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## Globalisation, Maquiladoras and Transnational Identities at the Us-Mexico Border: The Case of Ciudad Juarez-El Paso

Based on a paper presented at the XVI World Congress of Sociology, RC30 Sociology of Work, Session 6, Durban, South Africa, 26<sup>th</sup> July 2006.

*Négociation des relations de travail individuelles, témoignage de quatre organisations néerlandaises*

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/interventionseconomiques/648>

DOI: 10.4000/interventionseconomiques.648

ISBN: 1710-7377

ISSN: 1710-7377

**Publisher**

Association d'Économie Politique

**Electronic reference**

Patrick Gun Cuninghame, « Globalisation, Maquiladoras and Transnational Identities at the Us-Mexico Border: The Case of Ciudad Juarez-El Paso », *Revue Interventions économiques* [Online], 35 | 2007, Online since 01 May 2007, connection on 29 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/interventionseconomiques/648> ; DOI : 10.4000/interventionseconomiques.648

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This text was automatically generated on 29 May 2019.



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# Globalisation, Maquiladoras and Transnational Identities at the Us-Mexico Border: The Case of Ciudad Juarez-El Paso

Based on a paper presented at the XVI World Congress of Sociology, RC30 Sociology of Work, Session 6, Durban, South Africa, 26<sup>th</sup> July 2006.

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## Introduction

- 1 The local and global configurations of identity in Ciudad Juarez, in the Northern frontier state of Chihuahua, Mexico, are increasingly determined by the economic processes of globalisation whose main manifestation is the maquiladora<sup>1</sup> or assembly and packaging plant for export. So far studies on border identities have emphasized socio-cultural processes and have considered much less the importance of economic processes in identity construction. The main objective of this paper, therefore, is to follow the contours of a research project that seeks to determine whether transnational identities are emerging among maquiladora workers and former-workers, due to the impacts of the globalisation; what form these transnational identities are taking or could take; and what could be their social impacts and political implications.
- 2 The paper is part of a research project entitled "Globalisation, assembly plants and transnational identities in El Paso del Norte"<sup>2</sup> whose general objectives are, first, to discover the main features of the identities of maquiladora workers starting from a comparative analysis of the narratives of the workers themselves, and secondly to verify if transnational identities are emerging because of the impacts of globalisation. In terms

of their potential impact on the transborder society of El Paso del Norte, the project seeks to contribute to the improvement of intercultural conviviality and of gender relationships within and between the twin cities of Ciudad Juarez and El Paso. The project analyses the performance of labour, the use of free time and conviviality outside the maquiladora, in the family environment, to verify if the learning of what Peter Berger has called "managerial values" and "academic knowledge" are determining labour discipline, the rationalization of free time and entertainment as much as gender relationships.<sup>3</sup>

- 3 The effects of globalisation on the construction and reconstruction of the national and transnational identities of maquiladora workers are relatively unknown. Nevertheless, the full understanding of these identities and of the processes that build them have the potential to form the basis of a possible new cultural politics for this border region. This could help to tackle forms of racism and sexism that continue to prevail both inside and away from the workplace, so ending institutional indifference on these issues and promoting the formation of an intercultural society based on respect for and appreciation of cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences, as well as those of gender and sexual orientation.
- 4 There is a special focus in the project on women workers and their identities for four reasons: first, they formed until recently the majority of the maquiladora workforce in Ciudad Juarez. Second, supposedly "the border woman" is freer and more independent than women in other parts of Mexico and so she represents an actor who puts in practice her antagonistic subjectivity in the face of the traditional stereotype of the passive and submissive Mexican woman. Third, because they have been the main victims of the "femicide" of some 450 women "without power" in the last decade, namely working class indigenous and mestizo women, migrants from other regions of Mexico, especially the south. Finally, due to the socio-political effects of the three previous reasons, women are the majority of the social movement and NGO activists in the transnational conurbation of "El Paso del Norte".
- 5 Thus, my initial hypothesis is that primarily the economic effects, but also the socio-cultural ones, of globalisation in Ciudad Juarez are channelled, mainly but not exclusively, through the maquiladora assembly plant and its mode of production. In turn, these effects, together with others linked to internal and external migration and the globalisation of North American consumerist culture, are contributing to the emergence of transnational identities of varying types and intensities among men and women maquiladora workers. As a result, these new identities are contributing to the creation of what Ursula Biemann calls "a transnational space", but which takes form and has very different effects in the two cities.<sup>4</sup>
- 6 In order to deepen and broaden the theoretical perspective of the project the main discourses and debates within the theory of globalisation are identified, before progressing to the most relevant aspects: the relationship between economic and cultural globalisation and the formation of transnational and hybrid identities; and the position of the maquiladoras within economic globalisation and their influence on identity formation.

