

CROSSING THE FACTORY FRONTIER: GENDER, PLACE, AND POWER IN THE MEXICAN MAQUILADORA[†]

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Across disciplines, a pressing question raised by contemporary feminist theorists is how to conceptualize the intricate relationship between “real” women — women as social agents — and “Woman” — an ideological representation of a female subject (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990; Poovey, 1990). In addressing this issue, some feminist scholars have shown how women often face the paradoxical situation of having to disavow this Woman in order to become the kind of women they want to be (Scott, 1996). For instance, in the workplace women still frequently contend with representations of Woman as the embodiment of a hormonally unstable, fecund, passive and uncontrollably sexual subject which they must somehow subvert in their efforts to establish their own careers (Martin, 1987; McDowell, 1995). A related question asks: Can we theorize how women participate in their own representation of themselves while simultaneously rejecting the representation of themselves as exemplars of Woman?

Although I cannot explore all facets of this vexing issue, I will open up the discussion by way of an exploration of one woman’s journey through the ideological representation of her as a “typical Mexican woman” in the Mexican *maquiladoras*.¹ My aim is to demonstrate how this ideology produces the capitalist division of labor through the reproduction of sex-difference, nationality and ethnic categories within one firm.

The Mexican woman I highlight has the goal of becoming skilled within a U.S.-based firm that is initiating efforts to upgrade its Mexican labor force as part of a larger strategy for making the transition to flexible production.

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Through her endeavors, we see how the representation of Woman is tied into historical discourses of nationality, ethnicity, the gendering of work and the negotiation of class within the *maquiladora* division of labor. We find a familiar story, well-documented by feminist scholars of the workplace, of women who have to prove that the representation of Woman is a category built around the exclusion of women as valuable participants in the workplace (Lamphere, 1987; Scott, 1988; Kondo, 1990).

The prevailing representation of the typical Mexican *maquiladora* Woman is of a "docile," "submissive," and tradition-bound worker who will only be suited to the positions of least prestige and power in the workplace (Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Chapin, 1995; Wright, 1996). This discourse of the Mexican Woman echoes the generalized discourses around women in third world contexts, who are said to be a homogenous type of female, uniformly tied to traditional roles and culturally oppressed (Mohanty, 1991). In this essay, I highlight a woman I shall call Gloria² who has worked in the same firm for over twenty years in an officially unskilled capacity. To gain skill and be promoted, she subverts the dominant representation of the Mexican Woman and forces her managers to realize that they have misidentified her. She demonstrates that whereas she is indeed a Mexican woman, she is anything but someone bound to traditions they thought to be typically Mexican.

Gloria confronts this historical representation of the Mexican woman within the *maquiladora* I shall call *Tres Reyes*. As in many *maquiladoras* over the last decade, *Tres Reyes* has initiated a shift towards a more flexible facility, both in terms of its client networks and its labor process (cf. Wilson, 1990; Gereffi, 1991; Shaiken, 1994). When I arrived at *Tres Reyes* in August 1993, the signature elements of just-in-time production were being implemented (cf. Piore and Sabel, 1984; Holmes, 1989) and, most significantly for this study, a new initiative for "skilling-up" their labor force was just underway. The managers hoped that by upgrading more of the Mexican labor force, it would improve its quality performance and thereby enhance its competitive edge (cf. Schoenberger, 1988). And as in other *maquiladoras*, Mexican women are, by and large, excluded from training programs critical to the skilling process. The skilling of the labor force is associated with the integration of men into the training programs rather than the training of women despite the latter's domination of *maquiladora* employment rolls in the past.³

My interviews with managers in *Tres Reyes* reflect a discourse I encountered across *maquiladoras* in which Mexican Woman represents an untrainable category of labor given the historical condition of docility, subordination, and so forth. Gloria confronts this discourse when her managers claim that despite many years of service to the firm, she is not trainable material. In her bid for a promotion from an unskilled supervisory position into a skilled managerial slot, she encounters one of the rigidities to flexible production within Mexico⁴ when she faces a rigid representation of herself as a Mexican Woman. Moreover, she runs head-

long into an ideology that she cannot develop skill because as a Mexican Woman she is incapable of overcoming her inherent limitations. Her efforts to gain skill are therefore attempts to present herself as a person of value, capability and growth.

It should be said that three of the four managers at Tres Reyes are women and all of the managers are Mexican-American.⁵ The discourse of Mexican Woman cuts across gender and nationality.⁶ We see through Gloria's efforts how the distinction between skilled and unskilled labor is a matter of deploying representations of both a national divide between Mexico and the U.S. and a sex difference among employees, such that Mexican men, unlike Mexican women, are seen capable of acquiring solid American business sense. In the interpretation of Mexican men as capable of Americanizing lies the exclusion of the Mexican woman, seen to be the embodiments of Mexican Woman, from Tres Reyes management.

In other words, the "universe of stylistic possibilities" (see Bourdieu, 1984), for holding a position in management is to present the appearance of being either an American or a Mexican who has "Americanized." Americanization is a process by which the Mexican adopts the stylistic trappings equated with a more professional demeanor within the *maquiladora*. Establishing the stylistic schema for interpreting material markers as the indicators of nationality is a negotiation over who belongs where given who they are.⁷ And the Mexican woman does not belong alongside the American or Americanized man in the schema prevailing at Tres Reyes.

Consequently, when Gloria eventually moves into a managerial post, she scrambles the material codes for reading the difference between skilled and unskilled employees and thereby subverts the ideological representation of Mexican Woman. She talks, behaves and wears the clothes interpreted as the stylistic markers of the Mexican Woman, but Gloria takes her promotion by storm. In her new position, she represents an impossibility: a skilled Mexican woman. The old guard of Tres Reyes managers claim that she is confusing the boundaries between skilled and unskilled employees, and they not only oppose her promotion but quit in protest when she gains it. Her advancement provokes their resistance and the social division of labor hangs in the balance.

This story illustrates that the capitalist continuum of uneven development (Harvey, 1989) works through the negotiations of local identities specific to a particular place in time. The working out of social identities at the local level is not epiphenomenal to the functioning of the multinational firm. At stake in this story is the crafting of a local schema for recognizing the abstract categories of the division of labor among the people who work and hold the corporation together.

This analysis grows out of ethnographic research I conducted over a year's period in Tres Reyes. This facility is located in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, across the national divide from El Paso, Texas. I position my

work within the growing geographic literature on the importance of qualitative research for studying the social processes of the firm (Schoenberger, 1997). Feminist geographers have been particularly articulate in demonstrating how ethnographic methods reveal the connections between the negotiations of identity and the uneven relations of power in various contexts (McDowell, 1992; Nast, 1992; Gilbert, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; Katz, 1996). And I have drawn from anthropological texts to guide my method of representing this work (Geertz, 1988; Strathern, 1991). I juxtapose the interviews in dialogue with one another as a way of recreating my interpretation of the coherence of events and conversations around Gloria's identity which unfolded over a prolonged period of time.

