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Salzinger, Leslie

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Manufacturing sexual subjects 'Harassment', desire and discipline on a Maquiladora shopfloor

■ Leslie Salzinger

University of Chicago, USA

ABSTRACT ■ Standing for all instances of problematic workplace sexuality, the notion of 'sexual harassment' illuminates but also obscures the role of desire in work relations. It spotlights isolated individual interactions at the expense of structural processes and stresses choice and blame rather than the way in which a given workplace evokes particular sexual subjectivities in the service of production. An ethnography of shopfloor relations in a Mexican export-processing plant shows how labor control operates through the interpellation of both workers and supervisors as sexual subjects. In this plant, panoptic architecture evokes and focuses the male gaze in the service of 'quality' and 'efficiency', and desire emerges as a force of production. Male supervisors are located as voyeurs and young female workers as sexual objects to be consumed. Worker efficiency and desirability are conflated and workers become subject to management for the affirmation of both. In such a setting, framing shopfloor sexuality as aberrant distracts from its primary, and equally problematic, function as a shopfloor discipline.

KEY WORDS ■ gender, globalization, labor control, maquila, production, sexual harassment, sexuality, work

On first entrance, the shopfloor is eerily familiar: the nubile women workers of managerial dreams and feminist ethnography, theory and nightmare are brought to life in its confines. Rows of them, darkened lashes lowered to computer boards, lids fluttering intermittently at hovering supervisors who monitor finger speed and manicure, concentration and hair style, in a single glance. Apparent embodiments of availability – cheap labor, willing flirtation – these young women have become the paradigmatic workers for a transnational political economy in which a highly sexualized form of femininity has become a standard ‘factor of production’ (Benería and Roldán, 1987; Elson and Pearson, 1986; Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Fuentes and Ehreulich, 1983; Iglesias Prieto, 1987; Kamel, 1990; Sklair, 1993; Standing, 1989).

In this context, allegations of ‘sexual harassment’ surface repeatedly among critics and journalists, sitting uneasily amidst reports of job loss in the first world and exploitative wages and male unemployment in the third. However, few have stopped to investigate the relationship between the sexualization and the cheapening of production or its role in the transformation of working women into ‘nimble fingers’. Within this analytic vacuum, the language of sexual harassment serves to obscure more than it illuminates, as it focuses our attention on isolated, aberrant, generally dyadic interactions, rather than on social and organizational processes.

Although I spent 18 months doing participant observation in Mexico’s border, export-processing (‘maquila’)¹ industry, it was during the months I spent in Panoptimex,² the plant described above, that I first began having difficulty responding to journalistic questions about sexual harassment. In Panoptimex, sexuality is an integral part of the fabric of production, an essential aspect of the process through which labor is transformed into labor power and women into the ‘docile and dextrous’ workers of transnational repute. Within this context, there is nothing out of the ordinary about sexuality on the shopfloor. On the contrary, it is a fundamental element of the efficient operation of labor control and hence of production itself. Ironically therefore, it is only through removing the lens of ‘sexual harassment,’ with its focus on individual perpetrators and unwilling victims, that it becomes possible to see the role of sexuality on the shopfloor – that is to discern the systematic role of desire in constituting productive workers.

This is not to say that the journalists’ repeated inquiries had no basis. Certainly, ‘sexual harassment’, as conventionally understood (cf. Fitzgerald’s definition of the term as ‘unwanted sex-related behavior at work that is appraised by the recipient as offensive, exceeding her resources, or threatening’ (Fitzgerald et al., 1997: 15, quoted in Welsh, 1999: 172), is a problem in the maquila industry – as it is in a wide variety of industries and cultural contexts (Gruber et al., 1996). However, their questions envisioned psychologically or morally troubled individuals, impelled by obstreperous libidos,

secretly targeting unwilling individual victims. In this framework, the organization is obscured by the image of the 'offender' and the ongoing constitution of consent is similarly hidden by the image of the 'victim'. Such a lens reveals important workplace problems, but in focusing attention on the isolated, closeted dyad, it impedes investigation of more social and systemic manifestations of shopfloor sexuality.

The academic literature on 'sexual harassment' is built upon many of the same underlying assumptions (Stockdale, 1996b; Welsh, 1999; Williams et al., 1999). The field is dominated by lawyers and psychologists, hence individuals – both 'targets' and 'perpetrators' – rather than organizations, become units of analysis. Frequently, this tendency is accentuated methodologically, as most analysts, whatever their disciplinary origin, recruit a cross-section of the population to survey or participate in experiments, rather than interviewing or observing people located within a single workplace.³ This leads to a set of questions about the statistical likelihood of particular sorts of people harassing or being harassed, specific individuals' tendency to label these interactions as 'harassment' and predicted resiliency of 'targets' in the face of harassment. Even in studies where organizational structure is an explicit issue (Gruber, 1998; Hulin et al., 1996), workplaces themselves are treated as individual units within a set and sorted by particular characteristics, rather than investigated as productive wholes.

Just as the emphasis on individual perpetrators distracts researchers from analysing the role of sexuality in the workplace as a whole, so the emphasis on individual victims obscures the more subtle role of sexuality in the constitution of shopfloor consent.⁴ Thus, investigators tend to focus on the impact of shopfloor sexualization on those explicitly targeted, at the expense of analysing its meaning for workers overall. Similarly, they highlight blatant coercion, and in so doing neglect situations in which women workers are successfully interpellated as sexual objects and so respond affirmatively, even enthusiastically, to being addressed as such (Althusser, 1971).^{5,6,7}

In recent decades, the term sexual harassment has served an important intellectual and political function, drawing our attention to the common sexual coercion of women at work. However, precisely because of its capacity to name the problem, it has effectively come to stand in for all problematic workplace sexuality. As a result, its essentially psychological rather than social perspective increasingly constrains our capacity to analyse the role of sexuality in the workplace more fully. 'Sexual harassment' implies a process that is an intrusion in the workplace, rather than an integral part of production. That is, it highlights isolated, hidden, individual interactions at the expense of systemic, visible and structural processes. In addition, by focusing on dyadic interactions, it leads to questions about individual choices and the allocation of blame, rather than about the way in which a given workplace evokes particular sexual subjectivities in managers and

workers alike. In so focusing our attention, it has come to impede our ability to investigate other manifestations of sexual exploitation at work.

