Creating Norma Rae: The Erasure of Puerto Rican Needleworkers and Southern Labor Activists in a Neoliberal Icon

Aimee Loiselle
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Creating Norma Rae: 
The Erasure of Puerto Rican Needleworkers and Southern Labor Activists in a Neoliberal Icon

Aimee Loiselle, PhD
University of Connecticut, 2019

ABSTRACT

This dissertation uses the 1979 movie Norma Rae as an entry into the global textile and garment industry and as an example of contested cultural production. It argues that U.S. colonial experimentation with the labor of Puerto Rican needleworkers helped to propel a disaggregation of manufacturing, but an American fascination with poor white southerners led media to focus on Crystal Lee Sutton in the 1970s. In recycling the narrative of white working-class individuals in isolated circumstances, Norma Rae elided a history of collective southern activism and contributed to the erasure of Puerto Rican women. The dissertation does not simply recover Sutton but reevaluates the context in which she labored, expanding it to the Atlantic U.S. as a whole, including Puerto Rico. The dissertation makes a vital contribution in its use of archives fragmented by colonialism and racialized labor practices. The women were interconnected, if not interchangeable, labor markets critical to how the diverse working class coalesced. The argument contradicts the dominant historical narrative of industry relocating in a direct line from the Northeast to the South to a final stage in the Global South.

A detailed study of Norma Rae then shows how popular culture works to rearticulate familiar meanings and obscure such disconcerting complexities due to its own reliance on
gendered, racialized, and colonial narratives. The dissertation argues Hollywood professionals used legal and financial contrivances to remove Sutton from the production when her insistence on the collective efforts of workers did not suit their commercial ambitions. It reveals the importance of status and capitalist mechanisms in the arena of cultural politics, especially regarding questions of who contests and shapes the visibility and meanings for “working class,” “worker,” and “American.” These contests in the business and politics of culture generated the Norma Rae icon, a representation of a white woman standing alone, with its individualist narrative and affect of inspirational defiance.
Creating Norma Rae:
The Erasure of Puerto Rican Needleworkers and Southern Labor Activists in a Neoliberal Icon

by

Aimee Loiselle

B.A., Dartmouth College, 1992

M.A., University of Vermont, 1998

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History at the University of Connecticut

2019
APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Creating Norma Rae:
The Erasure of Puerto Rican Needleworkers and
Southern Labor Activists in a Neoliberal Icon

Presented by Aimee Loiselle, B.A., M.A.

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Micki McElya

Associate Advisor

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Peter Baldwin

Associate Advisor

________________________________________
Christopher Clark

University of Connecticut
2019
Completing a dissertation depends on the support and guidance of many people, and they come from many places in academia and many spaces in one’s life. I greatly appreciate my advisor Micki McElya who gave me inspiring ideas and pointed feedback as well as encouragement for my unconventional framework and inter-methodological approach. I thank my committee members Christopher Clark and Peter Baldwin. Their questions, conversations, and reading suggestions enriched the research and improved my project. I could also rely on all their backing through the long job search.

My seminar papers on aspects of Caribbean history for Mark Healey’s Latin America in the Twentieth Century and Cornelia Dayton’s Colonial British North America, 1492-1765 served as incubators for ideas in this project. Jason Chang read drafts and offered helpful comments and writing tips. As a scholar studying transnational currents by tracking diverse workers, he has been a role model. Annelise Orleck and Emma Amador are fantastic historians of women and labor who have provided vital inspiration and insights.

I convey special thanks to Jennifer Tucker who shared exciting conversations about gender and labor when I was a Visiting Assistant Professor at Wesleyan University; Julie Greene who encouraged my work as part of the mentoring program coordinated by the Organization of American Historians (OAH); and Kim Phillips-Fein who gave the keynote at the Boston University APHI graduate conference and offered to read part of my project. Three professors from my master’s program, Melanie S. Gustafson, Denise J. Youngblood, and Mark
Stoler, extended ongoing enthusiasm. These gestures of collegiality as well as their scholarly expertise had significant impact.

The administrative staff in the History Department kept the faculty, graduate students, and visiting scholars running smoothly. Their care for the people and logistics of the department made my work possible. Jessica Muirhead started at UConn the same year I did and helped me adjust to the program. She remained a trusted and reliable resource after she advanced to coordinate the entire department. And thank you to Kathy O’Dea for her assistance and Heather Parker for her dedication and verve.

Research and writing require an incredible amount of time and funding. Thank you to the History Department for prioritizing summer research funds. A huge appreciation to El Instituto: Institute of Latina/o, Caribbean, and Latin American Studies, which granted me two research awards; the Caribbean Interdisciplinary Research & Outreach Initiative from the Africana Studies Institute and El Instituto for a summer research award; the UConn Women’s Center for the honor of a 100 Years of Women Scholarship; and the Covenant Insurance Company for its Summer Fellowship through the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The thoughtfulness and generosity of Bruce and Sandra Astor Stave and Albert and Wilda Van Dusen help to sustain history at UConn. I must thank the Labor and Working-Class History Association for a travel award to present my work at the OAH, and Boston University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst for their outstanding graduate conferences with their dedication to providing feedback and prizes for student papers. The dissertation would have been a very different experience without the GEU-UAW Local 6950, which negotiated improved stipends, benefits, and parking conditions for graduate students.
Several devoted archivists and librarians provided expert and timesaving assistance as I navigated their collections. At Alamance Community College, Sheila Street, who serves researchers interested in Crystal Lee Sutton and undergraduate students seeking basic course materials, helped me with all my questions and allowed me to explore at my own pace. She also put me in contact with Cathy Jordan, Crystal Lee Sutton’s daughter-in-law. That was so thoughtful and unexpected. Archivist Patrizia Sione and administrative assistant Melissa Holland at the Kheel Center have responsibility for an awesome range of papers, items, and resources. Their meticulous guidance facilitated my use of the collections while I was at Cornell University and via their outstanding digital aids. El Centro at Hunter College-CUNY has illuminating papers of all types and a lovely reading room. Senior archivist Pedro Juan Hernández and archivist assistant Juber Ayala support scholars and community members alike, encouraging Puerto Rican neighbors and public school students to sit alongside doctoral candidates and faculty. Archives and Special Collections at the Dodd Center at the University of Connecticut contain an informative range of papers, and I greatly appreciate archivists Betsy Pittman and Laura Smith and archivist assistant Nick Hurley for their support. The Margaret Herrick Library has a sharp and efficient crew who made that visit incredibly productive. The archivists and research librarians at the Sophia Smith Collection and Schlesinger Library sustain the mission of these institutions with brilliance and warmth. They are gifts to women’s history.

The highly specialized and dedicated care of archivists, librarians, and directors at smaller, local institutions infused this dissertation with otherwise unavailable subtleties, personal stories, and case studies. Their intensive financial and physical efforts to preserve and share the special papers, artifacts, and oral histories of small communities grant scholars
and neighbors the ability to search through distinct records and into the niches of people’s lives. I regret scholars lost one of these resources just weeks after my 2014 visit. Jane Ward and archivists for the Osbourne Library had to store or disperse its amazing collections when the venerable American Textile and History Museum closed due to lack of funds. Jane had an outstanding knowledge of the items and papers that she was boxing for storage even as I sat in the dismantled reading room requesting material. As textile, garment, and home goods manufacturing sprawled further into global currents, the families and foundations that had sustained such important historic resources have declined. I also appreciate the invaluable help of Penni Martorell at Wistariahurst, Jamie Eves at the Windham Textile and History Museum, and Cliff McCarthy and Maggie Humberston at the Lyman and Merrie Wood Museum of Springfield History.

The University of Connecticut Humanities Institute (UCHI) provided a marvelous Dissertation Fellowship that opened the time to reflect and write. I am grateful for the opportunity to fully immerse myself in the scholarly life. Michael Lynch and Alexis Boylan are indefatigable advocates for the humanities. During my last three years in the doctoral program, Brendan Kane coordinated the Initiative on Campus Dialogues for UCHI. It created pathways for graduate students and faculty to collaborate with community members, and I greatly valued the chance to connect with folks who do not often have access to advanced research and academic content.

Allison Horrocks was the officemate and brilliant, dedicated graduate student whose guidance and humor got me through the loops and straightaways of grad school. Her tips on program requirements as well as on writing made my time at the university more productive. Her ongoing work in public history and the questions of history continues to inspire me. I
must thank Mary Mahoney for her intellectual commitment, dedication to public and digital history, and wry sense of humor. Mary shares her insights and friendship with tremendous generosity. I could not have made it through the dissertation process without her camaraderie.

I have a special place of appreciation for Olga Koulisis. We started at the same Welcome Weekend and progressed through seminars, research, writing, and job markets together. We walked in our robes for the last hurrah. Olga and I share an interest in the modern U.S., twentieth-century capitalism, and the ways cultural narratives and the construction of personas intersect with finance. Our conversations about scholarship, research trips, writing, and teaching pushed me forward. Thank you for the collegial sustenance, bonne amie.

While writing remains a solitary task, the process of revision and polishing depends on the generosity and insight of peers. I thank Edward Guimont, Michael Limberg, Amy Sopcak-Joseph, and Jessica Strom for their feedback in our dissertation chapters group. And again—thanks to Allison for diving through an entire draft. Her comments and overview on the full 300+ pages enriched the writing and my thinking.

Scholars cannot thrive on academia alone. My friend, Irma Medina, showed earnest interest and support for my doctoral endeavor. She also coaxed an interview from her mother, Aracelis Martínez, who left Puerto Rico to work in the factories of the Northeast mainland and stayed at the Gemini Mill in Springfield until its closure in 1989. Few friends are “ride or die” like Irma—muchas gracias por tu amistad y apoyo. Betsy Raab, Meghann Connolly, Ed Collins, and Kevin Sullivan regularly asked me about my scholarly pursuits. Gabrielle Brooks not only expressed admiration for my research and writing, she welcomed me into her apartment during visits to several archives in New York City. While others asked “why” I was
doing a PhD program, these folks asked “how’s it going.” The difference in tenor and implication was noticed and much cherished.

I must thank my mom, Kathleen Loiselle, for a few reasons. She encouraged her three daughters to read, take education seriously, and aspire to write and draw and share our thoughts. When the inevitable rejections occurred, my mom commiserated about the challenges for arts and humanities pursuits and for nontraditional students in twenty-first century America. In a more practical sense, she walked my dogs when I had late seminars, classes, or events. I could not have worked and attended the fabulous evening lectures and panels without that peace of mind.

