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# **UMI**

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**'Invisible Threads'  
Skill and the Discursive Marginalization  
of the Garment Industry's Workforce**

by

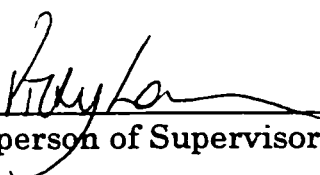
Linda Gail Becker

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

1997

Approved by   
Chairperson of Supervisory Committee

Program Authorized  
to Offer Degree Geography

Date September 12, 1997

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### Doctoral Dissertation

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University of Washington

Abstract

**'Invisible Threads': Skill and the Discursive Marginalization  
of the Garment Industry's Workforce**

by Linda Gail Becker

Chairperson of the supervisory Committee: Professor Victoria Lawson  
Department of Geography

The threat to move manufacturing offshore is perhaps more potent in the garment industry than in any other. The 1992 campaigners for NAFTA put the garment industry in the list of likely losers; amidst the winners of expanded free trade, the public was constantly reminded, were consumers. Workers in the industry are thus subjected to extremes in the insecurity that is reported to plague more and more workers. This insecurity serves the economy well, according to the reactions on Wall Street and the Federal Reserve, by reducing the likelihood of inflation and undermining any attempt to organize workers.

In the hegemonic neoliberal discourse of free trade, the jobs of sewing machinists are discursively reduced to the unskilled jobs that developing nations (the Third World) are comparatively advantaged to perform as they join the global economy. The outcomes of this marginalization (in the domestic economy) for sewing are complex. First, it rationalizes the low wages paid not only to machinists in the U.S. but also to people sewing in offshore export processing zones. A closer look at the garment industry in this case study of the Seattle manufacturers of outdoor wear reveals that machinists are not only more skilled than this picture suggests, but also that the current trends in garment manufacturing makes those skills even more essential as retailers demand greater flexibility in inventory management. In other words, the information technology that is transforming the industry depends, but rarely acknowledges its dependence, on a skilled workforce. By reifying sewing as low wage women's work (reproducing the gender relations of production) appropriately performed in the Third World and by immigrants in the First, machinists are cast as the Other, people whose interests are not the same as "ours".

I argue that the geography of garment manufacturing can only be understood by looking at the industry as the on-going ever-changing outcome of interwoven processes that are social, cultural, political and economic. For instance, the media paid an enormous amount of attention to the revelation of the "slave-like" conditions of Thai immigrant women working in El Monte, California. These stories are an example of how discourse about the garment industry reproduces the social and cultural relations of the industry, within the larger industrial structure, and within communities.

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**“Besides the factory worker, the workers engaged in manufacture, and the handicraftsmen, whom it concentrates in large masses at one spot, and directly commands, capital also sets another army in motion, by means of invisible threads: the outworkers in the domestic industries, who live in the large towns as well as being scattered over the countryside.”**

**Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, 1976, page 591**

## Chapter One: Introduction

Rapid changes since 1973 in political and economic power, technological processes, consumption habits and labor control practices have profoundly reorganized production in the U.S. (Harvey, 1989). In most manufacturing industries, especially electronics, apparel, and automobiles, the hallmark of these changes has been the development of extensive contracting relationships, increasingly with offshore producers. As one of the first sectors to experience major “off-shoring” during the 1970s, the garment industry has been a poster-child of these processes, epitomizing in public discourses the new, and now inevitable “global factory”.

The flourishing of sewing and assembly plants in export processing zones (EPZs) of the Third World is represented in the media as both a survival strategy for U.S. firms facing fierce competition in global markets, and in a different venue as a progressive development strategy that will lead to industrialization and then rising living standards in Third World countries. While acknowledging the “shockingly low wages” paid in most of these factories, accounts from across the political spectrum understand workers as clamoring for these jobs because they “represent a vast improvement on their previous, less visible rural poverty.”<sup>1</sup> This rationalization links job loss in the U.S. to the exigencies of a new era of what is widely called “globalization”. By implying a teleology of development in which low skill/low wage jobs are appropriate at one end of a development spectrum and high skill jobs at the other, assembly type jobs are coded as expendable anachronisms in the U.S. economy. These coded references to job loss contrast the seemingly more real concern reflected in the national press over the loss of high wage manufacturing jobs (albeit, a concern that has done little to halt the decline of many manufacturing-dependent communities).

A genuine discussion of job loss would resonate with a worker-rights centered discourse that several decades of neoliberalism<sup>2</sup> have sought to unravel (Davis, 1992; Reich, 1992; Beauregard, 1993; Fraser, 1997). In place of worker rights, a contemporary narrative of “the freedom to consume” redirects the concerns of a public potentially weary of (or worse, angry at) the barrage of news about wage gaps and downsizing. Consequently, when the loss

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Krugman, “We Are Not the World”, *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 1997, p. A 17.

<sup>2</sup> The term neoliberalism has longest been used in discussions of Third World policies of structural adjustment, particularly the opening of protected markets. In reference to the U.S. economy, the term is less precise. For instance Winant (1994) uses it to describe policies that I simply describe as “liberal”. I use neoliberal to point to a merging of traditional liberal ideology with the state’s efforts to reduce regulation of capital, particularly in the area of trade. The Clinton administration epitomizes neoliberalism in this sense.

of jobs to off-shore contractors is scrutinized, as in the attention to sourcing and NAFTA during the 1992 presidential campaign, defenders of free trade inevitably, often primarily, invoke consumer demand for low prices. Behind this appeal to the self-interests of consumers (rather than to their interests as workers) lies a capitulation to the needs of capital that has a powerful impact on the prospects for low-wage manufacturing in the U.S. Not only does the appeal to prices direct attention away from the profit seeking behavior of firms and towards the individual's preferences regarding consumption, it also rationalizes increasing insecurity and joblessness among low wage workers in domestic industries.

For labor intensive assembly-type work, the move to off-shore sites has reduced the power of organized labor to nearly zero. The strike, once labor's primary tool, is effectively eliminated when a manufacturer can argue that moving a plant is a realistic option. But job insecurity is not restricted to low wage manufacturing workers. In most industries, not only the labor intensive, workers experience the fear and insecurity generated by down-sizing and contracting, a fear that has been reported widely in the national press.<sup>3</sup> By focusing on their insecurity, media representations of the plight of labor suggest that workers are impotent under globalization. I read this as a key narrative in the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism: if workers believe themselves powerless in the face of global restructuring, then they will buckle down to coping rather than organizing to resist.

In this dissertation I explore the processes that reproduce material and ideological configurations of low wage work and the global factory through a case study of the garment industry. Throughout the debate over the NAFTA agreement with Mexico and the most recent negotiations of the GATT, garment industry work was presented as an inevitable but bearable loss for the national economy. Can an industry that employs nearly a million machinists in the U.S. be so easily dismissed? Not exactly: at least nominal protection of the garment industry from "foreign competition" is as old as the GATT, and historically workers have played a far from passive role in determining the organization of garment production.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, a narrative that writes sewing as low-skill, low-tech, and low-waged overwhelms an alternative view that would present the loss of garment manufacturing work

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<sup>3</sup> On Dec. 29, 1996, New York Times ran a long article (9 column inches and a graph on page 1, plus a full page inside) that took a "year-end look" at the relationship between job creation/elimination and people's insecurity. The article was titled, "Though Upbeat on the Economy, People Still fear for Their Jobs". Comparing the results of a poll the paper took in December, 1995 to the same poll taken one year later, the Times reported that more people thought the economy was in "good shape" (51% in 1995, 67% in 1996), 37% in both years felt somewhat or very insecure.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Jenson and Davidson (1984) and Glenn (1990) for the role of unions in determining the conditions for workers in garment production.

as one of the devastating impacts of increasing free trade. In other words, the material restructuring of labor intensive industries like garment making through an explosion of global contracting relations is both accompanied by and *produced through* a discourse that devalues and writes off low wage manufacturing work in the U.S.

The material and ideological changes around low wage work in the U.S. are directly linked to the social construction of Third World people as Other. In this construction, inevitably the U.S. becomes the site of high-skill, high wage work, the landscape coded as white and middle class. This process discursively marginalizes a population living both in the U.S. and the Third World and helps to rationalize its exploitation (Mohanty, 1991). By focusing on the role of ideology in sustaining common sense notions about low wage work and workers, I argue that the elaboration of offshore contracting is partly based on misrepresentations of the garment industry's skill requirements and technological options. The metaphorical distance, the 'otherness' of Third World workers and immigrants as produced in these narratives serves to sustain these fictions. More important, these fictions serve to keep these workers poor. Exploring this link will provide critical insight into how social constructions of the workforce shape domestic labor market processes and industrial organization, particularly where the majority of the work force is made up of female immigrants and racialized minorities.

This is an interesting moment to consider these questions for two seemingly unrelated reasons. First, the insecurity of low wage workers is supported in data that reports a growing income gap (the percent of total U.S. income earned by the wealthiest and the poorest fifths of the nation's families is at its widest since World War II<sup>5</sup>), and given flesh in human interest stories that tell of married couples holding three and four jobs to support their families.<sup>6</sup> This gap grows ever more apparent as the connection between restructuring and workers' insecurity is reported on the front pages of newspapers, rather than buried in academic journals or in critiques from the Left. Does this increasing public disclosure

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<sup>5</sup> Census Bureau report, cited in New York Times, June 21, 1996, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> The role of part-time work is one of the most controversial topics in labor market economics. Employment figures do not reflect the number of people who have to hold multiple jobs in order to support their families, nor do unemployment figures tell of people holding part-time jobs who want full time jobs. I talked to a UPS part-timer, who incidentally is very supportive of the current (August, 1997) strike. She works only twelve hours a week there, but receives benefits which she does not receive at her other nearly full time job. These stories are common. In a seven-part series on downsizing, the New York Times (March 3 - March 9, 1996) told the stories of many families piecing together part-time jobs to try to maintain the income they had in formerly full-time positions and usually higher paying positions. Doug Henwood has been tracking these developments for years. He argues, and supports with extensive data, that the average U.S. worker works a full week more per

generate (or perhaps reflect) a growing class consciousness and augur a resistance to free trade?

Second, the last few years have seen a small but steady effort to change the consciousness of consumers regarding the wages and working conditions people experience in Third World export processing zones. So too has there been a concerted effort to publicize the existence of sweatshops in cities with large populations of immigrants. Why do these stories resonate more now than they did ten or twenty years ago? Do these two stories---the growing income gap, and at least a glimmer of a worker's rights campaign---represent a weakening of the hegemony of free trade? Does this public scrutiny represent a crisis for corporations that move production offshore? Does it represent a crack in the hegemonic discourse of globalization? Probably not. But as conditions for low wage workers in garments and other industries take on features associated with the early rather than the late 20th century, geographers can shed light on these processes. That we should ask these questions is implicit in David Harvey's reflection on the lack of a public outcry after the 1991 fire in the Imperial Foods chicken processing plant in Hamlet, North Carolina in which 25 workers died. Harvey writes

(T)wo decades of postmodernism and post-structuralism have left us with little basis to accept any particular norm of social justice "without mis-understanding," while in everyday life a titanic effort unfolds to convince all and sundry that any kind of regulation of market freedoms or any level of taxation is unjust and that "class" politics is an anachronism. Empowerment is then conceived of (as conservative politicians like John Major and Newt Gingrich avow) as leaving as much money as possible in the wage earners' as well as in the capitalists' pockets; freedom and justice are attached to maximizing market choice; and rights are interpreted as a matter of consumer sovereignty free of any government dictates. Perhaps the most important thing missing from the postmodern debate these last two decades is the way in which this right wing and reactionary definition of market justice and of rights has played such a revolutionary role in creating the kind of political economy which produced the effects of the North Carolina Fire (Harvey, 1996, p. 361).

### **The Uses of Insecurity**

Interpretations of the meaning of insecurity differ widely, although most agree that it is related to changes in the economy that are associated with globalization. For instance, the founders of an annual conference in Switzerland of world business leaders and economists argue that "a mounting backlash (against the effects of economic globalization), especially in the industrial democracies, is threatening a very disruptive impact on economic activity and

social stability... The mood in these democracies is one of helplessness and anxiety..."<sup>7</sup> A phenomenon of globalization, they go on, is that it "de-links the fate of the corporation from the fate of its employees. In the past, higher profits meant more job security and better wages."

Leading economists here agree that "a general sense of insecurity (is) taking place in the hearts and minds of most American workers."<sup>8</sup> And there is ample evidence that insecurity and anxiety is rising among workers, although its exact cause is unclear.<sup>9</sup> But the words from the Davos Forum (the writers are European) do not resonate with U.S. economists. On this side of the Atlantic this "general sense of insecurity" is greeted with much less concern, and its interpretation is very different. At the Federal Reserve Bank, the evidence for insecurity is seen in the continuing low or even negative pressure on wages, which is otherwise inexplicable considering the current relatively low level of unemployment. The Competitiveness Policy Council, a bipartisan federal advisory group set up by Congress, reported that average hourly wages, after accounting for inflation, are \$1.20 below their peak of \$8.50 in 1973.<sup>10</sup> There is also ample evidence to argue that it is the low wage workers who have experienced the severest decline in income: the Census Bureau reports that between 1979 and 1992, the proportion of full time workers who were earning less than poverty wages (\$13,000 for a family of four) rose by 50%.<sup>11</sup> The 2.3% fall in real wages between March 1994 and March 1995 was the biggest drop in eight years.<sup>12</sup> The income gap---or rather, declining or stagnant wages for the bulk of the workforce---is viewed in financial circles as a boon to the economy (Henwood, 1997). With each new set of figures reporting a continuing flat or declining wage level, the stock market surges.

Although difficult to measure, job insecurity is extremely important to economists at the Fed because of its impact on wages, and therefore on inflation. In 1995 and into 1996,

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7 Klaus Schwab and Claude Smadja, "Start Taking the Backlash Against Globalization Seriously," *International Herald Tribune*, Feb. 1, 1996.

8 *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1996, p. F-5.

9 Not all economists agree that worker insecurity is high. Some are convinced that American workers, whatever their past fears, have now moved beyond them. This appears to be a minority view, however. *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 1997, p. C6.

10 *Seattle Times*, Sept. 13, 1996, p. A5.

11 Prior to the 1980s, the incomes of the poorest fifth of American grew considerably faster than the top fifth. After 1980, incomes of the wealthy continued to rise while the median workers' wages fell by 3.6 percent and those of the lowest income bracket fell by 9.6 percent. Robert Reich, cited in "A Loss of Nerve" by Bob Herbert, *New York Times*, Jan. 27, 1997, p. A 15.

12 *Seattle Times*, Dec. 11, 1995, p. 8.

every tenth of a point drop in the rate of unemployment fueled economists' debates about whether or not the economy had adjusted to a new "natural" rate of unemployment. According to mainstream theory, inflation will be triggered if companies were forced to bid up wages to attract workers in tight labor markets. As it turned out, even when unemployment hovered just above five percent, inflation stayed within tolerable limits. A different reading of supply and demand logic suggests that fear and insecurity have dampened wage demands. However, even as the stock market continued to advance, Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the Federal Reserve, was less sanguine. While the Federal Reserve may view as positive the effects of job insecurity, Greenspan warned that a long period in which workers won relatively small wage increases "may already be running its course."<sup>13</sup> In other words, if workers stop feeling insecure they will start making wage demands, which would provoke the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates in order to ward off the inflationary impact of better wages. Observing changes in the composition of employment from this point of view suggests that insecurity may be a structural rather than a frictional feature of the growing U.S. economy (Harvey, 1996). Some economists in other highly industrialized countries envy this feature. For instance, in a recent report about growing unemployment in Germany, analysts suggest that Germany may need to pursue the American model of "growth with insecurity."<sup>14</sup>

The media---perhaps inured by the dismantling of the Rust Belt during the 1970 and 1980s---all but ignored continuing stories about job losses in *low* wage manufacturing. These stories are woven into a globalization discourse that narrates the fate of different kinds of industries and organizations in the global economy in the language of competition. The big blue chip firms are becoming 'lean and mean', reducing their overheads to protect stockholders' profits, responding to new developments in technology and communications, and so on. These are the "Corporate Killers", according to a cover of *Newsweek*, the accusation printed in big red letters over the pictures of the CEOs of Digital, Scott Paper, AT&T.<sup>15</sup> Manufacturers of consumer durables, on the other hand, are discursively reduced to the fierce competition of global markets where all other competitors have access to cheap and even unfair labor. Job loss is inevitable as manufacturing moves to offshore contractors: it is either do or die.

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<sup>13</sup> New York Times, Jan. 22, 1997, page 1.

<sup>14</sup> New York Times, Feb. 7, 1997, p. C3.

<sup>15</sup> Newsweek, February 26, 1996. Inside, more huge sans serif letters in black proclaim "The Hit Men", with photos of more CEOs and their salaries.

The Darwinian logic of this view of competition denies all that is social about the landscape of production. Behind these recent changes in the organization of certain industries, off-shore locational choices have been turned into a set of social relations that are *pre-Fordist*, not the harbinger of a new technological future (Harvey, 1993). In the garment industry in particular this competition has a violent material effect in the lives of millions of workers, an effect, I argue, that is fundamentally reproduced and justified through ideology. In this discourse, globalization, like technology, is often held up as the reason things cannot get any better; it is the explanation for cutting wages, firing thousands of workers, closing factories and moving offshore. It deflects attention from alternative reactions to globalization and technical change, conveniently rationalizing offshore production. In this narrative, globalization and new technology seem like outside forces, like gravity rather than products of human agency.

That the loss of low wage manufacturing jobs has been so completely naturalized in this discourse of globalization suggests a futility for a discussion of agency or resistance. However, as Stuart Hall argues, we must give an account of how social ideas arise, especially when an ideology has “gripped the minds of the masses, and thereby become a “material force” ” (Hall, 1986, p. 29). Globalization, free trade, and competitiveness have acquired this ideological force in the state’s pursuit of neoliberal hegemony. Only when dominant forces deploy ideology and it succeeds in organizing consent and is pervasive throughout society, can hegemony be produced (Barrett, 1991).

Nowhere have the minds of U.S. workers been gripped (by insecurity) more completely, and in no industry has it had a greater effect than in garment manufacturing. In 1995, nation wide employment in the industry fell from 945,000 to 846,000. Early in 1996 a *Women’s Wear Daily* headline announced “Jan. Apparel, Textile Employment Lowest Since ‘39”, predicting that another 40,000 to 50,000 jobs would be lost in 1996.<sup>16</sup> These job losses from garment sewing plants have gone quietly, at least in the national media, but not because the industry is unimportant: output was \$74.2 billion in 1994.<sup>17</sup> Rather, garment manufacturing is widely dismissed as an activity that U.S. workers will ever be able to perform competitively due to their “high wages”.

In 1995, the average wage in the garment industry is \$7.34 per hour, just over the

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<sup>16</sup> *Women’s Wear Daily*, Feb. 5, 1996, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Bobbin*, June, 1996, p. 33.

federal poverty level.<sup>18</sup> In two important respects, the industry is illustrative of the dilemmas for low wage workers in the U.S. First, it exhibits a socially complex and spatially divided labor supply produced through intersections of gender, ethnicity, and immigration status. Garment industry labor markets exhibit the archetypal forms of segmentation: the workers are in insecure positions regarding tenure, wages and status are low, jobs are discursively classified as unskilled, and sewing machine operators lack occupational mobility.<sup>19</sup> These factors militate against union organization. Secondly, even as the 1995 job losses occurred, U.S. firms gained dominance in international markets and the demand for jeans and running shoes and other American icons grew ever more ubiquitous. (Ironically, though jeans can be copied as easily as compact discs, authenticity is demanded in some markets. Some Japanese consumers have a marked preference for items declared "Made in America".<sup>20</sup>)

The widely accepted explanation of the garment industry's job losses refers to the phenomenal growth of offshore contracting which allows U.S. manufacturers to reap the benefits of wages in offshore processing plants of less than \$1 per hour. But contracting is more than just a logical response to changing markets and global capital. Contracting also depends on the way the state decides to regulate commerce and trade, for instance, and the way the courts interpret contract law (Sayer and Walker, 1992; Peck, 1996). I argue that another critical aspect of contracting in the garment industry is a narrative that depends on naturalized meanings of terms like 'skill' and 'high-tech'. These terms rationalize the employment relations, social position and wages of millions of people around the world and hundreds of thousands in the U.S. who are sewing clothes. This is not just a straightforward story of class exploitation. Gendered and racialized representations of the people who sew as Third World Women, unskilled and grateful, essentializes a set of processes with enormous geographic variability. This naturalization of apparel as a low-skill industry not only underpins the structure and geography of the industry, but also stigmatizes the work and the workers. The lack of respect accorded sewing and other low wage work enacts a kind of violence on people. Most of us do, after all, define ourselves and find our identity through our work (Pred, 1995; McDowell and Court, 1995).

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<sup>18</sup> Business Week, Nov. 16, 1995

<sup>19</sup> For a review of theories of labor market segmentation, see Peck, 1996, p. 46-82.

<sup>20</sup> This is reported by one of my respondents, a high level manager in a company with extensive sales in Japan.

While geographers have been very interested in changing landscapes of production, labor is a largely inert variable in the calculus of the corporate/firm locational decision making process (Herod, 1997). In their influential work on economic restructuring in southern California, Scott (1988, 1991), Storper and Scott (1989) and Storper and Walker (1989) distinguish between a core group of skilled workers and a peripheral group of low wage workers, mostly made up of politically marginalized social groups such as women, ethnic minorities and rural-urban migrants. But this work is unsatisfying in two important ways. First, it acknowledges, but then leaves aside the role played in social reproduction by processes of gender and racialization. Neither are the workers themselves, their organizing struggles and their political opposition part of these analyses (McDowell, 1991; Herod, 1997). Second, the marginality of these groups is taken as a *fait accompli* and thus rendered outside of the analysis. Research based on these assumptions cannot interrupt the discourse that rationalizes local labor market processes or mainstream industrial development theory.

For example, in an apparent effort to address this lacunae in his own work, Scott suggests that a “division of labour along gender and ethnic lines can be demonstrated to exist in the [electronics assembly] industry” (Scott, 1992, p. 1231). Yet he shows this by reporting on the findings of research he conducted among plants where most workers are Latin American or Asian immigrants but with a survey form written only in English and Spanish. Scott acknowledged this by explaining that there are too many Asian languages and the budget did not allow translation of the survey. Scott then reports that Asians are all in higher level jobs. By not accounting for the possibility of non-English speaking Asian immigrant workers who did not volunteer to fill out Scott’s questionnaire because they could not read it, he reproduces an essentializing narrative that contrasts hard-working Asians with uneducated un-skilled Spanish speaking immigrants. This seems a particularly careless piece of research, but it exemplifies the lack of interest in nuances of social reproduction. The material circumstances of the lives of workers and would-be workers are of course a primary determinant of labor market opportunity. But much that guides the formation of labor markets is social and cultural. Not only are people guided to certain labor markets by processes of gender and racialization, but the jobs themselves are discursive categories that affect social policy, class relations, consumer behavior, identity and participation in public life (Cockburn, 1983; Johnson, 1990).

Feminists interested in economic geography have demanded that theory account for persistent gendered practices (Massey, 1984; McDowell, 1986, 1992; Staeheli and Lawson, 1993; Pratt and Hanson, 1994). These demands are rooted in path-breaking work of socialist-

feminists in the 1970s when they revealed how gender organizes social life by defining women's work and by separating the home from the public world where waged work was done (Hartman, 1981; McDowell, 1986; Young, 1981; Kessler-Harris, 1990). An important contribution to these issues appears in Hanson and Pratt's (1995) research that explored ways in which the geography of labor markets and gender ideologies condition women's lives in Worcester, Massachusetts. They asked: how are women trapped in space by the dual nature of their responsibilities for domestic and wage labor? By looking at the circumstances of women's lives from a variety of angles, Pratt and Hanson elucidate complex processes that produce the inequalities of segmented labor markets, locating these processes in every phase of daily life. Despite Pratt and Hanson's important contributions to understanding local labor market processes, Walker (1996a) insists that these labor markets exist in a wider context, as part of the history, politics and society in Worcester and New England. Pratt and Hanson do not examine the stability of Worcester labor markets (and therefore all that it means to people who are trapped there) as part of an industrial project that is consciously and strategically reproduced. In other words, there is little political economy or industrial geography in their account. We need accounts of local labor markets that explore the ways in which the recursive relationships between industries and labor markets are articulated in social practices.

With less attention to geography, other theorists have demonstrated the role of race and ethnicity in the organization of labor markets (Miles, 1982; Omi and Winant, 1986; Portes and Bach, 1985; Safa, 1981; Sassen, 1980; Burowoy, 1976; Castells, 1975; Ong, et al, 1994; Lamphere, et al, 1994). Particularly relevant to the social reproduction of low wage work has been the research showing that immigrants' limited opportunities lead them to informal sector work which can be excessively exploitative (Sassen, 1991; 1988; Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia, 1989; Ong, et al 1994). Rather than being an accidental, or natural process, in some cities a large population of marginalized workers is a central component of dynamic entrepreneurial informal sectors (Portes and Bach, 1985; Sassen, 1991).

An interesting tension in the work on the relationships between labor markets and economic restructuring exists in the contradiction between seeing immigrants and Third World workers as helpless victims of capitalist exploitation or as the "model minority" entrepreneur adapting to the possibilities of local economies. The post-structuralist turns in social theory and particularly feminist theory lead researchers beyond the essentialized self-sacrificing entrepreneur to nuanced agency-oriented descriptions of female workforce participation. From this perspective, researchers like Lawson (1995) and Johnson (1990) see

women first, as struggling within the separate but integrated confines of local social contexts where the effects of gender and racialization are manifest and second, and second within the broader structural political and economic barriers associated with economic transformations. In a similar vein, historians and anthropologists examine accounts of women and work, opening up categories and stories to demonstrate the complexity and variety of situations formerly conceived of monolithically as oppressive (Amott and Matthaei, 1991; Glenn, 1990; de Leonardo, 1991).

The feminist concern with the conditions of paid labor exploded in the 1980s along with worldwide increases in female labor force participation. Most relevant to this dissertation is the literature that focuses on the effects of the spread of the “global factory” associated with economic restructuring. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, feminists investigated the international division of labor which found Third World women working in export processing zones doing manufacturing work for extremely low wages. In many cases workers were shown to be young women from rural areas, responding to structural adjustments by migrating to cities where export processing zones offered wage labor. The path-breaking work in this field was an important collection of international studies edited by Nash and Fernandez-Kelly (1983). This work contributed to theories of a *new* international division of labor, which describes an industrial landscape of cores and peripheries. The case studies of this collection focus on the negative impact of the emerging structure of industrial relations on social welfare and the decline in workers’ control over the work place. This research revealed the links between First and Third World workers as multinational corporations moved offshore to incorporate new (green) labor pools.

The Nash and Fernandez-Kelly collection focused on the political economic dimensions of globalization and how women as a class are incorporated into that process. In contrast, more recent perspectives examine the ideological processes that accompany political economic change, including multiple dimensions of exploitation that reproduce industrial relations. “Within this framework of multinational employment, it is through an analysis of the ideological construction of the ‘third world woman worker’ (the stereotypical [ideal] worker employed by world market factories) that we can trace the lines of sexist, racist, class-based structures internationally” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 30). That is, the racial, ethnic or national identity of workers is implicit in the social construction of people from Third World countries as Other in a process that shapes labor supply and economic development. The enormous importance of this concept lies in its insistence that social reproduction of the Other be analyzed as fundamental to social inquiry.

Besides revealing the complex subjectivities of people essentialized in monolithic categories like Third World Woman, it is crucial to understanding how ethnocentric universals are reproduced. The extent to which Third World women are employed in manufacturing for world markets suggests that a first step is to demand sustained attention to totalizing discourses that rationalize low wages and often inhumane working conditions. These questions must also be asked in relationship to U.S. based manufacturing, especially in those locales where the vast majority of workers are newcomers. If the structure of labor markets is built partly on these universals, then surely to understand industrial structure and economic transformation we must incorporate the analysis of their social reproduction.

### **Labor Struggle**

Most of us define ourselves by what we do for work (Pred, 1995). Besides using our work to create our own identities, we have complex associations with the identities of others, also based on what they do for work. Quite naturally there is an intimate connection between workers' identities and the industries with which their work is connected, and it is from that connection we get ideas about how much someone might earn, how much skill they must have. Even though these ideas are often wrong (everyone at Microsoft does not make a ton of money) they have a material effect in the way we form attitudes, and prejudices. In the following example, I tell a set of stories about one job (machining) and two industries, stories that appeared nearly simultaneously in the national news media which illustrate the material and the discursive reproduction of machine operators at the polar extremes of manufacturing industries.

Commonly held ideas about competition define the viability of industries, firms and even nations. For instance, according to theories of comparative advantage, countries should pursue those economic activities for which they hold a competitive edge.<sup>21</sup> So for instance, Third World countries are uniquely suited for assembly-type manufacturing because their wages are so low. But these low wages are the product of state policies that intentionally keep wages low in order to attract low wage manufacturing. In other words, in a discourse of globalization, a naturalized competitiveness overwhelms the social and cultural processes that shape international trade. In the name of competitiveness, the spatial mobility of manufacturing through relocation or contracting undermines the security of workers all over

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<sup>21</sup> This is facile explanation of a complex theory, but it is satisfactory in terms of its role in the popular discourse of trade.

the world. The insecurity keeps wage pressures low, and thus helps to reproduce the discourse that defines competitiveness as the driving force behind globalization.

This recursive relationship between competitiveness and insecurity is strikingly similar across manufacturing industries. The material and ideological effects, on the other hand, vary widely. Insecurity is tolerated, both literally and discursively, where workers have little bargaining power. As my research demonstrates, insecurity is not simply related to supply and demand in labor markets, but is also a product of social processes that marginalize some workers and not others. The outcomes are imprinted onto social relations of production.

Beginning in the 1970s the U.S. witnessed the decline of many manufacturing industries as firms left the northeastern U.S., first for the South and Southeast, and then to offshore locations (Harrison and Bluestone, 1988). This created enormous insecurity among well paid blue-collar workers, fatefully undermining organized labor. This is not only a matter of workers in the Third World employed in a process that undermined the security of highly paid workers in the First. Countries choosing export manufacturing as a key component of their development strategies began to compete against each other to attract contracts and foreign investment by attracting U.S. manufacturers with promises of labor control. In the garment industry, for instance, a hierarchy of low wages makes even sewing machine operators in Sri Lanka insecure as Bangladeshi and Vietnamese state agencies boast of and secure guarantees of lower wages.

While the garment industry is especially vulnerable due to the ease with which new contractors can enter markets and bid down wages, organized labor in highly concentrated industries like airplane manufacturing have trouble negotiating even relatively minor concessions regarding contracting. While Boeing machinists average \$22 per hour, even unionized sewing machine operators make only a third of that. Nevertheless, it is striking that the "global factory" is altering the decisions made by manufacturers of airplanes as well as bluejeans.

More importantly for my analysis in this dissertation, the *ideas* we have about the skill of the two sets of workers also contrast dramatically, with the ubiquitous claim that sewing machine operations are unskilled. These two indicators, skills and wages in airlines versus apparel, are powerfully etched in a discourse of manufacturing that naturalizes wage differences and essentializes the supposed differences between the people who perform the work. Yet both industries explain their dependence on contracting as inevitable in today's competitive environment. The extremes between these two industries are reproduced

discursively in the news media, where garment industry machinists appear as powerless. when they appear at all, compared to airplane machinists who were recently observed in the national press facing down one of the most powerful corporations in the world.

El Monte, California

In August 1995, seventy-two Thai immigrants, mostly women, were released from the "slave-like" conditions under which they had been living in an apartment complex in El Monte, California, near Los Angeles.<sup>22</sup> The complex, with fourteen people in each three-bedroom apartment, surrounded with razor wire topped fencing, was actually a garment factory, the living rooms and garages crowded with sewing machines and bolts of cloth. The machine operators sometimes worked from sun-up to midnight, seven days a week, for as little as one dollar per hour, and an average of \$1.60. From this they were supposed to pay for the nearly \$5000 transport fee from Thailand, pay for their food from the company store, where prices were marked up two to three hundred percent, and then, the goal for most of them, send money home.

