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1

Introduction

Disposable Women and Other
Myths of Global Capitalism

The most obvious function of myths is the explanation of facts, whether natural or cultural.

Encyclopedia Britannica Online

Myth is depoliticized speech.

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1972)

Everyday, around the world, women who work in the third world factories of global firms face the idea that they are disposable. In this book, I examine how this idea proliferates, both within and beyond factory walls, through the telling of a story that I call "the myth of the disposable third world woman." This international tale is told by people from all walks of life, including factory managers, corporate executives, and consumers across the globe who buy their products; it achieves translation across languages, cultures, and historical moments; and it is widely believed to be a factual account of a woman worker whose disposability is naturally and culturally scripted. Through several years of ethnographic research, spanning 1991–2003, I made this story the focus of my investigations within global factories and their surrounding urban areas in northern Mexico and in southern China. Illustrating what is

at stake in the telling of this myth for these factories, for the people who work in them, and for the constant flow of global capital is my principal objective.

The myth of the disposable third world woman revolves around the trials and tribulations of its central protagonist—a young woman from a third world locale—who, through the passage of time, comes to personify the meaning of human disposability: someone who eventually evolves into a living state of worthlessness. The myth explains that this wasting process occurs within the factories that employ her, as she, within a relatively short period of time and at a young age, loses the physical and mental faculties for which she was initially employed, until she is worth no more than the cost of her dismissal and substitute. In other words, over time, this woman turns into a form of industrial waste, at which point she is discarded and replaced. The myth explains this unlucky fate as a factual outcome of natural and cultural processes that are immune to external tampering. In short, there is nothing, says the myth, that can be done to save its unfortunate protagonist from her sad destiny.

Yet, paradoxically, even as this protagonist turns into a living form of human waste, the myth explains how she simultaneously produces many valuable things with her labor. Indeed, this paradox provides the myth with its organizational structure. For, the myth explains, despite her ineluctable demise, the disposable third world woman possesses certain traits that make her labor particularly valuable to global firms that require dexterous, patient, and attentive workers. And these traits make her so desirable that global firms go out of their way to employ her whenever possible because the things that she makes generate value even as she depreciates in value. So, on the one hand, we hear a story of a woman who is, essentially, wasting away, and then, on the other, we hear that this very woman is creating all kinds of wonderful and popular things that can be bought and sold on the international market. And, as it turns out, the myth explains how this internal contradiction means that this disposable third world woman is, in fact, quite valuable since she, like so many other characters of mythic lore, generates widespread prosperity through her own destruction. This conundrum caught my attention in factories throughout Mexico and China as I sought to understand how someone whose body represents a site of living waste can still create, with that same body, things that are so valuable. How does worth develop from worthlessness?

In making such questions the focus of my investigation and the subsequent analysis, I illustrate how the myth is a discourse with direct consequences for the functioning of global factories, for their

employees, and, more broadly, for the spatial circuitry of global capital. As geographer Geraldine Pratt has written, discourses are "sociospatial circuits through which cultural and personal stories are circulated, legitimated, and given meaning" within the production of the material realm that we call "geography" (Pratt 1999, 218).[1] Applied to the concern at hand, I employ this notion of discourses as sociospatial circuits to interrogate how the myth, as a form of discourse, produces specific subjects, their spatiality, and their significance for the relentlessly changing landscapes of global capitalism.[2] This means that I probe the story's internal circuitry to examine how it contributes to the making of a sentient being who is decidedly female, third world, and disposable and yet who embodies a form of labor crucial for the materialization of global capitalism around the world.

I must confess that my motivations for exploring this topic stem from my own political opposition to the myth and from my desire to do something about it. I consider the story, and the material circuitry it supports, to be dangerous for working people, and especially for the women to whom the story is directly applied. I also believe that it implicates not only those who work for global firms but also those who consume their products. I realize that, in admitting these beliefs, I have dashed any claims to objectivity or impartiality with regard to the outcome of this research.

Socially Useful Lies

Not all stories are myths, although I believe it can be said that all myths are stories.[3] Like myths told over the centuries,[4] the myth of the disposable third world woman attempts to provide steadfast lessons about what is accepted as "truth," "factual reality," and deepseated "human essence" all packaged within a synthetic narrative, laden with symbolism and drama. Myths have muddied the waters between fact and fiction since the time of Plato and the Sophists who transformed the Homeric significance of myth away from "truth" and toward a more complex meaning of, as anthropologist Talal Asad has put it, "a socially useful lie" (Asad 2003, 28). Their usefulness derives largely from their claims to unquestionable authority, which Roland Barthes (1972) captured with his statement that myths are "depoliticized speech." Myths, to use his words, "empty [reality] of history" by cloaking political situations with narratives of human essence and naturalized tautologies. In consequence, myths are vehicles for foreclosing discussions of politics as they use fantastic characters and situations that depict hierarchical relationships

broadly believed to have bearing on "real life" without having to explain these relationships.

