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Interdisciplinary Work on the Line

I should, perhaps, begin with an explanation of the title to this paper, with something that makes the bridge from my home field of literary Hispanism to sociological fieldwork with Tijuana prostitutes. The project I will be describing here is not just interdisciplinary (multidisciplinary) but collaborative and has been a particularly rich experience for me. It has given me an opportunity to learn about the very different ways by which knowledge is structured in other disciplines, and how those knowledge structures blind us to disciplinary limitations. At the same time, I have been able learn enough about several of these disciplines so as to cross the lines and write and speak to audiences in/from different social and academic sites. This project also crosses several other lines as well: the literal geographical borderline between the US and Mexico both in terms of my and my collaborators' institutional locations and, with respect to the project's goals, in relation to the necessary transnational implications of the study. And the sensitive, morally fraught nature of the work we have been doing, until very recently, when a body of very fine books have begun to break down institutional barriers, walked a transgressive fine line between acceptance and rejection in a specific stigmatized and stigmatizing manner.

In our Signs article published a few years ago, we cited an article by Lynn Sharon Chancer which began by asking the reader to imagine the hypothetical existence of a sociologist involved in participant observer field work on prostitution in Chicago. As Chancer notes, the responses she received to her suggested scenario (everyone assumed her academic interest derived from a prostitutional past) lead her to conclude that “something about sex work is

especially threatening, putting the researcher socially/sociologically at risk above and beyond the dangers attaching to the researched activity itself" (167). The risk is, clearly, both personal and professional. On the one hand, the places where illegal prostitution is practiced in the U.S. tend to be dangerous; on the other, the researcher can suffer professionally. All too frequently, the work is compromised, and "the benefits of participant observation are seldom brought to bear" (153). Many U.S. researchers do not go into the field at all, preferring the less risky sites of jails and halfway houses to interview a very non-random sample of women. Furthermore, the highly charged social connotations of this kind of study tend to identify the researcher as a member of that stigmatized community, to her professional detriment. In any case, the researcher's anxieties tend to be such that she needs to clearly delineate the distinction between herself and the women she studies, and this professional distance impacts significantly on the efforts to dialogue with the prostitutes, whose difficult lives have taught them distrust of strangers who may only want to use them, and who are highly sensitive--and generally put off by--the morally-encoded nuance of an academic's "objective" interest.

Prostitution has been a defining characteristic of Tijuana's vast tourist industry since the growth boom at the beginning of the century, and serves as the basis for its infamous reputation--on the U.S. side of the border-- as a sin city and giant brothel existing to serve the San Diego naval base, and on the Mexican side as a rest stop, point of departure, and haven for the Mexican field workers coming up from the south of the country. Nowadays, the presence of drug dealers and the 15,000 prostitutes¹ continue to feed this ugly stereotype, despite efforts by long-time residents to change the way people both in Mexico and in the United States think of the city and to encourage the image of the city as a modern metropolis that welcomes family-type tourism. These revisionary intentions, however, seem to be caught up in a tacit conflict with traditional expectations and with economic realities. Thus, for example, there is the curious phenomenon of Revolution Avenue and its attached "Zona Norte," the old center of the brothel-cum-night club industry, which currently by day functions as a family-oriented tourist area with restaurants and

handicraft shops, and by night transforms back into its old identity as an area of discoteques/bars/brothels.

One reason the Zona Norte is so important for all sorts of commercial transactions is that it is not only the site of the city's official "red zone," it is also here that a large number of contacts are made between prospective border crossers and the polleros (the person who makes a living guiding illegal immigrants into the United States). These contacts usually occur in the area's restaurants, in the billiard rooms, and in the run-down hotels. The Zona Norte is a major way-station for those people who hope to immigrate illegally into the United States. These are poor people, transient people, who come to the area, stay in the hotels and boarding houses, and make use of all the wide panoply of services offered in the area: not only sexual services, but also second hand clothing and hardware, food and pharmaceuticals. There is in the Zona Norte a wide range of shops not found in the nearby downtown area, making this an obligatory stop for both transients and the permanent population living in the area. This is a doubly captive audience for products; both the temporary and the permanent residents are equally users of the many and varied services, so that internal immigrants and local people, tourists and clients for sexual services all fall into the same vast network.

