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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9nh0t54j>

### Journal

Critical Sociology, 30(1)

### ISSN

0896-9205

### Author

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### Publication Date

2004

### DOI

10.1163/156916304322981677

Peer reviewed

# From Gender as Object to Gender as Verb: Rethinking how Global Restructuring Happens\*

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## ABSTRACT

Global restructuring is a gendered process. In transnational production, the creation and allocation of labor power is organized around and in terms of tropes of gendered personhood, and this has consequences for the way production works in general, above and beyond its implications for workers themselves. The paper explores this process through narrating the evolution of a local labor market in Mexico's export-processing (maquila) industry. In so doing, the account reveals globalization to be less linear, obdurate and inevitable than many theories suggest. In this context, managers' gendered commitments, desires and understandings prove to be literally counterproductive, undermining industry-wide shop-floor control.

KEY WORDS: gender, labor markets, globalization, Mexico, maquiladora, work, assembly, women.

It has been clear for some time that global restructuring processes integrate women and men in distinct ways and that young women are preferentially hired to assemble the products which flow from third world to first. For at least two decades, scholars have struggled over the impact of

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\* The research upon which this paper is based was done during my affiliation with El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) in Juárez and was funded by the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad and the OAS Regular Training Program Fellowships. My thanks to all.

these processes on women's overall wellbeing (Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983; Lim 1983; Wolf 1990; Pearson 1991; Gibson-Graham 1996) and explored their impact on the situation of export processing workers overall (Froebel et al. 1980; Standing 1989; Sklair 1993). These are, of course, significant issues. However it is time to flip the question: to ask not how global processes affect "women," or even "men," but how gendered understandings, assumptions and subjectivities structure global production itself. Thus, in the following pages I will explore the consequences for global restructuring of its gendered form.

There has been no shortage of scholars looking at the role of gender in globalization in recent years, but much of this work has focused on questions of consumption, citizenship and transnational identity (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Sassen 1998; Appadurai 1996). Here I want to look more closely at how the economic dynamics of global restructuring themselves happen in and through gendered tropes. More concretely, I will argue that managerial decisions about the legitimate, possible and desirable uses of labor are structured through their gendered senses of self, other and object. Decisions about what can conceivably be asked and expected of a worker are both enabled and limited by managers' sense of who workers are, and this sense is fully imbued with gendered understandings and assumptions. Thus, I claim that global restructuring is gendered not as a metaphor and not as an assertion about the dismal fate of women within it, although both these assessments would, in my view, be accurate. Instead, I am arguing that, within transnational production, the creation and allocation of labor power is organized around and in terms of tropes of gendered personhood, and this has consequences for the way production works in general, above and beyond its impact on gendered selves per se.

This exploration is part of a larger genre of feminist criticism which has emerged in recent years to challenge the ways in which "the left" (often figured through the work of David Harvey) has theorized globalization (Gibson-Graham 1996; Massey 1994; Freeman 2001; Bergeron 2001; Bhavnani et al. 2003). Feminist scholars working in this vein have noted these theorists' tenacious disregard, both of the contributions of feminist theory and of the empirical role of women (not to speak of gender!) in constituting global economic processes. They have gone on to delineate the consequences of these omissions for the picture these theorists present of globalization overall – arguing that such depictions make globalization appear to be far more linear, obdurate and inevitable than is in fact the case. Ultimately, they argue, such partial accounts are not only inaccurate, but function to undermine our capacity to imagine and thus to work for change.

In this essay, I aim to take their work a step further, laying out what such an alternate story about global “economic” processes might actually look like. Focusing on Mexico’s largest export-processing (*maquila*) labor market in Ciudad Juárez on the country’s northern border, I will trace the ways in which the notion that women are inherently malleable, supplementary earners-innately suited to the repetitive and tedious work characteristic of export-processing-actively shapes the on-the-ground work of transnational production, with contradictory effects for shop-floor control. Thus, I will follow the empirical process whereby gendered meanings and subjectivities-crystallized both in global conversations and in (often linked) local arenas of discussion-shape the embodiment, incarnation and development of transnational production on the ground. The narrative demonstrates not only that gendered meanings shape how transnational production is accomplished, but that the impact of this shaping is potentially contradictory, not only for women and men, but for capital itself. This in turn fruitfully disrupts images of the inexorably “efficient” drive of “rational managers” or “competitive markets.” Global restructuring is constituted and limited by the way those who make it see the world, and these ways of seeing may or may not be ultimately in the interests of capital as such.

