

# ★ Amerikka-asiantuntija kommentoi



## Researching Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border

★ Text: Benita Heiskanen, [benita.heiskanen@utu.fi](mailto:benita.heiskanen@utu.fi), photos: Lorena Tabares

The twin cities of El Paso, Texas – Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua border region between the United States and Mexico are only bridges apart from each other and had for years functioned for the residents as one large metropolitan area. Families were spread across the Rio Grande, or Río Bravo, as Mexicans preferred to call the river that marked the geographic boundary between the two nations. For the *Paso del Norte* border community, crossing from one side to the other was easy, as people strolled or drove to the other side for doctor's visits, eating out, or visiting family. That all changed in the 2000s.

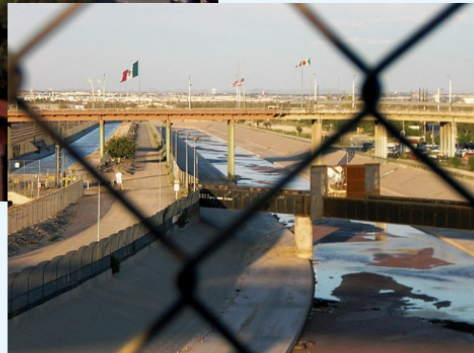
I had been curious about the region for years, ever since I had seen Lourdes Portillo's 2001 harrowing documentary film, *Senorita Extraviada* [Missing Young Woman] about femicide (or *feminicidio*), the mysterious murders of young women and girls that had made Ciudad Juárez infamous a decade earlier. In the early 1990s, the border community had woken up to a crime wave targeting women, many of whom had come to work in the multinational border factories, also known as *maquiladoras*. Nobody knew the exact number of the murders, much less why they were happening. According to speculations, the killers might belong to street gangs, organized crime syndicates, powerful families, a

satanic cult, underground snuff film industry, or the police, but nobody knew for sure. By the 2000s, hundreds of women had died, and most of the murders were unresolved.

I had been collecting newspaper clippings and other materials related to the Juárez femicides for years, but it wasn't until I went on a six-month sabbatical from my then position as Assistant Professor of American Studies at the University of Southern Denmark in 2010 that I got a chance to interview border residents about their understanding and experiences of the issue. My new project had a rocky beginning, though. A colleague from Denmark had put me in touch with a contact in the border region, but his chilling piece of advice stopped me in my tracks: "Don't come here. In El Paso, nobody will talk to you. In Ciudad Juárez, they'll kill you." I was stunned and utterly discouraged.

### The "Drug War" in Ciudad Juárez

At that point, there had been little media coverage of the so-called "drug war" in Europe, so I was unaware of the violence that had begun ravaging the region. However, during my very first interview—one, which I was able to set up thanks to my help-



ful colleagues at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) – it became evident that the women's murders were a tip of the iceberg amidst a massive wave of violence that had followed from President Felipe Calderón's declaration of "war" against organized crime in 2006. Even though the "drug war" was often depicted in public discussions as targeting solely criminals, its impact on the border community was tangible. What began for the residents as distant rumors of *narcos* [drug lords] taking over Ciudad Juárez, soon turned into personal experiences of killed family members, displays of violent crime, kidnappings, and extortions.

While the murder rate in the city had been 25 per 100,000 in 2007, it stood as 278 per 100,000 in 2010, the worst year on record. Small wonder, then, that the international media chose to label Ciudad Juárez the "murder capital" of the world. But what could be the reason for such drastic increase of violence? According to my interviewees, the violence started escalating in 2008 as a result of a turf war between the Juárez and Sinaloa drug cartels—led by Vicente Carrillo Fuentes and Joaquín "Chapo" Guzmán—over trafficking routes into the United States.

The turf war, however, soon spiraled beyond organized crime, generating mayhem, thousands of deaths, and social decay throughout the city. During the years 2008–2012, the death toll in Ciudad Juárez amounted to 10,882, with 3,622 bodies during the height of the violence in 2010. The year 2011 saw a slight decrease in the deaths with 2,086 killed, and a major decrease in homicides took place during 2012, with an estimated 797 deceased. Akin to the femicides, few of the killings related to the "drug war" were resolved; quite the contrary, the Mexican law enforcement became cause *célèbre* in its unwillingness or incapability to tackle the crimes.

## Reconsidering the Research Agenda

As I was coming to terms with the dramatic circumstances, I had to reconsider the focus of my research agenda anew. Given the three-decade-long legacy of femicide in the region, the new wave of violence had clearly not appeared out of nowhere. Yet making sense of such a precarious topic posed various challenges. For one, many of the established premises under which I was accustomed to conducting research—such as official records, documents, and archives—turned out to be either unreliable, incomplete, or downright fraudulent. I began to wonder how border residents were able to decipher what was happening around them.

