

Solidarity in Sweatshops and Sex Work

Documenting Women Worker Organisers in Made in L.A. and Live Nude Girls Unite!

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The call to solidarity almost immediately conjures to mind the raised, clenched fist of protest or the triumphant tones of Solidarity Forever, where the union makes us strong. It is a sentiment that is used somewhat synonymously with community, a shared understanding of struggle and a commitment to the collective. Solidarity in the seemingly natural association with labour and the political Left has been considered as in something of a decades-long crisis – if it ever truly flourished in the US – under the dominance of Neoliberalism. In an increasingly fragmented labour market, an ever more precarious and separated workforce is spread across the ‘global village’ where flows of capital, information, and work are understood to undermine the proximities and shared places from which to foment class consciousness and realise solidarity. Calls for ‘more solidarity’ in struggles for social, economic, racial, gender, and climate justice can take for granted a notion of solidarity as springing forth from an inherent same-ness, a shared fight that is somehow pre-existing but that is stymied or occluded by the powers-that-be. A concept so deeply normalised, I often sign off an email ‘in solidarity’, but in this easy evocation I must admit, I would be at pains to explain what exactly I mean in typing those words.

This taken-for-granted status was questioned by labour historian David Roediger,¹ who began the 2015 American Studies Association presidential address with a reflection on the Black Lives Matter protests of the previous year following the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson and urged caution in imagining solidarity as something that we must simply find and reignite. Rather, he calls for more scholarly engagement with the concept, but argues that such considerations must render an unease with solidarity to unsettle universalisms resting upon rose-tinted histories; while “it remains critical to make a case for solidarity”, for meaningful practice one

1 Vgl. Roediger, David: Making Solidarity Uneasy: Cautions on a Keyword from Black Lives Matter to the Past. In: *American Quarterly* 68 (2016), 2, 223–248.

must be “uneasy about the assumptions it sometimes evokes”.² Tracing an at times contradictory conceptual history across Catholicism to the predominant Marxist and Leftist associations, Roediger explores the practices of US labour solidarity that neglected or were actively premised upon exclusions based on gender, race, and relations of empire. Starting from the recognition then that solidarity is not a given, I draw upon new working-class studies and labour geography as a guide to re-theorise the relational, and cultural, practice of solidarity, which focuses upon the agency of working-class movements in shaping solidarities. The geographer David Featherstone³ has urged solidarity to be thought politically, as a “relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression”.⁴ With a focus on solidarity from below, the relation is not naturalised as Featherstone contends with the work and contingency of struggle in a recognition of the “generative, transformative character of solidarity and how solidaristic practices can shape new relations, new linkages, new connections”.⁵ In my contribution, I turn this lens toward cultural production by examining documentaries on labour organising, proposing the form as a means to screen class struggle and as a practice of solidarity.

As the kinds of work that dominate the US labour market shift toward what are variously termed immaterial, affective, and knowledge labours in service, health-care, and technology, in a landscape of deindustrialisation where workers in the US are less likely than ever to join a union with membership rates at just 10.3 % in 2021 (Dept. of Labor), this raises serious questions as to the study of working-class experience, politics, and institutions. A wave of strike action across the US in 2021 and continuing in successive ‘hot labor summers’, broad geographically and in various sectors, alongside refusals such as the Great Resignation and Quiet Quitting, calls for reflection on the role of workers in imagining social justice and the place of class in the US. Scholars in new working-class studies attempt to recentre “the unifying potential of class”, with a focus on the lives, cultures, and perspectives of workers as a “foundation and location for analyses of systems of power, oppression and exploitation”.⁶ Yet this focus does not lose sight of the necessity to address the distinct experience across race, gender, and ethnicity in any pursuit of class-based organising. In linking cultural expression and physical labour, Janet Zandy argues that the field provides an “alternative frame and a way out of the impasse of identity politics and identity fragmentation. By drawing a web of connections based on multiple forms of

2 Ebd., 224.

3 Vgl. Featherstone, David: *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism*, London 2012.

4 Ebd., 5.

5 Ebd., 19.

6 Linkon, Sherry Lee/Russo, John: Introduction: What’s New about New Working-Class Studies? In: Dies. (Hg.): *New Working-Class Studies*, Ithaca 2005, 11.13.

labor, working-class studies demonstrates how the margins are, indeed, the masses, quite literally, the hands that sustain the materiality of the world".⁷ The documentaries under analysis film class from two distinct sites of labour contestation, the sweatshop and the strip show. The Emmy-award winning, Spanish language film *Made in L.A. = Hecho en Los Angeles*, focuses upon Latina garment workers and a legal battle against the fast fashion brand Forever 21, while *Live Nude Girls Unite!* takes the viewer to San Francisco's Lusty Lady peep show to document the successful founding of the first, and until recently only, Exotic Dancers Union in the US. These films are first and foremost organised around labour mobilisation, as documents of legal battles for rights and recognition; however, both films mediate the material and social relations of class across multiple lines of identity and centre workers that are left out of the mainstream discourse on labour.

Upon reading these two choices, it may perhaps jump out as a little gauche to consider together the exploitations of garment workers and exotic dancers. Yet this is informed by a broader association of the two realms as largely populated by women workers. While the films adopt different tones in the storytelling, both track lengthy legal battles, situate the workers in tensions surrounding immigration and feminism respectively, are embedded within the campaigns, and convey the agency of the women at the centre of these stories. Enacting the unease of solidarity, the films also unsettle the assumed ideal type of the worker as the white male labouring in heavy industry, carrying a hard hat and a union card. Media, and particularly film, carry the potential to foreground labour that is often invisible in discussions of work and class. Communication media is a crucial aspect of class formation across a fragmented economy and a tool that can account for the intersections of working-class subjectivity. In the first section of this essay, I will explore the screening of labour and the documentary form; I then turn to the narrative strategies of personal storytelling in these films and the negotiation of public/private; finally, I consider the role of 'place' on film and in the transformative character of solidarity.