Panoptimex

Panoptimex is a highly successful TV producer, a subsidiary of Electroworld, an enormous electronics transnational.⁸ Since moving into its new building several years ago, the plant has been remarkably successful. Its production quantities and quality levels rival those produced by the same corporation at far higher cost in the United States. Recently, another TV assembler in the area, in the Mexican border city of Juárez, was so taken by its results (and look) that it bought the building blueprints for its second plant.

This success is directly, if unintentionally, related to the extreme sexual objectification of the plant's workforce. Visually oriented managers have created a structure of labor control in which everything is designed to produce the right look. In the process, they have designed a machine that evokes and focuses the male gaze in the service of production (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975). The building is a panopticon, an architecture designed to control through visibility, a visibility that is ultimately as much about fostering self-consciousness as it is about the more mundane operations of super-vision. The logic which designed it is also at work in populating and managing it. Thus, a generation of managers accustomed to electronics factories full of young women have taken care to fill their own factory accordingly.

Labor control operates within this visually oriented context. The enactment of managerial practices based on men obsessively watching young women creates a sexually charged atmosphere, one in which flirtation and sexual competition become the currency through which shopfloor power relations are struggled over and fixed. In this framework, women are constituted as desirable objects and male managers as desiring subjects. Male workers become not-men, with no standing in the game. Far from impeding production, aggressive, often coveted, supervisory sexual attention is the element through which labor control operates. Hence, in Panoptimex we find a workplace in which sexuality is integral to production, not an intrusion upon it. Rather than impairing efficiency through myriad isolated and closeted encounters, sexuality is made a highly visible and central element in the labor control process. Here, TVs are produced, not through the excision of distracting sexuality, but through the ongoing, systemic incitement of desire in production.

Over-seers

The structure of production on any given shopfloor is initially imagined and established by management. In the maquila industry, where capital faces a disorganized workforce and a captive state apparatus, this situation is particularly acute. These first decisions do not ensure managerial control, but they do set the context within which struggles over control will take place. Thus, in analysing the role of gender in production, we turn first to management: to the frameworks within which managerial 'common sense' is established and to the strategies that emerge from this cluster of understandings.

In Panoptimex, this common sense is remarkable for its consistent bias toward visual signs and symbols of success or failure. Management's visually skewed attention is the product of a cluster of forces – forces that are both institutional and discursive. Standard maquila accounting practices, the erosion of profit margins in the production of low-end TVs and the high internal mobility of top Electroworld managers combine to undermine a focus on costs and profits for their own sake and to encourage a focus on impressing headquarters instead. At the same time, these institutional predilections are solidified and underlined by the more general, visual rhetoric of TV production, in which 'the picture' is the frame within which everything is understood and evaluated.

This attitude has distinct consequences when it is turned from managers' bosses to their subordinates. Once focused 'down' – both literally and metaphorically – this visual attention is transformed into the gaze of sexual objectification. The focus on the 'look' of the factory, combined with a long tradition of women workers in electronics, leads to a rigid form of job-gendering, one in which filling the lines with young women becomes a goal in itself. Together, these institutional routines and attentional habits lead to a highly sexualized pattern of hiring and labor control – a pattern that, as we will see below, ultimately proves both pleasurable and titillating (if also disturbing) for the young women on the shopfloor, and in part because of this, proves remarkably effective in shopfloor control.

Projecting up

Production at Panoptimex occurs in a highly symbolic system, one in which appearances are as much the currency as dollars. To an extent, this is an issue throughout the industry. Most maquilas are far from any point of sale and their accounting systems are organized to 'make their budget'⁹ rather than to make a profit. As a result, local managers find themselves more subject to the managers at corporate headquarters than to external competition. Their energy is directed accordingly. However, in Panoptimex, the tendency to make headquarter approval the primary goal of work on a daily

as well as long-term basis is particularly accentuated. In just one example of this pattern, late in my sojourn in the factory, Electroworld was forced by international creditors to cut its workforce 10 percent across the board. The response in Panoptimex was a major effort – a bookkeeping effort however. No one was fired. No money was saved. But 10 percent of salaries were moved to the ‘miscellaneous’ category of the budget. Looking credible was enough, there was no countervailing price or profit pressure direct enough to undermine this entirely symbolic solution.

Two sets of institutional forces, intense price competition in the international TV industry and Electroworld career trajectories, frame Panoptimex’s operations and evoke these responses. The first of these, the low profit margin in TV production, is a rarely discussed backdrop against which daily decisions are made on the shopfloor. ‘TVs are not a business’, the manager of Electrofeed, a local Electroworld parts-maker, tells me early on. ‘If you had to face stockholders with only a TV business. . .’, he shakes his head. The profit margin on the low-end TVs produced by Panoptimex are so slim, according to the plant manager Carlos Rodrigues, that making the budget frequently means literally selling below cost. So, why produce TVs at all? Because, he explains, it’s worth it to Electroworld to keep its name in the marketplace in general. Once that’s accomplished, profit can be made elsewhere – in VCRs, for instance. Here, it’s not only Panoptimex managers who treat costs symbolically. The overall corporate decision to continue TV production is predicated on the calculation that it is worth it even under conditions in which it may not turn a profit on its own.

This sense among Panoptimex managers that appearances are paramount, and that the relevant audience is headquarters, is further encouraged by Electroworld’s corporation-wide, managerial placement policies. Electroworld is an American subsidiary of an even larger European corporation. Panoptimex managers report to bosses in the United States, but their personal career trajectories move throughout the corporation as a whole. Top managers around the world are brought in for several-year periods and then moved on to keep them from being overly attached to – and hence losing their ‘objectivity’ about – the factory they’re running. As one of them explained matter-of-factly, ‘The truth is I’d get less emotional about fighting for this place than for my little radio plant in England’. This external staffing policy has obvious implications for the perspective of those, the current Panoptimex manager among them, brought in from the outside. Carlos is a Brazilian on a 3-year contract. He began with Electroworld in Manaus, but most recently ran a plant in Singapore. He makes quite clear that his sights are set far above Panoptimex. He spends the better part of a first interview discussing details of the corporate structure and explaining where he’d like to be and when. These are no idle daydreams. His attention is firmly fixed on those who have the power to move him where he’d like to be.

