

# From Protests to Politics: Sex Work, Women's Worth, and Ciudad Juárez Modernity

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This paper combines ethnographic research with discourse analysis to discuss how the protests of women sex workers in downtown Ciudad Juárez also represent protests against a larger urban economy that valorizes the disappearance of women from urban space. In Ciudad Juárez today, these disappearances are taking place as women and girls vanish from the publicity regarding progress in the *maquiladora* industry. The disappearances occur as more women and girls are kidnapped and murdered, and the disappearances occur as the police remove sex workers from the downtowns of border cities long famous for prostitution. While these different types of disappearances are not equivalent—to be denied access to public space is not the same as to be kidnapped and murdered—they are knit together through a discourse deployed by the city's political and corporate elites that equates the removal of women from public space with urban development and industrial progress. By combining ethnographic research with discourse analysis, and Marxist with feminist critique, I am following the lead of several geographers who regard discourses as “socio-spatial circuits” that are productive of urban, economic, and cultural landscapes. This approach allows for an analysis of how the women sex workers' efforts to reappear in public space represents a protest, with potential for creating political alliances with other activists, against those invested in generating value from the disappearance of women across the Ciudad Juárez industrial and urban landscape. *Key Words:* political economy, gender, Mexico, ethnography.

Value does not stalk about with a label on its forehead.

—Karl Marx

I believe that a grave danger for women exists in each point of the city. I believe that the simple fact of being a woman here is a grave danger.

—Gullermina González, human rights activist in Ciudad Juárez (*Frontera Norte Sur* 3 March 2001)

In late October 2001, some 20 sex workers in the *centro histórico* (historic district) of Ciudad Juárez met with top officials in the police department to demand that “they be able to do their jobs without police abuse” (Ramos and Soza 2001, 11B, author translation). These women work along the city's congested streets and pedestrian walkways where the street La Noche Triste meets the one called La Paz, behind the Cuáhuitemoc market. There, people buy and sell everything imaginable: from sex to smoked chilies, parakeets and avocados, electrical gadgets, *carne asada*, and pirated CDs to dried rattlesnake and knock-off Nike sneakers. Women have sold sex for years in *la zona de La Paz* (the zone of peace). Their clients are generally working-class Mexican men, who pay 30 pesos (US \$3) for 15 minutes in a rented room with a bed and a bowl of water. Among *maquiladora*<sup>1</sup> workers trying to buy food or sex with the earnings of \$6 a day, day laborers who have risked INS detention to earn a few dollars more in the U.S., and kids

selling the cheapest forms of cocaine and heroin, the women of La Paz are resisting police attempts to remove them from the brick streets and walkways of the *centro histórico*.

This effort to purge sex workers from the downtown creates irony on many levels. For most of 20th century, Ciudad Juárez lured tourist dollars with the promise of free-flowing alcohol, nightclubs, and easy sex. Unlike many other Mexican cities, where local governments regulate prostitution by limiting the activity to *zonas de tolerancia* (red-light districts), Ciudad Juárez has no such restrictions (Curtis and Arreola 1991). Indeed, much of this city's commerce has rested on the ready availability of sexual services across its sprawling landscape, and sex workers have long constituted part of the city's promotional face to tourists, to businessmen, and to military personnel stationed in the U.S. Southwest. In fact, Ciudad Juárez has been known historically as a city of women who have comprised two significant parts of the economy, as prostitutes on the city's streets and as *maquiladora* laborers. During the initial stages of the *maquiladora* industry, corporations attracted poor women from the countryside and interior cities who established the city's fame as one of the best places in the world to find inexpensive laborers and quality labor (Cravey 1998; Carrillo 1990). Thus, for much of the city's history, women workers, on the street and in the factory, have symbolized economic prosperity.

Recent changes in dominant visions within corporate and political ranks for economic and political development have transformed the role and meaning of women workers for that city's ongoing project of modernization. In the 1990s, Ciudad Juárez's reputation shifted from one of a booming industrial city to that of a violent center of the drug trade, random crime, and outdated manufacturing facilities. In the face of declining corporate investment and the evisceration of tourist revenues, the political and corporate elites of the city have devised numerous strategies to illustrate new and potential prosperity. One such strategy is to equate the first 30 years of maquiladora development with an obsolete industrial tradition, including young female workers and labor-intensive assembly that the city is leaving behind in favor of higher-tech development. Another is to present urban cleansing and improvement through the removal of sex workers from the streets. These strategies mean that the formerly lauded women workers in the factory and on the street have come to signal economic stagnation and social degradation. Now, political and corporate elites demonstrate modern progress by pointing to the disappearance of the once-prized women workers from the city's maquiladora industry as well as from its downtown areas as evidence of a higher-tech maquiladora sector and of an improved urban climate, suitable for middle-class professionals and tourist families.

A central objective in this paper is to describe how the representation of progress in this city as presented by urban elites has changed from one that hinges on women's work to one that revolves around the demonstrated disappearance of women from the city streets and workplaces. Second, I want to show how the sex workers on La Paz who are fighting for their workspace and livelihoods in downtown Ciudad Juárez are running up against their removal from downtown Ciudad Juárez. Third, I hope to show how their efforts to protect their workspaces in La Paz are colliding with a broader political and economic strategy that, in short, seeks to generate value out of female disappearance across the city.

By female disappearance, I mean the removal of women and girls from some place where they once were. The efforts to make women disappear can be legal—making female presence illegal in some place—or can operate beyond the law, through such practices as kidnapping and harassment. Today, in Ciudad Juárez, women and girls vanish from the corporate-sponsored publicity as evidence of technological progress in a “masculinizing” industry. As more women and girls are kidnapped, the numbers now reach into the hundreds over the last few years. And the disappearances are occurring as the police attempt to eliminate

sex workers from the downtowns of border cities renowned for prostitution.

While these different types of disappearances are not equivalent—to be denied access to public space is not the same as to be kidnapped and murdered—they are knit together through a discourse deployed by the city's political and corporate elites that equates any form of women's vanishing from public space with urban development and industrial progress, as evidence of how the city has progressed from its renowned “traditional” past of prostitution and labor-intensive manufacturing to a more modern place organized around high-tech facilities and middle-class sensibilities.

I base this argument on research I conducted at the intersection of La Paz and La Noche Triste from 1996–2001 and upon interviews with corporate leaders, human rights activists, and archival research through 2003. A central question guided my research: how do age-old stories, so familiar around the world, of prostitutes as symbols of danger, filth, and contamination come to have meaning for the renovation of the Ciudad Juárez economy today? I address this question here by discussing my research on sex work in relation to two other events occurring simultaneously in the city. One is the concerted effort by corporate and political elites to attract high-tech maquiladora investment and also to invigorate the city's devastated tourist economy. The other is a burgeoning social movement by people trying to bring international attention to the escalation of violence against women throughout the city. In triangulating these three events, which involve different social groups and which play out at different scales within the city's political economy, I also have another question in mind: how can seemingly unrelated protests against the valorization of female degradation lay the basis for political action against the political and economic systems based on this kind of value?

## Theory

Central to my analysis is Karl Marx's (1990) observation that value, under capitalism, does not stalk about with a label on its forehead. Instead, the identity of value, and, by association, its antithetical form, is always socially constructed. Value, in other words, never represents itself; rather, other things, such as money, or brand names, or even social identities indicate the presence (or absence) of value within them (see Harvey 1996). Whatever its contours, says Marx, that which represents value's presence must continuously contribute to the further production and accumulation of capital. Otherwise, something that at one point

represented the presence of value will come to indicate its absence if that representation does not further the production and consumption of capitalist value.

