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Revealing the unmarked

Finding masculinity in a global factory

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ABSTRACT ■ Scholars frequently recount the ups and downs, the purportedly embarrassing – although always heroically turned to account – mishaps of research. However, acknowledging that one has rethought an analysis in the absence of new data makes explicit that social science is an interpretive project, and as such is rarely discussed in print. In this article I break that taboo, analyzing how I began to doubt my claim that a global shop floor was organized around an ungendered shop-floor subject. I then detail the more contextually sensitive reading of my fieldnotes that allowed me to grasp the fundamental masculinization of the shop floor in question. In the process, I theorize the aspects of gendered structure that enabled the error at the outset. Thus, the discussion reconstructs the life history of an argument – tracing the shifting development of analysis in a particular ethnographic case. In so doing, it follows epistemic problems back to their ontological roots, looking at how the tricky, obdurate situatedness of meanings – gendered and ungendered alike – requires an ongoing analysis of context in interpreting even our most minute and focused observations.

KEY WORDS ■ masculinity, gender, feminist theory, methods, epistemology, ethnography

Delve into the biography of any piece of empirical social analysis and you find a checkered history. First approximations are replaced by new ideas,

minds change, thoughts are reframed. However, that process is erased in, and by, the final product. A ‘good analysis’ gives one the sense of received truth – not only that it is true, but that it is apparent. The story behind the argument is only rarely told. We enthusiastically recount the ups and downs, the embarrassing – although always heroically turned to account – mishaps of research. But the many twists and turns of analysis are another story. It is legitimate, even admirable, to change one’s mind in the face of ‘new data’; however, acknowledging that one has rethought in the absence of such justification makes explicit that social scientific analysis is an interpretive project, and as such is rarely discussed in print. Nonetheless, in the case I recount below, the convention of retrospective smoothing is not an option; my conflicting analyses are both in print – the first in an article on gendered fragmentation and the second in a book that contextualizes that argument in contemporary global processes (see Salzinger, 1997, 2003). Thus the following pages reconstruct the life history of an argument – tracing the shifting development of analysis in a particular ethnographic case. In the process, I will follow these epistemic problems back to their ontological roots, looking at how the tricky, obdurate situatedness of meanings – gendered and ungendered alike – requires an ongoing analysis of context in interpreting even our most minute and focused observations.

Gender at work

In the late 1980s, I, along with many other feminists, found my attention drawn to the fact that young women were increasingly the labor force of choice for transnational capital production throughout the third world (Benería and Roldán, 1987; Elson and Pearson, 1981, 1986; [Enloe, 1989](#); Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Fuentes and Ehrenehich, 1983; Iglesias, 1985; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Pearson, 1986; Safa, 1986). The centrality of ‘femininity’ to this emerging system raised the issue of gender’s role in production more broadly and posed a challenge to analyses by Marxist labor process theorists in which gender occasionally figured but never mattered in the last analysis ([Braverman, 1974](#); [Burawoy, 1979, 1985](#); [Edwards, 1979](#); for a fuller discussion of these issues, see Baron, 1991). As I read, I came across an article detailing an anomalous situation in Mexico’s border export-processing industry (the *maquila* industry),¹ where an emerging ‘shortage’ of young women had led transnational managers to begin hiring young men for export-processing jobs.² Intrigued, I resolved to go to the border to see for myself, and to use these shifts as leverage in understanding the role of gender in production, thus confronting labor-process theorists on their own turf. The book that emerged from the project met this aim, among others, theorizing the wide range of meanings

femininity and masculinity could accrue and delineating the consequences of this flexibility for global production.

The maquila industry in Ciudad Juárez was indeed in a fascinating phase when I arrived in the early 1990s.³ Like export-processing plants around the world, the maquilas had begun operations with an overwhelmingly female workforce. By the mid-1980s, however, the combination of a plummeting peso, a consequently booming demand for maquila workers, and the industry's fixation on the legendarily 'cheap, docile and dexterous' Mexican woman had created a shortage of just such subjects. Not only were there not enough young females to go around at industry pay levels, but the famed 'feminine docility' around which the industry labor process had organized itself had become harder to come by, as much-coveted young women began to exercise the leverage created by a tight labor market. In response, the plants had reluctantly hired large numbers of young men. Nonetheless, the industry remained organized around the expectation of, and the (sometimes desperate) search for, what I later came to call the trope of 'productive femininity' (see [Salzinger, 2003](#), Chapter 2). Thus, the industry itself was operating with a powerful set of gendered expectations that simultaneously called a labor force into being and undermined the conditions of its existence.

The shop floor where I did my first months of ethnographic research looked much as the early feminist works I had read would have predicted: rows of manicured young women diligently at work, watched constantly by multiply-interested supervisors (Benería and Roldán, 1987; Elson and Pearson, 1981, 1986; [Enloe, 1989](#); Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Fuentes and Ehreulich, 1983; Iglesias, 1985; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Pearson, 1986; Safa, 1986). The two plants that followed were more challenging, however, as a shop floor filled with compliant beauties was soon replaced by another full of distracted party girls, and then again by responsible, insistently 'non-traditional' team-members ([Salzinger, 2003](#)), suggesting the range of distinctive subjects that locally appropriate 'womanliness' might index and evoke. These shop-floor experiences pushed me toward post-structuralist gender theorists whose work could encompass the fundamentally distinct versions of gendered selfhood I encountered in the field (especially Butler, 1990; Riley, 1988; [Scott, 1988a](#)). Nonetheless, it was the last plant I studied that really threw me. Although the content of the femininity around which each of the first three plants was organized varied widely, femininity itself was still centrally at play and at work. The substance might shift, but the category seemed fixed. That was not the case in the last plant I entered.