I end my acknowledgements with a shout-out to other doctoral students in the humanities. We continue to value scholarly questions, explorations, and nuanced analysis of human conditions and expressions. We wonder how and why our global societies came to be. In addition to that academic scholarship, the many posts, blogs, and essays about our shared struggles for funding, publication, financial stability, and career opportunities made me feel less alone in an intellectual adventure that pushes against the financial and technological tendencies of the contemporary world. That does not make us pure or right or superior, but it does make us valiant. For too many, scholarly employment ends with the dissertation defense, but our questions and contributions continue. Thank you for your determination and inspirations.
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<td>ACTWU</td>
<td>Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union</td>
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<td>ACWA</td>
<td>Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America</td>
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<td>AFDC</td>
<td>Aid for Families with Dependent Children</td>
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<td>AFL</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor</td>
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<td>AID</td>
<td>Aid for Industrial Development</td>
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<td>BIA</td>
<td>Bureau of Insular Affairs</td>
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<td>BIP</td>
<td>Border Industrialization Program</td>
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<td>CBERA</td>
<td>Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act</td>
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<td>CBI</td>
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<td>CIEP</td>
<td>Council on International Economic Policy</td>
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<td>CIO</td>
<td>Congress of Industrial Organizations</td>
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<td>CLUW</td>
<td>Coalition of Labor Union Women</td>
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<td>CPB</td>
<td>Corporation for Public Broadcasting</td>
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<td>CPEC</td>
<td>China Pakistan Economic Corridor</td>
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<td>CTIC</td>
<td>Cotton Textile Industry Committee</td>
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<td>CUNY</td>
<td>City University of New York</td>
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<td>CWA</td>
<td>Communications Workers of America</td>
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<td>E &amp; O</td>
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<td>FLT</td>
<td>Federación Libre de Trabajadores</td>
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<td>INS</td>
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<td>leveraged buyout</td>
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<td>Multi-Fiber Agreement</td>
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<td>National Association for the Advancement of Colored People</td>
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<td>NAFTA</td>
<td>North American Free Trade Agreement</td>
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<td>NAM</td>
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<td>National Black Feminist Organization</td>
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<td>NYSUT</td>
<td>New York State United Teachers</td>
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<td>OSHA</td>
<td>Occupational Safety and Health Administration</td>
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<td>PPD</td>
<td>Partido Popular Democrático</td>
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<td>PRIDC</td>
<td>Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company</td>
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<td>PRNA</td>
<td>Puerto Rico Needlework Association</td>
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<td>PROMESA</td>
<td>Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act</td>
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<td>PRRA</td>
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<td>RTA</td>
<td>Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, 1934</td>
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<td>Screen Actors Guild</td>
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<td>SCAP</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEAM</td>
<td>Textiles: Employment Advancement for Minorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWUA</td>
<td>Textile Workers Union of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMW</td>
<td>United Mine Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNIDO</td>
<td>United Nations Industrial Development Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITE</td>
<td>Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTW</td>
<td>United Textile Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VISTA</td>
<td>Volunteers in Service to America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEPZA</td>
<td>World Export Processing Zone Association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

A curious viewer might step through the direct entertaining experience of *Norma Rae* to find the publicity that surrounded the movie’s release. Such an effort would lead to the discovery of Crystal Lee Jordan/Sutton in multiple online sources, including newspapers, magazines, websites, and archival collections. One of these is the website for the formal archive she compiled, the Crystal Lee Sutton Collection at Alamance Community College in North Carolina. Continued research would lead a viewer to the 1963-1980 Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) campaign to force J.P. Stevens into a fair contract, which included a southern organizing drive.

When that labor activism becomes visible, it has the potential to connect to the longer history of southern worker resistance and union organizing since the 1890s. Even with an awareness of the larger regional context, however, a researcher might miss the dynamics of the South within the global textile and garment operation. Few people would make the connection to Puerto Rican women who increased their numbers in the industry at the same time as southern women. Gaining insight into Puerto Rico’s position and the migrations of Puerto Rican women requires either personal awareness of that history or an inclination to traverse the boundaries of cultural and scholarly convention.

*Norma Rae* and its icon have helped to perpetuate the invisibility of that history. In the 1970s, Hollywood movies had a tremendous presence on the cultural landscape. At a time when television offered three major networks and the Internet did not exist, movie theaters served as a primary source of low-cost entertainment and a communal forum for sharing
cultural narratives. In that milieu, *Norma Rae* became a prominent site for delivering ticket sales, royalties, and other revenues for people in the movie industry and for generating particular narratives and notions for American society. The production would not have existed without Crystal Lee as source material, and her experiences occurred in a particular time and place with both industrial and labor movement histories. The story garnered attention because of her appeal as a pretty, young mother identifiable as a white southern mill hand. The resulting movie did not make her wealthy or give her a stable career, but Crystal Lee has a noticeable presence in three major archives and dozens of references on the Internet.

Gloria Maldonado also grew up in the 1940s in a family that worked in textiles and garments. Both Crystal Lee and Maldonado took jobs in various mills and plants during the 1950s and 1960s and joined their local union, becoming active in organizing and negotiating. Newspaper reporters wrote about both women and their labor activism. In the early 1980s, Crystal Lee and Maldonado each participated in public discussions about textile and garment workers, unions, and struggles for fair pay and decent work conditions. Their voices contributed to coordinated efforts by other professionals to bring the stories of such women to a larger popular audience. When regional union leaders, the white men in established positions, heard Crystal Lee and Maldonado’s comments, both women received criticism for their sharp statements.

Yet Crystal Lee and Maldonado did not know each other and did not speak at the same plants and union rallies. Maldonado worked in garment factories in New York City, and she joined the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) in the 1960s, advancing in local leadership. She had seen managers and union representatives sitting in offices discussing the workers, responding to grievances, and negotiating contracts. They were all
white men while most of the workers were women of various ethnicities, increasingly Puerto Rican. In 1981, Puerto Rican scholars at El Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, located at Hunter College-CUNY, proposed a public history project about Puerto Rican needleworkers. They produced a radio show, photography exhibit, and public panels and presented them in 1984 as “Nosotras Trabajamos En La Costura.”¹ A dozen Puerto Rican women participated, including Maldonado. That project prompted two academic journal articles and a New York State Curriculum lesson plan.² Maldonado did not gain national prominence or a dedicated archival record, but fragmented evidence of her activities and ideas appears in two small collections.

Finding Maldonado, however, demands previous knowledge of Puerto Rican needleworkers in the Northeast, women with limited participation and representation in compilations of American popular culture, U.S. history, and American labor studies. Even with an awareness of needleworkers, seeing Maldonado then requires learning about one archive in New York City and having a desire to locate the names of specific women unknown to national media.

To find Maldonado, most scholars and researchers must acknowledge their own specific positionality, the bounded “field of visibility and codes of intelligibility” for their specialty. Then they must make a decision to turn their position, tilt their lens, and search for links across archives that have been “disjunctured” by colonial practices, marginalized by a lack of access to venerable institutions, or constrained by the formal practices of organizing

¹ Translation: Center for Puerto Rican Studies.
Gender, race, class, and citizenship shaped Crystal Lee and Maldonado’s experiences and identities, their access to jobs and political leverage, the form and prominence of the cultural representations of their work, and their disparate presence in the archives. Out of the global strands, several media outlets in the 1970s chose to focus on Crystal Lee. The attention resulted in a major Hollywood movie that became a pervasive popular representation of the American working class. That sentimental, narrow notion of the poor southern mill hand continues to obscure a long history of the global working class in which many women participated. Common conceptual and historiographical divisions among labor, capitalist, southern, Caribbean, and women’s histories have perpetuated distinctions between mill hands and needleworkers that allow for imbalances in the representations of and meanings for women textile and garment workers. These have tremendous impacts on knowledge, employment, and economic policies.

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“The thing is, I wanted it to be a movie that was right—about the union, about what we went through. In the movie they make like it’s only me that’s important, and there were so many others.” Crystal Lee Sutton, 1979, People Magazine

INTRODUCTION
WOMEN WORKERS AND CULTURAL NARRATIVE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: WHO CREATES THE “AMERICAN WORKING CLASS”

In April 1979, Crystal Lee Sutton spoke with a reporter for People magazine following the release of the movie Norma Rae. Although the title for that article contains the first use of the phrase “the real Norma Rae,” the piece describes Crystal Lee as anguished. The movie was released in March, and subsequent publicity had ended five years of seclusion and upset her fourteen-year-old daughter. Crystal Lee said that she had not received payment for the movie or for the New York Times Magazine article and Macmillan biography on which it was based. While she mentioned the possibility of a lawsuit, her immediate concern was the ideology of Norma Rae. “The thing is, I wanted it to be a movie that was right—about the union, about what we went through,” Crystal Lee said. “In the movie they make like it’s only me that’s important, and there were so many others.”

The People magazine reporter included the director’s response to Crystal Lee’s statements. Martin Ritt was an established, celebrated, and wealthy Hollywood director with

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1 In the majority of the dissertation, I use Crystal Lee’s first name. Referring to her by surname is problematic because most women at that time did not carry the same name through their lives. This issue highlights the legacy of the patriarchal tradition of referring to girls and women by surnames passed through men. Crystal Lee Pulley had her father’s name at birth in 1940 and became Crystal Lee Wood after her first marriage in 1959. During much of her activism with the TWUA in 1973-1974, she had the name Crystal Lee Jordan from her second husband, Larry Jordan, Jr., “Cookie.” She married a third time in 1977 to Lewis “Preston” Sutton, Jr., and took the name Crystal Lee Sutton, which she kept until her death in 2009.

membership in the Directors Guild of America and his own company, Saugatuck Productions. He had received accolades for films like *Edge of the City* (1957), *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958), *Hud* (1963), *The Great White Hope* (1970), *Sounder* (1972), and *Conrack* (1974). Yet his defensive reaction reveals a disturbing inability to acknowledge his power, with its ready access to the capitalist mechanisms of the Hollywood industry. “She’s obviously no longer the free spirit in my movie,” Ritt said. “She’s turned into a middle-class bourgeois woman who doesn’t want anyone to know about her life.” His comments reflect a profound disinterest and lack of awareness regarding Crystal Lee’s economic situation. She was working as a motel maid and hiding her identity from managers because the mills in North Carolina had blacklisted her following her union organizing and outspoken appearances in national media. Such blacklisting was a common practice, and Crystal Lee did not want her three children, especially her oldest son who needed his job, to be affected by any association with her activism for the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA).

Ritt’s prominence, the popularity of *Norma Rae*, and effusive positive reviews for Sally Field as the lead actress forced Crystal Lee into visibility in a way she did not choose and without remuneration—yet granted her a platform for public speaking, a basis for demanding payment from the studio, and invitations to prominent labor events. The *People* magazine article became an initial step in her return to a media spotlight that had shone on her from 1973 to 1974, when she was active with the TWUA membership drive in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina (see Figure 1). The movie production, however, had disregarded Crystal Lee’s ideas, ignored complex contemporary union efforts, and elided a long history of

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3 Morton H. Smithline to Susan McIntosh, Invoice #000776, Re: development deal for “Crystal Lee,” November 23, 1977, Box 23, Folder 235: Norma Rae, Legal 1977-1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
southern labor activism (see Figure 2). In addition, *Norma Rae* and its image of a white worker in a remote southern town obscured the constant global reconfigurations of the textile and garment industry, particularly the linked and vital experiences of Puerto Rican women. At the turn of the century, both the New South and Puerto Rico had become important regions for that industry, which was a major engine serving U.S. global ambitions. This project tracks the extraction of Crystal Lee’s life story from that history through to the generation of a persistent Norma Rae icon. It exposes how this pervasive symbol of rebellion derives from the intensive, collective experiences and activism of many diverse people.

The movie’s reach and popularity, however, depended on and reconstituted a narrow gendered and racialized representation of the American working class that erased larger contexts and complications. *Norma Rae* helped to foster an idea of the American working class as white industrial labor, under siege in local circumstances that make them vulnerable to plant managers and “foreign workers.” This particular filmic representation was not inevitable. It resulted from years of interviews, negotiations, and contests between Crystal Lee and elite creative professionals who had access to elaborate financial and legal resources.

Crystal Lee’s words became a central theme for this project. There were so many others, so many low-wage women of many races, ethnicities, geographies, migrations, and citizenships working and organizing in a global textile and garment industry. Governments, executives, managers, and even some workers used these categories to differentiate cost arrangements and women’s access to pay and benefits. Based on their own needs and priorities, women navigated these labor markets, which were not interchangeable but were intertwined. By starting from the women’s history, this project counters the cultural work of *Norma Rae* and its iconic image of a solitary white woman. Decades of women working and
resisting in the industry along the Atlantic U.S.— the Northeast, South, and Puerto Rico—and the dynamics between their labor markets precipitated the conditions for Crystal Lee’s decision to join the TWUA. And she provided the raw material for the movie.

The 1979 movie *Norma Rae* became the starting point for this project because it continues to appear on cable television; labor and women’s groups still screen it at events; and the Norma Rae icon maintains its relevance as an adaptable symbol of defiance for television shows and websites. In searches and conversations about the American working class or U.S. labor in the 1970s, it comes up repeatedly. *Norma Rae* clearly has serious cultural power to hold people’s attention 40 years later. I was curious about the reasons for its persistence and about how it has shaped the way people think of women as American workers. When I began researching the movie and the southern mills on which it was based, I had a general, semi-conscious acceptance of the dominant narrative of U.S. industrialization. It begins with the Northeast as the definitive starting point followed by a direct linear relocation to the South and then to the Global South in search of cheap, compliant labor. I also accepted the traditional emphasis on quantity and size as the primary marker of industrial capitalism, and the common idea that “southern mill hands” all worked in cotton textiles, especially on heavy weaving looms. In addition, I fondly remembered *Norma Rae* as an inspirational movie about a southern woman’s labor activism. Over the course of the research, I came to question all these presumptions.