The Juárez maquila industry is a particularly rich field in which to think about these issues because it makes visible not only **that** gender shapes export-processing labor markets, but **how** it does so. In this region, externally generated, globally extensive and historically tenacious narratives about “cheap, docile and dexterous” third world women workers have had the ironic consequence of producing precisely their opposite on the shop floor.<sup>1</sup> The city’s maquila managers, members of social networks that span the globe, entered the plants with deeply embedded expectations about the intrinsic “femininity” of “assembly” work. When the demand for feminine workers – that is workers who are as definitively cheap and malleable as they are sexed – produced a shortage of all these characteristics in the local labor market, these men – ongoing participants in larger transnational discussions – were unwilling and unable to shift frameworks. As a result, by the late eighties, women maquila workers were less and less “womanly” and men made up almost half of a labor force that continued to be understood and employed **as** women. All these contradictions make Juárez an ideal

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<sup>1</sup> See Lown (1990) for a historical analysis of women’s use as cheap labor in the first centuries of silk manufacture in Britain. See Benería and Roldán (1987), Milkman (1987), Safa (1986), Enloe (1989, especially Chapter 7), Pearson (1986), Gordon et al. (1982) for more general discussions of women’s use as cheap labor in early industrialization.

place in which to catch a glimpse of gendered tropes at work and see the complex and unpredictable ways in which they structure production.<sup>2</sup>

In looking at the omnipresence of young women in export-processing plants scattered across the third world, it is easy to assume that transnational assembly is feminized in the crudest sense – women’s social position outside the factory makes them the “right” labor force for plants dependent on cheap, malleable labor. The Juárez labor market’s idiosyncrasies make it possible to see the flaws in assuming social process from a demographic snapshot. It is not that “women” fit some autonomously created structure, but that what I call the trope of productive femininity shapes managers’ desires, expectations and plans, and thus shapes production itself. In this context, even in the absence of women, femininity continues to structure production. Thus, what the Juárez history makes visible is not only the impact of “globalization” on a particular group of women, although it does do this, but the impact of gendered tropes on the process of globalization overall.

### **Engendering an Export-Processing Labor Market**

When the program which established Mexico’s maquilas was put into place in 1965,<sup>3</sup> it was already framed in public, gendered rhetorics, although not those one might expect today. For decades, the U.S. government *bracero* program had imported Mexican men to work in the fields of the southwestern United States. Domestic pressures in the U.S. brought this to a halt in 1965, leaving both countries worried about the impact of 200,000 returning – and jobless – *braceros* on Mexico’s border states (Baird and McCaughan 1979; Van Waas 1981). The guarantee of tax-free entree into the U.S. for the products of Mexican export-processing factories was intended to alleviate this problem by encouraging the establishment of businesses that could hire returning male farmworkers. On the face of it, the program was a phenomenal success. In 1975, a decade after it was established, maquilas employed more than 67,000 workers (INEGI 1990), almost entirely at the border. By early 1992, when I began my research in the area, they provided work for seven and a half times that number

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<sup>2</sup> I am not arguing here that the Juárez labor market is “typical” of all export-processing labor markets. To the contrary, it is precisely in understanding what makes it unusual that it becomes an instructive case study, as its very idiosyncrasies illuminate processes that otherwise might remain opaque. Where managers’ gendered expectations are easily put into practice, the difference between hiring women and feminizing jobs is obscured, hence the social process whereby the market itself is engendered becomes difficult to see. In the case of Juárez, the disruptions created by discursively produced labor “shortages” make gender’s operations visible.

<sup>3</sup> The Border Industrialization Program (BIP).

(INEGI 1996). Unfortunately for this scheme however, the jobs were not going to returning *braceros*; in fact they were not going to men at all. From the outset, young women made up over eighty percent of maquila workers (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Carrillo and Hernández 1982). Investors, while increasingly willing to participate in the program as the years progressed, had arrived with their own ideas about whom to hire.

