

# Glorientalization: Specters of Asia and Feminized Cyborg Workers in the US–Mexico Borderlands<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article uses the 2006 experimental documentary *Maquilapolis* to shed light on the struggles of women workers in export-oriented industrial zones operating under the shadow of Asian global capitalism. My focus complicates the typical reading of the maquiladora factory system as simply a US–Mexico border issue by situating the burgeoning influence of East Asian nations and corporations in this economically profitable region of the world. Through the concept of glorientalization, I elucidate the connections between the all-encompassing gestures of globalization and the binaristic reframing of Orientalism found within the maquiladora system, where low-wage, brown, female factory workers in Tijuana must deal with an invasive foreign imperial presence that seeks to colonize, objectify, and exoticize them as docile, mechanized cyborgs similar to Asian women. As nonpermanent entities able to come and go at will, Asian companies are able to adopt a virtual character, while alienating women from the high-tech commodities they produce, treating the women as machine-like, disposable cyborgs without human needs or rights. I argue for an understanding of not only the economic and cultural imperialism of East Asia in the borderlands of the Americas, but the spectralizing processes by which displaced women of color are denied material presence and recognition as living labor. Situating *Maquilapolis* as a case study and prime text for rethinking women's subjugation as well as resistance to new capital allows critical insight into how marginalized groups negotiate their subject-position within hyper-mediated, "de-territorialized" spaces. A consideration of maquila women as both political actors and performers in the film draws attention to the scattered hegemonies of Asian technoculture as well as US hegemony, enabling

awareness of the differential modes of oppression and collective demands for social justice by third-world laborers in the so called “Asian Century.”

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This essay approaches the maquiladora factory as a rich, semiotically dense site for discussing the exploitation of third-world women’s labor under the global shadow of Asian capitalism. Through analyzing the experimental documentary film 2006 *Maquilapolis*, I take to task the perception of Mexican and Latina women not only as efficient proletarian workers, but as posthuman cyborgs because of their association with Asian techno-modernity. Challenging the cybernetic (and virtual) quality assigned to their material labor, I shed light on the discursive processes that manufacture these women into the abstract image of machines slaving away for foreign companies operating under patriarchal, Asian modes of production. Previous scholars have explored the pedagogical and artistic value of the film in showcasing the excesses of globalization, finding it useful for speaking about neoliberalism and free trade and their impact on the feminization of regional labor markets (Balachandran Orihuela and Hageman 2001; Cooke 2008; Leimbacher 2008). Interestingly, there has not been much discussion of Asia, even though the film is replete with numerous references to Asia, particularly Japan. The focus of this paper, therefore, is not primarily the cinematic form of *Maquilapolis*; rather, I read this filmic text as a case study to make a larger theoretical argument about the specter of Asia in the Mexican–US borderlands with the contention that “Asia” has greater influence in these territories, not only as an economic presence, but as a phantom menace able to shape the field of representation about people, places, and things.

Spotlighting the specters of “global Asia” within the US–Mexican borderlands, I find it necessary to investigate the central role of Asian monopoly capitalism in shaping Mexico’s political economy and imaging of the local female workers as “Orientalized” automatons, whose commodified, laboring bodies take on a technological and metaphorical character in accordance with the type of mechanized work they are often induced to undertake in making Asian products in high-demand, such as televisions. Although the women might take on the appearance of robots doing their daily chores for new Asian masters, the film adds a personal touch to the scene of mass automation found in their stories and political activism. Questions addressed in this essay include: how do the “scattered

hegemonies” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994) of Asian corporatism circumscribe the perception of maquila women as modern-day cyborgs, hybrid cultural figures composed of electronic parts as well as cultural elements from East and West?<sup>2</sup> How does the mechanization of their labor hamper the women’s social existence and their emergence within public discourse? What does the intertextuality of Asian and (Latin) American modernities offer in the way of grasping globalization as not simply a neocolonial process of domination of poor nations by rich ones, but a “glorientalist” discourse evincing multiple epistemologies of conquest and the various “assembled parts” (Lugo 2008) of race, class, gender, and nation? How do these women not only contest their cyborgized status through their feminist labor/artistic practices but also “play” with Orientalizing/globalizing forms of knowledge/power?

Critiquing globalization requires developing the question of gender and race further in relation to what can be called “glorientalization,” which observes the confluence of universalizing, planetary ideas of the “global” with the feminizing, particularizing notions of the “Orient.” For Edward Said, Orientalism denotes a Western discourse that, in order to justify European colonialism, constructs Asian societies as exotic, different, and inferior (Said 1979). Andrea Smith argues that Orientalism applies not only to Asians, but to all inferiorized groups that pose a civilizational alternative to Euro-American empire, demanding their enslavement and/or destruction (Smith 2006). Alongside settler colonialism (foreigners staying on conquered land) and heteropatriarchy, Orientalism for Smith constitutes one of the “three pillars” of white supremacy, enabling certain non-European modernized countries to approximate the power of whiteness to create new imperial frontiers or Orients. Benefiting from their economic trade with the US, South Korean corporations, for example, “settle” for a short while in Mexico, bringing in American-influenced industrialization models interlaced with “Confucian” Asian, heteropatriarchal styles of shop-floor management, with Korean and Korean American males as the supervisors of young brown women and girls (Paik and Sohn 1998). These racial- and gender-hierarchical, now globalizing, forms of subcontracting work extract resources and leave behind waste and a “temporary” form of settler colonialism, contributing to white-East Asian global hegemony (Rodriguez 2010).

While Orientalism demarcates gendered, racialized notions of superiority/inferiority within the East-West geographic frame, globalization promises to absorb and assimilate all countries into one unified mass

culture regardless of race, gender, and class. Despite its promise of economic access and opportunity for all, and the suggestion that all people will become the same, globalization discourse partakes in the Orientalization of the “developing” world, as more countries become integrated into a planetary system devised by “Western powers,” a broad designation that can now include well-off Asian nations. On the global horizon of capital’s advance, the threat of economic “nonproductivity” of indigenous people, and their resistance to the male-centered corporate profit model of globalization, necessitates the Orientalization of Mexican women, for instance, as the primitive, feminized Other, with maquiladoras signifying an invisible form of neocolonialism, ethnogenocide, and slavery.

