The Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women, and Maquiladoras

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Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image therefore a dream image. Such an image is presented by the pure commodity: as fetish. Such an image are the arcades, which are both house and stars. Such an image is the prostitute, who is saleswoman and wares in one. —Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*

Over a period of five years in the late 1990s, almost two hundred women were found murdered and dumped along the desert fringes of the Mexican industrial city of Ciudad Juárez.[1] On 21 March 1999, another young woman was found half-buried in the desert and bearing signs of rape and torture. Most of these women ranged in age from their teens to their thirties, and many worked in the export-processing maquila factories that have been operating in Mexico for more than three decades.[2] As international and national attention occasionally turned to these brutal murders, a number of stories emerged to explain the troubling phenomenon.

DIALECTICAL SUSPENSION

In this essay, I examine the image of the Mexican woman formed within these narratives with Walter Benjamin's notion of a dialectical image.[3] The dialectical image is one whose apparent stillness obscures the tensions that actually hold it in suspension. It is a caesura forged by clashing forces. With this dialectical image in mind, I see the Mexican woman depicted in the murder narratives as a life stilled by the discord of value pitted against waste. I focus on the narrative image of her, rather than on the lives of the murder victims, to reveal the intimate connection binding these stilled lives to the reproduction of value in the maquiladoras located in Ciudad Juárez. Through a comparison of a

maquiladora narrative of categorical disavowal of responsibility for the violence with another maquila narrative explaining the mundane problem of labor turnover, the Mexican woman freezes as a subject stilled by the tensions linking the two tales.

In the tale of turnover that is told by maquila administrators, the Mexican woman takes shape in the model of variable capital whose worth fluctuates from a status of value to one of waste. Variable capital refers to the labor power—what the worker provides in exchange for wages—that produces a value in excess to itself (see Harvey 1982). The excess coalesces into surplus value. Marx says that labor power is a form of variable capital since it is worth less than the value of what it produces. In the turnover story, the value of the Mexican woman's labor power declines over time even as her labor provides value to the firm. Furthermore, this deterioration produces its own kind of value as she furnishes a necessary flow of temporary labor. Her labor power is subsequently worth less than the value of her labor in a number of ways, given that her labor is valuable also for its inevitable absence from the labor process. Where the maquila spokespeople deny any similarity between the women described in the tale of turnover and those described in the stories absolving the maquilas of any responsibility in their murders, I endeavor here to locate the connections.

"Turnover" refers to the coming and going of workers into and out of jobs, and it often comes up during interviews in relation to the problem of worker unreliability. Industry analysts and administrators cite turnover as an impediment to a complete transformation of the maquila sector from a low-skilled and labor-intensive industry to one with more sophisticated procedures staffed by highly skilled workers (see Villalobos, Beruvides, and Hutchinson 1997). Workers who turn over, that is, who do not demonstrate job loyalty, are not good prospects for the training necessary for creating a skilled base. This form of variable capital is therefore the temporary kind. The turnover problem, however, has not completely inhibited the development of a higher technological base in the maquilas because some workers are not of the turnover variety. Training programs, combined with an emphasis on inculcating loyalty among workers, have created a two-tiered system within maquila firms for distinguishing between the "untrainable" and "trainable" workers. Gender is a critical marker for differentiating between these worker brands.

Benjamin (1969) provides a good point of departure for this feminist interrogation into one of Marx's (1977: 481) staple concerns: the dehumanizing process behind forming variable capital, which, he writes, "converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity." Through the image of dialectical stillness, Benjamin helps explain how this process involves not only the creation of value at the worker's expense but also a value that is valorized only insofar as it is counterposed to what it is not: waste. The kinship between discourse and materiality is key. In the maquilas, managers depict women as untrainable laborers; Mexican women represent the workers of declining value since their intrinsic value never appreciates into skill but instead dissipates over time. Their value is used up, not enhanced. Consequently, the Mexican woman personifies waste in the making, as the materials of her body gain shape through the discourses that explain how she is untrainable, unskillable, and always a temporary worker.[4]

Meanwhile, her antithesis—the masculine subject—emerges as the emblem of that other kind of variable capital whose value appreciates over time. He is the trainable and potentially skilled employee who will support the high-tech transformation of the maquila sector into the twenty-first century. He maintains his value as he changes and develops in a variety of ways. She, however, is stuck in the endless loop of her decline. Her life is stilled as her departure from the workplace represents the corporate death that results logically from her demise, since at some point the accumulation of the waste within her will offset the value of her labor. And after she leaves one factory, she typically enters another and begins anew the debilitating journey of labor turnover.

The wasting of the Mexican woman, therefore, represents a value in and of itself to capital in at least two respects. First, she establishes the standard for recognizing the production of value in people and in things: Value appreciates in what is not her. Second, she incorporates flexibility into the labor supply through her turnover. To use Judith Butler's formulation, this process reveals how discourses of the subject are not confined to the nonmaterial realm or easily shunted off as the "merely cultural" (Butler 1997). Rather, and as I endeavor to show here, the managerial discourses of noninvolvement in the serial murders of young female employees is indeed linked to the materialization of turnover as a culturally driven and waste-ridden phenomenon attached to Mexican femininity. The link is the value that the wasting of the Mexi-

can woman — through both her literal and her corporate deaths — represents for those invested in the discourse of her as a cultural victim immune to any intervention.

In what follows, I begin by describing some of the stories commonly told to provide explanation for the murders. Then I present an analysis of the turnover narratives.

THE MURDER STORIES

Circulating through the media and by word of mouth — as onlookers try to determine if the murder victims were prostitutes, dutiful daughters, dedicated mothers, women leading "double lives," or responsible workers — is the question: "Was she a good girl?" The question points to the matter of her value as we wonder if she is really worthy of our concern.

When news of these murders first captured public attention in 1995, Francisco Barrio, then governor of the State of Chihuahua, raised this question when he advised parents to know where their daughters were at all times, especially at night. The implication was that "good girls" don't go out at night, and since most of these victims disappeared in the dark, they probably weren't good girls. The local police have regularly posed this issue when bereaved parties seek official assistance in locating their daughters, sisters, mothers, cousins, and family friends. The police frequently explain how common it is for women to lead "double lives" and ask the grieving and frightened family and friends to consider this possibility (Limas Hernández 1998). By day, she might appear the dutiful daughter, wife, mother, sister, and laborer, but by night she reveals her inner prostitute, slut, and barmaid. In other words, she might not be worth the worry.

Related to this story of excessive female heterosexuality is a "foreign serial killer" plot woven by the special prosecutor appointed to the case. In this tale, we hear of how these murders are far too brutal for a Mexican hand and resemble events more common to the country's northern neighbor. The idea here is that a suave foreigner appeals to a young woman's yen for sexual adventure, lures her into his car, and then murders her after having sex. On this theory, an Egyptian with U.S. resident status, working in the maquiladora industry, was arrested in 1996, but since then another hundred bodies have surfaced.

This version ties into the long-standing Mexican tradition of casting Ciudad Juárez as a city whose cultural values have been contaminated by greedy and liberal forces emanating from the United States (Tabuenca Córdoba 1995–96). Such was the narrative woven by a Spanish criminologist, José Parra Molina, contracted by Mexican officials in 1998 to examine the crimes. He surmised that Ciudad Juárez was experiencing a "social shock" due to an erosion of its "traditional values" resulting from contact with a "liberal" American society. Consequently, he concluded, you now "see in the maquiladora exits . . . the women workers seeking adventure without paying attention to the danger" (Orquiz 1998: 3C).[5] The logic internal to this narrative explains that exposure to the United States has eroded traditional Mexican values to such a degree that young women are offering themselves, through their impudent behavior, to their murderers. This criminologist, among others, suggested that these women and girls could also be walking into traps set by an international organ-harvesting ring that kills the victims for their organs, which are sold in the U.S. market. The problem here, according to this story, is a cultural one. In such a cultural climate, such murders are bound to happen, and thus, a cultural shift is required to "sanitize" the environment in which women along the border live and work. The cultural decline is found within the girls themselves. As the Spanish criminologist asked in reference to the discovery of a girl's body, "What was a thirteen-year-old girl doing out at night anyway?" Evidence of her presence outside her home in the nighttime does not prove her economic need or a city full of nighttime commuters. Rather, her presence in the night points toward a cultural decline within which her death, a form of absence, can be logically anticipated. Indeed, her absence ameliorates, to some degree, the cultural decline represented by her presence in the night since it takes her off the street for good. Her death is explained as a cultural corrective to the decimation of traditional values. As the Spanish criminologist said, these girls out at night are "like putting a caramel in the door of an elementary school." When somebody gobbles them up, like children with candy, at least the source of the tawdry temptation is destroyed.