The first rupture came during a conversation with a Puerto Rican woman and close friend. After I described my research into the textile and garment industry of the 1960s and 1970s, she told me that her mother had moved from Puerto Rico to New York City and then Massachusetts to work in apparel factories in the 1970s. I had read Esmeralda Santiago’s
When I Was Puerto Rican (1993) and knew Santiago’s mother had sewn undergarments on the island in the 1950s. Now I had a story about a Puerto Rican woman sewing on the mainland in the 1970s. That prompted immediate questions: where and when did Puerto Rican women work in textiles and garments, and were there any popular representations of them as industrial workers? I discovered three journal articles and a range of archival material about Puerto Rican needleworkers that complicated U.S. labor historiography and narratives of deindustrialization that center the mainland.

I also returned to the 1961 movie West Side Story and realized the two main women characters, Maria and Anita, sew in a New York City garment business idealized as a romantic bridal shop (see Figure 3). Years before a white woman mill hand was the central character in a Hollywood movie, Puerto Rican needleworkers migrating from the island to the Northeast had appeared on the big screen.\(^5\) The embedded cultural narrative of West Side Story, however, articulated the Puerto Rican women as exotic beauties and troubled urban teens rather than as American workers. In development, performances, reviews, and scholarship, people did not discuss West Side Story as part of any public conversation about working-class Americans.\(^6\) Even in her 2013 memoir, Rita Moreno does not mention labor or the relevance of women’s sewing jobs in relation to the film, despite the fact her mother worked in island

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sweatshops and northeastern garment factories. Elite creative professionals, driven by the financial demands of the movie industry, had refracted Puerto Rican needleworkers through intersecting social and cultural categorizations of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and colonialism in order to make them legible to the widest possible audience. They performed as the “dark Other” rather than as workers, and that exclusion serves to further construct the American working class as white and masculine.

The fragmentation of textile and garment workers, labor archives, and historical scholarship and the concomitant gendered and racialized narratives of industry and American workers obscured links between southern and Puerto Rican women. That situation also cultivated *Norma Rae* and pushed it into popular consciousness as a canonical articulation of the American working class, with its conceptualization of white industrial workers in isolated local settings. The movie derives from and reiterates such fragmentation, and the result perpetuates the erasure of Puerto Rican women from “the American working class.”

*Norma Rae* tells the story of a white mill hand, mother, and wife in the South as she becomes active in a labor union in the 1970s. During the opening credits, a poignant theme song with a woman’s sweet voice plays, and the audience sees Field as Norma in a series of sepia-toned photographs. These images fade to cotton lint floating through the air, and the sentimental song cuts to the pounding of heavy looms in a textile mill. Norma works on the looms, one of several loaded choices the screenwriters and director made to deviate from Crystal Lee’s life story. In the introductory scenes, Norma shows her feisty defiance and

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9 The main character in the movie goes by “Norma.” Crystal Lee usually used one name as well, but depending on the situation, people called her “Lee” and occasionally “Crystal.”
10 Movies cannot be measured for simple “accuracy” against the historical record because they cannot possibly capture the full details of the past in two hours. But how production teams make decisions to condense or change
stubborn behavior both on the job and at home with her parents, who also work in the mill. She and her two children, one from a deceased husband and another from an apathetic local man, live with her parents. Her father has a loving but overbearing involvement in Norma’s life. When Reuben, a leftist, Jewish intellectual organizer with the TWUA, arrives in town from New York City, Norma’s father tells him to leave, but she becomes intrigued.

Reuben represents the start of the union drive and becomes Norma’s mentor, directing her passions into purposeful labor activism and an interest in poetry. Other mill hands eventually sign union cards and join the organizing drive. The activism causes tensions between Norma and her new husband, Sonny, who she married because they promised to be caring parents for her two children and his daughter. Despite pressure and harassment by management, including Norma’s termination and expulsion from the plant, the majority of mill workers vote to certify the TWUA. In the final scene, Reuben drives out of town and Norma stands alone outside the plant.

The Norma Rae icon emerged in the 1980s from publicity surrounding the movie and Field’s many awards for best actress, and it endures into the 2010s. The icon consists of a visual and textual component. In the image, Field as Norma Rae holds the UNION sign overhead with the camera focused only on her (see Figure 4). Fellow co-workers, union members, allies, and neighbors have been edited out, and since the movie did not contain any reference to the sixteen-year campaign against the J.P. Stevens Company or to the longer stories and their final results offer important insights into the power relationships in culture industries and into the ways culture products disseminate, debate, and reconstruct notions and meanings. Decisions by the Norma Rae production team will be discussed in detail in chapter three, but I include indicative examples here: When Crystal Lee joined the union in 1973, she worked as a gift-set operator folding fancy towels, inserting pasteboard, and fixing them in a box before wrapping it in plastic. The TWUA organizer was not an intellectual, New York outsider but a West Virginia organizer from the United Mine Workers. He joined a ten-year TWUA campaign in the region and initially worked with several black mill hands and another TWUA organizer before Crystal Lee signed up for the local drive. Crystal Lee’s second husband was not a textile mill hand disinterested in the TWUA but a shop steward in his unionized paper mill.
history of southern labor activism, neither does the icon. Norma Rae stands alone in her rebellion. The icon includes the phrase “Norma Rae moment,” which also entered circulation at that time and continues to appear. It expresses the essence of the icon, a representation of an isolated, personal, and transitory individualist defiance. The visual and rhetorical representation of rebellion without ideology, movement, community, or even context, allows the icon to be deployed for many different desires and purposes.11

Over the past twenty years, modern U.S. historians have increasingly focused on the 1970s as a pivotal time period. Previous attention to the “Reagan Revolution” gave way to an awareness that the national surge of right-wing activism and the Republican Party electoral offensive were not sudden or simple occurrences of the 1980s. This dissertation joins that burgeoning conversation, especially with those historians who look to earlier decades for the deeper roots of the 1970s and 1980s. Bruce Schulman was one of the first to argue the 1970s were not a sideline to the late twentieth century, but rather a significant phase in ongoing economic, political, and cultural contests. In dismantling the concept of a stable postwar consensus undone by the rise of a monolithic conservative opposition, Schulman and others encouraged more detailed questions. For example, Lisa McGirr argues grassroots activism in the middle-class suburbs of California built an important network for the rightward swing in U.S. politics. Bethany Moreton and Kim Phillips-Fein turn the lens away from formal politics to look at how earlier corporate mobilizations influenced the 1970s and 1980s.12

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Within that field of scholars, several historians have prioritized deindustrialization, labor organizing, and the working class in relation to the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s. Jefferson Cowie elongates the declension narrative of deindustrialization with his study of RCA’s relocations starting in the 1930s. His later dissection of the federal government’s battle over 1970s employment legislation and labor politics argues the ideal of a “conscious, diverse, and unified working class” ended in that moment. Cowie uses 1970s movies about working-class people to explore popular culture as a reflection of economic anxieties and the decline of heavy industry jobs. Tami J. Friedman and Beth English also complicate deindustrialization by including factors like state legislation and investment options along with wages and union action. Judith Stein looks to federal trade and monetary policy for a better understanding of deindustrialization. She argues the 1970s economic crises forced the federal government into heated debates that ended with the prioritization of currency and global capital investment at the expense of domestic employment and physical capacity. Lane Windham disputes the proposition that deindustrialization and union decline were the unequivocal experiences of the decade. She studied National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) records rather than union membership rolls to show that increasing numbers of black and women workers organized to demand collective representation. New anti-union management consultants, however, pursued legalistic rather than physical tactics to block their certification elections.13


This dissertation also challenges the prevalent understanding of deindustrialization, specifically its geographic pattern and emphasis on the mainland. When Puerto Rico becomes part of U.S. labor history, the direct southward relocation of capital and manufacturing, which others complicate yet maintain, cannot withstand scrutiny. That faulty linear understanding has placed various working women in sequential order rather than intertwined strands and set them in opposition rather than connection. It also serves to promote a flawed idea of capitalism functioning in some progressive way, with a logic of advancement, rather than as a constantly shifting array of enterprises seeking any available means for increasing returns and cutting costs. Mainland borders did not restrain industrial capitalism, and the U.S. occupation of colonies at the turn of the century multiplied currents of capital, manufacturing, and workers moving in many directions. Colonial quantities were often smaller than those for major industrial centers, but these connective tissues attached and lubricated the amplifying components of the U.S. economy, transmitting and fueling its global ambitions.

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15 I intentionally set “increasing returns” before “cutting costs” to avoid the inaccurate presumption that enterprises must cut costs as a means to increase returns. While cutting costs can serve to increase returns, in many cases that result is neither achieved nor necessary—cutting certain costs earns accolades on its own. In addition, I want to avoid the notion that transnational corporations primarily seek to increase profits. Many companies produce profits but continue to seek ways to increase rates of return on investment. Also, rates of return can have little to do with costs. Nike offers an illuminating example. The $220 price for a pair of Nike sneakers has little relation to the costs of design, materials, manufacturing, and shipping.
The U.S. acquisition of Puerto Rico in 1898 formalized a relationship that had existed between the Caribbean and North America since the mid-1600s, when the British Empire declared colonies throughout the hemisphere. A more deliberate economic linkage of the New South and Puerto Rico accelerated in the early 1900s. As discussed in chapter one, the 1901-1902 South Carolina Inter-State and West Indian Exposition demonstrates the perspective of industrial, financial, and political leaders. They envisioned Puerto Rico as an opening for their business interests and invited people and companies from the Northeast, South, and Caribbean to Charleston.\textsuperscript{16} By the 1910s, Puerto Rico as well as the New South had become a differential option for investors, contractors, department stores, and manufacturers. It also provided a source of cheaper skilled labor for the Northeast, stimulating both labor recruitment and the northward migration of Puerto Rican women seeking higher wages into the 1970s.\textsuperscript{17}

Rather than a coherent proletarianization of workers with a clear emergence from either the white masculine guilds or major industrial centers of the Global North, the twentieth-century global working class percolated in such fragmented contexts. While the practices of capital investment and management established asymmetrical power and disadvantaged conditions for all workers, social categorizations and identities differentiated, bonded, and sifted those workers as well.\textsuperscript{18} The resulting global working class was continuously remade in

\textsuperscript{16} \textquotedblleft The South Carolina Inter-State and West Indian Exposition” booklet, Dec 1901-June 1902, 9, in The Exposition: Bound, Accession Number 0033.60.89, Osborne Library at the American Textile History Museum.

\textsuperscript{17} I do not question that local neighborhoods experience “deindustrialization.” When a mill, factory, or plant that had employed hundreds or even thousands of local residents closes, they tangibly experience the immediate results of deindustrialization: unemployment, the sudden loss of income, dark and empty industrial buildings, and the ripple of secondary closures that follow. This project explores the proposed larger pattern of deindustrialization and argues the constant reconfiguration of manufacturing follows no geographic line but rather a relentless shifting of currents in many directions as regulations, resources, taxes, technologies, and workers change. Deindustrialization accurately denotes the local experience but not the larger system.

\textsuperscript{18} Several scholars argue for a more complex analysis of class, challenging the traditional academic Marxist idea of class formation and earlier labor historians’ attention to artisan guilds and big factories. They include analyses or gender and race as part of the complexity. See Seth Rockman, \textit{Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery and Survival in Early Baltimore} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Grace Kyungwon Hong, \textit{The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor} (Minneapolis: University of
response to changing economic systems and crosscurrents of gender, race, ethnicity, and citizenship. As the dissertation shifts from an examination of those work conditions to the production of a prominent cultural representation of labor, it argues the social categorizations and identities of gender, race, ethnicity, and citizenship that fragmented workers and created a catalogue of options for managers shaped representations of labor in two ways. The categorizations constrained who had access to and influence over elite media resources and who received coverage and representation. As a result of these circumstances, movies cannot be observed as static reflections of a time period because they are products created in an aggressive capitalist system, and they do ongoing cultural work.

