

THE MAQUILA INDUSTRY:
DISCIPLINING WOMEN WORKERS
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Introduction

Cuidad Juárez, Mexico is a border town adjacent to El Paso, Texas that is home to maquiladoras, or assembly plants, usually transnationally owned and operated. At a glance, Cuidad Juárez is comprised of shanty make-shift homes built with whatever scraps are available; usually refuse from the maquilas themselves. The maquiladoras loom around every corner. Many of them are easily identified by the billows of dark smoke pouring from the smokestacks. Cuidad Juárez lacks the necessary infrastructure to support the growth that is directly related to the assembly plants and the thousands of jobs that they provide. Even photographs cannot adequately capture the abject poverty of those living and working in Cuidad Juárez.

In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed into law by the United States, Canada, and Mexico. NAFTA “opened” trade between the three countries by lifting tariffs. Following the passage of NAFTA, 2700 maquiladoras opened in Mexico.¹ But even before the passage of NAFTA, the Border Industrialization Project (BIP) initiated in 1965 opened Mexico to transnational corporations by providing enormous incentives to corporations such as low taxes (some states exempted taxes altogether), cheap land purchases or leases, and little to no interference from the Mexican government.² In Mexico, the labor is 25% cheaper than the rest of the world;³ this coupled with lax or no labor laws and environmental protections disproportionately benefit U.S. and Canadian corporations who are able to increase their profits. Conversely, Mexico is disadvantaged because they wrongfully assumed that a “transfer of skills would be part of the bargain.”⁴ Instead, they now are one of the most exploited labor forces in the world and lack the skills and technologies necessary to produce many of the goods on their own.

Upon entering the factories, female workers, who comprise over half of the workforce, are trained by their supervisors. Although women are usually considered “unskilled” laborers and the work on the assembly line is seen as “low-skill”, the training is a continuous process in which the supervisors attempt to transform the women workers into docile, obedient and efficient workers. In the maquiladoras, the supervisors employ many techniques to attempt to transform the women workers. Sexuality plays an integral part in this transformation. In “Manufacturing sexual subjects: ‘Harassment’, desire and discipline on the Maquiladora shopfloor” (2000) Leslie Salzinger states, “sexuality is an integral part of the fabric of production...through which labor is transformed into labor power and women into the ‘docile and dexterous’ workers of transnational repute.”⁵ Although Salzinger’s use of the term “desire” is static and fails to address its unconscious nature, she adequately describes how women workers are sexualized and her firsthand accounts of life in the factories provide a unique perspective. In her ethnography, Salzinger argues for a correlation between sexual desire and efficiency meaning that the more efficient the worker is, the more positive attention (with sexual undertones) she receives from the supervisor. The women workers, having few tools to work with, can sometimes perform sexuality to negotiate more benefits at work such as an extra bathroom break. However, the supervisor’s manipulation of sexual desire on the shopfloor serves to increase efficiency and docility amongst the predominantly female workforce.⁶

Furthermore, the architecture of many maquiladoras encourages a sexually charged environment because it allows for the women workers to be under the perpetual gaze of their supervisors. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault (1995) explores how panoptic architecture serves as a disciplinary mechanism. Panoptic architecture can be described as organizing the layout around a central point. In the factories, the central point is

characterized by a one-way glass circular room so that the workers can be viewed at all times and from every angle. Foucault studies the effects of this architecture in the prison system and yet this figure has been adopted in hospitals, factories, and schools because of its disciplinary function that Foucault describes when he states, “hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”⁷ The visibility of the women workers means that they are always under the sexual gaze of their supervisors. And even when the workers are not being looked at, they continue to operate with the feeling that they ‘can’ be looked at because they never know when someone is behind the glass observing them.

The maquila industry also uses women’s capability to reproduce and the factory’s ability to control the bodies of their workers as a disciplinary mechanism. In the production/reproduction dichotomy, female bodies are valued for their ability to reproduce. However, the women who work in factories in Mexico are viewed quite differently. Due to the current transnational economy, instead of being valued as mothers, their ability to reproduce is surveyed, regulated and controlled to increase productivity. Rapp (2009) and many others refer to this as “stratified reproduction-the hierarchical organization of reproductive health, fecundity, birth experiences, and child rearing that supports and rewards the maternity of some women, while despising or outlawing the mother-work of others.”⁸ The mother-work of the women who work in maquiladoras is despised and outlawed by the maquila industry and the mother/worker dichotomy is rigidly upheld in these factories. The restrictive policies of the maquila industry are justified by the belief that mothers cannot be efficient workers and vice versa. In fact, normalized management practices strictly regulate worker’s bodies. Some of these practices include workers having to show their used sanitary napkins to factory nurses, taking urine tests

and health exams.⁹ As a result, the female workers are reminded each day that their bodies do not belong to themselves but rather, they belong to the factories.

The desert along U.S.-Mexico Border has become a graveyard for hundreds of young women who were raped and murdered. The murders have been described as “Jack the Ripper-style sex murders,” an appropriate phrase being that many of the bodies were found with bite marks, stab wounds, and strange symbols carved into the flesh.¹⁰ The police have been slow to respond to these murders and have arrested numerous men that they claimed were the serial killers responsible only to have more murders committed while the men were still in police custody.¹¹ What is the connection between these murders and the maquila industry? Many of the murder victims worked in the maquiladoras and their bodies are discarded in the desert along with their work uniform. Also, some of the rape victims who have escaped their captors pointed fingers at security guards, supervisors and schedulers who work in the factory or the bus drivers who transport the women from their shanty homes in *las colonias* to the factories.¹² However, finding, arresting, and punishing the individual men who are responsible for the murders will not solve the problem. The city is run by the factories and the disposability of female labor is related to the seemingly effortless disposability of murdered women into the desert. The maquila industry and the Mexican government dominate the rhetoric on factory workers and murder victims and they assure the public that the women who were kidnapped and murdered were “loose” women. Meanwhile, the factories are not held accountable for their role in producing an environment conducive for murder. The threat of murder serves to discipline the women workers who fear that they will be the next victim.