1. Screening Solidarity

Labour and the moving image have been bound together from the outset of the technological advance: one of the first examples in the 1890s, Louis Lumière's *Employees Leaving the Lumière Factory* depicts the (mostly women) workers exiting the workplace. Considerations of the medium of film, particularly in the US context, as representing the working classes – and as a projection of class consciousness – inevitably zooms in to the documentary form. To challenge the power of Hollywood in shaping the largely negative and condescending portraits of the working class, film

7 Zandy, Janet: *Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*, New Brunswick 2004, 146.

scholar Tom Zaniello has argued that it has largely fallen on alternative, independent documentary filmmakers – through the radical Newsreel collectives founded in the 50s, agit-prop, cinema-verité, guerrilla styles, to the possibilities of digital doc forms – to film class agency, preserve militant labour history, and explore class in society.⁸ The documentary as a new cinematic form arose in the 1920s, informed by the Modernist modes of technological experimentation and re-theorisation of the medium to imagine new ways of seeing, with documentary as a media that could function as a form of criticism, education, and societal renewal, “a fabrication that thereby brought forward a new reality”.⁹ Documentaries are today a highly marketable and institutionalised genre; it is therefore important to parse the form. Exploring the psychoanalytic of desire in documentary spectatorship, Elizabeth Cowie has examined the relations of identification that can establish a distanced gaze, where the viewer has fulfilled a “certain ego ideal demand” that they are good people who can empathise with suffering. But this requires a cast of victims who are “properly helpless as well as voiceless [...] nor should they be able to provide a sophisticated analysis of their circumstances and its causes, or else they will rival the film and its spectator as knowing subject”.¹⁰ The radical potential of documentary however lies in the possibility to overthrow the dominant register of the ‘truth-teller’, to grant agency in the place of victimisation and in unsettling the distance between the screen and the showing, as a practice of mobilisation.

I draw upon Funke, Robé, and Wolfson’s concept of ‘media suturing’ to analyse the productive potential in video media – particularly documentary and activist film – in class formation. Class consciousness arises not purely from the material conditions of labouring under capitalism, but from “collectivizing processes such as struggle and communication” wherein classes of people can recognise the possibility for change and their historical agency. Noting the more generalised condition of isolated and fragmented work under neoliberalism, the authors note that “communication emerges as one critical vehicle through which class formation takes place in contemporary society”.¹¹ This essay is not the place for sustained engagement with the concept, but suffice to say here that suture theory typically refers to the extent to which viewers are ‘stitched in’ to the imaginary of the cinematic world, thereby losing sight of the fabrication to the extent that one cannot critically reflect upon the artificial construction. Suture is a medical term referring to the stitch that binds a

8 Vgl. Zaniello, Tom: *Filming Class*. In: Russo, John/Linkon, Sherry Lee (Hg.): *New Working Class Studies*, Ithaca 2005.

9 Cowie, Elisabeth: *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*, Minneapolis 2011, 47.

10 Ebd., 99.

11 Funke, Peter N./Robé, Chris/Wolfson, Todd: *Suturing Working Class Subjectivities: Media Mobilizing Project and the Role of Media Building a Class-Based Social Movement*. In: *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 10 (2012), 1, 18

wound or incision. The authors retheorise 'suture' in cinema theory, to ground the practice in the material relations of class formation. The production and distribution of video are argued to play a part in the suturing of different sections of a working class – across lines of ethnicity, immigration status, employment, and gender – in a collective transformation into class-based identification. Media “must be understood as a form of activist practice in and of itself, not only as a way to relay representations of activism happening elsewhere”.¹² The distance that could be inscribed by the screen is then collapsed to activism happening here. The documentaries are not considered “endpoints unto themselves” but instead as sparks that forge solidarities, renew class alliances and inspire organisation.¹³

Now to take this theory to the screen. The US-based, Spanish director Almudena Carracedo set out to make a short piece on sweatshop conditions after reading an exposé in the LA Times. Her encounters at the Centro de Trabajadores de Costura, the Los Angeles Garment Worker Center (GWC), pulled her to follow a three year battle against Forever 21 – filed by 33 garment workers, who had worked in a number of sweatshops across LA in illegal working conditions under subcontractors to the chain – to recognise the workers' rights in the manufacturing of their clothes. The GWC led a national boycott and the film follows the ultimately successful settlement through the lives of three main protagonists: María Pineda, Maura Colorado, and Guadalupe 'Lupe' Hernandez. The portraits of these women, three undocumented garment workers, weave their experience through the collective action of the lawsuit and boycott, and Carracedo navigates the way through the intersections of gender, ethnicity, immigration status, and exploited labour in the garment industry. *Live Nude Girls Unite!* on the other hand, was shot by one of the dancers involved in the unionising of the Lusty Lady, Julia Query, and follows the 85 workers as they go through the bargaining of the first contract – a very tricky process. The dancers collectively organised as a reaction to the club's policies on wage increases, dismissals, sick days, racist practices in scheduling, and the failure of management to enforce the 'no camera' rule, where dancers were being illegally photographed and images shared online without their consent. A comedian, writer, and sex worker, Query's helming of the film plunges us, the viewer, onto the peep show stage, the picket line, and the beige walls of the bargaining rooms.

12 Funke, Peter N./Robé, Chris/Wolfson, Todd: Rewiring the Apparatus: Screen Theory, Media Activism, and Working-Class Subjectivities. In: *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 28 (2016), 1, 57–72, 59.

