THE VIOLENCE OF GLOBAL SPACES: RACE, GENDER, AND SIMULTANEITY

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It feels as if there are no other options than hiding or exposing. There is danger everywhere for her, no shelter, no protection.

Nada qué ver. Nothing to see.
—Patricia J. Williams

My concern here is with what happens in different places during the same moments in time, and with how these things (events, people, processes) occupy wildly divergent spaces in our imagination and political agendas. I intend to demonstrate the connectedness of these places. Certain spaces (legal, physical, social, and historical) count only if what happens there counts; what happens counts only if who it is happening to counts; and who counts involves the social expression of race and gender. In short, this paper is about race, gender, and space.

My argument is twofold. I claim that race and gender exclusions construct space in ways that takes up racial and sexual hierarchies. I also suggest that our era of globalization brings a new level of violence to these spaces in a manner that binds distant places to each other. It is through the relationship of race and gender difference to global spaces that we can apprehend the simultaneity of this violence. I pursue this argument through a discussion of two distanced spaces, U.S. inner cities and the borderlands of the U.S.-Mexico frontier. In these distinct spaces I look at forces that delimit and violate working people’s lives. In this regard, urban gentrification and restructuring, and the industrialization of the borderlands, respectively, have introduced a new form of spatial violence to the inner city and to the borderlands. I am particularly concerned with implicating the state for its role in spatial violence: the globalizing of the political economy will reveal the centrality of the state and draw out the simultaneity of violent spaces in globalization.

In making these claims, I am concerned with understanding what is happening in the global political economy at the end of the millennium. Despite its daily invocation, “globalization” remains elusive as a description of what people are experiencing in their daily lives. The
emphasis in popular globalization discourse on new technologies and breaking down barriers—"where do you want to go today?" asks Microsoft—does not speak to the massive displacement from viable employment and educational opportunities that poor and working-class people of color are experiencing in cities across this country. The violence and poverty people endure or succumb to in places like Juárez, México, across the border from El Paso, Texas and home to thousands of maquiladoras, the low-wage manufacturing plants owned by multinational corporations which are integral pieces in the global economy, is nowhere acknowledged in the rhetoric of “free trade” and “border liberalization.” Moreover, globalization discourse is silent with regards to the ways in which race and gender discrimination is extended through the global political economy. The rhetoric of crossing borders and bringing people together covers for what is actually a process dependent upon the differentiation and subordination of women and people of color.

Despite these constant omissions, people are living out globalization, and while all of us are affected to different degrees, my concern here is with those people on whose backs the global political economy is built. It is my contention that we can better understand the connectedness between U.S. urban locations and cities such as Juárez through an analysis of the race and gender uneven development in global capitalism grounded in the physical spaces where capitalism touches down—or vigorously circumnavigates, as the case sometimes may be.

Any critique of global spaces must be grounded in an analysis of racial and sexual formation. To understand what is meant by urban restructuring, we need to look at cities (in the U.S., México, and elsewhere) as spaces simultaneously formed by and the bearers of competing and coexistent constructions of race and racism. Likewise, the process of global commodity production, whether it be services or manufactured goods, is spatially influenced through a racism that constructs the racial division of labor. These processes, inaccurately described through the binary expression of the “global” and the “local,” are interdependent and need to be seen simultaneously. At the same time, a focus on place shows that globalization relies as heavily on built infrastructure as did the economic transformations during industrialization. The capability for global production needs to be produced somewhere; we can better understand globalization, therefore, by looking at the specific places where the economy materializes through concrete processes. I suggest, then, that we can apprehend the violence of global spaces through a critical lens of simultaneity that focuses on the ways in which race and gender processes interface through the built environment.