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by Victor Ortiz, Ph.D.
University of Illinois at Chicago

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Abstract:

This article compares the responses to globalization by a Latina entrepreneur and a Latina labor advocate in the border city of El Paso, Texas. The two cases illustrate contrasting, yet inevitably related responses to the polarization generated by the ongoing process of international economic integration. As the local economy of that city becomes more immediately linked to global markets, business opportunities for new entrepreneurs coincide with massive displacement of garment workers, most of whom are Latinas. This article, beyond rigid ideological demarcations or automatic denunciations, uses ethnographic descriptions to contextualize the two involvements in reference to the sweeping magnitude of ongoing changes. The changes concern new economic parameters, suggesting class and gender reformulations as well as new avenues for local interventions.

About the Author: Victor Ortiz

Victor Ortiz is an assistant professor in the Latin American Studies Program of the University of Illinois at Chicago. He received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from Stanford University in 1993. He assisted in the creation of the database for the Immigration and law Enforcement Monitoring Project of the American Friends Service Committee. Dr. Ortiz is currently working on the completion of a 10-year longitudinal study of the socio-political impacts of the economic integration of Mexico and the United States in El Paso. His current research explores the socio-political dimensions of the "new capitalism" regarding technology and corporate innovations. Dr. Ortiz has been recognized with a Rockefeller Post-Doctoral Fellowship and a Great Cities Faculty Fellowship in recent years.

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Latinas on the Border and La Vista Grande: The Common Ground of Displacements and Breakthroughs

On April 19, 1990, the mayor of El Paso, Texas proclaimed the city to be the "*Maquila Capital of the World*" (Baake, 1990). *Maquila* is the colloquial term for *maquiladora. Maquiladoras* are export-oriented assembly line plants that companies from the United States, Japan, and other industrialized countries have established in Mexico. These are located along its northern border in order to take advantage of comparative lower wages and other incentives offered by the Mexican government. The mayor's proclamation referred to the high concentration of these production plants in Ciudad Juarez, the Mexican city immediately across the border from El Paso. The cause of the celebration was, in fact, the industry's bountiful and multiple economic benefits for the business community of El Paso.

The maoyor's experience directly attested to these benefits: her husband owns a *maquiladora* plant and she is an active business woman of long-standing success in El Paso. Pronouncement was made at the inauguration of the "*Maquila: La Vista Grande* (The Big Picture)," a week-long series of events to "increase the level of awareness of *maquila* industry and its impact on the local community" (*El Paso Herald Post,* 1990). The event was sponsored by the "Twin Plant Wives Association" with the initiative and help of Marcela Torres,[1] a young entrepreneur promoting the *maquiladora* industry.

While all *maquiladora* plants[2] are in Ciudad Juarez and not in El Paso, only two activities were held in the former city: a tour to the industrial parks with *maquiladora* plants and a golf and tennis tournament in that city's exclusive country club. The other events were held in El Paso. The activities held in El Paso's city hall and on the university campus included: the "*Maquila* Capital of the World" proclamation; the academic and press conferences on the *maquiladora* industry; a $30 per person banquet, and a "*Maquila* Family Funfest." All activities were open to the public with the exception of the "Funfest," with a cost of $25 per family and the "*Maquila* families only please" addendum.

Who did they mean by "*Maquila* families"? The location, nature, and cost of these events tacitly excluded *maquiladora* workers and lower level employees. Most of these workers and employees do not have permits to enter the United States, nor do they have the opportunity or resources to develop a liking for golf or tennis. They may even find it difficult to spend nearly half a week's salary on a picnic to celebrate the "*maquiladora* week." The *maquiladora* workers were not represented among the conference speakers nor were their concerns addressed, even when those concerns were being underscored with picketing by the displaced-garment workers (mostly Latinas) from El Paso during the events. This lack of inclusiveness reflected the restrictive scope of the event and its rather contradictory objective of "encourag[ing] greater understanding and cooperation between the *maquila* industry and the community." What community?

The event and the mayor's statement provoked polarized responses, which echoed the polemics surrounding the *maquiladora* industry throughout its 34 years of existence. Advocates of the industry stress the economic benefits of employment and business opportunities (Stoddard 1987, *Twin Plant News*). Critics of the industry point to displaced workers in the U.S. and low wages, limited training, lack of job security, unsafe working conditions, as well as instances of sexual exploitation for *maquiladora* workers in Mexico (Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Tiano, 1994; Pena, 1997). A local critic ironically equated the mayor's assertion by pronouncing Delano, Calif., as the "Capital of Stoop Labor." The inaugural event was picketed by more than 100 protesters, many of whom were laid-off garment workers from El Paso whose jobs were relocated to *maquila*-like production facilities in Mexico and other parts of the world.