## Theories of Globalisation

- 7 We need to see globalisation as an essentially historical and economic process in its auroral phase, but with political, social and cultural aspects, to be able to analyse its contemporary form better and to foresee future tendencies in its development. The very term "globalisation" runs the risk of being the defining cliché of our times. Thus a critical analysis and clarification of its principal theoretical definitions form the basis of this section. While we can consider political globalisation in terms of its historical development toward the current growth of global government and the supposed crisis of the nation-state, an analysis of the current relationship between globalisation and national and global societies should take into account above all the roles of mass planetary migration at the level of the last two decades and of borders in the promotion and regulation of human globalisation. It is also necessary to consider the impact of globalisation on national and ethnic cultures from the perspectives of transnationalism and of identity to understand better the cultural counter currents of integration and homogenisation on one hand, and of resistance and particularism on the other, where the role of information and communication networks is decisive in this incessant global cultural conflict. The present dominant form of militarised globalisation, of the emergence of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and of the politics of "preventive wars" by the United States have pushed the global justice social movements, a few governments and some national and international NGOs to outline the urgency of the democratisation of the processes of globalisation. However, what exactly are economic and cultural globalisation and what are their possible effects on a border urban society?
- 8 For Ulrich Beck a basic controversy exists as to what pushes globalisation forward, advance about which there are basically two diametrically opposed positions both of which contain internal variations: one group of authors underline a "dominant logic", while another group emphasises the complex and multicausal logics of globalisation, with the result that the semantic horizon of the word "globalisation" has exploded and now offers contrary meanings.<sup>5</sup>
- 9 Immanuel Wallerstein was one of the first in the 1970s to confront the social sciences with the question of globalisation, introducing the concept of the world system in which the development of capitalism is seen as the motor of globalisation.<sup>6</sup> Rosenau, Gilpin and Held have been more interested in international politics, questioning national state orthodoxy while highlighting the importance of the technological globalisation of the society of knowledge and information. At the same time, they underline political-military factors on the nature of global power and politics. In contrast, Robertson, Appadurai, Albrow, Featherstone, Lash, Urry and others move within the cultural studies tradition and oppose Ritzer's influential theory of globalisation as the 'macdonaldization'<sup>7</sup> of the world, as cultural globalisation does not signify that the world is becoming culturally more homogeneous. In fact, above all it means "glocalisation", a somewhat ungainly concept that sees globalisation and localization as parallel and mutually reinforcing rather than opposing processes. Beck therefore sees globalisation as a highly contradictory process, in the multiplicity of both its contents and consequences.<sup>8</sup> Two of the most problematic for the stratification of world society, according to Zygmunt Bauman, have been the increasing polarization between local wealth and poverty, coupled with the phenomenon of capitalism without work, or "jobless growth".<sup>9</sup>

Collectively these authors locate the origins and consequences of the dynamics of globalisation fundamentally in a single sector of world institutional activity: the economy, technology, international politics, ecology, culture (the world cultural industries) or the new social inequalities, so producing the image of a plural sociology of globalisation.<sup>10</sup>