I characterize this rendition as a "death by culture" narrative, which points to forces internal to a cultural system that are driving the deviant behavior. Death by culture is Uma Narayan's (1997) characterization of the global discourses for explaining women's death in the Third

World as somehow embedded in tradition, internally driven, and resulting from the distortion of "traditional" cultural values. The above murder narratives recreate the possibility that these women and girls are not only victims of a culture gone out of whack but also emblems of the loss of values. They represent cultural value in decline and in consequence are possibly not valuable enough in death to warrant much concern. When we find girls and women out on the streets at night, seeking adventure, dancing in clubs, and free from parental vigilance, we find evidence of diminished value in their wasted innocence, their wasted loyalty, and their wasted virginity. The logical conclusion is, therefore, not to seek the perpetrators of the crime as much as to restore the cultural values whose erosion these women and girls represent.

A number of *Juarense* activists and local women's groups have countered these murder narratives with a version of the victims as poor and hardworking members of the community who deserve more public attention than they are receiving. Through editorial writing and public appearances, these advocates warn that a "climate of violence against women" pervades the city. They identify male jealousy of wives'/girlfriends' economic independence and sexual and social liberty as motivating factors behind the crimes as well as behind police reluctance to treat the murders seriously. And they have met with the principal maquiladora trade association (AMAC) in the city to ask for assistance in curbing the violence. During one meeting, the director of AMAC explained that he saw no connection between the industry and the murders. The message was that, even though thousands of workers have to cross unlit, unpatrolled, and remote stretches of desert as they make their way to the buses that stop only on main thoroughfares, and even as many victims disappear while on such commutes, there is nothing that the industry can do to stop the violence. Rather, the industry's stance is that no degree of funding for security personnel, or outlays for improved streetlighting, or in-house self-defense workshops, or changes to production schedules will help.

This position has not changed noticeably even in light of more obvious connections linking maquiladora industrial activity with the murders. For instance, in March 1999, when the driver of a maquiladora bus raped, beat, and left a thirteen-year-old girl who worked in an American-owned maquiladora to die in the desert (she miraculously recovered and named her attacker), activists implored the maquiladoras

to acknowledge some connection between the murders and the city's industrial activity. One activist, Esther Chavez Cano, who is also the director of the city's new rape crisis center, said, "This case is absolutely horrible. The maquilas should have as much trust in the bus drivers as they have in the managers. This is an example of how terrible things are in this city" (Stack and Valdez 1999). The maquiladoras have yet to respond to this indictment, and their position appears to be much the same as it was when the spokesperson for AMAC was interviewed in January 1999 by ABC.[6] He cited female sexuality and nighttime behavior as the principal issues. In making this point, he queried, "Where were these young ladies when they were seen last? Were they drinking? Were they partying? Were they on a dark street? Or were they in front of their plant when they went home?" The silent corollary to this statement is the understanding that "men will be men," especially macho men, and if a woman is out drinking or partying or dancing on Juárez Avenida, then she should be prepared for the risks.

The AMAC spokesperson is invoking a death by culture narrative to absolve the maquiladora industry of any implication in the violence. The maquila narrative depicts the murdered women as cultural victims of machismo combined with Third World female sexual drives and rural migrant naïveté. It gains purchase with the city's long-standing reputation as a cultural wasteland, where American contamination and loose women have led to moral decay (Sklair 1993; Tabuenca Córdoba 1995–96). And in such a cultural milieu, the murdering of women cannot be avoided. Their deaths are only symptoms of a wasting process that began before the violent snuffing-out of their lives. All the sorting through of the victims' lives illustrates the deep, cultural roots of waste; for, as we scrutinize the victims' sexual habits and sift through the skeletal and clothing remains, we are supposed to wonder all the while, "What was *she* doing there anyway?" What sort of culture devours its own?

My interest lies in the similarities linking this death by culture narrative with descriptions of labor turnover. In the story of turnover, the Mexican woman also plays a leading role. She is the culprit of extreme turnover as well as the reason some measure of turnover is necessary for profit. She emerges in this story as a dialectic image built of both waste and value. Her odd configuration has roots in the cultural construction of female sexuality, motherhood, and a fleeting work ethic. It

also has roots in the physiognomy of the Mexican female form—in her nimble fingers and sharp eyes that eventually, and always eventually, stiffen and lose their focus. The manager of any maquila faces the challenge of having to monitor this wasting process, which, again, according to the turnover narrative, is a culturally driven cycle whose deleterious effects on women's working lives are inevitable. The maquila industry is helpless to divert this culturally driven, corporate death.

TURNOVER AND CORPORATE DEATH

To understand how, in the maquiladora context, the story of turnover produces a female Mexican subject around a continuum of declining value, we must examine it in relation to the value-enhancing process of training. As turnover refers to the coming and going of workers, "training" refers to the cultivation of worker longevity and firm loyalty. Both processes unfold through the materialization of their corresponding subjects: a temporary, unskilled labor force and trained, loyal employees, respectively. Trained workers are those whose intrinsic value has matured and developed into a more valuable substance, whereas temporary workers do not develop or transform over time. They simply leave when their value is spent.

Seeing turnover and training in this light adds another dimension to Marx's analysis of variable capital. The value of labor power varies not only because it produces value, as Marx urges us to consider: Labor power varies also because it produces waste. The laborer who is worth less than her labor is, in the story of turnover, eventually worthless even as she creates value. The trained subject, by contrast, is one whose intrinsic value increases over time and matures into a more valuable form of labor power, one that is skilled. As one American manager of a U.S. automobile manufacturer in Mexico put it, "Our goal is to take someone who just walked in the door and turn this person into a different kind of worker. Someone whose basic abilities have matured into something special."[7] Skilled labor power does not vary from the value that it produces to the extreme degree that unskilled labor does. Of course, there is some variation; otherwise profit would not be produced. At issue here is not the precise calculation of the dollar amount of profit that skilled labor creates but instead a sense that the more valuable the labor that goes into the production process, the more valuable the

commodities emerging from it. The German general manager of a hi-fi sound systems manufacturer explained the situation to me this way: "To make quality goods, you need quality workers. . . . We still need some unskilled workers. Some of this work is still just assembly. But now we've got products that require people who are willing to learn something new."

Marx begins his analysis of capital with the commodity precisely to demonstrate that the products of capital cannot be understood without seeing their intimate relationship to the people who make them. He, too, was extremely concerned with subjectivity even though he overdetermined the parameters for considering what sorts of subjects mattered in his analysis. My view of skill as a negotiated quality of value assigned to labor power takes its cues from feminist analyses of the valorization of workers and work and the formation of skill categories. Feminist scholars have demonstrated that we must consider how perceptions of the subject inform perceptions of the value promised by that subject's labor power and how skill is key for the differential valorization of the labor force (McDowell 1997; Cockburn 1985; Elson and Pearson 1981). This feminist contribution does not replace a Marxian analysis but rather, as I hope becomes clear in the following, reveals how poststructuralist theorizations of subjectivity are not necessarily at odds with a Marxian critique of capital (see Joseph 1998). Critical for Marx was an exploration of how value materializes as it does in capital, as we continually make abstract connections linking human energies with inanimate objects. Marx made this point clearly, but he failed to recognize how the many forms of labor abstraction that are categorized variably as degrees of skill complicate the relationship, linking the value perceived in laborers to the value perceived to be embodied in the commodities they make.

Events over the last decade reveal how maquiladora boosters and managers recognize the tight connection between perceptions of worker quality and recognition of the sorts of products workers can make. There are now about thirty-one hundred maquiladora facilities in Mexico, with a total employment of more than one million workers. Almost one-fourth of these workers are employed in maquiladoras located in Ciudad Juárez, and approximately 60 percent of these employees are women. Since the late 1980s, efforts to "skill up" the maquiladora labor force in the maquila industry have coincided with a concerted push

by city developers and industry spokespeople to stress the labor market's ability to accommodate the global focus on product quality over quantity (Carillo 1990). Industry proponents, mindful of the heightened competition for foreign direct investment by Asian countries guaranteeing even lower minimum wage rates for an immense labor supply, have emphasized that the city offers not only vast amounts of unskilled labor but also a sizable labor force that is trainable in just-in-time organizational systems, computer technologies, and even research and design capabilities. "Our workers can do anything here with some training, make the best products in the world," the director of a Juárez development firm told me. Rarely is the claim made that this labor force *already* exists in the city. Instead, emphasis rests on the *potential* transformation of the existing labor market into one that will one day be brimming with skilled workers. In 1994, the administrator at one of the largest and most prestigious maquiladora development consultant firms explained the potential this way: "We know that if Juárez is going to prosper into the future, we have to adapt. And we already are. You don't find sweatshops opening here like before. Now we have high-technology companies, and they are looking for workers who can be trained. We are having more of these workers now, and they will help this city grow in the right direction." One highly lauded example of this sort of growth has been the General Motors Delphi Center, which opened its doors in 1995. In a *Twin Plant News Staff Report* article, "Brain School," the director of Chihuahua's Economic Development Office exclaimed, "The Delphi center will revolutionize industrial production in our area." His view was seconded by a maquila manager who explained: "Without a doubt the most significant change has been the high technology manufacturing. . . . It just proves how the Mexican worker has been able to assimilate the ways of American business" (1997: 39).