The polarized responses reflected the contrasting impact that the processes of global integration have had for different local groups. The contrast was captured in the coverage of the event by a local reporter, who highlighted the celebratory mood of the event in the midst of the distressing plight of the protesters. He emphasized the contrast by describing the situation of one of the displaced workers. Leticia Santiesteban, a 45-year-old who was laid-off by the largest garment company in the city after 23 years of service. Born in El Paso and a life-long resident of a Mexican/Chicano working-class neighborhood located a few blocks away from the factory, Santiesteban dropped out of school at age 17. She left high school a few months before graduation because she had to support her family financially: "[W]e had financial problems. My father was a construction man. Sometimes he had the job, sometimes he didn't" (Baake, 1990). In

1973, she participated in a long and bitter, but eventually successful, strike for union recognition. It received national attention through a well-organized boycott of products made in one of the largest clothing manufacturers of the world (Coyle et al. 1982). Despite that success[3], Santiesteban was, 17 years later, again on the streets – this time fighting not only for her labor rights, but for her very employment.

Along with Santiesteban, an increased number of other garment workers (most of whom are Latinas) have also seen their jobs relocated to Mexico and other countries. The trend was intensified after the sharp devaluation of the Mexican currency in 1995, a year after the passage of NAFTA, making El Paso the city with the largest number of NAFTA-related applications for unemployment benefits in the U.S. On the other hand, concurrent with these closures and displacements, other local women, have made significant advances in business and political arenas as they have found and created unprecedented opportunities in recent years. For example, in the last 10 years, women have come to occupy prominent public positions including a county judge, two state senators, city mayor, university president, three city councilwomen, and two presidents of chambers of commerce. All of these public positions, with the exception of those in the city council, had never been held by women before. Notably, four of the 10 women are Latinas, including the county judge. Some Latina business women have also attracted public attention due to their salient participation in local affairs, such as Marcela Torres, organizer of the "*Maquila*: *La Vista Grande*" event. In 1992, she received a regional award from the Small Business Administration for her advocacy for minority entrepreneurs and, up to last year, appeared in the front cover feature of two business magazines of national circulation.

This article illustrates the cases of two Latino women, an entrepreneur and a labor advocate, pursuing contrasting, yet inevitably related, paths along the new frontiers that the ongoing reconfiguration of world economy represents for El Paso. Marcela Torres is a small business owner promoting a shift in the local economy from light manufacturing to professional and technical services. The wide focus of this long-term strategy contrasts with the more short-term demands of workers advocated by Carmen Rocha, the labor activist who organized the protest at "*Maquila: La Vista Grande*" – the event that Torres had organized. Significantly, Rocha's insightful and staunch advocacy for workers has projected her political/professional career beyond the local scope of El Paso reaching New York first and, later, to international politics.

The following pages describe these two women's contrasting involvements. However, beyond their evident contrasts, this article also highlights two important similarities that derive and respond to the global transformations reshaping their local contexts. On one hand, both women are quite efficient in participating in international webs of networks. Unlike most of the displaced workers, the labor advocate and the entrepreneur are quite adept in their maneuvering through globalized environments that involve fluid interactions at the local, state, national, and international levels. On the other hand, as the scope of changes surpasses the local dimensions of El Paso, the global proficiency of either women does not assure the success of their respective strategies to upgrade the local setting to the new conditions of economic competition.

Beyond evident contrasts, the related paths of the two women concern their shared commitment to the city and their class backgrounds, apparently not their orientations or gender. In class terms, the apparent advantage that the entrepreneurial standing of Torres may suggest over Rocha is greatly relativized by her firm's unstable grounding as a new small business, which translates into long hours, uncertainty, and exploitation by clients. At the same time, in gender terms, the individual breakthroughs of both women reflect what Robert Reich has perceptibly recognized as a "purer form of capitalism." In his view, non-market factors such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality are less important in influencing the access to economic opportunities at the current moment of intensified international competition (Reich, 1991: 77). His observation is consistent with the significant increase in the number of Latina-owned companies in the country, which tripled from 1987 to 1996 and reached a total of 569,000. This 209% growth greatly surpasses the 47% national rate and suggests an advancement toward addressing the underrepresentation of Latinas as business owners. While Latinas still only represent one-third of Latino-owned businesses, their progress, as a group, is not negligible regarding a 534% increase in sales and a 487% in employment (Russel 1998: 33). In El Paso, despite their different orientations, Torres and Rocha found enhanced individual opportunities in the wider, yet more integrated, environment of a globalized world.