- 10 Contrary to these sociological theories that tend to avoid "universalist" explanations of globalisation, Hardt and Negri hypothesize about the emergence of "empire" as the new form of global sovereignty and governance that subordinates all the national states to its expansive project (including the USA), while rejecting the claims of orthodox Marxism that neoliberal globalisation simply represents a new intensification of imperialism. In the polemic that seems to obsess a fair proportion of Latin American leftist intelligentsia between empire and imperialism as the fundamental explanatory model for contemporary globalisation, Wallerstein's world system theory seems to offer a third option.<sup>11</sup> It substitutes the image of mutually isolated individual societies with the counter figure of a single world system in which all societies, governments, entrepreneurs, cultures, classes, families and individuals must 'translocalize' within a single global division of labour. This unique world system reaches its fulfilment through capitalism which, due to its internal logic, is necessarily global.<sup>12</sup>
- 11 A theory of globalisation that seems particularly relevant for research on transnational identities is that of Roland Robertson's "glocalization", where the local and the global are not mutually exclusive.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, the concept of globalisation refers as much to the compression of the world as to the intensification of world awareness, which also means the mutual encounter of local cultures in the context of a clash of localisms.<sup>14</sup> Robertson's theory of "glocal" cultures has been developed by Arjun Appadurai who, against the eurocentrism of the former, replaces the relative autonomy of glocalism with a more complete autonomy.<sup>15</sup> For Appadurai, the 'not only... but also' society accentuates the situation of the Western metropolis as the main point of reference in a globalising world.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Hendrik Vaneeckhaute places the relationship between economic and cultural globalisation in its historical context as the growing interdependence of the economic development of the different countries or societies of the world, where, as in the past with the use of Arab numerals, the introduction of knowledge from other cultures has allowed us to advance. In this sense economic globalisation can be seen as a motor of social and human development.<sup>17</sup>

## Globalisation and Identities

- 12 Having outlined these more general theoretical debates on the globalisation, our attention now turns to the analysis of the relationship between globalisation and the construction of social identities, whether transnational or hybrid, before passing to the question of the role of the maquiladoras in this process of identity formation. A further objective is to discern the interaction of these transnational and hybrid identities, as products or consequences of globalisation, with more established types of identity such as the national, regional, of gender and of social class.
- 13 According to Held et al, transregional, transcivilizational and transcontinental institutions and cultural flows have deep historical roots. In the late 18th century the old forms of cultural globalisation, the world religions and the cultures of the imperial elites, were challenged by the emergence of the modern nation-states, with their national

cultures and institutions, along with the new Western secular ideologies of liberalism, socialism and science. In spite of the development of new technologies of production and communication, the cultural power of the nation-state and of national cultures remained dominant throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, contemporary technological and institutional changes have shifted the balance of cultural power, and the centrality of national identities and cultures, as that of national institutions, are increasingly challenged. The explosion of consumerism and materialism within popular cultures makes it difficult to measure the impact of cultural globalisation, characterized by its homogenizing effects, hybridisation and indifference, on political identities, national solidarity and cultural values, thus demonstrating the potential fragility and changeability of national cultures and identities.<sup>18</sup>

- 14 Regarding the identity-place relationship, Castells claims that the power of identity has not disappeared in the era of information; rather it has been reinforced, to the extent that the main question in a world of identities is that of the conditions of their communication and projection in a shared future.<sup>19</sup> The main source of comparative statistics on attitudes, values and opinions at the world level is the World Value Survey that the University of Michigan carries out periodically with representative samples from all over the world. In 2000, Pipa Norris analysed changes in the relationship between identity and territorial belonging during the 1990s using this data. Her study measured cosmopolitan consciousness (“citizens of the world”), and national identity consciousness (that of the nation-state) with local / regional consciousness. In full globalisation, no more than 15 per cent of the sample identified with the world in general or with their continent, but the most interesting finding is that 47 percent consider their local region or town as their main identity reference point, in contrast with only 38 percent that refer above all to the nation-state.<sup>20</sup>
- 15 The values of globalised managerial culture, based on “managerial discourses” and “academic knowledge” institutionalised as cultural mechanisms related to the operation of the world market, are transforming traditional regional and religious identities. Pluralism is a “market situation” where religious activity tends to be dominated by the logic of the market economy and religious groups compete as “market agencies”.<sup>21</sup> As Berger and Luckmann claim, “theories of identity are always included in a more general interpretation of reality; they are built into the symbolic universe with their theoretical legitimations, and they change together with the nature of the latter”.<sup>22</sup> Berger highlights how global processes have led to the decrease in the unifying power of the nation-state, the revival of local identities and forms of social interaction as ethnic, religious and cultural communities, of regional and transnational alliances, and have redefined the “cultural frontiers of religion”.<sup>23</sup> In turn, Burity speaks of how the increase of the competitive climate and practice in all fields of society is linked to the intense circulation of managerial and political discourses through cultural spaces.<sup>24</sup>
- 16 As for transnationalism and transnational identities, Beck claims that the nation-state vision of society breaks down completely once the theory of the container of society, of separate social worlds contained within the national State, is substituted by third forms of life transnationally integrated by spaces of social action that cross frontiers. Thus, ‘transnational’ means the emergence of ways of life and action whose internal logic is explained by the inventive capacity of humans to create and maintain social worlds and relations of exchange without measuring distances. It is clear that in these often illegal transnational social landscapes, with their ‘impure’ forms of life and action, something is