I find a similar logic at work in the issues I investigate in Ciudad Juárez today. Urban boosters, corporate executives, and political elites frequently refer to tales of the degraded woman worker, emblematic of premodern traditions and prostitution, to generate an image of a cleaner and safer city and more modern industry in the spaces where we find her missing.<sup>2</sup> Following such logic, if women represent a low-tech sector, then the sectors marked by her absence reveal a high-tech potential. If women on the street indicate urban decay, then their removal indicates urban renewal. In short, by equating female disappearance from the city's workspaces, both in factories and on the street, with a vision of industrial and urban progress, the city's elites are transforming the meaning of Mexican woman worker for the political economy of Ciudad Juárez. At one time she signaled prosperity as emblematic of the much-lauded "feminization" of the international division of labor that attracted *maquiladora* industries during their explosive growth from the 1970s to the mid-1990s. And she also represented the city's main tourist attraction for Mexican and U.S. male tourists who wanted inexpensive and easy sex. Now, however, she represents, under discourses that link her to industrial obsolescence and urban vice, the opposite of prosperity. She has been devalued. Yet, as with any process of devaluation, there is value still to be gained from her, if her image as value's antithesis can be put into motion toward the production of more value. And today in Ciudad Juárez, corporate and political boosters are indeed attempting to generate value via the circulation of a discourse of the depreciated Mexican woman worker. By representing what value is not, she establishes the contours for what value is. In her opposition, therefore, we find value's positive condition. And, following this logic, we find progress in the places where she once worked, in the spaces she once occupied, in the city she once inhabited.

The city's elites are thus keen to turn this representation of progress, indicated by female disappearance, into something that generates further investment in the city's capital base. In other words, they are banking on the value generated from the recognition of this progress at a time when international investors are increasingly skeptical over the city's ability to support further industrialization (see Cruz Sáenz 2003; Wright 2001a). And this kind of value—the valorization of a progress symbolized by female disappearance—stalks women throughout the city, such that to be a woman in Ciudad Juárez today is to be in grave danger.

A Marxian inquiry into the association of female disappearance with value also focuses on the value of the antithetical possibility. If female disappearance signals value, then female reappearance could potentially destabilize that value and mark its decline. What happens when some groups try to invert the vision of value so that a women's return to public space indicates the return of value? What is required to force such an inversion? What stands to appreciate and depreciate in the process?

With such questions in mind, I turn to the work of feminist theorists who have grappled with the difficult task of connecting the discursive production of cultural identity with capitalism.<sup>3</sup> By examining gender and sexuality as systems that also produce value, including capitalist value, such scholars have worked to maintain analyses of material power and exploitation, so evident within capitalism, without distilling the complexities of social life down to capitalist abstractions (Spivak 1994; Gibson-Graham 1996). Toward this end, feminist scholars have led the debate regarding the political struggles over making women's work and their lives, in general, more socially visible and economically viable. This scholarship has shown that the economic processes for devaluing women's labor often proceed through the production of the female subject as socially invisible, as a subject who does not count in history, in the public sphere, in cultural practices, or even in conceptualizations of some place (see Scott 1988).

Yet, as feminist geographers have illustrated, missing from much of this analysis into the visibility/invisibility of women has been an interrogation into the intersections of discursive with spatial practices (McDowell 1997; Lawson 1999). As Geraldine Pratt explains, discourses are "sociospatial circuits through which cultural and personal stories are circulated, legitimated, and given meaning" through the production of space and, more generally, that stuff we call "geography" (Pratt 1999). Pratt's emphasis on the spatiality of social discourses indicates a key question that requires investigation within discourse analysis: how does the reproduction of place at particular moments in time intersect with the reproduction of the social subjects associated with that place and with the distinctions that designate that place in contrast to others?<sup>4</sup> Such a question begs asking in a discursive regime in which Mexican women workers are named, described, and explained as signature markers of Ciudad Juárez's decay, economic privation, and social vice, marking their removal as a solution to the problems created by their former presence.<sup>5</sup>

The politics driven by such discourses play out across scales as corporate managers, regional and local politi-

cians, and municipal police officers create strategies for governing the city, and the economic region it sustains, around the logic that the removal of women from public space indicates the arrival of a new modern era. Such discourses also reveal that there is much more at stake than merely the meaning and identity of prostitute, public woman, and traditional women's work. Also at issue are the valorization of the spaces that women occupy, dominate, and identify through their appearances and disappearances. Consequently, when the women of La Paz refuse to disappear and when the human rights activists hold up their signs, they turn the valorization of female disappearance on its head and stalk the urban elites with another vision of value: a city that survives through women's reappearances.

## Methodology

I base this argument on research conducted via interviews, ethnography, and archival research. The bulk of the ethnographic material for this project comes from research conducted during 1997 and 1998, when my colleague Estela Madero and I walked and stood with the sex workers along La Paz. Estela, who was completing her undergraduate degree in sociology at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, had previous experience with a nonprofit organization that worked with sex workers on HIV prevention. Through 2001, Estela and I met with sex workers on and off their worksite at La Paz. We often met in their homes. Our investigation centered on the strategies used by sex workers to delimit and control their work spaces and to protect themselves. One sex worker in particular, Brenda,<sup>6</sup> who was the widely recognized *líder* (leader) among the sex workers at La Paz, took an active interest in my project. She told me that she wanted to make sure that I did more than talk about "our sad pasts and AIDS."

Simultaneously, I was also continuing my research within the maquiladora industry, where my attention had turned to how corporate managers were trying to spark a high-tech transformation of the Ciudad Juárez industrial base (see Wright 2001a). Many managers, along with industry analysts, were predicting that Ciudad Juárez would soon become an industrial backwater if it could not attract skilled workers who could support a high-tech sector. The city's infrastructure, in perpetual crisis since the 1970s, had by the 1990s seemed to reach its limits for supporting further large labor-intensive facilities (see Thompson 2001). In that project, I interviewed corporate leaders and urban developers to investigate how local managers and business leaders

worked to attract the capital investments that were required for making the transition from low-tech, labor-intensive, to higher-tech, capital intensive industries. And I also wanted to understand upon what basis they believed Ciudad Juárez could compete against other Mexican cities, as well as against other regions, for this kind of corporate investment.

Also in 1996, I began a research project on the new activist networks forming in the city around the issue of violence against women. In the mid-1990s, news that dozens of young women had been murdered and dumped along the city's desert edges had shocked the city. Many of the victims had worked in the city's maquiladora industry. Women activists took the lead in organizing meetings, press conferences, and protests to bring international public attention to the violence. By the end of 2001, several dozen more women had been murdered, and as evidence of serial murders mounted,<sup>7</sup> the activists who organized high-profile protests and marches that attracted international attention were increasingly the victims of harassment and threats themselves (see Amnesty International 2003). In my interviews with the activists, I sought to investigate how their activities, aimed at finding both the victims (either alive or their corpses) and at pushing the government to locate their murderers, constituted "activism." What kinds of conditions are required to establish that the search for missing women and girls, as well as for murderers, represents political protest?

While I did not embark on these three projects with a master plan of tying them all together, I quickly recognized a recurring theme of women's worth. As I worked simultaneously on them, I was increasingly aware of the tremendous importance and controversy accorded to the issue of women's visibility—in the maquiladora workplace, on the street, in marches, in the desert. Across these spaces, the issue of female visibility (or lack thereof) repeatedly raised the question of value as some groups described the disappearance of women/girls as evidence of progress and normalcy in a city increasingly known for a brutal misogyny. Meanwhile, human rights activists were constantly countering this valorization of female disappearance with a discourse that claims that the disappearance of women and girls represents excruciating loss, or the extreme opposite of value. Within each of these projects, I saw how this controversy over the value and meaning of female appearance/disappearance was over the identity of value itself. At issue was how value was recognized. And I began focusing on the following sorts of questions: If female disappearance represents the presence of value, then what kind of technology is required to create this kind of value? How

does further value derive from the identification of female disappearance with a form of value? What is required to devalue this value and turn female disappearance into value's antithesis? And what is the connection linking the valorization of female disappearance from space and the global capitalist circuitry that constantly reconfigures the Ciudad Juárez landscape?

In the following, I triangulate these three research projects around a spatial struggle that unfolded across scales, where those invested in female reappearances (whether their own or others) were up against a powerful intersection of political and corporate elites who had something to gain from female disappearances.<sup>8</sup> I begin with an analysis of the significance of the disappearance of women workers from the popular and international business presses, and I track their disappearance from a prominent corporation's vision of a future high-tech evolution. I then turn to an examination of how the activist efforts to fight political negligence and police ineptitude regarding the crimes against women illustrates a city-wide movement that has taken this issue of women's worth and visibility in Ciudad Juárez to a federal and international level. In the third section, I present the ethnographic study of women of La Paz during their fight with local police over their visibility in downtown Ciudad Juárez and the economic implications of their reappearance on the street.