13 Funke et al (2012), 21.

2. Narrating Solidarity

Examining the filmic practices of solidarity in these documentaries, I argue that the narrative strategy of personal storytelling functions as a mediation, not only between the individuals and larger, structural inequality but also as challenging “the unjust distribution of society’s resources for storytelling, or, more technically, the unequal distribution of ‘symbolic power’”¹⁴. The personal narrative, beyond producing an affective anchor, also centres the agency of the subjects in these documentaries, workers that are generally outside of the mainstream media depictions of labour and class. Grappling with *The Subject of Documentary*, Michael Renov has discussed the role of autobiography in film as a navigation of “who we are”, an expression of agency against the lofty industries of representation as in news, entertainment, and advertisement media.¹⁵ While noting critics have claimed the move toward the personal as a reactionary, individualist backlash, Renov argues that productions on the margins exercise a radical potential of collective resistance in “coupling liberatory public testimony and private therapy”.¹⁶ The personal narrative storytelling of these documentary films can be read as mediating between the private strife and the workplace dispute as well as the suture of the specific, local labour practices and the more general systems of exploitation within which these industries – sex work and sweatshops – are situated. The negotiation of the public testimony and private therapy is central to solidarity formation across a fractured working class. Labour organising often snowballs from the gradual recognition across a workforce that everyone is experiencing similar frustrations – as in *Live Nude Girls Unite!*, there came an instance where the women realised “you’re as angry as I am”. Part of the relational processes of solidarity building involves the breaching of the private in order to recognise the collective frustrations. The documentary form is one media which can provide a platform of intimate storytelling, where the individual portrait speaks to the common and shared, while also differentiated, experiences of oppression. In the documentaries under analysis here, the viewer is shown the burgeoning solidarities as workers recognise the collective struggle, but in this screening of class – alongside immigration status and gender oppressions – the films themselves contribute to the suturing of working-class subjectivity.

14 Couldry, Nick. *Media and Democracy: Some Missing Links*. In: *Media and Social Justice* (ed.) Jansen, Pooley, Taub-Pervizpour (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) 47; See also, Canella, Gino. *Social Movement Documentary Practices: Digital Storytelling, Social Media and Organizing*. In: *Digital Creativity* (2017) 28, 1, 24–37.

15 Vgl. Renov, Michael: *The Subject of Documentary*, Minneapolis 2004.

16 Ebd., XVI.

2.1 Sewing Solidarity

The documentarian behind *Made in L.A.* credits her being a native Spanish speaking woman and filmmaker working alone as enabling her to gain the trust and intimacy that is mirrored in the “unobtrusive, intimate verité study”, accompanied by a desire to “capture the lyrical beauty and the details of this colorful, diverse Los Angeles that few outsiders experience”.¹⁷ Carracedo notes her impression of the workers “need to tell their personal stories” and their surprise in her interest. The film is then positioned as providing a glimpse into those ‘other’ California’s that are hidden: not only the horrors of the exploitation experienced but the lives, labours, and communities that these workers have also built and sustained in LA. In verité style, there is no narrator from which to wrest the authoritative voice-over. Carracedo plots the growth and amplification of the local actors as reflecting an “all American experience” of the immigrant fight to “assert their voice in our society”; ultimately, she argues the film is “a story about the decision to stand up, to say, ‘I exist. And I have rights’”.¹⁸ Three women helm the narrative, each with distinct stories that intertwine at the GWC, in their experience as undocumented workers, as Latina women, and as garment workers. Maura Colorado from El Salvador is a single mother who came to the US 18 years before to support her family, leaving three young sons. María Pineda is a Mexican mother of three, whose husband’s abuse of alcohol and controlling behaviour – on top of the gruelling sweatshop work – influence her organising capacities. And finally, Guadalupe (Lupe) Hernandez is a single Mexican woman, who had joined her sister in LA to escape the confines of caring for an abusive father and six brothers after her mother’s death.

The documentary opens by situating the protagonists within their private, domestic space, each telling their individual story and how they ultimately came to seek the help of the GWC. The sequences are shot with an intimate focus upon the women, cutting every so often to a personal effect or another family member, this gives the audience a picture of their lives both in and out of work as well as highlighting the intertwining of their workplace exploitation and private circumstances. Maria sits at her home sewing machine, her children playing around the house, sat in the same chair she has worked long hours of overtime for no pay, where she explains the trials of sweatshop conditions and the difficulties of juggling family life through gruelling hours. We join Lupe in the ritualised routine of applying make-up, the everyday scene sets her story within the multiple strains of being a woman and her own insecurities. Finally, Maura is shown watching a VHS home movie from 1987, that is full of ‘roach poop’ and with the tape wearing out. The shot flits between grainy

17 Rogow, Faith: *Made in L.A. P.O.V. Discussion Guide*, PBS, American Documentary, Inc., 2007, 2.

18 Ebd.

footage of her family in El Salvador, including the three young sons that remained, and her emotional reactions. The ephemeral material of the tape frames this moment of remembrance and sense of longing. The immobility and stillness of workers trapped by economic considerations is further compounded by the precarity of undocumented status where the fear of deportation is exploited by sweatshop managers. The narrative focus of the three introductions reflects the organising strategies of the GWC itself, as building a “more broadly conceptualised labor movement” that centres the mostly women workers who “face multiple, interconnected layers of oppression – as workers, as immigrants, and as women”.¹⁹ The GWC is presented as something of a nucleus from which to recognise the shared experience of struggle and to provide a space of collective support and empowerment.