Common themes across the gamut of myths, including those of interest to me here, include linking chaos to social threats; justifying social hierarchies, such as those between women and men, the wealthy and the poor, and so on; and explaining inequities as resulting from the unstoppable forces of fate. In this way, myths are not told only for entertainment. Rather, such mythic themes course through narrative mediums that have long been used to influence social behavior on the basis that power is naturalized, apolitical, and beyond human intervention. As Asad (2003) writes, "Myth [is] not merely a (mis) representation of the *real*. It [is] material for shaping the possibilities and limits of action. And in general it appears to have done this by feeding the desire to display the actual" (29; my brackets).

Mythic protagonists—such as, gods, goddesses, spirits, and other extraordinary figures—who do not reside in the experiential realm of human existence but who, nevertheless, reflect this experience writ large are key to the function of myth as an explanation or validation of social realities. Often, these figures transcend the specificities of any particular human condition and illustrate abstract qualities that are believed to be part of human existence more generally. For instance, some mythic figures represent the abstract qualities of fertility, love, and power; others represent grief, mischievousness, and greed. These qualities are part of their essence and do not change with superficial transformations in appearance (Littleton 2002). What makes these characters so compelling is that, despite their far-fetched qualities and predestined fortunes, something about them "rings true" with real life. And through their experiences, we are meant to learn something about ourselves and the world in which we live.

The tale of the disposable third world woman shares such properties of the mythic genre. Its protagonist is larger than life in that she exceeds the limits of human experience. No one answers to her name, "disposable third world woman." She has no specific cultural profile other than an undefined one that is found in an amorphous region called "the third world."[5] Her identity as "woman" is likewise too vague to offer any specific insights into her character as, obviously, women do not share some essential sameness.[6] And even though many people around the world encounter the belief that they are disposable, few, if any, identify themselves as the bearers of the abstract condition of disposability (Bales 2004; Chang 2000). The disposable third world woman is, consequently, a composite personality built of different abstractions (third world woman, and disposability, for example), which, while not characterizing anyone in particular, form

the pillar of a story intended to explain social circumstances and validate specific practices based on the idea of her in concrete settings. In this fashion, the disposable third world woman functions like other mythic figures, such as the self-obsessed Narcissus and the blindly ambitious Prometheus, who embody intrinsic and indelible flaws that explain not only their own demise but also the demise of *real* people who, in everyday life and in different situations, share their signifying traits. No one may be identical to the disposable third world woman, but through the detailing of this myth, we are meant to learn something about real women who work in real factories and who embody the tangible elements of disposability within their being.

But the story's purpose, as well as the motivation behind its telling, is not only to describe its central character and her disposable fate. It also offers a blueprint for identifying the signature features of female disposability within actual human beings and for handling them accordingly. The story, in other words, serves as a vehicle for establishing the normative characteristics and behaviors of the disposable third world woman. It tells us how a *normal* disposable third world woman should look, act, and be treated. Therefore, it serves as a disciplinary device for patrolling the bounds of that normativity.[7] For instance, a woman who, despite being identified as disposable, refuses to accept the conditions of her disposability appears within the terms of the myth to be *abnormal*. Similarly, practices that treat women deemed to be disposable as if they were not so could also be called *abnormal*. Consequently, I regard the myth as a tool of interpellation, in the sense intended by Louis Althusser (1971), since it establishes the expectations both for identifying disposable third world women within specific populations and for determining how those subjects, so identified, should behave in relation to those who do the identifying[8] (Butler 1997b). In this sense, the myth is an attempt to summon the disposable third world woman into existence as a normalized subject who reaffirms explicit relations of power and hierarchy.

Thus, another and related function of this myth lies in its explanation that the disposable outcome of its protagonist and of those women workers who resemble her is a matter of destiny. According to its logic, the corporate practices that treat such workers as if they were disposable are justifiable and unavoidable, since to treat a disposable worker as if she were not disposable would be silly and irrational. Hence, the obvious violence and suffering that accompany the condition of disposability are not the fault of the companies that employ these women, nor the fault of the people the world over who buy their products. Indeed, not only does the myth detail how

this situation is the responsibility of neither global firms nor global consumers, but it also correlates its protagonist's demise with the creation of valuable commodities such that her employment, and the practices organized with her disposability in mind, constitute good business. To achieve this connection, the tale draws upon other staple mythic themes to detail how corporations use science to conquer the hazardous forces intrinsic to the disposable third world woman, such as a chaotic sexuality and a hysterical irrationality. And, at the end of the day, reason, via scientific management and masculinist rationality, harnesses the powerful forces that inevitably destroy the story's protagonist and channel them toward the creation of valuable commodities in some of the most sophisticated manufacturing facilities in the world. As a result, says the myth, the third world woman's path of destruction also leads the way to the capitalist development that heralds modern progress. And, again, in this respect, we see how the tale repeats a popular mythic theme that suffering and sacrifice, particularly on the part of women, are often required to move society in its proper direction (Littleton 2002).