The venerable scrub-clothes producer I came to call 'Androgymex' belied all my accumulated expectations. As I folded paper smocks and wandered through the plant's sewing sections, I looked in vain for the explicit

femininity I had come to expect. Not only femininity, but even masculinity was notably unreferenced – named only a handful of times over my six weeks of daily work and play in the plant and intermittent taped conversations with co-workers outside it.⁴ In stark contrast to the shop floors I had just inhabited, and the many others I had heard described in newspaper articles and interviews, gender seemed either trivial or actually invisible. Although many maquilas had both women and men working on the line, most continued to be gendered not only in their daily language and practices but in explicit self-definitions as well. This was not the case in Androgymex. Most plants directly requested young women when they advertised, no matter whom they ended up hiring eventually; Androgymex did not. Most plants gave men and women different positions, different uniforms, different job ladders; Androgymex did not. On most maquila shop floors highly gendered dress was the norm; in Androgymex, bodies were hidden. On most maquila shop floors, management addressed workers as ‘women’ and ‘men’; in Androgymex, they were addressed as ‘workers’. Disturbed and intrigued by coming across a structure I had assumed impossible, determined to be fair and open-minded in the face of countervailing evidence, I threw myself into accounting for its existence. Below is a picture of the plant as I saw it during my first round of formal analysis.

Androgymex makes disposable hospital garments. It’s one of the largest and oldest maquilas in Juárez. In 1981, women workers paralyzed the plant in a seven-month strike still remembered for its violence. Shortly after the strike, women’s putative ‘docility’ having lost its credibility, management began hiring men. Today the plant is 50 percent male, well over that in the sewing sections, its productive heart, and the current plant manager matter-of-factly rejects the notion that gender matters either in hiring or on the shop floor itself.

The shop floor is simultaneously uniform and chaotic. Workers are scattered across its large, flat expanse, swathed in blue smocks and caps. There are no lines. Instead, they sew, fold or pack feverishly in groups, tossing their products into piles. Music blasts through the factory. If it is especially inspiring, an impromptu salsa may develop – a couple of paired blue smocks dancing in the aisle – sometimes a man and women, sometimes two men, sometimes two women. Always these outbursts delight and distract, contributing to the sense of disorganization and play at work. And yet, appearances deceive. People work very hard here. This is in part because they’re paid by the piece. Although, on average, Androgymex workers make only slightly more than the \$40 weekly earned by those in nearby plants, those willing and able to push themselves to exhaustion can make substantially more, and a subset of workers does precisely that. Furthermore, many workers set higher quotas for themselves on an intermittent basis, in order to

control their own time and attention, and to experience their own power at work. A woman comments, 'I used to work in harness. I was so bored I'd go to the bathroom and sleep. Here I say, today I'm going to make so many, and that way I don't get so bored.' Experiencing the self as productive is a central aspect of shop-floor subjectivity.

The centrality of the 'productive self' is constituted not only in workers' relationship to the work, but in their relationship to management. The struggle over workers' rights and responsibilities – orchestrated by managerial policies around piecework – is compelling and constant and understood as fully legitimate by management and workers alike. Management changes a seam and changes pay rates – complaints ensue. Material is scanty and workers' production falls. There are standoffs over who counts the downtime, and who pays for it. Workers rarely win these battles, but they do occasionally. A worker at my table has a personal quota far higher than the factory's. Proud of his speed, he allows himself to stop work whenever he's reached this level. One day the supervisor insists that he keep working. After a long altercation, he goes back to work. But the next day he produces precisely the standard, finishing at exactly day's end. 'She won't bother me about that again', he says with grim satisfaction. He's right of course, and he occupies himself with his gloating satisfaction for days. It is in these struggles over exactly what the rules require that worker subjectivities are constituted on a daily basis.

The compelling experience of being addressed as an ungendered producer through shop-floor struggles is matched by the minimization of visual cues for gender. Since the product is sterile, workers wear smocks and caps that cover hair and clothes. Jewelry, make-up and beards are prohibited. At first glance, everyone looks the same – it's even hard to tell men from women. Not surprisingly, gender and individual differences are reasserted in subtle ways: in the style of wearing one's cap for instance. But bodies are under wraps. A young man I met working at the TV plant had worked here briefly and left. 'You couldn't tell who the pretty ones were', he complained, 'Everyone looked the same.'

The irrelevance of gender is further marked by the work itself. On the floor, scores of men bend over sewing machines beside their female co-workers. The hiring director tells me, 'Supervisors do sometimes request women for particular jobs, but not in the smock section – of course not! That's sewing!' Sewing is hard work with high turnover. 'Women's work' or not, supervisors will take whom they can get.

Supervisors have strong, and markedly idiosyncratic, opinions about gender. Some insist on women, some on men, some don't care at all. It's not that gender isn't articulated in this plant, either by management or by workers, but for all the strength of these opinions – they are erratically distributed. There's no 'line' on gender.