The challenge facing the current state government--which in 1990 changed from the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) to the conservative opposition party (PAN: Partido Acción Nacional)--is to change the image of the city. Thus, for example, in 1995 a preliminary proposal was made to relocate the Zona Norte, so as to diffuse the concentration of sex workers from the downtown area and thus, in theory, cleaning up the city's public face. In another attempt to change the city's image, in August 1997 the presidente municipal (mayor) of Tijuana, José Guadalupe Osuna Milán took the unusual step of "copyrighting" the name of the city, so as, in their terms, to protect "el vocablo Tijuana para evitar su mal uso" (*Jornada* 22 Sept. 1997: 8; "the word 'Tijuana' so as to avoid its ill use"). This action was the motive for a good deal of national satire, but has had little real effect on lives or policies. The elected officials' concern with the good name of Tijuana, of course, inevitably reminds us of the city's less than pristine

reputation; indeed, such legislation can only be imagined in the context of the considerable adverse publicity that has made the name “Tijuana” a byword for the worst stereotypes of excess associated with Mexico’s northern border.

While the status of these particular plans remains uncertain, a great deal of controversy has surrounded the licensing of new establishments in various other zones of the city. Critics argue that the government’s efforts are mostly cosmetic, since the goal is not to decrease the immensely profitable business of prostitution, but merely to displace it from its current, historically familiar location, to more diffused, but no less accessible locales. Most notoriously, these new establishments feature sex-related services like table dancing, which cater to particular clienteles (mostly tourists). Concerns about these new developments have been raised most vocally by representatives of the boards of restaurants, bars, etc., who have been using mass communication methods and the increasingly ubiquitous internet to call into question the commitment of the local government to making reforms.

The “Black Legend” of Tijuana as a giant brothel for U.S. tourists, soldiers based in San Diego, and transient Mexicans on their way to California’s prosperous agricultural fields makes the study of prostitution in this city both necessary, and exceptionally difficult. As Wendy Chapkis says in another context, which is equally revelant here: “Fear of and fascination with bad girls . . . is in part, I think, due to a concern with the potential collapse of the madonna/whore divide--in favor of the whore” (4). An additional complicating factor is the widespread disdain in Mexico’s centralized power structure for any border issues. Carlos Monsiváis, for example, underlines the political, social, and cultural cost of the traditional division between Mexico City and the rest of the country: “Se santificó el juego de los opuestos: civilización y barbarie, capital y provincia, cultura y desolación. Desde principios de siglo . . . cunde una idea: la provincia es 'irredimible', quedarse es condenarse” ‘A play of opposites was sanctified: civilization and barbarism, capital and provinces, culture and desolation. Since the beginning of the century . . . the idea has propagated that the province is 'unredeemable,' that to stay is to be condemned’ (“TLC” 197). From Mexico City's point of

view, the northern border is imagined as perhaps the most "unredeemable" of all the provincial representations, and Baja California is practically a foreign country. It is from a centrist perspective the region most affected by the cultural, linguistic, and moral corruption of Mexico's unfortunately proximate and powerful neighbor, the United States, and it is cut off geographically from the rest of the nation by its nature as a peninsula and by the treacherous Rumorosa mountain pass that is the most familiar land bridge into the area.

Such a complex of overdetermined images makes Tijuana an obvious site for a thoughtful, feminist cultural analysis: surprisingly little has been done in this respect, however. For the past six years, I have been involved in an collaborative project that brings to bear some of the insights of a feminist cultural practice to a specific case study at the heart of Tijuana's unfortunate international image. Several Mexican colleagues and I have been collaborating on an in-depth, multidisciplinary study of female prostitution in Tijuana that attempts to understand the concrete social situation of the women involved in this profession through careful analysis of their demographics, their specific social situation, the economics of the profession, ethnographic analysis of interviews with the women, a complementary client study, and efforts to address public health concerns. My major collaborators in this project include two people who have worked since the 1980s on this topic: María Gudelia Rangel Gómez (sociologist and public health practitioner) and Armando Rosas Solis (economist and demographer), along with Yasmína Katsulis, a new addition to the team, currently a Ph.D student in anthropology at Yale University. Along with substantial collaboration from Mexican scholars and people at the Ministry of Health, two other individuals are involved in a more major fashion in another, longer term and quantitative phase of the project: statistician Carlos Hernández Suárez and mathematical epidemiologist Carlos Castillo Chávez, and we have also counted on the technical support Bonnie Delgado, a local activist who transcribed most of the interviews, and Lorenia García, who manipulated the interviews for qualitative statistical analysis through an academic computer package.

