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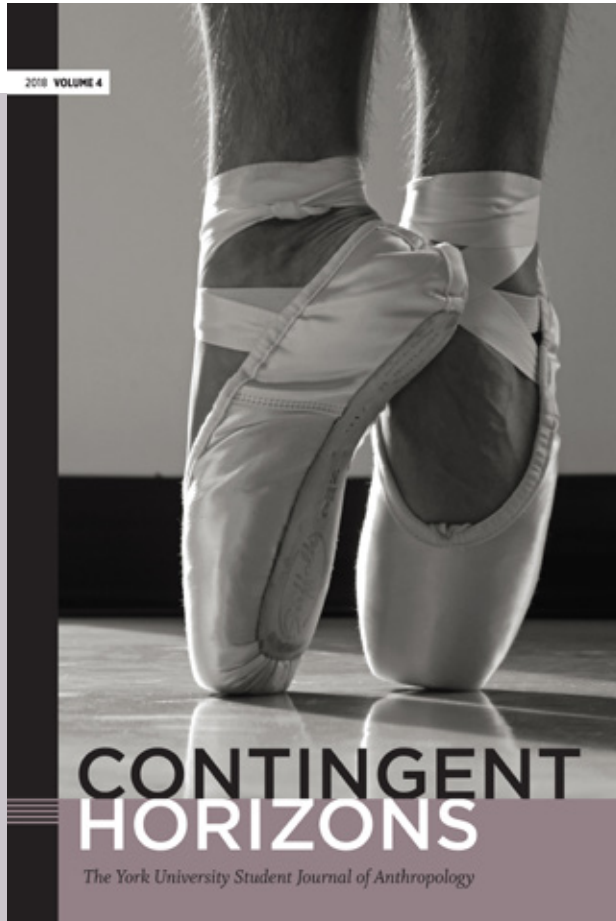
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Borderland, Maquilas, and Femicide: Issues of Migration and Gendered Violence in Northern Mexico

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Borderland, Maquilas, and Femicide

Issues of Migration and Gendered Violence in Northern Mexico

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The rise of *maquiladoras*, or foreign owned manufacturing plants, in Mexico during the 1970s and 80s symbolizes the social and economic tension of the Mexican–United States borderland. With the implementation of agreements like the Border Industrialization Program (1965) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) that created and supported the transfer of capital and goods between Mexico and the United States, such policies simultaneously limited the movement of people across the border. By the 1990s, growing disparities between the U.S. and Mexico became evident with the mass movement of Mexican economic migrants to the north and the growth of shanty towns south of the border. Women migrants and labourers in particular faced extremely vulnerable positions in the region due to their precarious work and living conditions, substantiated by the paralleling disappearance, kidnapping, and mutilation of women in the borderlands. This article mobilizes Ursula Biemann’s (1999) work on women’s positionality in Mexico to situate their experiences and agency in Mexico’s border town, Ciudad Juarez, within contexts of prevailing *femicide*. Ultimately, in engaging in the discussion of the role of what Melissa Wright (2006) calls women’s disposability in the borderlands, this essay will explore why transnational and migrant labour is often overlooked and exploited by policy, leaving women labourers particularly susceptible to such violence.

KEY WORDS Mexico, borderlands, gender violence, *maquiladoras*, economic migration

Since 1965, *maquiladoras* (also referred to as *maquilas*), or foreign owned manufacturing plants in Ciudad Juarez have become the center of Mexico’s export-processing industry (Wright 2006, 7). In the present day, Ciudad Juarez’s manufacturing production has become an “internationally recognized leader in low-cost, high quality, labor-intensive manufacturing processes,” an invaluable site for multinational companies in its cost cutting and easy access to the U.S. market (Wright 2006, 7). The rise of *maquilas* in Mexico during the 1970s and 80s symbolizes the social and economic tension of the Mexican–United States borderland. With the implementation of agreements like the Border Industrialization Program (1965) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) that created and supported the transfer of capital and goods between Mexico and the United States, such policies simultaneously limited the movement of people across the border. By the 1990s, growing disparities between the U.S. and Mexico became evident

with the growth of shanty towns south of the border and the mass movement of Mexican economic migrants to the north.