The meanings embedded in labor-control practices in this factory refer to work, not gender. In a context in which bodies are hidden, and in which the central struggles of the plant revolve around production, gender remains unmobilized – either by management or workers. Gender identity does not disappear of course. In fact opinions about gender proliferate, and individual workers at times project highly gendered personas. However, unconnected to the central struggles in the factory, gendered subjectivity recedes into unimportance in production. It is ‘workers’, not ‘men’ or ‘women’, who are being produced on the shop floor.⁵

Having decided that ‘Androgymex’ was indeed what I had found, I dedicated myself to explaining the anomaly of gender’s erasure. I looked at the plant’s history, focusing on a period in which their then overwhelmingly female and explicitly feminized labor force had been catapulted into what proved to be a long and violent strike. I noted the plant manager, a member of a local elite determined to find jobs for young working-class men who were seen as emasculated by the demographics of the labor market. And I analyzed the importance of costume and embodiment and the impact of covered bodies in undermining feminization. Eventually, I felt I could indeed account for the odd, contingent emergence of an ungendered shop floor in such a highly feminized context. I published this analysis in *Feminist Studies*, presented it in talks, discussed it with friends. After my initial distress at finding a plant where gender seemed insignificant, mostly I, and others to whom I presented the work, were intrigued and convinced. But over time, I began to have a lingering sense of disquiet about the analysis. Every time I went back to my notes, even to my already analyzed narrative, I was struck again by the deeply masculinized *feel* of workers’ daily practices and narratives in the plant. Nonetheless, I resisted the urge to re-analyze, determined not to do an essentialized reading in which shop-floor struggle was coded as masculine by definition.

Questions

That was the situation until 1999, when Ava Baron, in the process of reviewing my manuscript for publication, took issue with my analysis of Androgymex. ‘Just because gender is not articulated doesn’t mean it isn’t there’, she wrote.⁶ With an odd sense of relief I returned to my fieldnotes and interviews one last time, determined to lay my unease to rest one way or another. In the first plants I studied, femininity had been so pointedly named that the issue was not *if* gender was at work, but *how*. Androgymex’s (or was it ‘Andromex’s’?) less explicit framework presented a more fundamental challenge. What were the social categories I should be analyzing in the first place? How was I to adjudicate between gender’s absence and its

silent presence, given that it was indeed ‘not articulated’? Focused directly now on the question of what the meanings *meant*, I returned to my notes, looking to identify the web of contrasts and comparisons within which actions and interactions took on meaning in the plant.

What struck me first upon this rereading was the way that shop-floor practices and identities operated in avowed contrast to feminized tropes within the rest of the industry. This was particularly clear in the way work and workers were named within the plant. Most maquilas call their shop-floor employees ‘operators’ (*operadoras*) – a term so explicitly feminized it is almost invariably marked as feminine grammatically, even when it should ‘correctly’ be marked masculine because males are present in the group being indexed.⁷ In this plant, however, the term was never used. Employees were called workers (the masculine *obreros*). When I asked one of the folders about the use of the term worker in the plant, he immediately recognized the unspoken query and launched into a critique of the term *operadora* itself. Its purpose is just to create a feeling of superiority to those who do (low-status, men’s) construction work [*obra negra*], he commented, but really it’s the same thing in a new guise. In noting the gendered opposition instantiated by the term operator and refusing it, he evoked its feminization, only to place himself and his co-workers on the other side of the gendered line. These refusals emerged in practices beyond naming. For instance, when Manuel and I were discussing ongoing struggles on the shop floor, he immediately contrasted the situation with that elsewhere in the industry: ‘[on the assembly line] you don’t fight for the simple fact that you see that you don’t have anything to gain . . . What’s the point of fighting? . . . You have a little more power [here in piecework].’

At the same time as workers repeatedly contrasted the plant to the rest of the industry, they placed the work they did squarely within the realm of male experience in the city. Again this was clear both in labeling practices and in daily interaction. For instance, plant workers routinely used the word *jale* – a term used throughout the city to refer to masculinized heavy labor – to describe work in the plant. Similarly, workers were quick to locate the logic of their strategies on the shop floor in their breadwinner roles at home. Manuel, known in the plant for his high productivity, explained straightforwardly that he knew how many boxes he needed to fold so as to not ‘have [his] wife working’. The link between work in the plant and masculinized experience outside it was made by managers as well as workers. Javier described a fight with the plant ‘labor relations’ manager in which this was made unusually explicit. In Javier’s account, the manager closed the door and began yelling and cursing at him and he responded in kind:

‘Look, if you’re going to speak to me with your balls in your hand’, I told him, ‘That’s how I’m going to speak to you. I’m going to curse, I’m going

to say any fucking thing that comes into my fucking head . . . I don't give a fuck if you fire me . . . They've fired me from better jobs. . .' Then when I yelled at him too then all of a sudden the guy says to me, he says, 'Hey Javier, have you been in the United States? . . . Excuse me', he says.

Instead of firing him (as a manager spoken to in such terms would undoubtedly have done in any of the other plants I studied), the manager made sense of Javier's behavior within the context of prototypical male work experiences at the border. Within this framework, he was then able and willing to make sense of Javier's (thereby) understandable refusal to be intimidated.⁸ All this suggested upon rereading that I was not the only person in the plant who understood local patterns in masculinized terms. On the contrary, shop-floor interactions appeared to be located, within the plant itself, in a symbolic framework that both contrasted local experiences to those elsewhere in the feminized maquila industry and linked them to other traditionally male experiences in Juárez.

