Social Justice Today is an online, quarterly, not-for-profit journal which seeks to unite academics and other citizens passionate about social issues. We are interested in social, political, pedagogical, and cultural essays which examine issues of civic significance within a social justice framework.
Social Justice Today

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O’Neill, Dori Wall, and Miguel Rodriguez.

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quarterly in Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter. www.socialjusticetoday.org
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**Fall 2012**  
**Immigration, Globalization and the Militarization of the Border**

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Who We Are
Social Justice Today is an online, quarterly, not-for-profit journal which seeks to unite academics and other citizens passionate about social issues. We are interested in social, political, pedagogical, and cultural essays which examine issues of civic significance within a social justice framework. We are seeking essays which explore issues of race, gender, disability, health, social class or sexual orientation and ask challenging questions about the institutional constraints under which we live and work. Equally important, we invite essays that articulate constructive democratic visions that dare to step outside conventional modes of interpretation. Another core aim of Social Justice Today is to revive the lost art of the American essay in the tradition of Emerson, Thoreau, W.E.B. DuBois, and Susan Sontag, to mention a few exemplars of this genre. The hope is that our writers and readers will question their assumptions, prejudices, and personal/political ideologies in the process.

It is the editors’ belief that we often overcome trials and experience transcendence as a result of this type of questioning and examination of thought forms. We urge individuals to reflect upon socio-cultural influences which have shaped personal perspectives and how new experiences have the potential to transform pain and prejudice. In today’s post-modern American culture, heavily influenced as it is by degraded forms of commercial culture, social media, the blogosphere, and impersonal online interactions (often replacing face-to-face ones), the need for well-written thought-provoking essays is on the rise. Social Justice Today aims to provide a non-doctrinaire forum for publishing essays which ask fresh and difficult questions that provoke dialogue and stir up passion for public affairs.
Writer’s Guidelines

A well-written essay written in Chicago Style may range from 8-20 pages in length (double-spaced). An ideal essay may begin with a personal narrative, which propels the writer to critique and ask questions about various oppressive practices. The writer could examine how these practices are shaped by thought paradigms and belief systems and as a result may present a counter narrative or point of view. In addition to American essays, we will consider well-written Q and A dialogue pieces, short stories, and poetry with a social justice theme. Please send completed manuscripts attached in word via email to editor@socialjusticetoday.org for consideration. Please put SJT submission in the subject line. We do not accept simultaneous submissions.

Notification via email regarding the status of your essay will occur approximately two weeks post submission. This is a quarterly publication. Our next writer’s deadline is January 8, 2012. A short bio about the writer must accompany the submission.

Due to the fact that this publication is entirely run by volunteers, has no advertisers, and is unfunded, writers will not be paid upon publication. However, writers can use this opportunity to build their portfolios, curriculum vitaes, or resumes. It would be paradoxical for this publication to accept any payments for publication due to our commitment to social justice and equity issues. This not-for-profit publication will remain run by volunteers as part of our commitment to social change. If you have editorial experience and would like to volunteer to help edit a future issue, please send an email with your experience and interest to sarah@socialjusticetoday.org.
Dear Reader,

We dedicate this publication to the education of the American public regarding human rights issues involving immigration, globalization, and the militarization of the border. In May, 2012 Professor Arriola—who founded Women on the Border (WOB)—teamed up with the ally organization Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (ATCF) for a delegation on the Texas border. Fortunately, I had the honor of being one of the 13 delegates who traveled down to the border with WOB and ATCF. There we witnessed the economic and social injustice undocumented workers face on a daily basis as they endure wage theft, hazardous labor conditions, and the loss of human rights in the US Customs Enforcement detention system. We heard testimonies from the Workers Defense Project on wage theft at Casa Marianella—an emergency shelter for adult immigrants in Austin, Texas. We met struggling single mothers living in the “colonias”—slum housing along the border—who will never see their husbands again due to deportation or detention issues. We toured Port Isabel Detention Facility, operated by the Department of Homeland Security, in Los Fresnos, Texas where husbands, fathers, and sons peered across metal bars in quiet desperation to return to their families. We had the honor of meeting Diego Dominguez’, a labor organizer from the workers’ activist group Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO), who educated us on the harsh realities for maquiladora (sweatshop) workers who live at the border and work for the US companies that profit from their labor under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The following reflections and articles highlight important lessons we learned during the May delegation. In addition, we have included essays that delegates wrote about their past trips to the Mexico side of the border. As activists, we continue our work for a more just society through educating others about our experiences. We hope this issue of SJT will build a greater awareness of

1 Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.
the indignities families on both sides of Mexican border endure under hegemonic pieces of legislation like NAFTA, or anti-immigrant policies which support the construction of the border wall and militarized policing of the boundaries between the US and Mexico. Questions will inevitably arise such as: “Who has a right to feel safe? Who has the right to be paid a living wage? Who has a right to work in safe conditions? Who has a right to be with their families?” We hope the nuances and complexities explored in this issue create a greater urgency for immigration policy reform, which takes into account the immeasurable value of every human being. William H. Watkins speaks to this socio-political struggle with cautionary reference to the historical, “Our lawmakers have not learned the lessons of history at Berlin and Gaza that the consequences of walling people in or out of a place and space are dire. Even the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.” Our aim is to inform lawmakers about the human loss and cost we pay for the militarization of the border because “we are all Americans of the new world, and our most dangerous enemies are not each other, but the great wall of ignorance between us.” Finally, I would like to suggest to readers that one outstanding resource available for promoting greater sensitivity about the range of immigration issues facing us today is the recently released documentary, Harvest of Empire: The Untold Story of Latinos in America (Onyx Films, 2012). 

Sincerely,

Sarah Militz-Frielink
Co-founder and issue co-editor
Social Justice Today

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3 Harvest of Empire: The Untold Story of Latinos in America, directed by Peter Getzels and Eduardo Lopez (2012; Atlanta, GA: Onyx Films, 2012), DVD.
Different Eyes

By: Diane Kramer

Mae sat with elbows propped on the table, hands under her chin, eyes on me. Chunky turquoise jewelry highlighted her caramel skin. Colleagues for twenty years, she knew I needed a listener and she was the one to hear what I had to say. We often spoke up together at meetings, the only ones with a divergent opinion, or the only ones willing to take the risk. When I’d go off half-cocked, Mae would rein me in, saying “pick your battles, keep a united front, bide your time,” all lessons from her African-American experience. Despite our growing up in different colored worlds, we’d forged a bond of trust in the workplace, one of the borders where her people and my people mixed.

“Tell me the story,” she sighed, sitting back in her chair, as if readying herself for an unruly teenager’s adventure.

Judith and I had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. We’d met through Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera, an organization that sponsors educational delegations to the Mexican border. Now we were making a journey to Rio Bravo, in the state of Tamaulipas, just the two of us. We would connect with Mark, a union organizer, who was consulting with maquiladora workers from Duro Bag, a company that manufactures gift bags headquartered in Kentucky. Maquiladoras are foreign-owned corporations, usually US, who operate just inside the Mexican side of the border. They profit from low wages, lax enforcement of labor laws, and abusive oversight of employees by Mexican managers. The Mexican constitution contains some of the most progressive labor laws of any country, but few workers know this.
On a previous delegation to Ciudad Acuña, our group distributed booklets informing workers of their rights; such as bathroom breaks, no forced over-time or lock-downs, free speech, the right to assembly. Workers told us about their experiences. Some were denied requests to use the restroom and resorted to wearing diapers. In plants that offered breaks, workers were so closely monitored that women who needed more frequent trips to take care of their menstrual hygiene were forced to show used sanitary napkins to male supervisors to prove they weren’t just wasting time. Not surprisingly, sexual harassment was commonplace. Overtime wages were often withheld, workers were forced to accept payment through company store vouchers; and company housing, seemingly a nice benefit, left workers who were fired or quit nowhere to live and no equity to show for their money.

For this trip to Rio Bravo, Judith and I were delivering funds she had raised to support the striking workers at Duro Bag. The majority of their workers were young women. Not willing to take my car into Mexico we parked at Mark’s apartment in McAllen and accompanied him across the border. As Mark drove, we planned our respective steps and a strategy if things started to go awry.

The demonstration would occur during the graveyard shift. We’d already heard there was a lock down in the plant, no one allowed to go in or out, management’s way of intimidating workers. We knew the home of the leader of the pro-union workers had mysteriously burned the week before and one female worker showed us her injuries from an assault by her supervisor. Judith and I shook our heads and reflected on the similarities to the US labor movement in the early twentieth century. We wondered if anyone back home would believe this, anymore than we did seeing it with our own eyes.

Everyone was excited and nervous, undeterred by the dust of this rural area that swirled about us, choking our throats and stinging our eyes. We were three US Americans among a hundred
or so Mexicans, all of them poor. At the plant we chanted with workers, hung the red and black banner on the cyclone fence, a symbol of solidarity in Mexico, even took a few photos in front of the massive gates. Judith and I made a pact with Mark that we’d leave at the first sign of trouble, that is, when the police showed up. Forewarned this might happen in response to some protestors’ threats to close the plant, we’d parked the car heading away from the dead end road where Duro was located. As if agitated by our singing and chanting, the security guards at the station paced and traded places, in out, in out, their eyes darting back and forth. One guard yelled at us to get away from the fence. That’s when we saw the first police cars barreling down the dirt road toward the crowd.

“Oh, oh.” Judith and I said in unison.

We knew Mexico had several types of law enforcement like the US, but we couldn’t tell who was who. Different uniforms, different vehicles. The last to arrive: unmistakably, the Federales. A stream of cars pulled up in a line and officers in black uniforms, flak jackets, and weapons, including assault rifles, ran down the street toward the demonstrators. Judith and I slowly stepped back, one foot after the other into the shadows, but Mark was exposed at the front of the crowd and several officers made a beeline for him. Judith and I couldn’t see what was happening through the yelling and commotion until an officer threw Mark into a car and sped off. Hearts racing, we stood unable to decipher what had just occurred and what to do next.

Mark’s car sped around in front of us, gravel spraying, with Ricardo a local union organizer behind the wheel.

“Get in the back. Get down, get your head down!”
Judith and I scrambled in and crouched in the back seat. I yelled at Ricardo, “Where are we going?”

“Getting you out of here.”

Unseen by us, Mark had tossed his keys to Ricardo as the police had thrown him into the squad car. Now Ricardo raced down the dirt road, dust flying, swerving around pot holes; Judith and I pitched back and forth like sacks of groceries. Scared, but intent on knowing what was going on, I popped my head over the back seat where my eyes locked on like lasers to brake lights in front of us. My God, we were right on the bumper of a police car.

“Why are we following them?!”

“To make sure they don’t disappear Mark!”

Shit.

After a mile or two in the dark of rural roads Ricardo twisted the car to the left and came to a halt in front of the police station.

“Stay down!”

Within seconds, he threw the car into reverse and headed out to another unknown destination. At this point, I wondered how much Judith and I could trust Ricardo.

“Mark will be okay in jail. Now I’m taking you to a hotel where you’ll be safe until I know what to do.”

We parked around the corner from a local inn with two floors of rooms, not your Cancun resort hotel—Rio Bravo isn’t much of a tourist destination. We made our way through the grungy
foyer to the manager’s station. When we asked for a room, he looked at us disagreeably. It was midnight. He looked back and forth at Judith and me, argued with Ricardo, arms gesturing. I didn’t need to know Spanish to understand he didn’t want us gringas in his establishment, but US dollars were hard to pass up.