Not discounting the fact that Asian firms do indeed treat maquila women as “Latinas” with all the stereotypical associations of hard-working, family-oriented, brown women who listen to men, where signifiers float and transmute in post-millennial global culture, it must be recognized how Mexican women can be Orientalized (and Asian women Latinized). With a new twist on Orientalism, large trading firms hailing from Westernized nations like Japan contribute to and update a process of “glorientalization,” propagated originally by Euro-American superpowers, to turn the untapped, vast, virgin markets of the Orient into modern economic systems. Although Orientalism traditionally relates to the projected fantasies of the East by the West, in the age of global empire, the West and East are spectral doubles of each other, with some Asian countries standing in the position of the modern West, and supposedly Westernized countries like Mexico taking on a “subordinate,” feminized role to Asian empire. Mexico’s borderlands no longer simply occupy the status of backwards frontier zones for the United States, but constitute a strategic pathway for globalization’s “civilizing mission” to absorb poor women of color and developing nations around the planet into the operational norms of the world’s major powers, concentrated mostly in the “global North.” Despite this global trajectory of engulfment, the spatialization of the borderlands as a demarcation site separating rich from poor nations persists, despite the hemispheric agglomeration of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the development of a trans-Pacific regional sphere of co-prosperity led by Japan.

This essay foregrounds the multi-perspectival voices of maquila women to illuminate their challenges to the supposed disappearance of their

material bodies and experiences under the awesome specter and crushing blow of a techno-capitalist global future promoted by Asian conquistadors. This essay's feminist critique presents a challenge to the popular construction of maquila workers as docile, utilitarian robots by unpacking entwined ideas of materiality and spectrality, the personal and political, the local and the global. Before I launch into the mechanics of glorientalization, historical contextualization of the maquiladora as a target site for Asian capitalists is necessary.

## The Maquiladora as Globalization Machine

Maquiladoras, or maquilas for short, refer to industrial factories located in the US–Mexican border region known for the cheap labor for assembly-parts work they provide for the scores of foreign manufacturing companies based there. Though considered vital in terms of facilitating US–Mexico bilateral trade (where the northern cities of Mexico supply cheap, labor-intensive production sites for immediate export to the consumer-hungry neighbor to the north), these assembly plants also act as key nodes in the global chain of commerce and labor linking locales in Mexico not only to the United States but to industrialized economies in East Asia.

Formed after the conclusion of the US-sponsored *bracero* program (1942–1964), which granted temporary guest visas to Mexican agricultural (mostly male) laborers to work in the United States, the maquiladora program is another name for the Border Industrialization Program (1965–1974), a regional plan of development that soon became the paradigm for a new world order. In 1964, the Mexican government created this program to attract foreign investors to Mexico and to create a mature domestic-production system, while attracting those North American firms that were moving offshore to find cheaper ways of beating the high-quality consumer products made by Japanese companies that were invading the world at the time. Within lucrative, new, competitive industries like electronics, producers in both the United States and Mexico had been severely threatened by the interpenetration of Japanese-made goods in their markets (Lowe and Kenney 1994). Although Mexico at mid-century possessed a much larger electronics industry than those of countries like South Korea, it quickly fell behind, devastated by the flood of imports from up-and-coming manufacturing powerhouses, such as Taiwan and other

countries benefiting from Japanese and US investments (Lowe and Kenney 1994). The maquiladora program was established not to penetrate foreign markets but to build up regionally Mexico's northern territories; this domestic focus soon made the country vulnerable as feminized local spaces to be penetrated by bourgeois capitalists, the latter focused mostly on seizing new, virgin consumer and labor markets. As Mexican domestic firms were being pushed out of the manufacturing industry, dwindling US electronics suppliers relied ever more on the high-quality parts and sophisticated technology of Japanese suppliers.

The fits and starts of the maquiladora program forces reconsideration of the linear staging of global development from "core" to "periphery" to apprehend the *contradictions* of capitalism. Despite the myth that the world is becoming technologically interdependent and interconnected by globalization, there is little explanation for why people are getting poorer in an increasingly high-tech globalized milieu. This macrological framing of world development obscures the dense, overlapping, asymmetrical forms of power that absorb various populations under the mesh of neoliberal economic regimes and imperial projects. In the 1990s, the ailing maquiladora program was revitalized, spurred on by the precipitous devaluation of the Mexican peso, high inflation, and the passage of NAFTA, compelling third-country manufacturers, primarily from Asia, to establish facilities in North America if they wished to gain duty-free access to Mexico's untapped consumer markets, which was originally meant to block Japan but ending up serving up "a Trojan Horse that would help Japan breach the innermost walls of the American empire" (Orme 1996, 272).

Beyond the economic sphere, maquilas are constitutive of a global, technocultural imaginary where rich companies and countries from the "global North" foster new fantasy myths about the laborer masses they employ in the "global South." Third-world women, particularly Southeast Asian and Latina women, were viewed as "naturally" suited for certain kinds of automated, soulless handiwork because of the corporal properties they appear to embody—fast, efficient, and disposable—matching the industrial standards of a "global factory" system defined by flexible accumulation and quick export production. The maquiladora program contributed to what many of its critics dubbed the internationalization or "feminization of labor," where women become the "braceras" or extended arms of the Mexican state as it becomes entangled with supra-national

entities and neoliberal institutions like the IMF and World Bank in the age of late capitalism (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1995). If neoliberalism and globalization do more than manufacture products but also market dreams and desires (Guevarra 2009), then it is necessary to consider the emergent visions of an ideal “global” work force. Maquila women’s status as the invisible faces of globalization index the abstracted “surplus-value” generated from their domesticated feminized labor and their devalued status as subhuman beings within the international (sexual) division of labor that considers some races or groups of people as already less than human (and corporations as legally recognized persons).