This relative enhanced access to economic opportunity in the "purer form of capitalism" also entails the rapid dislocation of previous arrangements, including the massive displacement of workers and the further pauperization of the poor (Reich 1992: 208). In El Paso, the most salient manifestation of this dislocation concerns the progressive relocation of its garment industry which,

until recently, represented one of its main employers. The dramatic coincidence between enhanced opportunity for some sectors and the worsening of conditions for others relates, in general, to the polarization process at the national level. However, in El Paso, this coincidence reflects specific local characteristics. With 620,000 inhabitants, it is the largest city on the U.S.-Mexican Border. Due to its central geographical location, it has played a major role in the diverse exchanges between the two countries (Garcia, 1981; Sanchez, 1993; Martinez, 1996). For over a century, these exchanges have intensified and multiplied, ranging from migration, trade, investment, and technology. In the 1950's, El Paso experienced an expansion in the number of garment factories producing for the national market. This expansion often occurred through the relocation of factories from other regions of the country to the city of production operations (i.e. Levi Strauss with headquarters in San Francisco). These relocations, a national version of what was to lead to the *maquiladora* industry at its eventual international phase, entailed primarily the use of the labor of Mexican and Chicano women. Many of these workers did not even reside in the city, but commuted daily from Ciudad Juarez, across the river (Mitchell, 1955:80-81).

Thirty years ago, the high concentration of garment operations placed the city high among the main apparel manufacturing towns in the country. Currently, the city figures are once again in a distinctive place, this time in terms of the greatest number of NAFTA-related unemployment applications. The industry has gradually moved its operations to Mexico, Central America, and Southeast Asia since the early 1980's. The large number of displaced workers contributes to the dramatic decay of per capita income levels in the city, which corresponds to merely 62% of the national average (1992 El Paso Census). At the individual level, however, the high concentration of *maquiladora* plants in Ciudad Juarez represents significant opportunities in technical and business terms. In business respects, the aggregate and, at times, urgent demand for the supplies and services for *maquiladora* operations offers fertile grounds. In addition, constant upgrading of technical and administrative operations in the industry enhances the opportunities available for engineers and administrators. These optimal conditions for entrepreneurship have widened the local middle and upper classes, while sharpening their socioeconomic polarization in relation to the poor and the working poor.

Torres exemplifies a case of relative success in the intensified integration of the local economy into globalized flows. In her mid-30's, Torres is a native of El Paso, from a working class background. She holds a BA in communications and is fully bilingual and bicultural. Ten years ago, she started a communications firm in equal partnership with another prominent Latino business woman, Dr. Candy Mendez. The firm catered to the needs of businesses and government offices generated by: the increased direct integration of the region into international markets; an increase greatly influenced by the accelerated industrialization of the region; and the trade growth leading to NAFTA. The entrepreneurial partnership evolved from their professional contact in 1986, when Mendes ran for a position on the board of trustees of the local community college. Her successful campaign was directed by Torres, who later invited her to establish their communication's firm.

Their decision to take advantage of the business opportunity was influenced by experiences of gender discrimination in terms of professional promotions, recognition, and retribution. "I saw that women were always teaching men, who then would move on to higher positions while the women remained in the same position," Dr. Mendes said. Torres added that when she was the public relations manager of a newspaper, her boss refused her requests for salary raises on the grounds that "she was single and did not need the money." She countered that single male employees received more salary raises and their requests were (to her knowledge) never rejected on personal grounds. In her view, the professional contributions of women were rewarded not in terms of their own value, but of outdated stereotypes that benefitted the employer only. Seven years ago, in our first interview, they expressed satisfaction of no longer having to confront gender discrimination, at least in their own firm. At the time, Torres was enthusiastic not only for the business opportunities at hand, but also for the potential changes ahead. "The beauty of it is that old rules do not apply," she said. "Everything is changing and we must make the most of it." Six years later, in our last interview, Torres' enthusiasm persisted, although it was far more contained. She reported that, while not absent, gender discrimination has steadily decreased through the years in the business environment. However, she felt that not enough Latinas are taking the risks required to start their own businesses.

Torres is a conscientious business woman with an evident sense of loyalty to El Paso. She is often involved in activities, which she feels would promote the advancement of the city. While in business for only a decade and only in her mid-30's, she is a prominent role model and an accessible mentor to other Latinas whom are contemplating getting into business or looking to advance in their professional careers. She received the Small Business Administration regional award in 1992 for her advo-

cacy and support of minority small businesses. Torres' involvements are influenced by a wider vision, a "Vista Grande." Her efforts promote the enhancement of a local entrepreneurial group that could redirect the economic growth of the city. In her view, El Paso's current problem is that it has been "sold cheap." With no coherent plan for economic development, city officials, often controlled by a couple of powerful business groups, have promoted the city as a low-wage heaven for national and international companies. This short-sighted strategy of "bringing jobs to the city" paid no attention to the developmental and environmental implications of the companies it attracted.