The study involves three main components: one directed towards a better understanding of the social and cultural characteristics of the women working in prostitution in Tijuana, and summarizing the insights gained through the series of in-depth interviews; another related to proposing measures that respond directly to concerns about health and disease transmission in those communities, and a third concern that inserts this project into an ongoing international, interdisciplinary theoretical debate by feminist scholars from many disciplines on feminist approaches to sex work and trafficking. This theoretical debate has been largely carried out by humanists and social scientists, and our project weighs the usefulness of this mostly Anglo-European discourse for the very different social and cultural situation obtaining in Mexico. To give just one example: the US and most European discussion takes place against a background of criminalization; in Mexico prostitution is legal, if not quite in good taste. Thus, such US organizations as PONY and COYOTE lobby heavily against prohibitionist rhetoric and ethnics, and have a small, relatively well-funded base of support for their largely activist agenda. In contrast, the 300-member Tijuana María Magdalena group has organized women from the lowest-paid strata of sex workers--the street prostitutes--to serve as a basic education and public health resource.

Our project is also deeply concerned with the ways in which unwritten prejudices shape (and in some cases deform) the so-called objective hypotheses that undergird analyses in biological sciences/epidemiology and mathematical and statistical modeling analyses, for example, by defining prostitution a priori as a risk category or source of infection. Since these scientific studies have an important role in defining public policy, we are particularly concerned that they reflect accurately the material under analysis, or, in the worst of cases, at least recognize their own bias and its potential effects on statistical manipulations.

As an intermediate product of this long collaboration, four of us have written a book, Este ambiente de noche: La prostitución femenina en Tijuana (María Gudelia Rangel Gómez, Armando Rosas Solís, Yasmina Katsulis and myself). In addition to published research, consultation with health and municipal officials, and studies of client behavior gleaned from the

internet, direct information from the women themselves came from a two-phase qualitative project. The first phase involved ethnographic work in 1988, including visits to different zones of Tijuana to compile a list, as complete as possible, of places where prostitution occurs and to learn the social characteristics and study the dynamics of each of these places. This phase of the project included interviews with 184 women working in prostitution in Tijuana. The principal goals of the interviews were to evaluate their knowledge of HIV/AIDS and to take blood samples to test for seropositivity. During this process (1) a complete census was made of all the places in which prostitution is practiced in Tijuana; (2) researchers surveyed the areas to observe the working dynamics in each site; (3) through participant observation, researchers studied the characteristics of women working both in establishments and on the street; (4) researchers classified the zones based on the social characteristics of the sites in which prostitution is practiced and of the women who work in them. This information has been continuously updated by the researchers. The second phase took place in 1994-95 and consisted of in-depth interviews conducted in their workplaces with thirty Tijuana prostitutes; these women were chosen taking into account this complete census of places in which prostitution is practiced and types of services offered. This aspect of the project has also been continually updated as the book nears completion so that the information included will be current and accurate.

1. Qualitative methods

Efforts to describe prostitution either as stigmatized sexual activity or as “just another job” fall short in explanatory power; the real transgressive quality is that sex work involves crossing boundaries traditionally kept separate. Sex work is about work; it is also about sex, and the study of this social problem is kept complicated both the marginalized quality of the work and its place in a hidden economy as well as the stigmatized and even public nature of sexual activity that normative society sees as best kept a private matter. A major goal of this project is to plead for the necessity of more, and more carefully structured, empirical studies that will more adequately address this complexity and develop richer accounts.

Our analysis of the set of in-depth interviews had focused on four large areas of signal importance to the lives of these women: their commentaries on work, on the family, on prostitution itself, and on health-related issues. With respect to the family, we have identified the following crucial concerns:

- discussion of their home situation as children and adolescents,
- their sexual initiation,
- the location and organization of their own families (children, partners, etc.),
- the family's knowledge or lack of knowledge about the woman's work as a prostitute.

In relation to the topic of prostitution we highlight these issues:

- the prostitute's position with respect to her work,
- how she negotiates values and prejudices related to prostitution,
- her understanding of the social and familial cost,
- how she deals with the risk and unpleasantness of sexual harassment.

While the bulk of our questions on the women's relationship to the labor market focus on issues surrounding prostitution, we are also interested in clarifying the relationship between the woman's place in the labor market in general and the slippages that demonstrate a movement back and forth between prostitution and other types of employment. The categories under analysis include:

- jobs the women have held other than working in prostitution,
- prostitution conceived as a job,
- length of time they have been working in prostitution,
- movement in and out of the prostitution labor market,
- rotation within prostitution,
- hours and days they are currently working,
- types of clients or prostitute preferences in this regard,
- management of and negotiation with clients,
- sexual services offered to clients.

