Of Information Highways and Toxic Byways: Women and Environmental Protest in a Northern Mexican City

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WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTEST
IN A NORTHERN MEXICAN CITY

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ABSTRACT

Women’s involvement in collective struggles for environmental quality has surged in recent years, as has research focusing on this phenomenon. Consistent with this research, a feminist lens is useful in revealing a model of community struggle that features women’s activities and strategies to expose environmental insult. I use a case study of community protest in Hermosillo, a city in the Mexican state of Sonora, to feature social networks as a means of politicizing the placement of a toxic waste dump six kilometers outside the city. A feminist perspective reveals these social networks to be more than a way to mobilize resources. It allows us to see the ways in which gender interacts with globalized relations of power, political ecology, and environmental policy, and to validate a creative way in which women can out-maneuver the gendered constraints to political participation. An analysis of how social networks served in this particular struggle suggests that they are an important component in the process through which women gained voice and authored oppositional discourse in contexts where these have been previously denied, and ultimately deconstructed the political authority that sanctioned the dump.

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Women and Environmental Protest in a Northern Mexican City

Background and Setting

In March of 1997, residents of Hermosillo, the capital of the state of Sonora, Mexico, became aware of a toxic waste dump six kilometers outside the city. Hermosillo, with a population of more than 600,000, is located 275 kilometers south of the U.S.-Mexico border on Mexican Highway 15. Community concern about the dumpsite emerged after a truck driver, hired to transport wastes from California across the international border, came in contact with soil contaminated with a toxic substance and soon developed a burn on his leg.

When reports of the driver’s injury spread, concerned residents of Hermosillo came together to investigate the dumpsite. They found a dump of toxic waste lying exposed to the open air, situated approximately eight kilometers from the Río Sonora and less than 25 kilometers from several colonias populares (working class residential areas): Costa del Sol, Cuaúhtemoc, Altares, Palo Verde, and Nuevo Hermosillo. Among the toxic substances being dumped were lead, cadmium, cyanide, and other waste materials believed to have come from American-owned maquiladoras. They found that the company responsible for managing the deposit of toxic materials was Confinamiento y Tratamiento de Residuos (Confinement and Treatment of Residuals, CYTRAR), a subsidiary of the Spanish-based company, TECMED. It appeared that TECMED was contracted by various U.S. corporations to manage the disposal of toxic materials. TECMED then subcontracted CYTRAR for its waste disposal needs in Mexico.

The community groups, a coalition of several nongovernmental organizations, complained about the dumping to local authorities, pointing out that the toxins were being improperly disposed of. The photographs and videos taken of the site showed that the wastes were uncontained and exposed to the elements. They questioned why the waste generated in the U.S. was being brought to Mexico and why residents had not been notified. The waste material also leaked from the trucks in which it was being shipped, and these traveled over public highways as well as residential streets. They argued that failure to adhere to the legal requirement for the confinement and processing of hazardous waste materials posed threats to the environment, to the health and welfare of residents, and jeopardized the underground water supply.

One of the more vocal groups was Alianza Cívica (Civic Alliance), composed primarily of women. They lodged formal complaints against government administrators, charging them with violating laws regulating the importation, transport, and dumping of toxic wastes. Their petitions at the local levels of public administration were ignored for the most part, so they expanded their campaign to include agencies at the state and federal levels, such as the National Commission for Human Rights (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos), and the national environmental agency, Procuradoría Federal de Protección del Ambiente in Mexico City. They also began a vocal campaign to bring public attention to the dumpsite through newspaper editorials and a sympathetic radio talk show program. They organized rallies at the dumpsite and in front of the Palacio del Gobierno (the municipal and state government complex in Hermosillo). On March 7, 1998, the women of Alianza Cívica, along with community supporters, formed a human chain and physically blocked the entrance to the dumpsite. Local law enforcement units were deployed to remove the protestors. The next day, newspapers sported photographs of women being physically threatened by tractor-trailer drivers in a failed attempt to drive into the dump. The steady stream of waste-carrying trucks resumed later, facilitated by law enforcement officials and military personnel.
The women of Alianza continued to petition officials through conventional statutory channels with the hope that this strategy would eventually bring an end to the dumping. At best, this generated token guarantees. However, the women were well aware of the limitations inherent in this process because of the corruption that pervades all levels of Mexican government. The corruption of public authorities is generally acknowledged in Mexico as an intrinsic feature of the political system. In this, however, the public found official malfeasance and corruption intolerable. Community sentiment was nothing less than outrage: public authorities had grossly overstepped the boundaries of basic human decency by allowing the dumping to continue. When the conventional petitioning process failed to force administrators into action, the community struggle began to include a radical form of activism. With this strategy, the women crossed boundaries of what is considered appropriate political action. They brazenly confronted officials at every opportunity. The oppositional discourse that developed began to include a public and conspicuous denunciation of the overt collusion between government officials and those in private industry, which by design allowed the officials to feign innocence about dump management irregularities. Information gathered about these officials was used to challenge their integrity in public. Those not directly associated with the matter were challenged to take a stand for the community. Those that hesitated or neglected to act were assumed to be collaborators and risked being targets whenever they appeared in public. The number of political targets grew with the escalation of public activity and protestors continued gathering information that could be used to pressure those in office.

