AT YOUR SERVICE

Latin Women in the Global Information Network

Introduction

The essay that follows took shape in the course of 1998. While I was working on it and presenting parts of it at different public events, I was also conducting research that served as the basis for three works: a short piece for public radio about a *maquiladora* worker in Tijuana who had sued her former employer, a subsidiary of Mattel Inc. for violation of her civil rights; my video installation, ***Access Denied***; and finally my play, ***The Incredible Disappearing Woman***. Together these works constitute my critical assessment of the emergent field of cybertheory, its problematic treatment of race, and the limited consideration of globalization and its impact on Latin America. It took me several years to figure out how to enter a discourse that I found so profoundly troubling, and even more time to create artwork that spoke of the issues I have just listed in a manner that was neither simplistically topical nor didactic.

Maquiladora sign
Photo: Coco Fusco

I distinctly recall my skepticism in 1994 when artworld engagement with digital technology reached the point of obsession. Though I could clearly see the advantages of using email and surfing the net for information, I could not understand why so many of my colleagues had adopted an unrepentantly euphoric view of digital media, or why they were acting as if there were something new about forging alliances between art and technology. I found myself leaving conferences in a daze, wondering if I had been sent in a time capsule back to the time of the Futurists. I winced as young bucks turned the metaphors of Paul Virilio and Deleuze and Guattari into a literal description of hardware that was developed by our military industrial complex. I felt pangs in my stomach watching bureaucrats grin about new alliances with corporations that would do cheap R&D by letting artists play with their toys. I listened in disgruntled silence to artworld arbiters who had professed commitment to cultural equity just years before abandon those concerns in favor of what they now touted as the only important change in their field at the end of the century.

For the first few years, I wanted to close my eyes and pretend this would all be gone shortly. But it didn't. I started to grasp that the celebration of the digital was a perfect antidote for an embattled non-profit sector of the artworld that had run out of steam after the culture wars and longed for an escape from politics. Not only did the rhetoric of the brave new world invigorate them, but it resonated with a monied class of technocrats and designers who were ready to finance and consume this new culture. That language also appealed to new generations of youths who had grown up in a forest of technologically induced simulations, from computer animation to video games to theme parks to electronic billboards, CD-Roms and action flics with high-end special effects. I recognize that sensibility in many of my students, and thus feel compelled to understand it.

So I forced my self to look and read. Though the complacency of much of the writing I discovered disturbed me, I found a handful of allies who were also concerned about how the electronic domain reflects the goals of a new corporate controlled, ultra-privatized, and guarded society. In the fall of 1998, I was invited to give the keynote address at the annual International Symposium of Electronic Art that was held that year in Liverpool and Manchester in the UK. The irony of celebrating the digital revolution in the cities that gave birth to the Industrial Revolution made the invitation doubly appealing. I wrote the following essay recalling all those nineteenth-century utopians and philosophers who spoke of working conditions in British factories and dissected capitalism's ills in the same halls through which I was to pass.

In the three years since I began to work on this piece and other related projects, I have witnessed a shift in discussions and actions within cyberculture and progressive activism. The euphoria that I describe below is beginning to fade, due perhaps in part to the signals from the stock market that the internet boom turned out to be the shortest cycle of prosperity in recent history. Several extremely cogent publications containing pertinent critiques of the colonialist tendencies of internet

culture have appeared in the United States that complement other writings from Europe, Canada, Australia. Those writings share the sensibility of the chroniclers of a growing network of activism against what author Naomi Klein calls "branding," the corporate takeover of every aspect of waking life. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, electronic subversion has grown increasingly sophisticated and has been embraced by both net_art communities and grassroots activists. Consciousness raising via internet is not limited to the distribution of alternative information, but has been extended to include alteration of the system itself. The best example of this change can be found in the work of Electronic Disturbance Theater, some of which I discuss in another essay in this volume, "The Unbearable Weightiness of Beings: Art in Mexico after NAFTA" (Chapter 8).

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At Your Service: Latin Women in the Global Information Network

Once upon a time when black intellectuals used to elaborate their arguments against racism and colonialism, they would be compelled to explain that they did come from places that existed, that they did have a culture, or that they were in fact human. I think of them as I reflect on the suggestion that in the age of digital technology "we" don't need to be concerned with the violent exercise of power on bodies and territories anymore because "we" don't have to carry all that meat and dirt along to the virtual promised land. I think of them because I have been visiting places where the hardware of the digital revolution is assembled, and the people are not a part of this culture, and the conditions that they work and live in form the underside of the post-human. If we are to comprehend how identity and subjectivity are being reshaped in the digital age, we must look at the relationship between the desire to enable minds to fantasmatically disengage from bodies and the actuality of technologies that objectify bodies and bodily activity, thus disengaging them from minds. Digital disembodiment's fiction of transcendence relies on the expulsion of the abject interrelations between bodies and technologies from the virtual imaginary.

