

An Investigation into Exploitation of the  
Mexican Female Body along the U.S.-Mexico Border

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## Abstract

This dissertation studies Mexican women's lives in the U.S.-Mexico frontier; demonstrating the ways in which women are exploited – economically, physically, psychologically, and sexually – and investigating the causes of such oppression. It reveals that the colonial relationship between the United States and Mexico enables structural exploitation of poor Mexican women in the border region. Ultimately I argue that women's bodies, physically abused by powerful men, symbolically represent the unequal transnational relationship between these two nations.

In the Introduction I provide an economic-historical context for the contemporary oppression of Mexican women; showing how Mexicans were historically conquered, negatively racialized, and exploited as labourers by U.S. business, government, and the public. I explain how the U.S. established imperial rule over Mexico, by the twentieth-century culminating in a hegemonic neoliberal economic empire of domination. I suggest that the conditions and precedents set by past injustices have facilitated the ongoing abuse of Mexican women.

In Chapter One I provide a case study of women's exploitation within U.S.-owned manufacturing plants, or "*maquiladoras*". Using personal testimony from workers and various scholars' ethnographic research projects, I provide insight into real women's experiences of economic and physical abuse by U.S. corporate power; framed around a discussion of the U.S.'s economic-political policies, which caused this oppression.

In Chapter Two I focus on the city of Ciudad Juárez, bordering El Paso, Texas. Here the most violent manifestation of exploitation has occurred: hundreds of Mexican women since the 1990s have been murdered, many of them raped and their bodies mutilated. Primarily using documentary film, I analyse the causes of the violent, misogynist atmosphere in the city and hypothesize about who is to blame; implicating both the U.S. and Mexico in the epidemic.

In Chapter Three I examine the border-crossing experience of female Mexican migrants, during which systematic abuses by U.S. personnel frequently occur. Using recent human rights publications I provide first-hand accounts of rape by Border Patrol officers and discuss the circumstances that have cultivated a climate conducive to sexual abuse at the border.

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## Introduction

The primary purpose of this thesis is to investigate various ways in which the Mexican female body has become a site of exploitation in the U.S.-Mexico border region. My particular interest is in the physical manifestations of exploitation, such as rape, sexual harassment, and even murder, as I propose that Mexican women have become sexualized and racialized objects at the mercy of powerful men. Beneath this physical abuse lies an institutionally-embedded and historically-rooted transnational economic system, which adds a further dimension to women's oppression and provides the key to understanding the premise behind such gendered and racialized exploitation. The economic system to which I refer is global capitalism. This thesis will show that it is not only this type of economy which is to blame for the economic and physical injustices that Mexican women face, but also the historical relationship between the United States and Mexico, which created and maintains an unequal colonial relationship between these First World and Third World nations. My central argument is that Mexican women have become the prime, and all too often ignored, victims of U.S. imperial domination: their abused bodies symbolically represent the U.S.'s continuing economic and political abuses of power against Mexico.

There are countless examples of U.S. imperial domination over Mexican peoples, dating at least to their 1848 conquest and annexation of Mexican territory, creating what is now the U.S. Southwest. Against an enormous background of exploitation, over history and across both countries, I have chosen to focus on the exploitation of women, primarily over the last thirty years, and in the border specifically. There are a number of ways in which Mexican women are exploited at that interface, in border cities and whilst crossing the border itself. I shall concentrate on three specific sites of exploitation: *maquiladoras* (U.S.-owned manufacturing plants in Mexican border cities), where

women are economically abused and sexually-objectified by U.S. corporate power; *Ciudad Juárez* (bordering El Paso, Texas), where women have been mysteriously disappearing since 1993, their mutilated, raped, and murdered bodies often found discarded in the desert; and border crossing-points, where Mexican women are frequently raped by U.S. personnel. This approach facilitates an in-depth examination of the systems of exploitation at the border, and, using personal testimony, I shall offer insight into women's first-hand experiences of injustice, violence, and oppression.

### **The Border and the Body**

I focus on the border because it is here where the U.S. and Mexico most intimately converge. This two-thousand-mile long artificial line is where the First World meets the Third, often violently. Although the border has historically been a region of conflict, the violent manifestation of this transnational relationship on women's bodies, to the scale witnessed today, is a contemporary phenomenon. This makes my study highly relevant to ongoing events and conditions. All three chapters demonstrate that women are victimized because of their particular vulnerability to the U.S.'s relatively recent neoliberal economic policies in Mexico, and their politics of immigration, intensified in recent decades. Through the feminization of labour in *maquiladoras*, women have been specifically targeted as an exploitable workforce, while simultaneously the border itself has been masculinized through militarization policy: both have had dire effects on women's lives.

The body, particularly female, can symbolize conflict, especially at a nation's borders, where the social system is most fragile: "the boundaries of . . . bodies sometimes become the limits of the social per se, limits that are prone to symbolic and

factual pollution in border situations.”<sup>1</sup> The Mexican female body at the border provides a poignant example, as Pablo Vila explains:

. . . the vulnerability of Mexican society at its margins, specifically at its northern border . . . is resignified in terms of the vulnerability of the margins of . . . female bodies at the U.S.-Mexico frontier.<sup>2</sup>

Sylvanna M. Falcón describes the Mexican female body as symbolic of the nation: “Their bodies represent a country over which the United States has maintained long-term colonial rule resulting in a symbolic connection between women’s bodies and territory.”<sup>3</sup> Thus the Mexican woman’s body socially and territorially symbolizes a nation (Mexico) over which the U.S. exerts imperial control. The male body personifies power (U.S.), and the female body, vulnerability (Mexico).

### **Background to Contemporary Exploitation: Establishing Empire**

The contemporary U.S. is an imperialist power, an empire built on domination of poor countries and economic and military supremacy across the globe.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the exploitation of women in the frontier today it is necessary to contextualize this within the history of U.S. imperial domination over Mexico. The most useful text supporting my thesis is Gilbert G. Gonzalez and Raul A. Fernandez’s *A Century of Chicano History* (2003), as it offers an economic-historical framework for

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<sup>1</sup> Pablo Vila, *Border Identifications: Narratives of Religion, Gender, and Class on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (USA: University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 114. Also theorized by Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 131; and Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> Vila, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> Sylvanna M. Falcon, ‘Rape as a Weapon of War: Militarized Rape at the U.S.-Mexico Border’ in Denise A. Segura and Patricia Zavella (eds.) *Women and Migration in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert G. Gonzalez et al, *Labor Versus Empire: Race, Gender, and Migration* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), introduction, xiv.

understanding the contemporary subjugation of Chicanos in the U.S., and explains the continuing migratory flow of Mexicans towards *el norte* on U.S. economic policies.<sup>5</sup> The scholars date U.S. imperialism as we know it today to the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when “a new kind of American empire” was born: a “U.S. hegemonic empire characterized by a neo-colonial style of indirect economic domination over Mexico as well as other countries.”<sup>6</sup> This is differentiated from European empires as it is characterized primarily by economic rather than military domination.

U.S.-Mexican adversarial history dates back further, however, to the military imposition of U.S. empire in 1848 (if not before). Rodolfo Acuña asserts that the conquest of northern Mexico initiated colonial rule, beginning in the traditional sense as the implementation of political control by a foreign nation through military force, rendering Mexicans subjects of empire.<sup>7</sup> Many scholars, including Acuña, believe this makes the Chicano population unique as colonization was “*interna*” – initiated “*within* the country”.<sup>8</sup> However, Gonzalez and Fernandez dispute that their experience has been vastly different from other minorities’, especially as huge numbers of twentieth-century migrants overwhelmed the original “conquered” population, and place greater emphasis on the U.S.’ economic manipulation of Mexico over the last hundred years, rather than this military incursion.<sup>9</sup> They assert that the U.S.’s financial intrusions in Mexico caused “economic and social dislocations” – unemployment, land loss, and poverty – which “are at the root of the mass migration of Mexicans to the United

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert G. Gonzalez and Raul A. Fernandez, *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations, and Migration* (New York; London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, introduction, xii.

<sup>7</sup> Rodolfo Acuña, ‘Occupied America: The Chicano’s Struggle Toward Liberation’ in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanic (eds), *The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1998), p. 172.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Gonzalez and Fernandez, p. 13.

States”.<sup>10</sup> By emphasizing the uniqueness of the twentieth-century Chicano experience, and rooting their analysis in “macro networks”<sup>11</sup> of economic domination, these scholars frame their notion of empire around the emergence of global capitalism.<sup>12</sup> This is useful as it is the late twentieth and twenty-first century context of the globalized neo-liberal economy, which frames my investigation.

Nevertheless, I feel it is important to understand nineteenth-century history, as the precedents set by U.S. territorial expansion in Mexico and the ideologies that surrounded these incursions, have influenced and helped justify the economic domination that continues today. Also, as Grosfoguel and Georas assert, this history helped forge racist attitudes towards Mexican populations in the U.S. and the border region: “there are still important continuities with the colonial past given that Euroamericans remain at the top of the hierarchy and people of color remain at the bottom.”<sup>13</sup> These scholars believe that a history of U.S. imperial rule determines a group’s relationship with U.S. power and society today: previously colonized minorities are racialized as “colonial/racial subjects” in the hegemonic imaginary.<sup>14</sup> While formal administrations and laws of colonial times have long ceased to exist, they have been supplanted by “cultural and political processes that reproduce a colonial situation” today.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, these scholars envisage continuity between past and present Mexican populations’ experiences of subjugation based on historical precedents of racialization and economic subordination, established during colonization. I agree, and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., intro, xi.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., intro, xii

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ramón Grosfogel and Chloé S. Georas, ‘Latino Caribbean Diasporas in New York,’ in Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila, *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 101.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

contend that this history has helped cultivate the present climate of misogyny and violence at the border.

Mainstream U.S. historical narratives tend either to ignore, or to mask, the U.S.'s imperialist involvement, in Chicano history.<sup>16</sup> There exists a pattern of denial in mainstream discourse that seeks to portray the U.S. as "inherently anti-imperialist".<sup>17</sup> An obvious incentive to deny empire is linked with two ideologies that have resonated in American political and academic rhetoric since the seventeenth-century, and remain embedded in the psychology of the nation: "American exceptionalism" and "Manifest Destiny". The Puritans set the precedent for these ideologies, rooted in the belief in the U.S.'s divinely-ordained destiny as a "chosen nation" – an example to the world of an ideal protestant and democratic society. The notion of Americans as "exceptional" served to elevate the Anglo-Saxon race above all others, thus maintaining white supremacy.<sup>18</sup> American exceptionalism's eighteenth-century version, "Manifest Destiny", was then used to justify Anglo-Americans' displacement of land and peoples (Native Americans and Mexicans), in their expansion towards the Pacific coast: "Their mission, their destiny manifest, was to spread the principles of democracy and Christianity to the unfortunates of the hemisphere."<sup>19</sup>

Manifest Destiny is important for understanding U.S. imperialism over Mexico as it was used to assure the public that the 1848 attack was a destined component of their mission as "custodians of democracy".<sup>20</sup> Acuña traces U.S. expansionist interests in Mexico back even further, pointing to Benjamin Franklin's expressed interest in Mexico

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<sup>16</sup> Edna Acosta-Belen and Carlos E. Santiago, 'Merging Borders: The Remapping of America' in Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres (eds) *The Latino Studies Reader: Culture, Economy and Society* (USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 33; and Gonzalez and Fernandez, p. 176.

<sup>17</sup> Acosta-Belen and Santiago, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> For an excellent explanation of the origins and consequences of American exceptionalism, see Deborah L. Madsen, *American exceptionalism* (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Acuña, *Occupied America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p 12.

in 1767, expeditions planned in the late eighteenth century by “filibusters”<sup>21</sup> and the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which “stimulated U.S. ambitions in the Southwest”.<sup>22</sup> Similar rhetoric has since been used repeatedly by politicians to reassure the public of the noble, just premises of American wars and shield the government from accusations of imperialism. Therefore, even as the U.S. continually expands its empire, it has secured in the national mind the belief that imperialism is “an affliction of other countries.”<sup>23</sup> These ideologies “obscure the entire history of the past and its links to the present.”<sup>24</sup>

The attack of 1848 was in *reality* a brutal act of violence against Mexican people. Whilst, for the U.S., this new territory “expanded its possibilities of becoming a great and powerful nation”, the event for Mexico is “remembered by its people as one of the most critical junctures in the country’s history.”<sup>25</sup> This issue of scarred memory, to which Oscar J. Martínez alludes, merits emphasis. For although the twentieth-century Chicano population is distinct from their nineteenth-century “colonized” ancestors in terms of their economic and social environments, there remains a psychological attachment to the original generation and a sense of loss resonating from that humiliating appropriation of land and sovereignty. The nineteenth-century was from then marred by violence (including lynching), racism, and oppression for the Chicano community.<sup>26</sup> Tomás Almaguer explains that Mexicans were considered “half-civilized” and thus negatively racialized by U.S. society.<sup>27</sup> However, structural forces also enabled Mexicans’ subjugation: “racializing discourses and practices served as mechanisms to create,

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<sup>21</sup> Acuña defines “filibuster” as “an adventurer who engages in insurrectionist or revolutionary activity in a foreign country,” p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Acuña, *The Latino/a Condition*, p. 172.