The information gathered about politicians and public administrators came primarily through social networks. As these networks became roused into action under the stimulus of activity and assertions, more information was generated. With this information, the women attempted to further humiliate officials, disrupting public appearances with outcries of ¡Traidores! (traitors!), ¡Vendidos! (Sell-outs!), ¡Corruptos! (corrupted!), ¡Sin verguenzas! (shameless!), and ¡Nos han hecho el escusado del mundo! (You have made us the toilet of the world!). The verbal attacks in public, especially on high-ranking officials, was unprecedented. In addition to displaying signs at these outings, the women assembled life-size dummies portraying well-known officials. Local presses couldn't resist the political satire, and the effigies generated even more publicity—and humor—at the expense of the officials. The protesters, however, were then counter-attacked in newspaper editorials as unpatriotic, disloyal citizens. These attacks became even more furious when the women began to seek foreign audiences for their complaints, and there were rumors and threats that the women would be arrested or beaten, following the well-established practice of governmental suppression of critics.

In October 1998, two women from the Alianza traveled to New York, and filed a petition with the United Nations Environmental Programme. However, at the meeting with UN officials, the women were told that the UN was unable to “intervene” in contracts between countries. In the spring of 1999, another petition was filed with the Comisión de Cooperación Ambiental (Commission for Environmental Cooperation, CEC), an agency created by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to address environmental issues and regulations. In response to this complaint, they were told:

[T]he Government of the United States of Mexico is not legally able to respond to the matter in question, since it is subject to arbitration proceedings for resolving an international dispute with the Técnicas Medioambientales Tecmed, S.A. company [the investment partner of Cytrar S.A. de C.V.] over alleged noncompliance [the dump closure] with the Agreement for the Re-
ciprocal Promotion and Protection of Investments (Acuerdo para la Promoción y Protección Recíproca de Inversiones—APRI) reached with the Spanish Crown” (Commission for Environmental Cooperation 2002).

But the women persisted. Each day, the women and other community members gathered in front of the palacio, where, during the summer, the daily temperatures commonly reach 38 degrees centigrade (110° F). Alianza’s protest lasted for two years, with successes and failures materializing in various ways. In 1999, the dumpsite at Hermosillo was closed, signaling success for the group’s efforts, although the issue of clean-up for the site has not yet been resolved. The community activism served to raise the consciousness of residents of nearby municipalities, resulting in the blocking of proposed dumpsites at Benjamin Hill, Trincheras, and Carbó.

Through these efforts the Alianza women became self-educated on the interrelationship of systems that converged with the toxic dumping in their community: globalization, free trade, international subcontracting—none of which allowed for the inclusion of the opinions of those experiencing the negative and potentially harmful effects of unrestrained commercialism.

Implications for Feminist Activist Research
Although the community protest against the CYTRAR dumping did not address a gendered issue, a feminist analytical framework can be used to outline a model of community struggle in which gender interacts with the global market, political hegemony, national identity, and environmental policy. This framework considers three themes important to feminist activist research and these advance our understanding of this case. First, a feminist perspective brings to light a community struggle that was essentially organized and carried out by women, even through their activities as leaders and actors were largely ignored by the media. A focus on their activities can help us discover and validate alternative political strategies in which women play a central role so that this history is not lost. Secondly, the primary strategy used to mobilize resources is one that has been conventionally associated with women’s organizations, namely, the use of social networks. Third, the use of these networks is indicative of a sociopolitical structure in which the exclusion of women from political participation is the norm. In this respect, a feminist perspective is also important in identifying alternative models of political protest that go beyond immediate concerns to challenge patriarchally structured limits on democratic political participation. A postmodern model of political protest highlights the importance of networks and a deconstructionist strategy in which women gain voice and author oppositional discourse in contexts where they are traditionally denied.

Feminist Perspectives and Chronicling Gendered Experiences
Examining Alianza Civica through a feminist perspective brings to light a community struggle that was primarily organized and carried out by women. The fact that women as leaders and actors in a community struggle are routinely ignored by the media is not surprising. Aulette and Mills (1988) noted that even in struggles that receive substantial national coverage, women’s involvement in them might remain virtually unknown outside the local community. Not only does the media commonly obscure or underestimate women’s contributions to these struggles, but women often fail to recognize the importance of their own contributions as they have been rendered invisible historiographically (Aulette and Mills 1988:251). More recently, women in collective struggles for environmental quality have received more attention in the media, in part because of hit movies such as *Erin Brockovich* and *Silkwood*. Hollywood dramatization has done much to educate the public about the achievements (and perils) of environ-
mental activism. However, the problem with the sensationalism promoted by the film industry, where women occupy central roles, is that these cases appear to be isolated rather than a consequence of a broader hegemony based on gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Without dissemination of information about different struggles, women's political activity appears as “discontinuous,” or dislocated from broader movements for social change (Spivak 1994).

The role of women as agents of social change is often obscured by hidden relationships between social systems and institutions. Through reexamining the historical record, feminist researchers discover new political strategies and offer more accurate representations of women's political activity. The relative invisibility of women's political activism suggests that political protest is perceived as an almost exclusively male domain (Einwohner et al. 2000:681, West and Blumberg 1990:3). This model of political non-participation is supported by various arguments, none of which disclose the economic interests served by the gendering of political protest. For example, what is and what is not appropriate behavior for women is socially constructed in ways that emphasize their sexuality and reproductive roles. The fact that this emphasis serves capitalist interests (a topic I will return to in another section) is not disclosed. Another argument that is used to limit their political activity is to associate that activity with feminism in a negative way. It is noteworthy that many women involved in community protest do not consider themselves feminists and, in fact, may even resist or reject a feminist label, even though they endorse fundamental ideas associated with feminism. Kelly and Breinlinger blame this contradictory behavior on the negative representation of feminists in the media that works to silence insubordinate women (Kelly and Breinlinger 1996:151-152). They argue that the media reinforces negative stereotypes of feminists as hostile or deviant (lesbian). Consequently, women involved in collective action might attempt to disassociate themselves from any feminist framework out of fear of losing support for their struggle (Einwohner et al. 2000). Again, the arguments used to construct limits to women's political activity deny the economic interests that such constructs serve.