### The New Maquiladora Elite

For most of the 20th century, young women and girls, migrating from all reaches of Mexico, made Ciudad Juárez famous as a place where prostitutes could be found easily and, more recently, as a place with some of the most sought-after assembly workers in the Western Hemisphere. By the late 1970s, continuous migration had consolidated two prosperous urban economies, one being the sex trade, oriented to Mexican and U.S. clients, and the second the labor-intensive maquiladora industry. By the 1990s, amid signs of shifts in global manufacturing from mass production to systems requiring more skill and capitalization, however, city developers and maquiladora managers began marketing the city as having a potentially trainable labor force by representing a difference between the traditional maquila with its female *operadoras* (female assemblers) and a new higher-tech maquila organized around a skilled elite of male, Mexican employees (Wright 2001a).

This representation of the contrast between the old and new maquiladoras around sex difference proliferated in the U.S. newspaper and periodical coverage in the years surrounding the passage of the North American

Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). For example, coverage of the "traditional" maquiladora in the business pages typically focuses on the work of young, unskilled women.<sup>9</sup> A 1993 *New York Times* article demonstrates this common approach, portraying this old-style maquila as a place with "young women" who work in the style of the "traditional maquiladora" (Uchitelle 1993). This piece echoes the vision articulated in a *Wall Street Journal* in the early years of the NAFTA debates, in which its author describes the typical maquiladora as "light-assembly factories with the big, flat look of airport hangars. They are filled with tables and machines and people—mostly young, unskilled women" (Walsh 1985). These young women of the traditional maquiladora are notably absent, however, in the proliferation of articles covering the new elite of the more modern maquiladora.

For instance, a series of articles in *Business Week* during the mid-1990s reflects a wider industry trend to advocate passage of NAFTA on the basis that maquiladora production is shifting to an emphasis on "quality" rather than merely "cheap quantity," as the industry moves from unskilled female to skilled male labor (see also Cravey 1998; Shaiken 1994; Carrillo 1995; Gereffi 1991). Consistent with these *Business Week* articles over a several-year period is the almost full exclusion of women from the visual representation of the newly skilled labor force and from article interviews. The women, in other words, who had brought the maquiladora industry renown through the 1980s were being replaced in the publicity regarding the industry's new assets. For instance, in a 1992 *Business Week* cover story, entitled "Detroit South," the author writes that "thousands" of Mexican workers are "emerging as a low-cost, high-quality work force that will help re-shape the North American auto industry" (Baker, Woodruff, and Weiner 1992, 98). This workforce, however, is not to be confused with the previous "thousands" of Mexican workers who had already transformed the automobile industry (via components' manufacturing), among other industries. The workforce in "Detroit South" appears in the issue as all male. The cover page illustration depicts men walking into the mouth of a factory shaped like an automobile, while the photo on the table of contents page shows robust men in blue Ford uniforms. The only woman photographed is the unnamed wife of a worker who sits beside him and their children in a family portrait. If the visual images are not enough to unsettle the idea that maquiladoras are dominated by female workers, even though at that time women held about 70 percent of the jobs, the written text does. The author offers a thumbnail sketch of the maquiladora industry to explain the startling discovery, in the late 1980s, that "Mexican

auto workers . . . not only are dirt cheap but can also deliver quality." He writes: "Detroit's courtship with Mexico started in earnest in the late 1960s, when the auto makers opened up low-wage assembly plants, known as maquiladoras, on the south side of the U.S.-Mexican border. For \$4 or \$5 a day, Mexican workers threaded wires into cables and stitched upholstery. . . . By the mid-1980s, Detroit needed more than maquiladoras . . . . Ford executives settled on the desert cattle town of Hermosillo, a five-hour drive from Tucson. There, they found what they were looking for—lots of young, educated workers with no auto experience." The author goes on to explain how "these youthful cowhands" form a new generation of Mexican auto workers.

These new "cowhands" are not the same workers who thread cable or stitch upholstery, both well-known women's jobs throughout the industry, but instead the "youthful," rather than "docile," male workers tell jokes and trade stories about "coming to work hung over from time to time." The absence of women from a story of the maquiladora industry, known, by 1992, the world over for unskilled women workers, sustains the author's claims that "when workers step into the air-conditioned plant, with its new Japanese robots and stamping machines, they are clearly passing from the Third World into the First." The author relies upon the unspoken vision of a notable female worker's absence to cement the image of Ford's Hermosillo facility as a new kind of maquiladora.

This representation of Mexican women workers as emblematic of a surpassed industrial era continues throughout the pre- and post-NAFTA *Business Week* coverage. For instance, an article entitled the "Mexican Worker: Smart, Motivated, Cheap," describes how "while Mexico was preoccupied with its debt crisis in the 1980s, the maquiladoras quietly developed from simple, labor-intensive assembly into sophisticated, world-class manufacturing." While several photos of young men working in factories illustrate the point, the only woman shown is an employee eating lunch with her husband (also an employee). The only woman interviewed is a prostitute. Here the vision of a Mexican woman's traditional role corresponds to that famous split between "good girl" and "bad girl"; the former is a dutiful wife, the latter, of course, a prostitute. Missing in this presentation is the vision of a Mexican woman worker. These articles do not ask why women are not included in the new jobs offering more skill and potential advancement. Instead, the woman as representative of "pre-modern Mexico" surfaces again in a 1995 *Business Week* article, entitled, "Mexico: A Rough Road Back." This article examines the issues facing Mexico during the economic

crisis of the mid-1990s and states that in order to make Mexico more "attractive to investors," some companies are becoming "high-tech." In this article, the one woman who is pictured, amid several photos of factory and professional men, is washing clothes by hand in a concrete sink and casting the image of preindustrial, preelectrical, predevelopment Mexico. Speculating on Mexico's ability to rise to the promise of NAFTA, to recover from its 1995 economic crash, and to keep pace with its northern neighbors in the next millennium, such articles constantly make reference to, as a 1998 *Business Week* article, entitled "NAFTA Creates the World's Newest Industrial Power" put it, the "makeover of Mexican industry." As the authors write, "Many analysts believed NAFTA would generate years of demand for Mexico's masses of unskilled, poorly educated workers," wrote the authors. "Instead, many employers are leap-frogging to high-tech operations that require a high school education even for assembly-line operators" (Smith and Malkin 1998). The absence of any interviews with women reveals that the difference is not merely educational. It is a transformation of the gendered constitution of the labor force that contributes to this much lauded maquiladora "makeover."

As the above articles demonstrate, a new maquila elite is emerging from new programs oriented toward skilling up the maquila labor force, but Mexican women, by and large, are not among them. Very few women enroll in the new training courses organized by maquiladora managers in local schools and training agencies, and few women are targeted for internal training and promotion (Wright 2001b). The Mexican woman, however, is not fully absent from this new industry's image. Between the lines that speak of cowhands and of hangovers and among the photos of male workers, the Mexican woman makes an entrance in the form of her disappearance. For the less and less we see of her, the more we recognize how far the maquila industry has come.

This sort of portrayal of the modern maquila as the factory from which the Mexican woman has disappeared then underscores a further development in maquiladora progress when, in 2000, another *Business Week* article, "Car Power," featured "one of the first women to join the assembly line at Ford Motor Co.'s car plant in Hermosillo" (Smith 2000b). The article presents this woman's entrance into this factory as a step forward in an industry where women have been "traditionally" excluded. This sort of history makes sense only if the entire history of the maquiladora industry and of the labor of women in automobile manufacturers there (in the components industry) vanishes completely. In this case, where

women workers are a minority, the woman's presence represents modern progress against tradition—women are moving up, the traditional Mexican culture is letting them work outside the home, and so on. Again, we find progress in this article because this woman represents the exception rather than the rule. In the factories where women workers represent the majority, we know we are not looking at a modern maquila. The factories with more women than men are the “old-style” ones mired in premodern traditions, and a woman's entree into such places does not represent progress. Her presence represents the opposite of progress, and in today's Ciudad Juárez' maquiladora industry that means she represents the opposite of value.