Although much has been written on the maquila industry, few scholars have examined how sexuality, reproduction, and the Juárez murders serve as disciplinary mechanisms within the

factories. At times these subjects are discussed separately but I believe that the connections between the three are integral to understanding the maquila industry and its effect on Mexico. These discussions fail to explore how these three concepts work together to exert control over the workers. This thesis will examine how the manipulation, use, and control of sexual desire functions in the maquila industry and creates efficiency. It will also explore how the control of the female workers' reproductive capabilities serves as a disciplinary mechanism in the factories. This is closely tied to the sexually- infused shop floor because there is a disconnect between the sexual availability that is expected of the workers and their ability to reproduce. Thus women are expected to engage in sexual activities with their supervisors but absolutely are not allowed to become pregnant. Sexuality and reproduction are read in the narrow heterosexual discourse of the factories that positions the workers always in relation to men.

Finally, the Juárez murders must be examined as they serve as the ultimate control mechanism within the factories because for many women it is a matter of life or death. These sexually violent crimes mirror the sexually- infused atmosphere in the factories and many of the victims are known to have worked in the maquiladoras. Common stereotypes about racialized/sexualized Mexican women living along the border prevent gains from being made in ending the femicide in Ciudad Juárez. The rhetoric that surrounds the murders that claims that all the women who are murdered are 'loose' effectively obscures ties between the factories and the murders. Also, the constant fear of rape and murder helps to keep the women from making gains in demanding worker's rights (although many women workers in Mexico continue to fight for their rights despite this threat).

While assembly plants populate East Asia in equally high numbers, I chose to explore the maquiladoras in Ciudad Juárez because of the unique effect the devastating murders have in

disciplining the workers. Additionally, this paper is a critique of transnational capitalism as well as an analysis of disciplinary mechanisms in the maquiladoras because the two are interconnected. The current transnational economy has been naturalized and made to be seen as inevitable and even beneficial to the millions of people who are now employed by maquiladoras.¹³ It is my hope that an examination of disciplinary mechanisms used in the maquiladoras will inadvertently deconstruct these oversimplified notions.

‘Demographics’ of the Maquila Worker: Creating Gendered Workers

“Productive Femininity is a paradigm through which managers view, and therefore structure, assembly work, and through which they imagine, describe and define workers.”¹⁴ –Leslie Salzinger (2001)

Gender segregation in the workforce has proven to be highly efficient in the maquila industry. Frequently, being female is specified as a prerequisite for the job and women are the ideal worker because they can be paid less, are supposedly more physically dexterous for this type of labor and less likely to demand worker’s rights.¹⁵ However, gender should not be the only category of analysis as common (false) notions of racialized women are also described by the maquila industry as reasons for moving a corporation to Mexico. As Salzinger (2001) points out in her article “Making Fantasies Real: Producing Women and Men on the Maquila Shop Floor” an immense amount of work goes into “creating” workers. Salzinger states, “Thus it is a mistake to think that [worker’s] presence in the factory makes global production possible. To the contrary, they are global production’s finished product.”¹⁶ Thus, although the industry claims that Mexican women are ideal workers for the tasks in the factories based on supposedly natural, or preconditioned female characteristics, in reality, the industry itself constructs women into the ideal workforce. The construction of the Third World woman worker as already always docile effectively obscures the process of gendering workers. In Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (2003) discussion of Third World women in multinational production, she argues that women workers

are subject to “capitalist discipline” and that “ideas of ‘Third World women’s work’ have their basis in social hierarchies stratified by sex/gender, race, and class.”¹⁷ So, depictions of women workers in the maquila industry are formulated using prevailing stereotypes about poor, Mexican women. The rhetoric of femininity is used to claim that assembly work is inherently women’s work. Managers are persistent in their assertions that women are naturally more patient, docile, calm, and attentive despite many recent uprisings from women workers.¹⁸

Although women are highly desired and compose the majority of the workforce in the maquila industry, their work is devalued and segregated into the category of “unskilled labor.” In fact, Kopinak (1996) states, “The term ‘feminine personnel’ was used synonymously with unskilled production personnel.”¹⁹ The rhetoric of “unskilled labor” allows the industry to pay women less, approximately four to five dollars per day, a wage hardly suitable for supporting one person let alone an entire family.²⁰ Women are hired for their supposed docility, patience, and ‘nimble fingers’.²¹ With stereotypes of women of color as traditional (read: obedient to men) and apolitical (read: will not unionize), they are targeted by transnational corporations. As a result of using feminine ‘unskilled labor,’ the maquila industry is extremely profitable.

The concept of ‘unskilled’ labor contributes to the disposability of female workers because it makes it appear as if anyone can do assembly line work. It also justifies low wages. The narrative of ‘unskilled’ labor further diminishes the value of the worker. In “Dialectic of Still Life: Murder, Women, and Maquiladoras,” Melissa W. Wright (2001) states, “the value of a Mexican woman’s labor power declines over time even as her labor power provides value to the firm.”²² One reason for this decline is because the labor is “unskilled” and the workers will never develop into “skilled workers.”²³ The diminishment of value of these workers as human beings contributes to their commodification and disposability. This illustrates the contradictory

nature of transnational capitalism. “Women” as a group make enormous profits for people in the “First World” but “woman,” as the individual, is perceived as worthless and disposable.

