The politics of relocation: gender, nationality, and value in a Mexican maquiladora

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Abstract. In this paper, I combine a Marxist critique of the labor theory of value with poststructuralist feminist theories of subjectivity to illustrate how the decision to transfer a manufacturing operation out of Mexico revolves around the culturally constructed meanings of identity internal to the firm. I attempt to illustrate how the managers of a maquiladora establish patterns for designating national and sex differences among their employees to support an argument that the production of valuable commodities is a social process interwoven with the social construction of differential values in people. And I endeavor to show how these complicated processes for identifying value in things, and in the people who make them, have an impact upon the internal structure of the firm. The paper is based upon several months of ethnographic research conducted in a multinational maquiladora located in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.

To study changes in corporate decisionmaking is also to consider the processes for forming social relations and culturally constructed understandings which influence patterns of authority, status, and the meanings of value (see Schoenberger, 1997). For example, when emphasis lies on cutting labor costs and enhancing worker productivity, corporate decisionmakers often rank the human resources found in different places by correlating certain identities, such as national and gendered ones, with labor skills, innate abilities, and militancy, to name a few features. These methods for comparing the intrinsic traits of one pool of labor against another located in another place reveal how human resources are understood and evaluated through dynamic processes of social construction inside the firm.

In this paper my argument rests on the assumption that corporate managers have, as a group, social power for connecting certain kinds of people with the production of certain kinds of value in the firm. However, their power in the class structure of a capitalist workplace is not independent of the other social relations of power, such as gender and race, that contribute to the formation of hierarchical differences among people within a particular context. In elaborating this assumption, I attempt to illustrate how the managers of a multinational maquiladora(1) establish patterns for correlating the national and sex differences which they identify among their employees with the manufacture of valuable goods. By concentrating on these two social characteristics, I do not intend to imply that others, especially age, race, and wellness, are not of issue in the workplace I explore. Rather, I believe that in narrowing my focus to the interplay of nationality, gender, and value, I have ample evidence to support an argument that the production of valuable commodities is a social process interwoven with the social construction of differential values in people, and that this process has an impact upon the internal structure of the firm.

This sort of argument emerges from a theoretical dialogue I construct between Marx’s critique of the labor theory of value and a poststructuralist feminist emphasis

(1) The term ‘maquiladora’, also known as ‘maquila’, refers to the export-processing facilities located in Mexico.
on the productive power behind establishing social identities and their differences (see also Joseph, 1998). Through his critique of capital, Marx reveals a visceral connection linking the manufacture of commodities with the conceptualization of people as embodiments of a specific value which can be transferred to inanimate objects that no longer belong to them. The value of the capitalist good depends upon an ability to imagine people also in terms of value. However, as feminist scholars across disciplines have shown, a strict class analysis limits any inquiry into the complex connections binding the value of things to the people who make them (Kondo, 1990; McDowell, 1997; Scott, 1988). They emphasize how the evaluation of a worker’s value to the firm rests upon discourses that regulate the interpretation of the meaning of that worker as a social subject. The performance of work is not independent of one’s performance, say, as a gendered, sexualized, and raced subject, as the value of one’s work emerges through lenses bent on interpreting the value of one’s other features.

For this reason, in my study of the politics of relocation within a multinational maquila, I combine a Marxist with a poststructuralist feminist approach to explore how the vicissitudes of value found in people can complicate corporate managers’ habits of finding value in their products. A disruption to their historical patterns of recognizing value in people and in the things they make is enough, at least in my estimation of what happened in the case I explore, to justify their costly decision to relocate a critical operation out of Mexico and back to the USA.

**Mexico on the water**

The material for my argument originates with a ten-month ethnographic project I conducted between 1993 and 1994 in the maquiladora which I shall refer to as Mexico On the Water (MOTW). This facility represents the Mexican location of a multinational US firm, On the Water (OTW), which manufactures motors, boats, and other water-sporting equipment in operations located in Asia, Europe, South America, and in the USA.

MOTW set up shop in Ciudad Juarez in the early years of maquiladora development. It was the first maquila actively to seek male employees at least a decade before it was deemed necessary to compensate for a shortage of female workers in the local labor market. In an interview conducted in 1992, the first General Manager of MOTW (who had left before I began my ethnography in 1993) had explained that he intentionally excluded women from the labor force: “This is a tool shop, and the girls out here are not the right kind of worker for what we do. Our products are men’s products, and I think the men, here or anywhere, understand the work better”, he said. In the early 1990s, however, MOTW expanded its operation to include electronic assembly and began hiring women. This transition raised some harrowing challenges for the MOTW managers.

At MOTW, I studied how managers faced the challenge of producing quality goods with labor which they understood to be lacking in quality. This challenge takes on a particularly gendered and national dimension. These managers need to produce goods for a market which places a premium on American masculinity, a marker of quality in MOTW, and they evaluate their goods in terms of whether they reflect this desired condition. Yet, the MOTW managers attempted to accomplish their goal with laborers who, in their view, represented the opposite of this valuable masculine American condition. In an apparently contradictory move, they had hired Mexican women for a particular new operation specifically because these employees continue to be broadly construed as ‘dexterous’, ‘patient’, and ‘docile’ enough to work under the exigencies of electronic assembly (Salzinger, 1997). At the same time, these women are also widely

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(2) All references to individuals and to the firm are pseudonyms.
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recognized throughout the industry as ‘cheap’, ‘unprofessional’, and not worth the trouble to train (Wright, 1997). The hiring of such workers signified a shift at MOTW from a factory with a purposely male labor force to one with a sizeable proportion of women. And this transition played havoc with their well-worn customs for recognizing value in MOTW products, peoples, and in the spaces of production that ultimately contributed to decisions about corporate location.

