

“HOW DO WE NOT GO BACK TO THE FACTORY?” NEGOTIATING NEOLIBERAL
CONDITIONS IN A LATINA-LED TRANSNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION
IN EL PASO (TEXAS)

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By

Anthony Michael Jimenez

2012

Dedication

To all those I call family...

PREVIEW

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by

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THESIS

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Abstract

Background: As the structure of the global economy shifted the United States' manufacturing base South of the U.S-Mexico in the years up to and post-NAFTA, thousands of women of Mexican descent residing in El Paso (Texas) were displaced from their garment factory jobs and left without social, political and economic support. Subsequently, some of these women joined La Mujer Obrera, an organization committed to fostering community development for low-income women from both sides of the U.S-Mexico border. The organization faces difficulties in receiving economic aid from the local government, which is apparently due to their development model being incompatible with that of the city.

Design: I utilize three components of Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography: (1) in-depth interviews with 10 members of La Mujer Obrera and 6 city officials; (2) textual analyses of the documents reflecting La Mujer Obrera and the City of El Paso's development discourses and actions; and (3) participant observation.

Results: Members of La Mujer Obrera and the City of El Paso establish two very different yet intersecting models of development based on holistic community empowerment and neoliberalism, respectively. While city officials' adherence to a neoliberal paradigm predisposes them to reject some of the organization's activities and aims, La Mujer Obrera's transnational orientation toward development opens up an alternative approach for thinking about gender, development and culture.

Conclusion: Oriented by five feminist approaches toward development (Peet & Hartwick, 2009), this thesis makes four scholarly contributions: it (1) offers further critique of conventional models of development; (2) provides empirical evidence of gender subordination in neoliberal development discourse; (3) examines the relationship between certain texts (e.g., Empowerment Zone summary) and development discourse; and (4) presents a new paradigm for thinking about culture and its relevance in community development. With regard to (4), "culture as community capital" is introduced as a conceptual guide for converting heterogeneous intersections of oppression (Collins, 1991) into novel forms of symbolic capital. In terms of practical implications, this thesis provides development practitioners and policymakers a clear framework for understanding the importance and relevance of explicitly incorporating specific local-level needs and socio-demographic considerations (e.g., on gender and nationality) in development goals and discourse in order to foster comprehensive community growth.

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PREVIEW

Ch. 1: Introduction

Study Impetus

When thinking about the term “development”, practitioners, policy-makers, scholars and social activists usually attach a particular adjective to it. Whether it is *economic* development, *social* development or *human* development, to offer a few examples, the connotation changes and the implications that follow alter the possibilities and challenges for myriad social actors across heterogeneous social contexts. Griffin (2009) suggests:

The task for those engaged in the politics of development is to improve lives through careful and committed consideration of the ways in which ‘development’ operates, the assumptions on which it depends and the uneven and sometimes contrary effects that it reproduces. (p. 20)

In analyzing the way that development “operates”, discourse about development becomes relevant, along with the texts (Smith, 1987) (e.g., written goals, strategies or objectives) reflected in such discourse. When examining the “assumptions on which [development] depends”, questions about gender neutrality may be brought to the forefront, considering that women represent 60% of the world’s 550 million working poor (International Labour Organization, 2004). Lastly, understanding the “contrary effects” of development requires that scholars problematize what appear to be the most benevolent of development outcomes, such as economic enhancement. In this thesis, I argue that the city of El Paso promotes a neoliberal model of development that carries gender-neutral assumptions and, while it is founded on a discourse of economic enhancement for all (including women), it results in further gender subordination.

Development is often posed as a humanitarian tool for fostering equality across different localities among and within the world’s nations (Peet & Hartwick, 2009). Although local

governments, such as the City of El Paso, appear to present equitable, all-inclusive plans for development – for instance, through a neoliberal model of development focused exclusively on economic productivity – it is possible that these plans contain economic incentives that favor only a specific proportion of the population (i.e., wealthy, elite groups). Even if these incentives do benefit more than this small subset of the population, the social implications behind economic enhancement require further investigation. With this type of development, social injustices may be heightened, including further perpetuation or legitimization of gender inequality.

