12 Transfronteriza

Gender Rights at the Border and La Colectiva Feminista Binacional

MICHELLE TÉLLEZ

To better understand the ways in which women border dwellers are responding to transnational processes and the effects of neoliberal policies, this chapter focuses on woman-centered activism projects and innovative forms of political organizing and community formation at the U.S./Mexico border. Building on the idea of *transfronterismo* (Ruiz 1992), or transborderness,[1] I highlight how the actual border should be seen not just as a site of passage but also as a site for gendered transformation where a politicized *transfronteriza* identity can emerge. I look specifically at the transborder space of the twin cities of Tijuana and San Diego and the work of the Colectiva Feminista Binacional (Binational Feminist Collective),[2] which formed in 2004.

This work is part of a larger project in which Cristina Sanidad and I examine how grassroots organizations are collaborating, both binationally and locally, in the San Diego/Tijuana border region to create worker-centered spaces for change. Though the rapidly changing global economy causes constant shifts in production, stability, and worker conditions, the maquiladora (factory) industry has consistently drawn migrant workers north for more than forty years. The border economy arguably depends on the maquiladora industry, yet the lives of the workers are deemed disposable. The Colectiva Feminista Binacional (CFB), CITTAC (Support Center for Workers), and the San Diego Maquiladora Workers' Solidarity Network (SDMWSN, a binational support system for maquiladora workers based in San Diego) are the three grassroots, worker-centered spaces that challenge this disposability and have emerged as advocates for many workers seeking an improvement in unjust working conditions. Through the creation of an autonomous infrastructure, these groups offer legal support, workers' rights workshops, and the opportunity for cross-border actions to pressure the transna-

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

tional companies for whom they work. By examining the strategies of meagerly funded community-based organizations that have created change in the lives of workers struggling to survive the gendered, class-based, and racialized sociopolitical structures at the U.S./Mexico border, I center the lives and experiences of the men and women of the maquiladora industry, who are overlooked.

In this chapter, I examine the conditions and effects of policies proposed and enacted by the neoliberal state, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), to understand how women workers and their communities and families are responding to their predicaments. Through an analysis of the strategies, challenges and successes of the CFB, we will gain a better understanding of binational feminist organizing and the materialization of a politicized *transfronteriza* identity.[3] In my research, I found that the construction of this identity is determined by three factors: a shared geographical space, a collective consciousness based on mutual experiences and solidarity, and a feminist politics that looks at women's rights as fundamental to challenging the system.[4]

Methodology

The data from this paper were collected between September 2004 and March 2009. The data include participant observation, which entailed active involvement in the collective's activities (such as meetings, actions, and celebrations) for two years, extensive interviews with two current CFB members (one who has been involved since its inception and one who joined more recently and has become a vocal and active participant), and a follow-up focus group. To complement the ethnographic material, I incorporate textual data gathered by the CFB, such as meeting minutes, a ten-page summary of and reflection on a binational conference the CFB organized, and an analysis of the group's mission statement and supporting documents.

The interviews were conducted in March 2009 at the CFB's Tijuana office and followed a semistructured question format with three broad foci: the group's history and mission, current issues and organizing strategies, and the effects of recent political and economic changes on the interviewees' work as feminists, labor rights organizers, and border dwellers.

Tijuana y las Maquiladoras: Structural Violence and Worker Conditions

As a result of the intersecting power structures of capitalism, racial hierarchy, and patriarchy, Mexican border cities are fraught with infrastructural problems (lack of housing, health facilities, schools) that create a "structural violence" endemic

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

to the region (Segura and Zavella 2007). Many scholars have examined the transnational maquiladora industry on the U.S./Mexico border within the context of globalization, migration, and the effects of global capital on the social and economic environments. More recently, this scholarship has included the ways in which globalization affects the day-to-day lives of workers, who are subject to exploitation by means of low wages, exposure to environmental risks, sexual harassment, and discrimination (Bandy 2000; Cravey 1998; Landau 2005; Muñoz 2004; Peña 1997). The multinational companies that own this industry thrive and maximize profits through the recruitment of cheap labor, the implementation of strict labor conduct rules, and noncompliance with safety, environmental, and labor standards. These business practices create catastrophic environmental, health, and social problems that affect both the workers' labor experience and life in their communities and are compounded by the underdeveloped public service infrastructure (Bacon 2004; Landau 2005; Lorey 1999; Martínez 1994). The consequences are exacerbated for border women and workers on whom the conditions of structural violence weigh heavily, as they bear the greatest responsibility for alleviating these effects. Their induction into the labor force in the border region has a particular history.