Three methodologies inform my approach: labor history with its interest in workers, cultural history and its attention to the power of narratives, and history of capitalism for its analysis of political economy. I also use an intersectional frame of analysis to examine the

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ways gender, race, and class shape and are shaped by both cultural narratives and economic mechanisms. The resulting history crosses common conceptual and historiographical divisions between women’s, labor, economic, Southern, and Caribbean histories while setting the U.S. into a transnational framework. It is important to disrupt these conventions to recover the needleworkers, reevaluate the role of Puerto Rico and the South in U.S. history, reveal the workings of capitalism, and highlight how popular culture obscures historic complexities and its own financial structures.

In a key intervention, this project brings the methods of labor history and history of capitalism to bear on cultural history. It centers the contested process of creating major media representations, particularly the power of culture professionals—the producers, directors, writers, studio executives, and actors working in the nexus of production, often while relying on and sustaining formidable guild unions. Culture exists as a site of capitalist systems of investment, labor, and assertions and as a field of narrative constructions. As such, working people do not function merely as raw material for the content or as an audience for the final products. They also occupy positions within the movie business. Some are paid labor at many levels, with both competing and complementary stakes in the profitability and success of productions. Other working people, like Crystal Lee, have marginal positions and struggle to influence productions or gain a fraction of the invested capital and subsequent revenues.

Crystal Lee entered an unfamiliar Hollywood industry and contested not her conditions as a worker, but her position in the creative cultural production. She wanted to tell a different story of collective action and years of organizing. *Norma Rae* reveals the importance of capitalist mechanisms in the arena of cultural politics, especially regarding questions of who

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shapes the visibility and meanings for “working class,” “worker,” and “American.” In addition to the creative professionals and film crew, a movie depends on corporate professionals, such as studio executives, entertainment lawyers, and accountants, who have the leverage to formalize participants’ positions. Capitalist mechanisms like investment protocols, insurance regulations, state film tax incentives, and royalties as well as contracts allocate millions of dollars. This dissertation, however, does not tell the simple history of a poor mill hand exploited by a movie studio. Although the creative and corporate professionals removed Crystal Lee from the production, she used the success of Norma Rae to reassert her own point of view and demand remuneration.

In tracking how capitalist media systems extracted Crystal Lee’s life story from the larger intricate history, this dissertation questions the inclination of some scholars to use popular culture as a facile reflection of society rather than as a contested arena. Popular culture involves various groups and individuals fighting for input, payment, visibility, and representation. These contests engage and adapt earlier cultural narratives, and their products do work reconstituting meanings and providing narrative and affective normalization for certain ideologies. Just as with manufacturing and industrial labor markets, social categories, capitalist mechanisms, and contested access play important roles in cultural production.

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My arguments rest on two basic premises: economic practices and policies have a cultural component, and cultural products must be set into a rich historical context to understand their creation and their function as active participants in constituting meanings,

21 Cowie, Stayin’ Alive, Chapter 4 “I’m Dying Here” and Chapter 7 “The Important Sound of Things Falling Apart”; Gil Troy, Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005). Their use of songs, television shows, and movies as straightforward reflections of a time period enlivens a history but often overlooks the complications in making, viewing, reviewing, and replaying such cultural productions.
dynamics, and associations.\textsuperscript{22} Although the research began with \textit{Norma Rae}, which revealed Crystal Lee, her TWUA activism, and southern mill history, chapter one begins from the much wider rich historical context. The diverse archives and oral histories, as well as a mandate not to repeat the erasures of \textit{Norma Rae}, pushed the lens outward, to encompass the Atlantic U.S. and early twentieth century. In chapters two and three, the lens then contracts to study southern mill hands and civil rights labor activism, Crystal Lee in North Carolina, media coverage of her TWUA activism, and the Hollywood development and release of \textit{Norma Rae}. That tighter lens turns in chapter four to study Puerto Rican women and Gloria Maldonado, her union activism in New York City at the same time as Crystal Lee’s. She participated in labor activism as an organizer and spokeswoman—and as part of a union movement attempting to influence the ways globalization developed. The chapter also looks at a Hunter College-CUNY project to raise public awareness of Puerto Rican needleworkers. As chapter five discusses, the movie and Norma Rae icon of the 1980s and 1990s attracted considerable popular attention, outshining the global industry, Puerto Rican needleworkers, southern mills, the TWUA, and Crystal Lee. In addition, the icon’s stripped-down narrative of individualist rebellion inadvertently converged with an ascendant 1980s mainstream cultural formation of neoliberal individualism. A close-up lens in the conclusion allows for a discussion of Crystal Lee’s activism during the final years of her life and an exploration of the contradictory uses of the icon into the twenty-first century.

In a second key methodological intervention, this project connects archival sources that scholars have not studied in relation to each other. The approach exposes important links between the New South and Puerto Rico and presses against historical expectations. In this

\textsuperscript{22} McAlister, 5-6; Klein, 6-7. Both scholars build their arguments regarding U.S. foreign policy on these premises and discuss the ways popular culture constructed narratives that helped or reinforced national identity and policy in parts of Asia.
history, Puerto Rican women are crucial to understanding both the Caribbean and the U.S.
Although southern and Puerto Rican women did not work in the same mills and factories, their migrations, labor, and activism functioned within a national industry. They were not supposed to see each other as peers, even as government offices, corporate executives, buyers, and managers recognized the related if differentiated value of both groups of working women. Unions took note of these connections across race, ethnicity, and borders and attempted to build solidarity, with the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) most active from Canada to Puerto Rico.

Writing a history that places the U.S. in a framework that accounts for colonial as well as regional differentials; examines wage workers and labor activism as well as economic and trade policy; and analyzes the mechanisms of cultural production as well as its narratives pushes the limits of time and funding. Such a project depends on multiple historiographies and the deep dives of numerous scholars who have reached archives and gathered oral histories beyond the scope of one historian. 23 Timothy Minchin, Michael K. Honey, John Salmond, Robert Korstad, Jacqueline Dowd Hall, and Victoria Byerly have enriched the field of southern labor history on which this dissertation relies and builds. 24 Carmen Teresa Whalen,

23 Kornel Chang, Rutgers-Newark, State University of New Jersey, “Who Built the Empire: Rethinking the History of Labor and U.S. Empire,” panel, Labor and Working-Class History Conference, Seattle, WA, June 2017. Chang studies labor and U.S. empire in East Asia after World War II. In his comments, he suggested that broad reading across multiple historiographies is an important approach to the history of labor and empire because scholars will not have the time and language skills to read in the variety of archives spanning U.S. empire and all the workers in motion throughout its reach.
Altagracia Ortiz, Eileen Boris, and Rina Benmayor have increased the visibility of Puerto Rican women’s factory labor, wage earning, and union organizing in the field of Puerto Rican studies. This project expands on their research and engages it as a crucial part of U.S. labor and cultural history.

In addition to using methods from women’s history and labor studies to understand the identities and activism of women workers, tools from labor and empire and the history of capitalism allow for a scrutiny of labor market manipulation along the Atlantic U.S. The give-and-take between these labor markets, not simply localized circumstances, led to the variable conditions that women worked in, complained about, and organized against. Starting in 1898, as industry expanded in the New South, Puerto Rican women provided a dual option, as lowest-wage insular labor and as lower-wage labor migrating to the Northeast. That dual option was not spontaneous or random.


collaboration with textile and garment executives conducted experiments with new modes of imperialism and capitalism—like the offshore diffusion of production, extreme industrial exemptions, and managed migrations—because the 1898 Treaty of Paris omitted language regarding incorporation and citizenship. These experiments served U.S. imperialism and laid procedural and policy scaffolding for later neoliberal projects like export processing zones (EPZs). Their pragmatic contributions were as important as the theoretical discussions of economists like Friedrich von Hayek and the Mont Pèlerin Society, often at the center of histories of neoliberalism.27

Migrating poor women provided the majority of the workforce for U.S. textile and garment enterprises throughout the twentieth century. While popularly understood as solitary mills or sweatshops, U.S. producers were components of a global operation. National and international laws and agreements continuously reconfigured the regional, imperial, and transnational currents.28 As such, women workers did not participate in a sequence. They moved in fluctuating and overlapping patterns depending on changes in job openings, employer recruitment, citizenship and border definitions, government agencies, and chains of communication. In the twentieth century, European and Québécois immigrants moved


28 In an effort to critique the established neoliberal discourse of trade and migration, with its emphasis on freely moving “flows,” I use the word “current” instead. It foregrounds the presence of surrounding factors that interact with migrations, relocations, and investments because currents move within their surrounding water or air, constantly interacting with temperature, gravity, chemistry, and solid objects. I changed to this language after reading Colleen Woods, “Building Empire’s Archipelago: The Imperial Politics of Filipino Labor in the Pacific,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 13, no. 3-4 Labor and Empire (December 2016): 133. She questions neoliberal discourse and the “uncritical and ambiguous language of migrant ‘flows.’”
through the Northeast, rural Appalachian migrants traveled and relocated in the South, and Puerto Rican migrants moved from rural parts of the island to cities like Ponce and Mayagüez and throughout the Northeast mainland. In the 1960s, federal contract provisions and civil rights law, along with alternative job opportunities for white southerners, created openings in the mills for African American women migrating from sharecropping fields and tobacco factories.  

The extent to which poor women understood the magnitude of the global operation differed. Some women discerned the availability of jobs in other locales or the presence of migrating workers, while other women expressed a broader awareness of conglomerates, their financial interests, and their power to control labor markets as well as local employment conditions. By the late twentieth century, most workers knew the global textile and garment operation existed but their comprehension of its mechanisms, participants, and influences depended on their situation. Yet social categorizations, recurring terminology, and cultural representations like Norma Rae camouflaged the proliferating currents. In order to minimize investment risk and maximize audience reach, Hollywood movies often set out to rearticulate familiar meanings and obscure disconcerting complexities due to their own reliance on gendered and racialized narratives as studios pursue the widest possible sales.


The familiar terms “southern mill hand” and “Puerto Rican needleworker” are particularly misleading. “Southern mill hand” included women who did reeling and winding of yarn or thread, weaving on looms, cloth loading, shearing, hemming and finishing edges, trimming loose fabric off finished items, and folding items for retail packaging. In addition, many southern women, including Crystal Lee, trained as sewing machine operators and worked in apparel factories, not only textile mills.31 “Puerto Rican needleworker” covered a range of labor as well, including floorgirls, reeling and winding of yarn or thread, weaving on looms, cloth loading, cutting patterns, sewing machine operation for all types of apparel, hemming and finishing edges, generic and fine embroidery, and packing.32 This project’s intersectional analysis reveals how economic systems are constituted through the interaction of such multiple categories, whether they are formally articulated or not. In this approach, the analysis highlights political and structural inequalities as well as the experiences, identities, and agency of the women workers within and against those systems. The result captures the intersectional dynamics of power as well as the expression of identities.33

The global textile and garment operation and labor organizing throughout the U.S., which includes Puerto Rico, provided the larger context for Crystal Lee’s conditions and experiences. The mills in which she and her parents worked were not local or even regional


businesses. Immense national conglomerates like Cone Mills, Burlington Industries, and the J.P. Stevens Company had bought most of the southern mills by the mid-twentieth century. J.P. Stevens, the focus of the TWUA organizing drive launched in 1963, had started in 1813 as a woolen broadcloth manufacturer in Massachusetts. By the 1970s, it had become one of the largest textile, garment, and home goods corporations in the world. It owned most of the mills and plants in Roanoke Rapids, including Delta #4 where Crystal Lee worked and made her stand on a towel-folding table.

Company executives, southern politicians, Puerto Rican leaders on the island and mainland, and managers and boosters in both locales did their best to promote industrial opportunities with upbeat narratives of labor compliance. Many workers, however, chose to participate in acts of resistance that included collective action, from spontaneous walkouts to union membership drives. Their labor history is not a steady progressive arc to a final victory or national union dominance—it is the jagged history of ongoing resistance.