<sup>24</sup> Acosta-Belen and Santiago, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Oscar J. Martínez (ed.), *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (USA: Jaguar Books, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Martínez, ‘Filibustering and Racism in the Borderlands’ in Martínez (ed.), *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 8.

extend, or preserve . . . [Americans'] social position in the period during which white supremacy was being systematically institutionalized.”<sup>28</sup>

The U.S. government was implicated in these processes of racialization and subjugation, as they systematically subordinated the Mexican population, beginning with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which failed to protect their land grants. Mexicans were treated as second-class citizens, often disenfranchised, and marginalized economically. The government also revealed its continuing expansionist desires when disputes erupted in the 1850s over the demarcation of the border: “Washington took advantage of political instability”<sup>29</sup> in Mexico, and, threatening military action, bullied her into ceding more land.<sup>30</sup> Martínez also describes how Manifest Destiny-inspired literature promoted filibustering to “power-hungry” men, which the government failed to prevent, implying their “tacit approval of the incursions”.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Martínez highlights the financial motivations of these attacks, showing how far back the U.S.’s *economic* exploitation of Mexico dates. Almaguer agrees that both structural and ideological racialization emerged in the “context of capitalist transformation of the region.”<sup>32</sup>

Having considered the U.S.’s nineteenth-century imperial motives in Mexico and the treatment of her people, it is clear that this history involved complex interaction of economic, political, ideological, and racial exploitation. One of the most useful ways to trace twentieth-century U.S. domination over Mexico, as a nation and a people, is by examining their exploitation of Mexican labour. This is also extremely relevant to my thesis, as female labour exploitation within *maquiladoras* is best understood within a

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p 3.

<sup>29</sup> Martínez, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Angela Moyano Pahissa, ‘The Mesilla Treaty, or Gadsden Purchase’ in Martínez (ed.), *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>31</sup> Martínez, ‘Filibustering and Racism in the Borderlands,’ p. 47.

<sup>32</sup> Almaguer, p. 3.

historical framework. This also reveals the symbiotic relationship between structural capitalist exploitation and processes of racialization in fostering an unequal relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. As Gonzalez and Fernandez state, “economic factors...are crucial in shaping social and cultural forms.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Mexican Labourers as Disposable Commodities: Setting the Precedent**

Mexican laborers have . . . become the United States’ disposable labor force, brought in when needed, only to fulfil their use and be unceremoniously discarded, a trend that has been recurring for over 150 years.<sup>34</sup>

Migration is not a random phenomenon. Rather, migratory flows are the consequence of specific structural, economic, political and ideological conditions . . .<sup>35</sup>

Capitalist interests have encouraged the use of (cheap) Mexican labour in the U.S. since the late nineteenth-century.<sup>36</sup> In times of need (labour shortage), American business has actively recruited migrants from the south, for example during both World Wars, usually in collaboration with the government.<sup>37</sup> During the *Bracero* Program (1946-64)<sup>38</sup> “the U.S. government fully co-operated with growers, allocating insufficient funds to the border patrol, insuring a constant supply of undocumented labourers.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Gonzalez and Fernandez, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Gilbert Paul Carrasco, ‘Latinos in the United States: Invitation and Exile,’ *The Latino/a Condition*, p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> María Patricia Fernández-Kelly, *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico’s Frontier*, (New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1983), p. 69.

<sup>36</sup> This began during the Gold Rush in the mid-nineteenth-century when men were recruited to work in mines, railroads, and farms (Carrasco, p. 78).

<sup>37</sup> Acuña, *Occupied America*, p. 128.

<sup>38</sup> *Bracero* was a temporary-worker program, conceived in the light of labour shortages during World War Two, whereby Mexican men were recruited to work in American agricultural industry for a set time period. This was established through discussion between the U.S. and Mexican governments, and was supposed to guarantee certain protections for workers. However these terms were largely ignored by employers and the U.S. government (Carrasco, p. 81).

<sup>39</sup> Acuña, p. 146.

This also strengthened U.S. control over Mexico, as the constant flow of labour north since the mid-nineteenth-century had weakened Mexico's agricultural infrastructure, rendering her "dependent on the money brought back by workers."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the U.S. held the bargaining power over the terms of this, and subsequent, labour contracts<sup>41</sup> with her incapacitated neighbour.

Inconsistent with this desire for cheap labour, Mexican workers also faced a nativist backlash from mainstream society and the media who were alarmed by the influx of foreigners, blaming them for problems in society (particularly undocumented immigrants).<sup>42</sup> This was most heated during the 1930s economic crisis and again in the 1950s. Newspapers began "calling for their exclusion, and arousing antialien sentiment: undocumented workers were portrayed as dangerous, malicious, and subversive", explains Acuña.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, whilst they were valued by U.S. business, simultaneously Mexicans were negatively racialized in the hegemonic imagination and became victims of racist and discriminatory attacks.<sup>44</sup>

During economic crises Mexican labour was consequently abused in the opposite way; as its value as a commodity ceased it was forcefully discarded. During the 1930s Depression in particular, "Mexicans became the scapegoats for the failure of the U.S. economy",<sup>45</sup> and as Americans were forced into the jobs they never before wanted, Mexicans found themselves unemployed and forced to leave. Moreover, during government "repatriation" drives, Mexicans' civil liberties were frequently abused as police raids, often violent, rounded them up by the thousands, and, "without the benefit

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>42</sup> Acuña, p. 156.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p 130.

of counsel,” deported them (including U.S. citizens).<sup>46</sup> This was witnessed again during “Operation Wetback” in the 1950s, another time of concurrent vehement nativism and forced repatriation: aided by the McCarran-Walter Act, Immigration and Naturalization Service agents “indiscriminately searched and rounded up Mexican-looking people.”<sup>47</sup>

These past examples demonstrate how Mexicans have been viewed as disposable commodities by the U.S. public and government and that this process is highly systematic. They also reveal how derogatory and racist stereotyping, internalized in the American psyche, sensationalized by the media, and institutionalized by power, helped justify and foster support for discriminatory and dehumanizing policies towards Mexico and her people. Furthermore, this process is ongoing, as Chapter One will demonstrate. The key difference is in the gendered nature of labour today: both in *maquiladoras* (the site of my investigation), and the domestic and service industries in the U.S.,<sup>48</sup> women make up a significant majority of the workforce (whereas the examples above pertained to men).

In Chapter One I discuss post-1960 U.S. policies, particularly NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), and the Border Industrialization Program, which first brought *maquiladoras* to Mexico. These have continued the processes of labour exploitation and imperial domination; this time south of the border. I show that past and present U.S. policies have been intricately involved in reducing thousands of women across Mexico’s northern frontier to disposable commodities; their bodies exploited as racialized and sexualized objects.

Chapter Two investigates the mysterious disappearances and murders of Mexican women in Ciudad Juárez since 1993, framed around a discussion of globalization, U.S.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 139-142.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p 162.

<sup>48</sup> The employment of Mexican women as maids and in the service industry is another interesting site of investigation into their contemporary exploitation. Zaragosa Vargas offers insight in ‘Rank and File: Historical Perspectives on Latino/a Workers in the US’ in Darder and Torres (eds.) pp. 243-256.

imperialism, and Mexican *machismo* culture, in order to understand why these violent, misogynist attacks are happening. I reveal the U.S.'s integral role in this epidemic.

Chapter Three focuses on the border-crossing experience, during which Mexican women are often raped by U.S. personnel. I highlight the factors which have created a climate inductive to rape in the region, including U.S. immigration and militarization policies, which fuel nativism and violence and violence against Mexican women.

## Chapter One

### **Economic and Physical Exploitation of the Female Body in Mexico's *Maquiladoras***

Maquiladoras are the nation's largest employers of labor, numbering over a million, for the production of goods consumed in the U.S., however, the workers, the majority of them women, are guaranteed poverty...<sup>49</sup>

This chapter is the first of three case studies into specific sites of exploitation of the female body along the U.S.-Mexico border. Its focus is the *maquiladoras* in the Mexican frontier where hundreds of thousands of women toil in sweatshop conditions within predominantly U.S.-owned manufacturing plants. Working long, gruelling hours for the minimum wage (or below), often in dangerous and unhealthy conditions, and usually without social or healthcare benefits, or union support, these women are today's prime victims of the globalized neoliberal economy. This exploitative capitalist system will be examined in the context of the continuing imperial relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. Moreover, the consequences of U.S. imperial domination and economic exploitation of Mexico will be explored, as manifested on the bodies of *maquiladora* workers in the form of economic, physical, and sexual abuse. This will require both an

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<sup>49</sup> Gonzalez et al., introduction, xxx.

economic-political contextualization, and discussion of gendered and racial theories, to understand how the *racialized female body* has become a site in itself of the discourses and practices of unequal power between these two nations. I also give voice to women for whom exploitation is part of their daily lives by providing documented oral testimony from female *maquiladora* workers.

I should note that there have been some formidable challenges by women against exploitation. However, as my primary concern in this thesis is to expose the systems of power that created and maintain structural exploitation, it is not possible to provide fully the other side of this story; of resistance and survival. However, I recommend Melissa W. Wright's *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, and Devon Peña's *The Terror of the Machine*,<sup>50</sup> for insight into the ways women have organized against and resisted the injustices they face in *maquiladoras*.<sup>51</sup>

### **Background to the *Maquiladora* Industry**

1965 marks the birth of the *maquiladora* industry in Mexico when the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) was established through bilateral agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments. This program illustrated poignantly for the first time that “the utilization of Mexican labor as an integral component of the U.S. economy goes beyond the political borders of the nation.”<sup>52</sup> However, far earlier initiatives had

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<sup>50</sup> Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York; London: Routledge, 2006); Devon G. Peña, *The Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender, and Ecology on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Texas: University of Texas, Austin, 1998). Peña describes daily methods of resistance, such as sabotaging machinery, as well as more organized rebellions through strikes and workers' coalitions (pp. 8-9).

<sup>51</sup> Since NAFTA *maquiladora* activism has grown, according to Rachael Kamel and Anya Hoffman (eds.), *The Maquiladora Reader: Cross-Border Organizing Since NAFTA* (USA: American Friends Service Committee, 1999). This is another excellent resource telling the story of resistance from workers themselves, including the formation of cross-border alliances and grass-roots organizations, such as the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras. I also recommend the Women on the Border website – <http://www.womenontheborder.org> – for up-to-date information on *maquiladora* organizing.

<sup>52</sup> Gonzalez and Fernandez, introduction, xiv.

facilitated the U.S.'s financial infiltration into Mexico, including the 1876 *Zona Libre* that created a free-trade zone in the border.<sup>53</sup> This policy, proposed by the Mexican government to encourage U.S. trade and capital investment in the region, exemplifies Mexico's economic dependence on her northern neighbour.

Moreover, as Gonzalez and Fernandez assert, the seeds of empire were being sown by the 1870s when American companies invested in railroads, mining, and farming in Mexico, aided by "governmental threat of military intervention".<sup>54</sup> Therefore, as discussed earlier, U.S. economic imperialism is historically-rooted. These early trade concessions also helped "magnetize the border",<sup>55</sup> in Acúna's words, over the twentieth century – spurring immigration from interior Mexico, and trade and tourism from the U.S.<sup>56</sup> Thus the border was developing into a region of intense cultural and financial "interdependence"<sup>57</sup> long before 1965.

The BIP, which systematically incorporated a Mexican workforce into the U.S. economy, demonstrates the continuance of American empire in the twentieth century and today. The program consisted of a "system of concessions vis-à-vis Mexico that . . . [allowed] *maquilas* to be located in border towns in Northern Mexico and to export their products directly to the United States".<sup>58</sup> Concessions included tax breaks and exemptions from "labor and environmental regulations".<sup>59</sup> Mexico was experiencing a severe economic crisis and high unemployment, especially near the border, due to the demise of *Bracero* in 1964, which had "served as a crutch during the postwar period".<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Martínez, introduction, xvi.

<sup>54</sup> Gonzalez and Fernandez, p. 31.

<sup>55</sup> Acúna, *Occupied America*, p. 167.

<sup>56</sup> Martínez, introduction, xiii.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Carrasco, p. 84.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Immunity from Mexican labour laws was crucial in enabling exploitation within *maquiladoras*. Another negative consequence of the industry made possible by these concessions is environmental degradation, alarmingly associated with anencephalic births in the region: Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 34.

<sup>60</sup> Acúna, p. 165.

She was also heavily in debt and reliant on U.S. loans. Thus the Mexican government hoped that the BIP would attract capital and increase employment opportunities for impoverished Mexicans.<sup>61</sup> Soon thousands of U.S. companies headed south “in quest of cheap labor”.<sup>62</sup> Low wages, “high levels of productivity,” and “the panoply of benefits which accrue to U.S. business as a result of its proximity to the Mexican border,” were all impetuses for moving to the region, says Fernandez-Kelly.<sup>63</sup>

Although *maquiladoras* created many jobs (exploitative, unstable, and underpaid<sup>64</sup> nevertheless), high unemployment continued, especially for men, as the industry preferred female labour.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the Mexican economy did not benefit as these are in essence export factories – the products and capital from which flow directly back to the United States.<sup>66</sup> Instead, Mexico became even more dependent on the U.S., both economically, as the *maquiladora* industry became her “largest source of foreign exchange”,<sup>67</sup> and politically, as the government lost autonomy over its industrial sector. (The adoption of the BIP has been described as “the most overt form of national economic servitude yet accepted by Mexico.”<sup>68</sup>) Altha Cravey blames this loss of autonomy on the transition of Mexico’s economy “from an ambitious state-led import substitution [ISI] emphasis to a neoliberal export-orientation based on transnational investment.”<sup>69</sup> Whereas prior to 1976 the Mexican state under the ISI system had relative control over a centralized, “well-paid, stable, and *male* unionized work force,”

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<sup>61</sup> Fernandez-Kelly, pp. 26-27.