Chapter One: Sexuality as a Disciplinary Mechanism

The panoptic architecture used successfully in many prisons and now adopted in factories plays a substantial role in disciplining workers. In this case, watching becomes a form of control. In some factories women work standing side by side on an assembly line that encircles a smaller circle which holds the offices of the supervisors encased in one-way glass that allows the supervisors to view the workers but the workers are not privy to seeing behind the glass.²⁴ See images below:

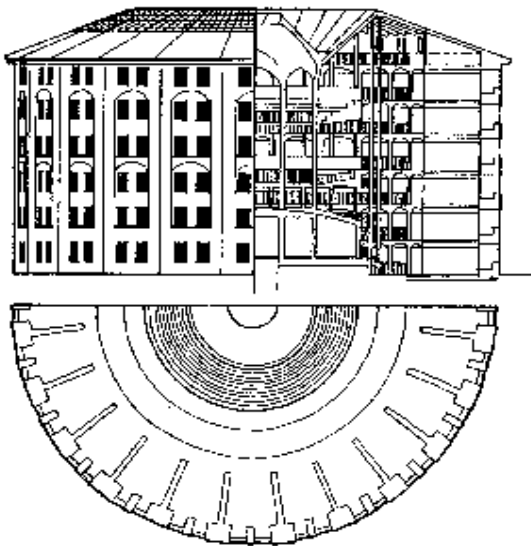


Figure 1²⁵



Figure 2²⁶

Also, some factories place cameras in the ceiling so that even if workers doubt the presence of their supervisor, they are aware that “even the walls have eyes.”²⁷ Not all maquiladoras have adopted panoptic architecture. However, the relationship between the male surveyor and the female surveyed is still present as the supervisor paces up and down rows upon rows of women. Salzinger (2000) describes the encounter between the male supervisors and female workers as

follows: “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.”²⁸ Salzinger argues that efficiency and desire are fused together in the factories. Thus, as the supervisor surveys the female workers, he gives more attention to the most efficient workers. Salzinger asserts that this attention materializes into sexual desire as the supervisor evaluates the physical appearance of the female worker and sexualizes her. This process leaves little room for male employees working as anything other than supervisors and as a result contributes to the myth that women are naturally better workers in the maquiladoras.²⁹ Although Salzinger’s description of sexual desire in the factories is useful and persuasive, at many times it is too linear, simplistic, and heterosexist.

Salzinger attributes the interpellation of women workers as sexual objects almost entirely to the gaze of male supervisors. She states,

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.³⁰

Undoubtedly the gaze and power of the supervisors contributes to the sexualization of the women workers. However, the surveyor/surveyed analysis is not an exhaustive explanation of how women become sexualized on the shopfloor. The nation-state plays an extensive role in marketing sexualized women to transnational corporations.

Women who work in the factories are marketed using similar techniques that the Mexican government uses to market its “hospitality industry” (organized prostitution). In Women in the Global Factory (1981), Fuentes and Ehrenreich see parallels between the hospitality industry and the factory work. The maquila industry and the Mexican government actively exoticize the women workers to appeal to corporations owned predominantly by white

Americans. Often times pictures of young attractive women looking down and away submissively are located on the front cover of a brochure encouraging companies to move to Mexico. Fuentes and Ehrenreich state, “Many governments are willing to back up their advertising with whatever amount of repression it takes to keep ‘their girls’ as docile as they appear in the brochures.”³¹ The selling of women workers to male owned corporations mimics the sale of prostitutes and posits women as sexually available to their supervisors and factory owners. The marketing of women workers as sexual objects also generates a stigma of factory workers as ‘loose’. This narrative serves supervisors’ desire to hire single women who are usually isolated from their families. It has been argued that Mexican men also promote this stigma because they resent the newfound job opportunities provided to women.³² Ultimately, the women workers are sexualized before they even enter the factories and the supervisor constantly surveying the women workers is a result of and further contributes to the sexualization of the workers.

Inside the factories, the process of disciplining the workers is continuous as the male supervisors hypersexualize the workers and use this to their advantage both in regards to meeting their own sexual needs and the needs of production. Salzinger observes the interaction between the supervisor and the worker and writes, “Often supervisors will stop by a favorite operator -- chatting, checking quality, flirting. Their approval marks ‘good worker’ and ‘desirable woman’ in a single gesture”.³³ This is a common interaction between supervisor and worker and sometimes the interactions occur entirely without words as the supervisor expresses himself through body language.

In “Desire and the Prosthetics of Supervision: A Case of Maquiladora Flexibility” Melissa W. Wright (2001) attended a workshop that teaches supervisors how to monitor and

react to their workers. According to the narrative, the unskilled, untrainable woman worker must be incessantly coached by her skilled (read: male) supervisor. Supervisors are taught to smile, nod their heads, or lift their eyebrows when evaluating women's work.³⁴ According to Salzinger's ethnography, it appears that the training used to evaluate women's work is also employed to evaluate the worker. Just as the supervisor's evaluation of the women's work helps increase production, the evaluation of the women workers themselves is essential to the production process. Salzinger argues that constant evaluation and sexualization of women workers is "a fundamental element of the efficient operation of labor control and hence of production itself".³⁵ An analysis of both Salzinger and Wright's work illustrates how supervisors are taught precisely how to evaluate workers and maintain power. Wright describes how the instructor of the course encourages the use of body language. At the workshop the instructor stated, "You don't have time to tell people how to do things over and over. You use body language... They need to do things as if *your* ideas were already in their *heads*".³⁶ The instructor's lesson demonstrates how labor and control operate in the factory and how the supervised (women workers) are expected to react to their supervisor's demands.

Women workers, interpellated as sexual objects, respond as such and often use their physical appearance to their advantage when possible. The workers are able to use their relationships with their supervisors (as long as they are on good standing i.e. they are attractive, responsive to flirtation, and efficient) to negotiate perks for themselves. Salzinger discusses how women can use their physical appearance to their benefit by responding to their supervisor's advances when she states, "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."³⁷ Acutely aware of their supervisor's sexual

desire for them and in a space with limited access to power, the women workers are able to transgress the rules. For instance, Salzinger describes a situation in a maquiladora in which a worker is late for her shift. This would normally prevent the worker from working the rest of the day and entail a severe cut in wages. But as a favorite of one of the supervisors, she appeals to him and he allows her to work with no consequences.³⁸ However, this access to power is not open to all women. The women must be young, attractive, and efficient workers. More importantly, they must be willing to respond to their supervisor's advances.

Despite the access to power that attractive physical appearance and flirtation can offer, ultimately the use of flirtation has detrimental results as it fosters competition rather than solidarity amongst the women workers. Women workers simultaneously offer beauty tips to one another and criticize each other's appearance. The women workers often compete for the attention of the supervisor and those who receive attention are envied by some of the other women on the line.³⁹ Salzinger describes how important appearances are in the factory and how she found herself changing her own appearance (wearing more make-up and dressing in more tight fitting clothing) with the help of her coworkers and at the implicit request of the supervisors.⁴⁰ The sexualization of women workers allows for the supervisors to exert control even when they are not present because they create divisions between women which can affect whether they organize to demand worker's rights.

