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FROM HIGH HEELS TO SWATHED BODIES: GENDERED MEANINGS UNDER PRODUCTION IN MEXICO'S EXPORT-PROCESSING INDUSTRY

LESLIE SALZINGER

In recent decades, young, Third World women have emerged as transnational capital's paradigmatic workers. Managerial manifestos recast women's "natural" affinity for the home as a transferable set of skills and dispositions. These then crystallize into "docility" and "dexterity"—terms that go on to have autonomous effects as "labor force requirements" for assembly workers internationally.¹ In this process, men have been redefined as nonworkers—lazy, demanding, and unreliable. This public narrative of home-grown sex differences provides a backdrop to the constitution of localized gendered meanings in export factories throughout the Third World.

During the first decades of the boom in transnational production, managers and feminists were in substantive agreement about the utility of young women's preconstituted "femininity" for capitalist production, although their moral evaluations of the process were markedly divergent.² However, in recent years, poststructuralist feminist theorists of work have turned their attention to understanding the formation of "gendered categories," rather than uncritically narrating history within them.³ This has enabled them to go beyond recounting the fate of "woman workers" to investigate the processes through which the gendered character of labor power itself is established. Focusing on public narratives, they have described the deployment of images of the "exploitable woman worker" from nineteenth-century France to the contemporary Third World.⁴

Meanings are constituted and operate at many levels however, and public narratives are only one of them. The post-structuralist focus on overarching categories has led to sophis-

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ticated delineations of "the" hegemonic, linguistically established gender categories that structure workplaces in a particular cultural moment. Such research agendas obscure the high level of variation between gendered meaning structures across individual workplaces and their links to particular sets of daily practices and struggles. In this process, these analyses reinforce a more generalized theoretical assumption that gender's meanings are stable across arenas within a single cultural system. If the content of gender categories is determined by the meaning structures within which their occupants are interpellated,⁵ then it behooves us to investigate, rather than to assume, the context in which meanings are formed and at what levels they vary.

In the spirit of this project, therefore, the following pages explore the constitution of gendered meanings in a set of three workplaces, all located in Ciudad Juárez and drawing on the same young, immigrant, North Mexican work force. By locating myself in production, within the meanings and practices of individual shop floors, a plethora of idiosyncratic "femininities" and "masculinities" become visible that are obscured in external discussions and descriptions of Mexico's export-processing industry. Of course, factory-level gendered meanings and subjectivities refer to larger discussions. However, they never simply echo them. Instead, they take shape within the framework of local, managerial subjectivities and strategies, and their final form can only be understood within the context of these immediate structures.

GENDERS UNDER PRODUCTION

When Mexico's Border Industrialization Program was established in 1965, it was already framed in public, gendered rhetorics. The border, export-processing factories, known as "maquilas,"⁶ were ostensibly intended to hire men expelled from migrant labor jobs in the United States. However, like other export-processing factories in free-trade zones around the world, maquila managers already had an image of "export workers" and male farmworkers were not it. Advertising for *Señoritas* and *Damitas* throughout the border areas made clear—only young women need apply.⁷ These policies were re-

peatedly, if indirectly, legitimated in public discussions by managers, union bosses, and political commentators, all of whom persistently invoked the superiority of women workers and the deficiencies of their male counterparts. In a typical article, a manager commented matter-of-factly: "85% of the labor force is made up of women, since they're more disciplined, pay more attention to what they do, and get bored less than men do."⁸ In an article headlined "Maquiladoras Don't Have Problems with 'Saint Monday'" (an allusion to [male] workers' unilaterally taking Monday as a holiday), the president of the Association of Maquiladoras explained that dependable work attendance "is one of the positive aspects offered by a female labor force."⁹

In the early 1980s, however, the image of the docile young woman began to crack. Inter-union conflicts led to several strikes, bringing anomalous pictures of defiant women workers, sticks in hand, to the front pages of local newspapers. Shortly thereafter, peso devaluations dramatically cut wage costs in dollar terms, and the demand for maquila workers soared. This led to a shortage of young women willing to work at maquila wages and to an increasingly assertive attitude on the part of those already employed. Confronted by young women workers who did not behave like "women" at all, some managers faced by shortages turned to young men. By the end of the decade, men made up close to one-half the maquila work force; and within individual factories, managers deployed increasingly diverse discourses around gender in their hiring and labor control strategies.

Given the historical persistence of the trope of the "malleable working woman" described in the literature,¹⁰ early public discussions of essentialized femininity come as no surprise. What is more remarkable is the ongoing resilience of this trope in citywide discussions of the industry in the face of changed labor market conditions and labor control strategies. More than a decade after men began entering maquila jobs in large numbers, the head of labor relations for the Association of Maquiladoras comments that maquilas do better to hire women: "Men are not inclined to sit. Women are calmer about sitting." Current interviews with managers about ideal workers elicit the same tropes—patient and malleable women, impatient and un-

controllable men. These traditionally gendered descriptions of "ideal workers" emerge even in the conversation of managers who—in response to the unavailability of cheap, young women—deploy distinctively gendered hiring and labor control strategies in the day-to-day management of their own factories.

Thus, these labor market shifts have produced a highly visible disjuncture between public narratives about gender and work and managers' gendered shop-floor strategies. Individual manager's claims around the gendered nature of the "ideal" worker reference public framings but do not reproduce them. Instead the specific institutional functions and managerial subjectivities on each shop floor lead not only to particular systems of production and labor control but also to specifically gendered versions of these systems. As a result, within the context of these individualized strategies and workers' responses to them, distinctive gendered subjectivities emerge for workers on each production floor.