The reporters covering this story made very clear that the villains were the Thai nationals who ran the operation. However attention turned briefly to the manufacturers and retailers (many familiar and nationally known brands) who sold garments made in the El Monte "factory". All of the firms claimed they had no knowledge that their products had been sub-contracted to this operation. Seemingly unsympathetic, the California State Labor Commission fined seven manufacturers \$35,000 each, and the federal Department of Labor sought \$5 million in back wages. Mervyn's, a popular discount chain, was subpoenaed under suspicion that the retailer may have obtained goods directly from the operation (indicating that they were aware of at least some of the conditions in the factory) as opposed to indirectly through manufacturing sub-contracts. The other manufacturers denied any knowledge of the working conditions, also claiming the sub-contracting relationship as a removed one, that it would be next to impossible to know how subcontractors run their businesses.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than any serious analysis of how contracting works in the garment industry, this story was told as a particularly horrid but isolated case of villainy. The debt bondage relationship was never placed in the socio-political context of economic development in Thailand, nor did the story provoke further inquiry regarding the conditions of manufacturing free trade zones of Southeast Asia, opportunities, which these women

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22 Scheer, Christopher, "Illegals Made Slaves to Fashion", The Nation, Sept. 11, 1995. Seattle Times, Aug. 3, 1995. New York Times, Aug. 4, 1995.

23 Scheer, ibid. Seattle Times, Aug. 17, 1995. New York Times, Aug. 16, 1995.

implicitly rejected. The story was repeatedly presented in the national press as a liberation, enacted by the agents of the U.S. government, even as the *Los Angeles Times* reported that local I.N.S. officials had been informed of the likely conditions in the El Monte factory as early as 1989.<sup>24</sup> The fact that the number of inspectors in the Wage and Hour division of the Department of Labor was reduced by the Reagan administration to a fraction of its necessary strength was not reported by the mainstream press.<sup>25</sup> The outpouring of sympathy for the Thai women was especially ironic considering that California was in the midst of campaign for Proposition 187 to deprive illegal and legal immigrants of all state support (Walker, 1995). A list of omissions could go on and on. This story is in startling contrast to the respectful coverage given to Boeing and its contracting strategies, as the following brief account shows.

Seattle, Washington

In October, while the plight of the released but now “illegal” immigrants from the El Monte compound was still in the news, 32,500 Boeing machinists began a strike that lasted sixty-nine days. Strikers initially focused on benefits. However, as negotiations proceeded, the machinists’ concentrated their bargaining on concerns about job security raised by the growing practice of having work done by outside contractors. The needs of the workers contrast with Boeing’s contracting policies that are based in economic rationale that clearly meets with the approval of industry analysts. Like McDonnell Douglas and Airbus, Boeing attracts and secures its market with a practice called offsetting---they send manufacturing orders or contracts to other countries in exchange for aircraft orders. As company executives explain, with 70 percent of its sales to foreign airlines, Boeing will continue to use foreign suppliers and use the promise of jobs to gain new aircraft orders. The impact on the domestic workforce will be enormous. One study warns that 469,000 aerospace jobs could be eliminated by 2013 because of foreign competition and offsetting.<sup>26</sup>

While offsetting may have critical marketing rationale, a rationale often repeated in press accounts, Boeing also engages in contracting that is not much different from that pioneered in the garment industry. Boeing buys *non-strategic* parts from domestic and foreign contractors. For instance, wire bundles are made by a Foley, Alabama company that pays an estimated \$8 an hour. A Polish company is making doors for the 757, paying

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24 *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 10, 1995, p. B-1.

25 Christopher Scheer did mention this in a column in the *Los Angeles Times*, and again in *The Nation*, Sept. 11, 1995, p. 237.

26 Study by Economic Policy Institute, reported in the *Seattle Times*, Nov. 13, 1995.

workers \$5 to \$6 per hour. The MexMil Company of Santa Ana, California pays its Mexicali workers less than \$1 an hour to sew insulation blankets. Current plans are to have 52 percent of Boeing's five commercial jet models made by subcontractors by 1998, up from 48 percent today.<sup>27</sup> Boeing insists this is necessary to remain competitive, but workers are understandably concerned. Machinists argue that they can and have helped Boeing cut costs and remain competitive, but they want assurances that helping Boeing become a more efficient company will lead to reasonable job protections.

Boeing machinists have a voice and authority greatly diminished by the sustained attacks of the combined powers of the state and capital against organized labor (Harrison and Bluestone, 1988). Nevertheless, the continued legitimacy of machinists' claims rests on the assumed superiority of their technical expertise and skill. Ironically, this makes airplane machinists more vulnerable than sewing machinists. Highly paid workers stimulate the search for labor saving technology (Braverman, 1974; Harrison and Bluestone, 1988). Even so, machinists fear the competition of low wage workers. Historically, advances in technology have often been initiated by the need to replace workers or change the kinds of skills required so as to rationalize a lower pay for workers (Braverman, 1974).

Nowhere is the development of labor saving technology neutral---that is, capital drives the development of technology in certain directions and not others. Who develops, who uses, and who is replaced by new technology depends on a complex intersection of economic and social relations (Wajcman, 1991). An important goal for research should be to demystify the "naturalness" of production relations and to explore the role of ideology in sustaining them. Notions like low-skill and low-tech cling to representations of the garment industry, rationalizing job loss and low wages. These rationalizations operate in media narratives that justify the highly exploitative conditions in the off-shore locations where clothes for U.S. firms are sewn. Images come to us from a media that represent the industry as retrograde, with some vestigial pieces festering in L.A. and New York.

The garment industry does not present itself as an interesting subject for an exploration of the role of technology in job loss, but a closer look reveals a different conclusion. Technological change produces dramatically different effects both between and within sectors of industries. In the textile industry, weaving has been highly automated, nearly eliminating workers, while the garment sewing industry is still labor intensive with

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<sup>27</sup> Seattle Times, Nov. 13, 1995, p. C1.

automation confined to a few products. In fact, it is the classic case of a "low-tech" industry that moved offshore to utilize cheaper labor. This representation, narrated in a discourse of a highly advanced industrialized country, has a material effect over the fortunes of workers' lives. As a "low skill" and "low-tech" industry, reports of the industry's move offshore and predictions that the North American free trade agreement (NAFTA) would speed this move, caused little alarm, at least at the national scale. This loss was rationalized in terms that focused on the industry's low technological requirements, associating the industry with the un-developed countries of the Third World. Developing countries, the story goes, are where these 'start-up' industries should be located because they do not have the technological capacity for doing more sophisticated work.<sup>28</sup> In other words, garment sewing, which requires low capital investment and supposedly little training, is a good place for them to start and will provide much needed jobs. The loss of this technologically simple industry from the U.S., breeding ground of high technology, is therefore naturalized.

I explore these issues in detail in my study of the Seattle garment industry. While typical in many ways (most of the machinists are immigrant women sewing for relatively low wages), the local industry is dominated by outdoor wear manufacturers, some of whom have been leaders in the industry since it began in the early 1890s. REI and Eddie Bauer are well known names across the U.S. and have a high local profile as hometown companies. But when the local press writes about either of these or the other successful outdoor wear manufacturers, they write about marketing strategy, new facilities, buyouts---not sewing machine operators.

This makes the Seattle area garment industry the polar opposite of Boeing, whose impact on local labor markets and the regional economy is considered critical.<sup>29</sup> For instance, the editors of the Seattle Times wrote in reaction to the Boeing strike: "Washington's bright future is based on the assumption that specialized, generation-to-generation blue-collar jobs will continue. For the larger sake of families, schools and thousands of other paychecks, the Boeing strike needs to be resolved so that neither side is fatally damaged."<sup>30</sup> Although there are thousands of lives in Washington that depend on garment industry work as well, it would sound like nonsense to make a similar claim for

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<sup>28</sup> This argument is often made in terms of competitive advantage. An interesting version of this approach is in Robert Reich's book, *The Work of Nations* (1992).

<sup>29</sup> The impact is misunderstood, however. Bill Beyers (unpublished) has shown that lay-layoffs at Boeing do not have nearly the negative impact predicted. This is not to say that individual families do not suffer.

<sup>30</sup> Seattle Times editorial Nov. 24, 1995.

these jobs. Until a recent front page article in the *Seattle Times*, few outside of the Chinese and Southeast Asian immigrant communities even knew there are garment sewing factories in Seattle. This is not so surprising. While images like the ones from El Monte linger, most people still do not think about manufacturing very much at all---the origins of what we consume are obscure, and is so much a part of contemporary life that we are inured to it (Sayer and Walker, 1992).

### **Logics of Consumption**

“Throughout European and North American commodity societies there now reigns a politics of resentment and profound discontent. Because of a prolonged decline in real income, and actual or threatened unemployment, the majority of people live with a sense of insecurity...In popular and mainstream political discourses these sentiments are rarely translated into an apt critique of capitalism’s current workings, but instead into multiple scapegoatings: the scapegoating of immigrants and refugees; the scapegoating of long-resident minorities and the perennially poor; and the scapegoating of government, especially for its assessment of taxes and, thereby- explicitly or implicitly- especially for its intrusions upon the “freedom” to consume.”

Allen Pred, 1995

In this dissertation, I present the evidence that leads me to argue that vulnerability and insecurity for all low wage workers is etched in narratives of global competition, technology, and needy unskilled immigrants---discourses that function ideologically to divert our attention from the material effects of vulnerability and insecurity. Why, as Pred argues, are we not engaged in “an apt critique of capitalism’s current workings”? Why do we seem to be more interested in the buying and wearing clothes than in the conditions of their manufacture?

Non-attention to the sewing end of the apparel business in Seattle sits in stark contrast to the marketing end. For instance, Eddie Bauer, the classic Seattle outdoor wear manufacturer, receives wide praise for the benefits it provides to its corporate and retail workforce.<sup>31</sup> Bauer was the 1995 winner of the Governor's Choice Award from the Washington State Department of Trade and Economic Development. The award from their division, Child Care Advantages, goes to the organization that has demonstrated leadership in providing effective work/family strategies. Working Mother magazine called Bauer a “company to watch” in its October 1995 issue, which features the “100 Best Companies for Working Mothers”. Bauer has a new program to help its employees who have just given birth; the company feels that hospitals send new mothers home too soon, so Bauer will send a

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<sup>31</sup> Seattle Times, Dec. 11, 1995, D-3.

nurse to their home.<sup>32</sup> They also have a "mother's room" at company headquarters where women can nurse their babies, and have recently added a fourth personal leave day so that employees can add "balance" to their lives. A *Business Week* survey of workers and employers to grade "family-friendliness" cited these programs in awarding Bauer a place on the list of ten top-scoring companies.<sup>33</sup>

The irony is that Bauer has turned a cold shoulder to the complaints against its contracting practices in Central America.<sup>34</sup> Companies like Eddie Bauer argue that in the highly competitive world of clothing retail, securing the lowest costs available is necessary for survival. In one of several interviews with me, a contract manager at a local firm expressed frustration at the necessity of having to compete with other manufacturers over price. "Consumers talk out of both sides of their mouths," she argued. "They want you to treat the workers great, but when it comes to buying a shirt, they go for the cheapest every time." Manufacturers regularly profess powerlessness in the face of global competition---they have to compete.

There is potential for a well-informed public to have an impact on production relations in industries like apparel. The most dramatic example to date was the National Labor Committee's (NLC) campaign to bring attention to a Salvadoran factory called Mandarin.<sup>35</sup> Mandarin was sewing under contract for a number of popular U.S. clothing lines when they fired workers who were trying to organize for union representation. The NLC pressured The Gap, one of Mandarin's biggest customers, to change their contracting relationship with this factory. Their campaign began in the summer of 1995 when two workers from Mandarin, on a trip sponsored by the National Labor Committee, toured several cities in the U.S. and Canada.<sup>36</sup> In reaction to their plight students joined in letter-writing campaigns, and religious groups organized protests. Two rabbis from a Manhattan congregation warned the chief executive of The Gap and Banana Republic "empire" that they would warn their congregation about their unethical behavior unless they corrected the problem.<sup>37</sup> The Gap, under strong pressure from these consumers and workers rights activists, has agreed to allow independent observers, including human rights officials, to

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<sup>32</sup> Seattle Times, Sept. 10, 1996, E-3.

<sup>33</sup> Business Week, Sept. 16, 1996, p. 74-80.

<sup>34</sup> Women's Wear Daily, June 11, 1996, p. 9; Washington Post, Sept. 12, 1995, p. B-1.

<sup>35</sup> New York Times, Oct. 9, 1995, A-11; Women's Wear Daily, Dec. 10, 1995, p. 16; Labor Report on the Americas, Sept.-Oct., 1995, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Los Angeles Times, Aug. 9, 1995, D-3.

<sup>37</sup> Bob Herbert, "A Sweatshop Victory", New York Times, Dec. 22, 1995.

monitor working conditions in the factories in Central America in which Gap clothing is made.<sup>38</sup>

We do not have to go to El Salvador to find working conditions that would outrage the congregations of progressive clergy. There are sub-minimum wage shops all over California and few inspectors looking for wage and safety violations.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, these shops are filled with documented as well as undocumented workers who fear reporting unscrupulous employers.<sup>40</sup> In Seattle and Arizona there are people sewing clothes for Eddie Bauer who receive none of the benefits for which the company is being recognized. The contracting relationship conveniently exonerates Bauer, puts a distance between the model corporate citizen in Redmond and the deplorable conditions in El Salvador. As an industry insider wrote, "This corporate distance between the label and the actual maker helps avoid unpleasantness associated with having labor investigators on company premises. If the links get too close, and the circumstances publicly uncomfortable, the work can be moved offshore."<sup>41</sup> They can say they have no control over the conditions in their contractors' factories, but as the Gap story suggests, it's not very convincing.<sup>42</sup>

One of the most overwhelming effects of the increased mobility of production lies in the way insecurity of employment has undermined organized labor. Workers rightfully fear that organizing or pressing for improved regulation will provoke firms to move offshore. People need the jobs, even if the pay is low, hours long, and work pace relentless. The need for work, the growth of contracting, and, as I will discuss in a later chapter, the decline of regulation, have combined in New York City, Los Angeles and San Francisco, so that sweatshop conditions have been resurgent since the early 1990s. Or rather, *awareness* of sweatshops has increased. Some recent titles tell the story: "96¢ an Hour: The Sweatshop is Reborn";<sup>43</sup> "Despite tough Laws, Sweatshop Flourish";<sup>44</sup> "Los Angeles Sweatshops are Thriving, Experts Say".<sup>45</sup> Well know labels run the risk of negative publicity about the high rates of exploitation reported in these stories. Rationalizing, and as I will argue, mystifying

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38 Women's Wear Daily, Nov. 30, 1995, p. 12; Dec. 4, 1995, p. 24; Dec. 19, 1995, p. 5.

39 Los Angeles Times, Dec. 18, 1989, p. 7; San Francisco Business Times, Feb. 26, 1993, p.1; Women's Wear Daily, Mar. 2, 1994, p. 18; Business Week, April 4, 1994, p. 40.

40 Women's Wear Daily, Nov. 16, 1995, p. 19.

41 Letter to the Editor of New York Times, from Seth Bodner, Executive Director, National Knitwear & Sportswear Association, Feb. 13, 1995.

42 San Diego Union-Tribune, Sept. 17, 1995, I-1; National Catholic Reporter, Dec. 29, 1995, p. 6.

43 New York Times, March 66, 1994, p. 13.

44 New York Times, Feb. 6, 1995, p. 1.

45 New York Times, Aug. 5, 1995, p. 6.

the manufacturing conditions of garments appears necessary to the managers of local companies who use subcontractors and source products offshore.<sup>46</sup> The social and cultural reproduction of that mystification must be explained in order to understand the organization of garment industry production.

A critical understanding of the material and ideological reproduction of sweatshops, and the conditions of manufacturing in the industry more broadly, is essential in the support of a campaign for human rights for workers. Campaigns to promote cross-border linkages---to raise wages and enforce fair practices in offshore sites---are having some success, as the Gap story shows. This represents a potential for improved security and dignity in the working conditions for the hundreds of thousands of garment industry workers in the U.S.

More problematically, all major retailers have drawn up principles and guidelines---codes of conduct---for their subcontractors to follow. The guidelines are supposed to protect the rights of workers and insure humane conditions, but they are routinely ignored.<sup>47</sup> The Gap bowed to pressure in an accord with the National Labor Committee that spoke specifically to the Mandarin International plant in El Salvador. Although Mandarin is not bound by the National Labor Committee to any action, The Gap is now obligated to take their business elsewhere if Mandarin does not respect the rights of workers engaged in organizing. In theory, if The Gap takes that action, it will influence other manufacturers that contract with Mandarin. This may be a small step, but it has stunning implications for the geography of production in the garment industry, and is thus an important area for research. The social production of knowledge is a political process. Herod (1997) argues that economic geography has usually chosen to understand and represent the interests of capital, but it is to the interests of workers that this dissertation is addressed.

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46 For an interesting example, see *The Seattle Times*, Aug. 27, 1996, p. C-1. Managers of reputable local firms denied using homeworkers, the ultimately exploited subcontractor. When presented with evidence, one manager admitted to being very embarrassed.

47 The logic and the ease with which codes are ignored is explained vividly in *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 23, 1995, A-1.

## Methodology

“Feminist struggles are waged on at least two simultaneous, interconnected levels: an ideological, discursive level which addresses questions of representation...and a material, experiential, daily-life level which focuses on the micropolitics of work, home...” Mohanty, 1991, p. 21.

In her most recent work, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition* (1997), Nancy Fraser calls for a political and scholarly agenda that would integrate the social and the cultural, the economic and the discursive. She argues that the crucial “post socialist” task is “first, interrogating the distinction between culture and economy; second, understanding how both work together to produce injustices; and third, figuring out how, as a prerequisite for remedying injustices, claims for recognition can be integrated with claims for redistribution in a comprehensive political project” (1997:5). The project of this dissertation is to tackle the first and second of these tasks, with a preliminary discussion of the third in a final section. The methodology of the research is designed to pursue this agenda---that is, this is an analysis of the discursive and material practices that contribute to the injustices woven into the lives of most of the women who sew our clothes.

With the exception of the most highly industrialized countries, the making of clothes exhibits a wide variety of divisions of labor and cultural meanings. Across the breadth and diversity of cultures, on the other hand, *factory* sewing is astonishingly similar. There is much to be learned about gender and racialization from an industry in which people (usually women) are subjected to sometimes illegal, often inhumane and always low wage conditions in most places where factory production occurs. It is not enough to say that the garment industry has a gendered division of labor. That is an historical fact, easily observable around the world. How is gender in this industry reproduced and contested? And how does that relate to on-going relations of power, not only between women and men and between capitalists and workers, but also between consumers and the low wage workers who make their clothes, and between First and Third World countries as they negotiate trade agreements and development projects?

To explore these questions and relationships, I approach the industry from a number of directions simultaneously, hypothesizing that the conditions in this industry and ideas about it are mutually constitutive. Simply, within the industry, I hypothesize, the people who make decisions about production---that is, the people who have to rationalize the social relations of production and the low wages of machinists, have to believe that the work is worthy of only low wages---that the wages are fair.

My principal concern is to contrast popular conceptions of garment production and the perceptions of the industry from within. This reveals a fundamental contradiction, the practical and discursive working out of which forms the core of the analysis. The case study is focused on the outdoor wear manufacturers that are sewing, or used to sew, in the Seattle area. It comes as a surprise to many local residents when I tell them that there is a small but apparently vital core of garment industry work in the Seattle area. The major product of the industry, outdoor wear, is less a surprise. In fact, through the 1970s, Seattle was the center of outdoor wear in the nation, and one of the only places in the country where the industry was growing.<sup>48</sup> The outdoor-ness of it is historically related to the area's abundant natural resources---commercial fishing, logging, mountain climbing, hunting, and mining each require rugged outdoor clothing and all have become increasingly specialized. Besides the physical geography factors, there is serendipity. Boeing needed flight jackets, the design of which launched Eddie Bauer from a sporting goods store owner who closed down during the fly fishing season to a major innovator of down-filled jackets.

But the geography of jackets is a much more complicated story now than it was even as late as the 1970s. Essentialist stories of a rugged and masculinized West may help to explain the demographics of old mountain climbers but it does little to explain continuing local manufacture in an industry more often organized around cheap wages in Third World export processing zones. These days we are inured to the anomaly that expensive high-tech jackets, designed to allow outdoor activities in freezing temperatures and snow, are now made in Sri Lanka where air conditioners and fans struggle against sweltering tropical heat.

I focus on jackets, both to ground the questions in a particular set of issues and to metaphorically and constantly evoke the mobility, the traveling nature of the industry. I pose this jacket too as a set of visual bookends to the dissertation. At the beginning of the story of women's marginalization in the industry, the first of women's garments to be made in factories were "ladies cloaks" (Baron and Klepp, 1984). Interestingly, Seattle had the first factory in the country to produce women's coats on an assembly line. At the end of the story, or rather, at the moment, an enormously popular television show has turned another kind of cloak into an icon by repeatedly referring to the florid prose of J. Peterman catalogues. The sketches in this catalogue, the most famous of which is a "duster", a long coat worn originally by cowboys, show the cloaks in motion, but with no hands or legs or face animating the coat.

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48 Between 1956 and 1976, the national garment industry lost 263,000 jobs. During that same period, King County's relatively small sector went from 2,300 to 3,800 workers. *International Examiner*, Jan/Feb 1978, p. 11.

In other words, these coats appear by magic, disembodied of their human relations, traversing the landscape as image only.

### Interviews of Industry Owners and Managers

I have interviewed people at key positions in all of the jacket making companies of the Seattle area, and all but one of the major contracting shops that sew outdoor wear. In addition, I have interviewed managers at outdoor wear contracting firms in Sri Lanka and Mexico, and other manufacturers and contracting firms in Washington. The goal has been to understand the context within which the local manufacturers make their production decisions, particularly regarding the viability of onshore production.

The interviews were open-ended, of from one to two hours in length; all were tape-recorded and most transcribed word for word by a patient research assistant. In every interview I followed a protocol to ensure a series of recurring themes to which I added as the research unfolded. It was often the sudden and unanticipated asides of respondents that fine-tuned my questions or suggested new directions. The focal issues revolved around the following questions:

- What militates in favor of and against going offshore?
- What is the role of product markets in militating in favor of---or against---local manufacture?
- What are the benefits or problems with NAFTA and other free trade issues?
- What problems are encountered with offshore/domestic manufacture?
- What agency is exercised in adjusting to these constraints?
- Does the firm use contractors?
- What relationships exist with local subcontractors? Are any of these “sweatshops”? Do any of these employ homeworkers?
- What rationale exists for investment in technology? What impact have new technologies had on the firm? (pros and cons)
- What changes in production are planned to adjust to new demands for quicker response to market changes/retailers demands?

These questions related to production staff:

- What wages and benefits do production workers receive?
- What is the ethnic and sex composition of the workforce?
- What skill levels are required? What counts as skill?
- Are there gender distinctions in the workplace?
- How important are training and experience? Is training and experience required for hiring? How is on-going training conducted?
- Is language a barrier in the workplace? How are language differences accommodated?
- What do they think about the goals and motivation of production workers?

Interviews began with a general history of the firm and the respondent's history, both with the firm and prior to the current position. Based on a history of labor conflict and recent publicity about the proliferation of sweatshops, most experienced garment industry managers are interested in presenting their employment policies in the best possible light. Many managers see themselves as victims of the whims of consumers, and helpless in the face of price competition. Consequently, questions were carefully posed so as to elicit as much unguarded opinion as possible. Considering managers as key actors in the social construction of garment industry work, I asked questions so as to discover attitude as much as empirical verification of the complexity of production decisions.

The four primary firms chosen for the most intense study represent four principle strategies in a typology of garment industry structure that I developed after an initial series of interviews. These basic types are:

1. firms that sew their own label in-house; that is, all sewing is domestic, and performed by machine operators who work for the firm that "owns" the label
2. firms that do not sew; that is, all sewing is performed by contractors, both domestic and offshore
3. firms that both sew their own label and contract domestically and offshore
4. firms that own no label but only sew on contracts for other firms

I conducted preliminary interviews with two of these firms in the early 1990s. During a three year period of dissertation research, I did extensive repeat interviews in all four firms, and have interviewed a number of people involved with each. One of the most experienced, successful, and surprisingly open of the local contractors allowed me to visit and interview managers, supervisors and production workers at each of her production sites, which includes a shop in Arizona and one across the border in Mexico. In addition to these four firms (and multiple sites for two of them) I conducted field work in Sri Lanka. One respondent granted an extensive series of interviews; he was part owner/manager of a large and successful contracting company, one of the sites of which is in the largest Export Processing Zones in Sri Lanka. During the period of these interviews, the company was making jackets for some of the most well know companies in the U.S.. This respondent also allowed me to interview operations managers and supervisors at two of the company's sites. In Sri Lanka I also interviewed the owner of a smaller company that was sewing jackets at the other end of the price spectrum. This owner was the only man I met who started in the business sewing clothes himself.

#### Other Interviews

In addition to owners and operation managers of major firms, I interviewed people

working at every other position in a variety of firms, including some not making outdoor wear, from homeworkers and sweatshop owners to designers and entrepreneurs in what the industry calls “ladies dresses”, to social service agents who help immigrants find sewing jobs. I limited my interviews of sewing machine operators to people who speak English. However, during fieldwork in Mexico, a geographer and friend who is very familiar with my research questions and fluent in Spanish conducted interviews with Spanish speaking machine operators.) The protocol for these interviews varied depending on the respondent’s position in the industry. For production workers I focused on work history, wages, skill, work conditions, employment options, family strategy, self-identity and plans for the future. For managers, I used the same protocol as listed for the intensive case studies. Among supervisors I used a hybrid list, emphasizing different questions depending on their work history and position in the firm.

#### Analysis of Interviews

I designed the approach employed in the analysis of the interview data to allow a cross-referencing of all key topics (and issues within those topics) with individual respondents and the firm or industry typology. I created an index that in the end had 41 major headings. All transcripts were read, with each reference to those subheadings logged in the index. The resulting index pages list and briefly describe the context of all relevant respondent comments for each subject area. (Software exists to do this, but it appears to be as laborious as this “by-hand” method.) Working from this index I was able to construct an extensive and very rich narrative for the key research questions.

#### **The Discourse**

(A) conception of discourse can help us understand at least four things...First, it can help us understand how people’s social identities are fashioned and altered over time. Second, it can help us understand how, under conditions of inequality, social groups in the sense of collective agents are formed and unformed. Third, a conception of discourse can illuminate how the cultural hegemony of dominant groups in society is secured and contested. Fourth and finally, it can shed light on the prospects for emancipatory social change and political practice (Fraser, 1997: 152).

#### The Industry Media

For another set of views from inside the industry, I have followed key stories from 1988 to 1996 in the two leading but completely different industry publications, *Bobbin* and *Women’s Wear Daily*. While *WWD* is a newspaper, *Bobbin* is the dominant commercial publication of the apparel industry. *Bobbin* puts on expositions, write articles to explain changes in legal issues, gather opinion about new technology and engineering developments,

provide forums about marketing strategies, and so on. Its letters and editorials offer a view into a fractious industry that includes contractors struggling to survive in the U.S. and importers who abandoned domestic contracting years ago. It includes among its advertisers national development institutions from most Caribbean and Latin American countries with export processing zones, and does a major annual survey to compare the costs and benefits of contracting in each country.

### Popular Media

If the scope for the operation of ideology in modern societies has been greatly enhanced by the development of mass communications, the complexity and ambiguity of ideological phenomena have also increased, by virtue of the fact that symbolic forms now circulate in a multiplicity of contexts which are remote in space (and time), which are structured in differing ways and in which symbolic forms may be interpreted, assimilated, discussed or contested in ways that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled by the principal communicators. (Thompson, 1990, p. 269)

To grasp the way ideas about clothing production are reproduced in the culture at large, I have made extensive surveys of the popular press, television, and radio. For key stories, the administration's "corporate responsibility" campaign, for instance, and the El Monte and Kathy Lee stories, I have done exhaustive searches. To track the day-to-day ways that the industry is represented, I have used the *New York Times* as a purveyor of popular attitudes.<sup>49</sup>

The local context of the garment industry is unique, and only partly because Seattle was the center for outdoor wear. The history of local firms was gleaned from interviews and archival research. Local government documents were not very helpful due to the historical neglect of women's work in economic surveys, but in the 1970s two newspapers focused on the Asian immigrant communities covered the garment industry with some interest. Finally, for four years I have traced a variety of issues through the major local daily, *Seattle Times*. The focus of my interest here has been representations of Asian immigrants, and women especially.

Almost from the beginning the research took me in unanticipated directions. I was so startled by what I learned in some of the early interviews that the focus of all interviews took the turn towards the questions of skill and representation that now occupy the central questions of this dissertation. In retrospect, this move put me more completely in the research---my own ideas and impressions, my experience as a seamstress and as a consumer, became part of the empirical project. As a teacher, I have witnessed the reactions of

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49 In this approach, I am following John Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, 1989.

hundreds of students in role plays in which they used their understanding of the position of a woman working in an Indonesian factory making Nikes. Their impressions and attitudes as well as their questions as they interacted with me in the exercise became part of what I was investigating. Ultimately this was liberating, uniting my intellectual work as a student and scholar with my political life as a feminist.

### The Argument, and the Structure of the Dissertation

In a way, it is the students who lead me to the central questions of the dissertation. They almost invariably understand women working for low wages in Indonesia as not only powerless but also grateful to Nike for their jobs. This corresponds to the hegemonic discourse of free trade that dominates industrial policy in the U.S. How does a narrative of garment making as low skill work sustain the industry's "spatial fix" as it internationalizes production?

In the middle three chapters of the dissertation I describe the recursive relationship between the geography of production and the social relations and ideology upon which it is grounded. Development of the industry's spatial structure occupies the core of Chapter Two. The mobility for which the garment industry is known has been a part of its dynamic since industrial sewing began at the turn of the century. Then as now, location decisions are the outcome of a tension between the priority accorded to distance factors (nearness to suppliers and markets), product market characteristics (mass production versus fashion oriented production) and the relative power over social relations claimed by labor. Mobility and location interweave in a narrative of inevitability that rationalizes the industry's dependence on low wage labor both in the U.S. and in Third World export processing zones (EPZs). As part of this narrative, the insecurity of sewing machinists is blamed on the inherently competitive nature of this labor intense sector.

From the turn of the century when immigrants in the Northeastern U.S. performed industrial sewing work, through the relocation to less militant areas of the U.S., and since the 1960s to contractors in Third World countries, the industry is known for its pursuit of the lowest wages and least militant workers---immigrants in the U.S. and women everywhere. The current landscape of garment manufacturing can be explained as a manifestation of this narrative in the hegemonic discourses of development and free trade. The reduction of sewing to "assembly" with its implied skill-less-ness justifies the industry's move to EPZs around the world, as well as its marginalization in U.S. economic policies such as NAFTA and GATT.

Thus, the characterization of sewing as an assembly operation rationalizes the sacrifice of this end of production to the development schemes of enterprising Third World countries, which also supports a neo-liberal political agenda in the hemisphere. A narrative of the industry as low-tech (a “start-up” industry) and low skill has facilitated this flight to offshore manufacturing sites by dampening protests against policies that support free trade. This narrative also rationalizes the industry’s status as a declining and low wage industry in the U.S.. An examination of the complexity of the industry’s organization of production suggests a different interpretation of its technological development and skill requirements. In Chapter Three, I examine the pattern of technological change in the industry, explaining in some detail the gendered division of labor as it relates to production technology. This discussion clearly reveals the development of technology in the garment industry as a social project. There are technical difficulties that so far prevent the automated handling of any but the simplest and most unchanging of sewing operations. While inherently difficult, there is also little impetus to invest in research and technology because the price paid for women’s sewing labor is low. Further, the structure of the industry, especially in those sectors dominated by small firms and contractors, militates against capital investments.

Technological development *has* occurred in the phases of garment manufacturing that have until recently been performed by men, and information technology is radically altering the way an increasing number of retailers expect their suppliers to respond to market signals---that is, to respond “flexibly”. In the second half of Chapter Three I employ case studies of Seattle firms to explain the dilemmas and contradictions posed by new technologies and strategies of production. As some retail markets increase their demands for production that is more responsive to point of sale information, manufacturers are reorganizing around small batch production. Besides changing the technology and skill requirements of sewing, market changes provoke new organizations of production, in some cases militating in favor of domestic manufacturing. How does this affect sewing machine operators? With more and more sewing done by contracting shops, but with contractors unable to invest in productivity enhancing technology, flexibility and innovation in garment manufacturing thus depends on the skills of workers.

