

Whose “Choice”?
“Flexible” Women Workers in the Tomato Food Chain
Deborah Barndt
1999

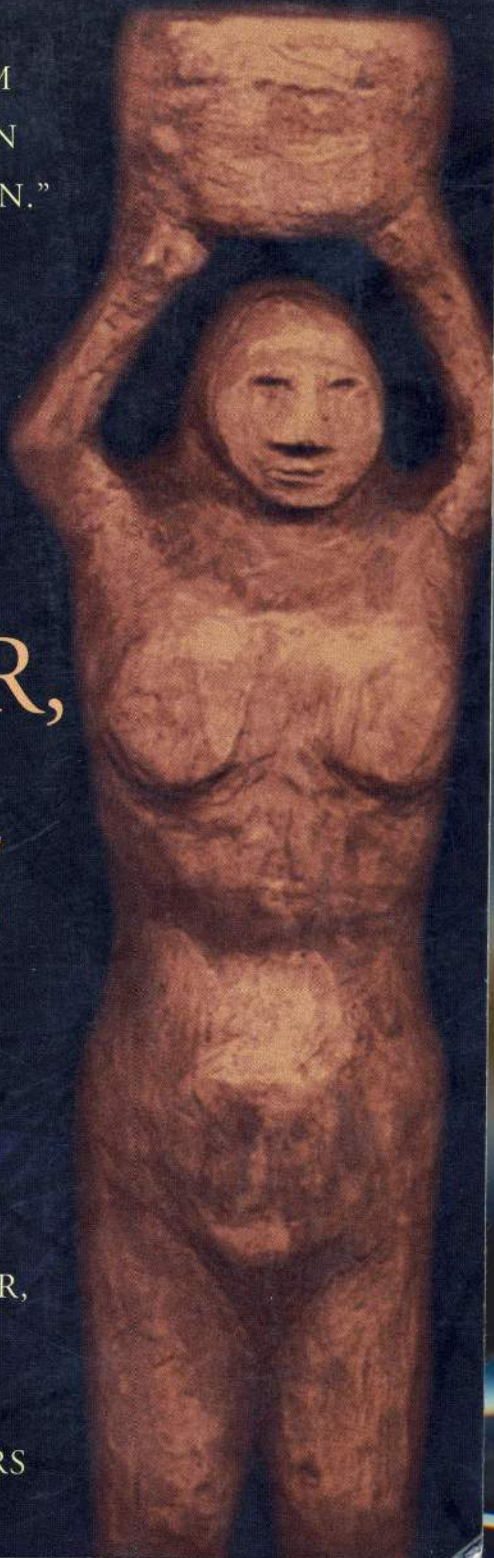
“Whose choice? ‘Flexible’ women workers in the tomato food chain.” Conference of the Society for the Study of Agriculture and Human Values and the Food and Society Association.
Ryerson University.

"A WORK OF REALISM
AND HOPE, BASED ON
DIALOGUE AND ACTION."

—ADRIENNE RICH

SING,
FEMINIST VISIONS
WHISPER,
FOR A
SHOUT,
JUST WORLD
PRAY!

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Whose "Choice"? "Flexible" Women Workers in the Tomato Food Chain

DEBORAH BARNDT

My whole family [works] at McDonald's: my mother, my sisters, my boyfriend, often at different times. And my dad, a police officer, works from eleven in the night 'til six in the morning. So there's no time we can eat together. We just grab something and put it in the microwave.¹

This narrative, by Tania, a York University student working at McDonald's, may resonate with many young women in the North. At the Southern end of the NAFTA food chain, Tomasa, a Mexican fieldworker for "Santa Anita Packers", one of the biggest domestic producers of tomatoes, describes her daily food preparations during the harvest season: "I get up at 3:00 A.M. to make tortillas for our lunch, then the truck comes at six to take us to the fields to start working by 7:00 A.M."²

An hour away at a Santa Anita greenhouse, Sara, a young tomato packer, tells us that the foreign management of Eco-Cultivos has just eliminated the two-hour lunch break, so workers no longer go home for the traditional noontime meal.³

These changes in the eating practices of women workers in the continental food system reflect several dimensions of the global economic restructuring that has reshaped the nature of their labor. Shifts in family eating practices have not been the "choice" of the women whose stories are told here, nor have they "chosen" the work shifts that involve them around the clock in growing and preparing food for other people.

