

## **BORDER GRASSROOTS MUSEUMS, MEMORY ACTIVISM, AND RADICAL PUBLIC HISTORY: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES**

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### **Abstract**

The El Paso/Ciudad Juárez region has long served as a vibrant contact zone where diverse communities intersect, coexist, and sometimes clash. This article explores Museo Mayachen, a grassroots museum established in 2008 by La Mujer Obrera, a nonprofit organisation addressing the needs of displaced garment workers. The museum was created in response to the lack of Mexican and Mexican American representation in the city's historical narratives and the ongoing gentrification of working-class neighbourhoods. Situated in a former garment factory, the museum serves as a space for preserving community heritage and memory through initiatives like workshops, community assemblies, and a community archive. The article explores how grassroots museums, particularly in contested areas like the U.S.-Mexico border, empower marginalised communities to reclaim and represent their own histories despite the challenges involved.

**Keywords:** Memory, Community Museums, Representation, Public History

This article explores how grassroots organisations can become vital to developing alternative museological practices, activating collective memory, and fostering community engagement through public history and cultural revitalisation. This exploration examines the formation of a community museum in the United States-Mexico border region, in the city of El Paso, Texas, one of the most unique and complex regions of the world, the locus of neoliberal economic policies, inequality, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and regional disparities. Amidst complexities, this border city is characterised by a thriving cultural life, fostering the surge of social activism and public history movements.

In 2009, La Mujer Obrera (The Working Woman), a local grassroots organisation with a rich history spanning over three decades, inaugurated Mercado Mayapan (Mayapan Mexican Market), a cultural and economic centre, as part of their community development initiatives aimed at creating economic opportunities for women in the border region, particularly those displaced by the maquiladora industry, while also functioning as a cultural hub where neighbourhood residents and visitors could experience the rich heritage and traditions of the Mexican culture and the border region. Strategically situated in a 40,000-square-foot warehouse, the market revitalised a deindustrialised landscape reminiscent of decades of prolific garment manufacturing in the border city of El Paso,

Texas. The choice of the site was a statement to emphasise the power of ordinary urban landscapes that nurture people's public memory and the politics of place construction, public culture, and memory in the process of (re)defining public pasts and (re)claiming what public historian Dolores Hayden refers to the power of place; the power that ordinary urban landscapes hold to nurture citizen's public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory(Hayden, 1995:9).

A vital component in this effort towards preserving Mexican and Border heritage through the preservation of urban landscapes and activation of public memory was the development of a grassroots museum or community-based museum. The initiative drew inspiration from the concept of 'restorative history,' a term emerging from the grassroots museum movement of the 1950s. This approach sought to reclaim and present a people's history that emphasised the contributions and sacrifices of racialised communities, which had been systematically marginalised in mainstream historical narratives. Also inspiring was the movement's feature that empowered teachers, social workers, civil rights activists, students, and volunteers to lead these museums' direction, coordination, and management. These individuals worked closely with their communities, deeply understanding their needs, and used this insight to raise awareness about the historical, cultural, and economic contributions of marginalised groups to the social fabric of the United States. Moreover, the grassroots model laid the foundation for the concept of a 'participatory museum' (Ruffins, 2022), emphasising the urgency and commitment to view the community as the central actor in preserving and safeguarding its cultural heritage.

This initiative commenced around 2002 and stemmed from various conversations involving a committee composed of long-time labor and community activists, community organisers, workers, neighbourhood residents, and members of La Mujer Obrera (Olvera, 2010). Even though the committee changed throughout the years, the goal remained the same: the creation of a space for the learning of history and culture that engages the community it serves and that acknowledges the presence and history of Mexican and Mexican-American people as a product of centuries of struggle, resilience, and triumph in the border region. i

From its inception, Museo Mayachen—named after an ancient town in the Yucatan Peninsula—was envisioned as a space to preserve and reclaim Mexican and Chicax working-class memories and voices. It aimed to serve as a tool for fostering self- determination and a sense of belonging within communities grappling with poverty, inequality, displacement, and discrimination. Understanding the pivotal role Mexican and Chicana women garment workers played in shaping the socio-economic landscape of their communities and the industrial fabric of the United States, the museum placed their

memories as the core of this project.<sup>ii</sup> Their stories, often relegated to the margins, overshadowed by broader narratives of industrial development and economic growth, and forgotten in the context of deindustrialization and capital flight, became the backbone of the museum. This collective remembrance sought to reclaim the 'deindustrial sublime'— the aesthetics of urban abandonment—(Apel, 2015:18) and recover the collective memory of deindustrialization, as it was explicitly embodied in racialised and gendered labor.<sup>iii</sup> Given this, I suggest that this model of a community museum in a border city expands the practice and experience of cultural citizenship by activating collective memory and transforming industrial ruins into sites of consciousness.