happening that the nation state, with its need for order, finds repugnant and seeks to control.<sup>25</sup>

- 17 In their book on Empire as the new form of postnational, global sovereignty, Hardt and Negri recognise hybrid identities, a much more ample category than the transnational, as part of its structure, along with “flexible hierarchies and plural exchanges [managed] by means of nets command modulators”.<sup>26</sup>In fact, “[...] the sovereignty of the own Empire is carried out in the margins, where the frontiers are flexible and the hybrid and flowing identities. It would be difficult to say what it is more important for the Empire, the centre or the margins”.<sup>27</sup> The same authors criticize the false dichotomy between the global and the local since it is often assumed that “the global includes homogenisation and undifferentiated identity, while the local preserves heterogeneity and differences. [...] in those arguments the implicit assumption is that the differences of the local are [...] natural, or, [...] that their origin is not in question. Local differences are pre-existent to the current scene, and they should be protected [...] against the intrusion of globalisation. [...] This vision can easily derive a classic premordialism that fixes and romanticises social relationships and identities”.<sup>28</sup>
- 18 As a result, it is necessary to analyse the production of localism and globalism and how both local and global identities and differences are created and recreated: “Globalisation, like localization, should be understood (...) as a regime of the production of identity or, really, of homogenisation and heterogenization”.<sup>29</sup>According to Hardt and Negri, who depend in this part of their theory on some concepts of Deleuze and Guattari, the best way to distinguish between the global and the local is “to refer to different networks of flows and obstacles in which the moment or the local perspective gives priority to deterritorializing barriers or limits, while the global moment privileges the mobility of deterritorializing flows. It is false, in any event, to sustain that we can re-establish local identities that are out in some sense and protected against the global flows of capital and the Empire”.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Hardt and Negri criticize the orthodox international leftist strategy of resistance against globalisation and defence of the local and national as “harmful because in many cases what appear as local identities are not autonomous or self determined [since] globalisation or deterritorialization operated by the imperial machine are not in fact opposed to localization or reterritorialization, but place it in a mobile game and in circuits of modulated differentiation and identification”.<sup>31</sup>
- 19 Analysing the construction of social identities in the transnational context of the Mexico-United States borderlands, Pablo Vila concludes that people build their identities primarily through the use of social categories, but also tropes and often by narrating stories about themselves and others, although most of the time social actors use all these linguistic resources in a complex interplay of narrations, interpellations and categories where it is not always clear which mechanism precedes the other, since all have a similar ability to order reality, which finally is the basis of all processes of identity construction.<sup>32</sup> On the question of “narrative identities” and their differences with Foucauldian “discursive identities”, Vila underlines the importance of the overlapping of narrative and categorical systems in the construction of social identities, so that narratives are always needed to understand the relational and sequential character of identities.<sup>33</sup> It is also very common for social actors to use narratives to support the connotations of the categories they use to describe the reality surrounding them, especially when those categories are used to describe “others” in a context of symbolic struggle for meaning.<sup>34</sup> As a result, it is impossible to know and interact with the real “other”, since we can only

know the “other” through descriptions: the narratives and classificatory systems that, as an essential part of the battle for meaning, are present in a particular cultural context.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the problematic of social identity differs from the American social psychology influenced by Mead that also uses the idea of the “other” as the source and guarantor of socially constructed identity.<sup>36</sup> Vila notes that we use narratives to understand the reality that surrounds us and this indicates their importance in what Berger and Luckman call the “social construction of reality”.<sup>37</sup>