"McDonaldization," initiated in the North and spreading to the South, and "maquilization," initiated in the South and now appearing in the North, are interrelated processes in the new global economy. McDonaldization, as George Ritzer describes it, is the model that the fast food restaurant has offered as a way to reorganize work in all other sectors. This model is based on efficiency, predictability, calculability or quantifiability, substitution of nonhuman technology, control, and the irrationality of rationality.⁴ Central to this model is "flexible" part-time labor.

Originating in the maquila free trade zones of northern Mexico, *maquilization* now refers to a more generalized work process characterized by the feminization of the labor force, extreme segmentation of skill categories, the lowering of real wages, and a nonunion orientation.⁵ In the traditional maquila sectors, such as the garment and electronic industries, there is full-

time (though not necessarily stable) employment. However, the trade liberalization epitomized by NAFTA has opened the door for the development of maquilas throughout Mexico. "Agromaquilas," in particular, depend on more temporary, part-time, and primarily female labor.

Central to both the McDonaldization of the retail and service sectors and the maquilization of the agro-industrial and manufacturing sectors in the continental food chain are the interrelated processes of the "feminization of poverty"⁶ and the "flexibilization of labor."⁷ Since the 1960s, when export processing zones such as the Mexican maquilas began to employ primarily young women in low-skilled and low-wage jobs,⁸ women have been key players in this new global formula.⁹

In the reorganization of work by global capital, women workers have also become key players in new flexible labor strategies, building on an already established sexual division of labor and institutionalized sexism and racism in the societies where transnational corporations set up shop. In these sectors of the global food system, women bring their own meaning to flexible labor as they juggle their lives as both producers and consumers of food, as both part-time salaried workers and full-time domestic workers in managing households.

Tomasita Comes North While Big Mac Goes South

In the Tomasita Project (a three-year cross-border research project conducted by the Department of Environmental Studies, York University–Toronto), the journey of the tomato from the Mexican field through the United States to the Canadian fast-food restaurant reveals the dynamics of globalization. While food production and consumption take place in all three countries, deep inequities, upon which NAFTA was based, remain among them.

The basic North–South contradiction of this continental (and increasingly hemispheric) system is that Mexico produces fresh fruit and vegetables (in this case, the tomato) for North American consumers, while Northern retail supermarkets¹⁰ and fast food restaurants, such as McDonald's, are moving South at record speed¹¹ to market new foods, and new work and food practices, particularly as a result of NAFTA's trade liberalization. This contradiction is revealed in retail advertising, such as a Loblaw's billboard promoting President's Choice products with an image of a Muslim woman in the desert with a shopping cart. The billboard proclaims "Food Means the World to Us." We are seduced by such images into consuming an increasing "diversity" and seemingly endless array of fresh, "exotic"¹² and nontraditional foods. Meanwhile, there are hidden costs under which these foods were produced—the appropriation of indigenous lands; the degradation of the environment and the health and dignity of workers; increasing poverty; deepening sexist

and racist employment practices¹³—which are kept (carefully and consciously) from our view.

The Tomasita Project aims to uncover these costs, particularly by exposing the living and working conditions of the women workers whose labor (not by choice) brings the "world of food" to us. A deconstruction of the Loblaw's ad would reveal these women workers as the producers behind the food product, and show that they, too, are part of a global system that links agro-export economies (such as Mexico) with the increasing consumer demand in the North for fresh produce all year round.

Tomasita is a both a material and symbolic "ecofeminist"¹⁴ tomato within globalized food production—from biogenetic engineering to intensive use of agrochemicals, from long journeys in refrigerated trucks to shorter journeys across supermarket counters where its internationally standardized "product look-up" numbers are punched in. Its fate is paralleled by the intertwining fates of women workers in the different stages of its production, preparation, and consumption. If the tomato is shaped by "just-in-time" production practices, women workers make this supply-on-demand possible through their flexible labor.

The tracing of the tomato chain builds on the tradition of "commodity chain analysis,"¹⁵ which examines three interlocking processes: 1) raw material production, 2) combined processing, packaging, and exporting activities, and 3) marketing and consumptive activities.¹⁶ The women workers who make the tomato chain come alive represent four different sectors of the food system—two in Mexico and two in Canada. In Mexico, they are the pickers and packers in Santa Anita Packers, a large export-oriented agribusiness; and the assembly-line workers producing ketchup at Del Monte, a well-established, multinational food processor. In Canada, the workers are cashiers in Loblaw's supermarkets and service workers in McDonald's restaurants.