Finally we also look at the important intersection between concerns about health and safe sex practices and their work as prostitutes:

- use made of the health care services,
- their evaluation of the services received,

- types of health care measures adopted in their work (contraceptives, condom use to prevent transmission of HIV and other venereal diseases),
- perceptions about smoking, drug, and alcohol use.

The open ended interviews and participant observation fieldwork that serve as the backbone of our study may not have the predictive value of a standardized survey, but the material is essential in the construction of hypotheses that can serve as a point of departure for more nuanced explanatory theory. Following Hochschild we can affirm four basic claims for the qualitative studies of the sort that serve as the core of this book: (1) conclusions tend to be resonant or suggestive; (2) qualitative studies help uncover theoretical questions which can then be formalized and tested through quantitative methods; (3) this kind of study helps clarify the interviewers' own understanding of the links between quantitative variables; and (4) qualitative research supplements what Hochschild sees as a potential blind spot in quantitative methods, where what she calls the "exigencies of statistical techniques" may limit research objectives (24-5).

In his reflections on sociological theory and method, Pierre Bourdieu comments that "the traditional opposition between so-called quantitative methods, such as the questionnaire, and qualitative methods, such as the interview, conceals the fact that they both rest on social interaction which is brought off within the constraints of social structures" (34). Bourdieu's comments hint at an underlying problem that haunts the pages of our study. While our goal is to provide a richer and more complete account of these women's lives, we cannot ignore the fact that we are dealing with a socially stigmatized population of women who perform sex acts for money. Even in the best of conditions, as Bourdieu argues, both in-depth interviews and quantitative questionnaires can be of limited value, as sociologists often fail to take into sufficient account the philosophical underpinnings of methodological claims, even to the point of failing to fully understand the conditions of their own research. This warning rings even more clearly with respect to research into prostitution. Bourdieu writes: "The sociologist must never ignore that the specific characteristic of her point of view is to be a point of view on a point of view. . . . And it is solely to the extent that she can objectivate herself that she is able, while remaining in the place inexorably assigned to her in the social world, to imagine herself in the place where the object . . . is also positioned and thus take her point of view. . ." (34). At all times "it is the investigator who starts the game and who sets up its rules: it is most often she

who, unilaterally and without any preliminary negotiations, assigns to the interview its objectives and uses, and on occasion these may be poorly specified--at least for the respondent” (19). In the worst of cases, he concludes, “answers . . . risk rebounding on the analyst herself, whose interpretation is always liable to take seriously an artifact that she herself has manufactured” (20). Exchanges of the sort Bourdieu describes in this scenario would be characterized by a double deception, operating through a discursive transaction that is also a conscious or unconscious transaction on the part of both participants: the interviewer “is taken in by the ‘authenticity’ of the respondent’s testimony” while “the respondent pretends to play her expected part in this interview” (27). On the other hand, says Bourdieu, under more carefully considered interview conditions, “respondents, especially the most deprived, seem to grasp this situation as an exceptional opportunity offered to them to testify, to make themselves heard, . . . to explain themselves . . . and to fully delineate the vantage-point within this world from which they see themselves and the world and become comprehensible and are justified, not least for themselves” (24). The results then can be of great value in providing us with richer and more complete accounts of social interactions.

Material drawn from in-depth interviews serves as the basis for this book, and the findings are consistent with ongoing research and with the prostitutes’ responses in workshops and meetings organized for and by them in Tijuana, and taking place both before and after these interviews were recorded. Thus, while a qualitative study of this sort does not allow the kind of generalizations that can be drawn from data collected using the tools of statistical analysis and larger, quantitatively determined samples, every effort was made to guarantee that we interviewed women of different ages and from different socio-economic classes within the world of prostitution, from different types of establishments and from the street, who had migrated from different regions of the country, and who had been working in prostitution for varying lengths of time ranging from a few months to many years. Likewise, in framing the interviews around public health issues of importance to the women themselves, we were able to obtain more complete and accurate information. Nevertheless, much more work remains to be done.