These institutional patterns: a market in which profits cannot be the primary criteria for success; a structure of career opportunities in which top managers are not deeply tied to 'their' factories; and a set of accounting practices which formalize local managers' absolute reliance upon headquarters, together encourage a highly symbolic attitude toward production. TVs still must be produced – if possible without huge cost overruns and of reasonable quality. However, top management attempts all this with an eye focused neither on 'the consumer' nor on 'the competition' but on the boss.

Seeing is believing

The institutional patterns described above *encourage* a focus on appearances, however they certainly do not ensure it. There is no question that these institutional structures are far more common among Juárez maquilas than is the plant's overwhelming focus on the look of things. What makes these structures so significant here is that they create an appearance directed context within which the visual rhetoric available in TV production can, and does, frame managerial perspectives on the shopfloor. In listening to Panoptimex managers, the sight related criteria through which success and failure are assessed is striking and pervasive. Ultimately, this visual rhetoric is both symptomatic, and constitutive, of the habit of watching as a practice of control.

The general visual focus held throughout the factory emerges almost obsessively in Carlos's conversation – most clearly as the centerpiece of his triumphal autobiography. It erupts in a set of photos – pulled with practiced gesture from a top desk drawer – of a factory he ran in Singapore. 'It was all shit, just shit, girls working with garbage all around. Dark, ugly, I change all that. We paint, we make it nice.' He slams down the before-and-after pictures for emphasis, expostulating on the importance of color scheme and pointing out details of the shift. The color scheme is of particular importance, he points out, and his first act on arrival in Juárez was to paint Panoptimex in identical tones. His commentary on more daily management reveals the same emphasis. He discusses his capacity to see production from his office window at great length, describing calls down to supervisors on the floor to check on problems and remind them he is watching. This focus is even expressed when he discusses the importance of politic ignorance. Covering an eye with his hand he comments, 'I have to keep my eyes closed here all the time.'

This visual idiom of control is most clearly embodied in the physical structure of the shopfloor. Clean, light, spacious and orderly – the production area is the very image of a 'well-run' factory. Top managers are highly aware of, and invested in, this fact and they often boast about its attractiveness. The factory floor is not only easy on the eye however. It is

organized for visibility – a fish bowl 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 – one defect, three defects, 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; ties for supervisors. Everything is signalled.

Ringling the top of the production floor is a wall of windows, a manager behind every one. They sit in the semi-privacy of the reflected glare, watching at will. From on high, they 'keep track of the flow of production', calling down to a supervisor to ask about a slow-down, easily visible from above in the accumulation of TVs in one part of the line, gaps further along, or in a mound of sets in the center of a line, technicians clustered nearby. It is from here that they show the factory to visitors, standing on the glassed-in balcony boasting about the plant's large capital investment and unique labor process. At one point, men with cameras watched for stealing from behind the glass walls, and it's common knowledge on the shopfloor that there are still cameras embedded in the ceilings for this purpose. They've set it up so that even the walls have eyes.

Hiring for looks

Panoptimex managers' focus on the look of things is expressed particularly clearly in the plant's gendered hiring practices. During the 5 years since Electroworld began producing entire TVs, including the 2 years since that process was moved into this showcase factory, years in which there was a dramatic 'shortage'¹⁰ of young female labor in Juárez, they have virtually never had under 70 percent women on the line, rarely under 75 percent. The average age on the shopfloor continues to be under 20, and they have yet to place a man in the chassis-building section.

When asked about their absolute commitment to hiring women for most line jobs, Panoptimex managers tend to point out that electronics – certainly Electroworld – *always* hires women, whatever country they're in. Panoptimex's last manager comments matter-of-factly, 'electronics traditionally used female types', when I ask about the decision to hire women even when they're much harder to find than men. Other upper managers tell similar narratives.¹¹ Supervisors request not only the number of workers they need for their line, but the gender of each position as well. The personnel department puts a great deal of daily planning and energy into hiring the 'right' gender for the jobs available. The head of personnel in the plant details criteria for most line jobs, beginning with being female and young and

continuing with slimness, thin hands and short nails. The criteria also include not being pregnant, using birth control and being childless or (if absolutely necessary) having credible childcare arrangements. The most basic of these requirements is being female, closely followed by a particular, sexualized body type and, as a result, on hiring days guards admit all the female applicants who come to the maquila gates, but only a previously specified number of men. The few men hired for what are known as the line 'heavy' jobs are not subject to the bodily strictures required of their female counterparts, but in their place are a substantially more demanding set of social requirements. Unlike their female co-workers, they need to be vouched for by the union or someone else already known in the plant, and they must present a certificate of high school graduation.

These criteria and practices are not unheard of among other Juárez maquilas. What sets Panoptimex apart is the lengths to which its managers went to ensure a female workforce even during the shortage of young women workers in the late 1980s, as their colleagues in other maquilas reluctantly began hiring men. Panoptimex managers decided to try to recruit workers from a village with an 'agrarian economy' an hour out of the city. In an extended 'PR' campaign involving all levels of the personnel department as well as top managers from other departments, they first courted the mayor, then treated the whole village to a picnic with mariachis, then knocked on all 150 doors in the village with pictures of the plant, and finally agreed to pay transportation for all young women willing to come work in the factory. Four years later, these young women still work the lines, and Panoptimex is still paying for their transport.

Managers' framework in Panoptimex is relentlessly visual, and this perspective is expressed not only in their dealings with their superiors, but in their hiring and labor control practices as well. As a result, they hire assembly line workers who are overwhelmingly female and young – the age to be beautiful, and to be invested in that beauty – and then monitor them through obsessive observation. The essence of their hiring criteria is most succinctly expressed by a woman supervisor in another Electroworld plant, 'In Panoptimex they don't look for workers, they look for models – short skirts, heels, beauties. . .'. Not that Panoptimex workers are, at least not to my eye, more beautiful than young women in other maquilas. However, Panoptimex workers *are* hired as 'models' – hired to look the way managers expect workers to look. Sexual objectification is part and parcel of the hiring process.

