

# Maquiladora Mestizas and a Feminist Border Politics: Revisiting Anzaldúa

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*This essay argues that a new, politicized mestiza is emerging within the cultural borderlands of the Mexico-U.S. divide. She works in the upper ranks of the multinational maquiladoras and raises many challenges for a feminist theorization of a new border politics. Through a presentation of research in one maquiladora, the essay demonstrates how understanding the dynamic between metaphorical and material space is vital for imagining a feminist politics in the cultural borderlands.*

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## IMAGINING THE BORDER

Along stretches of the Mexico-U.S. border, a new *mestiza* is emerging. Her language is Spanish, English, and “Spanglish,” and her job is in the *maquiladoras*.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes she has a college degree, but often she has simply worked her way through the corporate ranks, moving up from hourly wage positions and into jobs with prestige, power, and significantly more pay. She comes from both sides of the political border. Her nationality is Mexican or American, but she calls herself “*mexicana*,” among the other place-based identifiers, such as Mexican American, *fronteriza*, *norteña*, American, and Chicana.<sup>2</sup> A number of these *mexicanas* hold prestigious posts in community and business associations on both sides of the border. They have defied expectations limiting their role to the low-wage and unskilled positions (see Frobel 1979). And they raise some sticky issues for a feminist approach to the politics of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality along a border where such identifiers compromise the distance between the politics of Left and Right.

I refer to these *mexicanas* as “*mestizas*” in order to engage with Gloria Anzaldúa’s discussion of a “new *mestiza*” (Anzaldúa 1987). The *mestizas* I discuss are new political subjects in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands who, by reinforcing the symbol of the border as a permanent division cut across the

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social terrain, have made gains as self-identified *mexicanas* in the *maquiladoras*. They raise challenges for Anzaldúa's argument, which contends that only through resistance to the discourse of a border as dividing line can a *mexicana* community gain political ground in the cultural borderlands. And they challenge feminist theory, more generally, to examine how a politics of geographic difference intersects with assertions of identity and the conceptualization of communities in which women hold power and prestige and instigate change.

Anzaldúa's image of the new *mestiza* is as a cultural subject who forges political unity by dissolving the international divide from both the social imagination and political practice. "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [an open wound]," she writes, "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds." Along this border flows "the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third—a border culture" (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). She argues that in the divided border geography of the post-colonial period, the *mexicana* is devalued and her cultural integrity defiled. Writing as a new *mestiza*, Anzaldúa calls for "an exoteriation, a seeing through the fictions of white supremacy, a seeing of ourselves in our true guises and not as the false racial personality that has been given us and that we have given ourselves. I seek our woman's face, our true features" (1987, 87). Her prophetic vision is a battle cry for *mexicanas* to seek unity where the state, along with heterosexist, misogynist, imperialist, and racist ideologies, has segregated *mexicana* from *mexicana* throughout the borderlands. At the heart of this journey for cultural reunification is a political subversion of the meaning of the border in both discourse and practice. Through reimagining the border not as the place of division but as the unified seam, where different manifestations of an essentially unified culture meet, she foresees an emerging geography that will ground a reinvigorated cultural and feminist politics.

Anzaldúa offers an imaginative elixir for a practical problem that plagues *mexicanas* who are involved in political community groups who attempt to organize cross-border events.<sup>3</sup> Today, on the U.S. side, a dramatic militarization (Dunn 1996), a rekindled enthusiasm for walls that physically delineate the political line (see Fox 1995-96), and widespread condemnation of Mexican immigrants as parasites in "American" society have strained social networks and antagonized historical tensions on both sides (see also Anaya and Lomelí 1989). Imagining a unified border subject is no easier on the Mexican side, where the divisions between Mexicans and Americans, of Mexican descent or otherwise, are steadfastly reinforced by nationalist ideologies that separate "real" Mexicans from emigrants and their descendants in the United States (see Córdoba and Socorro 1995-96).

While these stubborn assertions of geographic division stand at odds with Anzaldúa's vision of geopolitical unity, they do not necessarily represent insurmountable obstacles for the conceptualization of a cross-border politics.

Instead, they illustrate the need for understanding how discourses of geographic difference work into the materialization of political subjects and their communities.

Against the background of Anzaldúa's work, I present some of my ethnographic research on how *mexicanas* navigate the shifting social terrain of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands in their attempts to scale the corporate ladder in the multinational *maquiladoras*. These *mexicanas* represent a new *mestiza* in the sense that they have subverted historical discourses of who they are as women of Mexican descent and where they consequently belong in the multinational firm.<sup>4</sup> I call them "*maquiladora mestizas*" because they express a cultural identity based on their deft navigation of the multinational *maquiladora* workplace and the politics of difference that characterize the Mexico-U.S. borderlands.