Regardless of whether collective action is incorporated into a feminist framework or not, elite circles of power are currently working to promote interests that sooner or later will impact women's quality of life. In addition, whether or not gender is emphasized by a movement's participants, it inevitably shapes that movement's activities (Einwohner et al. 2000). West and Blumberg argue that it is participation that ultimately becomes the instrument of a raised consciousness. In their fight against economic interests that work against them, women begin to see the roots of their oppression. Attacks, ridicule of their intentions, exclusion from the political process are all maneuvers to conceal the truth about what and whose interests underlie the structuring of inequality. Through participation, women gain leadership training in the political arena and this expands their skills and confidence (West and Blumberg 1990:20-21). Finally, “consciousness is the ground that makes all disclosures possible.” (Spivak 1988:10). Political activism thus becomes a precursor to acquiring voice, and voice leads to the unraveling of the official account. How this works is made clear in the case of the Alianza Cívica against CYTRAR. In this struggle, it was a community voice—fueled by a raised consciousness—that counteracted the interests of the political and industrial elite. In northern Mexico, even before NAFTA, economic and political power had been concentrated in the hands of political and industrial elites, first colonial, then First World capitalist. Without a voice, marginal communities risk remaining outside the public discourse related to
their well being. In this case, a raised consciousness about their exclusion from the discourse exchanged between the elite led to the demand that their voices be heard. When they were initially ignored, the women found ways around conventional channels of communication. In the end, these discursive and verbal tactics served to demystify the material interests at stake.

Social Networks, Resource Mobilization, in the Context of Northern Mexico’s Borderlands

The primary institution used to mobilize resources in the protest against CYTRAR was the social network. A social network can be understood as that which facilitates the mobilization of resources that can be of a material or nonmaterial nature, such as goods, services, emotional support, and information. Women occupy a central role in the creation and maintenance of social networks, mostly because of the social emphasis placed on their reproductive roles. In northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest, social networks can be observed facilitating basic provisioning and redistribution practices between households of Mexican-origin.

For many Mexican as well as Mexican American households, the history of chronic economic instability has been largely contravened by the emergence of various survival strategies—social practices that have enabled families to procure and distribute enough resources to sustain them over time. The creation, maintenance, expansion, and mobilization of social networks involve a constellation of related practices that foster a sense of community among members. Vélez-Ibáñez (1994) shows households to be fundamentally basic to larger webs of households related by extended family ties, fictive kinship, or other relationships based on employment, recreation, and neighborhood. These networks of households serve as buffers for physical hardships by providing the social mechanisms by which resources of all types are informally exchanged (Chavez 1985, Keefe et al. 1978, Keefe 1980, Selby et al. 1990). Individuals’ sense of duty and reciprocity is an ideological component that perpetuates social linkages between households over time and across geographical spaces. Women are key actors in planning and preparing for ritual year-round gatherings of family and friends that create and reinforce those social linkages. A calendric cycle of important celebrations, such as birthdays and anniversaries, as well as important church holidays and rituals provide opportunities for families to take inventory of individual commitments towards others within the network (Vélez-Ibáñez 1993).

A related concept that helps fix the social linkages between households is that of the la familia (Alvarez 1991, del Castillo 1984). The notion of familia is shown to convey loosely construed definitions of kinship, and often includes individuals who are not related consanguinely. Fundamental to this social system by which kin and non-kin are integrated into the web of social relationships is the role of compadrazgo. Literally translated, compadrazgo means co-parenthood. As individuals are born and develop within households, they progress through the different stages of Catholic religious formation. These stages are marked by religious sacraments, such as baptism, or confirmation, in which godparents, individuals committed to upholding the tenets of the faith, assume the responsibility for the individual’s religious development. In this way they become madrinas (a derivation of madre, “mother”) and padrinos (a derivation of padre, “father”) to the individual being conferred. They also become comadres or compadres (co-mother, co-father) to the parents of the person receiving the sacrament. It is not unusual for one person to have five to six pairs of madrinas and padrinos, given that any sacrament might involve anywhere from one to two sets of sponsors. If there are several children in the household, several dozen comadres and compadres become part of their extended familia.
What is remarkable is that the notion of familia moves religious practice beyond religious ideology to address economic concerns. Cooperation and reciprocated sharing are crucial in mitigating employment uncertainties. For example, networks of familia provide refuge for migrants and information about jobs; in this way they act as an important substructure for the economic development in the U.S.-Mexico border region (Alvarez’ 1987, del Castillo 1984).