Judith and I sat in the musty air after Ricardo dashed back out, feeling dropped in our room like the baggage we were. I sat on the edge of the bed, my body unable to feel the mattress, as thighs, knees, ankles, even toes shook uncontrollably. The urge to pee overtook me and somehow I coordinated my body to get from bed to bathroom several times.

“Nervous?” Judith asked, seemingly not anxious herself.

“My God, yes. I’m shaking like a leaf. Aren’t you?”

“No really.”

My head snapped around to look Judith squarely in the eyes, searching for clues to what she was really feeling.

Are you kidding me? We’ve just run from the police; how could you not be scared?”

“We haven’t done anything against the law.”

“Judith, these are the Mexican police. We don’t need to have done anything wrong. They’re corrupt!”

With an unsettling nonchalance, Judith answered, “I’m a Jew from New York. I don’t know these things.”
I hadn’t realized the reputation of the Mexican police I was so familiar with hadn’t penetrated Judith’s New York, not been in Texas long, mindset. I didn’t want to find myself inside a cramped, smelly Mexican jail cell or pondering whether to offer the not uncustomary bribe to the officers or judge. I insisted we leave as soon as possible.

The door swung open and Ricardo entered followed by a tall, heavy set man with chin and chest that said ego. I recognized him as Antonio, a labor attorney from Mexico City we’d met earlier at the demonstration that afternoon. We’d had a brief conversation about how to identify ourselves if detained by the police and our “international observer” answer had made his eyes roll that same dismay, “gringas,” that we’d gotten from the hotel clerk. Antonio had advised us we needed special papers for that and to just show them our ID.

Our activities didn’t side with the usual tourist visa and we knew we were on shaky ground. We’d been aware authorities wouldn’t want outsiders at this event, but we also knew outsiders were just what the workers welcomed. We had eyes to see, ears to hear, and voices to speak. Our presence pierced the anonymity that often hides misdeeds. Judith and I realized this was the reason we had violated our plan to leave at the first sign of trouble. We didn’t want to desert a group of women, even younger and more idealistic than we. We had gone to be advocates; we stayed to be witnesses.

Head-to-head, Ricardo and Antonio spoke in Spanish, then Antonio turned on his heels and left.

“We’re working on Mark’s release. The police arrested at least nine others. They’re all thrown together in one cell. Mark will be safe. But, you’re not.”

“Oh, great,” I sighed.
Ricardo stroked his chin as he paced around the room. “The International Bridge is the quickest, but it closes at 1am. Assuming we even make it on time, if the agents have been told about tonight’s events, they’ll be on the lookout for you.”

“So what do we do?” Judith asked.

“I’ll take you the back way to the Reynosa Bridge; it’s not used as often. If we hurry, we might make it before they close.”

The rural night was darker than the city nights I’m used to. No street lamps, road reflectors, or neon signs lit up the sky. Ricardo moved the car in a hurry along the dirt roads, but didn’t race as before. He made chit chat in simple English as if charming a new date. Still slumped in the back seat, Judith and I kept our answers short.

Perhaps he’d read our minds or was simply experienced in organizing in Mexico, “You can trust me. I’ve worked with Mark a lot. I’m really taking you to the bridge.”

Judith and I breathed a bit more deeply after that or maybe we relaxed the more miles we got from town and the closer to our side of the Rio Grande. Our bodies crouched less and sat more and the three of us conversed, first about union organizing, then about ourselves. In his early thirties and slightly built, Ricardo’s brown eyes conveyed he was an amiable fellow and I could see why Mark had entrusted us to him.

“We’re getting closer to the bridge. Let me do all the talking.”

Judith and I kept silent. The lights in the distance signaled it was show time. Ricardo slowed the car to a stop and the agent appeared at the driver’s window. He peered around the front seat, then the back. My stomach churned as the agent asked for our IDs. I recalled Ricardo’s instructions
to stay casual and hand them over. Next the agent asked what we’d been doing on the Mexican side and why we were headed to the US.

I heard Ricardo tell the story we’d agreed to, “We were at a party with friends. I’m just driving them back home, sir.”

The agent handed back our identification and motioned us on. I held my breath as we cruised across the bridge and onto US soil.

Our relief was short lived as we aimed our efforts at getting Mark out of jail. Ricardo returned to Rio Bravo and we assisted from McAllen. Judith caught a few moments of sleep, I none, as we made adrenaline-fueled calls to our friends in Austin Tan Cerca. The next morning, we visited the US Consulate, who, much to our dismay, did nothing. We called the Red Cross, which eventually sent an observer to the jail, who reported back that the accommodations were basic, but everyone was okay.

Striking Duro workers continued to hold rallies for many weeks at the zócalo, or town square. Back in Austin, Judith and I raised funds for the bail that eventually released Mark from Mexican custody, and the union was successfully registered by the end of the summer. We learned that after we left the plant, some of the demonstrators had been beaten by the police; most fled into the scrub brush of the rural countryside. A local Mexican newspaper wrote about what happened, “man arrested, two women flee,” and Amnesty International reported on the incident and Duro’s abuse of workers.

I participated in another delegation or two but mainly continued my labor organizing with my employer’s union, one I’d helped establish a couple of years before the events in Rio Bravo. Now ten years later, Judith continues with Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera leading delegations to
border towns and educating US Americans about cross-cultural solidarity. She received a PhD in Rhetoric, basing her dissertation on the voices of the maquiladora workers.

During the orientation for my first delegation to Ciudad Acuna, we were told Austin Tan Cerca had only one expectation of those participating: to be the eyes and ears and voices for the maquiladora workers when we returned to the US side of the border.

One leader had cautioned, “What you see and hear on this trip may change you forever.”

I kept my commitment, telling the stories of what I saw and what I heard many times to many people. And, yes, it’s true, my experience changed me. I came home with different eyes. Not just for Mexico or maquiladora workers. Not just for labor organizing or employer abuses. But for what I felt when I crossed over to “safety” onto the US side: I realized my sense of safety was because I was white. I had only seen US police through that experience, not through the eyes of someone of color whose treatment by law enforcement was not so safe as mine.

Though our eyes are taught how to see, we’re born with our skin. I began to learn of the unearned benefits afforded me because of mine. Though I may not feel prejudice or intentionally commit an act of discrimination, recognize or even want any advantage, I am given privileges based on the white skin that others see.

As I finished telling my story to my colleague Mae, she shook her head and chuckled. I explained how I realized the fear and distrust I had for police in Mexico is what Blacks like her routinely feel in the US. She nodded in affirmation. I don’t recall her words, just the feelings unsaid between us; she’d been waiting for a long time. I knew she understood I’d begun to see with different eyes.
Diane Kramer retired from Austin Community College in Austin, TX, after thirty years as a counselor and psychology professor. Her childhood of class and white privilege contributed little to her understanding of students coming from a wide range of race, class, language, and cultural backgrounds. Instead, her students became her teachers and showed her the real world beyond her upbringing. She continues to learn about white privilege.
Reflection on the May 2012 Delegation “Journey of an Immigrant”

By: George Gomez

If there is a word that can best describe my emotion towards this delegation, it is hope. This delegation signifies for me that there is still hope to fight for what is right. There are people still fighting for a better tomorrow. It demonstrates that not all hope for those who are voiceless is dead. I want to begin by extending a special recognition and thanks in this reflection to Professor and Executive Director of Women on the Border, Elvia Arriola, for her intellectuality. I would also like to express my gratitude to the members of ATCF and everyone who participated in this year’s delegation. You are all held closely to my heart.

The main concept of the delegation revolved around the concept of “Manos Vacias” (or empty hands). It is an enigmatic term for many and it might be hard for some to practice, that is to go into an experience without an agenda and with a willingness just to observe and to listen. I came to this delegation with an empty glass only to come back with my glass overflowing in the rich drink of knowledge and experience. I find the concept ground breaking. As if it had to be a concept of unprecedented caliber. Yet, it is not. It is something a typical person who crossed the border could have told you about his or her own experience coming to America. Yet ATCF and WOB’s organizers have aggrandized such a phrase to a new level of sophistication. I kept wondering why I never thought of it in the first place. Nonetheless, it opened another door of knowledge to enable me to think in a different perspective. A second term that I found captivating and probably one that I will take with me forever is solidarity. Solidarity was a word I have never quite clearly understood until I came on this delegation. Solidarity to me now is becoming one with the community. It is more than just attempting to fix a dilemma but understanding the dilemma and its complexities. However, the most crucial part of solidarity is the way one faces the dilemma. I read a quote in our
delegation packet that explains solidarity: “do not sympathize me, but support me.” One should be cautious before attempting to solve another’s problem: one should instead support them in their struggle. It is all about being an individual but becoming part of a community simultaneously.

This delegation experience especially affected me because it reminded me how far I have come. It reminds me how much my family has overcome. It brought me back to the very beginning. By far, the most cherished memory I will take from this delegation was our visit to the families in the indigent neighborhoods of Alamo, Texas facilitated for us by the organizing women’s group called ARISE. The women of ARISE meet and support the immigrant families of the Rio Grande Valley who live in constant fear of losing a home, a relative or spouse or of being picked up, jailed and deported. In the matter of a few hours, the members of ARISE and the family we visited unlocked my heart. I cried profusely during our visit to one family. I did not shed my tears out of sympathy but because I fundamentally understood the family’s experiences. I was taken back to my roots as the young child of immigrant parents. I knew their lack of food and bedding, the absence of capital because I had lived that way myself. I knew the mother’s pain and it was all too familiar. I had promised myself that my family would never go back to that life again. We were to move forward and never look back. However, I regret now never looking back.

Looking back to our own beginnings reminds one of why things turned out the way they did. As a first generation Mexican-American, it helps you understand life experiences that were incomprehensible at the time seen through a child’s eyes. Additionally, these kinds of experiences, of a group of people in a delegation meeting other people in their communities who share their stories, like the ATCF delegation, educates the public on what is really going on at this very moment at the Mexican border. One has the opportunity to see a problem from a completely different perspective when we connect it to a real person’s life story and situation. The experience helps us to
demystify subjects that are exaggerated regularly by the media with what we might call “the CNN effect.” Topics such as the NAFTA or immigration are only brought up by the media when they think it is important. But after this delegation I ask this -- how can this subject not be a priority issue to cover on a daily basis whether it is in Mexico or in the United States? Does the impact of our militarized border not deprive enough people of justice on a daily basis for it to become a newsworthy issue? We are at the whims of the media and yet we, as the public, permit them to tell us what is important for the day. Here is the truth -- there is a war occurring at the border right now that is being silenced or underreported. There is an on-going clash between the government versus its co-inhabitants. The worst thing is that most people, even those who might care, are oblivious to it. However, because of this delegation I am absolutely convinced that there are still people fighting. I guess I could not see it because I felt alone in this struggle. I felt that no one cared about what was occurring to my people. I do not feel that way anymore.