This close reading led me to rethink the formal structure within which shop-floor struggles took place in relational terms as well; thus I turned back to pay and unionization. Most workers in the plant earned salaries comparable to those in other large plants in the area – roughly \$40 weekly including bonuses in the early 1990s. However, average wages were almost 25 percent higher than those in other plants I studied. This was because it was possible for highly skilled workers in a few positions to as much as double their wages through incentive pay and production bonuses, and some did so. Furthermore, like roughly a third of the maquilas in Juárez (Carrillo and Ramírez, 1990), the plant was unionized. In most maquilas, unions operate effectively as part of the company personnel department, and this was true to an extent here as well. However, here the union had also become a framework within which certain sorts of shop-floor jockeying for power and respect were possible.

I had originally interpreted both these facts as a veil for the high level of effective managerial control exercised in the plant. In light of my reanalysis of shop-floor subjectivities, I came to understand them not as a mere disguise, but as part of an interpellatory structure (Althusser, 1971) which enabled shop-floor masculinization. In comparison with plants in Detroit, or even in Mexico City, Andromex workers were both poorly paid and under-represented in shop-floor politics. However, that was not the contrast that was operating on the plant's shop floor. The relevant contrast, not surprisingly, was more local, and within the context of the maquila industry, Andromex stood for the possibility (if less often the reality) both of something approaching 'breadwinner' wages and of an effective voice in shop-floor politics. Together, these possibilities gave certain credibility to masculinized shop-floor discourses which might otherwise have seemed

simply unbelievable.

As I finished this part of the analysis, I found myself increasingly convinced that 'Androgymex' was indeed better named 'Andromex'. But this then raised a new question. What about the women on the shop floor? Nearly half of the Andromex labor force is female. I had previously argued that everyone on the shop floor was addressed within a trope of 'worker-ness' that was fundamentally ungendered, made possible by the sterile coverings which obscured gendered forms of embodiment. Nonetheless, if the traditional masculinization of the term worker was indeed at work in Andromex ([Kessler-Harris, 1990](#)), how was I to account for women's evident capacity to operate successfully within these parameters?

Women, of course, were not explicitly hailed or labeled as men on the shop floor. Nonetheless, they did operate with remarkable fluency within a masculinized structure of meanings. Julia spent every day competing with a coworker over who could fold more, commenting on how much more interesting the work was than in other plants. Gladis talked constantly about producing more to set up a small business and better support her family. Marta complained in an interview, 'The fact that one won't let oneself be pushed around is already a problem for them [supervisors] . . . They want submissive people, people who won't defend themselves, but that's impossible.' All these comments, and others like them, participated in the larger masculinized discourses of the plant without ever naming manliness. In my initial analysis of the plant as ungendered, it was this absence of naming which had convinced me that the subject being addressed on the shop floor was a 'worker', unmarked by gender. Now it struck me that it was precisely the absence of explicit naming, masculinity's historically accrued capacity to stand in for the general, that enabled men and women alike to emerge as productive subjects on Andromex's shop floor.

With this framework in mind, I returned to a comment Gladis had made during an interview I conducted with her and a friend from the plant. Both women were senior shop-floor sewers, notable for their capacity to defend their turf against other workers and supervisors alike. Over the course of the interview, they recounted myriad tales of shop-floor struggles, all tinged by the unabashed relish of victory and the much-lamented sting of defeat. In the midst of these stories, however, Gladis had suddenly drawn a distinction between herself and the men around her, one quickly seconded by her friend: 'They [men] can't stand being yelled at, and for a woman, they yell at you, and, well, you just turn around and look at them. At least I'm like that. I don't like to fight.' Initially I had read this discussion as another instance of the 'erratic distribution' of gendered claims in the plant, and hence as further evidence of the absence of a hegemonic discourse organizing gendered meanings and selves in the plant. Seen through the lens of my more recent analysis, these 'contradictions' appeared more patterned.

As I reread Gladis's account within the context of her many accounts of legitimate struggle over work, I realized she was drawing a distinction that made highly situated sense. Rather than a generalized assertion of her own femininity, which she might have achieved more effectively by discussing her life at home or analogizing herself to the explicitly feminized 'operators' elsewhere in the industry, she was distinguishing her style of resistance from that of her male co-workers in the plant, *within* the framework of Andromex's version of a hegemonic regime (Burawoy, 1979). In so doing, she was not suggesting that shop-floor struggle was a problem; to the contrary, she was asserting a relatively feminine way of engaging in it. It was partly this very capacity I realized – the possibility of drawing subsidiary distinctions within a larger gendered frame – that enabled women to operate comfortably on the Andromex shop floor. Like the shop floor as a whole, which could be coded as masculine precisely because of its location within the context of the feminized maquila sector, so Andromex women could be understood, and understand themselves, as feminine in contrast to their male co-workers, within the overall framework of Andromex's (also relatively) masculinized system of production.

Gender as a structure of meaning

Seeing 'Androgymex' as 'Andromex' made it possible for my analysis to encompass and explain a far broader range of the meanings and practices at work in the plant than had my previous account. However, the process raised another set of issues. As I thought about the new analysis, I became increasingly convinced that my initial mistake was not a random one, but was related to the way gender operates as a social classification. Different objects invite different errors. What sort of object is 'gender' to enable this particular misreading?