By the time the maquila program was established, free trade zones were already operating in East Asia, explicitly advertising the virtues of their feminine labor force.<sup>4</sup> Managers coming into Mexico had visited or heard reports of these East Asian plants and took for granted that they would hire women (Pearson 1991). A 1966 report by the consulting firm Arthur D. Little (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Carrillo and Hernández 1982; Van Waas 1982), oft-cited as a “smoking gun” in discussions of the exploitative dimensions of maquila hiring practices, explicitly suggested hiring women in order to increase the number of potential workers and thereby increase employer leverage. More telling, however, is an early treatise for prospective maquiladora investors which simply assumed the workforce would be female and went on to enumerate Mexican women’s many attractions: “From their earlier conditioning, they show respect and obedience to persons in authority, especially men. The women follow orders willingly. . .” (Baerresen 1971: 36). This set of assumptions operated on the shop floor as well as in public relations. In a particularly fascinating example of this managerial common sense in the program’s early years, we find managers looking to hire gay men when women were unavailable. Thus, when women were still prohibited from doing night-work, Van Waas reports a manager requesting gay men “as queer and effeminate as possible,” commenting, “if I can’t have women, I’ll get as close to them as I can” (Van Waas 1981: 346). Similarly, in another local plant, a manager with a long history in the industry describes his experience supervising “the pink line.” “They worked well, like women. It was very famous, that line.”

Such rhetorics were particularly believable in a labor market such as that faced by the maquilas in the early years. In response to ads seeking “*damitas*,” unemployed young women flocked enthusiastically to maquila jobs. A woman who managed to get work in one of the first plants

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<sup>4</sup>The reason for women’s initial predominance in East Asian assembly work is the subject of an extensive literature. Analysts generally attribute it to women’s “cheapness” and attribute this in turn to their position in the family (Safa 1986; Pearson 1991; Standing 1989). Melissa Lutz focuses instead on the circulation of images of women’s docility. Although I am not attempting to explain this larger historical phenomenon here, the data suggest that such explanations are less distinct than they appear, and that women’s disproportionate share of low-wage assembly is due to the way in which their familial situation is understood, used and reconstructed by capitalist processes.

recalled stringent entrance requirements, the thrill of entrance given the “gigantic line of people trying to enter,” and the amazing sensation of being paid in dollars without having to cross the border.<sup>5</sup> In 1979, a union spokesman still described the many “little ladies” who “aspired” to work in the maquilas, adding that the quantity of female labor in the area was “inexhaustible.”<sup>6</sup> In the same period, the manager of a General Electric plant in Juárez explained at a conference that, given the twenty-five percent unemployment rate, they were able to hire two or three of every twenty-five applicants (Baird and McCaughan 1979: 146-7).

In the early eighties however, the industry romance with its workers began to fade. The U.S. economy went into a downward spiral, and maquila workers immediately began to feel the effects, not only in decreased hiring, but in mass layoffs and enforced “time off.” After years of double-digit growth, the number of workers employed by the plants in Juárez fell by six percent between 1981 and 1982. By 1982, formerly “docile” workers were losing patience. The years 1981 to 1983 saw a burst of worker “demands” against their employers before the labor board (the Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje) (Carrillo 1985). Local papers reported in June 1982 that there had already been more formal strike threats in six months than there had ever been before in a full year – .8 per maquila.<sup>7</sup>

In 1980 and 1981, two strikes became the focus of dramatic media coverage. In mid-1980, a conflict between two unions<sup>8</sup> erupted at “Andromex,”<sup>9</sup> and for seven months, the public was treated to the sight of women workers yelling at their bosses, barricading themselves into the

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with ex-worker. One of Iglesias’ (1985) interviewees also discusses the maquilas as an alternative to working illegally on the other side of the border and also comments on the significance of being paid in dollars for this decision. The practice of paying in dollars ended as the utility of peso devaluations became clear to maquila investors after the peso devaluation of the late seventies.

<sup>6</sup> *El Fronterizo*, June 13, 1979. All newspaper articles cited here dated between 1974 and 1985 come from the COMO archives.

<sup>7</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, June 3, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Through the mid-eighties, the Juárez maquila industry was the scene of union conflicts over who would represent workers. Conflicts took place both between the two largest national unions, the CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers) and the CROC (Regional Confederation of Workers and Peasants), and between them and the CRT (Revolutionary Confederation of Workers), the smallest of the three. The conflict at Andromex was between the CTM and one of its recently ousted leaders. He had established a local CRT branch and was attempting to reinsert himself into the Juárez union scene in this era by taking over CTM contracts. Roughly a third of Juárez maquilas were unionized in 1987 (Carrillo and Ramírez 1990). In those that were unionized, workers generally saw little benefit, as all three union locals operated as company unions.