Points of Departure

I began focusing on this myth as an object of study through several years of ethnographic research in nine different corporate facilities located in northern Mexico and southern China. The facilities included electronics, data processing, sewing, a machine shop, plastics, automobile, and textiles operations. Additional material comes from interviews conducted with employees of these and other companies, tours of those companies, and interviews conducted with business consultants, local political officials, workers and their families, activists, civic leaders, and other urban residents.

Throughout the research, I have taken cues from other studies that have exemplified the significance of ethnographic research for understanding the cultural and discursive dimensions of global capitalism. While this literature is too vast to encapsulate here, a few texts stand out as ones that directly influenced my thinking in this book. For instance, Aihwa Ong's (1987) important study of factory workers in Malaysia illustrates how discourses that constitute worker identities are the very processes that configure systems of power and resistance within factory contexts. Ching Kwan Lee's (1998) research in Hong Kong and southern China demonstrates how discourses of cultural identity throughout a firm's international offices also create the work categories within that company's division of labor. María Patricia Fernández-Kelly's (1983) benchmark investigation in Mexican export-processing factories clearly shows how discourses of local

cultural identity contribute to the making of an international division of labor across the diverse spaces of global capital. Emily Martin's (1995) and Linda McDowell's (1997) explorations into the embodiment of identity within the workplace confirm the importance of investigating how the body is a constant site of contestation within the rarefied world of corporate capital. Leslie Salzinger's (2003) book on the discursive production of gender within Mexican-based global firms illustrates how managerial discourses of their female workers are not solely descriptive but also productive of these workers' subjectivity. Miranda Joseph's (2002) ethnography of a gay theater group illustrates how the performance of identity simultaneously constitutes the subjects of capitalism without being fully defined by capitalism. And Erica Schoenberger's (1997) study of corporate culture exposes how executive discourses regarding a company's cultural identity guide the material processes that give shape to global capital around the world.

I situate my research in an ongoing dialogue with these and other such studies, all of which demonstrate how there is nothing "merely cultural," as Judith Butler (1997a) has put it, about studies of discursive and symbolic events. These processes are, instead, central to those political and economic practices that we identify as capitalist power, exploitation, and resource distribution. And they are at the heart of the imperatives for political action on the part of people around the world who want to develop alternatives to capitalist exploitation and the many forms of discrimination and misery that accompany it. My research extends this dialogue into an interrogation of the spatial dimensions at play in the discursive-materialist dynamics of global capital. So, consequently, my research into the myth of the disposable third world woman takes me across geographic regions as I follow a discourse that travels not only by word of mouth from factory to factory and continent to continent but also through the materialist circuitry of global capitalist production and consumption.

I began my own research in 1991 in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, which, in 1965, was the official "birthplace" of the country's export-processing industries, known as the "maquiladoras" (or "maquilas" for short). Over the next four decades, Ciudad Juárez became an internationally recognized leader in low-cost, high-quality, labor-intensive manufacturing processes. Its adjacency to the United States and the constant inflow of migrants from the Mexican interior contributed to this city's popularity among corporate executives seeking to cut factory costs while maintaining quality standards and easy access to the U.S. market. And I, like several other researchers from inside and outside of Mexico, set my sights on the city's

maquiladoras as a window for studying how local social processes contribute to the constant renovation of global capital (Carrillo 1990; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Shaiken 1994; Cravey 1998; Reygadas 2003; Salzinger 2003).