The contemporary view of garment making is that sewing machine operators are unskilled workers. Low wages are considered rational for work that requires no skill, which, as predicted by theories of segmented or dual labor markets, also entrains insecurity of tenure as well as gender and ethnic segregation. In Chapter Four, I demonstrate that skill has a much more complex role in the production process than any single characterization

suggests. A historical review of labor militancy in the industry indicates that skill definition has long been contested. Organized labor's impact has been dampened by the industry's incorporation of workers who have been either excluded from unions, which is the case for non-European immigrants (Eastern European Jewish immigrants were the most militant garment industry workers) or who live in the right-to-work states of the southeastern U.S. Thus gender and racialization are key to the geography of production; to narrowly conceive of the industry as competitive, driven by the single strategy of location at the site of low wages sidesteps the question as to how the gendering of sewing and racialization of machinists reproduces the economically marginal position of garment industry work.

As in other feminized professions, sewing skills are naturalized as female but in fact require training and a great deal of practice to develop. My research in Seattle shows that, contrary to what is expected of unskilled work, employers not only value the skills of their machinists but also try to protect their investments in training. In Chapter Four I argue that this presents a dilemma for firms in an industry organized around the economics of a "flexible" (i.e., hourly, contingent) workforce. The piece rate paid in most firms, and the insecurity of tenure, discourages machinists from enlarging their skill repertoire, but the new focus on flexible manufacturing ("quick response") requires machinists who can operate a variety of machines, who can adapt easily to constantly evolving detailed divisions of labor, and who can adjust to the nuances of changing product requirements. In other words, the very structure of the industry is organized around low wages, rationalized as reasonable due to low skill requirements. My research indicates that, like airplane machinists' work, sewing machinists' work is highly variable in terms of the training and experience required; in many cases sewing is skilled and difficult work. In some product markets manufacturers are demanding an increasing degree of skill and loyalty.

In the garment industry version of flexibility, the use of contractors to fill rapidly changing production needs is a characteristic of garment production since industrial sewing began, and has always been a source of conflict. It is in contracting shops that some of the worst abuses of workers occur. However this generalization is as vulnerable to deconstruction as are notions about skill. In a rush of newspaper stories, the consuming public has been given a glimpse into the sweatshop end of manufacturing work. In Chapter Five I look critically at the most prominent of recent media exposés. I argue that the focus on sweatshops and the contractors who run them divert attention from the social relations of production that have large wealthy corporations at the top of decision making. The most notorious cases are Nike and Disney, but companies like the Gap are trying to find a middle

ground between extreme exploitation and protecting their mass markets.

Lost from this media onslaught is the role of the state in sustaining the freedom of capital to exploit workers to whatever the extent the market can bear. In spite of recent calls for a return to corporate responsibility, capital is able to operate ever more freely, protected by a neoliberal agenda that reduces regulation to the bare minimum, as the case of the “Slaveshop” in El Monte, California reveals. To what extent are consumers willing to challenge the industry’s analysis of price consciousness? The power of consumers to change capitalists’ practices would seem to be potent, although the results of a recent Nike campaign are hard to read. One factor that helps to minimize the viability of consumer campaigns is a lack of information. While the *New York Times* devotes the entire front page of its business section to Nike’s dominance of the athletic footwear business, it fails to report on efforts of thousands of people around the world to draw attention to the conditions of factory workers. This is part of another question: why does the newspaper have a business section, but not a labor section? Why, as Pred (1995) asks, are we not engaged in a critique of capitalism’s current working?

## Chapter Two: The Garment Industry - Step-Child of Modernization

In the last three decades the U.S. garment industry has been transformed from a major domestic manufacturing employer to an industry with multitudes of contracting relationships in the some of the world's least industrialized countries.<sup>50</sup> In the process, sewing has developed an image as a manufacturing project appropriate only in the export processing zones (EPZs) of countries where, as Lester Thurow puts it, "(t)hose with third-world skills...earn third-world wages."<sup>51</sup> While for some the devolution of the garment industry to the Third World epitomizes the necessary and efficient response to the 'new world order', this transformation in industrial structure corresponds to economic insecurity for sewing machine operators around the world (Bonacich, et al, 1994). In fact, the complex global structure of the garment industry, reflected in its movement to one economically vulnerable population after another, suggests that the industry is dependent upon the availability of an easily exploitable labor force.

In this chapter I examine the structure of the industry as it evolved around the marginalized position of its work force, a position reproduced through intersecting social processes. A determining effect of these processes is to undermine workers' ability to organize and bargain for better wages and working conditions. In most export processing zones the ability of workers to organize is curtailed by the state, either overtly or by failing to enforce national labor standards (Bonacich, et al, 1994). However, in public discourse the unlikelihood of garment industry workers organizing is rhetorically reduced to a simple supply function: the abundance of cheap labor available in Third World countries. Clearly labor supply conditions, based on the lack of alternative employment, puts downward pressure on the wages of even the most experienced machinists. However, in the U.S. and abroad, the lack of alternatives is most fundamentally based in gendered and racialized divisions of labor. That is, the circumstances behind the "abundant supply" are social products. The processes that create a labor supply to begin with are historically and geographically specific. For instance, in many Third World countries, women are driven to employment in the factories of EPZs by the policies of structural adjustment, aided by patriarchal structures that encourage the proletarianization of young rural women (Enloe,

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<sup>50</sup> According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1996 U.S. apparel industry employment was 61% of its 1966 high of 1.4 million, and even lower than employment was in the late 1930s. (Bobbin, Feb. 1997.)

<sup>51</sup> Thurow, quoted in the New York Times, Feb.16, 1997, Section 3, p. 1.

1983; Ong, 1983; Safa, 1981). This pattern has variants in industrialized countries. In the U.S., labor supply in rural areas is based in the lack of alternative employment. For instance, one of my research sites is a town in Eastern Washington where the major source of jobs for people was formerly in timber and aluminum. As those jobs have been drastically reduced, many of the women in the town's one garment factory (which is now the town's largest employer) are the sole providers for their families. Alternative employment in many urban areas is mitigated by social and political practices that discriminate against immigrants (Peck, 1992a; Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia, 1989; Phizlackea, 1990; Bonacich et al, 1994). As a result, sewing machine operators rarely occupy positions from which they can bargain with management for better working conditions or higher wages. Although most of these processes have been important in determining labor supply for the industry since industrial sewing began near the turn of the century, the restructuring of the last three decades has revolutionized the geography of production.

In this chapter I argue that a critical aspect of this recent restructuring has been the coding of its spatial organization in the language of industrial development in the Third World. In the 1960s, the apparel industry was a pioneer of globalization with the innovation and elaboration of the global factory (Enloe, 1983; Dickerson, 1995). Importantly, the proliferation of offshore manufacturing and later contracting was not simply based on the logic of industrial location but encouraged in U.S. foreign policy in East Asia and Latin America. In East and Southeast Asia especially, U.S. investment in industrialization was part of cold war strategy that saw capitalist economic development as a bulwark against communism (Wade, 1990). Although overlapping in time, the growth of garment manufacturing in the Caribbean and Latin America was a response to a different set of processes, focused more on the opening of markets for free trade and the prerogatives of U.S. firms.

I complement this political economy analysis of the changing structure of the industry with an exploration of ideological dimensions of these developments. I focus in particular on the construction of garment manufacturing as a good 'start up' or sunrise industry for Third World countries. In development theory, start-up industries are those for which entry is easy due to low capital and skill requirements (Grunwald and Flamm, 1985; Dickerson, 1995). Whether or not the garment industry has or will play an important role in the industrial development of Third World countries is questionable, but not the topic of this dissertation. Rather, I challenge the basis on which the determinations of the industry's technology and skill requirements are made. In Chapter Three I demonstrate the

contradictory development of garment manufacturing technology, and in Chapter Four argue that the construction of sewing as a Third World skill not only obscures the value of training and experience, but also marginalizes those who offer this skill in labor markets. Although these skills and the sewing machines on which they are learned are in fact available in Third World countries---that is, many countries have been able to convert domestic garment making into export industries---it is the ideological force of the narrative of start-up in the context of U.S. industrial structure that is the focus of analysis in the present chapter. As Rothstein argues, a sunrise versus sunset industrial theory is naive. The decline in domestic employment of U.S. garment manufacturing is not the natural sunset of a mature industry nor the result of any comparative disadvantage for U.S. labor intensive production (Rothstein, 1989). Many advantages of offshore contracting are policy-created advantages, the policies not only of the Third World states bent on developing export processing zones, but also policies of the U.S. government.

### **Globalization: The Imperative of Exploitability**

“How exactly has the nature of manufacturing been “fundamentally altered”? Aren’t people just incrementally better at doing things they’ve always done, like locate product in the lowest cost location for delivery to markets (now “globalization of production”), like manage inventories in a least cost way (now “just-in-time inventory management”), like choose the appropriate level of vertical integration depending on the production process (now “critical buyer-seller links”), like match production to demand (now “short product cycles”). Is a “revolution” really the appropriate metaphor for these changes?”

Lawrence Summers, former chief economist, World Bank  
from a 1991 in-house memo <sup>52</sup>

Globalization is often linked to a revolution in communication technology that allows the nearly instantaneous transfer of information and money around the world. Certainly the speed of information exchange facilitated the relocation of garment manufacturing to East Asia, although transportation was probably more important, at least at first (Lardner, 1988; Grunwald and Flamm, 1985). However, the garment industry has always located manufacturing to take advantage of the availability of low wage workers, just as it has always responded to changes in product markets by reorganizing production. When the industry led the way to off-shore manufacturing, it simply became (in Lawrence Summers’ words) “incrementally better at doing things they’re always done.” To understand the restructuring of the industry and ascertain the forces that make it seem inevitable, it is important to explore these locational imperatives in historical context.

In the earliest days of garment making as an industry in the late 19th century, the heart of the industry was in New York City where quickly changing fashions were sewn near purchasers, suppliers, competitors and buyers. While this location afforded proximity to textile manufacturers in Massachusetts, it was the large immigrant populations and its fashion center status that concentrated the industry in New York (Glenn, 1990; Waldinger, 1986). By the 1920s, when new centers of production developed outside of New York, it was in cities like Philadelphia and Chicago, also rich with large populations of Jewish immigrants. Along with New York, these cities became centers not only of clothing production skills, but also of labor militancy (Glenn, 1990; Jensen and Davidson, 1984).

This localized structure gave way as standardized clothing became acceptable to consumers, an acceptance that escalated dramatically after W.W.II (Dickerson, 1995). Standardization allowed a radical reorganization of the sewing end of production away from the large (militant) cities of the Northeast. Because standardized garments are basically the same year after year, season after season (blue jeans are the quintessential standardized garment), proximity of production to the creative and marketing (New York City) center is not an important location factor. Further, the supply of inputs, inventory control, and production schedules can all be routinized, making long range planning possible. These developments radically altered the possible scope for production locations.

In effect, standardization and other changes in consumption created new economies of scale. Firms producing standardized clothes became larger and hierarchically controlled, and could also summon the financial resources required to disperse over space. As standardization for larger markets evolved, sewing was adapted to a typical assembly line where large quantities of identical items could be assembled with un-varying operations. Due to the growing ease of interstate transportation, these developments involved only minor adjustments based on the input requirements of particular products. By far the most important factor was labor supply---or more specifically, the demand for lower wage and less militant labor (Dickerson, 1995; Lardner, 1988; Waldinger, 1989). Thus, manufacturing work moved to low wage surplus labor sites in the northeast in the 1930s, and to the southeast by the 1950s (Waldinger, 1989; Dickerson, 1995). Although not usually considered in processes of de-industrialization, this decline in garment industry work in the northeast caused massive layoffs.

Offshore production actually began during this period, with the first U.S. firms going to Japan in the 1950s, and then to Hong Kong, both places with already well established and sophisticated industries (Lardner, 1988). In the 1980s Hong Kong manufacturers started contracting their own production to lower wage sites in China, Thailand and the Philippines (Dickerson, 1995). (This was to escape not only rising wages but also quota barriers, which I will discuss below.) In 1959 imports were 6.9 percent of domestic apparel production; by 1980, imports were 51 percent and climbing. By 1984, half of all clothing sold in the US was made abroad and there were 80 countries listed by the Department of Commerce as major clothing exporters (Waldinger, 1989, citing ILGWU report).

The appeal of offshore manufacturing is simple. In 1975 the average wage for U.S. apparel workers was \$3.79 per hour; in Hong Kong it was \$.70, in Taiwan \$.29 and in Korea \$.22.<sup>53</sup> In addition, East Asian governments were able to impose labor control, especially by limiting the freedom to organize (Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1983; Elson, 1983). The combination of low wages and worker control made offshore production so attractive that even manufacturers of fashion items began either producing or contracting in East Asia. As manufacturers constantly assert, the momentum of this shift to offshore contracting put relentless pressure on domestic manufacturers to either lower their costs or send production offshore. In the process of responding to these pressures, the industry has undergone major restructuring, the results of which I will briefly explain in the next section.

### Structure of the Industry

Depending on their position in the industry, apparel firms have differing and often contradictory interests in three major issues that have captured public attention vis-à-vis the garment industry: trade negotiations, minimum wages, and (a topic I will take up in Chapter Five) "corporate responsibility", including the apparent apoplexy in the press regarding sweatshops. Media representations of debates over these three issues, with their embedded narratives of skill and technology, are generally deployed in terms of free trade ideology. The thread that weaves these issues together is the incessant growth of contracting.

Many, if not most, well known names in clothing do not actually make anything, although most of them used to, a process glossed over in the phrase 'vertical disintegration'. For instance, Eddie Bauer used to have several plants in the Seattle area; it now has no

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<sup>53</sup> U.S. Department of Labor figures, cited in Bonacich and Waller, 1994.

sewing facility. Relegating sewing to contractors creates production flexibility for manufacturers. It also benefits manufacturers by severing the financial and social responsibilities associated with manufacturing labor.

The dense networks of contracting shops associated with agglomeration economies are most highly developed in (though not exclusive of) the sector of the industry known as "fashion" (Dickerson, 1995). For firms in this sector, the need to be responsive to rapid changes in their markets creates problems with offshore production not faced by manufacturers of standardized products. The market for fashionable apparel is unpredictable, but offshore manufacturing adds six months to the time from design to delivery of products. Further, due to economies of scale, most offshore contractors will only accept orders for large production runs. When fashion firms make the inevitable marketing errors, the quantity and therefore cost of excess inventory can devastate small companies.

This determines the structure of the industry in two ways.<sup>54</sup> First, the need for a quick response to markets militates in favor of domestic production. High-volume trendsetters like Liz Claiborne and Donna Karan, for instance, set the season's colors and styles, so they can afford the tariffs and time delays that overseas production involved.<sup>55</sup> Liz Claiborne sources all or most of their production offshore (Lardner, 1988). Classic menswear makers also have the luxury of shipping work abroad. The proliferation of small contracting shops in California, New York and Miami are most closely associated with fashion followers, especially of "ladies dresses", who, after seeing what is selling, try to have goods on the shelves in a matter of weeks. Secondly, at the retailing end, companies have dealt with excess inventory through the massive proliferation of sales, bargain basements, and outlet stores. In response to both of these trends, the perhaps inevitable "solution" is increasing pressure on wages. I will come back to this issue.

Given the relationships described above, tension in the garment industry can be seen as rooted in the fact that contractors actually hire people who sew garments but have little power in their relationships with customers (retailers and manufacturers). In other words, contractors are "price takers" (Gereffi, 1994). The situation is worst in cities like New York and L.A. where there has been a rapid proliferation of contracting shops, which increases the competition between contractors for work, cutting the prices they charge manufacturers. Further, contractors struggle to keep their sewing machine operators employed in an industry controlled by seasonal fluctuations;. Sub-contracting exists because even the most

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<sup>54</sup> This section is based on information from case study interviews, unless otherwise noted.

efficient well-run contracting firm sometimes has more work than it can do. Sub-contracting and sub-sub-contracting (including homeworking) is where work fluctuations may result in the brutality associated with sweatshops. Thus, the globalized and fragmented structure of garment industry in effect transfers market risks down to contractors, sub-contractors, and ultimately workers.

Where retailers or manufacturers source their products depends on the size of the contract, the amount of labor that will go into a product, the fabric required (if the fabric has to be shipped, or if it has to be dyed at the last moment), and a host of other issues, including the skills and experience of contractors. Countries that have been part of the international garment industry longest have the best managerial and financial skills, better infrastructure, and a textile industry with which to develop working partnerships (Lardner, 1988; Dickerson, 1995). This is the story of the NICs, countries that got into apparel early and gained an important long-term advantage.

These sourcing relationships are constantly evolving and changing. In general, fashion-oriented retailers of designer products obtain their expensive goods from high-value-added exporting countries, like Italy, France and Japan (Dickerson, 1995). Department stores like Nordstrom will source from the most established Third World exporters, especially the NICs, while mass merchandisers who sell lower-priced store brands buy primarily from a third tier of medium to low-cost, mid-quality exporters: Mexico and Brazil, low-end producers in the NICs, China, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia. The most inexpensive products are imported from China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and certain Caribbean Basin countries. According to my respondents, this pattern is not based on operators' skills, but rather management skills and experience, and infrastructure. In more expensive clothes, direct labor represents a lower percentage of overall cost, and so firms have more flexibility in deciding where to source---a dollar or two per item does not matter so much---so firms can contract with the most experienced manufacturers in East Asia.

The proliferation around the world of garment sewing plants in EPZs was not just a "race to the bottom" for the lowest wage (Rothstein, 1989). The structure of international contracting contains a critical political dimension that evolved as the intersection of U.S. cold war policy, the struggle of a southern Congressional coalition seeking to protect jobs in their region, and the ascendance and eventual hegemony of a neo-liberal free trade agenda

(Dickerson, 1995; Joeke, 1994; Lardner, 1988; Rothstein, 1989). Many countries have based their industrial policy at least in part on garment production for export, and because the U.S. is by far the largest market, access to the market was essential. Therefore, the protection fought for and won by U.S. industry defenders generated enormous controversy, and put the U.S. in increasingly compromised positions in succeeding rounds of GATT negotiations and in hemispheric development projects. The story of the garment industry during the last three decades is largely the story of the resolution this impasse, and the enormous impact it has had for machine operators around the world.

### **Protection or Free Trade?**

The domestic textile and apparel industries have had systematic protection for more than thirty years, a far greater degree of protection than any other segment of industry since the Industrial Revolution, and higher tariff rates than those applied to any other imported item.<sup>56</sup> This was achieved through the lobbying of a powerful block of congressional representatives whose constituencies depended in one way or another on manufacturing jobs in these industries (Dickerson, 1995).

The textile/apparel industry has been important in the Southeast and the mid-Atlantic regions since before WWII, but sustained growth occurred there after the 1950s (Taplin, 1994). In much of the South the industries are the leading manufacturing employer. In North Carolina, for instance, this sector accounts for nearly fifty percent of all manufacturing employment and forty percent of all industrial output (Dickerson, 1995). Plants are often located in rural areas where little or no other non-farm employment exists. New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania account for approximately one-third of apparel workers in the nation. The sheer size and the geographic concentration, plus a history of activism, makes the textile and apparel sector "perhaps the U.S. industry most effectively organized for political action" (Giesse and Lewin, 1987, p. 86, quoted in Dickerson, 1995). By the late 1980s the alliance began to fray, reflecting the changing structure of ownership that evolved with the Reagan era's heightened commitment to free trade (Lardner, 1988; Dickerson, 1995).

While in the 1970s and 1980s protecting jobs in the industry was a centerpiece of trade negotiations, by the time NAFTA gained the public's attention, the garment industry was seemingly unproblematically at the top of the list of manufacturing industry's that

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<sup>56</sup> This observation from William Dorward, cited in Lardner, 1988.

would be lost, part of Ross Perot's now famous "giant sucking sound" as U.S. jobs went to Mexico (Redman, et al, 1993).<sup>57</sup> Along with a profound change in political fortunes went an equally profound re-writing of a narrative of sewing work. To understand this story, it is necessary see it in the context of "globalization" and the political meaning of free trade, a negotiation in which the garment industry was a key player.

The purpose of the 1947 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), was to break down barriers to free trade which, some influential economists had argued, were one cause of the great Depression (Lardner, 1988). While that move immediately after W.W.II signaled a commitment to free trade, contradictory political processes quickly changed the shape of free trade (Harrison and Bluestone, 1988). Long before American automobile, steel, and appliance companies began complaining about cheap Japanese imports, textile and apparel interests warned of the collapse of their industries under competition from Japan, and soon after Hong Kong (Lardner, 1988; Rothstein, 1989). In response, the Eisenhower administration pressured Japan into voluntary textile trade agreements, and each following administration likewise bowed to the weighty political pressure that the industry was able to muster (Dickerson, 1995). At succeeding GATT negotiations the U.S. and several major European countries pushed for and won exceptions to the free trade agenda by allowing bilateral agreements that established quotas for particular garments, the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA)<sup>58</sup>. The veneer of free trade created through GATT would seem to have eroded as American negotiators pressed for and won new protections. However, the impact on the textile and apparel industries of these agreements calls this conclusion into question.

The effects of the MFA were contradictory. On the one hand, critics argue, quotas insulated U.S. firms in ways that dampened the industry's need to adjust to a new set of competitive pressures (Redman, et al, 1993). On the other, it actually provoked competition as East Asian exporters and U.S. importers pioneered production of new products or in new places that were not covered by existing quotas. For instance, after a 1957 agreement limited cotton products exported from Japan, new suppliers from Hong Kong entered the market, and in 1959 and 1960 cotton goods imported to the U.S. grew dramatically (Nehmer

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<sup>57</sup> The Department of Labor's most optimistic scenario predicts employment will drop from a 1990 level of 839,000 to 649,000 in 2005. The pessimistic prediction is a fall to 479,000 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1992, p. 57).

<sup>58</sup> Besides being enormously cumbersome (there are more than 20,000 possible quotas), quotas are not negotiated until market penetration can be proved---that is, after "damage" has been done. For instance, in 1985 the U.S. negotiated an agreement with Bangladesh, whose exports to the U.S. has increased by 400 percent in one year; but the base level for quotas were Bangladesh's exports after the export surge had occurred (Rothstein, 1988).

and Love, 1985). When Hong Kong manufacturers began to feel the pinch of quotas (and later rising wages and labor strife), they contracted production in countries in which there were, at least at first, no quota restrictions.<sup>59</sup> For instance, when economic reform opened the possibilities of manufacturing in China, Hong Kong manufacturers and contractors transferred much of their production (Lardner, 1988). So rather than a strategy to find the lowest wage, this initial expansion was stimulated by efforts to get around quota protections. Even after new agreements were signed with thirty-three countries, cotton imports continued to grow as contractors sought out countries not covered by quota.

Another quota-evading tactic was to develop new products (Lardner, 1988). To get around quota limitations on cotton, synthetic products were developed that then began to flood the US market, ramie being the classic case. One of my respondents argues that the fad for warm vests was another by-product of quota evasion: to get around the quota on jackets, vests were imported, with the intention of adding sleeves in the U.S. On a lark, perhaps, a manufacturer decided to try selling some jackets without the sleeves, and a new fad was born. Perhaps no other result more clearly illustrates the ambiguity of U.S. trade policy.

The MFA may be one of the most maligned trade agreements in history, although everyone hates it for a different reason, from the free traders' objection to any protection, period, to manufacturers who believe that the agreements never really meant to protect the industry (Lardner, 1988; Dickerson, 1995). Proponents of the MFA rationalized protection by arguing that it would bring about an orderly transition to free trade in textiles and apparel. The garment industry, it was argued, is especially sensitive to competition because of the ease with which new countries could enter. (This is the "good start-up" argument.) But, according to the U.S. Treasury Department, the most convincing argument put forward was that in the United States and Western Europe, the combined textile and apparel industries employed some twelve million people, seventeen percent of the industrial labor force (Lardner, 1988). From this point of view, "orderly transition" is code for an effort to avoid a severe economic disruption caused by the massive loss of jobs in the garment and textile industries.

Has the industry experienced an "orderly transition"? Critics of the industry like Rothstein (1989) argue that state intervention may in fact have served to retain control over

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<sup>59</sup> It takes about two years to negotiate quota agreements, so a new entrant to the global apparel industry can export to the U.S. unrestricted by quota for a couple of years after their industry develops to the point that it is deemed disruptive to the U.S. industry.

competitor's import penetration levels. However, rather than respond creatively, the industry's response has been to pursue spatial mobility. In this view, also colloquially described as "the race to the bottom in wages", the industry has avoided radically reorienting to emerging global production and market trends (Redman, et al, 1993; Glasmeier, Thompson and Kays, 1993).

Others within the industry complain that the MFA was never a genuine effort to protect the domestic industry (Rothstein, 1989). The continued expansion in textile and apparel imports is evidence that the MFA provided little protection. For instance, under the first MFA, the annual allowable growth rate of imports was set at 6 percent while the actual growth of the U.S. market was only around one percent. From 1980 to 1986, total textile and apparel import growth into the United States was 163 percent, an average of 27 percent per year. From 1984 to 1988, imports from all countries with which the U.S. had MFA agreements grew by 81 percent, an average of slightly more than 20 percent per year.<sup>60</sup>

There is another, more geopolitical view. Rothstein (1989) convincingly argues that these agreements were negotiated to head off domestic pressure for more *severe* import restrictions. In other words, strategically, the MFA only *appears* to be protective. According to a member of the U.S. International Trade Commission, the purpose of the agreement was actually to *increase* access to U.S. markets for exports from the developing countries, in order to facilitate economic expansion and development (quoted in Rothstein, 1989, p. 46).

The reliance of U.S. firms on importing (offshore contracting), reflected in the numbers cited above, rose dramatically throughout the 1980s. Manufacturers did not abandon domestic production without a struggle, but once a critical mass of manufacturers began importing, the closing of plants across the Southeast and the mid-Atlantic states began to seem like a *fait accomplis* (Dickerson, 1995). Eventually as a whole, this group's dependence on importing exceeded its demand for protection, and it fell out of the alliance that had successfully pressed for trade restrictions. This had dramatic repercussions in the most recent (Uruguay) round of GATT talks, effectively eliminating any future protection.

This result was preordained by the economic shifts of the 1980s. In the midst of a recession, and battered in key industries by the rise of East Asian and German industrial prowess, policy makers, analysts and industrialists were riveted by challenges to U.S. economic hegemony (Reich, 1992). The rationale for offshore production in a number of industries was a central theme in the discourse of economic restructuring, globalization, and,

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<sup>60</sup> American Textile Manufacturers Association, cited in Rothstein, 1989.

as a key narrative, competitiveness. Relatively high unemployment would seem a good political climate for continuing protection of the textile and apparel industries, but as political scientist David Olson argues, the already broad issue of foreign trade was transformed from trade to the capacity of the American economy to compete internationally (Olson, 1987). Issues of trade and competitiveness took on a partisan character, increasing the stakes and elevating the issue among constituencies and among policy makers (Dickerson, 1995; Reich, 1992). It is in this climate that the rationalizations for low wages in the garment industry become most fully developed. The social construction of sewing as 'women's work' gave way to a narrative of competition in which the Third World had a clear advantage due to low wages.

### **Geopolitics and "Trade, Not Aid"**

The MFA served primarily to regulate exports from East and Southeast Asia. A quite different set of arrangements evolved in North America and the Caribbean. In the U.S. special tariff programs were instituted in the early 1960s to promote relocation of labor-intensive phase of manufacturing. Since 1963, a special provision (paragraph 807) in the U.S. tariff regulations applies to garments that are cut in the U.S. and assembled or processed abroad. Although this provision was not limited to the Caribbean, this region became its major user, largely benefiting U.S. firms. Due to the low wages paid off-shore, the extra cost of tariff adds little to total costs. This code gave impetus to the development of export processing platforms, answering the problems for importers faced with trade restrictions and rising wages in Asia (Rothstein, 1988; Dickerson, 1995).

In 1983 the U.S. enacted Reagan's Caribbean Basin Initiative. The ostensible goal of the CBI was to enhance U.S. support for export manufacturing in the Caribbean, grounded in U.S. security concerns for the stability of the region (Bonacich and Waller, 1994). In the beginning, opposition from U.S. labor led to the exclusion of textiles and garments from the program. To ameliorate the effects of such exclusion, in 1986 a new agreement, the Caribbean Basin Textile Access Program (usually called 807A), gave nearly unlimited access to the U.S. market if fabrics were both made and cut in the U.S.

The details of 807A reflect the interests and struggles within the textile/apparel industry complex (Lardner, 1988; Dickerson, 1995). Domestic content is assured in the demand that 807A apply only to clothing made of U.S. textiles. And the strength of the male cutters' union is expressed in the requirement that the cloth must be cut in the U.S., and only *assembled* offshore. 807 has profound implications. In terms of globalization, it

expresses the new logic of regional integration that, as it manifests in the garment industry, gives domestic manufacturers contracting in Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America a competitive edge over firms importing from East and Southeast Asia. For the people who sew clothes, the discursive reduction of sewing skills to assembly helps to rationalize the 807 program and succeeding trade agreements (Safa, 1994).

Within the administration, opposition to restriction of apparel imports was geopolitical, based on "the aspirations of developing countries for economic progress, on which their political stability and, in turn, our own security depends."<sup>61</sup> This concession to development needs was constructed in a way that both protected and potentially stimulated the textile industry by encouraging the use of domestic fabric. Importantly, it also helped some U.S. manufacturers by preventing the duty free importation of items sewn in the Caribbean by South Korean and Hong Kong producers who mostly use textiles from East Asian suppliers. Long outlasting the CBI, imports under 807A have grown 76% each year since 1987 (Deere and Melendez, 1992).

The Caribbean Basin Initiative was a Cold War strategy of a U.S. government that believed a healthy dose of capitalism was the most cost-effective way to halt the spread of socialism in the region (Herod, 1997). As part of this program, between 1980 and 1992, through a program called Trade, Not Aid, the US-AID channeled over one billion dollars to establish EPZs throughout Central America and the Caribbean. In 1992 there were more than two-hundred EPZs, housing 3000 manufacturing plants and employing 735,000 workers, producing \$14 billion in annual exports to the U.S. (Kernaghan, 1992). Rothstein argues that U.S. policy in Latin America has offered apparel manufacturing as a bargaining chip, both in terms of cold war diplomacy, and in the 1980s to support debt repayment. "The workers in the U.S. apparel industry become unwitting sacrifices in the political competition...while being assured that their fate is the unfolding of natural economic laws, which cannot be changed" (Rothstein, 1989, p. 52). How did the garment industry become the sacrificial lamb of this intersection of cold war ideology with trade and development policies?

### **Development with a Capital D**

Governments of the poorest Caribbean and Latin American countries have based their industrial development policy on becoming part of the global factory (Sklair, 1989;

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<sup>61</sup> Under-Secretary of Commerce for International Trade, Bruce Smart, speaking in Congress, 1987.

Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Rosen and McFadyen, 1995). Struggling with debt crises, unemployment and the demands of structural adjustment, they have offered endless incentives to lure foreign investment in export manufacturing: they have lifted trade barriers, offered tax holidays, subsidized credit and exporting, allowed duty free import of machinery and raw materials, and many have offered unrestricted profit repatriation (Canak, 1989; Walton and Seddon, 1994; Safa, 1994). Infrastructural support in the building of export processing zones has been important, the building and advertising of which was a key development strategy of US-AID until the Congress limited this activity.<sup>62</sup> (I discuss this in more detail below.) These initiatives dramatically stimulated not only U.S. investment in the Caribbean Basin but also from Hong Kong and South Korean firms seeking access to U.S. markets (Safa, 1994). Due to its status as a start-up industry for newly industrializing countries, apparel companies have been in the forefront of this spatial reorganizing of production.

Among the many countries that have become part of the global factory, experience varies widely. As the (World Bank) models of successful development, Hong Kong and South Korea suggest that apparel and other assembly work can lead to industrial modernity. Phil Knight, who began production of Nike shoes in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, argues that every country that has been the site of this sort of "light manufacturing" has over time been transformed by the presence of the footwear and apparel industries.<sup>63</sup> However, the historical and political contexts of development for these countries were very specific. The development of export oriented manufacturing in the East Asian NICs co-existed with protected markets and strong state development goals that fostered the growth of backward and eventually forward linkages (Elson, 1988; Wade, 1990; Gereffi and Wyman, 1990). Furthermore, international markets have changed dramatically since the NICs achieved their first and pivotal successes. Any country trying to secure a new place in global markets more recently faces a sharp increase in the volatility of the international economy, increased uncertainty, and far more competition.

During their import substitution industrialization phase, many countries of Latin America developed substantial textile and apparel industries of their own. However, the imposition of neo-liberal free-trade policies have opened up these protected markets to fierce

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quoted in Rothstein, 1989, p. 52.