As more than 60% of *maquila* workers are women and girls, women labourers in particular face extremely vulnerable positions due to their precarious work and living conditions (Nieves 2002). Coinciding with the growth of foreign investment during the 1990s was the discovery of the bodies of hundreds of young women and girls who were travelling from Ciudad Juarez to work in the *maquilas*—their bodies mutilated and left in the outskirts of the city (Driver 2015, 32–33). Evident similarities in abuse of these women, including strangulation, stabbing, and battery, demonstrate the trend of *feminicide*, or the targeted murder of women (Valdez 2006, 1). Otherwise spelt as “femicide,” Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (2010) make the distinction that femicide solely means “the homicide of women,” while in contrast, *feminicide* refers to the “genocide against women” that occurs based on historically generated conditions (xv–xvi). While the total number of women missing fluctuates between sources, it is noted that nearly “913 women have been reported murdered since 2010, and 3,000 women have gone missing since the mid-1990s” (Encarnación López 2018).

In 1999, Swiss filmmaker, Ursula Biemann, produced a 43-minute video-essay called *Performing the Border*, tying the growth and maintenance of *maquilas* in Mexican border towns like Ciudad Juarez, to the emerging issue of *feminicide*. Biemann’s film becomes an essential source on border relations as it makes clear that women’s participation in foreign owned labour has unavoidable links to growing violence and death of women in the borderland region. Despite the continuing gender violence experienced by Mexican women along the American border and growing public concern, the Mexican government still neglects this issue (Driver 2015a, 2015b; Davison 2010; Staudt 2008; Wright 2011). In highlighting Biemann’s (1999) argument that the transnational realm of the borderland plays an important role in what she refers to as, mutual and multidirectional exchanges, this essay looks to situate women’s experience and agency in Mexico’s border town, Ciudad Juarez. In asking questions such as, how does Biemann’s work apply today, and how have other academics taken up Biemann’s analysis, this article will address why transnational and migrant labour is often overlooked by domestic and international labour policy, leaving women’s labour particularly more vulnerable.

Ultimately, this essay argues that the issue of *feminicide* in the borderlands between Mexico’s Ciudad Juarez and El Paso in the United States is related to issues of economic migration and displacement of Mexican women who look for work in the internationally owned *maquilas*. This essay will recognize domestic labour migration as interwoven with issues of displacement and women’s precarity in Mexico. To do so, I will first locate Biemann’s *Performing the Border* (1999) in relation to scholarly work to make clear that the *maquiladoras*’ placement along the Mexico–U.S. border is economically strategic and symbolic of tension at the border, reflecting inclusionary/exclusionary mechanisms of determining worthy citizens. In recognizing the link between northern Mexico’s issue of *feminicide* with *maquiladoras*, I will consider the contemporary context of gender violence in Ciudad Juarez and demonstrate the applicability of Biemann’s (1999) work in the present. As Biemann (1999) highlights, multinational corporations, like *maquilas*, play a crucial role in producing a border between Mexico as the global South, and the United States,

as the global North. This essay will tie the development of Mexican labour in *maquilas* with what Melissa Wright (2006) calls the “disposable” (1) woman labourer. The narrative of Mexican women’s disposable labour in *maquilas* is, I argue, interwoven with the violence experienced in Mexican woman’s everyday lives and *femicide* at the borderlands.

Performing the border

In a way, you need the crossing of the border to be real or else it’s just discursive construction...there is nothing natural about it...it’s [a] highly-constructed place that gets reconstructed and reproduced through the crossing of people because without the crossing there is no border, right? It’s just an imaginary line, or it’s just a river, or it’s just a wall... its highly performative.
—Berta Jotta in *Performing the Border* (Biemann 1999).

Biemann’s *Performing the Border* (1999), opens with a clip of Berta Jotta discussing the imaginative and performative nature of the U.S.–Mexican border formation. Jotta’s script introduces the film’s main argument, that the presence of *maquilas* demonstrates the constructed inequality of the border between the U.S. and Mexico, which results from securitization of the border.