For a Latina-led organization called La Mujer Obrera¹ (LMO) in El Paso, a city located on the southwest corner of Texas and adjacent to Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua, Mexico), development is framed in terms of the empowerment of a transnational community made up of Latina women from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border – a definition that simultaneously takes on a transnational orientation and adopts a broader conceptualization of development than the local government. Both the distinction and overlap between the development models that the city and LMO adopt are important because it is between and within them that specific demographic considerations are ignored, negotiated and/or fully embraced.

In adopting a feminist orientation toward development (Peet & Hartwick, 2009), I examine development from the ground up. According to Nichols and Griffith (2009): “Seldom is there an explicit link between people’s work on the ground and the policy relation in which their work occurs” (p. 244). Considering the ongoing discourse and practice in the field of “development”, examining how development texts and discourses are reflected in one another offers fuller insight into the assumptions being made about development in specific social settings, such as the U.S.-Mexico border. Using Dorothy Smith’s (1990a, 1990b, 1999, 2002,

¹ Translated “working women.”

2005) institutional ethnography as a methodological entry point, I look at what models of development city officials and La Mujer Obrera adhere to and discuss the social implications of such models in regards to questions about gender, culture and sociodemographics. Of importance in this thesis is unraveling the symbolic legitimization of oppressive social orders (e.g., masculine order) inherent within development discourses and practices.

In this thesis, I examine how definitions of development reassert social positions of individuals on the basis of several sociodemographics, for example ethnicity and gender. Because the Hispanic (interchanged with Latino(a) throughout this study) population is rapidly growing in the United States and El Paso is predominantly Hispanic (over 80%), the relevance of this study extends beyond just this U.S.-Mexico border site. In fact, census figures show that more than half the growth in the U.S. population between 2000 and 2010 was due to an increase in the Hispanic population (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas & Albert, 2011). In terms of gender, I focus on how LMO members negotiate the feminization of labor that many of them confronted within El Paso's former garment industry. This feminized labor is still seen today. According to Peet and Hartwick (2009), 90% of the 27 million people working worldwide in export processing zones (EPZs), which include garment factories, are women.

However, the women of LMO no longer work in the garment industry, which largely resulted from NAFTA and its requirements to shift industry south of the U.S. border. Spener (2002) explains: "the loss of sewing jobs in El Paso after 1974 can be attributed in some measure to maquiladora plants opening in Mexico" (p. 143). The amount of jobs lost in El Paso's garment industry due to the implementation of NAFTA in 1994 totaled 5,414 by May 1999 (Spener, 2002). This left Latinas formerly employed within the industry without an economic base. In response, some women in El Paso sought to address this job loss by shifting into the maquiladora

workforce in Mexico. However, literature indicates that this shift may not have been the most beneficial action for women. In examining whether maquila work is exploitative or emancipating, Beek (2001) concludes that the most prominent benefit of maquila employment is an elevated economic situation. Several scholars echo this finding and have noted the economic advantages that maquiladora employment provides (Feenstra & Hanson, 1997; Sargent & Matthews, 1997). However, following critiques that have been made about work in maquiladoras (Akhter, 2003; Gettman & Peña, 1986; Honig, 1996; Machado, 2010), I problematize (although do not fully reject) the economic advantages they offer and contend that they sustain a neoliberal model of development that repositions Latinas within a cheap labor pool (Visvanathan 1986, 1991) and institutionally legitimizes a social order characterized by gender subordination. In this sociology of development, I argue that the tensions created in the overlap between city officials' and LMO members' models of development create a space for rethinking development with attention to specific local-level needs and cultural considerations, which is critical to accomplishing community development in myriad social settings.

