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FEMINISMOS EN LA ANTROPOLOGÍA: NUEVAS PROPUESTAS CRÍTICAS

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DISLOCATION AND GLOBALIZATION ON THE UNITED STATES-MEXICO BORDER: THE CASE OF GARMENT WORKERS IN EL PASO, TEXAS

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INTRODUCTION

On a sunny Labor Day of 1997 in El Paso, Texas, some three hundred women and their supporters demanded jobs and denounced the North America Free Trade Agreement: "NAFTA NO! ¡TRABAJOS SI! NAFTA NO! ¡TRABAJOS SI!" Many were recently laid off from the city's garment factories. Others were about to lose their jobs. Drum beats, fists, and gritos punctuated the cool, morning air as we marched through the city's streets and chanted, "¡TRABAJOS SI! NAFTA NO!¡TRABAJOS SI! NAFTA NO!"

Within four years of the implementation of NAFTA, El Paso had lost the most jobs—nearly seven thousand—of any city in the United States due to the trade treaty (Medaille and Wheat 1997). These job losses represented nearly half (47.5 percent) of all jobs lost in Texas as a result of NAFTA at the time (Public Citizen 1997). Enough to devastate any city, the flood of layoffs occurred in a metropolitan area with nearly one-third in poverty (30.2 percent), the fourth most impoverished in the country (U.S. Census Bureau 1998), a per capita income about two-thirds (63.1 percent) the national figure (City of El Paso 2000), and an unemployment rate consistently two to three times the U.S. average during the 1990s.[2] El Paso's material scarcity

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[2] U.S. unemployment was ranged four to five percent during most of the 1990s while El Paso's unemployment rate averaged 12.1 percent in that decade (UTEP 2002, received via email, October 7, 2002. Average calculated by author from yearly data).

correlated with an ethnoracial make-up in which three-fourths (76.6 percent) were “Hispanic or Latino” (City of El Paso 2003).[3]

Most of the newly unemployed were Mexicanas and Chicanas.[4] According to La Mujer Obrera, a workers’ advocacy association which organized the demonstration, seventy percent of dislocated workers were Spanish-speaking between thirty-five and sixty years of age, and sixty-five percent had less than a sixth grade education and limited English literacy (Montoya 2000). Many had migrated to the United States as children or young adults. Entering a life of labor in both factories and families, few had gained additional formal schooling or training after migration. Up until the loss of their jobs, many were the financial heads of their households, “sustaining up to four generations of their families— themselves, their parents, their children and in some cases, their grandchildren” (Arnold 1997). Their wages were often below poverty level, particularly among these heads of household. In El Paso, about half of female-headed families (51.2 percent) were in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

That Labor Day morning, I walked with the dislocated workers, their friends and families along the streets of downtown El Paso. Across the emaciated Rio Grande River lay Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Before us, the urbanscapes of the two cities blended into one transborder metropolis of two million people. Along the route, I met Carmen and Abelina, both dislocated workers.[5] I asked them why they were at the protest. Yelling above the chants and pounding drums, Carmen explained: “We are supporting the workers because they, as much as we, were all working in the same jobs and they displaced us in order to take the jobs to Mexico. And they have promised us training, [but] they haven’t given it to us.” Carmen was laid off the previous December from Adrian Manufacturing along with two hundred other workers. There, she said, “We made clothes under contract with JCPenney [and] different stores. They closed it, and they took it to Mexico. …It’s the second [factory] where I’ve worked that they close”.

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[3] Nearly two-thirds (63.8 percent) of the population were Mexican or of Mexican origin (City of El Paso 2003).

[4] Throughout this essay, I use the terms Chicana and Mexicana interchangeably.

[5] Carmen and Abelina are pseudonyms. I use real names for public figures including labor leaders. Translations are mine.

Abelina was laid off the previous December. She was at the march, she said, “in order to support the people that don’t have…WE don’t have work, now.” Abelina labored seven years in a warehouse at Johnson & Johnson where she loaded and unloaded products that went to one of its three companies in Ciudad Juárez. “They suddenly closed the factory and went to Juárez,” she said. “They laid off some-- we were like five hundred people. …I was with them for awhile, and I liked my job, but they took it away. Now, we’re without a job. … And like me there are many, and there will be more, many more.”