### **Activating the Memory of Deindustrialization**

As a result of the Border Industrialisation Program of 1965, the border city of El Paso, Texas, experienced a significant surge in population, labor force, and job opportunities, primarily driven by the rise of a thriving apparel industry. This growth trajectory was fuelled by significant manufacturers such as Levi Strauss, which established its first plant in El Paso in 1965, employing thousands of young Mexican immigrant and Mexican American women on its assembly lines.

Contrary to the standard narrative of export-oriented development stemming from the Mexican side of the border, the emergence of maquiladoras in El Paso presents a unique variation in the formation of the 'frontera historica' (historic frontier), particularly concerning the fluidity of capital and the regulation of labor across the border. The South Central/Central area of El Paso became the heart of this burgeoning manufacturing garment industry, earning the city the title of 'the blue jean capital of the world' in the 1980s. Within this dynamic landscape, the stories of the women who worked in these garment factories became intricately woven into the fabric of the South Central/Central barrio. Their resilience, struggles, and daily labor infused vitality into this locality, propelling the broader El Paso economy and the greater U.S. economy.

However, the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on January 1, 1994, marked a seismic shift, triggering a dramatic process of deindustrialization that reverberated across the region. The consequences were stark and far-reaching: more than 25,000 workers, predominantly women, were left unemployed, and the South Central/Central barrio fell into disrepair and neglect. Capturing the devastation, both urban and social, of this once-thriving area from the perspective of the women workers whose lives were irrevocably altered by the forces of free trade became a primary focus for the museum. Documenting and restoring visibility to this historically marginalised workforce was essential in reframing the narrative of economic progress and recognising their contribution to the history of labor rights.

A consensus emerged after a series of discussion assemblies involving workers, community organisation members, and the museum's team: the project would begin with a permanent exhibition entitled 'Women in the Garment Industry of El Paso.'<sup>iv</sup> The exhibition seeks to commemorate these women's contributions to the garment industry by amplifying their voices, illuminating their stories, and fostering a deeper understanding of the complex socio-economic dynamics that have shaped their lives and communities. By centring the voices of women workers, the exhibition sought to directly challenge dominant narratives that often erase the contribution of immigrant working-class communities, particularly women of colour. More than a tribute, it was conceived as an act of historical and memory justice, providing these women a platform to reclaim their place in local and national histories.

Embracing the democratising and community engagement principles of community museology, the museum's team facilitated discussion assemblies where workers could share their stories, challenge dominant narratives, and assert their agency in shaping collective memory. Active participation in the exhibit's curation empowered these workers to engage in processes of self-representation. These processes included creating a timeline tracing women's involvement in the garment industry, linking their labor back to those who worked in laundry services as early as the 1920s, mapping El Paso's changing and decaying industrial landscape, and gathering mementos and memorabilia from their time in the industry. Anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner contends that achieving 'adequate representation of subjects in the attempt to understand resistance' (Ortner, 1995) goes beyond improving portrayals. It entails formulating and executing projects where subjects actively sustain and transform their social and cultural environments - exemplified by the workers who curated this exhibit.

### **The Intimate Archive of Capitalism**

Two crucial elements profoundly shaped the exhibit's design: oral histories, which offered a rich archive of emotions and narratives of struggle, and what the team identified as social sites and objects of memory. These included photographs, documents like diplomas and certificates, work tools like scissors, threads, aprons, video recordings, ephemera, and other artifacts that the workers deemed significant and valuable. These items served as tangible representations of their daily experiences, struggles, and decision-making processes influenced by corporate power, national interests, and the gender logics embedded in the maquiladora industry. Together, they provided a multifaceted lens through which visitors could explore the complexities of these workers' lives and the broader socio-political context in which they operated.