In the fishbowl

Panoptimex managers' focus on control through vigilance is expressed throughout the factory in a hierarchy of sight. While top managers sit behind windows above the shopfloor, supervisors walk the lines below. And

as supervisors walk the shopfloor, workers sit before them. In front of workers however, there is only their work and their individualized quality charts – co-workers glimpsed from the corners of their eyes. Shopfloor control is orchestrated through a set of embedded panopticons – managers watch supervisors and workers, supervisors watch (most) workers, workers watch themselves and, when they can, each other.

This picture is not the only one one might draw of this scene however. One might also describe men watching men watching women (and ignoring a few emasculated men). Or, one might more accurately include both these social realities: a panopticon in which male managers watch male supervisors watch women workers and ignore a few male workers. The hierarchy of sight is as defined by gender as it is by the relations of production, with predictable sexual effects.

Managers' attentional practices and the physical space they have spawned have constituted a highly visual system of labor control – a system that differentially affects women workers – the central objects of supervisory attention – and male workers – the objects of their aggressive disregard. Although it can be described with no reference to sexuality, the tremendous interpellatory power of the plant's system of labor control comes from its organization of desire. Even the most cursory tour of the shopfloor reveals an intensely sexualized atmosphere, and conversations with workers only add to this impression. These subjectivities in turn have repercussions for the level of managerial control on the shopfloor, accounting both for the shopfloor's intense atmosphere of titillation and control and for its highly successful production record.

Super-visualing

Unlike Electroworld's other maquilas in Juárez, Panoptimex produces a final product. From the beginning to the end of its long, looping lines, hundreds of tiny components are combined with monitors and cabinets to emerge as TVs, ready for sale. Production takes place in five long, looping lines – each one a perfect replica of the next. One hundred and twenty workers make up each line. Backs to their supervisors, eyes to their work, they repeat the same gestures a thousand times during the 9½ hour day.

The first part of the line assembles the TVs innards. This is chassis, the plant's most 'critical' operation. Here, several hundred miniature electronic parts are inserted into pre-punctured boards. The work is done by 40 seated young women, each of whom inserts 6–8 tiny, color-coded parts every 30-second 'cycle.' From there, the chassis is tested before moving on to the end of the line where 10 young men, standing, attach it to monitors and cabinets. Turning the corner into 'final', the now recognizable TV re-enters the women's domain. Here the electrical system is assembled, wires soldered and

twisted – the facsimile made real. On to the ‘tunnel’, where young women peer at the screen seeking straight lines, 90-degree angles and clear pinks and greens. Finally, the TV is ready for use. Once again, it moves into male territory at the line’s end. Here it is packed, boxed and marked with one of a half-dozen brand names, finally rising to the ceiling in a glass tube and vanishing from sight. Soon it will re-emerge in warehouses on the other side of the border, last stop before the large chains that bring it to consumers throughout the United States.

As in almost all maquilas, the workers who produce these TVs are paid poorly even in local terms. Most workers took home roughly 40 dollars weekly during the period I studied the plant.¹² This is not a negligible amount of money, but it is well below what would be required to live independently in Juárez, and even this is contingent on perfect attendance. Missing a single day of work costs a third of the weekly paycheck. Seniority doesn’t shift this, as promotion is extremely rare. As a result, three-quarters of the workforce is replaced over the course of the year. Not surprisingly, in this context, most workers are teenagers and live with family. Given this pay structure, labor control cannot depend too heavily on financial incentives or the hope of promotion. This is where the tremendous scrutiny under which workers operate in the plant, and the sexual self-consciousness that emerges from that scrutiny, becomes fundamental.

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 she hurries anyway. 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?’ He circles behind seated workers, monitoring ‘his girls’ as he is monitored from above.

There are layers upon layers of supervision. Above the shopfloor hover those known below as ‘the Americans’ – top managers who, for all their varied origins, are marked by the US headquarters to which they report. Their presence is often noted by workers and supervisors seeking to explain the difference between Electroworld plants. A Mexican assistant personnel manager comments, ‘[at Panoptimex] there are visitors all the time, and the windows all around . . . all the time you know they’re watching you.’ And they do not only watch from afar. In the late afternoons Carlos and his chief of production descend to see more closely. Hands clasped behind backs they stroll the plant floor, stopping to berate a supervisor about a candy-wrapper lying on the floor or to chat with workers on the line.

Below the production manager are the supervisors. Two to each line, they are all Mexicans, all men,¹³ most in their early 30s, all but one with some technical or managerial training. Both watching and watched, they are

particularly sensitive to, and reflective of, the prevailing visual idiom in the plant. After several months in the plant, one supervisor told me of pervasive rumors among them that my car, a 15-year-old Ford with a smashed-up front, had an incredible motor camouflaged beneath its battered exterior. This visual expression of distrust, the assumption that something was hidden from the eye, expressed both their vulnerable position in the plant hierarchy and their immersion in a world of visual signs and symbols. True to this focus, they spend virtually all day standing just behind workers' shoulders – watching. They alternately compliment efficiency and deride mistakes, decide who can still work if they arrive late and who can't, initiate and bar conversations, commandeer and offer forbidden candies, lecture and cajole whenever quality or speed falter. Their attentions are not evenly distributed however. Although they are responsible for their entire half of the line, supervisors in chassis can generally be found in the section where components are inserted by hand, and supervisors in final can be found in the testing tunnel. That is, they hang out where the girls are.

The sense of being watched comes not only from being looked at in the moment, but through the managerial production of signs and symbols that are then available for surveillance. Above each worker's head is a chart, fully visible to her at all times, as well as to anyone walking by. Group leaders fill them out each day. Gold stars mark perfection. Green dots mark errors. Red dots mark trouble. This sense of exposure has consequences for workers' sense of self, and self-worth. A woman whose chart is full of green and red dots comments, 'I feel ashamed. It's all just competition. You look at the girl next to you and you want to do better than she does even though it shouldn't matter.' At the end of every day, announcements echo over the shopfloor as each line finishes its daily thousand TVs. In lines far from their quota, the group leader begins circulating anxiously at 3:00, an hour before shift's end, saying they should 'get a move on' or they'll be the only line who doesn't make it. The line always picks up speed at this point. When I ask a young woman generally notable for her jaundiced attitude what's going on, she shrugs: 'When they start congratulating the other lines for having finished and we haven't, you feel bad. Competition makes you work harder.'