Over the course of the Forever 21 campaign, the protagonists are shown asserting their voice. During the nation-wide boycott, we see Maria and Maura speaking to students at prestigious campuses – UCLA and Georgetown respectively – as worker-activists. Carracedo captures the preparatory moments beforehand, where both women are visibly nervous at the prospect of public speaking and of sharing what have been humiliating experiences. Before each engagement, GWC organiser Joann Lo urges the women to talk about being a woman, a worker, “all of it together” and advising that “you’ll have more impact if you talk about your own experience”. The narrative arc of the film traces the finding of confidence, and ultimately power, in the collectivising processes of the campaign, perhaps most evidently in Lupe’s journey as she is hired as the Latino organiser at the GWC. From her place of experience as a migrant garment worker, Lupe is shown explaining the importance of collective organising with a constructed model of a pyramid of power. Noting that some workers there couldn’t read, she illustrates the ability of workers to shake the foundations in a physical display of punching out the bottom: if 150,000 workers unite “we must feel that strong and powerful, because we are that powerful”. By stating that individual petitions cannot achieve the same impact, Lupe communicates the power of a united class consciousness to effect real change. Stitching the protagonists into the mass of garment workers, Carracedo includes sequences of labouring bodies and in particular close shots of hands feeding material through the machines. Scenes of information evenings on California workers’ rights as well as organising meetings show discussions that note the health and safety dangers of sweatshops, and particularly the exhaustion. A structuring motif of the film is time, specifically the long and drawn-out months of the boycott, and the toll that this takes on fraying solidarities at the GWC. This underscores the huge personal expense of free time, a valuable commodity, of workers to organise and fight. As the boycott drags on, even

19 Sullivan, Richard/Lee, Kimi: Organizing Immigrant Women in America’s Sweatshops: Lessons from the Los Angeles Garment Worker Center. In: Signs 33 (2008), 3, 527–532, 531.

after the appeal is won and lengthy settlement negotiations set in, the frustration of the organisers, lawyers, and workers flare in a constant struggle to keep up the fight.

The strains and the fears of the workers, at the whim of employers who consistently underpay or fire people without hesitation, are invoked by Lupe who describes the immigrant experience as dreaming of the wealth of jobs in the US but what they find are “jobs of exploitation”. While she does not explicitly refer to racism in the exclusion and exploitation of Latino communities, she notes that “if you’re undocumented and you don’t know English you can’t do anything else. You basically don’t exist”. To explore the contemporary conditions of this workforce – doing the jobs that no one else will – the film interweaves histories of immigrant women as exploited workers in the US garment industry. The largely Latino, often undocumented, workers that populate sweatshops in LA is related to the generations of Asian immigrants who had come before. Everyone at the GWC is fluent in Spanish and the Asian American organisers heading the Forever 21 campaign are filmed leading protests, educating workers on their rights, and rallying the three protagonists. The shared history is invoked by Joann who expresses a sense of personal connection to the seamstresses in her own parents’ struggle as immigrants and in noting that her mother could not speak English. Media Studies scholar Camilla Fojas argues the organisers “represent a form of cross-racial coalition against worker competition based on race”: Asian and Latino communities have so often been excluded not only as a threat to the ‘domestic’ (read: white) US labour market but also pitted against one another in grabbing the available jobs, “though these groups also suffer equally from marginalization as racialized outsiders deemed foreign and unassimilable”.²⁰ The perceived sacrifice to become a part of the US fabric sews divisions across immigrant groups with similar class interests. From the Chinese Exclusion Act to national origin quotas, racist policy and rhetoric around immigrants here to ‘steal’ jobs have been organised around labour. As racialised groups held outside of US identity, the disposability of the clothes is mirrored by the disposability and deportability of the workers behind every stitch.

Recognising the place of the sweatshop workers in the ‘American dream’ and in US society provides a salient narrative framing and Lupe is posed as our guide in this history. Travelling as part of the national boycott, Lupe visits the Lower East Side Tenement Museum as well as Ellis Island, with Carracedo filming her reactions to and engaged consumption of the exhibits. The worker-activist is very clearly deeply affected by the historical recurrence; upon learning the conditions that the mainly Jewish, Eastern European immigrants faced, Lupe appears both dejected and angered that “things are just the same”. Spotting photographs of organisers in the early 20th century, taking notes to relay this to her fellow workers back in LA, Lupe is struck by the banners reading ‘Organize. Unity in Strength’. This personal discovery

20 Fojas, Camilla: *Migrant Labor and Border Security in Pop Culture*, Oxon 2017, 31.

and sympathetic connection also sews contemporary sweatshop conditions – and the Forever 21 campaign – into the legacies of immigrant women organising. This section of the workforce has been a major force in US labour history, such as in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, a sector that has now largely fallen outside of the remit of unionisation,²¹ but which remains active in alternative organising strategies, apparent in worker-activists such as Lupe: the strength of unity then continues into the present.

2.2 The Good Fight in Glitter and Heels

Live Nude Girls Unite! is similarly embedded within a (successful) labour struggle in California. Following the unionising of the dancers at the Lusty Lady with the support of the Services Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 790, as their campaign began to pick up national notoriety, one of the workers – Julia Query – was inspired to capture their journey for posterity. The film follows the contract negotiation struggle, the real battle, which pitches the women and the SEIU negotiator against a notorious anti-union law firm hired by management. Alongside filmmaker Vicky Funari, they shot a feminist film about working women that documented the dancers as radical collective organisers. The documentary filmed from the margins of organised labour was described by Roger Ebert as “an advertisement for the possibilities of the consumer digital video camera”.²² As accessibility to digital communication technology that can capture, edit, and distribute such a film has expanded beyond recognition since 2000, the documentary speaks to the possibilities of filming and framing class and labour from the workers’ perspective, to wrest “symbolic power”. Query provides the narrative voice and as a central protagonist is funny, arresting, and brutally honest, a tone that is underscored by sequences of her on stage at one of her other jobs as a stand-up comedian. The documentary is compiled of a mix of behind-the-scenes footage of the peep show, interviews with workers, animated sequences, action from the picket line, news reels, as well as shots from the long hours spent at the bargaining table. The resulting assemblage is a film that functions as an educational tool, an autobiographical journey, and a forum to debate the intersections of feminism and sex work.

