Border, Culture, and Maquiladoras: Testimonies of Women Workers

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Translated by Olivia Cadaval

Actualmente la industria maguiladora de exportación representa la forma más conspicua del capital extranjero en México. Estas fábricas tuvieron su origen en 1965 como parte de un proyecto alternativo de industrialización para la frontera norte del país, así como medida preventiva de empleo para cientos de trabajadores mexicanos que retornarían de Estados Unidos al término del Programa de Braceros.

La presencia de la industria maquiladora en la región fronteriza ha generado formas específicas de industrialización y desarrollo regional, así como fenómenos sociales tales como la masiva presencia de mujeres, quienes tradicionalmente se han empleado en estas fábricas, lo que ha estimulado la formación de patrones culturales específicos.

The border *maguiladora* industry, the most conspicuous form of foreign investment in all of Mexico, was established in 1965 to absorb the labor freed up at the end of the Bracero Program, under which many Mexican workers served as migrant laborers on U.S. farms. Granted special dispensations in taxes, tariffs, and various forms of regulation by Mexican and U.S. governments, American-based companies like General Electric, RCA, and Kenworth have built assembly plants along the border. The presence of the maquiladoras has generated specific forms of industrialization and regional development, unique social phenomena such as the massive concentration of women workers, and specific cultural patterns that have been stimulated by these conditions.

The border is a frontier between two different economic and sociocultural worlds. It is also a place of refuge that shelters migrants from many areas of Mexico. Day by day a great cultural mosaic is created by the presence of indigenous peoples, border crossing guides, and male and female workers including punks and *cholos* (a kind of neighborhood youth identity), to mention a few of the border identities.

This cultural mosaic tends to be masked by the daily environment of maquiladora workers, which has been shaped to create conformity among workers through the more than 20 years of these border industries. The structuring of worker interactions throughout the border industrial complex has produced a standardization of experience throughout the spheres of labor, family, and neighborhood. The environment created by work has become the most important single factor in the expression of social identity among border workers.

Of course, the expression of identity may also be a point of resistance, a disruptive counterstatement to the dominant discourse:

Here there are many girls that are real cholas . . . but the majority of the women say they are a disaster. They paint graffiti on doors, walls, and the bathrooms, and they fight too much. They know they won't be hired, so they get dressed well, normal like anyone. But once inside, they begin to dress chola.

Overall, the dominant maquiladora model defines workers as a unique and socially specific group. In this context, then, can we speak of a unified worker's identity or culture? Several complicating factors prevent this: principal among them are the cultures of distinct social groups at the border, brought there by massive migratory flows that serve the internationalization of productive processes. Cultural practices at the border are thus in constant reformation, reformulating and creating border identities.

This complexity should not cause us to lose sight of the fact that for maquiladora workers there are only two formative environments that bring together social and cultural life. The first is the work environment in the maguiladoras. The second is daily life in the workers' neighbor-



Maquiladora workers attach electric harness wires for refrigerators, whose assembly will be completed in the United States. Mexico's regional industrialization program based on foreign-owned assembly line plants has attracted many migrants from the interior of Mexico to the border. Photo by Olivia Cadaval

hoods of the border, which is increasingly coming under the control of the maquiladora managers.

In structuring the work environment, maquiladoras have always used motivational programs that combine control, supervision, and the elimination of production problems. This type of management achieves its ends by manipulating workers' subjective values with rewards and prizes directly related to production. Among the prizes commonly offered by the maquiladoras are holiday trips to the interior of the country, and hats, jackets, and T-shirts bearing legends such as those used by RCA: "RCA and I are a team," "I am part of RCA," or "I collaborate with RCA." According to the workers, these prizes are awarded

... to achieve higher quality. They give us pastry, ice cream, and parties, there in Taxca, or even take the whole production line to eat in Tenampa. When we achieve good production or rejection ratios, perhaps 100% or even only 70, we go with the supervisor, the boss of the work group, and all the operators. . . . In Taxca, they know how to value and recognize quality and their workers. In Taxca, the workers think they are the best even

though there are no studies. There is only one level above your supervisor, but everyone knows all the positions and the level of performance of everyone else, so it works out well. . . . They tell us that this place is our place but I don't think so. For example, there is this person that hires us. He tells us that we are pure garbage and that is why we are here. We have told this to the bosses, but they do nothing. For another example, I talked to one of the bosses, and he said I had a bad attitude. Well, what I had said was, "Just hear me out. We are taken advantage of all the time, but however much we complain, we aren't given the power to change anything."

In the world of the maguiladora there are

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poor working conditions, punishments, and the glaring disadvantage of being a woman.

... I have to take two buses, really four two going and two coming. Sometimes the public bus doesn't meet the factory bus and I have to pay. Then we have to be there at six so I have to get up very early. . . . The work is very hard, very dirty. You work with metals, and all the time you are shaking off shavings and picking out splinters. . . . When I cut off that finger they sewed back on, I grabbed it and threw it into my jacket pocket. . . . And then there was the supervisor who walked in with a female maintenance worker that repaired small things. And after a little while, he got her pregnant. Although he was married, he continued to pursue her. She already had a girl. When she felt bad or needed something, the supervisor authorized her time card. And the office realized he signed her card when she wasn't there, so they fired them both.

As the border industries developed, company control spread to the daily life of the workers outside the factory environment. Workers' free time is now managed by the maquiladora through sports, dances, gymnastics, birthday celebrations, festivals, and beauty competitions. According to management these types of activities make workers feel at home. This feeling of being "in a family," is explicitly mentioned in the invitations to workers and their kin.

Workers in the maquiladora in Juárez have their own nightclub, the Malibú, which has room for about 3,000 people and operates when it doesn't conflict with work schedules. Its regulars playfully call it the "Maquilu," a border-beach hybrid, and often party there till dawn. The Malibú nightclub and other similar installations encourage values and needs desired by the maquiladora management. Norma Iglesias quotes workers as saying that before they began to work in the maquiladora, they didn't go out to have a good time, but preferred to stay at home. That changed with work at the maquiladora.

The factory environment does allow many workers to escape, for a time, their poor living conditions. They spend a large part of their free time in the plant's recreational facilities, where they can meet their friends and even bring their family to events organized by the company. In

their imaginations contrasts are sharpened between the modern, industrialized ambience of the factory and the extreme poverty of workers' neighborhoods.

Workers sometimes use company incentives in their own survival strategies, rotating from one maquila to the next in search of good prizes or bonuses for signing on. They seek "good" companies, easier schedules, and better transportation benefits. They seek better working conditions, and especially look for a fun social environment where they can find all they need for their recreation. Networks among the workers help one pick out the best plant. Most workers have a friend or relatives in one plant or another.

Is there a workers' culture on the border? For more than 20 years workers have shared a set of common experiences of work and life in maquiladoras, but it is premature to speak of a "workers' culture," if we understand by this a vision of the world defined by class interests. Similarities in the composition of the work force, in the workers' condition as migrants, and in age are not by themselves sufficient to constitute a culture. Part of workers' culture also resides in the family, the neighborhood, and the borderland context in which distinct roles and identities like the punk, the student, the single mother, and the chola converge. Maquiladora workers' culture is rather a sector shared by, or accessed through, many larger cultural worlds.

As one maquila worker put it:

... well, it's very difficult. It's not that there was no other work — it's where one ends up, the last place you go. If you don't get something in one place, and there's no way, this leaves going to a maquila. . . . I always said, I am never going to work in a maquila, but yet here I am.

Citations and Further Readings

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