How do these women workers (both as producers and consumers) reflect, respond to, and resist the "flexible labor strategy" so central to corporate restructuring? There are, of course, obvious differences between the Mexican indigenous workers moving from harvest to harvest to pick tomatoes and the Canadian women slicing these tomatoes and stacking them into hamburgers. Yet, since NAFTA, there are increasing similarities in the feminization and flexibilization of the labor force in all four sectors and in all three countries. One of the similarities is the increasing participation of young female workers, who, from the perspective of the companies, are seen as both cheaper and more productive than comparable male labor.¹⁷ Gender ideologies, culturally entrenched and reinforced by managerial practices, strongly shape this socially constructed reality.

Flexibilization: From Above and From Below

Key to global economic restructuring is the notion of flexibility. The term, however, changes meaning depending on whose perspective it represents. The perspective from above, from the vantage point of corporate managers, is different from the perspective from below, from the new global workforce. To some, flexibility implies "choice," but "whose choice" rules in a food system built on structural inequalities, which are based on differences of national identity, race, class, gender, and age?

For large transnational corporations, flexibility has meant greater freedom (provided by NAFTA and increasing support from the Mexican government) to set up businesses in Mexico, where businesses are offered lower trade barriers, property laws that allow greater foreign investment, decreasing subsidies, decentralization of production through subcontracting, and so forth. For large Mexican domestic producers such as Santa Anita Packers, trade liberalization has meant entering a globally competitive market with comparative advantages of land, climate, and cheap labor. Once producing primarily for national consumption, Santa Anita has become ever more export-driven—it now produces 85 percent of crops for export and, in the case of greenhouse production, 100 percent for export. The fruit and vegetable sector is one of the few winners under *nafta* in Mexico.

The meaning of flexibility changes when set in the context of the new global marketplace, where borders and nation-states are less and less relevant, and where production is increasingly decentralized while decision-making is increasingly centralized. In this context, "flexibility" also refers to the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production practices. Fordism was based on scientific management principles and organization of tasks in assembly lines for mass production, with the production of large volumes being the objective. Post-Fordist or "just-in-time" production responds to more diversified and specific demands in terms of quality and quantity.¹⁸ It is ultimately very rationalized, of course, as demonstrated by the processes of workplace McDonaldization in which new technologies allow greater control of inventory and labor, while decentralization of production allows companies to shift many of the risks to subcontractors. In talking about the globalized corporate world, or "globalization from above,"¹⁹ then, flexibility is ultimately about maximizing profits and minimizing obstacles (such as trade tariffs, government regulations, underused labor, and trade union organization).

Women Workers' Experiences of Flexibility

What does flexibility mean, though, for the women moving the tomato through this continental food system, from Mexican field to Canadian table?

If we first look at the consumption end of the food chain, the fast food and supermarket workers in Canada, and then move to the source, where women plant, pick, pack, and process tomatoes in Mexico, we can learn how flexibilization has affected these women's daily lives. McDonald's "flexible labor strategies" have been key to the model of production of McDonald's and its competitors. McJobs, whether filled by students, seniors, or underemployed women, have always been primarily part-time (up to twenty-four hours a week). Part-time jobs do not require certain benefits and, because they are limited to short three- to four-hour shifts, do not require many breaks. Women student workers might be sent home after an hour or two if sales for the day are not reaching their predetermined quota. Karen, a university student, explains:

They're supposed to make a certain amount of money an hour, say \$1,300 between twelve noon and 1:00 P.M., and if they make less than that, for every \$50 (under the quota), they cut half an hour of labor. Especially if you're newer, there's pressure to go home. It takes me an hour to get to work by bus, and I could be asked to go home after an hour of work.²⁰

Flexibility of this temporary labor force is reinforced by the lack of trade union organization. Strong company-induced loyalty is fed by perks such as team outings, weekly treats, and training that inculcate a family orientation. It is meant to dissuade employees from seeking unionization or from complaining about their hours. Nonetheless, there are increasing efforts to organize McDonald's workers and there have been union successes in British Columbia and Quebec.

Loblaws

The experience of flexibility for women workers in the larger chains of the retail food sector, such as Loblaws in Canada, is just as precarious. Even though part-time workers are unionized, their working conditions have been eroded through recent labor negotiations. In the case of Loblaws, for example, a contract negotiated by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union eliminated almost all of the full-time cashier positions. Part-time cashiers are dependent on seniority for being able to choose their working hours. This particularly affects new cashiers, such as Wanda: "When you are low on the seniority list, you are lucky to get any hours. They might call you in once every two weeks for a four-hour shift."²¹ This restriction on available hours also affects the cashiers' earning power. A cashier must complete five hundred hours before being eligible for a raise. At this pace, she could work at the starting wage for over two years. From the company's perspective, this shift to primarily part-time flexible labor is a conscious strategy; it is part of "lean production."