As Abelina predicted, the number of displaced workers in El Paso grew to 20,000 just three years later (Montoya 2000). La Mujer Obrera described the city’s “NAFTA-era economy” this way: “The domino-effect if this restructuring has meant the disappearance of $154 million per year in lost [personal] income. The cataclysmic descent into poverty has strained the resources of social service providers, destroying the client base of small businesses and devastating entire neighborhoods” (Montoya 2000).

María Flores, a leader of La Mujer Obrera, related the personal devastation wrought by massive job losses: “Before 1994, there was already a lot of unemployment. NAFTA was still not implemented, yet the unemployment was disastrous. When NAFTA passed, conditions got even worse for our community. During the first month of NAFTA, from January to February of 1994, twenty sewing factories left, leaving four thousand, five thousand workers immediately without employment. In addition to all the unemployment that already existed, this was a very serious situation. This was a disaster for the families because nobody expected that they would lose their job from one day to the next after working five, fifteen, thirty, forty years at a company. Some only got one day of notice, which caused many problems even death among some workers due to the depression, the desperation it caused, particularly for the older workers. The situation in the working community of our people, of single mothers, is very critical” (M. Flores 1998).

1. CHICANA FEMINISM, LABOR (ON THE BORDER), AND RESEARCH METHODS

The profound impact of trade liberalization and NAFTA on the border gave, and continues to give, political and ethical urgency as well as a unique historical opportunity to examine the experiences of a subaltern group within the First World –Chicana/ Mexicana workers– undergoing globalization and consider their possible futures beyond dislocation. The purpose of my presentation today is to bear witness to the dislocation of workers, analyze it within a framework of neoliberal structural adjustments inclusive of the First World and, finally, to make known their efforts to resist dislocation and develop alternatives to its devastatingly exclusionary effects.

In my analysis, I strive to understand and represent dislocation, forms of resistance, and alternatives to the ravages of neoliberal social restructuring through intersections of race/ethnicity, class, and gender. I am inspired by feminist approaches in which these and other social categories are considered simultaneously. Intersectionality along the axes of race/ethnicity, class, and gender has been an epistemological tradition of Chicana feminist scholarship since its inception. In anthropology, intersectionality is evident in the ovumial works of Margarita Melville (1980) and Patricia Zavella (1984), among others.[6] As Zavella argues, "A feminist analysis…should focus on the totality of women's experience" (in W. Flores, 1997: 246). This totality stands in contrast with the universalized subjectivity of white, middle-class womanhood projected through much of Euro-American liberal feminism, particularly during the emergence and early development of Chicana feminist scholarship. My work contributes to a Chicana feminist intersectional tradition allowing for a more nuanced understanding of marginality and democratic alterities as we examine border communities undergoing globalization and struggling to forge a more humane and just future.

My work also contributes to a small but significant body of qualitative literature about Mexicana/Chicana garment workers and labor activism in El Paso (Coyle, et al. 1980; Honig 1996; Márquez 1995); only a few were conducted after the passage of NAFTA (Navarro 2002a, 2002b;

[6] "Ovumial" occurred to me as a feminist alternative to the masculinist "seminal".

Ortíz-González 2004; Yoon Louie 2004). In my analysis, I combine these studies and others about Chicana/Mexicana industrial labor, the apparel industry, and processes of globalization in order to provide a richly textured account of dislocation, the marginalities and forms of opposition it engenders, and the emergence of an obrera-centered alternative. Today, I present some of this analysis along with excerpts from participant observation, interviews, testimonies, and primary documents I collected from 1997-2000, the initial years of dislocation, supplemented with descriptive statistics and information from La Mujer Obrera's website.

Research of El Paso's garment industry in relation to U.S. industrial labor, generally, and the nation's apparel-manufacturing sector is nearly non-existent (Spener 2002). Indeed, studies of Chicana/ Mexicana industrial labor in the U.S. or transnationally are scarce, conducted mostly by a handful of Chicana feminist scholars (Ruiz 1987; Segura 1986; Zavella 1987, 2000). This valuable work, however, overlooks the border. Conversely, research on women and industrial labor at the border is considerable but focuses almost exclusively on the Mexican side and the export processing industry, more commonly known as maquiladoras.