The development of the modern-day maquiladora industry began more than forty years ago. In 1961, the Mexican government launched the Programa Nacional Fronterizo (PRONAF, National Border Program), which sought to beautify border towns, build up their tourist infrastructure, and create favorable conditions for industrialization in the border region. In 1965, the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), an outgrowth of PRONAF, established the border zone corridor of export processing industries known as maquiladoras (Herzog 1990; Lorey 1999; Nevins 2002). Maquiladoras were the only firms exempt from Mexican law, which requires majority Mexican ownership (Lorey 1999). BIP also helped to fuel significant migration to border cities from other parts of Mexico. Between 1950 and 1990, the population of Mexican border states multiplied 3.6 times (Lorey 1999). Implemented in 1994, NAFTA and the growing liberalization of the Mexican economy have also facilitated a significant exodus from Mexico's countryside. From 1980 to 1990, for example, the population living in Mexico's rural areas declined from 36 percent to 28 percent of the total (Nevins 2002). In Tijuana, the population has grown by 70.5 percent, from 461,257 in 1980 to 1,274,240 in 2000 (Kopinak 2003). Furthermore, despite the rhetoric of a borderless global society, the border has become starker in this neoliberal context, which can be seen in strategies such as Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego and Operation Hold the Line in Texas. For numerous reasons, migrants who intend to cross the border stay in border cities such as Tijuana and seek employment in these maquiladoras.

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

Although some recent shifts have occurred, women historically have comprised the bulk of the maquiladora workforce through strategic recruitment efforts resulting from a presumed level of both manual dexterity and naiveté (Domínguez 2002; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Peña 1997; Sklair 1989; Tiano 1987). The city of Tijuana currently has forty-seven industrial parks, each of which employs two hundred thousand workers on two twelve-hour shifts (Pool 2008). The evidence of disparities becomes abundantly clear when the minimum wage is 54.80 pesos ($4) per day and a gallon of milk costs approximately 45 pesos. Most maquiladora workers do not make more than fifty dollars a week. The impact of the dangerously low salary on families is exacerbated by the humiliation they face at the factories. Workers are often required to agree to a set of rules related to dress code, bathroom use and breaks, and water consumption. Women's rights are frequently violated through use of random pregnancy tests (which can include requiring women to show their underwear to prove that they are menstruating), and sexual harassment by power holders such as supervisors. As Elvia Arriola (2000, 782) writes, "The younger women are encouraged to utilize their sexuality in the maquiladoras at the same time that their right of reproductive choice is actively repressed. This is manifested in the sexist attitudes of managers who equate job security with being pretty, ladylike, and the sexual object of attention, exploitation, and abuse."

For many migrant workers from the interior of Mexico who work at the border, the blunt realities they encounter when they arrived are shocking, since they have been enticed to Tijuana by what one worker described as stories of "money on the floor" or "an abundance of well-paid work." According to another worker, "They tell us that here one can get a good car for almost nothing, that one will have work, a house, everything. It was the American Dream, only without the risks of crossing to the other side—the American Dream in Mexico." Instead, they find that their rights as workers are constantly violated. They suffer physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; are subject to forced overtime and illegal hiring and firing practices, such as being fired without pay; and have no recourse if they are hurt on the job. Such violations limit workers' job security and their freedom to make decisions without facing drastic consequences. Despite the obstacles, workers and activists are seeking ways to fight back.