<sup>62</sup> Acúna, p. 167.

<sup>63</sup> Fernandez-Kelly, p. 28.

<sup>64</sup> Wages were substandard from the BIP’s inception; furthermore the devaluation of the peso in 1994 caused another decline in wages by almost fifty percent, to around \$25 to \$50 a week: Kamel and Hoffman (eds.), p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Norma Iglesias Prieto, *Beautiful Flowers of the Maquiladora* (1985), translated by Michael Stone with Gabrielle Winkler (Texas: University of Texas Press, Austin, 1997), p. 37.

<sup>66</sup> Acúna, p. 163. The BIP also spurred a decline in Mexico’s interior manufacturing industry, which could not compete with the subsidized foreign-export plants (Davis, p. 29).

<sup>67</sup> Altha J. Cravey, *Women and Work in Mexico’s Maquiladoras* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), p. 2.

<sup>68</sup> Fernandez-Kelly, p. 36.

<sup>69</sup> Cravey, p. 1.

during the 1970s “a range of policies were reversed to encourage internationalization, liberalization, and privatization of the economy,” creating a “new factory regime based on a less organized, lower-paid, female workforce.”<sup>70</sup>

This shift symbolized Mexico’s surrender to pressure from the U.S. government and international financial agencies to liberalize her economy as part of a move by key developed nations towards creating a globalized neoliberal economic system. This included the relocation of productive processes to the Third World under “the new international division of labour.”<sup>71</sup> The result was highly detrimental to both Mexican national autonomy and her workers’ livelihoods, as the new system weakened trade unions, lowered wages, and grossly reduced welfare support.<sup>72</sup> The 1970s and 1980s were thus crucial decades in crystallizing the U.S.’ economic conquest of Mexico.

Further strengthening U.S. power was NAFTA in 1994. Described by Gonzalez and Fernandez as a “tool of U.S. imperial domination”,<sup>73</sup> this pact brought Mexico permanently into the globalized economy, contributing to her further economic and political downfall. As Fernandez et al. assert, “globalization” was promoted to Third World nations assuring democracy and prosperity; however, it was in reality a mechanism of power and control for affluent nations, which increased disparities between the world’s richest and poorest nations.<sup>74</sup> Henry Selby comments on NAFTA’s impact: “Responsibility for the Mexican economic and political process is now squarely in the hands of the gringos, and the Mexicans can do nothing.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 45-46.

<sup>73</sup> Gonzalez and Fernandez, introduction, xiv.

<sup>74</sup> Gonzalez et al., introduction, xii.

<sup>75</sup> Henry A. Selby, ‘Foreword’ in Prieto, xi. NAFTA and its predecessor GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) helped destroy local industry in Mexico, increased unemployment, and entrenched Mexico’s dependency on U.S. capital through governmental loans and foreign investment.

## The Feminization of Labour

Negotiated in response to the plight of thousands of Mexican men left unemployed after the demise of *Bracero* in 1964, the BIP ironically had the converse effect of creating a predominantly female workforce along the border:<sup>76</sup>

There is general agreement [among scholars] that the preferred labor force in . . . [maquiladoras] is female, very young, and with little or no previous work experience.<sup>77</sup>

The question I pose is: why is this workforce predominantly young and female? This will be answered through an investigation into the exploitation of *maquiladora* workers by various mechanisms and discourses of power. In conducting my research I used a number of sociological and ethnographic studies by border scholars published over the last thirty years. Workers' testimony was drawn from Norma Iglesias Prieto's *Beautiful Flowers of the Maquiladora* (1985), a study of Tijuana's *maquiladoras* from 1972 to 1982.<sup>78</sup> Although this work is over twenty years old, most of the conditions described by the workers prevail today and remain relevant to the continuing exploitation of women.

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<sup>76</sup> Until 1985 *maquiladoras* were eighty-to-ninety percent female (Prieto, introduction, xxiv). However, after the devaluation of the peso, more men entered *maquiladoras*: Lisa M. Catanzarite and Myra H. Strober, 'The Gender Recomposition of the Maquiladora Workforce in Ciudad Juárez,' *Industrial Relations* 32. 1 (1993): 133. These scholars explain "gender recomposition" as a consequence of economic need, which made factory work "relatively more attractive" to men (pp. 134-5), suggesting that workers, rather than managers, determine the workforce. This is disputed by others, however (with whom I agree), who assert that management has always preferred and purposefully maintains a majority female workforce: Wright, p. 82; Gonzalez and Fernandez, p. 114. For example, one factory actively recruited women from outside agricultural regions during the 1980s, bussing them into Ciudad Juárez: Leslie Salzinger, 'Manufacturing Sexual Subjects: "Harassment," Desire, and Discipline on a Maquiladora Shopfloor,' in Segura and Zavella (eds.), p. 168. Moreover, women today "are still in the majority, constituting up to 70 percent of the workforce in light assembly industries and 57 percent overall": 'Women in the Maquiladora,' American Friends Service Committee, <http://www.afsc.org/mexico-us-border/womeninmaquiladoras.htm>, (13 March 2008).

<sup>77</sup> Cravey, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Also useful were Fernandez-Kelly (1983), an investigation of Ciudad Juárez's *maquiladoras* from 1978-79; and Melissa Wright (2006), a more recent ethnographic project in the same city.

The transference of women from the home to the factory in the mid-1960s, described by Cravey as “female proletarianization,”<sup>79</sup> must not be mistaken as an inevitable or natural consequence of “modernization” or “globalization” in Mexico. Nor should factory managers be believed when they claim women are simply more “suitable” to the work than men, “based upon presumed anatomical and animal features,” such as dexterity or “nimble fingers” and patience.<sup>80</sup> As Prieto astutely asserts:

The characteristics of the maquiladora workforce are not accidental; they result from a careful hiring policy in which the firms seek to maintain effective control of labor and a high level of worker exploitation.<sup>81</sup>

Thus women were specifically hired by U.S. firms on the premise that they are a more productive and controllable workforce.<sup>82</sup> Women were employed because of their particular vulnerability to the capitalist forces of exploitation. This vulnerability stemmed from their inexperience in the workplace, having grown up in a patriarchal society in which women are traditionally confined to the domestic sphere. Most were also rural migrants with only primary-level schooling, with no knowledge of “wage labor and collective bargaining.”<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the recent decline of trade unions limited women’s bargaining-power and formal protections as workers.<sup>84</sup> All these factors made women a more malleable and exploitable workforce than men, as one factory manager openly articulates:

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<sup>79</sup> Cravey, p. 45. “Proletarianization” is a Marxist term describing the process whereby capitalism creates a working-class dependent upon wage labour, governed by a small elite. This notion has been historically applied to men, but the *maquiladora* industry reveals how women are being proletarianized today.

<sup>80</sup> Fernandez-Kelly, p. 66.

<sup>81</sup> Prieto, p. 36.

<sup>82</sup> “Advertising for *Señoritas* and *Damitas* throughout the border areas made clear – only young women need apply”: Leslie Salzinger, ‘From High Heels to Swathed Bodies: Gendered Meanings under Production in Mexico’s Export-Processing Industry,’ *Feminist Studies* 23.3 (1997): 550.

<sup>83</sup> Cravey, p. 46.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

We prefer to hire women who are unspoiled, that is, those who come to us without preconceptions about what industrial work is. Women such as these are easier to shape to our own requirements.<sup>85</sup>

Moreover, women's biological and social functions as mothers leaves them more vulnerable to labour exploitation. This is articulated by Alma, one of Prieto's interviewees:

Many maquiladora workers are single mothers and women whose husbands have abandoned them. It's not so easy for them to walk away from a job. This is an advantage for the owners because the girls have to provide for their children.<sup>86</sup>

Therefore, the motives for hiring a predominantly female workforce cannot adequately be understood as simply "the result of inherent feminine or masculine psychological and physical attributes," but rather is "explained by the economic and political position of men and women vis-à-vis international capitalism."<sup>87</sup> U.S. business capitalized on women's "absence of a culture of unionization",<sup>88</sup> tractability, and duties as mothers. Alma comments:

No woman in the maquiladora stands up for her rights. . . . That's why the owners prefer to hire women.<sup>89</sup>

### **Ideologies and Mechanisms of Control**

Powerful racial and gendered ideologies have aided the economic exploitation of women and rendered their bodies, racialized and sexualized objects. Three ideologies in particular are utilized by U.S. factory owners to control Mexican workers. First is the patriarchal gendered ideology embedded in Mexican culture, which, through the gendered division of labour, is used to suppress female workers below male superiors

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<sup>85</sup> Fernandez-Kelly, p. 117.

<sup>86</sup> Prieto, p. 32.

<sup>87</sup> Fernandez-Kelly, p. 66.

<sup>88</sup> Gonzalez and Fernandez, p. 113.

<sup>89</sup> Prieto, p. 16.

(American and Mexican). Second is a racist and nationalist ideology that views Mexico (and her people) as culturally and economically inferior to the United States; used to justify U.S. corporate management's power over Mexican workers. Third is a moral ideology concerning the "proper place" of Mexican women in society regarding their sexuality, which has led to the objectification of women under the male gaze. Below I will discuss various ways in which these ideologies manifest themselves in daily discourses and practices within *maquiladoras*, and the consequences on women's lives:

The ideological control mechanisms that prevail inside the maquiladoras are profoundly sexist. Attitudes of male superiority embrace all spheres of productive life and the social relations in the factory.<sup>90</sup>

One of the most effective ways in which U.S. bosses control Mexican female labour is by utilizing the existing hierarchical gendered relationship between men and women entrenched in their culture. In general terms the patriarchal tradition of male authority over subservient women helps "sanction their submission on the job" as it does in the home.<sup>91</sup> One particular technique employed in many factories, "which takes advantage of existing gender hierarchies, is the use of male floor managers alongside female line workers."<sup>92</sup> *Maquiladora* bosses can rely on the existing male-female power relationship to mirror itself inside the factory walls. Mexican values of femininity ("submission, self-denial, and resignation . . . modesty, patience, and reserve"), which are "transmitted through family life, schooling, and society", are exploited "to maximize production".<sup>93</sup> The hiring of predominantly young, primary-school educated girls also helps, as it is within the school and home that patriarchal tradition is strictly taught, Prieto explains.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>91</sup> Fernandez-Kelly, p. 72.

<sup>92</sup> Cravey, p. 7; Wright, p. 47.

<sup>93</sup> Prieto, p. 33.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 44

Managers also use cultural norms to promote the *maquiladora* as a “kind of . . . family in which *muchachas* do well to mind their betters, just as they minded their fathers and brothers.”<sup>95</sup>

Wright explains that managers propagate discourses that “construct the Mexican woman as essentially and inflexibly untrainable”,<sup>96</sup> supported by Mexico’s “culture of ‘machismo’”, assuming she is happy to be stationed below men.<sup>97</sup> This is complemented by another discourse that proposes women are “blind” to the labour process – incapable of understanding the factory system as a whole – thus denigrating their intellectual capabilities and deeming them most suited to unskilled and male-supervised work.<sup>98</sup> A practical means of reinforcing this discourse is through the physical positioning of men and women: men stand; women sit.<sup>99</sup> Male supervisors are visibly placed in a position of power, overlooking seated female line-workers; visually enforcing the gendered division of labour.

Relegating women to the bottom of the labour market within a patriarchal organizational structure has both physical and psychological consequences. Forced to perform the most repetitive, tiring, and dangerous work, women frequently suffer illness, injury, fatigue and depression.<sup>100</sup> Gabriela, another of Prieto’s interviewees, comments on the hazards of working in a Tijuana electronics factory:

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<sup>95</sup> Selby, xii.

<sup>96</sup> Scholars explain that assembly work is actually quite complicated, requiring precision, speed and coordination, and seamstresses undoubtedly perform skilled work; therefore undermining the notion that women are untrainable (Fernandez-Kelly, p. 113; Prieto, p. 15).

<sup>97</sup> Wright, p. 55.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p. 59.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 60; Peña, p. 173.

<sup>100</sup> Prieto says health hazards, including substandard protective clothing and poor ventilation, have led to: “nausea, headache, fatigue, sneezing, and coughing; irritation, pain, and inflammation of the eyes; dryness, itching, rashes and general skin irritation; shortness of breath; irregular menstrual cycles, irritability, and insomnia”, and on-the-job accidents (p. 22).

. . . I had to make chemical mixtures, and it was quite dangerous because we did not have all the necessary laboratory safety and ventilation equipment . . . often ventilation was poor, and I would get sick to my stomach.<sup>101</sup>

A seamstress, María Luisa, also expresses the physical strain of factory work:

The worst drawback of maquiladora work is all the damage we do to our health.