By taking the old (Orientalism) and putting it in the new (globalization), one can define new social relations that are not just spatial (transnational, top-down economics), but temporal. Broadly speaking, glorientalization, or even glorientalism, can provide a new mapping of contemporary “border studies,” tracking those invisible or overlaid historical-imperial borders that are everywhere but difficult to find. As a highly gendered phenomenon, maquiladoras are known for their feminized work force epitomized by the more than one million young women comprising the base of employees (over 70%), spread over thousands of European, American, Korean, and Japanese-owned factories (Bair 2002). Although the United States is often viewed as responsible for Mexico’s economic and labor woes, not to be underestimated are the powerful Asian firms specializing in consumer electronics operating now in a country nicknamed “The Land of Enchantment.” These companies’ easy access to low-wage workers provides the political battleground for the conflict between commodity industries and “low-skilled, high-tech” workers. They also provide the symbolic grounds for emergent forms of globalizing knowledge clustered around the fear of US decline in the twenty-first century and Asia as the future of capitalism.

The maquila system contributes heavily to the “Asianization” of global markets. During the early development of this system in the 1960s, Mexican operators were sent to rapidly developing countries in East Asia such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Japan to study their enviable models of production. While East Asian countries benefited tremendously from US technological and economic support in the post-WWII era as part of Cold War foreign aid and geopolitical restructurings, Mexico’s tutelage on development from its industrializing Asian counterparts did little in

expanding the maquila system due to the lack of foreign capital investment and a well-developed export industrial sector (Cañas and Coronado 2002). The maquila program did not truly take off until the Mexican economy stabilized after years of recession, with industrial production spiking after the passage of NAFTA, the tri-national free trade agreement between Canada, Mexico, and the United States, in 1994. The United States benefited most from this continental pact, and NAFTA contributed to the decimation of Mexico's agricultural business, despite the country's GDP doubling within twenty years, forcing it to rely more on foreign investors and exports-commodities markets. Mexico's wobbly economic predicament is as much, therefore, a by-product of US and Asian economic imperialism as it is the responsibility of Mexico's national elites, who benefited greatly by lobbying for the NAFTA accord without much foresight about how it would affect the country's poor. The number of maquiladoras along the border soon exploded, with rural migrants fleeing to the overcrowded border cities, positing a paradigm of international collusion and ad hoc urbanization that turned Mexico's North into semi-autonomous "free-trade areas" (FTAs), where foreign companies can quickly enter and set up shop without strict government regulation, labor laws, or corporate taxes.

In the so-called "Asian Century," state-driven industrialized economies in East Asia, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea, display their new national pride and economic strength on the world stage as part of a ratcheting up of what L. H. M. Ling terms "global hyper-masculinity" (Ling 1999). Ling dissects the gender representation of Asian women as both super-exploited workers and targets for transformation under gendered modes of modernization and industrialization. In the media discourse, she notes the "durability" of women's bodies and labor capabilities, where women are both feminized/subordinated but "hardened" under the virility of ultra-rigid Asian powers. Seen this way, Asian globalization is not a manifestation of planetary interconnectedness, but indexes a particular structure of seeing, knowing, and owning modern hybrid cybernetic subjectivities, where the modern Asian male eyes Asian women from an Orientalizing perspective, to the degree that Asian women represent old Asian cultural sexual traditions under the yoke of Asianized modern labor forms. As a marker of the contradictions of capital, the global specter of "Asia" on the international scene loops back to globalizing visions of third-world women as feminized/hardened cyborg workers

toiling within Asian-owned industrial hubs of the Pacific Rim, the busiest and largest trade region in the world. The women found in these spaces encounter all types of occupational hazards related to assembling cameras and computers, but their representation as “real cyborgs” has been largely one-way to make them into postmodern beings, neither living nor dead, but somewhere in-between. Feminist scholars have discussed the technocultural logics that reduce women of color to pliant subjects of disciplinary labor controls (Kang 1997; Chang 2000; Salzinger 2003). I draw upon these critical insights to consider the technologization and globalization of Mexican female labor in a different register. Where the term “techno-Orientalism” refers to anxieties regarding high-tech Asian countries like Japan under the worrying imperial gaze of the West (Robins and Morley 2002), I show how the high-tech Orient emerges as a recurring leitmotif in *Maquilapolis* and in the borderlands. Alongside the idea of Asia as a high-tech global empire, I boldface “glorientalization” as a thematic approach for evaluating the “planetary technologization of (disjunctive) experience” (Moreiras 1998, 94).

### Tijuana as Urban Dreamscape/Nightmare and Imperial City

The documentary film *Maquilapolis* relates the perils of the Mexican export factory system, highlighting the unsafe working conditions women face on the job. The filmic narrative is told from the perspective of mainly two women—Carmen Durán and Lourdes Luján—creatively publicizing labor disputes with foreign corporations and demands for toxic cleanups from the chemical spills left by these companies. Lourdes and Carmen met in an activist group called Casa de la Mujer Grupo Factor X. Collaborating with US-based filmmakers Vicki Funari and Sergio De La Torre, the women recorded video diaries to showcase their awareness of the changes happening in their country. Opening with an aerial, panoramic view of the desert synced with sounds of chugging machines and synthetic background music, *Maquilapolis* introduces women performing circular hand gestures that mimic and mime their activities at work—mind-numbing, body-aching, repetitive movements that often cause bodily injury. The women’s reenactment in the desert of this type of work pushes the audience to discern how women are induced into dull and monotonous occupations and how they are embedded in the hyperspace of a virtual popular imagi-

nary that also places them “out of sight” from the world as cogs in the global machine. By placing “factory work” outside of the original physical space of the factory, this scene exposes the artificiality and harshness of such work as it is set against the environmental calm of the desert, a natural space already polluted by man-made outflows from factories. This moment obviates women’s refusal to be caged or defined by their work, calling attention to their physical (dis)embodiment as real persons whose lives are threatened by the automation of labor but also by the colonization of their communities. It is a stylized performance, inviting multiple readings and aesthetic interpretations of the usual instrumentalist conception of “work.”