Del Monte

What does flexibility look like in the Del Monte food processing plant in Irapuato, Mexico? The production of ketchup in Del Monte takes place during a four-month period, from February through May. In part, this coincides with the peak period for harvesting tomatoes; thus flexibility in the agromaquilas depends, in part, on the seasonal nature of agricultural production (becoming less pronounced with the increasing phenomenon of year-round greenhouse production).

Another reason that production is limited to one period is to maximize the use of the food processing machinery and the skilled labor force. Del Monte's ketchup production employs a combination of Fordist and post-Fordist processes: it is an assembly line production from the dumping and cooking of tomatoes in big vats to the bottling, capping, and labeling on a mechanized line. Because other food processing (such as marmalade) uses the same machinery, the same full-time workers can easily shift from one product to another. Many are, in fact, multiskilled and are moved from one process to another, reflecting post-Fordist practices.

Such multitasking is another form of flexibility in the experience of the new global work force. Part-time women workers are brought on for the peak season only and for less skilled tasks. These women sometimes sit in the waiting room of the plant, hoping for a few hours of work, which are determined day by day. Flexibility reigns in a context where there is an oversupply of cheap labor, so companies can make such decisions on the spot, hiring and dismissing workers on a daily basis. This is another example of lean production, dependent on a disposable supply of female labor.

Santa Anita Packers

Finally we reach the source, Santa Anita Packers—the agribusiness that organizes production of tomatoes, from the importing of seeds to the exporting of waxed and packaged tomatoes in refrigerated trucks. Santa Anita, headquartered in Jalisco, central Mexico, uses a mixture of production practices and diverse applications of the notion of flexibility.

It is important to understand the historical development of the agro-export industry in Mexico²² in the context of North–South political economic relations, which are based on ever-deepening inequalities, both between and within nations. Since the early part of the century, Mexican agriculture has been led by Northern demand for fresh fruit and vegetables, and by the use of cheap Mexican labor by U.S. agribusinesses on both sides of the border. While the Depression in the 1930s led to American workers taking over farm labor jobs from Mexican workers in the U.S. and also to a spurt of farm labor organ-

izing, the availability of cheap Mexican indigenous migrant labor fed the postwar development of large agribusinesses in both countries from the 1950s onward. This transnationalization of the economy was built upon institutionalized racism and sexism within Mexico and the U.S., employing indigenous workers often as family units who were brought by the companies from the poorer states.

The sexual division of labor is seen most strongly in the packing plants, where a gendered ideology is used to justify the employment of women, as echoed by one of the company owners: "Women 'see' better than men, they can better distinguish the colors and they treat the product more gently. In selection, care, and handling, women are more delicate. They can put up with more than men in all aspects: the routine, the monotony. Men are more restless, and won't put up with it."²³

The feminization of the global labor force, and thus the feminization of global poverty, has been based on the marginal social role that women play and on a social consensus that their domestic duties are primary. As Lourdes Beneria argues, "the private sphere of the household is at the root of continuing asymmetries between men and women."²⁴

In the case of Mexican agro-industry, women are among the most marginalized workers, along with children, students, the elderly, and indigenous peoples. Sara Lara notes that agribusinesses exploit their common situation of "mixedness," referring to the fact that these workers already play socially marginal roles based on their gender, race, or age: "Women as housewives, indigenous peoples as 'poor peasants,' children as sons and daughters, young people as students, all as the ad hoc subjects of flexible processes."²⁵ It is important to integrate national identity, gender, race, class, age, and marital status²⁶ into any analysis of the new global labor force.

Deepening Inequalities: Flexibility for Whom?