This demographic shift provides us with an opportunity to investigate the localized construction of gendered meanings in a historical moment in which public narratives are relatively weak and local discourses are comparatively easy to discern. Thus, in the pages that follow I will take up where previous authors have left off, at the factory door. Entering the arena of production, I will show the variations in gendered meaning structures between three factories located within what is otherwise a common discursive context. In so doing, it will become possible to identify fissures in gendered meanings at a local level and to trace these differences to the particular struggles within which they emerge. In addition, in each locale, we can delineate the consequences that emergent gendered meanings have for the struggles that generated them.

The maquilas I will discuss here are typical of large plants in the area and exhibit a set of basic similarities. Although two have official "unions," in all three, workers are basically unorganized and managers set the parameters within which shop floor struggles occur. All are directly owned by enormous, world-renowned transnationals. The factories themselves are large, ranging from 750 to 1,100 workers in the day's first shift. Wages are low, generally about fifty dollars a week. This is far less than is necessary to support an independent life, still

less a family, in Ciudad Juárez. As a result, workers tend to be in their teens or early twenties and generally are unmarried and childless. The absence of any compensation for seniority leads to high turnover, and most workers have been on the job for under a year. It is against this backdrop of low-wage, low-investment work that the stories I recount below take place.

Given the level of managerial control in structuring these shop floors, I will pay particular attention to managerial practices in identifying the discourses that constitute local gendered meanings and subjectivities.¹¹ Nonetheless, the narrative will not take the form of structured comparisons of a consistent set of explanatory variables across shop floors. Subjectivity cannot be "held constant." Rather, I analyze each case as a unique configuration of structuring discourses within which the logic of local gendered meanings and subjectivities becomes comprehensible. Hence, I will argue through illustration, underlining in each case the highly idiosyncratic mix of managerial decisions, worker responses, and resultant gendered subjectivities on each shop floor. Each subsection should be read as a unit, an instance of the way that particular gendered meanings are constituted in terms of a specific context of domination and struggle.

The analysis draws on eighteen months of participant observation, interviewing, and archival research in Ciudad Juárez on Mexico's northern border.¹² Given my interest in localized subjectivities, the meat of the "data" comes through factory ethnographies. That is, I gather information on the "constitution of gendered meanings" through locating myself within the meaning-imbued practices, narratives, and structures of a particular shop floor. It is through interacting, through addressing and being addressed, that I come to grasp the formation of gendered subjectivities on a local level. Thus, the images below are not those of a worker or of an observer but of a "participant observer"—of an outsider located both literally and metaphorically on the line.

Seeing is believing. The gendered meanings and subjectivities enacted at "Panoptimex"¹³ appear to be straightforward reflections of external narratives.¹⁴ On its production floor, male supervisors direct objectivized and sexualized young women—apparently preconstituted in the home for use on the line. Yet

what is most noticeable over time spent in the plant is the amount of work dedicated to the creation of appropriately gendered workers. In this television assembly plant, managers' obsession with the visual sets the parameters within which gendered meanings are established. Labor control practices based on the heightened visibility of workers constitute self-conscious and self-monitoring women and emasculated men. Thus, managerial framing generates, rather than simply takes advantage of, a particular set of gendered subjectivities and in so doing establishes a high level of shop floor quiescence.

The plant manager is a white-blond South American with his sights set on headquarters. He is obsessed with the aesthetics of "his" factory—repainting the shop floor his trademark colors and insisting on ties for supervisors and tunics for workers. The plant is the company's local showpiece, a state-of-the-art facility whose design has been so successful that its blueprint was recently bought by a competitor building a second factory in the city.

The factory floor is organized for visibility—a panopticon¹⁵ in which everything is marked. Yellow tape lines the walkways; red arrows point at test sites; green, yellow, and red lights glow above the machines. On the walls hang large, shiny white graphs documenting quality levels in red, yellow, green, and black. Just above each worker's head is a chart full of dots—green for one defect, red for three defects, gold stars for perfect days. Workers' bodies too are marked: yellow tunics for new workers; light blue tunics for women workers; dark blue smocks for male workers and mechanics; orange tunics for (female) "special" workers, red tunics for (female) group chiefs; lipstick; mascara; eyeliner; rouge; high heels; miniskirts; identity badges. . . . Everything is signaled.

Ringling the top of the production floor are windows. One flight up the managers sit, behind glass, looking—or perhaps not. From on high, they "keep track of the flow of production," calling down to a supervisor to ask about a slowdown, easily visible from above in the accumulation of televisions in one part of the line, gaps further along, or in a mound of sets in the center of a line, technicians clustered nearby. Late afternoons the plant manager and his assistant descend. Hands clasped behind backs, they stroll the plant floor, stopping to chat and

joke, just as everyone says, with "the young and pretty ones."

The personnel department—its members titled "social workers"—is entirely focused on questions of appropriate appearance and behavior, rather than on the work itself. "That's not manly, a man with *trousers* wouldn't behave like that!" one of the social workers tells a young male worker who showed his ex-girlfriend's letter to others on the line. "Remember this, it's agreeable to be important, but more important to be agreeable," she counsels a young woman who keeps getting into arguments with her coworkers. Behavior, attitude, demeanor—typically in highly gendered form—is evaluated here. Skill, speed, and quality rarely come up.

Managerial focus on the look of things is reflected in the demographics of the workplace as well. Close to 80 percent of the plant's direct line workers are women. They sit in long lines, always observed, repeating the same meticulous gestures a thousand times during the nine-hour day. During the 1980s, when it became difficult to hire women workers and most Juárez maquilas began hiring men, the company went so far as to recruit a busload of young women from a rural village forty-five minutes away. The company, calmed by the sight of the familiarly populated lines, provided the workers with free transportation to and from work for years.

