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# Let women live: (dis)ability at work in Mexican maquiladoras

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Let Women Live: (Dis)ability at Work in Mexican Maquiladoras

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Honors in Anthropology

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**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements..... 1

Introduction..... 3

Chapter 1 ..... 6

Chapter 2 ..... 18

Chapter 3 ..... 27

Conclusion ..... 42

Works Cited ..... 44

## Introduction

Thanks to Donald Trump, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has gained popular prominence, becoming a common topic of conversation among news anchors, political pundits, and U.S., Mexican, and Canadian residents alike. Media reporting reveals growing public interest in the trade deal, which is tied to Trump's name due to a series of blunt yet impactful tweets. Many articles provide readers with a basic overview of NAFTA and speculate on potential changes as the deal faces renegotiation; Neil Irwin's New York Times piece, entitled "What Is Nafta, and How Might Trump Change It?" and published on April 27, 2017, provides a perfect example (Irwin, 2017). Irwin, however, like many other reporters, makes no mention of maquiladoras, the free-trade factories along the U.S.-Mexico border whose fate is intimately tied to the trade deal that prompted their creation, nor the women who provide their labor (Irwin, 2017). The majority of information provided by U.S.-based media outlets negates the contributions of Mexican women and the harm they face through their work in assembly plants that privilege profit over labor laws and worker safety.

The neoliberal capitalism from which maquiladoras are born encourages accumulation for accumulation's sake; multinational corporations, often based in the United States, seek expansion, profit, and power and rely on cheap, disposable female labor to achieve such goals. Maquiladoras deserve attention not only because their growth evidences the viral metastasis of neoliberal capitalism but also because their existence threatens the wellbeing and safety of Mexican women.

As I introduce this thesis, I feel compelled to acknowledge my privilege and the ways in which it shapes my approach to this topic. I am a white, Jewish, cisgender, straight, able-bodied woman born in the United States to an upper-middle class family. I have never faced poverty nor discrimination on the basis of race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. I attend a prestigious and expensive liberal arts college and am weeks away from completing my Bachelor's degree. The opportunities and benefits that my positionality grants allow me to live very differently from female maquiladora workers, and in this sense, I am and will remain unable to fully understand their experiences. I hope, however, to use my privilege and the platform that this thesis provides to publicize the voices of women workers and increase awareness of the gender-and-race-based violence enacted against them.

In her work, *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2010), a founding faculty member of the César E. Chavez Department of Chicana/o Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, argues that we, as individuals removed from direct involvement in maquiladora work, “unwittingly partake” in the “complicity of silence” through our ignorance of this violence (p. 84). My goal in writing about maquiladoras and the harm they perpetuate is to contribute to existing literature and increase discussion surrounding the immense hardships that female maquiladora workers face without objectifying their suffering. In her work, “Split at the Root: Prostitution and Feminist Discourses of Law Reform,” Margaret Baldwin (2006) cites Kathleen Barry, who argues that the separation of body parts “constitutes an essentially noninteractive, non-mutual sexual experience which establishes the basis for further demands of perversion and violence in the exchange” (p. 137). Baldwin (2006) also cites Timothy Beneke, who describes this separation as “‘pornographizing,’ whereby ‘one anonymizes the woman and fails to acknowledge her moral, spiritual, or emotional being’”

(p. 137). Though Baldwin quotes Barry and Beneke while discussing sexual pornography, I believe that the separation she explores can occur any time a body is taken out of context and detached from the person to whom it belongs. Therefore, using details regarding the bodily harm that maquiladora workers experience to prove a larger point, without acknowledging that such harm is done to *individual* people, arguably exemplifies the pornographizing that Beneke describes.

In the planning stages of this thesis, I also struggled with my decision to expound upon the ways that gender can be conceived of as a disability. I was, and still remain, worried that assigning labels (e.g. 'disabled') to women I have never met could be perceived as an attempt to strip female maquiladora workers of their agency. As individuals, we all deserve the right to identify ourselves using terminology we find most appropriate and applicable. Therefore, I hope my exploration of gender and disability in this work is seen as precisely that: an exploratory work that makes readers think about the relationship between two intersectional aspects of identity.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Capitalism, the Establishment of Free-Trade Zones, and the Creation of Maquiladoras**

In order to approach gender within maquiladoras, maquiladoras themselves must first be examined. The emergence of free-trade zones and factories is intimately related to the rise of neoliberal capitalism. Anthropologist and geographer David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberal capitalism as “a theory of political economic practices” that advocates for the liberation of “individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). He argues that the state plays a role in the growth and sustainability of a neoliberal capitalist market, explaining that it must “set up [...] military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights” (p. 2). Therefore, states that support functional neoliberal capitalist markets generally endorse corporate deregulation. Maquiladoras exist and remain profitable due to this deregulation, which attracts multinational corporations interested in the lack of Mexican labor laws. Plants and factories within free-trade zones are thus able to focus solely on profits while disregarding workers’ rights and safety. Policy decisions, economic trends, and international relationships are guiding forces in the eventual establishment of maquiladoras, and therefore they can also serve as impetuses for the human rights abuses that occur when profit is privileged over all else.

Susan Tiano (1994) argues that a desire for increased export-led industrialization on the part of U.S. multinational corporations and the Mexican state prompted the formation of free-trade zones. In her book, *Patriarchy on the Line: Labor, Gender, and Ideology in the Mexican*



*Maquiladora Industry*, Tiano (1994) asserts that industrialization “is a logical extension of the corporation’s inherent expansionary tendencies [,]” and she adds that “corporations must perpetually seek new product lines, new markets, new investment outlets, and new ways to reduce production costs” (p. 11). Applying Tiano’s logic to the Mexican state, it also makes sense that a country encouraged by capitalism of the 1960s and 1970s and looking to grow its global might would look to industrialization and deregulation to encourage the establishment of assembly plants, form international connections, and increase national profits.

Tiano’s (1994) conflation of industrialization with advancement is problematic because it privileges a singular Western understanding of economic success as tied to corporate growth. She adds that such growth is connected to “the evolution of the world capitalist system and the relationship between advanced nations at the center and Third World nations at the periphery (p. 11). Her use of the terms “center” and “periphery” undoubtedly recalls anthropologist Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory. Elwell (2013) explains that World-systems theory “divides the capitalist world-economy into three areas:” the periphery, the semi-periphery, and the core, presenting the periphery as the “least developed,” “exploited [...] for cheap labor, raw materials, and agricultural production,” the semi-periphery as “both exploited by the core” yet having “some role in the exploitation of the peripheral areas,” and the core as promoting ‘capital accumulation’ with the power to “enforce unequal rates of exchange between [themselves] and the periphery” (para. 5). According to this theory, Mexico seems to fall in between the periphery and semi-periphery; the state relinquishes sovereignty over much of its land near the northern border yet gains entry into the global capitalist economy by doing so. Though his theory is somewhat reductive, Wallerstein acknowledges the pervasiveness of neoliberal capitalism and its role the creation of free-trade zones and maquiladoras.

In *Desert Capitalism: Maquiladoras in North America's Western Industrial Corridor*, Kathryn Kopinak (1996) explores Western understandings of desert landscapes, arguing that “capitalism of the 1990s had the potential to reverse many of the negative meanings [that “our cultural history” has] associated with the [them]” (p. 3). According to Kopinak (1996), these understandings - of deserts as places that “should be abandoned, or literally deserted” - gesture toward culturally centric views of non-urban and non-U.S.-ian lands as less valuable (p. 3). She argues, however, that deserts play an important role in industrial production, as evidenced by the rise of industrial capitalism in the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts in the past thirty years. These deserts are fitting locales for monstrous assembly plants because Western audiences believe such plants’ presence improves inherently useless wastelands, transforming them into centers of corporate production and exportation. Kopinak’s analysis helps explain the abundance of maquiladoras on desert land along the nation’s northern border and references the impact that geographical conceptions have on landscape formation.