The tour inside the Port Isabel detention center was an eye opener for me and yet was self-evident. The overall conclusion is that we, the people, are the law. The people are the ones that elect those who create the law and the procedures that affect migrants today in their human rights and civil liberties. It is probably the most important yet the most overlooked concept. It should be a priority message for informing the masses, especially anyone who believes there is injustice in our immigration policies today. If we could only make people understand that voting representatives with more favorable attitudes toward the “immigration problem” can change the law of immigration to be less harmful. However, it seems easier said than done. Either people do not care about the realm of politics or they believe the idea that every white man is out in this world to get us (Latinos, foreigners, or immigrants). I personally thought that was true. Secondly, I never knew there were so many diverse nationalities represented in the groups that frequently use the Mexican border as their entry point for coming into the United States. For the first time, I heard a monk and a person from
Journey of an Immigrant

the Asian Pacific give testimony when we gathered at the refugee center Casa Marianella, in Austin, of her attempts to reach the U.S.-Mexico border. The wide diversity of those using Mexico as their entry point to the US was more evident at the detention center. The Assistant Field Director Watkins for Port Isabel informed us that out of the usual 1100+ detainees held in that facility, that Mexicans make up less than 10 percent of the facility’s population. It demonstrates how the media skews the statistics of those who are detained to make it appear that all are Mexican.

In all, this delegation has impacted my life dramatically. It answered questions some people around me could never answer. It has filled me with new information that has extremely diversified the topic of immigration and its effect on my own life, my communities and the world. I might not be able to help directly with the problems of injustice at the Mexican border but I can support the effort to bring awareness and more compassion to the discussions about it. I will support by informing other fellow students and youth about realities at the border today. I can help to demystify the general public’s stereotypical opinions about the border and those who cross or attempt to cross them. I will do this in support of the goals of solidarity, freedom, and opportunity.

George is a law student at Northern Illinois University, where he graduated with a degree in political science with an emphasis in public law and comparative politics. He is a first-generation Mexican-American who is the first in his family to attend college. Throughout his life, he has seen and experienced the struggles of his family and friends in the face of immigration enforcement. He spent years and summers of his youth in Mexico attending elementary school and visiting family.
A Spiritual Journey in the Colonias: Meeting the Heart of an Undocumented Single Mother

By: Sarah Militz-Frielink

I have stood in solidarity with undocumented mothers and their children on the US/Mexico border—knowing that I am here to learn, be an activist for change, and educate others when I return. Visiting the colonias (slum housing along the border in Las Milpas, Texas) was a spiritual experience that gave more to me than I will ever be able to give back—despite this work I try to do. When I speak of solidarity, I draw upon Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez’s work. He defines a creative kind that “underscores a way of being with each other that contingently presents itself against a sense of normalcy and coherence...a solidarity that operates under the assumption that we are incomplete, in the process of becoming.”

It was in this incomplete state of becoming where I met one of the bravest, most beautiful souls—Consuela—a single mother who struggles to feed her four children and grapples with the fact that she will never see her husband again due to issues involving detention of laborers denied legal residency status and deportation. Our meeting was a sacred communion of despair and grief tethered to a fragile strand of hope. This essay attempts to convey the transcendent human connections made when our small group of ACTF delegates—Natasha, George, Lisa, Elvia, Bianca, and me—visited Consuela and her children in May, 2012. A member of ARISE, a grassroots organization which empowers women in their communities, introduced us to Consuela’s family in the colonias. In the colonias, most of the tiny houses do not have running water or electricity. Consuela speaks about the daily challenge to feed her four children. Poverty isn’t the only issue she

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5 Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

7 ARISE, a grassroots organization started in 1987, along the south Texas border, works to empower women living in the colonias. ARISE is “about spirituality, cultural values and personal growth. It’s about connecting women with each other and strengthening the fabric of their communities. It’s about inspiring hope and a sense of possibility.” See www.ariseotex.org for more information.
faces; she is mourning the loss of her husband who is being detained for three more years (after two years in a detention facility) and then deported to their home town in Mexico which is too violent for her and the children to return. Consuela's husband has been transferred to different detention facilities over the past few years. He is slated to transfer to another facility in Arizona, which will make it nearly impossible for Consuela and the children to visit.

Consuela has little hope for her husband’s release because this is the second time he was captured undocumented in this country. The last time Consuela's husband fled Mexico, he was beaten, tortured, and left for dead by a drug cartel. Yet he found the strength to risk coming back here so he could provide for his family again. As tears started to well up in Consuela’s eyes, we felt our eyes mist up with tears as well. We listened as Consuela described feeding her children from the dumpsters in grocery store parking lots. We felt our hearts swell with compassion as she recounted cutting rot out of apples she found there. At one point Consuela stops speaking and is overcome with silence. Perhaps her story is too painful to share with strangers. Perhaps she wonders if we will ever fully comprehend her experiences. We pause in this space of silence, this distance, which is filled with a mixture of trepidation and understanding.

Then George, one of the delegates, breaks the silence. George who is a law student at NIU also happens to be a Mexican American immigrant too. He begins to connect with Consuela as he speaks about his childhood. He recounts growing up in this country as an immigrant in Spanish. I am not fluent in Spanish, but for some reason I can understand what George and Consuela say before Bianca and Elvia translate. George is describing his life growing up in Round Lake, Illinois. Being here in the colonias takes George back to his home life living in abject poverty just like Consuela's children. His mother and father worked three jobs below minimum wage. They did not have enough money to pay rent at one point. They lost their home soon after that. George speaks to
Consuela's children in profound ways. At this point Consuela, her children, and the delegates, are crying. I cannot look at George because the emotion in the room is too high as I teeter on the verge between sobbing and breaking down into complete hysterics. There is so much power in what George says as he speaks the language of shared human suffering. Witnessing the exchange between Consuela, George, and the children is precious. My spirit is filled with a mixed sense of gratitude and moral outrage about the social injustice undocumented immigrants face—as I listen to George relive the suffering Consuela's family faces every day. I believe that what George says to the children will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Here is someone who understands their pain—an older version of themselves who made it out of the colonias and into law school. George speaks through the tears: "Your mother is breaking her back so you can have a better life. I know this because my parents did too. I remember my parents telling me to stay in school because being poor makes you tired. We were so tired of being poor. You will probably lose your house but don't give up hope; stay in school because you may have a chance to get out someday. Your mom is working hard so you don't have to be tired for the rest of your life. Respect what she says. I got out. I pray you can too."

I know George will make one of the finest immigration attorneys because he has a depth of experience, resilience, and knowledge that transcends what any professor in the legal academy can teach him. George's connection to Consuela's family creates a safer space for Consuela to break the silence. Consuela shares the plight of her daily life, the exhausting details that she negotiates daily as a single mother working jobs that pay below minimum wage. We listen as Consuela relives her husband's capture, torture, and current imprisonment. She shares the struggles they face in the colonias with hunger, lack of access to schools, electricity, and adequate housing. She shares the plight of an undocumented working single mother who doesn't get as much time as she would like with her children because she is working too hard to feed them. Despite this, Consuela speaks with
tears and passion about her commitment to her children’s education here in America. She will not let her daughter drop out of high school. Consuela's daughter wants to drop out of school to help her mother save time and gas. There is no bus service and the school is an hour away. The mom recounts the daughter's reasons: "Mom, what's the point of a high school education when I don’t have papers? I will only be a cleaning lady like you and I can do that now without an education.”

Consuela responds with hope for a change in educational policy that will allow her daughter to get papers someday. Consuela wants her daughter to get her college degree and leave the colonias. She smiles with such pride and is willing to continue making the sacrifices needed to enable her daughter to continue her education. Right now Consuela is losing the small house over her head because the landlord died and had not paid the property taxes; his family refuses to deal with it. There is a posted sign "for auction" in front of her home. She worries she won't be able to make enough money for gas to drive her daughter to school this week. Consuela works as a nanny and cleaning lady. Her day is complicated as she commutes to her children's school, to work, back to the schools to pick up the children, and then back to work again. A fragile strand of hope prevails in spite of all these barriers. Consuela summons a cautiously hopeful smile. She says she is happy, despite how tired she is and how much her back hurts—she is proud and grateful to have two jobs now. Her family has more food now than when they first came to this country.

We ask Consuela if we can share her story with the world. She smiles with such beauty and courage and says “Si.” We take turns embracing Consuela. She wraps her arms around me. I wrap mine around hers. “Thank you,” she says. “Gracias,” I respond. After we embrace we hold hands. We look into each other's eyes, we share tears, and what I believe is a spiritual experience of

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8 On June 15, 2012, following our delegation, President Barack Obama announced a dramatic policy of amnesty for the children of undocumented workers/residents aimed at making it legally possible for them to work and go to college. Immigration Policy Spurs Cries of “Amnesty” from Conservative Media, http://mediamatters.org/research/2012/06/15/immigration-policy-change-spurs-bogus-cries-of/185372
becoming. She let me become a part of her journey—one I know is a continuous struggle—through opening a safe space for sharing—one I know George helped create. I have nothing to offer Consuela but compassion, solidarity, and hope that her story we have the privilege of writing will soften the hearts of policy makers who reform immigration laws. Yet I write this with a fragile sense of possibility that the right lawmakers will read this—the policy makers who have the power to consider the plight of families who will never see their fathers or mothers again and reform deportation laws. I do this because the policy makers are the ones with the power to make life a little better for Consuela, for her children, and for the thousands of marginalized families who live in the shadows of society.
Stories from Immigrant Detention

By: Elaine J. Cohen

It is a hot Texas morning and I have just returned from breakfast with Lina. *Huevos Rancheros, frijoles and cafecitos* in one of the many excellent Mexican restaurants on Austin’s east side has become part of our Saturday practice of visiting immigrant women detained in the T. Don Hutto detention center. Today, however, breakfast did not precede the almost hour-long drive to Taylor, the small town 45 minutes from Austin where Hutto is located. All four of the women we have been visiting since October have been released. We decided to have one more breakfast to exchange stories and catch up with each other’s busy life. Two weeks ago we drove from Austin to another city in Texas, to see Ana in her post detention life.

I have begun at the presumed end of the story, when all our four friends have been released. Now I will go to the beginning. Lina and I met at an Austin orientation for people who wanted to visit one of the 500+ women being held in immigrant detention in Taylor, Texas. The Orientation was sponsored by HVP (Hutto Visitation Program) and TUFF (Texas United for Families). These two groups operate under the umbrella of Grassroots Leadership. In addition, all are part of Detention Watch Network, a national coalition working to reform the immigration detention and deportation system.

I don’t have a car and Lina kindly offered to pick me up and let me come with her. The first time I went with her I met Ana. Ana had two friends who she said would like to have a visitor.

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9 In order to protect the identities of the women who were detained, I have assigned each a name that is not their real name. Accordingly, I have chosen to not mention specific cities by name. The names of my colleagues in the Visitation Program have not been changed.
The next week we met Diana and Silvia. They were each from a different Central American country and all had come to the U.S. seeking asylum.

Soon it was the Christmas holidays and Lina, who is a graduate student at UT, went home for a few weeks and I continued visiting, getting rides from other people in HVP. When Lina returned in January, she and I resumed visiting every Saturday morning. Sometimes one of us would focus on one woman; sometimes we had a small group meeting with the women together.

Hutto is a private detention center operated by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) one of the largest private prison corporations in the U.S. Along with GEO Corporation, they collectively receive billions of dollars annually for keeping immigrants and other targeted populations incarcerated.

What may I tell you about our four friends? Each has a different story, but if one were to assemble the stories of all the women in immigrant detention, they might fit one of a variety of profiles. In retrospect, each of these women represents a slightly different side of the issue.

Ana had been the victim of stalking and threats of continued violence at the hand of the man who raped her when she was 14. She couldn’t get away from him as he was from a “powerful” family in the area where she lived. One day he sent thugs to kill her at her mother’s home. Quite by chance she was out of the house, but finding her best friend there with her mother and not actually knowing her, the assassins mistakenly killed her dear friend.