Lines are "operator controlled." The chassis comes to a halt in front of the worker, she inserts her components and pushes a button to send it on. There is no piece rate, no moving assembly line, to hurry her along. But in this fishbowl, no one is willing to be seen with the clogged line behind her, an empty space ahead of her, managers peering from their offices above. And if she does slow momentarily, the supervisor materializes. "Ah, here's the problem. What's wrong, my dear?" For the supervisor is, of course, watching as well as watched. He circles behind seated workers, monitoring efficiency and legs simultaneously—his gaze focused sometimes on "nimble fingers" at work, sometimes on the quality of hairstyle. Often he will stop by a favorite operator—chatting, checking quality, flirting. His approval marks "good worker" and "desirable woman" in a single gesture.

"Did you see him talking to her?" For the eyes of workers are also at work, quick side-glances registering a new style, mak-

ing note of wrinkles that betray ironing undone. "Oof, look how she's dressed!" With barely a second thought, women workers can produce five terms for "give her the once over." A young woman comments that when she started work she used no makeup, only wore dresses below the knee. But then her co-workers started telling her she looked bad, that she should "fix herself up." As she speaks, her best friend surveys her painted, miniskirted physique affectionately, "They say one's appearance reveals a lot," she remarks. Two lines down, another young woman mentions she missed work the day before because she slept too late—too late that is to do her hair and makeup and still make the bus. To come to work is to be seen, to watch, and so to watch and see yourself.¹⁶

The ultimate arbiter of desirability, of course, is neither one's self nor one's coworkers, but supervisors and managers. Workers gossip constantly about who is or is not chosen. For those (few) so-anointed, the experience is one of personal power. "If you've got it, flaunt it!" a worker comments gleefully, looking from her lace bodysuit to the supervisor hovering nearby.¹⁷ This power is often used more instrumentally as well. On my first day in the plant, a young woman—known as one of the "young and pretty ones" favored by managerial notice—is stopped by guards for lateness. She slips upstairs and convinces the plant manager to intercede for her. She is allowed to work after all. The lines sizzle with gossip.

The few men on the line are not part of these games. Physically segregated, they stand rather than sit, attaching screen and chassis to the cabinet at one end, packing the finished product at the other. They move relatively freely, joking and laughing and calling out—noisy and ignored. The supervisor is conspicuous in his absence from their section of the line, and they comment disdainfully that he's afraid to bother them. Nonetheless, when they get too obviously boastful he brings it to a halt. Abruptly he moves the loudest of them, placing them in soldering where they sit in conspicuous discomfort among the "girls" while the others make uneasy jokes about how boring it is "over there."

One young man says he came here intentionally for all the women. "I thought I'd find a girl friend. I thought it would be fun." "And was it?" I ask. There's a pause. "No one paid any at-

tention to me," he responds finally, a bit embarrassed, laughing and downcast. His experience reminds me of a story told by one of the women workers who returned to the factory after having quit. "It's a good environment here," she says. "In the street they [men] mess with us, but here, we mess with them a little. We make fun of them and they get embarrassed." In the factory, to be male is to have the right to look, to be a supervisor. Gender and class positions are discursively linked. Standing facing the line, eyes trained on his work, the male line-worker does not count as a man. In the plant's central game, he is neither subject nor object. As a result, he has no location from which to act—either in his relation to the women in the plant or in relation to factory managers.

What is striking once inside the plant is how much work is involved in the ongoing labor of constructing appropriate "young women" and "young men" out of new hires. Gendered meanings are forged within the context of panoptic labor control strategies in which women are constituted as desirable objects and male managers as desiring subjects. Male workers become not-men, with no standing in the game. These identities are defined by management in the structure of the plant, but they are reinforced by workers. Young women workers take pleasure in the experience of being desirable and in their use of this delicious if limited power in attempting to evade the most egregious aspects of managerial control. Male workers attempt to assert an alternate masculinity, becoming vulnerable in the process to the managerial ability to undercut these assertions.

The gendered meanings developed here are familiar, echoing the formulations of the public narrative described above, as well as descriptions of export-processing factories in other parts of the world. These resonances suggest a model in which a single set of gendered representations emerges within the logic of an entire economic system, subsequently filtering down to local arenas. However, even amidst such similarities we note the plethora of localized practices within which these repetitious meanings are constituted anew.

Workers as "inputs." Unlike Panoptimex, where emergent gendered meanings and subjectivities appear to echo those crystallized in public discussion about the maquilas, the femininities and masculinities constructed at "Anarchomex" clearly depart

from these confines. Like their counterparts at Panoptimex, Anarchomex managers reiterate external gendered frameworks. However, their hiring and labor control practices around gender are in tension with their claims; and within the context of this contradiction, a new set of gendered meanings and subjectivities emerges that sharply diverges both from public narratives and from those at Panoptimex.

Anarchomex assembles harnesses (car electrical systems), and distant managers define workers as just another set of inputs. As a result, they are more concerned with finding the "right" workers than with addressing those they have. This has ramifications throughout the labor process. Managers have little presence on the shop floor and do less to speak to the subjectivities of workers—whether gendered or otherwise—on the line. As a result, given the high demand for women workers and the enormity of the plant, they have trouble attracting sufficient numbers of young women to work. Despite their primarily male work force, however, they continue to echo hegemonic narratives, defining women as ideal workers and men as congenitally unsuitable to maquila work.

Male workers respond to this combination of managerial absence and depreciation by claiming the social, sexual, work space of the shop floor as their own—in so doing, constituting a masculinity that at once restricts their female coworkers and contests managerial disrespect. Women workers are located at the intersection of two contradictory gendered discourses and constitute identities that hold assertion and passivity, work and sexuality, in complex tension. The gendered meanings that emerge here can not only be traced to local antecedents, but have local effects as well, as they undermine the managerial attempts at control from which they emerged at the outset.

The factory floor is dingy, dated, and chaotic—an enormous barnlike structure with dark grey floors and walls, exposed fluorescent lights hanging from cavernous ceilings. On the right side of the building, huge boards circulate. On the left, smaller boards revolve at a brisker pace, interspersed with splicing stations draped with wires of every imaginable color and length. Everything obstructs the view of everything else.