My research required that factory managers grant me entry into their facilities.[9] Some did so quite generously, and provided me office space and as much access as I requested or as much as they could authorize. Others were less generous. While I can guess that the managers who did not participate in my project were reluctant to have a researcher snooping around their facilities, I do not have ready answers for why others permitted me so much latitude, other than to say that each had his (and I use that pronoun advisedly) particular interests in the project. One manager in Mexico, for example, had studied sociology in graduate school for a couple of years before deciding that he wanted to pursue a more lucrative career in business management. But he continued to express interest in sociological issues, such as labor relations, and he expressed a real commitment to supporting academic research. As he told me one day in 1996, "You and I don't see eye to eye on everything. But you can't say that I have gotten in the way of science!" Another manager, in southern China, extended an invitation to me to visit his facilities in Dongguan and in Hong Kong after he had been contacted by one of his colleagues in Mexico. He made numerous arrangements to allow for my research visits into his facilities over a several-month period and over two different occasions. At one point, he explained that he was hosting me as a favor to his colleague, while in a different conversation he said that he wanted me to see how much things were changing in China so that I would not have only "stereotypes" of "Chinese people." Another manager, also in Mexico, was devoted to the study of literature, and on our first meeting, he was walking around the coupon-processing facility he managed while carrying *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* under his arm. He seemed to enjoy talking with me about my ideas and how I approached the issues I investigated, yet he was also troubled by my critique of the exploitation that was part of his world. He did not, for instance, agree with all of my conclusions, but he also admitted that my focus on the discourse of a third world female disposability was touching on something fundamental to the organization of his facility. I could continue in this vein with personal stories of each of the managers who offered me access, but my point is that I have no standard response to the question of why they let me in other than to say, "Because they wanted to."

When, in 1993, I expanded the project to include research within the Chinese facilities of some of the same corporations I had studied

in Mexico, the project expanded from a regional to a transregional or "more global" study. My decision to make this move emerged when I realized near the beginning of the project that a comparative investigation of processes internal to a company's different facilities, located in different parts of the world, would provide the breadth that I needed to understand the larger context in which the myth was told. Multinational firms and their constituent factory units operate within a tightly organized global network that is partly contained within the firm's organizational structure but that also expands into the complex interaction of clients, suppliers, and government officials in different countries simultaneously. And the myth of the disposable third world woman is also a part of this intricate global network. This realization hit me while I was listening to a presentation in the Mexican facility of a diverse multinational electronics corporation. The presenter, a company vice president who was visiting from Belgium, was comparing performance indicators between this Mexican facility and the company's other factories located in China and Brazil. During this comparison, he discussed the ability of managers in each of these facilities to control the turnover rate among the female workers in these different facilities. "You have to know when these workers are not worth keeping anymore," he said. Although at this time I had not yet formulated my argument about the myth of the disposable third world woman, I could appreciate the critical need to move beyond Mexico and investigate the processes he described for "knowing when the workers" were "not worth keeping anymore." Until that point, I had assumed that the discourses I had encountered regarding female disposability were features of a regional "maquiladora" environment. And it was not until I reached southern China that I put together the globality of this story and its significance for the global networks of capitalism.

I made my first trip to the Guangdong Province in southern China and to Hong Kong in 1993, and then returned for an extensive research trip in 1997. By the mid-1990s, managers in most of the Mexican facilities that I studied were competing against the Chinese factories within their same corporate complex for internal resources, and these competitions often hinged upon comparisons between facilities. With the 1979 implementation in China of the "open policy" to allow for foreign direct investment (FDI), southern China, primarily in Guangdong Province, which includes Dongguan municipality and the Shenzhen Economic Zone, erupted with industrial activity. While southern China could not compete with Mexico in terms of proximity to the U.S. market and U.S. infrastructure, it certainly did rival Mexico on its labor costs,[10] nearness to Asian industrial suppliers,

and strategic positioning in China, which has the world's potentially largest labor and consumer market. In southern China, I spent most of my time in Dongguan, a city of more than 2 million,[11] which is located in the center of the Shenzhen-Guangdong economic region in the Pearl River Delta.

The decision to take my study into southern China raised some difficulties for me as a researcher that are common to ethnographers who study a multisited field, a domain located in many different places simultaneously (Katz 1996; Sparke 1996). For instance, when I started this research, I was fully prepared to conduct studies in Mexico and along the Mexico–U.S. border. I had studied these regions, had extensive professional and personal contacts in them, and could speak the languages (Spanish and English). I knew my way around. That was not the case for me in southern China. Unlike in Mexico, I was much more dependent upon my managerial hosts, who exercised tight control over my access to corporate facilities, to workers, and to documents. I also did not speak the dominant languages (Mandarin and Cantonese) and relied upon translation provided by my bilingual managerial informants and occasionally by someone whom they appointed to assist me. I was not authorized to bring in my own translator. Therefore, I did not, as in Mexico, have the luxury of private conversations with laborers in China, and since they lived in factory dormitories, I was unable to interview them off premises. While I did interview workers, I was careful to avoid as best I could any topics I thought would compromise my informants or make them uncomfortable in front of their bosses. But basically I was aware that I was not fully aware of all the risks that workers faced when talking with me. I also could not control my own introduction to them. Since I did not understand the spoken languages, I really had no idea of how I was presented, and this made me even more uncomfortable. I was not permitted to move freely throughout the corporate facility, as I did in the Mexican factories, and I could not come and go at will. I had to make arrangements prior to all of my visits, provide a structured research and interview plan, and clear my access with management at all times.[12] My contact with managers and engineers, however, in southern China was extensive and occurred both on and off the work site in Dongguan, Shenzhen Economic Zone, and Hong Kong. And this wide access to management led me to turn my ethnographic focus on managers and engineers.