<sup>9</sup> Company names used here are pseudonyms.

plant and forcefully asserting their right to be heard. The following year, at “Fashionmex,” workers legitimately concerned that the company would close down without paying the legally required worker indemnizations took their complaints to local authorities, to the streets and to the media. They marched through downtown handing out leaflets calling “For the union of all maquila workers!!” and forcibly stopped a truck full of company products from leaving the city before workers were paid.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, a newly radicalized COMO (Center for the Orientation of Women Workers)<sup>11</sup> weighed in on the side of “working women” in general, supporting both the Fashionmex and Andromex struggles and loudly proclaiming working women’s right to self-determination.

The maquilas responded to these challenges either by leaving town<sup>12</sup> – or more commonly by threatening to do so – or with highly-publicized blacklists intended to keep out “conflictive people.”<sup>13</sup> Although they complained loudly of worker intransigence, they showed no sign of reevaluating the gendering of their hiring strategies.

Amid this charged context, 1982 brought a drastic peso devaluation – the first of a series that would follow over the upcoming decade. Between 1981 and 1982, the dollar value of the peso was cut in half, and average maquila wages fell from US\$234.30 weekly to US\$105.60 (Jiménez 1989: 417). The following year, maquila employment in Juárez jumped twenty-six percent. Nineteen-eighty-six and 1987 saw even more dramatic devaluations. By the end of the decade, in dollar terms the peso was worth a mere fraction of its value at the outset of the maquila program (Sklair 1993: 40), and maquila employment in Juárez had tripled (INEGI 1991 and 1996).

The soaring demand for workers had immediate consequences. In December 1982, the first sarcastic headline appeared: “Two companies seek 120 workers; but . . . the CROC<sup>14</sup> ‘doesn’t have anyone free.’”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed chronology of the conflict at Fashionmex as seen by COMO, see Beatriz Vera (n.d.). For an analysis of the “contract” see de la Rosa Hickerson (1979). Also see Carrillo and Hernandez (1985), pp. 158-164.

<sup>11</sup> For detailed histories of COMO, see Young and Vera (1984), Yudelman (1987), Kopinak (1989) and Peña (1997).

<sup>12</sup> Fashionmex, for instance, did ultimately flee the city, typically leaving wages unpaid.

<sup>13</sup> *El Correo*, Nov. 17, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> In the first decades of the maquiladora industry, workers seeking maquila jobs could go to the union hiring halls, from which they were sent to maquilas that requested workers. This system fell apart as the demand for workers outstripped supply. Until 1982, union complaints about insufficient employment were a fixture of Juárez public discussion, hence this headline’s sarcastic tone.

<sup>15</sup> *El Universal*, Dec. 22, 1982.



Four months and a half-dozen articles later, the tone was anything but sarcastic. “Marked absence of female labor for the maquiladoras: In the unions controlled by the CROC they need 500 young people; Yesterday only one hundred showed up.”<sup>16</sup> By May the tone was frankly hysterical: “‘DEFICIT’ OF LABOR FOR THE MAQUILADORAS: With Sound Systems They Look for Workers in the Shantytowns.”<sup>17</sup> The union leader who only four years earlier had claimed that the female labor force was “inexhaustible” now announced that it was “obvious that all the women of Ciudad Juárez are already employed”<sup>18</sup> and began suggesting importing labor from rural areas further south.<sup>19</sup> Personnel managers who worked during the early eighties communicate the mood of their departments at the time through the black humor of the period: “In personnel in those days, all we needed was a mirror. If they were breathing, they were hired”; or “We’d hire anyone with ten fingers. . .”<sup>20</sup>

Despite the sudden scarcity of young women workers willing to work at maquila salaries, after its initial collapse, pay stagnated (Jiménez 1989: 422-3; Sklair 1993: 72), with real wages falling throughout a decade legendary among managers for the severity of its “labor shortages” (see Rosenbaum 1994; Santiago and Almada 1991). In 1983, the plants began offering benefits such as free lunches, transportation to and from work and credits at nearby chain stores, but base pay remained low.<sup>21</sup> Industry representatives made much of the external factors which prevented them from raising wages, including pressures from the Mexican state, which was concerned with protecting international competitiveness,<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *El Universal*, April 20, 1983.

<sup>17</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, May 24, 1983.

<sup>18</sup> *El Universal*, April 6, 1983.

<sup>19</sup> *El Universal*, April 20, 1983 and *El Fronterizo*, July 27, 1983. In fact, some companies did eventually seek out and hire women workers from nearby villages to avoid hiring men (see *El Universal*, June 18, 1983). As far as I can ascertain however, no one ever traveled to the southern states to import migrant laborers.

<sup>20</sup> Managerial interviews, 1992-93.

<sup>21</sup> Catanzarite and Strober (1993). *El Universal*, April 11 and February 17, 1984. Managerial interviews.