Even before Mexican legislation permitted the establishment of maquiladoras on the northern border in 1965, Kopinak (1996) notes that the Bracero Program provided U.S. corporations with Mexican labor. Initiated by the U.S. with cooperation from Mexico, the program “permitted Mexican males to migrate to the United States to work temporarily in agriculture” and benefited U.S. capitalists by granting them access to “cheap Mexican labor without having to negotiate with U.S. unions, the main group lobbying for an end to the Bracero Program” (Kopinak, 1996, 8). Examination of the program reveals a consistent corporate desire to increase profit through the employment of populations not protected by labor laws. The Bracero Program also led to labor quotas, housing shortages, and unemployment among Mexican men and prompted the Mexican government’s creation of the National Border Program for

Development of the Border in 1962 (Schwartz, 1987, 2). This program, also known as PRONAF, subsidized the importation of foreign goods and encouraged tourism ventures to increase employment opportunities along the northern border (Schwartz, 1987, 2). Ultimately, the end of the Bracero Program negated PRONAF and prompted the inception of the Border Industrialization Program to combat Mexican unemployment and increase national wealth (Schwartz, 1987, 2).

In her work, *Mexican Women in American Factories*, Carolyn Tuttle (2013) notes the connection between the introduction of the Border Industrialization Program in 1965 and the establishment of the first maquiladoras. She argues that the BIP represented the Mexican government's "aggressive regional promotion of capitalist industrial growth," inspired by Octavio Campos Salas' - the Mexican minister of industry and commerce's - tour of export processing zones in East Asia (Tuttle, 2013, 65). The program "established a twenty-one-kilometer free trade zone along the [...] border" designed to entice multinational corporations into setting up shop with promises of regulatory freedom (Tuttle, 2013, 65). Though the BIP's concessions appease corporate worries surrounding profit and investment, they indicate the Mexican government's disregard for individual interests and workers' rights.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also played a crucial role in the establishment of free-trade zones geared toward assembly and exportation. Cypher and Wise (2010) discuss the economic difficulties that Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, who faced a 4.2% decline in GDP in 1982, his first year in office, struggled to overcome. In response to these difficulties, Mexico received a series of loans from the IMF, the World Bank, and the U.S. government under then-President Ronald Reagan (Cypher & Wise, 2010). Cypher & Wise (2010) also note that the U.S. "urged upon the World Bank and the IMF the imposition

of a neoliberal agenda for Mexico” (p. 31). Paul Drake (2006) explains that this neoliberal agenda encouraged the Mexican government’s alignment with the “Washington Consensus,” a term referring to “the U.S. government, economic think tanks, the International Monetary Fund, [and] the World Bank” and their “agreement about the desirability of [...] lean governments, [...] privatization, deregulation, [...] export promotion, and free trade” (p. 37).

Import taxes on goods shipped across the U.S.-Mexico border were mitigated by U.S. tariff schedules 806 and 807. These tariff schedules “allowed U.S. corporations to locate their manufacturing plants along the border and import machinery, parts, and raw materials without taxation” and gestured toward coordination between the U.S. and Mexico (Tuttle, 2013, 66). Such coordination on Mexico’s part demonstrated the ability to “attract foreign direct investment (FDI),” turning maquiladoras into “North America’s low cost manufacturing platform” (Tuttle, 2013, 69).

Maquiladoras stem from industrial capitalists’ desire for production at the lowest possible price. Kopinak (1996) asserts that Mexico’s lure and its designation as a desirable location and labor source was born from “its low wages and the lax enforcement which makes Mexican labor law much more flexible than anywhere else on the continent” (p. 4). Corporations singled out Mexican labor as attractive, accessible, and cheap, and maquiladoras served as a gateway to national involvement in international production and trade. Mexico’s economy began to “integrate with other larger economies through NAFTA, [with] the maquila [as] the first major connecting point” (Kopinak, 1996, 4). Altha Cravey (1998) argues that “the maquiladora factory regime became the model for the [...] neoliberal North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA),” replacing “the previous state-led model of industrialization” (p. 2). She adds that emergence of the maquiladora regime was beneficial “from the perspective of capital

accumulation” in that it “facilitated the imposition of new norms of employment” (p. 2). The phrase “new norms of employment” likely references the absence of labor laws protecting maquiladora workers, with its verbal softness demonstrating corporate refusal to acknowledge the harm that comes to women as a result of these laws.

NAFTA, short for the North American Free Trade Agreement, went into effect in January of 1994 under Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, U.S. President George H.W. Bush, and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (Hufbauer & Schott, 2005). The trade agreement between Mexico, the United States, and Canada, was designed to grow national economies through merchandise exchange and sale (Hufbauer & Schott, 2005). In their book, *NAFTA Revisited: Achievements and Challenges*, Hufbauer and Schott (2005) confirm that the economies of the three nations involved have grown, with “intraregional merchandise trade” doubling and annual real GDP growth from 1994-2003 around 2.7 to 3.3 percent (p. 2). Hufbauer and Schott, however, acknowledge that these statistics do not acknowledge “macroeconomic events,” such as the Mexican peso crisis in 1994 and 1995 and the U.S. tech boom in the 1990s (Hufbauer & Schott, 2005, 2). Each nation involved found different advantages to NAFTA; the United States found its passage provided “an economic opportunity to capitalize on a growing export market to the south and a political opportunity to repair the sometimes troubled relationship with Mexico” (Hufbauer & Schott, 2005, 2). Small U.S. corporations “whose products had low value-to-weight ratios,” found NAFTA beneficial due to Mexico’s proximity to the U.S. (as opposed to Asia, where other assembly factories existed), which them to avoid high shipping costs (Wilson, 1992, 21). NAFTA was also designed to reinforce “democratic processes” in Mexico and serve as a response to issues regarding migration.

Mexico viewed NAFTA as a reinforcer of market reforms, allowing for rapid economic growth, increased job opportunities, and more competition within the national market (Hufbauer & Schott, 2005). Canada, the last of the three nations to join discussions on NAFTA, had less at stake in the agreement and eventually agreed to the deal in part to “extract new commercial concessions from the United States” (Hufbauer & Schott, 2005, 4). Though NAFTA provided a bridge between Mexico, the United States, and Canada by encouraging open economic interaction and facilitating cross-border trade, arguments against NAFTA still resound. One only needs to listen to a single Donald Trump campaign speech to understand how criticism of NAFTA is associated with the demonization of Mexico and Mexican laborers as robbing the U.S. citizens of jobs they view as rightfully theirs.

The terminology surrounding maquiladoras gestures toward the inequality that exists between multinational Western corporations and the Mexican government. The term ‘maquiladora’ itself is a Spanish word used in the English language: a “loan-word” that represents Western co-opting of the Spanish language (Kopinak, 1996, 7). Kopinak (1996) also notes that maquiladoras were known as “twin plants” in their infancy because of “the proposal that companies would set up plants on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border, with the one on the U.S. side doing capital-intensive production, and the one on the Mexican side providing cheap labor” (p. 8). While the phrase “twin plants” implies potential equality between Mexico and the U.S. regarding their roles in production, Kopinak’s distinction between the two nations, associating the United States with the word “intensive” and Mexico with “cheap labor,” gestures toward a fundamental imbalance. Western perceptions of Mexico are also tied to the idea of cheap labor, especially labor may be understood to rightfully belong to U.S. manufacturing plants and workers. Many critics of NAFTA, including Donald Trump himself, wrongfully

blame Mexican workers for stealing jobs that should belong to ‘hardworking’ Americans without acknowledging the role of U.S. corporations in selecting such workers.