The plant manager is an American with many years of experience in U.S. harness production, but few on the border. His

Spanish is weak, and he keeps his distance from the shop floor. He tends toward discussions of Mexican "cultural" problems and is particularly concerned by his Mexican supervisory staff, whom he sees as simultaneously unwilling to take responsibility for problems and overly authoritarian and controlling on the line. As a result, he encourages supervisors to focus on the indices. "A line is like a grocery store. The supervisor . . . buys inputs and sells a product and he has to balance his books."

Not surprisingly given this framework, supervisors are notable for their absence on the plant floor. Everyone—workers included—knows about the numbers: numbers of defects, of harnesses unmade, of extra workers per line; and supervisors frequently call meetings in which they tell workers what the line's numbers are for the week and scold them for not doing better. But no one is there by the production line, hanging over workers' shoulders and watching them work. It is numbers that supervisors pore over, not bodies.

It is not that management is unconcerned with workers' characters. On the contrary, from the plant manager on down, getting the "right" workers is a preoccupation. However, the focus is not on making good workers but on finding them. As a result, management puts far more energy into hiring strategies than into labor control. Once the right sort of workers are hired, goes the logic, labor control will take care of itself. Hence, in discussing the production floor disarray, the plant manager comments, "No one can control 2,000 teenagers," and goes on to outline attempts to attract more job applicants.

This focus on hiring the "right" workers at the outset is particularly problematic because the primary criterion for being a "good worker" is being female, and the factory has never succeeded in hiring more than 40 percent women. Given its size—the plant is 50 percent larger than Panoptimex—and managers' failure to address any gendered subjectivities on the shop floor, Anarchomex could not begin to compete for women workers.¹⁸ Today the work force is 65 percent male.

These demographics are not inherently problematic for labor control, as we shall see in the case of "Androgymex" discussed below. However, the absence of any pretense of a "family wage" in the plant appears to make Anarchomex managers, both Mexican and American, reluctant to diverge from the public

framework that defines women as appropriate maquila workers, even in the face of their overwhelmingly male work force. Instead, managers comment disparagingly on the willingness of their young male employees to accept Anarchomex jobs. Typically dismissive, Marcos, the quality manager, comments, "Say I'm twenty years old. I know that with this job I can't support a family. Obviously, I'm going to look for something better." To reframe the work as men's work would be to define it as underpaid. Faced with the choice between questioning maquila pay practices or the manliness of maquila workers, managers choose to question their subordinates. As a result, Anarchomex managers hold their gendered practices and narratives in permanent tension, disparaging the great majority of their work force in the process.

Given management's sense that workers' aptitude for and attitude toward work is set at hiring, it comes as little surprise that the bulk of the labor control mechanisms they do employ are punitive in nature. As in other plants, pay is docked for lateness and absenteeism. "Technicians"—those promoted workers who do the bulk of daily supervision—are constantly coming by and scolding workers for producing defects, for sitting down, for disappearing from their posts. But, as their title indicates, their primary focus is on technical and not personnel issues. Workers' selves are not incorporated into either the work or the work place.

In general, it is workers who keep each other in check on a daily basis. Unlike the television plant, assembly is done standing by a moving line. Workers are mobile, following the boards as they go. If experienced workers want to take a break, they can work ahead, intruding on the previous workstation and reappearing just in time to finish a subsequent board, by now moving through an adjacent worker's territory. However, in most workstations, part of the assigned task is contingent upon the completion of previous jobs and is difficult to do once later stages have been finished. As a result, this work rhythm—or even a real inability to keep up—disrupts the work of those nearby. Thus, the limits on work pace are social and lateral, depending on the tolerance of coworkers and the thick-skinnedness of the worker in question. Workers rather than supervisors hold the pivotal place in labor control, and this

leaves much of the daily life of the factory in their hands.

The centrality of workers in monitoring each other does not produce investment in the work itself, however. On the contrary, in the context of extreme disconnection between workers and their product, these heightened social interactions take on a life of their own. Throughout days otherwise saturated by the meaninglessness of the work, workers elaborate a compelling, ritualized, laughter-filled world of play on the shop floor. In fact, the factory has gained a reputation beyond its walls for the teasing, flirtatious social life developed in its confines.

This social world is not neutral in gender terms, however. Stepping into the vacuum left by management, male workers determined to reestablish their masculinity assert it in this space. New, orange-smocked workers are greeted by male voices immediately upon entering the factory floor. "Carrots, carrots!" goes the chorus. But soon the women among the newcomers pick out a different call. "Carrot, come. Come here! Here's your rabbit!" Whistles and kissing sounds follow each woman as she walks past line after line to her new workstation. Within a couple of days she is angling for the navy smock used by other workers, an escape from the heightened visibility of the brilliant newcomer's uniform.

The new smock only changes the intensity. Although the whispers and calls diminish, soften and personalize with the new uniform, the male voices never stop. Sexuality—for both the young women and the young men in the plant—remains a primary entertainment, occupation, preoccupation; and in the game of flirtation, men act and women receive. Male workers leave their posts to flirt with prospective girlfriends. Women workers turn their backs on harness boards to chat with suitors. Men call out or visit, women smile and chat in response, either enthusiastically or with polite distance. But they ignore advances at their peril. "Don't be stuck-up," a young woman counsels, "If you act like that, no matter how pretty you are, no one will pay attention to you."

Male workers assert their masculinity not only through their sexualized interactions with their female coworkers, but also by disparaging women's ability to do the work at all. Thus, throughout the day they talk loudly about how the work is "really" men's work—performed standing, requiring speed

and endurance. They point out women workers who are slow or resting. They comment that women workers don't really need to work. They get in the way when their female coworkers attempt to learn new positions. And they describe women's sexuality as inherently problematic at work. Thus, in describing a coworker who acted like "a woman from the street," a young man comments: "If the line were faster and there were more pressure, I can assure you they wouldn't have time to go around grabbing . . . like that." A few lines down another man complains: "They shouldn't wear minis. The point at work is to be on the ball; it's impossible that way."