With the economic restructuring that came with globalization, social networks have assumed increased importance by mitigating the effects of market instability. As early as 1965, the establishment of foreign trade zones under the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) spurred commercial trade and industrial development between the U.S. and Mexico (Sklair 1993). The BIP laid the groundwork for the maquiladora industry, and by the 1970s, this framework for “free trade” between the U.S. and Mexico was tested (Kopinak 1996). Although the meaning of maquiladora has evolved in the last 30 years, it generally refers to a factory, and a factory production process that is broken down into parts, such as assembly or packaging, to take advantage of various tariff schedules. Maquiladora-based production has included favorable economic concessions for American, Canadian, and Japanese industries in Mexico, including lax enforcement of Mexican labor laws. Although maquiladoras were initially limited to the U.S.-Mexican foreign trade zones, in 1971 the BIP was officially extended to the entire Mexican Republic. NAFTA, which went into effect on January 1, 1994, deepened trade policies reserved for maquiladora manufacturing under the BIP into non-maquiladora industries including agriculture, fisheries, mining, and forestry (Weintraub 1996). The partnership between the U.S. and Mexico that began with the BIP culminated with NAFTA to fully institute globalization in North America.

Economic restructuring introduced greater market instability by the “flexible firm” type of employment such as short-term, temporary, part-time, subcontracted, temporary, or seasonal work used by employers to adjust to erratic market demands (Natti 1990). Depressed wages and a growing pool of underemployed workers thus chips away at household economic stability, and increases its reliance on the social network for its needs (O’Leary 1999). To be sure, the flexible firm can be seen as exploiting a shifting and ill-protected labor force. In fact, the flexible firm is made possible because it is subsidized by social networks. Households support the unemployed and underemployed while industry is freed from paying living wages for full-time workers, and other costs associated with fair employment practices. The importance of women’s reproductive roles can be understood in the context of maintaining the social networks upon which their households depend, but also in the context of the flexible firm employment patterns that exploit a feminine commitment family. As women labor to maintain and create networks, they stabilize the labor pool, and by way of a simultaneous emphasis on reproduction, they also assure industry of a future labor force.

The emergence of social networks, then, can be interpreted as procurement and provisioning practices that emerge in response to limited resources, especially in times of crises or instability. Recognizing women as principle architects of social network formation also suggests that such networks are important local depositories of women-centered knowledge. Ultimately, the way in which women participate in social protest evolves from their actual roles and functions in their communities.
Women, Networks, and Social Protest: A Postmodern Model of Community Activism

Feminist scholarship, in efforts to document the history of women’s protest activities, has contributed to a more inclusive definition of political behavior. In their discussion of this point, West and Blumberg (1990) argue that any analysis of politics and social protest necessarily must include the actions, attitudes and experiences of ordinary women in order to reflect the reality of their historical place and space. By widening the lens by which we see and acknowledge political behavior, scholarship moves beyond traditional conceptualizations and methodologies to include unconventional and otherwise neglected accounts, all of which provide “an alternative history to the official one…” (Said 1988:vi). By widening the lens, we also move to a reformulation of the political arena, eventually blurring differences that separate the official from unofficial forms of politics.

From this perspective, all persons are political beings from the time they are born, and, as members of a group, are involved episodically in varying forms of protest (limited only by their resources, opportunities, and sociopolitical conditions) (West and Blumberg 1990:8).

Using a postmodern vantage point, scholars and political activists alike can acknowledge the previously unrecognized type of political action in which women participate, and reconceptualize existing theories of political protest in which women are invisible.

Falling into the category of “unrecognized types of political action” is the social network. García-Gorena (1999:6-7) acknowledges the importance of “submerged networks” that worked to empower the anti-nuclear movement in Mexico. In submerged networks, members come together during periods of intense mobilization to visibly confront political authorities, for example, only to withdraw into every-day routines when the crisis has been resolved. She argues that the ebb and flow of membership of ordinary people allowed networks to sustain their efforts over time and these sustained efforts were largely responsible for the political push towards more democracy. The notion of submerged networks helps in formulating a model of community protest that is not well documented. In this model, whatever means the powerless have and do employ to resist oppression is validated. Understanding how social networks emerge in the first place is essential to reconceptualizing them as part of the myriad of collective events “in which groups generally defined as powerless, passive victims, gain power as they mobilize to act to control their lives” (West and Blumberg 1990:9).

We begin by recognizing the embeddedness of social networks within the social fiber of Mexican-origin populations. However, such activities may serve other purposes as Brú-Bistuer’s study shows. In her study of three environmental protest movements in Spain, where the women were the “main instigators” of the movements, she reports that their particular brand of community protest included coordinating activism with an annual cycle of popular festivities. As the community came together for these festivities, the women diffused information about the movement, solicited support, and reported on the problems they encountered (Brú-Bistuer 1996:122). This suggests that the purpose of social networks can expand to include political action.

Further analysis bears this out. In her study of the Madres Veracruzanas (Mothers of Veracruz) in the anti-nuclear power movement in Mexico, García-Gorena (1999) makes distinctions between the social movements of the past and new social movements (NSMs). She explains that whereas the former were conventionally recognized as worker and peasant movements struggling for economic justice, NSMs are more likely to engage in issues that bring more generalized moral questions to the public’s attention, and are indicative of the
Within this framework, NSMs characteristically bring up issues that address more than labor practices or problems of poverty; they include more abstract challenges to the dominant codes that structure society, such as hierarchicalism, sexism, and classism. West and Blumberg (1990:18) refer to movements in which the more generalized humanistic concerns are engaged as “alternative movements.” Environmental, anti-war, human rights, and anti-racist activism fall under the rubric of alternative social movements or the counter-globalist “alternative-development activism” referred to by Spivak (1994:429).