<sup>62</sup> U.S. labor unions investigated US-AID's support of export processing zones, linking their development to job losses for U.S. workers. This led to Congressional restrictions on this policy (Bradsher, 1992, NYT, p.5, cited in Safa, 1994).

global competition (Lawson, 1995; Figueroa, 1996). In El Salvador, for instance, domestic garment production declined by 55% and textiles by 40% from 1985 to 1991. During the same period, export-oriented assembly grew 12% (Figueroa, 1996). The countries of the Caribbean and Central America that failed to fully develop apparel and textile industries are participating strictly as low-cost assembly sites for TNCs (Chinchilla and Hamilton, 1994). For those countries, the requirement of 807A that fabric be formed and cut in the U.S. has discouraged the development of backward linkages.

As a development strategy, an export oriented garment industry, dominated by U.S. and Asian industry interests, seems to have little viability for the countries of the Caribbean and Central America (Safa, 1994). External market demand for export requires the maximum reduction of production costs, principally wages. There are few, or no, linkages to the domestic economy in any area but labor, which reduces the industry's ability to generate growth or foster more complex, capital intensive industrial production (Chinchilla and Hamilton, 1994). Further, the low wages fail to stimulate increased demand for domestically produced goods and services. Because of the tariff programs under which most of the export manufactures (particularly apparel) enter, the dutiable portion of 807 imports has not exceeded 32% of total import value since 1985, and under 807A it is even lower, 26 to 27%. Measured against the investments made by the governments in terms of infrastructure, lost revenues due to tax holidays, the unrestricted repatriation of profits, this form of export manufacturing appears unlikely to promote growth and development (Safa, 1994; Gereffi and Hempel, 1996).

### **NAFTA, the Final Straw?**

By the time the Bush administration started negotiations around NAFTA, opposition to apparel trade liberalization was waning. From the beginning, trade analysts predicted that the garment industry would suffer dramatic job losses under the agreement. Domestic manufacturers and contractors---at least those who were committed to domestic production---argued for the workers, the thousands of jobs that would be lost as more and more companies abandoned U.S. based manufacturing. On the other hand, allied with retailers, a powerful sector of the textile-apparel complex actually argued in favor of NAFTA.

There were two arguments used to answer concerns about jobs. The most common rationalization in support of offshore sourcing was, and still is, the industry's lament that it

could not compete against the low wages of foreign competition. The second argument, a major narrative of the free trade discourse in general, predicted an increase in exports (and therefore domestic jobs) due to opening of Mexican markets. This would stem from the growth of the Mexican middle class due to economic development---a vast under-served market for U.S. products. A key trope of this narrative describes consumers in both countries as benefiting from lower prices due to improved efficiency and productivity and a greater variety of products.

Even among apparel importers support was contentious, narrating a geopolitics of garments. To the manufacturers who had participated in the Caribbean Basin Initiative, to the Caribbean states, and to private entrepreneurs, NAFTA seemed like a disaster as it increases the attractiveness of Mexico relative to the Caribbean Basin countries.<sup>64</sup> In a statement to Congress, Peter Johnson, executive director of the Caribbean/Latin American Action Committee said: "Were a significant number of these [Caribbean] exports to shift to Mexico as a result of NAFTA preferences, the entire Caribbean Basin would have to undergo an economic contraction of unparalleled severity".<sup>65</sup>

Early during NAFTA negotiations, the administration committed itself to establishing Caribbean parity by extending preferential duty treatment and quota-free status to products that originate in the Caribbean. This promise did not fare well in the political climate around the NAFTA debate. For one reason, unlike NAFTA, parity does not, at least at first, require free access to Caribbean markets.<sup>66</sup> In attempting to balance competing interests, the administration introduced last minute amendments, but the domestic garment industry demanded limitations on the availability of duty-free treatment for apparel products, unions opposed the bill, and the presidential election campaign caused everyone to shy away from any new free trade program. In the meantime, imports of Caribbean goods are growing, despite the lack of parity, although not as fast as Mexican textile and garment imports, which increased seventy percent from mid-1994 to mid-1995.

The CBI, NAFTA, and the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative, which will eventually phase in NAFTA-like free trade throughout Latin America, thus establishes a spatial division of labor, with low-wage production in the Caribbean, and design, engineering, and marketing in the U.S. Asian garment industries, especially South Korean, are already locating production in the lowest wage countries as well as Mexico, keeping head

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64 Bobbin, March, 1993, p.84

65 Bobbin, March, 1993, p. 88.

office functions in East Asia. EPZs in Mexico and the Caribbean have been associated with undeniable gains in employment and foreign-exchange earnings, but it is unclear whether the local economies have in any sense “developed” (Safa, 1994; Henwood, 1997).

U.S. based interests widely diverge as they intersect with this geography of production. Importers and retailers want to be able to import whatever they want from wherever. Representative from states that handle the Caribbean trade (especially Florida) want above all for it to receive parity. U.S. producers, those that actually sew garments, will continue to be devastated. Redman et. al.(1993) argue that if U.S. manufacturers do *not* move to Mexico, they will be out-competed by European, Asian and Mexican firms that will have free access to U.S. market. They think the demise of the U.S. industry is inevitable, and that the adjustment packages accompanying NAFTA should reflect this. Experience supports this prediction. Since the implementation of NAFTA, and in combination with the peso devaluation’s effect on wages, Mexico has become the third largest apparel exporter to the U.S. behind Hong Kong and China.<sup>67</sup>

The competitive problems of the U.S. apparel industry extend well beyond higher wages. Most analysts point to the failure of the domestic industry to lead in the development and adoption of new technology, an issue that has plagued other sectors of U.S. industry. In the case of apparel, Hong Kong has led the way in modernization, and does not consider this a “sunset” industry (Redman, et al, 1993). However the structure of the industry militates against capital investment: the small size of most apparel firms makes incorporation of the newest technology prohibitive. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, the problems of automating garment assembly are legion. What technology has been developed has limited flexibility and is relatively expensive. Furthermore, there is much to support the more cynical argument made by analysts in and outside of the industry who believe that the availability of cheap labor dampens enthusiasm for capital investment in equipment that machine operators can perform with standard machines (Glasmeier, et al, 1993).

How has this geography of garments affected workers? Feminists, organized labor, and leftists in Latin America have been arguing since the 1970s that the working classes in both the U.S. and in the developing countries are hurt by the globalization of manufacturing assembly work, especially women in EPZs (Fernandez-Kelly, 1994; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Safa, 1981; 1994). As I have described above, increasingly companies that

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66 Bobbin, Nov. 95, p. 86-94.

design and distribute garments do not own sewing factories. The resulting arms-length relationship is extremely significant. First, it leads to runaway shops, the owners of which shift production to any place where the terms are more favorable. Contracting also allows the garment label's owner (the retailer or the so-called manufacturer) to deny responsibility for conditions of manufacture. Just as the economy in general seems to thrive on creating insecurity, at least by the reckoning of Wall Street and the Federal Reserve, as I discussed in Chapter One, manufacturing in apparel also grows with the insecurity of machinists and competitiveness among contractors. This is the source of the race to the bottom of the wage scale that has promoted the growth of the Latin American maquila industries.

Clearly the ubiquitous insecurity associated with this vertical disintegration of apparel manufacturing seriously undermines the bargaining power of labor. As in other manufacturing industries, when a company can, relatively easily, pick up and move off-shore, labor has little power to force change, or even to halt a decline in real wages and benefits. The garment industry has followed this strategy. The LDCs vying for foreign investment and job producing industries offer not only infrastructure and tax breaks, but also promise low cost disciplined workforces (Dickerson, 1995; Glasmeier, et al, 1993).

Given this bleak scenario, it is surprising that the National Labor Committee (NLC)<sup>68</sup> continues to campaign, and continues to have an impact. The NLC published a report in September, 1992, that documented the relationship between AID's program and job loss in the U.S. and well as labor violations in the Caribbean Basin. According to the report, a partial survey of the apparel industry found 30 U.S. manufacturers with offshore plants in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras as well as 68 other U.S. manufacturers and retailers sourcing from those countries. Between 1990 and 1992, those same companies had been involved in 58 plant closings and 11 mass layoffs in the U.S. that left over 12,000 U.S. workers jobless.

As mentioned above, through the "Trade, Not Aid" program, the U.S. government planned, financed and developed EPZs. For its industrial park program in El Salvador, for example, AID allocated \$32 million to finance the construction of 129 factory buildings to house manufacturing operations targeting the U.S. market. AID sought to fill these parks by funding investment promotion programs to target U.S. firms and provide incentives for them

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67 Women's Wear Daily, April 24, 1996, p. 14.

68 The full name of the NLC is The National Labor Committee Education fund in Support of Worker and Human Rights in Central America. It is a committee of 21 international unions, represented by their presidents, founded in 1980 to respond to labor and human rights violation in Central America.

to relocate. The Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES) received over \$102 million in U.S. government assistance to pursue contacts with U.S. firms to convince them to explore opportunities in El Salvador.

Besides documenting AID's efforts to build and fill the industrial parks, the NLC report described the earnings, falling real per capita incomes, and labor practices in countries associated with the AID-funded EPZs. The most damning allegation (everyone already knew that the wages were extremely low) was the widely practiced repression of labor activity. In Honduras, the investigation uncovered a country-wide constantly updated blacklist that assured that union sympathizers never worked again once they were identified.

This issue gained immediate prominence in election-year debate. The CBS program "60 Minutes", and ABC's "Nightline" both did stories based on the NLC's report, and then "Nightline" invited V.P. Al Gore and President Bush's Labor Secretary Lynn Martin to debate the issue; and candidates Clinton and Gore appeared on Phil Donahue answering questions about the policy, which, not surprisingly, Clinton condemned. Shortly thereafter, Congress ordered AID to cease financing overseas projects that could result in job loss in the U.S. and ordered a General Accounting Office investigation. The NLC has continued to expose labor abuses in the Caribbean Basin. Their most recent campaign explains the disparity of wages and garment prices in Haiti. In a brilliantly vivid example, the committee reports that J.C. Penney and Wal-Mart are selling Walt Disney and Pocahontas pajamas for \$11.97 while Haitian workers earn a mere seven cents for every pair of pajamas they sew.<sup>69</sup>

That a government agency implemented policies to maintain the lowest possible wage in the Caribbean Basin comes as no surprise. Structural adjustment dictates the need for foreign currency to repay loans to First World banks; this drives development policy in many Third World countries (Safa, 1994; Chinchilla and Hamilton, 1994; Rosen and McFadyen, 1995). Looked at this way, free trade agreements accomplish a transfer of money from U.S. garment workers through Caribbean Basin and Mexican workers to U.S. banks (Rosen and McFadyen, 1995; Henwood, 1997). The apparel industry feigns helplessness, responding as they are to global competition, but the whole concept of global competition has been driven by the desire of TNCs for unregulated capitalism.

I have argued that the decline of domestic production in the U.S. garment industry

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<sup>69</sup> The report is titled, "The U.S. in HAITI: How to Get Rich on 11¢ an Hour". National Labor Committee, January, 1996.

can be explained in part as a result of growing neoliberal hegemony. As the United States promoted its free trade agenda to the rest of the world, trading partners demanded that their less expensive manufactured goods be given access to U.S. markets, chief among which were garments. However, large parts of the southern U.S. were dependent on this industry for employment, and a coalition of southern politicians and industrialists sought and won protection through a complex system of trade quotas that became the most contentious ongoing geopolitical issues of succeeding GATT talks (Lardner, 1988; Dickerson, 1995). For a state committed to free trade, these protections presented a dilemma. To bring developing countries into global trade systems and to encourage the opening of new markets for U.S. exports, trade negotiators had to find ways to undermine and eventually dismantle these protections. In the course of this dismantling project, I have argued, a narrative evolved that rationalized the loss of garment manufacturing due to its highly competitive markets and its low technology and skill requirements. The loss of thousands of jobs per year was seen as inevitable, and in fact, *was* inevitable as the free trade agenda became hegemonic.

This has all been naturalized in a hegemonic discourse of the unfolding of economic laws, especially the benefits of free trade. However, as the NLC efforts demonstrate, a critique that questions the legitimacy of production sponsored by state suppression of workers rights has surprising viability. Beyond stories of grotesque levels of exploitation, however, the future of the industry remains indebted to the skill-less and grateful Third World Woman, sewing away on her primitive machine to feed her family. In the following chapters, I examine more closely the details of the manufacturing work itself.

### **Chapter Three: Technology and the Changing Division of Labor in the Garment Industry**

During the 1970s a combination of international competition and new technology forced the domestic textile/apparel industrial complex through its most profound transformation since the industrial revolution (U.S. Office of Technology Assessment, 1987). Because of the specific technology and capital orientation of textile manufacture, modernization and efficiencies for that industry were more readily implemented than was the case for the labor-intensive and more fragmented garment industry. The garment industry has one of the lowest capital/labor ratios of any industry (Hoffman and Rush, 1988). Does that doom the domestic garment industry? Many observers in and outside of the industry have come to believe that to preserve what is left of domestic garment manufacturing, the only long-term solution lay in the massive introduction of cost-reducing technological change that would remove the 'cheap labor' advantage of Third World competitors, that is, modernization. The garment industry should be ideal for this sort of change: it is labor intense, there are discrete tasks, and many of the tasks are highly repetitive. Further, technological change would seem to promise an improved competitive position for U.S. firms as most developing country clothing manufacturers operate at levels of efficiency and technological sophistication that are well below those found in an average firm in the U.S. or Europe (Hoffman and Rush, 1988; Abernathy, et al, 1995).

In some sectors of the industry, new (even revolutionary) technology has already been adopted. For instance, technologies employed in the design of clothing and initial stages of manufacturing have changed dramatically, and trade journals are nearly ecstatic as information technology revolutionizes the way manufacturers interact with retailers.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, modernizing the garment industry with new technology sounds at odds with its image as a start-up industry. Sewing, for instance, is performed on machines that have not changed much since the electric motor was added---this is what gives the industry its 'low-tech' appellation.

In this and the following chapter, I explore the pattern of technological change in garment manufacturing and its ambiguous impact on industry workers. As I argued in Chapter Two, a narrative of the industry as low-tech has accompanied this flight to offshore

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<sup>70</sup> Some recent Bobbin titles: "Flexible, Practical Solutions Steal the Show," Nov., 1996; "Technology in the New Millennium" and "Knowledge is Power", March, 1996; "Industry Linkage: The Inevitable", Jan. 1992.

producers, obscuring the complex social processes that rationalize the geography of production. Revealing these processes requires recognition of differences of interest and action among various capitals (Storper and Walker, 1989). Who defines these interests, and why are strategies weighed one way and not another? To answer this question, I explore the mutually constitutive role of technological change and ideas about the role of technology in garment production. Gender constructions of technology and skill influence these processes at every level. This contributes to the broader goal of the dissertation, which is to reveal the processes that reproduce material and ideological configurations of low wage work in the U.S. and non-western settings.

An industry like garment making would seem irretrievably mired in a history of sewing as women's work. But as I will argue, and illustrate with case study material, the social reproduction of gender and technology is an on-going process with determinant implications for the livelihoods of sewing machine operators. Starting from the insights of labor process theory into the social construction of technology for control through deskilling, feminist researchers have demonstrated that the gendered coding of work as masculine or feminine allows capital to use technology to undermine male workers and insert lower paid female workers (Baron, 1987; Cockburn, 1983 and 1985; Johnson, 1991). Thus, the feminization of gendered job categories is sometimes not only a product but a goal of technological change. However, technological change is not a singular event and may produce unexpected results. Determinations regarding investment in technology, and related decisions regarding skill requirements for manufacturing, may be based on characteristics of labor markets and their control (Peck, 1996) or the availability of underexploited populations (Massey, 1984; Peck, 1992a, 1992b).

In this and the following chapter, I will demonstrate that short term competitive pressures between capitals or motivational and flexibility concerns clearly lead to compromises over the deskilling potential of technologies and gender definitions of the division of labor. I use case studies of local firms to explain the dilemmas and contradictions posed by new technologies and strategies of production. This vividly reveals the role of technology as a social project and product. It also opens the way to a nuanced examination of the industry as an employer of the low-skilled, a topic I pursue in the following chapter.

### Technology Change

“Because of its very concreteness, people tend to confront technology as an irreducible brute fact, a given, a first cause, rather than as hardened history, frozen fragments of human and social endeavor.”

David Noble  
1984, p. xii

One of the ways that gender divisions of labor interact with technological change is through the price of labor, in that women's wage labor generally costs considerably less than men's (Cockburn, 1983, 1985; Harrison and Bluestone, 1988; Kessler-Harris, 1990). This may affect technological change in at least two ways. First, employers may seek new technologies that enable them to replace more expensive skilled male workers with low paid, non-unionized female workers. Cockburn's classic study of the printing press demonstrated intense male resistance to new technology that allowed for the undermining of craft and union control, a craft union from which women were explicitly excluded.

Whereas relatively high wages may provoke the development of new technology, low wages may affect technological change by slowing it. Because a new machine has to pay for itself in labor costs saved, new technology may be rejected in industries where there is an abundant supply of cheap women's labor. The pattern of change in garment industry technology suggests a thoroughly gendered process. The technologically transformed phases of production are those that have been considered most highly skilled and have been most highly paid. These are also the phases of production that have until recently been dominated by men. Sewing, conventionally considered the assembly stage, and as in many other manufacturing industries therefore considered to require little skill, has always been the lowest paid manufacturing work. There are considerable technical obstacles having to do with the floppy-ness of cloth that makes automated handling difficult, so little progress has been made in automating sewing assembly. Labor process theory would suggest that this outcome is more a social process than a technologically determined one (Braverman, 1974). This suggests that it is the low wages of the work force that have failed to stimulate research and development in labor saving technology.

On the other hand, the high wages and (until recently) organized strength of men engaged in pre-assembly work presented a formidable obstacle to cost cutting by manufacturers. Although limited with respect to gender, labor process theory would predict that new (male) labor saving technology has been a high priority. The pre-assembly stage of garment manufacturing includes two major steps: the development of patterns and then

"markers" that are used as guides for cutting fabric, and cutting itself.<sup>71</sup> Preparing accurately graded patterns and efficient markers, although not as labor intensive as sewing, is critically important and requires industry-specific drafting skills; top graders and marker-makers have commanded salaries that are in some cases equal to those of plant managers. CAD (computer-aided design) technology, by far the most radical technological innovation since the development of the sewing machine, has effectively eliminated this job.

Although CAD technology is expensive, the benefits for marker making are so overwhelming that adoption has been widespread. The first firm in Seattle to acquire this technology displayed it with pride when I visited their plant in 1990. By now, though, the technology is so widespread that on a 1996 visit to another firm I had to ask specifically to see their CAD equipment; the computer was stuck in a little hole-in-the-wall, not even an office.

Whereas CAD technology has de-masculinized marker-making, cutting is still a male enclave. Male domination of cutting is a leftover from the days of tailoring, perhaps based on the use of large manual shears, which are easier to wield with big hands and muscular arms when multiple layers of cloth are cut together. The technical and physical basis of men's skills in cutting was eroded in the early 1960s by the development of the reciprocating knife, also called a bandsaw, which, like most power tools, women can easily operate. Nevertheless, the masculinity of electric power tools (Wajcman, 1991) has helped to keep cutting a male activity. This is a clear case where skill is as much about job control and wage levels, and patriarchal control more generally, as it is about technique (Cockburn, 1985; Waldinger, 1989).

The higher wages for cutters have persisted through the efforts of a powerful union. This level of labor control has favored the kinds of investment in technology that are associated with management's efforts to wrest control of the labor process from workers (Braverman, 1974; Pollert, 1988). As a first step, the reciprocating knife was technologically relatively easy to develop, with the only hurdle being the limpness of the material to be cut. The size of the potential market and the promise of productivity gains easily stimulated investment in research and the development of this technology. Although reciprocating knives did not completely take control of cutting from the highly organized male cutters, the

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<sup>71</sup> A basic pattern is made from a designer's sample; then that pattern has to be adapted for all sizes, a process called grading. Then all the pieces in all the required sizes are laid out and traced onto a long piece of paper (the marker) that will be laid over a thick pile of fabric and cut into the pieces for sewing.

technology easily improved efficiency. While most of the cutters in the Seattle firms are male, the presence of women in cutting rooms is increasing. In Seattle, Eastern Washington, and Sri Lanka I observed female cutting room supervisors as well. Thus, the gender component of the skill category is eroding.<sup>72</sup>

The next step in technological development of cutting has not been so easy because automated cutting technology is expensive. When the technology made its debut in the 1970s, the price for a unit was between \$600,000 and \$800,000, limiting the market for the equipment.<sup>73</sup> There are single-ply cutters available now for as little as \$80,000, but these are appropriate only for custom or made-to-measure markets. But the goal, to de-skill the workforce and reduce it in number and influence, has been achieved. Only two of the firms in my case study have invested in automated cutting equipment. At one, the person (a man) in charge of the cutter makes only eight dollars an hour. According to the production manager, cutters using the hand-held bandsaw used to make at least twice that. In another local firm, cutter's wages have come down even without the adoption of automated cutting. The production manager explained to me that

“(t)here *was* a big difference in wage rates between cutters and sewers. They're somewhat closer now---I probably pay the cutters an average of \$10.50 an hour, and sewers at \$7. But back then it seemed like the difference was a lot more. And again, not necessarily due to skill levels. At least my feeling is that cutting does take skill, but the skill is equal for sewers. It was because it was male and female.”

The cutting room's gendered division of labor is breaking down, but this may not be due to changes in technology. Probably more important is the general weakness of the industry's labor markets and the viability of its threats to move offshore, which have weakened all manufacturing unions. For whatever reason, every year I see more and more women operating the reciprocating knife. In Sri Lanka where garment factories have been set up in rural areas with no previous experience in the national garment industry, I observed a female head cutter who drove every day from Colombo, and was paid almost as much as the plant manager. She was assisted by both female and male apprentices. On the other hand, in Seattle at a shop recently opened by a Vietnamese immigrant with many

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72 One could logically suggest that the role of cutting is simply changing its gender orientation to take advantage of lower female wages, but in the cases I observed, the female supervisors were supervising almost completely male staffs.

73 Bobbin, Oct. 1996. The technical problems were overcome with the computerized numerically controlled cutting tool by Gerber. The Gerber system receives digitized marker data from the CAD system; a high speed reciprocating knife is directed by computer through material held flat by means of a patented vacuum system. There are also laser cutters available that also link directly with CAD

years in the local industry, the owner insisted that only men could cut. When pressed, she argued that only men could lift the heavy bundles of fabric.<sup>74</sup>

One other male dominated job associated with the garment industry is pressing. Many old timers in garment manufacturing consider pressing practically an art---this is where you give the final shape to a garment. At one of Seattle's most prestigious firms, the owner, Sam Roffe, continued to press his factory's ski pants practically up to the day he died. Most of the fabrics and construction techniques used in jacket production result in garments that do not require this meticulous pressing, and so my research has not included this aspect of the industry.<sup>75</sup> Secondary sources suggest that where pressing is still important, it too has gradually yielded to a re-gendering that incorporates female pressers.

### **Sewing Technology: The Last Frontier**

Most factories operate with standard industrial sewing machines. The method of forming stitches mechanically with a threaded needle remains virtually the same today as it was more than 140 years ago (Baron and Klepp, 1984). Since 1930 the sewing machine has evolved via thousands of minor inventions that increase the speed and aid the operator by reducing handling time.<sup>76</sup> But developments toward automation have been slow. The difficulties of automating the sewing phase of garment manufacturing fall into two major categories---technological and economic.

Cloth is a very complex material to handle. Machinists who fabricate metal parts have fixed references for stress, strain, geometry, cutting speeds, oils, coefficients of friction, etc. There are no coefficients of limp, hand, stretch or friction for cloth. Besides which, there are constantly new developments in textiles, creating new handling qualities.<sup>77</sup> So, for instance, a person who sets in sleeves has a new set of handling characteristics to learn every time a different fabric is required. The fabric will slide differently, have more or less tendency to pucker or stretch, or have slight differences in grain alignment from one cut to

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systems.

74 It was my impression that the owner professed the masculinity of cutting because she wants to provide some jobs to young male Vietnamese immigrants who would not or could not sew.

75 While pressing is not required, it makes most garments look better---a good presser can add shape to a finished garment. One of my respondents explained that labor costs offshore makes the extra work of pressing affordable. Therefore, when she is competing for a contract, she is sometimes competing with a contractor who offers sewing and pressing, which my respondent cannot afford to do and still submit a competitive bid. In other words, an offshore contractor can throw in free "icing on the cake".

76 The most important are the underbed thread trimmer and the needle positioner.

the next. The operator is constantly compensating for these distinctions in a way that programmable machines can not, although some sensitivity of fabric changes has been achieved in the very newest equipment.

Economic problems are just as unwieldy. For instance, single-purpose or dedicated machines have been developed that automate certain complicated labor intense operations. The most common type in my study makes pocket welts---the hole that you stick your hands in when the pocket does not open on the seam. Operators usually do no more than load the work pieces, initiate the sequence, and unload completed parts. However, while desirable for their de-skilling effect, these machines have limited applicability because they are expensive and inflexible. For a firm that usually makes shirts or ladies dresses, and only occasionally pockets, the cost would be prohibitive. Outdoor wear is loaded with pockets, so most of the firms in my study have rationalized the expense of placket makers.

A firm's decision to invest in dedicated equipment is based on the size of the firm and the extent to which its product is standardized. For larger firms sewing long runs of standardized products, dedicated machines are important, both de-skilling and reducing the need for labor. In products that do not change very much and for which demand is stable, a return on an investment in a dedicated machine comes quickly. Some men's shirts, underwear and jeans are produced in plants that have capital/labor ratios that are near the average for manufacturing as a whole (Hoffman and Rush, 1988). The manufacture of specific parts of some items are totally automated.

On the other hand, investment in dedicated equipment is prohibitive for small contracting firms. Contractors in particular may switch rapidly between projects, and do relatively short production runs. However, a tightly linked customer with a commitment to long production runs can provide financing or otherwise help their contractor acquire new equipment. A small and relatively new contracting firm in my case is sewing under contract for a mass merchandiser-retailer. During the extent of my field work machinists at this firm were sewing only pile jackets. The *merchandiser's* contract manager had a permanent desk in the office and was there every time I stopped in. Although the owner of the contracting firm, Ann, did not want to discuss the details of her arrangement with this firm, she gave me the impression that the merchandiser had financed the expensive new pocket welter that

Ann displayed with obvious pride and may have been supporting her expansion plans well.<sup>78</sup>

Whether aided by dedicated sewing machines or not, most sewing is still performed on long un-changing assembly lines. In the progressive bundle system, the standard garment industry assembly line, each operator gets a large bundle of identical pieces (for instance sleeves, or collars) and performs an operation on the entire bundle before re-tying it and sending it on to another operator. All the pieces of hundreds or thousands of garments are tied up in bundles somewhere on the production line---this is what gives the characteristic look to the garment factory of huge piles of partly finished garments lying everywhere. Besides ridding their work of its craft status, the assembly line, and particularly the bundle system, is designed to maximize individual operators' speed. Wages are determined by how long the operator takes to perform a discrete operation, with a basic rate determined by the firm's "engineer". Besides the operator's skill, the machine's performance is critical to an operator's income.

In what is one of the fundamental relationships in the gendering of work roles in manufacturing industries, men control machinery, even if they do not operate it (Wajcman, 1991; Cockburn, 1985). As a result, men as a sex continue to be in a position to dominate and manipulate women's labor. Although in my research I saw cutting rooms with both women and men, including occasionally women as supervisors, the area that is still overwhelmingly male is engineering and maintenance. In every factory I visited, male mechanics were adjusting and maintaining and repairing the equipment. As capital intensity increases and the equipment grows more complex, the importance and skill requirements of the engineer increases. Especially in new cutting rooms where only one or two computer-controlled cutting machines produce the entire output of this phase of manufacturing, the person who maintains the machines may have an advanced engineering training.

A more insidious role finds the engineer, stopwatch in hand, standing or sitting in front of a sewing machine operator timing the performance of a specific task. Piece rates are the principal source of tension between management and operators because the rates can be adjusted by the engineers. The "engineering" in the piece rate lies in the role speed plays in line balancing and in rationalizing the rate itself, but the sight of a well-paid man sitting with a stop-watch in front of a woman working as fast and carefully as she can to earn little

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<sup>78</sup> Throughout this dissertation I will use pseudonyms to refer to the people I interviewed. I will also not mention the names of specific firms when I am discussing results of the interview phase of the research. When information about specific firms is part of the public record, then I will use the name of the company.

more than minimum wage was a scene potent with the unequal power of gendered social relations of production. The masculinized role of the engineer, who is also charged with the repairs and adjustments and arrangements of the machines and probably cannot sew, watches over the operator as though s/he too were part of the machine.

This image sticks in my mind, representing not only the gendered division of labor in sewing factories (I saw female sewing room supervisors stop watch in hand) but also as a reminder of the all-pervasive pressure under which machine operators labor. In high-tech plants, the surveillance is more complete but more discrete; the manager can sit in his (sic) office and turn to the computer screen to observe the rate at which each operator is sewing at the moment, how much money the operator earned the week before, or any other piece of performance information he wants. Being able to work under these circumstances---the low wages, the constant surveillance, the constant pressure---is not theorized as skill.

Within the industry opinions differ regarding the appropriate direction for technology advances, although all sides claim that the future of the industry is at stake. Some argue that changes in technology could raise productivity so that domestic manufacturing could compete with low wage labor offshore, but that the industry is reactionary, and in general too stuck on cheap labor. "This industry thinks all it needs is for mankind to breed more buyers of clothing, more sports stars to promote it and more hungry people to produce it."<sup>79</sup> In an editorial published in the leading trade journal, a longtime worker in R&D of an automated equipment firm wrote that the industry lacks the commitment to automated equipment. More often than not, he said, manufacturers, when buying a new piece of equipment, will not commit resources to training, but then expect their mechanic:

"who probably has a limited amount of education, to make a complex and highly technical machine run flawlessly... No matter how clever or ambitious this mechanic is, he or she can't overcome the lack of training. (And we haven't even considered that we expect these miracles from a person whom may speak English as a second language, who likely has 50 to 60 sewing machines and at least a half-dozen pieces of semi-automatic equipment to tend, and also may happen to be one of the lowest-paid employees in the company.)"<sup>80</sup>

One reply to the editorial listed the arguments against investment in technology that I heard repeatedly in my interviews: garment manufacturing is difficult to automate; automation is costly; labor is a relatively low cost of production so compared to automation,

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<sup>79</sup> Bobbin May 95 p.6

<sup>80</sup> Rovin, Herman. Bobbin, May, 1995, p. 2.

labor is cheaper (especially, the reader can imagine, when the labor-er does not speak English); and that payback (return on investment) is long term, at best. No wonder, this letter writer said, everyone is not on the bandwagon.<sup>81</sup> Naturally, the cost of new technology, its maintenance and repair, and the training and reorganizing required to operate it are all problems for small and medium sized companies. As the case study material clearly indicates however, the technology questions are much more complex than this writer allows.

### **The Many Faces of “Flexibility”**

Recent developments in apparel marketing reveal that the garment industry is impaled on the contradictions of the organization of production. The off-shore contracting system is geared for mass production, but the most profitable emerging markets require small batch production---in apparel that means production that can respond to the whims of fashion and taste. Off-shore production has reduced the costs of individual pieces of clothing, but as it is organized around large orders made six months in advance of the retail “season”, mistakes are costly.<sup>82</sup> Further, competition among retailers has encouraged a dizzying rate of change in product lines that consumers have come to expect, and that make new demands on the assembly line. These changes have encouraged the evolution of “Quick Response”, the garment industry’s version of just-in-time manufacturing.

Innovative firms are using advances in communications, CAD, and cutting technologies (i.e. pre-assembly) to develop a new lean retailing system based on quick response to market signals (Abernathy, et. al, 1995). The sewing end of production has been far more difficult to change due to the contradictions inherent in the bundle system. The jacket-making firms in Seattle exemplify the variety of experiments taking place across the industry. Central to this period of experimentation is a complex calculus based on the cost and flexibility of new technology, and the cost and flexibility of skilled labor.