Berta Jotta discusses the border as “before and after NAFTA,” explaining that despite the border allowing for goods to travel happily, the movement of people remains limited (Biemann 1999). Along the borderland, the implantation of NAFTA has had numerous effects on the wellbeing of Mexican workers, like that of Mexico’s agricultural businesses, where the introduction of U.S. subsidized corn and other products in Mexico left around 2 million Mexicans out of work (Golash-Boza and Parker 2008, 115). The ruling of the economy along the border is furthered with the role NAFTA played in “creating favourable conditions for large transnational” corporations, pushing small business out and initiating the displacement of people dependent on these means (Golash-Boza and Parker 2008, 116). Here, border performance is enacted and solidified with the disparity of wages between the north and south, where cheap Mexican labour often results in migration to the U.S. as a means to survive (Golash-Boza and Parker 2008). Moreover, with the advent of *maquilas*, economic policy in favour of free trade or trade with little stipulation in Mexico comes at the expense of economic migrants. Borderlands, which become sites of potential pay for these migrants, correspondingly see a 30% increase in the cost of living in comparison to southern Mexico. Women in particular are subjugated into living in the shantytowns lacking electricity and water that surround the factory cities (Hovespian 2008, 200).

These trends thus demonstrate the geopolitical formation of the borderland is identified as a space wherein the presence of *maquiladoras* represents a site that produces alienation and disposability of labour in order to create a “*maquiladora* culture” that demands productivity at the lowest cost (Driver 2015a, 112). Biemann (1999) notes that the production of value added products in *maquiladoras* ultimately allowed the modernization and inclusion of Mexico in elite global economics, but was also a toll paid through the exploitation of women. Women’s bodies “become a technology,” operating like an assembly line; a

woman's body is "fragmented, dehumanized, and turned into a disposable, exchangeable and marketable component" (Biemann 1999). The economic disposability of women's bodies links to the disposability of women's lives through ongoing *feminicide* that occurs at the border (Driver 2015, 112).

Like other video essays by Biemann, the film maker consciously engages in, and creates, "highly theoretical and self-reflective cinema" (Tay 2009, 150). Biemann's film-making methodology looks to expand the common space of global capitalism by incorporating and engaging with topics that close the gap between essentialist understandings of gender and feminist theory that becomes essential to the discussion of *maquilas* (Tay 2009, 157). Biemann's films work tactically to interrogate and critique the production and complexity of globalization during the 1980s. *Performing the Border* depicts the dehumanizing of women in the U.S.–Mexican borderlands but, as Driver (2015) points out, "[Biemann's] video essay does not provide a fully formed discussion of [*feminicide*]" and therefore should be used as a starting point in discussions of *feminicide* (116). In the next section, Biemann's discussion of Mexican women's labour in *maquilas* will be expanded upon in order to address the connection between the factories and gendered violence.

"Lethal spaces": Biemann on *feminicide* in Mexico

In her investigation of state connection to the ongoing violence against women at the U.S.–Mexico borderlands, Diana Washington Valdez (2006) highlights the role of *maquilas* in northern Mexico's growing violence: Ciudad Juarez is one of Mexico's biggest border cities with approximately 300 *maquiladoras*, "most of them owned by Fortune 500 companies" (4). Driver (2015) argues that a "narrative of seemingly positive economic markers" appears to be appealing; the success of *maquiladoras* neglects the exploitation of those working in the factories and living in the border towns (18–19). By the 1990s, the discovery of hundreds of bodies of women *maquila* workers that were mutilated and abandoned in the outskirts of Ciudad Juarez, dictated the indisputable link between gender violence and labour in the borderlands (32–33).

The death of women *maquila* workers in Ciudad Juarez initiates conversations regarding gendered violence and whether this mass disappearance truly constitutes an issue of *feminicide*. With the first disappearance of women *maquila* workers beginning in 1993, such statistics, along with clear patterned methods of abduction and brutality executed on the bodies, reflect the continual threat of abduction and disappearance that women face. Valdez (2006) notes that while not all deaths are related, most have striking similarities: the young women were subject to highly organized abductions with a selection process that ultimately meant their disappearance went unnoticed (2). The evident role of gender among these deaths makes clear that these deaths are a result of violence that is "targeting or affecting women exclusively [...] because they are women" (Moshan quoted in Fregoso and Bejarano 2010, 2).