*Maquilapolis* mounts a challenge to what David Harvey calls global “space-time compression” (Harvey 1989). The film slows down the temporal routine of the women’s work by allowing them to reenact their daily routines in an imaginary standing assembly line. When these women go through the grind of these familiar hand motions without actual machines, they become cultural performers and artists “performing” their wage labor work according to the refrain, “And I push, remove, push, remove.” This staged choreography places audiences out of the insular shadows of the factory (in fact, the entire film takes place outside the factory) to visualize the naked truth about the invisible labor and maltreatment of women’s bodies. It makes visible the living labor-power lying hidden under classic labor theories of value, which fail to adequately address the material experiences and nonvalued work done by feminized, “subaltern” populations subordinate and alternative to dominant power (Spivak 1985). Here, the communality of group performance and the singular declarative “I” relays their individuality against their lumping as faceless workers. The geographical openness of the scene subtly alludes to female workers elsewhere, who are viewed equally as soulless automatons, able to work long hours with manual dexterity assembling electronic parts (Ong 1987). Their scripted performance foregrounds the maquiladora as more than the grounds for labor-production but as an intense site of political negotiation and image-making. It highlights the maquila as a cyberspatial, public fantasy, one built on privatized spatial enclosures like the factory. The sequence gestures toward “the imbrication of the temporal within the spatial” and the “seemingly successful abstraction of space,

alternative conceptions of space [which] continue to thrive alongside, if not dominate, the flow of capital” (Brady 2002, 5).

Such group performances are counter-balanced with personal reflections and accounts of daily life in the city of maquilas. Audiences are introduced early in the film to Carmen, who gives an on-the-ground, emic view of the area where she currently lives: “Now we’re going to videotape. . . . This is my father-in law’s house. My neighborhood, Lagunita. You can see the factories from here. There’s Sony. There’s my son.” The blithe insertion of the name “Sony” into the quotidian landscape of family and home evokes a sense of the synthetic, artificial, built environment constructed by Japanese corporations, looming large in the city. The phantasmal qualities of the film’s *mise-en-scène* capture the unknown exigencies of life in Tijuana as defined by the hemispheric saturation of Asian sovereignties. This mixed composition of style and content illuminates how art can serve as political praxis, where the personal observations of women like Carmen comprise a powerful statement and sardonic commentary on the oppressive conditions of living in a world full of Sony factories. Carmen and Lourdes help us see their vital role as cinematic auteurs/actors and also *promotoras*, community activists who educate, organize, and advocate for other workers on their rights through the act of seeing globalization “from below.” “We see things differently,” as one promotora observes of her key insider position within the community, apprehending the process of glorientalization apart from her Asian bosses.

*Maquilapolis* escapes easy classification as an artistic or documentary piece by transcending many genres to include elements of experimentalism, impressionism, voyeurism, and cinema verité to expose the fragmentary story and assemblage of global modernity. *Maquilapolis* forms part of a new wave of documentary films beginning in the 1990s that transformed the medium, distorting the lines between narrative and social observation, signaling major changes in thinking about identity, representation, and art. The subject matter is unique, but *Maquilapolis* shares formal qualities with other works that documentary film expert Bill Nichols labels as expressive documentary, which he says reflects how contemporary postmodern culture has altered older modes of thought such as Orientalism (Nichols 1994). Such experimental films help us ask questions such as, how does one account for the foreign Other when the Other is no longer simply Other or “elsewhere”? Orientalism constructs fantasies of the real, the world-as-image organized

around principles of “us” and “them,” but Orientalism’s dichotomy (West/East) now maps onto and finds mutation under postmodern globalization (Turner 1994). Orientalism provides hetero-normative power coordinates allowing “the West” to extend its reach “toward” certain queered feminized objects, shaping “how bodies cohere, by facing the same direction . . . given how the world takes shape ‘around’ certain bodies” (Ahmed 2006, 121). Insofar as the “East,” historically, for Euro-Americans is Asia, for Asian nations “the East” is literally the Americas. The paradigm of globalization as a unidirectional model of development, first devised by Western economists idealizing market globalism, is these days hybridized and challenged by the global command of Asian capitalism. In this context, gloriantalization lends a name to binary thinking in a pluralized, heterogeneous world, interweaving the history of Western colonialism in Asia with the neocolonization of Latin America by Asia.

Globalization was contrived originally as a buzzword, as a kind of “messianic” discourse narrating the specter of capitalism’s global triumph and the bettering of human quality of life through the international exchange of technology, trade, knowledge, and capital. The term “specter” follows Karl Marx’s observation that capitalism not only engenders structural transformation, but concocts an international system of representation arising out of increasingly abstract relations of commodification, alienation, and domination, where the worker as “automaton mimes the living” and the laborer’s specters are the shadow of things past, present, and future—the disembodied or nonapparent things haunting all of us (Derrida 2006, 192). The “Orient” is both the sign of the high-tech past (Westerners always fear Asia’s mighty civilizations and technological advances) combined with a future Oriental specter bearing an incorporeal global spirit and process of world civilization that bends back to Asia, a ghostly object of constant dread for the West, one producing a simulated reality that is simultaneously self-referential and performative. For Jacques Derrida, the many global specters of Asia raise the possibility of that which has yet to arrive or that which is present but not fully materialized in a West-driven capitalist system, which justifies the colonization of Asia (Marx was Orientalist in this regard). In the case of Tijuana, Asian companies are not only physical intruders, but global specters, pervasive foreign entities with an impermanent presence in a postmodern geography. Gloriantalization presents the dialectical relations between colonial

masters and subaltern slaves haunting our global systems of simulation, requiring a differential political reading of laboring bodies hovering between life and death, the real and the unreal, the “uncivilized” periphery-horizon-limit and the Western core (Abbinnett 2008).

Maquilapolis in this regard shifts the global gaze of postmodern viewership, which tends to regard everything from the perspective of first-world subjects who view the planet in terms of disembodied virtual space-time rather than from the standpoints of those third-world “natives” not easily located within postmodern cyborg ideas of cosmopolitanism, bodily play, physical transcendence, and emotional indifference. In one interesting scene, Lourdes peers through a hole in the border fence dividing the United States from Mexico, while Carmen looks back at her from the other side. Lourdes then says, “I’m looking at the other side of the border. This fence divides the US from Tijuana. It’s something new for me.” Carmen adds, “I’ve lived here 18 years and I’ve never been to it.” Although international borders define the modern lives of people around the world, Carmen and Lourdes acknowledge the existence of these geopolitical borders in novel ways to demarcate the borders that are everywhere, even when we do not see them. These virtual borders call attention to the “(ef)feminization of Mexico within transnational formulations of the North American continent as a simultaneously broken and continuous imaginary geography” (Carroll 2006, 358), one connecting seemingly disparate places together.