### The New Silicon Valley of Mexico

During the mid-1990s, in an effort to transform the city's image from low-tech to high-tech industrialization, local corporate and city officials relied on this association of the old maquiladora with labor-intensive, feminized industries to establish a contrast against the new kind of facilities that would catapult the city into a higher-tech future. Within managerial circles and among the city's corporate boosters, this new future is sometimes likened to a “new Silicon Valley of Mexico,” where the promises of high-tech development outflank the misery of capitalist exploitation. Between 1999–2001, I interviewed the managers of a corporation I call ORION, a division of a diversified, multinational conglomerate that manufactures electronics and automobile components. Examining the interviews from ORION with interviews of urban officials, we can see how the marketing of this new Silicon Valley of Mexico vision rests firmly upon the understanding that the old style maquiladora will be transformed into a higher-tech, masculinized facility, with no room for traditional women's work.

In the early 1990s, the mayor's office appointed an official “director of communication” for the city, whose job was to convince the international business community of the city's higher-tech potential. In a 1999 interview with a maquiladora trade journal, the then-director of communication, Javier de Anda, began an aggressive publicity campaign aimed at prospective investors to demonstrate how the problems associated with Ciudad Juárez were not a result of rampant maquiladora growth but of the stagnation of the industry's evolution in a primitive state. “One of the main challenges we face in the future,” he insisted, “is speeding up the evolution of the industry. We tell companies that want to come here to do assembly that if it's just assembly they want, don't

come here. Go somewhere else. But if you want to do something that has some technology, come here” (*Twin Plant News* 15: 42–43).

His words are echoed by the upper management of ORION. “It's time to move away from the traditional model,” said Paula,<sup>10</sup> the human resources manager of ORION. She described the “traditional” maquila by saying, “It's what most people still think of when they think of maquilas. You know, unskilled girls doing assembly.”<sup>11</sup> She added, “We want to change that whole way of thinking.” “The problem here,” said Ignacio, an ORION engineer, “is the traditional mindset in the maquila industry. You know, you get people who don't think about the long term. They don't think about the future . . . Those kind of people are why this city has so many problems, why the maquilas are in trouble here. It's that traditional mindset.”

Ignacio and Paula, among others within ORION, are actively working with universities, vocational high schools, and even junior high schools in Ciudad Juárez, to develop a new kind of employee who will allow the company to make a transition into a state-of-the-art research and design facility. Their plan is ambitious. They are trying to form a consortium of corporate and city leaders who will finance the infrastructure in educational and residential facilities that will train and retain a skilled labor force within the city. As Paula explained, “What I mean by Silicon Valley is a different city and a different maquila culture. We have new projects and not just for our facility. But also new neighborhoods and a new city. It's a win-win situation for everyone.” The new jobs envisioned, both within ORION and outside of it, are salaried positions held by a Mexican white-collar elite, with middle-class sensibilities. Ignacio described his vision by saying, “This is not assembly work. This is not about female workers on the line. This is about skilled engineers. Guys with education.”

By early 2000, the Ciudad Juárez ORION facility had received grants from within and outside of the corporation to work toward this high-tech evolution. Their activities directly support the local officials' hopes for the city's future development, as plainly described in a 1999 issue of the maquiladora trade journal, *Twin Plant News*, which characterizes Javier de Anda's vision for the future: “[De Anda] sees a city with fewer businesses, but the ones that remain will be stronger. He sees the city's infrastructure being improved to keep up with growth. Juárez workers will be hired by international companies to hold key positions in the industry, facilitating a technology transfer. He sees the maquila industry improving skills levels to the point that wages and salaries

increase, providing a better way of life" (*Twin Plant News* 15: 43 [author parentheses]). And Paula clarified the distinction between this better way of life and the less illustrious one when she said, "I'd like to see women in these good jobs, but it just isn't realistic."

The realism of this entire project has been challenged by the current recession and the loss of some 100,000 maquiladora jobs in Ciudad Juárez between 2000–2003. According to Ignacio in 2003, the ORION plan to spur the evolution of a new Silicon Valley of Mexico is still in the works. And the products of this project patently illustrate how Mexican women disappear from the re-making of a new maquiladora industry. Women are not, by and large, participating in the engineering programs; women-headed households (Ciudad Juárez has some of the highest percentages in the country) are not moving into the new gated communities designed for white-collar employees; women are not moving into the salaried ranks of new personnel; women still perform most of the unskilled labor in the electronic facilities that dominate the city's industrial sector. Therefore, while the elite will receive professional salaries and live in gated communities, the old-type maquiladora worker will continue to labor for the minimum wage and live in poorly serviced squatter settlements that stretch the city in all directions but north.

The challenge, therefore, facing those who endeavor to peddle the new *maquiladora* vision is to keep the reality of these women workers under wraps, so that what is seen by potential investors is a future maquiladora industry that appears, despite current circumstances, to be leaving behind a city marked by desperation, poverty, and young women workers who are still very much tied to the city's low-tech, labor-intensive, and low-waged past.

## A Movement of Women

On March 12, 2002 (as part of an extended International Women's Day event) several thousand people marched through the streets of Ciudad Juárez to publicize the hundreds of murders and disappearances of women and girls since 1993. Many carried signs with women's and girls' faces pictured on them. They shouted slogans against political negligence and against the violence that has shaken this city to its foundations. Many of the women marchers had walked from Chihuahua City, about 360 kilometers south of Ciudad Juárez, to bring publicity to the violence and to their protest against political negligence and lack of accountability. They wore black dresses and pink hats in solidarity

with the families and friends of the disappeared girls and women. As the march coalesced in the city's center, more people joined from the residential and business areas, students came out of their classrooms, and other protestors streamed across the international bridges, from hundreds of miles away.

In 1995, when news of the serial murders broke with headlines in the city daily that declared some 50 women and girls had been murdered, several of them raped and tortured and dumped like garbage around the city's perimeter, many Ciudad Juárez residents expressed shock and disbelief. At that time, I was teaching at the city's public university (La Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez), and the 40 students in my economic geography class were stunned by the headlines. Several expressed disbelief that a serial murderer could be at work in Mexico since they believed that such horrors were foreign to Mexican culture and were indicative of its northern neighbor. Indeed, the large majority believed that the murderer was a U.S.-American. Toward the end of the discussion, one young man stood up from his desk and pointed a finger at me and declared, "It's not enough that people from your country come here and work our girls to death. They steal their organs and dump them like trash." When I asked how many students believed that an international organ ring was operating, all but six raised their hands. One student elaborated on the thesis that U.S. maquiladora managers were conspiring to steal organs from women workers, while murdering them in the process, for transplant into wealthy U.S. recipients.

While there has not been even the faintest evidence of such a conspiracy or of organ harvesting, the students' comments reveal a firm belief that these deaths had something to do with the devaluation of young Mexican women—even to the extreme of their trashing—as part of the international circuitry of capitalist wealth. Linking the devaluation of women (as illustrated by their dumping in the desert) to the tremendous wealth generated in the maquiladora industry (which does not trickle down to its workers) has figured prominently as a strategy in international criticism of the violence against women. Such coverage consistently draws attention to the low wages of the maquiladora industry, where numerous victims worked, and to the desperate conditions in which so many workers live (see Nathan 1999; Amnesty International 2003). Women's organizations have used this international criticism as leverage in their campaign to force political and economic elites to do something about the crimes (see Amnesty International 2003; Tabuence Cordoba 2003; Wright 2001c).

These women's groups, while not internally cohesive, have sparked the most notable social movement in



northern Mexico in the last two decades. The protestors take aim at numerous issues, including violence against women, domestic violence, sexual violence, and the disrespect of women in general. While their movement cannot be distilled down to a single objective or motivation, many of its participants are contributing to a larger debate over the worth of women as workers, as victims, as activists, and as mothers, as well as over the worth of a city known for women.

On the other side of the debate are those economic and political elites (and police officials) who have been harshly criticized for neglecting the crimes. Many from their circles have frequently resorted to the age-old "blame the victim" strategy, which I discuss in the following section as a "double life" campaign, a discursive strategy for trashing the victims by linking them to prostitution and declaring them unworthy of all the attention. This strategy seeks to normalize the violence via a degradation of its victim and in the process exculpate the political and corporate leaders from any responsibility (see Wright 1999).

