

## Ways of Seeing

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On a cold, dark morning in the winter of 1992 I stand blankly in front of my closet. Subject to my subject, I am once again rooted to the spot, wondering what to wear. My goal is to be at Panoptimex,<sup>1</sup> my factory fieldsite, in an hour, and things are not looking good. Back in Berkeley, my loose, layered clothes performed a legible, if expressly conflicted, femininity. Here the same clothes speak a different language—dowdy and desexualized to the point of unintelligibility.

Panoptimex is a global factory located in Ciudad Juárez, on Mexico's northern border. Owned by one of the hundreds of transnational corporations that have come to this desert outpost to produce goods for the U.S. market, the plant is a glowing example of the corporate fruits of globalization. It is also a socialist-feminist nightmare made flesh. A pristine TV assembler full of young women, it is a profoundly objectifying space—both sexually and otherwise.

My new fashion self-consciousness and the young, sexualized women who fill the shop floor are both at the fulcrum of a fundamental economic process—the creation of “cheap labor” for transnational production. Although the young women working in global assembly are generally understood as intrinsically “cheap, docile, and dextrous”—as original instances of a natural femininity—time spent on transnational shop floors suggests otherwise. Panoptimex, like all effective arenas of production, makes not only TVs but workers. The bedecked young women who surround me on the shop floor are reproductions of a global fantasy, generated by the shop floor itself. These willing, supplementary earners, objects of managers' multiple desires, are in fact man-

agement's unconscious creation. They are formed by the fantasy of a naturally productive femininity even as it purports to describe them.

Transnational capital's dream of productive femininity is not always invoked as successfully as it is in *Panoptimex*, but in global production, it is always at work. In the three other factories I studied, gendered discourses elicit dramatically different subjects: assertive, "nontraditional" women in one; masculinized producers in a second; embattled, would-be men in a third. The image of productive femininity sets the parameters through which workers are identified and assessed on shop floors around the world, but its consequences are multiple. Against its gendered injunctions, different shop floors generate different workers. Tracing this process, we will follow the category of productive femininity into Ciudad Juárez, where it shapes a labor market, and then further onto these four contrasting shop floors, where it constitutes equally varied gendered subjects. In the process, we can begin to grasp gender's centrality in global production and weigh its consequences for people and profits.

The ever more frenetic and far-flung search for the ideal assembly worker—malleable, "trainable," undemanding—is reshaping the contemporary world. Understanding that capital makes rather than finds such workers, and that gender is implicated in that process, gives us new tools for thinking about how we might challenge the terms under which global production takes place. Thus, starting from the feminist injunction that the personal is political, we add the economic, making visible the connections between the production of subjects and the production of commodities.

It would be unbearably ironic to embark on such an investigation without placing oneself within the panorama. Thus, as observer and analyst, both in the field and in my writing, I attempt to define my position and to keep that position apparent.<sup>2</sup> This is not because the book is about me. It is not. Rather, in clarifying my location, I give the reader the chance to understand the social/intellectual vantage point from which this story is told. My account aims to be what Haraway felicitously named "situated knowledge"<sup>3</sup>—knowledge created from a self-conscious and explicit political and theoretical perspective.

This commitment means that the book is written in at least two registers. Its bulk, measured in words and pages, is description and story, filtered through my own personal, political, and theoretical commitments and habits of attention. Here my aim is to bring the reader with me into the social world of the plants, to make obvious the way that

gendered selves come to matter in global production. In these descriptive sections, theory is mostly embedded in the narrative, not pulled out for autonomous treatment. In contrast, Chapters 2 and 8 are primarily analytic and theoretical, exposing the structure that undergirds the narrative chapters.

My fieldwork, which involved immersion in one of the many local universes of global production, began in late 1991 and ended in the summer of 1993. I located myself in northern Mexico, where I did fieldwork for sixteen months along the border in Ciudad Juárez and for two months in a small agricultural city to its south. During that time, I worked in a group of transnationally owned export-processing plants known as *maquilas*.<sup>4</sup> I interviewed managers, workers, job seekers, company lawyers, and industry representatives. I toured shop floors and read newspapers. I searched archives for records of the industry from its inception through the early nineties.<sup>5</sup> I spent a summer watching for organized resistance.<sup>6</sup> Most important, however, I worked as an ethnographer. For a feminist investigating transnational economic processes, ethnography was an obvious choice. The use of the embodied, emotional, thoughtful self as a research “instrument” is well suited to the enterprise of making connections between the purportedly public and private, between economics and gender, between the production of workers and that of their products.<sup>7</sup> Thus, I immersed myself in the habits and taken-for-granted of four shop floors, observing and sometimes participating in the meaningful practices and practiced meanings of daily production.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout those journeys, I kept myself attentive to gender and to specificity. That is, I attended to the economic and political causes and consequences of the emergence of gendered subjects in production, and within that context I kept an eye open for difference, for variation, for idiosyncrasy. These attentional practices are motivated in equal parts politically, theoretically, and empirically. Much of the following chapter is devoted to accounting for their prominence in the analysis.