Theoretical dialogues
In my inquiry into what was at stake when MOTW began hiring women I rely on a Marxist critique of the social construction of value in a capitalist setting. Capital, says Marx, is not concerned with producing just any kinds of things, but of particular things that embody value. This value can only be seen, recognized, and, in effect, valorized under the particular circumstances for evaluating different people as embodiments of a similar kind of value calculated as a condition of their labor.

Marxist scholars have elaborated on Marx's critique of the capitalist labor theory of value to emphasize the importance of understanding that the issue is not only about the construction of value in things, but also about its construction in the people who make those things. As David Harvey has put it:

“The paradox to be understood is how the freedom and transitoriness...of living labor as a process is objectified in a fixity of both things and exchange ratios between things” (1982, page 23).

With this statement, Harvey pushes us to ask how the myriad energies that people express in their activities and in their thoughts can be understood as the conditions of a similar kind of value, which lends itself to quantification and qualification of a trait found in inanimate things. Thus, this is a process for viewing people as well as objects. Feminist scholar Diane Elson emphasizes how this sort of question involves “seeking an understanding of why labour takes the form it does, and [asking] what are the political consequences” (1979, page 23, my parentheses).

These Marxian concerns are germane to my analysis, as the question that interests me here is not why Mexican women are paid so little for their labor but, instead, why does cheap labor assume a female Mexican form. How does a Mexican woman's labor take on a cheap fixity, and what is at stake in this transformation?

Yet even though I formulate this question with these Marxian critiques in mind, I cannot approach them from a strictly Marxist viewpoint. Feminist scholars have shown that any evaluation of labor as something of value courses through an evaluation of the different kinds of people who embody different properties of labor (Hanson and Pratt, 1988; Pratt, 1990; Rose, 1993). These feminist interventions have forced us to address how the historical constitution of women and racial minorities as laborers of inferior degrees of value have underscored the long-held industrial traditions of paying them less and of not recognizing the skill in what they do.

Taking these feminist interventions as a point of departure, I rely upon a particular kind of feminist scholarship to explore the dilemmas raised by Harvey (1982) and Elson (1979), above, in relation to certain events at MOTW. Of specific interest to me is Judith Butler’s poststructuralist views on materialization: she argues that the social construction of the subject is not an end in itself (1993; 1997). Instead, the constructed subject contributes to a productive continuum, in which the particular identity of the subject is both a product and a producer. The subject is a thing with reverberating productive

(3) For examples of feminist geographers who have contributed to the oeuvre of poststructuralist theorization and analyses, see among others Bondi and Domosh (1992), Nast and Kobayashi (1996), McDowell (1991), and Valentine (1993).
effects that do not necessarily travel in one particular direction. So, although I look at the social construction of the Mexican woman as the living standard for low-quality production in an American maquila, I do not view this construction of her as a terminus for productive flows. Rather, as the embodiment of low quality, she produces low quality if traces of her are found in the things she makes. In other words, she is not simply marked as a paragon of low value, she marks other things as the bearers of low value. And within the historical MOTW framework for manufacturing quality boat parts, her image as the low-value laborer extends to all products that bear her mark. The trick, therefore, for MOTW managers, is to guarantee that she disappears from the things that she makes. When they fail in this endeavor, they prefer to ship out the product line rather than risk devaluation.

In what follows, I present my material juxtaposing my observations with conversations and interviews conducted over a protracted period of time. The ethnography amplifies the ambiguous details behind the decisions which managers explain as cost-saving or market-enhancing measures. In the firm I explore here, I had an office located in the administrative area where I was granted unlimited access to meetings, files, and to employees as much as they would tolerate my inquiries. Through conversations and more formal interviews, I believe my informants exposed the politicized negotiations over the meanings of the very categories which are factors in the assessments of corporate efficiency and cost effectiveness, especially with regard to the assessment of people as some kind of valuable resource. I would like to stress that my concern here is not with establishing a correlation or rupture between what the managers say of their workers and how these workers explain their own experiences. Instead, I focus on how managers describe their laborers, with an eye to understanding how their own evaluations of people and the kinds of value they embody and manufacture affect their decisions governing the internal structure of the firm.

Making American

Even though MOTW is a Mexican subsidiary of its parent corporation, the corporate literature reinforces the idea that not only is MOTW an American business, but that all OTW products are American, no matter where they are produced. The authors of one of the official biographies of the company chronicle “the progress of this American institution” from the patriotic application of OTW technology, motors, and boats in US war efforts, to OTW’s commitment to supporting the US sportsman tradition, and to fighting Japanese “incursions” into the global market. The General Manager of MOTW operations, Steve, explained: “This is an American company to the core”. MOTW managers are careful to display the Americanness of their Mexican-located facility: “We are an American factory, and we want everyone to know that”, Roger, the Manager of Plant II, told me. To visualize the Americanness of this Mexican subsidiary, I will begin with the spatial layout of the facility. Within the spatial relations of production, we find determined efforts to buttress the functioning of an American system and the production of unmistakably American things by Mexican laborers.