That was when Ana fled to the U.S. She was apprehended almost immediately after crossing into the U.S. and was sent to Hutto. Lina and I went through the months of waiting for her to have
her orientation for her “credible fear” interview with the Asylum Officer. Then there were weeks of waiting for her interview. When the interview finally happened and she told us about it, we were optimistic. Her interview had lasted four hours; we felt that was a good sign.

It turned out that Ana passed her credible fear interview with the Asylum Officer. She could now have the opportunity to pass to the full asylum application stage. She was eligible to be released on parole upon payment of a bond. Fortunately, members of her family in the US were able to pay the bond and she was released to family and friends in Texas. I will discuss her current status later.

Diana finally had her interview, which lasted three hours and had a positive outcome. Diana also passed the credible fear interview and was, like Ana, eligible to be released on bond. Diana’s natural reticence kept us from ever getting the complete story that would explain why she was deemed eligible for conditional asylum. My desire to respect Diana’s privacy prevented me from asking questions that seemed to make her uncomfortable. I did find out one day, after months of knowing her, that she had suffered domestic violence. When I saw the pain that passed through her eyes, as she whispered this small acknowledgement, I chose not to push for more details. The visiting room is large and that day it was crowded. I did not expect, nor did I wish, for her to expose herself in front of so many people.

Then began the work of contacting her family on the East Coast to pay her bond and knowing, finally, that she had been released. Neither Lina nor I have heard from Diana since her release. I have come to accept that while our role of friends and supporters was appreciated, we still are reminders of a terribly painful period in her life. I can understand not wanting to stay in contact with us. Nevertheless, I do wonder about Diana and hope that her life with her sister is going well.

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10 The credible fear interview is the important first step toward being granted asylum. It is at this interview that the Asylum Officer listens to the story of the person detained to determine if her fear of returning to her country of origin is credible.
Like Ana, Diana had a child back in her home country, being cared for by her mother and extended family.

Fernanda is from a totally different category. We met her last; Ana and Diana had befriended her. She was brought to the U.S. when she was six years old by her mother and raised and educated in Florida. Fernanda was the youngest of our friends; she was going to a community college when the death of her grandmother in her home country compelled her and her mother to return home. Her mother stayed behind, but Fernanda was detained when she tried to return to the U.S.

Fernanda's mother had failed to appear at an immigration hearing some years back and was ordered deported in absentia along with Fernanda, who was a child at the time.

Fernanda is typical of many of the Dreamers\(^\text{11}\) who have taken their name from the Dream Act. The letters stand for the Development Relief and Education of Alien Minors Act. The bill was first introduced in 2001 and has been re-introduced each session since. Fernanda, had she not left the U.S. when her grandmother died, might well have been eligible for U.S. citizenship under the most recent version of the Dream Act.

To deport her meant deporting a young, healthy, well-educated bilingual person who certainly would have made a positive contribution in our civil society.

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\(^\text{11}\) This information, as well as a more detailed history and current activity of the movement can be found on the website: http://www.dreamactivist.org
Fernanda was advised that starting an appeal would be a long process and most likely have a negative outcome. She would be mandatorily detained for perhaps another year. Fernanda decided to accept deportation rather than face further incarceration.

Another friend and I have kept in touch with Fernanda via email. She reports that she has finally gotten a job at a Call Center in her country, where her English was certainly a determining factor in gaining employment. She is still learning to adjust to a country she barely knows and expressed worry about the dangers present in simply leaving her home and getting to work and back. She hasn’t, however, given up her hopes of returning to university.

Silvia was released only last week. She had been inside longer than any of these other women: close to twenty-one months. Silvia comes from one of the most impoverished countries in Central America. She has children back in her village. Some are older and living on their own but the younger ones lived with Silvia’s mother and her brother. Silvia’s emotional state in detention was painful and confused. Lina and I struggled, each in our own way, to stay calm even when faced with muttered insults and funny faces during our visits.

Lina reminded me that people come into immigrant detention with their personalities already set. Some, like Ana and Fernanda, had outgoing, optimistic natures. Diana needed drawing out but she was not hostile and eventually allowed our friendship to blossom. Silvia had been abused, not only by the men in her life, but also by the terrible poverty in which she lived. The stress and anger of being incarcerated exacerbated Silvia’s oftentimes angry response to our outreach.

The magic key seemed to turn when we brought Alex, another member of our small group, to meet her. He was from her country of origin. Her anger seemed to melt away as they talked about streets and neighborhoods in their city. Talking to someone who knew where she came from and understood her context was invaluable medicine. Alex tries to disclaim any exceptional
assistance to Silvia, but Lina and I know that his coaching her to be strong and go up to the
*Deportador* (ICE official) daily and to ask that her bond be reduced so that she could be released had
results. Her extraordinarily long incarceration of twenty-one months could be seen as reason to
reduce the bond. In comparison, Ana and Diana were detained about six months each, Fernanda
about four months. We may never know what caused it to change, but something worked and
Silvia’s bond was lowered from $3,500 to $1,500.

Silvia had a friend who was part of a church congregation in Central Florida that put
together the bond money. I have just spoken to Silvia the first time since she was liberated. She is
spending a few days with a friend in another part of Texas and then will be taking the bus to Florida
to start her new life. She was so very happy and we had a lovely conversation. She told me how
wonderful it was that she could make her own little rice and eat bananas and tortillas again. I told
her that her friends in Austin were happy for her and wanted to stay in touch. She sent us many
thanks, good wishes and prayers for our collective wellbeing.

The visit Lina and I made to visit Ana two weeks ago was bittersweet. Her living situation
outside of detention is far from perfect, but she received us with affection and warmth. It was then
that I realized that the relationship begun in detention should not end just because the person is
released. I feel that I still have a responsibility to help her and other women I met in detention
create new lives for themselves and see them through their next steps: the final Immigration Court
hearing which will determine whether they are ultimately granted asylum and can stay in the U.S.
legally.

Currently almost 400,000 women and men are held in immigration detention each year. You
may have one of the facilities near you. They are spread across the US. Detention Watch Network
can help you locate which detention center is closest to you. Do take the time to look: 
http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/dwnmap.

There may already be a Visitation Group in your region with which you can connect or you can start one. It would be very useful to contact the people at Grassroots Leadership who can provide strategic support and training: http://www.grassrootsleadership.org/visit.html.

Some of us share the vision of tens of thousands of people across the US visiting these unjustly incarcerated people. Every time one of us goes to visit and befriends a person far from their country, their family, their friends, we shine light on this horribly dark corner of U.S. Immigration Policy. Please join us in befriending the victims of our country’s current outbreak of xenophobic madness.

I am the granddaughter of immigrants. If the current laws had been in effect when my grandparents came to the U.S., at the beginning of the 20th century, they would have been turned away, or possibly imprisoned. How many of us are from families that came to the U.S. under more humane immigration policies? And who, really, is served by this policy that allows a few private corporations and the federal prison system to siphon scarce tax dollars into their coffers as they profit from the cost of the incarceration of this population?

Please consider joining us in breaking the cycle of corruption and cruelty. Become a friend to someone in immigrant detention. For some in our society, the border between freedom and incarceration is too, too fragile.

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Elaine is from the Midwest but has worked in a number of countries, including Spain, Mexico and India. She now lives in Austin and besides her work with the HVP, is part of a new Collective of Interpreters with a Social Justice matrix.
The border delegation experience opened my eyes to the ways in which many Latino immigrants are dehumanized in our society. Dominant themes of personal agency and perseverance in the face of dehumanization were underscored as we listened to immigrants tell their stories at Casa Marienella (a shelter for immigrants in Austin), toured Port Isabel Detention Center in Los Fresnos, Texas, visited with a family in a colonia\textsuperscript{12} in McAllen, Texas, met with an immigration lawyer, and spoke with a union organizer who worked with the maquiladoras\textsuperscript{13} in Reynosa, Mexico. Immigrants and their families strive to maintain their senses of humanity as the systems around them aim to strip them of it.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights charter from the United Nations, certain inalienable rights should be extended to all human beings. The list of these human rights is extensive and the violation of these rights was evident in the stories we heard and through our observations on the border delegation of the experiences of many Latino immigrants. Several of these human rights will be referenced within the context of the border delegation experience, but the complete list can be found on the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights webpage.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12}“Colonia Definition,” Rural communities within the U.S./Mexico border region that lack adequate water, sewer, or decent housing or a combination of all three, accessed September 1, 2012, http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/communitydevelopment/programs/colonias/history

\textsuperscript{13}“Maquiladora Definition,” A manufacturing facility under foreign ownership in Mexico usually located close to the U.S. border and set up to take advantage of low taxes and wage rates, accessed September 1, 2012, http://www.yourdictionary.com/maquiladora

In opposition to human rights are hegemony and the forces of dehumanization. It is in the best interest of the oppressors, or those in power, to maintain the status quo and to continue to profit from those without power. In order for all people to gain access to human rights, the privileged would have to relinquish some of their benefits. “For whites, it actually means losing their position in the racial structure, of giving up their lion’s share of resources.”\(^\text{15}\) In our highly-racialized society, this often signifies white people since we occupy a position of privilege. Leonardo goes even further to state that “in a racist society, asserting humanity by default means asserting whiteness since whites seem to represent what it means to be human…Textbooks, the media, government, and civilization in general all bear the marks of whiteness, which begin to suggest that ‘human’ equates with ‘white.’”\(^\text{16}\) Our society recognizes whites as being human, but does not always extend humanity to others, especially towards Latino immigrants. Our institutions such as schools, courts, medical care, prisons and detention centers all bear the marks of whiteness and serve to reinforce white privilege and undermine the human rights of other groups.

There are many agencies working at both community and intrapersonal levels to empower immigrants and workers. We were fortunate to be able to meet with representatives from Casa Marienella, ARISE (serving “colonias” or low-income communities located off the grid along the Texas border), Pro-BAR (represents detained immigrants at no cost), and the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (a workers’ activist group in Mexico). These agencies strive to work in solidarity with Latino immigrants and workers so that they may become visible in the eyes of the law and granted basic human rights such as the right to work, the right to an equitable education, and the right to healthcare.

\(^{15}\) Zeus Leonardo, *Race, Whiteness, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 37.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
Pedro from Nicaragua, shared his immigration story at Casa Marienella, a shelter for recent immigrants. He spoke of how he learned about the shelter through another detainee, and upon his request Casa Marienella sent a letter to the immigration judge where he was being held in south Texas. This helped him gain political asylum since the shelter stated they would care for him upon entry to the United States. Over the course of nine and a half months he spent time in two detention centers in south Texas, El Coralón and Port Isabel. Pedro* mentioned that detainees often spend three to five years in detention centers because they are forgotten about in the bureaucracy of the legal system.

Pedro spoke to us about his own experiences and knowledge of the abuses by staff upon detainees. His medical request was responded to after fifteen days. Detainees who talked to their visitors were known to be placed in solitary confinement after the visits. Pedro himself was sent to solitary confinement for thirteen days at one point because he threatened to call a human rights advocate about the filthy and cold rooms they were forced to live in. Water for the detainees at the detention center was dispensed from a large thermos but no cups were supplied so they had to put their mouths on the spigot. He also told of how frightening it was to be transferred in handcuffs and chains even when he was being released, and how he was uncertain of his freedom until the final moment they uncuffed him. This unnecessary but standard treatment for detainees occurs since the security is often contracted to private security companies who do not comply to standards as fully as government-run facilities, but these are human rights violations nevertheless.

