

The Maquiladoras

William Langewiesche

Key sticking points during the NAFTA negotiations of the early 1990s involved the treatment of labor and the environment. Critics charged that NAFTA was merely a ploy by transnational corporations to increase their profits by taking advantage of unprotected low-wage workers and lax environmental standards. Their fears were certainly not unfounded: to bolster their case, these critics needed only point to the region immediately south of the United States border, where maquiladoras—plants where goods were assembled using tax-free imported materials and then returned to be marketed in the United States—had been in operation for some time. William Langewiesche, a correspondent for The Atlantic Monthly, describes working and environmental conditions in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Mexico on the eve of NAFTA's passage.

After hundreds of miles of virtual wilderness, the border . . . is blighted by urban desperation. Before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico the Rio Grande snakes across a semitropical coastal plain, a green and hazy flatland known locally as the Lower Valley. The north side, where 80 percent of the residents are Mexican-American, has long been weakened by corruption and political bossism. *Colonias*, decrepit farming towns, and three decayed cities—McAllen, Harlingen, and Brownsville—attest to the lack of opportunity. Publicists there speak of a rich cultural heritage. No doubt. But as measured by income, health, and education, the Lower Valley is among the poorest regions in the United States. And to spite us all, it looks like the future.

Across the river, Mexico is poorer still. Life is dominated by the presence of American manufacturers, who have set up some of the border's largest *maquiladoras*. Reynosa, which lies on the Rio Grande, is a flat industrial city of perhaps 300,000 people, about seventy miles from the Gulf. To get there from Texas, you cross a big modern bridge, passing a mile of trucks waiting to clear Mexican customs, and an equally long line waiting to enter the United States. The trucks attest to the vigor of business and binational trade. Zenith alone employs ten thousand workers in Reynosa.

Colonia Roma is typical of the districts where they live. It sprawls across a swampy lowland beyond the Pemex refinery—a large and desolate slum, strewn with trash, where vegetation does not survive. The shacks are made of scraps discarded from the factories. Children wear rags and go barefoot. Here and there, a Coke sign hammered to a wall indicates a small grocery, a place perhaps with electric power. A paved road passes beside the neighborhood, on higher ground, and crawls with buses blowing smoke. During the shift changes at the *maquiladoras*, workers stream between the shacks and balance on planks across mud and sewage. The women dress in pressed skirts and blouses; they look like office workers from a better neighborhood in a better city. Many go into debt to achieve this effect. Inflation has outpaced wages in Mexico. The average *maquila* worker in Reynosa labors forty-five minutes for a quart of milk or a pound of chicken, two hours for a bottle of shampoo, three hours for two boxes of cornflakes or a toddler's used sweater, twenty hours for sneakers, and over a hundred hours for a double mattress.

Drainage in Colonia Roma is poor. The district flooded the week before I got there, and residents waited for the water to subside by perching with their belongings on their beds. This seems hardly noteworthy to the family I went to see. Their yard was a mess of cinder-block rubble imbedded in mud. They lived in a single-room plywood house that was almost filled by two iron beds pushed together. On subsequent visits I counted eight people who slept there, but I may have missed a few. The oldest was a toothless Indian grandmother who questioned me about my religious beliefs. I was cautious: she wanted to talk about God's grace and the afterlife. The youngest resident was a girl, perhaps five, who seemed ill. One of the sons, who in his mid-twenties had been working three years at Zenith, was small, thin, and discouraged.

I asked, "How is the job?"

He answered, "Good." But his eyes were furtive.

"Good?"

"Little good. The problem is there is no money."

"And the union?"

"It can't protect us."

"How long will you stay?" I asked.

"I don't think about it."

The shack smelled of lard and garbage. Smoke from a refuse fire drifted by the open door. Chairs hung from nails on the walls because there was no place for them on the floor. A pair of prized cowboy boots stood under the bed, by a stack of clothes. The kitchen consisted of a camp stove, a water jug, and an insulated box. There was a kerosene lantern, a transistor radio. The buzzing of flies mixed with the shouts outside.

