hearing, which can take between seven months to a year. After the hearing, it takes between forty eight hours and five months to learn the results (Manning lecture). Asylum seekers are detained throughout the duration of this lengthy waiting game.

The privatization of detention facilities feeds into the institutionalization of violence against immigrant women. The corporations who own these facilities support legislation that promotes the perception of immigrants as dangerous in order to profit. Corporations lobby in favor of harsher punishments and stricter immigration controls to ensure a continuous stream of

detained persons in order to maximize their profits. This was seen in 2010, when the Corrections Corporation of America played a significant role in the drafting of Arizona's infamous S.B. 1070 (No More Deaths, 44). This bill criminalized immigration at the state level and fanned the flames of anti-immigration hostility in Arizona.

Immigration policy is caught in a vicious cycle. The increased criminalization of immigration results in the further militarization of the border, which in turn leads to greater criminalization. The transfer of INS from the Department of Labor to the Department of Justice and then to the Department of Homeland Security reflects how immigration was initially a labor issue before being viewed increasingly as a potential threat to national security (Falcón, 119). The U.S. government and state governments have continued this cycle through new laws like Arizona's S.B. 1070. In popular discourse, undocumented immigrants are depicted as having committed a crime. This makes them particularly vulnerable to sexual assault.

The border is becoming increasingly militarized as both more military units are being stationed along it and as the Border Patrol is being reorganized and re-outfitted to reflect its increasingly warlike purpose (Falcón, 119). This militarization contributes to the characterization of the border as a war zone in mainstream discourse. As part of an effort to decrease immigration through the urban areas of El Paso, Texas and San Diego, California, the numbers of Border Patrol agents were increased. The purpose of this was to force people to cross the border in sparsely populated and dangerous areas with the idea that the increased risk to personal safety would decrease the rate of immigration. Its major impact, however, has been to make immigrants more vulnerable to abuse by Border Patrol agents (No More Deaths, 42). Because of the isolated areas in which they work, many Border Patrol agents are unsupervised and wield too much discretionary power. When mixed with the increasingly military culture of the Border Patrol, this

lack of oversight makes it far easier for agents to abuse and assault immigrants and U.S. citizens (Falcón, 127). As previously discussed, the militarization of the border has resulted in an increased incidence of sexual assault as this war is waged on women's bodies. Therefore, the entire institution of immigration and the social construction of the border must be challenged in order to actually prevent sexual assaults.

Future Directions for Activism and Scholarship

Sexual assault prevention programs seek to educate community members, both adults and youth, about the realities of sexual violence. These programs tend to target students and adult professionals. These programs can be problematically individualistic. While it is helpful for certain groups to “empower [women] to say no, and encourage men to respect boundaries,” immigrant women frequently do not have the same sexual autonomy due to their economic and social vulnerability (Pérez, 142). Therefore, traditional primary prevention methods will not be effective in preventing violence against immigrant women. There are cultural sensitivity and sexual harassment trainings for those employed by ICE. However, these are not enough to counterbalance the potential for abuse built into the structure of the Border Patrol. Because the violence is a product of the social construction of the border and its militarization, we must work against these institutions.

We must demilitarize the border and increase oversight of the Border Patrol. This requires the development of a standardized abuse reporting process. Organizations like No More Deaths/No Mas Muertes call for “independent oversight,” “clear complaint procedures,” “meaningful enforcement,” and “a shift in [Customs and Border Protection's] institutional culture” (44). Activism can be done through organizations like Casa Mariposa.

One possibility, as proposed by No More Deaths/No Mas Muertes, is to develop a Congressionally-funded oversight committee that is entirely independent of the Department of Homeland Security. The committee is to be comprised of experts in various fields, representatives from border communities, and intergovernmental agency liaisons (50). This would be a good start to reconstructing the public's perception of the border, but it will not take the place of substantial immigration reform and demilitarizing the border.

Furthermore, we must seek to decriminalize immigration. Detention should no longer be the standard procedure for immigrants. Those seeking asylum should be allowed to live and work in the community. Deportation should not be the goal of ICE. We must stop housing detainees in private detention facilities. So long as powerful corporations stand to make a profit off human suffering and can use their deep pockets to influence our legislatures, comprehensive and humanitarian immigration reforms will not pass.

Our immigration system is badly broken, and many people are victimized because of it. As feminist activists and scholars, it is our duty to fight for just immigration policies that do not enable sexual violence. We must develop a system that does not leave people vulnerable to violence, but rather supports survivors of any background.

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