Labor control in Panoptimex is achieved through practices – primarily but not exclusively visual – that speak directly to workers' sense of self. Whatever their center of attention in any single situation, managers' ultimate goal in the factory is to see that TVs get built to their bosses' satisfaction. They achieve this somewhat indirectly however, by focusing on who workers are, rather than on the work they do. In this process, worker subjectivities are directly addressed, and their success or failure as workers is easily conflated with their success or failure as human beings in general. This merging of workers' work and personal identities gives management tremendous leverage on the shopfloor.

This is not the whole story however. This leverage is achieved neither by addressing a concrete ‘worker’ identity nor a more abstract ‘human’ identity. The set of subjectivities addressed on the Panoptimex shopfloor are highly heterosexualized, and the narrative of shopfloor quiescence told above only begins to make sense as we investigate the substance of the subjectivities that are constituted and spoken to in the panopticon. Thus, in the pages that follow, I will retell the story above with the ‘empty places’ (Burawoy, 1979: 150) filled – investigating the impact, not of bosses watching workers, but of male bosses watching young female workers, of the male gaze in the service of managerial control. It is here that the depth of shopfloor control becomes comprehensible.

Ogling and dis-regarding

The visually-defined practices that typify labor control in this plant are imbued with sexual energies and gendered meanings when they are practiced in this girl-filled, guy-dotted space. Inside the panopticon, managers and supervisors are situated as voyeurs, while women workers are at the center of attention. Monitoring becomes the gaze of sexual objectification as soon as it locks upon them. Male workers, on the other hand, are at the periphery, beneath notice. Neither watching nor watched, they are as emasculated as their female co-workers are objectified. Thus, the visually defined practices described above frame a highly sexualized set of meanings in and for production.

Supervisory subjectivity reflects and embodies this symbolic framework. As the plant’s official watchers in this gendered space, they, as much as their charges, are located in a sexual relationship. This is expressed in their initial self-presentation, as well as in their routinized daily behaviors. They are generally married with children, yet they openly flout their marriages on the shopfloor, and their children make appearances only in joking references to their manhood. They are required to wear ties, and from the booted, blue-jeaned ‘cowboy’ to the ‘serious professional’ they each stamp their line with an idiosyncratic version of this symbol of masculine predominance.

Beneath the gaze of these monitors, female and male workers are incorporated into production in distinctive ways. They are given different identification numbers, different uniforms, different jobs and are subject to different modes of supervision. Women do ‘detail’ work such as inserting components and checking quality; men do ‘heavy’ work such as assembling the cabinet and packing the finished product. On top of this base, other differences arise. Women sit, men stand. The center of the line is a female domain, its ends are male. ‘Chassis’, where there is a 1 to 15 ratio of group leaders to workers, is all women. ‘Final’, where there is a 1 to 27 ratio, is almost half men. Within final, the group leader does all communication with

the men. This leaves the supervisor free to spend all his time with the women in his line. The cumulative, symbolic and practical effects of these differences are overwhelming. Women are central – watched, constrained, pinned down. Men are de-centered – ignored and relatively free to move.

The differences between men and women – and (also therefore) the meanings of femininity and masculinity in the plant – are marked as much by ongoing managerial behavior as by their initial setup in the structure of production. Every afternoon, Carlos walks the lines, all masculine and proprietary expansiveness, and ‘jokes’ with women workers – those who would be ‘men’ on the line he ignores. Among the women too, only some are recognized. As he walks, he stops and talks to an ever-changing favored few. These conversations are flirtatious and titillating, full of teasing on both sides, mild, blushing self-revelations on the part of workers, and pseudo-paternal supportiveness on his part. He does not stop at speaking either. It is well known in the plant that he has a mistress on the lines, as does the chief of production. Thus, every conversation is tinged by ambiguity and the flavor of forbidden sexuality.

The plant manager is not alone in this. His example is echoed down through the ranks, and in any case follows in a plant tradition that predates his tenure. Non-hourly workers, from low-level engineers on up, prowl the lines in search of entertainment of all sorts. In this context, supervisors take full advantage of their superior access. One of the workers favored by Carlos’s attentions comments pitilessly on her co-workers. She reports that the supervisor on her line propositions everyone, and that some make the mistake of going out with him hoping that it will lead to promotions. Not she, however. It’s obvious he’s very ‘hard’ about all that. Another supervisor has a worker pregnant and is currently dating another, both on his line. As the due-date draws near, personnel staff tease him flirtatiously, threatening to tell his wife or throw him a baby-shower. He struts complacently. The norm is best encapsulated by workers’ approving comments on one of his (also married) colleagues, who all agree is different from the others. ‘Why, as far as I know’, says one woman, ‘He’s only gone out steadily with one girl on his line, none of this using all the operators (i.e. workers).’

Supervisors not only use their position in production for sexual access, they also use a highly sexualized discourse around workers as a means of labor control. It is striking to watch them wandering their lines, monitoring efficiency and legs simultaneously – their gaze focused sometimes on fingers at work, sometimes on the nail polish that adorns them. Often supervisors will stop by a favorite operator – chatting, checking quality, flirting. Their approval marks ‘good worker’ and ‘desirable woman’ in a single gesture. Each supervisor has a few workers he hangs around with, laughing and gossiping throughout the day. It is not lost on their co-workers that these favorites eventually emerge elsewhere, in slightly higher paid positions

on the line as well as among those with the self-confidence to enter the plant beauty contest. Through each day, managers and supervisors frame women workers as sexual beings, and sexual objects. In this process, women workers become vulnerable to personal, as well as work-based, evaluations.