## Maquilapolis: The City of Factories and Television Screens

The world inside the screen may allow us to envision ourselves without bodies, but its images, the machines, and their users are embedded in material relations (Fusco 2001, 192).

The film’s title, *Maquilapolis*, combines the Spanish word “maquila” with the Greek word for city (“polis”) to describe the hybrid character of Tijuana as “the city of maquilas,” a city that reflects for one cultural commentator the rise of a “city that may well represent the future” (Romero 1990). Located in the Baja California region of Mexico, Tijuana is both a major tourist destination and urban manufacturing center, a major border city in one of the most densely populated border regions in the world. Though Tijuana is a cosmopolitan city, it lacks the global financial markets and

hyper-consumerism characteristic of other glitzy “global cities,” such as Tokyo, Singapore, Hong Kong, or Seoul (Sassen 2002). Tijuana is one of many “industrial cities” that are “on the rise,” sites pockmarked with extranational export-trading zones, where managerial, transnational elites possess “flexible citizenship” to travel anywhere, but the local poor have little spatial mobility (Ong 1999). As a border city, Tijuana’s position at a central point between Asia, the US, and Mexico attracts wealth-seekers, while creating much more class inequality. It is not just a place where low-paid workers assemble goods, but a place defined by commodities like televisions, as the message on one sign overhanging a highway shown in the film makes clear: “Tijuana, World Capital of the Television” (with a Panasonic logo affixed next to it). Television serves as a major signifier of the local economy (televisions are one of Tijuana’s prime exports). Though TVs are often considered only as a medium to watch or buy, it behooves us to know how they are made and who makes them.

Typically, television serves as a “screen” for projections of postmodern spectatorship and global subjectivity. The assumption of television as both a global medium for creating Oriental subjects as well as a site of Orientalization can be found in the thinking of major theorists of mass media, such as Marshall McLuhan, who claims that television ushered in a new way of experiencing and being part of what he calls the “global village,” one that pushes mankind from the linear, Western space of print media to the hieroglyphic nonlinearity of the East with its “all-at-once simultaneous” iconographic language (McLuhan 1966, 89). For McLuhan, the Western world “organizes itself visually by connective, uniform, and continuous space,” whereas the Oriental world “antithetically, organizes everything by spaces, by distances between sounds and objects, not by connection. [The Oriental] works by interval, not by connection, and that is why we think he is inscrutable. . . . We are orientalizing ourselves at a furious clip” (quoted in Park 2004, 63).<sup>3</sup> In McLuhan’s view, the normative human subject is assumed to be a young white male living in North America, a universal figure becoming more global and Oriental by watching “Asian” mediums like television. Television acts a transformative medium whose visceral impact upon human consciousness comes from the fact that today the “medium is the message,” and the communicative direction of global capital has shifted from the West to the East in hybridizing fashion. McLuhan fails to recognize the material and ideological processes underlying the construction of a gloriantalized

TV-watching humanity. Although people might become glorientalized beings through watching television, the question gets left out of who makes those Asian products and what subjects are able to define their identity in relation to the televisual global village.

One stunning sequence in the film shows the superimposition of Asian consumer culture upon the local environs of Tijuana. The corporate logos of famous American and Japanese companies are displayed and superimposed over rotating headshots of maquila women as they say out loud the names of companies populating Tijuana's urban landscape: Nellcor, Deltech, La Paloma, Kelmex, Puritan, Mabushi, Hansan Mex, Tocabi, Panasonic. Within circulating logos of monopoly capitalism, the women are able to assert their personhood in the face of their alienation as some of the many "products" of glorientalized exchange and labor. Against the "fantasy-production" of globalization in which third-world women constitute a vital part of what Neferti Tadiar calls the "new industrial slavery" (Tadiar 2004, 146), the women in *Maquilapolis* chant the names of corporations, revealing themselves as "unseen" visual object-subjects and de facto representatives of companies that do not want to acknowledge their existence. The collapsing of the names of Asian companies with European and American ones suggests that Western modes of seeing are not simply becoming glorientalized, as McLuhan imagined, but reconfigured insofar as modern visual economies from the West and the East assert themselves over and against feminized subjects in the global South.

*Maquilapolis* reexamines, then, the teleological presumptions of globalization to spotlight new visual regimes and cartographies of power through which certain women are turned into "gloriental" objects of fantasy. Carmen observes after the shutting of her factory: "In 2001, with the global economic crisis and the availability of cheaper labor in Asia, Mexico's boom gave way to a bust. Lots of factories closed, and lots of people were unemployed." She goes on to suggest that the recruitment of female labor in Mexico is falling due to the cheaper costs of hiring female labor in Asia:

I can't forget the time I spent pounding the pavement in the industrial parks. I was unemployed for two years. In two years, 350,000 jobs disappeared. Tijuana is no longer attractive. The Asian countries are. It's the same idea: they want the women workers, but at a lower cost.

Women workers in places like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and India stand at the “low-end” spectrum of global Asia, representing Asian countries poorer than Mexico now turned into prime destinations for cheap factory work refined under the maquila system. What conjoins maquilas workers in Mexico to Asian women overseas is their utility as interchangeable labor pools to be used and abused by capitalism at will. The framing of Asians and Latinas as the same kind of women workers—one or the other being cheaper, depending on the business cycle—marks them as spectral doubles of each other. This back-and-forth orientation is undercut by Carmen’s acknowledgment of the mental trauma and physical strain of their hard, localized labor (“I can’t forget the time I spent pounding the pavement in the industrial parks”) and her protest against the economic logic (“it’s the same idea”) used to justify moving bases of production elsewhere in order to find more “efficient” workers and cost-saving benefits.