- 20 Having outlined some of the main arguments in the debates around globalisation, identity and borders, we now need to connect these ideas more directly with the impacts of the economic processes of globalisation, particularly those related to the maquiladora industries, on the cross border community of “El Paso del Norte”.

## Assembly plants and Identities

- 21 One of the main objectives of the research project is to determine the nature and importance of the maquiladora production system within the processes of economic globalisation. Another is to discover if the maquiladora mode of production and organization of work, as an expression of economic and cultural globalisation, are promoting the formation of transnational identities among men and women workers and ex-workers in El Paso del Norte. That being so, it will be necessary to identify the variations and types of acceptance or resistance that exist toward the transnationalization of identities among men and women in the two cities. However, before going into the theoretical implications of these observations, some basic data on the maquiladora industry in the Ciudad Juarez area would help to set the scene.
- 22 The maquiladora program of assembling and packing for export began in Ciudad Juarez, the first place in Mexico, in the mid 1960s, although its historical roots go back to the 1930s, as cornerstone of the National Border Program (PRONAF) and of the Program of Border Industrialization (PIF) to develop an isolated region and boost the national economy.<sup>38</sup> Since 1970 the program has grown spectacularly in Ciudad Juarez, above all in the 1980s, reaching its apex in 2000, with 308 (or 9.7 per cent) of the 3,166 maquiladora plants in Mexico, employing 249,380 people out of a total of 1,291,232 (one in five) in the sector nationally.<sup>39</sup> In recent years these numbers have decreased due to the impact of global competition in the labour market, particularly in China where a factory worker earns approximately a third of one in Ciudad Juarez. However, since the third quarter of 2004 the Mexican maquiladora sector has recovered, with the opening of several new maquiladoras, mainly at the expense of El Paso, where most transnational “twin plants” have closed and moved to Juarez in recent years.<sup>40</sup> In 2003, the last year with statistics verified by INEGI<sup>41</sup>, there were 271 maquiladora assembly plants, employing 194,642 workers.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, we can affirm with certainty that this sector completely dominates the economies of Ciudad Juarez, the transnational space of El Paso del Norte, and the state of Chihuahua, continuing to be of vital strategic importance for the Mexican economy. As for the composition of the Juarez maquiladora industry in manufacturing terms, the electronics sector dominates, producing US\$26,082.7 million (50.2 per cent) of a total of US\$51,947.3 million in September 2000, employing 433,289 (34.1 per cent) out of a total of 1,271,268 maquiladora workers. Other significant sectors in order of importance were transport equipment, textiles, wood products and services.<sup>43</sup> Regarding labour composition in terms of gender for the year 2000 (although the figures are preliminary),



out of a total of 200,252 workers, 100,682 were men and 99,570 women: significantly, the first year since the beginning of the maquiladora program in the 1960s in which a majority was reported, although very small, of male over female workers, despite the fact the original purpose of the PIF was to solve the problem of male unemployment in the Mexican borderlands. As for the technical composition of the work force in the same year, out of a total of 249,509 employees, 30,004 were production technicians and 19,252 administrative staff. In other words, despite the prevalence of the electronics sector, only 19.7 per cent of maquiladora employees in 2000 were qualified (19.8 per cent in the state of Chihuahua and 19.1 per cent nationally).<sup>44</sup> From these figures we can conclude that the maquiladora production model in Ciudad Juarez, as in the state of Chihuahua, continues to be based on intensive, low cost labour, although employees are slightly more qualified than at national level.