Women workers are not the only ones controlled through heterosexual discourses. Sexuality is also the arena in which managers and supervisors struggle for predominance – both in individual cases and in the larger symbolic context. The shopfloor is rife with complaints by both supervisors and managers of ways in which the other group's sexuality undermines shopfloor discipline. One supervisor complains that Carlos's tendency to talk to some and not others undermines 'motivation' on the line. Another tells of being forced by the production manager to allow a worker in on a day she arrived late. 'OK', he reports agreeing resentfully, 'But then I'm not the supervisor any more.' There are stories of a line where the production manager's mistress throws her weight around, making the other girls cry and remaining exempt from sanction. And then there's the European O&E manager for Juárez commenting, 'In the Mexican environment . . . you can imagine what are the other things a young girl can offer to a supervisor . . . we've tried to crack down, but within the limits of the culture . . . macho is strong here.' In these incidents, supervisors and managers jostle for control of the shopfloor in order to legitimate and affirm their masculinity – which in this panopticon is about sexual mastery (or in the case of the European manager, about mastering their sexuality); and they jostle for control of women workers in order to legitimate and affirm their shopfloor power. In the process, a configuration of production and labor control processes are established that are as much about gender and sexuality as they are about efficiency and TVs.

These struggles over and through the mantle of masculinity also mark relations between management and male workers, although it's an unequal battle from the outset. Top managers casually belittle men who work on the line. Jones, the Juárez personnel manager, offhandedly exempts male line workers from the category of 'men' in explaining why they are not included in his general policy to pay men more than women: 'From a macho standpoint, a guy wouldn't take an operator's job.' Supervisors are less offhand, but equally scathing in their assertions. A supervisor finding a young man behind one afternoon is withering in his commentary, 'Just like I said, you have to keep an eye on these guys. He thinks he's some kind of Latin Lover. . .'. His target, a shy young man new to Juárez, looks at his shoes.

The managerial claims remain far more potent than that of male workers, in large part because they are reasserted in the structure of daily life in the factory. Just as women workers are disciplined within an essentially visual framework, so are their male co-workers. However, rather than being placed at the center of an immobilizing optic, male workers are relegated to its

periphery – actively ignored. Men are physically segregated, standing at the line's ends. The plant manager does not even slow down as he passes them during his daily perambulations, and the supervisor is conspicuous in his absence.

Emasculation does undercut male workers' capacity to resist, but as a mode of control, disregard also has its dangers for management. Men on the line are subject to little direct supervision. They move relatively freely, trading positions among themselves and covering for each other during extra bathroom runs, joking and laughing, catcalling women as they pass by. Nonetheless, male workers' relatively autonomous physical location, while permitting some freedom of movement and the enactment of a few masculine rituals, also provides a powerful tool for managerial control. Supervisors can always move them out of male territory, and occasionally they do just that. When men on the line get too cocky, the supervisor materializes and 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'. Ultimately, the supervisor has the last word in masculinity. Male workers can challenge his behavior, but he can reclassify them as women. In such moments, he retains control precisely through this capacity to throw into question young male workers' localized gender and sexual identities.

Productivity at Panoptimex is born of the routinized sexual objectification of women workers by their male superiors. The plant's architecture and labor process incite and channel supervisorial and worker desire. In this context, supervisors become voyeurs and women workers, productive objects of the male gaze. Labor control is established within this relationship, as young women workers are under constant watch and evaluation – both as sexual and as productive subjects – and the few young men workers are ignored – also in both capacities. Thus, just as young women become subject through their admission to a category dependent on managerial approval, young men – neither watchers nor objects of desire – become subject through their inability to claim any category through which to act. Sexuality is neither hidden nor extraneous to production in this context. On the contrary, it is powerful precisely because of its very visibility. In this process, it emerges as central to worker compliance and managerial control and thus as an intrinsic aspect of the process of production itself.

Making 'models', making 'drifters'

In Panoptimex's labor control practices, workers are hailed as gendered and sexual beings, and as gendered and sexual beings of particular kinds. Workers' response to this address is not preordained. Insofar as they emerge from this process as productive subjects, it is due to their capacity and

willingness to answer to this ascription, and to come to recognize themselves in these discourses. Thus, workers' factory-level experiences of themselves as (or as not) sexual subjects or objects, encapsulate the process through which sexualization operates through targets' desire, rather than 'against their will', even as it effectively objectifies and disempowers them.

Any glance at the Panoptimex shopfloor encounters a sea of stockinged legs and high heels, rows of meticulously curled bangs and brightly manicured hands, women painting their lips on every line. It is difficult to be a woman on the Panoptimex shopfloor without self-consciousness. The light, the windows, the eyes, the comments – each and all are persistently, glaringly evident. This gaze affects women at all levels in the plant. As the weeks go by, I find myself buying lipstick and agonizing over my outfit in the cold darkness of a predawn winter's morning. Despite my efforts, women in the plant are quick with more elaborate suggestions – why it's not that I'm not *feminine* they say diplomatically, but with a bit of makeup. . . . One young woman shows how much it matters, mentioning that 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 enter the plant as a woman is to be immersed in objectification – to be seen, to watch, and so to watch and see yourself.¹⁴

A young woman on the line tells her own story of transformation. When she started work she used no makeup, only wore dresses below the knee. Soon her co-workers began telling her she looked bad, that she should 'fix herself up'. So encouraged, she decided to be less shy. Today, mini-skirted and made-up, she reports she finally feels self-confident in the plant. As she speaks, her best friend surveys her physique with an affectionately proprietary air, 'They say one's appearance reveals a lot', she remarks. Later, they both appear at the Electroworld beauty contest, a poorly organized and attended affair except for the 50 contestants, many from Panoptimex, who infuse the occasion with a deep symbolic seriousness. The stories traded over cookies and shared lipsticks revolve around the lack of courage shown by those who 'chickened out' at the last minute and the value of participating, whether or not you win, as an act of bravery and an assertion of self-worth. There are also extensive discussions about those left behind, about the importance of representing those on one's line who lack the necessary bravery to be present themselves. To claim one's own desirability becomes an act of courage, independence, loyalty and solidarity all at once.