According to Foucault, “At the heart of all disciplinary systems functions a small penal mechanism…they defined and repressed a mass of behavior that the relative indifference of the
great systems of punishment had allowed to escape.”¹⁷ The frequent indignities that occur in detention centers in the name of discipline serve to strip detainees like Miguel* of their humanity.

With the help of ARISE (A Resource in Serving Equality), we were able to visit a family within a local colonia in Alamo, Texas, and learn about their lives. We sat on plastic chairs beneath a tree in the dirt that was their yard. The mother, Lupe, originally from Veracruz, Mexico, came to the United States for the first time in 1993. She stayed one year to work and then returned to Mexico. She decided to return to the United States because there was no work back in Veracruz. She fondly recalls the delicious fresh fruits she could obtain in Veracruz from far-flung regions of Mexico and how flavorful the oranges and pineapples were. She is currently unemployed after losing her job last August as a nanny. She sold tamales previously but does not know how to drive. Lupe has two children.

Lupe’s 17-year-old son works in a fruteria, or fruit shop. He is the only member of the family who can drive and learned at 15 since his father (Lupe’s husband) was away and now he is very sick. They bought a car one year ago, but the son already has three speeding tickets. Lupe is desperately worried about her son’s speeding tickets and does not want him to drive any longer. He had two court appearances in one month and they must pay $500 instead of the original $325 since he received two tickets close together. Her son was not home during our visit, and the mother broke into tears speaking about their hardships. Her son is unable to get a driver’s license because he does not have a social security number. Hidalgo County passed a local measure three years ago to prevent immigrants without papers from obtaining a drivers license. There are currently local movements to reverse this decision. No public transportation exists in the county so people must drive in order to

get to work. Many counties in the United States allow undocumented immigrants to obtain a license since they realize that driving is a necessity. Residents in Hidalgo County also pay the highest taxes in the state of Texas and have among the most expensive medical care in the United States while earning the lowest income in the U.S. \(^{18}\)

According to Article Twenty-Five of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an adequate standard of living for health and well-being is a human right. Latino immigrants residing within the 1,424 colonias in Hidalgo County often cannot afford to pay the outlandishly high costs of healthcare that are their only options, and they are forced to break the law and drive without a license in order to get to work or take their children to school.

While worried about her son, Lupe is also enormously proud of him. He has avoided joining the gangs that are so rampant in the colonias, and he is still in school. She told of the challenges he has faced to stay in school. He stopped attending school for a bit and Lupe found out because she was informed that she must go to court if her children were not in school. He was afraid to go because three boys threatened him with pistols. They managed to get another family in the other district to let him use their address so he could change schools and now he is studying again. Lupe* stated that this is a common practice for families to help each other to keep their children in school.

Article Three of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all humans have certain rights such as life, liberty, and security. Families such as Lupe’s, forced to live in certain neighborhoods and attend schools where they live in daily fear of gangs, are not afforded the right to security. They do not have the freedom to move outside of the border region within the United States because immigration checkpoints prevent them from relocating.

Lupe and Mario’s 13-year-old daughter stood shyly beside her mother throughout our visit. She is in middle school and looks like a typical teenager. Lupe voiced her hopes that her daughter will stay out of the gangs and obtain a good education for a better future. Mothers like Lupe are constantly battling to keep their children in school against all odds. There is a human right to an education, according to Article Twenty-Six of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Immigrant parents, like Lupe and her husband, deeply invest themselves in the public education system yearning for a better life for their children here in the U.S. However, a mismatch of interests often prevents these dreams from being realized. “With the highest dropout rate, only 64% of Latino 18-24-year-olds have completed high school.”19 This statistic speaks to the chasm that exists between the hopes of many Latino families and the lack of high quality culturally-responsive schooling opportunities, eclipsed by the current trend of high-stakes testing.

Lupe’s husband Mario came to the United States for the first time in 1986 when amnesty was granted for immigrants. He had his initial papers but misplaced them before they could become finalized. Recently, they heard on the radio that it was possible to go to a lawyer and acquire new papers since he had filed for amnesty years ago. However, in order to finalize his papers Mario would have to leave Hidalgo County to be interviewed at the embassy in Ciudad Juarez, across the border in Mexico, and risk deportation.

Families leave every day to cross the border into Mexico but many never return due to the growing violence on the other side of the border. Lupe expressed her frustration at the injustice of requiring immigrants travel somewhere unsafe in order for a chance at becoming a legal resident. This practice violates Article Three, the right to security. Lupe lamented that immigrants are taken to

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the detention centers for any reason such as child support debt and traffic violations. Her husband was arrested for one of these arbitrary reasons and ICE appeared on the scene and assumed custody of Mario from the local police. Mario was held in a detention center for six months and eventually deported. He was appointed a lawyer but did not feel that the lawyer adequately defended him. Now, back in the United States with his family, he has serious health problems and is unable to work.

Anyone who is not a citizen can be deported. The Immigration and Nationality Act states all reasons for deportation but in the words of Jane, an immigration lawyer from Pro-BAR we spoke with, the reasons are very broad and can be misconstrued. For example, domestic violence can be expanded to encompass having an argument in a shelter. Possession of any type of controlled substance can also lead to deportation. There is an active partnership between immigration authorities and community and state police. Often, transfers happen from criminal centers to detention centers. It is also very common for someone to have a green card and be a permanent resident of the United States and be convicted of a crime and be deported.

Article Nine of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that no one should be subject to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile. Immigrants, both legal and undocumented, are being subjected to all three of these inhumane practices on an everyday basis in the United States. Families are torn apart as one or both parents are sent to detention centers for an unknowable amount of time and with a high certainty of being deported.

Detention centers are prisons. The official purpose of the detention centers is to ensure that illegal immigrants will not escape and will appear for their court dates in order to be processed for deportation. Port Isabel, the “model” facility we visited, has five courtrooms and two judges. In theory, detention centers are not supposed to be jails. However, detention centers have turned into a
growing and lucrative business for the private sector since the government contracts out the
majority of them and it is difficult to identify the physical differences between a prison and a
detention center.

Most detainees go to court without attorneys since there are not enough available to support
them. This violates Article Ten of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights regarding the
entitlement to a fair and public hearing. A fair trial is highly unlikely when an immigrant who may
have limited English and most likely has limited understanding of legal terms and processes in any
language is forced to represent him/herself. Detention centers serve to finalize the criminalization
process of immigrants by housing them in prisons until their invisibility can become complete
through deportation. Simultaneously, they provide a cash cow for corporations and maintain the
balance of economic power. Detention centers are a growing and lucrative business. 20

Detainees are viewed and treated as criminals within detention centers. Port Isabel is the
largest facility in the nation that is ICE-owned and operated. 1,170 detainees were in custody the day
of our visit. The San Antonio field office, which Port Isabel falls under, is the largest field office in
the nation. It encompasses the area from South Padre Island all the way to Del Rio along the border.
This includes three border patrol sectors and 13 ports of entry. Department of Homeland Security
Field Director Watkins said that the average length of stay for a detainee at Port Isabel is 34 days,
but that it can vary depending upon the crime. He noted that they had rapists, murderers, thieves,
and people who had crossed the border illegally in their detention center.

The center classifies detainees upon entry on a scale of one to three with corresponding
colored jumpsuits. Three is the highest and represents extreme violence (red), two signifies a crime
like a DUI or simple drug possession (orange), and one (blue) represents illegally crossing the

20 “For Profit Immigrant Detention Center,” accessed September 1, 2012,
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/31/for-profit-immigrant-detention-center-chicago_n_1561084.html
border. When questioned, Mr. Watkins admitted that the vast majority, (75%) fell within level one while the other 25% was comprised of levels two and three (200/1170 detainees). Red jumpsuit-clad detainees are never allowed with blue, and orange can be placed with either red or blue. The facility is for male detainees only while female detainees are held in Taylor, outside of Austin. If an illegal immigrant is convicted of a crime in the United States the time served in a detention center does not count as time served. It is merely considered administrative or civil time.

Throughout the visit, it was clear that Watkins and his staff consciously or unconsciously found ways to distance themselves from the humanity of the detainees. Watkins referred routinely to detainees as “aliens” as did the rest of his staff, as if they were not human. He emphasized the highly criminal nature of the detainees and how many of them were rapists and murderers, when in fact, 75% of detainees were there solely due to illegally crossing the border. In naming oppressor characteristics, Paolo Freire states “they become inflexible and treat others as mere objects; instead of nurturing life, they kill life; instead of searching for life, they flee from it.” The emotional and physical separation of the detention center employees from the detainees likely justified their inhumane treatment of immigrants.

We were escorted in golf carts to tour a couple of pods at the facility and to peer through the glass to catch a glimpse of life as a detainee. It felt a bit like being at the zoo as we saw where most of their time was spent: a large rectangular cement room with several rows of metal frame bunk beds at the back and side walls, an open bathroom in the far corner, three round tables and a hard plastic bench in the center of the room, a bank of pay phones against the left wall, and a water fountain in

the corner near our viewing window. Many of the men stood up as they saw us approach the large viewing window, chattering with each other and gesturing as they interestedly observed our group of visitors through the glass. The temperature in the hallways outside the pods felt significantly cooler than the 74 degrees Fahrenheit on the thermostat in the upstairs meeting room.

Article Five in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights says that no one should be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment. The use of uncomfortably hot or cool temperatures over a long period of time in prisons and detention facilities is a known form of torture. Pedro, whose story we heard at Casa Marienella, spoke of the practice of maintaining the thermostat at a chillingly uncomfortable temperature within the detention center, as well as his other experiences of degradation suffered within the detention center.

Diego, a union organizer with workers in the maquiladoras (factories) along the Mexican side of the border, came across the border into McAllen, Texas, to teach us about the conditions of the maquiladoras and what their union is doing to improve these conditions. Workers need to know their rights so that they can individually and collectively defend those rights. Initially, there was a hesitation on the part of the workers to organize. A worker who is blacklisted will lose her job and will not be hired anywhere else. Eventually, they realized the importance of joining with others to collectively work together. They also recognized that the law is being violated and that there is a process in place to defend their rights. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights mentions the right of workers to unionize and work in favorable conditions. These factories are violating the human rights of their workers in numerous ways every day.

Mexico’s labor laws as written are much more progressive than those in the United States. Both Article 90 of Mexico’s legislative labor law and the Mexican Constitution guarantee a living wage. The 1917 Constitution after the revolution recognized the material, social, and cultural needs
of the individual and family, including education. There are also penalties written within the laws for
employers who fail to meet these basic human needs and the guidelines for a basic grievance
procedure against the employer. The authors of these documents realized the importance of
documenting human rights for all people.

The union’s worker consciousness-raising involves informing workers of what they are
earning now and what they ought to be earning according to the law. One organizing tool that
Diego used in the CFO’s “basic market basket” workshop is cost-of-living charts. The basic market
basket is a series of charts that shows the costs of items necessary just not to starve. He brought
these for us to see as well as copies of two real worker pay stubs. The Mexican minimum wage is
currently 62 pesos a day or about US$4.44/day for eight hours of work. He mentioned that it was
insulting that some employers are not even paying this much. Workers often work 40 hours from
Monday through Thursday and continue to work through Saturday with no overtime pay. Mexico
does have overtime laws but constant violation of these laws is standard practice. This happens fairly
frequently in the United States, as well, with wage theft. Companies reshuffle the start date for
overtime so an employee never receives it. Workers in the maquiladoras are unable to support their
families on these wages so some strategize to work twelve-hour shifts so that they can look for
another job to work the other three days of the week. Often, the supervisors will propose this very
idea to workers to make it sound like they are acting in workers’ best interest to arrange such
crammed hours instead of violating their human rights.