Through a focus on the *maquiladora mestiza*, I hope to demonstrate that a feminist politics should, following Iris Young's (1990) argument, consider how expressions of difference actually consolidate communal borders. Crucial to this endeavor is a critical inquiry into 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 (see Katz and Smith 1993).

In seeking to understand how metaphoric spaces materialize into places characterized by particular sorts of residents, I draw from Judith Butler's (1993) work on the interplay of discourse with matter in the formation of intelligible social subjects. Butler argues that discourse performs on matter such that the discursive markers of identity, as in race, sex, ethnicity, and so on, come into view as the materials that constitute the *real* corporeality of the body. Consequently, what is perceived to be materially grounded is actually discursively constituted, and is therefore in flux, despite its location in seemingly immutable matter. With this argument, Butler carves out a political space between discourse and matter, in which she demonstrates that political action can include efforts to disturb the codes for constructing subjects from the materials identified to be located in their bodies (see also Butler 1997). She refers to such disturbances as "resignifications," or "radical rearticulation(s) . . . of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all" (Butler 1993, 23).

This notion of resignification is important for my own interpretation of the *maquiladora mestiza* as a new subject who has subverted the historical meanings of her language, body, sexuality, opinions, and labor in the *maquiladora* corporate community. Her move up the corporate ladder and her recent prominence in probusiness cultural groups such as LULAC (The League of United Latin American Citizens) involves rethinking a vision of the unified *mexicana* who has a foothold in a unified border geography. While the *maquiladora mestiza*, who can claim a significant measure of status and material wealth, challenges representations of *mexicanas* as the unskilled and docile labor force of international renown, she simultaneously reinforces practices for exploiting *mexicana* labor, at the average price of fifty cents per hour, and for excluding the majority

of *mexicanas* from the benefits of the international mobility that multinational capital and its managers enjoy. The *maquiladora mestiza* demonstrates that her social strength rests on an interpretation of a bifurcated border geography and of a differentiated *mexicana* subject. Therefore, with the concept of resignification, I hope to show how a class politics is inextricable from both the politics of place (see Harvey 1996) and from the negotiations of identities articulated as part and parcel of the production of places. Further, I aim to demonstrate that a feminist politics of the Mexico-U.S. border, one that takes into account how women on both sides conceptualize their communities and alliances, must understand that class neither forms a discrete category nor is isolated from the social politics of identity in the cultural borderlands.

What follows is an interpretation of ethnographic research I conducted within a *maquiladora*, which I shall refer to as Mexico on the Water (MOTW), an offshore facility of a U.S.-based multinational firm that is located in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, across the border from El Paso, Texas.<sup>5</sup> This case is taken from a year long ethnographic inquiry in the *maquiladoras* (Wright 1996). The experiences of the *mexicanas* in MOTW that I present here reveal how a metaphor of the Mexico-U.S. border operates as a cultural, ethnic, classed, raced, and sexed divide that materializes through the production of space and subjects representative of border residents.<sup>6</sup>

#### MEXICO ON THE WATER

The day starts at MOTW in Ciudad Juárez when the American managers and engineers drive across the international bridge and park at the factory. Several hundred Mexican operators, technicians, and administrative assistants stream out of buses that have carried them from Ciudad Juárez's scattered reaches. This international meeting occurs each morning, moments before the production lines start pumping out the sundry parts of motorboats—ignition switches, carburetors, electrical harnesses, gauges— that MOTW has produced for more than a decade. When I arrived at MOTW in September 1993, all managers and engineers were American and the wage-laborers Mexican. I was invited by the plant manager to conduct my study on the organization of multinational firms, and I was allowed to park my car in the American area of the parking lot; this reflected my welcome into the American domain of MOTW administration, where I was provided with my own office.

I began my research in MOTW within a month of the highly publicized "Border Blockade," later renamed "Hold the Line," an operation undertaken by the U.S. Border Patrol in September 1993.<sup>7</sup> Justifications for this militarization of an officially peaceful border frequently invoked the crisis represented by the migrant *mexicana*, her pregnancies, her poor children, and their consumption of U.S. social services. As I sought to understand how space and

work were organized at MOTW, I came to see how the divide between the American administrative and the Mexican production areas was policed to ensure the exclusion of the *mexicana*. Over time, I heard discourses within MOTW, which echoed those heard throughout the United States, arguing that Mexican women must be prohibited from taking advantage of tax-funded social services in U.S. territory. Similarly, in MOTW, representations of the *mexicana* centered on her reproductive drive and her sexuality, which precipitated waste of U.S. resources (see also Fernández-Kelly 1983).

The policing of the *mexicana* social mobility in MOTW focused on where she appeared in the workplace. The verbal descriptions of the factory itself incorporated references to a nationalized “border” that separated the Mexican from the American areas. Doors, language surveillance, and uniforms marked this imaginary divide and brought the border to life in the internal spaces of MOTW. A *mexicana* presence was tolerated in the managerial domain only if it was accompanied by strict surveillance.