- 23 Framing the development of the maquiladora in its national and border contexts, Sergio Zermeño states that since the 1980s there has been a drastic spatial redistribution of the population caused by the deindustrialization of the traditional centres of the Valley of Mexico, Monterrey and the state of Hidalgo, while the Northern states became areas of rapid industrialization. As a result, the population of Ciudad Juarez increased from 700,000 to 1.2 million between 1980 and 1988.<sup>45</sup> The phenomena of rapid industrialization and accelerated urbanization affected the whole border area. Thus, while the national rate of annual population growth during the 1980s was 2.2 percent, border cities such as Tijuana it was 4.3 percent, Nogales, 7.5 percent and Piedras Negras, 7.2 percent. The border cities of the United States underwent similar changes with a population growth of 7.6 percent in McAllen and 6.2 percent in Brownsville.<sup>46</sup>
- 24 Extrapolating from Dyer-Witheford and De Angelis, we should consider the maquiladora as part of the transnationalization of capital in the form of the global factory, “made up of production systems and the circulation of value whose several nodes and sequences of functions are integrated in geographically extended and socially complex ‘chains of value’ [that] include conventional factories [...] but the factories and other work places are only moments within more extended processes”.<sup>47</sup> The maquiladora may be a secondary production process since it is centred on assembly and packaging rather than manufacturing and in the Mexican case is heavily dependent in the fluctuations of the US markets and consumption patterns. Nevertheless, it represents a mode of production increasingly typical under the present forms of economic globalisation and the international division of labour, where the production process is fragmented and dispersed globally, so maximising flexibility in the labour market and employment regime.
- 25 Luis Reygadas, in his comparative study of the role of maquiladoras in Ciudad Juarez and Guatemala in the construction of new work cultures through their relationship with diversity and conflict within the processes of globalisation, analyses the cultural dimension of the transnational experiences of industrialization in Latin America in which the global factory does not automatically produce a global labour culture.<sup>48</sup> In assembling these cultures, a homogeneous mixture does not occur, but rather singularities persist, misunderstandings arise, discrepancies are generated and, sometimes, consensus is built. The formation of global factory networks outlines new problems and challenges which refer to the mechanisms of intercultural dialogue among the actors that participate in these networks.<sup>49</sup> In the maquiladora, whether in Chihuahua or in Guatemala, there is permanent conflict among these different work cultures, that of the North American

managers and that of the Latin American workers, part of but also beyond the historical class struggle. These cultures influence each other mutually and their conflictual interaction has changed identities, values and lifestyles in the frontier region. The author describes the work regime in the assembly plants as one of “authoritarian flexibility”, with an “exclusive coexistence among Mexicans and North Americans”. Finally, the assembly plants are a “sign of two speed globalisation, multiple transnationalism and glocalization”.<sup>50</sup>

- 26 In the case of Ciudad Juarez, according to Olga Rodriguez, the maquiladora industry has functioned like an “invisible hand” which has “impelled development and progress through the transition from a primary to a secondary economy, leaving a new dynamics and space configuration (...) this legacy has become a geographical mark of the city that is linked to the activities and processes of globalisation, with social and space polarization consequences”, for example between the extreme poverty of the population of Anapra, an unpaved working-class neighbourhood that merges with the desert in the west of the city and the conspicuous wealth of the “art narco”<sup>51</sup> mansions of Colonia Campestre in the east, near the industrial parks of the maquilas.<sup>52</sup>
- 27 In his tentative explanation of the “femicide”<sup>53</sup> of at least 370 women and the disappearance of at least 1,000 others since 1993 in Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua city as a “copycat” phenomenon produced by an exasperated machismo, the result of dysfunctional gender relations and a generalized anomie caused by the social impacts of accelerated industrialization and deregulated urbanization, Sergio Zermeño describes how in 2000 80 percent of maquiladora activity in Mexico was concentrated in the borderlands. “An example par excellence of a stop-start economy” had been created: the national maquiladora industry had grown by over a million workers in only 15 years [1985-2000], representing four out of ten of all Mexican factory workers, while making many millions more gravitate around it, an impoverished army of internal migrants that has to improvise its own housing infrastructure, services and transport amidst the squalor of degraded urban panoramas and broken families.<sup>54</sup> Further examples mentioned by the author of supposed dysfunctions in social relationships, especially those of gender, and beyond the fact that until 2000 a woman was more likely to find work in a maquiladora than a man, are that of every three mothers in Ciudad Juarez two are unmarried<sup>55</sup> and that in 2001, 56 percent of the children born in Ciudad Juarez were registered as the offspring of single mothers, far greater than the national average.<sup>56</sup> However, in criticism of the traditionalist and masculinist implication by Zermeño that the rapid growth in the number of unmarried and unattached working-class mothers in Juarez is “socially dysfunctional” and represents a profound crisis in the traditional Mexican family, such a development can also be interpreted as a sign of greater self-determination by women who prefer to be single mothers than to live with and depend economically on abusive, sexist partners. Melissa Wright adapts Vila’s theory of the construction of identities through common sense narratives from a Marxist and poststructuralist feminist perspective to expose the construction of a stigmatised racist and sexist identity of the Mexican women workers by North American management in a high quality production maquiladora in Ciudad Juarez. In the language of the managerial discourse of that company the words “Mexican” in general and “Mexican woman” in particular were synonymous with cheap work of low quality. The unnamed company had avoided the employment of women to “protect” the quality of its high technology products until it finally needed to use them, whereupon it physically separated them