There are several answers here. First, if we take seriously the metaphor of 'reading', then legibility matters; and masculinity and femininity are not equally legible. To the contrary, one of the basic features of gender's manifestation in the contemporary western world is that for the most part masculinity is taken for granted, and hence not spoken, whereas femininity is the always-articulated modification of that assumed norm. That is, in both symbol and practice, masculinity is confounded with general, the human, that which need not be specified, whereas femininity is marked, frequently on the body (de Beauvoir, 1989; Wittig, 1992a, 1992b; Kimmel, 1994: 126).⁹ There is nothing about this pattern that is inherent in the fact of gender per se; the duality could operate differently. However, it has been produced in western writing and thought over several centuries and comes to us with all the weight of time and accumulated practice. Thus the essen-

tial contingency of this unequal marking makes it no less central to the way social life actually works in the current moment (see Nicholson, 1995; Riley, 1988). It was this empirical structure which in part accounted for my capacity to see femininity and overlook masculinity in the field.

The disproportionate salience of femininity is if anything more pronounced in the world of work than it is elsewhere. The noun 'worker' indexes a man. To specify a woman, an adjective is required. This is made grammatically explicit in Spanish, where the gendering of nouns requires the overlap between 'worker' and 'male worker'. However, it is also clear in English usage, where 'woman worker' is a frequently employed phrase, whereas 'man worker' sounds not only redundant, but non-idiomatic, even incorrect. The unelaborated 'worker' is always (already) male. What this means concretely is that, socially, femininity is often specified, by name or by highly explicit conventions around embodiment, whereas masculinity literally 'goes without saying'. Hidden in plain sight, masculinity is easy to miss, whereas the embodied frill of femininity intrudes on the field of vision.

In the maquila sector, this manifests as one might predict: both the labor market and the other plants I studied were constituted around highly specific discussions of femininity, often full of references not only to women's 'character', but to their 'slender fingers' or purportedly innate capacities to sit for long periods of time. On the other hand, although the shift within Andromex from a feminized to a masculinized model of labor control was signaled by overt references to masculinity when men were first hired,¹⁰ once the new system was in place these references disappeared. The more abstract and general discussions of respect, productivity and familial responsibility that emerged on the shop floor had made naming manliness gratuitous. By the time I arrived in the plant, masculinity was so deeply assumed that it was no longer noted, making it possible for women to recognize themselves within Andromex's masculinized tropes without needing to confront the dissonance of explicit 'mis'-naming or bodily references. Such naturalizing processes can easily mislead. Indeed, it had clearly misled me. For an ethnographer seeking to read the social, it is far easier to note that which is specified than that which is implicit. Thus, in relying too literally on what I saw and heard, I failed to look for the external referents and contrasts within which meanings in the plant were actually being made, thereby missing the underlying masculinization of production in the plant.

This leads us to the second aspect of gendered process that led me astray. Gender is situational and referential, both internally and externally. By that I mean that gender itself is a relationship of contrast, within which the terms masculine and feminine are in tension by definition. At the same time, the internal contrast that emerges in any given social space refers to the gendered contrasts and meanings that operate elsewhere in the social world (Riley, 1988; Scott, 1988a, 1988b). This relationship of reference is not a

logical or pre-ordained one. Rather, gendered meanings emerge precisely in the process through which these references are established. Hence, the specific set of contrasts that define gender in a particular space make local sense through the ways in which they are linked and articulated in relation to other gendered meanings. These patterns of connection are of course historically sedimented. References are never established on the social equivalent of a blank page. Nonetheless, although struggles over meanings and identities do occur on a field in which some associations are already deeply patterned, in most cases more than one set of possible associations are available for activation, and social struggles are in part over which ones are brought into play. Thus, one of the primary jobs of the analyst is to identify, rather than take for granted, the references that are at work. In *Andromex*, I had failed to problematize this process, essentially assuming a particular set of references were in operation.

In the other plants I had studied, both managers' and workers' primary point of reference in making shop-floor meanings was to the transnationally produced trope of productive femininity. In *Andromex*, this was not, or not only, the case.¹¹ Here, struggles around production took on meaning in contrast to the category of femininity around which transnational production was organized and with reference to positive, working-class masculine experiences in the city of Juárez itself. I noticed the first of these moves – the plant-wide rejection of 'cheap, docile, and dexterous' as a model for appropriate local selfhood. However, I failed to notice the second – the use of popular images of masculine work as a primary standard of comparison and point of reference on the shop floor.

One of the main reasons for this failure was the theoretical perspective from which I entered the field. Before arriving in Juárez I had immersed myself in two literatures: the labor process literature, which implied that the gendering of production was not of analytic importance,¹² and the new international division of labor literature (NIDL), which argued that transnational production was dependent on feminized labor to function.¹³ Through this reading, I had come to frame a theoretical duality of my own: were maquila shop floors indeed structured around femininity, or were they ungendered after all? These assumptions did not interfere in the other plants I studied where femininity was indeed at work, albeit with highly varied – often surprising – content. However, in *Andromex*, where femininity was not centrally in play, I mistook femininity's absence for gender's absence, operating within the opposition set up on my theoretical field. In taking for granted a particular set of gendered contrasts, I failed to note the ongoing social process whereby gendered references were being established on the shop floor.