MOTW consists of two facilities (see figure 1): plants I and II, each with its own production manager, engineering, and American-led supervisory teams who oversee 42 product lines and almost 800 Mexican employees. A Human Resources Manager, Materials Manager, and Engineering Manager are responsible for the operations of

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(4) My work fits within a growing ethnographic tradition within geography, and especially within feminist geography (see also Bondi, 1997; Katz, 1996; Kobayashi, 1994; McDowell, 1993; Nast, 1994; Pratt, 1990; Sparke, 1996).

(5) America, Americanization, and Americanness are used in this paper to refer to the United States of America.
both facilities and answer to the General Manager, who is the primary liaison with clients and other corporate offices. The MOTW administrative area is separated from the production area by a solid wooden door, which is guarded by a security officer who prevents unauthorized individuals from passing into the administrative interior. Inside this protected space, English is the dominant language. Mexican administrative assistants speak English to the managers, colorful posters of speed boats with muscular men and bikini-clad women boldly broadcast the charms of OTW products in English, the phones are answered in English, and meetings are conducted in English. As Roger, the Production Manager of the Plant II facility said to me: “This is an American company, so you’ve got to expect the administration to be English-speaking”. The production area, by contrast, is a world of Spanish, where the bulk of MOTW’s employees, who are monolingual Spanish speakers, work.

However, managers explain that, even though the vast majority of MOTW’s production employees are Mexican, the factory is American by virtue of American control over the labor process. “This is the brains of the operation”, the former General Manager told me when describing the administrative area, “we control everything from here”. The people in charge are to be American at all times, as is reflected in the corporation’s policy which does not allow for any Mexican to hold a position of authority over an American: “You would expect the top people to be American employees here”, said Burt, the Manager of Plant I; “We make American products and we need people who understand that”.

Figure 1. Production spaces at ‘Mexico On the Water’.
Corporate policy mandates that all those in management positions at MOTW be either US citizens or possess a US green card and reside in US territory. Therefore, any nonnative US citizen must apply for residency and a green card and pay taxes to the US government in order to qualify for a promotion into management. As a result, any Mexican national promoted into management is, for all intents and purposes, an American employee. Under these rules, it is thus impossible for a Mexican employee to wield corporate authority over an American one. And in those cases where an American and a Mexican employee share the same title, such as at the rank of production supervisor, the American employee receives, at a minimum, one third more in wages and also supervises the Mexican supervisor. Understanding the national border within the corporation's division of labor is key for individual career strategies, in a place where to "Americanize" is to climb and to "Mexicanize" is to descend the social ladder of power and prestige (see Wright, 1998).

When I asked Steve, the General Manager, if he thought the company would ever have Mexican managers—that is managers who were classified as Mexican personnel—he replied: "If we ever try to get into the Mexican market, sure. But as long as we're selling these boats in America, I don't see it happening". Within the logic internal to MOTW, there was a connection linking the national identities of MOTW employees with the marketability of MOTW goods. Even though all labor is technically absorbed in the product, and thereby made invisible according to Marx, the identity of this labor is brought to the surface through marketing strategies that emphasize national content, such as "Made in America". MOTW products, in the end, bear the mark "Made in America", the boat and engines undergo final assembly for the US market in the United States. Steve and the other MOTW managers, however, felt a need to guarantee that the internal operations of the factory did not disrupt the identification of MOTW products as American made. The labor itself might be invisible, but its social identity is part and parcel of the process for manufacturing value. For this reason, any identifiable traces of female Mexican labor within MOTW goods was especially dangerous according to MOTW managers.

The invisible MOTW women
Whereas the 'Americanization' of the product is assured by the American brains behind its manufacture, the masculinity of the product is protected by the masculinization of the labor process. On my first tour of MOTW in 1992, the then-General Manager, Bob, guided me through the carubetor-assembly area, which he called "the heart" of the operation, which dominates the one large room in Plant I, and then through the 'computer numerical control' area that dominates the space in the other part of the building. We observed engineers at their computers and desks, and we walked through the painting section that was soon to be transferred out of the facility. With the exception of the secretarial staff, all of the employees I saw were men. And it was not until the following year, when I began my ethnographic study, that I discovered the women, who then composed about 35% of the production labor force and worked behind the male labor processes (see figure 2). Off in the corners and against the back walls they assembled ignition switches, horns, drive shafts, and fuel systems. They cut and spliced wires and manufactured gauges for dashboards. When I asked the Manager of Plant I, Burt, in 1994, why the former General Manager had not shown me those female work areas, he said "Bob was proud of our carburetor and tooling operations. We were the first maquila to have those type of operations and to be successful....We have the girls in electronic assembly but that's not what we're known for".
The spatial arrangement of male and female workspaces successfully squirreled the women out of view and away from the ‘heart’ of MOTW production. This spatial practice both revealed and embraced a managerial discourse of MOTW as a ‘man’s shop’, while the women worked invisibly behind dust-proof doors and against rear walls to fashion the ‘incidentals’ of motor-boat production. The current General Manager, Steve, explained: “We think of ourselves as a tool shop. And across the industry the belief is that men are better at this work than females. It’s a macho place. No doubt about it”.