Additionally, some maquiladoras encourage competition amongst women using a literal competition- a beauty contest. Factory workers compete against each other to be deemed the most attractive woman in the factory. Salzinger describes how seriously the contest is taken by the women workers when she writes, "the value of participating, whether or not you win, [is] an act of bravery and an assertion of self-worth".⁴¹ Clearly, the supervisors benefit from fostering

competition amongst workers rather than solidarity because it distracts worker's from deliberating their situation. Also, women who willing participate in the beauty contest are further sexualized and thus controlled by their male supervisors.

The maquila industry's attempt to transform women workers into an obedient, docile, and efficient workforce is partially made successful through the sexualization of women workers. Before entering the factory, women are posited as sexually available through nation-state issued propaganda and narratives about the supposedly "loose" (read: financially independent) women workers. It is under this position that women enter the factories and are interpellated as sexual objects by their supervisors. However, this process does not occur for the mere pleasure of the male supervisors. As a Salzinger argues, it is integral to production in the factory and thus a key component in transforming women workers into an efficient workforce.

Chapter Two: Controlling Reproductive Capabilities

Women workers are sexualized through propaganda and myths about factory workers so that when they enter the factories they are viewed as already sexually available to their male supervisors. However, there seems to be a disconnect between their sexual availability and reproduction. In other words, women workers are expected to be sexually available but they are absolutely not supposed to get pregnant. Nor are they supposed to be pregnant upon entering the factories. Strict factory policies are in place to ensure that pregnant women are not hired. These practices range from filling out a questionnaire on sexual history and activity and receiving birth control pills from the factory doctor to showing used sanitary napkins.⁴²

Why such stringent control over reproduction? In "Pregnancy Discrimination in Mexico: Has Mexico Complied With the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation?" Reka S. Koerner (1999) argues that the main reason maquiladoras regulate pregnancy is because they do

not want to be held financially responsible for maternity benefits.⁴³ In *Global Production*, Petersen (1994) argues that employers fear pregnancy and believe that women who enter the job market while pregnant do so with goal of receiving paid maternity leave.⁴⁴ Although I agree with scholars such as Koerner and Petersen who argue that the maquila industry regulates pregnancy because it does not want to have to pay for maternity leave and other benefits, there are other causes for oppressing and controlling the female reproductive body.

I argue that in the maquiladoras, reproduction is policed for the purpose of creating docile and disciplined bodies so that they will be efficient workers. In “Local Response to Global Development: An Emerging Culture of Health among Pregnant Women in Mexican *Maquiladoras*” Catalina A. Denman (2006) argues that according to traditional gender roles, “Motherhood represents a step towards empowerment for women in Mexico.”⁴⁵ The maquiladoras need to restrict and repress any feeling of empowerment amongst workers in order to construct disciplined, docile, and controllable bodies. Additionally, the body of the female worker is treated as a commodity. In “The Commodification of the Body and its Parts” Lesley A. Sharp (2000) states, “Commodification insists upon objectification in some form, transforming persons and their bodies from a human category into subjects of economic desire.”⁴⁶ The maquiladora workers are no longer seen as human and instead are valued as part of a machine that is required to meet the production quota for each day. The commodification of the bodies of these female workers creates abject and disposable bodies subject to control and discipline.

Before female bodies can be controlled, they must be commodified and fragmented. Victor Quintana, an economist, states in an interview that the “Lack of ethics begins on the production line because the young women maquila workers are pieces of a machine, not human

beings”.⁴⁷ The control exerted on the bodies of female workers is dehumanizing and humiliating (i.e. showing sanitary napkins) for the purpose of increasing the efficiency in the production line. The female worker’s body is fragmented into parts that hold value in the eyes of the industry, such as their fingers. However, the body is also fragmented to highlight body parts that are threatening to productivity, in this case, the womb. Sharp states, “women consistently emerge as specialized targets of commodification, where the female body is often valued for its reproductive potential. Such bodies, may in turn, require regulation.”⁴⁸ In highlighting reproductive capability as negative, supervisors are attempting to construct an alternative identity for their female workers by devaluing their potential to reproduce. The devaluation of reproductive potential is very deliberate as it attempts to transform the female body from being valued for reproduction to being valued for production.

Disciplining the Reproductive Female Body

“Unlike other biological beings, a woman does not simply ‘get pregnant’ and ‘give birth.’ She does so within the context of explicit and variable material conditions, including opportunities for employment...” - C.H. Browner.⁴⁹

Before women even step foot into a factory, attempts are made to control their reproduction. The government has taken an active role in producing propaganda that will encourage women to refrain from having large families so that their energy can be dedicated to production in the maquiladoras. Kopinak states that the government uses the media:

for convincing people to change their reproductive behavior, to control or encourage migration- like migration toward the northern border- and it has been those media... which propagate the idea that it would be a better life with a small family, without questioning what women or couples want.⁵⁰

The maquila industry brings in \$16 billion in revenue per year so it is no surprise that the government also plays an active role in disciplining the bodies of female workers.⁵¹ Maquilas

employ 1.5 million workers, 60% of which are women meaning that a majority of women in Mexico will be employed by the industry in their lifetime and thus become targets of the process of creating obedient and productive workers.⁵² The management practices in the maquiladoras that do not allow women to have control over family planning demonstrate that the industry does not think that women are capable of making the “right” decision, i.e. the decision that is most beneficial for the factory and the nation-state. A supervisor is reported saying, “Usually, they have too many children...Our aim is to make the workplace a better environment than the home. There is order here, something many are not accustomed to.”⁵³ The supervisor’s comment reflects the goal of the maquila industry to reduce pregnancy and maintain the idea that the maquiladoras themselves are beneficial to the women because the factory is a better environment than the shanty housing built in *las colonias*. It also assumes that factory workers already lack control over their bodies because they have too many children and live in chaos. But the supervisor fails to address how the maquila industry produces those conditions in the first place.