In Tijuana, the movement to organize independent unions has been unsuccessful (Bacon 2004); instead, various grassroots organizations (CFB, CITTAC, La Red) have devised a plan of action that draws on Mexican federal labor laws to hold the transnational giants accountable. The legal code provides appropriate parameters for workers, including eight-hour workdays, vacation time, and health and safety regulations. While these laws work in favor of the workers' rights advocates, the complex layers of power within the maquiladora industry make it

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

almost impossible to enforce those measures. As one organizer stated, "Before, a worker would confront his boss and would fight with his boss and that was the struggle between them. . . . Today this is not the case. For example, we are not fighting just with the bosses. In one case, we had to fight against the authorities, because the authorities always were on the side of the boss. And then we had to fight with the union, because the unions are also on the side of the boss. Then we had to bring in the environmental protection agency, asking them to help us look into the chemicals that were being brought into Mexico. So then we had to fight with customs. So that each time we would move forward, we would confront someone else. It's like a monster, and the maquiladora workers do not confront just their boss. No, now we have to confront the entire system. . . . The enemy that is coming face to face with the workers is an enormous enemy which they alone cannot defeat. They need a strong alliance to be able to defeat it." Workers' rights advocates in the border region find themselves in this environment, which is made worse by the fact that federal law lacks a clause that addresses sexual harassment and gender discrimination. While CITTAC has addressed the needs of all workers, and in the early 1990s became the first group to combat and win a sexual harassment case for a maquiladora worker, the CFB remains the only group highlighting the needs of women workers and border dwellers.

Binational Organizing against Transnational Forces

Widespread abuses and corruption in the maquiladora industry have ignited activist networks that transcend the U.S./Mexico border. This transnational or transborder activism has been studied as a collective response to globalization, creating networks across borders and nations that challenge inequalities in working conditions and environments created by multinational corporations (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Bacon 2004; Bandy 2000, 2004; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Liebowitz 2002; Muñoz 2004; Staudt and Coronado 2002). As Bandy (2004) notes, creating solidarity between workers and organizations is based on four elements: workers' critiques of neoliberalism, their mutual concern for the creation and upholding of labor standards and collective participation in unions or other political arenas to affect change, the cultivation of communication and relationships that extend across borders, and the creation of a culture of hope. Developed in this way, solidarity transcends borders and is central to the success of activists' efforts. This notion of solidarity is also central in Staudt and Coronado's (2002, 51) characteristics of successful cross-border organizing, which involve activists' involvement on both sides of the border; relationships with other local, state, or international movements; and transparent and cooperative efforts that have

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

measurable results. Transnational solidarity, then, is critical to the effectiveness of movements that challenge the practices of multinational corporations.

Similarly, Bandy (2004) argues that transnational activism can strengthen social movements, creating greater possibility for social change in power structures and environmental and social conditions. Bandy's examination of the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras demonstrates that with increased solidarity between social actors through worker-to-worker exchanges, collective consciousness emerges. This increased solidarity allows workers to identify with each other in their common struggles and to address their needs, which are often absent from larger political debates for change (Bacon 2004). Finally, transnational activism creates hope. Though this hope may seem relatively unimportant, it fuels the movement: "This language of hope cannot feed or clothe workers in need, and it alone does not regulate capital. Yet, it cannot be underestimated since, in the absence of substantive reform, it is a primary source of workers' commitments to movement participation and international coalition" (Bandy 2004, 419).

The elements of solidarity and hope for the creation of a collective consciousness are integral to the work of the cross-border organizing that takes place in the San Diego/Tijuana region. While current literature on gendered cross-border organizing highlights the particular concerns of women and the importance of an intersectional analysis of the effects of political processes at multiple levels (Collins 2006; Domínguez 2002; Mattingly and Hansen 2006), my work focuses on how these elements contribute to the creation of what I call a politicized *transfronteriza* identity by border women activists.