Torres'disappointment with the current orientation of the local economy influences her involvement in the promotion of the *maquiladora* industry and NAFTA. She feels it could bring, if properly fomented, better economic opportunities to the city in the form of professional and technical positions with higher skills and better wages. This view influences her concerned, yet ultimately matter-of-fact, attitude toward displaced workers:

> "One worker I met at one of my presentations, she said: 'you are taking my job away and I have been in [company's name] 20 years.' We spoke in Spanish because she didn't speak English. I said, 'well, you worked [there] 20 years, how much of an increase in wages have you had over that period?' and she had basically [only] wage increases according to what was being increased by law. [She] never had any retraining or learned to speak English because they keep her there for that purpose. They figured, 'who else is going to hire her.' But how do you tell somebody, 'it's wrong what they have done to you and now you have to change.' Whether this is coming across as being cold-hearted, but in fact that's what I have tried to explain to her. She really needs to look at this as a natural change, an evolution that is happening with or without our help."

For Torres, the worker is inaccurate in blaming the *maquiladora* industry for her loss of employment. Moreover, she sees this misperception as what led the workers to a misguided strategy for solving their problems. In the entrepreneur's view, most of the eliminated garment jobs had been lost to either automation or relocations. Most of the relocated jobs, she pointed out, had not gone to Ciudad Juarez, but to Southeast Asia, Mexico's interior, and Central America, in orders of magnitude. Contrary to the workers'complaints, Torres said that El Paso would have benefited had the jobs only been moved across the border due to the companies' monetary inflows. Their operational expenses would have stimulated other local economic activities, such as construction and business services ranging from janitorial companies to law and customs offices. These multiplier effects would have also involved direct wages and salaries, most of which are eventually spent in El Paso. Instead, with the relocation of the plants to distant regions, these economic benefits were lost along with the employment gains that they would have generated for El Paso.

With a contrasting interpretation of the processes leading to the displacements, the entrepreneur felt that the workers took the wrong approach in addressing the problems related by the relocations. In her view, the workers' demands to keep the low-skill, low-wage production operations in El Paso were neither plausible nor sound in an increasingly integrated global economy, in which companies could find many other cities around the world with lower production costs. Instead, she thought that the workers and the government should implement the training required to be competitive in the new global arrangement so as to upgrade the local labor market, its wage levels, and the overall technological standing of the economy. She felt that her business contributed to this upgrading of the local economy, in terms of the activities she fostered and the type of higher skill jobs she offered to her employees. In this logic, the scarce and rather obsolete developmental contribution of the garment industry was not something to be fostered, as they felt the workers demanded.

Carmen Rocha, the director of *La Mujer Obrera* (Working Woman), disagreed with the idea that the garment industry was a thing of the past for El Paso. For her and the other members of this labor advocacy group, the economic shift promoted by Torres and other entrepreneurs not only failed to address the urgent needs of the workers, but also to capitalize on their substantial and long developed skills. Thus, beyond the entrepreneurs' assumption of the government's responsibility to retrain workers according to the emergent economy, Rocha felt that much more was needed. Recognizing an imminent need to reformulate the local arrangement to respond to the needs of globalization emphasized by Torres, she inverted the order of the factors in the entrepreneur's equation. For her, the emphasis was not to be put on the workers' retraining alone, but on enhancing the local industrial capabilities to revitalize the garment industry and make it competitive in the reconfigured apparel markets. This strategy evolved through years of attending to immediate needs of workers.

La Mujer Obrera was founded in 1982. In 1991, at the time when the alternative strategy was formulated, the group consisted of seven permanent staff members and a handful of occasional volunteers. All but two of the personnel were women and, with the exception of two Anglo women, all were Chicanos, two of whom immigrated to the U.S. as adults from Mexico and worked in the garment industry. This organization operates mostly with the aid of grants from national and international organizations. This group designed the alternative strategy to address the disruptive effects not only from the relocations, but also from the restructuring of the garment industry at the national level. Along with increased geographical dispersion, the major companies reconfigured their corporate structure into subcontracting pyramid-like arrangements. In El Paso, the fragmentation of larger firms opened opportunities for former managers and supervisors to open their own subcontracting firms. These firms, on one hand, provided to them, aside from a business opportunity, a very much welcomed-employment option in light of ongoing closures. On the other hand, the business opportunity involved impending crises due to capital and technical challenges they were ill-prepared to meet. In general, subcontractors had a decreased participation on profit margins due to their lower positions on the subcontracting pyramid. In addition, they contend with erratic work orders due to industry's volatile markets (Tower, 1991). In El Paso, the cost and consequence of these problems were often passed on to workers in the form of poor working conditions and under-the-minimum wages. These irregularities were further accentuated by overnight closures, in which the owners left to avoid their financial responsibilities to the city, banks, and workers, including back wages. According to Rocha, some of these shop owners soon reopened and registered them under new names to evade their legal responsibilities.