The maquila industry uses various methods to establish control over its workers’ bodies and their reproductive abilities in order to reinforce the idea that the female worker’s body belongs to the industry and serves the sole purpose of production. Women seeking employment are subject to urine tests, health exams, and questions on the application about contraceptives, menstrual cycle, and sexual activities.⁵⁴ If the women seeking employment cannot demonstrate that they are not pregnant, they will not be hired and most know not to even apply if they are pregnant. The fear of becoming pregnant while employed at a maquiladora is constant.

I never saw my mother pregnant, I never noticed... We never talk about it...in the factory we talk about how we care for ourselves, which pills you can take...how certain things can help you avoid pregnancy. We always talk about these things among ourselves.

Gloria, age 28, operator at Plant X.⁵⁵

Female factory workers are forced to hide their pregnancies from their employers. In a study of 77 women from various *Colonias* in Ciudad Juárez, groups with five women per group were formed to discuss attitudes towards contraceptives. The study reported “the perception and assurance of effectiveness provided by ‘seeing a period’ was extremely important... These women considered the missed periods... quite worrisome.”⁵⁶ Garcia and Snow attribute this anxiety to concerns about the effectiveness of the pill. Considering the necessity of seeing a period in obtaining work, it seems that workers need to see their periods as the ultimate proof for their employers that they are not pregnant. This pre-employment screening is a precursor for the regulation that will occur once hired.

Every movement, glance, and discussion amongst coworkers takes place under the vigilant gaze of the supervisor. Under this supervision, female workers are at the mercy of their employers. Browner states, “Differential access to a society’s sources of power would determine how conflicts over reproduction would be articulated, conducted, and resolved- and even whether resolution would ever take place.”⁵⁷ In Ciudad Juárez, a town marred by the affects of transnational capitalism, women lack power inside and outside of the factories. Female workers report witnessing supervisors slap coworkers across the face.⁵⁸ This direct form of violence serves to further assert the power of the employer by instilling fear of violent reprisal for misbehaving.

Sexuality and Reproduction

What are the implications of Salzinger’s argument in relation to disciplining reproductive bodies? First, the factory workers are expected to be sexually available but are punished if they become pregnant. The violence and power exerted by the supervisors can also manifest itself as sexual violence. There are workers who have reported being raped by their

supervisors and then becoming pregnant and ultimately fired.⁵⁹ Second, the control over reproduction inside the factory also serves to repress sexuality outside of the factory.⁶⁰ The fear of becoming pregnant and losing one's job can inhibit women from engaging in sexual intercourse.

Not all women are fired from the maquiladoras when they become pregnant but their bodies are subject to even more extensive control by their employers. First, pregnant women attempt to hide their pregnancy in any way that they can. They hide snacks in their work aprons and some even wear corsets to hide the weight that they put on during their pregnancy.⁶¹ After they can no longer conceal their pregnancy, if they are not fired, the control exerted by their employers over their bodies becomes, in some ways, even more wide-reaching. Denman states, "Their immediate supervisor had the ultimate say in their access to benefits during their pregnancy".⁶² Upon learning about the pregnancy of one of their employees, supervisors are offered more opportunities to exert control, as the life of the worker and the fetus depends upon their 'generosity.'

Pregnant workers are pressured to please their supervisors and a relationship develops in which they negotiate to receive benefits. Pregnant workers are forced to negotiate with their employers for additional bathroom breaks and lunch breaks, for a chair to sit in while they work, and for permission to visit the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) for medical care.⁶³ This can sometimes create hostility between pregnant workers and their coworkers who long for that type of 'special treatment'.⁶⁴ Foucault argues that punishment is only one aspect of discipline and that rewards play significant role:

The teacher must avoid, as far as possible, the use of punishment; on the contrary, he must endeavour to make rewards more frequent than the penalties, the lazy being more encouraged by the desire to be rewarded in the same way as the diligent than by the fear of punishment.⁶⁵

The type of relationship formed between the pregnant worker and her supervisor is representative of the “gratification-punishment” model that Foucault describes. During this stage, pregnant workers are particularly obedient because they are at an even greater risk of losing their jobs and their potential child.

Becoming pregnant while working in a factory and maintaining one’s job can also be seen as a form of resistance. Foucault argues that wherever there is discipline there is resistance. The women who become pregnant are expected to lose their jobs and many do. However, those that continue working in the factory blur the lines between the mother/worker dichotomy demonstrating, quite literally, that women can simultaneously be mothers and efficient workers. The women who successfully negotiate additional bathroom breaks or a stool to sit on while working have access to benefits not given to the other employees and in that sense are afforded with power and are resisting the disciplinary methods of the industry.

The maquila industry employs thousands of desperate women who are trying to care for their own well-being as well as their families. Consequently, they are usually not in the position to demand that their bodies be treated humanely. Instead, the maquila industry engages in practices designed to discipline the bodies and minds of their workers. The factories demand that any privacy or agency a worker once had over her body be stripped when she is subjected to the humiliating pre-screening for employment. This will be the first of many times that women will be required to reveal to their employers information about their sexual history, contraceptives, and menstrual cycle. If hired, these dehumanizing practices continue and sometimes worsen. The commodified female body is viewed as nothing more than part of a machine that manufactures goods. Any reproductive capabilities must be eliminated and control over the body is placed in

the hands of the supervisor. The supervision over the reproductive processes of the body reflects a larger supervision over the processes of production.