Workers' narratives presented above illustrate some of their experiences with globalization and its broader impact during the first years of NAFTA when the apparel industry relocated wholesale outside the U.S., often to Juárez and other places in Mexico, as Abelina indicated. I continue, now, by locating the problem of dislocation historically in the construction of Chicanas/os, including Mexican immigrants, as a subjugated people colonized internally to the United States. Subsequently, I explore some of the ethnoracial, class and gendered dimensions of dislocation as these become mutually constituted with the emergence of neoliberal capitalist globalization. This will be followed by a discussion of the barriers to workers' re-employment and economic stability and subsequent mobilization. I conclude with a final narrative by María Flores about "El Puente", a vision developed by displaced workers to build a bridge to a future of greater autonomy and inclusion of working class, poor, Mexicanas.

2. NEOCOLONIAL ORDER AND RISE OF NEOLIBERALISM ON THE BORDER

In her personal treatise about the border, Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa wrote, "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [is an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa 1987: 3). Anzaldúa's poignant observation alludes to vast social disparities of global proportions at the border. However, as the narratives by dislocated workers and statistics reflect, not only the Third World bleeds where Mexico and the U.S. meet. Suffering, too, occurs throughout the "Third World within" where Mexicanos, and women especially, are wounded by a globalizing, neoliberal capitalist regime constructed upon centuries of overlapping colonialisms and through intersections of race/ethnicity, class, and gender.

Mexican Americans endured a half-century of mass dispossession from their lands and subjugation to second-class citizenship after the U.S. war against Mexico that ended in 1848 (Estrada, et al. 2001). Following this initial period of deterritorialization, Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants have been an indispensable source of cheap labor in the U.S. southwest (including the border region) throughout the 20th century to the present (Acuña 2004; Meier and Ribera 1972). The sectors in which women—Chicanas and Mexicanas—have been most concentrated are the so-called unskilled and semi-skilled such as agriculture (Acuña, 2004: 192; Segura, 1986: 49), household and other cleaning services (Romero 1992), and certain manufacturing sectors such as apparel (Coyle, et al. 1980), canning and packing (Ruiz 1987; Zavella 1987), and electronics (Zavella 1991). Chicana feminist and other scholars, some just cited, have long documented that Chicanas and Mexican immigrant women have, on the whole, experienced even more acute forms of labor exploitation and workforce exclusion than their Chicano male or white ethnic counterparts of either gender. Sociologist Denise Segura (1986) refers to this intersectional condition as a "triple oppression".

Chicanas and Mexicanas worked in manufacturing at least as early as the 1920s in California's canneries (Ruiz 1987). In the post-World War II era, Chicanas and Mexicanas were drawn further into industrial

production as some factories moved from the northern U.S. to the south and southwest in search of cheaper non-unionized labor, fewer environmental restrictions, lower taxes, and government subsidies. Historian Jefferson Cowie (1999) argues U.S. de-industrialization was preceded by these regional "capital moves" before moving across international borders with the same motives. Other research supports this thesis for the apparel industry for which the southwest was a destination in the well-known "rustbelt-to-sunbelt" phenomenon (Collins 2003; NACLA 1980; Zavella 1991). During this period, these regional capital migrations contributed to the rise of Chicanas and Mexicanas employed in manufacturing. In El Paso, for instance, the garment industry accounted for more than half (50-62 percent) of all manufacturing employment from 1965-1976 (Márquez, 1996: 72).

Once a preferred and profitable labor force, working-poor Chicanas and Mexicanas in the U.S. were increasingly vulnerable to the dislocations of globalization as the manufacturing sectors in which they had been concentrated historically migrated across the border. This occurred more dramatically for the textile and apparel industries in the 1980s under the "the neoliberal agenda" of President Ronald Reagan which accelerated the passage of trade accords favoring expansionists within these industries (Rosen 2002: 119). Texas, however, was one of the last states abandoned by the garment industry due to working conditions so inferior, sociologist and maquila scholar Leslie Sklair referred to it as "the Texas maquila" (1993: 104).