One of the things that becomes very clear in both the prostitutes’ narratives about themselves as well as in the clients’ representations of them is that while most exchanges involve straightforward sexual service in a heavily racialized and exoticized environment, the stereotypes seldom hold entirely. These women, who are so often portrayed in mainstream studies as

nothing more than sexual objects, even in the context of their professional activities frequently have the opportunity and flexibility to resist such conversion into objects, at least at some level, turning the tables on their clients and assuming a position of relative power. Their provocative looks and arousing dancing (not to mention the fact that the most highly solicited of these women may earn considerably more money than even the more affluent of their customers) may strategically turn the tables on the men, turning the potential clients into their supplicants.²

Still further; at least one insightful study points out the degree to which both the prostitute and her client engage in a kind of transa, or con game, in which roles are consciously manipulated. Holzman and Pines note that “the position accorded customers in the occupational ideology of prostitutes is not one of respect. Johns are considered ‘marks’ in what is perceived by prostitutes to be a sexually based con game. . . . Prostitutes are taught different pitches or stories to tell the mark so as to extract more money from him” (92). In this respect, the women see the client as an exploitable object. In Holzman and Pines’ study of US clients, however, they learn that while the client is often amused by such tactics, he is seldom taken in by them. These researchers find that whether the client is an infrequent user of prostitutes or a very experienced one, he understands the delicate rules of the game in which they are engaged; he will listen to the stories and “routinely modifies his behavior to help create or maintain a good rapport” (95). In the back and forth negotiation of this transa, both the woman and the man shift continually between subject and object positions, sometimes occupying both at the same time, but from different perspectives. In the simulacrum of a social relationship, both remain on guard, and both imagine that they are fooling the other. If the woman tells a particular story to try to elicit more money, the client seems perfectly aware of the fictionality of the narrative, though he may give her the money anyway, just to ensure a more agreeable encounter.

And yet, at some point, the studied fictionality can turn into a real conversation with a woman who “seems like a nice person”, and where there is a sexual relationship involving mutual enjoyment and even a simulated or real tenderness between client and sex worker. In the midst of the usenet reports ranking women by numbers, there are also comments like this one: “I’ve always wanted to really get into the head of some of these women and figure out what they’re really feeling, but my Spanish isn’t perfect and my communication with them is strained. The life of a prostitute has got to be a strange life to say the least. Couple that with cultural differences and who knows what they’re really feeling.” El Chamuco talks about how some of

the most daring strippers and the hottest prostitutes have deep concerns about how their work might affect their private and their family lives. Someone else writes about a Catholic woman and mother of seven working in prostitution who was always very upset about the mortal sin she was committing, and the terrible conundrum of having no education and not being able to feed her large family in any other way. Cachondo-- a frequent contributor who writes numerous explicit reports to the usenet and the World Sex Guide, including his comments on fulfilling his fantasy of being with two women--also writes meditative reports, such as this one in which he discusses his ongoing relationship with a former regular of his who quit prostitution for a time, and who was now back in Tijuana working on an occasional basis: "she told me she had breast cancer. She's getting chemotherapy now in Mexico DF. Really quite sad. She has to come to TJ once every month or two to make some money to support herself, two kids and her mother. She's worried that her hair will fallout and she won't be able to work any more." In comments such as these, we can see how easily an artificially defined encounter, in an ugly setting, can somehow slip into some other kind of human relationship--transient, but nonetheless real.

Thus, the interviews and the client reports both describe a world which combines horror and personal agency, in which from the women's point of view the fundamental paradox is defined by a position in which they are experiencing at the same time blatant exploitation as sexual objects and a kind of personal freedom to choose the best remuneration for their labor. From the clients' point of view, the women are both living dolls that they use for sex, and queens for whose attention they compete. And, too, both the men and women are frail and complex human beings: the women are mothers and caretakers who sometimes find sexual satisfaction with the clients; the clients at times establish more complex, human contact with the prostitutes. There is also a paradox imposed by the very nature of the commercial exchange. Holzman and Pines describe the median income of the U.S. client as \$30,000 a year, with a range from \$8,000 - \$75,000 (101). In this context, Cachondo's realization of the kind of money that can be potentially earned in prostitution by women in Tijuana comes as a real shock: "I spoke with a woman working in Adelitas that I've been with several times now so we're a bit more open with each other. I asked her how much she makes working there. She said a good week's \$2,500. Sometimes only \$1,500 though. She works 6 day weeks. Figure an average of \$2,000 per week. That's \$100,000 per year if she takes no more than two weeks vacation." Furthermore, Cachondo reminds us, this putative income is tax free.