Chapter Three: Murder in Ciudad Juárez

“Young women being raped is another dimension of that depersonalization in the assembly line.”-

*Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos*⁶⁶

The rampant violence along the U.S.-Mexico Border takes the lives of many women and men each year. However, within the past fifteen years, women have been specifically targeted for violence. Violence against women continues with impunity making border towns like Juárez ripe for rape and murder. There are disputes over the number of women actually murdered, raped, and discarded in the desert in a serial killer-like-manner and estimates vary from the low end of 80 to over 300 murdered women.⁶⁷ Regardless of the numbers, the border culture (re)produced by the factories creates a breeding ground for this type of violence and 20.8% of the women who were murdered or are missing worked in the factories.⁶⁸ Ursula Biemann’s *Performing the Border* (1999) interviewee, Isabel Velazquez, draws our attention to the irony of border towns in which some of the most sophisticated technologies are produced and yet cities like Juárez lack basic infrastructure (running water, roads, street lights, etc.).⁶⁹ Like many others, Biemann points to the nature of the work in the factories as a fragmented process that ultimately fragments the workers’ bodies and contributes to their disposability.⁷⁰ The discourse of disposability reveals how the workers are viewed not only as a disposable work force but also as disposable bodies, demonstrated by the women found raped and murdered in the desert. In this section, I argue that the factories themselves produce specific conditions that allow for and even encourage violence against women. Additionally, I analyze how the fear of rape and murder can serve as a disciplinary mechanism that keeps women obedient in the factories. In concert with one another, the control and manipulation of sexuality and reproduction in the factories and the

violence produced as a result of the factories attempt to create a docile, disciplined, obedient and efficient workforce.

Factory conditions and policies fabricate a dangerous situation for women and other inhabitants of the border. Evelyn Nieves' "To Work and Die in Juarez" (2002) describes some of these conditions. For example, if women are late to work, even if it is only a few minutes, factory policy forces them to return home. Not only do those women lose an entire day worth of wages, but they are also forced to make the trek back home by themselves. Nieves reports that several of the women who were turned away from the factories because they were late were later found dead.⁷¹ Even when women do arrive to work on time, getting to work involves a long unlit walk from *las colonias* to the bus stop each day. Nieves illustrates this when she writes "women still wait for the rickety green factory buses well before the sun is up, on lonely, unlit corners where no one would see if they were dragged into a car never to be seen alive again".⁷² Despite the knowledge that many of the murdered women worked in the maquiladoras and were last seen leaving work, the maquila industry has not taken steps to protect their workers or change their policies that put women's lives in danger.

The high number of maquiladoras along the border and as a result, the high number of people moving in and out of the city, has changed the dynamics in these towns. First, the population has skyrocketed and the cities have not been able to keep up. Consequently, people are living in homes made from the scraps left over from the maquilas in areas that lack street lights, roads, and running water.⁷³ Second, there is also a massive shift in social customs as women move to the border on their own providing them a certain freedom and independence from patriarchal familial situations but simultaneously removing them from their social safety net. It also has been argued that wage earning women are resented by men who have a harder

time finding work in the factories and who are dissatisfied with the power afforded to women who are employed and making money.⁷⁴ Finally, an interviewee in *Performing the Border*, Berta Jortar, articulates the damage of selling both your time and life to the maquiladoras.⁷⁵ A similar concern is voiced in Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos as social systems previously used to provide support to families are destroyed as every waking moment is spent manufacturing goods for the maquilas rather than developing relationships.⁷⁶ These drastic changes to the border and the lives of Mexicans have created a distinct border culture that leaves women in vulnerable positions.

Melissa W. Wright's "Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women, and Maquiladoras" explores the narrative told by maquila administrators of "high turnover" to explain the perception of Mexican women workers as always declining in value. According to Wright, the turnover narrative posits certain workers as unreliable, temporary and therefore untrainable.⁷⁷ Determining which workers are at risk of "turning over," is highly gendered as women workers and the type of work they do is feminized by notions previously discussed such as nimble fingers and patience. Wright argues that this feminization allows for

the managers [to] depict women as untrainable laborers; Mexican women represent the workers of declining value since their intrinsic value never appreciates into skill but instead dissipates over time.

Consequently, the Mexican woman personifies waste in the making, as the materials of her body gain shape through the discourses that explain how she is untrainable, unskilled, and always a temporary worker.⁷⁸

The maquila industry's propagation of the discourse of the Mexican woman as waste allows them to be disposed of like waste. This discourse also prevents real action from being taken to find their killers. Yet the maquila industry refuses to concede that they have any role in the disappearance and murder of women.

An exploration of the notion that the maquila industry is not linked to the murders or is not responsible for taking action to protect their workers warrants more attention. Wright explains that the industry claims “no degree of funding for security personnel, or outlays for improved streetlighting, or in-house self-defense workshops, or changes to production schedules will help”.⁷⁹ Wright proceeds to describe an incident where a driver of a maquiladora bus raped a thirteen year old and left her in the desert to die.⁸⁰ She survived and named her attacker but the maquiladoras took no responsibility for their driver’s crime. In November 2001, eight bodies were found in a field located directly across from the office of the foreign companies’ trade organization, *Asociación de Maquiladoras*. When asked to respond to these crimes, the maquila industry resorts to describing the women as promiscuous.

This distinct rhetoric in the public sphere is used to discuss the victims of the murders and is supported and disseminated by the Mexican government and the maquila industry creating direct links between sexuality and murder. According to the rhetoric, the general public should not be concerned with the murders because only a specific type of woman is at risk. The government argues that ‘loose’ women are targeted for murder and that as long as women ‘behave’ themselves then they are not at risk. This is illustrated by statements issued by the mayor such as “do you know where your daughter is tonight?”⁸¹ and “was she a good girl?”⁸² Wright argues that these questions about the murdered women “point to the matter of her value as we wonder if she is really worthy of our concern.”⁸³ This discourse is reinforced by the notion that the murdered women are living double lives. As the story goes, by day they may appear to be well-behaved and obedient mothers, daughters, wives, and factory workers but at night they engage in sexually promiscuous behavior in the thriving bar and club scene.⁸⁴ This rhetoric successfully labels the women as unworthy of public and police attention and “the logical

conclusion is, therefore, not to seek the perpetrators of the crime as much as to restore the cultural values whose erosion these women and girls represent.”⁸⁵