Clearly, I am not the first person to question the universal applicability of the digital revolution's emancipatory rhetoric, or to ask who gains and who loses by ignoring the political realities in which these technologies develop. There are many ways in which the question of access to the electronic wonderland has been posed to demonstrate how imbalances of power in the material world carry over into the virtual domain.

The approaches of artists and theorists to address the problems of identity and access in the digital domain tend to fall into a few basic categories. The first goal for

many artists of color is to demonstrate that not being white does not necessarily mean that one is a techno-primitive or a technophobe. These demonstrations are buttressed either by claiming the legacy of *détournement* of Western technology by non-whites or by ironically retelling of the history of the adulatory embrace of technology by non-Western elites before and after colonialism. These efforts are favorably read as counternarratives to the primitivist and folkloric tendencies of cultural nationalism and populism, and they are also interpreted as fundamentally accepting of the "emancipatory" script that links technology with liberation. This approach reminds me of the kind of genuflecting that people of color were compelled to engage in the pre-Civil Rights era, when their acceptance into white society hinged on their proving themselves to be good candidates for assimilation. It bears keeping in mind that the digital art explosion comes on the heels of the backlash against multiculturalism and identity politics, in a revamped cultural milieu in which white artists and institutions are newly armed with means of eliciting silence on the subject of race and power in exchange for acceptance.

A second approach focuses on the substantive content of internet exchange, science fiction, and video games to analyze the significance of racialized images in virtual reality. Instead of assuming that cyberspace is "beyond race," these analyses examine how race is "contained" by being designated as anti-social or dehistoricized by being rendered as purely physical. For example, "passing" for non-raced (i.e. white), is more often than not a rule of "good conduct" in mixed-company in chatrooms, at least in the US. Theorist Beth Kolko notes in her study of the popular Multiple User Domain LambdaMoo that it allows users to set properties for their age, hometown, timezone, webpage, friends, gender, online home, feature objects, and email address, but not their race.[1]

On the other hand, colonialist imagery and perspectives dominate simulated landscapes. As Lisa Nakamura points out in her brilliant analysis of the exotic imagery used in high-tech advertising, diversity is displayed as the sign of what the internet will eradicate, while at the same time the picturesque landscapes visualize cyber surfing as an extension of imperialist adventurism.[2] A good deal of work in this area addresses the significance of representations of cyborgs as mixed-race women, and explores why the "miscegenation" generated by morphing and math games that produces honey-colored cyber girls such as *Time* magazine's SymEve elicits a similar libidinal response to the colonial trope it invokes as its biological and historical predecessor.[3]

Despite the claims that cyberspace is "raceless," it is difficult to avoid concluding that scientists, web designers, and other digital artists are appropriating black cultural tropes to represent psychic freedom in cyberspace (references to Bush Spirits and Sojourner Truth for example) in the same way that modernists turned to Africa to represent irrationality. These observations confirm that image-makers, regardless of their tools, continue to borrow from the already known to imagine what they cannot see.

A third strategy aims at showing how the rhetoric of disinterested disembodiment is culturally valenced and speciously apolitical. This approach takes note of how the euphemistic invocation of the internet as a free space for communicative interaction among equals and of its users as "communities" masks the economic imperative to structure that space as a market and to channel usage into a dynamic of privatized consumption.[4] Such arguments foreground such "public alternatives" as activist uses of internet communication for either reconstituting fragmented communities or for the formation of oppositional virtual public spheres that circumvent state control of information and civic dialogue. These considerations are sometimes deemed unaesthetic and instrumentalist in their view of technology, or they are critiqued as expressions of romantic longing for communal politics in a post-political, individualist era.