from the rest of the factory, rather like the treatment of women by religious fundamentalists, and imposed a particularly rigid regime of physical control and factory discipline, with special uniforms and a heavy emphasis on the control of the body and hair. Nevertheless, the North American managers expected a high rhythm of productivity in the production of high technology components, but without providing training since they assumed the women were already “naturally” (as women) “nimble with their fingers”. However, a concomitant crisis of absenteeism and low productivity led a North American woman manager to take the initiative of relaxing the regime to increase productivity successfully. Nonetheless, she was subsequently accused of having “Mexicanized” herself, meaning she had broken with the North American managerial style dominant in that maquiladora. She was dismissed despite her achievements and soon after the company decided to close its operations in Ciudad Juarez. This episode gives us an example of how the clash of cultures of class, gender and race within the maquiladora can produce the construction of negative identities on the basis of racist and sexist prejudices, with disastrous results for all.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusions

- 28 The question thus remains open on the causal relationship between the nature of work in a maquiladora assembly plant for export and the construction of transnational or postnational identities. As does the issue of whether this relationship can be socially positive in human terms or finally only reflects the social class, cultural and gender conflicts within the factory in the context of the Ciudad Juarez-El Paso borderlands. This leads us to the next question, on the idea of “El Paso del Norte” as an emerging transborder and transnational space, in spite of its internal division by the most rigidly controlled frontier in the world, a “tortilla curtain” in the context of the extreme-right militia of the Minuteman Project, the already baptized “Wall of Shame” that President Bush proposes to build along much of the border in 2006, including in El Paso<sup>58</sup>, part of the “permanent global war against terrorism” of North American neoconservative unilateralism. Can this “transnational space” emerge to challenge the idea of the borderlands as a weak, porous and consequently “dangerous” site at the crumbling edges of the nation-state?
- 29 We can conclude that the men and women workers and ex-workers of the maquiladoras of Paso del Norte are living and working at the interstices between globalisation and localization, and the opportunity and degradation that a series of contradictions and polarizations in their lives is producing at the border, so affecting the construction of new and the distortion of more traditional individual and collective identities. For example, they work in cutting-edge high technology industries like Delphi, where they are immersed in an alien environment of hermetic hygiene and shining technological brilliance, while receiving subsurvival wages that impose harsh life conditions and opportunities outside the factory wall, where they take filthy dirty 30-year-old buses with broken, vandalized seats, loose hand rails in a state of dangerous disrepair, that will take them to their ramshackle dwellings in the poorer western districts of the city, often constructed from the toxic containers of maquiladora raw materials and products. It is not surprising that the hours spent in the maquiladora, clean, ordered monuments to the spirit of modernity, well-heated in winter, cooled by air-conditioning in the torrid summers, are the most appreciated, despite the relentless production line rhythms that