Sorting subjects into trainable and untrainable groups, then, is a first step toward upgrading that minority of the maquila labor force that will eventually assimilate to the demands of a dynamic global economy. Distinguishing between the trainable and the untrainable—the "quitters" and the "continuers" (Lucker and Alvarez 1985)—requires an evaluation of employees early in their careers in order to put them on the right track, either the unskilled or the skilled one. The Brazilian manager of a factory that manufactures automobile radios explained, "We

can tell within one week if the operator is training material. It's obvious from the beginning." The principal marker of the untrainable subject is femininity. As feminist histories of industrialization have noted, the notion of women's untrainability has a genealogy far beyond the maquila industry (Fernández-Kelly 1983). The specificities of this untrainable condition vary depending upon how the relations of gender unfold within the matrices of other hierarchical relations found within the workplace: the family, heterosexuality, race, and age—to name but a few. In the maquilas, the discourse of female untrainability plays out through explanations that describe what women do well as "natural" (dexterity, etc.) and that explain the cultural constitution of Mexican femininity as adverse to training. "Most of the girls aren't interested in training. They aren't ambitious," the same manager of the automobile radio manufacturer told me. "I have tried to get these women interested in training," the American manager of an automobile firm explained, "but they don't want it. They get nervous if they think they will have to be someone else's boss. It's a cultural thing down here. And if they're not ambitious, we can't train them."

This culturally ingrained lack of ambition, nervousness with responsibility, and flagging job loyalty create the profile of an employee whose untrainable position cannot be shifted through training. When I asked the human resources manager of a television manufacturer how he could recognize those workers who were involved with in-house training programs, he said, "Well, most of the workers in the chassis assembly [all are women] aren't taking training. They're not as interested. Most of our trained workers come from the technical and materials handling [completely male-staffed] areas." The gendering of work positions in this particular firm, as in many others, also revealed a gendering of trainability and the skilling-up of the maquila labor force. There are no statistics calculating the percentage of women participating in the multitude of training programs offered throughout the city in addition to in-house training opportunities. However, my interviews with the managers of seven "high-tech" maquilas and with instructors who offer maquila training programs indicated that women represented fewer than 5 percent of those enrolled in any type of skills training. The rate of female promotion into positions defined as skilled in three high-tech firms was even less than that.

As a result, Mexican women are said to be the principal contribu-

tors to turnover, because untrainable workers are those who demonstrate the lowest degree of longevity on the job. "If you have a plant full of these girls," the Mexican general manager of a sewing operation explained, "then you're gonna have high turnover. And you can't train workers in that kind of environment." Although the trade journal literature rarely mentions gender as a variable in any maquiladora-related phenomena, managers are quick to mention sex difference as a key component of their "turnover problem." The Brazilian plant manager of a television manufacturer elaborated on this connection. "We have about 70 percent females here. That means high turnover. Sometimes 20 percent a month. Now the guys also sometimes leave but if they get into a technical position . . . they usually stay longer. Our turnover is high because we have so many girls." The American human resources manager of this same firm said, "You can't train workers if they won't stay around. That's the problem with these girls. You can't train them. They don't understand the meaning of job loyalty." The tautology described in this turnover narrative revolves around the following syllogism: Women are not trainable. Trained workers remain with the same firm longer than untrained ones. Therefore, women do not have any corporate loyalty.

Minimized, if not completely missing, from this narrative, and from the many articles dedicated to the "turnover problem" in the industry literature (see Beruvides, Villalobos, and Hutchinson 1997; Villalobos, Beruvides, and Hutchinson 1997) is a consideration of how the pigeonholing of women into the lowest-waged and dead-end jobs throughout the maquilas contributes to their high turnover rate. Instead, within the maquila narrative of female unreliability, we hear how her intrinsically untrainable condition cannot be altered through training. There is no remedy for her situation, at least none that the maquila industry can concoct. Even though trade journal articles abound that make the connection between training and enhancing worker loyalty, these lessons do not apply to her. Meanwhile, Mexican men who are relative newcomers to the industry are the ones climbing the ranks into skilled and higher-salaried positions, while Mexican women remain where they have been for more than three decades, in the positions with the least skill, least pay, and least authority. In fact, recent press attention to the skilling-up of the maquila labor force and renovation of the industry reveals the masculine image of the new maquila trained and trainable subject (Wright 1998). Things are changing in the maquilas, we know, not

because women are changing but because Mexican men are. They have added a masculine and trainable dimension to the once only unskilled, feminine labor force. As the American human resources manager of a television manufacturer put it, "The men are more involved in the new technologies here. They are changing the industry." The women, meanwhile, in their status as "untrainable" employees, represent what does not change about the maquilas.

However, it is critical to bear in mind that the untrainable Mexican woman is not completely worthless to the firm, for if she were, she would not continue to be the most sought-after employee in the maquiladora industry. Local radio stations frequently air advertisements promising good jobs, the best benefits, and a fun social atmosphere for young women seeking employment. Some maquilas contract agencies to recruit women throughout the city's scattered neighborhoods and migrant squatter settlements. These agencies generally seek female employees and sometimes are often expected to recruit one hundred women for a particular firm in a single day. As an employee of one such agency explained in an interview with a local newspaper in July 1998 (Guzmán 1998: 5), "The agency offers jobs to both sexes, masculine and feminine, but for the moment, they are looking only for women to work in the second shift."

Women are so explicitly in demand for a number of reasons. Discourses that detail a blend of natural qualities combined with cultural proclivities establish the Mexican woman as one of the most sought-after industrial employees in the Western Hemisphere. For one thing, as throughout industrial history, Mexican women are still coveted for what are constructed to be the feminine qualities of dexterity, attention to detail, and patience with tedious work (Elson and Pearson 1989). They are, therefore, perfectly suited for the minute, repetitious tasks that still constitute much of contemporary manufacturing and information processing. Adding to the attractiveness of their supposedly natural abilities is the widespread perception of their cultural predisposition to docility and submissiveness to patriarchal figures. These discourses outline a figure who is not only aptly designed for assembly, sewing, and data entry but who, unlike her northern counterparts, is also seen to be thankful for the work, unlikely to cause trouble, and easily cowed by male figures should thoughts of unionization cross her mind. Discourses of this sort explain, in part, why, since the passage of NAFTA,

maquilas have been setting up operations at an unprecedented pace and have continued to employ more women than men across the industry, even as they emphasize trainability.

Another property underlying the Mexican woman's popularity among maquiladora executives is the inevitability of her turnover. Her lack of corporate loyalty is, in the proper proportion, a valuable commodity since her tendency to move into and out of factory complexes reinforces her position as the temporary worker in a corporate climate that responds to a fickle global market. This need is well explained in a 1998 *Wall Street Journal* article (Simison and White 1998) about the General Motors Delphi operation: "Delphi says it relies on rapid turnover in border plants to allow it to cut employment in lean times and add workers in boom times." Part of what is so valuable about the Mexican woman is the promise that she will not stick around for the long haul. Her absence represents for the firm the value that flexibility affords it in a flexible market economy.

Turnover itself is, therefore, not necessarily a waste but the by-product of a process during which human beings turn into industrial waste. The trick facing maquila managers is to maintain turnover at the proper levels. Excessive turnover means that women are leaving at too high a rate for the firm to extract the value from their dexterous, attention-oriented, patient, and docile labor. An insufficient degree of turnover, however, represents another form of waste: an excessive productive capacity. For this reason, articles appear regularly in the principal industry journal, *Twin Plant News*, offering advice on how to manage the "very real problem" of *high* turnover (see Beruvides, Villalobos, and Hutchinson 1997; Villalobos, Beruvides, and Hutchinson 1997). Turnover that is too high (as opposed to turnover that is just right) means that unskilled workers are leaving before they have exhausted their value to the firm. The desired rate of turnover most often quoted to me was 7 percent annually, and that requires that most of the new workers remain at least one year. "If we could get these girls to stay here two years," the human resources manager of the automobile radio factory said, "then I would be happy . . . after that they always move on and try something new." The problem with turnover, therefore, is not that the women leave. Rather, the problem has to do with the timing of their departure in relation to the rate at which their value as workers declines with respect to the value of their turnover.