This depiction of MOTW as a ‘macho tool shop’ made sense against the backdrop of what was to be understood by femininity and women’s work in the maquilas. In my earliest interviews, several MOTW managers contrasted their facility to the maquila archetype of electronic assembly and sewing. Burt explained: “We’re not like the electronic maquilas down here. We’re building the basics of an expensive product. It’s very different, and we’re a different kind of place”. Roger, the Manager of Plant II, said: “We’re not building televisions here. So you won’t see as many females in our plants’. The stereotype of the female electronic assembly line, I was to understand, did not characterize MOTW, either in kind or quality. This was not women’s work. “The work we do here is what men usually do. We get guys who have worked on their cars or have some kind of experience with tools”, Burt said, “It’s a different quality of work”.

Such explanations contributed to a representation pervasive through the maquilas of the Mexican woman as (a) especially suited for unskilled electronic assembly of low-end
goods, and (b) as particularly unsuited for engineering work, skilled jobs, or any tasks deemed 'physical' (Salzinger, 1997; Wright, 1996). Rosalia, the Human Resource Manager, explained: "MOTW has traditionally hired men because we need workers with some experience with machines and tools—a little bit of skill and more dependable than the electronic workers....When they think of female workers here, they think of unskilled, manual labor. And we need more commitment for many of our jobs". Burt said: "We haven't worked with women much. We have a different kind of operation. We need more skilled labor". As Steve put if: "We sell our boats to men. It's not a television".

Still, in 1993 women were already putting together many of MOTW products, and by 1997 about half of the 800 production workers were women—a shift having to do with the other pervasive construction of Mexican women as dexterous and innately deft with tedious hair-splitting tasks. Roger, the Manager of Plant II, said, in 1994: "Things are definitely changing here. Plant II is mainly electronic work, and we've just got that going over the last three years. That means we're hiring more female workers because they're good at this work". Steve said, "I think when we decided to put the electronic operations down here it was because we knew that women in Mexico had experience with electrical assembly. And it made more sense to do it here for a lot less money than we were doing it in Europe or in the US". The Human Resource Manager, Rosalia, explained that MOTW actively pursued female workers for the electrical assembly operations: "Women here are very good with electrical assembly. They have more patience and are better with their hands", she told me.

The hiring of women to work in electrical assembly raised a paradox for the managers of MOTW. Although their labor process had shifted, since the late 1980s, from a purely 'man's tool shop' to one including 'women's' electrical assembly work, the product, a decidedly man's product, had not changed. When I asked Steve if he thought MOTW customers knew that Mexican women were assembling some of their products, he said “No, and it's my job to make sure they don't find out”. The social construction of Mexican women as naturally suited for electronic assembly did not shift their construction as not suited for making MOTW products. If anything, it intensified the managerial conviction that their control over the labor process was even more critical. Now they would not only have to concern themselves with the Americanization of the product, they would also have to supervise its masculinization.

This challenge can be seen in light of the twofold problem raised by the social constructions of MOTW products and of Mexican women as entities of contrasting values. First, the process of social construction is never complete. In order for MOTW products to be seen as 'American' and 'masculine' they had continually to be seen as the opposite of 'Mexican' and 'feminine'. This process gained backing from managerial efforts to explain that the value in MOTW products was other than the typical value found in electronic feminized maquila production. As the managers reiterated how their products were of a superior caliber compared with an assembly-line television, they repeatedly emphasized how those products associated with female Mexican labor were of inferior quality and value, as opposed to the masculine ones emerging from MOTW. And, as we shall see shortly, in order to preserve the representation of Mexican women as the cheap opposition who outlined the limits of masculine value, they did not train their new female employees sufficiently for their jobs.

Second, and related to the first problem, the construction of the Mexican woman as incapable of producing masculine value also exercises a productive effect. As Judith Butler (1993) argues, there is no reference to a body that is not, at the same time, a further production of that body. It can then be said, in the case of labor, that there is no reference to someone's labor power (that is, what is exchanged for wages) without
further producing a quality of his or her labor. As a result, to view the Mexican woman as naturally adept with electronic assembly and cheap because she has no skills, is at once a construction of her labor as cheap, even as its cheapness generates more wealth for capital. The trick is to take advantage of cheap labor power without jeopardizing the value of the product. At MOTW, this challenge means guaranteeing that no evidence of Mexican women is found in the things that they make. The value of their labor power resides both in its cheapness and in its disappearance from MOTW's quality products.

The complexities underlying this task become clear in the following elaboration of gauge production at MOTW. In this case, we shall see how concerns over the inner workings and outer marking of the Mexican woman's body lead to fears that Mexican women, in electronic assembly, are infiltrating the male spaces of MOTW production and authority and, thereby, threatening the masculine products and the masculine firm with contamination and devaluation.

The gauges
The events surrounding the short-lived gauge-production operation at MOTW reveal the contradictions inherent to manufacturing a product of high quality with a labor process full of low-quality people. And this transformation absorbed managers from its beginning.