The patterns of violence inflicted on the women found in the outskirts of Juarez is argued by both Valdez (2006) and Biemann (1999) to reflect local, global, and national discourses on the devaluation of women. For Cristina Morales and Cynthia Bejarano (2008), rape becomes a "marker of conquest" in the everyday experiences of women living in

Ciudad Juarez “through both actual rapes and the threat of rape” (189). This theme of brutality is most evident in Biemann’s documentary when the film juxtaposes an ongoing list of the police descriptions of the women’s injuries, where each rape, murder, and mutilation are named and labelled over images of uncovered women’s bodies in the desert of the borderlands. Biemann’s display of an ongoing list of the assaults identified on the murdered women acts as a strategic technique to represent the systematic brutality. The list runs across video clips of the bodies being discovered, playing with the sensory experience of viewers. The repetitive descriptions of violence on top of the images of undefinable bodies work to desensitize the viewers with an overload of information.

The Mexican women’s body changes meaning in Biemann’s depiction: these bodies are not only victims of brutal, patterned violence, but are also victims to the desensitizing of crimes by media representations that show images of the women victims’ legs, breast, short skirts, and tight blouses (Driver 2015, 73; Morales and Bejarano 2008, 189). Like Biemann’s sensory play in this scene, the desensitizing and normalizing of the brutality faced by women comes to mark the border as a site where distinctions between the productive and reproductive, or masculine and feminine body, are blurred. This distinction only comes to exist and be defined when those in power decide—the unending cycle of violent deaths makes each body indistinguishable from the next, obscuring and devaluing any signs of a life that existed prior to the violence.

Despite media representation, the United States and foreign investors maintain ambivalence towards the lives of women in the borderlands. Thinking with Giorgio Agamben’s (1995) theorization of the “state of exception” (15), we can consider how the borderland is ambiguous both by law and in daily life, enabling the continued brutality towards women in the borderland. Specifically, *this* state of exception refers to Mexico’s power to not acknowledge or stop such murders from occurring as their sovereignty means that they both form and exist outside the law (Agamben 1995, 15).

This apathy resonates with Achille Mbembe’s (2003) description of sovereign power, “a twofold process of self-institution and self-limitation” (13), as the modern Mexican state, and its foreign investors, ultimately has the capacity to dictate life and death. Working with Michele Foucault (2003), who recognizes that state power is exercised through what he calls biopolitics, or making live and letting die, Mbembe (2003) expands this theorization of power by noting the production of a state of exception that forms “the normative basis of the right to kill” (16) to develop his theory of necropolitics. Necropolitics, which acknowledges politics as a form of war in which the post-colonial state determines who dies and who does not die (11–12), is dependent on biopower in permitting racism “to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state” (Mbembe 2003, 17). Akin to Mbembe (2003), Judith Butler (2009) argues that the sovereign state’s ability to recognize what life is deemed as living, and, further, who is worthy or unworthy of living, ultimately means that only the recognized life is “grievable” to the state (6–7).

Locating the role of state and international players along the U.S.–Mexico border in Mbembe (2003) and Butler’s (2009) terms situates the perpetuation of women’s marginality and gender violence in Mexico. For Mexican women in the borderlands, Wright (2011) argues that the role of necropolitics in their endured violence and *femicide*, reflects how these political and biopolitical spaces are constructed in gendered terms. These gendered

terms, moreover, establish women's disposability in settings like *maquilas* as these spaces are also noted as being constituted in terms of violence (Wright 2011, 708).