Although women workers generally enter the arena of sexual play on the terms set by their male coworkers, they resist their denigration as workers. They make no attempt to elaborate the work as inherently feminine. However, they take insistent note of managerial hiring preferences for women, all the while ignoring managers' substantive claim that their value lies in their docility. Locating themselves at the intersection of two discourses of domination, women workers elaborate a femininity marked both by a ritualistically receptive sexuality and a highly capable work persona.

Thus, the gendered meanings defined here depart both from the sense and from the uniformity of those constituted in public narratives and at Panoptimex. Supervisory authority and the right to see do not define masculinity. Instead, activity and aggressiveness vis-à-vis women workers—both in the sphere of sexuality and in the sphere of work—constitute masculinity on the shop floor. Similarly, femininity is not defined around objectification. Instead, what counts as femininity is fragmented. Sexually, to be feminine is not to be *seen*, but rather to receive, as a form of play, the comments of the male workers. And it is male workers who are empowered to judge if women respond appropriately. To be a good woman worker, on the other hand, is specifically not to play, to focus on the work itself. Here, women themselves judge what counts, backed by the distant voices of supervisors. Thus, gendered meanings are contested and contradictory here, evolving within struggles between workers and management and between female and male workers, and in the process leaving room for maneuver for all workers, but particularly for women.

These gendered meanings have both localized antecedents and localized effects. They emerge in response to the use of punitive rather than disciplinary¹⁹ labor control methods and to managerial challenges to worker masculinity. In treating workers as inputs and failing to address the selves of workers on the shop floor, managers inadvertently allow gender to be defined between workers, eroding labor control and constituting subjectivities that they then have little capacity either to legitimate or sanction. Shortly after I left the factory, half the work force was moved to another building, a costly move that idled much of the plant's machinery. The maquila manager explained simply that they'd felt the factory was "too hard to control."²⁰ The set of gendered meanings constituted through managerial hiring and labor control practices undercut those very attempts at control.

Gender under wraps. In Panoptimex, gendered meanings echo those in public discussions, while in Anarchomex they depart from this paradigm. However, in Androgymex, no hegemonic gendered meanings materialize. The definitions of femininity and masculinity crystallized in elite, public discussions are present here, as are many other such definitions, but managerial negation of gender's importance, coupled with the compelling nature of struggles in and over production, sideline the importance of gender as a central axis of subjectivity in daily life on the shop floor. As a result, although various gender definitions are alluded to, discussed, and even employed in the arena of production, no particular configuration emerges as dominant.

Unlike the maquilas discussed above, in Androgymex, production rather than sexuality is the focus of attention in workers' daily practices. Skill matters here. Paid by the piece, workers can appreciably increase their weekly salaries through experience and hard work. This possibility, and the games and conflicts generated by the piecework structure in general, draw attention and focus to the work itself. At the same time, managers' experience with a strike in the early 1980s destroyed any illusion of woman's controllability, and jobs are unmarked by gender on the shop floor. Women and men work side by side, sewing intently, bodies covered in smocks and caps that obscure gender markers. Gendered subjectivities, sexual and otherwise, are muted. Gendered rhetorics abound, but there

are as many opinions about women, men, and work as there are managers, supervisors, and workers to have them, and there is no consistent correspondence between position in production and perspective on gender. As a result, unconnected to the fundamental axes of struggle over control in the factory, gendered categories do not disappear, but they subside into insignificance in daily interaction on the shop floor.

Androgymex produces disposable hospital garments. The impression one receives upon first entering the plant is one of total uniformity amidst chaos. Workers are scattered across its expanse, swathed in the blue smocks and light blue caps produced in the plant. There are no lines. Instead, workers sew, fold, or pack feverishly in groups—tossing their finished products into piles which are carried or wheeled in towering, precarious-looking edifices to the next step in the process. Apparently just at the brink of collapse, the piles are thrown down at the appropriate production site, where they immediately become part of the next step in the process.

Music blasts through the factory. At intervals, loud whoops emerge from the floor in response to a particularly favored selection. If the music is especially inspiring, the commotion may develop into an impromptu salsa—a couple of paired blue smocks dancing in the aisle—sometimes a woman and man, sometimes two women, sometimes two men. Whoops greet other things as well—entrance onto the shop floor without the required sterile smock or cap or the attempt of some unlucky soul to chat privately with someone of the "opposite sex." Always these outbursts delight and enliven, contributing, for the casual observer, to the sense of disorganization and play at work.

And yet, appearances deceive. The single most striking characteristic of this plant is how hard people work. In this factory, production itself compels. This is in part due to the fact that workers are paid by the piece. It is worth it to work hard. Nonetheless, when asked why they set standards for themselves that are higher than those set by the plant itself, answers generally revolve not around money but around making work life bearable.²¹ A woman comments: "I used to work in harnesses. I was so bored I used to 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." The guy down the line from her mea-

sure his production against hers, constantly telling me that *today* he is going to produce more than she.

Forestalling boredom is part of the reason for the focus on work, the possibility of gaining a sense of control is another. Sharing one side of a table are two men, the fastest folders in their section. They both have a personal daily standard far higher than the factory's, and they both give themselves permission to stop work either when they've reached their own quota or at 2:45, even though the work day ends officially at 3:05. "This way *I* decide what I do," says one. One day his group leader insists that he keep working after he's reached his own limit. After a long and aggressive altercation, he goes back to work. But the next day he produces precisely the quota, finishing at exactly 3:05. "She won't bother me about that again," he says with grim satisfaction. He's right.