In their restructuring, corporations have adopted a dual employment strategy that deepens the inequalities within the workforce and divides it into two groups: a "nucleus" of skilled workers who are trained in new technologies and post-Fordist production processes (quality circles, multiskilling, and multitasking) and who have stable employment; and a "periphery" of unskilled workers whose jobs are very precarious. McDonald's and Loblaw's each has a small full-time work force, mainly male, while women make up the majority of the more predominant part-time work force.²⁷

Tomato production in Mexico mirrors this dualism. Small numbers of permanent workers prepare the seedlings and the land for production, and later pack and process the tomatoes; a large number of temporary part-time

workers pick tomatoes during the harvest seasons. Santa Anita, for example, employs *mestizos* (people of mixed race) from the local area for the jobs of cultivating the tomato plants, while hundreds of poor indigenous workers, brought in by trucks and housed in conditions of squalor in makeshift camps, do much of the picking during the three-to-five-month harvest season.²⁸ In this dual employment strategy, indigenous workers are again required to be the most flexible, which is yet another form of discrimination and exploitation.

Such flexibility has been integral to labor intensive and seasonal agricultural production for decades, though the composition of the migrant labor force has shifted over time. It is not uncommon for entire families to work together in the field, when the demand for labor is up. Children of local mestizo peasant workers join their families on weekends during peak season, while children of indigenous migrant workers, with neither school nor extended family to care for them, often work alongside their parents.²⁹ With increasing unemployment in Mexico, however, men are taking on agricultural jobs done previously by women, such as picking, and because the current economic crisis has increased the surplus of labor, companies choose the youngest and heartiest workers above the older ones (the ideal age seems to be fifteen to twenty-four, so workers in their thirties can already be considered less desirable). The flexible labor strategies of Mexican agribusinesses are predicated on race, gender, and age. And once again, flexibility is determined by the companies and not the workers.

Technological changes within the production process are integral to the application of flexibilization. Differences among workers (of gender, race, and skill) are accentuated with the increasingly sophisticated modes of greenhouse production and packing. Tomatoes in those plants, for example, are now weighed and sorted by color in a computerized process, which at the same time records the inventory and monitors the productivity of the workers. Through these changes, foreign managers and technicians are reorganizing production relations and the workday in ways that are also shifting social relations, both in the workplace and at home.

In a Santa Anita greenhouse, unproductive workers are dismissed daily, as there is always a plentiful pool of surplus labor to choose from. There are echoes here of the McDonald's worker being sent home when quotas are down and the Loblaw's cashier not being called for weeks when she's not needed, as well as Mexican women waiting for a few hours of work on Del Monte's ketchup production line. Flexibility serves the companies' need to maximize production and profits; it does not always serve the needs of Mexican or Canadian women in this food chain to survive, to complement their family income, or to organize their lives and their double-day responsibilities. And as

Sara Lara concludes, "flexibility is not a choice for women," and "labor force management by companies is at the same time family management, that is, it reinforces particular family power relations."³⁰

With NAFTA, the Mexican fruit and vegetable industry has been one of the only sectors to benefit from trade liberalization and has maintained an international competitiveness. Mexico has the advantage over its Northern partners in terms of land, climate, and cheap labor. The expansion of the agro-export industry, however, reflects a basic North-South contradiction between a "negotiated flexibility" and a "primitive flexibility."³¹

Large domestic companies in Mexico, such as Santa Anita, are becoming increasingly multinational, yet are still in the periphery of production decisions (controlled outside Mexico) and often lag behind in technological development. In the agro-export economy of Mexico, there is a growth of unstable and temporary employment in the still labor-intensive processes of production, sorting, packing, and processing. In these jobs, women, children, and indigenous peoples (the most flexible workers in a rural labor market) are managed by "primitive flexibility." Transnational companies, however, are located primarily in the more industrialized North and control production through ownership, subcontracting, and advanced technology (biogenetic engineering, sophisticated food processing, production of most of the inputs and machinery of production, and design of the commercialization and distribution systems). These transnationals employ the "nucleus" of skilled workers, with relatively stable employment, and manage this workforce through "negotiated flexibility."

Comparisons Across Borders: Women Workers as Producers and Consumers

Yet there are also increasing similarities between women workers in Mexican agribusinesses and food processing plants and women working as supermarket cashiers and fast food service workers in Canada. They play key roles in the implementation of corporate flexible labor strategies. As a result, they experience similar contradictions in their efforts to fulfill their dual roles as salaried workers in the food system and as consumers or providers of food for their families. Wanda, a Canadian cashier, feels some common bonds with Tomasa, a Mexican tomato fieldworker:

Tomasa used to make her own tortillas but now she has to go and work, so she buys ready-made tortillas. And she's feeling that pull just like the North American women are: Should I stay at home with the kids? Should I go to work? She's feeling the economic thing, because everybody has to survive, everybody has to eat. She's taking care of the

family, that's a priority in her life; I'd like to think that in my life that's a priority.³²