Diego showed us two worker pay stubs. They were each paying about 122 pesos per day
(US$8.74). Diego mentioned that this is the typical rate for all of the factories along the border on
the Mexican side. The total for a week for the first pay stub was 1,028 Mexican pesos (US$73.67) of
net take-home pay while the second pay stub was for 534 Mexican pesos (US$38.27). Diego
explained why there was such a large different in the two weekly paychecks. The second pay stub reflected a deduction taken out for an employee who had opted for the federal housing program (Instituto del Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda para los Trabajadores-INFONAVIT). For 30 years, this worker will be making payments on a house that will take half of her/his salary. These are very basic and small homes and the payments keep the workers forever in debt.

Diego saw similarities between this system and the old hacienda system or the way the World Trade Organization works today in third world countries since countries are so indebted that they are never able to overcome their financial obstacles. Some of the workers who purchase homes through the federal housing program never realize they finished making payments because there is no system in place to inform them. Workers involved in the federal housing program are subject to many obstacles. If they lose their job and are unable to find a new job after the one-year grace period, they will never be able to repay the debt since the interest will escalate astronomically. This is a lucrative business since the regular payments from the maquiladoras come before they even see their paychecks. There is no real urban planning in the design of housing projects under the INFONAVIT program. Investors, contractors, and builders purchase large tracts of land and sell it to the federal government. Often there is very poor infrastructure in these cities. Although the city of Reynosa has five industrial parks that are aesthetically pleasing from the outside the workers are forced to choose between the federal worker housing or squatter housing, often made from cardboard.

Diego and his wife decided against getting an INFONAVIT home even though they look pretty and they can be very tempting since they are ready to move into right away. They thought about the half a million pesos they would spend over the course of 30 years. They knew they would suffer for years getting a home on their own since it would mean going through an informal
settlement process that has legal backing. First, they would either have to purchase or squat on a plot of land. Mexico has squatter’s rights for land that is not being used. Over time, others also squatted or purchased plots of land near them and when they reached a critical mass they were able to organize and request services such as gas, water, and electricity from the city. This process can take 15 to 20 years. For Diego and his wife it took 16 years but it was worth it. They did not view it as a choice since their options were dire. It was more an act of desperation.

The “basic market basket” is calculated for four people for one week at 966 pesos (US$69.23). It does not include such things as meat, vegetables, crackers, eggs, or dishes figured at an additional 504 pesos (US$36.12). Nor does it include obligatory costs such as water, electricity, gas, school supplies, and transport at another 547 pesos (US$39.20). Diego depicted all of these items and their costs on separate charts. The two pay stubs were each for US$73.67 and US$38.27 while the total for these bare necessities was US$144.55. This discrepancy between the cost of living and pay causes a constant pressure upon the workers. They are forced to continually play catch up and only buy certain necessary items each week for their families. This causes children to leave school at 14 or 15 years old and start to work because they want to help their families. They cannot face seeing their parents, or single mothers, working themselves to death. The legal age is 16 but there is an underground system of falsifying birth certificates. The employers start to favor younger workers because they are faster with their hands and age discrimination occurs against 35 and 40-year-old workers who are slower. It is important for the union to educate the workers so they understand why they are working to change the conditions.

Article Four of the Universal Document of Human Rights states that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude. The conditions of the maquiladoras demonstrate that a system is in place that replicates the conditions of slavery. These workers are trapped within a caste system of servitude.
Survival mode encourages their participation in programs like INFONAVIT and dissuades them from joining legitimate unions out of fear.

According to Paolo Freire the oppressors, or those in power, use myths to keep the people passive such as that “all persons are free to work where they wish, that if they don’t like their boss they can leave and look for another job…the myth of the universal right of education, when of all the Brazilian children who enter primary schools only a tiny fraction ever reach university.”\(^{22}\) The living conditions that the workers in the maquiladoras and the families in the colonias endure daily is testament that these myths are present.

Jane, the immigration lawyer we met with, mentioned two pieces of legislation that could help the immigration situation. She advocated for a guest-worker program since the business community in the United States relies on a large class of people they can exploit, and she felt that we need to be honest about our economic model. Under NAFTA, some companies are benefiting on both sides of the border since some U.S. companies have factories that pay below poverty wages in Mexico, too.\(^ {23}\)

The second piece of legislation that Jane felt was necessary is the Dream Act. Immigrant children are often brought to the United States by parents at a young age, and there was no path to citizenship for undocumented youth. They may have completed their schooling here, and even obtained a university degree and find they were unable to get a job. Fortunately, initial steps are finally being taken to put the Dream Act into effect. However, a change in administration would likely derail these efforts at positive immigration reform.

\(^ {22}\) Ibid., 139.

In the words of the CFO organizer, Diego, we should “not feel sorry for immigrants but see them as they truly are.” Latino immigrants, and all immigrants, often go unnoticed within our society but the strength that they exhibit daily through human agency in order to make a better life for their children within a limited set of choices is profound. Freire emphasizes the importance of recognizing the purpose and mechanisms behind the actions (our institutions) and taking steps for reform. By opening up spaces for dialogue, especially between leaders and people of diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, this can lead to action. “Permanent dialogue between leaders and people, and consolidates the participation of the people in power.”

The Dream Act is a beginning to restoring humanity to Latino immigrants since it provides a legal pathway to citizenship. But this conversation cannot end here.

Dorothy Wall is a doctoral student in bilingual/bicultural education at the University of Texas at Austin. She was a bilingual/dual language teacher in Oregon and California, and served as a Peace Corps volunteer. In May 2012, Dorothy participated in a community delegation to the border region of Texas sponsored by the non-profit organizations Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera and Women on the Border. Her research interests include the relationship between family and school curriculum, student-centered instruction, and student language interactions.

24 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 139.
Borderlines

By: Reverend Pamela Brouker

Borderlines

The wall moves upward
taciturn in its function
for who does it serve?
"Surely not I"
says the ocelot
seeking food in its remnant habitat
"Surely not I"
says the tortoise
whose shell cannot survive the brakish waters
following hurricanes
"Surely not I"
says the border patrol man
who maneuvers with deerlike attention
around stylized columns without a tazor certificate
"Surely not I"
says the birder
who notices one less endangered species on this annual pilgrimage.
"Surely not I"
says the Lutheran theologian
who recognizes crosses in the gathered ladders
Then who asks the people crossing the borders of the mind
seeking for life giving bread and water, beloveds and a chance?

Please think about what being a "walled in" nation means. Is that really freedom?
Austin Tan Cerca De La Frontera and the Struggle to Redefine the Border Paradigm

By: Charles I Rand

It appears lately that organized labor is getting pounded from every side. With the support of big business assets, the rights of public employees to bargain collectively were recently rescinded by Governor Walker in Wisconsin. Other states are poised to follow suit. The conservative offensive to debilitate organized labor is vehement, and many unions have gone into retreat, temporarily or permanently. In at least one important area, however, organized labor has been making headway. Advances in organized labor strength have been notable in the area of transnational solidarity, which arose as a reaction to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). As one scholar recently put it, “NAFTA—the concrete embodiment of globalization in North America—had the unanticipated consequence of catalyzing labor transnationalism…”

The 501c3 nonprofit educational organization, Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (ATCF), as indicated on the organization’s website, was founded by a handful of activists opposed to corporate run sweatshops and substandard working conditions particularly in developing countries, in order to help counter the ill effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement on workers on the Mexico side of the Texas border. The 501c3 nonprofit group began in 1999 as a project of the American Friends Service Committee, the social action arm of the American Quakers. The stated mission of ATCF is to promote attempts to improve the quality of life and working conditions of the women and men who work in the maquiladoras, often with typical characteristics of large

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industrial sweatshops/factories on the Mexican side of the border. The majority of all maquiladoras are US-based and multi-national corporations that have moved a part of their operations to the north of Mexico to take advantage of the unenforced Mexican minimum wage and labor laws. In order to realize its stated mission, ATCF supports the efforts of the Mexican labor union, the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO) in its opposition to sweatshop conditions, substandard wages, and routine abuses that take place at the maquiladoras. ATCF has continued to nurture its relationship with the CFO over the past 13 years by contributing regularly to the CFO and sending quarterly commissions, or delegations consisting of approximately 12 guests or delegates, chosen from among interested members of the general public to meet with the CFO representatives and maquiladora workers, share meals, exchange views, and tour the grounds where the maquiladoras are located. Delegates commonly talk about how impressed they are by the delegation experience, and many relate how the time spent with workers, the CFO and ATCF continues to affect them even after returning to Texas or wherever else they are from (some come from as far as the Midwest or New York). Many find the experience of driving with the workers outside the maquiladoras or sharing meals and visiting with workers in their homes deeply moving. After returning home, former delegates have become more active in progressive and border-related causes, such as standing against many cruel practices in the immigration detention centers, or supporting labor movements on the US side of the border. In 2010, owing to budgetary concerns of the American Friends Service Committee, ATCF became autonomous, though because the ATCF and Quakers share many values, these groups still retain ties.

ATCF got its start in 1999 when a few women, maquiladora workers, and union organizers, came to the US to describe the conditions they face in the maquiladoras and what they are up

\[28\] Ibid.
\[29\] Josefina Castillo and Judith Rosenberg (ATCF founders) in discussion with the author, July, 4, 2012.
\[30\] Ibid.
against as organizers with personal, firsthand knowledge of the material hardship, harassment and indignities suffered by maquiladora workers. The material hardships include harsh working conditions and long work hours for low pay\textsuperscript{31}.

**Social setting around the time of ATCF’s founding**

The year 1999 marked the largest anti-neoliberal, anti-globalist demonstration in the history of the United States, just months after the formation of ATCF. Tens of thousands of progressive, mostly young trade unionists and environmentalists took to the streets of Seattle to protest a scheduled meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO). While there was some storefront looting—a small group of anarchists broke shop windows and vandalized storefronts—the vast majority of the demonstrators were peaceful.\textsuperscript{32} The police, apparently alarmed at the vast number of well-organized protesters present, used aggressive tactics such as tear gas and rubber bullets, in an attempt to drive the crowds back, however. About 600 protesters were arrested. A federal jury appointed after the demonstration found that the police had overreacted and arrested many protesters without due cause. Norm Stamper, at the time Seattle chief of police, ended up resigning\textsuperscript{33}.

Seattle’s was not the first, nor the last, demonstration opposing institutions of global capital, but it was the first one that was highly visible and publicized widely in the United States. Some months earlier, in June of 1999, tens of thousands of counter-hegemonic activists had staged a massive rally against the G8 in Cologne, Germany. The previous year had seen demonstrations in

\textsuperscript{31} Personal Testimonies of Maquiladora Workers in discussion with the author and other ATCF delegates in Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña, México, January 6-8, 2012. (All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement).


Birmingham, England, also in opposition to the G8. Around the same time, anti-corporate protests had also taken place in a range of international cities, including Barcelona, Spain, Melbourne, Australia and many others\textsuperscript{34}.