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<sup>81</sup> Keohane, Denis J., letter to Bobbin editor, July 1995, p. 6

<sup>82</sup> Mistakes can be of two kinds: first, consumers can reject a style or color, sending a whole inventory to the outlet stores, often at a huge loss for the manufacturer. Manufacturing errors can be made as well. In early 1997 a friend purchased what would be an expensive Pacific Trails jacket, sewn in Sri Lanka, which ended up on the rack at Costco for \$29 because (it appeared to me) the pocket welt was sewn on backwards. The pocket still worked, but the opening was a little awkward. REI lost a whole run of jackets because they buttoned in the wrong direction. (Women’s and men’s jackets button in opposite directions; these directions were reversed, though the jackets still worked fine. These are mistakes that would not happen if the plant sewing the jackets was downstairs or down the block.

For instance, REI's Thaw has invested in new automated cutting equipment and a new shipping plant.<sup>83</sup> The automatic cutting will aid Thaw in its efforts to organize around quick response, and the shipping plant is necessary for REI to become more competitive in catalogue sales. Besides owning the most advanced technology in Seattle, Thaw has a more traditional plant in Wenatchee, an agricultural community with a fairly high unemployment; half of the machine operators in this plant are part of Wenatchee's large population of Mexican immigrants.<sup>84</sup> They also give work to contractors, including (until recently) to a Seattle firm that owns a set of plants on the Mexican border.<sup>85</sup> Most of Thaw's contractors are offshore, including in China.

Thaw's complex structure of manufacturing is typical for the industry. The popular perception is that the location of production is based on the location of the lowest wages. The industry claims to lack flexibility in labor costs due to the competition of low wage producers in the Third World. But as the REI/Thaw case shows, there are other factors of production. This is very important in analyzing the industry's position regarding the low wages and the supposed low skill of its workforce.

REI/Thaw is positioning itself as what might be called a flexible firm, achieving a garment industry version of functional flexibility with its combination of manufacturing sites and sourcing options. Flexibility is also achieved through automation and quick response by way of communication technology, although their customers are not yet geared toward that kind of interaction except in catalogue sales. The higher labor costs that go along with flexible domestic manufacturing is balanced with the less flexible but lower cost imports. They also seek contracts for garments that do not require them to squeeze labor. For instance, they sew for the Forest Service, a government agency that will buy only domestically produced garments. What is interesting in the REI/Thaw case is that they are still investing in sewing plants. REI's position as a co-op rather than as a firm focused on profits may explain this, but that does not detract from the suggestion that this company is pursuing a complex strategy of manufacturing flexibility. How do sewing machine operators fit into this new wave of organization? Interestingly, the production manager told me that

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<sup>83</sup> The company has also expanded its retail stores, and opened a very fancy headquarters/store in downtown Seattle, with much fanfare.

<sup>84</sup> The Feb. 1996 unemployment rate for Chelan County was 11.4%, when King County was 5.2% (Washington State labor market and economic report, 1996).

Although many Mexican immigrants in Wenatchee work in orchards and packing plants, those jobs are highly seasonal. Sewing has at least the potential of being a year around job.

<sup>85</sup> This relationship ended during the course of my research, with the final straw being the backwards-

his key concern is how to change the method of pay so that his workforce can be rewarded for flexibility in sewing skills.

### **Flexibility by any other name**

In their provocative book that symbolically marks the beginning of the flexibility debate, Piore and Sabel (1984) described a crisis of mass production---that mass markets for standardized goods were saturated, presaging a new age of what is now widely known as post-Fordism. Optimistically, they saw an alternative technological paradigm emerging in those industrial regions based on artisan production where microtechnology was allowing more flexible production. Thus firms were able to specialize in new and fragmenting markets. Pollert (1988) argues that trumpeting this development as a "radical break" allows a new role for dualism in industrial structure, and a context for the emphasis on labour flexibility as progressive. This new accommodation with 'flexible patterns of work' legitimates pliability, insecurity, unemployment, and self-employment (Pollert, 1988; Christopherson, 1989). This analysis suggests a more critical view of current trends in the garment industry where a kind of responsiveness to markets is sought in two directions, one through subcontracting relationships and the second through changes in the labor process.

As I explained above, the bundle system is fine for mass production of identical items, but not for small batch production and quick response (or just-in-time) manufacturing. For the last couple of years, *Bobbin*, the leading magazine of the apparel industry, has filled its pages with articles about the promise of Quick Response, and published long glowing articles about companies that have reorganized manufacturing to respond quickly to point of sale information.<sup>86</sup> However moving away from the progressive bundle system is not happening quickly.<sup>87</sup> The major problem seems to be the piece work compensation system. In the

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buttoning jackets.

<sup>86</sup> For instance, the March, 1996 cover title, "Plugged into the Future" and the subhead, "Technology in the New Millennium", illustrated with a drawing of a computer cable. Inside, the basic story is told in this heading: "Technology Enables; The Consumer Drives". The potential is explained: "The initial investment to put a 'store' on-line is modest; it costs about \$200 a month to reach the entire world..." But the failure to get on board is severe: "A manufacturer must weigh the cost of doing business in today's Quick Response environment versus not doing business at all." But *Bobbin* is interested in the whole industry, not just the potential for domestic contractors. Two take-out lines tell the story: "To have a home in the new millennium, you must merge your marketing, sourcing and technology strategies." "For the manufacturer, technology enables teams from around the world to work together without ever meeting face to face." Implications for skill requirements go largely unnoted by *Bobbin*.  
<sup>87</sup> This is one area where domestic manufacturers can compete with offshore suppliers. No matter how electronically linked retailers are with offshore offices, there is still distance to overcome for shipping goods---you cannot re-stock shelves from China. As I discussed in chapter two, however, this

bundle system, operators are paid according to the number of pieces they complete, compared to a standard time per piece set by the firm's engineer. The operator's pay is based only on individual performance, which induces in the operators a relentless desire to beat the clock. [This ability to sew fast is what counts as skill among the operators I interviewed; I will discuss this issue in Chapter Four.] Managers planning the reorganization of production must consider other approaches to compensation, but the industry is literally geared by piece work.

In the early 1990s, modular manufacturing emerged in the pages of *Bobbin* as a production technique that could help manufacturers respond to the changing demands of retailers. Similar to teamwork approaches that have been applied throughout manufacturing, modular or "flexible work groups" have been particularly challenging to the garment industry due to its long history of piecework. Work groups handle single units (garments) in a continuous flow through the group---that is, all the pieces of a single jacket start at one end, and some short time later a finished jacket comes out at the other end of the work group. There is a dramatic reduction of work-in-process---that is, there is less inventory tied up as un-shipable pieces on the assembly line.

Besides the changes in technology and the evolving new organizations of production described above, many firms solve their manufacturing problems by abandoning them to contractors. Although this strategy is common in all market niches, product market characteristics of clothing have a determining impact on these decisions. For instance, large manufacturers with relatively stable products for which there are economies of scale (jeans, bras, men's shirts and pants), can invest in dedicated and automated equipment. An important innovation among these firms is rapid communication by electronic data transfer for quick response to point of sale information. This is especially common among manufacturers that are linked to large aggressive retailers like Wal-Mart and Penneys (Abernathy, et. al., 1995). Levi is experimenting with an extreme version of this in their new service that makes jeans to fit individual customers with only a small mark-up in price. While some standardized clothing is made on contract, contractors tend to be larger and have long term relationships with their customers, which facilitates capital investment.

As I explained in Chapter Two, firms in more fashion sensitive products operate in an environment that demands quick response to fashion trends. This sector is highly volatile, with more small firms, and for most, smaller profit margins, and a high rate of firm death.

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advantage for American producers is likely to be temporary as more foreign (especially Hong Kong and Korean) firms open manufacturing facilities in Mexico, the Caribbean, and even Canada and the U.S.

Capital investments are likely only in the technology that facilitates manufacturing process flexibility: sewing machines. More than investments in technology, the factor driving the organization of production in fashion sensitive products is the sudden surges in demand as consumers respond to each season's new offerings

Jackets are not considered fashion sensitive, especially compared to dresses. In Seattle there are some standard items, jackets that you see on every third person in a crowd of Seattlites. But my respondents argue that high-tech outdoor wear is sensitive to changes in technology, for instance, with regards to water resistance. In these cases, as the materials that go into outdoor wear are relatively expensive, and some jackets with all their zippers and interior pockets and zip-out linings are labor intense, inventories of jackets that do not sell can be very expensive. Therefore manufacturing close to the market is essential. Finally, one production manager adamantly declared that weather is more fickle than fashion. If it rains all summer, the camping clothing will sit on the shelf. If it does not snow, the ski clothes get dusty. One lost season can ruin a small company. In other words, though not fashion items, outdoor wear manufacturing proceeds in a very uncertain environment.

To even out the ebbs and flows of demand, all of these firms, fashion and outdoor wear, depend on contractors, who in turn depend on subcontractors. Merchandisers like the one Ann sews for achieve flexibility with their contractors. In that case, the merchandiser essentially has a dedicated pocket welder for which it pays no overhead, operators for whom it pays no benefits, and workers for whom, when they are laid off during slack production times, it pays no increase in unemployment insurance. To solve her production problems, Ann has fewer options. Small companies like Ann's have less capital for investment and fewer economies of scale. Unless in stable alliances with large manufacturers, contractors may be called on to produce everything from swimming suits to overcoats, each of which would require different pieces of dedicated equipment. However contractors are the least able to invest in dedicated machines and fancy cutting equipment; they often make short runs and may have to change products often. This is certainly not always the case. One of my respondents made hundreds of thousands of a particular Eddie Bauer jacket, and was therefore able to make a good profit and invest in equipment specifically for the project. But the contracts have to be firm and long to rationalize investment. More often, a firm's investment is likely to be in standard equipment---sewing machines.

Contracting firms therefore achieve flexibility through employment practices, and that does not necessarily mean sweatshops. Some contractors achieve production flexibility with the combination of a skilled workforce and a reputation that attracts good customers.

In all of the woman-owned contracting firms in my case study there was extensive involvement of family members, operating a kind of moral economy of loyalty and commitment. One of these contractors was extensively involved in helping some of her operators sponsor the immigration of relatives, and all struggled to provide the best benefits they could afford. The prices paid for sewing labor do not make this easy. Ann expressed extreme frustration over her inability to provide medical coverage for her machinists, although she was doing as much as she could in many other ways. What could be called the im-moral economy of contracting is that the merchandisers like Costco and Eddie Bauer now escape these obligations.

To give a sense of how some of these issues are resolved, I introduce two companies that have, at least for the moment, resolved these complex issues. The dilemma for local firms is summed up by the production manager of one of Seattle's most unique and in some ways successful manufacturers:

“We are not interested in getting into Costco or Nordstrom's or being big in any of these...I've been a party to this before where you get in with a mass-merchandiser and Bauer's a sterling example. They just tighten down, it's all price with them...And you're making it for nothing. You can't make any money. You keep your people employed, but you just barely break even. And then if they decide to drop you, you lay off all your work force. So we're not interested in that. We have really loyal people....The people who buy our clothing really like it. And we just kind of like where we are right now.”

The oldest outdoor wear firm in Seattle, C.C. Filson, capitalizes on domestic manufacturing. Filson was started in Seattle in 1897 to outfit goldminers and timber workers. The clothing itself has not changed much---no synthetics, no Gore-tex. You have probably seen Filson clothing if you have ever wandered into a small western sporting goods store---thick wool plaid shirts and heavy cotton jackets with an oil type weather proofing, all with lifetime guarantees. Anglers, timber workers, ranchers and hunters wear Filson. For years Filson's advertising was word of mouth, but the loyalty of its clientele convinced new owners that they could probably expand their customer base. During the five years I have been studying the industry in Seattle, Filson has doubled in size. Unlike Eddie Bauer, a local firm that expanded rapidly, especially after being purchased by Spiegel in 1988, Filson has stayed very close to its roots.

The customer base dictates their manufacturing policy. Filson is the quintessential Made-in-America company. Their catalogue is filled with old photos of a masculinized turn-of-the-century Americana: guys standing by a freshly felled thousand year old tree. Even at

trade shows, Filson proudly announces that it is a *Seattle* company.<sup>88</sup> This image is as important in the product they sell in Japan and Italy as it is in the U.S. They say they want to stay that way: "small, exclusive, Seattle based."

By sticking to tried and true styles and colors, Filson has entered into the opposite of a fashion niche. Their clothing is more expensive than REI or Bauer, but it comes with a lifetime guarantee.<sup>89</sup> Filson's problem, then, is to ensure the highest quality but also restrain costs so that their rural customer is not priced out of the market. Consequently, production technology and organization does not have to emphasize flexibility. Computerized cutting allows them to save more on their expensive fabric, quickly lay-out and cut a special order, and change styles easily. All production data is available electronically, so management can know the efficiencies of operators, and line balancing or plant balancing can be achieved before problems arise. This is impressive progress; when I first visited Filson, there was only a rudimentary information system.

Because of quality demands, and because some of their fabrics are difficult to handle, Filson requires experienced operators. They provide a lot of training and offer good benefits (full medical coverage, paid holidays and paid vacations). Still, the pay is low, though not by industry standards. An average operator makes around \$8.50 per hour in piece work, while an excellent operator can make between \$12 and \$13 an hour. Unfortunately for the operators who want to earn as much money as possible, Filson works no overtime.<sup>90</sup> The production manager thinks that a lot of Filson operators supplement their earnings by sewing a swing shift at another factory. When weather intervenes to slow sales, Filson, like all U.S. manufacturers, lays people off, sometimes for weeks. They try to coordinate down times with paid holidays, and also try to give advance warning of layoffs so people can make plans. When the layoffs are going to be longer term, the operation manager uses his connections in town to find other positions for his operators. He tries to find positions in factories whose downtimes will be opposite of Filson's so that he can get the operators back when production picks up again.

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88 Apparently not Seattle enough. Filson is in a building that needs to be torn down for a new football stadium. Filson has steadfastly refused to move. We'll see how long that lasts. Next door is the Thaw factory. They are already making plans for the move, basing it on the transportation needs of its workforce

89 REI has adopted an amazingly liberal policy on returns, however. Friends of mine have received a full refund on hiking equipment they have used for an entire season. This is different from a lifetime guarantee.

90 Another highly respected company in town, though not part of my study, works a lot of overtime due to the demands of fashion. One of my respondents argued that this company was now locked into

How can Filson survive in the highly competitive cut-throat garment industry? Besides the particular characteristics of their market I discussed above, Filson has a discounting policy that is the exact opposite of Eddie Bauer. Filson garments never go on sale. No discounting, period. If a sporting goods store buys more garments from Filson than it can sell, they cannot then turn around and sell them to Wal-Mart or Costco. If they did, Filson will never sell to them again. They do this to protect their price, but also to protect their customers, the small shops. If Costco was going to sell Filson jackets cheaper than Warshall's (a local sporting goods store), customers would desert Warshall's, but Filson wants the Warshall's of the world to survive. (This once secure product niche is certainly vulnerable. A new Eddie Bauer store in Seattle has its main entrance decorated in a style that evokes the western sporting goods store of Filson catalogues.) They also want to continue paying decent wages, which they will not be able to do if they have to sell a large part of their inventory barely above cost. It may seem like a risky strategy in this sale-crazed discount-store-mad retail climate, but it seems to work for them.

Jean is a contractor, pursuing an equally risky strategy, innovating in areas that others in Seattle call crazy, and fighting doggedly for fair prices and realistic production schedules. Because she sews for well established companies, her strategy has worked well, but is always precarious.

Jean started sewing years ago when she suddenly found herself a divorced mother of two young children with no work experience. She currently has four contracting factories, one a maquiladora in Mexico. In Jean's Seattle factory machinists sew extraordinarily complex uniforms which she designs and her daughter markets. In Tacoma and Mexico she was sewing for one of the biggest firms in Seattle, but that firm's price-is-everything approach has strained this relationship. Also in Tacoma Jean is experimenting with tailored women's suits, a private label she hopes to sell, taking advantage of a skilled sewing staff, computer aided communications, and her own manufacturing expertise.

Jean's plant's are far from sweatshops. Even in the miserly end of the apparel industry, she both makes a profit and provides a measure of security for her workforce, a security that depends on her customers, however. Her operators are highly skilled and Jean often works fourteen hour days solving production problems so that she can keep them all employed (she would put it in terms of cash flow) and relatively well paid. In contracting, there is constant pressure to be on time with every order even when suppliers are late, and

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overtime because it had in the operator's eyes become part of the "benefits" package.

everybody blames the contractor for everything. Serious problems arise when (as they usually do) contractors sew for a number of companies at once, and each one wants to be given priority. Once, during the course of my research, Jean was making a coat for Pendleton when her whole schedule got backed up because of a fabric change Pendleton made. The contract manager for the firm next in line on Jean's production schedule complained to me:

"(Jean) is not getting product out in time...and she refuses to work overtime to help out. It's unfortunate Pendleton's having problems, but it's not my issue. She's either got to work overtime for my product and charge Pendleton for that overtime, or she's got to work overtime and not charge anybody... There's a point where I've got to say, I don't know if we can do business with (her) anymore...We struggle to increase domestic sourcing. One of the things that sells it is quick turnaround, but something like this comes...."

Jean has had a long and in many ways profitable relationship with this firm, but their ambitious expansion has caused such extreme pressure on costs that even an innovative and successful firm like Jean's is likely to lose this contract. Soon, all of this manufacturer's sewing will be done offshore, where overtime, when it is paid, costs pennies.

Each of these strategies creates its own set of conditions for the workers. The particular conditions in the Seattle labor market, the labor content of the garments, the market niche, vulnerability to fashion, the corporate structure, the attitude of management toward capital investment, and so on. With places like Filson, Jean's, and Thaw all offering good benefits and, at least for the industry, reasonable pay, the machine operators in Seattle would seem to have more security than those working in the infamous sweatshops of New York and Los Angeles. Managers at several of these firms expressed concern about a rumored improved benefits package and expansion at Thaw that would lure away some of their operators, suggesting somewhat more "power" in the local labor market. Jean said she may do some very aggressive advertising to recruit the best operators in Seattle. The Seattle area is unusual in this regard. There is not a huge unemployed workforce clamoring for jobs in the garment industry. The majority of machine operators immigrated from China and are beginning to retire with twenty and more years of experience sewing in Seattle. While it would be an exaggeration to say that it is a sellers market in labor, good operators are often in demand. As most of the shop floor supervisors are Chinese as well as most operators in the older plants, it is difficult for the more recent Vietnamese immigrants to find work in these plants, although that is happening as Chinese operators retire.

Vietnamese women are more often forced to take jobs in contracting firms; contractors, especially those sewing low-end garments, operate on much narrower margins,

not only paying less, but offering few to no benefits and no job security. For instance, the only benefit Ann is able to provide is flexible hours so that people working for her can attend school, which many of them do. She wants to provide a medical insurance package, but at the moment this is out of the question. While her shop appears to be on stable ground, it is in the contracting segment of the local industry where “entrepreneurs” may operate quasi-legal shops or employ homeworkers. The many excellent and highly respected contractors in Seattle are finding it harder and harder to satisfy the demands of the market. That is exactly why shady contractors exist: manufacturers demanding lower labor costs indirectly feed this sector when their contractors go to subcontractors who offer lower prices. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Vietnamese men with ties to local communities have set up networks of homeworkers who have no other options but to take in the work.

With more and more sewing done by contracting shops, but with contractors unable to invest in productivity enhancing technology, flexibility and innovation in garment manufacturing thus depends on the skills of workers. To survive, a firm would likely have to employ both skilled workers and new technology, but there is little impetus for capital investment in technology. First, it would be hard to pay sewing machine operators less than they are already making. Second, the industry is *already* perceived as low skill. This dilemma brings to the fore the issue of the skill required in sewing. It brings into question the whole concept of skill, and brings up the critical question of the relationship between technology and the future of the workforce. And as I have already shown, developments in information technology and the market shift towards quick response highlight the benefits of a skilled and versatile workforce, and yet the overwhelming image of garment sewing work is that of an unskilled, low wage Third World job. In the following chapter I examine in more detail a very different conception of garment industry work.

## Chapter 4: The Local Market in Sewing Skills

The garment industry has not figured prominently in geographical research about de-industrialization in the U.S.<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, it is very prominent in literature about *new* industrial spaces. In Italy and Southern California, for instance, researchers used the garment industry as an example of dense networks of contractors evolving in response to contemporary demands for flexible specialization. It is ironic that garment production, one of the oldest industries, is ignored in literature about de-industrialization (the demise of *old* regional concentrations of industries), but highlighted in discussions of new industrial spaces. The implication is that as global markets increase competitive pressures on this industry, it was one of the first to innovate, to respond in new ways to new pressures.

There is another, more compelling implication. In retrospect, it appears that because garment industry workers were among the least protected, garment manufacturing firms were the first to utilize "flexibility" with the workforce--- "quantitative adjustments of the labor intake in accordance with fluctuating production needs"<sup>92</sup>---the flexibility to lay off workers.<sup>93</sup> The flexibility of the workforce, while critical, was not the focus of analysis in studies of these new dense agglomerations. Rather, workers were considered in reference to unquestioned "abundant supplies" of women and immigrants who wanted jobs but had no skills.<sup>94</sup>

In this chapter I challenge dominant representations of skill in the garment industry, using as a basis for that challenge my case study of the Seattle area garment industry. The idea that anyone can sew is rooted in the industrial organization of sewing as an assembly line operation. On an assembly line, some operations can indeed be mastered easily, and certainly their infinite repetition requires little skill. But that is not what most sewing is about, as my research reveals. And it is certainly not the case that the simple presence of

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91 For instance, in Harrison and Bluestone's much cited work, *The Great U-Turn - Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (1988), the apparel industry is mentioned twice, both times in a list of industries that have been affected by the expansion of global markets. In the second list, it is included among the "mature" industrial sectors that included steel, auto, machine tool, and textiles, but is the subject of no further discussion.

92 Peck, 1996, p. 123, citing Storper and Scott, 1990.

93 As I complete this dissertation, major news stories repeat this theme. For instance, analysts of the airline industry suggest that in order to compete with Boeing, Airbus consortia members in Germany and France will have to win concessions from labor regarding the flexibility of its workforce (NPR, Aug. 1, 1997). In another major case, teamsters are threatening to strike UPS over the ratio of part-time temporary workers to full-time workers (New York Times, July 31, 1997, p. A1).

94 See for instance Scott (1988, 1992).

women looking for jobs creates a garment industry labor market.

Using the industrial geography literature as a backdrop, I show that both historically and currently, the success of the garment industry depends on the continued social construction of sewing as women's work, a process that through patriarchal social relations trivializes the training and skill that machinists require. I extend this argument by showing that the representation of sewing as unskilled work is incorrect---that sewing takes training, practice, and talent. In addition, my interviews reveal that while the skill of local machinists is widely lauded, managers throughout the industry hold contradictory opinions about skill that determine it as a racialized category, in some cases more than a gendered one. The complexity of the way these issues interweave demands a more careful attention to the articulation of material and discursive reproduction of labor supplies.

#### **“Flexibility” in Garment Production**

Scott's (1984, 1988) widely cited study of agglomeration economies in Los Angeles uses the ladies' dresses sector as an example with which to theorize new industrial spaces that form around dense contractor networks. Scott theorizes the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation as one that through geographical logic shifts production to labor markets where contingency (or flexibility) is feasible. He argues that increasing flexibility in production and increasing flexibility in labor markets are mutually reinforcing and self-sustaining. In the case of the dresses sector, the density of designers, suppliers, contractors and subcontractors (not to mention the unacknowledged homeworkers) makes the labor market vibrant. Workers are able to adjust to unstable jobs because of the density of jobs---alternatives are plentiful. In turn, the abundance of workers makes the agglomeration possible. But the flexibility Scott is concerned with is numeric---he assumes the presence of the skills or the ease with which skills can be acquired.

In a recent paper, Scott (1996) draws attention to the disparity of production relations in what he calls the cultural products industries of Los Angeles, which now employ more people than the high technology sectors. He differentiates among these industries, which besides garments includes printing and publishing, furniture, entertainment, and jewelry, according to how they have adapted to the competitive environment. The successful industries have taken the “high road”, tending to maintain high levels of skill, worker remuneration, and market appeal. Those that have taken the “low road” have opted for “the purely short-run advantages of substituting unskilled low-wage immigrant and female labor for skilled, higher-wage labor” (p. 315). Thus, Scott reproduces the two-tiered economy in

which unskilled immigrant women travel the low road, and native born white men travel the high.

Interestingly, Scott puts the garment industry on both roads, with the higher end fashion makers on the high road, and the budget clothing producers on the low. Because he is interested primarily in policy, Scott's preference for high end garment manufacturers is understandable. But the paucity of his approach is glaring. High end garment manufacturers employ immigrant women in exactly the same proportions as the manufacturers of budget clothing, or (and this does not mean that they are the same) low-road producers, but pay them more fairly. And further, one of the examples he uses for a high end garment manufacturer is Guess, a company known for firing workers who attempt to organize.<sup>95</sup> I argue below that readings of California's garment industry labor markets must be interpreted in the context of California's changing regulatory standards and political discourses of neoliberalism and immigration, as well as the social relations of production and reproduction.

Scott's research into garment makers' contracting networks, describing them as *new* industrial spaces, uses as an example an industry that was organized around dense contractor networks in the 19th century. Even while other industries entered a monopoly phase between 1890 and 1920, and capital intense industries (including textiles) were concentrating, the garment industry remained largely decentralized in small plants and dependent on a local labor supply that often included subcontracting, homework, and other forms of contingent labor relations (Safa, 1981; Waldinger, 1985). For instance, Hiebert (1990; 1993) studied the emergence of flexible production in the Toronto garment industry from 1901 to 1931. Here, the entire industry became more organized around flexible producers, enterprising immigrants who took advantage of opportunities in clothing market segments that were unpredictable, and further, acted as subcontractors for the large factories. While Hiebert does point to the entrepreneurial skills of the immigrants who initiated these flexible production sites (not the skills of production workers), he remains focused on the market demand side of the production relation, on the need for a flexible production process. Like Scott, he fails to link the flexibility of producers with gender and ethnic relations that were dominating the garment industry in all other cities of the Northeast during the same era.<sup>96</sup> Waldinger (1989) makes a similar argument, focusing on

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<sup>95</sup> I will discuss Guess in detail in later sections.

<sup>96</sup> For a collection of these stories, see *A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike: Women Needleworkers in America*, edited by Jensen and Davidson, 1984.

the role of immigrants in contemporary New York City where entrepreneurs participate in apparel spot markets that require a high degree of flexibility in production scheduling. Waldinger adds to this analysis that the large population of immigrants enables production, but he too remains focused on the entrepreneurs.

In both contemporary L.A. and early 20th century Toronto, the contracting network depends on homework, but neither Scott's nor Hiebert's analyses include these. The utilization of homeworkers is one of the garment industry's more insidious and long-standing approaches to labor market "rigidities". Peck (1989, 1992) studied the restructuring of urban garment industry labor markets in Australia. Here he found that intra-industry dynamics were affected by changes in the local labor supply (especially the fact that new waves of immigrants were not as easily incorporated into the low-wage labor supply as earlier immigrants had been) which led to the incorporation of homeworkers in the labor market. Although legally sanctioned in many places where it is practiced (though not in the U.S.), garment industry homework often operates with little respect for workers rights. In her study of garment industry homework in Vancouver, Ocran (1996) points out that this is related to the unwillingness of the state to regulate the private sector, especially when that requires entering the private sphere of the home.

The small contractors (or entrepreneurs) in Los Angeles who typically run homework operations (squeezing a profit from homeworkers by avoiding the state's regulatory structures) are themselves providing flexibility to some contracting firms. Putting flexibility in this light represents the garment industry as retrograde---clearly the low road. Indeed, the practice *is* old. Seamstresses who did piecework at home were the most exploited wage laborers in 19th century America (Baron and Klepp, 1984). This was partly due to clothing manufacturers efforts to lower costs, but it was also due (then as now) to the lack of alternative options available for women who also had domestic responsibilities. The system of "putting out" work to homeworkers that Baron and Klepp describe for 19th century is structurally identical to the subcontracting practiced in cities like Los Angeles and even Seattle today. Initially contractors acted as middlemen between the manufacturer and seamstresses who completed the garments. Eventually contractors began to supply bundles to subcontractor who then distributed the bundles among homeworkers or small workshops. At each additional layer between the manufacturer and the seamstress, the profit margin was squeezed. Small firms generally had all work done on the outside, while large firms had sewing done in their own plant as well as outside. Outside (contracted) work allowed the firm to keep overhead costs down, and allowed greater adaptability to fluctuations in

demand. For example, Brooks Brothers, one of the large garment firms in New York City in 1860, employed 70 inside workers (that is, they were employees with some regularity of day to day work) and between 2,000 and 3,000 outside workers (Baron and Klepp, 1984, p. 41). Female employees earned four or five times as much as homeworkers, (a benefit explained not by the productivity of the sewing machine but because they had options for work other than the sewing factory and so could bid up wages) but only one-third or one-quarter of what men made.

The use of homeworkers has always been a source of conflict within the industry (Jensen, et al, 1984). During the 19th century, shops run by tailors entered bitter disputes as some began to use homeworkers, which undermined the competitive position of tailors who employed apprentices and seamstresses in their shops. More recently, the major garment worker's union, the ILGWU<sup>97</sup>, fought against the liberalizing of homework rules in the U.S. for many of the same reasons (Herod, 1991). This overlap of patriarchy and capitalist interests has been crucial in encouraging the growth of homework in other industries as part of a broader assault on organized labor (Sassen, 1988; Herod, 1991). Many employers have replaced highly paid male workers receiving full benefits with female part-time and temporary workers lacking benefits. As economic pressures continue to increase the number of women who participate in wage-earning work, homework will continue to grow because it remains the only work option many women have (Peck, 1996; Herod, 1991; Fernández-Kelly and Garcia, 1989).

The viability of homework as a solution for women with childcare responsibilities is ambiguous. Most simply, one cannot sew and take care of children at the same time. And as all of these commentators have noted, homeworkers are in a much more vulnerable position regarding excessive rates of exploitation.<sup>98</sup> Lawson (in press) goes beyond the discovery of exploitation to tell a more nuanced story about the way homework in Quito, Ecuador, recapitulates the low status accorded to all work done in the home. The processes invoked include the siting and naming of sewing operations, demonstrating that the status accorded to domestic spaces plays a key role in reproducing gender identity of the garment making performed by women, but not the tailoring done by men.

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<sup>97</sup> The International Ladies Garment Workers Union has recently merged with other industry unions to form UNITE, Union of Needlework and Industrial Textile Employees.

<sup>98</sup> This is not to deny that women often choose homework. It is only to say that isolated workers have little information with which to bargain for better piece rates or other working conditions. This is why states like New York and California continue to outlaw home-sewing. For a discussion of Washington Department of Labor's view on this issue, see Seattle Times, Aug. 27, 1996, C-1.

Besides its historic organization around contractor networks and utilization of homeworkers, the garment industry has long practiced a spatial division of labor across a broader landscape. In her influential work, *Spatial Divisions of Labour*, Doreen Massey (1984) suggested an analytical framework within which she argued that labor process dynamics shape not only the general course of industrial restructuring but its specific geographic form. The spatial differentiation or uneven development that arises in capital's competitive search for profits is well established in the garment industry. For instance, the labor militancy of garment workers in the 1930s spawned a spatial reorganization and decentralization that was made possible by growing road networks and truck transportation (Waldinger, 1985). The effects on local labor of the collapse of the cotton textile industry in southern Massachusetts and coal mining in northeastern Pennsylvania made these favored new locations for the garment industry, leaving former sites of concentrated garment work with devastating job losses (Baron and Klepp, 1984). After W.W.II the cost of female labor in the Northeast rose due to an almost insatiable demand for office workers (Burawoy, 1985). In response, the garment industry moved to the right-to-work states of the Southeast, and increasingly to the West Coast.

The economic changes of the 1970s had a profound impact on many manufacturing industries (Harrison and Bluestone, 1988; Massey, 1984). The conditions that led up to the restructuring of the garment industry had a dramatic impact on production: (1) full employment, particularly during the economic boom of the 1960s; (2) a dwindling supply of immigrant labor, particularly after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, which greatly limited the admissions of unskilled immigrants; (3) high wages, brought on by a scarcity of labor and the increasing strength of unions and of the working class in general; (4) growth of the welfare state, which provided members of the reserve labor force, particularly women, with an alternative to poorly paid, manual labor; (5) technological changes, which facilitated the development of a cheaper and faster international cargo transportation system; and (6) the deskilling of work (or the "massification of labor") through mechanization and scientific management (Safa, 1981, p. 424). A new spatial division of labor emerged; the New International Division of Labor, ushering in the runaway shops in which the garment industry was a pioneer.