A fourth strategy traces the historical roots of technophobia among peoples whose primary contact with machines has been violent. This mode of inquiry deconstructs the myth of the neutrality of technology, science, and mathematics by emphasizing how Europe and the United States have used technology more consistently than racial classification to distinguish themselves from other cultures and measure their superiority over them. Analyses here focus on the commercial imperatives underlying the use of bio-technologies, addressing ethical issues of the post-human era. Critics look at for example the genetic experiments on indigenous peoples promoted by pharmaceutical companies and the localized efforts to ban such testing; the dichotomy between the rapid advances in telepresent robotic surgery financed by the US military versus the laggardly pace of supplying low-cost medical treatment to millions of people in Africa with Aids; proposals to implant electronic detectors in the bodies of criminals for long-distance tracking; the repressive use of medical technology on poor, colonized, and incarcerated peoples, ranging from forced sterilization to demanding that indigent patients submit to being used for drug experiments in exchange for medical treatment, to the revelations in 1998 that a New York hospital was conducting drug tests on adolescent brothers of incarcerated black men to determine the controllability of their presumed aggressiveness. These bodily interactions with technology form a counterpoint to the discourses that stress freedom from biology and presence via screen names and avatars, virtual cross-dressing, designer babies, plastic surgery and prosthetics, and teleconferencing.

Together, these inquiries elaborate what cultural theorist Chela Sandoval has called an oppositional consciousness within cybercultural discourse,[5] one that reads the teleology of techno-liberation not as natural law but as the ideology of the virtual class, scrutinizing the implications of representing the new technological revolution as an unending experience of mood enhancement and empowerment. While these approaches share mainstream cyber theories' impetus to assess new technologies' impact on the world and our imaginations, they cast a skeptical look at the predilection for the poststructuralist rhetoric of fluidity and polyvocality for three main

reasons. First, the protracted metaphorical references to the "feminine" morphology of computing and the internet, and to transgendered marginals and social outcasts, anti-authoritarian rebels and willfully irrational nomads as its protagonists creates a rather convenient masquerade of diversity for a milieu still overwhelmingly dominated by an extremely powerful, firmly entrenched, and predominantly American male sector of world population. The abundance of descriptions of net communication as structurally anti-authoritarian, decentralized, "rhizomic," open-ended, flowing, as if it followed some force of nature, are effectively diverting attention from the centralized economic formations that sustain it. In the same way that concentrating solely on what we see on the screen suppresses the status of the computer as a manufactured object, formalist fixation of the net we use as consumers or make a living off as designers obfuscates the political and economic realities out of which digital media and telecommunications emerge. Far from being a decentralized business, the electronics, electrical components, and electrical industries are among the top ten most monopolistic industries on earth, with more than 50 per cent of the world market being controlled by the five top firms. The digitalization of transnational banking has enabled fifty of the world's largest commercial banks and finance companies to control 60 per cent of the world's productive capital.[6]

Second, poststructuralism's cogent and necessary critique of the philosophical underpinnings of the unitary bourgeois subject is too often construed in electronic media contexts as a justification for dismissing all ethical discourses as repressive. This effectively suppresses the history of humanism as an oppositional discourse that has been used to reveal the discrepancy between democratic ideals and actual inequities, against authoritarian regimes, against racist, sexist, and classist distortions of "universality," and against the excesses of instrumental reason. By casting all concern about the alliance of post-human discourse and instrumental reason as a vestige of an outdated monolith or a dystopic fantasy, poststructuralism's deployment within cybertheory creates an apologia for pan-capitalism's commodification of the ephemeral and its demonization of legal restraints on unbridled exercise of power on bodies and minds. This paves the way for views that endorse the eradication of market regulatory mechanisms, social service safety nets, labor laws, and civil rights. For poor people, this has meant less freedom, not more. As an antidote to the idealist and formalist strains in cyberculture's rejection of the body and the social, approaches that actually address the abject interface of bodies and machines instead of jumping straight into the screen constitute a strategic, materialist humanism, that insists on the political dimension of technology and calls for the redirection of its power for ends other than pure pleasure or profit.

These modes of inquiry tacitly point to the need to reframe the question of access as something other than a technical problem of how to develop more user-friendly machines, or a market imperative to advance computer literacy, both of which are primarily motivated by the techno-elite's search for a more efficient work-force

– which at this point means better trained at the top, less trained at the bottom, and more readily positioned for increased consumption of commodified leisure. To believe that technological development will even out access for all on its own imputes an innate benevolence to it and frees users from political responsibility, while it naturalizes the status quo. This position, willfully or naively, ignores how our current global economic system is structured not only to increase wealth at the top of the social ladder but also to decrease wealth at the bottom to accelerate profit accumulation. It also overlooks how the democratic potential of revolutions in the past have been realized, not simply by a trickling down of benefits from above alone but by struggles to redefine terms and priorities from below.