In tracking Gloria's journey from unskilled employee to a skilled and powerful manager, I faced my own dilemma in representing her efforts as a form of resistance. As Katz writes: "In the crossroads of improbable possibilities and the performances of deception are some of the dilemmas of doing fieldwork" (Katz, 1996:171). My dilemma emerges when I see Gloria's actions as simultaneously resistance and compliance to the social relations of capitalism within Tres Reyes. I locate her resistance in her subversion of the practices monitoring the discourse of the typical Mexican Woman. That she has to organize a work stoppage in order to be recognized as skilled indicates that she is resisting powerful social forces. Yet throughout, Gloria maintains that her actions are anything but resistance. She claims to be working in the corporate interest by fighting the managers' refusal to promote her. Moreover, once she gains the ground she covets, she turns into a skilled manager and is even more adept than her predecessor at extracting surplus value from laborers. She successfully deploys one logic against another within the system to navigate the contested terrain of skill development at Tres Reyes.

Within this dilemma, I encounter the difficulty of theorizing the relationship between a woman as a social agent and the ideology of Woman that she wants to escape. When Gloria forces the firm to recognize her skills, she is the author of her own inscription. Consequently, on one level this story of multi-skilling is not about corporate initiatives to upgrade the offshore labor force but, rather, is about one woman's determination to subvert a historically ingrained ideology so that she can become one of the "multi-skilled." On another level, the story reveals how little management really knows about the labor process and how they resort to universal categories to frame a social context that operates beyond their own comprehension of it.⁸ The result is that the managers of Tres Reyes recreate categories of sex-difference, nation and ethnicity that actually obfuscate the social practices unfolding within the firm. In turn, their ignorance of these events contributes to their vulnerability to Gloria's deft navigation of the class rankings within this socially diverse workspace.

A Manager's Tour of Tres Reyes

Tres Reyes is the wholly-owned Mexican subsidiary of Three Kings, a coupon processing firm based in Memphis, Tennessee. My study was based in Tres Reyes Plant I, a facility consisting of two buildings, administration and production, where about 500 operators, five supervisors, and some 45 section leaders (supervisor's assistants) worked along with Gloria and all but one of the four Tres Reyes managers. I entered the production facility with an invitation from management. For the first two weeks at Tres Reyes I interviewed managers, watched them work and recorded their versions of how the firm operated. I attended meetings and had a workspace within the General Manager's office. After the initial two weeks, I then moved my research into production when Gloria, a supervisor and the interim-superintendent, agreed to participate in my project. For the next several months, I followed Gloria on her days, worked in her office and often met her at her house on the weekends. I interviewed all of the supervisors and most of the section leaders at Tres Reyes, as well as about 40 operators over that period.

My first understanding of Tres Reyes history came out of the initial conversations I held with managers. Their oral history of Tres Reyes was of a firm that had peaked in the mid-1980s and was currently reorganizing to pull out of a desperate financial crisis. They described how in the early 1970s, the corporate officers decided to take advantage of the young *maquiladora* program opening up in northern Mexico and expand operations by relocating all labor-intensive processing to Ciudad Juárez. The Mexican facility employed about 1,000 production workers by 1978, working under a Mexican and male management team. In the early 1980s, corporate streamlining replaced all of the Mexican nationals with the Mexican-American staff. The former general manager, Tommy recalled: "When I took over in 1982, the company was really struggling for the first time. We needed to make some changes. So one day, I went to the store and when I saw those scanners at the check-out, I thought 'hey, we can do the same thing at Tres Reyes'. . . . We put in the computer system and suddenly we have the information right at our fingertips. . . . That means we don't need the same quality of workers we had back then. Scanning is automatic. You don't have to read or even concentrate. The computer does it all." After dismissing the Mexican production managers, the El Paso-based administrators, all U.S. citizens, moved into the offices in Ciudad Juárez. Additionally, claiming that supervisors were no longer needed to perform technical tasks, Tommy cut the supervisory pay in half, dismissed the male supervisory staff and promoted a number of Mexican women to replace them. He described this move as a "deskilling" of the work rather than an "upgrading" of the workers.

Tommy: "We put in the computers, the scanning . . . and we just didn't need as much from the supervisors. Once I put in that system, we could really streamline and focus on production. All the information was stored

on a disk, and we just needed a couple of people to handle that end of things. After that, the supervisors were just there to make sure that people got to their places on time and that sort of thing. They didn't really have any technical skills. . . . The old supervisors did. They had to know how to handle all of that information. Coupons are like banks. You've got to keep all the figures straight. Now the computers do all the hard work."

Tommy's version of deskilling was corroborated by other managers who spoke of the lack of skills among the Mexican women supervisors in contrast to the formerly more skilled Mexican male supervisors.

MW (Melissa Wright): "Are your supervisors skilled employees?"

Carmen (human resource manager): "What do you mean by skill?"

MW: "I mean have they developed valuable knowledge and techniques? Are they different from the operators?"

Carmen: "They have some people skills, but I wouldn't really call them skills. Probably most of the operators could do what they do. They just don't have the chance. . . . It wasn't always like that. The supervisors used to be skilled before we put in the computers."

MW: "Why do you even have supervisors?"

Carmen: "We need someone to make sure the workers do what they're supposed to do. . . . But they don't have anything I would call technical skills."

The general manager, Martin: "I've been thinking about your questions about skills, and I think speaking for the managers, we see the Mexican side different from how we used to see it. Before the computers, we really had to work together because they controlled the actual information. Supervisors then really had to know the business. But now they don't so much, or at least that's how we see it. And I'm sure that when Tommy hired Gloria and then the other women supervisors that he thought he was hiring an unskilled labor force."

In a separate interview, Tommy seconded Martin's suspicion when he explained why he had chosen to promote Gloria out of the possible candidates for the supervisor promotion. "She was hungrier than the rest," he told me.

The customs manager, Georgina, "It's Mexico. It's a very authoritative culture. They need someone standing over them all of the time. . . . Does she (Gloria) have skills? I wouldn't say so."

Gloria's skills, or lack thereof, became a corporate issue when local managers and corporate executive officers decided that they would hire a Mexican national as part of a corporate strategy to make the facility more "flexible." Their first step towards "flattening" the work hierarchy was to integrate the Mexican production staff into decision-making roles and diminish the social division segregating "Mexican" from "American" positions. Their hope was to facilitate communication between the two national domains of production and administration.