Seen from a distance — say, in a photograph — such poverty evokes powerful feelings. Close up, however, it can seem unreal. It is bewildering that people you can touch, who share the air with you, can be suffering in conditions so different from your own. I have experienced this before in Africa, in the midst of starvation. We carry our own world with us and it is numbing.

IT IS AN ENVIRONMENTAL future to be feared. When people live in cities built on industrial waste, they suffer. In the Lower Valley, miscarriage, birth defects, disease, and cancer rates are high. For this and the other calamities of their lives, the workers have begun to blame the United States. In Matamoros, the city of a half million that lies across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Texas, I talked to a labor organizer named María Torres. She said, “Americans say they can save us from starvation. But all of us who have come to the north, if we had stayed where we were, we would not be dying of hunger. Here on the border, we are just slaves.”

That word *slave* kept reappearing. Upriver I had seen graffiti scrawled defiantly across a bridge: NO SOMOS ESCLAVOS! We are not slaves! And in Reynosa’s Colonia Roma, I had talked to a man whose greatest wish was for his children to work in the *maquiladoras*. He said, “In the past we were nothing but the slaves of the rich. And if we are still slaves today, at least the *maquiladoras* pay us more.”

I quoted him to Torres. She became calmer and said, “No one is against the plants. No one wants to close them down. We ask only for better conditions and we are willing to compromise. But we refuse absolutely to be used as a dumping ground for industrial wastes. The president of Mexico claims he won’t allow contamination. He claims environmental enforcement will be part of free trade. But why should we believe him? We’ve seen what they do: they close down the companies that contaminate the least and they leave the big polluters alone.” She named them for me and said, “There are strong interests involved. The neighborhoods around the plants have denounced them, but nothing is done.”

In Matamoros the best-known case of this occurred around a chemical plant called Chemica Flor, which sits by a mountain of its own waste. The plant, partly owned by DuPont, produces hydrogen fluoride, a volatile, toxic, and highly corrosive acid shipped to the United States for use in the manufacture of Teflon coatings. The risks of having such a facility within the bounds of a city are considerable. When nearby residents objected, Mexican authorities ordered the permanent evacuation of neighborhoods within two kilometers (1.25 miles) of the stacks: ten thousand people were affected. The residents marched in protest. Finally, the authorities “backed down” and allowed the

people to remain. Such false concessions have sustained the Mexican government for decades. But the technique has its limits.

Across town, I visited a General Motors facility that makes bumpers. The buildings were big, square, and anonymous. They had nice little lawns. I arrived during the shift change, when several thousand workers—again, mostly young women—streamed out and climbed onto the colorful buses waiting to take them back to their shacks. I went around the side of the main building, to the ditch into which the plant's outflow pipes drain. Activists from the United States have taken samples here showing massive levels of xylenes, ethyl benzene, acetone, toluene, and methylene chloride. I did not need a test tube— from a hundred yards away I could smell the solvents. They dribbled from the outflow pipes in paint-colored water and floated off through the city in the ditch.

Senior General Motors spokesmen have denied these conditions, and in all sincerity. The corporation does not intend to pollute. Workers are provided with tanks into which to purge their paint guns. But to save time, they simply purge the guns into the drains, which empty into the ditch. Mexico has adopted strict laws regulating toxic wastes, but government technicians measure the outflow water only for feces and bacteria. In addition, Mexican laboratories are notorious for falsifying results. So for a variety of reasons, the industrial chemicals do not officially exist. If they did, nothing would be done anyway. General Motors' Mexican landlords were legally obligated to build a treatment plant, if not for chemicals, at least for sewage. Instead they dug the ditch. This was not unusual. General Motors' ditch empties into a larger flow, the central canal, where it mixes with untreated municipal sewage and the poisonous outflow from an entire city of unchecked industry.

I spoke to a chemist in Brownsville, who said, "G.M.'s problem is they empty directly into a ditch. Other plants empty into other pipes, which empty into the main canal. It's practically impossible to trace their spills." Speaking of *maquiladoras* in general, he said, "The companies hide in their own corporate structures. They pass responsibility upward. If they go high enough, they can find people who don't know what's going on. They don't have to lie."