Though the film features no Asian workers, Asian female labor is rhetorically and metonymically evoked as another specter of “global Asia” as well as a source of political solidarity rather than competition for maquila women. In globalization discourse, the cheapness of Asian female workers is frequently referenced as “the most oft-invoked sign of capitalism’s decentering,” an archetypal symbol of Asian globalization (Lye 1995, 49). Carmen takes the global positionality of the maquila worker as interlaced with that of the Asian woman worker under Asian capitalism, two sides of the same coin of exploited virtualized labor, circulating as an “essential corporeality or accessible subjectivity” that fixes the third-world woman in distance/difference to multinational desires (Kang 1997, 404). “Within globalization, a woman factory worker is like a commodity,” says a promotora named Lupita Castañeda. “And if that commodity is not productive, if she’s not attractive for globalization because she starts to defend her rights, then they look for that commodity elsewhere.” This statement considers the various methods for outsourcing work at a time when many maquila workers and Asian female workers are demanding their rights to living wages. “As a maquila woman,” Lupita concludes, “this worries me because we are just objects, objects of labor.” In this statement, the women are not simply laborers making objects of global consumption but are rendered as disoriented *objects of labor*. This objectification/orientation process inherently reflects what Lisa Lowe calls the “racialized feminization of labor,”

providing glimpses of the ways women's objectified selves determine the "material site in which several axes of domination intersect" such as Orientalism, colonialism, sexism, and racism (Lowe 1997 357). This intersectional/transnational focus on maquilas, women's work, and oppression stretches the territorial boundaries of the nation-state and even globalization models to query the "gender of sovereignty" (Lowe 2008) in the borderlands, asking questions about power in a world where women are reduced to objects floating in the ether of global production.

### Deconstructing Maquila Workers as "Real-Life Cyborgs"

Most people come to Tijuana eager to work, work, work. You live a hurried life here, always on the go. (Anonymous female narrator in *Maquilapolis*)

This quote from a female factory employee speaks to the fast-paced work life in Tijuana. Although Tijuana is not viewed in the same way as Tokyo, with its many robotic, white-collar "salary men" who suddenly die from overworking, Tijuana's workers are always on the go, ceaselessly working to the brink of death. The visual design of *Maquilapolis* exposes this harsh reality beneath the phantasmagoria of global consumer culture, identifying the virtual properties of capitalism insofar as material-labor production "becomes increasingly spatially scattered, detached, and hidden from the magical part of consumption and other parts of the spectral economy" (Nguyen-Vo 2008, 2). Indeed, the film discusses the experiences of maquila workers at a major transitional moment in which maquila women face layoffs as the corporations seek cheaper labor in rising Asian nations like China. Beyond the idea of these women as living in a space of "social death," the film creates an interesting juxtaposition, where the women working in the maquiladoras are treated and idealized as cyborgs in a manner not unlike Asian women; such "strange affinities" across difference make new analytics of comparative, gendered racialization as well as coalitional possibilities for women of color come alive (Hong and Ferguson 2011). Speaking over close-up shots of women holding microchips and wires, one narrator observes: "When the maquiladora industry began, we women represented 80% of the industry's labor force. They said we would make a good work force because we had agile hands and would be cheap

and docile.” This description of the “innate” docile traits and demure personality of Mexican female worker is similar to statements first made by Japanese managers about Malaysian women as being docile, cheap workers with agile hands, attributes supposedly unique to “Oriental” women (Ong 2010, 152).<sup>4</sup> Like the kampung women of Malaysia, the maquila women are mechanized and mythologized as cyborgs. In this way, Tijuana as an imperial city denotes a virtual “contact zone where copresence precipitates interactive and improvisational encounters,” distorting our sensible maps (Ngô 2014, 162).

Rather than recognize their interconnected oppressions under cyborg worker discourse, American feminists like Donna Haraway have appropriated the postmodern language of technological determinism to call Asian women and women of color generally “real-life cyborgs” in a world where humans are all cyborgs of some sort (Haraway 1985, 178).<sup>5</sup> These Asian female cyborgs, she claims, are playfully rewriting the texts of their bodies for survival. Such statements, however, do not see the fallacy of calling working women of color cyborgs. As performance artist and theorist Coco Fusco observes, labeling them cyborgs “naturalizes the economic order to which they are subjected and mystifies their interface with technology” (Fusco 2001, 200). *Maquilapolis* challenges the fetishization of technology as something that people “use” freely every day as modern cyborgs to the degree that cyborgs often mean human beings transformed through access to digital technology, rather than workers who make technology but rarely get to use or buy it. It is imperative, says Fusco, that feminist scholars develop other approaches to technology and globalization studies that address the interface of bodies and machines where “political engagement begins with assuming the role of witness . . . [to] expand the imaginative and metaphorical dimensions of telepresence” (191).

In the film, Carmen addresses the problematics of the body-machine interface while working the night shift at the Panasonic factory for \$11 a day:

It’s nice because I’m learning to use computers. . . . The only problem is the lead contamination. You breathe lead every day. . . . I’ve started to get spots and sores on my body. . . . And my doctor says I’m at risk for leukemia. Also, you can’t wash your clothes with those of your children or get close to your kids after you leave work.

Carmen pinpoints the health problems of learning how to use computers in Japanese-owned factories full of chemicals, where contact with technology poses a danger to her body in the form of anemia and kidney problems. The human-machine connection so taken for granted in cyborg myth and technocultural studies (computer usage) becomes a site of risk of harm for real people. Inasmuch as the specter of Asian capital is the specter of death, Carmen underlines the vulnerability of being associated with Japanese companies whose public image projects clean energy, and the precariousness of living as a poor person in the computer age. Women such as Carmen fear for the safety of their kids playing in wet streets that sizzle with static from downed power lines and rivers tainted with the run-off from the factories. Such anxieties confirm the dangers of inhabiting land around “high-tech” industrial parks lacking in urban infrastructure and overrun with electronic waste. Japan is figured as the land of robots and cyborgs, but the idea of automatons with human parts wired into technology looks very different in Mexico. “In Lagunitas we don’t have electricity, so we hang wires from the lines. As you can see, all these cables are piled and tangled up. . . . When the wires touch each other, they short-circuit and burn. If a child steps here, he could be electrocuted.” Against the received wisdom of factory workers as part of a global “multitude” possessing cyborg bodies, their “immaterial labor” producing an “amorphous flesh that forms no body” (Hawkesworth 2006, 362). Duran’s words draw attention to what it means to live in glorientalized spaces like Tijuana constructed as an image in the world imaginary, but also what it means to inhabit the “image-as-feminized-space” (Chow 1991, 18). Maquilapolis, then, is more than an ideational space of object otherness; it is an actual physical “home” to communities with their own ideas of how it should look or be.