<sup>22</sup> In the Nov. 3, 1983 *El Universal*, AMAC (the maquiladora industry association) complained publicly that the state wouldn’t permit the maquiladora industry to raise wages. Shaiken (1994, p. 58) reports similar pressures on the plants he studies. Nonetheless, industry complaints about this pressure are somewhat disingenuous, as they frequently note that labor is cheaper everywhere when pushing to keep local wages down. For instance, Baird and McCaughan (1979, pp. 144-6) and Van Waas (1981) describe the tremendous (if unsuccessful) maquila campaign to lower the minimum wage in the inflationary mid-seventies and their plants explicit references to “the loss of international competitiveness” of the BIP” (Van Waas, p. 245) in the service of this goal. Sklair (1993, p. 179) argues that

and pressures from domestic capital, unable to afford wage inflation computed in dollars.<sup>23</sup> However, local maquila management was also limited by the image of assembly labor elaborated in home offices and accepted as common sense in their border outposts, which took the linked characteristics of femininity, supplementary earners and extreme cheapness as defining features of appropriate export-processing labor.<sup>24</sup> Thus, discussion of raises in pesos, even if their costs were constant in dollars, remained taboo, even as labor shortages and turnover played havoc with productivity on the line. Instead, in interviews, managers frequently referenced the (feminine) “irrationality” of workers, who, they said, were not that focused on money, and thus could be assuaged by benefits and shows of appreciation, but not by wage increases.

As a result of these transnationally generated assumptions about who assembly workers should be, the maquilas in 1984 paid less than half what they had just a few years earlier and far less than comparable national industries in Mexico City (Jiménez 1989: 424). Although by 1988, even the industry’s English-language newsletter was remarking that “earning \$3.50 or less for a full day’s work simply doesn’t seem attractive to many people,”<sup>25</sup> managers in plants where I did fieldwork in the early nineties continued to reassure themselves about the ethics and efficacy of paying low wages with ongoing references the fact that these were appropriately women’s jobs (see Salzinger 2003, Chapter 7).

Managerial bromides notwithstanding, as the value of maquila wages fell, women workers who had become reliant on higher salaries indeed began to look elsewhere. Local newspapers reported them moving into better-paying “men’s jobs”<sup>26</sup> and crossing the border to earn dollars.<sup>27</sup> It was this set of decisions which, in tandem with management’s inflexibility on wages, produced the “shortage” so dramatically presented in personnel department accounts. This was occasionally recognized at the time. In May 1988, the industry newsletter tartly lectured its readers. “Many companies believe that (because of) the large number of maquila plants that have been started in the last few years . . . there aren’t enough people to go around. . .

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the reasons for low maquila wages are less byzantine than the industry claims, and that ultimately the maquilas have simply found turnover to be cheaper than wage increases.

<sup>23</sup> In an industry conference in 1990, industry representatives claimed that they did not raise base salaries so as not to undercut other economic sectors in the city (*El Diario de Juárez*, March 28, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Home offices generally insist that their third-world outposts pay “prevailing wages” (managerial interviews). Shaiken (1994, p. 58) also reports such requirements.

<sup>25</sup> *Twin Plant News* 3:10, May 1988.

<sup>26</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, July 2, 1985; *El Diario de Juárez*, June 8, 1986.

<sup>27</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, April 20, 1988.

We would like to point out . . . that the number of ‘employable’ operators is still larger than the number of vacancies.”<sup>28</sup>

Transnational managers expected “feminine” workers. However cheapness and pliancy are at least in part market products, and tight labor markets rarely produce them. Thus, despite maquila managers’ experience of the grueling labor shortage of the eighties as something like a natural disaster, it was substantially of their own making. In defining the paradigmatic maquila worker as simultaneously cheap, female and docile, they created a market which eventually undercut the conditions of existence for such a creature. Many young women were still willing to work in the plants of course, but there were no longer enough of them to run the assembly lines without other workers as well. Ultimately the demand for cheapness made some shift in the demographics of maquila assembly lines inevitable.