This task of monitoring the correct turnover rate requires a measurement of the amount of value residing in the labor of the Mexican woman who labors in unskilled work. Such measures are necessary in order to balance the value of her productive capacity as an active laborer with the value of her turnover. How does the value of her presence measure against the value of her absence? This is the question that maquila managers constantly pose, and they rely upon a cadre of supervisors and engineering assistants to figure it out. These lower-level managers track the march of repetitious tasks through the bodies of the female laborers who occupy the majority of such jobs through the industry. They watch for signs of slower work rates resulting from stiff fingers, repetitive stress disorders, headaches, or boredom (Wright forthcoming). And they note declining work performance in order to justify a dismissal without eligibility for severance pay. As the Brazilian manager of a television manufacturer told me, "This is not the kind of work you can do for years at a time. It wears you out. We don't want the girls here after they're tired of the work." In this, as in many other maquilas, an elaborate system of surveillance focuses on the work primarily performed by women workers on the assembly line (Salzinger 1997). Furthermore, according to my informants, any worker who reveals an interest in expressing grievances or organizing worker committees is routinely subject to harassment if not immediate dismissal. The Mexican human resources manager of an outboard motor company said, "We have a policy not to allow workers to organize. It's like that in all the factories. . . . These lawyers [the ones involved in union activities] are lying to the workers and trying to trick them. We try to protect them from this." Workers with feisty attitudes are thus not very valuable to the firm either. So if a Mexican woman loses her docility, one of her values has been spent.

Another method for monitoring the depletion of value in the bodies of women workers involves the surveillance of their reproductive cycles. Women seeking employment in a maquiladora commonly have to undergo pregnancy tests during the initial application process (U.S. Department of Labor 1998; Castañon 1998). The scrutiny of their reproductive cycles, however, does not end there. Also common is the continued monitoring of their cycles once they begin work. Reports vary depending upon the age of the employee and the particular factory, but a number of women have described to me and to others how on a

monthly basis they are forced to demonstrate that they are menstruating to the company doctor or nurse. In several facilities, women have been pressured to show their soiled sanitary napkins. "They even make the *señoras* do it," one woman explained. "They treat us like trash." This pregnancy test is hardly fail-safe, and a number of women explained how they got around it. One who worked for a television manufacturer said, "I was pregnant, so I sprinkled liver's blood on the napkin. They never knew. But when I started to show, my supervisor got really mean." She was then moved into an area that required that she stand on her feet all day and lift heavy boxes. "I left because I was afraid for the baby." Harassment of pregnant women is common, although illegal, and demonstrates that once a woman displays a pregnancy, she is ripe for turnover. "This is not a place for pregnant women," one supervisor in a machine shop told me. "They take too many restroom breaks, and then they're gone for a month. It slows us down."

These procedures revolve around a dialectic determination of the female subject as one continuously suspended in the ambiguity separating value from waste. She is a subject always in need of sorting because eventually the value of her presence on the production floor will be spent while the value of her absence will have appreciated. The sorting must occur in order to maximize the extraction of her value before declaring her to be overcome with waste. This inevitability, according to the death by culture logic, is driven by a traditional Mexican culture whose intrinsic values are in conflict as women spend more time outside the home. The many characteristics that the managers attribute to Mexican women as a way to explain high turnover, such as a lack of ambition, overactive wombs, and flagging job loyalty, represent cultural traits that are designed to check her independence. She might be subverting some cultural traditions by working outside the home, but her culture will ensure that she not go too far afield by inculcating her with a disposition that makes her impossible to train, to promote, or to encourage as a long-term employee. The maquilas are helpless to divert the forces of a culture that, in effect, devours its own, as women's careers are subsumed to such ineluctable traditional pressures.

Her disposability, then, represents her value to the firm since her labor power eventually, as it is a cultural inevitability, will not be worth even the cost of her own social reproduction, which is the cost of her return to the workplace. And she, the individual who comes to life as

this depleting subject, experiences a corporate death when her waste overrides her balance, because, as David Harvey (1982: 43) put it, "The laborer receives . . . the value of labour power, and that is that." Turnover is, therefore, this turning over of women from those offering value through their labor power to those offering value through the absence of their labor. And as they repeat their experiences on this continuum while occupying jobs for several-month stints in different maquilas, their own lives are stilled as they move from one maquiladora to the next in a career built of minimum-wage and dead-end jobs. These women experience a stilling of their corporate lives, their work futures, and their opportunities inside and outside the workplace that might emerge were they to receive training and promotions into jobs with higher pay and more prestige.

All the managers cited above agreed that the turnover rate could not be diminished by corporate measures such as higher salaries and benefits. The American human resources manager of the television manufacturer responded, "These girls aren't here for a career. If we raise the wages, that would have a negative effect on the economy and wouldn't produce any results. Turnover comes with the territory down here." The American general manager of the motorboat manufacturer said, "Turnover is a serious issue here, especially in the electronic work that the female operators do. But that's how they are. They're young and looking for experiences. You just have to get used to it down here. . . . I don't think wages would make any difference." The Mexican general manager of the television manufacturer replied, "Wages aren't the answer to everything, you know. Most of these girls are from other places in Mexico. They don't have much experience with American attitudes about work. And that's why we have problems with turnover." The German general manager of the electronic assembly plant explained, "We always try to cut down on turnover, but we don't expect to get rid of it. That wouldn't be realistic. Not in Juárez."

Within such interviews lurks a death by culture narrative, which absolves the maquila industry of any responsibility in the repeated corporate deaths experienced by most of their female workers. By spinning a tale full of vague referents to the obstinate turnover condition of Mexican women, they are explaining how turnover is part and parcel of a cultural system immune to maquiladora meddling. The specificities of that culture are not the issue. Instead, it is the exculpation of the ma-

quila industry from any responsibility in guiding a turnover process that serves their purposes in some critical ways. Consequently, maquila preventive measures would be fruitless or even a further waste. Competitive wages, training programs for women workers, day care, flexible work schedules, attention to repetitive stress disorders, or a compassionate stance toward maternity would not, according to this narrative, make one whit of difference. These Mexican girls and women are going to turn over, as they always do, because of who they are. Turnover is part of their cultural constitution. And, as the women come and go, one after another, day after day, the managers exclaim their impotence against the wasting of women workers. These women, they maintain, are victims of their culture. Their eventual corporate deaths are evidence of death by culture.

DEATH BY CULTURE

In a March 1999 interview, a research psychiatrist from Texas Technical University who specializes in serial murders commented to the *El Paso Times* that these Juárez murderers "tend to 'discard' their victims once they get what they want from them" (Stack and Valdez 1999). Such a vision of the Mexican woman as inevitably disposable is common to both the murder and turnover narratives. At the heart of these seemingly disparate story lines is the crafting of the Mexican woman as a figure whose value can be extracted from her, whether it be in the form of her virtue, her organs, or her efficiency on the production floor. And once "they," her murderers or her supervisors, "get what they want" from her, she is discarded.

The vision of her disposability, the likelihood that this condition could exist in a human being, is what is so valuable to those who extract what they want from her. When she casts the shadow of the consummate disposable laborer whose labor power is not even worth the expense of its own social reproduction, she is a utopian image. In this particular manifestation, the Mexican woman is the utopian image of a culturally victimized variation of labor who guarantees her replacement—after being worn down by repetitive stress syndrome, migraines, or harassment over pregnancies—with fresh recruits who are, perhaps, leaving another place of employment for one of the same reasons. That the same women are turning over as they move from one place to another does

not disrupt the utopian image of their constant decline as part of their continuum toward disposability. Quite the contrary, their value circulates through their continual flow from one factory to the next, since as a woman leaves one place of work, perhaps having been dismissed for missing a menstrual period, and then enters another once her menstrual flow resumes, she again represents value. Her fluctuation between value and waste is part of her appeal for her employer.

This image of the female worker as the subject formed in the flux between waste and value provides her contours as a variation of capital. With such a constitution, she can be nothing other than a temporary worker, one whose intrinsic value does not mature, grow, and increase over time. And therefore, as a group, Mexican women represent the permanent labor force of the temporarily employed. The individual instances of this subject come and go, as women deemed wasteful to a firm's project are replaced by new recruits. Her cultural constitution is internally driven and immune to any diversionary attempts by the industry to put Mexican women on a different path. Instead, she will repeat the pattern of women before her and perpetuate the problem of turnover so valuable to the maquilas.

Such a utopian image of the Mexican woman as a figure permanently and ineluctably headed toward decline, always promising that her labor power will be worth less than the cost of her own social reproduction, evokes Benjamin's elaboration of the fetish. Benjamin renovated Marx's analogy of the fetish as phantasmagoria to refer not only to the social relations of the market embedded in the commodity but also to the social relations of representation that were sustained in the commodity. According to Susan Buck-Morss (1989: 82), Benjamin's concern with "urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-in-the-market as the commodity-on-display." Benjamin's point is that the mechanics of representation are as critical to the creation of value as the actual exchange of use values in the marketplace.