This debate has raised the connection linking the identification of the Mexican woman with the meaning of the space that she occupies. Those who carry signs and organize protests against female disappearances are declaring that violence signals a terrible decline in the social, political and economic climate of this city. Those, by contrast, who blame the kidnapping and murder victims for the crimes perpetrated against them, claim that these events do not reflect problems in the city but instead, problems within the women/girls who brought about this trouble. At stake in this debate, therefore, is the meaning of the city itself, as a place on the brink of economic and social despair or as a place brimming with rich potential.

### La Doble Vida

*La Doble Vida* (the double life) usually refers to women who are suspected of being prostitutes. They live a double life. By day they appear to be good mothers, sisters, daughters, friends; by night, their other side comes out—the one that sells sex and walks the street and lives the life of a fallen woman. This other, darker side, according to the oft-told tale, is secretive. Even the most intimate relatives of this sort of woman would not know about it. Over the last several years, when family and friends inform the Ciudad Juárez police of a woman's disappearance, they are often asked, "Are you sure she didn't lead a double life?" And, as they insist that the woman who is missing and whom they are missing led no such double life, they are usually aware that at stake in

this question is whether the police will act upon their pleas for help. For, as the well-rehearsed story goes, if the woman or girl in question was a prostitute, then there is little to be done. She was asking for it. She was already trashy. And her trashing in the city's deserts is not of grave concern.

This discourse of the *doble vida*, like its many associated discourses around the world that blame victims of rape and violence in all kinds of ways (see LaFranchi 1997; Nathan 1999; Quiñones 1998), normalizes the kidnappings and murders that have attracted international attention to Ciudad Juárez since 1995. Among the police forces, the "double life" story is a popular tool for distracting public scrutiny from their failure to stop the crimes. After 10 years, only one man has been convicted; police continue to use torture to extract confessions, which are not deemed valid by human rights organizations; and the DNA evidence is frequently contaminated (see Amnesty International 2003). Meanwhile, police officers still greet friends and families who report another missing woman/girl with the question: "Are you sure she didn't lead a double life?"<sup>12</sup> By normalizing the disappearances as predestined outcomes to "bad girl" behavior, the disappearances that mount from one month to the next are not indicative of problems in policing but instead of simply an influx of "bad girls." Following this logic, then, even as more bad girls disappear, there is no cause for concern since one more disappearance is *normal* in a city full of women who lead double lives. In fact, according to this logic, the more that women and girls disappear from public space, the more normal it is for women and girls to disappear from public space. The story of the *doble vida* tells us that, given how normal and even desirable it is for bad girls to disappear, the refusal of the police to investigate makes sense. They are merely doing their jobs. They are protecting social stability. The discourse of prostitution as the degraded outcome of the public woman is therefore a technology for normalizing female disappearance in a context where creating a sense of a normal city is valuable.

Consequently, the city police have often resorted to hostility when greeted with protestors' accusations of their incompetence. For instance, after the November 2001 discovery of eight young women's corpses in a lot across from the maquiladora association's headquarters, not far from an elite country club and down the street from Walmart, Ciudad Juárez activists combed the area for more bodies. When they found clothing, hair, and other things pertaining to "forensic evidence," the police, embarrassed by the presence of media, arrived late on the scene and scolded these activists, among them victims' family members, for contaminating the evidence

that they had not bothered to collect. An image, spread across the Internet, of a police officer screaming at a victim's mother as she clutched her dead daughter's overalls ignited international protests.

The incumbent political parties have also tried to avoid scrutiny by claiming that the murders, occurring under their watch, do not represent problems. Two rival political parties have dominated the mayor's and governor's offices over the last decade. One is the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), the historically dominant party of Mexican politics, and the other, *El Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN), which has gained popularity as a rival to the PRI since the 1990s. The PAN, under the leadership of Vicente Fox, is the first non-PRI party to occupy the federal presidency since 1929.<sup>13</sup> When their respective candidates are holding office, both the PRI and the PAN claim that the violence against women in Ciudad Juárez lies within normal bounds. Meanwhile, candidates who try to defeat an incumbent party have regularly criticized the incumbent for failing to curb the violence. For instance, in the mid-1990s, the former governor of the state of Chihuahua, Francisco Barrio, who now serves as the PAN president's anticorruption czar, dismissed the murders of women slain in Ciudad Juárez as normal for a city of its size. After Barrio, the current governor, the PRI candidate, Patricio Martínez, gained office with the promise that he and his party would, unlike his predecessor, resolve the crimes and bring them to a halt. Yet, under the Martínez administration, the murder numbers continue to rise and have spread to other cities in the state while he and the party he represents now assert that the violence against women in northern Mexico lies within normal parameters given the state's urban populations. His office has been particularly vociferous in its accusation that activists and journalists are "inflating" the real murder and kidnapping figures (Martínez Coronado 2003).<sup>14</sup>

If the city's size, according to political leaders, normalizes the overall murder rate in Ciudad Juárez, then, according to urban elites, prostitution normalizes the choice of victims. Only those who are "asking for it," in the way they dress and behave, become victimized, and both the PAN and PRI governors have asserted that "good families" do not have to worry about the safety of their women and girls (see Tabuenca Córdoba 2003; Nathan 2002). Only the bad ones do. Former governor Barrio made this clear when, in response to outrage over the murders, he urged parents to know where their daughters were at all times, especially at night. And current governor Martínez provoked widespread outcries when he blamed the violence on the "social disintegration" of victims' families (Martínez Coronado 2003;

Prado Calahorra 2003b). Meanwhile, in a rare act of bipartisanship, both parties joined forces in 2001 in a blatant attempt to link the violence against women with prostitution. In that year, state legislators from both the PAN and the PRI passed a bill that minimized sentences for rapists who were "provoked" by their victims, while the law fully exempted rapists from conviction if the victim were a prostitute. Women's organizations across the state succeeded in reversing this law within the year.

In addition to the normalization of the crimes, on the basis of the normalcy of violating prostitutes, political elites have also accused human rights activists of subverting social stability, for being opportunistic, and, even, for obstructing justice by bringing unnecessary attention to the violence (Barrientos Marquez 2003; Ramos Estrada 2003). The charge, more or less, is that the activists are subverting the social order by questioning the normalcy of the violence against women. "They say these crimes are *normal!* Normal? What does that mean?" exclaimed Esther Chávez Cano, the director of the city's only rape crisis center, in June 2001. "We don't care if they are prostitutes, are poor, are young, are migrants. They don't deserve to die in the desert like dogs." Such statements spark hostility from public authorities, who continue to use the discourse of prostitution as a vehicle for normalizing the violence. For instance, in June 2002, when activists appeared for a prescheduled meeting with the governor in Chihuahua City, they were met by hecklers armed with baseball bats who told them to "go home and watch over their families." "These people were put there by the governor," one of the protestors told me in March 2003. "The only reason we weren't beaten is because the media was there. Without the press, I think there would have been violence." She added, "They called us whores and said our daughters were whores." "It's ugly," said another protestor in March 2003. "They say all kinds of things . . . our daughters are whores, we are bad mothers, anything to make us stop." Many activists, including family and friends of the victims, have received death threats and other forms of intimidation aimed at discouraging their participation in public protests against the violence (see Candia et al. 1999; Amnesty International 2003).

The private sector has also been eager to portray the murders as a normal, although unfortunate, outcome of women loose on the streets. In response to activists' requests that the maquiladora industry change shift schedules and bus routes to enhance worker safety, industry leaders have repeatedly stressed that they are not responsible for the violence, but that the root cause lies instead in wanton behavior that characterizes the largely young female labor force (see Wright 1999; Nathan

1999; Candia et al. 1999). For instance, when the spokesperson for the maquiladora association (AMAC) was interviewed in 1999 on ABC's 20-20, he made this point when he asked, "Where were these young ladies when they were seen last? Were they drinking? Were they partying? Were they on a dark street? Or were they in front of their plant when they went home?" (ABC 20-20, 20 January 1999). The message was that even though thousands of young women have to walk through lonely stretches of desert and through the downtown areas of Ciudad Juárez either at night or in the early dawn hours to make their way to work, and even as many victims have disappeared while making such commutes, the victims were responsible for their own demise as evidenced by the fact that they were out on the street in the first place.