Due to its role as harbinger in the expansion of global factories, its worldwide distribution, and its role as the employer of a significant proportion of women in manufacturing, researchers from many fields have focused on the garment industry's responses to the changing competitive market environment. The most revealing research

into the effects of this restructuring comes from feminists who have been motivated by issues of gender equity---low (and sometimes no) wages, forced overtime, poor working environments, and the denial of freedom to organize. Fernandez-Kelly (1983) pioneered work on garment industry maquiladoras on the U.S.-Mexican border, and compared the growth of underground (informal) work in the garment industry between Miami and Los Angeles (Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia, 1989). Lawson's (1995) work in Ecuador on the impact of structural adjustment shows how women's economic opportunities are differently situated in restructuring economies, with women more often sewing in the informal sector and, as mentioned above, in homework.

While each of these researchers has been interested in the role of contracting where production flexibility was of some importance, and most have recognized the significance of contingent relations of production, none have pointed to the theoretical and practical problems for local manufacturers who depend on a contingent workforce.<sup>99</sup> Contingency in some sectors is possible because changes in technology have allowed the labor process to be de-skilled. Further, in low wage labor markets the use of temporary workers is associated with what is assumed to be low skill requirements of work that therefore requires little or no training. There is both a material and an ideological effect in categorizing sewing as unskilled. As downward pressures on wages began to mount in the 1970s with the rise in offshore contracting, cost-cutting made firms increasingly unable to rationalize training while increasingly in need of rising productivity. This is a problem for flexible labor markets in general. The Doeringer-Piore model noted one of the main causes of segmentation is the differentiated nature of skill and training; employers who invest in training due to increasing specificity in workers' skills want to induce stability in the expensively trained labor force (Peck, 1996). Theoretically, employers of secondary sector workers can forego training for the skills demanded by the sector's industries are lower and more irregular.

Surprisingly, there is no lack of need for training in the garment industry (Rosen, 1994; Coyle, 1982; Mitter, 1986; Fernandez-Kelly, 1983). Not only is training essential and on-going, the processes by which managers seek to expand the skills of the workforce *without*

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<sup>99</sup> There have been a number of terms used to describe the employment of workers in the variety of temporary and part-time roles that have evolved along with restructuring. Since Christopherson's important paper on the use of part-time and temporary workers in insurance companies (Christopherson, 1989), feminists have often emphasized the phrase, "the flexible use of labor" to pointedly refer to the new relations of production in so-called flexible work. The term "contingency" is used here in the same sense; it points to the fact a job and therefore income exist only if there is work. For a discussion of the relationship between various forms and uses of flexibility, and their relationships to labor markets, see Peck (1996).

*having to pay for training* is a key feature of the piece work system (Rosen, 1994). If training in firm-specific skills is important for productivity in sewing, then the contingency of employment presents a severe dilemma for manufacturers. My research clearly confirms this prediction: in Seattle, and contrary to expectations based on ubiquitous representations of the industry, the skills and experience of machinists is critical to manufacturing. This does not conform to the stereotype of a segmented labor market where more routinized work is done in a secondary sector where a high turnover of labor is acceptable and sometimes preferred due to minimal requirements of training and low need for extended tenure. How can a labor supply be reproduced if a skilled workforce is in demand but at the same time treated as contingent and paid the lowest manufacturing wages?

#### **Training and the “Unskilled” but Flexible Machinist**

As a number of writers have pointed out, the vaunted role of flexibility in the restructuring of industries often simply inscribes a new up-to-date rationale for creating insecure employment (Pollert, 1988; Christopherson, 1989). Sewing machinists already experience high levels of insecurity, but de-mystifying the role of skill puts this insecurity in a different light. This is particularly so as skill is a central though disguised element in recent developments in the garment industry.

One of the principal mechanisms by which inequalities in pay and power are produced, reproduced, and legitimated is through the attribution of “unskilled” status (Cockburn, 1983, 1985; Peck, 1996). The issue is not so simple a question as: is sewing a skilled job? To begin with, there is no set definition---there have been contests over skill definitions in clothing manufacturing since the beginning of the nineteenth century (Coyle, 1982; Cockburn, 1983). Skill has a much more complex role in the production process than a single characterization suggests. More importantly, the continual perception and definition of women as unskilled workers is strongly linked to gender ideologies and to notions of masculinity and femininity that are firmly embedded in the production process in which garments are said to be assembled in a process that requires “nimble fingers” and tolerance of tedium (Kaye, 1994; Baron and Klepp, 1984; Elson, 1983).

As feminists have demonstrated, “girlhood” is a time of unpaid apprenticeship (Mitter, 1986; Elson, 1983). That is, girls *are trained*. I was trained to sew, starting when I was ten or so. Although I had some classes at school in “home economics”, my mother and older sister taught me the rudiments. My mother was an uninspired but diligent seamstress who sewed to save money; in most of the photos of my childhood I am clothed in her efforts.

My progress from sewing a straight seam to being able to set in a sleeve without puckers or a zipper that didn't buckle was halting, frustrating, maddening, and resulted in many abandoned projects. These abandoned projects meant that my training was fairly expensive.<sup>100</sup>

The difficulty in sewing arises in the subtlety accompanying tasks that vary dramatically between fabrics with slightly different textures and stretch. Fine details like the tension between the top and bottom thread or whether to push or pull the fabric along under the needle determines whether or not something looks homemade. There are many tasks that require precision, attention to meticulous detail, and dexterity, all of which come only after long practice. The lauded dexterity of nimble fingers takes training and is itself a skill (Kaye, 1994; Elson and Pearson, 1984). As one of my respondents put it:

"It's a high skill. It really is. And it's too bad, the wage rates that we pay. As a matter of fact, in this factory we don't hire anybody that hasn't had previous sewing experience...My feeling is, it really takes a year. An unskilled person comes in with some real good training and follow-up, it's a year before they really become skilled....Yeah, it's definitely a skilled job."

Sewing factories have for decades used a fragmented production process to create assembly-line-type efficiency, following the same path as other manufacturing industries. Production is broken down into discrete tasks, so any individual operator does not perform all the steps---s/he does not have to know how to assemble an entire garment. (Few people in *any* industry know all the steps in the completion of their product.) In most other manufacturing industries, however, Taylorist fragmentation followed by Fordist automation led to decreasing labor intensity. This has not happened in the garment industry.

Even if confined to jacket-making plants, sewing machine operators experience a wide variety of demands. A simple pile jacket may have only ten pieces and twenty or thirty seams with no fine detail, while an all-weather Gore-Tex jacket could have fifty pieces and lots of details, like set-in pockets with separate compartments with zippers and flaps. The jackets worn by the bicycle-riding police force, which are made by one of my respondents, require a dizzying array of materials and techniques, not to mention ninety-five separate pieces. Besides the number of pieces, the way the pieces are joined varies in difficulty and with changing margins for error. A variety of machines are used for different kinds of seams. The multiplicity of fabrics used in one of these jackets creates special problems. For instance,

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<sup>100</sup> Both of my sisters still sew. My older sister makes all of her own (very beautiful) clothes, while my sewing machine gathers dust.

if a jacket is lined, some operators will be joining together materials with very different handling qualities; this demands a delicate adjustment in tension as the operator compensates for the slide characteristics of the two different fabrics. One of my respondents, a contractor, reported that it takes several weeks to get up to speed with every change in fabric, even for the most skilled machinist.

Besides the variety in the operations that constitute the assembly of jackets, permutations in the skill requirements of jacket sewing also arise from characteristics of the product market and each employer's position in the commodity chain (Rosen, 1994). For instance, a subcontractor sewing jackets for K-Mart will emphasize different production standards than one sewing for Nordstrom. When a contractor makes jackets at two different price points, then the problem is to change very subtle details of the machinists' work to make up the difference in price structure. The point is that within the variety of sewing firms, what is considered skill---or what is valued---is different. In some instances, the quality most in demand, and the only skill rewarded, is speed. Being fast requires balancing the fabric handling with the machine speed, and balancing that with quality requirements; these will all change from one operation to the next, and from one garment to the next.

### **The Productivity Dilemma**

Being fast is what the machine operators in my study regard as skill. This emphasis on speed stems from a piece rate system that rewards people for the number of pieces completed. A base rate for each operation or piece is determined before manufacturing begins as part of the cost estimates for production or price estimates in contract negotiations. If an operator sews at this pre-determined rate all day, s/he will earn the base rate, which in the U.S. is usually slightly above minimum wage. Any operator who can sew faster than the base rate will earn more, and in Seattle all factories have one or two operators who make eleven or twelve dollars an hour, which, as one of my respondents put it, is "good money in this business." Operators did not express any interest in learning new machines or new operations. For them, the challenge was to beat the basic piece rate---to out-sew the standard and earn more money. Only by performing the same operation over and over could they invent tiny but significant improvements in their handling so as to produce more pieces. The standard reply to my question, "Don't you get bored?" was, "Sure I get bored, but I have to make money!" laughing at my naive question.

On top of speed comes endurance---not simply being fast, but being fast all day long. This requires concentration, and makes an enormous strain on the body. Except during

mandated breaks, the only time machine operators get a relief from their position at the machine is when they finish a bundle; then they tie the bundle up, move it out of their way and fling another bundle into position. Machinists explained to me that their backs and necks ache from sitting and bending over work. Repetitive motion injuries are common and in some circumstances eyesight fails very quickly (Lardner, 1988). This race against the standard rate creates what sometimes seems like a manic pace. One operations manager described to me the factory he took over as looking like "Sleepy Hollow" before he switched it to piecework. It is hard to imagine the industry without it. But because it rewards only speed, the piece rate system presents a dilemma for the industry as it pursues changes in the organization of production. There is no motivation for machinists to learn new skills or new machines---learning slows them down. Managers in every plant in my case study explained that machine operators resent and resist learning new skills because the period of learning invariably involves a loss of wages.

This problem is embedded in the system: piece rate is a kind of "flexibility" personified. Machinists are only paid when and if there is sewing to do (that is the flexible part). If there is a gap between projects and the machinists are idle, they leave for another factory (if there is one hiring), collect unemployment insurance (if they are working for a legitimate firm in a country and state which allows it) or they are without an income. Where managers try to find small projects to fill in between major projects, machinists are still having to start new projects, work with new fabric, or do an operation that requires a new skill, all of which takes time and practice.

Time and practice amount to training. Who pays for the training? Operators pay for their own training in the way that managers or engineers set the piece rates, a finding corroborated by Rosen's research among men's suit manufacturers (Rosen, 1994). The basic piece rate is set so that the average good operator will earn the firm's standard wage whenever she or he sews at highest efficiency. However, throughout the period of learning a new operation, or switching to a different fabric, her efficiency will be lower, and s/he will earn less than the factory's (and her previous) wage. In other words, the operator pays for her own training in lost wages.

My respondents report that operators bitterly resent regular changes in operations, then, and unions have fought to limit the number of operations each operator is required to perform (Coyle, 1982). This obviously presents a dilemma for firms that are trying to develop more flexible production schedules---there is no incentive for workers to become skilled at new machines or to work on new projects. However, some firms in Seattle, determined to

keep their skilled operators, get around this problem by adjusting the rates while operators gain experience in a new project, thus actually supporting training and experience with foregone profit. Whether the firm supports training or not, the loss of firm specific skill occurs every time production gets too slack to keep operators on the clock. (Of course, slack production is even more of a problem for machinists; those more economically secure will collect unemployment insurance, but most will have to take jobs in other firms.) At one contracting firm where operators had recently been laid off, the owner expressed anxiety about being able to get her operators back because "we trained them and we spent a lot of money on them."

All managers I interviewed discussed their strategy for keeping their machinists fully employed. For instance, I interviewed the owner of a firm that is known for doing very high quality work on difficult garments. During the interview, part of the sewing staff was removing and replacing labels in shirts (not a skilled job) that had been made somewhere offshore but arrived in the U.S. with the labels sewn upside down. Although the owner does not make any money doing repair work for apparel companies, she regularly solicits it in order to keep the operators steadily employed.

One solution to the disincentive for machinists to learn new skills is to pay hourly, which is the route taken by two contracting firms in my study. When I interviewed the owner of the first plant, her operators were making very complicated high-end ski wear---lots of different stitches, different width seams, different kinds of very expensive imported fabric. Of each style her operators were making small quantities, which meant they were always having to learn something new. They were soon to start production on a high end men's tailored line. This firm specializes in being versatile, and being willing to do small quantities. This requires that the operators in her plant are extensively cross trained on a range of equipment to handle different kinds of projects, from leather to silk. But as this owner provides extensive training, other firms recruit her operators; thus keeping the operators fully employed is a key part of her strategy.

A larger, more well known and more profitable company, pays hourly rates, but with a different rationale. The owner explained that when she went to hourly wages everyone in the business told her it would not work, that piece rates were necessary to control production. But she thinks that piece work makes the operators feel like the owner is an adversary. She insists that if operators know what is expected of them---that they agree to work with the efficiency that gives the plant the capacity it needs, then they have done their job and should

be paid accordingly. The owner/manager pays more efficient operators more, as *though* it was piece work; but her approach, which recognizes skill as based on experience and versatility, allows for her subjective interpretation of efficiency---a merit evaluation. However this strategy means that the owner/manager has to insist on fair rates from manufacturers---that is, this strategy only works where there is not a "race to the bottom".

In clothing retail, with its highly volatile markets, everything is about timing---every order was due yesterday because people want to buy it now. But because the market is also geared to the lowest possible labor costs, the number of machinists is kept to the bare minimum; therefore, firms cannot easily gear up production when capacity is exceeded, so orders are passed on to subcontractors. But subcontractors have the same capacity problems, and they too put out work to other subcontractors---this is where sweatshops come in. "Sweating" evolves where there is a proliferation of subcontractors and a population of workers who have few options. Under these circumstance subcontractors may undercut each other---that is, they will bid less than it actually costs to complete a job---less than it would cost if they planned to pay machinists fair wages. One of the ways around fair wages is homeworking.

Besides providing the ultimate in contingent work (there is no overhead for the firm, for instance), homework is another venue for the free training that keeps the industry flush with skilled workers. It is especially widespread in areas where most garment workers are newly arrived immigrants. In her research among Bangladeshis in London's East End, Kaye writes:

(W)omen rely upon their informal kinship and friendship networks both to find employment and to act as a training source. Employers recognize this and rely upon the women's contacts to carry out training. Hafiza told me that she recruited and trained her neighbors for homeworking at no extra cost to her employer...(Sometimes women are) left to their own training devices. "I was left a sample to follow, I could ring the employer if I wasn't sure how to do it and ask for advice on the phone," said one woman. "At first I had to keep redoing them until they were right...(F)irst time homeworkers all had the same story to tell---of hours spent at the machine sewing, unpicking and redoing linings, slowly learning the skill of successfully operating the sewing machine, and putting together linings with both speed and accuracy....(A) period of informal training at little or no cost (in the case of homeworking) is a recognized feature of becoming a machinist. (Kaye, 1994, pp. 122-123).

This trial period is a benefit to the employers, too: people train before they apply for work. Of those who come to a factory with no previous training or experience, Hoffman and Rush (1988) report that only 40-50% become successful production workers. This result is confirmed by my respondents. Where homeworking is extensive, operators struggling to

learn factory-type sewing at home can determine if they possess the required skills. Or they can practice and train at their own expense until they do. Although aware of the precarious status of homeworking, job counselors in Seattle that work with Southeast Asian immigrant women often reluctantly support homeworking for those who arrive in Seattle with no factory sewing background. Of course, many people arrive in the U.S. already trained. One counselor I interviewed reported that it is common for women to take garment industry jobs in their native country prior to emigrating *in order to prepare for work in the U.S.*

One problem for the employer who uses homeworkers is the logistical one of moving the bundle from one operator to the next. Part of the solution is to have each operator/homeworker perform a number of operations, and sometimes sew the whole garment. This limits the operator's potential for speed and also requires that she perform all of the required operations, both conditions explaining the extremely low earnings for homeworkers. Not all contractors leave machinists to their own devices. One of my respondents, Ann, works extensively with her subcontractors, training them in her techniques and to her standards. When Ann gives them a job at a rate at which the subcontractor feels s/he cannot make money, Ann offers to have the subcontractor's machinists (some of whom are homeworkers) come in to her factory where she shows them how to do it more efficiently---she shows them "the tricky parts". This may be rare in the industry.

I discovered two other categories of homeworkers in the Seattle area. I met three women who are highly skilled seamstresses and choose to work at home in order to control their own schedules. For the most part, these women are not doing production sewing, but rather are making samples for manufacturers to give to their sales representatives. Another respondent who has worked in a wide variety of sewing jobs is a "homeworker" only in the sense that her tiny subcontracting business is run out of her home. None of these women are the sole support of a family.

Finally, I interviewed a woman who did homework in addition to a factory-based job while she put her husband through school:

You know, there's times that I'm really tired. We do a lot of overtime this year. Since June, I think until November, I didn't have no Saturday off. And very little Sunday....*(This company pays time and a half after 8 hours and on Saturday; on Sunday they pay double time.)* And like, in fact last week, I worked 10 hours a day, plus Saturday. Plus my work at home....I'm very tired....Sometimes I feel like a yo-yo, just going around in circles...I feel sorry sometimes for my son. Every time he wants to go somewhere, I have to do my work. It's sad sometimes....I wake up, change my clothes, go to work. I go home, go straight to my sewing machine, go take a shower, go to bed. That's my life. Sunday, go to church, go home. Start sewing.

I don't want to be old and still sewing. I can see myself sitting there like---I feel sorry for some of the people that work there that they're already old and they're still sewing.

### **The Racialization of Sewing Skill**

Implicit in this discussion of the way most employers avoid training costs is the institutional abandonment of training for factory sewing. In the late 1970s when factory owners in Seattle expressed serious concern about their labor supply as second generation Japanese and Chinese women turned to more profitable trades, a local community college floated the idea of a modern and expanded industrial sewing program to train new workers. Neither the sewing program nor the employment crisis materialized. In fact, I was very surprised to learn that in Seattle the majority of the people sewing are still Chinese immigrants, with a smaller proportions of Filipinas, Vietnamese, Koreans and Latinas---one factory was almost entirely Latina, reflecting the way family and community networks fill job openings. (Besides the practical benefit of current employees finding new employees, factories run more smoothly when the machinists all speak the same language.) In Tacoma there is a high proportion of Korean women (one of the factories I visited was 90% Korean immigrants), as well as some Eastern Europeans and Latinas. Throughout the region, Vietnamese women are finding more opportunities to sew, including as homeworkers. In the one factory I studied in central Washington the workforce was half Mexican immigrant, half white, and in Eastern Washington the sewing staff was all white, including several white men.

Throughout the local industry, people have firm convictions about the association between ethnicity (or race) and sewing. White managers, supervisors and contractors often discussed the willingness of people to work hard, regularly telling stories about "Orientals" sewing for two and three shifts. At one factory the manager said that Chinese workers would sew for 24 hours a day while they pay for a house or a car, and another (when reluctantly saying why he let operators take work home) said "Asians would work 24 hours a day if you let them." In this way he rationalized allowing his workers to take sewing home:

"Some of the workers in here, because I only allow them to work so many hours, they want to take it home to sew, and it's because they just want to make more money. They're sitting at home and they don't want to watch TV, so they're sewing at home, too....And even some of our subcontractors, they put maybe six, seven machines in their basement. They hire five, six people working there. We cut it and everything, and they come here and take it home. A lot of them work like that....It's more convenient and you don't have to rent a store."

The stories managers tell to explain their hiring preferences weave together tropes of skill and work ethic. In the words of a contract manager from a major firm:

I think Koreans are fantastic. I love to walk into a factory and see Koreans sewing...They have training---that's their background, their dexterity that's developed in evolution over the years. I don't understand all about evolution and everything, but I've got to believe that somewhere they've always sewn....Koreans are definitely more adept, above the Chinese...I haven't seen enough Vietnamese to know yet...Koreans are better than Americans. ....Mexicans don't have the work ethic that Koreans have. I think that they can sew, in some respects probably similar quality. But they don't have this...this dexterity plus the work ethic...

This contradiction between sewing as an *innate* skill and one that is manifested only when there is a "work ethic" was repeated over and over in interviews.

Well, it's been my experience that the garment industry is only a single generation task, so to speak. and it's ever been thus, that when you enter this country, you have to work really hard. You don't get to enter this country and just rest on your laurels and everything is wonderful. It doesn't work like that. At least it never has. Doesn't matter whether it was the Irish or the English or the Finnish or what it was, they always had to work so hard and their goal was always to try to educate their children for something better.

At a factory in Tacoma that employed a surprising number of Mexican immigrants, I asked about training:

We do train, because some of them have some limited skills, so we bring them in, we test them, see if they have any potential...dexterity tests....You know down there [in Mexico] they just don't have the work ethic that the Asian countries have. Their absenteeism is just astronomical. Half their crew won't show up on a Monday because they've been out all weekend partying....The ones that come up from the border, they have more drive, they're more self-motivated.

The idea that Mexicans are lazy until they emigrate is also a widely held myth among my informants. However, when pressed, not one person had a personal experience to confirm this. One manager, after repeating the lazy Mexican myth, admitted that "if I was a Mexican, I'd probably be just like them in that you can work your butt off and still be poor." My fieldwork on the Mexico/Arizona border revealed the dilemma for maquila workers, and a unique solution. The maquiladora association in this town keeps a firm hand on wages in order to attract new firms to the town (thus making sure that Mexicans were "working their butts off" and staying poor). Under these circumstances, it is impossible to use the piece work system to motivate high levels of performance---everybody gets the minimum wage, but no matter how hard an operator works, no matter how skilled, s/he will never be allowed to make much more. The owner of the factory in which I did research solved this problem by

paying her workers more when they sewed above the set standard---that is, she ignored the association's rules. When her manager was called before the association's board for this infraction, she successfully argued that she was paying her machinists exactly the same as the other firms, but that they were just producing twice as much.

### **“QR Beats Importing in Retail Sourcing Analysis”<sup>101</sup>**

If there is a future for domestic manufacturers, it lies in the growing demand from retailers for production that is more responsive to fluctuations in consumer markets. What it all comes down to, according to a recent article in *Bobbin*, is “a realization that no forecasts are perfect, and that it is only during the selling season, when customer demand is revealed, that intelligent supply decisions can be made.”<sup>102</sup> There seems to be a small but growing school of thought that U.S. manufacturers organized around providing “Quick Response” to retailers' needs can compete successfully with offshore vendors. In Chapter Three I described some of the technological components to the garment industry's version of just-in-time manufacturing, including electronic data interchange and changes in shipping. At the production end this ultimately comes down to a fundamental change in the way sewing factories operate.

To develop flexible production systems (FPS), some firms in the garment industry are changing their assembly lines to smaller modular units, or work groups. Because they are not integrated in a long assembly line, work units of five or six machinists should be more flexible, able to change projects easily (in terms of line balancing) so therefore able to complete small orders. However, this requires a staff of sewing machine operators who can use a wide variety of machines, and can sew efficiently on any garment item---that is, a staff that is highly skilled. Rather than sew up the side and back seams of the same style jacket, made of unvarying fabric, for weeks or months (or years) on end, an operator could work on several different styles of garments in one day. As I argued above, this requires a level of skill that is not rewarded in the system organized around speed and is not acknowledged in the glowing reports in industry magazines or the popular media.

Technical skills are not the only challenge for sewing machinists. Rather, group or modular or team sewing requires a fundamental shift in the social relations of production within the sewing factory. In particular, it requires a reorganization of decision making and control, and this is not easily accomplished. In a story with the confusing title, “A Factory

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<sup>101</sup> “QR” means Quick Response. This was the title of an article in *Bobbin*, March, 1997, p. 22.

Reinvents the Sweatshop”, the *New York Times* tells a story that seems intended to report on the good side of the local garment industry as it reorganizes production around work groups or “modular units”.<sup>103</sup> A take-out line reads, “It doesn’t feel like a factory,’ an operator says.” Workers come “willingly” to this sequin factory, even with their backs and legs aching, “wearing saris or carrying meringue tapes.” The factory offers English language instruction [the teacher is paid for by the garment workers’ union], invites workers’ participation in management meetings, and reorganized the work process to “ease the threat of physical injury” and allows women to have some variety of “conviviality”.

Workers, whose single-task focus almost never required them to speak with anyone during the course of their day, now have to read orders, resolve problems and coordinate work, and then sometimes manage the skill and courage to do it while speaking their imperfect but precious English.

...[The owner benefits because] educated, healthy workers who are not limited to single-task, assembly-line routines will produce better goods with less waste, allowing him to both cut costs and charge more. He thinks the workers will return his trust and civility with greater commitment, and he projects that he will be able to run a shop soon in which each worker accounts for \$100,000 in annual sales. In the year since he began his initiatives, production efficiency, he said, has improved by 80 percent.

Mr. Gladstone, the owner, is using work groups to fill orders as he gets them, shipping out quickly, keeping his inventory down and his capital circulating. While the demands on the machinists’ skills, including problem solving and ingenuity, have changed, the benefits for the workers are not so clear. The benefits mentioned (language classes and varied work routine) do not address the basic issue of wages, suggesting they are standard garment industry wages, a little above minimum. In my interviews one after another machine operator insisted that the most important benefit was being given a fair opportunity to work as consistently fast as possible so as to earn the highest wages. On the other hand, in this wonderfully updated factory, Mr. Gladstone’s productivity and thus earnings are up, but the machinist earns only his “trust and civility” and the opportunity to talk to each other.

Besides their skill, the social position of garment industry workers, both here and in Third World industrializing countries, is constructed as vulnerable and grateful at the same time. These women are represented as shy, non-English speaking---they must be grateful for this opportunity to speak English (not to mention speaking with each other, as in “conviviality”) in Mr. Gladstone’s modern factory. The writer of the story expresses surprise that the women from Colombia, Dominican Republic, India and Bangladesh “found

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102 Ibid., p. 23.

themselves strangely intimidated by the demand that they become more involved in the strategies and conditions of the factory," and that "some of the girls are worried that they will not be able to do everything they want us to." In fact, they are probably happy to have any job at all. But to imply that the reason the workers come "willingly" to work is because of the factory's excellent new policies begs the question as to why people are banging on the doors of sweatshops all over New York City.

My case study demonstrates not only that sewing require far more than nimble fingers, but also that production managers themselves hold sewing skills in high regard. In dozens of interviews, the managers of local operations assert the value of their workforces' skill, yet it is at the level of management, and of the local labor market, that the exploitability of "cheap labor" must be sustained. The struggle I observed as local managers attempt to cope with the need for a highly skilled and loyal but poorly paid production staff has become especially significant as apparel markets stimulate domestic manufacturers to experiment with "flexible manufacturing systems" (FMS). From its beginnings the industry has depended on a numeric "flexibility" ---that is, sewing machine operators have almost always been treated as a temporary or contingent workforce (Baron and Klepp, 1984). National policies and local regulation have sustained these social relations of production (Phizacklea, 1990; Peck. 1989, 1996). FMS, on the other hand, requires a flexibility in the labor process that depends on the skills of sewing machinists.

More important to the argument I develop in Chapter Five, the discursive reproduction of sewing machine operators as unskilled workers in the popular media legitimates their pay and social status. Sewing is ideologically reproduced as low skill in multiple ways, historically in discursive rationalizations of changing gender divisions of labor, and more recently in the discourse of development and free trade, as I discussed in earlier chapters. In that discourse the industry is represented as appropriate for Third World countries where women are grateful for the opportunity to sew and become part of a growing industrial workforce, representations also applied to seamstresses in the 19th century (Baron and Klepp, 1984). More recently this narrative was played in connection with the flourishing of garment industry enclaves of New York and Los Angeles where only the most gruesome of conditions are contested in the popular media. Considering both the material circumstances of the industry and the narratives within which they are

rationalized, my research shows that the processes that generate garment industry labor markets do not simply mirror extra-market social relations, but play a part in their reproduction.

## Chapter Five: Narrating "Sweatshops"

"Sweatshop" is one of the most evocative words in our vocabulary of industry. It brings to mind seven year olds looping wool to make "Oriental" carpets in poorly lit factories, and women jammed into crowded lofts breathing lint as they sit hunched over sewing machines all day and into the night.<sup>104</sup> According to officials of the Labor Department, today's sweatshop looks just like the 1911 version made infamous by the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire.<sup>105</sup> The workers are mostly immigrant women; the fire exits are often locked; children play along narrow corridors that are littered with flammable plastic bags. And sweatshop contractors often disappear without paying their workers (stitch and ditch, they call it in California), only to reopen under a different name and in another part of town.

During the last three years there has been (at least relatively speaking) a barrage of front page and feature stories about sweatshops. I understand the media's fascination with sweatshops. Stories like the one from El Monte contain the moral intensity that "human interest" seems to require. The images are potent: "victims" of sweatshops working in slave-like conditions; innocent women and children cruelly exploited at the hands of rapacious capitalists. Because of the human interest these stories arouse, revelations of the conditions in sweatshops potentially threatens the complacency of consumers. Does the focus on sweatshops also therefore threaten the complacency of capital? A rush of meetings convened in Washington to discuss "corporate responsibility", sweatshops, and child labor suggests that it does. If so, does this portend a change in the conditions under which garment industry workers labor? More broadly, do the clothes on our backs lose some their fetish quality?

Rarely did these stories connect with other potent front page issues of the contemporary restructuring economy---the flow of low wage jobs to the Third World, the threatening loss of immigrants' rights, especially these coded "illegals", the growing income gap, the ever-growing use of contractors and part-time workers, and the need for a higher minimum wage, all of which are important issues to garment industry workers. Rather, sweatshops are treated as aberrations, as something shocking. The focus on sweatshops diverts our attention from the larger issues of an industry restructured during an era of de-regulation and free trade hegemony.

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<sup>104</sup> I have always found the phrase "hunched over" somehow demeaning. Pianists, surgeon, car mechanics, academics, all have to bend over their work sometimes, but they would never be described as "hunched". The phrase is as common in descriptions of sewing as "nimble fingers".

<sup>105</sup> Echaveste, Maria and Karen Nussbaum, 1994. New York Times, March 6, 1994, p. 13.

In this chapter, I de-code this rush of interest in sweatshops, moving back and forth between the images in the media and the stories I have heard and read during the course of my research. Sweatshop stories are an example of how discourse about the garment industry serves to reproduce both the social relations of production and consumption and the culture of which the garment industry is a part---the larger industrial structure. Into these stories of sweatshops and the discourse of economy and culture that rationalize their existence, is a new version of an old thread: corporate responsibility. The sweatshop stories grope for some-*one* to blame, but are deflected from contemporary capitalist relations of production. The ease with which narratives of sweatshops elide the processes that lead to the pervasive insecurity and low pay of sewing machine operators can be understood only if these workers are placed outside of the core's economy (skilled and therefore modern). Even as objects of well intentioned concern, sewing machine operators are made invisible by gender and racialization, and by their location in a "Third World", even as that world happens to be in California or New York, or even in Seattle. These narratives add legitimacy to the industry's structure that depends on its characterization as a suitable development activity for Third World countries and as a source of jobs for "unskilled" people both in these developing countries and among immigrant communities in the U.S. To put it differently, in multiple ways garment industry work is constructed as outside of the normative work that (white) skilled members of highly industrialized (modern) countries perform. In this sense, borrowing from Said (1978) and Mohanty (1991), women who sew are the Other, the monolithically defined group that is marked by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or class---they are not "us".<sup>106</sup>

### **The Front Page**

It is significant that the *New York Times*, the "paper of record", has chosen to write about sweatshops on its front pages. A particular kind of meaning adheres to front page stories which are "consecrated in a certain light and set the terms for their reception as containing facts at least 'more true' than other stories" (Mitchell, 1996). In two recent stories that the papers followed for weeks<sup>107</sup>---the "enslaved" Thai workers in El Monte, and "child

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<sup>106</sup> Of course, they are us. In December 1995, there were more than 7000 garment industry workers in the State, most of whom are in the Puget Sound area. (Employee payrolls in Washington State by County and Industry, No. 206, June, 1997.)