In a joint interview, Martin and Tommy, both explained that they encouraged the promotion of Mexican nationals as part of Tres Reyes' more "flexible" strategy.

Tommy, the former general manager: "The automation took care of our problems in the 1980s, but now Tres Reyes has got to become more flexible . . . and be responsive to clients and have better communication with the production workers."

Martin, the current general manager: "We want to improve communication between administration and production. That means training more Mexican nationals and giving them more responsibility."

One of the proposed actions for meeting this goal was to hire a Mexican national for the formerly American position of production manager. Like many multinational *maquiladoras*, Tres Reyes had a traditional split between "American" and "Mexican" jobs. Traditionally, the American jobs were those in management and engineering located above the Mexican production positions, such as supervisors, technicians and operators. At Tres Reyes, as in most of the other *maquilas* I studied, all of the Mexican positions were subordinate to American ones. The American jobs fall under U.S. labor codes, pay U.S. taxes and conform to a pay-scale that is commonly one-third or more higher than for the same position when it is designated as a Mexican job.⁹ Although both Tommy and Martin agreed that the company would save money by hiring a Mexican national into a former American position, both stressed that the decision was designed to enhance flexibility rather than to cut salary costs.

The American/Mexican split in the division of labor also found an expression in the spatial layout of Tres Reyes. Markers of national difference segregated the Tres Reyes complex into the Mexican production and American administrative domains. I found the designation of the Mexican area as the "Spanish" site and the American area as the "English" site. Language was a marker of professionalism in a place where to be Mexican was to represent a position subordinate to any American position within the division of labor. For example, in Tres Reyes administration, the ambient background music originated from an El Paso Country-and-Western station. I asked Carmen why they chose this station over Ciudad Juárez station even though most of the clerks were Mexican nationals and she replied, "This is the American part of Tres Reyes, so we have an El Paso station." By contrast, a Ciudad Juárez station filled the production arena with the sounds of *cumbiás*, *corridos* and Mexican pop. The effective marking of language areas was one mechanism for stamping the national code built into the division of labor into the spaces of Tres Reyes. To paraphrase from Bourdieu in an understanding of the symbolic capital of linguistic and cultural markers, Spanish was a stylistic impossibility within Tres Reyes administration, because Spanish itself was a marker of Mexicanness, and Mexicans worked in the lesser skilled jobs in production.

Martin: "I think there has always been this feeling that the Mexicans just don't have good business sense and that they can't be trusted to make decisions. I think you could say that there's been an 'us and them' mentality. Something like, we're the professionals and they're the hired labor. . . . Speaking English, *I think, has been more symbolic than practical*" (my emphasis).

Georgina: "We have a different work ethic over here. The American work ethic is very different from the Mexican way of doing things. . . . I am Mexican-American, my parents came from Mexico, but I could never tell you that I understand their (the 'Mexican') way of doing things. . . . They don't have 'American' business sense."

Indeed, even though the managers had decided to hire a Mexican national into a formerly American position, they sought someone who would fit in with the "American" schema in administration. The requisites for the position included an ability to speak English, even though all of the managers agreed that English was not necessary to perform the job while Spanish was.

Martin: "It was a big move to hire a Mexican and I think everyone wanted to find the most Americanized Mexican they could."

The significance of the national distinction within this context of finding the most "Americanized Mexican" was articulated to me as an issue of skills. Seeming more American than Mexican was an indication of professionalism. To reflect "Americanness," therefore, was to reflect an acquisition of the skill required to hold an American job. All of these jobs were described as skilled and certainly more skilled than any of the Mexican positions.

Martin: "I think there was a lot of uncertainty about how to fill the position. Most of the managers thought that the Mexicans really couldn't do it. . . . I think the idea was that if we could find someone who seemed more American than that would be the right kind of person."

Once the managers decided to fill the Production Manager with a Mexican national, only two candidates were under consideration. One was Gloria, suggested by Martin, and the other was Mauricio, a male supervisor. In a heated debate over who had the most qualifications for the job, the discourse around the typical Mexican woman was preeminent among those arguing that Gloria did not have the proper qualifications. Unlike Mauricio, she could not develop the professional skills for that position because as a Mexican woman she was bound within a cultural tradition and she could never Americanize. At Tres Reyes, such a fate meant that she would never acquire managerial skills.

Martin: "And there was this feeling that none of the Mexican women could ever become the type of American manager we wanted. She just wouldn't reflect the right corporate image."

Georgina: "We need more degreed Mexicans. . . . we want someone who can work with us, on our side . . . someone who understands American business. The Mexican culture, unfortunately and I hate to say this, just doesn't allow its women to really get ahead. And they don't want to. I think we have to look to the men."

Martin: "We definitely were looking for someone who could fit in with us, with an American group. And I just don't think anyone thought that Gloria could ever fit in. I mean Gloria didn't want to fit in with the Americans. She made that clear and that bothered everyone."

The discourse for understanding Mauricio as skilled emerged through a discussion of how he was different from a Mexican woman. He therefore

could escape the “unprofessional” Mexican culture by demonstrating more American national traits indicative of a business culture.

The human resource manager, Carmen: “I think of all the employees that Mauricio will probably have a career. He’s ambitious. He’s got an education. He’s smart. And I think he’s got a good head for business.”

MW: “How about any of the women supervisors?”

Carmen: “I think that they’re about as high up as they’re going.”

Georgina: “The Mexican women can’t get ahead. It’s the culture.”

Before describing how Gloria proved them all wrong, I will describe her version of the social geography of Tres Reyes. From her perspective, we see not a history of deskilling but of the flexible skills required of a supervisory team working with a predominantly young, migrant labor force during years of technological change. In her discourse, she and the other Mexican women supervisors are professionals who skillfully oversee the social complexities of the production domain.

Gloria’s Tres Reyes

Gloria was one of the first ten Tres Reyes employees. She was 17 and desperate for a job after her family moved from Parral, a town near Chihuahua City, in 1972. Her father found work in El Paso as a trash hauler and her mother started cleaning private homes. As the oldest daughter, Gloria was expected not only to find a job but to take care of her eight younger siblings since her parents were out of Juárez for most of the week. She thought of working for RCA, which had just opened its doors, but decided on Tres Reyes because she preferred the relatively quiet atmosphere of coupon processing.