In her analysis of the maquiladora industry, Tuttle (2013) establishes nine phases of growth, with the first labeled “installation and consolidation” and lasting from 1965 to 1973 (p. 71). This first phase describes maquiladoras’ steady growth under Mexican president Luis Echeverría Álvarez, who also “introduced a federal labor law that provided significant improvements for maquila workers” (Tuttle, 2013, 71). Under this law, Tuttle (2013) notes that “workers received paid vacations, Christmas bonuses, mandatory training, recreation programs, death and termination benefits, retirement benefits [...], employer-provided housing assistance, and a guarantee of minimum wage” (p. 71). This phase also saw the uneven hiring of young women over men and gesturing toward gender-based hiring practices for reasons to be elaborated on later in this chapter. An enumeration of benefits that maquiladoras initially granted employees helps throw subsequent retraction of such benefits further into relief.

Tuttle’s (2013) phase two lasts from 1974 to 1976 and details the “backlash” that the Mexican economy faced in response to a U.S. recession (p. 71). Employment in maquiladoras dropped by 11.5 percent, leading to the relaxation of “standards and regulations [...] in order to keep the industry alive and attract the U.S. investors who were not very interested in Mexico” (Tuttle, 2013, 72). Tuttle (2013) observes that such “relaxation” also allowed employers to “fire inefficient workers without severance pay, extend the thirty-day probationary period at below minimum wages to ninety days, and reduce their contributions to the social security fund” (p. 72). The rollback of these standards and regulations is so crucial in the examination of women’s disabling experiences within maquiladoras because it sets the stage for abuses and harms to come.

In phase three, from 1977 to 1982, Tuttle (2013) describes Mexico's changing economic strategy, shifting from "import substitution to export-led development, which favored the maquiladora industry" (p. 72). This move led to an industry growth rate of around 13 percent annually, with further "simplified" regulations to encourage this growth and "attract foreign investment" (Tuttle, 2013, 72). Also during this period, Tuttle draws attention toward the Mexican government's devaluation of the peso in 1982, leading to pressure from the IMF to "undertake economic liberalization" and produce economic gains" (Tuttle, 2013, 72). Clara Elena Suárez Argüello (2001) writes that devaluation occurred in response to an economic crisis under Mexican President José López Portillo; between June of 1981 and June of 1982, "more than US\$20 billion left the country" (p. 226). In August of 1982, López Portillo was forced to declare that Mexico was unable to pay interest on its debt, resulting in the "imposition of IMF austerity rules" (Argüello, 2001, 226). Argüello argues that the acceptance of austerity measures by Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid, who took office in December 1982, signified governmental adoption of "neoliberal economic precepts" to the delight and benefit of U.S. corporations (p. 226). The chaos surrounding the peso during this period gestures toward the economic instability that led Mexico to accept help from foreign banks and adopt neoliberal capitalist ideals in the process. This adoption helps explain the Mexican government's subsequent privileging of deregulatory legislation over legislation designed to protect citizens from corporate harm.

Phase four, lasting from 1983 to 1989, describes the impact of the devalued peso on the Mexican labor economy, making Mexican labor cheaper to foreign corporations using different currencies. Tuttle (2013) also notes that "[f]oreign investment in maquilas increased dramatically," which lent "permanence" to the industry (p. 72). She also writes that "a new



maquila [opened] every five days on average,” gesturing toward the aggressive growth of the assembly industry and its importance for the Mexican economy (p. 72). The Mexican president during this period, Miguel de la Madrid, also joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which Tuttle (2013) argues “reduced protectionist tariffs” and “made it easier for foreign investment to operate in Mexico [and] reduced wages” (p. 72). De la Madrid also prioritized the growth of maquiladoras and, in doing so, endorsed the lack of labor laws and regulations designed to protect maquiladora workers (Tuttle, 2013, 72).

Tuttle (2013) describes phase five, lasting from 1900 to 1994, as characterized by steady maquiladora growth and the passage of several important trade deals with various nations. She argues that GATT was proving successful and agreements between the Mexican government and Chile in 1992, with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in 1993, and between the Mexican government and the U.S. with NAFTA’s passage in 1994, “further expanded the free trade zone and reduced tariffs” (p. 72-3). These agreements lead to an annual growth rate of 6 percent within maquiladoras but also represented a dangerous trend: the forfeiting of labor laws for corporate and national profits (Tuttle, 2013). The evidenced success of maquiladoras reinforced neoliberal capitalist ideals by proving that the adoption and implementation of such ideals could produce national economic success.

Tuttle’s (2013) phase six, from 1995 to 2000, includes a post-NAFTA “growth spurt” among maquiladoras that transformed the industry into “the fastest growing sector in the economy,” surpassing “oil and gas, migrant remittances, and tourism as the top foreign exchange generator” (p. 73). Contrastingly, phase seven was influenced most heavily by the U.S. recession between 2000 and 2003, which led to the loss of over 240,000 jobs, the closing of more than 400 maquiladora plants, and a loss in FDIs and “consumer confidence” (Tuttle, 2013, 73).

Since the establishment of maquiladoras succeeded in improving the Mexican economy once before (during the peso crisis of 1982)), the Mexican government clung to free-trade factories during this period of difficulty to sustain production.

During phase eight, lasting from 2004 to 2007, Tuttle (2013) writes that the maquiladora industry was revived by Mexican president Vicente Fox's extension of NAFTA for another ten years. She notes that plant numbers increased and "[t]he industry secured several crucial automotive and aerospace contracts to build new production facilities" (p. 73). The Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) also helped free trade expand but received no South American support, prompting the formation of the Central American Free Trade Agreement-Dominican Republic (CAFTA-DR) in 2005 (Tuttle, 2013). These deals represent the global impact of neoliberal capitalism and its pervasive spread, which encouraged the procurement of profit over personal safety.

The final phase that Tuttle (2013) outlines, phase nine, lasted from 2008 to 2010 and was affected by the U.S. financial crisis. Despite this recession, Tuttle (2013) argues that high rates of foreign ownership in the assembly industry by countries like the United States consistently ensure less financial wealth for Mexico and individual Mexican workers. Foreign ownership of maquiladoras keeps workers' wages low and allows profits made from goods produced in Mexican factories to leave the country, neither improving the Mexican economy nor allowing Mexican workers to accumulate significant wealth, ultimately disadvantaging non-Western parties (Tuttle, 2013).

Maquiladora owners' general lack of regard for worker safety results in exposure to a brutal workplace culture with differing norms and harsh penalties - such as fines for tardiness and absences - following a lack of adherence to such norms (Tuttle, 2013). Wage discrepancies

represent a massive gap maquiladora workers' salaries and the amount of money necessary to afford basic living expenses. An understanding of the history of maquiladora emergence and formation hopefully lends background and reinforcement to my subsequent examination and analysis: of gender and its disabling potential among women working in Mexican free-trade factories.

## Chapter 2 Why Women?

In their ravenous quest for profit and accumulation for the sake of accumulation, large multinational corporations rely on human labor for the purposes of mass production. In Mexican maquiladoras, women compose a significant majority of the employee population. Before focusing on the violence enacted against women in free-trade factories and its relation to feminist disability studies, the targeting of women must be explored as a standalone issue. The maquiladora blueprint requires women's participation to maintain its existence, creating a parasitic relationship designed to benefit corporations and national interests rather than individuals. What happens to women in global factories is of little consequence to these corporations and nations, who view the lives and wellbeings of female workers as sacrifices for corporate and national growth.