The rigidity of transnational management’s image of an appropriate maquila worker not only created a bona fide labor shortage, but it also eroded the “docility” of those women workers who were available. The alarmism of the early eighties notwithstanding, maquila lines did not come to a halt for lack of workers. However, in the context of high labor demand, idiosyncratic benefit packages virtually invited workers to shop around. Thus, although maquila wage policies did not stop production, they did produce turnover.<sup>29</sup> In February 1984, the head of AMAC (the maquiladora industry association) said as much when he “dismissed the version that there is a labor shortage on our border, what is going on in these moments . . . is that there are seven thousand unstable workers . . . [who] go from one industry to another to where it’s most convenient that they offer their services, and this is reflected in the plants that don’t bring their benefits up to the level of their competitors.”<sup>30</sup>

Women’s growing leverage in the labor market produced a similar phenomenon on the line, and after years of calling the shots, managers found themselves at a disadvantage. A supervisor who had been a worker in the seventies lamented the new order: “In the beginning it was marvelous, when the maquilas started, because you looked out for your work, you

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<sup>28</sup> *Twin Plant News* 3:10, May 1988, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Shaiken (1990, p. 99) reports that although maquilas “would clearly like to reduce turnover, they have structured work in a way where transience in the production work force has a minimal negative impact.” The highly fragmented labor process to which he is referring here is visible throughout the maquilas. Just as complaints about labor shortages must be understood within the context of the decision not to raise wages, so complaints about turnover must be understood within the of context of the decision not to introduce seniority systems.

<sup>30</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, Feb. 5, 1984.

knew there were 200,000 more willing to do it.”<sup>31</sup> This comment, and others like it, were encapsulated in tropes that, like the labor shortage jokes, were repeated throughout the interviews I conducted with personnel managers who had been in the industry during this period:<sup>32</sup> “They always knew they could get work on the other side of the street”; or “All a supervisor needed to do was look at her crosswise and she was out the door.” Newspaper reports of the period took the same exasperated tone. Early in 1983, one complained: “Due to the current scarcity of women workers in the maquiladoras . . . the women change employment when they feel like it. . . .”<sup>33</sup> A year later, the same paper reported:

Yesterday, maquila operators were found enjoying the labor shortage facing the plants; they don’t worry about arriving early or being fired. At the Juárez Monument, Guadalupe Cárdenas and Laura Lozano were interviewed when they commented that they were already late; both said that, because of the labor shortage, they couldn’t fire them, and that’s the way it is, because the one thing there’s plenty of is work in all the factories.<sup>34</sup>

Women workers’ “bad behavior” was directed at new male workers as well as at their bosses. A frustrated union boss complained that the few men who entered the plants were forced out by catcalling women coworkers, who were gleefully taking advantage of their unusual numerical superiority.<sup>35</sup>

On the heels of women workers’ increasing assertiveness, a few cracks in the maquila managers’ implacable image of the “docile woman worker” emerged in the spring of 1983. Fresh from a year of shop-floor militancy, and in the midst of soaring male unemployment rates,<sup>36</sup> Andromex’s new Mexican plant manager was among the first to recognize that “docile” was as scarce as “female” in its current workforce, and to announce that he was hiring men.<sup>37</sup> By March of 1983, a few others were quietly following, although they were reluctant to admit publicly that they were breaking with tradition. The head of the CROC announced that several companies the union worked with “had seen themselves obliged to hire men.” He refused to name them, commenting that if he did so “afterwards they wouldn’t hire

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<sup>31</sup> “Panoptimex” supervisor, 1992.

<sup>32</sup> Managerial interviews, 1992-1993.

<sup>33</sup> *El Universal*, Nov. 10, 1983.

<sup>34</sup> *El Universal*, Feb. 17, 1984.

<sup>35</sup> *El Fronterizo*, Aug. 31, 1983. Senior women workers in Andromex also told me they had teased new male workers during this period.

<sup>36</sup> On Sept. 5, 1983, in the middle of the maquila “labor shortage,” Banamex announced that unemployment was soaring in the city as a whole (*El Fronterizo*).

<sup>37</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, June 11, 1983.

them anymore.”<sup>38</sup> Obviously, these companies were not the only ones. In June, men made up three of every five workers hired,<sup>39</sup> although they would not make up this high a percentage of the total workforce until the end of the decade.