While the documentary is about the difficulties of securing rights for sex workers against unfair labour practices, it is also about a schism that exists within feminism as to how women should pitch their fight within – and against – the patriarchy. Noting her background as a former grad student, exotic dancing as a con-

21 Vgl. Sullivan, Richard/Lee, Kimi: Organizing Immigrant Women in America's Sweatshops: Lessons from the Los Angeles Garment Worker Center. In: *Signs* 33 (2008), 3, 527–532, 528.

22 Ebert, Roger: *Live Nude Girls Unite!* [Review] <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/live-nude-girls-unite-2001>.

scious choice for the women of the Lusty Lady foregrounds an agency that is so often negated in media representation of sex workers. In one of her comedy routines, Query quips that “I love working at a peep show because I’ve never worked with so many women who have college degrees. Mostly women’s studies and philosophy. It’s like they figured out what to do about patriarchy – take their money!” The transformative relation of solidarity is not only necessary between the workers in taking on management, but as is underscored time and again throughout the film their appeal is also for other workers to recognise sex work as an issue of labour and class and for feminists to take seriously the possibility of autonomy and agency within sex work, as part of a society that oppresses both women *and* workers.

Query very consciously draws attention to the film as a part of the organising efforts as well as to her own role in driving the narrative. The documentarian-dancer-organiser as an agent in the storytelling is captured in multiple shots against the mirrored walls of the peep show, as the reflection of Query’s camera stares back at us, the viewer. Further, Query’s relationship with her mother is used as a secondary, complementary narrative framework, even noting overtly at one point that her so-called ‘second coming out’ to her mum will provide a plot device and a tension that is self-reflexively recognised in the creative process. Query’s middle-class upbringing, born amidst the US civil rights movement and raised by a feminist single-mother who is a professor and prominent activist for the health protection of street sex workers in New York, provides a dramatic arc of the film. Posing her mother as something of a quintessential, women’s movement era feminist of the second wave, a woman who had rebelled against her parents’ wish to marry a doctor by becoming one, Query notes that as her daughter, she was primed to fight the ‘good fight’. The fronts had simply opened up in an unexpected place, “here amid the neon lights, the fake hair, and the high heels was the good fight I dreamed of fighting”.

In his cautionary call to sit with the unease of ‘solidarity’, Roediger notes his own early associations with the word, and the only too easy assumptions of solidarity in the ‘good fights’ – such as with the United Farm Workers or the Vietnamese revolution. The appeal for “sober reflection on the difference that differences make even in how unity is apprehended” he argues is not defeatism but intended to free solidarity from the “impossible expectations leaving us coming up forever short of an unexamined ideal”.²³ It is exactly this rub that Query and the Lusty Lady dancers come up against which the film relays not just in the moralised exclusions of sex workers from the ‘good fights’ of organised labour and feminism, but in the family dynamics of Julia and her mother, Joyce.

In the confrontation scene that shows her ‘second coming out’, Query can be seen signalling to direct the camera, at one point saying that it should be closer,

23 Roediger, David: Making Solidarity Uneasy: Cautions on a Keyword from Black Lives Matter to the Past. In: *American Quarterly* 68 (2016), 2, 223–248, 225.

which highlights the importance of capturing the struggle as part of the labour mobilisation. Her mother's initial admonishment recognises that all work is demeaning but imparts a deeper level of shame: "we have to swallow pride in almost every kind of work, but it is much better to work with your mind than with your body". Query sets this mother-daughter struggle within the debate which continues to rage among feminists regarding sex work. To explain the fissures in interpretations of female empowerment and selling sex, a series of quotes are overlaid on images of Query dancing on stage; Catharine MacKinnon, billed as 'feminist scholar' argued that "pornography turns a woman into a thing to be acquired and used"; Nina Hartley, 'feminist porn star', asserts the possibility of agency in that "a woman can choose a job in the sex industry and not be a victim. She may become stronger, more self-actualized"; and finally, Julia Query, 'feminist worker', notes in the voice-over that "after hours of dancing and watching men cum and go", she can only describe it as "boring", thereby stitching herself, and her co-workers and colleagues across the industry, into the discourse. In exploring not only Query's choice to work as a dancer, but showing a diverse array of workers who have joined the show, the film expresses a feminist politics that accounts for the "varied responses to the conditions and social obstacles of women's exploitation" while retaining the ability to take individual experience to a transformative relation:

It is these women's shared sense of injustice at the hands of capitalist power that eventually allows them to recognize the possibilities of female solidarity and collective confrontation for creating spaces to resist social and political domination.²⁴

Throughout the documentary, the distinction between public and private – where sex work is pushed to the realm of the personal – is unsettled. The notion that sex cannot be work – either because it is pleasurable or as a shameful exploitation which should not be encouraged – is a critique continually levelled at the activists and challenged in the documentary. During bargaining negotiations, the place of women in the production/consumption of pleasure is exposed in the categorisation proposed by the anti-union law firm. Three months into bargaining, management argued that the preamble should describe the job as "temporary, part-time, fun employment". The assumption then excludes dancing from the public realm of work and even further, asserts that it must bring the women personal enjoyment.²⁵ A stand-up segment by Query sets this exclusion within labour history, as she wonders if the steelworkers would be faced with such an insult. The film at multiple points also sites

24 Borda, Jennifer L.: Negotiating Feminist Politics in the Third Wave: Labor Struggle and Solidarity in *Live Nude Girls Unite*. In: *Communication Quarterly* 57 (2009), 2, 117–135, 126.