Seager (1996) explains that women’s preeminence in environmental movements is more a function of their social location, and that this location is a function of their systematic exclusion from decision-making processes and formal information channels. Because of this location, women are more likely to be the first to ‘notice’ environmental problems: “they are often the first to notice when the water smells peculiar, when the laundry gets dingier with each wash, when children develop mysterious ailments…” (Seager 1996:280). Because they are more sensitized to their systematic exclusion from the formal decision-making processes, they are also more likely to be less trusting of political authorities, and, subsequently, to be more active in community protest activity (Seager 1996:273).

In the case of the Alianza vs. CYTRAR, the principles challenged included the neoliberal trade agreements that endangered their environment and the idea of being treated as second-class members in their own society. The initial moral outrage gave way to social protest, and a political consciousness that redirect social networks into the political arena. A raised consciousness thus becomes a political resource, a tool by which others are mobilized into political action (West and Blumberg 1990). Alone it cannot transform state policy, but it was a necessary element in the subsequent stage of protest.

The verbal and discursive tactics employed by the Alianza, what Spivak (1988) refers to when she describes “deconstruction,” served to expose the collusion between the elite, and can be understood only by “the crises” these tactics produced among the people in authority (Spivak 1988:120). Deconstruction as critique is based on the work and philosophy of Jacques Derrida. It was initially formulated as a critique of texts and authorship, of literary discourses that construct hierarchies between opposites: between good and evil, between male and female, between master and slave, “which in keeping with the structures of logocentrism, make one side of the opposition the key concept in relation to which the other is defined negatively” (Weedon 1997: 159). Spivak (1994) argues that although it has been primarily an academic exercise, there are practical applications of deconstruction as well. As a critical practice, deconstruction can be used to analyze how a discourse of difference works ideologically and politically to direct power. Differences construct normative expectations along hierarchically ordered oppositions, which we work to deconstruct.

Social differences can be observed in everyday practices. People make distinctions between categories of people, for example differences based on gender, class, and race, and maintain and reaffirm those distinctions in all manner of communication (discourse) (Spivak 1999:429). Institutions, at all levels of social organization, work to enforce distinctions, through customs or laws, and in this way, control and maintain the hierarchy based on differences. Invariably, the social distribution of power is aligned to hierarchically ordered differences, which serve the interests of power. In its “setting to work” mode, Spivak (1999) explains deconstruction as a persistent attempt to disclose how power is used to construct differences along binary oppositions so that these differences
can be deconstructed, or, undone. Hence, an alternative discourse that undoes the hierarchical ordering becomes an objective of deconstruction. The failure of oppressed groups to succeed in this regard points to the greater political strength of authorities despite their smaller numbers. The failure attests to the strength of interests between local hegemony and globalized neoliberal commercialism, where power is concentrated, in maintaining the hierarchical ordering.

**Closing the Toxic Byway: Mobilizing Social Networks**

The redirection of social networks in the fight against CYTRAR is indicative of sociopolitical structuring that normatively denies communities from participating fully in the political process. The image of the “submerged network” can be invoked to convey a sense of reactivation or resuscitation for the purpose of political activity. Because they emerge through informal mechanisms of exchange where women have a pivotal role, these networks become an important component in the process through which they gained voice and authored oppositional discourse. The power of the social network lies in its pervasiveness—in its embeddedness within a social system that gives it life—and its subversiveness. By redirecting networks for the purpose of challenging governmental authority, the Alianza worked to politicize the dump site issue and by so doing, offered a critique of capitalism and globalization.

Without examining the various institutions involved in the community struggle against CYTRAR the role of women would be near invisible. At the most rudimentary level is the institution of the household, and the corresponding relationships that connect women with social processes, such as reciprocal exchange and compadrazgo, which serve to link households to the larger community, be it the neighborhood or the wider geographic region—depending on where those linkages lead. Then there is the interaction of gender with market forces and globalized institutions of power. Initially, it is a process by which households are engulfed by the political economy of northern Mexico, making critical cultural institutions of networking and exchange. Ultimately, gender interacts with globalized institutions of power as illustrated by the community protest against CYTRAR. In this last step, the practical response capabilities of social networks are transformed into a vehicle of politicization that women were particularly astute in manipulating.

CYTRAR symbolizes the forces of globalization, materially and politically, and by challenging its existence, the economic and political framework for free trade agreements between several nations were also questioned. NAFTA held promises for the economies of both the U.S. and Mexico. Mexico saw it as a way to attract foreign investment and improve its economy. In effect, it served to further liberalize Mexican trade policies and protect U.S. companies that felt Mexico imposed unfavorable constraints on foreign investment. Liberalization of commerce across international boundaries also opened the door to abuses by industrialists and Mexican officials. It literally created toxic byways through which hazardous materials were recklessly transported, and people’s health put in jeopardy, in blatant neglect of U.S., Mexican, and international laws.

Suppression of information about the dump site can be understood as an attempt by Mexico to maintain its credibility as a worthy economic partner to the U.S. For the U.S., suppression of the information occurs for economic reasons. Kerton and Bodell (1995) have examined the economic efficacy of concealing information from the public sector by industry. They raise concerns over the shipment of toxic wastes to developing countries that often lack the expertise or monetary means to safely confine potential hazards. Indi-
viduals in western European nations and in the U.S. largely depend on education and government agencies to safeguard the public from hazardous wastes. However, the existence of so-called “watchdog” agencies is not a guarantee that important information will be made public. Agencies and regulatory boards often conceal information to protect themselves. In places where no agency exists to detect violations, the probability of apprehending toxic polluters is low, as is the likelihood of punishing them. U.S. law requires an opportunity for citizen review and comment on drafts of environmental impact statements (EIS) for proposed hazardous waste disposal sites, allowing the community input in the process before the final EIS is issued. In general, community pressure on the U.S. side of the border has made it difficult to establish new hazardous waste facilities. Reducing waste at the source is an expensive alternative for industry. Another option is to find sites in Mexico, where the procedure by which permits are granted for hazardous waste dumps is more lax. In Mexico, public participation is not allowed until the final EIS has been circulated, which often comes late in the game. EISs have been known to be incomplete or not widely distributed (Nauman 2000).