Requests from *Mujer Obrera* to local authorities to protect the workers' rights were met with bureaucratic explanations about insufficient resources and personnel to tackle the backlog of complaints. In response to this lack of protection of rights and conditions, the advocacy group initially resorted to confrontational militancy. At first, they demonstrated at City Hall and at the entrances of factories with bad labor practices. When these actions brought little results, six women — three workers and three members of *Mujer Obrera* (including Rocha) — chained themselves to sewing machines in a small garment shop. The owner of this shop owed workers back wages and they feared that he was planning to close the small factory overnight. The six women were arrested for criminal trespassing and the three activists spent three days in jail because they refused to post bonds for their release. Their refusal aimed to point out to the authorities the incongruence of jailing them for demanding back wages for workers, while the bosses who owed the wages were not being prosecuted. In this awkward situation, the authorities released the workers despite their refusal to place bonds (*El Paso Herald Post*, 1990). Building on this success, the *Mujer Obrera* carried out a 7-day hunger strike to pressure the authorities to expedite solutions to the workers'problems. During that week, they held public meetings with the Congressman for El Paso, its District Attorney, and the city council to ask for their intervention to protect workers' rights. The *Mujer Obrera* also held protests in New York and Los Angeles to pressure the contractors and retailers of those products that had been manufactured with unpaid wages. The International Ladies Garment Workers Organization provided support in these activities.

The visibility of these actions did not generate the results Rocha had hoped for and led her to examine the situation anew. Aware of the weak technical and financial position of small contractors, *Mujer Obrera* looked for a more cooperative strategy to address the root of the problem: the technical and spatial reconfiguration of the garment industry. In her mid-30's, college educated, and from a family with history of involvement in the Chicano Movement of the 60's and 70's, Rocha's views reflected ample knowledge, not only of the social impacts of technological and organizational trends reshaping the garment industry, but also of academic and media discussion of these trends. She stressed that as plants relocate, cities loose tax revenues at a time when they are most needed, given the increase demand for social services to attend unemployment-related problems. Some of these problems range from retraining to increasing the rates and incidents of alcoholism, domestic violence, and suicides.

Rocha's direct exposure to the everyday functioning of the industry allowed her to recognize the overwhelming magnitude of the changes and to opt for a concerted solution. This concerted spirit was grounded in a distinction she perceived among entrepreneurs. Displaying a refreshing ideological flexibility, she differentiated between "entrepreneurs" and "barbajanes (crooks)."

> "[*Barbajanes* have] no business plan or ethics. [They are] those who lack a sense of planning, who set up a business just for the quick profit, with no commitment or sense of building anything, just for the quick kill. They don't care about anything, their business, their workers, the

> community, nothing. As soon as the business stops yielding a huge and easy profit, they fold down and look for some other chance to make a lot of money with very little work or risk. They just keep going from one business to another, like hustlers or gamblers."

As *empresarios*, Rocha recognized those business people who, in contrast [with the *barbajanes*],

> "have a business plan and care about their business and the community. Those who at least pay minimum wages and care about the basic rights of their workers. These are the business people who are committed to the growth of their businesses, who invest with long term goals in mind. [Those] who understand that they can't just take from the community without putting anything back. Unfortunately, there aren't many of these."

The conciliatory position, which did not mean an abandonment of occasional militant actions, aimed to appeal to the private and public sectors of the city to formulate a collective plan to revitalize the garment industry. Rocha's initial idea was well received by a mid-level administrator in the local chamber of commerce, who helped in the development and implementation of the project. The receptivity of this administrator, Horacio Garrido, was related to his own background. A Latino in his early 40's, Garrido left his native El Paso in his mid-20's to do graduate work at an Ivy League school toward a doctorate degree in political science. He returned to gather data for his dissertation and found himself involved in a number of community and city positions that have prevented him from completing his doctorate. Ten years later, the inspiration for community empowerment he had drawn from the works of the Brazilian pedagogue Paolo Freire made him receptive to Rocha's idea of exploring creative approaches to revitalize the garment industry. Garrido served as a liaison between the workers' group and individuals in the industry and other concerned business people. A tactful person, Garrido provided contacts and bureaucratic savvy to make Rocha's idea attractive beyond a "garment industry as a thing-of-the-past" mentality or the concerns of business people about working with "militant activists."

Rocha's idea received some support from a handful of garment factory owners, a few public officials, and other concerned business people (*El Paso Times*, 1990). However, this cooperative attitude was frequently weakened by practical and ideological factors. Heavy schedules and workloads, as well as a certain amount of mutual distrust among some people involved, delayed the progress of the meetings for some months. Eventually they agreed to develop a plan for a concerted effort of the city, the private sector, and workers to capitalize on the long-established assets of El Paso as a garment production center. The plan, which was presented to city officials as a developmental strategy in October 1990, proposed the development of the local infrastructure in accordance with the new technologies and processes of the industry.