Gauge production is a critical operation, with ramifications for client safety and the overall aesthetic appeal of the boat. “Customers always look at the dash board. If they don’t like the way it looks, how the dials read, then they may not buy the boat”, said Roger, the Manager of Plant II. Burt, the Manager of Plant I said: “Gauges are important on a boat. Can’t have someone taking off for the ocean with bad gauges”.

This critical operation had been sent to Mexico from one of the US facilities after Steve, the General Manager, won what he called “a bloody turf battle” with his counterpart in OTW’s China facility. “We all compete with each other for the operations”, he explained, “A manager is only as important as the quality and quantity of the people under him”. Questions were raised over whether the Mexico facility could handle the task. Steve convinced them that, under his watch, gauges would be up to standard: “My neck is on the line”, he told me.

MOTW sought young women for this operation. Rosalia explained: “The younger girls have flexible hands. This area involves a lot of work with fine wires and small pieces”. However, expectations for these young women’s careers were not high. “I don’t think many of them will be here for a long time”, Rosalia continued, “Most will come and go. They will start families. These aren’t the workers who have the discipline to learn and go through training. That’s how it is in the maquilas with electrical assembly. It’s not the workers who really want to learn and improve themselves”.

MOTW brought in a female American supervisor, Mary, to work with these ‘unskilled’ and nonambitious ‘girls’ to produce the quality-sensitive gauges. MOTW had another woman supervisor in the horn and ignition assembly areas, located against the back wall of Plant I, but Mary was to be the first woman to supervise a ‘critical’ area. Like the other American supervisors, Mary was Mexican-American, bilingual, and had previous experience in manufacturing. When she accepted this position she came out of retirement after a twenty-year career as a supervisor in a clothing maquila. Steve explained why they hired her: “She had experience with sewing operations and had a good reputation. And we knew that this operation would have mainly females because it is electronic assembly. We thought her experience in sewing operations would be useful with this. It was new ground for us”.
"I always like a challenge" Mary told me as she described why she came out of her brief stint as a “full-time grandmother” helping her daughter with childcare, “My family is a working family. Migrant farmers... sitting around makes us nervous”. In the summer of 1993, Mary returned to the maquila labor force and resumed her El Paso—Ciudad Juárez commute. “They told me I would be in a sensitive area. That our quality would have to be very good. I knew I was working with young kids.... You always do in the maquilas”.

Her job was to supervise 35 employees, mostly women in their late teens and early twenties, in the start up of the gauge-production line. The making of gauges entails a painstaking inspection process. Almost half of the workers were inspectors of some sort. They either tested product functions, inspected for paint consistency, or ran durability tests. The production line began when an automatic winder wrapped fine copper wire tightly around a bobbin; this would then be tested for current flow and placed in a housing, after which more wires would be attached, more tests run, and then the painted dial face connected. Only two operators had the delicate task of stamping on the dial face—a process requiring a steady hand and unwavering attention to detail. Two more inspection steps preceded the sealing of the gauge, which was followed by a final test before they would be packaged and shipped to the final-assembly plant in Georgia.

Isolated behind the dust-proof doors and in a windowless room, the laborers in gauge production did their work beyond the notice of the rest of the facility. “I guess you could walk around this plant”, said Roger, “and never know those girls are back there”. And Mary had explicit instructions not to allow the workers to leave their area without permission, and to stagger restroom breaks so that no more than one worker left the area at a time. All of the gauge workers wore gender-distinguished uniforms, and all the women had to cover their hair completely with hair nets—a policy which was only sporadically enforced for the few men in the area. Men wore the nets like caps, over the top of their heads, whereas the women pulled the nets completely down to their necks. Mary explained this preoccupation over women’s hair: “Well they’re all supposed to wear the nets. But we let the guys just sort of stick them on top ‘cause it bothers them more.... They don’t want the girls’ long hair getting in the paint or in the wires. It’s the girls we worry about the most”.

This heightened attention to evidence of femininity, such as long hair and miniskirts, extended to other body parts as well. Mary described the policies regarding female appearance: “The girls can’t wear fingernail polish... and we don’t want pregnant girls in here. The fumes aren’t good for them”. Indeed, as in many maquilas, a policy both for refusing to hire pregnant women and for encouraging those who became pregnant to leave their job was tacitly enforced, although such practices violate federal legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of pregnancy. “We all know we’re not supposed to hire pregnant girls. It’s that way in all the maquilas” said Mary. Reports from human-rights groups protesting the practices of forcing women to submit to pregnancy tests throughout their tenure on the job, in addition to when they solicit employment, and of harassing pregnant women to quit, have provoked defensive responses across the maquila industry. Roger, Manager of Plant II, echoed the sentiment behind these practices when he said: “We don’t want pregnant women here. It’s not good for the company and it’s not good for them”.