On my initial tour of MOTW, the plant manager, Steve, an “Anglo” male most recently from Georgia, explained that the physical plant was divided along a national line. “In here,” he narrated as we walked through the shop floor, “is where we put our Mexican employees. We’ve got about five hundred now, about half female. That’s a lot less than other *maquiladoras* because we started off as a machine shop, but now we’ve got more of the electrical work that the girls do.” We walked past the almost totally male-staffed carburetor tooling and assembly operation, and he proceeded to describe his plans to promote some Mexican employees because he believed that “Mexico can produce good quality engineers and I think we should support that.”

However, as we continued our journey through the expansive operation and reached the predominantly female populated areas of electrical assembly and wire cutting, I realized that his optimism for Mexico’s technical ability did not extend to *mexicanas*. “I don’t think we’ll have many promotions from here,” he replied in answer to my question as to whether he intended to promote employees from the electrical assembly operations. “Mexican women just don’t have the cultural upbringing for industrial careers. They’re here to find a mate and raise some kids. Sounds harsh, but that’s the reality here.” When we had completed our rounds of the production operations, we stopped at a metal door with an opaque window. “Now our administration,” he said while holding open the door. “This is where the Americans have their offices. We have two assistant plant managers, and managers for the other departments—engineering, the warehouse.”

When passing through this door, I could not deny the palpable sensation of crossing from a consciously designed Mexican domain into an American one. I noticed that several of the posters on the wall advertised the thrilling experience of operating MOTW motorboats. Some encouraged teamwork for quality production; all were in English. The audible language was also English

in the administrative area, an expansive space segmented into several offices along the side and filled with cubicles in the middle. These visual and audible markers contrasted with the Mexican area, where a sound system broadcast popular tunes from a local Ciudad Juárez radio station and notices in Spanish outlined corporate policies regarding safety and general comportment. These markers revealed a concerted effort to reproduce in the firm's social and spatial arrangement the hierarchy of Mexicans to Americans articulated in larger border discourses.

The international divide in the factory also represented a divide in the labor code, pay structure, and tax system.<sup>8</sup> Mexican employees worked under the guidelines imposed by the Mexican labor laws, and while Americans had to respect these laws in their treatment of Mexican workers, the general understanding of the law was that Americans were bound by the U.S. code in their treatment of each other. Under no circumstances, Steve explained, was a Mexican to hold authority over or earn more money than an American. "That goes against the grain of an American company," he said.

However, unlike the immigration authorities who policed the international line only a few miles away, passage across the international border inside MOTW did not depend on a birth certificate. One's citizenship was not under scrutiny; rather, it was the performance of identity that was subject to examination. Any performance by a woman that might be interpreted to signify the presence of a *mexicana* in the American domain of administration was considered dangerous.

For example, even though Steve described the area as the preserve of American management, the vast majority of the people working in that room were Mexican administrative staff, all women. Many had migrated from various parts of northern Mexico to find work in the *maquilas*, and they now facilitated the MOTW paperwork for a poverty-level, minimum wage. Everything about their job performance, from how fast they typed to what they wore, how they spoke, and how they presented themselves was carefully scripted, all in the effort to demonstrate a U.S. managerial control over the out-of-control *mexicana*. I noticed that the fifteen or so secretaries and clerks wore the same outfit—a drab gray pinstripe dress suit with a red blouse and matching pumps. "Are they wearing uniforms?" I asked. Steve explained that there were uniform regulations for the Mexican women in administration because "you should have seen what they used to wear. It looked like one of those cantinas down on Juárez avenue [the red light district]. It made some of the guys uncomfortable."

Reference to prostitution when discussing women employees came up on more than one occasion in my research at MOTW. For example, when I asked one of the production managers, Roger, to describe the labor force, he said, "Some of these girls have second jobs. You know, I've even heard that some work the bars." The message that you cannot tell the difference between a

prostitute and a female *maquiladora* worker was common in my interviews. "We don't know what these girls do at night," Burt, another production manager said, "but we don't want them to bring it in here." Steve, the general manager, further explained in a later conversation, "It's important for our clients to feel like they're in an American office when they're in here. Also, it just makes the secretaries seem more professional, not just some girl walking in from the street."

This managerial narrative of the female Mexican employee at MOTW was an effort to help me see her as they did and to bring her to life as the embodiment of that sexually chaotic third world woman so common, according to corporate gurus, to other industrial worksites around the globe (cf. Ong 1987). This version of the female *maquiladora mexicana* is not particular to MOTW (see also Salzinger 1997; Wright 1997), and she was not a static figure, found only in people born on one side of the border or the other. Rather, she traveled with the discourses that sought her out and recreated her in the gestures, clothing, language, hair styles, and attitudes of the female labor force. All women employees at MOTW had to stake her position as non-*mexicana* or risk being interpreted as another instance of her dangerous corporeal configuration. And to be seen with such an embodiment would threaten any woman's career into the decidedly American domain of MOTW management.