Piecework fosters a focus on work not only through giving workers a sense of control but precisely because it is the site of so many minor conflicts. A few months before my arrival, management increased the standard, supposedly as a consequence of a new and easier folding pattern. Wages fell. The entire twelve-person section agreed to produce exactly the standard—no more. They lasted a week, until a threatening lecture from the union and the head of production in tandem scared them back to the old rhythm. Now the story is told and retold—evidence sometimes of the impossibility of collective action, sometimes of the ability of the worker telling the story to stand up for her or himself, whatever the consequences.

The event is repeated in miniature again and again. Material is scanty and production falls. Who pays for the lost time—company or workers? Workers complain about the supervisor, contest their checks with the union, squabble with each other over scarce material. "He steals material," go the whispers after an offending worker is caught in the act during a lunchtime stake-out. The quarrels and complaints are constant. Their effect is not disruptive. On the contrary, these myriad conflicts provide a space in which workers can insist on respect and human dignity and in which particular elements of work can be negotiated, without challenging the overall functioning of the plant.

This form of labor control through conflict works in part because workers are valuable in the garment business. In elec-

tronics or harnesses, most workers can be trained in under two weeks. The company can't be forced to negotiate unless workers can threaten to organize broadly. Thus, constant conflicts would simply lead to constant turnover. Sewing however, despite its low-tech nature, is a skill that cannot be easily acquired. This is reflected in the hiring process, where garment plants attempt to steal each others' workers, and in the fact that workers who previously worked in the plant are recontracted, few questions asked. And it is reflected on the shop floor, where workers do sometimes win minor concessions. It is in this context that struggles can be a force for stability. Labor control in this plant is achieved precisely through these ongoing struggles over when, where, and how much. The slightly higher wages show that management has had to respond to some of these demands, but the struggles over exactly how to interpret the rules serves not only to renegotiate amounts but also to reaffirm the managerial right to set the rules to begin with.

This permanently negotiated peace has a history, a history with implications for gender as well as for production processes. In 1981 the work force was almost entirely female. A conflict between two unions paralyzed production, precipitating a yearlong strike still remembered in the city for its violence. It was shortly after that strike, the putative docility of women workers having lost its credibility, that management began hiring men. The current plant manager was brought in at the end of the strike. He discusses the union, piece rates, the "Androgymex family," but gender does not catch his attention. Unlike many of his fellow managers in the maquila industry, he is convinced that gender doesn't matter.

This attitude is visible throughout the plant. Gendered signs are minimized on the shop floor. Because the product is sterile, jewelry, makeup, and beards are prohibited. Workers wear dark blue smocks buttoned high, caps that cover every strand of hair. These remain in place even at meals. At first glance, everyone looks the same. At the outset, it is even difficult to distinguish gender. A young man I met working elsewhere had worked at the plant briefly and left. "You couldn't tell who the pretty ones were," he complained. The first sight of one's co-workers outside is a shock, somehow obscene, as if everyone had suddenly been stripped of clothes entirely. Eyes fall on all sides and smiles are uneasy.

The plant is 55 percent male, 50 percent in the smock area where all the sewing is done. Men and women do the same work. Once the swathing blueness is decoded, one notices scores of men bent over sewing machines, whipping out smocks beside their female coworkers. The woman in charge of hiring tells me: "Group leaders 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—often as high as 20 percent monthly. Group leaders, she implies, will take whomever they can get.

Yet, this is not entirely accurate. In the smock area, gender proportions range from a low of 30 percent men to a high of 70 percent in sections engaged in exactly the same work. Group leaders, generally women who began as line workers years ago, have strong and markedly idiosyncratic opinions about gender, and they indeed request their preferred gender when they ask for workers. One comments: "I don't like to work with men. They're just big children!" The next section down, the group leader disagrees. "I'd rather work with men," she says, "Fewer problems with child care and stuff." It's not that gender isn't articulated in this plant. On the contrary, opinions are legion. But for all the fervency of these comments, they are erratically distributed. There's no "line" on gender.

In this factory, the importance of skill, the institution of piece work, and the strike-impelled presence of a semifunctioning union combine to create a context in which labor control is in part negotiated rather than simply imposed. The resulting daily struggles take the form of impassioned altercations that bypass gendered subjectivities. In a context in which bodies are obscured, literally under wraps, and in which the central struggles of the plant—both between management and workers and among workers—revolve around issues directly related to production, gender ceases to be a significant category. This is not to imply that anyone in the factory forgets her or his gender identification or that people don't have a great deal to say about gender when asked. In fact, gendered discourses proliferate here, in quantity if not in importance. However, there are so many different opinions precisely because none are linked to central conflicts over labor control and work life in the plant. As a result of gender's irrelevance to struggles for power and

control, it loses its practical and experiential importance on a day-to-day basis on the shop floor.²²

Panoptimex reconsidered. Public narratives about the maquilas in Ciudad Juárez continue to elaborate on the docility and malleability of young women workers and the laziness and incompetence of their male counterparts. Androgymex, Anarchomex, and Panoptimex are all embedded within this framework, yet the gendered meanings and subjectivities in the three diverge sharply, both from this larger common sense and from each other. By locating our lens within these factories rather than training it on public discussions about them, these distinctive patterns, and the discursive contexts that shaped them, become visible.