Her characterization of contemporary Tres Reyes was of a social complexity that reflected the urban changes within Ciudad Juárez. She became a supervisor when Tommy promoted her after she had worked at Tres Reyes for 13 years, during which time she had trained hundreds of operators and had worked as a supervisory assistant. In contrast to the managerial version of the simplification of supervisory work over time, she said her job had become more difficult over the years due to changes in the social landscape of Ciudad Juárez.

MW: “Is the supervisory work easier?”

Gloria: “Absolutely not.”

MW: “Why? Hasn’t the computer system made it easier?”

Gloria: “In some ways, but the city is more complicated. The people are more complicated.”

A few days after I arrived, Gloria gave me a tour of the production floor. Her version of Tres Reyes resonated with the managers’ in so far as she saw production to be a “Mexican” production domain apart from the “American” administrative area. For her, however, Tres Reyes production was a microcosm of Ciudad Juárez, and instead of a production area of homogeneously

unskilled workers, she described an organization of people depending upon a wide variety of characteristics that affected their job performance.

We started in Receiving and followed the coupon's path through the floor.

Gloria: "The coupons come here from El Paso in those packages and boxes. We don't need many people in this area, just a handful, but it's important to get the numbers right. If you mess up here, the whole thing is wrong. So I put trustworthy people in this area, some of the women who have worked here for a while. The ones with children."

MW: "Why women with children?"

Gloria: "They're here to work, nothing else."

Then we moved to the *Prepa* area, where the packages were opened and coupons dumped in heaps of crumpled and often torn pieces of paper.

Gloria: "The *viejos* [older people] work here."

MW: "Why?"

Gloria: "They have to straighten out the coupons, stack them. Make them neat. Young people get frustrated. It's boring work to them. They want to work with computers and be in the center of things. . . .

"There's really not any work for older people in the *maquilas* . . . the *maquilas* won't hire anyone over 25."

As we stood on the fringes of this work area, one of the materials handlers wheeled a cart full of packages from the Receiving area. Suddenly, the 13 quiet workers leapt from their seats and dashed over to the cart. Two of the women reached the cart before the others, rifled through the packages and grabbed a couple. One of them tossed a package to another woman standing off to the side.

Gloria: "The *viejos* are hard to work with, very cranky. They go through the packages to pick the cleanest ones and those two [women] are in charge. Marsela is bossy [*lider*] and you have to watch her, but she keeps everyone in line and she's a very good worker. She's almost 70. The problem with her is that she picks on the young women for what they wear."

On an afternoon a few months later, I watched Marsela reduce one operator to tears because she was offended by the younger woman's style of clothing and called her a whore. A supervisor moved the younger operator out of earshot of the older one.

From *Prepa*, we moved into Sorting, the manual sorting area. Here about ten workers categorized coupons into stacks of manufacturer brands or grocery client.

Gloria: "This is the difficult area because they have to read and memorize the codes . . . But these workers make the least money. It's harder to keep up with production bonuses."

MW: "How do you keep people here?"

Gloria: "I asked Martin and Carmen to change the system so that these workers make more money. But they don't . . . understand that this is harder work. They think it's just not as productive. So I help these workers out. We

have a flexible agreement. . . . I help out their production figures. . . . And I don't put migrants here."

MW: "What do you mean?"

Gloria: "I only put *Juarenses* [people born and raised in Juárez] in here."

She then explained how the recent migrants from other parts of Mexico were not as trustworthy. Those from Torreón and Durango, she said, were too timid; those from Mexico City [*chilangos*] were confrontational; whereas, the employees from Chihuahua City were militantly independent.

Most of the 350 employees worked in the computer scanning section located in the middle of the production floor. Once the coupons are flattened and stacked into neat piles by the *prepa* workers, and the minority of coupons without bar codes sent to the manual sorting area, the bulk of coupon orders are processed by workers who scan the bar-codes with an electronic eye.

Gloria: "We put the new workers here," said Gloria, "but we have to spread *cholos* [gangs] apart. We can't put *cholos* together, but this is where the *jovenes* [youth] are the best workers. . . . They like to work with computers, new technology."

Then we walked over to the material handlers' station, where young men carried trays of coupons, loaded others onto dollies and wheeled them around between work areas in the facility.

"These guys are all *rancheros* [or *los ranchos*], from the country. They have better manners than the *cholos* or the *roquers* [rockers]. . . . They get along with everybody."

She identified the *rancheros* by their cowboy boots and western wear and by their taste in music. Anyone seen to be a *ranchero* was considered to be perfect for the material handler position. Like her managers, Gloria also read the division of labor on the sleeve of the laborforce.

Additionally, Gloria, like most other supervisors I met, was not comfortable asking a woman to move a box or pick up a tray. She preferred to ask men to do these things and explained her preference in terms of a female dislike for moving objects and lifting anything.

MW: "Why are there no women here [in the materials' handling area]?"

Gloria: "They carry things and get dirty . . . it's tiring. The boys like it, but not the girls."

From the materials section, we moved to invoicing and shipping, where I learned that more of the unmarried young women and the *roquers* worked because the supervisor there, Emi, was "good with the young women" and she would "run off a trouble-maker within a week." The *roquers*, those who listened to contemporary hard rock were, in Gloria's estimation, always potential trouble-makers, and they seemed to blur some with the *cholos* on the Tres Reyes plant floor.

What emerged after this tour was a mapping of the Tres Reyes production area into sections of older and younger, female and male, married and unmarried, single mothers and wed mothers, rockers, rappers, gang members, urban and rural, and migrant and local employees who performed a

variety of tasks. Gloria clearly did not see the Tres Reyes production domain in the same way as her managers. And her version of how women became supervisors was also at odds with the managerial account of their promotion. She describes how incompetent male supervisors were replaced with women who were adept at reading the complex networks within the city's laborforce.

Gloria: "A good supervisor has to know people and the work. Mainly it's the women who care enough to ask questions and get to know people personally. That's why my supervisors are so good."

Tres Reyes had more women supervisors than any other *maquila* I had studied. Whereas the managers described the movement of women into supervision to be an outcome of deskilling, Gloria said quite the opposite. She described how Tommy, the former general manager, had dismissed the previous male Mexican supervisors because they were not good at their jobs.

Gloria: "We started to have problems and they couldn't bring things under control."

MW: "What sort of problems?"

Gloria: "Workers not doing their jobs and there was a walk-out. . . . I told Tommy that I could get things under control."

MW: "How did you do that?"

Gloria: "I've worked here longer than anybody and I know the city. And I work with some very good supervisors. We work together, like a team. That's why I picked them."

MW: "You picked the supervisors?"

Gloria: "Well, we decided who would apply for supervisor jobs. We knew who could do it."