I encountered this very threat when two self-described *mexicanas* attempted to change jobs and ascend the MOTW corporate ladder. Each of these women described herself to me as *mexicana*, and each faced the challenge of having to navigate the discourse of the *mexicana* in order to legitimate her claim to residency in the American domain of administration, where she could earn a higher salary and exercise more authority. In these two cases, being an American or a Mexican, masculine or feminine, Anglo or *mexicana* hinged on a performance of the subject position as it is understood in the symbolic realm of representation. We shall see how a woman who was born and raised in Mexico transforms herself into an American, while a woman born and raised in the United States slides down the corporate scale as she is seen to embody the *mexicana* image. Each encountered a discourse that recreated a historical representation of *mexicanas*, in general, as vulnerable to their sexual drives and dangerous for corporate capitalism as their bodies, language, and mannerisms were screened for evidence of the *mexicana* who might lurk within her. And each struggled to resignify herself within the dominant discourse of who *mexicanas* are and what they provoke inside and outside of the MOTW walls.

#### ROSALÍA

When I met Rosalía, she was the personnel director for Mexican employees. She had been working in the *maquilas* for twelve years, having started out as

an operator, then having moved from clerk to secretary, and finally to the assistant personnel director position at her previous *maquila* employer. She was raising her two children single-handedly and had just received her college degree in business administration after years of night school. She was the only career woman in her immediate family, and she expressed pride in her accomplishments. "A lot of people say that women can't have a career. You hear that about Mexican women especially, but it's not true. You have to want it, but you can do it," she told me when I asked her to describe her career history.

At the time of that conversation, Rosalía's office was in one of the cubicles designated for Mexican administrative staff in the production area. In the history of MOTW, no Mexican woman had ever moved above that position; however, within two months of my research, Rosalía not only would make a bid for a promotion, she would be the first *mexicana* to occupy an office in the American administrative area, and she would hold authority over American employees. A month after this promotion, I asked Rosalía to describe the events surrounding her move. "It was obvious that Steve needed some help with the American personnel. I was already doing the insurance work . . . I told him I could do the job. I showed him my books on the U.S. labor code . . . He knows that I'm professional. I'm not just any *mexicana*."

Steve explained his decision to me this way: "I knew it was a big deal to move Rosalía into this office, but I also knew that she was the best for the job. They look at her and see just another Mexican woman, but I know Rosalía. And I know she's tough as nails and ambitious. She'll end up showing us all that she's not just some Mexican woman who's in over her head. She'll fit in with the Americans."

Still, when he announced Rosalía's promotion, four of the five managers stormed out of the meeting in protest.

"This is an invasion of my privacy," one production manager, Roger, growled as he marched out of the office. "What's wrong?" I asked Burt, the other production manager, as he exited the staff meeting room. "Roger is pissed about Rosalía. I am, too. I don't see why she should have an office here. She was fine where she was," he replied as he walked toward his office, located across the hall from hers. Outside I asked Roger what irritated him so about Rosalía's promotion, "I don't want to sound like a bigot, cause I don't have anything against Mexican people. But she's very Mexican and a woman in that culture doesn't know what it's really like to play hardball."

"What does this have to do with privacy?" I continued.

"Look, she's just not qualified to oversee our affairs. For Christ's sake, she's just a secretary. They're probably having a goddamned affair," Roger barked. Burt jumped in, "She's supposed to handle our insurance claims or worker's comp?" He added sarcastically, "She doesn't even know what that means."

Inside, the grumblings from other American employees were more subtle but still audible. I approached Cynthia, one of the quality engineers, who said,

“What does a Mexican woman know about sexual harassment? She’s *mexicana mexicana*.” *Mexicana mexicana*, as I was assumed to understand, meant that Rosalía was a particularly Mexican *mexicana*, who would then fit within the lower ranks of MOTW’s political and economic hierarchy.

On this issue, Cynthia was quite vocal: “Do you realize that she is now my boss? And she makes more money than I do. That’s an insult.” Part of the protest was directed at Steve, who had disrupted the social code by allowing Rosalía to move physically into American social space. They feared a sully of the American domain by the presence of a *mexicana*. Burt and Roger summed up this sentiment when each complained, “What do you think our bosses in Illinois are going to think when they come into our offices and see her?” Cynthia was also concerned about the image: “Rosalía won’t know how to act around corporate people. She looks out of place, and that’s no accident.”

Rosalía knew of these misgivings. She immediately enrolled in an intensive English course, bought some new suits at Dillard’s in El Paso, and filled out the paperwork for a green card. She would be moving to El Paso. Within one month, she had checked out the El Paso schools for her children and chosen the neighborhood where she would like to live. I asked her why she was making the move, and she responded, “Well, the job is an American job. That means I have to get a green card.”