The fetish of the Mexican woman as waste in the making offers evidence for Benjamin's view of the fetish as an entity "on display." As a figure of waste, she represents the possibility of a human existence that is perhaps really worthless, and this representation is valuable in and of itself. If we really can see and believe in her wasted condition, then she opens up a number of valuable possibilities for numerous people. For the managers of the maquiladora industry, her worthlessness means

they can count on the temporary labor force that they need in order to remain competitive in a global system of flexible production. The image of the murder victims—many of them former maquila employees abducted on their commutes between home and work—also represents value for the industry as cultural victims. Through the descriptions of Mexican cultural violence, jealous machismo, and female sexuality, maquiladora exculpation finds its backing. No degree of investment in public infrastructure to improve transportation routes, finance lighting on streets, boost public security, or hold safety seminars in the workplace will make any difference. Others can also benefit from the widespread and believable representation of the Mexican woman as waste in the making. The perpetrators of serial murders, domestic violence, and random violence against women can count on a lack of public outrage and official insouciance with regard to their capture. And the city and state officials in Chihuahua who are concerned about their political careers, under the public scrutiny of their effectiveness in curbing crime, can defer responsibility.

The stories of this wasting and wasted figure must always be told since, to adapt Butler's (1993: 8) calculation to my purposes, the naming of her as waste is also "the repeated inculcation of the norm." The repetitive telling of the wasting woman in the turnover and murder stories is requisite because of her ambiguity: the waste is never stable or complete. The possibility of her value—of fingers still flexible or of a murdered young woman who was cherished by many—lurks in the background, and so the sorting continues as we search for evidence of the wasted value. Her dialectic constitution is suspended through the pitting of the two antithetical conditions that she invariably embodies. We find this dialectic condition through the questions that ask: Is she worthy of our concern? Are her fingers nimble or stiff, her attitude pliant or angry, her habits chaste or wild? Through the posing of such questions, her ambiguity is sorted as if it were always present for the sorting. Meanwhile, she hangs in the balance.

NOTES

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1 The number of murders varies, depending upon the sources, from about one hundred forty to more than two hundred. Local activists in Ciudad Juárez have voiced a suspicion that not all of the murders are brought to public light, and for this reason I am persuaded that the larger number represents a more accurate assessment of the scope of the problem. My material for this essay derives from interviews and research conducted over a several-year period of ethnographic fieldwork in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.

2 The word *maquila* is a shortened form of *maquiladora*, which refers to the export-processing factories located in Mexico that assemble appliances, electronics, and clothing; it also refers to data processing in high-technology operations.

3 Much of my discussion of Benjamin's theory of dialectics draws on Susan Buck-Morss's (1989) account.

4 My discussion of the woman as waste in the making is informed by the conceptualization of waste as a continual negotiation elaborated by Sarah Hill (1998).

5 All translations are provided by the author.

6 John Quinones interviewed Roberto Urrea, president of AMAC, on the 20/20 television program of 20 January 1999.

7 I conducted this and other interviews that I draw on throughout the text during a several-year period of ethnographic research within specific maquiladoras located in Ciudad Juárez. I specify the nationality of the managers in this text in order to demonstrate how a cultural explanation is widespread throughout the industry among managers of many nationalities. All the interviewees reported on here are men, with the exception of one human resources manager. I also use the problematic referent of "American" as it is used by my informants and commonly along the Mexico-U.S. border to identify residents and citizens of the United States who do not identify themselves as Mexican.

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20 Gender, Industrialization, Transnational Corporations and Development: An Overview of Trends and Patterns (1995)

Kathryn B. Ward and Jean Larson Pyle

Since the days of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim more than a century ago, enormous intellectual effort has gone into analyzing social change and development. Yet not until the 1980s and 1990s has there been systematic analysis about women and the importance of gender. Kathryn B. Ward, author of *Women Workers and Global Restructuring* (1990) and Jean Larson Pyle, Associate Professor of Economics at University of Massachusetts, Lowell, review the literature about women and development, and they offer their own gendered analysis of development, in the age of the "global economy." Ward and Pyle argue that gender is crucial for several reasons. First, globalization affects women differently because state policies, and those of transnational companies, can both incorporate and limit women. Second, women influence the process of globalization through their different needs to participate in the labor force and how their availability to work determines corporations' choices about location and hiring strategies. Furthermore, Ward and Pyle point out the critical differences between paid and unpaid work, the informal economy, family relations of work, and household survival strategies. They also acknowledge how the intertwining of class, race, and gender shapes economic roles, often in different ways in different parts of the world.

The literature on women's industrial labor and its relation to informal and household work can be understood only in the larger context of changes in the world economy that have significantly affected women's economic roles. Global restructuring in the latter part of the 1980s was characterized by three trends. First, there was a movement toward market-based economies, in particular, export-oriented strategies, at the behest of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Mitter 1986). Second, the rapid globalization of productive and marketing activities by transnational corporations from many countries was

accompanied by substantial informalization and subcontracting of work arrangements beyond state regulation (Portes et al. 1989), or what Harvey (1989) labels "flexible accumulation." Finally, various economic crises, involving periodic recessions, debt, and the environment, have occurred. As a consequence of all these changes, industrial and family-based economies now exist side by side in a mixture of factory organization and subcontracting to family sweatshops that maintains men's control over women workers (Harvey 1989).

Several themes are clear in this portion of the women-in-development literature. First, in the six years of research between 1986 and 1992, we find many similarities and some instructive differences regarding the use of women's labor and the effects of employment in export-led development and transnational corporations' production networks. As wages have risen in some areas, transnationals have cut labor costs by various combinations of relocating production to another tier of low-wage countries, increasing the use of subcontracting and/or homework (home-based assembly), or restructuring work through automation (Heyzer 1988; Elson 1989; Harvey 1989; Portes et al. 1989; Kamel 1990; Pyle and Dawson 1990). These trends reveal the growing relationship of industrial work to the informal sector and the household. Second, we note an implicit and explicit need for theoretical and empirical redefinition of "work" to capture the reality that, particularly for women, daily work often takes place in the three spheres of the formal and informal sectors and the household (Mitter 1986; Benería and Roldán 1987; Ward 1990b; Benería 1991; Hossfeld forthcoming). Third, women's resistance to unequal situations and their efforts to empower themselves involve many diverse strategies and encompass struggles in all three spheres.

Furthermore, we see the importance of the intertwining of class, race or ethnicity, and gender in shaping women's economic roles. State policy, independently or in conjunction with transnationals, plays a critical role here because it can be used to incorporate women or limit their access to opportunities. If drawn into the development process, women, people of color, and/or poor people are often restricted in their choices, and their activism is suppressed by state policy. Because of the importance of the intersection of gender, race, and class with the state, it is clear that new theoretical frameworks and praxis must be developed to incorporate these factors.

Women and Industrialization

In the early 1980s women-in-development scholars debated whether employment in transnationals was beneficial for women or if they were being exploited in yet another way, as low-wage workers, employed at most for a few years, and working under unhealthy conditions (for a review of this earlier literature, see Lim 1985; Tiano 1987; Ward 1988b; Joel 1989, 1990). Few references to this controversy have been made since then. Linda Lim (1985, 1990) continued to argue that such employment is an advantage to women, while others maintained that the net impact of such employment on women was unfavorable (Ward 1988b, 1990a).

Instead, from the mid-1980s onward, we find that this dichotomous debate has largely been replaced by analyses acknowledging the contradictions and dynamics of women's employment in transnational corporations. This newer view recognizes that

transnationals have some positive and many adverse effects on women, which evolve over time because of changes in corporate strategy, state policy, geographical location, and/or worker resistance.

Although employment in transnational firms is a small proportion of women's work in the global economy, it remains a critical component for several reasons. First, women's work in these firms constitutes a growing proportion of women's work in currently developing countries (Ward 1988b; Benería 1989; Lim 1990) due to the primacy placed on the export-oriented industrial growth strategies involving transnationals by international development and financial institutions. As a result, transnationals now arise from a wider range of countries, including Japan and the newly industrializing countries (NICs) in Asia. Second, export-oriented transnational firms constitute a dynamic sector in which continual change (automation, increased use of subcontracting and homework, and movement into new tiers of countries) affects rapidly expanding numbers of women. Finally, researchers increasingly recognize the direct links of formal sector transnational employment to the many women working in the informal sector and the household.

Since the mid-1980s much research has examined women's experiences in transnational corporations and in the informalized layers of subcontracting and homework they are establishing. Such production networks span both the currently developing and the industrialized countries. In reviewing these studies, we find similarities across regions as well as unique local patterns. On the one hand, the new research has increased our understanding of the parallels that exist globally in the importance of women's labor to transnational corporations' production networks in industries such as electronics, garments/textiles, shoes/footwear, toys, plastics, and consumer products and the way gender, class, and ethnicity interact in shaping the composition of the workforce. Similarities also exist in the sometimes contradictory yet largely negative effects of transnational employment on women and how these effects persist or change over time as corporations relocate to lower-wage countries, increase their layers of subcontracting and homework, or automate. On the other hand, this research has shown how the effect of transnationals on women is mediated by preexisting cultural patterns of male dominance, state policies, and workers' resistance that can vary across countries. As a consequence, profiles of women's labor-force participation differ among some countries.

Importance of Women's Labor in Transnational Corporations

Women are employed in transnational corporations in many areas of the world: Pacific Asia, Latin America, a few areas of Africa, and throughout industrialized countries. Important differences exist by region.