Unlike her managers, she did not see the company as run by the computer system. Instead, she said that the workers actually exercised a great deal of control over their own work because they controlled the pace. The challenge for supervisors was to make sure that workers performed their jobs up to speed and within the proper quality ranges. To accomplish this task in such a way as to seem automatic, Gloria organized an elaborate social system that her managers did not know even existed. Moreover, given their descriptions of her, they thought her to be incapable of such organizational skills.

Gloria's Division of Labor

Gloria enforced the corporation's division of labor but not in the manner described by her managers. She had developed over the years an elaborate social network of insiders and outsiders to a patronage system encircling her. Her social network extended through the supervisors to the section leaders and down to the operators in a dynamic system of give and take, which she manipulated to oust rivals to her authority at all levels.

She described her social strength as one built around *confianza*, a word usually translated to mean some combination of intimacy, trust, confidence, and loyalty. Gloria intended for all of those senses to be understood when she said she had *confianza* with someone or that *confianza* did or did not exist with others.¹⁰

She explained that her networks of *confianza* were critical for identifying who belonged where within the division of labor and for controlling them in their jobs.¹¹ She relied upon her networks of *confianza* to identify the employees—as *cholos*, single, rappers, mothers, and so forth—and to keep these various sorts of people in line. Her interpretation of social identity was at once an interpretation of someone's position in the division of labor in much the same way that her manager's interpretation of her as a typical Mexican woman was simultaneously an interpretation of her as unskilled. However, her *confianza* networks eventually forced her managers to realize that they had misinterpreted who she was and therefore where she belonged within the Tres Reyes division of labor.

When I met Gloria, she received only a supervisor's salary. Still, she and the other supervisors clearly saw her as the boss in production, where there were five supervisors working under her, another 50 or so section leaders under them and then the almost 500 operators.

Everyone had a set wage structure, time schedule and production standard. The operators had to process so many coupons within a given period of time, then they received bonuses above that amount. Section leaders had to ensure that the people in their areas met their collective minimum and only received bonuses when their workers produced more than the minimum degree of work. Supervisors received a salary but were immediately chastised if their area did not meet production projections. Every operator or section leader who committed an infraction, such as not meeting production quality standards, suffered a loss in pay. Every supervisor feared reprisal over an unexplained deficit in their production numbers.

"You can't expect people to do something for you if they're always afraid of losing their job," Gloria explained. Her response to this rigid and punitive social arrangement was to trade flexibility for loyalty. Several operators talked of how Gloria would help them out, give them advances, personal loans, provide pointers, and even turn a blind eye to an occasional absence as long as they were loyal to her. Loyalty meant advising a supervisor of a *rebelde* (someone who thought of organizing workers for any reason), a *lider* (someone who challenged authority and resisted being managed), or notifying a supervisor if someone was cheating and stashing coupons in the bathroom trash to pad their numbers.

In exchange for loyalty, the operators were treated with leniency and respect. One operator, Miriam, explained that she had worked at Tres Reyes for over a decade because "when you find a supervisor who will talk to you and find out why you missed a day or why you weren't feeling well, then you stay. In other *maquilas*, they don't care. . . . Of course, you have to give something in return."

The return to Gloria was an internal policing system. Information passed up and down the floor and favors were handed out and loyalty promised such that Gloria knew most of the 500 operators by name. She also knew whom she could not trust if the employee had not responded to supervisory efforts to cultivate *confianza* with them.

Emi, another supervisor explained how *confianza* worked, "I tell my section leaders that their job is to get to know everyone. Know why they work here. About their families. If they go out to the bars or go back home. If they have kids. If they're *cholos*. You have to know all of this. . . ."

MW: "Do you have *confianza* with your workers?"

Emi: "Yes, if I don't, I run them off [*los corro*]. You know, this isn't like the Philips factory where everything moves on time. We've got to keep them motivated and working. You can't have a *rebelde*. . . . I can spot a *rebelde* in a week. . . . Then I run him off."

MW: "How can you tell if you have a *rebelde*?"

Emi: "From experience, and then the others tell me. They say, 'he won't do what you say,' or 'he's making comments.' That kind of thing."

The *confianza* that Emi has with her workers forms part of Gloria's network of *confianza* because they have *confianza* with each other.

Emi: "I'll do anything for Gloria. She knows that because she'll do anything for me."

MW: "What do you have to do for each other?"

Emi: "Just back each other up, no matter what. . . . She watches out for us on this side. They [the U.S. managers] don't know anything. *She runs this place and they don't even know it* [my emphasis]."

Gloria spoke of her *confianza* with the supervisors as the critical link in her network since she needed them to organize workers in their areas. She was also in a position to mete out favors to them in exchange for their loyalty and trust. For example, when a supervisor, Lulu, had a miscarriage and then fell into a noticeable depression, Gloria gave her a month of paid leave without notifying the managers. She said that Lulu needed the time and was a good supervisor with high performance ratings, even if the rules did not allow for such a break. Martin told me later that he realized that he hadn't seen Lulu for a while but her work was being done, her check getting cashed, and no one mentioned anything at all.

Martin: "Whenever I made the rounds, they would say that she had just stepped out."

Again in contrast to the managers' version of events, Gloria saw her move into the interim-superintendent spot as a temporary pause en route to being production manager. For this reason, she knew that she had to make a good showing in the job because her performance would be evaluated when she applied for the manager's job. Part of this strategy was to make sure that quality was up, that there were no labor disputes, and that *rebelde*s were run off. She said her goal was to make production *seem to operate as if by computer*. Her first test occurred immediately upon assuming the position in the midst of a labor walk-out.

Martin: "I don't know what she did, but as soon as she stepped in, everyone went back to work. It was a mess. Everyone was mad about overtime. We had been working seven day weeks and they walked out. Then we put Gloria in and suddenly it was like there was no problem. . . . I never asked her how she did it."

Gloria: "Well, it was a big problem with the other manager. So as soon as she left, I called together the supervisors and said, we need to get this place working again. We can figure out the problems after we get to work."

Emi: "We told our people that if they came back to work that we would take care of the overtime. We would be more lenient. The Americans don't understand how it works. They just said 'no, you have to work overtime.' They don't know how to be reasonable. . . . As soon as she [the former U.S. manager] left, then we [Mexicans] took charge. It's different now with Gloria. She knows how to treat people because she knows what it's like to work here."

MW: "Why did you want to help Gloria work this out?"

Emi: "I want her to go all the way to the top. She's the best worker here. She is Tres Reyes."

According to all accounts — managerial and supervisory, "American" and "Mexican" — Tres Reyes production did get back on track after Gloria assumed the superintendent position.

Martin: "Actually, things are working well under Gloria. Things have calmed down. Quality is back up."