In order to qualify for the human resources position as it was structured in the corporation, Rosalía had to become an American resident with a green card. The human resource manager’s position was a structurally “American” one. It was paid in U.S. dollars; it forfeited taxes to the U.S. government; and it fell under the U.S. labor code. No less significantly, it was ranked above several American positions in terms of pay, status, and corporate power. Rosalía was demonstrating that this human resource manager was not going to be a Mexican but rather an American employee.

She put it this way: “In the *maquilas*, you have to understand the difference between being Mexican and being American. They say right to my face that a *mexicana* can’t do this job. That I don’t understand sexual harassment or can’t stop a strike. You watch. I am *mexicana* but I have American business sense, and that means I know both sides.” In showing that she could reside in the U.S., Rosalía played off the metaphor of the international border outside the firm in order to renegotiate her position vis-à-vis the border inside it. She was leaving her *mexicanismo* behind. She was Americanizing and, no less significant, she was proving that unlike the overwhelming majority of *mexicanas*, she was not culturally bound to sexual chaos.

Steve told me one day over lunch, “She really surprised a lot of people when she announced that. I think they thought she wouldn’t be able to leave Mexico. But you know I think she’s got her sights set on an international

posting. She's serious. She wants to be treated like an American and have a real career. . . . I think she can do it."

However, Rosalía's own description of this movement reveals that she considers herself to be a new kind of *mexicana*, one who understands how the border as a metaphor interacts with the material organization of power, capital, and prestige in the political borderlands. When I asked her if she would miss living in Ciudad Juárez, she said, "I will always be *mexicana*, but I also need to understand American issues. Here I am American. I represent American employees to the corporation. I translate policy. So I need to know what it means to cross the bridge every day, to have your kids in an American school and try to keep up with what they want. I am *mexicana* but I'm not the traditional version."

And she did transform herself in front of everyone's eyes into what was broadly construed as the prototype of an American manager. Her dress suits changed to darker hues; her hems grew longer and her heels shorter.<sup>9</sup> Within a few weeks of her language class, she rarely spoke Spanish. She also handled a delicate insurance problem regarding offshore American employees and impressed her skeptical colleagues with her acumen in a U.S. corporate bureaucracy. I asked Steve how he found her job performance. "You know, she really has changed. I think they don't even know she's Mexican up in headquarters."

Rosalía's apparent abilities to dispel labor disruptions further impressed the other managers. In February 1995, following a seventy percent peso devaluation (against the U.S. dollar), thousands of workers walked off their jobs in the *maquiladoras*. Rumors spread that someone was trying to organize unions throughout the industry as factory managers came under pressure to raise wages both to compensate for the immediate cheapening of their labor force (in dollar terms) and to stem the decline of the workers' buying power. Two of the factories neighboring MOTW were paralyzed by a walk-out, and the almost five thousand striking workers at the nearby RCA television manufacturer forced a shut down in the firm's Illinois operation (see Kern and Dunn 1995). Yet at MOTW, work continued as usual. Steve was bursting with praise for Rosalía when I asked him how MOTW stayed in operation. "She really knew what to do. She had informants spread out all over the place. . . . In the doctor's office. Everyone talks to their doctor, and on the lines. She's tough, tougher than anyone thought she could be. She's shown that she's not your average Mexican woman. In fact, I think she's as American now as I am."

Rosalía was also making her presence known beyond the MOTW walls. One year after her promotion, she was appointed to a prominent position in the *maquiladora* trade association in Ciudad Juárez, and she expressed the hope of opening the door for other *mexicana* managers to participate in the group.

As Rosalía crossed some Mexico-U.S. divides, she resignified herself in MOTW. She became a professionally savvy *mexicana* by rearticulating what it

meant to have her knowledge as a *mexicana*, her language, and her own political vision. She manipulated the border as a metaphor for division in order to carve her place as a particular type of *mexicana* with mobility across the international divide. And she assumed a politics of geographic difference. Her movement into American space meant putting some distance between herself and the majority of *mexicanas* employed at the firm. Yet she still identified herself as a *mexicana*, one with the ability to make links across the border, to forge political connections and to strengthen her position through her own awareness of herself as a political agent. She is not the kind of new *mestiza* Anzaldúa envisions, but she is the type that is becoming more prominent in the contemporary place that is the Mexico-U.S. borderland.

Alongside Rosalía's efforts for promotion there was another attempt by one of her American colleagues, Cynthia, also to gain ground in management. Rosalía was the corporation's point person for managing this affair, and her handling of it reveals her view that the failure to recognize the politics of geographic difference in the *maquiladoras* is disastrous for a *mexicana* who aspires to improve her own material standing.