. . . from sitting in front of the sewing machine, in no time you can hardly stand the pain in your back and kidneys.<sup>102</sup>

There is a practical (and disturbing) impetus for making this work backbreaking from a U.S. business perspective: the harsh conditions and long hours ensure a high labour turnover thus maximizing productivity. The optimum labour turnover rate (the average length of time each employee remains in a factory) is two to three years for electronics plants (longer in garment factories).<sup>103</sup> Wright explains the motives for this most effectively:

The desire for a two-year labor turnover rate reveals the belief that unskilled workers operate on a trajectory of diminishing returns. [After this time] the replacement of these workers is regarded as more valuable to the company than their continued employment.<sup>104</sup>

Wright explains the value of labour in Marxist terms: “The greater the variation between workers’ value and the value of their labor, the greater the profit.”<sup>105</sup> This is partly achieved by high turnover, which prevents women climbing the job-ladder (in skills, benefits and wages) as they do not remain in the same company for long enough. The daily physical and psychological strain on workers, making them more tired and prone to illness, decreases women’s productivity over time, anticipating which factory

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>103</sup> Wright, p. 28; Cravey, p. 7.

<sup>104</sup> Wright, p. 28.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

managers seek their replacement.<sup>106</sup> Wright has conceptualized the female *maquiladora* worker, based on her diminishing use-value as a labourer over time, as the “disposable third world woman worker.”<sup>107</sup> This explains how women are invaluable to U.S. business, ironically because of their diminishing value, and subsequent disposability. This in turn illustrates how the Mexican female body within the *maquiladora* has been reduced to little more than a machine, viewed in terms of output, functionality and productivity.

The oppressive factory environment often itself ensures high turnover, as many cannot endure the work for long and leave voluntarily.<sup>108</sup> Elena, for example, resigned because of the intense physical pain she experienced from repetitive assembly work:

My hands hurt so much that when I got home I couldn't do the housework; I couldn't even change my son's diapers.<sup>109</sup>

When required, however, managers and supervisors employ other tactics to “persuade” women to leave by fostering an “environment of intimidation and insecurity”<sup>110</sup> within the factory. Prieto highlights the frequent occurrences of blacklisting, unfair dismissal, and an environment of fear maintained through constant surveillance: “It is well known . . . that most factories openly maintain an effectively extralegal system of surveillance and sanctions against employees.”<sup>111</sup> Mike Davis asserts that workers face “dismissal, arrest [and] beating” if they protest conditions.<sup>112</sup> Many are also scared to speak out because, as María Luisa explains:

...if you stir up a lot of trouble you get blacklisted, and you don't get hired anywhere.

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<sup>106</sup> Fernandez-Kelly, pp. 67-68.

<sup>107</sup> Wright, p. 29.

<sup>108</sup> Fernandez-Kelly, p. 68.

<sup>109</sup> Prieto, p. 9.

<sup>110</sup> Cravey, p. 73.

<sup>111</sup> Prieto, p. 24.

<sup>112</sup> Davis, p. 35.

The truth is that a lot of us don't act as we should because we don't know our rights and we're scared of the owners. That's how they can walk all over us and no one says a thing.<sup>113</sup>

Alma also acknowledges the intimidating atmosphere and absence of worker solidarity:

They have us by the neck! . . . those of us who resist are dismissed as malcontents and troublemakers, and the other workers repudiate us. That way there can never be any kind of worker alliance.<sup>114</sup>

The control mechanisms employed in *maquiladoras* are also linked to U.S. racist ideology, particularly apparent in the use of surveillance. Wright explains how a “panoptic gaze” is fostered through “the spatial organization of the facility”, whereby managers are located on the second floor, able to look down upon both Mexican male supervisors and female line-workers.<sup>115</sup> Like the placement of Mexican men standing over seated women, this arrangement further demarcates the power hierarchy within the factory, this time on national/racial lines. This is an extremely powerful method of control over male and female workers, as they experience the ever-constant pressure of being watched from above for mistakes, idleness, or misconduct. Wright explains that this facilitates the subjugation of the Mexican worker “as a ‘subject-to-be-watched’”.<sup>116</sup> As a result, all workers have been reduced to “ethnic bodies”<sup>117</sup> within the factory – robbed of their intellectual and bodily autonomy, under the control of U.S. managers.

This discourse of Mexican inferiority (economic, political, and cultural) can be linked to the historical ideologies of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism, which have long been used to justify the U.S.’s economic-political subordination of Mexico. As Fernandez et al. pronounce: “It is as if the ‘white man’s burden’ of 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>113</sup> Prieto, p. 25.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>115</sup> Wright, p. 64.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

colonialism has been transformed into a 21<sup>st</sup> century American empire.”<sup>118</sup> Cultural supremacy is evident in the comments made by a U.S. manager:

They way I figure, these plants are good for Mexico because they . . . offer the young women a chance to be something better.

It provides solutions to a lot of problems and brings superior skills to Mexico’s labor force.<sup>119</sup>

The manager’s first statement also feeds into another controlling discourse – of Mexican women’s sexual morality. This asserts that women are better off working in *maquiladoras* within a “nurturing” paternalistic environment than elsewhere; partially based on the debasing assumption that work outside factories equates to prostitution.<sup>120</sup> Peña sarcastically remarks: “Our presumed street urchins and whores should be thankful that the maquilas are there to save them from the Mexican border’s immoral excesses...”<sup>121</sup> It is also inspired by patriarchal culture, which dictates not only women’s economic and intellectual, but also sexual, subordination to men. Managers deliberately cultivate a highly-sexualized environment within *maquiladoras*, played out between “macho” men and female “*señoritas*” on the shopfloor, which functions as another systematic control mechanism utilizing existing gendered and sexualized roles.<sup>122</sup>

The panoptic structure of the factory helps facilitate a sexually-charged atmosphere and constructs women as sexual objects by fostering a male gaze from above: “Monitoring becomes the gaze of sexual objectification as soon as it locks on the women”<sup>123</sup> says Salzinger. Both managers and supervisors are encouraged by this discourse to prey on women within a “flirtatious and titillating”<sup>124</sup> environment, which has

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<sup>118</sup> Gonzalez et al., introduction, xvii.

<sup>119</sup> Peña, p. 14.

<sup>120</sup> Pablo Vila explains the “city of vice” narrative depicts the Mexican border as “a site of violence, drugs, and prostitution” in *Border Identifications*, p. 113. This is discussed fully in Chapter Two.

<sup>121</sup> Peña, p. 15.

<sup>122</sup> Salzinger, *From High Heels to Swathed Bodies*, p. 554.

<sup>123</sup> Salzinger, *Manufacturing Sexual Subjects*, p. 173.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

led, unsurprisingly, to sexual harassment and promises of job security for sexual favours.<sup>125</sup> Ángela speaks from personal experience:

Abuses result when the bosses consort with the girls. . . . That boss we had was a very coarse person, quick to paw you with his hands.<sup>126</sup>

As women are assessed not only on productivity, but by their beauty and sexuality, many feel forced to forsake their moral and personal integrity for job security. It also fosters competition between girls, seeking to be the supervisor or manager's "favourite" – by flirting and sexualizing their appearance, wearing "lipstick", "high heels" and "miniskirts"<sup>127</sup> – further increasing production and reducing worker solidarity.<sup>128</sup> The discourse is even more powerful as women become active participants in sexual game-playing as their livelihoods depend upon it: "femininity is defined and anointed by male supervisors and managers. Women have little to offer each other in comparison to the pleasures of that achievement and the perils of its loss."<sup>129</sup> This environment both objectifies Mexican women and emasculates men,<sup>130</sup> as U.S. managers remain firmly at the top of the hierarchy, reinforcing American exceptionalism.

Women often become sexual objects before they step inside *maquiladoras* as some firms stipulate a specific desire for attractive women in the hiring process.<sup>131</sup> Elena confirms this:

What they wanted was pretty young things who dressed nicely. . . .they looked us up and down. If they thought you were pretty, you got a job; if not, no way."<sup>132</sup>

Furthermore, women's sexuality is grossly exploited through reproductive monitoring. Nearly all *maquiladoras* explicitly state a preference for single, childless

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<sup>125</sup> Fernandez-Kelly, p. 140; Prieto, p. 77.

<sup>126</sup> Prieto, p. 77.

<sup>127</sup> Salzinger, *From High Heels to Swathed Bodies*, p. 554.

<sup>128</sup> Salzinger, *Manufacturing Sexual Subjects*, p. 178.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169; Fernandez-Kelly, p. 129.

<sup>132</sup> Prieto, p. 37.

women, and many use pregnancy-testing in the interview stage.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, as reported by Human Rights Watch, “if a woman becomes pregnant soon after gaining employment . . . she may be mistreated or forced to resign.”<sup>134</sup> Prieto experienced the required medical exam when she applied for factory work in Tijuana as part of her research. She recalls being asked “if I were a ‘*senorita*’ – that is, a virgin – if I had frequent sexual relations, the date of my last menstrual period . . . [Then he] palpated my abdomen to make sure I was not pregnant.”<sup>135</sup> Sometimes more invasive examinations are required: “pregnancy tests . . . often include not only ‘surprise’ urine testing but also examination of menstrual pads to prove that a young worker isn’t pregnant.”<sup>136</sup> Such practices are clearly a violation of women’s human rights.

## Conclusion

This chapter has revealed the harsh physical and psychological conditions within *maquiladoras* for a predominantly female workforce, maintained through systematic exploitation based upon political, gendered, and racial ideologies of power. Ultimately, it has exposed the strength of U.S. imperialism today, which when combined with Mexican patriarchal culture, has powerfully oppressed women economically, physically, psychologically, and sexually. Because of an exploitative political-economic system women’s bodies are viewed as machines, valued only for their productivity; while simultaneously, through racist, sexist discourse that justifies women’s sexual subordination to men, they are objectified.

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<sup>133</sup> Prieto, p. 39.

<sup>134</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘No Guarantees: Sex Discrimination in Mexico’s Maquiladora Sector’ (April 1996), *The Maquiladora Reader*, p. 31.

<sup>135</sup> Prieto, pp. 39-40.

<sup>136</sup> Elvia Arriola, ‘Where the Borders of Class, Race, Age and Sexuality Meet,’ Women on the Border website, <http://www.womenontheborder.org/sexdiscrimination.htm>, (9 March 2008).

In Chapter Two I investigate the horrific murders of Mexican women in Ciudad Juárez, during which I revisit the theory discussed above. It is possible, for example, to link Wright's notion of the disposable female worker with the more shocking *literal* disposability of the murdered women. Wright states that the "disposable third world woman" is a product of power; constructed by global firms. Her disposability is a "myth" propagated to rationalize high turnover by virtue of women's "natural" and "inevitable" physical and mental degeneration over time,<sup>137</sup> thus blaming women themselves and Mexican culture, for their subjugation.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Wright., p. 2.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 17. Managers blame high turnover on Mexican female traits "such as lack of ambition, overactive wombs, and flagging job loyalty," assuming patriarchal culture and women themselves determine their untrainability and temporary employment (p. 86).

## Chapter Two

### Rape, Murder, and Mutilation in Ciudad Juárez: The Mexican Female Body as a Site of Conflict and Disposability

Ciudad Juárez . . . [is] one of the most violent cities, especially for women, in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>139</sup>

All the murders have in common a total disregard for women's lives. They're kidnapped, tortured, raped and their bodies abandoned like they had no value.<sup>140</sup>

This chapter investigates the most horrific phenomenon of oppression against women in the border region today: the "Juárez murders." Since 1993 Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, the largest Mexican border city of over 1.3 million residents,<sup>141</sup> has witnessed an unprecedented spree of violent and often sexually-motivated murders of poor, mostly young, women. It is estimated that nearly five-hundred women have been murdered over the past fifteen years,<sup>142</sup> although numbers are uncertain due to the ineffective investigation by Mexican officials into the crimes.

I attempt to demystify the murders and the atmosphere of violence and hate towards women in Juárez generally by investigating the systematic corruption and exploitative policies which have allowed the physical subjugation of women's bodies. This will reveal collusion between Mexican and U.S. power networks, which use exploitative discourses and practices to oppress women, and justify or mask their actions. As in *maquiladoras*,

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<sup>139</sup> Wright, p. 72.

<sup>140</sup> Lucha Castro (co-founder of organization, May Our Women Return Home), speaking in *On the Edge: The Femicide in Ciudad Juárez*, documentary by Steev Hise (Illegal Art, 2006).

<sup>141</sup> *Juarez: The City where Women are Disposable*, documentary by Alex Flores and Lorena Vassolo (Toronto, Canada: Las Perlas Del Mar Films, 2007).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

the rhetoric of power combines controlling Mexican patriarchal ideology with a global capitalism and U.S. imperialism-infused doctrine. Thus it is reasonable to draw comparisons between the ideologies cultivated within *maquiladoras*, which utilize traditionally inscribed gendered roles to delineate the boundaries of Mexican women's femininity and sexuality (as objects), and their (economic) value, ultimately cultivating a myth of their disposability as workers (and human beings).<sup>143</sup> Ciudad Juárez, a city of crime, poverty and violence, is where the most shocking and gruesome effects of globalization, U.S. imperialism, and Mexican *machismo* are manifested, most poignantly on the racialized, sexualized bodies of poor Mexican women.

