

Melissa W. Wright

Disposable Labor and Femicide: Making the connections

Everyday, around the world, women who work in the third world factories of global firms face the idea that they are disposable. This idea proliferates in the form of a story, which is widely told, that explains how women from third world countries represent a homogenous worker whose productive value inevitably depletes over time until she is worth no more than the value of her own replacement. Those telling the story draw from numerous beliefs in order to frame this narrative. They draw from sexist ideas of women's inferiority as workers, as citizens and as contributing members of society. They draw from xenophobic portrayals of migrant workers as unworthy of social investment and from racist, among other, ideologies that explain how some people are simply worth less than others.

In my work in factories and in their surrounding cities in northern Mexico, in southern China, and in the southwestern United States, I have followed this narrative as it has traveled across continents within global firms that seek to employ, primarily, migrant women from the working poor. How these firms create production systems that count on the disposability of these workers as a hard fact of life is one of the questions I explore. Another is how workers have resisted this narrative and its material consequences for them, for their families and their communities. In this talk, I will focus on the second of these concerns as I examine how a social movement in northern Mexico, along its border with the United States, has galvanized working, migrant women to confront this logic of disposability and its violent consequences in their communities. These activists call this violence, "femicide," and expose how the killing of women with impunity in northern Mexico is directly linked to the widespread belief that poor, migrant and working women are inherently disposable, both within and outside of the workplace.