La Colectiva Feminista

The CFB was formed in 2004; the group self-identifies its members—mostly Chicanas and Mexicanas—as activists, feminists, maquiladora workers, Zapatistas, environmentalists, students, artists, and organizers from the United States and Mexico. The collective comprises seven active members and up to thirty-five affiliates between twenty-five and fifty-five years old.[5] The members attend meetings, organize workshops, and contribute to the kitchen collective. An informational pamphlet describes the collective's mission as helping to "construct a new movement that supports and highlights the spiritual and human components to the diverse struggles experienced by women in the border region." Members of the group had been working on various political projects independent of each other, but as post-NAFTA conditions became more visible, they realized that these policies had created more pressure on women through lower salaries, sexual harassment, constant threat of unemployment, chemical contamination, and toxic

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

waste from the maquiladora industry. These factors affect the women not only as community members but also as mothers and wives. By drawing from their diverse experiences, the women actively sought to move beyond their individual locales to have a broader reach through collective action.

While the collective works in tandem with the other groups, its focus ensures that women's issues are highlighted and recognized in the struggle for workers' rights. The binational collaboration has facilitated development of a politicized *transfronteriza* identity that promotes not only cross-border solidarity but also the blurring of the juridico-political demarcation of the U.S./Mexico border, where commonalities of needs and rights both drive and inform actions. Through its work, the CFB is not only fighting for workers' rights but also introducing a gendered consciousness.

Over the past six years, the collective has developed four organizing tactics. First, with the goal of building networks, in September 2004 the collective decided to organize an *encuentro* (meeting) with other activists working on issues affecting women in the border region. This was the first grassroots, binational, woman-centered meeting and was hosted at the women's center in the autonomous community of Maclovio Rojas (see Téllez 2005, 2006, 2008), situated between the cities of Tecate and Tijuana. According to the call for the *encuentro*, "Knowing each other gives us the opportunity to extend our own struggles and working together we can come up with strategies for better communication locally, regionally and binationally. With this kind of gathering, we'll focus on the specific gendered problems that we face and, also, we will put forward a perspective from women and by women." The *encuentro* sought to

- examine ties that already exist between organizations in Baja California, Mexico, and California, United States;
- share different organizing experiences and learn from each other;
- discuss solutions to our problems as women workers, community members, and organizers in this region;
- reflect on who we are and what are our struggles are; and
- formulate strategies for support.

The two-day meeting attracted more than forty organizations from California and Baja California and an organizer from Guatemala. *Encuentro* participants included migrants, academics, students, union organizers, maquiladora workers, community health workers, indigenous women, stay-at-home moms, and media workers. In light of the fact that the gathering was organized and led by workers, students, and activists without any institutional support or external funding other than participant donations, the turnout was extremely successful. Important conversations and critical exchanges began to take place, and the construction of a cross-border collective identity began to emerge.

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

The collective's second strategy for developing a *transfronteriza* identity is through workshops for maquiladora workers. These workshops have been made available with the help of contacts and resources both from the *encuentro* and from relationships developed over years of organizing and working along the border. Workshop themes include gender rights in the workplace, reproductive rights, safety issues highlighting the needs of women, and the patriarchy. The CFB has also collaborated with other grassroots organizations along the border to produce a video, shown during the workshops, that documents incidents of sexual harassment against women maquiladora workers. According to one member, at the workshops, "we can focus on how women's reproductive health is affected in the sense that, for example, the lead disrupts one's menstrual cycle and causes spontaneous abortions while inside the factory. The men's sexuality is affected also. Their libido is lowered, just like the women's. . . . We prepare ourselves better. It interests us to have women participate in the intellectual. . . . Activism is good and all, but we also know that [such work is] sometimes based in books." Another member explained that community is built at the workshops: "We come to listen to one another . . . to share our troubles and frustrations as women, as border dwellers, as youth, as stay-at-home moms, as women, etc."

The third strategy is the kitchen collective, a service that functions as an alternative to the unemployment that runs rampant in the border region. In the words of one member, "The kitchen collective is a cooperative, a group of women that get together to make different food for different events. We sell food to those on the maquiladora tours.[6] . . . Basically, it's for economic help. And apart from this, we share recipes. Cooking is an important part of our culture, and we are learning a lot. We cook for a lot of people."