The central canal in Matamoros flows through residential neighborhoods. When residents complained, Mexican federal cleanup money was used to cap it for a mile or two and hide it from view. The covering was made in part of rock and gravel, which was later discovered to be toxic waste. A string of playgrounds was built on it. Word got out and the playgrounds lie unused. The canal does not empty into the Rio Grande. The discharge emerges from the city, flows southeast, and twenty miles below the border feeds into the Gulf of Mexico, where fish swim it north again.

The fear of poisoning is not an abstraction. Industrial accidents in Matamoros have sent hundreds of people to the hospital and forced thousands of others to evacuate their houses. On the night of December 6, 1990, a tank in the center of town overheated, blew a valve, and leaked a cloud of toxic vapor. The vapor entered the ventilation system of another *maquiladora*, a manufacturer of electric blankets, about three blocks away, and sent fifty women to the hospital. Slowly dissipating, it drifted over the Rio Grande into Brownsville, where the stench caused terror in the streets.

María Torres, the labor organizer, took me to a neighborhood sandwiched between two chemical plants: one brewed pesticides, the other detergents. By the standards of Matamoros, the neighborhood was middle class. The houses were made of rough, unpainted wood, but they had electricity, running water, and small yards. Most of the families had moved there in the 1930s, when cotton dust was the biggest nuisance.

A chemical smell wafted through the area and burned softly in my throat. The day was hot and I had a headache. A stout woman with crooked teeth, a friend of Torres's, invited us into her house. We sat on chairs covered in padded red vinyl in a room the size of a closet. Through a doorway veiled by a beaded curtain I heard a television. An open fuse box was fixed to the wall, and a Coors-shaded light hung from the ceiling. A new telephone stood on the cabinet.

The woman offered me a glass of water and I declined. I asked her if she worried about the chemicals next door. She said, yes, ever since the explosion of 1983, when a pipe had burst at the insecticide plant and sprayed poisonous foam over the houses. I asked her to describe it. She said, "It snowed foam. We were afraid and ran with the children, thinking only of saving ourselves. Where we touched the foam, we got sores on our feet. The next day it rained, and the poison spread through the neighborhood. We were kept out for eight days. Our clothes were contaminated and destroyed. We had to kill our animals. Pigs, chickens, dogs, cats. We had seven ducks. They were all buried in a trench in the company compound."

I wandered across the street and talked to an old man who told me of digging holes and smelling chemicals in the groundwater, which lies close to the surface. The detergent factory had built evaporation ponds next to his house. When they overflowed, his chickens picked at the water and died. Chickens in Matamoros are like canaries in a mine—but here when the canaries die the miners stay on.

Later, Torres took me for a walk along a ditch where discharges from bordering plants sink into the soil. The water was black and it turned milky when I tossed rocks into it. Families live there along the railroad tracks, in a district

called *Chorizo* because it is long and narrow like a sausage. They drink from tainted wells and hang their clothes to dry on the fences that separate them from industry. The border is full of these fences. . . .

MARÍA TORRES, WHO wanted so for me to see her industrial nightmare, is a woman well known to the poor of Matamoros. . . . I first met her at a café in the heart of the city to talk about her efforts to organize women workers in the *maquiladoras*. At forty-eight, she has a gentle face coarsened by hardship. For most of her adult life she worked on the production lines in Matamoros for a company called Kemet, which manufactures capacitors. Now she works for an organization called *Comité Fronteriza de Obreras*, or the Border Committee of Working Women. The committee collects no dues and has no membership rolls, but is well known to thousands of *maquila* workers along the lower Rio Grande. Its approach is low-key: it does not exhort the women to march or strike, but rather encourages them to meet discreetly in small groups in the shantytowns. They teach themselves about their rights under Mexican federal labor law and about the occupational dangers in the factories. Torres helps them to learn, as she herself learned. She encourages them to ask for small improvements from the *maquila* managers and better representation from the huge Mexican union, the CTM. Faced in their offices with delegations of women who are calm and resolute, the managers and union sometimes give in to the demands. As a result, wages and working conditions in Matamoros are slightly better than elsewhere on the border. Torres has nourished herself with these small victories. She is a strong woman who has grown stronger with age.