Just as there is no single image of the woman who works in prostitution, so too there is no single characterization of the client. A number of the more self-reflective threads on the usenet describe the men's feelings about their own roles in these transactions, quite apart from bragging about particularly "hot" sessions or recommendations for specific women. One series of comments is sparked by the question, "How many of you guys would marry a prostitute?", another by the comment of a client that he frequently feels depressed when he reflects on his "expensive hobby" and wonders, "does anyone else experience feelings like this? And how do you deal with them?", still another by a writer who broadcasts to the net his challenge: "I am astounded by these guys who go to TJ to get lucky--and pay for it. What a bunch of losers. . . . Get a life -- and a good therapist." The responses to these questions/comments remind us that many of these men have given considerable thought to their activities. The answers to these questions are: (1) yes, a fair number of the clients marry or are tempted to marry prostitutes: "Turns out that these women have MUCHO opportunities to settle down with their customers. In fact, they get tired of men falling in love with them. . . though I don't know what kind of husband material most johns would be. Not at all what I expected the situation would be"--a response confirmed by the women who talk about their many offers of marriage, and about the women they know who have (successfully or not) taken up clients on these offers; (2) yes, the feeling of depression is common since the men are often aware that they are trading a sex life for a love life and that this activity is not in the long run healthy either physically or emotionally, even though it fulfills a specific immediate yearning to touch and be touched--responses that echo the women's sense that men want to talk as much as they want to have sex, and (3) the writer who calls them "losers" is uninformed: "you know nothing of what you're talking about and are basing your opinion on 'feelings' rather than facts. In short, you're stupid and you're stereotyping." In each of these answers, the writer's comments complicate the stereotypical picture of the prostitute-client transaction. The client's feelings of inadequacy and depression, the questioning of his own fitness as husband material, his defensiveness about oversimplifying his motivations all point to specific locations at which subcultural values resist and recognize dominant culture morality. These paradoxes remind us that as investigators coming to the world of sex work from the outside, we are too often apt to reduce its complexities to a single, and much flattened, vision. One of the women brought us up short with the poignant reminder: "Mi

vida es mía. Yo vivo una vida normal, como Ud., como cualquier otro ser humano” ‘My life is my own. I live a normal life, like you, like any other human being.’

2. Public health proposal

AIDS infection among women is due to three types of vulnerability: 1) Biological vulnerability; since women have a higher risk of exposure to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases given that women expose a larger mucous area than men during coitus and that the virus concentration in semen is higher than in vaginal secretions; 2) Epidemiological vulnerability, as women tend to have partners who are older than they are, who have more sexual experience, and therefore suffer a higher risk of having being infected, 3) Social vulnerability, in that women in general carry out a passive and receptive role in sexual activity. In the case of prostitutes, the situation is aggravated because clients expect to receive sexual pleasure from them, often asking them to perform certain sexual practices that carry with them a higher risk of exposure to HIV.

The scientific characteristics of sexually transmitted diseases, and particularly of HIV/AIDS, which is a disease that has appeared in Mexico relatively recently, demonstrate conclusively that the first cases were imported into the country. It is likely that the cases associated with blood transfusions initially derived from European blood products and the first cases of sexual transmission came from the United States. After 1987 health authorities began to diagnose cases documenting endogenous transmission in the interior of the country (Mexico City). Nevertheless, in the specific case of the northern Mexico border, and especially the border between California and Baja California, there must exist a mixed category of virus transmission including both transmission between members of the local population and importation of infection due to the enormous population flows that occur in the city of Tijuana (Rangel, G., Izazola, J. A., 1995).

AIDS remains the most important public health challenge facing the northern border at the end of the twentieth century; and even now fundamental unanswered questions remain about this epidemic. A few studies, as noted earlier in this book, have been done with populations of prostitutes, and these studies seem to indicate a very low transmission rate in this population (Valdespino et al. 1989). There are questions about the generalizability of these conclusions, however. There are numerous reasons to suspect that prostitutes could be an important bridge in

the heterosexual transmission of AIDS, since all too frequently they perform sexual services without safe sex protective practices. In the specific case of the northern border, another element enters into play as well; intravenous drug use appears in a higher percentage of AIDS cases than in other parts of the country, accounting for 12.2% of those afflicted with the disease (SIDA/ETS, 1995).