We may never know how much of the world’s health problems are due to the high cost of monitoring hazardous waste disposal and enforcing regulations. Kerton and Bodell (1995) cite a United Nations report on corruption that bears out the fact that the payments to officials to cover up violations are all too common. We can assume, then, that payments to corrupt individuals for aiding in the concealment of information are less than the cost of having to follow standards for the confinement and treatment of toxic waste. In an ideal world, an ethical concern for public welfare should make superfluous regulations governing toxic waste disposal. However, it seems clear, as Kerton and Bodell state, that in the noisy storm of the international marketplace, the calm voice of moral suasion is easily drowned out by the promise of economic rewards.

Exclusion of the public from the discourse formalizing the agreements between states and industry has generated widespread opposition, and the discourse emerging from this opposition has brought pressure against siting hazardous waste facilities in Mexico. The difficulty in understanding how the views of certain groups are officially muted in this manner stems from the nature of the power that determines whose voice will be heard, and how it is diffused within a seemingly neutral political order (Weedon 1997:174).

Postcolonial scholars see the absence or elimination of discursive interchange between “the rulers” and “the ruled” as a consequence of colonialism (Said 1988:vi). Discursive relations among the rulers (the bourgeois nationalist and imperialist proxies) makes invisible the new, complex forms of domination even after a country’s independence. So-called decolonization left ruling classes intact in “states that are still often ideologically in thrall to, and practical satellites of, their former colonial masters” (Said 1988:ix). Neo-colonial regimes (such as the criollo leadership after Mexico’s independence from Spain), have used mechanisms by which disruptions by marginalized populations could be subverted, global economic relations continued, and a political hegemony internalized (Spivak 1994). Thus, it is from within the insurgent “subalterns” that Spivak predicts change will emerge (Spivak 1988:3).

Mexican state officials and industrialists complain that the threat of resistance scares off foreign investors and prevents the development of an adequate hazardous waste disposal infrastructure. Environmentalists counter by saying that if the siting process involved the community at an earlier stage, this dynamic would change (Nauman 2000). Meanwhile, the tons of hazardous residues dumped at Hermosillo continue to pose health threats. But
View of the Padilla Ranch well and cattle, with the CYTRAR dump in the background. The mounds of earth in the center of the picture were used to cover exposed waste, which is visible just to the right of the mound. (Photo: Rubén Duarte)

Sequence of photos showing a truck approaching the CYTRAR site and dumping materials, as winds scatter the toxic dust into the wind. Note lack of protective gear on man operating hydraulic dumper. (Photo: Rubén Duarte)

View of solid and liquid wastes lying exposed and uncontrolled at the CYTRAR dump site. (Photo: Rubén Duarte)

Protestors gather at the dump site in March 1998 before they were removed by police. (Photo: El Imparcial)

After protestors were barred from the dump, they began to assemble in front of the Palacio de Gobierno in Hermosillo’s city center. Everyday, when officials would leave the building (background), they were verbally confronted by the protestors. (Photo: Rosa María O’Leary de Lizárraga)
Alianza Cívica formed coalitions with other community groups. Here, Alianza members join a protest against a cement plant during a binational health conference at the Hotel Fiesta America in Hermosillo. A United Nations attendee talked to some members of the coalition, and took with him information and photographs of the CYTRAR dump. (Photo: Rubén Duarte)

Protestors being forcibly removed from the dump site in March 1998, when they attempted to close the site for the 2nd time. (Photo: El Imparcial)

Alianza women demonstrating at a national symposium of doctors held in Hermosillo. The group had pressed the medical community to support their efforts to point out the potential hazard of the dump. The great majority refused, fearing reprisals. One poster urges doctors “not to be afraid to denounce CYTRAR.” (Photo: El Imparcial)

Members of La Alianza Cívica at the entrance of the CYTRAR dump. (Photo: Rubén Duarte)

Alianza women in New York City, where they met with representatives of the Environmental Programme. The banner states “No to U.S. Toxic Waste, Mexico is not an international dumping ground.” (Photo: Rosa María O’Leary de Lizárraga)
no one currently claims responsibility for addressing this serious issue, illustrating the relative toothlessness of the NAFTA environmental “side agreement.” We can only guess at how many more tons are being clandestinely disposed of as Mexico’s regulatory, monitoring, and enforcement capabilities are overwhelmed by the disposal needs of industry.