Several groups of Pacific Asian countries have pursued export-oriented growth by attracting transnationals in a wide range of labor-intensive industries. Research confirms that women workers are critical to the existence of these industries throughout this region (Heyzer 1986, 1988, 1989). Since the 1960s, in the newly industrializing countries of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, women have provided the needed supply of low-cost labor for the remarkably rapid economic growth this region has experienced (Li 1985; Gallin 1990). The

Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand have relied on female workers since the 1970s; state development agencies in Thailand and Malaysia still actively advertise their availability to attract foreign investors (Pyle and Dawson 1990). In the latest group of Asian countries to establish export processing zones during the 1980s, such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and areas of China and India, there is heavy reliance on the labor of women and often children (Rosa 1987; Sultana 1990). In addition, export processing zones are being planned for other developing countries as diverse as Iran, Vietnam, and Mongolia.

New studies on women's employment in transnational corporations in Latin America center on the *maquiladoras* along the United States border with Mexico and on those industries located in Mexico City, Costa Rica, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, and the Caribbean (Benería and Roldán 1987; Humphrey 1987; Peña 1987; Ruiz and Tiano 1987; Young 1987; Ríos 1990; Scott 1990; Tiano 1990; Truelove 1990; Yelvington 1993). The free trade zones along the Mexican border and in the Caribbean produce mostly garments and electronics and hire predominantly women (Gereffi 1990). In contrast to *maquiladora* production, small sweater-making workshops have expanded in rural Mexico (Wilson 1991). These backstreet shops or homesites rely extensively on women's labor. In addition, the Caribbean is the initial offshore location for newer service industry jobs in banking, airline reservations, and telemarketing (Anderson 1989; Freeman 1989; Kamel 1990).

In a few areas of Africa transnational firms employ women assembly workers. In South Africa they have used mostly black men as workers, leaving women to work as domestics (Cock 1988). Although black women were finally allowed to become factory workers, they were the last group to be employed, and a very small percentage of them work in transnationals (Seidman 1985; for a history of women cannery workers, see Berger 1990). Mauritius established the first export-oriented free trade zone on the African continent. This zone focused on textiles and garment industries and hired female workers (Hein 1986; Rosa 1987). Proximity to Europe and well-behaved workforces have made North African countries attractive sites for production. In clothing factories established in Morocco, female labor was also preferred (Joekes 1987).

Transnational corporations have also set up operations in several countries in the western European semiperiphery, such as Greece, Spain, and the Republic of Ireland. The European textile and clothing industry has developed extensive links via coproduction or subcontracting with firms in eastern Europe and northern Africa that employ mostly women (Redclift and Mingione 1985; Mitter 1986; Elson 1989; Hadjicostandi 1990; Pyle 1990a, b). Many of these firms, such as Benetton, are marketing ventures that coordinate subcontracted production activities of family- and sweatshop-based industries (Harvey 1989).

State policies in this region have differentially affected workforce gender composition. For example, in Greece state-sponsored transnational garment manufacturing generally has employed women and structured production to take place both in the factory and at home under a piece-rate system (Hadjicostandi 1990). By contrast, the government of the Republic of Ireland designed its export-oriented development strategy to attract corporations that would employ primarily men and used discriminatory state employment and policies on family/reproductive rights to limit women's employment (Pyle 1990b).

In the United States transnational corporations operate in the same types of industries (i.e., garments and electronics) as in developing countries (Safa 1986; Lamphere 1987; Rosen 1987; Fernández Kelly and Garcia 1988, 1992; Fernández Kelly 1989; Hossfeld 1990, forthcoming; Kamel 1990). Contrary to the widespread impression that electronics and garments are declining industries, total employment in the apparel industry in the United States is greater than in the automotive, steel, and electronics industries combined (Fernández Kelly 1989).

Patterns in the composition of the labor force evolve in relation to the hiring preferences of the transnational corporations, labor shortages, state policies, and preexisting relations of male domination as well as ethnicity and class. Although the workforces in electronics consist largely of young, single women, some variation has occurred over time, and married women are employed by textiles/garment and electronics firms in countries such as Thailand and the Philippines (Lim 1990). In Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, when *maquila* employers increased job benefits to attract more workers, the proportion of men increased; but in other cities where employers did not increase benefits, this pattern did not occur (Catanzarite and Strober 1993). In Pacific Asia the state has been active in shaping the workforce via family policies and family planning programs that manipulate fertility rates either to increase the current supply of women workers or to augment the future labor supply. In Thailand and the Philippines cultural traditions have permitted women wider economic roles, whereas in Taiwan and Japan patriarchal norms have restricted women's employment in the formal sector to the period before marriage (Carney and O'Kelly 1990; Gallin 1990).

Ethnicity, class, and gender also shape the structure of the transnational corporation workforce. For example, in Taiwan in the late 1970s managers and union leaders in factories were predominantly mainland Chinese military men, whereas the workers were native Taiwanese, largely women (Arrigo 1985). Similarly, in Malaysia native Malay women are more likely to be found in assembly work than Chinese women (Salih and Young 1989). Such patterns also occur in Mexico and Latin America (Fernández Kelly and Garcia 1988, 1992; Zavella 1988; Fernández Kelly 1989). For example, Kevin Yelvington's (1993) research in Trinidad reveals that line workers are women, predominantly black, while floor supervisors are men, mainly white. Annie Phizacklea's (1990) research on the small-firm sector of the fashion industry of the United Kingdom found that production relations are conditioned by class, gender, and ethnicity. Last, in Los Angeles the labor force in garment manufacture is largely female, 91 percent of whom are minority, chiefly Hispanic (Fernández Kelly 1989).

Effects of Employment in Transnational Corporations on Women

Literature from the late 1980s and early 1990s on the effects of employment in transnational corporations on women supports two major points. First, this type of work has contradictory effects on women; positive aspects can exist even in the presence of widespread adverse impacts. Because of this recognition, the earlier dichotomous discussion regarding whether such employment was beneficial or disadvantageous for women has been replaced by a more complex analysis. Second, corporate strategies in the late 1980s increasingly involved cost-cutting measures such as relocation of production to lower-wage countries, increased use of subcontracting/homework, and/or automation, each of which has definite effects on women workers.

Female factory workers often consider transnational corporation employment a favorable option initially, because it provides them immediate earned income, material benefits, and more independence from their families than existing alternatives (Agarwal 1988; Salaff 1988). Some women in the newly industrializing countries have experienced improved working conditions and absolute wage levels over time due to worker resistance and organization. Lim (1990) argues that although wages are low in these corporations relative to industrialized countries and working conditions more adverse, in many areas transnational firms offer conditions and pay that are relatively better than those of other local employers.

On the other hand, most research since 1985 shows that, over time, women working in transnationals encounter a variety of adverse effects: occupational segregation and lack of advancement possibilities, job insecurity or loss, wages relatively lower than men's, and a variety of oppressive working conditions. Women occupy low positions on occupational ladders, and there is an absence of opportunities to gain skills and advance in the job hierarchy (Humphrey 1987). These jobs are often precarious, and in recessions, enterprises employing predominantly women are the most likely to cut back or close. For example, South Korean women remain a peripheral workforce (Phongpaichit 1988).

Relative male/female wage differentials have persisted over time and appear to be substantially due to discrimination, even in newly industrializing countries such as Taiwan and South Korea (Gannicott 1986; Amsden 1989). Subsistence or lower wage levels often prevail, and transnational corporations may rely on households to support low-wage workers. For example, in Indonesia corporations have located production in rural areas because they can pay the young women they employ less than subsistence wages since they live with their families (Mather 1985; Wolf 1990b, 1993). Cynthia Truelove (1990) argues that agribusiness transnationals in the coffee industry established rural mini-*maquiladoras* in Colombia, employing women at below-subsistence wages to produce shoes and garments for export. The year-round work of women subsidizes the wages of male agricultural workers, who are employed only seasonally.

In parts of Latin America employment in transnational corporations has little impact either on high unemployment rates for women and men or on subsistence wages, even for women with extensive labor histories (Tiano 1990; for an exception, see Catanzarite and Strober 1993). Many Latin American women display ambivalent feelings toward this type of work, because although they need money for household survival, this form of economic activity contradicts women's cultural roles (Young 1987; Tiano 1990). Transnationals in Mexico have capitalized on these contradictions to reduce unionization of Mexican women to less than 10 percent and thereby remove a source of upward pressure on wages (Kamel 1990).