Readers have my points of departure laid out in Chapter 2, but the people I studied had little context for a “sociologist.” Despite my many attempts to account for myself, they never had access to the social world within which I was intelligible, either to myself or others. The confusion this engendered merged into disquiet as my repeated oscillations between participant and observer raised questions of membership, judgment, and power. These responses emerged with particular force in Panoptimex, where labor control was already expressed and enforced

through multiple hierarchies of watching and watched. A telling pair of incidents revolved around the figure of my car—a tiny, ancient Ford Fiesta with a smashed-up front. Early in my period in the plant, the American personnel manager invited me to attend his negotiations with the union, held in an elite local club. As we emerged together from its dim recesses into the harsh Juárez daylight, my car stood directly before us, an eyesore in a parking lot full of shiny sedans with tinted windows. “*That’s* yours?” I reluctantly admitted it was. “Oh, you bought it here.” He offered the explanation laughing—a gleeful American co-conspirator. My abashed admission that it was *really* mine, that I had actually brought it with me across the border, stopped him in his tracks. For several days he was noticeably less forthcoming, until eventually I seemed to blend back into expat togetherness. Nonetheless, the query made momentarily visible always hovered in the background of our conversations: Was I “us” or “them”? And if them, which “them” was that?

A couple of months later, a supervisor with understandably different concerns from those of his boss hesitantly asked about a story circulating among his colleagues. Rumor had it, he said, that my car had an incredible motor camouflaged beneath its battered exterior. Was that true? I hastened to reassure him of its authentic rickety-ness. Nonetheless, the question suggested both the depths of distrust and the effort being expended in placing me. Perhaps the friendly, underdressed, Spanish-speaking woman who looked as young as a worker was actually another watchful gringo whose sharp eyes spelled trouble. What power lurked beneath the disarming exterior?

These confusions were not my “subjects” alone. Over the course of a day’s fieldwork, I found myself identifying in vertiginous succession with worker and manager, woman and man, Mexican and American. When I worked on the line, a single error was enough to throw me from analyst of supervisory tactics to crushed, inept worker. Chatting intimately with a woman in the next work station, an insinuating, hungrily curious, “but in the United States, the women are very *liberated*,<sup>9</sup> aren’t they?” catapulted me from engrossed confidant back into recognition of my otherness. Complacent flirtation and feminist refusal took unpredictable turns. Managerial interviews were journeys into the empathy that flows from deep listening. Later, typing fieldnotes in the evening, I found myself broiling as I assessed the damaging consequences for workers of these so-understandable perspectives.

These constant shifts were confusing, but they were also productive, of power and knowledge alike. Once at home, writing, I was indeed

evaluator and judge. I was creating a portrait whose parameters its subjects would ultimately not control, often written through the lens of a politics they did not share. What's more, it was precisely the dizzying and constant shifts from watched to watcher, from participant to observer, that made it possible for me to tell this story at all. These movements and contextual truths were unsettling for everyone concerned, but they were not something to fix. On the contrary, such movements across identifications and social terrain and from intimate to analyst and back again are the inherently problematic meat of ethnographic work.<sup>10</sup> It was precisely this set of processes that revealed the social world I sought to describe. Later, as I moved from one plant to another, once even between plants competing for status and resources within a single corporation, these issues became still more complex. Nonetheless, they remained productive, every oscillation in my local role or social experience a new clue to the gendered configuration of production in a given factory.

In every factory, gender has a distinctive architecture, structured and bounded by managers' ongoing, sometimes contradictory, efforts to constitute productive workers. These attempts are incarnated in the most mundane, repetitive, and trivial of linguistic and bodily practices. Their repercussions are reflected in the texture of shop-floor life—in mood, conversation, relationship, gesture, style. As I located myself within this field, the practice of participant observation became one of honing attention, of learning to watch others, to watch myself watch others, to watch myself in action and reaction. Thus, I saw supervisory pressures and social dynamics from without, but I also learned their contours through watching my own responses, experiencing them from within the social world of the factory and from within myself.

Panoptimex was my entry point into the industry. The head of personnel approved my presence casually, if brusquely, refusing my request to work but otherwise imposing few restrictions. Nonetheless, as the weeks went by, I felt increasingly uncomfortable. Returning exhausted in the late afternoons, I would find my room strewn with discarded clothes—too baggy, too shabby, too loose. Weekends I bought lipsticks, pale attempts to blend with the fiery, two-tone oranges and reds in the plant and still recognize myself. Despite my best efforts to pass, the women of Panoptimex kept offering unsolicited beauty tips. Guided by my own discomfort, I began to notice the centrality of the visual in the plant—the primacy of appearance as a rhetoric through which production was grasped as well as beauty. My role as she-who-

needs-fashion-advice made evident the process through which an apparently preexisting femininity was actually created through managerial strategies of shop-floor control.