**The North American Free Trade Agreement**

Understanding NAFTA is important for understanding the civil society organization Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (ATCF). As Kay noted, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which went into effect on January 1, 1994, essentially formalizes and reinforces a pre-existing relationship of economic, political and social power linking the US, Canada, and Mexico.\textsuperscript{35} While eliminating tariffs between the US, Canada, and Mexico, Chapter 11 of NAFTA in particular, effectively makes it possible for multinational business to contest a plebiscite, occasionally even overriding the *vox populi*. In other words, it appears that NAFTA, along with other global economic treaties, may effectively compromise national sovereignty when popular consensus conflicts with international laws protecting big business.\textsuperscript{36} Consequently under NAFTA, American and multinational corporations became more powerful than ever. While greater corporate control generally led to greater wealth among investors, many ordinary working people in the US, Canada and Mexico lost jobs. Many others may have retained their jobs, but often did so at the expense of their benefits or job security.

Scholars point out that NAFTA did not generally serve the interests of the Mexican working and middle classes. Sandler and Mein note that in the aftermath of the NAFTA signing, Mexico


\textsuperscript{35} Kay, *Nafta*.

“experienced a massive devaluation of the peso, sending the country into a downward spiral,” which hurt poorest citizens the most. In addition, beginning right after NAFTA came into force in 1994 until 2011, Mexico experienced only 1% economic growth, compared to 3.2% growth between 1948 and 1973\(^37\).

This has had a far-reaching effect on the workers in the maquiladoras. Maquiladora workers are seldom promoted, remaining at the bottom of the employment ladder and making the rounds from one factory to another. Last year, the typical maquiladora worker in Piedras Negras made between $60 and $70 US for 48 hours work. In addition, for years the rate of inflation in the north of Mexico has soared, making it very nearly as expensive to live in Piedras Negras, Ciudad Acuña or Reynosa, as in Eagle Pass or Harlingen to the north, across the border.\(^38\) Moreover, the Mexican economy remains addled in part because money raised from the sale of products assembled in Mexico tends to go into the pockets of overseas investors and not spent in Mexico.\(^39\)

In any case, the internationalization of US, Mexican, and Canadian economies was a process. It did not happen overnight, and it was not entirely the result of NAFTA or any other single accord. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, multinational corporations, deregulated and left to their own devices, became stronger and the formal NAFTA treaty was the final blow to labor.\(^40\) On the other hand, corporations prospered by zeroing in on locations where there was a concentration of cheap labor, nearby access to resources and demand, and setting up factories in those locations. One environment extraordinarily well adapted to corporate needs was the


\(^{38}\) Worker Testimonies.


\(^{40}\) Kay, NAFTA.
US/Mexico border. The border region has given corporations access to cheap Mexican labor, and nearby US markets with their demand for manufactured goods.

**A brief reference**

Although not standard procedure, so as to assist the reader to understand what life in the maquiladoras was like in the 1990s around the time ATCF’s sister organization, the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras was formed, it is helpful to consider a Carlos Fuentes story set during that period in Ciudad Juárez on the Mexico/Texas border.\(^\text{41}\) The story, “Malintzin de las maquilas,” depicts some of the abuses and indignities to which Mexican maquiladora workers were subjected in the border city of Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s, coinciding quite closely with the passage of NAFTA. During this period in Ciudad Juárez a series of gruesome femicides, which left some 400 women dead, also took place (and appears, appallingly, to be ongoing). In “Malintzin,” Fuentes depicted the atmosphere of promiscuity, sexist manipulation, and almost comical indifference to exploitation that permeated Ciudad Juárez, and he linked it to the maquiladoras. This cavalier, lurid maquiladora environment stood in stark contrast to the very traditional atmosphere prevalent in many of the small Mexican towns from which the women workers, many of whom were barely past girlhood, came. The exploitation, youth, and inexperience of workers appear to have resulted in an unusually large number of single parents, and in particular, of single mothers.\(^\text{42}\) This has created a generally unfulfilled need for child care. To this day, parents of young children who work in the maquiladora often point out that finding ways of providing for the care and safety of their children, is a major concern.\(^\text{43}\) In “Malintzin” Fuentes offered a plausible reading of events in and around the maquiladoras in the 1990s in Ciudad Juárez that tasks the cynicism and indifference of management,

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\(^{41}\) Carlos Fuentes, “Malintzin de las maquilas,” in *Frontera de cristal*, (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 1995), 129-60.


\(^{43}\) Worker Testimonies.
as well as the major stockholders in large corporations, with some responsibility for the tragic incidents that ensued.\(^{44}\)

**Conditions in the maquiladoras**

We have mentioned the Fuentes story to remind the reader of the dire conditions surrounding the maquiladoras in the 1990s and the difficult task of leaders who took it upon themselves to organize maquiladora labor. The events alluded to in the story provide a general backdrop to conditions throughout the north of Mexico in the 1990s. Moreover, though the actual center of Comité Fronterizo de Obreras operations is farther southeast, in the region running along the Rio Grande from Ciudad Acuña to Piedras Negras (opposite Del Rio and Eagle Pass, Texas), it is likely that elements of the maquiladora culture permeating Ciudad Juárez at the time were present throughout the border area.

Among the conditions that present themselves in maquiladoras throughout the border region is the pervasive custom of paying workers sweatshop wages. Maquiladora workers take home on average just $60 to $70 US for 48 hours of work in Piedras Negras.\(^{45}\) Considering that the cost of living has dramatically increased in regions where there is a high maquiladora density in recent years, and now approaches the cost of living in towns on the US side of the border, $60 to $70 for 48 hours a week is not a livable wage for the many families with four or more members in any case. In families with four members, two breadwinners at least are necessary simply to cover the cost of basic needs. Couples with small children, arrange when possible to have sequential work schedules that permit one spouse to remain at home at any given time to care for small children. This means, a husband may work the day shift while his wife is obliged to work all night, or vice versa.

\(^{44}\) See Appendix A for a plot summary of Fuentes’ “Malintzin de las maquilas.”

\(^{45}\) Worker Testimonies.
In addition, workers commonly speak of employee dress codes which, though ostensibly designed to protect them from workplace accidents, often have little functionality apart from that of enabling management to convince multinational observers and stockholders that maquiladoras do in fact observe in-shop safety requirements. Employees, moreover, object that they have to pay for uniforms, including shoes, out of pocket which constitutes a hardship for those who are already struggling to make ends meet. Despite the emphasis on clothing, workplaces can be dangerous because of unsafe or faulty machinery, and accidents are not infrequent. When a worker submits a complaint about an unfair, dangerous, or generally exploitative working condition, a common management response is to lay the worker off. Romero and Cruthirds point out that rather than promote employees or permit them to build up the seniority necessary in order to claim to severance legally, managers often lay workers off in the unspoken expectation that workers will simply rotate from factory to factory, and factory owners will be off the hook when it comes to worker severance packages. Workers report they are often laid off only a few days prior to having built up the seniority necessary to be entitled to severance pay.

Finally, maquiladora workers report to ATCF and the CFO continued on-the-job harassment. Workers complain of having to raise their hand and wait to be called on to use the toilet or of being deprived of bathroom breaks altogether. Request for sexual favors by supervisors, particularly from the newer hires, continues to occur.

In the face of these and other substandard working conditions, three spokeswomen, workers and trade union activists/organizers from the CFO, came to a meeting of American Quakers in 1999 to give a talk about maquiladora life and describe the small victories and trials of the Mexican

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46 Worker Testimonies.
48 Worker Testimonies.
49 Worker Testimonies.
labor leader. In so doing, they inspired a handful of Austin-based activists to found the Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera. The activists who founded ATCF were seeking to provide external support to the CFO in its struggle to achieve fair labor practices and justice. It is not ATCF’s approach to meddle in the affairs of the CFO. Rather, ATCF embraces Paulo Freire’s admonition “to walk with, not for” the oppressed.\footnote{Paulo Freire, \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1983), 33.}

**Maquiladora management and civic relations**

With regard to the maquiladoras as corporate entities, one of the main stumbling-blocks they face when attempting to set higher standards, improve working conditions, and enhance their image in border towns like Piedras Negras is the history of mistrust surrounding multinational corporations in general. According to surveys done in 2004, Mexican charitable, non-governmental organizations expressed a great reluctance to ask maquiladoras for financial or other assistance.\footnote{Richard Kiy et al. "Corporate Giving Trends in the US-Mexico Border Region," \textit{US-Mexico Border Philanthropy Partnership}, 2005, 35. http://www.synergos.org/knowledge/06/bordercorporategiving.pdf.}

The following chart shows why Mexican NGOs cited for not asking for maquiladora help in 2004:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideological Reasons</th>
<th>13%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in meeting corporate requirements for grant applications</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO programs aren’t consistent with the corporation criteria</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unawareness of opportunities for funding</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of access to the contacts to pursue funding opportunities</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: “Challenges and Struggles…,” www.icfdn.org/publications/cs/008_04.htm

Whether because of the imposing image presented by the maquiladora, or because of mistrust of management resulting from a history of worker mistreatment and indifference to local
communities, Mexican NGOs and civil society organizations often feel discouraged from seeking assistance from maquiladoras located in their communities. It seems quite plausible that maquiladoras suffer major image problems among local populations.

If US-based and foreign corporations made more of a point of reaching out to local communities, it is at least possible that the level of trust felt between citizens and foreign businesses in local communities could increase over time. Improved relations, however, would likely involve maquiladoras adopting more culturally sensitive and appropriate models. This seems rather likely as long as corporate responsibility to shareholders, i.e., profitability, continues to be the main priority.  

Finally, political pandering to investors by rich local elites is particularly rampant in some Mexican border towns. A New York Times reporter recounts that a former mayor of Ciudad Acuña, Mr. Ramón Valdez, declared to potential investors he had managed to suppress all labor union activity. “I’ve always managed the situation so that there are zero unions,” he told a reporter for the N.Y. Times.

The Comité Fronterizo de Obreras

Surprisingly perhaps to some, Mexico has an extremely progressive set of federal labor laws. For example, labor laws in Mexico guarantee to the worker a more complete package of benefits and worker protections than do US federal, or individual state labor laws. The problem for Mexican workers is that Mexican labor laws are only seldom enforced, though whether this is due to the inefficacy of the government, external pressure, or corruption, is not always easy to discern. Moreover, as one might expect, few big businesses go out of their way to inform workers of their

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52 Ibid., 14 and 26.
Since many Mexican workers have little education and are accustomed to the neglect of institutional bureaucracies and government officials, many have concluded that workplace exploitation is an inevitable fact of life. The most powerful Mexican labor union, the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM), though originally pro-worker, has, according to workers and organizers of other unions, become transfigured over time into what many refer to popularly as a “cowboy, ghost or sham union” (“sindicato charro o fantasma”) that does little more than mimic a committed stance that favors the worker. In the meantime, it is widely assumed that the CTM collaborates in secret with big business and the Mexican government. The workers and organizers with whom we broached the subject expressed unanimous contempt for the CTM. On the other hand, there are unions and labor organizations which seem genuinely committed to the workers’ cause. They include the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (Sindicato mexicano de electricistas or SME) and the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO) in the maquiladoras on the US border.56

The CFO, whose organizers unfailingly greet ATCF delegates when they arrive in Piedras Negras, Ciudad Acuña, or Nuevo Laredo, conceives of itself as a conduit by which the workers gain awareness and knowledge of their basic rights as in the Mexican Labor Law. The CFO accomplishes this in a variety of ways. One of the most common of these is role-playing with workers what happens in workplace situations if the worker finds him or herself bullied or intimidated by a supervisor. In a typical role-play, the CFO organizer plays the role of a supervisor who insists, for example, that a pregnant worker work long hours until the day the baby is due, and return to work immediately after giving birth. The organizer/supervisor would cajole the worker, insist, and then threaten to take away her job if she does not comply with the organizer's-supervisor's demands. The worker, at first meekly at the CFO’s promptings, would open a copy of the Mexican Federal Labor