The discussion of the biopolitical construction of gendered space and women's subjectivity is taken up further in Wright's ethnographic piece on Mexican women in *maquilas*, titled, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (2006). Wright argues here that gendered violence against women *maquiladora* workers is tied to the foreign ownership of *maquilas* and narratives of "third world woman's disposability" (2006, 71–72). Fitting into Marxist conceptions of labour power as a form of variable capital (a value that changes with production in contrast to constant capital), the Mexican woman *maquila* worker becomes a "turn over story" where her labour power loses value over time, "even as her labour provides value" (Wright 2006, 71–72). The women are depicted as untrainable labourers whose presence "never appreciate[e] into skill but instead dissipate[e] over time" (73). In this sense, as Wright points out, women in *maquilas* "personify waste-in-the-making [...] always a temporary worker" (73).

Furthermore, the discussion of women *maquila* workers' disposability highlights Parin Dossa's (2014) discussion of the mass displacement of people as "common-place" (7). Dossa stresses that colonial violence is maintained through conquering, dehumanizing, and ruling of displaced peoples in contemporary contexts. She further cites the prevalence of global capitalism as "systematically [undermining] the rights of the marginalized and racialized other on a global scale" (Dossa 2014, 7). The disposability of the "third world" woman labourer in *maquilas* subscribes to a similar colonial narrative, substantiated through the bodies of women *maquiladora* migrant labourers. Transnational corporations, in the form of *maquilas*, conquer, dehumanize, and rule women labourers, marginalizing, ignoring, and rendering them obsolete. In recognizing the colonial narratives that appear through the regulation of women's bodies in Dossa's terms, clarify the "chains of connection that have been drawn across the world" (Ginsborg cited in Dossa 2014, 7). Moreover, as I will discuss in the next section, these colonial ties evident in contemporary Mexico remain unequal and one sided, as their driving force is embedded in "economic profit and national power" (Dossa 2014, 7).

Gender and capital: The political economy and Mexican Women

In order to discuss the link between *maquilas* and *femicide*, it is necessary to clarify how the issue of *femicide* links to women's vulnerability in their participation in economic migration to the border. Specifically, as some victims of the ongoing *femicide* were on their way to and from work in *maquilas*, it is important to discuss how violence in the borderland has connections to globalization and "feminization of labour" in the region (Morales and Bejarano 2008, 189).

NAFTA, and such international trade agreements, aid the establishment and perpetuation of inclusionary and exclusionary terms of the ideal citizen and labourer in North America. To Saskia Sassen, (2008) examples of globalization, like NAFTA, play a role in a particular denationalizing, where international legislatures change the relationship between citizens and the state (2). Under globalization, Aihwa Ong (2003) describes how countries like the United States, a nation of immigrants, naturalizes a practice of creating a particular type of citizen, noting: "nationality has been shaped by a series of inclusions and

exclusions on the basis of xenophobia, racism, religious bigotry, and male privilege” (79). Despite locations on Mexican soil, *maquilas* provide an opportunity for American ideals to spread through, as Ong points out, a process of individuation where the foreign work in America is constructed and understood in a definitive way (Ong 2003, 80).

Movement towards the border by both labour and international corporations is strategic here: the direction of migratory flow is both a result of individual decisions, and histories of certain geographic locales, including histories of trade, tourism, and economic migration, which ultimately necessitate and form social and economic integration between the U.S. and Mexico (Chavez 2016, 5; Fernandez-Kelly 1983, 206). For Sergio Chavez (2016), the story of the border is one of state power, where the exertion of this power is done through policies and the securitizing, which inevitably shape the livelihoods within the region. For labour, the border is an area of hope and opportunity, but for international *maquila* owners, the Mexican location allows for control, cheap production, and ultimately maximizing profit.

At the same time, while Chavez (2016) and Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (1983) note the inherent links between nations that share borders, the affects and impact that these border relations have to the Mexican nation, its environment, and the residents are largely ignored. Wright (2006) argues that it is difficult to image a “unified border subject” due to the existence of divisions between residents of the north and south (95). This division rests in and is reinforced “by nationalist ideologies that separate ‘real’ Mexicans from emigrants and their descendants in the United States” (Wright 2006, 95). This division is more than just geographic: it is social and political, as the discourses produced around the border “work into the materialization of political subjects and their communities” (95).