But, despite this limited access, it was during my research in southern China and Hong Kong that I made a turning point in my work and saw that what I had taken to be a series of regional (Mexico–U.S. border region) discourses about female disposability were,

rather, endemic to the organization of production for firms at the global scale. This realization came to me as I was quickly struck by the fact that despite the extremely different circumstances (cultural, economic, political, and so on) that distinguish northern Mexico from southern China, administrators in both regions echoed one another when I asked them to explain why young women cycled in and out of their jobs as if they were constantly being replaced. The repetition of a story about how these young women always turn into disposable waste and how this is to be expected of the women workers who are employed by these factories in third world regions made me realize that this tale, like the factories themselves, travels around the globe and with definite productive effects. In this regard, the myth provided the common ground for my research. And my experiences in southern China changed the way that I approached my studies in Mexico as, once I realized that the myth was significant for the global operations of the companies I studied, I focused my inquiry in Mexico on making the connections between the myth's telling in a particular factory and the international production and consumption networks in which that firm was embedded.

Yet, while the research in Asia allowed me to appreciate the global extent and relevance of the myth, I was able to investigate this discourse more fully only in Mexico. My greater access in Mexico to all levels of corporate personnel permitted me to follow the tale as it wove into the processes for hiring, training, and supervising workers. And I was also able in Mexico to document the many ways that the myth was resisted by workers and activists. That I do not document such events in southern China is in no way meant to indicate that they do not exist or are not significant. In fact, worker protests have increasingly made the international headlines (Douglas et al. 2005; Hutzler 2002; Mufson 1997; Pomfret 2002). And other scholars have demonstrated that workers in China demonstrate myriad ways for subverting the political machinery used to discipline them (see Pun 2005; Lee 1998). During my research, I simply did not have the ethnographic skills to document worker resistance to this tale in China since, as my Mexican research reveals, such acts are often waged through battles that take place in the realms of symbolism and language, which were beyond my reach.

As a result of this imbalance in my methodological experience, I include only one chapter on China in this book. I must confess that I had wanted to present a more regionally balanced text, with an even number of chapters from China and from Mexico. But as I got more into the writing, I came to accept that this was not possible. I simply could not overcome in the analysis some of the distance that kept

me from understanding the localized idioms for telling and challeng-
ing the myth of the disposable third world woman. Nevertheless, my
research in southern China and Hong Kong sets up the other chapters
that are based in Mexico and provides the context in which I locate
those more ethnographically nuanced accounts. The one chapter I do
include on China follows this introduction, and I have placed it in the
front of the book in order to draw attention to the significance of this
material for the claims I make throughout the book.

Book Overview

In the subsequent analysis, I have created a theoretical toolkit from
three epistemological approaches: Marxism, poststructuralist femi-
nism, and postcolonial theory. Combined, these three fields of
thought help me to investigate how a myth about a specifically third
world, female, and disposable worker contributes to the generation
of capitalist value. They allow me to pursue what happens to this
accumulative process when the myth is disrupted or challenged such
that this worker's disposability, as well as the value derived from it,
fails to materialize. And these theories also push the analysis into
a discussion of political strategies for subverting this myth and its
productive effects.

Figuring prominently throughout the text is the Marxian critique
that *all things of value under capital originate with those energies we
call "human labor."*[13] With this insight, I am able to investigate how
a story of a worker's devaluation is simultaneously a story of capital's
valuation because even as this worker is said to lose value, she contin-
ues to generate value as she works. How this worker's own worth as a
subject comes to be distinguished from the worth of her labor is one
of the themes I follow throughout the analysis. And feminist strands
of poststructuralist scholarship enable me to regard the myth as a
productive technology that actually creates the material embodiment
of the disposable third world woman that houses this labor.[14]

Such an exploration takes me to a common ground between
Marxist inquiries into exploitation and feminist analyses of the
embodied subject. Marxist geographer David Harvey provides a
framework for recognizing such a theoretical alliance in his book
Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference (1996), in which he
opens up Marx's binary between labor and capital by engaging post-
structuralist feminist work on the complexities of embodied subjec-
tivities. Borrowing from Donna Haraway's work on the subjugated
body, Harvey refers to the body as a "site of capitalist accumulation,"
in that its apparent fixity as a culturally specific entity (across the
divides of race, sex, ethnicity, wellness, and so on) provides corporeal

breadth to the social subjects required under capitalism. In other words, laboring subjects do not present themselves in isolation from the other forms of embodied subjectivities that abound in any social setting, such that someone stands out as merely a laborer or a manager, apart from appearing as a subject located across a spectrum of locally specific cultural identities. It is impossible, for instance, to distinguish the sexed and raced body from the laborer's body or from the boss's body as all combine into the corporeal package that is taken to ground each subject's identity and recognizable set of differences from or affinities with one another. Therefore, determining how the body materializes as a site of multiple identities, where no single identifier establishes the sole definition of the subject's existence (or its "essence"), is vital if we are to understand how the laboring body, under capitalist conditions, emerges as an embodied site of exploitation and accumulation (see Scott 1999).