55 Worker Testimonies.
56 Worker Testimonies.
Law, and indicate to the organizer/supervisor the passage guaranteeing to Mexican women not merely a couple of days of maternity leave, but six weeks paid leave both before and after the birth of her baby.\(^5^7\) Whether or not the organizer/supervisor continues to cajole the worker, insisting on her obedience, she is encouraged not to back down. The fact that both the law and the CFO support her cause embolden her.\(^5^8\)

While many US-based civil society organizations (CSO) aim to promote warm ties with Mexican individuals as well as churches and schools in Mexico, ATCF seeks to foster and maintain a deep, durable relationship with the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO), an organization that shares its respect and appreciation for maquiladora workers. The issue is addressed on the webpage: “The Comité Fronterizo de Obreras...hosts each group’s visit enabling US delegates [ATCF] to meet with workers who are defending human rights, justice, and dignity in a harsh labor environment.”\(^5^9\) The Mexican workers we addressed in Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña voiced unanimous support for the CFO as the organization workers confidently rely on to defend their rights and interests. Not all Mexican labor organizations receive the same worker approval.\(^6^0\)

**ATCF’s place alongside other civil society organizations**

What sets ATCF apart from other border CSOs is the fact that ATCF’s clients are not isolated individuals with very little or no political clout, e.g., the migrants aided and honored by BorderLinks,\(^6^1\) a CSO which resembles ATCF in many respects. Instead, ATCF’s client, or to be precise “partner,” is an organization, the CFO. This means that ATCF and the CFO are roughly equals in the sense that while neither wields great power, neither is completely powerless. Both

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\(^5^7\) *Ley Federal.* See Appendix B for the original text (and my English translation) of the section of the Mexican labor law pertaining to the maternity rights of the Mexican worker alluded to above.

\(^5^8\) Worker Testimonies.

\(^5^9\) ATCF mission statement.

\(^6^0\) Castillo and Rosenberg, discussion.

organizations are free to play complementary roles in a larger, though not much publicized, scheme: helping to constitute a transnational system of fair and equitable labor practices that do not exploit working women and men anywhere in Mexico, North America or if possible the world. This frees ATCF and the CFO from an implicit sense of superiority, or of weakness and co-dependency, that often plague border CSOs and their clients. To clarify, US-based CSOs often provide a disproportionate share of capital and resources, as well as expertise to their relationships with Mexican clients. This may give to US-based CSOs the erroneous, often unconscious, impression that the CSO is an eternal source of active, engaged philanthropy while its Mexican partner is only a passive drain on the CSO. Members of US-based CSOs often experience frustration which, in extreme cases, may result in CSO dissolution. For their part, Mexican clients are often disappointed by the inability of many CSOs to keep their sometimes extravagant promises. This may deepen the sense of hopelessness and neglect that many clients already feel. In the worst cases, CSOs and their Mexican clients may begin to believe the myths about themselves. It is this self-perpetuating cycle that defeats a well-meaning CSO’s purpose.⁶²

For this reason, ATCF prevails on delegates not to give money or gifts to individual clients. Any gift giving, policy makes clear, must be organizational. ATCF makes donations to the CFO as a whole, not to individual members, and ATCF avoids expressing disapproval or satisfaction about how donations are used or distributed. The CSO and ATCF are partners. There is no hierarchy bestowing on either organization any power or ascendency over the other.⁶³ Moreover, ATCF avoids meddling in the CFO’s inner workings. The CFO and ATCF are wise to be cautious. Old assumptions and prejudices are deeply ingrained, and it is easy to fall back on stereotypes that for many years have undermined, and continue to undermine, the missions of US-based border CSOs.

⁶² Castillo and Rosenberg, discussion.
⁶³ Ibid.
Finally, the three maquiladora workers CFO organizers who came to Austin to speak to Quakers in 1999 apparently did not strike their audience as meek and ineffectual at all. On the contrary, those present at the event who were interviewed expressed great admiration for the courage and determination of the speakers. They were inspired by the speakers. ATCF founders also confirmed that the impetus to create ATCF arose out of admiration for the strength of the CFO speakers, not pity owing to any perceived weakness. It seems logical to conclude that ATCF sought a partner to achieve an even greater goal. As a former ATCF board member puts it, “If multinational corporations can erase national borders to make more money…, then American consumers can also join in solidarity with workers in other parts of the world to produce a more globalized economy.” This helps explains why ATCF can partner with the CFO without meddling or trying to influence or pressure the CFO. ATCF’s mission is the result of its founders’ vision. ATFC and the CFO are partners on a mission, each playing a role in the larger scheme of things. Moreover, they will likely go on reaching out to support each other for as long as each continues to play its essential role in bringing about a fairer, more just and humane order. That, in essence, is what keeps the ATCF-CFO relationship strong.

Sample delegations

After delegates arrive in Piedras Negras, Ciudad Acuña, or Nuevo Laredo, they meet with workers and the CFO. The venues for the meetings are not designed to be particularly comfortable. (Would-be participants who desire comfort will, it is assumed, seek out a tour of a different sort.) Instead, tours offer authenticity, camaraderie, and a frank and open look at workers’ lives, communities, workplaces, and the places where they meet to discuss labor strategy. Locales where

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64 Castillo and Rosenberg, discussion.
delegates are received and addressed are small and often crowded. Sometimes delegates have to sit on the floor because chairs are in short supply and even the ones available are not always comfortable. However, for a journalist, researcher, or someone who wants to get a first-hand, eye-witness account of the lives workers and labor organizers in Mexico, these meetings are ideal. Open, honest discussion invariably ensues because the ATCF has taken care to nurture a relationship of trust with the CFO. If ATCF promises the union it will provide some sort of assistance to the CFO, it keeps its promise. Moreover, ATCF does not judge the CFO in any way. ATCF adheres strictly to Paulo Freire’s prescription for elites who wish to remain in solidarity with those Freire speaks of as the “oppressed.” ATCF commitment to the Freirean stance is clearly elaborated in the group’s mission statement: “ATCF seeks to address conditions of social and economic injustice along the Texas/Mexico border […] and to find community-driven alternatives through transnational solidarity and fair trade.” As one of ATCF’s founders, Rosenberg, and others have pointed out “One of the most important aspects of delegations are the home visits, eating and ‘communing’ (‘conviviendo’) in the homes of workers, sharing food and space.”

At the conclusion of every delegation, just before the delegates prepare to return home, there is a period of reflection of two or three hours in which workers and delegates sit together one last time and meditate about everything learned, and the emotions stirred up by their experiences. On the last delegation to Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña, of the 12 or so delegates, all but one spoke conversational, if not completely fluent Spanish. Each was given a turn to express what the delegation had meant to him or her. One young Chicana woman wept because her parents had remained stolidly laconic about all the suffering and poverty they had endured before and after crossing the US-Mexico border and arriving safely in the US. Hearing the workers’ perspectives had

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66 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*
67 ATCF mission statement.
68 Castillo and Rosenberg, discussion.
stirred up the sadness she felt at having lost some deep connection to her Mexican ancestry.

Another delegate, who knew no Spanish at all, left an indelible impression when she summed up her experience of the nearly three days spent in Mexico. An African Studies major at the University of Texas at Austin, she talked about the time she had spent in Africa and how in many ways her Africa experience both resembled and was different from her maquiladora experience. One of the things the maquiladora workers have in common with the African workers she observed is that neither group commonly enjoys the fruits of their own labor. On the other hand, those of us privy to a host of privileges and lucky enough to enjoy the fruits of the workers’ labor, only rarely appreciate the workers. On saying that, she lovingly ran her hand along the seam of the fabric covering the seat which could have been produced by the maquiladora workers. It was a bitter-sweet gesture.

Nevertheless, her words matched the mood that had settled upon us in the early evening of the last day of our trip. This non-Spanish-speaking delegate had internalized the maquiladora experience as well as anyone, summing up perfectly up the experience all of us had shared.

**Una dinámica**

Towards the end of an ATCF delegation to the maquiladoras, when the delegates are about packed up and ready to go home, the CFO has a custom. The custom is to engage in a group exercise in which all participate. In Spanish, this exercise is sometimes referred to as *una dinámica*. It seems, therefore, appropriate to conclude this brief tour of ATCF, the CFO, and the maquiladoras with a sort of *dinámica*.69

Once you have finished reading the lines that follow, close your eyes and think of the border. If you have experienced it firsthand, you can call to mind memories; if not, imagine it based

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69 This would normally be managed as a group activity and a discussion of the images individual delegates called to mind would be elicited.
on what you have heard from friends or news accounts. Then, imagine first that you are a helicopter pilot and next a jack rabbit. In each of those cases, how does what you see on the border change based on your, or the various perspectives? Finally, ask yourself what function the border plays in the grand scheme of things and, whose interests it really serves.

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Appendix A

A Plot Summary of Carlos Fuentes’ “Malintzin de las maquilas”

The main characters are Marina, the “Malintzin,” or the “traitor,” referred to in the title, and three co-workers and companions in the maquiladora (TV assembly plant): Dinorah, Rosa Lupe and Candelaria. Each of these young women/girls is described in some detail along with their love relationships or lack thereof. In the factory, Rosa Lupe is stripped once for not wearing a regulation uniform by her supervisor in full sight of everyone, and later on again, by another supervisor. To cheer up the depressed Rosa Lupe, who has also been physically accosted in addition to being stripped, the still very naïve, Marina takes off her shoes and runs barefoot on the manicured lawn fronting the factory in defiance of a sign warning: “keep off the grass!” The Mexican factory owner and his US partner, apparently grasping for any excuse to demolish the workers’ homes and speculate on land on which the workers’ homes are located, catch a glimpse of Marina’s “betrayal” and (it is easy to deduce) use the workers’ “lack of loyalty” to justify the home demolitions. Instantly, and apparently without warning, they order the demolition. One of the workers, Dinorah, is a single mother who, either because she is unable to afford the cost of childcare or simply unable to find any, has tied her child to a bedpost before going out Friday evening with friends. While Dinorah is away, her child dies in the destruction. Dinorah is overcome. Marina, in another parallel development, discovers her boyfriend in bed with another woman, which crushes what is still left of her innocence and girlhood.
Appendix B

Text of the *Ley Federal de Trabajo* (*Federal Labor Law*), Artículo 170, in Regard to the Rights of Working Mothers in Mexico

Las madres trabajadoras tendrán los siguientes derechos:

I. Durante el periodo del embarazo, no realizarán trabajos que exijan esfuerzos considerables y signifiquen un peligro para su salud en relación con la gestación, tales como levantar, tirar o empujar grandes pesos, que produzcan trepidación, estar de pie durante largo tiempo o que actúen o puedan alterar su estado psíquico y nervioso;

II. Disfrutarán de un descanso de seis semanas anteriores y seis posteriores al parto;

V. Durante los períodos de descanso a que se refiere la fracción II, percibirán su salario íntegro...

Working mothers will have the following rights:

I. During the pregnancy period, they will not perform tasks that require great effort and entail a danger to their health as it regards gestation, such as lifting, throwing or pushing large weights that produce trembling, standing for long periods of time or realizing actions that may disturb their emotional or nervous state;

II. They will be entitled to holiday leave during the six weeks preceding, and the six weeks following childbirth;

V. During the holiday period mentioned in section II, they will receive their full salary...