#### CYNTHIA

When I first met Cynthia in September 1993, she worked as a quality engineer overseeing the production of the fuel systems. The job description for this position involves more managing than engineering, and her role was as the managerial liaison to the manufacturing engineers, all Mexican men, on the shop floor. With a college degree in engineering and chemistry, Cynthia had the most years of education in her family, and she was taking night classes at the University of Texas in El Paso to complete the requirements for a master's degree in industrial engineering. Although her parents were first-generation immigrants from Mexico, she said she learned to speak Spanish well in high school. She had started working at MOTW two years earlier when she decided that even though she was from Ohio, her roots were along the border. "You know," she told me, "my family was all migrant workers. Picking tomatoes. My mom told my dad one day that she just couldn't stand the sight of another tomato, and they went to Ohio and opened up a *panaderia* (Mexican bread store). That's where I worked as a kid."

Cynthia described herself as ambitious. She spoke of her participation in the probusiness group LULAC (League of Unified Latin American Citizens) and in El Paso political circles. She told me of her aspirations to move into management from our first interview. "I'm a good manager and I'm the best writer they've got around here. I write all of the reports even for the other guys. I'm working on something for Steve right now." Steve agreed, "Cynthia writes well. She's talented, but she's always in some controversy. I can't tell you how much time we spend trying to figure out the 'Cynthia problem.'"

This was evident after just a few days at MOTW. During one of the weekly managers' meetings, soon after Rosalía's promotion, Cynthia's name came up when Roger stated, in a commanding tone, "Somebody has got to talk with Cynthia."

The next morning, Cynthia came into my office and closed the door. "Do you know what they said to me? Those fuckers. . . . My bows. They say I can't wear my hair bows." She took a sparkling purple bow from her hair and showed it to me. "My mom gave these to me for my birthday. . . . And it's Rosalía telling me this. . . . First it was my hair, 'tone it down.' Steve calls me in his office and says he wants me to look more like an American engineer. He said I had gone too Mexican. Who the hell does he think he's talking to?"

Over a series of conversations, Steve explained to me that Cynthia simply did not look professional, given her position. "I don't know if she's here to discover her roots or what. I don't care. I just want my engineers to act like engineers. I can't have my boss coming down here and bumping into glitz and bows when he wants to talk about the fuel system. . . . This might sound bad, but that's just how it is in this world. If she wants to be a manager, she had better tone down the Mexican stuff."

Cynthia was not bending to the pressure. One day she came in wearing a violet blue dress suit with rhinestone buttons and a bow to match. "I dare them to say anything," she told me in the hallway. When I asked Cynthia if she was tempted to yield in an effort to mitigate tensions, she expressed anger and said, "Look, I'm not a white girl like you. And I'm not ashamed of who I am. I show it. I'm a woman, I show it. I'm *mexicana*, I show it. Outside, I wear blue jeans but here I'm professional and that's what I show. If they don't like it, fuck 'em."

Meanwhile, she had received written memos not detailing the nature of her clothing but stating in vague terms that she was not fulfilling her professional duties. One of the evaluations gave her low marks on professional conduct, and Cynthia understood this to be in preparation for her legal dismissal. Rosalía explained the conflict in these terms: "Here you have to be one thing or the other. You are either Mexican or American. There is no place for a Mexican American here."

Paradoxically, while hours of staff time were dedicated to the controversy over Cynthia's appearance, her performance as a quality engineer, measured in terms of product defects and reliability, won the highest award in the company, worldwide. The corporation flew her and her parents to Miami so that she could attend the award ceremony. However, this award did not prevent her forced resignation a short while later.

In the days just preceding her resignation, Steve made an announcement that he had promoted a Mexican man into the engineering manager job that Cynthia had covered. "I don't think the *maquilas* are ready for a Cynthia yet," he told me in explanation of this decision. "This guy acts like an engineer. I know where he's coming from." By this I understood that he was impressed

with a strictly masculine presentation, the wearing of ties and an unambivalent understanding of the difference between the Mexican and the U.S. domains in MOTW.

I asked Rosalía to explain why Cynthia's self-presentation was such a problem and worth so much attention when her work was clearly helping the company. She justified the concern over Cynthia's appearance by discussing how the international border operates. "Well, it might seem irrelevant, but how people look and act is really important for keeping everything running. It's like the border, you have to show your papers. It doesn't matter who you are. If you don't act right, then they won't let you in. They have their rules. So do we. Cynthia doesn't want to accept them. She doesn't seem professional and it bothers everyone. She really doesn't know who she is here. That's her biggest problem."

What Cynthia presented was an incongruous image at MOTW. She asserted herself as a "Mexican American" woman, a particular version of *mexicana*, in a context where a clear-cut division was the norm. By refusing to acknowledge the border as a metaphor for division, she threatened a social order built around an international segregation within the division of labor. And she directly challenged the predominant discourse of the *mexicana* as unprofessional. This was an effort at resignification not simply of her individual self, but also of the symbolic interpretation of the *mexicana* in general. Unlike Rosalía, she was not adjusting her own presentation to fit the dominant symbolic framework of space and subjects. Instead, she tackled the representation and perceived place of the *mexicana* and met forceful opposition. In some ways, she, like Anzaldúa, imagined a possible unification of the Mexican with the American side. She attempted to negotiate a social ambiguity, inserting the Mexican with the American, and the feminine with authority, in a context where such discursive and material alignments were cast as impossibilities.