Because media reporting clashed with stories circulating about the root and cause of the violence, my interviewees had long since learned to distrust public depictions of ongoing events. Instead, they had created various informal communication networks and information channels as tools for everyday maneuvering. Indeed, the "word on the street" had become far more relevant to them than media or public depictions of ongoing events. This had remarkable implications for my research as well. I realized I had to take rumors, urban legends, and underground information networks seriously—not for their factual

accuracy or authenticity but, rather, because they had a central significance for people's everyday lives.

During the "drug wars," members of the Mexican media had become targets of violence and many were forced to operate under the censorship machinery of either media gatekeepers or criminal organizations. A most staggering example of this was the newspaper *El Diario de Juárez's* Sunday editorial, "What Do You Want from Us?" published on September 19, 2010. Directed at the drug cartels in the region, the editorial pleaded: "What is it you want to

publish, or stop publishing? Explain so we can attend these issues. You are, at present, the de facto authorities of this city." The newspaper's drastic measure ensured immediate international media uproar.

At the same time, a group of *narco*-bloggers began to draw attention for their ability to report on violent incidents without the censorship machinery of the mainstream media. Such blogs, complete with photographs and video clips, were often shot on location with cell phone cameras in real time. The blogs described incidents related to the turf wars between cartels, with graphic images of crime victims as well as videos displaying the interrogations of rival cartel members. Available to anyone with access to the Internet, the *narco*-blogs extended the violence beyond its local and national scale to a global context.

Even if most of the physical violence occurred in Ciudad Juárez, while El Paso remained a relatively safe city to live in by U.S. standards, it had tangible everyday effects on individuals and families on both sides of the border. Approximately 124,000 *juárenses* left the city to other parts of Mexico or the United States, and most people from the U.S. side stopped crossing the border into Mexico for several years. Some 10,000 children were orphaned because of the violence. Tourism in the state of Chihuahua plummeted. All of these changes had long-lasting social, cultural, and economic consequences to the border community.

# ★ Amerikka-asiantuntija kommentoi



## Violence as a Historical Continuum

During 2013, while I was working as Collegium Researcher at the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies (TIAS), I got a chance to return to the *Paso del Norte* region for another five-month period of research. By the time I came back, violence in the region had decreased in a major way. During 2012, there were "only" some 797 violent deaths during the year, or two per day, in comparison to the previous year's 2,086 bodies, or 5-6 a day. There were several explanations for the decrease of violence. City officials claimed that their firing and hiring of police officers had cleaned up the city. Others argued that the Sinaloa cartel had won the turf war and, in so doing, debilitated the Juárez cartel in the process. Yet, even as the numbers seemed to give cause for optimism, the grim reality was that crime in Mexico on the whole had not diminished; rather, its geographic focus had shifted.

On September 29, 2014, Mexico once again attracted international headlines, when the news hit the stands that 43 Ayotzinapan students of a rural teachers college were attacked by the municipal police in Iguala, Guerrero. After their arrest, the students were allegedly handed over to the local drug cartel, *Guerreros Unidos*. None of them have been seen since. According to a statement made by a member of the cartel, the students had been killed and burned. During the investigation that ensued amidst local and global outrage, several mass graves were found in the state of Guerrero, but only one of the bodies has been positively identified as those of the missing students. A major fear is that theirs will be yet another set of crimes filed under "unresolvable."

The various incidents of violence in Mexico over the past three decades suggest that, rather than examining each of them as isolated instances, we would do well to consider them within a broader historical continuum. The culture of impunity and corruption that first allowed the femicides to occur later caused the *narco-violence* to spread in Ciudad Juárez, also setting the stage for the Ayotzinapa students' disappearances in Guerrero. Looking at one form of violence, then, will necessarily inform about the other. Under no circumstances should violence in Mexico be chucked up as an accepted state of affairs, but as an extraordinary human rights crisis, with ramifications on a global scale.

*Dr. Benita Heiskanen is the Director of The John Morton Center for North American Studies in Turku.*



## Hau, taku eničiyapi hwo?

Suomen intiaaniyhdistys järjesti historiansa ensimmäisen intiaanikielen peruskurssin Helsingissä helmi-maaliskuussa 2015. Kurssilla opiskeltiin lakotan kieltä lakota-intiaani Thomas Yellowhairin johdolla. Thomas on kotoisin Etelä-Dakotasta Pine Ridgen reservaatista, ja hän puhuu lakotaa äidinkielenään.

Yhdistys on aina silloin tällöin saanut kyselyitä intiaanikielen kurssista, ja nyt vihdoin sellainen saatiin myös toteutettua. Joka maanantai Helsingin yliopiston seminaarihuoneeseen kokoontui viitisentoista innokasta oppijaa aina Savonlinnaa myöten. Kokoontumiskerrat menivät varsin nopeasti ryhmän kuunnellessa Thomasin selvityksiä miten sanat ja lauseet muodostuvat sekä yrittäessään itse ääntää lakotankielisiä sanoja oikein.

**Ja vastauksena otsikon kysymykseen: Riku emáčiyapi.**

*Riku Hämäläinen*