Wanda has reached a point in her career, after twenty-three years as a part-time cashier, where she now has seniority and so may choose her hours. She "chooses" to work three eight-hour days instead of six four-hour shifts, for example, because she moved out of town a few years ago and must now commute one hour to work, adding two hours to her workday. That "choice" is framed by the fact that if she transferred to a Loblaws that was closer to her home, she would lose her seniority. She also "chooses" to work on weekends, because, as a single mother, it is the only time her former husband can take care of her children, saving her child-care expenses. Her "choice" of hours allows her to be at home during most weekdays:

As a single parent, I'm taking my kids to school, doing the piano lessons, the Brownies, that kind of thing. So I know which days I don't want to come down to Toronto to work, because it's quite a ways for me. Or if they have a pd day [professional development day for teachers], I don't go into work that day.³³

Here is where the flexibility of women's labor comes head to head with other social contradictions of an institutionalized sexist culture. Corporate managers, in fact, often point out that their flexible labor strategy suits women who "choose" to have more time with their families, and therefore don't want to work full-time. And there is certainly some truth to this. Even some feminists argue that flexibilization can be reappropriated by women and men, if it challenges the sexual division of labor in the home and promotes more shared responsibility, while also shortening the work week. But it usually has little to do with "choice" and is often based on the assumption that women, not men or public child care, will take care of children and feed their families.

In the Mexican context, there is even less of an illusion of "choice" for indigenous women who are at the bottom of the hierarchy of workers, both locally and globally. While Santa Anita Packers brings indigenous families to work during the harvest season, they provide neither adequate housing nor child care, and it has been a struggle to get the children into the local school. It has been reported that company foremen became angry with indigenous women workers who brought their children tied to their backs to the fields and who stopped work, periodically, to breastfeed them. Here, in the most basic sense, the primary role that women fulfill in feeding their children is regulated by the company's rules. And though they have little choice but to bring their children to the fields, they also take tremendous risks in doing so. When we visited their camp, one baby was reportedly dying because, as the

indigenous workers explained, pesticide residue on the mother's hand had entered the child's mouth during breastfeeding.

Since NAFTA, and with the deepening impoverishment of the rural population in Mexico, these indigenous families are forced to migrate from one harvest to another for even longer periods of the year. Whereas previously they may have been able to remain home for a few months and raise some of their own food, they are now permanently moving, by necessity, ready to go to wherever there is work.

The mestizo workers who live near the Santa Anita plant and only work seasonally experience the insecurity in another way. Due to erratic weather conditions, their work periods have been cut short, and the jobs available for them peter out. Describing the situation, Tomasa said:

In the end, we were working one or two days a week, and then not at all. They don't even say thanks 'til the day that they return. Only when they begin to plant again in the next season, they come with their truck to take us back to the fields, no?³⁴

This sense of never knowing when you are going to work, and often in the case of indigenous migrant workers, even where, is a permanent condition of agricultural fieldworkers. Canadian cashiers and fast food workers may know a week or two in advance what their shifts are to be, but the constantly changing hours often affect family routines, interactions and, especially, eating practices. It is not uncommon for a family to have no time when they can all sit down to a meal together.

Whose interests are served by this flexible labor strategy? Flexibilization as it plays out in the continental food system, and particularly in the lives of women workers in this food chain from Mexico to Canada, must be seen as "an ideology propagated by firm owners as a desirable future end state, and supported by conservative probusiness forces and governments in order to assist the private sector in achieving this goal."³⁵ It is part and parcel of lean production, maximizing efficiency and profits and leaving the most vulnerable and marginalized workers bound to the shifting winds of just-in-time production. In the end, they become just-in-time workers with no time of their own.

And what are the real choices for women in this system? Wanda, the Loblaws cashier, has taken a keen interest in this study and has read the stories of the Mexican workers. She concludes:

I feel an overwhelming sadness and connection to all the women in the "tomato food chain." We all play a seemingly small part, but the ramifications of our work are enormous.... We are all entrapped in the corporate workings of flexibilization. However, the dilemma still exists for all of us in the food chain: we're trying to survive.³⁶

I gratefully acknowledge the tremendous efforts of the graduate research assistants who worked from 1995 to 1999 on the Tomasita Project, helping to shape it and carrying out the interviews referred to in this article. Special thanks to Emily Levitt, Deborah Moffet, Lauren Baker (Mexican interviews), Ann Eyerman (McDonald's interviews), Stephanie Conway (Loblaws interviews), Eglá Martínez-Salazar (review of Mexican interviews), Karen Serwonka (McDonald's interviews), Anuja Mendiratta, and Melissa Tkachyk (glossary).