The borderland between America and Mexico can be recognized as a precarious space, where the internal migration of Mexican men and women for work opportunities operates and depends on American labour markets. As Ong (2003) describes, American corporations, like *maquilas*, take advantage of the desperate Mexican workers, believing these workers are “grateful to be hired... no matter what,” while giving them no benefits or overtime pay (233). These dominant narratives are highlighted in the understanding of the positionality of Mexican women in *maquilas* as “[they]...reproduce the devaluing of those jobs and of those who hold the jobs” (232). Ultimately, in these work spaces, order in the work force is maintained by restricting those who have access to the economy itself.

These narratives of the grateful, but docile foreign worker acts as a method to neglect and silence women’s true role in *maquilas*, and how women’s lives are impacted by their labour roles. Fernandez-Kelly’s critical work recognized early in the advent of *maquilas* that nearly 85% of its workers were women between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five (1983, 214). With 70% of *maquila* labour coming from origins outside of Ciudad Juarez at this time, these migrants came at an early age with family for work opportunities; furthermore, for every five male family members was one woman *maquila* worker (1983, 215). Many of these women labourers began working in order to fulfill “personal needs or to supplement family income,” leading them to become the main providers of stable and regular income in their families (1983, 217). At the same time, in commentary to Fernandez-Kelly, Kathleen Staudt (2008) notes that even with this income, women are “hardly economically independent and autonomous” due to the low value of pesos, as well as receiving backlash from family as these women challenge gender norms with their

participation in the work force (45–46). The complexity of women’s positioning in the public, or work sphere, and the domestic sphere, challenges the essentialized narrative of the docile “third-world” woman—the phrasing of “third world” follows Edward Said’s (1995) understanding of the West’s production and solidification in relation to the “other” in the East or the global south.

More than this essentialized depiction, these narratives, and the way women labourers’ bodies have been taken up in the space of the borderland under neoliberal politics, work to produce the vulnerability of migrant women. While nations involved in NAFTA saw it as “a story of social and economic freedom,” Morales and Bejarano (2008) acknowledge that this deal came an “implicit sexual contract:” women’s bodies become something easily accessible and controllable, whether through sexual violence, terms of labour, or political subjugation (194). Women engaging in such labour maintained positions of inferiority which were instilled and solidified through neoliberal trade policies.

Twentieth century border policies, and the *maquiladoras* themselves, furthermore, become evidence of ongoing imperial power in the role of the “implicit sexual contract” (Morales and Bejarano 2008, 194). When speaking of women’s labour and the way their bodies are conceptualized within the economic market of Ciudad Juarez, female woman’s body is only seen as valuable for its role in producing and creating profit for the multinational companies. In *Imperial Debris: Reflection on Ruins and Ruination* (2009), Ann Stoler recognizes the ways in which imperial formations are not just a figure of the historical past but are ongoing processes that come to substantiate state institutions and authority which are maintained through material debris and social ruination (193–194). In Stoler’s terms, imperial power persists as a result of the active qualities of the ruins and debris of its presence, where its aftershock memorializes the empire leaving people to deal with the “leftovers” (2009, 9). The remains of these power relations do not just appear in physical traces, but also in the intangible. Agreements such as NAFTA become evidence of this ongoing debris specifically in the form of policies that permit, through ambivalence, what Morales and Bejarano (2008) describe as the “routinization of sexual violence in the everyday” (188). When reflecting on the sexual contract and objectification of women’s bodies within the third world labour setting in Mexico, the systematization of their experience makes evident an inherent violence experienced in order to make a living wage.

The Killings: Femicide and Displacement

To understand the complexity of the positionality of women in the borderlands and the ways in which women navigate the experience of everyday violence, this essay recognizes what Wright (2006) describes as “the relationship between the border as a metaphor for myriad social divisions and the border as a material space that is policed, enforced, and physically crossed” (95–96). In her discussion, Wright explains that Mexican women represent a subversion of historical discourses regarding their involvement in multinational corporations, suggesting that women labourers must “confront the myth of their disposability” (96). Wright advocates that while the passive victim or docile worker is perceived to be materially grounded, the Mexican woman’s body is in flux. The fluidity of Mexican women is apparent with the subversion of historical meanings placed on “her language, body, sexuality, opinions, and labor in the *maquiladora* corporate community” (96–97).