For example, recent arbitration has forced the Mexican and U.S. governments to agree to clean up the abandoned Metales y Derivados smelting facility in Tijuana. In 1994, the U.S.-based owner of Metales y Derivados abandoned the site after being investigated by Mexican environmental authorities, leaving 6,000 metric tons of waste behind, and putting the health of the local community at risk. In October 1998, after years of trying to pressure Mexican authorities into action, the San Diego-based Environmental Health Coalition and a citizen’s committee in Tijuana (Comité Ciudadano Pro-Restauración del Cañon del Padre) filed a citizen enforcement complaint charging Mexico with failing to enforce its own environmental laws (Kourous 2000). For over ten years, the residents of the Chilpancingo neighborhood, located just downhill from the abandoned facility, have complained repeatedly to Mexican authorities about the pollution being emitted from Metales. Rains turn nearby ditches into brown rivers of waste, while lead slag heaps remain uncovered and open to the elements, allowing lead dust to blow into nearby homes and yards, covering them with a fine layer of the residue. They argued that people routinely walk past the plant on their way to work, and children occasionally use the toxic dump as their playground. Chilpancingo residents have complained of dizziness, nausea, gastrointestinal and breathing disorders, skin rashes, headaches, memory loss, and serious birth defects. In response, Mexico’s minister of SEMARNAP (La Secretaría de Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca) was quoted as stating that Mexico doesn’t have a budget for the remediation of such sites and legal proceedings to extradite the dump’s owner have been repeatedly defeated (Kourous 2000).

On April 26, 1999, dump opponents in Hermosillo attempted to set up another blockade at the facility’s entrance but they were immediately dislodged by police. After the first blockade attempt in which the site was blocked and shut down for 37 days, a coalition of NGOs filed a complaint with State Commission of Human Rights saying that protestors had been physically abused by the police who removed them. On April 30, the NGOs of Hermosillo reached an agreement with authorities of the state of Sonora to conduct a joint inspection of CYTRAR. The agreement allowed members of the NGO coalition to take part in an inspection of the dump site along with local and state officials to determine if CYTRAR was in compliance with the laws regulating the disposal of toxic waste. The inspection led to the dump’s closure.

Since the closure, CYTRAR’s parent company has filed a legal claim against Mexico at the World Bank’s Washington, D.C.-based International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID). The Madrid-based Técnicas Medioambientales S.A. (TECMED) is seeking an undetermined amount of compensation from Mexico for the investment it lost when the its wholly owned Mexican subsidiary of the same name (Técnicas Medioambientales de México or TECMED), was denied permission to operate the CYTRAR facility in Hermosillo. The parent company submitted an administrative complaint to the Mexican Trade and Industrial Development Secretariat (SECOFI) after the National Ecology Institute denied a renewal of its annual permit to operate the CYTRAR dump in November 1997. The company proceeded to international arbitration after the secretariat’s refusal to grant its request to continue operating. In its decision
SECOFI cited “lack of public participation in decisions regarding the hazardous waste confinement, as well as legal questions regarding CYTRAR’s proximity to Hermosillo” (Nauman 2000).

Conclusion

I have attempted to define a model of environmental activism that succeeded, to a large degree, in forcing the closure of a toxic waste dump in Hermosillo, Mexico, which threatened the health of citizens. A feminist analytical framework was used to outline a model of community struggle where women’s interaction with the systems of globalization, political hegemony, and environmental policy was gendered. This framework considered three themes important to feminist activist research that can be used to outline a postmodern model of political protest.

1. A feminist perspective brings to light a community struggle that was mostly organized and carried out by women, even though their activities as leaders and actors were ignored or suppressed.

2. A focus on their activities can help us discover and validate alternative political strategies in which women play a central role, not only to record this history, but because social networks prove to be a force by which women especially are empowered. Officials had withheld information about the dumping, and public knowledge of the dump’s existence was the result of an accident. Activists then mobilized social networks to find out more about the dump, and subsequently used these networks to organize protests and gather additional important information about its danger. Furthermore, the networks proved to be an important source of information about officials, which helped pressure them to order the dump closure.

3. A feminist perspective is also important in identifying alternative models of political protest that challenge patriarchally structured limits on democratic political participation. The way social networks were used in this particular struggle shows them to be an important component, not only for gathering information needed by the community to protect itself, but also in a deconstructionist sense, through oppositional discourse that exposed corruption of the political and commercial elites who permitted the dump to operate in an illegal and hazardous manner.

An outline of this model of community activism is important because many communities, especially those that are economically and politically marginalized, are the most likely victims of dangerous waste management practices. By the same token, they are the most likely to benefit from alternative models of political activism. As industrialization programs are further facilitated through NAFTA, information about potential toxic hazards, and how waste disposal policies are enacted and enforced is needed to alert vulnerable communities, considered otherwise tractable by officials and industrialists. This raises the issue of how access and control of such information is easily abused by economic and political elites. Many communities on the fringes of industrial expansion are more likely to be silenced about waste management irregularities, not necessarily because they agree to the dumping, but because they are economically and politically subordinated and have little legal recourse.

Spivak’s notion of the subaltern (see note 9), helps us understand how marginalized groups are silenced. Given that power is invested and exercised through voice, the obliteration of native histories and languages and replacing them by those forged by capitalism, helped secure the hegemonic relationship between commerce and national elites (Spivak 1994). This “epistemic overhaul” (Spivak 1994:76) serves in addition to construct differences between sets of knowledge: between that of the “Modern-and-Enlightened Capitalist-West,” and that of native peoples, disqualified as inadequate and insufficiently scientific. The community activism illustrated by the present case study highlights the importance of accessing and gaining control of information. Networking was the primary means by which information was accessed, and by which the public gained a political consciousness. It was the primary means by which information about officials was generated, and gave political activists the confidence to participate in
acts of civil disobedience. The sense of moral outrage made it possible for the activists to cross recognized boundaries of what normally would be considered inappropriate political behavior. Attaining the level of pressure needed to make authorities responsive to democratic processes was a direct outcome of this strategy.