Nonetheless, Gloria's stint in this position did not reflect her skills in the managers' eyes. They could not see how production was organized into networks of *confianza* and around Gloria's mapping of social space. Yet even when the managers could see that production was back on an even keel, they did not attribute the recovered stability to Gloria. She continued to represent that typical Mexican woman in their eyes. And so they decided to hire Mauricio, another supervisor, to be the new production manager.

The managers took almost six months to decide that Mauricio was to be the next production manager of Tres Reyes. Meanwhile, Gloria continued to perform the job of interim-superintendent and in effect carry the load for the manager's position. Their decision and the ensuing protests revolved around a discussion of who Gloria really was — a typical Mexican woman or a skilled Tres Reyes employee? For the managers, the two together posed an impossibility. For Gloria and her supporters in production, her skills emerged precisely from her experience as a typical woman worker in the city's *maquiladoras*.

Tres Reyes v. Three Kings

Mauricio had worked at Tres Reyes for five years when I met him. He had started as an operator even though he had a master's degree in agricultural engineering.

Mauricio: "I needed a job. We had a baby. . . . It was hard at 100 pesos a week." Unable to support his family on the income, he worked two jobs for 18 hours a day until he was promoted to supervisor about four months later.

MW: "You were promoted quickly."

Mauricio: "Yes, I think they realized that I was not your average operator here. . . . It is hard for everyone, but I have my degree."

Over several conversations I had with Mauricio, he explained his skills in terms of his being stricter and more authoritative than Mexican women, on average, and more than Gloria, in particular.

MW: "How would you describe your own skills?"

Mauricio: "I understand computer systems and am a tough manager. I know how to handle people. I'm tougher than most here."

MW: "Is being tough a skill?"

Mauricio: "Well I think so. It's something you have to figure out. I mean you need to be compassionate but also let them know who's boss. Some of the women, you know Mexican women, have a harder time with that. . . . Gloria is a good supervisor but she's not tough enough with the people to be a manager. That's what I've seen."

I asked Carmen, the human resource manager, to explain why she thought him to be well-suited for the job, and she backed Mauricio's account that he was "tougher" than the average Mexican woman, of whom Gloria was one.

MW: "How are his skills different from Gloria's?"

Carmen: "Well, he's a man, for one thing. I think Gloria is a good supervisor but she might have a hard time."

Georgina: "Yes, you may not like it, but Mexicans really don't respect Mexican women. You've got to be a man for them to listen. . . . Mauricio definitely benefits from being a man."

Throughout these conversations, I heard that Mauricio was qualified for the position precisely because he did not present the image of the typical Mexican woman. These same conversations reified this historical representation of this sort of woman who is submissive to male authority and bound to a culture which forces her into traditional roles and to a life with minimal economic power. Another example of this discourse of her and of Mauricio's difference from this historical image occurred when managers spoke of Mauricio's ability to Americanize, or, effectively, to escape the cultural traditions that bind him to the national domain of least skill and power in the Tres Reyes schema.

Georgina: "Mauricio is the kind of person who can work in both worlds."

MW: "How does he demonstrate this ability to work in both worlds?"

Georgina: "He makes an effort to speak English, and he works well with us over here. He fits in more than most Mexicans."

Martin: "Mauricio comes over [to administration] and talks, has a cup of coffee. Sometimes he goes out for drinks with the American staff in El Paso."

His ability “to fit in” with the American managers was a reflection of his professionalism according to Carmen. “He presents a professional, American, image. . . . He speaks English, always wears a tie and has a real sense of the company, of the business.”

Martin: “I think everyone wants Mauricio in the position because, well, it’s embarrassing to say, but I think that the group is leaning towards Mauricio because he’s more like they are. You know, it’s a big step to put a Mexican national in this job, and they want someone who seems more American than most Mexicans.”

MW: “Who do you want?”

Martin: “Well it’s a tough call. Gloria is probably the most knowledgeable one here, but Mauricio does have some things working in his favor.”

MW: “Like what? Could you give me an example?”

Martin: “It’s image, I guess. He just seems right for the job here. And I think the managers would have an easier time working with him.”

MW: “Does his engineering degree have anything to do with his image?”

Martin: “Oh sure, he’s very smart. I think the degree has a lot to do with it, but also his demeanor. . . . Like his clothes.”

Ironically, Gloria had almost completed her Master’s degree in the seemingly more relevant field of Business Administration from the same university. When she started working at Tres Reyes, she had only finished the seventh grade, but after years of night courses, she finally attained her goal of a college degree. Yet, her education and years of work experience at Tres Reyes did not lay the foundation of skilled experience according to the managers.

The invisibility of her education contrasted to the visibility of his provides further evidence for Bourdieu’s (1984) argument that recognition of social capital, such as skill, operates through an interpretation of material tastes and styles as the markers of this capital. To present the appearance of masculinity by wearing suits and talking more “toughly” to the workers marked Mauricio as a man of skill. Whereas Gloria’s continual negotiation with workers was interpreted to be “soft” or “womanly.” And her personal appearance certainly did not evoke the markers of professionalism that her managers understood.

After some time I realized that Gloria’s clothing presented some real obstacles to the managers. She simply looked out of place to them. Martin: “Now this is tacky but Gloria really should tone it down. Did you see her today?”

MW: “No, not yet.”

Martin: “She’s in this bright orange, tangerine almost, outfit. Tight and lace. Carmen just about passed out.”

MW: “What did she say?”

Martin: “She hoped we didn’t have any clients today. I have to agree that it’s not a very professional look.”

Georgina: “It’s one thing in production but not over here. . . . I’ve tried to talk to Gloria about how she dresses but she looks at me like I’m crazy. You can’t have a manager who looks like she’s heading out to the disco with the operators after four. That’s how Gloria looks sometimes.”

Carmen: "Well it's a delicate issue but Gloria, I don't think, will change. She's a Mexican woman. That's how they dress and it's a problem for her career. It's a problem for us. But you can't change her. It's her culture. It's who she is, I guess."

Gloria's self presentation fed directly into the managerial interpretation of her as unprofessional and unskilled after all the years.

Georgina: "I know you've been talking with Gloria, and she's been here for 21 years, but she doesn't understand what it takes to run a business. The hard hours. Always having to learn how to overcome problems."

MW: "She hasn't learned. . . ."

Georgina: "No, she hasn't picked up the skills that I think she should."

Carmen: "Gloria is a good supervisor. She's good with people, but I don't think she should be in charge of production."

MW: "Why? She's been here for a long time."

Carmen: "Yeah, and I guess that's part of the problem. You would think after being here for so long that she would have developed more. . . . You know, gotten a better sense of the computer system and finances. I just don't think she has."