I heard she went to Mexico City with a coalition of Mexican and American union men concerned about the effects of free trade. They met with scholars in a conference room at the Colegio de México. Someone gave a presentation. The discussion that followed was too theoretical for Torres's taste. She butted in and said in Spanish, "What I want to talk about is not free trade. What I want to talk about is, I worked eighteen years in the *maquiladoras*. I washed parts in methylene chloride with my bare hands. No one told me it was poisonous. No one gave me safety equipment." Looking annoyed at the interruption, some of the academics pushed back from the conference table. Torres persisted. She had brought along the label from a spool of lead solder, and because it was in English, she asked an American to read it: CONTAINS LEAD WHICH MAY BE HARMFUL TO YOUR HEALTH. LEAD IS KNOWN TO CAUSE BIRTH DEFECTS OR OTHER REPRODUCTIVE HARM. FEDERAL AND STATE LAW PROHIBIT THE USE OF LEAD SOLDER IN MAKING JOINTS IN ANY PRIVATE OR PUBLIC POTABLE (DRINKING) WATER SUPPLY SYSTEM. AVOID BREATHING FLUX

FUMES EMITTED DURING SOLDERING. FLUX FUMES MAY CAUSE PULMONARY IRRITATION OR DAMAGE. AFTER HANDLING SOLDER, WASH HANDS WITH SOAP AND WATER BEFORE EATING OR SMOKING. Torres said, "There are thousands of women handling solder who have no idea what this warning says. They are told nothing."

When I met her in Matamoros she continued the story. "They don't have time before lunch to wash. They eat greasy tacos, which become black from their hands." She spoke from experience, the source of her power.

Torres was born in 1944 in Cárdenas, a large town in the state of San Luis Potosí, about 250 miles south of the border. Her father was a railroad laborer who died by falling off a train when she was a baby. Her mother went to work as a domestic for other railroad families. They could not afford to pay but provided food and a place for the night. María . . . grew up in their shacks, sleeping in blankets on the floor. When she was seven she caught typhoid and nearly died. She spent a year recovering. At the age of ten, having completed the third grade, she gave up on school and went to work with her mother.

Her mother dreamed of working in the United States. "My mother . . . had the dream of crossing into Texas and we came here to the border, to Matamoros, when I was sixteen."

It was 1960. The bracero guestworker program was still in full swing. Mexicans could cross the bridge into Brownsville without documents; it was thought of as part of the natural border traffic. Nonetheless, moving to the United States was a big step. Mother and daughter hesitated for eight months in Matamoros, working in the upper-class neighborhood.

When finally they ventured into Brownsville, they quickly found live-in jobs. Torres became the nanny of four children, for eight dollars a week. She stayed three years, until she was twenty, saved a little money, and went often to the dances. Then she and her mother moved to Harlingen, the next town north, where again they found jobs in separate households. Harlingen lasted a year, until someone called the Border Patrol. When the agents came, Torres ran into the field and hid in a furrow. Afterward, her employers drove her back to Brownsville, where her mother, too, had taken refuge.

By then you needed a Border Crossing Card to take the bridge. The women had a friend in Mexico who was sleeping with someone in American Immigration, who got them the card. They found work in Brownsville. Torres wanted to return to Mexico; her mother did not. They argued about it.

I asked Torres why she wanted to return. She said, "I felt alone in the United States and this loneliness was overwhelming me. . . ."

One Saturday when she was in her mid-twenties, Torres crossed the bridge from Brownsville and rented a room in an old house on Morelos Street, in the

central district of Matamoros. Her mother did not approve of the expense. Torres bought the basics: a bed, a two-burner stove and a tank of gas, a frying pan, two cups, and two plates. Her mother stayed with her for the weekend, but returned on Monday to Brownsville. That morning, Torres went to the union office looking for a job.

It took two months to get one, at a pottery factory. After the first week she learned she would not be paid because she was "in training." She wondered how she was going to survive. There were twenty workers there, and they told her this was standard. She answered, "If they haven't paid you either, then you should ask for your money."

They told her not to make trouble.

When the owner arrived, she said to him, "I won't work here anymore, but you owe me for the work I've already done." She pointed to the pots she had made. "I did all this and I'm sure you'll sell it. I won't leave until you pay me."