Consequently, the young women who worked in MOTW gauge production and who were subject to the practices concentrating on control of their hair, their nails, their clothing choice, and their wombs as they manufactured gauges in the back room of Plant II, also reinforced the traditional gendered pattern for delineating the social hierarchy of the MOTW division of labor. According to the payrolls of MOTW, the
women in electronic assembly and gauge production received the lowest wage rates and, over time, had the highest turnover rate. “These workers don’t come here with commitment”, Rosalia explained, “so we don’t expect it. I wish we could”. Ramon, a supervisor in carburetors said: “The girls in electronic assembly are important but individually not as important as the guys out here. We need to work with them and try to keep them. The girls come for some experience and then leave when they want a family”. Training, in short, is wasted on them. This view of the female employees as not worth training and as likely to leave because of their personal circumstances, rather than because they are not offered wage and training incentives, again reinforces a discourse, pervasive in the maquilas, of the inferior value of the female worker’s labor.

Mary had to work with this assumption that training for women in electronic assembly was not warranted. “They put me in with a roomful of girls who didn’t have any experience and expected us to do it right the first time”, she said. “That’s the problem, they want American quality, without the time”. Steve explained: “I expected a slower system, but the quality needs to be up to standard. This is an American operation... and it’s Mary’s responsibility to make it work”.

From the beginning, however, Mary, her managers, and her workers confronted the contradiction of hiring workers who are not “worth the training” to make something conforming to strict quality guidelines. Gauge manufacturing got off to a very shaky start and had not settled into a routine two months into production, when it was supposed to be operating at almost full capacity. Even though this problem seemed to be one involving a simple miscalculation of how much time would be needed to bring gauge production up to standard, the MOTW managers cast the matter as a national and gender crisis. As I show in the next section they framed the problem as one in which Mexican women were making gauges that had their stamp all over them because Mary had subverted the gendered and national schema for protecting the integrity of MOTW products and its division of labor.

**Female contamination**

In October 1994, after three months of production, almost two of every three gauges were defective. A problem which caused a great deal of anxiety was the rate at which faulty bobbins came out of the wrapping machine at the beginning of the production process. Erratic paint quality further diminished the number of acceptable units and, making matters worse, demand for gauges was at a high as the company readied for the holiday season. Steve was receiving calls on an almost daily basis from his client—the final production assembly plant in Georgia—to discuss the gauges and predictions for a resolution of the problems. He in turn called meetings with Mary and her immediate boss, Roger. “We’re shipping out Mexican product”, he said in one such meeting, “And that’s got to change”.

Mary explained that the problem lay in technological systems and in the lack of training. “It’s too much to learn and get good at in two months”, she exclaimed in one meeting. In order to “make an American operation out of this”, to use Roger’s words, they agreed to take the following measures. Roger would tell maintenance that gauges were top priority and Mary would work overtime until things were back on track.

Within ten days, however, Steve was informed that not only was MOTW still shipping what he would call “Mexican” quality, but that also the lack of acceptable gauges had idled almost 100 workers in the Georgia facility. “I won’t be shutting down Georgia!” he announced. By this time, Mary and the operators in her area were putting in 50 to 60 hours in a 6-day, and occasionally 7-day, work week. After a month of overtime in an anxious climate, the operators started to quit. In one week alone, Mary lost more than half of her employees and was spending more time on training
new hires than anything else. One operator, an eighteen-year-old woman who had worked at MOTW for about six weeks, said: "We're killing ourselves in here.... They’re always yelling at us and telling us that we're not doing it right. But they don’t even give us time to learn how to do it”.

Mary asked Steve for some more time to bring the workers up to speed and to lessen the pressure on everyone: “I've got more new workers than old ones”, she said, “And it’s hard to teach them what to do and get everything out”. Steve explained the impossibility of more time. “At this point”, he said, “we don’t have any time”. He and the other managers repeatedly stressed the reasonableness of their expectation that Mexican women ought to be able to pick up this work with little training as this was the kind of work that comes naturally to women. As Burt said, “These girls do electrical assembly all the time”.

Mary, exasperated with her bosses’ refusal to allow her more training time, decided to take matters into her own hands. She made some de facto amendments to the work rules in the gauge area as a way of introducing some flexibility into the labor process while still expecting overtime from the workers. “I had to do something, or everyone would have left”, she told me.

Without her managers’ authority, she immediately relaxed the uniform requirements. Everybody still had to wear the smocks, although she did not object to the women wearing male smocks, which some found more comfortable, and she allowed workers to remove their hairnets as long as their hair was pulled back. “Those things itch”, she said, “and after a few hours you’re ready to tear them off”. She promised coffee and donuts for everyone on Saturdays and announced that anybody working on weekends could work a half day during the week without losing their production or attendance bonuses. They simply had to arrange with her in advance which day they should take. She also took measures to relax the working environment by allowing them to bring in music and by loosening rules governing restroom and water breaks.

Over the next couple of weeks, the turnover rate stabilized and the defect rate improved. Mary was optimistic: “You can’t ask these kids to put in six or seven-day weeks without a break.... Things got better right away”.

Although they were not completely out of the woods, the crisis had seemed to pause. The Georgia operation was back in business, and calls had slowed as more gauges were passing the inspection tests of their clients. Mary was not being summoned for daily emergency meetings. And Steve told her: “Whatever you’re doing is working”. However, he would soon change his mind even though, by Georgia’s standards, products were continually improving.