As the previous chapter indicates, men composed the majority of the Mexican wage-earning workforce prior to the creation of maquiladoras. In his work, *Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts: Culture, Capitalism, and Conquest at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, Alejandro Lugo (2008) notes the prevalence of men in Mexican factories before 1965; he writes that "most of the individuals who came to such border localities as Ciudad Juárez [...] were males - especially fathers and older brothers who were economically responsible for families left behind" (p. 70). According to Lugo (2008) women during this period worked as "laundresses, waitresses, cooks, or prostitutes," displaying the gender specificity present in the Mexican workforce (p. 70). Lugo (2008) also cites the Bracero Program as a Mexican policy demonstrating the pervasiveness of

gendered work, creating agricultural job opportunities for men and reinforcing conceptions of differential ability based on gender identity.

The decision by free-trade corporations in need of labor to fill mass assembly factories with women is not random. Rather, it is related to social and cultural norms and a calculated desire to profit off of a vulnerable population regardless of the human impact. In her article, “Fairness and Wages in Mexico’s Maquiladora Industry: An Empirical Analysis of Labor Demand and the Gender Wage Gap,” Aurelie Charles (2011) explains how competition with assembly plants and factories in Asia prompted the pursuit of female workers, whose labor was understood to be cheaper because women were considered secondary wage-earners, less ‘skilled’ than their male counterparts. Charles (2011) borrows from the argument of Sargent and Matthews, who assert that a “strategic choice [for companies competing with Chinese free-trade factories and their “Chinese labor-intensive products”] has been to increase the gender wage gap, lowering female workers’ wages relative to males, rather than reducing employment, in order to keep productivity constant or positive while cutting labor costs” (p. 2). The corporate devaluing of women’s work demonstrates the inherent misogyny of the capitalist world economy, which feeds off of norms reinforcing female inferiority.

Charles (2011) also explores the relationship between the gender wage gap and social norms, arguing that pay discrepancies exemplify externalized “social norms of the paternalistic household” (p. 2). She specifies that Mexican “norms place a lower value on female effort relative to male effort” (p. 3) and attributes them specifically “to the Mexican context, where the cultural background reflects strong traditional Catholic and ancient indigenous beliefs” (p. 11). Charles’ (2011) assertion that sexist norms are a result of *Mexican* traditions, her mention of Catholicism without citing Spanish colonialism, and her scapegoating of indigeneity ought to

elicit skepticism from readers. Though social norms do, in any circumstance, influence the treatment and pay that female workers receive, Charles neglects to discuss the role of colonialism and the spread of global economic influence in perpetuating sexism. In *The Devil Behind the Mirror: Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic*, Steven Gregory (2007) presents research that directly contradicts some of Charles' questionable assertions.

Gregory (2007) writes that:

Feminist scholars have argued that the widespread, if not 'universal asymmetry,' in how the sexes are culturally evaluated can be understood neither as a necessary consequence of biology [...] nor as secondary effects of other social processes, such as capitalist class formation. Instead, researchers have argued that, since sex and gender relations are implicated in the structuring and reproduction of all social systems, women's subordination must be analyzed in relation to wider, yet context-specific, processes of social stratification (p. 134).

Colonialism undoubtedly structures and reproduces social systems of inequality; in fact, it is predicated on the systematic and imperialistic replacement of certain ideals, traditions, languages, religions, and other forms of community-building, thus allowing for the transmission and adoption of new norms. Likewise, the global capitalist system, which promotes Western ideologies and assists in the flow of money, goods, and thoughts, is a vehicle for such transmission and adoption. Therefore, it is impossible to attribute the misogyny and patriarchal norms present in Mexican society (and any other society) to any single party; rather, the notions of masculinity and femininity informing the treatment of female maquiladora workers are connected to global systems of power.

In their analysis of gender throughout Mexican history, Matthew Gutmann and Susie Porter (2001) argue that “Mexican male identities in the twentieth century were consistently associated with the prestige and power of the Mexican nation, in particular with the very modern image of the Mexican macho” (p. 241). Understandings of Mexican male pride relate to *machismo* and its converse, *marianismo*. *Machismo* signifies a conceptualization of male-ness characterized by dominance, independence, and strength, whereas *marianismo* presents the ideal woman as docile, nurturing, and virginal (Edwards et al., 2008, 449). In his piece, “The Sons of Malinche,” Octavio Paz (2005) uses more forceful language to describe the effect of *machismo* ideology on male behavior. He argues that the term encompasses “the aggressiveness, insensitivity, invulnerability and other attributes of the *macho*: power. It is force without the discipline of any notion of order: arbitrary power, the will without reins and a set course” (p. 23). Charles’ (2011) citation of a survey conducted in Mexico in 2000 gestures toward the effects of *machismo* and *marianismo* culture; the survey found that “61.6 percent of Mexicans agreed with the statement: ‘If a woman earns more money than her husband, it’s almost certain to cause problems’” (p. 11). The results of this survey reveal deeply rooted social and cultural understandings of gender that women’s work in maquiladoras ultimately challenged.

If equal pay is viewed as disruptive to *machismo/marianismo* culture as well as threatening to domestic peace, Mexican citizens’ desire(s) to maintain misogynistic yet familiar structures of power is understandable. Haberland (2015) explicitly states that the experiences of women workers “challenged a traditional understanding of *marianismo*, or women’s role in Mexican culture,” which sees women’s rightful place as within the home (p. 147). She adds that maquiladora factory work allowed women to leave “marginal” work behind, transitioning to “jobs that were central to production and [assuming] (at least in part) the traditional roles of

men” (p. 147). The challenge that female factory workers posed to Mexican masculine identities likely contributes to the discomfort evident in Charles’ survey, which has the potential to fester. In her book, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico’s Global Factories*, Leslie Salzinger (2003) quotes a 1979 Ciudad Juárez newspaper article’s headline - reprinted in the Los Angeles - as reading “Maquiladoras: Evil Exploitation of Women’s Work: Fracture Traditional Mexican Family Structure” (p. 38-39). She adds that an abundance of media coverage of maquiladora growth relayed a sense of national perplexity and unease regarding working women’s “emancipation,” emphasizing the extent to which the accommodation of women into the export-processing industry disrupted norms and mores (p. 39).

Multinational corporations with assembly plants in Mexico, however, are likely less concerned with disrupting the status quo if their underpayment and mistreatment of female factory workers is any indication. These corporations are rarely Mexican; they are generally based in the United States and Canada and thus are unlikely to have a stake in the preservation of longstanding social and cultural norms surrounding gender. They are, however, interested in profit, and it is convenient that such norms correspond with the undervaluation and manipulation of female labor for corporate gain.

Economic insecurity also plays a role in women’s decisions to seek employment in maquiladoras by creating a susceptibility of which capitalist corporations can take advantage. Jessica Livingston’s (2004) work, “Murder in Juárez: Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Global Assembly Line,” expounds upon the role of such insecurity in leading women to factory work. She cites Molly Moore, who reports that “factories have ‘lured hundreds of thousands of women and girls from their confining homes and remote villages across Mexico, giving them greater financial and social independence than perhaps any other single phenomenon in recent Mexican



history” (p. 60). Moore’s association of maquiladora employment with independence requires greater scrutiny, especially given that factory work is generally harmful to women’s health and safety due to a lack of labor regulations and regard for human rights. Her acknowledgement of financial stability and independence as temptations drawing women to urban factories, however, is important in the formation of a broader understanding of gender-based discrimination and violence in maquiladoras. Livingston (2004) continues on to describe the migration of young women from rural areas to urban spaces in search of work and freedom as creating “a new phenomenon of mobile, independent - and vulnerable - working women ‘living in the city’” (p. 61). Thus, women who struggle to make enough money to support themselves and/or their families compose a demographic whose economic vulnerability is exploited by multinational corporations in their hunt for flexible labor.