The kitchen collective is a new dynamic space that provides women an opportunity to build relationships and creates an alternative way to make a limited income. The CFB also recently applied for and received a grant from the city of Tijuana to purchase cooking supplies such as frying pans and stoves.

The CFB's final strategy involves cross-border actions in support of the campaigns initiated by the maquiladora workers. These actions are organized and attended by members of CFB, CITTAC, and the San Diego Maquiladora Workers' Solidarity Network. According to one member, "One of the best examples is the case of the company owners who were living in San Diego, specifically in Chula Vista. What we did was organize a simultaneous protest in San Diego and Tijuana. While the workers in Tijuana were marching in front of the factory that had been closed and in front of other businesses of the owners and the sports club that the owners belonged to, here [in the United States], we were protesting in front of the house of the owners, and through their pure bad luck that day had . . . invited over all of their friends and family. . . . Then all of the people there were scared when groups of activists arrived. It created a big scandal!" Members

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

of the CFB support these cross-border actions and participate in the protests as they are able; currently, more members live on the Mexican side of the border.

Discussion

POLITICIZED TRANSFRONTERIZA IDENTITY

In many discussions of transnationalism, the border is merely seen as a passage, as the division between two nation-states rather than a site for community formation. The CFB's work demonstrates that women border dwellers and activists are moving beyond this typification and beginning to create a broader definition of community. For example, the space created within the *encuentro* allowed women to discover their commonalities across the geopolitical demarcation. With the border divide momentarily erased, several common transborder issues affecting women were exposed, including land and housing concerns, access to public services, and the racialization of environmental health. Participants repeatedly named state and transnational companies as the powers that shaped their realities and shared similar experiences as laborers in the global political economy. A shared politicized *transfronteriza* identity emerges.

For example, Beatriz, a maquiladora worker in Tijuana, discussed her lack of employment security: "Our boss gives us three- to six-month contracts. So they'll fire everyone at once and then call us back with these short-term contracts, sometimes lasting only a month. In December, some don't even get their job back. We have no seniority rights and no security. In that factory, we made plastic boxes for televisions for Sanyo, Sony, Panasonic, Sharp."

Albina, a worker and organizer from Guatemala, explained, "I worked for fourteen years in a Korean garment factory. I started out as a minor, and when the owners came, they would hide us in the warehouse because [management] didn't want [the owners] to see us. They humiliated us in many ways, especially women who are pregnant. We couldn't eat inside because the clothes would get dirty. They wouldn't clean the bathrooms, and there were about six hundred workers with only two bathrooms for men and four for women. There was no light. We would preserve our water because there was so little of it."

As a garment worker in Los Angeles, Lupe "would get about ten- to fifteen-minute breaks for lunch. We could only go to the bathroom twice, and you would have to ask for the key. They threatened to not pay us constantly—they'd pay us late or too little. Hygiene is really bad, it is very dirty, there are rats and cockroaches in the refrigerator. Owners would also threaten us by telling us that La Migra [the immigration police] was coming."

These short narratives demonstrate that those devalued in the market (poor, Third World women) experience exploitation on both sides of the border; thus,

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

the sharing and acknowledging of their experiences creates a collective *transfronteriza* identity. Furthermore, these workers and activists also shared their local victories (campaigns against transnational companies, coalition building); by exchanging models of change, participants learn elements of new strategies and how to implement them successfully. As Rivera-Salgado (1999a, 1999b) underscores in her analysis of indigenous migrant workers from the Mexican state of Oaxaca in northern Mexico and California, binational activism strengthens communities and creates shared identities and political alliances. At the very least, listening to each other's struggles creates the sense of solidarity and hope that Bandy (2004) highlights.

Also, dialogue enables the activists to come to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the United States and Mexico, an understanding that not all peoples living in the United States are rich and privileged. The *encuentro* also made visible the experiences of those living in the United States who are also subjugated, building links between them and creating a unique sense of mutual understanding and support.