One morning, in a private meeting, the Human Resource Manager, Rosalia, alerted Steve to the fact that things were getting “out of control” in the gauge area. She was concerned that Mary’s tampering with the attendance schedules would disrupt the attendance and punctuality policies of the company, introducing Mexican chaos into their professional American system. “This is not a Mexican sweatshop”, she said, “She can’t just change it around when it’s convenient”.

Steve decided that he would talk with Mary about the attendance policy on the following Saturday, when she came in for an overtime shift. “I agreed with Rosalia, we have to stick with policy. We need to follow the rules like any American company, but I didn’t think it was an emergency”. What he encountered, however, when he went to speak with Mary in the gauge area on Saturday morning, shocked him: “I thought I’d walked into a Mexican fiesta”, he said, “The only thing missing was a piñata”.

According to Steve, after he pushed through the set of dust-proof doors separating the gauge area from the rest of the plant, he saw women talking loudly and walking around the work area with no apparent regard for their work stations. Music, he said, was blaring
from a jam box next to the empty donut box located atop a work table. Mary, he said, "looked just like a Mexican grandmother". His American supervisor was beginning to look femininely Mexican in his eyes. Steve described his alarm at the next Tuesday morning staff meeting: "I don't know what she's doing in there, but there are girls running around everywhere. And they want to bring their children.... There's no telling how many babies those girls have".

Mary described the scene in this way: "Steve came in ready to jump all over me for not telling Rosalia about our scheduling changes and then he has a heart attack because I told him that one of the girls had asked to bring her baby on Saturdays". She had not let her.

During the staff meeting, concerns over the gauge area shifted from the quality of the product, as it was measured by performance tests, to apparent loss of control by American managers over Mexican females. They agreed that the product was sure to suffer. Burt said that they could not "tolerate" a "Mexican occupation" of the gauge room. Roger raised the issue of fingernail polish. "Some of those girls wear fingernail polish", he said, "Just what we need is a call [from corporate headquarters] asking how purple fingernail polish gets into the gauges". They discussed the dangers of not enforcing the hairnet policy. Roger was sure that hair would slip into the paint and said: "We should just stamp 'Made in Mexico' across the speedometer". They talked about the significance of allowing female operators to wear male uniforms. They voiced doubt over the prudence of allowing the workers to roam the main areas without supervision. And they agreed that, given how things were going, it was only a matter of time before Mary would let someone bring their baby to work. "That's a liability issue", said Steve, "We're not in the day-care business". Burt summed up the meeting by saying: "The thing that bothers me is that we don't know what type of product they're putting together in there. Now that's a problem".

Throughout this meeting, no one mentioned that, as far as their client was concerned, the product was approaching corporate standard. The managers, however, were alarmed over the quality of their gauges, not because of the performance of the gauges in inspection tests, but because they feared that the telltale traces of Mexican women could be identified in them. They made the connection between seeing women roaming the workspaces and relaxing their uniform standards and a loss of managerial control over the labor process. Their lack of control, in turn, meant that the product would not emerge as planned, but instead as a product of undisciplined female and Mexican labor. Steve implied this connection when he said "What I don't want is for someone... to walk in this plant and find a bunch of Mexican girls running around.... I'll hear that we're going Mexican on them and our product going to hell".

The root of the problem, they decided, was that Mary was not 'American' enough to 'Americanize' the labor process, and was not disciplined enough to keep the feminine influence within its proper bounds. Roger was assigned the task of speaking firmly to Mary about the situation and of advising her that she was being placed on probation. According to Roger, he was trying to be as diplomatic as he could when he told Mary that she needed to "represent the corporation out there" and perform her job to the standards of "American professional behavior". He said, "I told her that we were worried about the product".

Mary was furious. She said, "I told him (Roger), 'I am as American as you are'. I can't believe he said that to me. I know he's saying that I'm not up to their standards. That's what it means when they say something is 'Mexican'.... We've had typical problems for start-up. That's not my fault. It's gotten better but they don't even mention it. They're all upset because I let the girls wear boys' uniforms and take off their hairnets. It's unbelievable".
Soon thereafter, the managers decided to demote Mary for being, as Roger recorded on her evaluation form, "unprofessional", "failing in the performance of duties", and not producing quality product. In addition, they demanded that she attend three hours of supervisory-training classes offered by the University of Texas El Paso every week on top of the overtime she was continuing to perform. He also denied her a routine salary inflation compensation. Mary's demotion put her on equal footing with the other Mexican supervisors. She was the only American supervisor who worked under the supervision of another supervisor.

Mary begrudgingly attended the supervisor classes. "It's an insult", she said, "they're putting me in there to humiliate me. As far as I can see, they're the ones who aren't being very American. You know they want top quality work without paying for it or even giving enough time for training. And then they turn around say it's because Mexican females don't do good work. If you don't put in the training time, you can't expect anyone to do it!"

On the heels of her demotion and salary cut, and with mounting evidence that Mary would not mend her attitudes, the managers decided to fire her. When I asked Roger why the managers focused so much on Mary's supervisory style rather than on the obvious improvements, according to performance tests, she made in production he said: "We want a good product. That's what this is about really. It's a long-term issue....We're an American operation. We've got an American product....Mary doesn't understand".