Like those in the public sector, private business leaders have repeatedly criticized activists for drawing attention to the killings, which, they argue, scares away investors. As activists step up their campaign and as the violence continues, they have increasingly faced accusations that they are contributing to the "social disintegration" of Ciudad Juárez and that they are running off tourism and private investment (Prado Calahorra 2003a, 5A; Amnesty International 2003).<sup>15</sup> And in September 2003, the *Asociación de Empresarios y Profesionistas de la Avenida Juárez* (Juárez Avenue Business Owners and Professionals Association) requested that the city government remove the cross that the activists erected at one of the international bridges in memory of the victims. In a press release they stated that the cross was "a horrible image in terms of tourism."<sup>16</sup> They made no such statement about the murders themselves. In April 2003, an employee of a high-profile nonprofit organization in Ciudad Juárez told me that when she showed a documentary about the murders, "La Señorita Extraviada,"<sup>17</sup> to a group of visiting students, she received phone calls from two maquiladora managers. "He (one of the managers) was furious that I had shown the film. They don't want us to say anything about the murders," she admitted.<sup>18</sup>

These events reveal that for the urban elites who are invested in portraying Ciudad Juárez as "normal," the attention to the murders, including the finding of corpses and the identification of victims in the public sphere, proves quite costly. Any activity that contests the normalization of the crimes and challenges the devaluation of the victims threatens the value that is supported by such processes. If the crimes indicate trouble, then the political incumbents are not doing their job. If the victims are innocent, then the police officers are failing to provide protection. If the dis-

appearance of women from public space exposes a social and economic system organized around poor, migrant workers who live in violence-stricken and impoverished communities, then the maquiladora industry and the backers of free trade have not delivered on their promise of progress. By raising such doubts, the human rights activists are threatening a political and economic circuitry that relies on the association of female disappearance with value. To claim, in contrast to the political and economic elites, that the victims' deaths and disappearances represent loss and waste is to devalue a complex process that generates value out of female disappearances. And current elites are invested in this form of value as they try to attract accumulate political and economic capital.

Over the same period of time, from the mid-1990s into 2001, a handful of women who work the street where La Noche Triste crosses La Paz have also been struggling against the valorization of their own disappearance. Their protests against police abuse and municipal officials reveal some commonalities with protests organized by the human rights and family organizations on behalf of the kidnapped and murdered women.

## The Women of La Paz

When the sun sets, the zone of La Paz transforms from a place where women and men buy and sell fruits, vegetables, medicinal cures, and household products, to a place where women and men buy and sell sex, alcohol, and drugs. The cantinas that blend into the background during the day become much more prominent in the darkness. Men, many of them *maquila* workers who have had a couple of hours drinking cheap beer and tequila, steadily stream through their doors. *Ranchera* and pop music filter out along with a stench of things overripe. Men often stumble out onto the sidewalk. They piss on the walls. Fights are common. Shortly after midnight, people pour out of the buses that bring them from the industrial parks and scatter into clubs, down the street, and into the dark corners of La Paz. Inside the cantinas, where few can see them, women known as *ficheras* are paid a percentage for each drink their clients consume. In turn, they remit to the bar a percentage of their earnings for sexual services performed in bathrooms or in the back. Some of the women who work inside arrive at the cantinas while wearing a *maquila* uniform (*bata*) to create the appearance that they are commuting to a *maquila*. But the women who work outside, on La Paz, stand for all to see in sequins, tight skirts, low necklines, heels.

Unlike the higher-dollar sex workers in the areas frequented by middle-class clients and U.S. tourists, the women of *La Paz* do not have pimps. They are independent entrepreneurs. They set the terms for their fees, services, hours, and workspaces, and they keep all of their earnings. On an average workday, between 12 and 15 women work this area at any one time. They charge the same rate, with little variation, for the same services. Each sex act and position is itemized and carries a price. Kissing is largely forbidden.

Most of the women who work in *La Paz* are in their 20s; some are in their 30s, and a few are in their teens. Most of the women have children; almost all are living without a spouse or partner, although many are married. The majority migrated to Ciudad Juárez from interior towns and cities. Many described how they had migrated with the intention of working in the maquiladoras. Seven of the nine women I interviewed had worked in the maquiladora industry at some point, but all had opted to work the streets, where they could make more money and control their own time. Socorro, a woman who was 28 in 1997, described her decision to leave an electronics manufacturer: "They don't pay you anything, and you work and work until you're exhausted. People tell you what to do, when to get up, when to eat, when to piss. As long as I make more money here, I will not go back."

At the time that I began my study with the *La Paz* women in the mid-1990s, state and municipal officials, working with private business leaders, were initiating a development plan for downtown Ciudad Juárez.<sup>19</sup> The plan's objective was to create a vehicle for guiding "public and private investment" that would "revitalize tourist and cultural activity and introduce the infrastructure for financial, retail and commercial services" (Municipio de Ciudad Juárez 2000, 1, author translation). As a high-profile area of the city frequented regularly by 45 percent of the city's population as well as by tourists, the *centro histórico* figured centrally in their plan. They write, "Ciudad Juárez in its current economic situation—*maquiladora* industry, border with the United States—and in its social situation—vast cultural, racial, and social mosaic, has the potential and necessity of developing an urban center capable of offering premier services and in this way representing (to the international community) the country's culture" (Municipio de Ciudad Juárez 2000, 1; Author parenthesis and translation). The plan calls for a strategy to "systematically correct the vices" associated with the downtown area and "replace them" with other activities that will "renovate" the city's image and "reactivate" its economy (59). Its authors explain, "Delinquency (in this area)

constitutes a social problem in the city. The proliferation of entertainment places that clandestinely permit all sorts of excesses, such as the consumption of alcohol, drugs and the practice of prostitution contributes to the extreme degradation of the downtown area" (58; author translation and parenthesis).

In the late 1990s, this gentrification plan was one of the motivating forces behind an intensification of police efforts to force the women of *La Paz* off the downtown streets. One of the sex workers, Brenda, who was my principal informant, explained, "The story here," she told me in 1997, "is our fight with the police. They want to move us out of *La Paz*. To move us out of the centro . . . They say there are too many women in the centro. Everyone has to work inside or leave."

Brenda represented an exception to the usual work patterns among the women of *La Paz*. She was widely viewed as the most successful of the sex workers since she had two steady clients and picked up others only on a need-be basis. In 1997, Brenda typically arrived at the cantina *El Puerto*, just off the intersection of *La Noche Triste* and *La Paz* around 7 p.m., after returning from her regular appointment with *El Profe* (short for *El Profesor*), the junior high school teacher who saw her every Tuesday and Thursday between 4:30 and 5:30. She had until 8:30 before she needed to be home, about 10 blocks south, where she would await the arrival of her next client, *El Poli* (short for *El Policía*), the policeman who was also the father of two of her three children. Between the two men, Brenda earned about 700 pesos per week (about US \$100 in 1997), which she considered to be good money. "Vivo de las rentas," ("I live off the rents"), she explained.

In 1997, Brenda, along with two of the other women, Ema and Socorro, were actively organizing the women of *La Paz* to fight the police enforcement of the downtown "clean-up." Ema explained, "The mayor says that we have to leave. We are a problem in the downtown. Well, I have worked here for twelve years, and if they want to make me leave. I will fight. I have a right to work here. Prostitution is legal in Mexico. They need to read the constitution." Brenda added, "We are not fighting about the constitution. We are fighting for our right to work, to make a living. If they make us leave, we will lose our clients."

The women of *La Paz* made their living by relying on the high turnover of their clients and also by combining the selling of sex with the selling of other goods and services. Six of the seven women I interviewed often sold clothing, food, or childcare services, which they arranged with coworkers or people who passed through the market area. Brenda sold amphetamines and cocaine to her

coworkers and occasionally to clients. Ema sold cheese, which she bought from Mennonite farmers, to coworkers on La Paz and to her neighbors. "I make more money in cheese now than from sex," she explained. Another sex worker, María, in her late 20s, sold used clothes, which she bought from warehouses in El Paso. "It's extra money," she said, "and sometimes if I want to stay home with my children, then I have money from the clothes." Bertha, who was 26 at the time, sometimes sold pills, although her own drug dependency ate into her profits. "I sell enough pills to pay for my own," she said. "I can't do this work without the pills."