This combined theoretical approach also extends the feminist analysis into the gendering of work and workers. Much feminist research, from across disciplines, has led the critique into Marxist assumptions regarding the uniformity of the laborer's experience and also regarding the transparency of the laboring body as either a skilled or unskilled entity (Jackson and Pearson 1998; Phillips and Taylor 1980; Cockburn 1983; Elson and Pearson 1981; Lamphere 1987; McGaw 1992). These scholars have challenged numerous assumptions that have been blind to how the subjection of labor proceeds through the many ways that social differences cut across working populations so that no single "worker" emerges as a unified subject with a unified experience. This investigation takes such important insights as a starting point for extending the analysis even further to demonstrate that feminine and masculine subjectivities are wound into a never-ending circuitry of material production, occurring across scales from the most intimate bodily functions to the networks of a global firm. Not only does the feminine stand as the masculine's "other," but also vice versa, in an endless continuum of dialectical processes through which a masculine subject only gains shape as a particular kind of employee through the materialization of the female subject who outlines him by way of her opposition.

Here, I am also drawing directly from the work of Judith Butler (1993), who argues that the human body, as well as the subject associated with it, is always a "matter of production." By this, she means that the material embodiment of the social subject is never fully constructed. It is always materializing, which is why she prefers to use the terminology of "production" over "construction," as a way to keep attention on the incompleteness of the material body.

I agree with this emphasis on the enduring process of production, particularly as it segues well with Marx's insight that capitalism, along with its embodied subjects, likewise is a system whose materialization is never complete.[15] Therefore, by combining Butler's insight into the ongoing production of the embodied subject with Marx's insight into the ongoing production of capitalism, we see how the disposable third world woman's body is a spatial entity that is always being produced along with the commodities that flow through the circuits of capital.[16]

To understand, however, why the mythic protagonist has a particularly third world and female corporeality, I turn to the work of postcolonial scholars, many of them feminist, who provide tools for critiquing the significance of the "third world" for the meaning of a female subject who is seen as embodying a persistent state of underdevelopment (Mohanty 1991; Narayan 1997). These scholars have drawn attention to the problematic usage of the term "third world woman" to refer to a coherent social subject who is typically located in an inferior conceptual position across a host of binary continuums, such as developed/undeveloped, oppressed/liberated, and so forth. While I am unable to evade the pitfalls of linguistic representation since I do rely on references to a "disposable third world woman" to explain the myth, this critique helps me investigate what is significant about the reiterations of "third world" and "female" as they combine within the telling of this myth and its application to specific people.

These critiques have also pushed my own analysis into the political implications of my argument and the implicit call for subversive strategies that runs throughout the text. How to create a politics or coalition that confronts the myth is a question that I cannot fully answer, even though I stress the imperative for doing so. Although I regard the myth as a technology of production and use Marx's analysis to demonstrate the human consequences of this productive device, the analysis does not lend itself to his call for class politics or, even more generally, to an identity politics approach. The myth is organized around an identity that people do not overtly embrace. But more than that, the myth illustrates the difficulties of an identity politics approach for organizing responses to global capital, as working people around the world have rare (when they do have them) opportunities for finding common ground around identity or experience. I therefore throughout the analysis turn to those scholars, feminist in their majority, who discuss strategies for building coalitions that do not assume shared identities or universal perceptions of work experience (and relationships), but that, moreover, explore how an embrace (rather than denial) of social differences can strengthen political

coalitions (see Scott 2002; Sandoval 2000; Young 1990; Martin and Mohanty 1986; Haraway 1985). The differences that require addressing are those also of geographic dimensions since workers, even when employed by the same firm, often find themselves in situations in which face-to-face contact is not an option and in which awareness of each other's context is not possible. As feminist geographer Doreen Massey has written, global capitalism exposes the strategic need for creating coalitions with *distant others* across the spectrum of spatialized identities (Massey 2004).