*Norma Rae* and its icon would not exist without Crystal Lee, her awareness of the TWUA drive, and her decision to become active. This project acknowledges the relevance and potency of the accumulated memories, anecdotes, tactics, and insights passed down from generations of labor activism. Crystal Lee had heard stories and debates, and her experiences involved both agency and the conditions of her daily existence. Crystal Lee’s actions were not predetermined by the economic, social, and cultural structures in which she lived. She had discretion and opportunities to act in different ways, but the conditions of her daily existence did provide provocations, incentives, aspirations, frontiers, obstacles, and repercussions for her decisions. These conditions included her immediate household, family, and town—and

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decades of southern labor activism, colonial experimentation with Puerto Rico, and the global array of enterprises and investors.

Crystal Lee grew up in Roanoke Rapids and Burlington, North Carolina, during the 1940s and 1950s. At seventeen, she worked as a battery filler in the same unionized Burlington textile mill as her parents, but they did not become members. Her father believed unions caused trouble that got people fired. Crystal Lee, however, noticed the woman who served as shop steward walking with confidence into the “bossman’s office.” That same year, the TWUA local in Henderson, about forty miles from Burlington, went on strike. In 1962, Crystal Lee returned to Roanoke Rapids to join her older sister. The town had been the heart of organizing drives in 1948 and 1958, and a new one started in 1963 with initial TWUA organizers, Virginia Keyser and Jim Pierce. In 1973, Crystal Lee joined that drive. She was a vocal and influential member of the TWUA for several months, but she was not the principal leader or illustrative of the southern union members who had given it momentum. The great majority of initial workers who signed member cards were black mill hands. This crucial influx of black membership built on long histories of civil rights activism and African American labor organizing. Their achievements made Crystal Lee’s participation possible.

Crystal Lee’s 1973 termination and expulsion from the mill coincided with a journalist’s request for interviews. The subsequent New York Times Magazine piece caught the attention of editors at Ms. magazine and Macmillan Publishing and two women producers

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36 Daniel J. Clark, Like Night and Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Conway, 4-5.
37 Conway, 190-196.
in Hollywood. They created versions of Crystal Lee’s life story that had no room for the colonial and global context, instead relying on familiar notions of the troubled South and sentimental images of poor southerners. Each version showed the mill as the nostalgic stereotype of a peculiar southern industry, isolated and removed from wider strands of corporations, investment, lobbying, government relations, colonial arrangements, or trade agreements. As discussed in chapter three, Ritt expressed in his own words this American fascination with the South. His location and costume designs were explicit. This project also argues that each version of the Crystal Lee story, from the original newspaper article to the PBS-Ms. magazine television segment to the movie to the icon, created a gradation that increasingly focused on the individual and abbreviated, marginalized, elided, and eventually eliminated the longer history of southern labor activism.

The *New York Times Magazine* article, PBS-Ms. television segment, biography, and *Norma Rae* movie production, however, were not inevitable, progressive, or conspiratorial. They functioned in relationship to broader ideas and trends as well as in response to the specific demands of news outlets, television stations, Hollywood studios, and creative professionals that included producers, directors, screenwriters, and actors. Crystal Lee cooperated with various productions to raise awareness for unions, but during the movie’s

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development she resisted the individualist storyline. She did not want the movie to erase the other mill hands and labor organizers, so Twentieth Century-Fox removed her.\footnote{Raymond Williams, \textit{Marxism and Literature} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 136-138. He argues for the analysis of “cultural production as social and material” with attention both to the mechanisms of capitalist production and distribution and to cultural formations that have no direct or exclusive formal institutional realization.}

Media coverage of Crystal Lee’s union activism from 1973-1975, the 1979 movie \textit{Norma Rae}, the icon that spread during the 1980s and 1990s, and their embedded cultural narrative gained prominence at a time when dramatic postwar economic changes in world trade and investment became tangible and obvious to many Americans. As successful and captivating popular culture, the coverage and movie impacted understandings of American workers and organized labor in the 1970s and 1980s. They worked to perpetuate the conception of U.S. textile and garment labor as “poor white mill hands,” which reinforced ideas of a parochial and white “American working class.”

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The cultural inquiry driving this dissertation depends on a theoretical background that traces to Antonio Gramsci and includes Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, Williams’s theorizing of cultural formations and structures of feeling, and Bourdieu’s model of contested fields of cultural production shape my analysis of \textit{Norma Rae}, its icon, and their significance.\footnote{Bourdieu, \textit{The Field of Cultural Production}, especially Part I “The Field of Cultural Production”; Williams, \textit{Marxism and Literature}.} I use these conceptualizations as part of my analysis to argue culture is a highly contested arena with an impact not only on the way society understands economic relations, but also on the unfolding of economic relations and their mechanisms.

Four theoretical frameworks provide specific tools for understanding the development and function of \textit{Norma Rae} as a Hollywood movie in the 1970s and 1980s and of the Norma
Rae icon that endures into the 2010s. The practice of cultural history, with its emphasis on cultural narrative, serves as the overarching analytical method. Norma Rae’s basis in a popular fascination with poor white southerners and 1970s apprehension about U.S. workers reinforced a cultural narrative of the American working class as white individuals in industries in embattled local circumstances. Cultural narratives are not discrete storylines and tantalizing plot contrivances of a movie or book, but rather the generic narratives that recur in various creative forms within a society. These cultural narratives do not simply reflect a society or group, they also function as interactive and shifting structures. They perform, constitute, reinforce, impede, unsettle, and undermine structural relationships as well as meanings, beliefs, and perceptions. The wide-ranging stylistic representations of cultural narratives are sites of contest, where groups and participants with different ideas and hierarchical access question or define aspects of their society. Most U.S. magazines, books, albums, shows, and movies are also products that earn income for many levels of workers, executives, and investors who rely on them to generate revenues.


42 It is important to highlight that movies made by Hollywood studios have large crews doing paid work, from craft services to grips/boom operators and lights/cameras to editing/soundtrack. Most of these workers are members of unions, a different model than social media websites and apps in the twenty-first century. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat rely primarily on unpaid labor from their customers/users—who have no established pathway to unionizing or even basic payment demands. The customers/users create content like posts, images, videos, sketch comedy, and even short shows and movies. Some of the content is “bootleg,” using photographs, footage, or music from other creators without remuneration. The websites and apps then use that unpaid labor and its generative content both to sell advertising that targets the customers/users and to sell data about them to other corporations. See Jonathan Beller, The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press/University Press of New England, 2006) for a thorough analysis that uses the tools of Marxist theory to examine this cultural labor.
The way in which different people tell the same core narrative over and over again changes with the creators, contexts, and imperatives. Creators make their choices and develop ideas within larger social and economic rankings and broader structures of power. The creators’ efforts to realize artistic or literary coherence and describe or give meaning to a situation via cultural creation, usually while earning revenue, affect people’s understandings and emotions. Popular cultural narratives that become ingrained dispositions can make it easier or more difficult to sustain or alter other structures, like economic and financial policy, political participation, elections, labor practices, educational institutions, immigration, and trade agreements. Gender, race, class, and status serve multiple functions in both the production mechanisms and the creative content of each version of a cultural narrative. In popular representations, gender, race, class, and status can suggest an imitative function, mimicking familiar features of a society and allowing audiences to feel recognition or affinity with the movie, song, television show, or novel. Representations can also serve a constitutive or disruptive function as they reiterate, absorb, refract, subvert, or challenge stereotypes, social categories, big changes, or ideologies in the society. Gender, race, class, and status shape the hierarchy of culture producers and workers as well, helping to determine the distribution of access, labor, and income in each production. For example, white men with some formal training or education have worked most often as the professionals on Hollywood movies, from directors to lighting technicians.

This project’s recurring comparison of Crystal Lee’s 1973 stand in Delta Plant #4 to its 1979 depiction by Norma Rae relies on a theoretical model developed by two scholars of

visual rhetoric. James J. Kimble and Lester C. Olson argue workers within a shared space like a factory experience posters, comments, or actions as affiliated members of a group. Kimble and Olson call such performances “backstage” gestures, displays in a limited area where public viewing is not available or allowed. Backstage gestures rely on a level of “reciprocal familiarity” and function as a means of “communal identification” within a particular group. When the public or a wider unexpected audience views such a gesture as if it is a “frontstage” performance, they can mistake it as the act of one self-possessed person. That imaginative process by an outside or unanticipated audience transforms the gesture from a vernacular unifying signal to a highly individualistic iconic performance.45

The third analytical framework comes from film scholar Robert B. Ray and infuses the discussion in chapter three. He argues the postwar Hollywood industry consensus dictated the “conversion of all political, sociological, and economic dilemmas into personal melodramas,” placing focus on the individual and the emotional redemption of a reluctant hero.46 For example, Ritt and the screenwriters made the explicit decision to produce a movie about one woman’s personal transformation through a sexualized if unconsummated relationship with a labor organizer. When Crystal Lee challenged that creative decision, the producers and studio executives removed her. This “Hollywood tendency” minimized the collaborative, long-term efforts required for substantive economic, political, or social change and reinforced the notion that individualist actors making personal choices serve as the crucial component of power and

45 James J. Kimble and Lester C. Olson, “Visual Rhetoric Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s ‘We Can Do It!’ Poster” Rhetoric & Public Affairs 9, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 553-554. Kimble and Olson studied the Westinghouse factory posters commissioned and displayed by managers during World War II, one of which has become known as “Rose the Riveter.” The image’s twenty-first century embedded narrative of iconic individualist empowerment derives from the imaginative process that results when the image from the original poster, with its collective message for group productivity, appears outside its original context.

responsibility. The tendency did not participate in a methodical right-wing conspiracy, and movies are not perfectly coherent ideological texts. However, as described in chapter five, there was a potent convergence of this Hollywood convention and the amplifying neoliberal projects of the 1980s.

In chapter five, Raymond Williams’s theory of cultural formations and structures of feeling provides a fourth framework. My analysis of the movie and icon’s narrative and affective reverberations uses Williams’s concepts to highlight the significance of popular culture. His propositions regarding cultural formations and structures of feeling elucidate an unstable but instrumental bridge between agency and structures—between individual decisions and temperaments, ideologies, and larger social, political, and economic systems. Cultural texts like *Norma Rae* and its icon are not inert or freestanding objects but rather components in pervasive cultural formations. Texts, intentionally and inadvertently, interact with other texts to forge particular formations and provide narrative and affective experiences that “legitimate a given distribution of power.”

Williams argues that as part of this process, cultural texts generate structures of feeling, consistent patterns of emotions, affective responses, and lived consciousness. In structures of feeling, “regularized patterns of emotion and sentiment” translate ideologies that support certain arrangements of power into naturalized personal sentience. Structures of feeling bring ideologies and their principles into people’s consciousness and daily living in the form of affective associations. They are more than a zeitgeist or the mood of a generation. They derive from repeated sensations and affective experiences that align mental and social habits.

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with certain economic and political organization. In this case, *Norma Rae* and its icon contributed to an aspirational discourse of the unstoppable power of the free and triumphant individual. As discussed in chapter five, this structure of feeling served the burgeoning mainstream cultural formation of neoliberal individualism.

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter begins with a wide-angle lens that encompasses the Atlantic U.S. and its diversity of women workers, and the fifth ends with a close-up lens on the cropped Norma Rae icon and its solitary white woman. Following the first chapter and its larger context, chapter two focuses on the South and the historic economic and social circumstances that instigated and shaped Crystal Lee’s decisions, work, and activism. It includes a brief analysis of the popular culture practices and narratives that filtered media interest in the TWUA and Crystal Lee. American audiences had a longstanding fascination with stories about poor, white southerners in novels, biographies of country singers, and Hollywood movies. Chapter three closes the lens tighter to follow the contested development and production of *Norma Rae*, from the initial 1978 “Crystal Lee” script to Field’s sweep of the major acting awards in early 1980.