On my first visit with Brenda, I rode the bus with her the few blocks to her house after her appointment with El Profe and after she had sold some pills on La Paz. Her 14-year-old daughter, Paty, was home with a friend and her two younger brothers. As soon as we entered the two-room house in the old section of the city known as *la Chaveña*, Brenda changed out of her black nylon skirt and red blouse with the scalloped neckline and put on a white slip and blue tee-shirt. "My policeman is coming early," she said, "and he likes me to be a housewife." In front of this client, Brenda referred to him as her husband, although he lived with his legal wife and their children. When "her husband" was not around, Brenda called him "mi poli" (my cop).

During this visit, Brenda explained how she used her contact with her *poli* to gain access to the police lieutenant and negotiate over the plans to remove sex workers from downtown. Ema often accompanied her on these visits. When, in early 1997, the police stepped up efforts by conducting random raids on sex workers, whom they would arrest and then often rob and rape, Brenda had her poli arrange a visit with the lieutenant. "At first I was nervous," she said, "but now I know you have to know how to talk with him. I tell the lieutenant, 'Look, we are responsible women. We are mothers. We do our work and take care of our families.'" She then emphasized, "I tell him that everyone on La Paz needs us. The cantinas, the shops, they need us to bring their clients."

Indeed, the police did acknowledge that the sex workers brought important business to the centro histórico at night. "During the day, people come for shopping," one police officer told me in 1998, "but at night, they come for the girls. All these bars, this store here (a convenience store) would not have business without the girls." One lawyer, who was careful to assure his anonymity, described the tight links between the cantinas, sex workers, and the selling of drugs, especially heroin and cocaine, in the centro histórico. "These places are owned by one family," he said, "and they only contract

with Carta Blanca (a Mexican beer company and local distributor). So those people at Carta Blanca want this business." He continued, "The mayors have to let the women work here because they move heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and pills. This is big business in the centro. People get angry if they leave."

A bartender from one of the La Paz cantinas explained, "We need those women to bring us business. I tell the police that. I tell them to leave them alone. They are bringing us business." A worker at the "oysteria and snack bar" just off the intersection of La noche triste and La Paz corroborated this perspective. "Without them (the sex workers) we wouldn't have business. The police know that." An employee at the *Econotienda* (convenience store) added, "The girls buy things here." And a hair stylist at the salon on La Paz added, "They (the sex workers) help us. Men come in for a haircut because they're here for them."

During the spring and summer of 1997, Brenda and Ema urged the owners and managers of some of the local businesses to meet with the mayor and with the police to stop the harassment. Brenda said, "I know some of them said something to the police. Everyone agreed that they needed to leave us alone." The owner of one cantina supported her suspicions that some of the local business owners spoke with the police and mayor's office. "I didn't go, but I think a couple of people did talk to the mayor's office. They might not like the prostitution, but it is part of our business here. It's how we make a living here."

Yet, despite the local merchants' support for the sex workers, the police harassment continued through the summer of 1997. One day in late May 1997, for instance, after the police had swept through the centro and picked up prostitutes (forcing two of them to perform oral sex and stealing their money), Brenda went back to see the police lieutenant with Ema. She said, "He understands that there is a problem (with the policy to remove them). He knows the other businesses want us there. We bring them business. But other people tell him that so many women in the centro is bad for the city . . . He says the politicians want to move us out."

As a result of that May meeting, Brenda negotiated with the lieutenant to allow the women of La Paz to remain on the street even though he was under orders to remove them. He agreed that if the women constantly walked, rather than stood, then they would not be bothered, but they had to keep walking. Walking was a means by which the women could blend into the background. As Brenda put it, "If we walk, then those *cabrones* (bastards) think no one will see us working." In other words, the regulation of female mobility did not make prostitution into a crime. Rather, it turned women

standing into a crime. This new criminalization of women standing was applied only to the women of La Paz because the women in Mariscal and on the Juárez avenida and the men and boys in front of the cathedral were forced to hide or to work indoors.

This concession was no small victory for Brenda, if viewed within the hegemonic context in which prostitution was and is still currently used to produce female disappearance around the city as normal, stable, and valuable. Brenda was talking to a police official who was responsible also for investigating the murders and disappearances of hundreds of young women and girls throughout the city. It was out of his office that the discourse of prostitution was regularly employed as a means to devalue the victims to their families, as well as a means for justifying their murders.

Brenda, however, was able to negotiate as a prostitute on the strength of the leverage she had by exposing the contradiction that even though the removal of women from downtown Ciudad Juárez represented value to some, it represented a loss of value to others. And the police lieutenant, caught in the crosshairs of this contradiction as the enforcer of this disappearance, had to figure out some way to remove women from view without removing them from the city's economy. Making a crime of women standing was his solution.

So the women of La Paz walked. For a few weeks in the summer of 1997, they walked nonstop, in a constant pattern along the brick walkways. Some walked in a two-block loop with the main cantina, El Puerto, and the Casa de Huespedes (inn), where the women rented rooms, at its center. Others walked in a figure-eight around a group of stalls right in front of the Casa de Huespedes. Some walked in pairs and others by themselves. A few brave ones stood still, but kept constant watch for police.

This constant movement of women in circles, figure-eights, or pacing made it difficult for both customers and for the women who were tired from the endless motion, and by the end of the summer, most women stopped walking and resumed their positions, leaning against the stucco walls of El Puerto and the Casa de Huespedes or sitting atop wooden pallets next to the metal stalls. Socorro declared in exasperation, "Look, we're tired of walking. It's hard for everyone. So I'm sitting."

Socorro's act of defiance was regarded as a challenge by the police officers who patrolled the area. "We told them to walk, or you will be arrested," one officer told me. And when I asked what would be the charge, he answered with a shrug.

By the fall of 1997, a treacherous game of cat-and-mouse developed between the police and the women of

La Paz. Police officers conducted frequent and random raids to catch them standing. On one warm September morning, around 1:30 a.m., several women were standing and sitting and keeping a nervous eye out for the police when one shouted "Poli!" to alert their coworkers who rushed into the Casa de Huespedes and into the cantinas, where the police would not enter. The police darted quickly and quietly, clearly having practiced these maneuvers, through the shadows between the metal stalls, and several ran after a woman walking down the street, whom they suspected of having stood still for all to see.

Even though the walking policy was not easy for the women of La Paz, it still represented a victory for them because it resulted from meetings in which a discourse of their value was recognized and officially validated. In the process, Brenda, and some others, succeeded, at least for a moment, in disrupting the homogenous construction of the prostitute as a unified subject whose value is intrinsically known and around whose removal value can be harvested. The policy exposed how the police were bound on the one hand by the technologies that continue to produce female disappearance as value and, on the other, by the evidence that female disappearance is actually quite destructive to the downtown economy. So they came up with the ill-fated policy that made women standing a crime. In the process, they made it very easy for a woman to defy their authority. By standing still, by pausing on the stones of the centro historico, women sex workers flouted the state's authority. Thus, their visibility turned into a double-edged sword. By standing, they not only challenged the economy that valorized their disappearance, they also challenged the police, the mayor, and the state. To stand was to protest.

In October 1997, Brenda threw an elaborate party in celebration of her daughter's *quinceañera* (15th birthday and "coming out" party). This event revealed the breadth of a social and economic community that the La Paz women sustained. Over 200 people attended the event, which traveled in a multicolor procession between a prominent cathedral in the central section of the city, to a portrait gallery in the northeast, back to the downtown club *San Antonio*, a former luxury hotel on the 16 de Septiembre, a few blocks east of La noche triste and La Paz. Current and former workers from La Paz, along with an extensive network of family and friends, some of whom worked in the downtown shops and cantinas, contributed whatever they had to fund this expensive event. The women who made contributions with money and their own labor were the official *madrinas* (godmothers) of the various elements that made this all-night party a success. There was a *madrina* of the gown,

madrina of the whisky, madrina of the band, madrina of the sodas, madrina of the invitation, madrina of the video, madrina of the flower arrangements, and madrina of the photographs. These women pulled on their own social networks from within and outside of the city to bring Brenda's eldest daughter properly and publicly into society.

The social network behind this quinceañera was the same social network that coordinated protests against police abuse of the La Paz over the next several years. By 2001, neither Brenda nor Ema picked up clients on La Paz. "We're too old for this work," said Brenda. "There are always younger girls." Brenda continued to work her two steady clients and sell pills, while Ema generated most of her income by selling cheese. Yet both remained active in protecting the La Paz women from police abuse and efforts to remove them. Both women visited their former coworkers on La Paz at least once a week, and Brenda still met with the police lieutenant whenever she felt the abuse had escalated to an intolerable level. And, in October 2001, when the local newspaper reported their public protest against police abuse, these women were still threatening the urban elites with their dogged reappearance in downtown Ciudad Juárez.