don't permit toilet breaks for the entirety of a nine-hour shift. The rhythm of industrialization is accelerated but that of the economy is stop-start (the "Chinese invasion" of 2000-2004 demonstrated that even Mexico's low-wage economy can be undercut), with deregulated urbanization that has left the centre of the city pockmarked by the abandoned half-built buildings of property speculators of dubious financial probity, leaving it with a profile reminiscent of Beirut during the civil war. A serious lack of basic services means that a city that produces more GDP per annum than Uruguay still has more than half its streets unpaved. In this socio-cultural context a crisis of national and traditional identities and the slow but seemingly inevitable emergence of transnational and hybrid identities with lasting implications for the rest of Mexico and for the borderlands seems one of the few natural processes in a "posthuman space".

30 Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, 30 January 2007.

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## NOTES

1. Literally, "golden mills", first introduced in the 1960s in the border strip and now the dominant manufacturing model within contemporary Mexican industry, but prone to controversy due to its poor record for underpaying workers, lack of implementation of health and safety regulations, industrial accidents, excessive hours, lack of trade union rights, and overdependence on the conditions of the US domestic market. Since 2000 many corporate owners have moved their maquiladora operations to China, where labour costs are even cheaper and trade union activity even more limited.
2. Name given to the transnational transborder conurbation formed by Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. It was formerly the name of the whole city during the period of the Spanish colony of New Spain and during independence until Mexico was forced to cede extensive territories following the US invasion and war of 1847.
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40. An example of this process of crossborder transfer within “El Paso del Norte” was provided by the Wrangler Jeans Company, which closed its plant in El Paso in 2004 and opened a new maquiladora the same year in Ciudad Juarez.
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51. An ironic term coined by the local population to describe the rash of villas built with pseudo-bizantine domes atop, an architectural hallmark which appears to have no roots in the history of Chihuahuan architecture and whose appearance coincided with the influx of money brought to the city by the unparalleled growth in organized crime linked to drug trafficking during the 1990s.
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53. This term not only describes the serial murder of young working-class mestizo and indigenous women and girls, but also the extremely cruel and sadistic manner in which many of

the murders were committed, including kidnap, torture, vaginal and anal rape and mutilation, some allegedly as part of the local “snuff movie” industry. A significant part of this now almost defining phenomenon of Ciudad Juárez and increasingly of México has been the at best indifference at worst collusion of the police and judiciary which has resulted in very few cases being resolved to the satisfaction of the families of the victims or their supporters. The few arrests and imprisonments made, mainly of poor working class men and foreigners, have been denounced by the families as cases of miscarriage of justice. The Special Federal Prosecutor, Maria Lopez Urbina, appointed by the Mexican government in 2004 to investigate some of the cases, identified 177 police and state officials as negligent or for abuse of authority in a report published in 2005, but no action has been taken against them by either the Chihuahua state or Mexican federal governments. See : Amnesty International, “Mexico : Justice fails in Ciudad Juarez and the city of Chihuahua”, Date : 28/02/2005, Index : AMR 41/007/2005 ; <http://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/mexico/document.do?id=5AB197BCEE37D92D80256FB600689A74> ; February 2006.

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## ABSTRACTS

This paper’s point of departure is that the local and global configurations of identity in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, and in El Paso, Texas, are determined by the processes of economic globalisation, whose main manifestation is or has been until recently the maquiladora assembly plant. Hitherto, studies on border identities have emphasized more socio-cultural processes and have not analysed economic processes sufficiently as decisive in the construction of identities. The paper’s objective is to identify the salient characteristics of the identities of maquiladora workers and ex-workers on both sides of the border and to ascertain if transnational identities are emerging because of the impacts of globalisation, and what impacts these imply for cultural and social policy in “Paso del Norte”.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** mondialisation, maquiladoras, identités transnationales, Mexique, Ciudad Juarez-El Paso

**Keywords:** globalisation, maquiladoras, transnational identities, Mexico, Ciudad Juarez-El Paso

## AUTHOR

PATRICK GUN CUNINGHAME

Dr. Patrick Gun Cuninghame (Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, Mexico) All comments should be sent to : [pcuninghame@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:pcuninghame@yahoo.co.uk)