The ultimate arbiters of desirability, of course, are supervisors and managers. Workers gossip constantly about who is or is not chosen. On every line, they can point out those Carlos speaks to and those the supervisor favors – women only too happy to acknowledge their special status. For those so anointed, the experience is one of personal power. 'If you've got it,

flaunt it!’ Estela comments gleefully, her purple-lined eyes moving from her black, lace body-suit to the supervisor hovering nearby. 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 Carlos to intercede for her. She is allowed to work after all. The personnel office is incensed and the lines sizzle with gossip.

Gossip is the plant pastime and weapon of choice, as well as its most cited cruelty. ‘Did you see him talking to her?’ The lines bristle with eyes. Quick side-glances register a new style, make 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’ – words that shade in meaning from gossip about to cut down to censure. The issue of favoritism is a constant source of conflict, and everyone is always watching. Estela is a frequent target of sexual rumors, and she is torn about whether to be hurt or proud of her notoriety. The first time I meet her she boasts ‘the other girls don’t like me, I get on their nerves’. She turns to a co-worker, ‘Isn’t that true?’ The other girl nods calmly. In this bounded space, femininity is defined and anointed by male supervisors and managers. Women workers have little to offer each other in comparison to the pleasures of that achievement and the perils of its loss.

If the young women in this plant have little to offer each other, the young men have even less for them. One unfortunate 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 attention to me’, he responds finally, a bit embarrassed, laughing and downcast. His experience brings scenes to mind: women on the line discussing the gendering of production, mocking men’s ‘thick fingers’ and lack of attention to detail, giggling helplessly at the notion of a male group leader. I hear again a comment made by one of the women workers who returned to the factory after having quit. ‘It’s a good atmosphere here. 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 face of such commentary, men on the line struggle to affirm a legitimate masculinity in production. Like their female counterparts, they also look to supervisors to affirm their gendered location. Unlike their female counterparts, however, both what they want and how they attempt to get it require confrontation rather than intimacies. Eschewing indirect appeals for legitimation, they make constant, carefully ritualized demands that the supervisor acknowledge their masculinity, both on the shopfloor and off. In *sotto voce* rebellions in the plant, they impugn their supervisors’ manhood and imply his fear of theirs. ‘If he has a problem, he should come tell us himself, not send Mari (the group leader) down. He’s just afraid it could

come to blows', complains Juan in a characteristic (and characteristically quiet) critique. A group in 'final' excitedly tells me what happened after I left their line's Christmas party. The supervisor showed up late and they asked him, 'So what's the story here, do we talk to you like the supervisor or like a man?' Needless to say, he said like a man. 'So we gave it to him, almost insulting his mother!' they reported with relish.

Despite such performances, the plant denies male workers' masculinity in its very architecture, and supervisors have no reason to undercut this. On the contrary, male workers' desperate desire for respect becomes a potent tool of control. When supervisors tire of the constant challenges and move male workers into female territory, the effect is dramatic. Once snatched from their domain and relegated to the 'womanly task' of soldering, even eye-stinging black smoke amidst broken ventilators evokes no complaints. In Panoptimex, to be male is to have the right to look, to be a supervisor. Gender and production relations 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. Just as his female co-worker becomes a productive subject through her response to managerial discourse, so does he. However, in her case the process has its pleasures. In his case, it is the lure of fixing things, the recurrent desire to remake an untenable, local gender identity, that ties him into factory life.

Within the panopticon, workers are incorporated into production through the pleasures and pains of sexual objectification, and it is only through their willing participation in these processes that they become effective. The framework embedded in the language of sexual harassment directs our attention to situations in which subordinates object to managerial overtures, at least internally. However, in Panoptimex, all workers are interpellated into production as sexual beings, and in responding to this address, they become participants in the process through which they are controlled. It is this participation which makes labor control in Panoptimex so effective and so troubling. 'Sexual harassment', recognizable and offensive, would not incorporate workers into their own subjugation, would not increase productivity, and would not affect those unattended to. However, the routinized operations of sexual objectification in Panoptimex accomplish all those goals, addressing workers as sexual and productive subjects simultaneously, and in so doing increasing supervisorial control and TV quality in a single move.

Making sexual subjects

Panoptimex is a highly monitored space, yet rather than weighing down production through cumbersome checks and antagonisms, supervisorial vigilance is woven into the very fabric of relationship between supervisors and workers, enhancing control and productivity simultaneously. Sexual objectification is central here, as it is within this process that the male supervisorial gaze evokes productive subjects, thus integrating sexual subjectivities directly into the structure of production. Rather than interfering with production, sexualized surveillance creates workers both willing and able to produce.¹⁵

This suggests a fundamentally different image of the role of sexuality in production than that which is generally highlighted by the term 'sexual harassment', yet it is, if anything, more consequential and problematic. Sexuality in the workplace is indeed sometimes extraneous, isolated and hidden. However, we see in the case of Panoptimex that it can also be intrinsic to production, social and highly visible – part of the basic infrastructure through which the factory operates. Much of the discussion of sexual harassment assumes that it is an impediment to production, and researchers tend to analyse its corrosive effects on productivity via increases in turnover, absenteeism and lowered morale (Hanisch, 1996; Knapp and Gustis, 1996). These studies conclusively demonstrate the destructive impact of individual, aberrant and stigmatized acts of 'sexual harassment' on individual productivity. However, when the labor process itself is sexualized, as is the case in Panoptimex, sexuality and desire can themselves become productive forces, more than compensating for the random inefficiencies they introduce into the production process by their outsize capacity to constitute productive subjects. For those disturbed by forced sexual contact, the managerial capacity to harness workers' most intimate sense of self in the service of production might give pause.