Despite the burst of men hired in 1983, management remained skeptical about the utility of men for assembly work. In a typical statement from the first uptick in hiring men, the union boss responsible for hiring for a group of maquilas commented:

The hiring of men is done with more rigorous selective criteria, given that they are more disobedient, irresponsible and prone to absences; distressingly, in Juárez, the men already got used to not working.<sup>40</sup>

Newspaper ads from the first half of the decade reflected this attitude, continuing to request women.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, by the end of the eighties, industry representatives were frantic. Turnover was well over a hundred percent annually,<sup>42</sup> and industry complaints about shortages and increasing training costs had reached a fever pitch.<sup>43</sup> Still focused on getting their hands on femininity, however embodied, a few plants hired transvestites. One manager recalled, “The need for people was so great that we had men who walked around the plant dressed as women.” Maquilas began paying workers to bring in friends,<sup>44</sup> established “gentleman’s agreements” not to hire workers who had left previous jobs “without clear reasons,”<sup>45</sup> and even considered setting a single salary and benefit structure for the industry as a whole.<sup>46</sup> In this context, they began to publicly discuss broadening their worker profile for the first time, acknowledging the possibility of hiring men, albeit in the most disrespectful terms. Their first public statements on the subject coincided with assessments of the feasibility of contracting senior citizens and the handicapped,<sup>47</sup> and although discussions of these

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<sup>38</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, March 30, 1983.

<sup>39</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, Aug. 23, 1983.

<sup>40</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, March 30, 1983.

<sup>41</sup> Review of COMO archives.

<sup>42</sup> By 1989, AMAC statistics were showing an average of a hundred and forty-four percent turnover annually AMAC (1989).

<sup>43</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, September 14, 1987; *El Diario de Juárez*, January 25, 1988; *El Diario de Juárez*, June 17, 1989; *El Diario de Juárez*, March 28, 1990; *El Diario de Juárez*, October 20, 1990.

<sup>44</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, April 1, 1989; *El Diario de Juárez*, November 29, 1989.

<sup>45</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, September 18, 1990.

<sup>46</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, October 11, 1990.

<sup>47</sup> Not surprisingly, there is little evidence that either group was ever hired in large numbers.

latter two groups were pitched in the most self congratulatory terms,<sup>48</sup> the possibility of hiring men was consistently framed as a compromise. Although women are “more careful and responsible,” commented the head of AMAC in 1988, men had also been found “acceptable.”<sup>49</sup>

Not surprisingly, men responding to these mixed messages were slow to enter maquila doors. In the spring of 1983, amid reports of the first labor crisis in the maquilas, their pace drew the ire of the editors of a local paper. A picture of men sitting under the trees was glossed by the caption: “Despite the many maquiladora factory announcements soliciting male workers, it seems that the *juarenses* have declared war against work and prefer to face the heat in the shade of a tree.”<sup>50</sup> In 1988, the head of AMAC reiterated these complaints, commenting that, “despite the invitations to take positions, there are very few (men) who are interested in working.” Managerial ambivalence and male workers’ responses meant that the proportion of women in the maquila workforce did not go into free fall. Rather, between 1982 and the end of the decade, the percentage of men increased between two and six percent yearly. It was not until 1988, in the third year of over ten percent growth in the city’s maquiladora workforce, that there was finally a surge of advertisements directed at men as well as women.<sup>51</sup> Not until the end of the decade did men constitute a stable forty-five percent of the industry’s direct local workforce, and even then, on the great majority of shop floors, neither the language, the labor control practices nor the pay schemes implemented by management acknowledged the shift.<sup>52</sup> Despite the thousands of men working in the maquilas, there was still no trope, no structure of meaning, within which “male maquila worker” made sense. At nearly fifty percent, they remained the ubiquitous exception.

As cheap, docile and female became an increasingly difficult combination to find among flesh-and-blood job applicants, one might have expected that the tenacious feminization of maquila work would erode. As thousands of men filled shop floors with no noticeable impact on industry productivity, this would appear foreordained. However, this was not the case.<sup>53</sup> The trope of productive femininity, nourished by ongoing links to

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<sup>48</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, May 27, 1989; *El Diario de Juárez*, November 29, 1989; *El Diario de Juárez*, August 27, 1990.

<sup>49</sup> *El Diario de Juárez*, May 14, 1988.

<sup>50</sup> *El Fronterizo*, May 31, 1983.

<sup>51</sup> Review of *El Diario de Juárez* archives.

<sup>52</sup> INEGI, 1991. These levels remained stable throughout the years of my fieldwork in the industry (INEGI 1996).