In the 1990s, however, NAFTA became the driving force of neoliberal globalization and broke the industry's residual stronghold in Texas. It continued the restructuring of the border economy and dismantled El Paso's garment industry, once the city's most important source of private employment (DeMoss 1989), manufacturing (Márquez, 1995: 72) and, for many years, one of the largest centers of denim jeans production in the U.S. (Spener, 2002: 139). In a regional economy of few economic opportunities, particularly for working class and immigrant women, the garment industry was a privileged sector of employment for Chicanas and Mexicanas in El Paso in spite of the many abuses that characterize this industry historically (Boris 2003; Collins 2003) and in El Paso, specifically (Coyle, et al. 1980; Márquez, 1995: 70-71).

María Flores, our labor leader and herself a former garment worker, bemoaned this loss of good jobs, blaming it on the development of the maquiladora industry just across the river. “In the 70s,” she said, “there was a treaty, the twin plant treaty. This was the first treaty that allowed for a business to both stay here and have a maquila*,* or a production factory, in Juárez. Many businesses left El Paso, immediately leaving thousands of workers without jobs. These were big companies with good salaries. Jobs in a company like this in the 60s and 70s was something very, very fabulous because some had health insurance, good wages, paid vacations. They gave they kind of things a worker deserves. But once they saw the opportunity, these businesses left” (M. Flores 1998).

3. MARGINALITY, DISLOCATION AND “THE NAFTA PROGRAMS”

By 1997, NAFTA was so closely linked to a deteriorating economy along the border, a Texas Senate Committee investigated its impact through a series of public hearings. This represented a victory for La Mujer Obrera and others who mobilized to pressure the state to act. Dislocated workers and leaders of La Mujer Obrera were a center of attention at the hearing held in El Paso in November 1997, which I attended. Their testimonies publicly revealed the loss of jobs was only the beginning of a new phase of marginality for them. Following the layoffs, they discovered a range of significant barriers to re-employment. For instance, dislocated workers were increasingly denied entry into even the lowest end of the job market due to new English-only language requirements. Displaced workers also often complained of the competition from younger women. These forms of language and age discrimination compounded the general lack of jobs.

Added to the closing of the local labor market was the failure of what displaced workers called “the NAFTA Programs”. The NAFTA Programs were a web of federal, state, and local agencies for providing educational and job re-training services promised by NAFTA’s side agreements. However, at the hearing, two dislocated workers and one of their leaders testified to the poor design of these programs, conducted only in English, and how unemployment benefits were poverty-level and often late or not even paid. Their testimonies also

indicated how training programs were gender-segregated, relegating women to minimum-wage, low-end vocations such as childcare and elderly assistance.

Moreover, the hearing revealed how these crises confronting displaced workers were rooted in the neocolonized status of the border and chronic institutionalized neglect. Already underfunded and stressed given the generalized poverty of the community, local and state agencies were overwhelmed by the numbers of dislocated workers and their needs. One local community college administrator indicated the problem of institutionalized scarcity when he testified, “The current solutions and responses to this crisis are not sufficient to meet the challenges. We lack infrastructure. We are serving four thousand people with an infrastructure that we have for three hundred people.” Further explaining the failure to provide adequate job-training, he said, “The NAFTA [job re-training] legislation was drafted for the Pittsburgh displaced worker or the Detroit displaced worker or the Dallas displaced worker. It was not drafted for the El Paso displaced worker, certainly not for the border displaced worker. The NAFTA [job re-training program] really is looking at someone who already has basic English skills, basic literacy skills, probably GED [high school equivalency], probably a high school degree, and already some basic or higher-skill job skills, NOT the typical displaced worker you find in El Paso” (Ramírez 1997).

His testimony, along with that of displaced workers, referred implicitly to a further problem of the cultural model for job re-training and the presumed subjectivity of the industrial, working- or middle-class individual who is a monolingual English-speaking, white ethnic, Euro-American male, in spite of the historical reality in which white women and people of color have long been a part of the industrial workforce in the United States. The exclusion of displaced workers from job-training demonstrated how economic legitimacy, that is, the right to be re-trained and the right to work, is demonstrably ethnoracialized, classed, and gendered.