By the same token, in scores of workplaces, malicious or troubled perpetrators harass individual, unwilling victims. However, in Panoptimex, flirtation is a social relation that defines and frames the interactions of supervisors and workers overall. In this context, the sexualization of work becomes significant for everyone on the shopfloor, whether or not they are personally involved in sexual game playing. Recognizing this more generalized process in turn suggests that an exclusive focus on worker refusal and supervisorial culpability in identifying problematic sexual contact misses much that matters. The most effective forms of labor control are interpellatory structures in which productive subjectivities are evoked within daily shopfloor interaction. Panoptimex's mode of shopfloor control is of this kind, and its content is highly sexualized. Workers are addressed and incorporated into production only (although not exclusively) within this

framework. Indeed, it is the very demography and architecture of the plant which incites desire in its occupants – supervisors and workers alike. Insofar as we look to the psyches of the particular individuals involved to explain this excess of shopfloor sexuality, we are missing its primary, structural catalyst. Factories produce widgets, but they also produce people. In Panoptimex, this production process is a sexual one. Neither the supervisorial voyeur nor the seductive factory girl are personality types, they are Panoptimex products.

This recognition returns us to where we began, to the production of the ‘cheap, docile and dextrous’ workers who are a staple of transnational production. Both managers and academic analysts tend to discuss this as a hiring issue. However, the central story of Panoptimex’s success is not one of effective hiring, but of the effective interpellation of those hired. Both job choice and hiring in the industry is remarkably casual, and young women workers who end up elsewhere show little of the sexualized docility evident at Panoptimex.¹⁶ In fact, Panoptimex workers are striking precisely for their uncanny resemblance to the sexual objects and productive subjects implicitly promised in advertising brochures by maquila promoters. The process through which they have been so constituted is a sexual one, and its power suggests how essential it is that we develop a language that makes it visible. ‘Sexual harassment’ is indeed important, but we should not let it obscure sexuality’s other shopfloor incarnations. Insofar as sexual objectification is a significant mode of shopfloor control, it requires our attention and analysis.

Notes

- 1 ‘Maquiladoras’, or as they’re popularly known, ‘maquilas’, are export-processing factories located in Mexico, generally along the country’s northern border, which assemble parts produced in the USA for sale on the US market. The highest concentration of maquila workers is in Ciudad Juárez, where I did my research.
- 2 All factory, corporation and personal names used here are fictitious.
- 3 Williams (1997) and Hearn and Parkin (1995) make similar points. The over-representation of survey methods is evident in Stockdale’s (1996a) collection, in which every essay based on empirical data uses either survey or experimental methods.
- 4 For defining analyses of the production of shopfloor consent in general see Burawoy (1979, 1985).
- 5 The definition of sexual harassment as unwanted is so ingrained in the academic literature that the 1999 *Annual Review of Sociology* commissioned two separate reviews, one focused on coercive sexual contact and the other

on 'positive and autonomous expressions of workers' sexual desire' (Williams et al., 1999: 73).

- 6 The troubling and intimate relationship between sexuality and power was first explored in depth by feminists in the 1980s (Snitow et al., 1983; Vance, 1984) and by Foucault (1980). Hollway and Jefferson (1996) raise these issues explicitly in the context of sexual harassment, however the discussion is focused on psychological rather than structural processes.
- 7 A few ethnographic researchers studying service industries (Guiffre and Williams, 1994; Loe, 1996; Rogers and Henson, 1997) have looked at the productive function and ambivalent worker experience of workplace sexuality. However, these studies don't explore the ways in which sexual interaction between superiors and subordinates can become an intrinsic element in labor control even in an industry in which femininity is unrelated to the product sold. Yelvington (1996) discusses sexuality at work in factory production, but he focuses on sexuality as a site of resistance rather than managerial control. Williams (1997) also calls for such studies.
- 8 The research on which this article is based is part of a larger study of four Juárez maquilas done over 18 months in the early 1990s (see Salzinger, forthcoming). I spent three of those months in Panoptimex. During that time, I spent every weekday wandering the shopfloor, sitting in personnel or meetings, or interviewing managers. Later, I interviewed 10 workers I knew well at my home.
- 9 Panoptimex managers propose a budget to their US superiors. Once accepted, their task is to spend no more than projected to assemble the promised quantity of goods. Spending more is a failure, but spending less is also penalized, as the following year's budget is cut accordingly.
- 10 This shortage of female labor is a reflection of how many young women are willing to work for below-subsistence maquila wages, not of how many young women workers are available in total.
- 11 The current plant manager is a notable and not terribly credible exception to this pattern. Having decided that as an American woman I am an advocate of 'gender-blindness', he eschews any consciousness of gender in conversation with me, repeating that nothing matters but the will to work. After one of our interviews, he is so concerned to prove this that he begins badgering the, extremely irritated, Juárez personnel manager to hire a blind man. The Panoptimex personnel manager makes her skepticism obvious when I mention his stance. Her response comes as no surprise, as Carlos's clear and not exactly disinterested preference for young women is an ongoing subject of office gossip.
- 12 Wages have since fallen further. Base pay is supplemented by a variety of coupons (e.g. for lunch and transportation) and yearly bonuses. Even with these additions however, pay remains low. Some workers supplement their income by selling candy, jewelry, makeup and other items illicitly on the

- shopfloor. This is difficult in chassis because of the high level of supervision, but relatively easy elsewhere. Management doesn't interfere unless it becomes too blatant. As a wage subsidy, it has its advantages for them too.
- 13 There is one female supervisor, but she is on second shift. I have focused my analysis on first shift because, once managers leave their windowed offices in the evening, the panopticon is replaced by distinct modes of control.
 - 14 Critiques of women's objectification have long been a staple of feminist theory (MacKinnon, 1982; Mulvey, 1975). Feminist analysis of its troubling pleasures have been less developed. Two authors who do discuss this are Chancer (1998) and Steele (1985).
 - 15 Here sexuality functions as one of Foucault's (1979) 'disciplines'.
 - 16 See Salzinger (1997) for a comparison of varied labor control strategies and their outcomes in distinctive shopfloor femininities and masculinities in the maquila industry.

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LESLIE SALZINGER is an assistant professor in the sociology department at the University of Chicago. The article printed here is part of a larger ethnographic comparison of the distinctive constitution of gendered meanings and subjectivities in four Juárez maquiladoras (Salzinger, forthcoming from the University of California Press). She is currently beginning a new ethnographic project, looking at the cultural constitution of value and the role of masculinity in dollar/peso trading in several New York and Mexico City based banks. *Address:* 1126 E. 59th Street (320), Chicago, IL 60637, USA. [email: l-salzinger@uchicago.edu] ■