In Baja California, Tijuana represents a special problem, since a variety of factors conjoin to make this municipality a particularly fertile ground to favor conditions for HIV transmission. Among these factors are the high rate of growth in general, as propelled by the large numbers of immigrants; the social and demographic exchanges among the cities of Tijuana, San Diego, and Los Angeles; and the paucity of efforts in implementing education campaigns designed to prevent the spread of the epidemic. It is important to note that the Ministry of Health has reported a national undercount of 40% in AIDS cases--a matter of grave concern nationally, and particularly in the border region. This notification should take place through the various medical services such as private and public hospitals and clinics. Nevertheless, such reports tend to be made extemporaneously or not at all, due to deficiencies in detection, diagnosis, and lack of communication among institutions.

Despite the potential importance of this population to disease transmission, very little to date is known about prostitutes and we have been able to derive relatively scarce data from pre-existing careful scientific studies. Despite our own efforts and the relatively thick analysis we have been able to complete in our book, too many questions remain. The number and demographic composition of this population is still largely unknown, as is the frequency with which the women engage in risky sexual practices that could be related to the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Also still uncertain is the length of their careers and periods of transition in between stays in Tijuana working in prostitution. We need to know more about who are their clients, how often they use safe sex practices so as not to become infected, what is the frequency of drug use, and what is the real prevalence of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases in this population.

The initial pilot studies and the qualitative work done in our book allow us to refine our research questions but by no means provide any definitive answers. What must be done in order to make real determinations is a large probabilistic study among the prostitute population in Tijuana. This kind of quantitative work would supplement and complete work done in this book

and would provide information that would help us to understand more clearly the role that prostitutes play in the epidemiology of AIDS and other diseases. The principal objectives of such a study would include:

1. Estimating the size of the population of prostitutes in the city of Tijuana and their distribution in terms of the way they obtain clients (in bars or on the street);
2. More accurately determining the career paths of the prostitutes;
3. Estimating the prevalence of HIV and other STDs in this population and studying the behavior of the infection with respect to the type and place of work and type of client;
3. Identifying the risk factors associated with HIV infection, both sexual practices and drug use;
4. Measuring the frequency of condom use;
5. Estimating the number of sexual acts with and without protection that occur between women infected with HIV and other STDs and their clients and other partners, and the distribution of these acts according to the characteristics of women working in prostitution.

The results of previous studies in Mexico have been obtained through sample studies, participant observation, and qualitative analysis with very little emphasis on quantitative study. Our most urgent call to action would be for a serious, large scale, quantitative study in this volatile and swiftly changing community. Tijuana is an epidemiological time bomb waiting to explode; every effort should be made to diffuse this threat.

3. Interdisciplinary feminist concerns

To talk about women working in prostitution is to evoke what Wendy Chapkis calls a “‘magic sign’ whose meaning always exceeds its definition” (211). When we as researchers try to understand the concrete situation of real women in Tijuana, we are thrown back on ambiguously framed narratives about their lives that implicitly or explicitly rub up against all these social, theoretical, cultural, historical frames in a sometimes complicitous, often contestatory manner. The interplay between theory and methodology has invented a certain familiar discourse of ethically-driven personal engagement, ironically reproduced in its (our) critique; the interplay between interviewer and interviewee opens onto another space of negotiated identities, a counterdiscourse by which narratives and selves are continually

reinvented in ways neither unmotivated nor naive. Our aim, finally, is to try to understand the articulations among these competing social and cultural formations. Our tactic is to move back and forth between the staging of methodology and the performance of identity, between the theoretical and the thematic, with the goal of exploring the concomitant complicities and appropriations.

One of the symptoms of the disquiet provoked by studies of prostitution is the plethora of terms surrounding it, each with particular connotations and ideological baggage. Wendy Chapkis's introductory chapter to *Live Sex Acts*, "The Meaning of Sex," offers a lucid analysis of how specific terms such as "prostitute," "whore," and "sex worker" play themselves out relative to the position of the researcher. The Tijuana women interviewed for this study also differ with respect to the terms they prefer to describe themselves and their work; some say "call me what I am," while most prefer the less explicit reference to "el ambiente" (loosely equivalent to "the scene"). There is a general (but not universal) dislike among them for the term "trabajadora sexual" (sex worker), which they see as an academic affectation. Shifting perspectives in our choice of vocabulary used to paraphrase the interviewees.