## East Meets West in the Global South

In a regional sense, maquiladoras help to propagate US-Japanese hegemony in Latin America. According to Tadiar, these two friendly countries are unified through a symbolic “marriage” consummated through the exploitation of poorer sexualized nations (Tadiar 2004). Japan and the US are intermittent economic competitors with each other, but Japan remains a junior partner of the US, one whose economic ascendancy since the 1970s would not have been possible without American postwar financial support

and political controls (Shigematsu and Camacho 2010). The pervasive global influence of Japan since the late twentieth century and the US modernization of certain Asian allies reveal a new global imperium, where certain places in the developing world serve as safety valves and “spatial fixes” for the crisis of economic overproduction by two major industrial powers (Harvey 2005). Although the US implemented NAFTA to compete with Japanese firms and expand its export operations, corporations of Japanese and Asian origin were able to compete with the US by transferring the final parts of their production processes to the export zones in maquiladoras to penetrate the US and Mexican domestic markets. Between 1996 to 2000, 70% of all foreign investment in the baja norte pocket of Mexico was of Asian origin, while only 15% came from the US (Kopinak 2003 325–26).

Asian modes of production are characterized according to sociologist Manuel Castells less by a regionally “integrated” sense of economic development than an assemblage of “networks” that organize social actors within rigid protocols but also “informal” systems of control (Castells 1996). With government codes and trade laws regularly flouted by foreign manufacturers, maquiladoras help catalyze the rural-to-urban migration patterns in Mexico and the fly-by-night operations of Asian multinationals. Whereas the manufacture of Asian products is outsourced more and more, the maquila woman is a sign of the expansionary reach of Asian maquila practices, beginning first in Mexico, then spreading to other countries in Central and South America. As feminist scholar Grace Hong observes, Asian capitalisms are simultaneous competitors and collaborators with US capitalism, part of the “new economic internationalism” that creates new pools of low-wage Asian labor in the US and abroad, as well as new meanings about modernity that accrue around the global signifier of “Asia,” all of which play a role in extending the reach of US imperialism (Hong 2001, 124). I would add that Asian capitalisms not only extend US empire but also Asian imperialism, while creating pools of poor, non-Asian labor for the new global economy cohered around the poles of East Asia and the US. Indeed, a “boomerang” effect results from the cycles of Asian capital, since the rapid development of China as an industrial powerhouse has forced those Asian maquila firms who originally set up shop in Mexico to find cheap workers, to return to China, only to later leave China and return to Mexico, since China’s ascent into superpower status has led to a stronger currency, rising wages, and

labor unrest, pushing factory owners to shift production back to Mexico (Kurtenbach 2010).

Asia under the sign of Japan maintains a strong spectral authority in Mexico. A recurring filmic object in *Maquilapolis* is the Japanese flag, a pervasive signifier of Japanese economic imperialism in Tijuana. In one particular shot, we see the US flag, the Japanese flag, and the Sony flag strewn together in a line until the screen dissolves to a full capture of only the Japanese flag. This repetitive imagery of Japanese empire confirms the extra-territorial power of multinational Asian corporations in overtaking the Mexican national landscape (Kenney and Florida 1994). Within these layered sites of capital, tensions emerge when maquila workers claim certain rights as human beings and global citizens. “When we talk about globalization, we see that these companies can go anywhere in the world,” one promotora comments. The film reaches its climax when, lacking support from factory labor unions (which are virtual unions paid for and used by many Asian corporations to cover up their wrongdoings), maquila women bring a lawsuit against two major Japanese conglomerates, Sanyo and Sony, the two largest companies in Tijuana. Lacking legal consultation with the Mexican government, the women find legal advice from a fellow national, who tells them “Sanyo and Sony set the example of how things will work in Tijuana.” The two Japanese companies want to use this case as a legal precedent to keep exploiting women, but if the activists successfully challenge Sanyo and Sony’s corporate practices, this creates a powerful legal precedent of labor injustice with international repercussions. Indeed, Sanyo knowingly broke the law when it sent “flyback” product lines to Indonesia, avoiding severance pay for the maquila women and blaming them instead for failing to “finish” the product. Such underhanded activities evidence the power of Japanese companies to traverse global spaces like apparitions and rework the maquila worker into the gloriental figure of vanishing subaltern/woman/civilization, unable to emerge properly into representation.

Where Japan has been historically a repository of US Orientalist fantasies, an “empire of signs” for Westerners, according to Roland Barthes (Barthes 1983), Japan with its subsidized national companies like Sanyo, Sony, Panasonic, and Mabushi posit another empire of signs, one that controls the semiotic and visual discourse of countries like Mexico. Moreover, while Japanese people are often portrayed by Westerners as “economic animals,” soulless workaholic cyborgs industriously beating

the West at its own capitalist game (Morley and Robins 1995, 154), I believe the representation of the maquila women as cyborgs under the sign of neo-imperial Japan reflects a strange form of technological subject-making. Taking to task the effects of gloriantalization in their lives, the women recognize that though they may be part of Japan's empire of signs—the threatening-though-docile Other—they remain real people with roots in Mexico's economically poorer southern regions. The women chant in succession the following: "I am from the state of Michoacán . . . I am from Guadalajara, Jalisco. I am from Sola de Vega, Oaxaca. I am from Mazatlán. I am from Sinaloa." *Maquilapolis* flips the script on the feminizing, racial gaze of globalization's "desiring-machine" to focalize the women's own desires within the machinery of globalization (Deleuze 1977).

If globalization discourse directs capitalist flows toward certain geographies as a matter of economics and restructures the spatiality of desire (what products, countries, and workers are most wanted), the film poses the women's desire to change the conditions of globalization, turning against what Marx foresaw as capitalism's need to establish itself "over the surface of the globe," to nestle and form connections everywhere (Marx 1978, 526). Enunciating who they are and where they come from "reorients" the top-down gaze of gloriantalization by Asian colonizers, underscoring how workers are truly the ones who operate "the hardware that runs the machinery," while laying bare horrible labor practices and exposing the myth of electronics-manufacturing as a "clean industry" (Park and Pellow 2005, 45). By placing their individuality once again within a context in which corporations view them as expendable or synonymous with Southeast Asian female workers, the maquila women expose not only the heteronormative idea of public space as a masculine power derived from the private domestication of women (Lefebvre 1991), but reveal the ways public space is "privatized" and spectralized under the globalization of Asian sweatshops and management styles. The "maquila" in this gloriantalizing context means more than as a simple matter of Mexican labor exploitation by Asian capitalists, but a kind of multi-spatial politics of desire conceived under the shadow of globalized empire.