Moreover, conditions of employment are often oppressive with long hours, forced overtime, increased production quotas or speedups, poor working conditions or housing, stress, and harassment from management and the state. These conditions lead to deterioration of workers' health and often to high turnover, which has been particularly documented for Asia. Although conditions may have improved in some

newly industrializing countries, adverse impacts persist throughout most of the region (Rosa 1987; Agarwal 1988; Heyzer 1989; Pyle and Dawson 1990; Sultana 1990). As a result, workers continue to resist and unionize (Ong 1987; Mai 1989; Kamel 1990). In the latest group of Asian countries to attract foreign investment, for example, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, conditions are the worst. Furthermore, in Pacific Asia the state has always been active in controlling the workforce in transnational corporations, often at the cost of democratic movements and human rights (Agarwal 1988; Heyzer and Kean 1988; Enloe 1989). Lourdes Arrigo (1985) examines parallels between Taiwan and South Korea, the Philippines and Malaysia in terms of military dictatorships that maintained a stable economic climate for foreign investment.

In regard to the second major effect of employment in transnationals, each of the corporate cost-cutting strategies used throughout the world in the latter part of the 1980s – including relocation to lower-wage countries, development of extensive networks of subcontracting and homework, and automation – has had distinctly negative effects on women workers. As corporations relocate to lower-wage countries, women in the original country lose jobs. For example, wages in Caribbean countries are higher than in Mexico or in some Asian countries (Massiah 1989; Griffith 1990; Yelvington 1993), and employment can be shifted. Relocation is particularly disadvantageous for the original women workers if they are in low-skill jobs in a country that is restructuring its export-led economy toward higher technology products, such as South Korea (Hyo-chae 1988), or if they are in areas such as the Caribbean (or even the United States) where slow growth means few alternative job opportunities. In addition, as corporations move production into new tiers of countries, as has occurred in Asia, these firms and their local networks commonly adopt the same exploitative practices they formerly used in other countries.

Subcontracting to local factories and homework (home-based assembly) have increased throughout the world from Mexico, the United States, and Europe to Taiwan, China, Bangladesh, and India (Arrigo 1985; Benería and Roldán 1987; Harvey 1989; Standing 1989; Sultana 1990). These extended production networks cut costs because corporations can pay lower wages than in factories, bypass provision of benefits, and avoid protective legislation. These workers are unlikely to unionize and their employment can be immediately terminated in an economic downturn. The women involved are often married or heads of households, and such work is their only option for combining home duties with participation in the wage economy. At the lowest level of the subcontracting pyramid in Taiwan, for example, mothers and children assemble components at home at piece rates about half the hourly wage for factory work (Arrigo 1985). In Mauritius transnational corporations locate factories throughout the country to avoid unionization efforts and to use homeworkers (Hein 1986).

Automation of existing industries or accompanying the restructuring of an economy toward more technologically complex industries has differential gender effects on employment, because it tends to reduce the number of lower-skill jobs that are primarily female. Governments in Taiwan and South Korea are deliberately altering the structure of industries in export processing zones by shifting to higher technology, automation, heavier industries, and men workers (Hyo-chae 1988; Gereffi 1990). Kamal Salih and Mei Ling Young's study of the semiconductor industry in Malaysia (1989) reveals that, although there was net growth in employment in this industry from 1977 to 1984, the proportion of women decreased. This trend is also expected to occur in the garment industry when it automates (Elson 1989).

Redefinitions of Work

Global restructuring, industrialization, and transnational corporations are increasingly linked to the growing informal sector and to unwaged work in the household, both because of these corporations' burgeoning networks of subcontracting and homework and because people are forced to find informal sector work and/or increase household subsistence activities in times of economic crisis and retrenchment. This recognition reinforces the longstanding theme in women-in-development literature that much of the work women do takes place in the informal sector and household and often is omitted from statistics on labor force participation. Because women predominate in the work done in these sectors, formal labor force data present a particularly inadequate profile of women's economic contributions (Benería 1989, 1991) and of economies that include a variety of activities such as large factories, informal sectors, and ethnic enclaves (Harvey 1989).

As a consequence, much of the research on women and work since 1984 has emphasized the need to redefine "work" (Mies 1986; Standing 1989; Ward 1990b, 1993; Benería 1991; Hossfeld forthcoming). Women's and men's work must incorporate all three dimensions – paid labor in the formal sector, paid informal labor, and unpaid labor in the household – and should be analyzed along a continuum from formal to informal to household work, as described by Kathryn Ward (1990b). Parts of this work continuum have been suggested by others, but none has incorporated all three dimensions (Bruce and Dwyer 1987; Stichter and Parpart 1988a, 1990; Grown and Sebstad 1989; Collins and Gimenez 1990; Nash 1990). Benería (1991) reviews the widespread efforts – conceptual, methodological, and empirical – since the mid-1970s to correct the underestimation of women's work in subsistence production, unaccounted paid work, domestic production, and volunteer work.

The majority of the world's women work in two to three of these categories, a situation Karen Hossfeld (forthcoming) has aptly called "the triple shift." For example, Joycelin Massiah (1989) describes the sixteen-hour-a-day triple shift activities of women in the Caribbean, and Noeleen Heyzer (1989) provides a detailed account for Asian women. The boundaries of the triple shift are fluid for women and relatively rigid for men (Ward 1990b). Men define work as something that takes place outside the household (Hossfeld forthcoming) and rarely engage in household labor (Hochschild 1989), whereas women's work spans all three sectors. Hossfeld (forthcoming) found that, in the Silicon Valley, women worked up to fifteen hours a day in various combinations of the triple shift, while men were often unemployed and worked far fewer hours. Caren A. Grown and Jennefer Sebstad (1989) found that poor women may spend up to sixty hours per week in unpaid household labor.

Informal Sector

Informal sector work is heterogeneous, encompassing entrepreneurial activities and wage labor that is unregulated by the state. This sector includes subcontracted

to ensure that families do not migrate during slack times (Aguiar 1986; Enloe 1989; Heyzer 1989; Truelove 1990). Cynthia Enloe (1989) describes the shifting gender and race division of labor and informalization on sugar and banana plantations in Central America that seasonally employ women and use race to allocate jobs.

Many women homeworkers, other informal workers, and entrepreneurs report dissatisfaction with the arrangements because of low wages, little control over the work processes, health risks, long hours, and overhead costs (Leung 1986; Boris and Daniels 1989; Enloe 1989; Narotzky 1990). For example, Ximena Bunster, Elsa Chaney, and Ellan Young (1985) and Linda North (1988) describe the struggles of Peruvian market women who work eighteen to twenty hours a day. In Africa and Latin America women's informal businesses have lower sales revenues, asset bases, and profit margins than men's (Grown and Sebstad 1989; Jiggins 1989). M. Patricia Fernández Kelly and Anna Garcia (1988) found similar conditions for women entrepreneurs in Los Angeles. Janice Jiggins (1989), however, describes how some Sub-Saharan African women entrepreneurs have moved from survival activities to more prosperous growth-oriented enterprises. As in formal factory work, the empowerment of women is a complex process. Women homeworkers and entrepreneurs benefit immediately by the wages earned in informal sector work. In the long run, though, many women work in isolated, hazardous conditions and continue to exist at the survival level rather than experience economic mobility (Jiggins 1989; Massiah 1989).

Household Labor

As discussed above, women's household labor is integrally linked to formal and informal sector work, since the majority of women worldwide pursue some combination of these types of work to sustain their families. Transnational firms are increasingly intertwined with women and households when they subcontract assembly work as paid homework and when they pay low wages, because women's work in the household subsidizes the actual cost of family maintenance. Such relationships with transnationals intensify women's workloads. If the totality of women's work lives is not examined, this fact is obscured.

The literature since the mid-1980s has reinforced and extended research showing that women's unpaid labor in the household and agriculture is critical. As producers and consumers, women provide food, clothing, and energy and maintain the family in time-consuming activities. For poor households in many countries, such work contributes at least half the household subsistence (J. L. Collins 1990; Narotzky 1990; Stichter 1990). Women's household labor is intensified in times of economic crisis and global restructuring (Friedmann 1990).

Another major development in scholarship regarding women's roles in the household is the movement beyond earlier research that treated household members as having a unity of interests (Smith, Wallerstein, and Evers 1984). New studies show how the roles of individuals in the household vary by gender, race, and class (Bruce and Dwyer 1987; Acker 1988; Lever 1988; Stichter and Parpart 1988b, 1990; Blumberg 1989; Bruce 1989; Fernández Kelly 1989; Collins and Gimenez 1990; Wolf 1990a, b, 1993; Amott and Matthaei 1991; Mizan 1992).

For example, women contribute far more of their earnings and unpaid labor to the household, in some cases up to 100 percent, whereas men may use most earnings for personal consumption. This is illustrated in rural Spain (Narotzky 1990) and in Mexico City, where male partners often do not pool money or information with spouses (Benería and Roldán 1987). In some cases, poor and minority men share fewer resources and devote less money and effort to the household than more economically advantaged men do (Blumberg 1989; Hochschild 1989). To maintain status and power within the household, men may devalue women's economic contributions or resort to domestic violence.