My thinking here obviously reveals the influence of Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) decree that subversive political strategies to hegemonies of power cannot rest upon notions of "we" and "them," which tend to underpin traditional class or identity politics (see also Grewal and Kaplan 1994). Yet to forsake identity politics, including those organized around class, is not to deny the hegemonic force of capitalism and its constituent technologies. If anything, I am certain that the myth of the disposable third world woman exposes the dire need for forming alliances between the consumers and the producers of global capitalist goods. The power of the former has been felt when focused on particular companies and their practices, and many anti-sweatshop, fair trade, and antiglobalization/antineoliberal groups are working with such aims in mind.[17] I would like to see the myth of the disposable third world woman, and the many stories that go into it, emerge as an issue for political activism. Its technical role within the circuits of capitalism provides an opportunity for building coalitions that could have direct impact upon the organization of global capital and the many relations of power supported through it. For, as I argue throughout this book, to sabotage the myth is to strike a blow at the numerous hierarchies that rely upon its constant repetition.

And, finally, before detailing the book outline, I would like to address briefly my presentation of myself as a researcher and author. To begin, I do not in this book attempt to describe how my informants saw me. I find that to be an impossible task for a range of reasons. For one thing, I do not believe that I have either the appropriate knowledge to know fully what "others" think of me or a perspective outside of myself to relate some version of how I appear in the field. Also, my perception of myself surely clouds my ability to decipher how I am understood by informants and how they situate me within the research context. But, I can with confidence say that certain categories were relevant to my positioning in the field: gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, class, religion, professional status, family, labor politics, and able-bodiness. All of these issues arose in one way or another throughout the course of my study as significant

categories for defining who I was and what I was doing in relation to other people. I certainly moved through these categories in various ways. Over the several years of my research, I aged and changed from a student into a professor. My sexuality, age, able-bodiness, gender, race, and so on were variably significant depending upon whom I was interviewing, where I was conducting research, the kinds of topics we broached, and the circumstances in my personal life and in my health. Arguably my race ("white"), my nationality ("U.S.-American"), my gender (female), my class ("professional" or "professionalizing"), and my ethnicity ("Anglo") have not changed, even as the meanings of such categories have modified during my research, and continue to do so.

The Chapters

I have grouped the chapters into two sections, "Storylines" and "Disruptions," which are loosely organized around the myth's telling as a form of power and the myth's interruption as a form of resistance. I do so with the intent of problematizing the binary distinction that separates the concept of power from resistance while still demonstrating why the binary is nevertheless useful as a conceptual device for recognizing prevailing forces that shape social processes and the resourceful approaches for reorienting them and offering alternatives.[18] Each section contains chapters that could be situated in either the Storylines or Disruptions sections since the acts that fall into these categories are unavoidably intertwined. I do not organize the material chronologically or regionally, and since I wrote these chapters at different points in my interrogation of the myth, they do not provide a seamless, linear movement from one to the other. Instead, they demonstrate how the myth of the disposable third world woman, just like any other technology of global capital, is dynamic and changes through space and time. And each chapter reflects my attempt to grapple with this flux at any one point in time.

In the first section, I highlight how the myth facilitates capitalism's constant expansion and its ability to generate wealth from the exploitation of labor around the world. For example, in chapter 2, "Disposable Daughters and Factory Fathers," I examine how the managers and engineers of a motorboat engine factory in Dongguan employ the myth as a means for disciplining their female workers. In this case, the myth justifies their practices for monitoring their reproductive cycles, including invasive procedures for insuring that workers are menstruating, in order to control the turnover rate of their employees. Here we see how factory administrators use the myth to explain that the "chaotic forces of female sexuality" are only temporarily

controllable through the scientific practices of factory management. During the period when managers hold these forces in abeyance, a great amount of value can be gained from employing women workers. But, eventually, as in the myth, the factory managers explain how female workers succumb to the chaotic pressures contained within their bodies and how their value as employees begins to wane until they require replacement by fresh workers who enter the same cycle of diminishing returns. While chapter 2 is the only one I present from my research in China, it provides a foundation for seeing how the myth guides specific corporate practices at the ground level aimed at guaranteeing a constant supply of temporary labor constituted primarily of young women workers in third world regions.

Chapter 3, "Manufacturing Bodies," extends this analysis by investigating how the engineers and managers in a television factory located in Ciudad Juárez design ergonomic practices that secure skilled labor from female workers without changing their "unskilled" status in the factory's division of labor. This chapter reveals how the myth operates as a discursive mechanism for producing the embodiment of the disposable third world women through practices that scrutinize and control the corporeal movements of actual women at work. Managers and engineers in this factory carefully monitor the wrists, fingers, backs, eyes, and other body parts of women workers to extract valuable labor from them while determining that these women are worth little of value in and of themselves. And, as I argue, these practices contribute to the manufacture of a laboring body, built of assorted body parts, that does not resemble the common image of a human form but that, nevertheless, is expected to function as the worker's body on the assembly line. In this case, we see how such practices ironically create difficult challenges for the male supervisors of these women workers as they are in charge of ensuring that disposable third world women generate ever more skilled labor.