25 Vgl. ebd. 129.

the peep show stage as the shop floor and the dressing room area as the gathering point of camaraderie, where workers don their uniforms and crack jokes between shifts. Look past the make-up, the wigs, the tan lines, and the question remains, what makes this workplace different from any other?

Sex workers, activists, and writers Juno Mac and Molly Smith have tackled the negation of sex work as work in *Revolting Prostitutes*, where they argue that this not only pathologises those in the industry but that this line of argumentation presumes work to be good. Asking sex workers if they would do so without compensation surely begs the same question for much employment.²⁶ Rather, waged work is itself exploitation and it is only through the broader fight for solidarity in a larger recognition of class status that the many intersections of exploitation can be tackled. Linking the struggle to recognise sex work to the history of gendered work, Mac and Smith invoke the 70s 'Wages for Housework' movement: "naming otherwise invisible or 'natural' structures of gendered labour is central to beginning to think about how, collectively, to resist or reorder such work".²⁷ The recognition of 'women's work' as work – the emotional, domestic, and sexual – is not to support the exploitation of wage labour but rather to make possible the protections and assertions of rights. One of the dancers, 'Naomi' unpicks the layers of structural oppression:

They're not exploited just because they are exotic dancers. It has to do with the fact that the club's fucked up, the management's fucked up, they're not getting their tips. If that was in place then, no, I don't think they would be exploited just because they're job is selling pussy.

The moral indignation, and transposed shame, is invoked by the anti-union law firm who take umbrage with the language used by the bargaining team and other workers. The women's use of the word 'pussy' in negotiations as well as in signs such as "no contract, no pussy" was an issue for the lawyers who accused the women of "sexually harassing themselves". Asked to explain this limit to speech, a shop steward relays that one of the lawyers had argued "I don't let my kids talk that way, why should I let you?" This statement not only infantilises the women, as unable to engage in adult conversation, but the patriarchal male figure policing their language also somehow continues this blur between the public and private, where the women have to be disciplined as uncouth girls, rather than respected and recognised as organised workers who are campaigning for representation.

Staging the labouring body is a trope of capturing class on film and filming dancers complaining of aches and pains or keeping their minds occupied by think-

26 Vgl. Mac, Juno/Smith, Molly: *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights*, London 2018.

27 Ebd., 79.

ing of appointments after clocking-off sets the work in the everyday. Alongside the attempt to devalue the work as 'fun' is also the notion of temporary and part-time. This is surely important in relation to the growth of service-related employment not just in the US but globally, in a labour market increasingly characterised by positions that are precarious, freelance, and flexible. Documentary film can thus contribute to the necessary "reconceptualization of how workers position themselves in relation to occupations where a worker's performance is the product being sold".²⁸ Working-class subjectivity in antagonistic relation to neoliberal capital demands a solidarity that practices a unity across difference.

Navigating this difference, a series of animated sequences also punctuate the film to contextualise the local struggle within the history of US labour as well as in feminist debates surrounding sex work. As educational breaks, the animations include depictions of the difference between an 'open shop' and 'closed shop' in union contract language – the audience not assumed to be au fait with labour organising jargon – as well as an image flitting between a woman burning her bra in the 70s to a woman holding her bra aloft in a strip tease performance, placing the dancers struggle in the trajectory of women's liberation. Inserting the Exotic Dancers Union within a genealogy of social justice organising, we can see "the filmmakers attempt to resuscitate the image of the embattled union worker as a component of the American national imaginary".²⁹ Thus, films such as *Live Nude Girls Unite!* contribute to a revival and remaking of the beleaguered figure of the working class. The conclusion of the film ties the two stories, the successful negotiation and the grudging acceptance of her mother. Alongside the difficult – yet collective – concessions made to secure a contract, Joyce's difficulty to accept her daughter's involvement in sex work disrupts any easy allusion to the ties of solidarity and back-patting over the good fight. Query's union activism is ultimately her mum's source of pride, that "she empowered or helped to empower these women to make their working conditions better": which Query responds was possible not because of her individual qualities, her wit, intelligence, or strength, but only because of the collective struggle. This resolution then tentatively proposes labour organising as a means to improve the exploitative conditions of exotic dancing, and the film itself as a means to educate and to spark struggles.

28 Ward, Anne E.: *Capturing the Labor of Sex Work: The Pedagogical Role of Documentary Film* In: Juhasz, Alexandra/Lebow, Alisa (Hg.): *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, Malden 2015, 192.

29 Ebd., 197.

3. Placing Solidarity

These documentaries, embedded within local labour organising and driven by personal narrative, are grounded in place: in the labour landscapes of LA and SF as well as the sites of solidarity building in the GWC and Lusty Lady. Linkon and Russo have noted the importance of place in class identity and solidarity “because the forms and structures of work, the way class intersects with ethnicity and race, and the language of class are shaped by the industries that tend to dominate particular places”.³⁰ A focus on place however does not translate to containment and separation, the relations between places can speak to the commonalities of class, the global reach of economic structures, as well as the competition for jobs where corporate greed forces job losses and relocation in a race for ever-cheaper workforces. Both films reflect the site-specific experience of the workers in these cities, while also recognising the national and international industries of which they are a part. In tracing the transformative relations of solidarity, documentary can contribute to the contextualising of “maps of grievance”. This term is theorised by Featherstone to highlight the practices of connection between and across places in common grievances, that are constitutive not only of political identity but can unpick and challenge the seemingly disparate relations of power.³¹ Such mapping functions to make legible a structural critique of a fractured labour force and unsettles a neoliberal frame of individual responsibility.