Once I returned to my notes in search of the structure of references within which gender emerged, it became clear I did have the materials at

hand to distinguish ‘ungendered’ from ‘unarticulated’. Identifying a set of empirical references to local images of masculinity in my fieldnotes made it possible for me to explain my gut sense that masculinity was at work on the shop floor without taking my own cultural parameters as self-evidently relevant and without taking masculinity to be some sort of trans-historically invariant category. Ultimately this made it possible to grasp shop-floor masculinity in Andromex in terms directly analogous to those in which I had understood femininity in the other plants I studied – as an active, contingent, ever-so-local creation.

Noting the local nature of gendered contrasts makes visible the final aspect of gender that contributed to my confusion. Gender is not only a semiotic, referential figure, it is also a fractal (Gal, 2002; Abbott, 2001). That is, the distinction between a masculine and feminine pair can be endlessly subdivided, as each side of the line can always be subsequently repartitioned internally into its own relatively masculine and feminine components.¹⁴ Thus, the same set of practices can be coded as masculine from one vantage point and feminine from another, even within the same social space. Furthermore, contradictory claims about gendering may be internal gradations, further elaborations within a single set of agreed upon terms, rather than evidence of conflict or struggle. Thus, in a context where multiple gendered meanings circulate, we cannot assume they are in contradiction. To the contrary, in order to adequately grasp what they mean in the social space at hand, we need to ask if they are nested – or not – and if so, in what order.

This can be seen most clearly in occupational systems, in which jobs that are understood as relatively masculine or feminine from the outside are frequently subdivided internally in the same manner.¹⁵ Thus, ‘doctor’ is generally coded as masculine in relation to ‘nurse’. However, within the category of doctor, ‘pediatrician’ is coded as feminine in comparison to ‘surgeon’. Thus, in order to adjudicate whether the claim that pediatrician is feminized is in contradiction to the claim that doctor is masculinized, one needs to look at the empirical context. One could certainly imagine struggles in which that claim is a destabilizing one, but it is probably more frequently true that the idea of the feminized pediatrician is simply a further specification within a stable masculinized term and as such reinforces rather than contests conventional gendered meanings. In such cases, terms such as variability or contradiction are far too imprecise to capture the structured hierarchy within which these gendered distinctions take on meaning. Thus, the crucial task for the analyst seeking to grasp the gendering of a specific arena is to understand the relevant level and vantage point at which distinctions are made in the space itself.

In the rhetoric of unionized workers in the US heartland, plants like Andromex are coded as feminized ‘assembly’: cheap, docile workers stealing

US breadwinners' jobs. But internally the contrast is not with Detroit, but with the expressly feminized maquila industry. In consequence, seen from the shop floor, Andromex codes as masculine, with important implications for the functioning of shop-floor control. It is gender's fractal structure which both gave me the impression of chaos and which made these nested contrasts possible, as the dichotomy between masculine and feminine was remade at many levels, both inside and outside the plant. Over space and time, the distinctions became increasingly fine, but that made them no less consequential. Andromex's high productivity rates were in part based on its operation within a highly gendered context, in which it was precisely managers' capacity to assert masculinity *in contrast to a highly feminized backdrop* that ensured such effective shop-floor control.

Seen in this light, Gladis's insistence on a feminine mode of struggle also comes into clearer focus. In my initial analysis, I took her narrative to be part of an uncoordinated set of gendered narratives. Once having grasped gender's fractal structure, we can better understand her claim as a classic subsidiary – and thus stabilizing – repetition, creating the same masculine/feminine distinction, but now within rather than across shop floors. From this perspective it becomes clear that the language of 'proliferation' that I used to analyze what I saw at Andromex initially was simply inaccurate, as it suggested random variation in an arena that was in fact characterized by structured relationships and serial oppositions.

None of this is intended to imply that gender is static, that gendered meanings are always-already set in relation to human interaction, or that all the gendered meanings within a particular social space are internally coherent, ordered simply by recursivity. To the contrary, gendered meanings are frequently in flux and remade in interaction and they are often in tension within a single social arena.¹⁶ This was, in fact, the case in the Juárez maquila labor market as a whole, where managers' deep epistemological and emotional commitments to a certain image of feminized work created space for new gendered subjectivities and at times led to chaos on the shop floor. Nonetheless, my failure to keep alert to the unmarked, to draw referential webs, and to check for fractal structuring all impeded my capacity to grasp the ways that gender was being enacted in Andromex. The foregoing is intended to bring such questioning to the fore in analytic work.

Gender on the line

Although these processes were relatively hard to see in Andromex, they are sometimes quite clear in the field, even without this semiotic language. At the upper reaches of transnational production, where managers reside whose networks and experiences span states, production systems and

decades, and where almost everything is encoded as text eventually, the contrasts and comparisons through which export-processing is labeled 'women's work' are clear without explicit naming. When I asked the managers I interviewed in Juárez about what made export-processing 'women's work', they were happy to elaborate: the work is low-paid, dead-end, unskilled, boring and highly-detailed. The motley assemblage of characteristics seemed to me to be so obvious that in my first interviews I forget to write its specific incarnation down.¹⁷ Of course this was what women's work was, of course this was what export-processing work was. It was easily intelligible because the implicit references and contrasts that made for this transparency were so obvious as to resist specification – for me as well as for those I interviewed. I knew without the awkwardness of translation that in this context 'women's work' was being contrasted with 'men's work' – which here, although not necessarily elsewhere, meant well-paid, unionized, long-term, skilled and 'heavy'. At the same time, 'women workers' – patriarchally controlled, supplementary earners – were being understood in contrast to 'workers' (masculinity need not be named) – assertive, breadwinning patriarchs. This is by no means the only meaning 'women's work', or for that matter 'women', has of course. In another context, 'women's work' might mean unpaid housework, where the implicit but apparent contrast is 'men's work' understood as paid work in general; and 'women' might index 'mothers', as opposed to a 'normal' male focus on provision rather than caretaking. However, it is a tribute to the way meanings work that which meanings were being indexed was clear to me and those I interviewed alike.