Through oral histories, workers formed a nostalgic connection to a past and place shaped by the intimacies of industrialisation and global capitalism. They played a pivotal role in fostering recognition and inclusion of diverse voices, identities, and memories. As Alicia Schmidt-Camacho articulates in *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S-Mexico Borderlands*, the testimonies of maquiladora workers illuminate the multifaceted lived experiences of obreras (women workers), transcending their depiction as mere labor inputs (Schmidt-Camacho, 2008:256). Among the many testimonies collected, some recounted their involvement in the historic Farah Strike of 1972-1974, while others expressed loyalty and gratitude to the factory for the financial stability it provided to themselves and their families. Most women shared harrowing accounts of exploitative working conditions, including low wages, strip searches, verbal abuse, and sexual harassment. Yet, contrasting narratives also emerged, highlighting benefits such as health insurance (in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico), Christmas bonuses, and vibrant New Year's celebrations organised by the factories.

Despite the diversity of their experiences, the worker's testimonials converged into a collective memory marked by anger and sorrow when reflecting on their current circumstances. Social sites of memory, such as photographs and documents, provided a visual and material backdrop for their personal accounts and emotional landscapes. These artefacts enriched the narratives, adding historical and cultural context layers to the exhibit. By juxtaposing testimonies with tangible objects from the worker's daily lives, the exhibit aimed to create a more immersive and comprehensive understanding of the complexity of their experiences. Moreover, the emphasis on oral histories and social memory sites highlighted the exhibit's participatory essence. Rather than presenting a static narrative imposed by external curators, the exhibit actively encouraged the workers to shape and contribute to the representation of their history. Drawing from James Scott's concept of the 'hidden transcript' and the emergence of disguised forms of dissent, it becomes evident that these testimonials and the preservation of memory objects provide insight into experiences of subordination, domination, and vulnerability. At the same time, they foster an environment conducive to mutual understanding and solidarity (Scott, 1990: 112), all within the context of displacement from the labor market and the bicultural, transnational lifestyles within a region characterised by violence and precarity.

Currently, displaced workers from the textile industry in El Paso represent a demographic increasingly unlikely to secure reemployment opportunities. The rigid work structure within garment factories hindered the worker's ability to pursue further education or achieve proficiency in English, leaving many unable to integrate into the already fragmented social fabric of El Paso, which poses additional barriers to their reintegration into the community. Compounding their exclusion from the labor force is the detrimental impact of Ford's

repressive automated production system on the health of garment workers in the short and long term. While Devon G. Peña argues that Mexican workers displayed autonomy, resistance, and creativity on the shop floor (Peña, 1997:6), the realities of job specialisation, repetitive tasks, and the fast-paced assembly lines led to significant adverse health consequences. Many workers experience chronic physical and emotional ailments exacerbated by the monotonous and often strenuous nature of their roles.

One of the defining characteristics of factory work is its labor intensity, a nearly ubiquitous aspect of the maquiladora system. Workers are continually pressured to meet standardised quotas, which creates a high-stress environment. A critical component of the exhibit *Women in the Garment Industry* was the simultaneous generation of a report on the health-disease process of Mexican women in the garment industry, drawing on insights from their recorded oral histories. As highlighted in their testimonies, the quota system is central to this system of repression and exploitation. It compels workers to intensify and accelerate their pace to meet predetermined production targets. Failure to fulfil these quotas resulted in penalties, such as salary reductions or extended working hours to achieve the goals. This culture of fear, underscored by the constant threat of fines or job loss, served to increase production in a manner reminiscent of colonialism's control mechanisms (Cesaire, 200:41).

Rosa's testimony, a worker at Levi's factory, poignantly illustrates the intensity and rigidity of the work environment: 'We could not talk, we couldn't even turn to see our neighbour, as it meant falling behind on production. We had to be present all day. Even going to the bathroom was considered a setback. The job demanded sacrifice. Yes, we were compensated, but it came at a great cost.' The excessive workload and prolonged periods of repetitive tasks have resulted in numerous health issues, including stress, cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, and compromised immune defences. This commodification of women's labor exacts a considerable toll on their physical well-being, as evidenced by Karl Marx's assertion that 'the physical deterioration, widespread bodily suffering, and premature death of the working people accompany the success of manufacturing.' (Marx, 2000:25). Such conditions underscore the inherent exploitation within the maquiladora system, revealing the start of trade-offs between economic gain and the health of labourers.