Martin disagreed with their assessment that Gloria did not understand the computer or financial systems, but he did believe that her persona struck everyone in management as non-professional.

MW: "Do you think Gloria knows how to work the computer system? Do whatever you need to do as a manager?"

Martin: "Oh sure. I think Gloria could go toe-to-toe with anyone here. I know she knows how to diagnose and program the system and the finances she could pick up, if she hasn't done it already. Gloria has her ways."

MW: "Why do some others think she doesn't have the computer skills?"

Martin: "It's who she is, I think. Gloria refuses to compromise and be more appealing to people like Georgina, Berta [the Vice-President in El Paso], and probably Carmen."

MW: "What do you mean?"

Martin: "She won't learn English, for example. That's just not good form here. There's this sense that we're an American company."

MW: "Does she need English in that job?"

Martin: "Not really. But she doesn't seem the right type."

MW: "What's that?"

Martin: "I guess Mauricio."

That Gloria not only did not speak English but actually refused to take classes was considered to be proof-positive that she would not make a good manager.

Martin: "You know she would start to take classes and then just quit. I think that really bothered everyone. It was like she didn't really try or want to learn the language."

MW: "Do you think her monolingual Spanish made her seem too Mexican?"

Martin: "Certainly. She just seemed like every other *maquila* worker, not a manager."

Georgina: "Gloria is an older generation of *maquila* worker. She came in when we were hiring like crazy and she found a good deal. It's not easy for someone like her to get a promotion. Most of these girls who come in, like she did, just stay at the ground level. *We gave her a break.*" [my emphasis]

Carmen: "She's a good production worker, a good supervisor, but not managerial material."

Unsurprisingly, when Martin and the managers decided to hire Mauricio, Gloria and her "*gente de confianza*" were not pleased.

Emi, a supervisor: "They're trying to get rid of Gloria but it won't work. She knows how to run this place with her eyes closed, and they will soon see that."

MW: "What do you mean?"

Emi: "Just wait. Gloria will get the job."

Two days later, she did. On that morning, everyone came to work and sat quietly at their desks and work stations. The coupons were not moving.

Martin described the scene: "It was eerie. Everyone there but nothing happening. I got about as far as the scanning area when Emi motioned for me to come over and said that we better offer the job to Gloria or the supervisors would not make it work for a while. And then Lulu came over and said the same thing. In no uncertain terms, they were threatening to walk out. . . . The whole plant."

By the time he had walked off the floor, all of the supervisors, except for Mauricio and the other male supervisor, Fernando, had told him that they would protest any decision other than to make Gloria the production manager. After consulting with the other managers, he made the executive decision to give the job to Gloria and promise Mauricio that he would probably be promoted over Plant II in the next year.

Martin: "I didn't think the company could endure a strike. So I made what I thought was the only decision."

Gloria did not want to talk to me about the show of force. I saw her evasion of this topic to be evidence of her lack of *confianza* with me. I am an "American" in this schema, after all. Nonetheless, Emi, the supervisor, told me: "We were prepared to do what was necessary because without Gloria, this place would fall apart. They're too dumb to know it. But she runs this place and they can't expect to make her work for Mauricio. She trained him. She trained all of us. It's humiliating and they don't know how this place really works."

I talked with several section leaders and operators who said that they would have done what the supervisors told them to do in that situation because they needed to stay on their good side. If the supervisors said "don't show up for work," then they wouldn't.

Ezequiel, one operator explained his interpretation of events: "I've worked here for two years and Gloria is demanding but she also listens. In

these *maquilas* when you have someone who listens to you, you want to work for them, even if they ask for a favor sometimes."

Another operator, Celí, said: "I couldn't afford to miss the work really, but I think they were wrong. They should have picked Gloria."

MW: "Were you willing to protest?"

Celí: "It wasn't a protest. I was doing what my supervisor told me. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?"

As it turned out, a walk-out did not take place and Gloria was officially offered the job. The other three managers, Carmen and Georgina in Ciudad Juárez and Berta in El Paso were furious with Martin and with the entire production staff. They called a meeting and Georgina, speaking for the group, announced that he had just sold the "future of the company" for nothing. Afterwards I asked her to explain why she was so upset: "This place is going down the drain. Now we have an operator in charge, someone who doesn't know anything about the business and it's a disgrace."

Carmen: "Things have been going downhill for a while. But this is really a mistake. Gloria does not belong in management. It will be chaos."

Two weeks later, Martin was fired by his boss in Tennessee, who had received complaints from the other managers that Martin was mis-managing Tres Reyes; one even accused him of embezzling, a charge subsequently dropped. I was informed that I was *persona non grata* but Gloria insisted that I keep visiting the plant. My access to managers, except for Martin who was no longer a Tres Reyes employee, was cut off, but from production I could see a tug-of-war over the reins of Tres Reyes. Gloria remained tight-lipped regarding the whole situation, and I relied on Emi to tell me the goings-on.

Emi: "Berta [the Vice-President] quit."

MW: "Why?"

Emi: "She didn't say but I know it's because she can't get rid of Gloria. She and Gloria don't get along."

Within one month, Georgina, who had worked with Tres Reyes for eighteen years quit without explanation. Again, Emi translated the events for me and said it was over Gloria's having access to the El Paso office. Although this facility was diminished in comparison to the company's salad years, managers still had office space in El Paso. Gloria was the first Mexican employee to have an office in the El Paso building. Then Carmen left and then Mauricio, until Gloria oversaw the searches for all of the these positions. A new general manager finally arrived, and Gloria was the only production manager he knew. She bought some new clothes, most of them bright, some with rhinestones and all with matching pumps. I continued research for another month until one day when Gloria explained that she was too busy now to have me tag along and ask questions. At the time of this writing, Gloria is still managing production at Tres Reyes.

Conclusion: The Paradoxes of Resistance

On one of the occasions when I pushed the issue of resistance with Gloria, who usually succeeded in resisting my persistent inquiries into this topic, she explained that she was not protesting corporate policy or trying to cause any troubles for the firm. Her actions, she said, stemmed from her allegiance to Tres Reyes.

Gloria: "I've put my life into this company."

Fortunately for me, Emi, who was also one of Gloria's closest friends, provided more verbal responses to this question.

Emi: "They made a mistake for everyone, including Tres Reyes. Gloria runs this place. She has for years. They didn't see that. . . ."

MW: "Do you think that they did not have good managerial skills?"

Emi: "Well, that could be."