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; and digital technology is a market-driven phenomenon that organizes our vision in the era of multinational capitalism, with global economic ramifications. Digital technology has reshaped the nature of capitalism as a world system; it has redefined the "postcolonial" space via neoliberal privatization, transnational banking, long-distance management, and the internationalization of labor; it has reformulated the dynamics of belonging and community in those spaces via telecommunications. Though the expansion of individual experience is the leitmotiv of the cybercultural advertising, focusing on the interconnectedness of the digital revolution and globalization turns our attention to how people's relationship to technology positions them within a network that connects them to worlds both on- and off-line, and allows us to ask how those relations not only posit new modes of consumption but also call for new concepts of citizenship and engagement with the public sphere.

The digital revolution has provided the technology that has reorganized what used to be known as the third world, making those territories into low-end markets and low-wage labor pools for multinational corporations. None the less, the political and economic implications of its centrality to globalization are elided by the repeated fetishization of new technologies as *the* primary agent of democracy. The story most familiar within the context of discussions about creative uses of new technologies details how it has enabled opposition groups to circumvent government control of information and form international support networks. It is within this framework – that is, the emancipatory, in this case anti-statist, script of the digital revolution – that the Zapatistas' web sites (which are actually made in the US) and electronic mass mailings have been celebrated as the quintessential subaltern electronic subversion of the authoritarian state. It would be ridiculous to argue that there is no truth to the claim that the internet has saved the Zapatistas from total annihilation and generated the international financial support they need to sustain themselves materially. It is also true that internet activist networks are an absolutely crucial component of a host of progressive political efforts. Indeed, such protectionist governments as those in power in China, Cuba, and Iran are extremely wary of making the internet available for private use precisely for this reason. But the fact

that we can learn about the Zapatistas via the internet does not mean that the problem of access has been resolved by our consumption of information about them. (Little attention is paid in this context to the fact that their political demands call for a deceleration of economic policies that underpin globalization and the digital revolution.)

What I want to suggest here is that while there are certain narratives linking the subaltern with technology that do confirm the democratic potential of the digital revolution, they are most appealing precisely because they enhance rather than disrupt its emancipatory script. Inuits who use the internet to transcend harsh weather conditions near the North Pole or masked rebels transmitting diatribes against state violence from the mountains of Chiapas, or, for that matter, black athletes and artists endorsing laptops and cell phones confirm the dominant ideology that technology increases democracy while it generates profit. To focus solely on these apparent electronic victories misleadingly constructs the thrust of technological development as benevolent and economically disinterested. It also occludes the ways in which the industries that underpin the digital revolution contain information about their own undemocratic, if not inhumane, practices.

The libertarian strain of cybercultural discourse shares its anti-governmental stance with neoliberal economists who characterize all forms of social organization with goals other than pleasure or profit as inefficient and/or repressive. What this perspective underplays is that we do not all enter the market or participate in the digital revolution on equal footing, and that once the states lose ground, most people in the world are left without any sort of buffer against the free market's power, not only to commodify their needs and desires but to objectify them. The focus of attention on the inefficiency of the state bespeaks a rather limited notion of how power is articulated in the digital era, since it does not address the growing political force of the stateless corporation and its unregulated power to alter the social, political, and economic conditions almost anywhere in the world. (Of the world's 100 largest economies, fifty-one are corporations, not nation states.)[7]

Under the aegis of globalization, new alliances between third-world states and multinationals have led to wholesale privatization. In much of Latin America, this has resulted not simply in more individual freedom but in economic destabilization, monetary devaluations, drastic losses of purchasing power, and the disappearance of much of the middle class. While cellular phones have been introduced in areas in Latin America that are grossly underserved by regular phone service, the privatization of phone and electricity services in many parts of the Southern Cone has led to skyrocketing prices, and increased inaccessibility of services. Once nationalist, broad-based civil servant middle-classes have been replaced by trimmed down technocratic managerial elites quick to distinguish themselves from protectionist precursors and majority populations struggling at the level of subsistence. The underclass that left rural areas and underground urban economies to join the global assembly line has discovered that its pay is worth less every year, or that factories

have moved to neighboring regions or countries in search of lower wages. (While news of the Zapatistas' demands that the government respect indigenous rights filled the airwaves in 1997 and 1998, for example, plans were under way to bring assembly plants to Chiapas, which investors claim is more attractive than the northern border because labor is cheaper and less transient, which means people are poorer and less able to migrate.)