While the BIP program has been in place since the 1960s and workers have previously voiced their concerns, the CFB's work is important primarily for two reasons. First, transnational companies and economic policies have forced activists to think beyond their own locales, giving way to the unintended consequence of cross-border collaboration. Second, the collective *transfronteriza* identity was created through woman-centered grassroots collaboration and supported through continued work via workshops, actions, and the kitchen collective. While there is a primary focus on the needs of maquiladora workers and their struggles, as evidenced in the workshops and cross-border actions, U.S.-based activists (members of the CFB or the San Diego Maquiladora Workers' Solidarity Network) and supporters (doctors, teachers, and other professionals) build solidarity as they build relationships. Furthermore, to continue shaping the initial goals of the 2004 *encuentro* and to further build a *transfronteriza* identity, a second gathering should take place. However, through their transborder activism, these critical actors in the San Diego/Tijuana region demonstrate an emerging consciousness that highlights not only women workers' and activists' agency but also the solidarity they are creating across the border, which is an important factor when the news we hear about the border often pertains solely to violence, crime, and exploitation.

CHALLENGES

Although the CFB's work has many strengths, there have been challenges as well. The collective initially had difficulty getting recognition within the workers' rights struggle, particularly from CITTAC, because some male members of the larger movement did not see the need for a separate organization focused

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

on the needs of women. One woman challenged this perspective, saying, "There are so many demands placed on women within the movement. We have to work, study, be good organizers, good workers, good wives, good everything, and we said, 'Enough!'" Women organizers realized that they needed to step up to fill this void. They also found it difficult to become involved if their husbands or partners did not agree with their participation. Members thus found ways to secure child care at meetings and workshops as a way to alleviate some of the tension. Collins (2006, 20) explains that organizing is especially hard for women, who are often faced with a "double-day" during which they not only hold down paying jobs but also bear responsibility for tending to the private sphere (cleaning the home, preparing food, and caring for children). With so many responsibilities in the home and at work, women have little time to participate in politics. While the active members of the CFB found ways to remain involved, they are still working on creating a better balance for all women.

Furthermore, while cross-border alliances provide unique opportunities for an engaged solidarity against transnational companies, language and cultural misunderstandings create obstacles to the projects. Similarly, although a collective *transfronteriza* identity is created, the political demarcation cannot be ignored; U.S.-based activists are more freely able to cross into Mexico than vice versa, creating inequalities in terms of privilege and access.

The recent economic crisis has presented the CFB with another major challenge and has had catastrophic consequences in Tijuana. The media is focused on the wars among drug dealers, paying almost no attention to the long lines of anguished people who wait outside the maquiladoras looking for jobs. The Tijuana government avoids speaking about this topic. "We must be optimistic," said an (employed) government official on TV (Davalos 2009).

As of January 2009, between twenty-five thousand and forty thousand jobs had been lost (Davalos 2009). Companies such as Samsung, Sony, and Panasonic are cutting days. The companies take advantage of the recession to lay off workers, increase productivity, reduce salaries, and deny benefits such as membership in the public health system (Seguro Social). In addition, the companies are now requesting middle or high school diplomas before hiring workers.

These conditions have made organizers rethink their strategies. For example, according to one organizer, "There are workers who are in conditions that are so bad, and they go through things in their work, and they come to us to get help and I feel terrible having to recommend to them, 'Take care of your job. Hold on just a little longer. It's bad what you went through, but it's better than not having a job.'" Activists argue that they must do more than protest; they must also look at ways to survive, creating alternatives in the form of collective gardening and shopping to avoid becoming victims of the companies and market for which they work.

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

Conclusion

In an environment (maquiladoras) where women are stripped of humanity and encouraged to compete against one another, these workers not only attempt to restore humanity and rights in the workplace but support each other in their shared and individual fights. Their activism demonstrates both the power of communities coming together and women's roles in creating solidarity and strength in the face of globalization.

Despite these obstacles, women reinvent and reenvision alternative forms of resistance and activism that would allow their voices to be heard and better represent their struggles, finding power in organizing within the community. Through their actions, women demonstrate that they are not passive victims, constantly finding new methods of resistance in their daily lives in the maquiladora industry and in their communities.