Chapter four takes the same tight lens and turns it to Maldonado as one of thousands of Puerto Rican needleworkers. It examines their shifting position in postwar currents of capital, manufacturing, labor, and 1970s activism. Maldonado participated in more ways than Crystal Lee—as an organizer and business agent, but also as an educator and advocate for import limits and other means to manage globalization. The daily lives and labor of Puerto Rican needleworkers were obvious enough in 1950s New York to appear in a popular cultural

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48 Klein, 7 and 16; William, *Marxism and Literature*. 

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production twenty years before *Norma Rae*.\(^{49}\) The 1957 Broadway play *West Side Story* was such a success that it became an Academy Award-winning 1961 movie, but the women characters contributed to a narrative of the “dark Other” and exotic beauty rather than American workers. The presence and popularity of *West Side Story* in the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, helps to undermine the conception of the textile and garment industry relocating in a direct geographic line from North to South to an end in the Global South. It also challenges the view of Puerto Rico and its residents as negligible to U.S. economic growth, industrial capitalism, and labor activism in the twentieth century.

In the Northeast, Maldonado also attracted media attention for her labor activism in the textile and garment industry and broader union movement. Although the coverage did not compare in quantity to the stories about J.P. Stevens, the TWUA, and Crystal Lee, the archives show Maldonado was an established and celebrated union organizer. She worked in New York City factories from the 1950s to the 1970s and served as a steward, business agent, and organizer for the ILGWU. She had seen white men, both managers and union leaders, meeting to discuss the conditions and grievances of the mostly women workers and decided to get active with her local.\(^{50}\) She became a vocal union member and outspoken participant in the 1984 public history project “Nosotras Trabajamos en la Costura.”\(^{51}\) But she did not have the type of platform, no matter how problematic, that Crystal Lee gained from *Norma Rae*, a filmic misrepresentation of her life story.

\(^{49}\) Whalen, “‘The Day the Dresses Stopped’,” 123-125; Ortiz, “Puerto Rican Workers,” 105-130. Whalen notes the high number of Puerto Rican women in New York who sewed in homework, non-union, and union shops. Ortiz quotes Dan Wakefield, a journalist that documented East Harlem in the 1950s who said, “the farmed-out needlework of garment shops” in Spanish Harlem reminded many people of the island, and the neighborhood had a lot of homework and “fly-by-night dress shops.”

\(^{50}\) “Gloria Maldonado,” 8/8/1984, Box 229, Folder 3, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Collection, Series XIX: Audio-Visual (1973-1999), Oral History Transcripts, Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.

\(^{51}\) Translation: “We Work in the Garment Industry.”
Chapter five zooms in to the emergence of the Norma Rae icon. From 1980 to 1981, Twentieth Century-Fox pursued multiple legal and financial avenues to block Barbara Kopple’s production of another Crystal Lee movie. The Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) collaborated with the studio because it sought any positive publicity as it continued to fight J.P. Stevens, federal trade policy, and the accelerating disaggregation of the textile and garment industry. Without any cultural competition, the Norma Rae icon grew from media coverage of the movie and Field’s elevated career. Constant appropriation of the cropped image and the phrase “Norma Rae moment” further condensed the embedded narrative to a bare but inspirational line—individual defiance is the answer. Despite its origins in systemic exploitation, racialized labor, union organizing, and civil rights campaigns, the icon’s embedded cultural narrative of individualist rebellion allowed it to work on behalf of different types of defiance, unmoored from specific conditions or ideologies.

The icon particularly, if inadvertently, converged with flourishing texts, images, and sound bites from libertarian economists, right-wing politicians, and activist evangelicals in the 1980s. These texts, images, and sound bites worked to constitute a mainstream cultural formation of neoliberal individualism. The ascendance of neoliberalism was not a conspiracy, but it had an important cultural aspect with optimistic narratives of the individual, defiance, choice, and freedom helping to obscure predictable exploitation. The Norma Rae icon,

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though it appears to be a very different type of text, converged with them, helping to make such ideas and policies appealing, reasonable, and normalized.\textsuperscript{53}

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When the movie and icon are used as an entry point into the larger context rather than as a reflection of the time period, the interconnected migrations and labor of Puerto Rican women, a long history of southern labor activism, and Crystal Lee’s complicated experiences become visible. A history of textile and garment workers that examines the ties between women from the New South and Puerto Rico also exposes a deep history of neoliberal trade practices and the critical role of the U.S. government and transnational corporations in directing globalization.\textsuperscript{54} Norma Rae elided that historical context, and the icon entirely eliminated it. They performed a certain type of cultural work, participating in the construction of notions of the proper American working class, whiteness, and individualist economic and political rights and responsibilities.

Different economic expectations, practices, policies, and systems emerge from, demand, produce, and reinforce different legitimating discourses. Cultural productions like

\textsuperscript{53} McAlister, 8; Klein, 8-10. The scholars do not address neoliberalism, however, they use texts including movies, television shows, museum exhibits, speeches, and policy papers to show the importance of the convergence of cultural, social, and political structures for extending and reinforcing U.S. imperialism.

\textsuperscript{54} Capitalist enterprises have covered the globe since their inception, and states have been at the center of the making and remaking of global capitalism. Fluid spatial configurations have functioned hand-in-hand with fluid labor configurations. The resulting collage of labor practices does not contain “proper” hourly-wage proletariats in a physical plant with some outlying remnants of pre-capitalist labor. Rather, varying cultural, social, economic, and political conditions generate varying labor practices, which include contemporary versions of coercion, paternalism, fealty, sweatshops, and homework as well as artisanal and waged factory employment. See Beckert, xxi, for his argument that “capitalism has been globe-spanning since its inception” and his challenge to the “presentist conversation on globalization,” which discusses it as a new phase in the history of capitalism. See Beckert and also Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire (London: Verso, 2012) for their arguments against the false dichotomy between states and markets and against the supposed inevitability of global capitalism in its current form. See Rockman, Scraping By; Hong, The Ruptures of American Capital, 108-113; and Collins, Threads, 189-190 for their arguments regarding the constant mix of labor and work practices and their scholarly challenges to any capitalist or Marxist teleology.
movies, television shows, and websites can serve these larger discourses, even when they are not overtly directed toward economic policies or debates about labor, trade, and finance. *Norma Rae* worked to constitute and perpetuate a notion of the American working class as white, industrial labor in embattled local circumstances. The icon it generated converged with and reinforced neoliberal economic and political projects in the 1980s. In the twenty-first century, contradictory groups and organizations continue to use the icon as a symbol of individualism, as a joke about taking a personal stand, or as a rallying point for union action.
“I don’t give a darn if he does it to her, then he’ll do it to me, do it to my sister, do it to the one... And I will not stand for that you know, because after all, we’re human beings, and we’re all ladies.” Louise Delgado, *Nosotras Trabajamos en la Costura*

CHAPTER ONE
THE ATLANTIC U.S. IN A GLOBAL INDUSTRY: SEEING THE HISTORIC RAW MATERIAL BEHIND NORMA RAE

In 1899, a group of South Carolina businessmen set out to coordinate an exposition around the cotton industry. Their objective was not a world’s fair. They wanted to foster economic ties between the South, Northeast, and Caribbean. The South had reestablished cotton production and increased investment in manufacturing since the Civil War. The Northeast still encompassed more industrial sites and financial options, and the Caribbean had long running relationships with U.S. trade. These South Carolina businessmen, investors, and politicians wanted their state to become a hub for all three regions (see Figure 5). The Charleston City Council approved the Inter-State and West Indian Exposition, allowing organizers to found a company and launch a fundraising campaign in 1900. The city council supported the mission to expand commerce with the “open, growing, and profitable” Caribbean islands.¹ Leaders in business, banking, and politics understood the cotton regime, both the commodity and textile and garment manufacturing, as an engine of U.S. global ambitions. Additional industrial, labor, and investment options for such a massive operation

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meant greater flexibility for maximizing returns in a world of accelerating change and multiplying variables.

The Inter-State and West Indian Exposition is an example of how colonialism affected mainland and regional dynamics. In addition to expanding U.S. military reach and economic intervention, colonialism impacted currents of trade, investment, and migration. U.S. imperialism in Puerto Rico was not simply the military occupation or extraction of sugar. The island offered the ability to experiment with labor markets, investment, finance banking, and tariffs. Its incorporation into the textile and garment industry, which was critical to U.S. economic power, meant Puerto Rico, the New South, and Northeast were linked. Working women navigated, resisted, and participated in these related lines even if they did not know each other personally.

The links also meant increased business demands for wage, safety, and investment differentials and more opportunities to enlist and reconstitute categories of gender, race, ethnicity, and citizenship. The question for leaders and managers was not simply North versus South. It was how to maximize the entire Atlantic U.S. to provide correlative options. Southern and Puerto Rican women became interconnected laborers in that operation. The invisibility of Puerto Rico in the historical understanding of textiles and garments does not indicate an economic absence or irrelevance but rather the power of cultural narrative and the importance of gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, and sovereignty in determining who receives mainstream recognition as “American workers.”

The Inter-State and West Indian Exposition symbolizes the rich historical context of women workers along the Atlantic U.S. in an industry with multiplying lines throughout the world. In order to understand both the conditions against which women like Crystal Lee and
Maldonado organized and the cultural work of *Norma Rae*, we must be aware of these deep intricacies. When women in the South, Northeast, and Puerto Rico changed jobs, resisted stretch-outs and low wages, or went out on strike, their local circumstances were not isolated. When unions like the ILGWU and TWUA organized workers, their national leaderships were also lobbying the federal government about colonial and international tariffs, quotas, and labor laws. When women migrated both within and across regions seeking better conditions, they contributed to and reshaped the industry and helped reorder populations.

Representations of workers are gendered, racialized, and colonialized, so eighty years after the acquisition of Puerto Rico and increasing globalization of U.S. economic interests, two producers and Twentieth Century-Fox made *Norma Rae*. A movie about a white woman hero achieving personal transformation through labor activism is better than no movie about working women. Standing on its own, *Norma Rae* celebrates a woman’s hard work and commitment to channeling her energy and rebelliousness into an uplifting activity. But it is also limited and obscures as much as it illuminates. Of course movies cannot be measured for simple accuracy because they cannot possibly capture the full details and varied interpretations of the past. Choices made by creative professionals, however, come from social and cultural dispositions as well as financial demands and have consequences for subsequent social and cultural understanding. The choices can be examined for their sources, situations, and implications.

People have looked repeatedly to *Norma Rae* or its icon for ideas about the American working class. Its simplicity, with the familiarity of white workers in a loud factory, makes for a consumable and seductive visual story. Its heroic union organizer storyline might even attract some people to activism. But the long history of the twentieth-century textile and
garment industry and labor unions that made *Norma Rae* possible get lost behind its alluring and accessible surface. That makes for excellent popular entertainment but at the price of developing narrow meanings for who can be considered “American workers.” It is no surprise the studio wanted such a movie, which prompts serious questions about the implications.

An oral history of mill workers in Connecticut provides an academic counterpart to the cultural work of *Norma Rae*. The same year as the release of that movie, a graduate student at the University of Connecticut conducted interviews with workers at the American Thread Company in Willimantic. He spoke with a dozen white women and men. Most of them, including the interviewer, mentioned a noticeable increase in Puerto Rican workers during the 1960s and 1970s, and one white woman complained that recent jobs had gone to Puerto Rican women rather than to local residents. Yet that oral history project, “Millworkers of Willimantic, 1979-1980,” did not include Puerto Rican women. Although the arrival of Puerto Rican women in Willimantic appeared abrupt to white workers, they were not a sudden aberration in northeastern factories. Their employment at American Thread from the 1960s to 1980s proceeded from decades of needleworkers laboring in Puerto Rico and the Northeast.

This chapter uses a wide-angle lens as it discusses the eighty years between the acquisition of Puerto Rico and the making of *Norma Rae* and “Millworkers of Willimantic.” It decenters the mainland with its North-to-South narrative, and adds layers and loops moving in multiple directions throughout the Atlantic U.S. The result disorients readers in search of a neat chronological sequence or straightforward causation. It challenges them to reorient to many contradictory factors that formed and reformed the textile and garment industry. This formidable history has two purposes. Most clearly, it builds a kaleidoscope counter-narrative

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to the dominant historiography and *Norma Rae*. It also lays out the political economy of the intensifying but disaggregating textile and garment industry. The intertwining of the three Atlantic U.S. regions and world events calls attention to many dynamic complexities.