<sup>107</sup> News coverage of the Thai workers in El Monte began on Aug. 3. See for instance, Seattle Times, "Virtual slavery in garment factory", Aug. 3, 1995, p. 2, and New York Times, "Thai workers are set free in California", Aug. 4, 1995, p. 1. Both papers ran the same photo prominently, top center of page

labor” stitching Kathie Lee brand clothing---the garment industry has been subjected to a moment of de-mystification, an un-cloaking of the social relations of production that epitomize the tensions of global capitalism. The images associated with these two stories are disturbingly uneven. Again and again in the mainstream media El Monte is evoked with a photo of the Thai women right after being released (or saved, the subtext reads), squatting in a line, elbow to elbow, looking tired or worn. The word we remember is ‘slaveshop’. On the other hand, the sweatshops discovered sewing in New York City for Kathie Lee are remembered---or rather, forgotten---behind a photo of Ms. Gifford herself, wiping a tear from her eye (with dangerously long fingernails) as she spoke to a standing room only crowd at a Senate sub-committee hearing---a glitzy star raking in millions of dollars suddenly becoming a champion for the poor working child/woman. I use these two stories as entry points, and as bridges---to reveal the “invisible threads” that tie our clothes, our standard of living, our role in world markets to the low, and in many cases miserable wages paid to women in Seattle and all over the world. In an increasingly “globalized” economy, these are ties that bind.

**Virtual slavery in garment factory--*Seattle Times*, August 3, 1995**

**Thai Workers Are Set Free in California--*New York Times*, August 4, 1995**

Wire services, newspapers, magazines and television news across the country and around the world covered the release of these 70 Thai workers from behind the locked gates and razor wire of an El Monte, California apartment complex. Many newspapers (including the *Seattle Times*) ran multiple articles as the details unfolded. As I wrote in Chapter One, most stories focused on the conditions under which the people were held and their grueling work schedule. A few stories reported on the conditions in Thailand that led these experienced seamstresses to accept the debt bondage that paid for their trip to the U.S.

Inspectors of the site found famous name-brand clothes, at first provoking these companies to deny that their products were sewn at the El Monte complex. Later, after it

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1 in the NYT. The Los Angeles Times covered the story extensively, with an article about every development in the investigation, and a number of editorials. The first editorial ran on Aug. 4, 1995, and was titled “Slavery’s Long Gone? Don’t Bet on It.” The Kathie Lee “story” started out small, with Gifford telling her television audience about the National Labor Committee’s April 29th report to Congress (People Magazine, June 10, 1996, p. 58). On May 22, the case became more complicated, with the NYT reporting on Gifford’s “Scramble to Save Face” (May 24, 1996). On June 27, 1996, the NYT ran a long story with two large photographs on the front page of the business section titled “From Sweetheart to Scapegoat.” Interestingly, the electronic (LEXUS) copy of this article is titled “A Sweetheart Becomes Suspect.” The implications are quite different. The *Seattle Times* placed the story prominently as well. On July 16, on page 3, there was a story with a large photograph of Gifford appearing at a Congressional hearing. The story is titled “After the tears, Gifford testifies on

was verified that these were authentic garments (not bootlegged), they claimed that they had no way of knowing that their work had been sub-contracted to this firm.<sup>108</sup> The official voices of the industry expressed shock and outrage. Other voices, including some of my respondents, laughed at the disclaimer---"of course they knew!" "Everybody knows." As the media has been writing stories about the return of the sweatshops in California for years, these protests were disingenuous. California is certainly a special case---its garment industry is the largest in the U.S. But does that mean that the sweatshop stories issuing from the "low road" in Los Angeles have nothing to teach us about sweatshops, and about the garment industry in Seattle? To answer that question, it is necessary to look at how the "slaveshop" of El Monte fits into the context of California's political economy, and into the U.S. industry in general.

In contrast to the rest of the country, apparel production in California has grown steadily since the 1920's. By 1924 Los Angeles had emerged as the fourth largest garment center in the U.S. (Laslett and Tyler, 1989, cited in Blumenberg and Ong, 1994); the rate of growth actually doubled in the 1970s and 1980s. By 1989, California had more garment workers than any other state, and three-quarters of them were in Los Angeles. The emergence of Los Angeles as a global manufacturing and trade center is inextricably linked to growing numbers of Latin American and Asian immigrants (Scott, 1996; Loucky, et. al., 1994; Light and Bonacich, 1988; Sassen, 1988; Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia, 1989). Up to 80 percent of garment industry workers in Los Angeles are from Latin America, mainly Mexico (Loucky et. al, 1994), while in San Francisco most workers have migrated from East or Southeast Asia, especially China and Hong Kong. One estimate put apparel manufacturing employment in six Southern California counties at 133,806, but an industry insider claims the figure is understated by at least 40 percent because it does not take into account the thriving underground economy.<sup>109</sup>

The apparel industry in the Los Angeles region produced about \$9 billion dollars of apparel at the wholesale level in 1991.<sup>110</sup> This supports Scott's linking the garment industry with L.A.'s new dynamism---its cultural products industries. But it does not accord

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sweatshops." The paper editorialized "Kathie Lee Gifford rectifying her mistake" on July 21, 1996.

108 Women's Wear Daily, Aug. 14, 1995, p. 24; Los Angeles Times, Aug. 9, 1995, A-20.

109 Women's Wear Daily, Oct. 6, 1995, p. 12.

110 This estimate is by Fabric Marketing Researcher, a New York consulting firm (Loucky, et. al. 1994).

with the discourse that evolved around Proposition 187, Save our State, which argued that illegal immigrants (by which was meant Mexicans) take jobs away from citizens and cost tax payers millions of dollars in social services. There is real public fear and discontent with the declining quality of life in California (Walker, 1996b; Smith and Tarallo, 1995). In California, however, Proposition 187 and Wilson's election campaign used a rhetoric of 'invasion' and 'takeover' that developed a racist patina, which directed attention away from California's complex economic and fiscal problems---recession, budget shortfalls, the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the defense and aerospace industries (Walker, 1995). The restructuring of the Californian economy, including flexibilization, down-sizing, off-shore sourcing, and contracting, that contributed to a deterioration in jobs and the proliferation of sweatshops (Scott, 1996), was laid at the feet of immigrants and 'illegal aliens' whose very presence, Wilson claimed, drove wages down. While high unemployment clearly puts downward pressure on wages, it does not explain blatant disregard of safety and wage and hour regulations, which is what officially defines sweatshops.

In cities where there are large populations of immigrants, especially New York, Miami, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, newspapers report that sweatshops are flourishing (if such a word can be used) as manufacturers absolve themselves of the messy details of manufacturing, leaving most production to contracting shops. As I described in Chapter Two, contracting offers a number of benefits for manufacturers. It allows them a version of quick response, externalizes labor, and creates downward pressure on costs as contractors compete with each other. Because of low capital requirements, immigrant entrepreneurs have found niches in the garment industry, engaging in exploitation of unpaid family members and newly arrived immigrants as they have in the U.S. since the mid-19th century. This competition squeezes margins for sub-contractors to the point that up to one-third of sewing shops in L.A. go out of business each year (Loucky, et. al., 1994). The other outcome of this squeeze is sweatshops.

The logic of sweatshops is clear: in labor intense industries, the easiest way to raise productivity is to reduce the amount paid for labor. The logic is constant, but the circumstances that produce this logic change over time and from place to place. Besides the variable impact of labor market cycles, and the related changes in immigration, sweatshops owe their existence in part to the failure of the regulatory apparatus to prevent contractors from squeezing more profits from their already underpaid workforce. A study in 1994 of 69 garment manufacturers by the California Labor Dept. found that 50 percent did not pay minimum wage, more than 60 percent paid no overtime, and more than 90 percent were

guilty of breaking health and safety codes.<sup>111</sup> Although estimates vary, there are probably 1000 underground shops and 4000 registered shops in the Los Angeles area. Applying those percentages to the registered shops, and assuming the underground shops all violate wage and hour regulations, then the extent of sweatshops in Los Angeles is appalling. This is not a problem in California alone. Soon after the El Monte raid, federal labor investigators inspected fifty contractors in New York City and found wage and overtime violations at 46 sites, shortchanging 600 workers by more than \$500,000.<sup>112</sup>

That non-compliance is so high suggests that owners do not consider detection a serious threat. At least one explanation for the failure of detection is clear: the number of inspectors in the wage and hour division of the Department of Labor declined steadily throughout the Reagan-Bush years and has not risen since.<sup>113</sup> Depending on how you look at it, there is approximately one enforcement agent for every 1000 factories in California. There are only 800 investigators nationwide to monitor all industries. Besides lack of inspectors, the regulation system lacks informants. Immigrants without proper documentation fear Federal agents, even though inspectors from the Labor Department do not examine workers' papers. In the anti-immigrant climate of California, this sentiment is understandable.

Ironically, the Federal agency that should be feared, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), would seem to have an ambiguous stance regarding the papers of people working for low wages. The INS and the U.S. attorney's office in Los Angeles knew of the El Monte operation for more than three years before the August 1995, and may have had suspicions since 1989.<sup>114</sup> The government's failure to take action illustrates deep shortcomings in the immigration service's effort to protect immigrants. The agency claimed that in neither 1992 nor in 1995 did their surveillance collect adequate information with which to seek a federal warrant.<sup>115</sup> Although a *state* warrant would have been justified, the INS informed no other agency about its investigation. The raid eventually proceeded after the California Labor Department received a tip about the conditions in the El Monte

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111 New York Times, May 4, 1996, p. 17. According to the chief economist for the Economic Development Corporation of Los Angeles, 15-20,000 of the 120,000 garment industry workers in the Los Angeles area work in unregulated, sweatshop conditions. New York Times, Aug. 5, 1995, p. 6.

112 New York Times, Sept. 21, 1995, p. A-3.

113 Maria Echaveste, chief administrator for Labor's Wage and Hour Division, cited in Women's Wear Daily, March 2, 1994, p. 18.

114 Los Angeles Times, Aug. 25, 1995, B-1.

115 Los Angeles Times, Aug. 10, 1995, B-1.

compound. They asked the INS to join them in the raid; the INS not only refused but asked the Labor Department to not conduct the raid.

The lack of diligence by the INS underlines the hypocrisy of Proposition 187. While using “illegals” as a campaign tool, Governor Pete Wilson (and Deukmejian before him) clearly favors the business community when it comes to regulating the immigrant workforce.<sup>116</sup> Wilson twice vetoed bills that would have held big garment industry manufacturers responsible for monitoring their subcontractor’s compliance with labor and immigration laws. Mr. Wilson argued that regulations would place too great a burden on manufacturers and would drive them out of the state.<sup>117</sup> In other words, the governor tacitly admits, manufacturing depends on the illegal exploitation of immigrants.

### **Hot Goods!**

In 1992 the Department of Labor instructed its regional offices to begin using the old and infamous “hot goods” provision of the Fair Labor Standards Act.<sup>118</sup> Under the provision, any manufacturer or their contractors in violation of minimum wage or overtime rules cannot ship goods to other states, a potentially devastating blow in an industry where the only way to make any money is by keeping money circulating. Only the Los Angeles and San Francisco regional offices took up the provision. Although the hot goods provision makes manufacturers responsible for conditions in their contractors’ operations, it still requires inspections. The Labor Department is unable to perform in numbers that would begin to pressure compliance among the underground fly-by-night or “stitch and ditch” shops.

The visibility given the El Monte raid created a national stage for Robert Reich to bring attention to the Labor Department’s efforts to press the industry for self-regulation--- the alternative to federal and state regulation.<sup>119</sup> Various efforts have been made to convince the California regulators to allow the industry to self-police. For instance, an industry group proposed the creation of a certification board that would certify contractors in the same way CPAs or attorneys now are certified. For their part, manufacturers claim that if they give out a contract in “good faith” that the Fair Labor Standards are used by the

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116 Los Angeles Times, Aug. 25, 1990, p. 29; March 25, 1991, p. 28; Aug. 25, 1995, p. B-1.

117 The Nation, Sept. 11, 1995, p. 237.

118 Women’s Wear Daily, May 5, 1993, p. 15.

119 Newspapers printed hundreds of stories in the aftermath of the El Monte raid, with the Labor Department getting high visibility. A typical headline, run in the Seattle Times on Nov. 24, 1995, was titled, “Sweatshops hit in Labor Dept.’s new campaign”. It was not a new campaign, as I reported above.

contractor, the manufacturer should not be liable. Bradshaw, the State Labor Commissioner, dismisses these pleas for self-policing. "I can guarantee you the California Legislature won't give you the authority to self-police your industry," she told an audience of manufacturers and contractors.<sup>120</sup> Bradshaw did not win the day.

In June 1995 (the El Monte raid was in August), Robert Reich announced the formation of a consortium of Southern California's garment manufacturers that will conduct regular audits of contractors to screen out shops that break laws on minimum wage, overtime pay and child labor.<sup>121</sup> "This is one of the most effective ways of eliminating sweatshops, thus reducing the magnet for undocumented workers that sweatshops often represent," Reich said.<sup>122</sup> Throughout 1995, and particularly after the August raid, Reich was interviewed regularly by radio, television and newspapers and magazines, consistently supporting the effectiveness of self-regulation for the industry. While repeatedly presented as a bold move, this self-policing actually tells of the abandonment of serious regulation by federal labor inspectors. This is the outcome of "down-sizing" government: lacking investigators to enforce regulations, Reich's only resource was to appeal to retailers' palpable fear of bad publicity.

There are a number of problems with both the enforcement of the hot goods provision and with the threat of negative publicity. In the first place, self-regulation is not working, as recent raids in the L.A. garment district reveal.<sup>123</sup> But the most serious problem is that it threatens workers' jobs. The story of Guess offers a cautionary tale. Until recently Guess, who in 1994 made 97% of its garments in the U.S., was held up as a model of compliance.<sup>124</sup> The company conducts education and training programs for its workers, contractors and contractors' workers. Guess has a toll-free telephone answer line that workers can call with questions about labor practices. It audits contractor records, and is helping finance contractors who are paying back wages. However, this all came about after Guess agreed in 1992 to self-policing to help settle a Federal investigation that found large-scale wage and

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<sup>120</sup> Apparel Industry Magazine, March, 1994, Vol. 55, No. 3, p. 30.

<sup>121</sup> In a column in the Los Angeles Times on Aug. 24, 1995, B-9, members of the Asian Law Caucus pointed out the pitfalls of self-regulation, arguing that manufacturers and retailers must be held jointly responsible and fully liable for labor law violations.

<sup>122</sup> Los Angeles Times, June 20, 1995, p. D-1.

<sup>123</sup> New York Times, July 19, 1997, p. A8.

<sup>124</sup> No doubt this is the basis on which Scott aligns Guess with the cultural products producers that travel the high road, as I wrote in Chapter Four.

child labor violations by Guess contractors.<sup>125</sup> Using the hot good provision, Federal inspectors had seized a large shipment of apparel produced by Guess contractors, and forced the company to pay \$600,000 in back wages and overtime to contractors' employees before being allowed to ship the goods.<sup>126</sup>

Apparently these efforts did not produce results (Rothstein, 1996). In the summer of 1996, five contractors sewing for Guess were cited for illegal home-sewing operations. Then a class-action suit accused Guess and sixteen subcontractors of paying their mostly immigrant workers less than minimum wage. In what *Time Magazine* calls a final one-two punch, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) forced the firm to re-hire employees it had fired for union sympathizing, and the U.S. Labor Department took Guess off its list of Trendsetters.<sup>127</sup> In a stunning confirmation of garment industry workers' worst fears, in January, 1997, Guess revealed that while it was fending off the labor organizing of UNITE, the apparel and textile workers' union<sup>128</sup>, the company was shifting about 40% of its manufacturing to Mexico and South America. UNITE will file a suit with the NLRB (it is illegal to move work abroad to avoid labor organizing). This story reveals the powerful role of insecurity in dampening labor militancy---a role that is at once material and ideological. As long as workers believe that their job and wage is the best they can do, and that the company they work for is in a genuine competitive bind, and that the company can easily run-away, workers feel powerless to press for improved conditions.

UNITE is pursuing another tactic. The union will attempt to influence Guess with a boycott campaign and protests on 300 college campuses, a key Guess market (Rothstein, 1996). This brings me back to the question this dissertation began with: how vulnerable is this commodity fetish? Just how invisible are these threads? The El Monte story certainly brought a great deal of media attention to the existence of sweatshops the fact that production of clothing is contracted. But how much light did this story shed on the *relationships* of production, the relationships between manufacturers and contractors, machinists and consumers?

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125 New York Times, July 18, 1997, p. A8.

126 Apparel Industry Magazine, Jan. 1996, Vol. 57, No. 1, p. 68.

127 Time Magazine, Jan. 27, 1997, p. 48. the Trendsetter List is a Labor Department listing of garment industry "good guys".

128 UNITE stands for Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees. It is the result of a merger of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). Once the ILGWU and ACTWU could claim nearly a million members between them, but at the time of the merger, their combined strength was about 350,000. Multinational Monitor, June, 1995, p. 14.

### **Kathie Lee Goes to Washington: Sweatshops as Narrative and Place**

In May of 1996 a committee in Congress heard testimony that the Kathie Lee line of clothing which sells at a record pace in Wal-Mart stores across the country was being sewn in Honduras by children as young as twelve working for \$.31 an hour.<sup>129</sup> At first Gifford protested that she had no way of knowing about the conditions in Honduras, and even called the human rights activist who reported it a 'nobody'.<sup>130</sup> Much to her very public embarrassment, on the day after her ABC news interview, she and the rest of the country (I am barely exaggerating the extensive coverage) learned that women working only blocks away from the TV station in New York City had been sewing Kathie Lee blouses for up to sixty hours per week at less than minimum wage and no overtime. In her initial reaction, Gifford proclaimed on her popular television program that the people who were running the sweatshops where some Kathie Lee brand clothing is made were the "cockroaches" of the industry.<sup>131</sup>

On the advice of a highly paid publicist,<sup>132</sup> Ms. Gifford volunteered for Reich's campaign to bring about industry responsibility for working conditions. In mid-July, she spoke to a House subcommittee<sup>133</sup> in support of a bill that would block the importation of goods made with exploitative child labor and cut off foreign aid to countries that tolerate sweatshops that use child labor.<sup>134</sup> When Reich organized a meeting (a summit, he called it) with some of the biggest names in retailing and manufacturing, Gifford made a well publicized appearance, joining in to discuss how to improve the conditions and monitoring of contracted work.

Throughout these stories, in interviews industry representatives used their standard argument: they would work to improve the working conditions for machine operators if they could be assured that the competition, including the foreign (read Third World) competition,

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<sup>129</sup> Time, May 13, 1996, p. 191; Seattle Times, May 24, 1996, p.2.

<sup>130</sup> He is Charles Kernaghan of the National Labor Committee. Gifford may not have known who Kernaghan is, but the leaders of the apparel industries do; more than any other person, he and the NLC have brought to the attention of Congress the conditions in Caribbean export processing zones. It was an NLC report to Congress that led to the halting of US-AID money to EPZs that I reported in Chapter Two. It has not been the work of the NLC that has brought Nike contracting into the public eye; the NLC is mainly involved in the Caribbean and Central America.

<sup>131</sup> Live with Regis & Kathie Lee, May 1, 1996.

<sup>132</sup> Howard Rubenstein; this Knight-Ridder story appeared in the Seattle Times, Sept. 24, 1996, p. D1.

<sup>133</sup> The House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on International Organizations and Human Rights.

<sup>134</sup> BNA Daily, July 17, 1996. (Bureau of National Affairs)

would also have to obey new rules, and if consumers would pay higher prices.<sup>135</sup> Reich appeared sympathetic to this argument,<sup>136</sup> however it ignores the geography and social relations of U.S. apparel production: U.S. manufacturers are competing with each other, not Third World firms.<sup>137</sup> It is these same corporations, writing contracts with the lowest bidders, who support the flourishing sweatshops of the Caribbean and Mexico. And it is the structural adjustment policies (supported by the U.S. government) that encourages the development of export manufacturing, free trade zones and the diminishment of social spending---conditions that mean twelve year olds in Honduras have little choice but to work.

Reich's summit focused on child labor, an easy issue for U.S. manufacturers. Supporting fairer wages in EPZs, on the other hand, was not on the agenda.<sup>138</sup> Even more difficult to achieve are efforts to enlist manufacturers to work against unfair labor practices in domestic production. Nevertheless, Reich energetically began a campaign to make retailers monitor contractors for wage and safety violations. "We need to enlist retailers as adjunct policemen," says Reich. "At a time when business says to government, 'Get off our backs---we can do it for ourselves,' we're giving them the opportunity."<sup>139</sup> Edna Bonacich calls this "the fox guarding the hen house."<sup>140</sup>

Sweatshops are more and more common now, but they are not a blight, and they are not new. Newspapers in Seattle wrote about the "return" of the sweatshops in the 1970s.<sup>141</sup> Rather, sweatshops come and go along with changes in the overall economy and its effect on wages, with changes in the regulatory environment, with changes in immigration---and of course, these are all intricately related.<sup>142</sup> After the Triangle fire in 1911, and after passing the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938, labor abuses declined in the U.S., and, based on the

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135 The language is usually "level playing field". This becomes a particularly contentious issue when industry forums start to consider compliance with regulations. See, for instance, *Women's Wear Daily*, June 11, 1996, p. 1, and *Women's Wear Daily*, June 17, 1996, p. 1. The same issues emerged in the new garment industry accord unveiled in April, 1997. See for instance, *New York Times*, April 13, 1997, p. 1, and *USA Today*, April 14, 1997, B-1.

136 *Women's Wear Daily*, June 17, 1996, p. 1.

137 Hong Kong is home to some successful manufacturers, but they mostly produce high end garments, and are not competing in mass markets. Some Korean firms also manufacture their own brand, but these are small labels, not brands that are driving the competition.

138 See "Report on Reich's Fashion Industry Forum", by Katherine Hoyt, Campaign for Labor Rights of the Nicaragua Network Education Fund, Nicaragua Network, nicanet@igc.apc.org.

139 *New York Times*, July 18, 1997, p. A8.

140 *ibid.*

141 *Northwest Passage*, Jan. 16, 1978, p. 8; *Seattle P-I*, May 29, 1979, A-6.

142 *Women's Wear Daily*, June 1., 1996, p. 1. During the 1950s and 1960s sweatshops did "nearly eradicate" sweatshops.

news media's coverage of Reich and the Labor Department's efforts to end the "scourge" of sweatshops, it looked like the same kind of reaction would follow the discovery at El Monte. However, the major development has been the industry's promise to monitor contractors better. It is suggestive that because the women sewing in El Monte were "illegals"---because they were so clearly not citizens---the abrogation of their rights did not provoke the kind of self reflection that mobilizes the state to protect the most severely exploited workers.

Through a narrative that reworked the economics of garment manufacturing as performed in aberrant sweatshops by cut-throat immigrant sweatshop owners, a critical analysis of the industry and free trade was avoided. What would a more thorough-going analysis reveal? Contractors are going out of business everyday, leaving in place those entrepreneurs most willing to make profits on the backs of vulnerable workers---people with few or no options.<sup>143</sup> The whole system is driven by the merchandisers, department stores, and brand names. The media appears dumbstruck by the well versed public relations teams from J. C. Penney, Nordstrom and other retail giants, and is apparently unable to locate (or perhaps believe) owners of small struggling contract shops.

But the system of sub-contracting is firmly anchored in the practices of nationally known retailers and manufacturers. The hegemony of free trade and the attendant ideology of competitiveness has reduced the state's responsibility for interrupting this systematic exploitation, reducing it to appeals for voluntary virtue, that is, "corporate responsibility". Ironically Scott's description of cultural products industries as those that travel the high road and those that travel the low reveals how facile are our theories about exploitation, as Guess slips from one category to the other. The claims of helplessness in the face of globalization issued by the attendee's at Reich's summit, firms like Guess, Nordstrom, The Gap, Nike and all other well-know brands, belie the potential for a kind of brutality in contracting relationships.

When I began this research, I anticipated having difficulty finding garment factory owners who would agree to participate in my research. I anticipated that with the bad publicity the garment industry attracts, and with the unscrupulous labor relations for which the industry is famous, that my phone calls would remain unreturned. I expected to find or at least hear of numerous sweatshops. I was wrong.

There are sweatshops in Seattle. The first person I interviewed has a warehouse full of sewing machines which he sets up near a low-income housing project in Everett whenever

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<sup>143</sup> US News & World Reports, Nov. 22, 1993, p. 48; Women's Wear Daily, June 1, 1996, p. 1.

he gets a big contract. While I do not think he flies-by-night, he is certainly in it to skim as much profit as he can, and all of the machinists he hires are only temporary workers. I interviewed another owner who (probably because he was new in the business) was not guarded at all. He does some contracting, but prefers to sub-contract---there are less headaches, he said. I do not know how much of this goes on. Based on my interviews, I think that most of the contracting firms in Seattle area (there are fifty or so listed in the Yellow Pages) are reputable firms. The local office of the National Labor Relations Board has brought charges against only one firm in the last ten years, and that one was actually located in Guam. The local Labor Department office took the garment industry off of their list because there was so little to provoke their inspections. This is not to say that no local firms use less reputable sub-contractors, but for the most part, the Seattle garment industry travels the "high road".

My ideas about contracting and sweatshops changed dramatically as a result of a series of interviews I conducted with three contractors, each of whom I talked to on multiple occasions, and one of whom I interviewed repeatedly over the course of the research. This is not a representative sample---all three are women; two began in the business as seamstresses (one of emigrated from Vietnam in the early 1970s and started sewing right away to put her husband through engineering school at U.W.; the other was a divorced mother of two with no financial support). The third woman began a small shop making children's clothes, based only on her experience making clothes for her own children. The most important things I learned from these interviews were the strategies these contractors used to support their operators in the face of low wages. Some of these I discussed in Chapter Four. Here I want to reveal the frustration and helplessness that contractors feel in the face of the pressures from their customers---the manufacturers and retailers, the real generators of the race to the bottom. The following excerpts are from interviews with only one of these women, the most outspoken of the three, who owns several factories and sews for some of the most well know brands in Seattle. I heard the same frustrations from the others.

I just think that it's plain garbage that these retailers are moving all this work offshore in order to enhance their margin. When you go down to any of these stores, like (*name deleted*), my best customer, you go in and you buy a polo shirt for \$35, and it cost them \$3 to get it made! Now, what on this earth ever means that they should have that kind of margin? It used to be plenty good enough for retailers to keystone everything---that is, traditionally charge 100% more than what their wholesale cost was.

I'm rapidly getting to the point where, if I can't figure a way out of this, then I have to say that's it, I have to quit. And Mexico's fine, but see, I didn't mean to run Mexico

exclusively, it just doesn't fit with my thinking. I'm not interested in that. I don't want to move to China either. I have factories here---this is my home. I do not understand why, when I have some of the best operators there are, why I have to start somewhere else, all because there are a bunch of retailers that need better margins. I just can't accept that. It doesn't seem right to me.

Now you would think that as a business owner, I would have to compete by being excellent. Now I only have to be cheap.

The largest contractor in Seattle (not one of my respondents) sews almost exclusively for one of the most successful East Coast catalogue companies. But most contractors sew for a number of companies---even dozens---the main work of a contractor is finding new business to keep the cash flowing and operators employed. But this means having operators who are skilled at a variety of machines and experienced on a wide variety of fabrics. Switching operators from one project to another creates the major contractor's dilemma---when operators have to switch projects often, they rarely reach top efficiency, and so rarely make as much as they can earn when sewing on a longer more un-changing project. But contractors cannot pad their bids with money to pay for what amounts to training time. Under these circumstances, even reputable contractors sewing for the best name brands, sometimes have projects for which their operators earn only minimum wage.

Besides the relentless pressure under which contractors work, there were other missing pieces of the Kathie Lee story. For instance, rarely did the media report on the Department of Labor's inability to regulate the industry due to budget cutbacks that reduced the number of inspectors in enforcement agencies. Rather, the focus was on child labor in Honduras. Another notable absence---the social relations of production in the industry were examined only in passing---points to a suggestive difference between the story associated with Kathie Lee brand clothing, sold exclusively in Wal-Mart, and the retailers that owned the clothing sewed by the Thai workers in El Monte. While Wal-Mart, which is where Kathie Lee brand clothing is sold, was mentioned repeatedly, the brand names confiscated from the raided apartment complex (most of whom advertise in newspapers extensively) were rarely mentioned.<sup>144</sup>

The Kathie Lee story begins to look like a particularly blatant attempt to deny the social relations of garment production during a moment of crisis. Her ABC news interview

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<sup>144</sup> The exception to this generalization can be found in *Women's Wear Daily* where the details of specific companies is of great interest to the readers. *Wall Street Journal* also reported this news with

was on the television station recently purchased by Walt Disney Company. At the very moment that Kathie Lee was on the front pages and TV screens across the country, the National Labor Committee was pursuing Disney for even worse violations of labor rights in Haiti.<sup>145</sup> Like Kathie Lee, Disney claims innocence---they have no knowledge of the contracting relationship. But the National Labor Committee reports that the Haitian based company has been manufacturing Disney clothes for twenty years (Rothstein, 1996). This story did *not* make it onto the evening news.

Behind the scenes in sweatshop stories are workers, usually immigrants trying to exist in difficult economic environments who have found their best available options. That their options are appalling, and that the globalization of the garment industry has proceeded by taking advantage of those appalling circumstances rarely appears in the news media's analysis. Rather, there is a play of narrative that struggles for distance between the readers and consumers and the conditions of manufacturing, the social relations that exist in garment production. The image of young women (girls) aged fourteen, working day after day rather than going to school is presented as Dickensian, even when it is pointed out that in Honduras fourteen is the legal working age (as it was in the U.S. until the turn of the century) and school past sixth grade is available for few, partly due to the demands of structural adjustment.

#### Sweatshops as Narrative

For a couple of months after the Kathie Lee story broke, radio and TV shows, and major newspapers and magazines buzzed with stories about sweatshops in America. To be more accurate, they did stories that were peripherally about sweatshops. Most were about whether Gifford, whose television image is based on her role as wife and mother and on her commitment to children's issues, should have known that sweatshop conditions prevailed and children employed where her clothes were being made. Most stories across the country hailed Gifford's efforts. The *Washington Post*, for instance, wrote "She was just what the sweatshop battle needed: a famous, embarrassed face to keep the public interested in a complex, hazy issue."<sup>146</sup>

There seems to be an anxiety about sweatshops that suggests a kind of national psychic dilemma for consumption, if not for capitalism. As narrated by the state---Robert Reich and the Labor Department, industry leaders and major media talk show hosts---

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more attention to specific manufacturers and retailers.

145 Extra!, Sept.-Oct. 1996, p. 6.

146 Washington Post, July 15, 1996, p. D1.

sweatshops are an aberration, a "scourge" that can be "wiped out". Meetings at a high political level are immediately convened to figure out what to do about "child labor". The tension between what may be a dilemma for consumers but seems a necessity to producers is everywhere apparent in these stories.

The invisible workers of the Kathie Lee story are the undocumented Mexican workers sewing down the street from Gifford's studio. Cheated of back wages, these workers were subsequently erased from public view, their story appearing only briefly as part of a five page *People Magazine* spread. Unlike the sympathetic portrait of tired but liberated workers from the El Monte story (a photo than ran on the front pages of newspapers across the country), the images of the Kathie Lee exposé were invariably of Kathie Lee herself. And the *People Magazine* story was a full-page photograph of an ominously darkened building (a photo that was obviously snapped at twilight).<sup>147</sup> Instead of a human interest story about the badly treated innocents---the child workers or the gentle Thais---we have the illegal alien, the racialized Other; and although badly treated, she is missing.

Rather than expose the seamy side of capitalism in the age of free trade, the *New York Times* took the opposite approach, running two major articles that pointed out the "other side" of the sweatshop story. The first article<sup>148</sup> supported industry's claim that sub-contracting chains were complex,<sup>149</sup> that retailers rightfully cannot be expected to know where their clothes are made, and that Wal-Mart is known for questionable practices (in other words, one should not generalize from Wal-Mart to the rest of the industry). This writer laced her revelation of Honduran factory conditions with the anti-organized labor narrative that has dominated mainstream media for several decades. The writer questioned the validity of the anti-sweatshop campaign based on the fact that Kernaghan (the activist from the National Labor Committee who brought the Kathie Lee case to the attention of Congress) is "[O]perating on a \$250,000 budget, financed in part by labor unions", though she then calls his a "one-man crusade against third world sweatshops." The reporter cited "some experts" who say that "Western campaigns against low-wage factories overseas mostly

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147 *People Magazine*, June 10, 1996, p. 58.

148 Strom, Stephanie, 1996. "From Sweetheart to Scapegoat - Looking Behind the Kathie Lee Labels," *New York Times*, June 27, p. C1.