Unfortunately, there are many arenas within which all of this is less clearly spoken or practiced – Andromex, like many arenas of daily life, was one such social space. In smaller, less enduring and less text-based social worlds such as those in which many of us do fieldwork, these references and distinctions can be far harder to catch, in part because the participants themselves may neither name nor even recognize the labeling processes they otherwise enact. Furthermore, what counts as 'feminine' or 'masculine' can become increasingly minute, or even contradictory, as these distinctions proliferate downwards. The fractal nature of these processes is such that something which counts as feminine at one level, say that of the labor market, is recoded as masculine at a level below, for instance in a particular shop floor, where the contrasts in operation already take the first set for granted. Here the ethnographer's task becomes more delicate. The first step in any analysis is interpretive and involves making judgments about what precisely is being indexed – what implicit comparisons and contrasts are at work – in a particular social space. This in turn requires that we specify the relevant context in which meanings are made. Interpretation of course is a fundamental challenge for all ethnography, and in fact for all social or

human 'science', but in an ethnography of gender, the issue of context and meaning is brought front and center.

The question of whether or not this system of production is ungendered or masculinized is I think interesting in itself, but it is not self-evidently important. Let me clarify here why this might matter in a larger theoretical and political context as well. In the early 1990s, Leslie Sklair argued that once jobs were terminally 'feminized' – both in the maquila industry and elsewhere in transnational assembly work – men could be brought in on the same terms as women, without risking challenges to the overall definition or conditions of work or wages (Sklair, 1993: 172). This is an important insight because it suggests, correctly I believe, that discursive processes of feminization not only structure poor jobs for women, but can substantially erode the power of all workers in those areas. However, as framed, the argument implies that feminization is something that happens to a job category, full stop. The selfhood of those filling the job is not understood as relevant to the process. Nonetheless, we know from decades of shop-floor ethnographies that successful capitalist production ultimately requires consent as well as coercion (Burawoy, 1979, 1985; Edwards, 1979; Knights, 1990; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Kondo, 1990; Kunda, 1992; Willis, 1979). Could it be true that men could simply be placed in 'feminized' jobs and would find themselves with no choice but to comply? I think not. The process is more complex, and the analysis above suggests how this might work.

Before returning to Andromex, let me make a brief detour. During my fieldwork in the maquilas, I worked in four plants. As I mentioned earlier, despite the ongoing force of the trope of productive femininity in the industry overall, a shortage of young women had forced some plants to hire men. One of these was a plant I called 'Anarchomex', in which 60 percent of the labor force was male. This was the only plant I studied where labor control was an absolute failure.¹⁸ In Anarchomex, managers believed that real men should be 'breadwinners' and that maquila work was not breadwinner work by definition. They dealt with the cognitive dissonance this created by simply refusing to bring the hundreds of male workers in the plant into their range of vision. Instead, in interviews, whenever they discussed labor-control problems, they immediately began discussing their ongoing search for women workers, complaining about the 'teenagers' on the line and casually denigrating male maquila workers' masculine credentials. If these young men took these jobs, it was their masculinity, not plant policies, which was suspect. Needless to say, young men on Anarchomex's shop floor, although formally willing to accept feminized work conditions, were indeed not 'productive' workers, despite the capacity to work astoundingly efficiently when aiming to take an unofficial flirting break further down the line. Instead of thinking about work or even wages, they

spent their days romancing, hassling and competing with their female co-workers, thus creating the most entertaining and chaotic shop floor I found. The situation was so difficult that plant managers decided just before my arrival to cut the workforce in half and build an entirely new plant to house half its production, as they were convinced that workforce size – because it forced them to hire ‘too many’ men – was the problem on the shop floor.

This story suggests that hiring men into feminized jobs is harder than it sounds. Although Sklair is clearly right in flagging femininity as a structure of meaning that has both enabled cheap labor and functioned to keep maquila jobs defined in those terms, production itself requires other processes at work. One way to think about the difference between Anarchomex and Andromex is through the semiotic framework I laid out above. In the maquilas, plant managers have a huge amount of power in setting plant atmosphere, and the Anarchomex manager was an American who had previously worked in Detroit. To him, maquila jobs were ‘women’s jobs’, in explicit contrast to the ‘men’s jobs’ back home. Thus, despite all the men on the line, production in the plant was never redefined as a legitimate masculine realm. In consequence, it was impossible for management to fully incorporate male workers into production, and given that, they disrupted production on a regular basis. In Andromex, on the other hand, the Mexican plant manager was deeply committed to the notion that Mexican men could be good workers in his plant, and over time the plant had developed into a space within the industry in which men could feel legitimately at home. Within this context, it was possible to successfully address workers, men and women alike, within Andromex’s parameters. This suggests that it is precisely gender’s fractal structure that makes it possible for men to enter ‘women’s jobs’ as productive subjects. Within the context of a feminized industry, new gendered divisions are formed. It is inside this new, masculinized partition that men can be incorporated into what is understood overall as a feminized system of production. Even in the maquilas, men can emerge as legitimate gendered subjects on the shop floor. In order to understand not just *that* but *how* this occurs, we need to understand how gender operates as a structure of meaning, and to look empirically at the context within which those meanings are made.