The chapter’s inclusion of women, migrations, and union activism acknowledges the workers’ constant struggles and influence. Their choices and actions occurred within vast energetic arrays of capital and political power, yet women fueled, tweaked, and fought these arrays. Many women workers experienced their strained work conditions or union membership from a personal perspective, while others understood they were part of bigger systems of management and investment. Regardless of their point of view, their circumstances and decisions were shaped by the political economy described in this chapter. It is an important aspect that gets lost in *Norma Rae* and its parochial view of a southern mill town.

These decades at the first half of the twentieth century reveal the importance of federal actions, particularly colonial and trade policy. While studies of Congress and textile and garment legislation underscore the interests of specific state constituents, federal colonial and trade offices had an increasing influence. After the 1934 Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act (RTA), several executive offices and agencies relied on industry for all types of foreign economic policy goals. This chapter emphasizes these larger currents of capital and labor and how events like World War I, the Great Depression, the New Deal, World War II, Operation Bootstrap, and the Cold War intersected with U.S. imperial interests and the broader textile and garment operation. This long history traces salient government policies, conglomerates, unions, and migrations with which southern and Puerto Rican women interacted. In the 1960s and 1970s, the TWUA and Crystal Lee and the ILGWU and Maldonado made their resolutions and took certain actions based in this state of affairs. They were not inevitable or prescribed,
but they were enmeshed in years of colonial and trade policy that had made these women increasingly vulnerable to exploitative conditions and relocations.

The longer arc also exposes forces that drove wages down overall. A range of policies and agreements changed the directions of capital and labor, convulsing or realigning industry practices, in relation to many factors. The results, however, pressured world textile and garment wages downward. Like the stock market, which shows growth over the long term despite short-term downturns, wages and treatment in the industry show steady decline over the past 120 years despite moments of temporary upturn. Union activity might contribute to a specific manager or company’s immediate decision about pay or relocation, but worker resistance and unions were not to blame for the overall diffusion of the industry with its spiral of wages to the bottom.

Intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, status, and citizenship in the political economy shaped Crystal Lee and Maldonado’s experiences and identities and their access to jobs and political leverage. They also shaped the form and prominence of the cultural representations of their work and their disparate presence in the archives. Out of the global strands of workers, unions, mills, factories, homework, investors, trade representatives, politicians, and lobbyists, several media outlets in the 1970s chose to focus on Crystal Lee. The attention resulted in a celebrated Hollywood movie that became a pervasive popular representation of the American working class. The notion of a pretty, young white woman in a parochial mill village fighting management in a single antiquated plant obviously had tremendous appeal. That sentimental imagining of the poor southern mill hand continues to obscure a long history of the global working class in which many women participated. Common conceptual and historiographical divisions among women’s, labor, capitalist, Southern, and Caribbean
histories have perpetuated distinctions between mill hands and needleworkers that allow for imbalances in the representations of and meanings for American workers.

Using *Norma Rae* as an example of contested cultural production could replicate its marginalization of historic worker activism and erasures of women workers who were not white or easily associated with “mill hands.” The hundreds of documents and ongoing media references to *Norma Rae* could supplant the archival record of the TWUA and overwhelm the record for Crystal Lee. And the archival record for Crystal Lee could eclipse the documents regarding the labor and activism of Puerto Rican women like Maldonado. Such cultural categorizations and resulting gaps have consequences for economic and political leverage because they constitute, overlap, and reinforce meanings for concepts like American worker, real work, fair pay, deserving citizens, and other terms that undergird employment and institutions. Any effort to examine the women’s differing but connected experiences and circumstances—without further duplicating the constructed distinctions between workers, imbalances in cultural representations, and fractures in the archives—requires an intersectional approach and interdisciplinary techniques. Political-economic history as well as cultural history has to be brought to bear to understand why and how a spunky, white woman mill hand became an icon at a time when the U.S. textile and garment industry already included generations of migrating Puerto Rican women and a recent influx of southern black women.

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Scholars have written extensively about antebellum industrialization in the South, the postbellum retrenchment of a landless black workforce, and the squeezing of small yeoman

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farm families that generated a pool of poor white workers. Another group of historians has discussed ongoing ties between the Caribbean and the United States, especially with the South.

The Atlantic slave trade, slave labor, slave resistance, and commodities markets tightly bound the two regions. More recent scholarship has examined the global history of cotton and textile enterprises, often with attention to the nineteenth century. The twentieth-century textile and garment industry, with its importance to U.S. global expansion, was predicated on that past. This project launches from that point to examine the shifting industry through five phases: the 1890-1910s, 1920-1930s, 1940-1950s, 1960-1970s, and the 1980s. This first

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chapter discusses the initial three periods. Each section presents a breakdown of pertinent events, issues, or factors that connected the Atlantic U.S. and redirected currents of manufacturing, labor, and capital in multiple and correlative directions.

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The cotton textile and garment operation, from plantations to retail, permeated the world prior to this initial modern phase. By the mid-1800s, it was a major engine of global capitalism, with intertwined enterprises stretching from the Caribbean to India and Massachusetts to Mexico. For example, in 1835, an industrial business manager from New York City was already traveling to the Yucatán Peninsula where the former governor and a Scottish investor had opened Mexico’s first steam-powered cotton manufacturer. The New York manager brought engineers, machinery, and carts to get the mill established, and it turned out 395,000 yards of cotton cloth in 1844. While that was a small quantity compared to Lowell, Massachusetts, the mill’s existence—along with dozens of other small facilities around the world—reveals global lines of trade, technology, finance, management, and labor. Unlike previous attention to sites of highest quantity or years of peak production, tracking such lines highlights particular but vital mechanisms, like early steps in the modern organizing and reorganizing of investment, labor, technology, and trade and the consistent role of state power. In this wider frame, focusing on average rather than exceptional sites also provides more representative examples. Most textile and garment workers were not in Lowell.

The Yucatán business illustrates the intensifying but sprawling links between government leaders, financial investors, and industry experts from multiple continents and how they were triggering new currents of capital, technology, labor, and consumer goods. High output factories in England and the Northeast U.S. were not solitary, static

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7 Beckert, 136-142.
manufacturing centers but rather agile hubs within changing global strands. These hubs concentrated and reallocated resources through plantations, railroad lines, ports, cotton and wool markets, shipping companies and their routes, mills and factories, homeworkers, investors, banks, industry managers, corporate executives, lobbyists, and government officials.

During this first phase of modern industrial reconfiguration, the U.S. government was consolidating hemispheric power. It collaborated with boosters, investors, executives, banks, and policymakers in various regions to assert an imperfect but potent political, economic, and cultural hegemony. Textile and garment enterprises played a vital role, and the New South and Puerto Rico were crucial. Their increasing sites along the Atlantic U.S. interacted at a critical time. The reconstruction of the South and occupation of Puerto Rico happened when technological innovation had freed mills and factories from waterpower that previously limited construction. In another serendipitous convergence, all this happened just as industrial design ideas like Fordism and Taylorism changed the layout of production, definitions of efficiency, and measurements of processes. The result was an integration of the three regions via a variety of arrangements that reconfigured the entire array. It reordered and thinned Northeast manufacturing and shifted production steps and investment into newly adaptable formats rather than driving a linear relocation of companies or enlargement of factories.

The consolidation of U.S. hemispheric power was buttressed by the redeployment of federal troops. Economic as well as geopolitical interests propelled their movements, and they in turn facilitated economic changes. For example, troops supported Anglo-American

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8 Fredric Jameson acknowledges that an absolute hegemony, a total controlling dominance, does not exist, but without some general sense of cultural dominance, “we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable.” Jameson, Postmodernism, 57.
settlement in western territories, yielding land and capital options for the cotton regime. Investors directed money to new or consolidated sharecropping plantations in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas as well as to mills in the Carolinas and Georgia. As land values and equipment costs increased, southern white farm families lost their land and entered tenancy and sharecropping—with most sending members to mills to earn cash. At the same time, some northeastern textile and garment companies modernized in the South due to aging physical plants, the recent ability to locate away from waterpower, and the comparative lower cost of real estate and labor.

By the 1890s, the revived U.S. cotton regime was integrated with world markets, and the federal government had consolidated western territories through tactics that eliminated or marginalized Native American tribes, Mexican subjects, French descendants, and métis people. These two accomplishments encouraged companies and investors as well as government and military leaders to look beyond the mainland. The Caribbean offered possibilities for U.S. expansion, and erosion of the Spanish Empire triggered intense debates about how it should occur. Military, political, corporate, and financial interests pushed for various types of involvement even though many people expressed concerns about race mixing. In 1891, Secretary of State James Blaine advised President Benjamin Harrison that


13 Some politicians, policymakers, and corporate executives argued against absorption due to race mixing. They said incorporation of the “tropical countries” would require incorporation of “their people.” A few politicians also argued occupation and absorption of the islands contradicted democratic practices and American ideals. See
Hawai‘i, Cuba, and Puerto Rico were the only places “of value enough to be taken.”

Discussion spread of a canal linking the Caribbean and Pacific and solidified U.S. commitments to further conquest. Leaders argued Puerto Rico was crucial to the protection of that future canal. When a war with Spain escalated in May 1898, former Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt urged senators to make “Porto Rico ours.”

The 1898 Treaty of Paris that ended the Spanish-American War, unlike previous treaties of acquisition, omitted language regarding incorporation and citizenship rights. That omission was not an accident. As noted, U.S. leaders, policymakers, and investors debated not the importance of the Caribbean but the appropriate level of absorption. The treaty answered definitively that full statehood would not be the resolution, but left the rest open. The acquisition of Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines in the Spanish-American War provided an opportunity for experiments with modes of imperialism, including extreme tax and banking exemptions, an offshore diffusion of industry and capital, and labor migrations.


15 Puerto Rico is actually three inhabited islands—Puerto Rico, Vieques, and Culebra—and a collection of small atolls. But following convention, I will use the terms “Puerto Rico” or “the island” to refer to all the islands in the territory as a unit. See Ayala and Bernabe, 1; Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship,” 6.

16 Ayala and Bernabe, 14.

17 José Trías Monge, Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 28. The 1819 treaty with Spain for Florida, 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo for large parts of Mexico, 1867 treaty for the purchase of Alaska, and 1898 annexation of Hawai‘i all included immediate or rapid incorporation into the Union and citizenship rights.

18 Schoultz, Beneath the United States; Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color, Chapter 6.

19 The acquisitions of the 1898 Spanish-American War were part of a series of imperialist assertions by the U.S., including the 1893 occupation of Hawai‘i, 1899 Open Door Policy with China, and 1904 Roosevelt Corollary in response to an international court decision regarding a blockade of Venezuela by European nations.
The federal government took Puerto Rico and defined its status in relation to clear economic objectives but in ways crosscut by gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, and sovereignty. As with most colonialism, some insular elites and criollo hacendados negotiated with the U.S., seeking ways to benefit from contradictory combinations of cooperation and resistance. Despite the Spanish Empire’s recent implementation of an autonomous constitution and insular government, U.S. occupation ended Puerto Rican governance. Some criollo hacendados welcomed the change because they wanted independence from Spain’s feudal traditions and access to the protected U.S. sugar market. Most leaders soon realized, however, equitable political and economic integration was not a possibility. The U.S. developed different plans for Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines, making Puerto Rico a fully dependent colony. From 1898 until passage of the 1900 Foraker Act, four U.S. generals served as appointed governors.