149 In the Kathie Lee case, the chain went like this: Wal-Mart buys the Kathie Lee apparel from Bonewco (they are Gifford's partners, really, not Wal-Mart). Bonewco gives the contract to a company in Alabama, who sub-contracts it to Universal Apparel, based in New Jersey. Universal cannot handle a rush order, so they sub-sub-contract it to the shop in New York City.

benefit the American labor movement and do more harm than good in poor countries by draining off scarce jobs and choking off investment."<sup>150</sup>

The second article, titled "Hondurans in 'Sweatshops' See Opportunity,"<sup>151</sup> picked up a theme begun in the first story when it reported that workers from the Honduran factory criticized Mrs. Gifford because Wal-Mart canceled its contract (with Global Fashions) and put them out of work. This very long article reproduces the narrative of need and gratitude that legitimizes all exploitation of Third World workers in maquiladoras and free trade zone factories. The front page story begins with this headline: "U.S. Critics See 'Monstrous Sweatshop,' but Hondurans See Better Life." There is a large photograph of a tidy production line with women busily sewing (sweatshops and sewing factories are more generally represented with photos of crowded spaces, fabric heaped everywhere, which is a necessity of the typical bundle system), and a caption that identifies it as the factory where Kathie Lee garments were made. For the busy newspaper reader, then, the headline and the photo suggest that this whole Kathie Lee story was one-sided, that the workers are being done an injustice, losing precious jobs due to a false human rights consciousness. But for the interested reader the text actually reports that Global Fashions is known in Honduras and abroad as "especially harsh and abusive to workers."

The rhetorical evocation of Honduran EPZ factories not as "sweatshop" but as "opportunity" perfectly but unintentionally reveals the role of insecurity and poverty in garment industry labor markets. Honduran workers certainly do need jobs. What the article fails to reveal are the processes that keep wages low and workers' rights minimized in order to attract the "Global Fashions" of the world. Women working in the small contracting firms in New York City need their jobs, too, and in the language of the model minority, Chinese women are regularly portrayed as self-sacrificing and hard-working.<sup>152</sup> Contracting firm owners, on the other hand, are often monolithically represented as the scourge of the garment industry. In the popular media, I read this as a narrative of "good guys" (white corporate CEO's) and "bad guys". Even when there are campaigns organized by human

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<sup>150</sup> It is hard to imagine that the Times did not know that Kernaghan and the National Labor Committee initiated a high profile campaign in New York City to force the Gap to reinstate a contract with the Salvadoran company Mandarin. The Gap had canceled the contract when they learned Mandarin had fired workers who were trying to organize (an action they learned about from Kernaghan). Under pressure, the Gap went back to Mandarin and Mandarin re-hired the workers, and has agreed to independent monitoring.

<sup>151</sup> New York Times, July 18, 1996, p. 1.

<sup>152</sup> Chinese women may be self-sacrificing, engaging in self-exploitation, and are certainly hard working. But that cannot rationalize their exploitation. For an example, see Zhou, 1992.

rights groups to highlight the contracting policies of Nike and Walt Disney, the *New York Times* will not subject the CEOs of these companies to the same scrutiny as they give to “sweatshop” owners. The small contractors of NYC, LA and San Francisco are usually people from East Asia or a Third World country, entrepreneurs, in another discourse. Entrepreneurs have always exploited workers, and often excessively, especially if they are immigrant women or people of color, even members of their own family. Some have always been worse than others. What these stories fail to reveal is that the “bad guys” running the sweatshops are part of a system owned and managed by a corporate elite who have successfully isolated themselves behind a narrative of globalization over which they claim to have no control.

A particularly good example of this stereotyping was a *NYT* story about a small contractor, Ms. Zheng, bending the rules right and left to exploit her workers.<sup>153</sup> The article did not explain that the economics of the industry left her with profit margins so tight as to make day-to-day operations precarious. Although the article does imply that she is stuck with circumstances out of her control, this is put in the context of the debts of the former owner, not in the structure of the industry and its response to free trade. Even though the cost of labor in the average garment is a minor part of total costs, it is at the sewing end of the industry that costs are cut, not in executive suites or advertising budgets.<sup>154</sup>

The story was not completely one-sided. “In the perverse logic of the sweatshop, the workers considered Ms. Zheng a good boss precisely because she was willing to violate labor laws and allow their children to work by their sides. In fact, she is so flexible that she allows mothers to leave in the middle of the day, pick their children up from school and take them back to the factory.” The reporter wrote that the workers revere their boss, calling her by a Chinese expression (Nu Qian Ren) that conveys awe and respect. She did not emphasize, but might have, that the flexibility to pick up their children and bring them to work is not a trivial benefit, for one of the biggest dilemmas faced by low wage workers is how to deal with

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153 *New York Times*, Feb.6, 1995, p. 1.

154 I have been surprised to hear these high advertising budgets defended by sewing contractors who argue that clothing labels have to compete this way. Only a couple of my respondents have spoken of the consuming public or of an industry that does not also have to compete with decent wages or job security. As I mentioned above, the *Wall Street Journal* regularly reports on corporate problems that may affect stock performance, and so you can read about the bad publicity that Nike and Walt Disney have received about contracting practices. Not so the *New York Times*. The one exception is the way profligate spending at Donna Karan (a high fashion designer and manufacturer) has cost her the confidence of her investors after going public in 1996 (*New York Times*, June 29, C-1). Needless to say, there was no mention about how this spending might affect the wages of people sewing Donna Karan garments.

childcare. Childcare responsibilities often turn sewing machinists to homework. (It is a dilemma for better paid workers, too. *Business Week* ran a major story based on the rankings across the country of how well companies did in allowing their employees to balance work with family obligations. Eddie Bauer was at the top of their chart.<sup>155</sup> I'm sure they failed to poll Ms. Zheng's employees.)

Reading "Sweatshop" in Seattle

A couple of months after the Kathie Lee spectacle died down, Liz Szabo, a reporter for the *Seattle Times*, phoned me with some questions about the local garment industry. She wanted to hear about my work---or rather, she wanted to hear about my work until she found out that I was not exactly studying sweatshops. She wanted to know if I had learned much about homework (I told her there was some, probably mostly in the Southeast Asian community, and that people used it as a stepping stone to larger firms, or as a way to work at home when there were childcare responsibilities). Finally, her impatience growing, she wanted to know if I had seen any child labor. Again, I disappointed her.

Whether because she could not find any gruesome stories, or because of editorial decisions, the story Szabo wrote bears little resemblance to the exposés issuing from California and New York. It ran on page one under the title "Sewing for the American dream."<sup>156</sup> There were lots of color pictures; while none were of dark foreboding buildings, there was the standard photo of isles crowded with piles of fabric. And while there were some personal stories of hardship (people working two and three jobs), the journalists reported that there were few shops in Seattle that resemble the notorious sweatshops of New York and L.A. Even though the story was about the garment industry, and made some connections to the wave of sweatshop news, the overall context was familiar to Seattle readers: refugees and immigrants sacrificing for the future of their families, making Seattle a better place.

That story emerged even more clearly the next day in a companion piece by the same reporters, again on the front page.<sup>157</sup> The community where many of the not-quite-sweatshops operate is featured under a headline that reads "Hard-working newcomers give White Center new life".<sup>158</sup> The reporter writes that this section of Seattle has had a seedy

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155 *Business Week*, Sept. 16, 1996, p. 74.

156 *Seattle Times*, Aug. 25, 1996, A-1.

157 *Seattle Times*, Aug. 26, 1996, A-1.

158 The choice of the word 'newcomer' in the headline is significant, avoiding the discursive homogeneity of terms like 'minority' or 'immigrant'. In popular discourse ethnicity and immigrant are

reputation since early in the century, and has recently seen the flourishing of gangs and high crime rates; reports of violent crime are down 48 percent since 1992. "For Asian, Hispanic and recently Eastern European men and women who are escaping economic and political repression at home, White Center represents a port of entry to dreams of a better life."<sup>159</sup> The hours that people are working to earn this new life are grueling---in fact, most work two jobs and some three---and as the area develops competition is increasing, which puts a strain on profit margins. But most of the people in the story have managed to buy a home, and all are smiling in the photographs. At the end of the story, the reporters merge a narrative of community with the hard-working immigrant: "(W)ithin the change that's transforming the community lies a deeper truth: That no matter what differences exist among the ethnic groups reshaping White Center, everyone shares the redemptive powers of hard work."

For the *Seattle Times* to use the term "newcomer" in its headline speaks of an intention to avoid the racialization of the immigrant community as has occurred in California. With a Black mayor, the first Asian-American governor in the continental U.S., and its exalted position on the Pacific Rim, Seattle, through the eyes of its major newspaper, is embracing multiculturalism. The paper is similarly ecstatic about its rugged outdoor image and it devoted pages and columns to the opening of a new REI store. A store where consumption will be an adventure. An editorial in the paper actually said, "REI is Seattle." There are sweatshops in Seattle, and more than a few homeworkers, but the numbers are small. The industry provides many immigrants a viable occupation, but the low regard awarded to the industry threatens the jobs of these newcomers.

### **Purchasing Power**

"People don't care if it's made in Timbuktu or Chewelah, Wash. They look at it, try it on and if they can afford it, they buy it" (*Seattle Post-Intelligence*, May 29, 1979, p. A-6).

I have argued that the most recent flourishing of sweatshops represents an outcome of economic restructuring and racialization of immigrants based on definitions of skill and readings of opportunity. The attention focused on sweatshops also presents an ideological dilemma for the consumer/worker that the public discourse fails to resolve. When I have raised the issues among students, their reactions are similar to those expressed on a CNN

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code words for racial minority, as illegal alien is code for Mexican. All of these terms have been subjected to deconstruction, but they are used indiscriminately in the popular press.  
159 *Seattle Times*, August 26, 1996, p. A-1.

show called "Talk Back Live".<sup>160</sup> The most interesting reaction to the disclosure of Bonewco's (and therefore Wal-Mart's) contractors using sweatshop working conditions and child labor was as the audience was led to consider Kathie Lee Gifford's guilt. The audience wrestled with the problem of knowing, and of being innocent, both for themselves and for Gifford. A guest from a California workers-rights agency argued that "No intelligent American adult who reads the newspaper doesn't know why their goods are being made south of the border. [Manufacturers go] because it's cheap labor and there are no labor laws. She [Kathie Lee] had to know. There was no way not to know."<sup>161</sup>

In this venue, Kathie Lee is contested as a symbol of innocence with which consumers could relate, on the one hand, and as complicit in the sweatshop conditions though helpless, on the other. By claiming lack of knowledge and thereby asserting innocence, consumers (in this case, the television audience) may participate in the mystification of exploitation. Working simultaneously is a narrative that asserts a hierarchy of need, which implies that sweatshops have to be sent back where they belong---to Third World countries where people are desperate for jobs. Blame for excessive exploitation in U.S. factories and shops is laid at the feet of immigrant entrepreneurs, also the non-White Other.

Innocence is about knowing, then, and as all of us (intelligent Americans) know, then none of us are innocent. The gist of the discussion implicitly concludes that it is better not to know how capitalism works in a highly competitive industry, but also that everyone does know. There was no discussion of what to do with that knowledge.<sup>162</sup>

From the very beginning of the Kathie Lee story, the complicity of consumers was at least part of the subtext. Besides interest in Gifford's role, the media fairly widely reported a survey commissioned by the Marymount University Center for Ethical Concerns.<sup>163</sup> *USA Today* first published the results in November, 1995 in their "Money" section<sup>164</sup>, but the research was widely quoted in prominent stories after Gifford's public embarrassment and subsequent campaign.<sup>165</sup> The most commonly reported statistics were that more than three-fourths of those polled would avoid shopping at stores if they were aware that the stores sold

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160 CNN, Talk Back Live, June 4, 1996.

161 Alice Callaghan from Las Familias del Pueblo.

162 On a couple of NPR programs UNITE representatives urged listeners to ask sales people if they know under what conditions their clothes are made.

163 November, 1995 (unpublished document). Steve McFadden of ICR Survey Research Group conducted the survey.

164 *USA Today*, "Consumers frown on sweatshops." November 17, 1995.

165 The poll was a telephone survey of 1,008 randomly selected adults, reporting a margin of error of

goods made in sweatshops",<sup>166</sup> and that 84% would pay an extra \$1 on a \$20 garment if it were guaranteed to be made in a legitimate shop. Less widely reported was that 66% would be more likely to patronize stores that they know are cooperating with law enforcement officials to prevent sweatshops.<sup>167</sup>

These poll results indicate that the Labor Department's publication of a list of industry 'good guys' right before the Christmas shopping season would have a powerful impact.<sup>168</sup> In fact, according to the poll, 69 percent of consumers would take into consideration a published list of cooperators when deciding where to do their holiday shopping. Inexplicably, Reich quickly backpedaled on his Good Guys list, saying his list was not intended to be a where-to-shop list. He appeared to be responding to an industry that was furious with this attempt to manipulate consumers. People in the garment industry do not really believe that consumers would pay more to support better working conditions. Every manager I talked to believed that, all else being equal (quality and style) consumers made their decisions based on price.

The political power of consumers has a mixed record---or rather, the ability to rally consumers has waxed and waned. With the Labor Department capitulating on its Good Guys list, and with the entire structure of the industry geared to the low wages of offshore manufacturing, it is hard to be optimistic about real change. Nevertheless, 'purchasing power' has a venerable history. In the late 1890s, when few unions existed, the National Consumers League formed in New York and spread over several states.<sup>169</sup> The league devised a label issued only to companies that adhered to certain standards in wages, hours, rest periods and sanitary conditions, gave equal pay for equal work irrespective of sex, and did not employ children. The agreement also tried to stamp out homework; it required that all stitched goods be made on the manufacturer's premises. Lists of participating firms, the good guys, were published.

Consumer boycotts have had some success in other industries, and are an important part of labor history. Dana Frank (1994) tells a story about the politicization of consumption

plus or minus 3 points.

<sup>166</sup> For instance, *Newsday*, December 17, 1995.

<sup>167</sup> There was a distinct class difference in this reply (but not sex, age, region or metro status). 76.6% of families earning between \$40 and \$50,000 a year replied yes, while of those earning less than \$15,000 only 42.2% agreed. This was the only large deviation in the study.

<sup>168</sup> On Nov. 2, 1995, the Labor Department unveiled its guidelines for making the "Good-Guy List", officially called Trendsetters. (*Women's Wear Daily*, Nov. 2, 1995, p. 14.) The list was released on Dec. 5, and immediately met a storm of criticism. (*Women's Wear Daily*, Dec. 9, 1995, p. 11.)

<sup>169</sup> *New York Times*, Aug. 9, 1995, A-23.

in the Seattle labor movement in the 1920s in which gender dynamics permeated labor's attempts to make shopping political as trade union men sought to persuade their wives to "shop union". The power of this sort of effort depends on labor's power in general, in terms of scale, but also important was the ability of male unionists to grasp the concerns of wives who were crucial to the implementation of consumer tactics.<sup>170</sup> This they ultimately failed to do.

"Made in the USA" campaigns have been launched from time to time ever since foreign manufacturers made in-roads in U.S. markets. In labor-friendly areas these may have some limited impact, motivating Wal-Mart to make pledges to sell only U.S. (a commitment they obviously abandoned). In spite of the anti-labor tenor of public opinion, it does appear that consumers asserting a demand for fair labor conditions offers the only hope for improving the conditions of at least the most exploited workers---those in sweatshops and in certain Third World factories.

For consumers to affect production decisions outside of sending "market signals", they will have to organize. The campaign to change contracting policies at a Gap contractor called Mandarin offers a model. Empresa Mandarin is one of those garment plants constructed with U.S.-AID money that I wrote about in Chapter Two.<sup>171</sup> It pays wages of about 56 cents an hour, and uses a private armed force to inhibit unionization. Many of the workers live without running water or electricity in squatter-type settlements. When workers attempted to unionize the first time in 1993, Mandarin fired all union leaders. Another attempt in 1995 provoked the management to lock out 850 workers, some of whom were attacked and beaten by security guards. The 150 workers who refused to renounce unionization were fired. Protests provoked another lock out, and then further firings. At the time, Mandarin was sewing for The Gap, Eddie Bauer, J.C. Penney, Dayton Hudson (DHC) and other retailers. An investment fund for several religious organizations demanded at a DHC shareholders' meeting that the company require its off-shore vendors to respect employee rights to organize and to receive a living wage. DHC, The Gap and J.C. Penney all adopted rules, with varying vagueness.

Conditions at Mandarin did not change. Three times in 1995 The Gap, Eddie Bauer and Liz Claiborne inspected the plant and found no violations. But a U.S. speaking tour by

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<sup>170</sup> Factors external and internal to the AFL movement led to its demise, not least of which, Frank argues, was that the AFL continued to redefine solidarity to include fewer and fewer members of the working class, excluding or marginalizing women, and excluding industrial unionists, and Asian- and African-American workers (Frank, 1994).

<sup>171</sup> This story is based on a report by Richard Rothstein (1996). It also received relatively extensive coverage in the Los Angeles Times.

two of the fired employees, sponsored by UNITE and the National Labor Committee, changed that perception. At first the retailers responded to this campaign by ending their business with Mandarin, but the Labor Committee, focusing on The Gap, demanded that the retailer continue to outsource to Mandarin and other Salvadoran suppliers, but that it use its relationship with its suppliers to pressure them into honoring codes of conduct, reinstating the fired workers, and agreeing to independent monitoring for compliance.

Other campaigns have focused on child labor issues, with similar emphases on not leaving the workers with even fewer alternatives. Within three days of the launch of a U.S. consumer boycott of clothing from Bangladesh in May, 1995, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association resumed negotiations the International Labor Organization and the UN Children's Fund to end child labor in garment factories. On July 4, a formal agreement was signed to remove children from garment factories, create schools and transition children into them, and provide a stipend to replace lost income.<sup>172</sup>

One has to look hard for these stories. The mainstream press rarely reports strikes (Silver, 1995) and almost never reports boycotts. And negative publicity about major retailers and manufacturers (who are also advertisers) rarely circulates in the mainstream national press.<sup>173</sup> Nike, for instance, has been the object of a campaign by an energetic human rights group for its contractors' treatment of workers in Indonesia and Vietnam, and the *Seattle Times* has covered it.<sup>174</sup> Because it runs Doonesbury on the Op-Ed page, the *Seattle Times* also gave a prominent place to a scathing series of cartoons by Garry Trudeau on Nike, with the final series imagining Michael Jordan as a hero for pressing Nike to treat workers better.<sup>175</sup> Nike's woes (if indeed they are woes) receive much less attention in the paper of record.<sup>176</sup> When the *New York Times* ran a story about Nike, it is most likely about Nike's dominance, and how little a chance any firm has to take over even a small part of

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172 A letter to the editor from Darlene S. Adkins of the National Consumers League, published in the *New York Times*, August 9, 1995.

173 The interesting exception to this is the *Wall Street Journal* which reports on issues that affect stock prices and earnings.

174 *Seattle Times*, Feb. 22, 1997, C-1; May 13, 1997, E-1.

175 The Doonesbury series, by Garry Trudeau, ran in the *Seattle Times* in three segments: May 22-31, June 23-28, and July 28-Aug. 2, 1997. On June 6, 1997, A-3, the *Seattle Times* also ran Nike's protest of the Doonesbury theme.

176 The *New York Times* does print Bob Herbert's weekly column which he has devoted to Nike's Southeast Asia contracting on many occasions. See for instance, June 14, June 24, July 12, Nov. 1, 1996; March 28 and June 27, 1997. An article in the *Times* about Nike workers, titled "For Indonesian Workers at Nike Plant: Just Do It", the paper ran two photos, the top and largest one had as the caption, "workers at the Nike plant say that even at low pay, sewing sneakers represents one

Nike's market.<sup>177</sup> In a recent version, there was not one word about Nike's labor practices, or about any possibility that a consumer boycott could threaten Nike in any way.

If consumers do not know about boycotts, then there is no boycott. A small newspaper published in an attic bedroom in Seattle for a couple of years was the only place in the country where consumer boycotts information was centralized, collected and disseminated. Now there is no place. I bought a T-shirt at Eddie Bauer the other day and was offered the opportunity to pay an extra dollar to plant trees in Guatemala. The sales person had no idea what I was talking about when I asked him if he could assure me that my shirt was not made in a sweatshop. (One of my respondents says that Bauer will "campaign for voting rights for ducks but doesn't care a damn about seamstresses.")

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rung on their climb up Indonesia's economic and social ladder."  
177 "Nike Is in a League of Its Own. With No Big Rival, It Calls the Shots in Athletic Shoes", New York Times, June 7, 1997, p. 21.

## Chapter Six: Discussion

At the beginning of this dissertation, I invoked Stuart Hall when he argues that we must give an account of how social ideas arise, especially when they have a material effect (Hall, 1986). I take this as a goal for research and as a statement of praxis. In this final section I more explicitly link the intellectual project of this research to the questions of social justice that Hall's work inspires.

I have argued that sewing is not the low skill job most of us imagine it to be, and that a narrative that naturalizes garment industry work as low skilled has important determining effects. To make this case it is necessary to simultaneously view the industry as an economic activity and as a complex set of social meanings. In doing so I follow the path set out by feminists who have revealed the deeply gendered division of labor in society. Gender is not a static structure---it is a process that is imported into production, and is developed, maintained or changed as the labor process is changed (Baron, 1991). Overwhelmingly industrial sewing is constructed as women's work, a social process with profound consequences. Besides this impact on the gender division of labor, the status of sewing as a low-skill industrial activity has an important role in the garment industry's spatial fix. For instance, as a sunset industry, garment production is coded as appropriate for the female workforce of "less developed" countries, or as work that unskilled Third World immigrants in the U.S. are able (and happy) to perform.

These stories about the garment industry are so naturalized in explanations about jobs and industry as to seem self-evident, but I posit them as ideologically laden. Thompson (1990) argues that the concept of ideology can be used to refer to the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of power and domination. By studying the meaning of sewing in particular contexts, as Thompson's approach suggests, I have located its construction as a low skill activity within the broader processes that have contributed to the wage gap and insecurity of workers that I discussed at the beginning of the dissertation.

Narratives that rationalize job loss, flexibility, contracting, low wages, etc. are part of a larger project of persuasion. The state insists that free trade and deregulation are necessary to maintain the economic prowess of the U.S. economy, a necessity constructed in terms of competitiveness. Sewing is marginalized from the mainstream of manufacturing because Third World countries have a comparative (or, more popularly, competitive) advantage in wages, the story goes. Job loss of U.S. based manufacturing is therefore inevitable. This story has important policy implications. For instance, the garment industry

was a focal point in recent GATT negotiations with countries that are trying to increase export processing as part of their industrial strategy.

Questioning the naturalization of sewing as a low skill assembly project focuses critical attention on the hegemony of neoliberal restructuring in the interest of free trade. In the garment industry, electronics, and other so-called assembly operations, capitulation to the "globalization" of production institutionalizes an ideology of global competition which legitimates extreme levels of labor exploitation in the Third World and continuing low wages and insecurity in the U.S. Even among liberals and analysts on the Left, the rules of the game in a global capitalist economy are a (perhaps unpleasant) reality (Cullenberg and DeMartino, 1995). One unpleasant outcome with important implications for trade relations is the fact that in EPZs more often than not wages and worker's rights are repressed in the interest of attracting companies looking for the lowest possible costs.

Narratives that call on the competitive advantage of low wages within the trade regime are deployed in news stories about the proliferation of sweatshops. This is ironic in that sweatshop stories would seem to have a progressive intent, to be about demands for justice. As human interest stories, some of these stories are powerful. Heart-warming stories are told of the willingness of women to sacrifice for their families as they toil long days for low wages (Becker, 1994). And the sweatshop stories hold the promise of a critique of capitalist manufacturers moving to offshore sites. While this critique may be implicit, the larger story in the pages of the *New York Times* is of the necessity of these jobs for the people who sew. This is an effective discourse---it represents the material conditions of many immigrants and most people living in low income countries, and the stories are persuasive when they tell of the economic necessity (and implied gratitude) people feel, even for these poorly paid job. That is, in this sense, they are true, and because they are often presented on the front page of newspapers, they acquire more truth.

Rarely do news writers investigate the systematically asymmetrical power relations in EPZs where women are forced to work due to the severe disruptions caused by structural adjustment policies, and "modernization" more generally, or in the dense enclaves of New York and Los Angeles where immigrants are unlikely to complain of labor abuses because they have so few options. The question that has riveted my attention for many years is: how have these wages and working conditions acquired such legitimacy? Why are readers not led to wonder: "Why should immigrant women sacrifice?...Why are the people working in EPZs desperate?"

One of the reasons that most consumers in the U.S. do not ask these questions is due

to a lack of identity with conditions of Third World people---they are the Other, they are not “us”. But also, there is a lack of connection between production and consumption that is reproduced every time (and it is often) people are reminded that higher wages for workers means higher prices for consumers. A detailed analysis of this connection is long overdue, but a few chinks (micro-chinks) in capital’s armor have had some impact. The most highly publicized effort to contrast capitalist profits with labor conditions in the Third World is the current “assault” on Nike---a reigning icon of U.S. consumerism. This project began with an article that appeared in *Harper’s* magazine that compared the wage earnings of an Indonesian worker to the economics of sport shoe production, including the phenomenal amount paid for Michael Jordan’s endorsement. This article implies that the cost of labor in the price of Nike shoes is barely perceptible. The National Labor Committee made an attempt to draw the same kind of conclusion by revealing that labor in a pair of Pocohantas pajamas cost about eleven cents but sold in the U.S. for \$12. These figures are surprising, and not widely known. Why is there so little analysis about wages in the mainstream press?

In six years of teaching I have been surprised at how little my students know about offshore manufacturing, but how convinced they are that the low wages paid offshore reflect the lower standard (I think they mean cost) of living. Low wages are seen as the major comparative advantage in Indonesia and other developing countries (Rothstein, 1989) and are important for generating corporate profits, of course. But low wages offshore also play an essential role in depressing the wages of U.S. workers. To have this effect, there must be a narrative, an explanation that circulates and becomes part of workers’ “common sense”. When called on to defend the wages, Phil Knight of Nike argues that they pay above the legal minimum wage of these countries. There is something about the phrase “legal minimum wage” that has an aura of fairness about it. I find this a stunning (but apparently successful) mystification. These wages do not receive serious attention in news accounts of the conditions in offshore factories.

The Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR), which played a leading role in the anti-apartheid fight, has written a set of “benchmarks” for assessing corporations’ conduct in offshore sites (Rothstein, 1996). This approach offers an interesting avenue for analysis. The ICCR’s model includes a definition of a sustainable community wage, which enables workers to meet basic needs, set aside money for future purchases, and earn enough discretionary income to participate in support of the development of small business in a local community. This is of course a higher wage than is paid in EPZs, but makes sense if development is actually the intended goal for countries like Indonesia.

Of course, the minimum wage (and the wages of garment industry machinists) in the U.S. does not meet basic needs either. The fairness of low wages has been in the center of much political discourse during the last few years: the growing wage gap, the official minimum wage increase, the lack of benefits for part-time workers, the new rules to end entitlements. In the first chapter I pointed out the irony of the obsessive attention at the Federal Reserve and Wall Street to the smallest changes in the rates paid to low wage and minimum wage workers, to the importance of insecurity as a mechanism to keep inflationary pressures at bay. On the front pages of newspapers, this narrative weaves a flashing neon--- as opposed to invisible---thread through contemporary economic discourse. In this sense, all low-wage workers are perceived of as “dangerous” to the “us” identity.<sup>178</sup> Whose health is being addressed when economists talk about the health of the economy?

Of course, individual low wage workers are not a danger, but to the workers themselves this identity as Other enacts a kind of violence. My intention throughout this dissertation has been to point to the ways that a group of industrial workers has been positioned within the division of labor in a way that reproduces their vulnerability and low wages by way of a discourse that essentializes them as unskilled workers and as doing work appropriate for un-developed countries. The positioning of worker identity within this schema reveals the power of the division of labor for sorting people out in the social imaginary of work, as Sayer and Walker argue (1992). Feminist geographers have used ethnographic methods to reveal the connections between identity and uneven relations of power in various contexts (McDowell, 1991; McDowell and Court, 1996; Lawson, 1995; Katz, 1995; Kobayashi, 1996). Although my focus in the current paper has been on the social construction of skill at the level of management and in popular discourse, the impact of that on the identity of workers has an equally important role in determining wages.

During the course of a field visit (at a site where machinists all have health insurance and retirement), I literally stumbled across a group of machinists sitting outside having a smoke during lunch break. They asked me what I was doing, and I asked them the how-long-have-you-been-sewing questions, etc. . We chatted, and everyone loosened up a bit. Finally, one of the more assertive of the group blurted:  
 “Do you know what really ticks me? Did you see that show on *60 Minutes* about the

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<sup>178</sup> Mouffe (1993) refers to a political antagonism, whereby the “other” is perceived as a negation of and in fact dangerous to the “us” identity. Considering the drama written into headlines whenever there is upward pressure on wages, I think “danger” is an appropriate metaphor, and the danger is clearly only on one side of the us/other divide.

sweatshops? I hate that. They make it sound like we all work in some dark hole being treated like shit. I don't like to tell people where I work because they all think this is such a horrible job. "Poor you!" I have to argue with my family all the time---they tell me to quit. It just makes me so mad that everyone thinks that clothes are all made in a bunch of sweatshops!"

By this point in my research I knew that contractors are not all sweatshop owners. But this woman's vehemence started me thinking about marginalization in a different way. I expect that the Chicanas sitting inside eating their lunches would not have the same complaint because their families would probably think that they were lucky to have a fairly steady job, in a town with high unemployment. This is where the issue gets complicated. The sweatshop stories on the one hand seem progressive as they reveal the depths of exploitation in the garment industry, they also demean the work, the jobs and the status of all the people who sew. By now most people *do* think clothes are made in sweatshops.

The stigma of sewing for a living is a product of the gender identity and racialization of the workforce, but as the historical record confirms, these are on-going processes. So too are the subjective orientations (the hopes and aspirations) and material labor market positions of workers related; one cannot be reduced to the status of by-product of the other (Peck, 1996). The link is more dynamic. As McDowell and Court argue, material experiences of work and the formation of labor market expectations are dialectically related and mutually constitutive (McDowell and Court, 1994). The geographic distribution of firms, the structure of the industry and the economics of manufacturing in general cannot be understood outside of these processes.

Many of the managers I interviewed used expressions of anger and frustration when discussing the precariousness of domestic manufacturing. Even in Seattle where job prospects are fairly good for most people, managers expressed concerns about their machinists if they had to find different work. Sid Riley, President of the American Apparel Contractors Association, sums it up: "I just hope that the emerging markets and new jobs that some can see become reality. But I've never been able to see exactly what those jobs are. What I can see is the jobs that we're losing." But some respondents argue that the jobs in the garment industry could be *good* jobs, that people could earn average manufacturing wages, instead of the lowest. When treated fairly, the machine operators I interviewed *like* to sew. What the machinists in Seattle do not like is the pervasive insecurity. As Scott argues for a garment industry that travels the high road in Los Angeles, a vibrant garment industry

would be a boon to some sectors of the local economy---part of a cultural products industry for Seattle, and a stable income for thousands of people. This is a different picture than one that emerges on the front page of the *New York Times*.

As an academic project, I have focused on a set of ideas that mystify production relations in the garment industry and rationalize certain aspects of consumption. But what does this mean for the day to day violence that these relations imply? Certainly the place to start is by interrogating the tightly woven fabric of culture and economy.

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**LINDA GAIL BECKER**

*University of Washington  
Department of Geography, Box 353550  
Seattle, Washington 98195  
Phone: Office (206) 543-5843 Home (206) 523-6919*

**EDUCATION**

1997 University of Washington, Seattle. Ph.D. in Geography.

1987 Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Master of Professional Studies in International Development.

**RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**

***Publications***

1997. 'Invisible Threads': Skill and the Discursive marginalization of the Garment Industry's Workforce.

1987. Defining Family Patterns in West Africa. *Colloqui* 2:14-16.

1987. Determinants of Population Distribution in the Frafra Area of Northern Ghana. Masters Thesis.

***Research Grants***

1994-1995 National Science Foundation, Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant \$9,2000 'Labor Market Formation in an Immigrant Community'. Provides 12 months of field research funding, with Victoria Lawson as Principal Investigator.

***Presentations and Colloquia***

1992. The Interactions of Agroecology and Labor Migration in Northern Ghana. Invited Colloquium, Department of Geography, University of Washington.

April, 1994. Migration and Immigration in Garment Industry Labor Markets. Paper in special session titled 'Women and Work: Consequences of Gendered Migration', at the Annual Meeting, Association of American Geographers, San Francisco, California.

April, 1995. "Chinatown Sweatshop": Representation and Identity in the Garment Industry. Paper in special session on Gender, Immigration and the Workforce at the Annual Meeting, Association of American Geographers, Chicago, Illinois.