The initial part of this strategy was the creation of an industrial incubator, the High Fashion Institute, to foster the stability and growth of small firms in the reconfigured industry. The central component of this initial project was to provide assistance to subcontractors in a very competitive environment. In Rocha's words, the aim was to help them become "better bosses" through technical training in bookkeeping, marketing, financial programs, and in their legal responsibilities toward workers. The success of these small firms (it was hoped) would represent their increasing specialization into more sophisticated operations in the industry to assure its local stability, as well as higher skill and income levels for workers and the city as a whole.

After the presentation of the project to city officials, the initial enthusiasm of the cooperative efforts in promoting the establishment of the High Fashion Institute weakened. Muddled with campaign promises and uncertainties, few concrete actions were taken by local politicians. Eventually, however, the *Mujer Obrera's* mixture of conciliatory and confrontational activities managed to bring results, albeit slowly and inconclusively. Its denunciations of bad labor practices elicited a 14-day investigation of local garment factories by the Labor Department, which found irregularities in 20 factories ranging from unpaid wages and wages below the legal minimum to employment of minors. Working conditions in six of the plants also represented safety or health hazards for the workers. The amount estimated in unpaid back wages was $85,000 (*El Paso Herald Post*, 1990). Despite these findings, no immediate action was taken by any governmental office. It took nine months of inter-

rupted state senate debate to pass an amendment establishing criminal charges for "willful nonpayment of wages" as a third degree felony (*El Paso Times*, 1991). While the evidence was clear, some legislators opposed the bill on the grounds that it would generate an "anti-business" image and be counterproductive because companies would be discouraged to relocate to the state.

The High Fashion Institute opened in 1994 with one full-time staff person and two consultants, along with a 10-member advisory board that included owners of garment factories and a representative of the largest garment company in the city. The only direct and prevailing connection between the Institute and *La Mujer Obrera*, its original promoter, is the participation of one of the consultants in the two groups. This rather tenuous connection did not seem to concern members of *La Mujer Obrera*, who stated that they never aimed either to incorporate or to be incorporated by the Institute. The Institute surpassed its original annual goals in its first two years of operations. It originally aimed to provide assistance to 13 companies per year and to assure employment to a minimum of 39 workers. Instead, the Institute offered assistance to 15 companies each year with approximately 290 workers benefiting from it. The institute offers basic bookkeeping and managerial instruction along with assistance in finding and negotiating contracts with manufacturers. Another original aim of the Institute was to promote the diversification in the garment products manufactured locally from mostly denim jeans to other types of operations, catering especially to women's fashion markets. Realizing this goal has been a slow process given the reluctance of some subcontractors to venture into new operations due to financial, technical, or marketing limitations.

The hard-won accomplishment of the *Mujer Obrera*, under Rocha's direction, has been dwarfed by the magnitude of global changes. At first, garment employment rebounded from its lowest point in October 1990 with 15,800 workers to its highest peak ever in September, 1995 with 21,100 workers. Obviously, this rebound cannot be attributed directly to the Institute's accomplishments. The magnitude of its operations and slim resources, notwithstanding its constructive vision, could not produce such a major turnaround in such little time. Instead, employment growth can be attributed to expansions made by larger companies in specialized operations, particularly in cutting. There has also been a significant growth in industrial laundries doing stone and acid treatments of fabric for pre-washed jeans. From this highest figure, however, the industry has declined again to 18,842 (Vargas, 1998). The massive layoffs have overwhelmed the capacity for the advocacy group to implement an ambitious plan that would optimize the use of retraining funds granted by the labor clauses of NAFTA. However, besieged by the number of displaced workers and their demoralized spirits, most of the group's energy has been concentrated in guiding the workers through the tortuous process of securing compensations as well as denouncing the deficient training that most workers are receiving. Through these denunciations, the group gained last year a 6-month extension of benefits for workers who had been affected by initial delays in the training programs and in the processing of the workers' benefits by the government.

Rocha's involvement in *Mujer Obrera* has decreased in the last six years. In 1993, she left El Paso to become a board member of a national foundation located in New York City, which promotes community-based projects aiming to advance social justice. The following year, at the onset of the indigenous uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, Rocha became the official spokesperson of the Zapatista Army in the United States. Her departure has not meant a termination of her involvement with *Mujer Obrera* even though it reduced its immediate input and the degree of energy she directly committed to local events. Her husband remains directly involved and played an important role in securing the extension of the relief funds. Last year, right after securing the additional funds, Rocha's husband expressed satisfaction for the accomplishment, but was very restrained with his optimism for the situation of the workers and the group itself. In recent months, *La Mujer Obrera* had reduced its personnel to only two full-time staff members, further limiting its capacity to address a mounting demand from displaced workers.