Shortly after Mary's departure, the gauge-production line was returned to a US facility. The politics over Mary's supervisory methods, the uniforms, fingernail polish, hairnets, and whether or not MOTW would turn into a daycare facility had taken its toll on the organization and its budget. The women who could not be placed in other electronic-assembly positions were encouraged to leave. Eventually, the line was outsourced to an external producer. "This makes us look bad", Burt said, "losing a line means something's gone seriously wrong".

Mary sued the company in court and received some back pay.

Steve explained that, despite all of the turmoil, he had no regrets over his actions: "I'd rather lose a line than ship out inferior products", he said.

Conclusion
Clearly, one of the key issues at play in the events surrounding the relocation of the gauge operation is how the production of value at MOTW works out through the processes for identifying nationality and gender. And this calculation revolves around the continual efforts of MOTW managers to resolve the perplexing paradox described, to some degree, by Harvey (1982). How will they turn the vibrant energies of Mexican women into a feature of male, American goods? Another way of putting this question is, how will they manage cheap people in the manufacture of quality goods? We need to recognize the social construction of Mexican women within MOTW as cheap people to understand the difficulty the managers faced when they hired them for their nimble fingers and in the belief that training was not required. The managers knew they were bringing in the worker who had always represented precisely the kind of people MOTW did not employ. If we adjust the Harvey paradox to address Elson's question—how does labor acquire the form that it does—then we can see that the Mexican woman was acquiring a contradictory constitution. On the one hand, she represented the kind of worker whose exclusion reinforced MOTW's superiority among maquiladoras. On the other, she was becoming a member of the MOTW team because of her natural ability to assemble electronic components.
The historical social construction of the Mexican woman as a non-MOTW employee had served a useful purpose for the company because it exercised further productive effects. To use Butler's views on this process, we could say that the materialization of the Mexican woman as cheap labor personified was not an isolated event, but rather one interwoven with how value materialized within MOTW goods and within the company itself. The Mexican woman made the recognition of value in MOTW possible by establishing the parameters for recognizing what it was not. She cast the shadow of nonvalue and, against her, value came to light. In MOTW, this relationship of the Mexican woman to the value of company products and people was explained in the designation of the labor process as a masculine one—within an American system for creating American men's goods. Anything that revealed the energies of Mexican women, in their view, such as televisions, was not a thing of quality in comparison with MOTW goods, which revealed American ingenuity that transformed a Mexican labor process into a top-notch tool shop.

The decision to hire women into the MOTW labor force demonstrates the continuous pattern for protecting the labor process from the influence of cheap Mexican women. Although MOTW was expanding in the area of electric assembly, managers still described the principal operations as those involving carburetor assembly, tooling, and engineering—all male-dominated occupations in the factory. The women worked in windowless interior rooms, out of the view of the major production space. Their movements were to be carefully monitored, along with their clothing, reproductive cycles, and personal hygiene habits. These regulations were part of the plan for integrating Mexican women into the labor force without contaminating the MOTW labor process or its products with evidence of their presence. Perhaps they could protect the value of their products by keeping the women's contribution to it secret. Steve had guaranteed his executive officers that he could produce quality gauges at the same time that he was committed to making sure that customers would never know that Mexican women built parts of their boats. In this way, the labor of Mexican women could be turned into something that reified American masculinity.

Problems occurred when Mary subverted the traditional methods for guaranteeing that these vibrant energies of Mexican women could be transformed into the fixed properties of male American goods. In stressing the need to train the women with flexible procedures, she appeared to dismantle both the American system that protected the Americanness of the operation and the masculine domination of MOTW workspaces and procedures. In so doing, she violated the codes for recognizing quality in this workplace. She declared that these women were worth training if quality was what was expected. In fact, it was the only way that this result could be achieved. But her bosses, rather than seeing a group of workers learning and improving over time, encountered the troubling vision of Mexican women getting out of control while their American supervisor was 'Mexicanizing' in front of them. Their traditional pattern for connecting the value of people to the value of MOTW goods was unraveling.

The MOTW case also broadly reveals, I believe, that capitalism is, in the first instance, a local phenomenon. The ideas behind it may have a global dimension, but the working out of capitalism occurs when individuals are identified to represent varying kinds of capitalist subjects, their dimensions being drawn and understood in the local landscape (see Gibson-Graham, 1996). The evaluation of the quality of the gauges demonstrates this point. Just as the final-assembly facility in Georgia was increasingly satisfied with the gauge quality, the MOTW managers were less so. Both sets of managers equate product quality with product value. However, their criteria for evaluating these conditions differed and, as a result, that which held value for one was
lacking in value for the other. The value in the gauges depended upon who was performing the evaluation, and on how they recognized the evidence for value in people and products.

Finally, I think that the benefits of an ethnographic approach to exploring the dynamics of corporate behavior ought not to be underestimated. For, had I only conducted interviews with MOTW managers in order to understand why they made particular decisions, I doubt that the kind of story I present with the ethnographic material would ever have materialized. Likely as not, I would have heard that the decision was made based on the budget and the lack of skills among the Mexican workers. These are the sorts of explanations that abound when a maquila operation fails to function as expected. There is, of course, some validity to both of these contentions, as I think the MOTW case demonstrates, but it is in the conceptualization of the interplay between value, labor, Mexicans, and women that the terms of such explanations come together at MOTW.

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