As members of the CFB join in solidarity across the border to create strategies of resistance, they become activists, giving voice to the marginalized to survive the border's gendered, class-based, and racialized social structures. As Landau (2005, 359) argues, "On both sides of the border, residents understand globalization not as a theory, but as a result of living the experience." This analysis of the workers and woman-centered organizing projects in the Tijuana–San Diego region underscores this experience as well as the lived experiences of resistance and social change from below, producing a politicized *transfronteriza* identity.

Notes

This chapter would not have been completed without the help of my research assistants, Courtney Andersen, Elizabeth Miller, Katie Norberg, and Cristina Sanidad. Thank you for your dedication, insight, and hard work. I would also like to thank photographer Oscar Michel for his help with the documentation of pivotal conversations and events. Finally, special thanks to members of La Colectiva Feminista for allowing me to share their story.

1. Transborderism occurs in an area that is geographically delineated and refers to the activities of people, communities, and institutions of local origin and destination (Ruiz 1992, 2). I use *transfronteriz*(*a*) to underscore the gendered signifiers of this identity.

2. The correct usage of the word *collective* in the Spanish language is *colectivo*, but members of the group chose to change the word to a feminine ending to mark their women-centered framework. For more information on the group and its activities, see Colectiva Feminista Binacional 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2009.

3. I use *binational* to differentiate between groups based in the United States and in Mexico; I use *transfronteriza* to describe the process in which an identity is formed that simultaneously embodies both sides.

4. Sonia Saldivar-Hull makes a similar argument in her analysis of Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros's story, "Women Hollering Creek." Saldivar-Hull (1999, 2) examines

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

the ways in which this literary text "enacts a practice of Chicana feminism that engages with a transnational, transfronteriza practice of *feminismo popular* (popular feminism) . . . that enables us to re-examine an emergent formation of feminism on the border, a formation characterized by specific types of movements of Mexican women across geopolitical boundaries and borders." While in this fundamental literary text and analysis we can only imagine "the socially nuanced global Chicana Mexicana coalitions" (2), the CFB demonstrates the lived experiences of this exchange, offering important insights into the practices of these feminist encounters.

5. Women who are actively organizing events, workshops, and actions are members; the affiliates are women who participate in events, form part of the list of contacts, and support the group's actions.

6. The Maquiladora Support Network offers border tours to U.S. activists, students, and others as part of its organizing project. The CFB supports these activities.

References

Armbruster-Sandoval, Ralph. 2005. "Workers of the World Unite?: The Contemporary Anti-Sweatshop Movement and the Struggle for Social Justice in the Americas." *Work and Occupations* 32:464–85.

Arriola, Elvia. 2000. "Voices from the Barbed Wires of Despair: Women in the Maquiladoras, Latina Critical Legal Theory, and Gender at the U.S.-Mexico Border." *De Paul Law Review* 49:729–815.

Bacon, David. 2004. *The Children of NAFTA: Labor Wars on the U.S./Mexico Border*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bandy, Joe. 2000. "Bordering the Future: Resisting Neoliberalism in the Borderlands." *Critical Sociology* 26:232–67.

———. 2004. "Paradoxes of Transnational Civil Societies under Neoliberalism: The Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras." *Social Problems* 51:410–31.

Colectiva Feminista Binacional. 2004a. "Call for Encuentro." Flyer. Tijuana: Colectiva Feminista Binacional.

———. 2004b. Event flyer. Tijuana: Colectiva Feminista Binacional.

———. 2005. Encuentro summary. Tijuana: Colectiva Feminista Binacional.

———. 2009. Informational pamphlet. Tijuana: Colectiva Feminista Binacional.

Collins, Jane. 2006. "Redefining the Boundaries of Work: Apparel Workers and Community Unionism in the Global Economy." *Identities* 13:9–31.

Cravey, Altha. 1998. *Women and Work in Mexico's Maquiladoras*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.