The increased integration of the local economy to global networks greatly increases the immediacy of their powerful impact on the local population. The overwhelming contrast between local and global resources and priorities underline the accommodations that both Rocha and Torres made in their respective fields, regardless of their contrasting orientations. As one contended with plant closures, the other faced an overwhelming market expansion that provided its own challenges and drawbacks. The expansion resulted from the explosive growth in attention from the private sector that the region gained through NAFTA. Ironically, the avalanche of enthusiasm about business possibilities heralded by media publicity generated overwhelming demands on her firm and on her. Torres saw herself as "the victim of her own circumstance":

> "I go on and I do a presentation to 200 people. Suddenly those 200 people start thinking, 'God, the opportunity is so great. I am going to call [Marisa Torres] and I know she can help us.' They don't even know what they want to do, but they want to do something. I had a guy call me, 'you know, I just sold my sheep ranch and I want to do something in Mexico.' He has the money, but I can't think of what I can do to be able to make money as a company and do something for that man. He was going to invest a $1 million in Ciudad Juarez. I am not a financial adviser.
>
> You have this type of thing. It has really escalated since this whole media hype on NAFTA. That is our problem right now… I get a lot of calls and I am working, but I am not making a lot of money… I spend the whole day returning people's calls and what's happening is, because we love to do work and we know that we are good in the information business, we end up taking each one of these calls into consideration and even if you give a half hour of your day to each one, that shifts the whole day for us and one, maybe, out of 20 is a good deal."

The considerable amount of time, resources, and the numerous calls handled led Torres to eventually narrow the scope of her business. However, it took her time to recognize the need for this shift and even longer to implement it, in part, because of the alluring potential level of business suggested by a high volume of inquires and her small firm's initial tenuous position. Some of the inquires, while often vague and outside her field of expertise, promised generous offers of profit-sharing or commissions that lured her into preliminary explorations. In one occasion, she estimated that she invested close to $10,000 in phone calls, faxes, and time dedicated by her and her staff. This investment produced no return given that the business venture did not materialize.

Like the subcontractors in the garment industry, Torres faced an innovative and volatile market, in which the ostensible opportunity also yielded a constant vulnerability of being exploited. While the ratio between profitable and non-profitable inquiries was, in her estimate, 20-1, there was always the potential that the profitable one could not only compensate for the other calls, but perhaps, launch the firm into a path of major success. Moreover, because its recent establishment and its limited capital reserves as a small business, the firm could not afford to blindly shun alternative sources of business. Depending mostly on a few temporary contracts at first, she contended with different types of contingencies. For example, in an interview five years ago, she said that she often found herself having to negotiate over the prize of her directories given prevailing misconceptions:

> "[Some clients] also perceive Mexico as being cheap. This goes back to the way the whole media presented the disparity of wages [between the two countries]. Yeah, you look in the papers: 'it is cheap there.' No doubt about it. So you have a perception that everything is cheap, including my work: 'You charge a $100 for that… directory. I can get that information for free.' So pretty soon, I am sitting there and negotiating: 'what if I sold it to you for $80?'and I cheapen my own service."

Torres' firm is registered as a U.S. company and it is located in El Paso, Texas; most of the companies in its selling directory are U.S. based. The facts that the *maquiladora* plants are in Mexico, her firm is on the border, and that she is a Chicana were advantageously misconstrued by some clients as part of the bargains to be gained from "Mexico" via NAFTA. She also spoke about "dreamers" and "opportunists" among her clients. The dreamers were those without capital, but intensely driven by an innovative business idea to take advantage of NAFTA. The "opportunists" were those with capital, but who would manipulate her into doing work for them under the promise of a business deal that would not come into being: "they end up paying me $20 for something I could have probably sold for a $1,000." Both types of problematic clients took advantage of the firm's weak standing as a new small business and of Torres' enthusiasm for the ostensible opportunities. In addition, they also took advantage of her natural good disposition, which without a doubt led her to offer nurturing advice to the misguided "dreamers" and trust the manipulative "opportunists."

Gradually however, as the sales for her main product (a *maquiladora* directory) expanded, Torres was able to consolidate her firm's operations. Counting on the fairly stable revenues from the directory sales and the hard-learned wisdom that a lot of calls does not necessarily translate into profitable businesses. She now focuses

solely on the production and upgrading of the directory. In 10 years, its sales have increased from 500 to 600 directories worldwide and is currently available electronically through the Internet. The consolidation of her firm led to her enthusiastic outlook. In this light, the situation of the workers, while acknowledged, is relativized in the "Vista Grande" that she promotes. Their displacement appeared as part of an inevitable process of developments and transformations that, were not only beyond any individual or specific place, but also involved everybody:

> "It's going to happen because we as consumers want to buy products that are competitive to our pocket book. We are going to be looking for ways of finding cheaper places to manufacture and it's our own fault. If we had a way of being able to buy American and pay the prices then we could say, 'lets close our borders,' but then again: is that smart? I mean, economics tell us it's not smart because that's what Mexico tried to do for so many years. They closed their borders to competition and now you have suppliers that can't even compete in their own country for *maquila* [contracts]."