In addition to the physical deterioration of their health, women workers also experienced significant emotional and psychological effects. Nearly two decades after the implementation of NAFTA, testimonies reveal the profound devastation experienced by the workers. Maria Fernandez, a machine operator, articulated her experiences by stating:



The North American Free Trade Agreement destroyed us not only economically but also morally. At that time, we thought that our life was over. We were so involved in the dynamics of the factory that it became our whole world; there was nothing we could do outside of that world. It destroyed us morally because we felt incapable of functioning in any other work. We were and continue to be rejected from other jobs because we are not young enough. Employers think we are not useful because we are old. The feeling of being rejected always hurts.

Drawing on the examination of 'knowledge practices' by Casas-Córtés, Osterweil, and Powell, which emphasises that knowledge is actively produced and reproduced through social practices and shaped by local realities (Casas-Córtés, Osterweil, Powell, 2008), the testimonies of women workers evolved into a rich form of knowledge. These insights transcended mere personal narratives, transforming into theories and political analyses that critically address how neoliberalism commodifies humans, rendering them as disposable entities. Furthermore, the testimonies illuminate the lived experiences of workers, who often face subjugation and re-contextualisation solely to serve the demands of the capitalist market. These narratives encapsulate the profound human toll of economic restructuring, serving as poignant reminders of the intricate connections between global trade policies and local communities. Oral history interviews played a crucial role in activating the public memory of women workers whose lives and labor contributed to establishing El Paso, Texas, as the 'blue jean capital of the world' from the 1960s to the 1990s.

In conjunction with the oral histories, the sites of memory enriched a visual representation of social memory. The museum cabinets were filled with an array of artefacts—scissors, threads, measuring tapes, thimbles, photographs, aprons, diplomas, buttons, and more—that the women had carefully preserved from their days in the factories. Many of these artefacts had been kept for over two decades, underscoring their deep emotional significance. One of the most poignant contributions to the museum was a home video documenting the final day of operation at the last Levi Strauss jeans plant, which closed its doors in 1998. In this farewell footage, the cameraperson moves through the workstations, capturing women as they bid their final goodbyes. An operator distributes the last paycheques and final compensation at one particular moment. Displayed in the exhibit, this video had the power to transport visitors to that pivotal moment in history, evoking what sociologists call 'mnemonic synchronisation'—the complex process through which a community grapples with differing memories and perspectives, rarely achieving full consensus on a particular past event (Zerubavel, 1996).

Recognising that the significance of deindustrialization is inseparably linked to the urban landscape, it becomes clear that 'place memory' and 'body memory' are crucial elements, with locations imbued with shared experiences of homes, public spaces, workplaces, and

the paths traveled between home and work. While public historians argue that conveying these memories in an exhibit is challenging, the women, as custodians of knowledge and memory, embraced the concept of 'socially lived theorising'- the agency of individuals and communities in theorising about their circumstances-(Casa-Córtez, Osterweil, Powell, 2008)" by participating in the design and organisation of two distinct displays.



Figure 1. Museum display featuring a visualisation of production labor and a map of garment factories in the South Central Area of El Paso (Source: the author 2010)

The first display featured a city map meticulously marked by a group of women, highlighting the locations of over 100 maquiladoras that operated before 1994. In the second display, two pairs of jeans were prominently showcased under the heading 'Who Made Your Jeans?' (Figure 1). This inquiry encouraged visitors to critically reflect on the individuals behind producing these iconic garments. By weaving together fragments of oral histories and data from telephone questionnaires (gathered from workers affiliated with La Mujer Obrera), the Museo Mayachen team crafted a visual representation showing the minimum number of workers required to assemble a single pair of jeans. Their analysis



revealed that at least 50 workers were involved in various roles, excluding those responsible for the dyeing and ironing.

The active involvement of women workers throughout the planning and design stages of the exhibit challenged the traditional culture of museum-community relations. These dynamics often result in identities being defined, denied, excluded or included, overrepresented or misrepresented within the museum space. By resisting this hegemonic culture, the women highlighted the museum's potential to exercise power by creating and disseminating knowledge more equitably and inclusively. The Women in the Garment Industry exhibit made visible the stories and experiences of women navigating the survival circuits of global economic processes while also reclaiming the significance of what may be considered 'industrial ruins' (Apel, 2015:69) as sites of memory.