This swelling poverty, together with alliances between states and foreign investors, has produced new malleable work forces and new forms of information control about exploitation of labor and the environment by multinationals. While government corruption and censorship in Latin America, for example, are held up continuously – and I would add rightfully – for public scrutiny, attempts to monitor the labor practices of multinationals there are considered far less media-worthy, and are even lampooned as the misguided concerns of those guiltridden about their newfound wealth. These attempts to discredit human rights and labor activists notwithstanding, unionizing efforts are severely curtailed in export processing zones. Entry into assembly plants by the media is strictly limited by both state and corporate officials. In Mexico, special visas are required for foreigners to enter assembly plants in free trade zones, recording devices other than internal surveillance cameras are generally banned inside plants except for during specially planned press conferences to showcase new equipment, and public relations offices provide strategic image management. In the summer of 1998, for example, a major business organization in Honduras called upon the government to declare an American union official who was attempting to forge connections with his Central American counterparts a persona non grata.

Despite cybercultural claims that we have moved beyond cultural and racial identity, there are particular ways in which the digital revolution participates in globalization's redrawing the lines that distinguish bodies from each other, rather than erasing those lines altogether. For all the celebration of mobility and fluidity, digital technology organizes a world economic order that thrives on a global labor pool of poor non-white people – for whom "access" to many critical signifying spaces – legal, symbolic, and electronic – is diminished and even denied. This worldwide service sector extends beyond the cashiers at fast food chains to assembly lines in free trade zones, to legions of data processors in remote villages, to thousands of telephone sales workers inside American prisons where half the black male population spends its early adulthood. These people experience "flexibility" as chronic economic instability and alienation – not from a pre-industrial past, but from the possibility of meaningful engagement with the present. For all the advertising imperatives to make consumers identify with logos that unite items and activities in different milieux, the global labor pool operates in a system that does not permit them to identify with a trade, or to maintain a clear sense of the chain of authority that links them to a transnational economy. Whatever their biological constitution, these workers are interpolated into the global economic order under the sign of the

passive subaltern female, forced by necessity into absolute obedience to hierarchical managerial structures with invisible but omnipotent bosses, remunerated as if their wage was supplementary, and expelled from the workplace if they speak out against the manifold ways that atomization is exacted upon them in the name of efficiency.

If the Industrial Revolution created the factory town, then the digital revolution must be credited with the perfection of the export processing or free trade zone, the sites in third-world countries where low-end production takes place. In the Dominican Republic, they are nicknamed *zonas de la muerte*. Work in these territories takes place in assembly plants or *maquiladoras*, an Arabic term that entered colonial Mexico via Spain to signify the processing of foreign grains. Approximately 70 percent of the workforce is female. In the past year, I have been conducting research on women maquiladora workers in the US–Mexico border and the Caribbean. Though these women have virtually no access to the internet, they are a crucial component of the global information circuit. Not only do they assemble much of the digital revolution's hardware, but their low wages maximize multinational profits and facilitate accelerated consumption of electronic media for the virtual class. In Tijuana alone, they produce more televisions than anywhere else in the world. Their growing importance to the governments and business elites of their countries as bargaining chips with which to lure multinationals depends on their being symbolically constructed as passive subaltern subjects. By this I mean that they are characterized as inclined, through a felicitous combination of nature and culture, to accept tedium, and to obey unquestioningly. This rationalization of their role in the global economy draws upon pre-existing cultural stereotypes about Latin women and about women's work to mask the intentional exploitation of their economic disadvantage. Ironically, these "feminized" women are more likely to occupy the traditionally "masculine" position of heads of households and primary income providers. And not surprisingly, there are sociologists who argue that these women serve primarily as shock troops, setting in place a work dynamic that can then be applied to laborers of either gender.

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I began my own inquiry into the *maquiladora* by stumbling on a bit of history that has become for me a kind of parable, a tale about performance and technology, women, sex, and death. While I was travelling over a year ago, I heard a story about an art event that took place in 1980 in which a male artist in Los Angeles underwent a vasectomy – as performance art – and videotaped it for public viewing. As a prelude to this technological intervention upon his own body, he confessed that he had deposited his last seed in the body of a dead woman. To obtain the body, he crossed the border into Mexico. According to his account, he paid $80 for one hour of access to a female cadaver and complied with his procurers' requirement that he make no visual record of his sex act, but he did make an audiotape. I later learned that his

peers were revolted by his confession, and that some took measures to suppress its circulation in the media, which eventually led to his leaving the country claiming that he was a victim of rabid feminists.