This ability to contend and negotiate historically induced narratives is inherent to women's positionality in border towns like Ciudad Juarez. In *Performing the Border* (1999), Biemann makes clear that as Ciudad Juarez grew with foreign investment, migrant women were forced to move to unoccupied land in the desert outside the city. Living without water and true shelter in the desert, the mass migration of women here demonstrates the desire and hope for work opportunities. Simultaneously, these living conditions represents the fact that the only infrastructure in Ciudad Juarez was for the owners and managers of the *maquilas*, not those that worked for them (Biemann 1999).

The lack of infrastructure and support in terms of living conditions provokes many women to begin participating in sex work. In *Performing the Border* (1999), Biemann introduces Juana Azua as an example of this common reality. Azua moved to Ciudad Juarez at the age of 31 to become a sex worker after her brother's accident left her responsible for providing for her family. Azua's story follows similar storylines to the narrative of Sonja, described in the film. Sonja says: most sex workers in Ciudad Juarez come from the south with little education, and after not being accepted into the *maquilas*, turn to sex work. Further, Sonja states that there are really only three options for women in Ciudad Juarez: work in the *maquilas*, work at home, or participate in sex work. The lack of opportunity for women in Ciudad Juarez places them in a double-bind, or in this case a triple-bind: that although the Mexican woman migrates for better opportunities as a means to provide for family, the *maquila* is a space of heightened violence either in the workplace itself, in their commute, or in their familial lives. Moreover, the migrant women's second option of working in the home as a house wife often times is not a real option, as most men cannot find employment, and the income of two adults is still not enough to live in most cases. Additionally, the final option of sex work unmistakably leaves women more susceptible to threats of violence.

As mentioned by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), the machine of the imperial empire "does not fortify its boundaries to push others away, but pulls them within [...] like a powerful vortex" (198). Women face the triple bind, a subjective conflict, as an example of the power that transnational corporations have in the everyday. The financial needs of women motivates their migration to areas of more global capital flow and thus expands beyond the *maquilas* to include other means of labour and/or the private realm, ultimately demonstrating the "complex variables" of the imperialist hold (Hardt and Negri 2000, 199).

This powerful vortex of transnational and national power, described by Hardt and Negri (2000), expands past terms of labour and production to further formulate women's relationship with the domestic sphere, and this is particularly evident with household economic struggles often having been cited as a source for suspicion in women's disappearance. Kathleen Staudt (2008) describes that the new economic relationships between men and women may have been difficult for some men as "their economic struggle has been transformed into a fight against a closer target: their partners" (47). Women as breadwinners for the family had meant a shift in the household, and to some, a sense of reconstructed masculinity (Staudt 2008). A challenging of patriarchal norms was felt deeply in Mexican society, where machismo culture, or exaggerated masculinity, was prevalent and meant "[proving] one's manhood at any cost" (Valdez 2006, 13). Such familial changes manifested into "domestic violence, and in the attitude of police who belittle reports of sexual assaults or family violence" (Valdez 2006, 13).

With patriarchal roles deeply bound to national narratives in Mexico, such as myths and symbols of the virgin of Guadalupe that present an image of the prized virginal mother for example, sexual violence particularly in the home remains unclaimed (Stuadt 2008, 35–36). This becomes a significant issue when considering that, according to statistics, 47 percent of women “experienced a wide range of abuse—physical, sexual, emotional, or economic” (Stuadt 2008, 32). Domestic violence in this case demonstrates the changing gender relations within the borderlands, where violence by men are “desperate and [use] flawed [strategies] to regain power” in the neocolonial economy of Ciudad Juarez (Stuadt 2008, 49). While women might be perceived to be accessing more power in the context of *maquiladoras* in the borderland, or what would be deemed the *vortex*, and thereby providing economic security and terms of control in the private sphere; this can also manifest in violent terms against women’s participation.