Excerpted from *Women Working the NAFTA Food Chain: Women, Food and Globalization*, Deborah Barndt, ed. (Toronto: Sumach Press, 1999). Reprinted by permission of Sumach Press.

NOTES

- ¹ Tania (pseudonym), interview with author, Toronto, Ontario, February 1998.
- ² Tomasa (pseudonym), interview with author, Gómez Farfás, Mexico, April 1997.
- ³ Sara (pseudonym), interview with author, San Isidro Mazatepec, Mexico, April 1997.
- ⁴ See George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1993). Ritzer notes that the new model of rationalization in our culture is no longer the bureaucracy, as Max Weber suggested, but the fast-food restaurant. He outlines the characteristics of this work organization based on 1) efficiency (from the factory-farm production of the ingredients to the computer scanners at the counter), 2) predictability (from the ambience and the personnel to the limited menu), 3) calculability or quantity, 4) substitution of nonhuman technology (the techniques, procedures, routines, and machines make it almost impossible for workers to act autonomously), 5) control (the rationalization of food preparation and serving gives control over the employees), and 6) the irrationality of rationality (for example, we see McDonald's as rational despite the reality that the chemicals in the food are harmful and that we can gain weight from the high calories and cholesterol levels).
- ⁵ The four dimensions of maquilization, developed by J. Carillo as he observed restructuring in the auto industry, are elaborated by Kathryn Kopinak in *Desert Capitalism: What Are the Maquiladoras?* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997): 13.
- ⁶ Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987: 25.
- ⁷ Kirsten Appendini, "Revisiting Women Wage-Workers in Mexico's Agro-Industry: Changes in Rural Labor Markets," *Working Paper 95, no. 2*. Copenhagen: Centre for Development Research, 1995: 11–12.
- ⁸ The categorizing of so-called "low-skilled" work needs to be problematized, particularly when describing the kinds of tasks allotted to women in food production. Job tasks that correlate with women's domestic labor have almost universally been devalued and their counterparts in paid work have suffered a similar fate. While reigning gender ideologies purport that women are "naturally" more suited to certain tasks, Elson and Pearson argue that the famous nimble fingers are not "an inheritance from their mothers," but rather "the result of training they have received from their mothers and other female kin since early infancy in the tasks socially appropriate to woman's role." See Diane Elson and Ruth Roach Pearson, "The Subordination of Women and the Internationalization of Factory Production," in Nalini

Visvanathan et al., eds., *The Women, Gender, and Development Reader* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1997): 191–203.

⁹ For a classic analysis of this development in the 1980s, see Swasti Mitter, *Common Fate, Common Bond: Women in the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

¹⁰ For a further elaboration of this North–South contradiction, see Deborah Barndt, "Bio/cultural Diversity and Equity in Post-nafta Mexico (or: Tomasita Comes North while Big Mac Goes South)," in Jan Drydyk and Peter Penz, eds., *Global Justice, Global Democracy* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1997): 55–69.

¹¹ While the presence of North American fast-food restaurants in Mexico is more visible, there has also been an incursion of the retail giants. Few are aware, for example, that the big Mexican supermarket chain, Aurera, is now owned by Wal-Mart, the Arkansas-based company that has become synonymous with corporate takeover, spelling death for smaller retail chains.

¹² The "appropriation" of the "exotic other" is the subject of the postcolonial theory and cultural studies examination of how difference is constructed within the politics of consumption to entice us into buying the mythical (and essentialist) look, the purity, the passion, the natural freshness of Southern peoples and lands. For an analysis of how Loblaws, and particularly President's Choice, has led the retail market in packaging difference, see C. Sachetti and T. Dufresne, "President's Choice through the Looking Glass," *Fuse Magazine*, (May–June 1994): 23.

