



## Disrupting the myth of maquila disposability: Sites of reproduction and resistance in Juárez



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### SYNOPSIS

The research presented in this article combines an analysis of the political economy of export processing production systems with critical attention to the discursive formations of racialized women's bodies in the context of maquiladoras on the US–Mexican border. Drawing on anti-racist feminisms, transnational feminisms and feminist political economy theories, the article challenges academic discourses that either victimize or neglect to thoroughly understand the social reproduction of working class women from the global South. In so doing, this research aims to dismantle the portrayal of Third World women primarily as victims of exploitation. This article first joins the lineage of feminist scholarship that deconstructs the victimizing discourse of racialized women's bodies in the labour market and then proceeds to discuss the various ways women workers in maquiladoras have resisted exploitation and opposed the myth of their disposability. This article bridges conversations amongst feminist political economy, transnational feminisms and anti-racist feminisms, as these fields have lacked engagement with each other's works.

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### Introduction

The discursive production of racialized women's bodies as inherently inferior has become integral to the current operation of intensifying global capitalism. Historical processes of devaluing what is constituted as the feminine, along with the colonizing production of the racial *other* as inherently inferior to that of the archetypal White middle-class male body, have manifested themselves within the current global economy. Working class women of colour, specifically from the global South, predominantly fill unskilled labour positions within the global labour market. Understanding the discursive production of racialized and gendered bodies as devalued allows for a complex narrative, which draws on the processes of racialization and feminization within the labour market as sites of violent exploitation. Consequently, discursive forms of violence placed on racialized women's bodies become connected to the physical forms of violence faced by women of colour in the global labour market. As argued by Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002), “the application of violence—the cause of premature deaths—

produces political power in a vicious cycle Feldman (1991)” (p.16). The various forms of violence faced by women at the U.S.–Mexico border exemplifies the ways in which racialization, feminization and capitalist exploitation are in constant dialogue with one another; marking the bodies of working class women of colour at the border.

Focusing on the forms of production (both social and material) maquila workers at the U.S.– Mexico border are confronted by, the first half of this article will draw on the discursive production of the maquila worker as an exploitable and disposable body. Drawing on discourses that have shaped the constructed identity of the Third World woman as docile and disposable, a further analysis will be developed which connects historical processes of colonization to violent forms of exploitation faced by maquila workers and families that live in *colonias*<sup>1</sup> on the U.S.–Mexico border. Consequently, many scholars have (re)produced victimizing narratives of women workers at the U.S.–Mexico border by focusing on harsh working conditions without paying attention to the resilience and resistance mounted by many of these women in order to

survive, and to organize in the face of violent exploitation (see Cravey, 1998; Tiano, 1994). For this reason, the latter half of this article will draw on the resistance efforts made by maquila workers against the injustices intensified by global capital and the multinational corporations they work for. This article serves three main purposes: 1) to deconstruct the exploitative processes that have been marked on the bodies of maquila workers through discursive productions of the disposable Third World woman; 2) to explore how Third World women workers have come to resist the different forms of exploitation they face both as racialized women within factories and as women within their communities and 3) to ignite necessary conversations between anti-racist feminisms and feminist political economists. Although many scholars have attempted to deconstruct the myth of maquilas as disposable (see Wright, 2006), the overall goal of this article is to shift the ways in which academia comes to know women workers at the border. In order to do this, it is important to take more seriously the theoretical contributions made by women and feminists of colour within academia—specifically within interdisciplinary fields such as ethnic studies, women and gender studies and equity studies.