And in chapter 4, "The Dialectics of Still Life," I explore how the myth's justification of the violence suffered by its disposable protagonist, on the basis of her essentially wasting constitution, parallels other discourses that blame women, more broadly, for the violence they encounter as victims of sexual assault and murder outside of the factory. In this chapter, I juxtapose the myth of the disposable third world woman with other discourses that have been commonly told by political and business elites in Ciudad Juárez to minimize the significance of a crime wave that has claimed several hundred women's lives in that city since 1993. When put together, we see how these discourses echo one another as they repeat a story of how third world women are propelled by cultural and sexual forces toward a

condition of waste. Therefore, when women workers are determined to be worthless or when women's corpses are dumped like trash in the desert, these discourses explain how, given these women's "intrinsic worthlessness," such events are both natural and unavoidable. Again, we see how these discourses work into each other to create a powerful mythic figure of a wasting third world woman whose essential properties are said to be found within real women who work in global factories and who experience all sorts of violence, for which they are held accountable.

The chapters grouped in the section, "Disruptions," demonstrate that, while formidable, the myth is far from irrefutable, especially when workers reject this discourse, challenge its factual claims, and/ or refuse to be defined by its grim predictions. Each chapter in this section reveals that when such women interrupt the myth's telling or challenge its believability as an explanation of natural and cultural facts, they disrupt also the capitalist accumulation that depends on the story's telling. These chapters further demonstrate, however, that even when women challenge the myth directly, their resistance is not limited to the myth, nor do their acts constitute resistance always and only in segregation from the reaffirmation of certain hierarchies. Such acts reveal the numerous articulations, to borrow from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, that converge in often unpredictable ways as people work with each other to topple social hierarchies of power. They also reveal the complicity of resistance with power, as action against one kind of power relation so often creates or reaffirms another.

For instance, in chapter 5, "Maquiladora Mestizas and a Feminist Border Politics," I engage with Gloria Anzaldúa's provocative theorization of a new mestiza identity as a form of resistance against the racist, sexist, and homophobic practices that have caused a symbolic and political rupture across the Mexican-U.S. borderlands. I use Anzaldúa's concept of the mestiza, who represents a politicized subject emboldened by her own identity as someone who embodies multiple borders, to demonstrate how three women tackle the myth of the disposable third world woman within an electronics and tooling factory (part of the same corporate complex as the Chinese factory in chapter 2) located in Ciudad Juárez. In this chapter, we see how each woman must confront the story as a powerful force that stands as an obstacle for her career and personal goals. Yet, we also see how their efforts to subvert this myth raise some important questions for feminists, including but not limited to Anzaldúa's theorizations of political agency, resistance, and power, since they eschew any efforts at labor solidarity and refuse claims to "feminism," even as each struggles for her rights as a professional woman in a sexist, racist, and exploitative environment.

In chapter 6, "Crossing the Factory Frontier," I illustrate how one woman, unlike those in the previous chapter, does indeed organize a labor stoppage as an effective means for subverting her managers' use of the myth to limit her employment possibilities within a coupon-processing facility in Ciudad Juárez. Her fight against this myth exposes how it operates as a force for cleaving the value of her labor from the value of her person. Yet, even as this woman coordinates with laborers to confront the myth, she does not do so in order to disrupt the accumulation of capital that derives from the exploitation of labor. Instead, she claims that her managers' discourse of her as "worthless" is dangerous both to her and to the firm for which she works and that her disruption of this tale is in the best interest of the company, its shareholders, and its employees. And she bases such claims upon the evidence of her undeniable skill at managing and exploiting labor in the factory.

And finally, chapter 7, "Paradoxes and Protests," demonstrates how a social movement against the violence that has claimed so many women's lives in northern Mexico also represents a potential opportunity for forming alliances against the concept of third world female disposability that is vital for contemporary global capital. This movement also, however, illustrates the many paradoxes of attempting to organize a social movement around identity politics across a diverse international terrain. In this case, the movement has cohered around the political agency of "mothers" and "daughters" as the core activist and victim identities. While this strategy has succeeded to a certain extent in building an international coalition around activist demands of justice for innocent victims, it has also weakened the movement by making it vulnerable to accusations that its participants do not represent "good" mothers and daughters. As the activists respond to these critiques and continue their pressure upon governing elites, they demonstrate the need for forming coalitions with "distant others," who do not share some specific identity, to fight the myth of the disposable third world woman and the devastating consequences that this story wreaks around the globe.