In investigating who is to blame for these murders (and who gains from their cover-up), I highlight the ways in which the U.S. is specifically implicated, examining the effects of their economic policies in Mexico (the *maquiladora* industry and NAFTA), as well as addressing Mexican culpability. Reliable information is hard to find in official discourse; therefore I rely predominantly on the knowledge of grassroots activists and journalists and victims' mothers, who voice their highly personal experiences of the crimes. Evidence is drawn from two recent documentaries: *On the Edge: The Femicide in Ciudad Juárez* (2006) and *Juarez: The City where Women are Disposable* (2007), which incorporate expert discussion of the epidemic with personal accounts from affected families. (I acknowledge the risk of using potentially biased reports from grieving relatives; however I believe their voices should duly be heard, within a balanced analysis of evidence from various sources.<sup>144</sup>) The most useful texts on the issue are Diana Washington Valdez's *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women* (2006)<sup>145</sup> (Valdez is

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<sup>143</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>144</sup> I have consulted books, journal and newspaper articles, and interest-group publications on the topic.

<sup>145</sup> Diana Washington Valdez, *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women* (USA: Peace at the Border, 2006).

an *El Paso Times* reporter), and Charles Bowden's *Juárez: the Laboratory of our Future* (1998)<sup>146</sup> (Bowden is an American author and journalist).

## **Femicide**

The Juárez murders are often referred to as acts of “femicide,” (“the killing of a female”),<sup>147</sup> implying a gender-motivated attack. In other words these women are murdered specifically because they are women. There are other features too, which characterize the cases as Fregoso explains:

. . . all of the murdered women are poor, most are dark, and many have been tortured and sexually violated: raped, strangled or gagged, mutilated . . . or penetrated with objects.<sup>148</sup>

To understand why women (specifically poor, dark and young) in Juárez are the targets of male hate and violence, and henceforth, hypothesize about who is to blame, I will discuss below various discourses that are propagated to explain, and often conceal, the phenomenon. It will be revealed that men, Mexican and American – in government, the police, the media, and the workplace – control the discourses that construct and propagate images of Mexican women's femininity and morality, consequently delineating the real-life terms of their existence.

## **Morality Discourse: “Blame the Victim”**

The most common discourse circulated by Mexican officials blames the violence against women on their own alleged deplorable sexual morality and corrupted femininity.

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<sup>146</sup> Charles Bowden, *Juárez: the Laboratory of our Future* (Hong Kong: Aperture Foundations, Inc., 1998).

<sup>147</sup> ‘Femicide,’ Dictionary.com. *Webster's New Millennium™ Dictionary of English, Preview Edition (v 0.9.7)*, Lexico Publishing Group, LLC, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/femicide> (19 March, 2008).

<sup>148</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, ‘Voices Without Echo: The Global Gendered Apartheid,’ *Emergences* 10. 1 (2000): 137.

Whilst encouraging “hyperfemininity” and “hypersexuality”<sup>149</sup> within *maquiladoras*, women’s sexuality outside is debasingly associated with cultural and moral degeneration, and ultimately prostitution.<sup>150</sup> This presents a paradox whereby women are encouraged to flaunt their sexualized bodies to ensure job security within the factory (and are similarly sexually-objectified at home), but are demonized for such behaviour elsewhere. Moreover, as the boundary between discourse and reality ever blurs, *maquiladora* workers, and young women in border towns more generally, are often synonymously associated with prostitutes or sexually-promiscuous “liberal” women in the popular imagination.<sup>151</sup> Women today shoulder the blame for the supposed degeneration of Mexican culture, as they personify the loss of “traditional” values through their new financial independence as workers and alleged sexual liberalization – influenced by U.S. popular culture.<sup>152</sup> Fregoso calls this the “morality discourse,” “the subtext underneath . . . [which] is one of nostalgia: a lament for an earlier era of traditional, strong-arm masculinity.”<sup>153</sup>

Vila explains why Mexican women, particularly in Juárez, personify sexual and moral degradation in the Mexican imagination, linking the contemporary imagined construction of the “*Libertine Juareense*” with the mythical character of “*Malintzín*,” the betrayer of the ancient Mexican race.<sup>154</sup> He states: “*Malintzín* is resignified by the

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>150</sup> Vila, p. 112.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. This is particularly true of the Juareense woman, who is “by default . . . suspected of having loose morals and values” (p. 123). There *are* some *maquiladora* workers (and others) who work as prostitutes to supplement their income – many are forced to as they cannot survive on factory wages alone (p. 124). However the discourse grossly exaggerates this reality.

<sup>152</sup> Wright, p. 75.

<sup>153</sup> Fregoso, p. 139.

<sup>154</sup> Vila, p. 115. *Malintzín* is likened to the Mexican version of Eve.

prostitutes and female workers-as-prostitutes who supposedly, in one way or another, open their bodies to Americans.”<sup>155</sup> Women are accused of “ethnic and national treachery”<sup>156</sup> – shamed as betrayers of their race for imitating U.S. culture and having sex with *gringo* men, just as *Malintzín* did.<sup>157</sup> This illustrates the power of patriarchy and myth in Mexican culture, which historically and today scapegoats its women for the ills of society. Vila also explains the power of the “*Libertine Juareense*” by its symbiotic association with another popular discourse that has historically portrayed “the border as a site of violence, drugs, and prostitution”: the “city of vice” narrative.<sup>158</sup> The stigma attached to the border, and Juárez in particular,<sup>159</sup> is ultimately blamed on women (as prostitutes), according to Vila’s research.<sup>160</sup>

Alarmingly, this morality discourse has led to a Mexican media and governmental rhetoric that blames women themselves for the sexual violence they face in Juárez, as their alleged promiscuity places them in a vulnerable position (by frequenting bars and clubs at night, dressing provocatively, and courting male attention). The implication is that women are asking for trouble. Debbie Nathan explains: “many people in Juarez assume that women who work in maquilas, or women who frequent clubs, or women who dress in sexy clothes -- that they're all whores. And whores in Juarez deserve what

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid. The border represents the boundary of the Mexican social system and thus it is here where the body is susceptible to “pollution” from the U.S. See my Introduction, p. 3.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>157</sup> Vila explains that *Malintzín* was a “*vendida*” – a “sell-out” to the white race, accused of miscegenation (sex with white men), p. 115.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>159</sup> Juárez and Tijuana are the most notorious “cities of vice.” This narrative will be explored again later.

<sup>160</sup> Vila, p. 120. Vila found evidence of this narrative in interviews with both men and women in Juárez.

they get.”<sup>161</sup> Women are often accused “of leading a ‘*doble vida*’/‘double life,’ that is respectable work by day and casual sex work by night”<sup>162</sup> says Fregoso. Marisela Ortiz (grassroots activist) comments:

We knew that the femicide existed but there was a lot of misinformation about it, both from the authorities and from the media. They said that women were being murdered because they were prostitutes, because they were involved with drug dealers, because they were out at night in the streets . . .<sup>163</sup>

This “blame the victim” narrative is linked with what Wright terms “death by culture,”<sup>164</sup> which explains the violence and death in Juárez as an *inevitable* consequence of women’s sexual immorality, symptomatic of Mexico’s cultural decline. The restoration of “Mexican values” is placed above the need to find the perpetrators, as the victims are deemed unworthy: “They represent cultural value in decline and in consequence are possibly not valuable enough in death to warrant much concern.”<sup>165</sup> Wright explains “death by culture” as applicable to both the “corporate death” *maquiladora* workers experience through high turnover, and the literal death in Ciudad Juárez.<sup>166</sup> The “myth of female disposability”<sup>167</sup> is thus extended outside the factory:

At the heart of these seemingly disparate story lines is the crafting of the Mexican woman as a figure whose value can be extracted from her,

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<sup>161</sup> Debbie Nathan, ‘Missing the Story,’ *The Texas Observer*, 30 August 2002, p. 4 [http://www.womenontheborder.org/Articles/Senorita\\_Text.pdf](http://www.womenontheborder.org/Articles/Senorita_Text.pdf) (22 March 2008).

<sup>162</sup> Fregoso, p. 138.

<sup>163</sup> Marisela Ortiz (co-founder, May Our Daughters Return Home), *Juarez*.

<sup>164</sup> Wright, p. 76.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

whether . . . in the form of her virtue, her organs, or her efficiency on the production floor.<sup>168</sup>

Vila agrees that there is a definite link between the disposability discourse and the murders. Interestingly, he acknowledged this narrative before the murders received public attention in 1996, and consequently “was not surprised by what was going on”:<sup>169</sup>

My hypothesis was that, since this discourse was so prominent, perhaps the murderers saw the women they were killing only as prostitutes (women whose lives are less valued in many male discourses) instead of as workers (like themselves) or plain women (like their mothers and sisters) whose lives are more valued . . .<sup>170</sup>

The consequences of “blame the victim”/“death by culture” are catastrophic. First, by categorizing the victims as prostitutes (hence attracting, even deserving, sexual predation and violence) the Mexican authorities absolve themselves from blame for the crimes and divert public sympathy from the victims.<sup>171</sup> The government and media are involved in a “campaign . . . to deny the whole femicide,”<sup>172</sup> asserts Lorena Vassolo, Assistant Director of *Juarez*, which has had terrible repercussions. Ortiz says:

. . . [It] actually generated more crimes because if you ask the mothers if they thought at any point that their daughters would be murdered they say absolutely not, because they know [they] weren't prostitutes, they didn't go out at night, or dress provocatively . . . so they weren't believed to be at risk.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>169</sup> Vila, p. 12.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>171</sup> Ortiz, *Juarez*.

<sup>172</sup> Lorena Vassolo, *Juarez*.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

Some mothers have challenged the discourse, such as Elba Mancha Moreno, who says of victim Rebeca: “She was a very good daughter.”<sup>174</sup> Josefina González also remembers her daughter as a hard-worker and good mother: “She worked in the morning because Claudia would come home and take care of her daughters in the afternoon.”<sup>175</sup> However this has had little avail as the debasing official rhetoric remains. Moreover, scholars, activists, and journalists agree that the Mexican authorities are involved in the murders, not least for granting impunity to the killers and the networks of power which protect them.<sup>176</sup> Valdez asserts: “The state has more power than organized crime, but they don’t use it. They don’t want to use it because they are involved.”<sup>177</sup> Alex Flores agrees:

The Mexican authorities are either the least efficient in [the] world, or are involved . . . How else can one explain 450 sexually brutal murders, over an extended period of time . . . without finding a suspect?<sup>178</sup>

One means of obscuring justice has been to place blame on various scapegoats, often victims’ family members, and usually without tangible evidence.<sup>179</sup> Bill Conroy states: “The Mexican police find a scapegoat, torture a confession out of them, then start the count over.”<sup>180</sup> One scapegoat case was that of David Meza, charged with the

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<sup>174</sup> Elba Mancha Moreno, *Juarez*.

<sup>175</sup> Josefina González, *On the Edge*.

<sup>176</sup> This opinion is voiced in *Juarez* by Flores and Vassolo, Oscar Mainez (Chief of Forensic Services in Juárez, 1993-2001), Regina Orozco and Jesusa Rodríguez (social activists). Also in *On The Edge* by Bill Conroy (correspondent, *Narco News Bulletin*) and Jessica Marques (grassroots coordinator, Mexico Solidarity Network). See also Valdez, Chapter 31 and Bowden, p. 101.

<sup>177</sup> Valdez, *Juarez*.

<sup>178</sup> Flores, *Juarez*.

<sup>179</sup> Ortiz, *On the Edge*.

<sup>180</sup> Conroy, *On the Edge*.

rape and murder of his cousin, Neyra.<sup>181</sup> Speaking of his torture he said: "I felt like I was dying . . . So I told them I would sign anything they wanted."<sup>182</sup> Having secured Meza's false confession, the police stopped investigating Neyra's murder, and thus justice has never been delivered.<sup>183</sup> The state government has also tried to divert public scrutiny by blaming the murders on a single serial killer, such as Abdel Latif Sharif Sharif in 1995, described by Valdez as "the state's trophy suspect."<sup>184</sup> However, each time a man was charged, the murders continued,<sup>185</sup> undermining the government's claims that the attacks are by lone madmen (most likely foreigners).<sup>186</sup> According to the professional opinions I have encountered, this is clearly the work of systematic, organized crime.<sup>187</sup>

Furthermore, "investigations by the United Nations, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International, members of the U.S. Congress and other groups have repeatedly shown that local police have mishandled or fabricated evidence and failed to follow logical leads."<sup>188</sup> For example, a 1998 report by the U.S. National Commission for Human Rights charged "gross irregularities and general negligence in state investigations including, the mis-identification of corpses; . . . [and] failure to

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<sup>181</sup> Kevin Sullivan, 'In Mexico, a Question of Guilt by Protestation,' *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 10 October 2004, 'The Washington Office on Latin America' (WOLA) website, [http://www.wola.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=viewp&id=533&Itemid=8](http://www.wola.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=viewp&id=533&Itemid=8) (3 March 2008).

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Valdez, p. 139. Sharif was an Egyptian chemist with a U.S. sex-offense record, convicted for raping Blanca Estela and jailed until his death in 2006 (p. 141).

<sup>185</sup> Fregoso, p. 137.

<sup>186</sup> Valdez, *Juarez*.

<sup>187</sup> Ortiz; Castro; Jason Wallach (coordinator, Portland Central America Solidarity Committee); Bowden; and Marques: *On the Edge*.