Assumptions about female biology and feminine ‘nature’ contribute to the unequal treatment of women maquiladora workers, reinforcing conceptions of gender specificity within the workplace and serving as a justification for the unequal corporate pursuit of workers of a certain gender over others. In “Endangering Women’s Health for Profit: Health and Safety in Mexico’s Maquiladoras,” author Hilary Abell (1999) describes maquiladora employers’ decisions to hire girls and young women as due to the assumption that “they have the dexterity and patience for detailed manual work” (p. 596). In more contemporary works, Livingston and Elvia Arriola reaffirm Abell’s assertion. Livingston (2004) writes that “[maquiladora] managers claim that women are better suited to factory work because of their manual dexterity and their ability to tolerate tedious and repetitive work” (p. 61-62). In her work, “Accountability for Murder in the *Maquiladoras*: Linking Corporate Indifference to Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border,” Arriola (2010) delves deeper into notions of dexterity, citing Leslie Salinger’s

conclusion that “women were seen as ideal workers because their smaller hands and fingers could better assemble the tiny parts of export goods such as light bulbs, cassette tapes, and recorders” (p. 31). Salinger illustrates the conflation between unchangeable bodily traits stereotypically associated with femininity and suitability for factory work. International corporations use such a conflation to justify women’s placement in maquiladoras and reinforce conceptions of gendered labor that disadvantage female workers.

Arriola (2010) also states that “[t]he ideal *maquiladora* worker [is] a hybrid of stereotypes based on sex, race, and class - she [is] not only more docile and passive than Mexican men, but submissive, easily trainable, and unlikely to pose problems with union organizing” (p. 31). The general lack of union support maquiladora laborers receive coupled with regulations within free-trade zones that exempt factories from protecting certain workers’ rights creates situational vacuums in which injury and violence can - and are permitted to - occur. Charles (2011) notes that the absence of unions is supported by “Mexico’s renunciation of the International Labor Organization (ILO) convention on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining,” which helps to “sustain the null bargaining power of maquiladora workers” (p. 11).

Multinational corporations also play a crucial role in the suppression of union formation. Livingston (2004) acknowledges the active efforts undertaken by such corporations, who accomplish such suppression through “dismissals and threats of blacklisting or moving the factory” (p. 62). Workers have few options for recourse if they hope to keep their jobs given that high turnover rates threaten their job security and that other employment options do not often exist (Livingston, 2004). Cravey (1998) provides statistical evidence referencing this lack of unionization and thus, dearth of bargaining power, noting that Ciudad Juárez, the Mexican city

with the “largest concentration of maquiladora employees,” “has only 13 percent unionization” (p. 48). In *The Children of NAFTA: Labor Wars on the U.S./Mexico Border*, David Bacon (2004) argues that a lack of unionization among maquiladora workers reflects the Mexican government’s alignment with neoliberal capitalist corporations over its own citizens (p. 61). This lack of unionization decreased the power of female maquiladora workers’ voices and contributed to sustained factory abuse.

Haberland (2015) criticizes the AFL-CIO and its subsidiary, the American Institute for Free Labor Development, for their reinforcement of misogynistic practices within the labor industry. Established in 1962, The AIFLD intended to promote labor organization among Latin American workers (Haberland, 2015). The use of ‘free’ in the Institute’s name, however, gestures toward corporate conceptions of female maquiladora workers as neoliberal subjects, flexible and free to make their own decisions. These conceptions are damaging because they fail to acknowledge the ways that factories and corporations *discipline* the female body in order to create such subjects. Haberland (2015) argues that female industrial workers were largely ignored in the AIFLD’s efforts to encourage unionization. She also draws attention to the U.S. labor media’s presentation of maquiladora workers as “passive, docile participants” (p. 150). The use of “participant” assigns culpability to female employees, exonerating the neoliberal ideologies that inspired the creation of the very free-trade zones that threaten workers’ rights and safety in exchange for profit. Media portrayal of working conditions within maquiladoras is so influential because it has the power to reach the ears of international corporations if given sufficient attention. It is therefore important to note that media coverage was and can be manipulated in such a way as to skew public perception and affect change through the use of specific rhetoric.

The first chapter of this text has established a broad timeline outlining the rise of neoliberal capitalist policies, the growth of international corporations devoted to profit above all else, and formation of free-trade zones in which assembly plants rely on cheap labor in order to export parts and finished goods. This second chapter has attempted to examine the social and cultural norms - notions of *machismo* and *marianismo*, for example - and factors such as economic insecurity and a desire for independence that lead to a hugely female workforce within maquiladoras. The women who compose this workforce may also be seen as members of a vulnerable population whose lives and bodies become fodder for multinational corporations and the Mexican state. The corporate search for a willing, cheap, and replaceable labor source leads companies to free-trade zones, where regulations are scarce and border taxes are few. The Mexican government's desire to grow its international might and become a ready participant in the capitalist world system gestures toward their complicity as well. Regardless, it is women who ultimately suffer, and such suffering deserves recognition. In the chapter that follows, I will examine existing literature on such suffering, and in doing so, hopefully shed greater light onto the often-disregarded experiences of women.

### **Chapter 3** **Gender and Disability in the Workplace**

The violence enacted against female maquiladora workers manifests in many different ways but ultimately coalesces into a single pattern described by Elvia Arriola (2010) as “[f]atal indifference” (p. 33). Arriola (2010) defines this indifference as “a systematic, structural disregard by corporations and their agents for the humanity of the laborer” (p. 33). Though ‘indifference’ may be too gentle a word, it emphasizes the ways in which Mexican labor laws, international corporate policies, and a pervasive neoliberal agenda promoting the accumulation of capital lure women into dangerous and potentially violent situations while refusing to take responsibility for eventual repercussions. Arriola’s characterization of such violence as “systematic” and “structural” highlights the calculated intentionality behind it.

In my writings on such violence, I have chosen to withhold certain details that I deem unproductive to the larger goal of this thesis. Though I firmly believe that knowledge and awareness are crucial in combating the stigmatization surrounding gendered violence and the shielding of perpetrators, I also think that sharing graphic and personal details relating to individuals’ physical, mental, and emotional health, especially without explicit consent, can violate women’s privacy. My decision to omit these details is not an attempt to minimize the violence enacted against female maquiladora workers and does not prevent readers of this work from accessing such information should they choose; all of the sources I drew from are cited in my bibliography and thus, relatively accessible. Rather, I hope to illustrate that such violence, born from discomfort, agitation, and anger at women’s changing social and economic roles and

neoliberal policies designed to privilege profit over individual people, leads to women's compromised health and safety.

I also try to incorporate voices of female maquiladora workers to prevent reader apathy and convey the grim reality of this violence. Arriola (2010) writes that:

Those who study, write, and think about globalization often understand at an abstract level that the pay is low, the working conditions are bad, and the workdays are long. But few ever confront and absorb in detail the depth and breadth of the physical, mental, and emotional pain the workers experience in the *maquiladoras* unless they can hear it from a worker (p. 34).

Researchers' and readers' dissociation from painful information may be natural, constituting an attempt to avoid hardship regardless of its secondhand nature. This discomfort, however, is necessary if privilege - whether on the basis of race, class, nation of origin/residence, or gender identity - is to be combatted and a more equitable production system is to be created.