The narratives of struggle captured in the Museo Mayachen exhibit and archive go beyond academic frameworks that often reduce women's lives to concepts of disposability, social death, and trauma. In the factory context, resistance extended beyond disrupting productivity, organising against sexual harassment, and abuse, or seeking to improve working conditions. The workers' culture became a locus of resistance and resilience, fostering social bonds and nurturing a sense of community. Acknowledging that knowledge practices are deeply intertwined with power dynamics and resistance, the Women in the Garment Industry exhibit embodied the feminist call to recognise and validate knowledge originating from 'marked' locations. It positioned activist and subaltern knowledge alongside archival memories, creating a space that fosters the capacity to aspire – to claim agency, envision alternative futures, resist the erasure and invisibility imposed by capitalism, and reclaim the significance of their labor and experiences within a broader historical and economic narrative.

## Conclusion

In essence, the community museum discussed in this paper explores the intricate relationship between everyday public spaces and narratives of struggle, viewed through the socio-cultural and political lens of Mexican and Mexican American working individuals and their families. Museo Mayachen embodies an alternative process wherein people's discursive social narratives—both personal and collective—not only imbue public spaces with meaning but also possess the capacity to shape and reshape cultural structures while envisioning alternative futures. Rooted in the ethos of rural community museums, these institutions embrace the participatory role of community members, including elders, activists, and immigrant workers, in constructing and interpreting local narratives. This inclusive approach extends to developing a new museology, where the community is not

merely a subject but an active participant in the design and development of museum exhibits. It adopts a bottom-up approach to curation, allowing the stories, artefacts, and narratives to be shaped directly by those who have lived them.

Situated in the Ciudad Juarez-El Paso border region, this community museum amplifies the voices and experiences of marginalised populations, challenging dominant narratives within the American urban landscape. Community museums along the U.S.-Mexico border function as inherently politicised spaces, where representations of place and identity are neither predetermined nor fixed but are actively constructed and contested. This project highlights the strategies and potential of Latino cultural politics in resisting neoliberal development initiatives, emphasising the vital role of museums as sites where culture, memory, and community can actively engage in shaping and redefining spatial and social landscapes.

## Notes

1 Museo Mayachen developed a series of newsletters to engage the community of South-Central El Paso, Texas in the multiple initiatives and participatory practices. These materials along with a broad collection of political pamphlets and periodicals from the region, are preserved in the archive of grassroots organization La Mujer Obrera located at 2000 Texas Ave. in El Paso, Texas.

2 For discussions on the significant contributions of Chicana and Mexican American women to labor history in the United States, see Vicki L. Ruiz's *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (1998), which offers a comprehensive account of Mexican women's activism in labor movements, focusing on their roles as agricultural and factory workers, as well as their efforts to improve working conditions. Similarly, Patricia Zavella's research on cannery workers, particularly on her book *"Women's Work and Chicano Families: Cannery Workers of the Santa Clara Valley"* (1987), examines the experiences of female cannery workers in California. For an in-depth exploration of Mexican and Mexican-American women's labor history in the region of El Paso, Texas see *The Mexican Women of El Paso, 1880-1920: A Case Study*, in which Mario T. Garcia delves into the lives and experiences of Mexican and Chicana women that participated in the El Paso laundry strike of 1919; a pivotal moment in the history of the Chicana movement.

3 In the book *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline*, art historian Dora Apel explores the notion of the deindustrial sublime to describe the emergence of an aesthetic of industrial ruination. She presents the city of Detroit, Michigan, as a case study to understand the commodification of ruin imagery resulting from industrial disinvestment and capital globalization. Like Detroit, Michigan, the city of El Paso, Texas has experienced the profound impact of deindustrialization, leaving marginalized communities that once depended heavily on industry for their economic stability in extreme poverty as those industries disappeared. In Detroit, the decline of the automotive industry led to widespread economic hardship, as many working-class neighborhoods were left without the jobs that had once supported them. Similarly, El Paso, which relied on the maquiladora industry from the late 1960s until the early 1990s, faced significant challenges when this sector diminished. Both cities share a common narrative of industrial decline leading to economic despair in marginalized communities. Dora, Apel, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 18.

4 The model of discussion assemblies was inherited from the organization's Marxist practices of participatory

democracy, which emphasizes the direct involvement of the working class in decision-making processes. In this case, workers gained a sense of ownership and control of their stories, objects of memory, and representation.

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