<sup>188</sup> Sullivan, 'In Mexico, a Question of Guilt by Protestation.'

conduct autopsies or obtain semen analysis . . .”<sup>189</sup> Norma Andrade, mother of victim Lilia, claims “the government . . . in some cases, burned the garments it found.”<sup>190</sup> Moreno recounts her personal experience of corruption and injustice:

They found the murderers but they let them go. They paid the authorities off and now they are free . . .<sup>191</sup>

When explaining official collusion and cover-up, the experts have concluded that it boils down to power and money.<sup>192</sup> Valdez states: “there is a lot of money involved,” from which the authorities gain (through bribes), thus they choose “to look the other way, not to investigate and not to put the responsible criminals in prison.”<sup>193</sup> Bowden blames poverty for the corruption, expressed when he crudely asks: “. . . what do you think happens in a society that is poor and somebody shows up with a dump-truck full of money?”<sup>194</sup> Many, including Bowden, also blame the drug trade, which has saturated Juárez since the signing of NAFTA.<sup>195</sup> They suggest that “narco-traffickers . . . pretty much run the state . . . [and] the economy,”<sup>196</sup> thus are instrumental in corrupting the “the police force, and the judicial system, and politicians.”<sup>197</sup> Nathan asserts: “Juarez law enforcement authorities are low-paid, barely professionalized, and thoroughly prone to corruption by narco-traffickers.”<sup>198</sup> Within this environment of impunity, it is easy for rich

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<sup>189</sup> Fregoso, p. 138.

<sup>190</sup> Norma Andrade, *On the Edge*.

<sup>191</sup> Moreno, *Juarez*.

<sup>192</sup> Conroy, *On the Edge*.

<sup>193</sup> Valdez, *Juarez*.

<sup>194</sup> Bowden, *On the Edge*.

<sup>195</sup> The rise of drug-trafficking is intricately linked to globalization, discussed later.

<sup>196</sup> Marques, *On the Edge*.

<sup>197</sup> Martinez, *On the Edge*.

men, whether drug-traffickers, foreign businessmen, “snuff film-makers”<sup>199</sup> or serial-killers, to act without consequences:

If . . . you have money and power in Ciudad Juarez, what can stop you from carrying out your fantasy? Nothing.<sup>200</sup>

Some experts also implicate the federal government, particularly for allowing the impunity to continue. Carmen Huete states: “The PAN party<sup>201</sup> has given their permission for this to happen. . . . [because they] haven’t gotten involved in investigating any of these crimes.”<sup>202</sup> Many still believe the right-wing PAN party, to which current President Felipe Calderón is affiliated, condones the continuing violence and oppression against women.<sup>203</sup>

This impunity has also increased domestic violence in Juárez as ordinary men abuse the situation. Jessica Marques reports that the ‘*Casa Amiga*’ domestic violence shelter increasingly hears women’s claims that:

. . . when their husbands are beating them, one of the threats . . . [they] are using is the femicides . . . saying ‘look around you. I could kill you and dump your body and nobody is going to do a thing to stop me’ . . .<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Nathan, p. 5.

<sup>199</sup> One theory is that women are targets of the “snuff” film industry (their rapes and murders filmed for viewers’ sexual pleasure), which could explain why many victims are raped and strangled (and young and attractive).

<sup>200</sup> Mainez, *Juarez*.

<sup>201</sup> *Partido Acción Nacional*/The National Action Party.

<sup>202</sup> Carmen Huete (actor), *Juarez*.

<sup>203</sup> Ofelia Media (activist); Rodriguez; Orozco; Huete; and Valdez: *Juarez*. Nathan, however, is wary of pointing blame at institutions higher than the local police, believing there is an element of “conspiracy thinking” to such claims (p. 6).

<sup>204</sup> Marques, *On the Edge*.

Substantiating such threats, many cases are indeed domestic violence-related. Nathan actually believes the *majority* of the killings fit into this category, rather than those “raped and murdered in the desert by unknown assailants” – the most popular theory.<sup>205</sup> Either way, it is clear that there is a complex web of assailants involved, including some “ordinary” Mexican men targeting their own wives or other close acquaintances. Undoubtedly, therefore, the morality discourse is a farce – a tool to conceal systematic corruption. This has amplified the climate of violence and misogyny in Juárez by painting women as saboteurs of patriarchy.<sup>206</sup> Thus the murders could be understood as an extreme retaliation by macho Mexican men against changing gender roles – this conflict symbolically and physically manifesting on women’s raped and mutilated bodies.

### **How is the United States Implicated?**

As this male backlash is correlated in the Mexican imaginary with U.S. cultural and economic “pollution” in Juárez (manifesting on women’s bodies),<sup>207</sup> the U.S. is partially involved in cultivating a discourse which oppresses Mexican women. Pheona Donohoe agrees: “America is partially to blame for the moral chaos across the border.”<sup>208</sup> Moreover, the very cause of male unemployment and disproportionate female employment, fuelling men’s anger, was the U.S.’s economic intrusion in the border through the *maquiladora* industry and the myth of female disposability is cultivated within U.S.-owned factories. This discourse has also extended north: the killings went

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<sup>205</sup> Nathan, p. 2. Nathan, for example, critiques Lourdes Portillo’s 2001 documentary *Senorita Extraviada* for overplaying the conspiracy of the desert murders, in-so-doing, veering “into pop-culture paranoia” (p. 5).

<sup>206</sup> Fregoso, p. 139.

<sup>207</sup> Vila, p. 114.

<sup>208</sup> Pheona Donohoe, Director of *Women of Juarez* documentary, Citizen Shift website,

<http://old.citizen.nfb.ca/onf/info?aid=8442&eid=21961&atid=27> (10 January 2008).

unreported in the U.S. for years, and only recently have they received high-profile attention.<sup>209</sup> Ralph Armbruster Sandoval blames media disinterest on the disposability discourse: “These women’s lives don’t count,” therefore “it’s no wonder why [American] people don’t know that poor, Mexican women, 4/500 of them, are killed – the media just don’t take that into account . . .”<sup>210</sup>

### **“Blame the Culture”**

The U.S. media bought into the “blame the victim” discourse for many years, verified by its prolonged silence. This can be partly explained by a U.S. narrative that blames Mexico itself for its “cultural deficiencies” (used also within *maquiladoras*).<sup>211</sup> In this case, the narrative frames the situation as a “Mexican problem”: of Mexican men raping and murdering Mexican women, blamed on their “culture of machismo.” This absolves the U.S. of responsibility and diverts media attention and governmental involvement. This is also linked to the “city of vice” narrative, which has also long been part of the American popular imaginary.<sup>212</sup> I believe the narrative, when promoted in the U.S., demonstrates the continuance of American exceptionalism today. That the U.S. public still accept this image is proven by the continuing U.S. tourist trade to border cities, especially Tijuana and Juárez, fuelled by the “exotic” allure of drinking, gambling, and “loose women.” The U.S. media also degrades Juárez’s image: for example, the

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<sup>209</sup> Only after human rights organizations’ campaigning and local reporting, particularly by Valdez, did the crimes receive (limited) national attention in 1996. In 2006 two Hollywood films were based on the murders. However, the severity of the situation remains obscured, and the crimes, underreported.

<sup>210</sup> Ralph Armbruster Sandoval (Professor of Chicano Studies), *On the Edge*.

<sup>211</sup> Wright, p. 87.

<sup>212</sup> The narrative developed during World War One when U.S. military facilities were based in El Paso and San Diego, making Juárez and Tijuana attractive “providers of ‘leisure’ (alcohol and prostitution) for the predominantly single, male population” (Vila, pp. 113-4). Martínez also traces the discourse to the Prohibition Era, when Americans flocked to border cities in search of liquor and other “sins” (Martínez, pp. 151-2).

“recent NBC-TV miniseries ‘Kingpin’” is “replete with sex, drug-dealing, gunplay and intrigues.”<sup>213</sup>

## **Globalization**

The most convincing narrative explaining the murders and revealing the U.S.’s role links the climate of violence in Juárez to globalization, particularly the signing of NAFTA. The deaths in fact began in 1993, “one year after NAFTA was signed by executive agreement in August of 1992,”<sup>214</sup> which Marques asserts is no coincidence.<sup>215</sup> One key effect of NAFTA (discussed in Chapter One) was the destruction of Mexican agricultural industry – “depopulating the Mexican countryside, [and] launching millions . . . onto the highways of migration.”<sup>216</sup> Overpopulation at the border, particularly male, was worsened by *maquiladoras’* female-hiring bias. Furthermore, evidence suggests that there is a strong corollary between NAFTA and the escalating drug trade along the border, particularly Juárez. Nathan says NAFTA re-routed the U.S.’s South American drug trade, which in the 1980s primarily entered “through the Caribbean and South Florida,” but in the 1990s “shifted to Mexican border cities like Juarez.”<sup>217</sup> As free trade worsened poverty in Juárez, more men became enticed by the industry. Marques explains the link between NAFTA, male unemployment, and drug-trafficking:

. . . people in Mexico are not able to support themselves farming traditional agricultural products anymore like corn and coffee, so . . . are faced with

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<sup>213</sup> Michael Newton, ‘Ciudad Juarez: The Serial Killer’s Playground,’ p. 2, Crime Library website, [http://www.crimelibrary.com/serial\\_killers/predators/ciudad\\_juarez/index.html](http://www.crimelibrary.com/serial_killers/predators/ciudad_juarez/index.html), (2 April 2008).

<sup>214</sup> Fregoso, p. 140.

<sup>215</sup> Marques, *On the Edge*.

<sup>216</sup> Gonzalez and Fernandez, introduction, xiv.

<sup>217</sup> Nathan, p. 2.

the hard choice of migrating [to the U.S.], or cultivating a product that can actually be sold on the market at a profitable rate [drugs].<sup>218</sup>

Violence, lawlessness, and corruption increased simultaneously with drug-crime.<sup>219</sup>

Thus it is clear that the U.S.'s neo-liberal policies have increased poverty and unemployment in Juárez, leading to narco-trafficking and violent crime, fostering a systemic network of corruption between drug barons, police officers and government bodies.<sup>220</sup> This has led proponents of the "globalization discourse" to implicate the U.S. in the murders. Bowden sarcastically asserts: "our brilliant NAFTA and our brilliant governments produced this."<sup>221</sup> Martinez agrees: "I believe that Americans have played a direct role in what has happened there."<sup>222</sup> This reveals the disparity between the official rhetoric of "globalization" and the reality. As Bowden says, "the benefit . . . from globalization is a long time coming."<sup>223</sup> Furthermore, Bowden pessimistically concludes that the horror of Juárez is in fact, "the laboratory of our future."<sup>224</sup>

## Conclusion

Unfortunately it is impossible to draw accurate conclusions about the identity of the killers. Michael Newton asserts: "Despite all the suspects, all the conspiracies, all the reassuring words from public officials, it is clear that the case is nowhere near

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<sup>218</sup> Marques, *On the Edge*.

<sup>219</sup> Martinez, *On the Edge*.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Bowden, *On the Edge*.

<sup>222</sup> Martinez, *On the Edge*.

<sup>223</sup> Bowden, *On the Edge*.

<sup>224</sup> Bowden, p. 117.

resolution.”<sup>225</sup> What is plain, though, is that both countries are responsible for the corruption and impunity that allows the murders to continue. While Mexican officials’ culpability is undeniable, the U.S. is also guilty of contributing to the violent, misogynist climate in Juárez – through their exploitative neoliberal policies and their cultural supremacist attitude towards Mexico. Mexican cultural nationalist ideology is also instrumental as it has been shown that women’s abused and discarded bodies physically represent the transnational conflict between U.S.

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<sup>225</sup> Newton, p. 10.

## Chapter Three

### Border Patrol Rape: The Sexual Violation of Mexican Women's Bodies as a consequence of Militarization, Nativism, and Patriarchy

Daily, attacks against border crossers occur in the form of brutal beatings, assaults (including rape), and harassment by state and federal officials as well as by regional vigilantes. Like all militarized endeavors, the state is ultimately accountable for this violence.<sup>226</sup>

The final way in which this thesis investigates exploitation of the female body along the U.S.-Mexico border focuses on the border-crossing experience itself. While traversing the border, Mexican women frequently face violent and oppressive encounters with American personnel, particularly Border Patrol officers,<sup>227</sup> and many are raped. This chapter will provide two case studies exemplifying Border Patrol rape, and discuss the circumstances that have cultivated a violent atmosphere in the region and allow violations to continue. Evidence is drawn primarily from three investigative reports by reputable human rights organizations: Border Action Network (2007),<sup>228</sup> Amnesty International (1998),<sup>229</sup> and Human Rights Watch (1995).<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Falcón, p. 203.

<sup>227</sup> The Border Patrol is the law enforcement branch of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), under jurisdiction of the United States Department of Homeland Security.

<sup>228</sup> Border Action Network is a grassroots organization in southern Arizona. This recent report investigates the ongoing human rights violations in the Arizona-Sonora area; data collected through interviews with local people and analyzed by legal/constitutional experts: *Human and Civil Rights Violations Uncovered: A Report from the Arizona/Sonora Border*, Border Action Network (2007), [http://www.borderaction.org/PDFs/abuse\\_documentation\\_2007.pdf](http://www.borderaction.org/PDFs/abuse_documentation_2007.pdf), (27 March 2008).