Displaced workers’ testimony at the hearing also revealed the inadequacies were not only technical, that is, due only to a lack of resources or improper pedagogies, but that systems of governance were

not readily open to examination or corrective and, thereby, contributed to the failure of "NAFTA programs" and the marginalization of displaced workers. Displaced workers laid bare a widespread lack of democratic practice in public institutions at all levels of government, exposing an authoritarianism that sheltered hierarchies from criticism and accountability.

By creating large numbers of unemployed and relegating the problems of unemployment and re-employment to unprepared, underfunded, and unresponsive institutions, the crisis of dislocation had the unintended effect of motivating many workers to renew their collective mobilization. As on Labor Day of 1997, displaced workers protested and marched to reclaim their jobs, to demand that promises be kept, and to stem a deepening marginalization of their community. During the years I conducted field research, they waged demonstrations at international bridges, city council meetings, senate hearings, and city streets demanding recognition as legitimate economic, political, and cultural subjects.

Workers' militancy also propelled them on a path toward a new social imaginary, one distinct from that planned and structured for them by an ethnoracist, patriarchal, and corporatist state economy. Through their intellectual labor and activism, the workers indicated how alternatives to marginality and spaces of relative autonomy and inclusion –what I call "the democratic imaginary"– are conceived and achieved.

4. EL PUENTE AND THE DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARY

I conclude with a final narrative by María Flores in which she describes "El Puente", a bridge quite different from those at the border serving NAFTA.

> "Even though we have brown skin, we are from the United States. For this reason, we have the same rights as any citizen. So, as an organization, we are trying to build a bridge. This is the bridge that we need and that we are imagining for our people, the workers displaced by NAFTA. The bridge includes good schools with bilingual training and stable jobs… Also, investment in economic

> development for the workers because there are resources from the NAFTA bank [NADBank] that are for making loans to workers who want to be business people. …The organization is doing different things in order to build this bridge.
>
> We made efforts to get this building. Aside from this building we have another on the next block that is for a school for displaced mothers. We are talking about how to create an incubator for micro-enterprises in which the workers themselves can be self-sufficient. We are also trying to create a school to give them education and training in business because we don't want them to fail. We also want to conserve our culture. We're in the middle of renovating the place to have a space for our people to be able to have music from different cities or countries and other cultural activities so that we don't have to go pay twenty-five dollars just to get into a place to hear mariachis. So, these are the alternatives that we as an organization are trying to achieve for our people. It's a slow, very slow process that we're in, right? But, little by little, we think we're going to succeed" (M. Flores 1998).

That year (1998), La Mujer Obrera received a forty-five million dollar grant from the federal government enabling them to realize each of the projects envisioned for El Puente that Flores described.

CONCLUSION

The displaced workers embody a democratic imaginary in which organization, mobilization, and multiple expressions of self-determination by the marginalized are central. Drawing from their experiences, the democratic imaginary is as a realm of opposition making inequality and injustice visible. It is where critique and analysis occur, de-constructing power in order to hold it accountable through political association, civic participation, and protest. Through these methods, the dislocated workers materialized a vision of relative autonomy through the building of institutions, provision of services,

and creation of economic possibilities as an alternative to a neoliberalism that would leave them jobless, homeless, hopeless, and even dead.

Finally, all of these arenas of empowerment are expressed through cultural idioms in which displaced workers find a “shared sense of legitimacy”, the basis of a modern social imaginary, according to philosopher Charles Taylor (2004), and formed through “common understandings” and “common practices”. For displaced workers, these include the Spanish language, devotion to La Virgen de Guadalupe, Mexican music and food, as well as values and beliefs cultivated as mothers, obreras, immigrants, activists, and heads of household with scare material means. These commonalities reinforce their shared sense of legitimacy and empower them to insist on a more radically-conceived, democratic culture inclusive of working and poor women, Chicanas and Mexicanas.

While celebrating their achievements, we must acknowledge they are partial and incomplete. Only a fraction of those who lost their jobs could “walk across” El Puente. Many more displaced workers fell off the NAFTA bridge into permanent unemployment, deep poverty, despair, and even suicide. Nevertheless, the accomplishments of dislocated workers at La Mujer Obrera are immense. They give us who occupy borderlands ground for imagining and creating a more expansive, more inclusive society from one steeped in marginalities. This is the democratic imaginary.

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