Increasingly, gender is being used in everyday parlance as a less-embarrassing and more sophisticated way of referring to ‘sex’. However, if one takes the term seriously as a claim that ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ are forms of human classification, rather than intrinsic human attributes, then it forces us to recognize that gender is complicated indeed as an object of empirical investigation. As a social category like race or other ascriptions, gender is simultaneously subjective and objective. That is, it is itself a knowledge claim, an idea about how the world is and should be ordered (Bourdieu, 1984), and it is only as such that it goes on to have the profound

pragmatic consequences for people, distribution and politics that we more easily identify. Thus, just as recognizing ‘situated knowledges’ requires that we make explicit our own location, tools and questions as researchers (Haraway, 1988), so recognizing that gendered meanings themselves are ineluctably situated requires that when we ask if and how a social arena is gendered, we specify the context within which those meanings emerge and the perspective from which they are read. In the case of *Andromex*, this meant specifying the web of references within and through which practices and claims took on meaning when seen from the shop floor. It is only in making such a highly situated semiotic process visible that we can adjudicate what sorts of genderings, if any, are at work.

None of this is unique to gender of course. These are issues facing anyone analyzing processes of social classification. Social categories are by definition semiotic, relational and contextual. As such, they always emerge somewhere, they are necessarily understood by someone, they respond to particular questions. It is this feature of their social character that makes them so well-suited to theoretically conscious, explicitly situated ethnographic investigation, and it is also this feature which makes them so easy to misread.

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Notes

- 1 ‘Maquilas’, or ‘maquiladoras’, are Mexican export-processing factories, owned by foreign (usually US) capital. They were first established in 1965 on Mexico’s northern border. The factories employ low-paid (even by local standards) Mexican workers to assemble US-produced parts into goods to be sold, free of normal import taxes, on the US market. In the last decade, NAFTA has placed much of Mexican industry in the same situation, but this was not the case in the early 1990s when I did this research.
- 2 Catanzarite and Strober (1993). I first read this paper in draft form in the late 1980s.

- 3 Juárez was home to the maquila industry's largest labor force, hence my decision to go there to investigate the famed shortages in operation.
- 4 I supplemented shop-floor conversations with informal, taped interviews with workers with whom I'd established relationships at the plant. I talked to people from a cross-section of jobs – one man alone and four men and four women each in pairs of two.
- 5 This description is a nearly verbatim excerpt from my 1997 *Feminist Studies* article, slightly amplified from fieldnotes to make the argument here easier to follow.
- 6 Reviewer's comments for the University of Chicago Press (1999). I eventually chose to publish the manuscript with the University of California Press (2003).
- 7 In Spanish, collective nouns are gendered feminine only if all members of the group are female. If there is even one male included in the group, the grammatically correct locution would name the group as a whole in masculine terms. This would imply that in newspaper articles and managerial discussions, *operadores* should be used in most cases. This is not what occurs however. To the contrary, in general, the term *operadoras* is used to refer to groups of workers or to maquila workers in the abstract. The fact that the category *operadora* retains its feminine ending even when inhabited by male workers suggests the depth of the association between women and the term in customary usage.
- 8 Although I do not do this analysis here, this comment makes clear how nationality, like gender, plays in these contexts. For this manager, it is actually Javier's experience in the US that qualifies him as fully masculine.
- 9 Simone de Beauvoir put this elegantly when she wrote half a century ago, 'Man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria . . .' (1989: xxi).
- 10 In 1985, as men began to be dominate the plant work force, the company newspaper published a paean to manhood on its first page headlined 'LET'S BE MEN', followed by a set of exhortations to responsible productivity phrased as exhortations to manliness (*El Conversador*, November 1985).
- 11 Space does not permit me to go into the causes of such differences here. For a more complete analysis of the shop floor, including an analysis of its emergence, see Salzinger, 2003, Chapter 6.
- 12 [Braverman, 1974](#); Buraway, 1979, 1985; Edwards, 1979.
- 13 Barajas and Rodríguez, 1990; Benería and Roldán, 1987; Elson and Pearson, 1981, 1986; [Enloe, 1989](#); Frobel et al., 1980; Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1983; Gambrill, 1981; Hossfeld, 1990; Iglesias, 1985; [Joeques, 1985](#); Lim, 1983; Mies, 1986; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Pearson, 1986; Safa, 1986; Standing, 1989; Tiano, 1987a, 1987b.

- 14 For a fascinating discussion of how fractals function socially, see Gal (2002). Bourdieu (1984) defines a similar set of processes around social categorization, although he doesn't use the language of fractals to do so.
- 15 Abbott (2001: 159–65) provides an elegant description of how this works structurally in *Chaos of Disciplines*.
- 16 See Fraser (1992) for an insightful discussion of tensions around this issue in feminist theory.
- 17 This is in part because we share a position in what has become a global system of stratification, so that despite differences in political evaluation and intention, our taken-for-granted about what *is* have substantial overlap. Leslie Sklair discusses this phenomenon in *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (2001).
- 18 For a full discussion of this plant, see Salzinger (2003, Chapter 7).

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