The second plant I entered was Anarchomex, a mixed-gender Juárez auto parts plant. The shop floors could not have been more different. It was dark, noisy, and chaotic in Anarchomex, and supervisors appeared on the line only to yell. Over my first incompetent weeks, I found myself constantly entangled with two young men just down the line. Sometimes they snapped, mocked, and complained at my falling behind. Sometimes they came by to help, speeding me up immeasurably and making errors throughout, to the line technician's immeasurable irritation. Sometimes they worked ahead, interfering with my tenuous rhythm so they could finish early and take a flirting break—either with me or other women. To the amusement of my colleagues at a local research institute, I became obsessed with speed, coming in after work not with astute sociological observations, but with endless talk about keeping up. Again, my social discomfort proved to be a rich lode of information, as it propelled me to recognize male workers' ongoing struggle to redefine and claim a legitimate masculinity—and the disastrous consequences of this struggle for production quality. Here, it was not women but gendered meanings that were on the line.

From Anarchomex I moved to Particimex, a subsidiary of the same corporation which owned Anarchomex, using virtually the same technical process. Nonetheless, once again the plants felt remarkably different. Particimex was located in a small city south of Juárez, where desperate managers had moved in search of the legendarily pre-controlled women they could no longer rely on in the larger city to the north. And in Santa María, they indeed found daughters and wives home schooled in obedient gestures. Nonetheless, to my eye, on the shop floor these women did not appear docile. To the contrary, I found myself constantly taken aback by the contrasts between what happened inside and outside the plant. Accounts of evenings spent with my co-workers, who waited interminably to be asked to dance, sat jarringly in my fieldnotes next to stories of their take-charge attitudes at work. Disconcerted by these contradictory experiences, I began to notice the emphatic, persistent managerial description of Particimex workers as *not*—"traditional Mexican women." Labor control practices in Particimex addressed women workers in direct and explicit contrast to common transnational images of third-world femininity. It was this process that evoked women workers' remarkable shop-floor assertiveness. By the time I left Partici-

mex, I had begun to grasp the possible magnitude of variation in the content of femininity across space and time.

Andromex, a mixed-gender Juárez hospital garments plant, was my last—and initially my most daunting—fieldsite. Gender seemed invisible, femininity absent. One day, shortly after I began work at the smock folders' table, we returned from lunch to find my completed work missing. I was slow; there wasn't much to steal. It was public knowledge that the maquila wasn't paying me. Nonetheless, indignation over my loss consumed the work group for the rest of the day and re-erupted periodically throughout my tenure in the plant. My co-workers speculated over who was responsible, ruminated on how they'd managed to get away with it, and excoriated those responsible as immoral. Wondering over this obsessive accounting, I came to realize that the apparent absence of femininity was not something to debunk, it was an anomaly for analysis. The indignation, the ongoing fomentation of conflict, were central here. These shop-floor practices responded to a framework that located them within the implicitly masculinized category of breadwinner/producer. Femininity was not elaborated here because women and men alike were addressed within masculinized categories, leading to the intense shop-floor competition over productivity. For the first time, over meager piles of smocks, I began to consider the place of masculinity in transnational production.

Analysis is its own fieldsite. Over time, my fieldnotes became an independent object, and incidents widely separated by time and space were thrown into close proximity. Although I was struck by the idiosyncrasies of each plant during fieldwork, it was, ironically, only during my later search for general patterns that I came to appreciate not only the powerful impact that gendered ways of seeing had on the industry as a whole, but the enormous and highly contingent range of gendered subjects who actually emerged within industry bounds. The book tells these intertwined stories, emphasizing the combination of gender's persistent presence and unique configuration in each plant.

It is tempting to speak about transnational production as a process that develops without people, or conversely, to assume that it is composed of the accrued actions of many preset individuals. The reality is more complex and more interesting—and it became visible to me only as I placed my socially susceptible self on the line and noticed what happened. Once located in the distinctive crosscurrents of a particular shop floor, my own embodied self-consciousness showed the marks of its pressures and eddies. In the process, "femininity's" generative rather

than descriptive character became apparent, and it became possible to trace the impact of gendered meanings on who workers are and ultimately on commodity production itself. Thus, through ethnography, I was able to enter the gendered heart of global production, where the subjects who produce are themselves produced. In consciously situating my idiosyncratic, theorizing self in that space, I became capable of telling meaningful stories about the world beyond.