<sup>229</sup> Amnesty International is a globally-renowned human rights organization. This report focuses on Border Patrol offences from San Diego, California, 3000 miles east to Brownsville, Texas; interviews conducted with human rights monitors and lawyers, and Border Patrol and INS staff: *Human Rights Concerns in the Border Region with Mexico*, Amnesty International/USA (20 May 1998), <http://amnesty.org.ru/library/Index/ENGAMR510031998?open&of=ENG-390>, (28 March 2008).

<sup>230</sup> Human Rights Watch is an international non-governmental organization. This report is the third in a series of fact-finding investigative trips to southern California and Arizona; data collected from government officials, human rights organizations, lawyers, INS officials, and victims themselves: *Crossing the Line: Human Rights Abuses Along the U.S. Border with Mexico Persist Amid Climate of Impunity*, Human Rights

## Militarization of the Border

Before World War One Mexicans could cross the border legally and easily.<sup>231</sup> Then, after the Great Depression, immigration became a contentious issue. In 1924 the Border Patrol was created under the Immigration Bureau and by 1950 it was based predominantly at the southern border to tackle illegal immigration.<sup>232</sup> Its size and powers have grown steadily in correlation with rising anti-immigration fervour in the U.S., particularly post-1965, in response to increasing numbers of Latin American and Asian arrivals, including a “second wave” of Mexican migrants. A diminished need for cheap labour combined with nativist fears of newcomers<sup>233</sup> resulted in the reversal of previous “open door” policies that had welcomed Mexican labourers (such as *Bracero*). An increasingly belligerent attitude towards immigration resounded in American public, media, and governmental discourse.<sup>234</sup> Particularly contentious was escalating undocumented Mexican migration, because, as Jonathan Xavier Inda explains, the U.S. public tends to blame “immigrants, primarily the undocumented, for . . . the socioeconomic ills of the United States: unemployment, crime, deteriorating schools, deficiencies in social services, and so forth.”<sup>235</sup> The issue was addressed through

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Watch/Americas (April 1995), <http://hrw.org/reports/1995/Us1.htm>, (21 March 2008). My case studies are partially drawn from this report.

<sup>231</sup> Amnesty International, p.2. Also see my Introduction for background on labour exploitation.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> For a fuller discussion of nativism in response to “new immigration” see George Sánchez, ‘Face the Nation: Race, Immigration, and the Rise of Nativism in Late Twentieth-Century America,’ *International Migration Review* 31.4 (1997): 1009-30.

<sup>234</sup> Public vigilante campaigns for example surfaced in border regions, such as ‘Light up the Border,’ (San Diego, 1989): John F. Dulles, *Federal Immigration Law Enforcement in the Southwest: Civil Rights Impacts on Border Communities* (Los Angeles: Diane Publishing, 1997), p. 37.

<sup>235</sup> Jonathon Xavier Inda, ‘The Value of Immigrant Life,’ in Segura and Zavella (eds.), p. 134.

federal legislation (the 1986 Immigration and Control Act), but this failed to stem the flow.

During the 1990s the government reassessed the “undocumented problem,” devising a strategy to tackle the issue head-on: border militarization. Following substantial budget increases, new technologies and resources such as “new lighting, fencing, ground sensors, mobile infra-red night scope cameras, more vehicles and computerized systems”<sup>236</sup> helped the Border Patrol apprehend illegal immigrants. Operations including ‘Hold the Line’ in El Paso (September 1993) and ‘Operation Gatekeeper’ in San Diego (October 1994), were a “show of force” in these particularly porous areas.<sup>237</sup> The presence of high steel fences and numerous law-enforcement personnel have made border residents feel they are living in “an occupied territory.”<sup>238</sup> But the effect on migrants, especially the undocumented, is even more threatening. Mexicans attempting to travel north illegally have been forced to risk their lives by journeying “across the desert, over the mountains, and through rural areas where the physical dangers are considerable.”<sup>239</sup> Thus, contrary to the official line that boasts the “immediate success” of such operations, producing a “drastic reduction in apprehensions,”<sup>240</sup> it is widely reported that “these measures have failed to reduce the total number of migrants”; but rather “redirected the flow to the deserts and

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<sup>236</sup> Amnesty International, p. 3.

<sup>237</sup> ‘Border Patrol History,’ U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) website, 15 July 2003, [http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/border\\_security/border\\_patrol/border\\_patrol\\_ohs/history.xml](http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/border_security/border_patrol/border_patrol_ohs/history.xml), (28 March 2008).

<sup>238</sup> Padre Robert Carney (resident of Douglas, Arizona), speaking in *Border Crossings*, documentary by Heather Lares (USA: Pan Left Productions, 2001).

<sup>239</sup> Amnesty International, p. 3.

<sup>240</sup> ‘Border Patrol History,’ CBP website.

mountains”.<sup>241</sup> The consequences are deadly: for example “between 1993 and 1996, it is estimated that at least 1,185 migrants died in the attempt to cross the border.”<sup>242</sup>

### **Open or Closed?**

[The border] has never been intended to stop labor from migrating ‘al otro lado’ [to the other side].<sup>243</sup> On the contrary, it functions like a dam, creating a reservoir of labor-power on the Mexican side of the border that can be tapped on demand via the secret aqueduct managed by . . . ‘coyotes’ [people smugglers] . . . for the farms of south Texas, the hotels of Las Vegas and the sweatshops of Los Angeles.<sup>244</sup>

Davis’ statement suggests the use of Mexican labour in the U.S. widely continues despite the contradictory rhetoric of immigration law and border militarization: “The paradox of US-Mexico integration is that a barricaded border and a borderless economy are being constructed simultaneously.”<sup>245</sup> This illustrates the hypocrisy of these policies, which ideologically demonize immigrants in the popular imagination, blamed for stealing American jobs and draining public services, while conversely many industries depend on undocumented Mexicans and exploit their labour: “Cheap labor means lower prices for goods and services – a benefit for all Americans.”<sup>246</sup>

The border, therefore, is deliberately porous – open or closed on U.S. terms. Mexican labour is still valued as a (disposable) commodity by U.S. business and families

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<sup>241</sup> Rudy Adler et al., *Border Film Project: Photos by Migrants & Minutemen on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (New York: Abrams, 2007).

<sup>242</sup> Amnesty International, p. 3.

<sup>243</sup> Acuña says that during *Bracero*, “while the press condemned migration from Mexico . . . the border patrol looked the other way when growers asked” (*Occupied America*, p. 156). Thus the U.S. has a history of manipulating the border’s defences to suit their labour needs.

<sup>244</sup> Davis, p. 27.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> Adler et al.

who hire Mexican maids, even as racism and nativism scar migrants' lives within the U.S., and govern their encounters with border personnel. Moreover, the very impetuses for migration north (poverty, unemployment, land displacement) have been predominantly an outcome of U.S. economic policy in Mexico, particularly NAFTA.<sup>247</sup>

There are many reasons why Mexicans cross the border illegally, including "severe financial need, inability to obtain the requisite papers (passport or border crossing card), and . . . to reunite with family members . . . in the USA."<sup>248</sup> For most, *el norte* represents hope and opportunity for financial progress: Mexicans are fleeing the dire economic and social conditions within Mexico, which ironically, the U.S. helped foster. Although migrants were once predominantly male, women today "are crossing the border alone in greater numbers."<sup>249</sup>

### **"Threat to National Security"**

For those who choose not to risk their lives travelling perilous desert terrain, crossing instead through fences or at checkpoints themselves, the journey may nevertheless be dangerous. Daily, men, women, and children face violent and oppressive confrontations with U.S. officials. The prime targets are the undocumented, although abuses are also reported against document-holders, and even U.S. citizens.<sup>250</sup> From this it can be reasoned that attacks are racially-motivated. Amnesty International reports that "people of Latin American descent have reportedly been ill-treated, detained, interrogated, searched and harassed on account of their ethnic origin."<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> See pp. 18 and 43 of this thesis.

<sup>248</sup> Amnesty International, p. 15.

<sup>249</sup> Falcón, p. 207.

<sup>250</sup> Amnesty International, p. 2.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

Abusive and unlawful treatment of migrants is not new, but has likely increased due to militarization, says Falcón.<sup>252</sup> She believes that militarization has amplified a confrontational, aggressive environment at the border, as the policy “violently reinforces the territory of the United States.”<sup>253</sup> One of the key effects has been to support the perception of Mexican immigrants as a “national enemy” – a threat to national security. Such fears were invigorated following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001: “in the aftermath of 9/11 a complete shutdown of the U.S.-Mexico border occurred . . . contributing to the classification of the border as an area for national security.”<sup>254</sup> The US Customs and Border Patrol department itself makes the point: “The priority mission of the Border Patrol is preventing terrorists and terrorists’ weapons, including weapons of mass destruction, from entering the United States.”<sup>255</sup> This has cultivated a hostile attitude towards immigrants as they are portrayed in official rhetoric as (racialized) enemies of the state.

Another factor creating an antagonistic environment was the militarization of border personnel; through both the integration of armed forces, and “the modification of the Border Patrol to resemble the armed forces via its equipment, structure, and tactics”,<sup>256</sup> explains Falcón. Military personnel have been regularly deployed in the region since the 1980s in response to the rising “threat to national security” and the U.S.’s “War on Drugs”,<sup>257</sup> while the Immigration Act of 1990 increased the Border Patrol’s “arrest powers

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<sup>252</sup> Falcón, p. 207.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 205-6.

<sup>255</sup> ‘Border Patrol mission statement,’ CBP website, [http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/border\\_security/border\\_patrol/](http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/border_security/border_patrol/), (28 March 2008).

<sup>256</sup> Falcón, p. 204.

<sup>257</sup> Amnesty International, p. 3. This was made possible in 1981 when President Reagan circumvented “the historic Posse Comitatus Act of 1879,” allowing military personnel “to assist civilian law enforcement agencies” for the first time (p. 19).

. . . as part of the federal government's efforts to interdict narcotics entering the country."<sup>258</sup> Ideologically, the department has also been militarized: "transferring the INS from the Department of Labor to the Department of Justice in 1940" (and later to the Department of Homeland Security) "altered the classification of immigration as an issue of labor to one of national security."<sup>259</sup> These endeavours have contributed to intensifying Border Patrol hostility towards immigrants, subsequently increasing "the risk that human rights violations may occur."<sup>260</sup>

### **Effect on Women's Bodies: "Rape as a weapon of War"<sup>261</sup>**

Falcón and others have likened border militarization to "low-intensity-conflict (LIC)" military doctrine, which involves using non-military bodies adopting military tactics, targeted at civilian populations,<sup>262</sup> and is "typically accompanied with a lack of government accountability."<sup>263</sup> One effect has been to justify the use of violence when apprehending or detaining immigrants as a necessary tactic of war.<sup>264</sup> Furthermore, Falcón suggests that "the execution of LIC doctrine can create a climate conducive to rape."<sup>265</sup> This is because, inspired by a discourse and policy that constructs Mexican migrants as a threat to national security, the Border Patrol espouses an "us versus

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<sup>258</sup> HRW, p. 2.

<sup>259</sup> Falcón, p. 204.

<sup>260</sup> Amnesty International, p. 2.

<sup>261</sup> Falcón, p. 203.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>263</sup> Border Action Network, p. 6.

<sup>264</sup> Falcón, p. 205.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

them' philosophy"<sup>266</sup> that infuses their encounters with migrants with hostility. Moreover, this "contributes to the construction of a racialized enemy" (the immigrant) that has particularly become associated "with women's bodies, which symbolize a nation" (Mexico).<sup>267</sup> Thus, although men too frequently encounter violence with border personnel, women's bodies in particular represent conflict between the U.S. and Mexico. Rape powerfully symbolizes their unequal colonial relationship, as male bodies (American) are used to conquer (physically and symbolically) sexualized and racialized female bodies (Mexican). Falcón concludes therefore that "rape is a weapon of war": a "hegemonic tool" employed by the U.S. to wield "power and control" over Mexico.<sup>268</sup> This practice is "systematic", as cases are "not random or isolated", but often planned and "institutionally supported".<sup>269</sup>

A final factor contributing to Border Patrol rape is the climate of hyper-masculinity within the organization fostered by militarization. This is due to the overwhelming male dominance of INS personnel and the masculinized nature of military doctrine and practice traditionally.<sup>270</sup> Violence takes on a gendered dimension when male officers target the weakest, most exploitable group (women). By raping women, men demonstrate the power of the nation through physical domination, while simultaneously reaffirming their masculinity, gratifying their sexual desires by abusing Mexican women's bodies. Thus patriarchy, hyper-masculinity, nativism, and colonialism have all helped induce an environment conducive to rape at the Mexican border.

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>270</sup> Falcón, p. 206.

## Case Studies

Below I provide two examples of Border Patrol rape to show how the U.S.'s politics of immigration affects the lives of real women traversing the border.