Exposure, whether to toxins, unsafe equipment, or substandard working conditions in which massive corporations withhold necessities to save money, can be understood as a form of violence enacted against maquiladora workers. International corporations *choose* to place their factory employees in dangerous situations, thus negatively affecting their health, in order to further capital gain. Abell (1999) cites "acids, solvents, glues, paints, and dyes" as commonly used substances in maquiladoras, especially those producing electronics, car parts, and furniture (p. 597). In Elvia Arriola's (2010) interview with Amparo, a maquiladora worker, Amparo

recalls leaving the factory at which she worked with her face “blackened by lint and dust due to the poor ventilation system” (p. 33).

Maquiladora workers often come into contact with these toxins without proper information regarding the risks that exposure poses (Abell, 1999). The improper disposal of industrial contaminants into surrounding areas also impacts women workers living near factories, polluting their air and water and demonstrating the far-reaching detrimental effects of such factories and the neoliberal capitalist competition from which they emerge (Abell, 1999). Since free-trade factories force female workers into close proximity to toxic chemicals, the responsibility to inform employees regarding the dangers of such toxins falls on those factories’ proverbial shoulders. It is clear, however, that factories seem to feel no obligation to alert workers of these dangers and, if they do, their desire to promote efficiency and turn the largest possible profit wins out.

Abell (1999) notes that maquiladora work also requires female workers to engage in repetitive motions at a rapid pace, leading to potential “musculoskeletal injuries” and “ergonomic problems” (p. 597). She cites “back and neck pain, tension, and carpal tunnel syndrome, all of which can result in chronic pain and lasting disabilities,” as injuries that may occur due to such repetition (p. 597). Remaining in a single position for hours without movement or breaks can also contribute to musculoskeletal injuries, proving that maquiladora policies that discourage and prohibit necessary reprieves such as bathroom breaks have a significant detrimental effect on female workers’ bodies (Abell, 1999). Arriola (2010) adds that conditions such as carpal tunnel syndrome, asthma, and allergic reactions all “accompany the privilege of working in a *maquiladora*,” her sarcasm gesturing toward the bitter pills that women workers must continually swallow in order to make money and survive (p. 35).

Such repetitive motion, when combined with other factors such as exposure to toxins and the stress of meeting high production quotas while struggling with “job and wage insecurity,” also contributes to a host of conditions indicating compromised physical, mental, and emotional health (Abell, 1999, 597). Abell (1999) argues that:

Most workers [...] experience one or more of the following: headaches, dizziness, nervous tension, anxiety, unusual fatigue, anaemia, forgetfulness, stomach pain, nausea and vomiting, chest pressure, heart disease, circulatory problems, high blood pressure, respiratory problems, numbness or tingling in the extremities, back and shoulder pain, vision and hearing problems, allergies and skin problems, [...] sterility, seizures, organ failure (especially of the liver and kidneys), and cancer (p. 597)

These conditions, she adds, may develop gradually and potentially lead to death. Abell (1999) also assigns blame for “[h]igh incidences of lupus, cervical cancer, lead poisoning, brain and liver cancers, tuberculosis, hepatitis A, and other diseases [...] to the disastrous mix of poverty, environmental contamination, and inadequate healthcare” (p. 598). Here, poverty, the environment, and health seem impossibly tangled; it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which all of these factors - contributors to the overall violence enacted against maquiladora workers - can be isolated and/or combatted in order to affect positive change for women in the assembly industry. The complexity of this interplay also evidences the embeddedness of violence in such an industry and gestures toward the difficulties that emerge when such violence is challenged.

The international corporations relying on maquiladora labor for production generally take little responsibility for the harm they inflict on their workforce. Arriola (2010) explains that



corporations must pay when injured workers qualify for government disability programs, therefore incentivizing corporate cover-ups to prevent the loss of profits. Thus, corporations encourage injured workers to use company doctors who “minimize [...] harm” in order to downplay “the potential liability employers face for occupational hazards under the Federal Labor Law” (Arriola, 2010, 35). Arriola (2010) adds that “[c]aring about people does not factor well into a business driven by commitment to the bottom line or a cost-benefit analysis” (p. 37). The assembly industry views any attention paid to personal suffering as antithetical to the ultimate goal of neoliberal corporations: profit. Through decisions that jeopardize individual health (e.g. unrealistically high production quotas and punishments for bathroom trips during work), Arriola (2010) notes that corporate leadership conveys that “workers’ lives are less important than production schedules, and [...] the safety of workers is yet another cost that disturbs the projected return on investment” (p. 38). Maquiladora workers thus become “mere cogs” in a larger system created to take advantage of their labor while abusing their bodies (Arriola, 2010, 39).

Since the majority of maquiladora workers are female, many of the health repercussions they face due to unsafe working conditions, exposure, and stress are related to menstruation, pregnancy, and fertility. Abell (1999) cites “menstrual irregularities, miscarriages, and [...] birth defects” as consequences of neglectful employment policies (p. 598). She adds that “workers in a factory in Tijuana reported more than 20 miscarriages and four anencephalic births (babies born without brains) during the three months in 1996 in an electronics factory of only 200 workers,” providing statistical evidence to gesture toward the harm that maquiladora work wreaks not only on employees’ lives but on the lives of their unborn children (p. 598).

Pregnancy is discouraged, however, through discriminatory practices designed to single out women without spouses, romantic/sexual partners, or children. Multinational corporations viewed these women as members of the most productive workforce due to their detachment from gendered responsibilities in the 'traditional' paternalistic household. Livingston (2004) elaborates, explaining that "Mexican law requires social security coverage of pregnant women during the third trimester" (p. 62). Since maquiladoras must pay for this coverage, pregnant women are viewed as financially inefficient and harmful to factories' economic bottom lines. Livingston (2004) also describes the medical exams that potential female employees must endure before being hired, in which they are required to disclose information regarding their sexual history and activities. She adds that "[p]regnancy tests are routinely administered," "birth control pills are plentiful at the factories while other health services are scarce" and "some supervisors even inspect employees' sanitary napkins to ensure that they are not pregnant" (p. 62). Though Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2010) draws attention to the U.S. Department of Labor's condemnations of these pregnancy tests as a form of sexual harassment, she also provides the Mexican Labor Ministry's opinion: that "administering pregnancy tests to job applicants [is] not illegal because Mexico's labor laws protect workers only after they have been hired," which she deems "the kind of doublespeak that NAFTA enables (p. 65). That the Mexican Labor Ministry refuses to publicly denounce such invasive and unnecessary tests signifies their alignment with international corporations and their neoliberal agendas.

These infringements on personal privacy and physical liberty are also microcosms of a larger workplace culture defined by neglect and the neoliberal desire for accumulation. If maquiladora workers do give birth, studies have shown that their babies are more likely to be premature or of low birth weight, though infertility is common. That women working in free-

trade factories may lose the ability to carry and give birth to healthy children is a solemn and gruesome testament to the far-reaching tentacles of capitalist production, which snuff out life in exchange for corporate wealth.

Male managers also target female maquiladora workers because of their gender identity and appearance. Looks are often taken into account during hiring and women are told to utilize their sexuality in order to procure jobs (Livingston, 2004). Livingston (2004) writes that “[s]upervisors often stalk the assembly lines, playing favorites [,] asking for dates,” and encouraging workers to “participate in annual industry-wide ‘Señorita *Maquiladora*’ beauty contests (p. 62).