However, Cynthia's expressions of social unity across a rejoined geography did not challenge the class divides inherent in the division of labor that separate professional *mexicanas* from day-laboring *mexicanas* across a nationalized border. "These girls," she explained in reference to the female operators under her charge, "are lucky to have this job and they don't even know it. Mexican culture really doesn't teach them how to respect their jobs. My family is Mexican but when it comes to work, we've got the American work ethic." Cynthia may have threatened a social order crafted around the exclusion of a particular manifestation of *mexicanas* in American administration, but she expressed steadfast dedication to the nationalized and sexualized bordering of class divisions that preserved the capitalist integrity of the operation. For example, when she heard that I had attended a labor meeting in Ciudad Juárez, she called me at home. "Are you one of those bleeding heart labor people?" she asked. When I replied that I didn't know what she meant, she informed me

that she could not take any risks and would not talk to me again. I then received a call from Steve, who asked if I was a "labor spy."

Despite her problems at MOTW, Cynthia did not leave in a weak position. She sought support and advice from an extensive legal community both in El Paso and in Ciudad Juárez. Fearing a lawsuit, Steve authorized a bonus and provided strong recommendations to another company, where she began working. Shortly afterwards, she was named in a widely circulated industry trade magazine as one of the top women employees and as a highly regarded engineer in the *maquiladora* industry. She attributed much of her success to her experience as a woman knowledgeable of both the American and the Mexican cultures located in the border environment.

As she said to me before her resignation, "You know I think these white guys are in for a big surprise. . . . There's a lot of us, and we know what we're doing. This is one of the few places where a *mexicana* can really do something in industry and be recognized. We know both sides down here and that scares them."

#### FEMINIST POLITICS AND THE MAQUILADORA MESTIZA

Speaking of the new *mestiza* and *mestizaje* almost ten years after the publication of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa says, "The new *mestiza* is sensitive to and aware of her ethnic and cultural *mestizaje*. She is politically aware of what goes on in these different communities and worlds and therefore brings a different perspective to what is going on. She is no longer just a Chicana. That is not all that she is. She is the feminist in the academy, the dyke in the queer community, and the person working in straight America" (Anzaldúa and Hernández 1995-96, 9). And at MOTW, she is the *mexicana* working in American administration. To borrow (and thereby distort Anzaldúa's image) she is the *maquiladora mexicana* resignified to be the new *maquiladora mestiza*.

Rosalía and Cynthia raise the following question for Butler's version of resignification as it applies to this new *mestizaje*. Can we think of resignification as a partial subversion or, more to the point, even as a radical rearticulation with status quo conditions and subjections? The *maquiladora mestiza* is resignified to the extent that she was never predicted to emerge and is still a surprise when she does. But her resignification as a new border subject is simultaneous with the reinforcement of the corporate script for crafting employee identities around the markers of sex, nationality, and culture into the spaces and positions of the corporate workplace. While each woman expresses a cultural hybridity that resonates with Anzaldúa's vision for *mestizaje*, each actively works toward maintaining the border of a class division on which the *maquiladora* industry thrives. As Rosalía Americanizes and Cynthia makes a name for herself throughout the industry, the majority of *mexicanas* in the

*maquiladoras* continue to work for poverty wages. Many live in economically strained conditions, and fewer than a fraction will ever rise in the corporate ranks. Their success begs the question, is a political articulation possible between Anzaldúa's version of a radical *mestiza* and the probusiness, *maquiladora mestiza* in a feminist border politics?

Rosalía and Cynthia raise this question as they disrupt some codes for interpreting their subject positions while holding steadfast to others. Their new *mestizaje* is evident in their hybridity and in their proclamation of themselves as women who know both sides of the border and the subjects who inhabit those places. Yet excluded from their *mestizaje* is a mixing with non-professional *mexicanas*, and even with each other in a social sense, except that each of them supports *maquiladora* trade associations and is active in politically conservative business groups. Moreover, each brings diversity to the firm and provides corporate managers with evidence of the firm's commitment to moving women and minorities through the ranks. In seeking how they might articulate with Anzaldúa's vision of a new *mestiza*, it is useful to address how these women appear different from each other and to what extent their negotiations of difference beget joint effects.