The concept of “submerged networks” introduced by García-Gorena (1999:6-7) is helpful in the image it invokes, suggesting that such networks of ordinary people account for the hidden strengths in political mobilization because of their subversive nature. As key actors within these networks, women play an important role in the struggle for democracy — they are catalysts for redirecting collective energies towards the opening up of the political process. Crucial to mobilization of networks is the emergence of a shared consciousness that an act of injustice has been committed. In the case of the Alianza, a raised awareness gave the activists insights into the complicity between economic and political elites. With this awareness, the activities of the social networks were redirected to challenge the logic of certain economic and political principles. With these principles under attack, the transgressions by public authorities began to be openly and publicly discussed. The information activists gathered was set to work in a deconstructionist strategy, where the authority of public officials was challenged and rejected.

A post-modern model for community activism can be seen as having developed within a framework of inequality and structured oppression, a sociopolitical framework in which women are rarely perceived as capable of instituting change beyond a limited arena. Although there are no gender differences in the ways human beings relate to the environment, there are gendered differences in the way constraints are imposed by hegemonic political and economic structures. The collusion between public officials and industrialists limited the democratic process women sought to employ, and because of this, conventional measures to end the dumping were impeded.

Ultimately, an analysis of the Alianza’s activities makes visible the history of struggle over domains of discourse, and is a history that is much needed by communities to empower themselves. An analysis of the Alianza’s activities also makes visible women’s roles in the struggle for community empowerment. If not made a priority of feminist activist scholarship, the power of women’s political activism is subsumed under the guise of community protest and risks erasure from the historical record. Historically, the gendered control of discourse has served to perpetuate and ritualize a political process that silence women and the ramifications of this process on all marginalized communities—not just women—is compelling as the physical well-being of all is threatened. Thus, to treat women’s protest activities as separate from that of men would fall into the pitfall of binary separatism. In effect, women would be silenced in an affirmation of nonparticipation, and by virtue of this logic, nonexistence (Spivak 1994:102). Instead, by this analysis I hope to advocate an integrative approach in which women are re-represented as intrinsic to the political process, not outside it. The use of social networks suggests an alternative vehicle by which to holistically transform structures that marginalize, and argues for the need for feminist eyes to guarantee that women remain central to the process of transformation.

Notes
1 This figure is from the official website for the municipality Hermosillo. (“Municipio de Hermosillo: Hermosillo en Línea,” 2001.) Official estimates are conservative due to the continual influx of migrants who settle in unregulated shantytowns.
2 Based on a true story of a local community’s struggle to expose the source of contaminated water which caused devastating illnesses among some residents. The investigation of Pacific Gas & Electric Company, a
powerful corporation, led to one of the largest settlements ever paid in a direct-action lawsuit in U.S. history ($333 million).  

3 Based on the true story of Karen Silkwood, an employee of an Oklahoma plutonium plant who died in a mysterious car accident before blowing the whistle about dangerous conditions at the plant.  

4 In the Roman Catholic religion, there are seven sacraments that begins with baptism, and continues with confirmation, penance, first communion, marriage, extreme unction (last rites), and ordination. Unless an individual is ordained as a priest, all others can expect to receive all of the first six sacrament during a lifetime. 

5 Although the free trade zones have been modified over the years, they generally came to consist of a 20 mile-wide area along each side of the U.S.-Mexico line.  

6 Maquiladoras are organized along a twin-plant assembly concept where companies set up plants on both sides of the border. Using this arrangement, U.S. companies send raw materials to assembly plants established in Mexico. Mexico provides cheap labor for production and/or partial assembly of products. Mexico also provides concessions for the use and/or purchase of the natural resources needed by the assembly plants. Partially assembled products are exported to the U.S side, where the company’s “twin-plant” provides final assembly and/or packaging for shipment.  

7 Modernity, which began intellectually with the Enlightenment, attempted to describe the world in rational, empirical and objective terms. It assumed that there was a truth to be uncovered, a way of obtaining answers to the question posed by the human condition. Post-modernism, on the other hand, questions the “truths” provided by modernism. A post-modern critique questions its authority and monopoly on “truth” via its control of science and history and power. 

8 Environmental Media Services (EMS 2001) provides a fact sheet for the provisions of environmental safety according to the NAFTA treaty. 

9 The term “subaltern” (of inferior rank or position) was first used by the Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) to describe those groups who are subject to domination by the ruling classes. Spivak expanded on Gramsci’s original covert usage of subaltern (he was obliged to encrypt his writing to get it past prison censors), which “signified ‘proletarian,’ whose voice could not be heard, being structurally written out of the capitalist bourgeois narrative.” (Kilburn 1996).  

10 At least 12 lawsuits have been filed by companies under Chapter 11 provisions since NAFTA was signed in 1992. Seven of those have arisen because of environmental laws. (There may be more than 12 that aren’t known about publicly because of the secrecy of Chapter 11 proceedings.) Chapter 11 has had the unintended consequence of allowing private investors to force changes in other countries’ public policy — all behind the closed doors of the arbitration process. Ralph Nader’s public interest group, Public Citizen, has detailed briefing papers on its website (www.citizen.org) for some of the Chapter 11 cases.  

11 The possibility that a clean up of the Tijuana site will ensue any time soon is remote, given the history of environmental cleanup in the U.S. For example, in 1989 the U.S. Department of Energy closed its military dump site facility in Fernald, Ohio. Although Fernald was slated as a clean-up site through Superfund money, experts estimate that it will take 50 years and 50 million dollars to clean up (Seager 1996). 

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