Women are not only more likely to be employed in the garment industry but are also the main target of fast fashion advertising, as well as the condemnation of consumption. Across documentary, academic, and social media commentary, Rimi Khan has analysed the gendered subject of much of the discourse surrounding fast fashion activism.³² Where critique had previously focused on corporate greed, Khan notes that while contemporary discourse does not completely ignore corporate guilt, ultimately the (white, typically young) women consumers (from the Global North) are shouldered with more responsibility than ever, where their personal choices offer a way out. The ability to make the ‘right’ choices to consume sustainable and ethical brands are then placed within the moral frame, a schema that does not account for the multiple intersecting constraints upon choice. The binary moral distinction of ‘rational choice’, that places an enlightened, stylish woman at the centre, sidesteps any real sustained engagement in a reproduction of free market logic. The critique therefore stays on the level of the status quo and in promoting a ‘conscious consump-

30 Linkon/Russo, Introduction, 13.

31 Vgl. Featherstone, David: *Resistance, Space and Political Identities: The Making of Counter-Global Networks* Oxford, 2008.

32 Vgl. Khan, Rimi: *Doing Good and Looking Good: Women in ‘Fast Fashion’ Activism*. In: *Women & Environments* 96/97 (2016) 7–9.

tion', "it's only proposed solution is a distinctly individual and neoliberal one".³³ This white saviour frame also fails to suture a solidarity with the garment workers across the world who have been engaged in labour struggles at huge personal cost. While Lupe is shown talking to young women in the neighbourhood to educate about the true costs of these brands, the target of the national boycott is to hold accountable those who are reaping huge profits off the backs of garment workers hunched over machines. The shirking of responsibility of Forever 21 was initially assured by the use of subcontracting: it was only through conversations at the GWC that patterns began to emerge across six different factories, all producing for Forever 21, that the workers could file a joint claim.³⁴ The garment workers on film are shown as the active agents in struggling for recognition, not passive victims waiting to be saved by the conscious consumption of the enlightened viewer to buy ethically. While education on consumption choices and boycotts are legitimate campaigns, a sole focus on individual consumers obscures sites of accumulation above as well as the mappings of grievance from below: the documentary refocuses on nodes of connection carried through the voices and actions of workers in, across, and beyond their workplace.

The title, *Made in L.A.*, invokes the cultural capital that brands have cashed in by touting their products as 'American-made'. The idea then is not only that domestic products are a marker of quality, but this label can obscure the abysmal conditions which garment workers are forced to endure. As working-poor Latina women, the social and cultural barriers to 'making it' in LA are high, where corporations can exploit the fear and invisibility of the non-English speaking, often undocumented, women workers. The organiser Kimi Lee notes in the film that 95 % of Forever 21 production was taking place in LA at that time, so a success in holding this company accountable could have a huge effect on the labour struggles across the city. The practice of subcontracting fractures workers across contracts, employers, and sites, while the GWC seeks to harness collective power in a place of connection and community. Beyond this, *Made in L.A.* also signals toward the local industry as one site in a global tapestry of production and consumption. However, one can also say that the lawsuit, the solidarity, and the women that we see on the screen as activists and organisers were also somehow made in LA.

The close of the film revisits each of the women a year after the settlement success. Maria has separated from her husband and while she continues to work in the garment industry, she only works "what's fair, 8 hours". She continues for her children, to give them the opportunity to flourish in the US, a classic immigrant parents'

33 Ebd., 7.

34 Vgl. Archer, Nicole A./Gonzalez, Ana Luz/Lee, Kimi/Gandhi, Dimmi/Herrera, Delia: The Garment Worker Center and the "Forever 21" Campaign. In: Milkman, Ruth/Bloom, Joshua/Narro, Victor (Hg.): *Working for Justice: The L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy*, Ithaca 2010, 160.

tale. We join Maura in English class, in the hopes of finding another job as garment work is becoming scarcer. She notes a growing trend of factories moving to other countries. While these interconnections are only alluded to, the factories have relocated to the Global South where labour laws and protections are weaker. There is a clear recognition of the ripples across the industry, where a win can also prove a loss, and the exploitations in LA have to be contextualised in global uneven geographies of accumulation. Lupe's journey from seamstress to organiser in the film provides an ending that takes her further afield, to a global struggle for workers' rights. In the final moments, Lupe is in Hong Kong to protest the World Trade Organisation, placing the GWC within a global, intertwined movement. Looking out and surveying the city, Lupe reflects on how far she has come not just geographically but in herself: "the more I learn the lonelier I feel. Ignorance somehow protects you". Yet from this melancholic note, she retains hope in relaying her mother's ability to make a "yummy omelette" from any scraps of food: "You take what you have and from something bad you can create a masterpiece." This final sentence of the film stresses the improvisation and resilience in poverty, the often unrecognised labours of women, as well as the complications and contradictions in the transformative processes of solidarity. The more one can see, the structures become exposed, and with that the width and depth of the problem.