Rosalía shows that *mexicanas* can "do American"—she changes her language, her dress, her social circles, her national residency, and her children's schools. She crosses the border outside the firm and reflects the one she crossed within it. In so doing, she breaks down the concept of the *mexicana* who is tradition-bound, who is culturally destined for a nonprofessional future and who is eternally socially subordinate.<sup>10</sup> Yet to demonstrate this change, she disavows her status as a *mexicana* in the firm. She subverts the expectations for who that *mexicana* is by demonstrating her distance from that category. In other words, the continuity of the category, *mexicana*, allows Rosalía, through her disavowal of it, to rise above the possibilities it allows. She therefore desires that the *mexicana* exist as a viable subject, for without it she could not stand in its contrast (cf. Butler 1997), and she will not allow Cynthia, or anyone else, to subvert the meaning of this subject which is so valuable for her and for the firm. Meanwhile, as Rosalía proves that "once a *mexicana*, not always a traditional *mexicana*," the majority of those who bring the *mexicana* subject to life in the *maquiladora* industry continue to work for low wages and enjoy few prospects of professional advancement as they create those many products coveted in the U.S. market.

Cynthia, on the other hand, refuses to "do American" according to the MOTW corporate narrative. She is not, like Rosalía, a recent immigrant to U.S. territory, but expresses her identity as an "American" with a long Mexican heritage who is entitled to residency there. She consequently struggles in MOTW because she challenges the corporate version of *mexicana* as a homogeneous subject who represents the unprofessional employee. She attempts to "smuggle" her type of *mexicana* into the American domain, where the *mexicana*

is expressly barred, and she is soon forced to evacuate this place. But her story is hardly a tragedy. After experiencing blatant sexual and racial harassment at MOTW, she finds employment in another firm and continues to occupy a prominent place—as a *mexicana*—in the Mexican *maquiladora* industry.

Even though Rosalía and Cynthia express contempt for each other at some level, they both effectively pull the image of the *mexicana* from the shadows of *maquiladora* offices and production floors and place her front and center with respect to the positions of power in those firms. They are new *mestizas*, therefore, in the sense detailed by Anzaldúa, insofar as they have reinvented themselves as women of power whose base emanates from their cultural heritage and knowledge of the worlds defined by the border and borderlands. Yet clearly they are not the sort of new *mestizas* Anzaldúa had in mind, for the joint effects of their self-inventions, or resignifications, also work to exclude other *mexicanas* from the material and social benefits accruing to *maquiladora* managers.

Rosalía and Cynthia illustrate what is at stake in the formation of border subjects around a geography of difference and what, therefore, must be challenged by a feminist politics located in the borderlands. In their efforts we see how a geography of difference integrates class into the formation of border subjects and the political divide, and we see how the border as a symbol of division resonates throughout daily activities. A feminist politics that seeks to join forces across this geography will have to address how perceptions of difference are incorporated in the daily activities that bring the borderlands, border activities, and border residents, such as the *maquiladora mestiza*, to life.

## NOTES

1. *Maquiladoras* are export-processing facilities located in Mexico.

2. I use the term American in reference to its common deployment in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso and in the *maquiladoras* to refer to U.S. citizens, although the term is misleading.

3. Sporadic and small-scale efforts are made to form binational links and organizations, but beyond corporate organizations and some ecumenical activities, such efforts continue to be piecemeal, underfunded, and stretched for human resources.

4. For a fuller discussion of the cultural context of the multinational firm see Schoenberger (1997) and Martin (1994).

5. I use pseudonyms for all references to individuals and corporations, as agreed with my informants.

6. I offer this account as my interpretation of events, conversations, and responses to questions. Like many ethnographers, I believe that a representation of myself does not have to be front and center for my role as an interpreter to be understood (see Strathern 1991, Geertz 1988).

7. This operation involved the positioning of U.S. Border Patrol agents every 200 yards of a twenty mile stretch of the border in the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso area to create a physical blockade that would deter illegal immigration. This operation is still in effect.

8. At the time I conducted this study, the majority of MOTW workers were operators who, like those throughout the *maquiladoras*, earned the minimum wage which was just less than U.S. \$1.00 per hour. After a series of peso devaluations since 1994, the minimum wage is now worth about U.S. \$0.50 per hour. Jobs above operator earn slightly more. The supervisor is the lowest ranking salaried employee. U.S. supervisors earned salaries ranging in the mid-twenties per year, while the Mexican supervisors earned from \$8,000-\$13,000 per year. Engineers earned above that amount, again with the discrepancy between U.S. and Mexican employees. The U.S. managers earn considerably more at a range between \$40,000 and \$130,000 per year.

9. Throughout the *maquilas*, attention to women's dress styles is continually articulated as an American or Mexican affect, and often in reference to a cultural representation rather than to a national divide. The difference is generally discussed as one of length; fit, in terms of degree of snugness; color (bright or subdued); shoe style; make-up applications and hairstyle. However, there is a continual negotiation of this difference that cannot be explored within the confines of the essay (cf. Garber 1992; Bourdieu 1984).

10. For discussions of how this discourse of women in Third World regions is representative of the tradition-bound and socially subordinate subject, see Mohanty (1991). For evidence of how this discourse is put into practice in political and economic analyses of Third World regions, including Mexico, see Frobel (1979).

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