Resistance

The new scholarship on women's industrial labor and its connections to the informal and household sectors reveals broader dimensions of women's resistance to their subordinate positions than had formerly been recognized (Dill 1986, 1988; Bookman and Morgen 1988; Ward 1988a; Westwood and Bhachu 1988; P. H. Collins 1990; Talwar 1990). In the past many labor unions viewed women workers as unorganizable. Earlier accounts depicted women as passive victims of the consequences of development, transnational corporations, and various types of marginalization.

New research has illustrated the need to examine forms of resistance other than large-scale social movements or union activities. Like the commonalities noted in women's experiences in transnational employment and the informal sector around the world, similarities exist among women's resistance strategies. Bettina Aptheker (1989: 173–4) proposes examining women's daily resistance: "To see women's resistance is to also see the accumulated effects of daily, arduous, creative, sometimes ingenious labors, performed over time, sometimes over generations." She suggests that since much resistance is based on the need to survive, survival itself is a form of resistance. Resistance strategies fall into three categories: (1) making use of traditional structured organizations along with spontaneous daily resistance in the formal workplace, (2) household transformation, and (3) the act of survival itself, which may involve various combinations of activities in the formal, informal, and household sectors. Contradictions may be inherent in these strategies.

Despite barriers placed by governments and corporations, women workers in both developed and developing countries organize and strike for better wages and working conditions and against plant closures. Women workers are among the most militant union members, particularly in South Korea, the Philippines, and South Africa. Increasing international connections between women workers and unions in different countries facilitate communication of ways to support workers and strikes and to fight runaway plants, de-skilling, low wages, and other transnational corporation tactics (Arrigo 1985; Byerly 1986; Rosa 1987; Jayakody and Goonatilake 1988; Pineda-Ofreneo and Del Rosario 1988; Elson 1989; Enloe 1989; Heyzer 1989; Mai 1989; Berger 1990; Kamel 1990).

This resistance takes place daily at the computer terminals, on the shopfloor, and at other worksites around the world (Byerly 1986; Bookman and Morgen 1988; Zavella 1988). In Barbados women workers entering data for airlines reprogram

their computers to record higher than actual output (Freeman 1989). Women workers in the United States' Silicon Valley use managers' racist and sexist biases to acquire more power and control over their working conditions on the shopfloor. For example, women workers may tell their male managers that they need frequent "hormone" or menstrual rest breaks (Hossfeld 1990). Sallie Westwood (1985) and Westwood and Parminder Bhachu (1988) show how immigrant women workers in England have used a variety of strategies such as wedding and baby showers to control interaction on the shopfloor. Devon Peña (1987) describes the "turtle" or slowdown strategy of workers in Mexican *maquiladoras*. Finally, Malaysian women factory workers have sought control over their work by spirit possession (Ong 1987).

Self-employed and informal sector workers are also organizing (Sen and Grown 1987; Bhatt 1989). In India the success of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) demonstrates how previously isolated women in the informal sector can achieve some power over their work situation. Loan groups based on the Grameen Bank model provide supportive contexts for women's education, economic development, and empowerment vis-à-vis men in the household (Mizan 1992; Blumberg 1995). Nash (1988a) describes how market women in Lima, Peru, organize *comedores populares*, or communal kitchens, to ease household burdens. Migrant domestic workers in Europe organize to counter the increasing growth of transnational cleaning corporations (Gowen 1988).

New research indicates that for women around the world, some combination of work in the formal, informal, or household sector is a survival strategy and one way to resist marginalization from low-wage employment. For example, homemakers whose households' survival is threatened by the debt crisis take to the streets in alliances with unions and formal sector workers to challenge austerity programs in Latin America (Nash 1988a, 1988b, 1995; North 1988) or governmental violence (Bunster-Burrotto 1986). Bonnie Thornton Dill (1986, 1988) argues that survival itself is resistance and discusses how women of color in the United States pass skills along to their children, ensuring their survival and resisting negative socioeconomic forces (see also P. H. Collins 1990).

Aptheker (1989) describes how household relationships can be transformed by women's resistance activities. In the United States Barbara Kingsolver (1989) describes permanent transformations of gender relationships in households after Chicana and Mexicana family members and workers formed their own support organizations during the Arizona copper mine strike in 1983.

This resistance, however, contains ambivalence as women seek to reconcile the cultural and religious contradictions among their work, resistance, and the structures of male dominance in which they live (Bookman and Morgen 1988; North 1988; Freeman 1989; Hossfeld 1990; Ward 1990b). As Fernández Kelly and Garcia (1992) note, some women rationalize their need to work without questioning their particular cultural ideology.

Often women's resistance only temporarily mediates their immediate, individual situation without generating changes in the structures or institutions that control their labor. Although the triple shift strategy may ensure survival, it can reinforce the global economy that made such a strategy necessary. As a consequence, large numbers of women remain exhausted in a survival mode, and only a privileged handful experience economic mobility via this strategy.

Conclusion

Significant developments since the mid-1980s in the literature on women's role in industrialization and its relation to the informal and household sectors have added immeasurably to our understanding of women's subordinate roles. They have provided an invaluable foundation of knowledge for developing more relevant theoretical frameworks and building political and economic strategies to improve women's positions in developing and developed countries. Clearly, much theoretical, empirical, and political work is needed. This literature review and the trends we highlight starkly reveal the need for theoretical models that incorporate gender, class, ethnicity, the changing strategies of transnational corporations, the totality of work, and the role of the state in analyzing women's roles in economic development. Our review also shows that theories focusing only on work in the formal capitalist sector with little consideration of gender are simply inadequate (Mies 1986; Benería 1991; Ward 1993).

Accordingly, much more empirical research is needed. First, longitudinal and cross-national studies must be made at the firm and industry level to examine women's job histories, wage trends, differences in working conditions, and the range of economic choices women working in transnationals have in selecting employment. For example, more information is needed on the length of time women spend in such employment. Estimates from the 1970s speculated that women in electronics worked an average of only two years. If this trend remains, then any benefits for women of employment in transnationals would be short-lived. The relationship between layoffs by gender and business cycles also should be more thoroughly examined.

Changes in wages for women, at an absolute level and relative to men, should be studied to determine the effects on education levels, work experience, uninterrupted work history, support from the household, and discrimination. In addition, working conditions can be more closely examined to ascertain differences within a country between transnationals and indigenous firms or between different firms in the same industry internationally. Interviews can be conducted to provide more information regarding structural constraints versus personal choice and the economic options these women had when selecting transnational jobs. This type of information must be collected for those directly employed in such firms as well as for those working in extended subcontracting networks. Data can be gathered regarding what proportion of women's work lives are spent in factories compared with other types of work in the formal, informal, and household sectors.

Second, researchers can extend examination of women's and men's multifaceted experiences of work along the continuum of formal, informal, and household labor. More comparative and longitudinal research is needed to document commonalities and differences in women's experiences in these three sectors and the racial and class patterns that prevail. These proposed comparative work histories would require a movement away from reliance on formal labor force statistics to a combination of macrostudies and microsurveys of time use that incorporate gender, race, and class. Innumerable aspects of this work continuum can be examined. For example, ties among women's work in factories, informal assembly, and participation in the sex trade constitute an important area for new research.

Third, scholars and organizers must more fully study and understand all forms of women's resistance and the contradictions that may accompany them, recognizing that the increasing informalization of work makes effective organizing difficult. As David Harvey notes in regard to women workers (1989, 153), "struggling against capitalist exploitation in the factory is very different from struggling against a father or uncle who organizes family labour into a highly disciplined and competitive sweatshop that works to order for multinational capital." Women workers and community groups can develop new organizing strategies that encompass women's everyday acts of resistance as well as unionization. For example, local-based groups such as SEWA or the Grameen Bank projects can empower women workers relative to their immediate environment and families. In addition, researchers must more extensively analyze the international connections between gender and work in developing and industrialized countries, identifying the many parallels that exist as well as the differences. Women's groups can work toward cross-national coordination of and support for strikes and contract negotiations (Kamel 1990). Thus, scholars and activists can formulate effective strategies for change that empower women workers while facilitating socioeconomic development.

Finally, in conjunction with these dimensions of analysis, future research must more systematically and completely study the role of state policy and the intertwining of gender, race, and class. With respect to state policy, for example, scholars can examine, via case studies or comparative analyses, how the state determines the conditions of women's work by attracting investments on the basis of gender; by weakening state regulations to attract investment, thereby creating hazardous working conditions or informalizing work processes; by using police or military power to suppress workers' resistance activities; by promoting and using women workers in the tourist or sex trade; or by influencing fertility patterns with labor-supply objectives in mind. In many cases, states have sought short-run development without looking at the long-run socioeconomic and political costs of competing with other states for transnational corporations' investment. Understanding the way the state shapes women's economic lives is critical for the development of strategies for effective change.

Scholars and activists should build on these predominant themes in the women-in-development literature to create a new theoretical framework and to extend empirical research. In so doing, they will establish a solid basis for understanding women's roles in economic development and for innovating strategies that more efficiently and equitably incorporate women into this process, thus eradicating their subordinate status.

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