Misogynistic attitudes and unsolicited sexual advances, however, are not uncommon in workplace environments, wherever these workplaces exist. Recently, one only needed to tune into any cable news broadcast or skim any major newspaper to encounter stories describing Bill O’Reilly’s demise. O’Reilly, a former Fox News anchor, was recently dismissed from the network after advertisers withdrew support from his show following the publicization of the accounts of many former female colleagues. Many of these women accused him of sexual harassment and had turned to Fox’s Human Resources department to file formal complaints in the past. Though a network investigation took place, the details that Fox News; its parent company, 21st Century Fox; and the Murdoch family, owners of 21st Century Fox; released to the public imply that O’Reilly was dismissed because of the public uproar surrounding these allegations, *not* because of the allegations themselves. The fact that O’Reilly had likely terrorized many of the women he came in contact with throughout his tenure at Fox News seemed of little importance to the Murdochs; in a letter written to the public regarding this news, the family named O’Reilly “‘one of the most accomplished TV personalities in the history of

cable news,”” adding that “[h]is success, by any measure, is indisputable” (Steel & Schmidt, 2017, n.p.). The emphasis on O’Reilly’s career accomplishments rather than the fear and pain he caused displays a larger corporate disregard for women’s physical and emotional experiences and a clear privileging of capital, with action coming only after profits prove to be in danger.

Alongside sexual harassment, murder was and still remains a prominent threat to female maquiladora workers. The murders of such workers have often been motivated by victims’ gender identity; women, especially those who are young, are targeted systematically. Women’s bodies and lives are treated with disregard, and are sacrificed to promote the growth of international capitalism and the earnings of global corporations. In her work, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, Melissa Wright (2006) argues that “the myth [of the disposable woman] is an attempt to summon the disposable third world woman into existence as a normalized subject who reaffirms explicit relations of power and hierarchy” (p. 5). Wright (2006) adds that “[t]o disrupt the myth of the disposable third world woman is to disrupt the capitalist systems that require that the story constantly be told” (p. 93). Her writing brilliantly captures the simple logic on which the “myth” relies; that since women living in regions of the world that are deemed less “developed” due to a perceived lack of monetary wealth are truly disposable at their core, these women would be used and thrown away with *or* without the involvement of large international corporations. Therefore, multinational corporations that use Mexican women’s labor are simply taking advantage of something naturally occurring. This logic also exonerates such corporations by painting them as clever and opportunistic though not truly evil, implying that their actions have little effect on the lives of the women they rely on for production.

Ciudad Juárez, one of Mexico's "largest industrialized border cities," is both an epicenter of maquiladora activity and the location of hundreds of violent, systematized murders that are just recently receiving international attention (Lugo, 2008, 1-2). Lugo (2008) describes the city as "the oldest colonial settlement along the U.S.-Mexico border," founded in 1695 and possessing a history intertwined with the legacy of Spanish colonialism (p. 1-2). Lugo (2008) cites "the sociocultural markers of empire" and "the unequal social relations that produced these markers," which have persisted since Spanish conquest in 1598, as important factors to consider when exploring the relationship between gender, power, colonialism, and capitalism (p. 1-2).

In her work, Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2010) notes the massive migration of young Mexican women from rural areas to large border cities, arguing that their lack of preparedness for harsh maquiladora conditions, coupled with "the dangers of border life" and "the tragic exploitation that awaits them at work," makes them more vulnerable to violence. Alba credits Caputi and Russell for coining of the term "femicide" in their work, "Femicide: Sexist Terrorism against Women." As the title suggests, femicide can be defined as a form of "antifemale terror that includes a wide variety of verbal and physical abuse, such as rape, torture, sexual slavery, [...] sexual harassment" and results in death (Alba, 2010, 83). Alba (2010) also draws attention to the fact that femicide victims along the U.S.-Mexico border are not "*güeras del norte*" or "light-skinned girls from the north;" rather, they are "*muchachas del sur*:" women of color labeled as "*maqui-locas*" and viewed as "far from God" (p. 80). A *maqui-loca* can be defined as a maquiladora worker who tries to behave in an 'American' way. The term also relates to Tres Marías Syndrome, a phenomenon which "constructs women's gender and sexuality according to three biblical archetypes - virgins, mothers, and whores" (Alba, 2010, 81). Alba (2010) argues that *maqui-locas* fall into the latter category, compromising their "good Mexican girl morality"

and thus, their femininity (p. 80). Figure 1, displayed below, is a graphic created by Alba that provides detailed characteristics defining each of the three archetypes:

MARÍA, LA MADRE

- La que vive por sus hijos y su familia/She who lives for her children and family
- La que siempre perdona/She who always forgives
- La que nutre, cuida y protege/She who nurtures, cares for, and protects
- La que hace todo/She who does it all
- La que da a luz al futuro/She who gives birth to the future
- La que participa en el sexo únicamente para procrear/She who has sex only to procreate
- La abnegada/She who is abject and abnegated

MARÍA, LA VIRGEN

- La que obedece/She who is meek and obedient
- La que no se va con el novio/She who does not run off with her boyfriend

- La que se espera hasta que se casa para tener sexo/She who waits until her wedding night to have sex
- La que se viste y se porta decentemente/She who dresses and behaves decently
- La que vive con sus padres hasta que le piden la mano/She who lives with her parents until someone asks for her hand in marriage
- La que no conoce del sexo, ni consigo misma/She who has no knowledge of sex, not even with herself
- La que no llama la atención/She who doesn't call attention to herself
- La inocente/She who is innocent

#### MARÍA, LA PROSTITUTA

- La que tiene sexo por placer/She who has sex for pleasure
- La que tiene sexo por oficio/She who sells sex
- La que toma anticonceptivos/She who takes birth control
- La que corrompe a los hombres/She who corrupts men
- La que avergüenza a su familia/She who shames her family
- La a que no le importa lo que dirán/She who does not care what people say
- La que se va con cualquiera/She who goes out with whomever
- La fácil/She who is loose and easy
- La que se merece lo que le dan/She who deserves what she gets

Figure 1. Alba, A. (2010), [image], From *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.

Alba argues that Tres Marías Syndrome remains relevant today, reinforcing the internalized shame and public judgment that women experience when, for example, deriving pleasure from sexual intercourse or taking up space/challenging men with their bodies and voices. Tres Marías Syndrome reduces and categorizing women based on arbitrary guidelines, using them to speculate on their moral character.

The Mexican legal system's definition of rape aligns with the reductionism Tres Marías Syndrome reinforces and conveys a governmental disregard for victims of sexual violence. Alba (2010) notes that the Mexican legal system considers a sex crime rape "if the 'passive subject' is under fourteen or is a private citizen of sound mind or an infirm person forced into vaginal, anal,

or oral copulation and is unable to resist the attack” (p. 76). This definition poses many problems, one of which being the fact that private citizens seem to be the only people of “sound mind” who are able to be raped in the eyes of the law. Private citizens are likely already members of a ‘protected’ class and granted certain rights while undocumented immigrants, a population of individuals on the margins of society, remain susceptible to sexual violence. The protection of some at the expense of others is not a new or solely Mexican phenomenon; many nations, including the United States, manipulate their immigration systems in order to denigrate certain populations. The ignorance shown toward marginalized groups if they experience sexual violence demonstrates the inequity of the legal system and gestures toward the difficulties maquiladora workers and their families may face in their search for justice.