From these and other conversations, I realized that Gloria and her supporters believed that they were not fighting against the firm when they protested the managerial decision. Instead, they thought they were acting in the firm's best interests by effectively pushing out an incompetent managerial team. In this regard Gloria is waging a class battle: She wants to remove the threat to corporate stability. She wants to bolster the class divisions of the Tres Reyes hierarchy and strengthen the efficiency of labor exploitation. And with her mapping of *cholos*, *jovenes*, motherless women and single mothers, among other groups, she consolidated a base of support not only for her promotion but also for better controlling production. To this day, Gloria and her *gente de confianza* actively attack anyone who is merely suspected of harboring thoughts of organizing workers. They carefully police social groups and establish an elaborate spy network for controlling the work pace. Anyone seen to be slacking on the job runs the risk of being reported by a co-worker and being "run off."

Still, Gloria is certainly resisting a dominant order. She butts heads with a tremendous historical apparatus designed to deny her of any sense of personal value. She has to fight a widespread belief that she is just like any other Mexican woman whose career has started in the operator's position of multinational firms, and she does so because the strength of the representation is not lost on her. Beyond the world of Tres Reyes, Gloria would likely not be able even to apply for another *maquila* job. I interviewed over ten women who had lost their jobs as supervisors and none of them were able to find occasions into that level of position. They had to start from the bottom (operator) or seek work elsewhere. Fighting for her career at Tres Reyes is in many ways a passionate effort to keep her own historical experience of herself intact. She does not want to lose a career built by determination, learning and honing — and become just another Mexican woman looking for a *maquila* job.

In order for her work experience to count as skilled, Gloria has to subvert a historical representation that is built around her exclusion as an active social agent. In doing this, she changes from her status as the object of one

story to the subject of another. And when she makes her move up, she also validates the experiences of many of her female and Mexican colleagues. Those Mexican women who the former managers said were “unskilled” have gained status. Together, Gloria and these other Mexican women form a formidable group of *maquila* managers.

So how can resistance to the social representations of the division of labor — to the designation of gendered or nationalized work categories, say — be resistance when the aim is not directed towards ridding the system of the fundamental work categories and the capitalist hierarchy they indicate?

To address that question, the analysis must venture beyond the context of the workplace in order to seek how the patterns of domination/subordination there feed into other contexts which people navigate. In my concentrated attention on the reproduction of workplace subjects, I have narrowed the contextual field to the worksite and have excluded many other contexts that figure prominently into the negotiation of social subjects at work. I have done so for the specific goal of focusing on a single figure to ask what role she plays within a given context. However, in reducing the scale of analysis to her, I have excluded the many other representations that Gloria and other Mexican women must navigate — as mothers, daughters, single women, political party members, working class, cultural members, and national residents, to name a few. These relationships figure directly into their own strategies of resistance and compliance and to their formation of a consciousness of themselves as social subjects. And so I am faced with the contradiction that most theorists face when narrowing their discussion to a particular contextual field, of attempting to think through political action within a sphere of limited scope. So the question remains: Must resistance in capitalist contexts always attack the fundamental laws of capitalism to be resistance?

I side with those scholars who argue that resistance does not have to be conceptualized through class consciousness (Ong, 1987) or even through a consciousness of the action as resistance to some particular relation of power since one action can have reverberating and contradictory effects throughout someone’s life depending upon the context. But if that is the case, there are still some sticky questions regarding politics at work and the goals and fruits of actions, construed to be energies in resistance.

Notes

1. Historical references to the *maquiladoras* have been to the export-processing firms located within the northern reaches of Mexico (see Fernandez-Kelly, 1983, for an historical overview).
2. I use pseudonyms for all individuals and corporations.
3. See Cockburn, 1985, for examples of the masculinization of skill in other contexts. For examples of the masculinization of skilled jobs in the *maquilas*, see Mertens and Palomares, 1988; Carrillo, 1989; Wilson, 1990; Shaiken, 1994.

4. This discussion reveals how powerful the division of labor is as a concept for sorting people out in the social imaginary of work; see, for example, Sayer and Walker, 1992. Within this essay, I am limited in my exploration of how the division of labor as a functional device intersects with social processes for constructing various categories into embodiments of capitalist entities. I have addressed this question at length in other texts (Wright, 1996).
5. Explanations of Mexican, Mexican-American, Anglo (*ajona*), *Paseño* (someone from El Paso), and so forth are complicated, but in this instance I am referring to how these individuals identified themselves to me in terms of national identity with a cultural and ethnic marker, in part to distinguish themselves from me, an Anglo-American. Again, references to "American" reflect local vernacular within the Ciudad Juarez/El Paso area in which America refers to the United States. I use American when evoking this common usage within the maquiladoras even though the term is problematic since it excludes most of the areas within the Americas.
6. Due to spatial constraints in this essay, I cannot elaborate on the conflation of race with ethnicity, culture and nationality for determining the divide separating Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans. Part of the complexity has to do with the racial dynamic in a place where the difference between Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans is also typically described as one between "whites" and "Mexicans." The discourses of race within Mexico also distinguish between the whiter and the darker complexions, in which the darker carries the association of *indigenismo* (indigenous background), a politically, economically and socially marginalized identification in Mexico. Although to be "Mexican" according to the mainstream discourses in the United States and prevalent even in El Paso is to be "dark" (see Vila, 1994), in my research, ascriptions of race often had little to do with appearances and more to do with family background, nationality and class. My complexion, for example, is darker than several of the Mexican personnel at Tres Reyes, but I was still often called *huerita* (blondie). At the same time, in El Paso I am often identified as Mexican-American.
7. My discussion draws directly from Judith Butler's analysis of schema in her text *Bodies That Matter* (1993).
8. For other examples of how different levels of knowledge contribute to a split between management and waged labor within the firm, see Burawoy, 1979; Storper and Walker, 1989.
9. At the time of my research (1993–94), the average wage in Tres Reyes was 130 pesos per week (approximately \$40 per 48-hour week in 1993 figures) and about 30 pesos above the average minimum wage per week. Supervisors in Tres Reyes earned about \$800.00 (U.S. dollars), which was almost one-third less than made by Mexican supervisors in the electronics firms I studied and less than half the earnings of U.S. supervisors.
10. Alvarez and Collier (1994) have an analysis of *confianza* as a social system of "insiders/outsideers" critical for coordinating work among Mexican truckers.
11. Ironically, within the *maquilas*, people will generally say that "*gente de confianza*" (people of "*confianza*") are those who are in with the management and should not be trusted by operators on the floor. Yet in Tres Reyes, Gloria had no *confianza* with management or anyone who was "in" with the people in that domain. Her "*gente de confianza*" stretched in the other direction and covered the workers in production, from operator to supervisor.

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