The Mexican government’s rhetoric materialized into harmful legislation. A frightening example can be seen in 2001 when a state law was passed in Chihuahua (Juárez is located in Chihuahua) that “would have reduced sentences from four years to one for rapists who could convince a court that their victims had ‘provoked’ them.”⁸⁶ Fortunately, women fiercely fought back and ultimately convinced Mexico’s Congress to intervene if Chihuahua refused to repeal the law. Nonetheless, this legislation reflects the common belief that women who are the victims of these crimes ‘had it coming’ or someone how provoked their killer by overtly displaying their sexuality. This ploy of blaming the victim has even resulted in claims that all of the women who were murdered were prostitutes and journalist Debbie Nathan writes, “it is thus no coincidence that many border dwellers equate maquiladoras with prostitution”.⁸⁷ Ironically, it was once thought that the maquila industry would remove women from dire economic situations that would require them to prostitute themselves. Instead, women who work in the factories are automatically thought of as prostitutes as illustrated by Nathan’s interview of “Margarita”: “The maquilas are purely *pinche puteadero* [fucking prostitution], purely *pinche* corruption. I think that a *chingada* [fucking] cantina is cleaner than maquilas”.⁸⁸

What role do these murders have in disciplining women in the factories? First, the murders produce fear. Nieves describes this fear when she states:

Women are on the edge. On a visit after the bodies were found in November, women factory workers who were waiting, alone, for buses at 5 a.m. all recoiled when I came to approach them for interviews with a male photographer and a male guide. Two ran away...⁸⁹

This fear also operates in the factories. Would you show up to work late if you knew that it meant you would be turned away to walk home by yourself in the dark? Would you protest the working conditions at the factory if eight of your fellow coworkers were just found raped and murdered in a ditch across from the *Asociación de Maquiladoras*? Would you make a complaint against sexual harassment when the factory bus driver could make you disappear? No.

The murders also serve as a disciplinary mechanism because of the disposability of women workers. Women who demand agency over themselves and their bodies risk losing their jobs. The high turnover rate in the factories coupled with the hundreds of women looking for jobs silences factory workers. This notion that the workers are always replaceable is replicated outside of the factories where women are nonchalantly disposed of. In “Transnational sexual gendered violence: an application of border sexual conquest at Mexico-US border” Morales and Bejarano link this concept of disposability to a depiction of the border as “a place in which ‘everything is for sale’” and “anything goes”.⁹⁰ As a result of this perception, the border is “an ideal site for transnational corporations to experiment with globalization and not be accountable for the structural vulnerabilities that subjected women to sexual violence”.⁹¹

In sum, the Juárez murders are reflective of the treatment and perception of the women in the maquilas. The hypersexualized factory floor reinforces the belief that maquila workers are prostitutes and thus when they are murdered they either provoked it or deserved it. Maquiladora regulations that control and manipulate sexuality and strip agency from women as they strictly regulate reproduction produce an environment in which women are viewed not as humans but rather as parts of the machines on which they work. This allows for the equation of these women with the cheap goods that they produce and they are viewed as similarly disposable.

Conclusion

I began my discussion of the maquila industry by exploring the manipulation of sexual desire as an integral part of production. Supervisors overtly express their sexual desires towards women workers who are young, attractive, and efficient workers. This positive attention can serve as a motive to increase efficiency and productivity. Also, to the women's detriment, it can encourage competition between women workers rather than solidarity. The manipulation of sexual desire attempts to discipline workers by increasing productivity, preventing workers from uniting to demand rights, and distracting women from their plight in the factories.

I then discussed how the maquilas strictly regulate women's reproductive capabilities. Women, expected to be sexually available to their supervisors, absolutely are not allowed to become pregnant or they risk losing their jobs. The regulation of women's reproductive capabilities functions to uphold the mother/worker dichotomy. But ultimately, the health exams, urine tests, and requirement of showing used sanitary napkins operate to remind the women workers that they are not in control of their own bodies.

Finally, I analyzed how the maquiladoras themselves produce an environment conducive for violence. The maquilas treat women as disposable sexual objects that can easily be replaced by the next woman in need of a job. It strips women of their identities and they are viewed as just another worker, the same as anyone else. This treatment of women seeps out of the factories into Ciudad Juárez where all women are at risk of being viewed as disposable. Yet again, this performs a disciplinary function as women, in fear for their lives, may not stand up for their rights if it means that their bodies could later turn up in the desert.

These three methods of discipline exerted simultaneously make an effort to control and transform women into docile, obedient and efficient workers. Despite claims that women are

naturally or inherently docile, it is a continuous struggle to position women workers as such. The maquila industry goes to great lengths to situate women as perfect for work in the maquilas and the industry has been repeatedly challenged by the women workers themselves.

Although I explored the effects of disciplinary mechanisms in the maquilas, there are still many questions left unanswered. A further analysis of how the racialization of workers operates in the factories is crucial to understanding the task of sexually objectifying the workers as well as to understanding who receives sexualized attention from their supervisors. Unfortunately, very little research on racialized sexuality in the maquilas was available to me. Furthermore, it is important to scrutinize how other types of violence such as domestic violence perform disciplinary work and whether its causes are similar or distinct from the seemingly random murders. Finally, an examination of how the United States is implicated in the treatment of factory workers is essential to understanding the power dynamics at work here. This is imperative because only after we recognize our role in the exploitation of Mexican women workers and how this is linked to the high death toll in Ciudad Juárez can we begin to imagine solutions.

¹ Evelyn Hu-Dehart, "Globalization and its Discontents: Exposing the Underside," Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies 24, no. 2/3 (2003): 244-260.

² Annette Fuentes and Barbara Ehrenreich, Women in the Global Factory, (Boston, Ma: South End Press, 1981), 27-28.

³ Hu-Dehart, 253.

⁴ Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 27.

⁵ Leslie Salzinger, "Manufacturing sexual subjects: 'Harassment', desire and discipline on the Maquiladora shopfloor," Ethnography 1, no. 1 (2000): 68.

⁶ Although nowadays men hold more jobs in the factory and comprise almost half of the workforce, the labor is highly gendered, placing men in segregated jobs that require "more skill" or heavy lifting.

⁷ Michel Foucault, Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 201.

⁸ Rayna Rapp, "Gender, Body, Biomedicine: How Some Feminist Concerns Dragged Reproduction to the Center of Social Theory," American Anthropological Association 15, no. 4 (2001): 469.

⁹ Reka S. Koerner, "Pregnancy Discrimination in Mexico: Has Mexico Complied with the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation?" Texas Journal on Civil Liberties & Civil Rights 4, no. 2 (1999): 235.