Davalos, Enrique. 2009. "El Mexicano." *Boletin Maquilero*. http://casadeculturaobrera.org/centro-de-informacion-para-trabajadoras-y-trabajadores-a-c/. Accessed November 30, 2009.

Domínguez, R. Edmé. 2002. "Continental Transnational Activism and Women Workers' Networks within NAFTA." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 4:216–39.

Fernández-Kelly, Maria. 1983. "Mexican Border Industrialization, Female Labor Force Participation, and Migration." In *Women, Men, and the International Division of La-*

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

bor, ed. June Nash and Maria Fernández-Kelly, 205–23. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Herzog, Lawrence. 1990. *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space, and Politics on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas.

Keck, Margaret, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kopinak, Kathryn. 2003. "Globalization in Tijuana Maquiladoras: Using Historical Antecedents and Migration to Test Globalization Models." *Papeles de Poblacion* 9(37): 219–42.

Landau, Saul. 2005. "Globalization, Maquilas, NAFTA, and the State: Mexican Labor and 'The New World Order.'" *Journal of Developing Societies* 21:357–68.

Liebowitz, Debra. 2002. "Gendering (Trans)National Advocacy." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 4:173–96.

Lorey, David. 1999. *The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century: A History of Economic and Social Transformation*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources.

Martínez, Oscar. 1994. *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Mattingly, Doreen, and Ellen Hansen. 2006. *Women and Change at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Mobility, Labor, and Activism*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Muñoz, Carolina. 2004. "Mobile Capital, Immobile Labor: Inequality and Opportunity in the Tortilla Industry." *Social Justice* 31:21–39.

Nevins, Joseph. 2002. *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*. New York: Routledge.

Peña, Devon. 1997. *Terror of the Machine: Technology, Work, Gender, and Ecology of the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Pool, Emilia. 2008. "Tijuana's Maquiladoras: Producing Resistance." *Rebeldia* 5:25–35.

Rivera-Salgado, Gaspar. 1999a. "Binational Organizations of Mexican Migrants to the United States." *Social Justice* 26:27–38.

———. 1999b. "Mixtec Activism in Oaxacalifornia: Transborder Grassroots Political Strategies." *American Behavioral Scientist* 42:1439–58.

Ruiz, Olivia. 1992. "Visitas y Convivencias de los Norteamericanos de Ascendencia Mexicana en Baja California." Paper presented at the conference on Historia y Cultura, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte/Universidad Autonomía de Cuidad Juárez.

Saldivar-Hull, Sonia. 1999. "Women Hollering Transfronteriza Feminisms." *Cultural Studies* 13:251–62.

Segura, Denise, and Patricia Zavella. 2007. *Women and Migration in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: A Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Sklair, Leslie. 1989. *Assembling for Development: The Maquiladora Industry in Mexico and the United States*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Staudt, Kathleen, and Irasema Coronado. 2002. *Fronteras No Más: Toward Social Justice at the U.S.-Mexico Border*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Téllez, Michelle. 2005. "Globalizing Resistance: Maclovio Rojas, a Mexican Community in Lucha." Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate University.

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.

———. 2006. "Generating Hope, Creating Change, Searching for Community: Stories of Resistance against Globalization at the U.S./Mexico Border." In *Re-Inventing Critical Pedagogy: Widening the Circle of Anti-Oppression Education*, ed. Cesar Rossatto, Ricky Lee Allen, and Marc Pruyn, 225–34. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.

———. 2008. "Community of Struggle: Gender, Violence, and Resistance on the U.S./ Mexico Border." *Gender and Society* 22:545–67.

Tiano, Susan. 1987. "Women's Work and Unemployment in Northern Mexico." In *Women on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Responses to Change*, ed. Vicki Ruiz and Susan Tiano, 77–101. Boston: Allen and Unwin.

Copyright © 2013. University of Illinois Press. All rights reserved.

Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age, edited by Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, et al., University of Illinois Press, 2013.
ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3414284.
Created from uaz on 2021-11-18 04:43:24.