Conclusion

The magnitude of changes reshaping the lives and opportunities of women in El Paso entail a skewed distribution of costs and benefits related to their readiness to operate in an integrated world economy. The dramatic contrast between the displaced workers and the unprecedented public success of a number of local women could easily induce one to an automatic denunciation of the unevenness of the outcomes and involvements. The two cases presented in this article shed light on the diverse and complex changes confronted by local residents in light of global transformations. Hopefully, a concrete awareness of the magnitude of the changes and the diverse responses could foster better measures to address the human costs involved and to consolidate the important breakthroughs made by Latinas. The cases of Torres and Rocha illustrate two important instances of energetic and resourceful women who are actively involved in reshaping the conditions in their city. The different orientations of their involvements and accomplishments reflect the nature of the major reconfiguration of the world economy, in which options and opportunities are also reconfigured for local actors. Thus, Reich's notion of a "purer capitalism" entails new frontiers into which these two women ventured according to their different perception of ongoing changes. For Torres, the garment industry was not only bound to relocate, but did not offer the developmental potential to move El Paso beyond its traditional "low wage" orientation. Instead, in agreement with her own firm's activities, she advocated for a new economic role for the city based on service and technical activities related to the ongoing regional industrialization process. Her strategy, however, paid little attention to the immediate needs of the displaced workers, the focus of Rocha's involvement. The labor advocate promoted the upgrading of the industrial infrastructure to revitalize the competitive standing of the city in international markets. Her vision afforded her the ideological flexibility to differentiate business people according to their professional and social standards (e.g., *barbajanes and empresarios*). In turn, "ideological flexibility" allowed her to initiate the concerted effort that led to the creation of the High Fashion Institute.

The divergent interpretations and involvements of the two women, nevertheless, have important points of convergence given the magnitude and nature of the change at hand. As Torres' last quote points out, in its global nature, the pervasive extent of the effects and manifestations of the transformation involves everybody. This participation entails multiple roles as producers, consumers, or intermediaries in an ever expanding and totalizing flow of immediate global interactions. In this enhanced immediacy, the interplay between "local" and "global" intensifies, not only leading to the massive relocations, but also to Torres' capacity to sell her directory worldwide and to Rocha's new involvements in New York and Mexico. Significantly, Torres and Rocha, regardless of their ideological differences, share a functional proficiency to operate in this globalized environment, a proficiency that displaced workers lack. Each, according to their own perception of the transformation, advocated for paths to enhanced the workers'capacity to operate in this globalized scenario. Torres advocated for retraining programs for service and technical positions, while Rocha advocated the revitalization of the garment industry. While significant, the accomplishments of the High Fashion Institute are dwarfed by the momentum of the relocations. In similar fashion, they have also overwhelmed *La Mujer Obrera's* capacities to address the multiple needs of the workers.

Torres' capacities were also overwhelmed by the magnitude of ongoing changes. The alluring demand for her services due to NAFTA offered business opportunities, at the same time, it made her vulnerable to exploita-

tion during the initial phases of her small business. The limited and tenuous resources at her command, in light of the ostensible opportunities, suggest important class considerations easy to overlook in her dramatic contrast with workers. As a striving entrepreneur, Torres faced capital limitations that compelled her to exert herself in the pursuit of numerous potential contracts, many of which only drained her energy and resources, but also yielded no profit. Through years of hard work and optimism in the face of uncertainty, her resourceful and persistent application has managed to conquer a relative stable market for her directories in the new frontier of the new global economy. In this new frontier, regarding the class recomposition of this new economy, entrepreneurship may be acquiring a new meaning in light of new conditions and option to procure a living. At a time when local mass employment in factories and in government decreases in El Paso, and in the country as a whole, the entrepreneurial option becomes more compelling. In this transition, Torres' involvement (as an "empresaria" according to Rocha) in promoting the reconfiguration of the local economy toward a new and improved standing in global markets is meritorious, albeit limited, given the little attention it pays to the pressing condition of displaced workers. The individual breakthrough of women like Torres and Rocha, hopefully, will help pave the way to consolidate and extend the inroads toward gender equality. In the mean time, hopefully as well, their successes could lead to solutions to the worsening of class inequalities overlooked in "La Vista Grande."

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Endnotes

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms, with the exception of “Twin Plant Wives Association” whose actual name is provided because of its specific gender and ethnic resonances and because its name appears in the references provided in the paper.

2. Production plants in El Paso performing operations similar to the *maquiladora* industry are not officially recognized as *maquiladoras* since they are in the United States.

3. Although one may add that – to a certain general degree – it was also partly because of that successful strike that plant relocations have taken place in the city (Pena, 1983). Gerardo Debon Pena, “The class politics of Abstract Labor: Organizational forms and Industrial Relations in the Mexican Maquiladoras.” Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1983.