As mentioned previously, as there is a large population of Mexican women participating in the *maquilas* for living wage, there is also a parallel increase of women who come to the borderlands to earn money as sex workers, sometimes simultaneous with jobs in *maquilas*. The heightened vulnerability of women in Ciudad Juarez participating in sex work, or even being conceived as doing so, becomes an effect of the neoliberal policy and the presence of *maquilas* in the borderlands. More specifically, in Ciudad Juarez, women’s participation in underground labour is seen to “betray the city’s newfound image as a haven for tourism and modernity” (Morales and Bejarano 2008, 191). The sex worker becomes the “beacon for border vices,” and deemed overtly disposable and invaluable (Morales and Bejarano 2008, 191).

The existence and perpetuation of these discourses of sex work manifest into increased sexual victimization for women (Morales and Bejarano 2008, 186). For Morales and Bejarano (2008), the sexual conquest of these Mexican women is rooted in a marginalization of a region, in addition to race, class, and gender. The eroticization of these women which in turn produces a market for sexual labour for Morales and Bejarano (2008) re-appropriates imperialist expansion of the *maquilas* onto women’s bodies. In this understanding, the woman’s body becomes the site of national discourse where the woman’s body remains something to conquer (Morales and Bejarano 2008, 186–187). Such discussion opens up room to acknowledge women’s participation in underground labour in these border towns as a response to the informal economy growth resulting from *maquilas*. The transnational migration to the border by women for access to the informal economy, as a means to support and create opportunity, acts as an example of the production of the disposable body. While women are able to participate and make financial gains in these cases, their bodies (and livelihoods) become subjected to national and transnational narratives which depict and instill their lower value.

The line between the good public woman and the sex worker is thin in Mexico as Wright (2001) suggests, and portrayals of sex workers are correlated to the erosion of national narratives of the good domestic woman, and simultaneously, the good public woman. Despite the importance of women’s work in global manufacturing, as evident in their work in *maquilas*, an inherent shame remains attached to these women because of their departure from the normative domestic sphere. Such ideologies support discourses promoted by political and corporate elites in Ciudad Juarez that normalize the public woman’s body as going against patriarchal norms; where when women in the public sphere

were meticulously killed and dumped in cotton fields outside the city, it was because these women “were looking to be murdered” (Wright 2011, 714–715). Violence here acts, and is understood, as a means to delineate and promote the spaces where women should or should not be. Police frequently questioned the stories of the *maquila* working women killed in the *femicide* for “leading double-lives” (Wright 2006, 75). Regardless of whether migration is undertaken for economic needs, the public woman remains vulnerable. The violence endured by women who enter the public sphere evidently signifies the gendered and geopolitical spaces they exist in.

Conclusion

Ultimately, in examining the ways in which *maquiladoras* along the borderlands of Mexico and the United States reflect the neoliberal economic policy of transnational organizations, this essay claims that the migratory patterns of women looking for work in this setting are complexly intertwined with women’s experiences of different forms of gendered violence. Biemann’s depiction of the growing disappearance and brutality towards women in Mexico’s north initiates discussion of the role of *maquiladoras* in the gendered necropolitics of the region. Moreover, the presence of multinational corporations in Mexico’s borderlands in particular manifests a vulnerable workplace for women economic migrants as they are deemed disposable in the division of labour. In considering the ways in which labour and the neoliberal political agenda affect the personal lives of the migrant women in the borderlands, gendered spaces that underlie labour participation and domestic life must be brought to the forefront in order to acknowledge that these lives have been deemed “ungrievable” (Butler 2009, 22).

While narratives of violence and migration in Mexico’s borderland have often been unrelated, in order to discuss the stories of the missing women this essay demonstrates the intersecting narratives that women in these spaces must face on a daily basis. Public anthropology becomes a means to bring the topic of *maquiladoras* and the everyday narratives of women within these spaces, a product of globalization and North American trade agreements, to light. Violence against women thrives on silence. While traces of these stories may be found in online articles or newspapers, discussions of who controls the work and who decides the fate of women’s labour within the borderlands must be publicized.

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