#### *Theoretical contributions*

This article aims to make a theoretical contribution within the field of human geography by bridging the unspoken gaps between feminist political economy, transnational feminism and anti-racist feminism. Although there has been much advancement within the field of feminist political economy to understand and take more seriously race in relation to class and gender, Bannerji argues, “‘gender, race and class’ has become a litany, in response to ‘protest and analysis by non-white women,’ noted rather than developed centrally in the analysis” (Maroney & Luxton, 1997, p.99). Emerging out of a response to Marxism (dominated mainly by white men), feminist political economy borrowed, expanded and critiqued Marxism to engage more thoroughly on women’s labour and value. This paved way for theories of social reproduction that were not taken seriously by academic Marxists. “However, in the 1980s, academic political economy, particularly its feminist current, was criticized for ignoring the way in which ‘race’ entered into and distorted its work” (Maroney & Luxton, 1997, p.87). Part of the reason for the exclusion of race comes from the makeup of the field of feminist political economy: white socialist feminists who wanted their voices and experiences to be heard in an androcentric field. Consequently, gender took a prominent role in establishing theories of social reproduction to the exclusion of race. For this reason, much of the theoretical contributions being made by women of colour within interdisciplinary studies were not given serious consideration.

Parallels can be made with the ways in which mainstream feminist movements have silenced the experiences of working class women of colour and shaped the idea of labour through the lens of bourgeois white feminism. For example, Hooks (1984) discusses the ways in which middle class white women shaped feminist theories of work as a possibility for liberation, which reflected their own experiences, but “ignored the fact that a vast majority of women were (even at the time *The Feminine Mystique* was published) already working outside the home, working on jobs that neither liberated them from

dependence on men nor made them economically self-sufficient” (p.96). It was the resistance efforts by working class racialized women both within and outside the academy which challenged the middle class feminist movements and theories that were silencing the voices of the vast majority of women. It is for this reason that anti-racist feminist thought and transnational feminism needs to be taken seriously by feminist political economy; to centre the lives of working class racialized women.

This article aims to enrich theories of social reproduction by centering critiques put forward by anti-racist and transnational feminists. To deconstruct the victimizing narratives of women from the global South, it is important to draw on the works of transnational and anti-racist feminists as they call for a deeper engagement with the lived experiences of women of colour. Since social reproduction relies mainly on the gendered dynamics operating with increased global capital, it does not necessarily account for the lived experiences of women of colour internationally. This article attempts to further theories of social reproduction in order to produce more critical research that challenges the silencing, victimizing and erasing of resistance efforts put forward by women from the global South.

Much of the article will necessarily draw on Melissa Wright’s (2006) work on embodiment. Although I do find her work to have made important contributions to understanding the myth of disposability amongst women in the global South, I wish to expand on her work through the use of social reproduction and theories of racialization brought forth by anti-racist feminists and transnational feminism, which she does not fully engage with in her work. Wright relies on three modes of thought: Marxism, post-structural feminism and post-colonial theory. Although these theoretical frameworks serve an important function for understanding the embodied experiences of maquila workers, they have several limitations; the first being that all three modes of thought continue to silence to differing degrees the voices of maquila workers. All three fields have been critiqued for excluding the voices of marginalized communities and continue to, in varying degrees, reproduce the notion of victimhood that is consistently marked on bodies of women from the global South within Western scholarship. In addition, many of these frameworks have been shaped by predominantly white, Western academic institutions and people. For example, the feminist strand Wright uses is post-structural feminism. She states that this scholarship enables her to “regard the myth as a *productive technology* that actually creates the material embodiment of the disposable third world woman that houses this labor” (Wright, p.12). Borrowing from Judith Butler’s analysis of embodiment, Wright sets to understand the ways in which the Third World woman’s body is set in a contradiction, where the labour is valued but the body is deemed disposable. This analysis serves its purpose, but without an in depth understanding of social reproduction and theories of racialization, the understanding of disposability becomes limited. Rather than disposability solely being an embodied experience based on the U.S.–Mexico border, the complexities of how labour is socially reproduced and experienced need to be much more nuanced. Using post-colonial theory, despite is a large critique of the appropriation of marginalized voices, to explore such nuances also becomes insufficient for this specific context as it is employed in a way

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