The owner refused.

Torres raised her voice. Using strong language, she said, "These other women have been here for months, and have never been paid for their training either. You owe them, too."

The owner hushed her and agreed to pay. He wanted to write her a check, but she had never in her life been to a bank and she demanded cash. Leaving the factory, she waved the money at the other workers and cried, "Look! Look!" She heard later that they, too, were paid.

The next factory was a clandestine operation making knitted handbags. There were twelve workers. They had no chairs or tables, but sat on newspapers on the floor. One day a union man arrived and got into a shouting match with the owner, who was Italian. The union man took out a pistol and made the owner pay the workers then and there. Then he said, "Any who want to work in an electronics factory, come with me in my car." The car was a black Buick. Torres was the first one in. The others crowded in after her, until the union man barely had room to steer. Somehow he drove them to his office.

The electronic factory was an American *maquiladora*, set up by the Electronic Control Corporation to manufacture electrical coils. The union was supplying the workers. There were two hundred. Torres was given a three-month probationary contract with a promise of permanent employment if she performed well.

At the café in Matamoros she showed me what the job entailed: she folded a paper napkin and with deft and reflexive fingers simulated wrapping wire around a spool. The company required the women to produce two boxes of four hundred coils a day, six days a week, for about eighteen cents an hour. De-

spite swollen and bloody hands, Torres caught on quickly, and by her second week was producing four boxes a day. The supervisors were pleased, but after eight months the company still had not given her a permanent position. Then, just before Christmas and the mandatory two-week bonus, all two hundred workers were fired.

Torres was in trouble. Her savings were gone, and her clothes, which she had been given while working as a nanny, were wearing out. Her mother moved in with her to help with the rent, and both women took occasional day jobs in Brownsville. But Torres was determined to stay in Mexico. Every morning she walked to the union hall. Another eight months went by. She knew already about the difficult conditions at Kemet, the *maquiladora* where she was to work for eighteen years. She took the job there because she felt she had no choice. It was 1969 and she was twenty-five.

Kemet was as bad as they said. She worked in the department of injection molding, forming capacitor bodies from hardening epoxy. She washed the bodies bare-handed in methylene chloride, a volatile solvent that turned her skin papery and white. Methylene chloride is chlorinated hydrocarbon, linked to liver damage, birth defects, and cancer. It is in the same chemical family as chloroform and it can have similar soporific effects. The warning labels cautioned in English against breathing the fumes and mentioned narcosis, respiratory failure, and death. The workers did not understand the dangers. Their supervisors probably did not, either.

They were all under constant pressure to increase their production. "Once they brought in a man who stood beside us, watching the clock, and wouldn't let us go to the bathroom. Every hour he came by with a file to check the production. Many women felt it necessary to work right through the breaks. He told us not to talk. If we looked up, he ordered us to work."

I asked what his orders sounded like.

"With just a glance, he ordered us." She laughed. "He wanted us to sit there like statues. I rebelled by talking, by singing, by getting others to sing. If he accelerated the belt, I loaded it up with too many units so they would fall off. Sometimes I sabotaged the machine, and while the mechanics tried to fix it, I took a rest."

I asked, "What happened in the end?"

Her answer surprised me. "Eventually the man relaxed. He became our friend. When he had to leave he threw a party for us. That was before I knew about my rights."

I asked, "And now, would he still be your friend?"

She smiled. "Probably not."

She was never a docile employee, and over time she grew angry. "I felt they

were constantly loading more work on us. I began to ask the others, 'Don't we have any rights?' One day my friend Ludivina told me her brother, who was a law student, had mentioned a federal labor law to her. This was the first I heard of it."

By then Torres had put in eleven years at Kemet. The idea of a comprehensive labor law, its mere existence, strengthened her resistance to the supervisors. But she did not know where to find this law or how to use it. She kept asking questions. Eventually she discovered that an American was coming from across the river and holding meetings in a Matamoros church, teaching Mexican workers about their rights. The American was Ed Krueger, then fifty, a soft-spoken man who had spent years helping the migrant farm laborers of Oklahoma and Texas. In February 1981, Torres went to her first meeting and took fifteen Kemet women with her. . . .