<sup>53</sup> Catanzarite and Strober (1993) assert that maquila work no longer was feminized by the late-eighties. My own research shows no support for this conclusion. In interviews,

a larger transnational imaginary, remained in place. In the fantasy world of “offshore production,” docile women continue to hold the microscope and thread the needle. Maquila managers, ongoing participants in a larger, transnational system of meanings and taken-for-granted, continued to cite the “maquila-grade female”<sup>54</sup> as a standard against which to measure maquila labor. As a result, for the most part men were hired, but marked upon entry as lacking, sometimes with disastrous consequences for managerial control.<sup>55</sup>

Managers facing this situation – simultaneously constrained by transnational frameworks and local recalcitrance – implemented a variety of shop-floor compromises and innovations. Some continued to insist on women workers, importing them from rural areas outside the city at extra cost or even relocating further from the border. A minority consciously shifted both demographics and shop-floor expectations, reframing maquila jobs as “men’s work” by changing labor control mechanisms on the job floor and even marginally improving wages. And many faced ongoing turnover and shop-floor disruption, as neither prized women (with other options) nor insulted men (never addressed in terms they could accept on the shop floor) made for ideal workers.<sup>56</sup> However engaged, these problems were not inherent in the fact of production in Juárez. They were produced by the gendered structure of the labor market itself. Women were no longer the only ones at work in the Juárez maquilas, but for the most part, femininity continued its contradictory reign.

The evolution and development of the Juárez maquila industry has been shaped by a myriad of understandings and assumptions-frameworks constituted in many locales and invoked internally in the service of distinctive strategies. Gender is clearly not the only, or even necessarily the primary, referent here. Nonetheless, the narrative above suggests the crucial role of the trope of productive femininity in this context – evoking and, perhaps more crucially for this historical period, stabilizing, a particular set of pay, hiring and labor control practices, with consequences not only for workers, but for the productivity and efficiency of the industry itself.

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managers constantly expressed their preference for women workers, generally referencing women’s purportedly greater patience, tolerance for boredom and shop-floor malleability.

<sup>54</sup> Sklair (1993, p. 177) reports that this phrase was used by a speaker in an industry seminar in 1984 who discussed the scarcity of “maquila-grade females.”

<sup>55</sup> Andromex was to become a fascinating and suggestive exception to this pattern (see Salzinger 2003).

<sup>56</sup> See Salzinger (2003) for ethnographic accounts of these varying shop-floor responses and of the role of gender in producing export-processing work and workers in the arena of production itself.

### **Opening Accounts**

So, why might this matter? Gendered meanings and selves organize and structure the development of transnational production. Why should we care? What are the implications of this argument for how we might reckon with what is and imagine possibilities for change?

Many accounts of global restructuring – including those written by feminists – picture globalization as a whirlwind descending upon us. In such an image, the local is always-already constituted, never acting, always acted upon. In the same narrative, the global (often conflated with “capitalism” itself) bears down inexorably: linear, focused, with a logic of its own.<sup>57</sup> Despite the grim seductions of such an image, the narrative above suggests such stories are partial and misleading. The managers I describe above certainly make “rational” and “efficient” decisions in their own experience. However, seen outside their (empirically erroneous) assumption that “woman” is a fixed subject and therefore a highly specific kind of labor, their strategies appear to be neither of those things. Instead, weighed down by a set of taken-for-granted assumptions about gender, about legitimate manliness as well as womanliness, they make choices which directly produce the labor shortages and chaotic shop floors which go on to plague their daily work lives.

I am not suggesting here that capitalism has no logics of its own, simply that the relationship between those logics and what actually happens on the ground may be more tenuous than such naming suggests. Actors’ on-the-ground intentions and strategies are necessarily framed, grasped and practiced through particular lenses. Gender of course is only one among many of these, but the history of “cheap labor” makes it a highly salient one in this context. Each optic distinguishes what is possible, desirable, and legitimate from what is not, thus shaping the organization of production itself. Among other things, this illuminates one of the many ways in which managers’ considered decisions may undermine as well as support their conscious intentions. Certainly, in Juárez, the attempt to employ what was understood to be women’s natural docility fractured on the shoals of the new gendered selves these very strategies had created.

It is compelling to picture global restructuring as an unyielding, super-human force, remaking everything in its path for its own purposes. Part of what makes this narrative so credible is that it matches individual experience as well as theory. Nonetheless, to read this experience back into explanation is a mistake. The fact that no one of us can shift history alone does not mean that it is created by “forces” that lie outside the

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<sup>57</sup> This is beautifully captured by J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996) in her analysis of globalization as a “rape script.”



processes of meaning and subject-making we engage in on a daily basis. If this is the case however, then it is important analytic work to delineate how this works, and thus to make concrete how ways of seeing are linked to what is made and thus to what enables and constrains us in the next iteration. In this context, gender's links to our conscious sense of self make it particularly helpful to us as analysts, as its insistent presence disrupts too-elegant images of capitalism's relentless linearity.

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