## Conclusion

Certainly the women of La Paz illustrate how the designation of their social identity as "prostitute/prostituta" and "whore/puta" functions as a powerful technology for devaluing their labor and their lives as women and as human beings. And as they fight to reassert their presence in downtown Ciudad Juárez, they are fighting against such forces of devaluation. Their battle is not, in the case I present, over wages; it is over their meaning as women, as economic agents, and as valuable members of society. This battle is not old to prostitutes, inside and outside of Mexico, who continue to fight against the abuse and degradation that they endure, often at the hands of state agents (see Castillo 1999). Still, their struggle is, in great part, an economic one; they are trying to protect their ability to work and to make a living, but their struggle is by no means limited to the strictly economic sphere.

The La Paz women have not yet made international headlines, but within their struggles, we can find potential linkages with other protests, also waged over the issue of female worth and visibility, at a time when the urban elites are confronting the possibility of stagnant industrial growth, at best, and deindustrialization, at

worst. The city has lost over a quarter of its maquiladora manufacturing base since 2000, while violence against women, environmental ruin, and drug trafficking dominate international coverage and bring further attention to the impoverished conditions of the city's industrial labor force and its rickety infrastructure. The political and economic leaders who seek to attract further capitalist investment and to generate faith (also known as venture capital) in the city's potential as a high-tech enclave are having to compete not only with other such enclaves around the world but also with the activists and critics who point to the current problems in Ciudad Juárez as evidence of the failure of their previous development visions. Given the extent of international attention currently turned to Ciudad Juárez, any social protest, even one occurring at a low-end address such as the intersection of La Noche Triste and La Paz has the potential of turning into a politics for disarming such visions of modernity. These protests over "rights to the city" have, as Neil Brenner has written, "expand(ed) into a broader 'right to space' both within and beyond the urban scale" (Brenner 2000, 374). And, with such theorization in mind, it is my position here that any analysis that limits the significance of the La Paz women's fight for their "rights to space" (including their rights to appear in space) to the status of "merely local" fails to consider how the reproduction of Ciudad Juárez modernity occurs through intersecting scales, in which "the local" and "the global" are often inseparable.

Connecting the women who work in La Paz with those activists who work to make young women and girls reappear in the desert is easy to do if you listen to the discourse of prostitution so widespread throughout the city. This discourse reveals the dialectical condition of value, as described by Marx. For within the story of the woman who is lacking in value—the prostitute—we hear a story of where and when value is present. We find it in her antithesis. Value is "not her." Thus, a space known as being "not hers" represents a place of value. Therefore, for those invested in this story of degraded women, the value of the wasted prostitute lies in her representation of value's antithesis. The women of La Paz and the human rights activists are struggling against this dialectical production of women as indicative of waste at a time when urban elites are banking on the value derived from the disappearance of these wasted women.

In this way, the women of La Paz and the human rights activists are confronting a form of gentrification that illustrates, as Neil Smith has called it, the "revanchism" of capital. The urban elites' plans for revitalizing the city's capital base take direct aim at the working people who have made this city famous the world

over for top quality assembly work, inexpensive bars, and easy sex. These working people are young women who have migrated from all over Mexico and who are its most visible downtown habitués. Yet this re-vanchism does not materialize through the abstract concepts of class. Rather than the language of workers and bosses, we find the language that condemns women for being whores, for being on the street, for not being at home, for being “loose.” This discourse identifies the apparently noneconomic categories of sexual behavior and sexual virtue as economically significant such that to understand the political economy of Ciudad Juárez today, we must understand how the representation of the whore—as the wasted woman who represents urban waste—contributes to the positive production of value across the city.

As the women of La Paz and human rights activists have shown, much is at stake when women do stand up, stand still, or, otherwise, destabilize the many discursive technologies dedicated to extracting value from their degradation. When combined, these protests, as minor as they might appear, can have an impact on a city that is the focus of much attention. At a time when many corporate and political analysts are looking to Ciudad Juárez to determine if NAFTA is succeeding and if the Free Trade Area of the Americas is a good idea, the question that requires asking is: When they look to Ciudad Juárez and find the disappearance of poor, young Mexican women from the picture, what do they see? The women of La Paz and the activists who carry signs with women’s faces are having an impact on the answer.

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## Notes

1. *Maquiladora* refers to the export-processing facilities in Mexico. Sometimes, I refer to them by their common nickname of *maquila*.
2. The association of women workers with “traditional” women’s work of prostitution, and, in turn, of prostitution with social decline is prevalent throughout industrial history (see, for instance, Lamphere 1987). For the Mexico/U.S. border context, Debra Castillo (1999) provides a good illustration of how women who work as sex workers in Tijuana contend with police harassment and abuse, which is justified by references to sex workers as indicative of social decline. Some of these women have organized around the questions of safety and work rights. Nathan (1999) has shown how female maquiladora workers continually face the charge that they are “prostituting themselves.”
3. Feminist scholars, across disciplines, have unraveled these discourses to examine the creation of the public sphere around the prohibition of female presences (see Landes 1998). For feminist scholars who have explored the meaning of identity for the creation of a capitalist categories and divisions, see Lawson 1999; Elson and Pearson 1989; Ong 1987.
4. Geographers who have focused on the intersections of social identity with power structures have used this combination of methods to demonstrate the spatial implications to identity formation and the exercise of power in everyday life. I have drawn from the work of several to think through this project. See, for instance, Kobayashi 1994; Katz 1996; McDowell 1997.
5. My thinking on the production of female disappearance as a spatial activity has some roots in Elizabeth Grosz’s (1994) theorization of the body as a spatial site of discursive production. I also draw from Judith Butler’s (1993) formulation of the body as a site whose meaning is never fully established and therefore constantly under production.
6. All interviews that took place in Spanish have been translated by the author.
7. The official police account of the serial murders as of 2003 was around 90. Many activists are suspicious of the official numbers and claim that the number is closer to 300 (see Amnesty International 2003). Some activists demand that domestic violence and other sorts of violence against women needs more attention.
8. A significant body of geographic research has employed such tools for investigations into the geographies of subject formation (Blunt and Rose 1994; Keith and Pile 1993; McDowell 1997); for explorations into the space-time of political economy (Barnes 1996; Gibson-Graham 1996); and for untangling productions of place from the discursive regimes of power that guide interpretations of social difference across urban landscapes (see Martin 2000; Mitchell 2000). As many scholars, inside and outside of geography, have observed, the interrogation of spatial politics has much to offer discourse analysis, across disciplines (Pred 1996).
9. For scholarship into the organization and representation of the “traditional” maquiladora, see Cravey (1988), Wright (1999), and Fernandez-Kelly (1983).
10. All informant names are pseudonyms.
11. Such descriptions are commonplace throughout the business literature as well as the academic literature that discusses the “old-style” maquiladora (see Gereffi 1991; Carrillo 1990).



12. Lourdes Portillo exposes this frequent question in her documentary, *La Extraviada*, that explores police negligence and that suggests a political cover-up regarding the murder investigations.
13. The party that formed in 1929 was the precursor to the contemporary PRI.
14. Political analysts widely believe that the current Chihuahuan governor's political future and presidential aspirations hinge on his abilities either to solve the killings or to quash the publicity over them.
15. Several activists described these allegations during interviews. Many of them have received hostile phone messages from anonymous sources who blame them for the economic downtown and lack of tourism.
16. This information came from an Internet listserv maintained by Frontera NorteSur on September 23, 2002. It was entitled, "Juárez Business Association Wants to Remove Memorial Cross at Downtown Bridge."
17. Film maker Lourdes Portillo is the director of this documentary, which was released in 2001. It has aired internationally as well as on PBS's "Point of View."
18. This informant asked me not to identify her or her organization after admitting that she had received calls from the managers of prominent maquiladoras, which also provided some funding to her organization.
19. This plan was later published in 2000 by the Municipio de Ciudad Juárez as the *Plan Parcial del Centro Histórico de Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua*.

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