About La Mujer Obrera

Many of the women who joined La Mujer Obrera previously worked in El Paso's garment industry. Between the 1920s and the late 1980s, the garment industry has played a vital role in El Paso's economy; it expanded after the Great Depression to meet the need for more military uniforms (Spener, 2002). In the beginning of the 1970s, women began a two-year strike against Farah, a garment manufacturing company in El Paso, calling for membership into the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union and the end of repressive working conditions (Coyle et al., 1984; DeMoss, 1989; Honig, 1996; Spener, 2002). However, gaining membership in the union did not offer women opportunities for leadership, persuading the

former garment workers to form an organization called Centro del Obrero Fronterizo² in 1981, which was later renamed La Mujer Obrera to represent the organization's demographic makeup. The primary goal of the organization at the time was to call for women workers' rights. Yet the situation for women in El Paso worsened. As a direct result of NAFTA and as part of the United States' economic restructuring along neoliberal political economic lines, the garment industries in El Paso closed and relocated across the border into Mexico (Spener, 2002), China, India and elsewhere, leaving thousands of women without jobs. La Mujer Obrera subsequently became a new space for women to advocate for economic opportunity, women's empowerment, and a new economic base grounded in community revitalization.

Along with economic empowerment, La Mujer Obrera's primary aim is to foster community development for low-income Latina women. They accomplish this with six social purpose businesses, guided by an ideological framework they refer to as Plan Mayachen. They social purpose businesses include (1) Mercado Mayapan Festival Marketplace; (2) Rayito de Sol Daycare; (3) Café Mayapan; (4) Lum Metik Trading Company; (5) Uxmal Apartments; and (6) Center for Bilingual Development and Social Enterprise (CDBES) ("Women's analysis", 2011). The Mercado, daycare and café bring the experience of Mexico to residents in the United States, offering nutritional dishes that date back generations in Mexico, education for children rooted in Mexican tradition – such as the Día De Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) – and live performances of groups from various parts of Mexico, like Veracruz. Lum Metik³ Trading Company, a fair-trade women's cooperative established by a bi-national organization located in El Paso called La Red, helps with the exportation and commercialization of Mexican crafts, providing items to sell

² Translated "The Border Worker Center"

³ Translated "Mother Earth" – it comes from a Mayan language called Tzotzil.

in LMO and an economic profit for women in Mexico (“Lum Metik”, 2011). The apartments provide affordable housing for residents of the community. CDBES serves as an educational program for adults that augments members’ entrepreneurial, technological and leadership skills, advancing their ability to foster economic development for the community through micro-enterprises and business incubation while simultaneously ensuring that economic opportunities are accessible to members of their community. Plan Mayachen, an ideological framework that presents Mexican heritage as an economic motor and a medium toward community development, guides all of LMO’s social purpose businesses. Its primary philosophy revolves around the embracement of culture as a means of holistically developing every component of Chamizal Barrio’s social infrastructure.

In terms of funding, the organization has managed to gain wide community support. Sources of funding include the City of El Paso Museum and Cultural Affairs Department, Bank of America, the Ford Foundation, Coca Cola, the Margaret E. Casey Foundation and Sparkplug Foundation. Additionally, the city has provided financial support to La Mujer Obrera in the form of Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs). According to the City of El Paso, this particular type of funding was provided to LMO between 1991 and 2000 and then again between 2007 and 2012 with support ranging between \$16,000 and \$250,000. Of particular focus in this study is the Empowerment Zone (EZ) grant, which La Mujer Obrera applied for in 2009 but was denied and subsequently provided to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (“Mercado Problems”, 2009). Although La Mujer Obrera does sustain funding from other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-profits in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez region, the funding received has not been nearly as substantial as the prospective amounts available through local government, specifically the City of El Paso. As a primary funding source for La Mujer Obrera’s

activities, the City of El Paso enforces the conditions that designate whether or not La Mujer Obrera will receive the funding needed to continue its activities (i.e., through the Empowerment Zone grant). In order to gain necessary resources from the local government, La Mujer Obrera has had to negotiate its position vis-à-vis state politics and ideologies, to include beliefs regarding particular gender norms, ideas, and beliefs.