The focus in this analysis on "superficial" differences rather than on "essential similarities" is a theoretically driven one. Obviously, there are commonalities in gendered meanings across these three shop floors. However, much has been made of the "archetypal nature" of Mexican "sex roles." In that context, the differences that emerge here are particularly striking. Any project of transformation must be able to recognize the broad range of lived specificities a "single culture" can encompass.²³ Thus, although it would be perverse not to acknowledge similarities, in this reading I have chosen to foreground the crucial differences in gendered meanings and subjectivities that emerge even in these closely situated arenas.²⁴

In Anarchomex, managers' definition of workers as inputs leads them to ignore all worker subjectivity and actively disparage that of male workers. Worker responses to this ultimately produce a distinctive, local set of femininities and masculinities. Shop floor, worker masculinity comes to be defined around control of production—both of the work and of their female coworkers, whereas shop floor femininity is configured almost entirely around receptive sexuality. In sharp contrast, in Androgymex, the labor process makes possible the emergence of work-based subjectivities, even as the need for a sterile workplace and managerial disillusionment with women workers' docility leads to the minimization of gendered markers on the shop floor. The result is a proliferation of gendered meanings and subjectivities, in which no single set of masculinities or femininities holds sway.

Of the three factories, the gendered meaning structures in evidence in Panoptimex are hardest to distinguish from those of the public narrative within which they are embedded. What counts as "womanly" or "manly" is so close to its definition in external discussion that from a distance it appears as a simple reflection. However, once we focus on factory-level discourses, it becomes clear how vital these local practices are in bringing the docile women and unsuitable men of external definition to life.

Panoptimex managers subscribe to dominant notions of the ideal, feminine maquila worker, and their smaller work force makes it conceivable for them to develop hiring practices that match this image. However, it is their focus on the visual that ultimately compels and enables them to put this vision into practice on the shop floor. The factory is set up to be seen and to look a particular way. The young women seated in long lines complete the appropriate picture—in their own sexualized daily experience as well as in that of managers. Managers at all levels strategize to ensure their presence. Their decision to bus young rural women to work on a daily basis suggests their determination to maintain a primarily female labor force. But women workers also respond to this image. Unlike most maquilas, women workers who leave for other maquila jobs often try to return. Nine hours of objectification prove less stultifying than nine hours of invisibility.

Young women are hired into a panopticon for the same reasons that they are hired at all—because the managerial framework for labor control is to ensure that production looks right. In an arena peopled by male supervisors and female workers, this objectifying modality of control constitutes a particular set of gendered subjectivities. Women workers' laboring and sexualized identities merge on the shop floor, and the few male workers lose their claim to masculinity by virtue of their location at the wrong side of the lens. Although the gendered representations and subjectivities here echo those embedded in public discussions, they are incarnated on the shop floor within specific managerial practices. Even shared representations must be construed and acted upon by living beings in specific contexts. Thus, in seeking to understand the construction of gendered meanings and subjectivities, we must look to the particular configuration of localized frameworks and daily practices within which they emerge.

THEORIZING SPECIFICITIES

"Any attention to the life of a woman, if traced out carefully, must admit the degree to which the effects of lived gender are at least sometimes unpredictable, and fleeting."²⁵ This caution, written by Denise Riley in the late 1980s, was directed not at a sexist academy, but at more than a decade of feminist theory. In the process of delineating and analyzing the oppression of "women," she and other such critics warned, notions of gender as a binary system were being reinforced—replacing biological with sociological essentialism.²⁶

Riley's words encapsulated one of the central goals of post-structuralist feminism: to develop a language capable of describing gender in all its palpable heterogeneity and fluctuating significance. Despite this focus, the unpredictability and inconsistency of gender have been more cited than explored; and, for the most part, theorists working in this tradition have not chosen to further investigate gender's lived specificity. Instead, much of this analysis has remained at the level of the purportedly hegemonic discourses of a particular period—for instance, Judith Butler's²⁷ ongoing dialogue with psychoanalysis or Riley's own fascinating discussion of the changing meaning of "woman" historically.²⁸ This focus on intellectual categories, while certainly crucial, implicitly assumes the societal extension and resonance of a particular discursive understanding of gender.²⁹ The question of how these representations vary between localized arenas of domination, even those sharing elements of a common discursive framework, remains unexplored.

Of this group of scholars, Joan Scott's historical analyses have gone furthest toward recognizing and describing the varied social contexts, as well as the complexity, of gendered meanings. Nonetheless, even this research focuses on public discussion, leaving open the question of how gendered representations are specified and lived within particular sites.³⁰ Poststructuralist feminist theorists have argued that gender is a discursive construction and emphasized its variable content. The research described above seeks to ground and specify these assertions.

Gendered subjectivity indeed appears to be "unpredictable" and "fleeting," but its shifts are neither arbitrary nor isolated. Gender is a social relation—a structure of meanings established

by and between living subjects in the practices of daily life. As such, the meanings of femininity and masculinity vary with these interactions—with the strategies, frameworks, and subjectivities of those who people a specific arena and with the outcome of their struggles. Questioning the conventional gendered categories with which we narrate our stories is an important goal of feminist theory. However, this need not entail a move away from those stories into a history of categories. It is precisely the question of how these categories are built and lived in daily interaction that must concern us.

NOTES

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1. This point is made in dramatically different theoretical contexts in Leslie Sklair, *Assembling for Development: The Maquila Industry in Mexico and the United States* (San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1993): 172-73; Guy Standing, "Global Feminization through Flexible Labor," *World Development* 17 (July 1989): 1077-95; Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review* 15 (March-April 1985): 65-107.

2. See, for instance, Rachel Kamel, *The Global Factory: Analysis and Action for a New Economic Era* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1990); Norma Iglesias Prieto, *La Flor mas bella de la maquiladora* (Mexico City: Secretaria de Educación Pública, 1987); Lourdes Benería and Martha Roldán, *The Crossroads of Class and Gender* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson, "Third World Manufacturing," in *Waged Work*, ed. Feminist Review (London: Virago, 1986): 67-92; Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); Annette Fuentes and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Women in the Global Factory* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

3. See Joan W. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 14 (spring 1988): 46-47; and Ava Baron, "Gender and Labor History: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future," in *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1-46. For excellent examples of research done in

this vein, see the essays in Baron's collection cited above; Joan Scott, "Part III: Gender in History," in Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 93-163; Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990). For work done with more focus on daily practices, see Aihwa Ong's insightful study of women workers in Malaysia, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), and "Japanese Factories, Malay Workers: Class and Sexual Metaphors in West Malaysia," in *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia*, ed. Jane Monnig Atkinson and Shelly Errington (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 385-422.