¹³ Analyses by ecological economists have helped to unveil the "hidden costs" in the production of the food we eat. William Rees, for example, advocates that we measure the "ecological footprint" of the goods we consume, and feminist ecological economist Ellie Perkins reminds us of the unpaid labor of women in managing the household. A more popular version of this analysis can be found in the cartoon story, "Tomasita Tells All: True Confessions of Tomasita, the Abused Tomato," an ecofeminist tale told from the perspective of the tomato forced onto this continental conveyor belt. Parts of this story appear in Deborah Barndt, *Tangled Routes: Women, Work and Globalization on the Tomato Trail* (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

¹⁴ Ecofeminism offers an analysis that links the historical domination of women with the human domination of nonhuman nature. Although there are many different schools of ecofeminist thought, I support an analysis that proposes an integrative, historically and culturally contingent analysis of structural oppressions based on gender, race, and class, as intertwined with the exploitation of nature as a "resource." I don't ascribe to the stream of ecofeminism that suggests women (as an essentialist category) are inherently (biologically) closer to nature. See Noel Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁵ See Gary Gereffi and Miguel Korzeniewicz, eds., *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994).

¹⁶ See Laura Reynolds, "Institutionalizing Flexibility: A Comparative Analysis of Fordist and Post-Fordist Models of Third World Agro-Export Production," in Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, eds., *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993): 143–160.

¹⁷ Elson and Pearson, "The Subordination of Women and the Internationalization of Factory Production": 192.

¹⁸ For a useful discussion of Fordist and post-Fordist production practices, particularly in terms of the model of fast food-restaurants, see Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*: 150–153.

¹⁹ Jeremy Brecher, John Childs, and J. Cutler, eds., *Global Visions: Beyond the New World Order* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1993).

²⁰ Karen (pseudonym), interview with author, Toronto, Ontario, February 1998.

- ²¹ Wanda (pseudonym), interview with author, Toronto, Ontario, May 1997.
- ²² See Sara Lara, "La Flexibilidad del Mercado de Trabajo Rural": *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 54, no.1 (January-February 1994): 29-48.
- ²³ Conrado Lomeli, interview with author, Guadalajara, Mexico, December 1996.
- ²⁴ Lourdes Beneria, "Capitalism and Socialism: Some Feminist Questions," in Visvanathan et al., eds., *The Women, Gender, and Development Reader*: 330.
- ²⁵ Lara, "La Flexibilidad del Mercado de Trabajo Rural": 41. Translated from the Spanish by the author.
- ²⁶ Single women are preferred as packers, for example, because they are moved from one production site to another and housed in company homes in women-centered families. In the case of Mexican farm laborers hired by the farms program in Ontario to pick and pack our vegetables during the Canadian growing season, however, widows are preferred, reflecting a *machista* attitude that they're safer than married or single women in a foreign job (Irena [pseudonym], interview with author, Miacatlán, Mexico, December 1998).
- ²⁷ According to Statistics Canada, women are more likely to work part-time, by a ratio of 3 to 1, compared with men. *The Globe and Mail*, reporting on the study, states that "part-time employment was most prevalent among sales and service occupations, particularly in the food-service industry and among grocery clerks." *The Globe* quotes Gordon Bercherman of Canadian Policy Research Networks: "Many employers want to hire staff to work less than 30 hours a week because they can be more flexible in scheduling around peak demand and because they have to provide fewer benefits" ("Part-time Work Stats Questioned," *The Globe and Mail*, 18 March 1998: 6). A related article notes that the most predominant female occupation is "retail sales clerk," with "waitress" as number seven on the list ("He's a Trucker, She Types," *The Globe and Mail*, 18 March 1998: 1).
- ²⁸ The harvest season has varied tremendously lately, due to erratic weather conditions that are often blamed on El Niño. Unseasonal freezes have cut short the tomato season, causing companies financial losses and sending workers either on to other harvests or home to their villages where they seek casual labor to carry them through until the next harvest. In Gómez Fariás, the workers lost three months of expected fieldwork and were eking out a living making and selling straw mats (Tomasia, interview).
- ²⁹ With the economic crisis in Mexico and deepening gaps between the rich and the poor, agricultural workers are part of a "family wage economy," requiring all members to work for the survival of the family. In *Desert Capitalism: What Are the Maquiladoras?* Kathryn Kopinak shows that while in 1981, 1.8 family members had to work to feed a family of five, by 1996, the number was 5.4. Though Northern economies are described as "family consumer economies" rather than "family wage economies," it is increasingly the case that working-class families also depend on multiple salaries, which are often from combinations of part-time jobs.
- ³⁰ Lara, "La Flexibilidad del Mercado de Trabajo Rural": 42. Translated from the Spanish by the author.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*: 41.
- ³² Wanda (pseudonym), interview with author, Toronto, Ontario, October 1997.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Tomasia interview.
- ³⁵ Kopinak, *Desert Capitalism*: 116.
- ³⁶ Wanda (pseudonym), interview with author, Toronto, Ontario, August 1998.