¹⁰ Debbie Nathan, "Work, Sex, and Danger in Ciudad Juárez," Report on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 33, no. 3 (1999): 25.

¹¹ Senorita Extraviada Dir. Lourdes Portillo, Xochitl Film, 2001, Videocassette.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hu-Dehart, 253.

¹⁴ Leslie Salzinger, "Making Fantasies Real: Producing Women and Men on the Maquila Shop Floor," Report on Gender 34, no. 5 (2001): 13.

¹⁵ Kathryn Kopinak, Desert Capitalism Maquiladoras in North America's Western Industrial Corridor (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 83.

¹⁶ Salzinger, "Making Fantasies Real: Producing Women and Men on the Maquila Shop Floor," 14.

¹⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Feminism Without Borders: Decolonization Theory, Practicing Solidarity (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 74.

¹⁸ Salzinger, "Making Fantasies Real: Producing Women and Men on the Maquila Shop Floor," 14.

¹⁹ Kopinak, 83.

²⁰ Senorita Extraviada Dir. Lourdes Portillo, Xochitl Film, 2001, Videocassette.

²¹ Hu-Dehart 252.

²² Melissa W. Wright, "Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women, and Maquiladoras," Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 126.

²³ Ibid., 127.

²⁴ Leslie Salzinger, "Manufacturing sexual subjects: 'Harassment', desire and discipline on the Maquiladora shopfloor," Ethnography 1, no. 1 (2000).

²⁵ This is the architectural image of Jeremy Bentham the creator of the panopticon.

²⁶ This image is of a prison name Presidio Modelo built in Cuba.

²⁷ Salzinger, "Manufacturing sexual subjects: 'Harassment', desire and discipline on the Maquiladora shopfloor," 74.

²⁸ Ibid., 68.

²⁹ Men do work on assembly floor (they make up approximately 20 percent of the workforce) but Salzinger's (2000) interviews with them illustrate that they are largely ignored on the floor by the supervisor and the women workers.

³⁰ Salzinger, "Manufacturing sexual subjects: 'Harassment', desire and discipline on the Maquiladora shopfloor," 70.

³¹ Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 34.

³² Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 33.

³³ Salzinger, "Manufacturing sexual subjects: 'Harassment', desire and discipline on the Maquiladora shopfloor," 80.

³⁴ Melissa W. Wright, "Desire and the Prosthetics of Supervision: A Case of Maquiladora Flexibility," Cultural Anthropology 16, no. 3 (2001): 354.

³⁵ Salzinger, "Manufacturing sexual subjects: 'Harassment', desire and discipline on the Maquiladora shopfloor," 68.

³⁶ Melissa W. Wright, "Desire and the Prosthetics of Supervision: A Case of Maquiladora Flexibility," Cultural Anthropology 16, no. 3 (2001): 354.

³⁷ Salzinger, "Manufacturing sexual subjects: 'Harassment', desire and discipline on the Maquiladora shopfloor," 80.

³⁸ Ibid., 84.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Koerner, 235.

⁴³ Ibid., 239.

⁴⁴ Kurt Peterson, "The Maquila Revolution in Guatemala," Global Production (Temple UP: Philadelphia, 1994), 275.

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- ⁴⁵ Catalina A. Denman, "Local Response to Global Development: An Emerging Culture of Health among Pregnant Women in Mexican *Maquiladoras*," Trading Women's Health & Rights?: Trade Liberalization and Reproductive Health in Developing Economies (New York: Zed Books, 2006), 152.
- ⁴⁶ Leslie A. Sharp "The Commodification of the Body and its Parts," Annual Review of Anthropology (2000): 293.
- ⁴⁷ Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos Dir. Saul Landau and Sonia Angulo, Cinema Guild, 2000, Videocassette.
- ⁴⁸ Sharp, 293.
- ⁴⁹ C.H. Browner, "Situating Women's Reproductive Activities," American Anthropologist 102, no. 4 (2001): 773.
- ⁵⁰ Kopinak, 111.
- ⁵¹ Señorita Extraviada.
- ⁵² Kopinak, 83.
- ⁵³ Petersen, 277.
- ⁵⁴ Koerner, 238.
- ⁵⁵ Denman, 152.
- ⁵⁶ Sandra Guzman Garcia and Rachel Snow, "Preferences for Contraceptive Attributes: Voices of Women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico." International Family Planning Perspectives 23, no. 2 (1997): 52.
- ⁵⁷ Browner, 773.
- ⁵⁸ Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos.
- ⁵⁹ Petersen, 276.
- ⁶⁰ In response to the Juarez murders, the Attorney General's Office recommended curfews as a solution to the murders because 'good' girls should be home with their families at night (*Señorita Extraviada*).
- ⁶¹ Denman, 154
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 155.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ Karen Messing, Katherine Lippel, Diane Demers, and Donna Mergler, "Equality and Difference in the Workplace: Physical Job Demands, Occupational Illnesses, and Sex Differences," NWSA Journal 12, no. 3 (2000): 37.
- ⁶⁵ Foucault, 180.
- ⁶⁶ Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos.
- ⁶⁷ Debbie Nathan, "Missing the Story," Texas Observer (2002).

⁶⁸ Maria Cristina Morales and Cynthia Bejarano, "Transnational sexual gendered violence: an application of border sexual conquest at a Mexico-US Border," Global Networks, 9, no.3 (2009): 429.

⁶⁹ Performing the Border Dir. Ursula Biemann, Women Make Movies, 1999, Videocassette.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Evelyn Nieves, "To Work and Die in Juarez," Mother Jones (2002): 53.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Performing the Border.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos

⁷⁷ Wright, "Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women, and Maquiladoras," 127.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 130.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Nathan, 26.

⁸² Wright, "Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women, and Maquiladoras," 128.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Nathan, 26.

⁸⁵ Wright, "Dialectics of Still Life: Murder, Women, and Maquiladoras," 131.

⁸⁶ Nieves, 54.

⁸⁷ Nathan, 29.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Nieves, 53.

⁹⁰ Morales and Bejarano, 434.

⁹¹ Ibid, 432.