Nearly twenty years later, I discovered that I knew several of the witnesses. His critics sought to respect a collective pact of silence they hoped would kill the piece's power as a consensual hallucination about transgressing the "human" by crossing the boundary between life and death. His defenders sought to disassociate the performative gestures from their sociopolitical referents, thus positing the aesthetic dimension as transcendent. One art historian suggested, for example, that the fact that dead women could be made available posed disturbing ethical questions about Mexico, but had nothing to do with what was a purely aesthetic act on the part of the artist. Shortly after I began my inquiry, the records of the performance were unearthed for a major museum exhibition in Los Angeles, and the curator in charge took pains to dismiss the original controversy as irrelevant – in fact, a colleague of mine who worked in the education department of the museum at the time of the exhibition recalls that the chief curator specifically rejected staff questions about the ethics of the piece. When I finally had the opportunity to communicate with the artist, via internet, and asked what he recalled about the woman, he refused to answer any specific questions, referring me instead to his web site.

This minor footnote of performance history became a harbinger of the contemporary scenarios of feminine sacrifice and effacement in the border zone. There was that artist, exhibiting a portrait of himself on the operating table willingly turning himself into an object of medical science to express his desire to detach himself from his body's procreative function, playing a tape of his transgressive rejection of his generative capacities – a gesture that required that another place and another person serve him in silence and then, disappear. Here am I, wondering, some twenty years later if the underlying act of transgression ever existed, if it has any cultural implications, what the investment is in suppressing them, and why the status of the performance as art demands a reluctance to consider the dead Mexican woman as significant.

Not being able to determine who this woman was, or even know for certain if she ever existed, I found myself speculating about who she may have been. Several people suggested to me that she was probably a prostitute. At first I read this simply as their attempt to explain how her body could have been left unclaimed in a morgue, but as I heard it repeated over and over again, I started to wonder if this imputed identity as a socially outcast woman who in life chose to sell her body didn't serve to shut the lid on discussions of the ethics of his buying time with her for sex after death.

As I continued on my search, I learned that there were thousands of young women living alone in the border regions of Mexico, and that many of them shuttle back and forth between brothels and assembly lines depending on the vicissitudes of the job market and their health. Drawn to the border from rural villages by the

possibility of employment in the *maquiladoras*, they come to these bloated border cities that lack support systems for such a rapidly growing work-force. The twilight zones of science fiction pale by comparison to this world of industrial parks filled with gigantic hangars bearing corporate logos and red light districts with half-broken neon signs, gated fortresses perched on grand boulevards and mazes of cinder block and tin shanties along dirt roads, rows of tires wedged into hills of poor *barrios* to hold back mudslides and a corrugated steel wall stretching for miles along the border to hold back the immigrants; shopping malls and toxic waste dumps, truck depots packed with portable entertainment centers and forests of abandoned cars. The telephones, televisions, toys through which we channel our interaction with the virtual flow out of this world, shielding from view a parallel flow of illicit desirables, from commercial sex to narcotics to involuntarily donated organs to scores of undocumented human beings.

Not surprisingly, disappearance from these areas is hardly uncommon. In Juarez, more than 150 young women vanished between 1993 and 1998 (the toll in 2000 had risen to 220). Many bodies had turned up in the desert, with signs of their having been raped. Several of them have not been identified or claimed. It has often been suggested that these women were prostitutes, even though the evidence indicates that they were more likely to have been *maquiladora* workers. Some people say these are revenge killings against a new class of women with bigger paychecks than their male peers. A criminologist reported to the police years ago that they were probably victims of a serial killer, and a committee of family members protests publicly for an investigation on a regular basis, but little effort has been made by law enforcement to pursue this matter. Even less attention is paid to the environmental conditions that increase the possibility of such violence taking place.

The fact that the *maquiladora* work-force is nearly three-quarters female could be said to put pressure on traditional notions of family and female status within it. But the extent to which this increase in industrial employment can be read as female underclass empowerment depends on how one accounts for other key factors. It was an overall drop in real value of wages, brought about by the monetary devaluations and deregulation that brought them into the *maquiladora* and catapulted their male counterparts across the border or into the underworld of subemployment and crime. A substantial proportion of them are single heads of households without access to childcare or other services that would traditionally be provided by extended family networks. Entry age is 14, which allows management to capitalize on their inexperience. With the exception of the garment industry, whose practices are less agist, workers are usually forced out of the *maquiladoras* by 35, cutting off the possibility of more experienced workers assuming positions of leadership. Their pay – usually $30–40 a week – is higher than the country's minimum wage, but provides them with less than what is needed to feed a small family on a daily basis. Their presence in the industrial work-force may eventually compel organized labor in Mexico to acknowledge that this shift in the gender composition of its constituency should be

reflected in the orientation and composition of leadership. However, they face multinationals that have the two-pronged advantage of a neverending supply of desperate workers in many different countries and the support of local governmental authorities who ignore or condone their suppression of attempts at lateral association to keep companies from moving to other countries. In a gesture that seems to have sprung from the pages of Jean Baudrillard, many plants sign blanket contracts with phantom unions without notifying employees, so that other unions operating in workers' interests are prevented from intervening.