Experience in Mexico shows that the first reaction of people working in prostitution when approached by researchers is to ask, "Why are you interested in us? Do you have AIDS?" If they are not satisfied with the answers to these questions, they will not participate in the interviews and will influence companions not to participate. Published research in Mexico, as elsewhere, frequently marks the difficulty of securing useful material: commercial sex workers are "reluctant to talk about their trade--especially to outsiders identified with public institutions" (Zalduondo, Hernández Avila, and Uribe Zúñiga 167), and researchers often have to adjudicate the accuracy of the information gathered; as one article delicately puts it, referring to the veracity of a particular statement, "doubt exists" (Uribe-Salas 124).

The issue of doubt has always been present in cultural studies, though its implications are seldom explored with any rigor. Davidson and Layder's book on methodology in the social sciences comments that "while all manner of methodologists have a lot to say about how best to get people to give truthful, or full and sincere replies, less is said about how a researcher can tell whether an interviewee is telling the truth," allowing such questions to fall back onto an assertion about good rapport as a foundation for the interview process (116, 122). Chancer, Zaludondo et al., and Uribe-Salas et al. put pressure on methodological concerns at precisely

this level; in studies of prostitution, where both the rapport and the responses are always in doubt, the data have to be evaluated very carefully indeed. Furthermore, we must take seriously the concerns of feminist writers (Chapkis and Davidson are excellent examples in the Anglo-European scene, as is Lamas in Mexico) about the masculinist bias in social research, to the effect that “the orthodox methodologist’s emphasis on control, hierarchy and the impersonal nature of scientific research reflects a masculine view of the world and of human relationships more generally” (Davidson and Layder 125). Even here, however, doubt persists and cannot be alleviated by our assurances of a good interview rapport or by a non hierarchical format for interviews of women by women since, inevitably, class and the educational differentials between interviewer and interviewee reinstate a hierarchical relationship.

The narratives of Tijuana prostitutes pose a continuing challenge to theoretical and methodological recuperation. Our task is complicated by the fact that narratives and selves are continually reinvented in ways neither unmotivated nor naive. Even in our narrative subsumption of their voices, they remain unruly and recalcitrant and resist categorization. Some of the interviewees reinscribe specific stereotypes (about women, about prostitutes), some live at odds with conventional expectations. Their narratives remain uncontainable, and in this important respect they function most crucially not as indices to or even recuperations of dominant culture’s expelled and contained Other but as its shadow supplement. It is this complicity that most threatens standard categories and thus is so often silenced or reduced to unintelligible cacaphony. These Tijuana prostitutes’ border lives, read in the context of cultural studies practices and social scientific theory, remind us that appeals to “knowledge” and “understanding” inevitably raise the stakes in a complex game of contested meanings. Their conjunction has forced us to rethink the question of the social; their presence shadows every theoretical turn.

James Clifford describes the predicament of postcolonial ethnography as an unnerving process of negotiating across resistances while at the same time dealing with the moral tensions, inherent violence, and tactical dissimulations of modern fieldwork. His comments seem apposite to the way we undertake a study of Tijuana prostitutes and their clients as well :

Some “authentic encounter,” in Geertz’s phrase, seems a prerequisite for intensive research; but initiatory claims to speak as a knowledgeable insider revealing essential cultural truths are no longer credible. Fieldwork . . . must be seen as a historically

contingent, unruly dialogic encounter involving to some degree both conflict and collaboration in the production of texts. Ethnographers seem to be condemned to strive for true encounter while simultaneously recognizing the political, ethical, and personal cross-purposes that undermine any transmission of intercultural knowledge. (Clifford 90)

Here too, in commenting upon the prostitutes' stories-- created in dialogue with a non-sex worker interviewer, and upon the clients' stories-- created in dialogue with each other--we find ourselves striving for some version of "true encounter" in the realization that the stories we hear, or eavesdrop upon, are narratives shaped for a particular audience and with a particular political, ethical, and personal stake. Wendy Chapkis suggests "we need new tools that allow us to listen to the different stories told without simply asking 'is this True.' We need tools that help us listen for meaning rather than fact --to ask what it means that a story is told in this way . . ." (2). The question is still open.

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¹ There is no particular consistency to our use of terms for the women engaged in paid sex work in Tijuana. Some of the women accept the term “sex worker”, others find it a silly academic affectation. Some prefer the straightforward term “prostitute”, many find it harsh and suggest the circumlocation “work in the (night) scene.”

² For more discussion and a deeper analysis of the interviews with the women, see our article, "Border Lives: Prostitute Women in Tijuana."