### Juanita Gómez:

On 3 September 1993, twenty-two-year-old Juanita Gómez and her female cousin, Ana, crossed through a hole in the fence between Nogales, Sonora, and Nogales, Arizona.<sup>271</sup> After meeting two male friends at a McDonald's on the U.S. side, the group was apprehended by Border Patrol agent, Larry Dean Selders. The officer detained the two women in his vehicle, where he "asked them if they had papers," which they did not.<sup>272</sup> He then threatened to take them to the station "for processing and deportation to Mexico" if they would not have sex with him.<sup>273</sup> The women declined Selders' proposition, following which he allegedly "instructed Ana to get out of the truck, and . . . drove away with Juanita," subsequently raping her.<sup>274</sup> Afterwards, Juanita went to the Mexican Consulate, where Ana had already reported her kidnapping. Both women identified Selders in a photo lineup; however, the detectives "did not believe either of the women's statements."<sup>275</sup> They also assert that one detective inquired if they were prostitutes and threatened them with imprisonment.<sup>276</sup> Juanita recalls: "They treated me as if I were guilty of something, not a victim."<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>272</sup> HRW, p. 9.

<sup>273</sup> Falcón, p. 208.

<sup>274</sup> HRW, p. 10.

<sup>275</sup> Falcón, p. 208.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> HRW, p. 10.

Human Rights Watch reports that “from the beginning, the handling and investigation of the case indicated incompetence and bias.”<sup>278</sup> Important evidence was lost, such as Selders’ clothes, as police incompetence meant he was “not picked up for questioning until after 6 P.M., more than three hours after Juanita reported her rape.”<sup>279</sup> Also, “police reportedly seized the wrong Border Patrol vehicle, and held it for a week and a half before they realized their mistake, thereby ensuring that all meaningful evidence was destroyed.”<sup>280</sup> Selders remained employed with the agency until he negotiated a “no-contest plea” of the “lowest class of felony available,” sentenced to only one year in prison, and paroled after six months.<sup>281</sup> The case remained under review by federal prosecutors however and Selders later pleaded guilty to charges of civil rights violations.<sup>282</sup> His sentence was only fourteen months imprisonment and he “received credit for time served” (awaiting trial).<sup>283</sup>

**Maria:**

Maria was stopped by Border Patrol officer, Luis Esteves in Calexico, California, on 16 December 1989.<sup>284</sup> Esteves asked to see her papers and then invited her on a date that evening, which she cautiously accepted. Maria reports that shortly after picking her up that evening, Esteves lured her to his home so he could “change his clothes,” soon

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Falcón, p. 209.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

after which he “told her she had to have sex with him.”<sup>285</sup> “Fearful for her life” as Esteves had “positioned a gun on each side of the bed,” Maria complied.<sup>286</sup> She later recounted that Esteves “forced an object into her vagina, placed his hands into various parts of her body, orally copulated her and forced her to have intercourse with him.”<sup>287</sup> However Maria did not show up to the preliminary hearing and consequently the charges were dropped.<sup>288</sup> Esteves resumed “active duty as an agent”<sup>289</sup> until he was arrested in 1992 after allegedly raping another woman, “found guilty on three counts of felonious sexual misconduct, and sentenced to twenty-four years in prison.”<sup>290</sup> However he appealed and was “acquitted on all charged in December 1994.”<sup>291</sup> Esteves actually had a history of violence against women, with past domestic violence allegations and a reputation of “problematic behavior toward women early in his career.”<sup>292</sup> Falcón asserts that the INS is partially to blame for allowing Esteves “to commit multiple acts of violence against women” by failing to conduct a thorough background check before hiring him.<sup>293</sup>

## Conclusion

The case studies illustrate many elements of Border Patrol rape. First, they highlight the systematic nature of abuses, as both demonstrated an element of planning.

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> James Cavallaro, *Frontier Injustice* (USA: HRW/Americas, 1993), p. 9.

<sup>288</sup> Falcón, p. 212.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> HRW (1995), p. 4.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Falcón, p. 215.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

Juanita, for example, claimed Selders had seen the girls crossing through the fence initially, but waited until later to apprehend them.<sup>294</sup> Second, they reveal that rape is institutionally supported: in Juanita's case as police incompetence and indifference both hindered the investigation and undermined the integrity of her story. The disturbingly short sentences served by both men, and the fact they continued working as agents until their convictions, also raises alarming questions regarding the conduct of justice. Furthermore, all three reports which I have consulted denounce the INS for inadequate prevention and redress of abuses against border-crossers. Particular issues of concern are: the substandard complaints system for reporting abuses;<sup>295</sup> poor training of new officers;<sup>296</sup> lack of an independent review staff;<sup>297</sup> an environment of intimidation, discouraging victims from coming forward;<sup>298</sup> and a "code of silence" within the agency, deterring officers from testifying against one another.<sup>299</sup>

Third, both men exploited their power as law-enforcement officers and the women's converse vulnerability as (potentially) undocumented migrants (although Maria did have papers), in Juanita's case, threatening her with deportation. This shows the discourse of U.S. imperialism in practice; the American male in power exploiting the Mexican woman's inferior legal status through the sexual degradation of her body. Lastly, it is also interesting that a detective in Juanita's case invoked the morality (prostitution) discourse; used as a tool of power both within *maquiladoras* to objectify women, and in the official rhetoric surrounding the murders in Ciudad Juárez to justify the crimes. This

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<sup>294</sup> HRW, p. 9.

<sup>295</sup> Amnesty International, p. 5.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>298</sup> Border Action Network, p. 6; HRW, p. 17.

<sup>299</sup> HRW, p. 19.

shows that U.S. personnel have also been influenced by the discourse, which propagates a degraded moral image of Mexican women in the border, and justifies the violence and sexual oppression they face.

It is clear, therefore, that the INS and Border Patrol are in need of serious reform to address the corruption and impunity that continues to permit violence against women and abuses against people of Latin origin in general at the border. Despite taking some steps towards reform in response to pressure from human rights organizations, for example forming a “Citizens Advisory Panel”,<sup>300</sup> many of the suggested initiatives have not been implemented and the abuses continue.<sup>301</sup> Thus it is doubtful that the Border Patrol is living up to the standards it has proclaimed: “professionalism, honor, integrity, [and] respect for human life.”<sup>302</sup>

Moreover, as militarization continues to be the U.S. government strategy to tackle undocumented immigration,<sup>303</sup> and is ideologically associated with both national security and the War on Drugs,<sup>304</sup> border-crossers will continue to face a nativist and xenophobic backlash from the public in the form of vigilante violence, and abuse from immigration officials at the border. The most recent report concludes: “Such brutal policing practices, wielded predominantly against people of a single ethnicity, contradict both the law and the intent of responsible criminal justice practice. In addition, they promote

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<sup>300</sup> Amnesty International, p. 1. The CAP’s 1997 report acknowledged the inadequacy of the INS complaints process and the lack of professionalism within the organization.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., p. 6; Border Action Network, p. 7.

<sup>302</sup> ‘Border Patrol History,’ CBP website.

<sup>303</sup> Federal lawmakers insisted in 2007 that “border enforcement was sustained as the unquestioned basis for any solution to the realities of immigration,” (Border Action Network, p. 7).

<sup>304</sup> In 1986 “Operation Alliance” formally integrated the issues of “drugs, weapons, [and] aliens” crossing the border and the federal government continues to prioritize national defence and drug interdiction in its budget and manifesto (Ibid., p. 19).

forms of ethnic and regional inequality that US civil rights law and international human rights laws were designed to prevent.”<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

## Conclusion

Having investigated three specific sites along the U.S.-Mexico frontier, I have demonstrated that the Mexican female body is exploited economically, physically, psychologically, and sexually; by U.S. corporate power, government policies, and personnel; and Mexican men. Through critical analysis of a broad range of secondary material, as well as examining primary accounts of abuse, I have revealed the systematic nature of oppression; catalyzed by “globalization,” and supported by the historically-embedded colonial relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. Each case study has revealed a different aspect of women’s exploitation: physical and sexual abuse in *maquiladoras*; brutal and violent murder in Ciudad Juárez; and rape at border crossing-points. However, common themes recur throughout: (1) U.S. ideologies of power, (2) Mexican patriarchy, (3) imperialism, and (4) nativism and racism. Through this powerful combination of exploitative discourses and policies, the Mexican female body has been racially and sexually objectified; viewed and treated as disposable.

As discussed in my Introduction, U.S. imperialism is discursively protected by American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. Used historically to justify territorial expansion, the subordination of minorities, and white supremacy, these ideologies continue to support the oppression of Mexicans today. Chapter One has explained how *maquiladora* managers adhere to a racist and nationalist belief in Mexican inferiority, exhibited through the hierarchical factory structure – visually placing U.S. personnel above Mexican workers. Factories also cultivate a degraded image of the Mexican woman (as untrainable and unintelligent), based on alleged inferior cultural traits. Manifest Destiny rhetoric echoes within *maquiladoras*: U.S. corporations’ belief that they are helping Mexicans by providing jobs in a supposedly nurturing environment is reminiscent of nineteenth-century claims of Americans as world-leaders in democracy

and civilization. The “city of vice” narrative is also invoked by assuming women are “better off” as workers than prostitutes.

Chapter Two further illustrated the U.S.’s cultural supremacist attitude, shown by the public and media’s prolonged disinterest in the Juárez murders, and their continuing acceptance of an outdated, degraded image of the border. The U.S. willingly dismissed this cross-border issue as a “Mexican problem” because of their racist belief in the superiority of U.S. liberal democratic culture over Mexican machismo (“blame the culture”). Chapter Three also demonstrated that U.S. personnel espouse a hierarchical view of U.S. and Mexican culture, as Border Patrol officers unapologetically and with impunity abuse Mexican migrants and the INS fails to protect their rights.

As my work progressed, it became clear that Mexican women are often dually-exploited: by U.S. imperialism *and* Mexican patriarchy. Chapter One showed how *maquiladora* managers are able to manipulate the existing gendered relationships in Mexican culture to maximize production. Women’s culturally-inscribed sexual subordination is also exploited to create a highly-sexualized environment on the shopfloor. This reveals the strength of Mexican patriarchy today, providing U.S. corporations with a built-in mechanism of control, and implicating Mexican men in women’s exploitation as they participate in denigrating and objectifying female workers. Chapter Two then revealed the violent backlash by Mexican men against the perceived threat to patriarchal tradition outside the factory; because of women’s cultural and economic “liberalization”: women are blamed for the loss of traditional Mexican values, Juárez’s negative image, and ultimately their own deaths. Thus the Mexican female body is vulnerable to abuse by both American and Mexican men, as they personify the conflict between U.S. liberalism and Mexican cultural nationalism.

My dissertation has illustrated how U.S. imperialism is primarily economic, enforced through coercive political-economic policies in Mexico. The introduction explained the

historical precedents enabling structural exploitation of Mexican labour and creating Mexico's financial dependence on the U.S.; caused by continual intrusions in the Mexican economy. Labour contracts since the nineteenth-century initiated migration towards *el norte*, weakened Mexican agricultural industry, and worsened unemployment and poverty. Economic empire was then secured by taking advantage of Mexico's weakened economic-political status and reliance on American loans, trade, and tourism. The U.S. expanded its empire onto Mexican soil with the BIP in 1965, and has since exploited female labour economically, physically, psychologically, and sexually, as Chapter One illustrated. This also accelerated migration, worsening overpopulation and male unemployment at the border. Mexico was officially brought into the globalized neoliberal economy through NAFTA. As Chapter One explained, BIP and NAFTA were negotiated on U.S. terms: disastrous for the Mexican economy, national autonomy, and workers' livelihoods.

In Chapter Two I suggested that U.S. imperialism played a part in the Juárez murders. American cultural and economic invasion in the region fuelled a Mexican backlash against modernization and liberalism (targeted at women), aided by the disposability discourse cultivated in U.S.-owned factories. Moreover, the murders began almost simultaneously with the signing of NAFTA, suggesting a direct link between globalization, poverty, the drug trade, and the epidemic. In Chapter Three I also discussed NAFTA's effect on migration, showing how Mexicans ironically attempt to start their lives again in the very country that caused the socio-economic dislocations, which forced them to leave their own. I also highlighted the connection between drug-trafficking and migration: as the U.S. ideologically associates illegal immigration with the "War on Drugs," violence increases at the border. (However they fail to admit the effect of their own neoliberal policies in creating both of these phenomenons.) Moreover, the rape of Mexican women by Border Patrol officers shows U.S. imperialism in practice:

American men in power exploit Mexican women's inferior legal status through the sexual degradation of their bodies.

Finally, my thesis has shown how nativism and racism continue to oppress Mexican women today. The historical racialization of Mexicans by the U.S. public and government set the precedent for prevailing racist attitudes and the belief in Mexicans as disposable commodities. In Chapters One and Two I demonstrated the continuance of this degradation, as the Mexican woman is viewed as disposable, both as a worker, and a human being.

In Chapter Three I also revealed that the exploitation of labour through cycles of recruitment and repatriation continues today as the border is deliberately porous. Moreover, nativist fears of immigrants have steadily intensified, leading to anti-immigration campaigns and government policies, border militarization, and vigilante and Border Patrol violence against migrants. These conditions have contributed to institutionalized rape of Mexican women.

It is evident that a complex set of factors has led to women's exploitation along the border; stemming from U.S. policies of colonialism, globalization, and militarization; and both Mexican and American cultural nationalist ideologies. Ultimately, this dissertation has shown that the Mexican female body is where conflict between the United States and Mexico symbolically and physically manifests itself. Mexican women, as workers, citizens, and migrants, are economically, physically, psychologically, and sexually exploited through an unequal colonial relationship; engraved on their mistreated, abused bodies, and symbolized by their economic and – even literal – disposability.

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