These advantages also enable management to take an excessively invasive attitude toward workers with little fear of reprisal – ranging from unwarranted searches of personal belongings, sexual intimidation, and the gratuitous control of bathroom breaks in the name of productivity quotas. The need to discipline the biological functions of the female body so that workers serve more efficiently results in somewhat paradoxical behavior from management. On the one hand, enormous pressure is often exerted to discourage and even prevent pregnancy (including dispensing contraceptives and making pregnancy tests a mandatory component of job applications, though this is a violation of international law). On the other hand, single mothers' sense of responsibility for their children's welfare is sometimes manipulated to justify extending work hours and demanding increased productivity. The women are brought in contact with hundreds of female peers on a daily basis, which might suggest possibilities of association, but in some plants they are compelled to stand far enough apart not to be able to hear one another, or to wear earplugs, or to have their conversations monitored even during breaks. Their move out of the informal economies of domestic service and street vending onto the assembly line, in theory, entitles them to such benefits as social security, medical care, and maternity leave, but these benefits are easily withheld, and often require protracted and costly legal battles in order to be obtained. That they live in makeshift dwellings, segregated in cramped neighborhoods devoid of basic services encourages them to band together to steal electricity from wealthier areas to light their streets and homes, but telephones and computers are beyond their reach. I interviewed a woman worker who ran a small black-and-white television in her home off a car battery, but the majority can hardly afford to purchase one.

Now if you think that I am painting a bleak picture because I cannot perceive any benefits wrought by the new technological revolution, let me concede that while these border zones filled with transients, traffickers, and tourists pose more dangers, they also offer greater possibilities of association to women than one might have in a small village or in domestic service. While intellectuals debating the benefits of technology may be still caught up with the legacy of Luddites, I couldn't find any such tendencies among the people I've spoken to or read about. No one I interviewed longed to return to a pre-technological environment. Every worker, labor lawyer, human rights activist, and economist I questioned accepted economic integration and the expansion of free trade as the inevitable future. Though there are plenty of

popular expressions that characterize the border as a twilight zone and foreign companies as malevolent, most people I interviewed had a much more nuanced perception of the *maquiladora* and their managers, differentiating between the degrees of repression and harassment and showing appreciation for and acceptance of authority they deemed fair. On the other hand, many workers choose to ignore health hazards and violation of privacy out of economic desperation and lack of information about their basic rights. What they seek is the means, both local and global, to reduce the violence of the process by improving labor and environmental conditions and forcing multinationals to adhere to laws they now transgress with impunity.

Nothing has been more beneficial to achieving this end than the expanding networks of grassroots feminist, labor, and environmental groups, international human rights organizations and other NGOs that form the transnational "public sphere activism" that counterbalances multinational corporations' global networks. They are veritable channels through which global citizenship is politically activated. The strategies of these entities reflect awareness that traditional, single-issue, nation-based forms of political subversion directed at the state- and nation-based legal systems are inadequate means of fomenting change in the digital age. Instead, they apply ongoing pressure on an international level via countersurveillance and direct action at key points (which include commercial and state institutions). As I have already mentioned, electronic communication is a key component in the orchestration of these activities and the dissemination of information. It is also a critical means of generating financial support for oppositional political movements that are strategically denied sustenance at the local level. The organizations play a leadership role in shaping direct action by politicizing consumption, advocating boycotts of particularly heinous multinationals as a means of altering their policies and practices.