While no official number of femicide victims along the U.S.-Mexico border exists, the Mexican government and various researchers and non-governmental organizations researchers have provided informed estimates (Alba, 2010). The literature surrounding these femicides generally focuses on Ciudad Juárez due to its status as a maquiladora hub. In her 2008 exposé, “Death Stalks the Border,” Diane Washington Valdez, an investigator for the *El Paso Times*, argues that 320 women were killed in Ciudad Juárez between 1993 and 2002 (Alba, 2010). The Mexican attorney general’s office puts the number of victims during the same time period as Valdez at 254 (Alba, 2010). In August of 2003, the Instituto Chihuahuense de la Mujer (the Chihuahua Women’s Institute) produced a report with what Alba deems the most “definitive answer” regarding the number of women maquiladora workers killed in Ciudad Juárez: 231 women in ten years (Alba, 2010, 71). This data, created in conjunction with the State of Chihuahua’s Homicide Unit, also considered 43% of these 231 murder cases resolved and 56% of them unresolved/still under investigation (Alba, 2010). Though Alba places her trust in this



information, it is important to note the involvement of the Mexican government - with a vested interest in the concealment of incriminating evidence surrounding the femicides - in its development.

Alba (2010) draws attention to the fact that Los Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez (Friends of the Women of Juarez), a New Mexico-based NGO, argued in September of 2003 that the Instituto Chihuahuense de la Mujer's report presented partial details and omitted important facts. Their press release in response to the report stated that "the homicide rate for women in Ciudad Juárez is at least 4 times that of any other border city" (Alba, 2010, 72). They also disputed the rate of clearance (the percentage of cases that are brought to trial and considered 'solved') that the report and the Mexican government purport, arguing that "the conviction rate for sexually motivated murders is only 0.05 percent" (Alba, 2010, 73). Los Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez NGO rightfully challenges the notions of closure (and thus, erasure) that the Mexican government and the Instituto Chihuahuense perpetuate through their claims of solved cases, deeming them "ludicrous" and citing "a recurring pattern of torture" (Alba, 2010, 73).

Alba (2010) also points that the statistics surrounding femicides along the border fail to account for "the hundreds of women and girls who have disappeared without a trace" (p. 73). A report presented in 2003 by the National Commission on Human Rights in Mexico stated that 2,000 women disappeared in Mexico in the ten years between 1993 and 2003 while other sources argue that the number stands at over 4,000 (Alba, 2010). Though various groups have conducted significant research to produce such numbers, confusion and disagreement remain. Alba (2010) notes that "the discrepancies in all these statistics and reports adds to the general confusion that surrounds the crimes, that mystifies activists and authorities alike, increasing the sense that these cases are impossible to solve" (p. 74). These discrepancies also have the potential to confuse the

public and spark infighting among NGOs and other organizations dedicated to the same cause: pursuing real justice for victims of femicide and improving maquiladora conditions to ensure that such violence never occurs again.

A natural next step after learning about the violence enacted against women is to ask oneself: what happens now and what are the repercussions of this violence? Maquiladora work subjects women to disabling conditions, often leaving lasting negative impacts on their bodies and minds. In *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism*, Dan Goodley (2014) cites Wolfbring, writing that he defines ableism as “the favoritism for certain abilities for example cognition, competitiveness or consumerism” (p. 22). Because young Mexican women are handpicked for assembly work due to feminine (mis)conceptions surrounding dexterity, obedience, and value, they are understood to be able-bodied in a way that other people, including Mexican men and all American workers, are not. Their able-bodiedness, however, is closely connected to the devaluation of their labor: young women are suitable for factory work because their labor is believed to be worth less, prompting their mistreatment and underpayment. Goodley (2014) further defers to Wolfbring, who argues that “ableism [...] ‘has been used by various social groups to justify their elevated levels of rights and status in relation to other groups” (p. 22). It is altogether ironic that young Mexican women are considered to be able-bodied when the ‘ability’ they supposedly possess is predicated on the very gender-based assumptions that put them in a position to become disabled. The manipulative power of ableism relates to Melissa Wright’s classification of maquiladora workers as “disposable women;” women workers from non-Western countries like Mexico are assumed to be inherently disposable and thus, their exploitation by international corporations is twisted so as to seem less problematic.

Goodley (2014) also notes the importance of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality as categories of identity that “converge around the problems of disability as a consequence of attempts to maintain what Campbell terms ableist normativity” (p. 22-23). I argue that these categories of identity - which, in the case of maquiladora work, seem to be gender, race, and class - can also be construed as disabling because they lead women to situations in which their health and safety are compromised, leaving lasting (and potentially fatal) effects on their bodies and minds. The otherness that women maquiladora workers experience because of their gender, race, and class also contributes to the lack of visibility surrounding responses to the violence enacted against them, perpetuating the cycle of violence by obscuring its origin and exonerating those responsible.

In her work, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) notes that “feminist issues [are] intricately entangled with disability” despite the fact that such issues - including “the particularities of oppression [and] the construction of the subject” - “are discussed without any reference to disability” (p. 2). In the case of maquiladoras, being a woman, being young, being financially insecure, being unattached to a paternal familial structure/unmarried, and being viewed as sexually desirable may qualify as “particularities of oppression:” specific aspects of women’s identities that draw them into situations in which they face discrimination and disabling conditions. Garland-Thomson (2002) also argues that “Western thought” associates “female-ness” with disability through an “understanding [of] both as defective departures from a valued standard” (p. 6). Disability, gender and the differences that both beget, however, are not inherently negative. It is only because individuals in power *manipulate* difference in order to create hierarchies that positions

themselves, their characteristics, and their possessions at the top that societies come to view certain aspects of people's identities as lesser.

Though such manipulation is deeply twisted, it plays a formative role in the establishment of social and cultural norms, leading feminist scholars to conclude that "female embodiment is a disabling condition in sexist culture" (Garland-Thomson, 2002, 6). Given that the transnational flow of capital also permits the transnational flow of prejudices like misogyny, it is possible to conclude that if female embodiment is disabling in Western society, it is also disabling in Mexican society and vice versa. The use of the term 'embodiment' emphasizes the fact that simply occupying a body perceived by others as 'feminine' is disabling, and harm does not need to be done to that body to reinforce such disability. The fear of harm, which follows women in workplaces and other spaces they occupy, is disabling in its own right.

### **Conclusion**

The brief exploration of maquiladoras in this thesis proves that neoliberal capitalism disproportionately disadvantages Mexican women. Selected for maquiladora work because of gendered misconceptions surrounding their 'natural' abilities, such women are lured away from their families, verbally and physically harassed, exposed to toxins, forced to live in substandard conditions, and deprived of basic human rights, often their right to life itself. Though this violence should not be disregarded, I propose that gender can be conceived of as a disability in

its own right. Simply inhabiting a body perceived by others to be female is dangerous because it places individuals in situations that have the potential to cause harm. The knowledge of its possibility alone is a burden that women alone are forced to carry.

I hope that this thesis has also illuminated the ways in which gender and neoliberal capitalism are intimately related. Much of the language used to describe Mexican free-trade zones demonstrates this closeness. Often feminine in nature, such diction portrays Mexico and Mexican women as tempting seductresses who entice multinational corporations into establishing factories outside of the United States. This language also contributes to prejudiced Western understandings of Mexican laborers as thieves, stealing jobs that should belong to Americans.

In order to combat this prejudice, transparent dialogue surrounding maquiladoras is necessary to expose human rights abuses and contribute to the improvement of working conditions. More honest representations of free-trade factories and greater acknowledgement of their effects on individuals may expand understandings of structural violence, particularly as it occurs in workplace settings. Though not explored in this work, the similarities between the experiences of female maquiladora workers and the experiences of Western women in high-powered professional settings gesture toward the transnational nature of misogyny.

In moving forward, individuals who possess greater resources due to their privilege must use their platforms to combat corporate apathy toward and disregard of factory violence. Intersectionality theory acknowledges the complex relationship between oppression and identity and thus, we must remain aware of the responsibilities our identities require us to fulfill in order to affect equitable change for all people.

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