Moving to Northern California, *Live Nude Girls Unite!* similarly engages in a local mapping of San Francisco that branches out, stretching across the US. Query notes her relative privilege in the SF stripper scene in choosing the Lusty Lady as "it had a reputation as the hip, feminist peep show with good working conditions". Posing the question of why other clubs in SF had not unionised as they had, the filmmakers embark upon a local investigation of labour mobilisation in the lap dancing scene, which takes the viewer through the worsening conditions of exploitation, where the precariously employed dancers are expected to do more for less money: "the film provides a kind of Marxist socialist analysis of the evolution of the sex industry and the resulting devolution of the sex worker".³⁵ In a race to the bottom for profit, when one club allowed illegal activity – such as customers touching dancers – or removed precautions, the rest followed. One of the interviewees discusses the common practice of the 'stage fee', where dancers pay to work. Initially around 5 to 20 dollars, in the 7 years since it had been instituted the fee could be upwards of 150 dollars, a rapid inflation accelerated by clubs in competition to wring the most money with no legal obligations. The platform upon which the workers can sell their labour, the very labour that the club is dependent upon, is sold to them at an exorbitant rate. Unlike the Lusty Lady where workers were classed as employees, dancers at other clubs were 'independent contractors' who cannot unionise,

35 Borda, Jennifer L.: Negotiating Feminist Politics in the Third Wave: Labor Struggle and Solidarity in *Live Nude Girls Unite*. In: *Communication Quarterly* 57 (2009), 2, 117–135, 131.

therefore the clubs could benefit from a fractured labour force in direct competition for the chance to make money. An effort to create a ground for solidarity had been attempted in the 1990s with the formation of the Exotic Dancers Alliance, acting together to try and improve standards. However, the action was met with denial by working class institutions, as one of the dancers relays the reaction of the Head of the Labor Commission who frankly noted that if it were agricultural or garment workers, he would be more inclined to help, but that he could not “chose to waste the taxpayers’ resources on this ‘class’ of workers”. Solidarity then only extended so far, and certainly not to those regarded as below the working class. Breaking out beyond the city limits, the epilogue traces ‘the ripple effect’ of their successful bargaining. Query notes they had received calls from clubs in almost every state from dancers hoping to unionise. Taking her camera along, we join Julia on a trip to the Showboat in Alaska, where dancer Megan decries the fancy lifestyles of the owners financed off the back of their insecure labour without benefits, as well as to the dancers in the famous union town of Philadelphia, who note that 90 % of their customers are union and would not cross a picket line. These travels underscore the importance of the first Exotic Dancers Union in inspiring other strippers as well as the centrality of the communication function of the documentary itself as a pedagogical tool of class struggle.

4. Conclusion

The fights for fair labour practices in these two industries remain active sites of organising. In September 2021, California Governor Newsom signed into law Senate Bill 62, known as the Garment Workers Protection Act, designed to tackle wage theft and hold brands accountable to the garment workers making their products. Among other things the Act prohibits piecework, where workers are paid by the garment, and instead brings garment employees to the state minimum wage. The Lusty Lady has now shut up shop – after the workers bought the club in 2003 it was run as a worker cooperative until closing in 2013 – but there have been a number of actions across the US recognising strippers as employees, not independent contractors, and in 2023 the second strip club union was recognised. In 2018, a dancer Brandi Campbell sued the Centrefold Club in Ohio for unfair dismissal, and the National Labor Relations Board upheld a ruling that Campbell was an employee, therefore protected by federal labor law. The continued practice of strip clubs denoting their workers as independent contractors is a problem that expands beyond the industry:

from Uber and Lyft drivers to yoga teachers, large numbers of workers in a range of industries are misclassified as independent contractors rather than employees,

a move that allows employers to get away with denying them benefits [...] and rights to which they're entitled by law.³⁶

The Lusty Lady legacy and value of coalition can be seen in the successful campaign at another California strip club. Dancers at the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in LA, with the support of Strippers United founded by Lusty Lady alum Antonia Crane, began picketing in March 2022 to protest unsafe working conditions and in May 2023 became the only unionised US strip club when they joined the Actors' Equity Association.³⁷ Thus, the unifying potential of class, in an economy dependent upon the fragmentation of labor, is more important than ever. As I have argued, the documentary form can function to suture struggles as an organising tool and as a key component in class formation, by recognising a shared fight and holding space for the imagining of other ways of being.

As director and labour researcher Judy Branfman has argued, “a great deal of organizing is taking place, often outside ‘traditional’ workplaces and frequently tied more closely to the immigrant-rights movement than the formal labor movement”: labour documentaries have the potential to capture changing patterns and to re-contextualise labour in US society as “worker organizing is occurring in powerful and unexpected ways across the country, often getting significant attention – and building new movements for justice that could benefit from more filmmaker participation”.³⁸ I would argue then that (labour) solidarity is not necessarily in crisis but as class remains so powerfully rejected in studies of intersectionality in US society – and still stuck on the traditional Fordist imaginary of the male labouring in heavy industry – it is imperative to look at other workers, workplaces, and forms of organising. The documentary form, as I have analysed here with respect to narrative strategies as well as the spatial mapping of grievance across industries, has the potential to capture the difficulties in practicing solidarity and forming what Featherstone described as the “transformative, generative character of solidarity” from below, in centring worker agency. With the expansion of accessible technology and platforms on which to share independent media, filming class is easier than ever, yet Zaniello warns that “the danger always exists that these new and important films and the struggles they define will not persist without support and effort by interested

36 Press, Alex N.: Strippers Are Workers With the Power to Unionize. In: Jacobin (31 Aug 2020) <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/08/stripping-adult-dancing-unions-strike>.

37 Actors' Equity Association Press Release: Dancers at LA's Star Garden Topless Dive Bar Become the Nation's Only Unionized Strippers (16 May 2023); Crane, Antonia. Let's Hear it for the Strippers' Union. In: The Nation (31 May 2023) <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/strippers-union-vote-nlrb/>

38 Branfman, Judy: Eyes on Labor: Documentaries on Work in the Neoliberal Era. Research & Policy Brief, Los Angeles: UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment: No. 20 (April 2015), 2.

viewers, teachers, trade unionists, community organizers, and researchers”.³⁹ For the revolution to be realised, solidarity must be screened.

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