The most difficult question for me to address, however, is what to do with these issues as an artist. In her excellent essay on the intersections and gaps between postcolonial and electronic media theory, Maria Fernandez noted that while postcolonial work has made the question of history central to its inquiries, electronic media theory (and much art as well) rejects history as irrelevant or reduces it to recombinant visual data.[8] I count myself among those who find these erasures profoundly disturbing, especially when I recall that it was in the wake of real technologically generated disasters in the twentieth century that survivors have implored us never to forget. At this point, I only have questions, not answers. Is the centrality of corporate sponsorship for aesthetic development in the field of digital media encouraging self-censorship of historical subject matter? Is the role of "public art" in the age of simulation to provide doses of "reality," to politicize the "loss of the referent" by asking who suffers the greatest loss or gain when a cultural milieu finds a theoretical justification for jettisoning imaginative engagement with the social? How can technologies that are promoted as the means of dissecting the physical world, of extending our physical and mental capacities, and of creating an

imaginative realm beyond the social be brought to bear imaginatively upon the social itself? Is there a creative halfway point between the investigative reporting of internet activism and the anarchic antics of irreverent hackers who create a momentary ruckus by tampering with official electronic records? Is there a way to intertwine reality and fiction that does something other than conveying that life looks more like a movie or that we would prefer to live in one? Looking back at the vast bodies of literature, photography, cinema, and video that provide us with an imaginative chronicle and critique of the impact of technologies on human societies up to now, can we remain open to the revelatory power of an image that bears a trace of the real without interpreting this as tyrannical or manipulative of realism or literalism? Does this mean, as I now suspect, that electronic artists who refuse to forget about history will have to tease out the possibilities of telepresence? Or has the limited success of earlier forms of media activism, coupled with the obvious financial incentive to support rather than critique new media, made such questions uninteresting or irrelevant or impossible to answer?

It seems to me that the emancipatory script of the digital revolution is simply inadequate to interpret the situation of those on the "have not" side of the access divide, and the situation of the *maquiladora* workers is a case in point. Calling these women "cyborgs" naturalizes the economic order to which they are subjected and mythifies the political nature of their interface with technology, which is precisely what needs at this point to be clarified. One could argue that an industry in which women are so highly represented is thus more feminine, but this approach would confuse presence with power, and ignore the strategic elimination of opportunities for their subjective intervention in the production process and of external support systems. One could assume that the *maquiladora* will do for them what the factory, the secretarial pool, and the early telecommunications industry did for European and American working-class women – that is, get them out of the house and make them financially independent. However, the Industrial Revolution's working class and the digital revolution's service sector cannot be collapsed into each other that easily. Digital technology has restructured work so as to perfect the extraction of profit by decentralizing production and minimizing the intervention of and remuneration to the laborer; and there are plenty of sociological studies that indicate that what is offered by the export processing and service sectors are dead-end jobs. Digital technology reshaped the nature of education and leisure to serve the interests of business, aiming at the formation of an efficient and consolidated economic network complete with programmed leisure – there is no reason to expect that it will naturally broaden the possibilities for political engagement.

If we embrace the idea that the digital revolution has altered our social and political lives and made us members of a global culture, then we are also compelled to acknowledge that we participate in a global economy with networks that connect us as consumers to these women as producers. The degree to which we perceive their exploitation as necessary or as an evolutionary stage (both common arguments

used by neoliberal economists and *maquiladora* management) depends largely on the degree to which we cast the digital revolution as politically neutral. To do so is to deny that economic leverage is its politics. The extent to which we affirm our link to their situation is contingent on whether we are prepared to contemplate an emerging politics of global citizenship. Following the methods that have been elaborated by other cyber-activist efforts, political engagement begins with assuming the role of witness, exercising pressure via oppositional surveillance tactics and refusing the role of passive consumer. What their lack of access represents for me, as a cultural producer exploring the possibilities of new media, is a challenge to expand the imaginative and metaphorical dimensions of telepresence, collapsing cultural and geographical distance so as to broaden and strengthen a sense of connection to them.

Notes

[1] Beth E. Kolko, "Erasing @race: Going White in the (Inter)face," in ***Race and Cyberspace***, ed. Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert Rodman (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 216.

[2] Lisa Nakamura, "Where Do You Want To Go Today? Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet and Transnationality," in ***Race and Cyberspace***, pp. 15–26.

[3] Jennifer Gonzalez, "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research," in Chris Hables Gray (ed.), ***The Cyborg Handbook*** (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 267–280.

[4] Lincoln Dahlberg, "Cyberspace and the Public Sphere: Exploring the Democratic Potential of the Net," ***Convergence***, volume 4, number 1, (spring 1998), pp. 70–84.

[5] Chela Sandoval, "New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Repressed," in ***The Cyborg Handbook***, pp. 407–422.

[6] See David C. Korten's, ***Globalizing Civil Society: Reclaiming Our Right to Power*** (New York: Seven Sotires Press, 1998).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Maria Fernandez, "Postcolonial Media Theory," ***Third Text***, number 47 (summer 1999), pp. 11–17.