The film concludes with a meeting between Sony and Panasonic heads and maquila activists fending off corporate efforts to throw monetary compensation at their injuries. "Don't make it so hard for me! Just tell me what you want!" one corporate representative screams. It's not even

“enough to buy a TV set,” responds one of the women. “You’ve got a TV already, why do you want another one?” the man responds, taking literally the woman’s sarcastic comment about the meager amount of the corporate offer. Once again, the television serves as the form of currency that mediates the local political economy, spotlighting how the workers’ labor is cheapened, their labor compensation not worth the product they make. Meanwhile, the owner takes the women only as consumers (not laborers), not understanding why they would want another television to buy. The workers’ right to adequate compensation presents a moot point insofar as it occurs within a form of public exchange based on televisual consumerism with little regard for the entitlements owed the working poor. The classic Marxian conundrum of over-production and workers’ alienation from the products of labor, which prevent them from buying consumables, is turned on its head by the women’s comments about not having enough to buy a TV. Asking for fair wages makes little sense in a privatized industry that views such women as gloriantalized, TV-watching cyborg subjects in a commodity supply chain run by foreign managers unable to consider why workers want to earn enough money (to buy more than a television, but a sustainable life). The metaphysical abstraction derived from over-production is countered by the realness of the workers, enabling “the magical spell [of capitalism] to be undone and the reality of exploitation to be revealed” (Peeren 2014, 21).

The film concludes with Carmen and her coworkers forcing Sanyo’s labor board to pay high severance packages of up to \$2,500, though this means they will not have future employment with the companies and no future prospects of work. Lourdes’s group of promotoras induces the US and Mexican governments to promise a clean-up of the e-waste left by runaway companies. *Maquilaopolis* exhibits the multiple sides of Tijuana as more than a capitalist fantasy space outlined by Asian corporations backed by autocratic states like Japan, but a dreamscape of hope for a better life, according to a voice-over: “Tijuana today has many faces. It’s the Tijuana of the migrant, of injustice, of hunger, of insecurity, and of the maquiladora but it’s also the Tijuana of dreams.” Toward this end, the movie draws to a close with a scene of maquiladora women standing in the open, barren desert again, the repetitive performance of factory work casting light on women’s entrenched struggles in the US–Mexico borderlands. By performing their functionalist work outside the cage of the factory and engaging in

activism, the women expose the ethical demands of witnessing the actual work of feminine material labor elided in the glorientalist dreams of a corporate global takeover. The film concludes by centering the local perspectives of these women against their over-determination by foreign domination as glorientalized subjects. The “situated knowledge” of these “organic intellectuals,” cultural performers/workers, and political activists demonstrates the need to reappraise both the “glocal” but also gloriental impact of globalization through new visual economies of scale.

## Conclusion

This article contributes to several interdisciplinary fields, such as area/ border studies, globalization studies, transnational feminism, and media culture. Maquilapolis enables a feminist critique of the virtual ecologies of globalization by identifying the specter of global Asia and Japanese empire proliferating within the sur/realities of modern life. The film’s aesthetic and narrative production forces scholars and audiences to go beyond the given categories of identity, place, and difference within globalization studies to scrutinize how the modern West, which now includes East Asian nations, interacts with “the rest,” pointing up the multivariate forms of oppression found in corporatized, multinational spaces. Glorientalization as a metaphorical trope and analytic motion to a “worlding of the world” is a simulacrum or global image without a fixed referent. In the planetary “society of the spectacle,” glorientalization gives shape to relations among people that are “mediated by images,” providing a hyper-real representation of life that feeds into the autonomous movement of commodities and labor of “the non-living” (Debord 2010, 2). Not the same as a spirit or ghost that haunts from the past, specter indicates unrealized potential in the future sense, a disturbing image or prospect that draws on old hauntings. It is the perfect term for describing the fluctuating temporalities of globalization that transfigure and absorb the historical past (and future) of Orientalism and imperialism. Glorientalization is the by-product of a neocolonial capitalist machine predicated on the mechanization/virtualization of labor in a world market that appears more and more abstract as well as automated. The film Maquilapolis helps visualize glorientalization processes and specters existing in the twenty-first century. It takes a fresh perspective on globalization to apprehend how financially struggling countries like Mexico find

contact with wealthy Asian ones. It forces audiences and scholars to grapple with the messy, porous boundaries between the visceral in the visual, the corporal, and the cybernetic—bespeaking the (dis)embodied forms of desire, power, and knowledge within an expanding glorientalist landscape. As a commentary on the new intimacy of continents, Maquilapolis elucidates the spectral qualities of not only Asian capital but the specter of social justice for workers everywhere, which has yet to be met.

#### NOTES

1. I would like to thank Lisa Lowe, Tere Cesena, and my blind peer reviewers for their wonderful suggestions and great insights.
2. “Cyborg.” Merriam-Webster. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cyborg> (accessed June 13, 2014).
3. For McLuhan, Americans are becoming more Oriental through televisual spectatorship. He goes on to say: “The television form of experience is profoundly and subliminally introverting, an inward depth, meditative, oriental. The television child is a profoundly orientalized being. And he will not accept goals as objects in the world to pursue. He will accept a role, but he will not accept a goal. He goes inward. No greater revolution has ever occurred to western man or any other society in so short a time” (McLuhan 1966, 93).
4. This reference is a replay of the descriptions of women by local firms seeking to attract foreign investors.
5. Haraway later regretted her words in an interview, suggesting her narrative ended up further imperializing the indigenous Asian women of color whose material labor provides the foundation for the microelectronics industry. See Haraway 1991.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In his work, **Long Bui** explores the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality to discuss the intersections of globalization/colonialism, cyborg identity, and technoculture.

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