4. See "L'ouvrière! Mot impie, sordide . . .": Women Workers in the Discourse of French Political Economy, 1840-1860," in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*; and Haraway.

5. Teresa de Lauretis, "The Technology of Gender," in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1-30.

6. Maquilas, or maquiladoras, are Mexican export-processing factories, owned by foreign (usually U.S.) 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 U.S.-produced parts into goods to be sold on the U.S. market. Ciudad Juárez contains the largest concentration of maquila workers in the country. In the last decade, the program has mushroomed. Today it is one of Juárez's largest employers.

7. For excellent histories of this labor market process, see Jorge Carrillo and Alberto Hernández, *Mujeres fronterizas en la industria maquiladora* (Mexico City: SEP-CEFNOMEX, 1985); and Fernandez-Kelly. For an overview of the varied ways in which gender has figured in contemporary transnational production, see Aihwa Ong, "The Gender and Labor Politics of Postmodernity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20 (1991): 279-309.

8. *Fronterizo* (Ciudad Juárez), 16 Mar. 1981.

9. *ABC* (Ciudad Juárez), 27 Sept. 1980.

10. Baron; Benería and Roldán; Elson and Pearson; Fernandez-Kelly; Fuentes and Ehrenreich; Iglesias; Kamel; Haraway; Rose; Sklair; Standing.

11. The search for "constituting discourses" is not an attempt to introduce a more finely tuned essentialism—replacing global images of femininity and masculinity with highly predictable localized images. Gendered meanings do not automatically emerge from a given set of "structural conditions" that managers merely "enact." On the contrary, managerial goals are as discursively shaped as gender itself, and it is managerial subjectivity that determines what constitutes a relevant "condition" in decision making. Similarly, managerial labor control practices do not automatically produce a particular gendered outcome. Like these practices themselves, worker responses are not random, but neither are they inherent in the practices at the outset.

12. The research on which this discussion is based was done in Ciudad Juárez during 1992 and 1993. Data were collected through participant observation on the shop floor of the maquiladoras, through interviews with managers, lawyers, labor organizers, and job seekers outside these factories, and through an archival search of local newspapers from the 1970s and 1980s. In each of the factories discussed in this article, I observed on the shop floor—talking to both workers and supervisors—and interviewed managers in their offices. I spent three months in the television plant, observing but not working in production. In the harness plant I spent ten weeks, and in the scrub clothes plant I spent six weeks. In both these factories I worked on

the line for half of my period in the plant. In all three factories, after leaving I conducted a series of ten, unstructured, small-group interviews in my home with my coworkers.

13. All maquila names used here are fictitious.

14. Ironically enough, this factory not only is easily explained by poststructuralist theory but also most clearly resembles the "patriarchal plant" described by feminists in the 1980s. (See note 2).

15. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

16. Critiques of the physical objectification of women have been a staple of feminist theory since its inception. (See, for instance, Catherine MacKinnon's "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs* 7 [spring 1982]: 515-44). Feminist analysis of the pleasure of being seen has been less developed. One author who discusses this is Valerie Steele, in *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

17. My own style is also under daily examination in the factory. As I listen to the daily gossip, I recognize the inflated sense of one's physical presence that is described by women in the plant.

18. For discussions of the accepted hierarchy of maquila jobs, see Iglesias; Fernandez-Kelly; Susan Tiano, *Patriarchy on the Line: Labor, Gender, and Ideology in the Mexican Maquila Industry* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Lisa Catanzarite and Myra Strober, "The Gender Recomposition of the Maquiladora Labor Force," *Industrial Relations* 32 (winter 1993): 133-47.

19. Foucault.

20. A similarly structured factory owned by the same company had severe labor problems shortly thereafter. Although I was never allowed in, it raises the question of whether shop floor dynamics similar to those described here ultimately created a social space in which more organized resistance could develop.

21. Michael Burawoy describes a similar process around piece work in *Manufacturing Consent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

22. As a fieldworker, it took me much longer to notice gender's insignificance than it did to notice its numerous incarnations. Barrie Thorne has an elegant discussion of this problem in "Children and Gender: Constructions of Difference," in *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference*, ed. Deborah Rhode (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 100-113.

23. See, for instance, Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1950); and Evelyn Stevens, "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America," in *Male and Female in Latin America*, ed. Ann Pescatello (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 89-101. For a critique of this literature, see Matthew Gutmann, "The Meanings of Macho: Changing Mexican Male Identities," *Masculinities* 2 (spring 1994): 21-33.

24. Jennifer Pierce, in her recent book, *Gender Trials: Emotional Lives in Contemporary Law Firms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), employs the opposite strategy. In a study of several workplaces, she emphasizes the way lawyers and paralegals across several law firms all enact a single set of culturally prescribed gender roles such as "mother" or "Rambo."

25. Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name?": Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 6.

26. See, for instance, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), esp. chap. 1.

27. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

28. Riley.

29. The tendency to theorize gendered meaning structures at the level of a given culture in part reflects the legacy of feminist anthropologists, who were the first to point out and delineate the distinctive meanings that accrue to femininity and masculinity in varied cultural contexts. In 1981, in *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead presented a pathbreaking set of essays, each of which described a different cultural configuration of gendered meaning. Poststructuralist feminist theorists have continued in this vein—emphasizing the varied content of gendered meaning systems but taking it as a theoretical given that the relevant level of variation is that of a linguistic system or culture as a whole.

30. See, for instance, Joan Scott, "Work Identities for Men and Women: The Politics of Work and Family in the Parisian Garment Trades in 1848," in *Gender and the Politics of History*, 93-113.