Demographically, La Mujer Obrera is primarily made up of Mexican women. Although the term “Mexican” usually indicates someone of Mexican nativity, the women of LMO do not accept that distinction. Lourdes (LMO) explains:

The board [of LMO] is 100% Mexican women. Now, but by Mexican women I mean . . . there’s no differentiation between women who were born on this side of the border versus the other side of the border. Some of these women may have been born and raised in El Paso, and some not.

Despite the fact that many of the women who are part of La Mujer Obrera were born in the United States, the women of this organization reaffirm an identity that draws on their Mexican descent across the international border. Vila (1999) explains: “Identities are formed partially through a complex intertwining over time of categories and identity narratives about ourselves and others” (p. 77). The women of La Mujer Obrera identify themselves in harmony with Mexican heritage and traditions, drawing on their Mexican roots for things like nutrition, clothing, and cuisine. Moreover, because the organization’s goals are relevant to a population residing on and traveling between both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border (i.e., low-income women of Mexican descent) and resources are drawn from both localities, La Mujer Obrera may be understood as a transnational community organization.

Gender and nationality are not the only characteristics that compose members of La Mujer Obrera. Other intersecting attributes include age, race and ethnicity, language, level of education, whether or not they were formerly employed in maquiladoras, marital status,

socioeconomic status and location. According to members of LMO, many of them have been part of the organization since its inception in the early 80s, resulting in an organization spanning three generations. Ages thus range from early twenties to early sixties. Racially and ethnically, the organization is mostly comprised of non-white Hispanics. In terms of language, members generally agree that about 15% of the organization is bilingual while Spanish remains the primary language for the rest of the membership. Members of LMO indicated that many of them have not completed higher than a middle school education, although level of education does range all the way up to the graduate level. In terms of maquila employment in Mexico, several members suggested that about 50% of the organization's attendees (i.e., individuals who attend LMO's functions) work in maquiladoras today, while nearly 80% of LMO members (i.e., those who work for LMO) had worked in maquiladoras in the past. Moreover, approximately 25% of interviewed LMO members previously worked in El Paso's former garment industry. Members also indicated that over 90% of the organization was married. The socioeconomic status of most LMO members is low, reminiscent of the situation for many residents in the Chamizal Barrio where LMO is situated. Erica (LMO) briefly explains how several of these demographics intersect to marginalize the organization's members:

It is true that women workers are marginalized, and when you add race, and when you add class and gender, I mean that's a triple no matter what. But then when you talk about being at the border, and that they're immigrants, and that they're Spanish-speaking, it's a whole other layer and level of marginalization.

The intersections of all these demographics are carefully considered in LMO's development model, which is not the case for the city's model. Intersectionality thus becomes an important theme to consider in development discourse.

About Chamizal Barrio

Situated along the U.S.-Mexico border, El Paso is a transnational site, serving both U.S. and Mexican residents, and it is not particularly wealthy. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, more than 82% of the El Paso County population identified as being of Hispanic/Latino origin. About a quarter of the county's population fell below the poverty level, and about 27% of residents were foreign born (U.S. Census, 2010). Vila (1999) suggests that El Paso and Juárez's transnational positioning influences how perspectives and identities are cultivated in the region, which becomes pertinent to the way the members of La Mujer Obrera negotiate gender norms and ideas propagated by the City of El Paso. In 2002, El Paso was characterized by some of the cheapest labor in the United States and noted for having the highest unemployment of any major city in Texas (Spener, 2002). Additionally, like other U.S.-Mexico border locales, El Paso confronts issues of high underemployment and participation in the informal economy (Anderson & Gerber, 2008).

For Chamizal Barrio, a neighborhood adjacent to the U.S.-Mexico border in El Paso, the situation is bleaker. La Mujer Obrera sits at the heart of Chamizal Barrio, located in census tract 28, which has been designated an eligible Empowerment Zone area ("Executive Summary", 2010). El Paso is one of fifteen cities nationwide to be designated an empowerment zone, contingent on being federally recognized as a "distressed area in need of sustainable community development" ("Empowerment Zone", 2012, p. 1). Table 1.1 illustrates some of the ways the neighborhood compares in socio-demographic terms with the El Paso Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Table 1.1: Comparison Statistics for Chamizal Barrio and the El Paso MSA

TABLE 1			
Comparison Statistics		Chamizal	El Paso MSA
Poverty Rate	Poverty rate 1970 ^a	54.4	21.4
	Poverty rate 2000 ^b	58.7	23.8
Income	Median household income ^c	\$11,362	\$31,051
Demographics	Population 2000 ^d	10,086	679,622
	% Population change, 1970 - 2000 ^e	-34.0	89.2
	Racial/ethnic composition, 2000 ^f		
	% White	2.4	17.0
	% Hispanic/Latino	96.2	78.2
	% Black/African-American	0.7	2.7
	% Residents under age 18 ^g	34.8	32.0
	% Single-parent households ^h	26.0	12.2
	% Foreign born, 2000 ⁱ	48.0	27.4
Education	% Population in same house as five years ago ^j	52.9	55.2
	% Adults without a high school diploma, 2000 ^k	71.2	34.2
	% Adults with a college degree, 2000 ^l	1.9	16.6
	% Students proficient in reading, 2005 ^m	64.1	80.7
Labor Market	% Students proficient in math, 2005 ⁿ	55.0	65.5
	Unemployment rate, 2000 ^o	18.0	9.5
Housing	% Adults in the labor force ^p	40.9	56.5
	Homeownership rate, 2000 ^q	21.1	63.6
	% Renters with a housing cost burden ^r	46.7	43.2
	% Rental units that are HUD subsidized ^r	55.4	15.4
	Median value for owner-occupied units ^s	\$40,596	\$69,600
Access to Credit	Median year structure built ^t	1956	1976
	% Credit files that are thin, 2004 ^u	36.1	24.7
	% Credit files with high credit scores ^v	50.2	49.8
	% Mortgage originations that are high cost, 2005 ^w	38.1	31.8
	Mortgage denial rate, 2005 ^x	52.9	25.5

Source: Lopez (2007)

In 2000, the Chamizal Barrio poverty rate was more than double that of the El Paso MSA. The median income level of those residing in Chamizal Barrio was just a little over a third of the MSA's. More than 90% of the neighborhood identified as Hispanic, and almost half the district was foreign-born. Lastly, over 70% of residents in the Chamizal Barrio did not have a high school diploma, more than doubling the percentage for the entire El Paso MSA.

Several residents and LMO members identify the Chamizal Barrio as a site in major need of assistance and revitalization. Carolina (LMO) describes the area:

In this area we don't have a library; either we have to go to Clardy or to the one downtown. A lot of people, well, they don't have a car to move around in or anything. [The area] is very abandoned and contaminated. Also, there are a lot of junkyards. There are

pornographic stores. This street, Texas, is very dangerous for children . . . There are a lot of bars . . . This community has been forgotten in relation to the contamination, the education, the lack of investment. I'm not talking to you about the market [LMO's Mercado], because this is a space for the community, but we, little by little, are accomplishing something [with LMO]. Do you understand me? This is for them. (Translated from Spanish)

Several members of the organization feel like Chamizal Barrio is a place that has been forgotten by the city, although this may not entirely be the case. The City of El Paso's Department of Community and Human Development (DCHD) has established what is called a Weed and Seed program, designed to address major gaps for the Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Area (NRSA), which the Chamizal Barrio comprises (see Figure 1.1). The Weed and Seed program draws on information from meetings with residents, non-profits, businesses and other stakeholders in the area to strategically address the systemic issues in the Chamizal Neighborhood ("Chamizal Neighborhood", 2012), clearly illustrating that the city has not forgotten about the region.



Figure 1.1: Chamizal Neighborhood Weed and Seed Boundary ("Chamizal Neighborhood", 2012)

According to the program, major gaps for this region were identified as follows: (1) youth/educational programs; (2) substance abuse/gang prevention; (3) affordable homeownership