As with the South after the Civil War and the West during conquest, commerce was a top priority. Realignment of Puerto Rico’s economy with the Atlantic U.S. began immediately. The War Department established the Division of Customs and Insular Affairs (DCIA) for the ports and collection of customs in Puerto Rico and Cuba. The U.S. government implemented numerous trade policies that encompassed its own national and international concerns. The DCIA increased tariffs on tobacco and coffee entering Cuba from

20 Translation: creole landowners—in Puerto Rico, usually light-skinned or white men of Spanish descent who owned large plantations and other assets.
Puerto Rico, two of the top products the island had exported to Cuba. But Congress did not open North American markets. The result reshaped Puerto Rico’s trade and economy, driving landowners from coffee to sugar and women in the coffee regions to needlework. By late 1898, U.S. importers, garment companies, and department stores were already using island contractors to buy the fine needlework produced by women in homes and small shops. That early attention to Puerto Rican embroidery framed the women as “needleworkers” although they eventually labored in industrial manufacturing in addition to contracted embroidery.

Social categories of race and ethnicity that derived from Spanish colonialism, intersected with U.S. notions of race, and were reconstituted in modern capitalist imperialism were just as important to the formation of economic structures. The meanings for Puerto Rico and its residents contributed to its role in the U.S. economy and its invisibility in narratives of the American working class. Press releases, government memos, magazine photographs, and world’s fairs articulated different stories for each Spanish-American War acquisition, with Puerto Rico represented as backward and primitive but not aggressive. U.S. political and economic dominance depended on this cultural narrative of Puerto Rican people as a passive “dark Other”—dependent, childlike, impoverished, and uneducated—even as U.S. government and business leaders collaborated with criollo hacendados. These elites had advanced formal

education, cosmopolitan experiences, friends and colleagues in the U.S., and highly concentrated wealth.

American depictions and their embedded cultural narrative of Puerto Rican people reinforced criollo hacendado claims to insular power even as U.S. colonial systems constricted them. The criollos had benefited from the racial hierarchies of the Spanish Empire, which granted white men born to wealthy families in the colonies privileges second only to aristocrats and wealthy men born in Spain. Such colonial intersections of race, class, and status had defined black slaves as the lowest social position, but the majority of Puerto Rico’s residents were rural poor of mixed backgrounds often called jíbaros. Criollo hacendados did not often oppose the initial American press releases and memos about jíbaros because that cultural narrative of race, poverty, and civilization aligned closely with Spanish colonial divisions of race, class, and status. Eventually, criollos understood the U.S. government would not relinquish military or political sovereignty over the island, but they realized it would grant them local governance, access to investment, and protection of their wealth.25

The narrative of backwardness for Puerto Rico intersected with the hardening of modern de jure racial segregation in the U.S. South. When the governor General George W. Davis planned the first election for the House of Delegates, the only partially representative institution within the insular government, he referred to the 1896 decision *Plessy v. Ferguson.*

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Davis argued that if “the disenfranchisement of the Negro illiterates of the Union” could be justified then the same could be defended in Puerto Rico. The criollo hacendados became the political elites of this new system. The U.S. government and its appointed colonial administration deployed such practices of selective inclusion and exclusion in many areas.

The U.S. acquisition of Puerto Rico required legislation, rules, and offices for governing, taxing, monitoring, and investing. Since the Treaty of Paris did not articulate any plans for territorial status on a path to statehood, the U.S. could experiment with Puerto Rico in ways it could not in the South, West, and Hawai‘i. The resulting alterations in lines of sovereignty, citizenship, and governance; offshore categorizations; real estate and tax manipulation; and managed labor migrations exceeded practices in the South and built scaffolding for the postwar neoliberal project of EPZs. That scaffolding consisted of bureaucrats and experts, economic data and rationales, legislative clauses, legal definitions, and finance mechanisms as well as models of geographic sites and buildings. Puerto Rican women, especially needleworkers, were central to the experimentation and to the generation of a global working class, not the proletariat imagined by nineteenth-century philosophers.

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26 General Davis served as governor from 1899 to 1900, Ayala and Bernabe, 31. He went on to become a governor of the Panama Canal Zone as well. Theodore Roosevelt also believed self-government in Puerto Rico should not be rushed. His 1906 report to Congress said the appointed governor and council were cooperating “with all of the most enlightened and patriotic of the people of Porto Rico in educating the citizens of the island in the principles of orderly liberty” although it was not easy to instill the principles of the American system, Theodore Roosevelt, “They Are Loyal,” in The Puerto Ricans, 128-129; Go, American Empire, 26-28, 40, 44.

27 Briggs, 1-3 and 20. She argues historians must study the ways colonialism and then development were elaborated in Puerto Rico to understand the forms in which globalization takes shape. Her analysis tracks changes in narratives of family, sexuality, women’s rights, and social science and how they defined Puerto Rican women as deviant and poverty as a problem of their motherhood. She hopes this argument points to the possibilities for understanding Puerto Rico as a key place where U.S. colonialism was honed.

28 Colleen Woods makes a similar argument about 1940s collaborations between the U.S. military, private contractors, and Filipino company-union hiring halls. She questions the scholarly focus on the 1974 Overseas Employment Development Board, situated within an ascendance of neoliberalism, as the pivotal moment that initiated an exploitation of mobile labor. She does not use the notion of “scaffolding” but states that the postcolonial practices of the 1940s “set an important precedent in the development of the relationship between states, capital, and labor migration” which neoliberalism accelerated thirty years later. See Woods, “Building Empire’s Archipelago,” 149-150.
These complexities show how most twentieth-century workers did not undergo a precise conversion to the proletariat, and workers did not exist solely in relation to a means of production. They experienced multiple relations not only from employment, income, and wealth, but also with gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship. In addition, they interacted and acted as consumers, dealers, traders, investors, and hustlers in their own side businesses. Most contemporary manifestations of the working class more closely resemble the migrating and colonized women workers in the textile and garment industry during the first half of the twentieth century.\(^{29}\) Poor rural white women in southern mills and rural Puerto Rican women of insular and northeastern homework and sweatshops were interconnected if not interchangeable labor markets in which that global working class coalesced.

The Foraker Act of 1900 was a formative piece of legislation that drew Puerto Rican women into the U.S. and global capitalism as low-wage employees and as nonincorporated insular residents to which the state and employers had very malleable obligations. It was also an important step in a process that constructed Puerto Rico as a site of dramatic experimentation, especially for the disaggregation of manufacturing and capital.\(^{30}\) The Foraker Act defined Puerto Rico’s distinct status as a “nonincorporated possession” rather than as an incorporated territory because it created a U.S. civilian government but imposed a tariff on products entering the mainland. The Supreme Court had ruled tariffs could not be placed on territories due to the Constitution’s “uniformity clause,” which stated that Congress could

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\(^{29}\) Hong argues global women workers are the “new proletariat” of the twenty-first century, and they do not see an antecedent in the white, masculine working class but rather in colonized and racialized subjects who were incompletely “interpolated into consumerist domesticity”—so the new proletariat is aligned with the subaltern, Hong, 111; Rockman, *Scraping By*; David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 102.

not place tariffs between parts of the United States. The Foraker Act challenged that precedent, and the Insular Cases disposed of it.\textsuperscript{31}

The 1901 case of \textit{Downes v. Bidwell} is the most relevant decision. Samuel Downes sued the U.S. Customs Inspector for the port of New York after his company was forced to pay an import duty on oranges from Puerto Rico. Justice Edward Douglass White’s concurring decision differentiated between incorporated territories and nonincorporated possessions, arguing that mere possession did not imply incorporation in the Union. He argued nonincorporated possessions were not foreign in the international sense because they were under U.S. sovereignty, but they were foreign in the domestic sense. Critics said it was a rationalization for imperialism and a “bending of the Constitution to the imperatives of a colonial project.”\textsuperscript{32} Whatever the criticisms, the decision constructed political, legal, and financial scaffolding in which land held sovereign by a nation could be deemed outside the laws and constitution of that nation—a template for later EPZs often called “free zones” in the neoliberal rhetoric of the 1990s and 2000s.\textsuperscript{33}

The Foraker Act implemented additional economic structures that manipulated Puerto Rico’s trade and made it appealing for investment and manufacturing. The island was prohibited from negotiating commercial treaties or determining tariffs, and the U.S. monetary


\textsuperscript{32} Ayala and Bernabe, 26-30. The act imposed the temporary tariff on Puerto Rican products, treating the island as not part of the U.S. but then outlining the organization of a colonial government: an insular governor, cabinet, and supreme court appointed by the U.S. president, and a bicameral legislature with both presidential appointees and elected house delegates.

\textsuperscript{33} Government offices, business owners, and corporations constantly debate and rearrange tariffs and duties. Puerto Rico is not the first site of such contests and variability, but it does represent the first effort to experiment so completely with sovereignty, citizenship, and the nation-state in such ways. Puerto Rico was also the first example of an entire geographic entity demarcated as part of the U.S. yet designated with a special status exempted from federal laws. The South and West had to comply with or at least appear to address national laws. The concept of “labor arbitrage” as part of later neoliberal projects appears in Aihwa Ong, \textit{Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). The concept of “regulatory arbitrage” appears in Philip Cerny, \textit{Rethinking World Politics: A Theory of Transnational Neopluralism} (London: Oxford University Press, 2010)
system was mandated, with Puerto Rican currency retired at the rate of 60 cents to the peso. U.S. banks were permitted, and the American Colonial Bank became the second largest bank in 1901 and the largest in 1910. The policies constructed economic dependence and differential business options that had consequences for the island and the entire Atlantic U.S.

At the same time as implementation of the Foraker Act, businessmen in South Carolina proposed the Inter-State and West Indian Exposition for 1901-1902. The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago and 1895 Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta had been popular ways to assert U.S. global interests, the importance of industrial technology, the appeal of consumerism, and visual manifestations of racial hierarchy. They set the standard, pushing commerce as a primary goal. The Inter-State and West Indian Exposition’s Special West Indian Commissioner traveled the Caribbean to promote the event (see Figure 6). His visits included Puerto Rico, with meetings in Ponce, Yacco, and San Juan. An article in the promotional magazine celebrated Señorita Herminia Davila (see Figure 7). Davila ran a school for needlework and said the embroidery of Puerto Rico was unlike any in the United States. At the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, she displayed an embroidered portrait of George Washington that was brought to Charleston.

The Inter-State and West Indian Exposition offered the usual range of attractions. It had a Bazaar with international displays, an Auditorium for performances, a Women’s and

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34 Korrol, From Colonia to Community, 20-30; Dietz, Economic History, 89-91. Prior to the act, only 16% of exports and 22% of imports had been carried on U.S. ships—although more than 80% of its trade was with the U.S. Prices rose after the Foraker Act because the U.S. merchant fleet was more expensive and had a monopoly.
Negro Building, and several State Buildings. The Textile, Railroad, and Commerce Buildings had central locations. The Cotton Palace, however, had the greatest visibility (see Figure 8). Organizers hoped to highlight the South’s ability to compete with states like Massachusetts and “to show the resources and industries of our new possessions in the West Indies.” The displays provided a tangible manifestation of the Atlantic U.S. bound by technology, financial partnerships, and racial hierarchies. The E. Jenckes Manufacturing Company of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, brought four machines from its hosiery mill. They ran near a section dedicated to Olympia Cotton Mills, one of the largest textile manufacturers in South Carolina, which had installed a famous Hopedale loom to show “the greatest weavers ever invented.”

The exposition organizers asserted their economic ambitions and enacted them through racialized and colonial as well as industrial means. They saw these relationships they encouraged along the Atlantic U.S. in a global frame. For the businessmen of South Carolina, their plantations and mills were not parochial or local.

[Our] object is to secure to our American Cotton Manufacturers a greater share of the lucrative trade in cotton fabrics in South America and the West Indies. These countries import fifty million dollars of cotton goods annually, three million dollars more than the Chinese Empire with its four hundred million people. Of this vast traffic, England controls twenty million, Germany ten million, France three million, other European nations sixteen million and the United States, the most energetic people of the globe, one million or only two per cent.

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38 “Exposition Flyer” trifold, 1901, 1, in The Exposition: Bound, Accession Number 0033.60.89, Osborne Library at the American Textile History Museum.
Although the organizers emphasized exporting to the Caribbean, their recent awareness of Puerto Rican needleworkers, lower wages, and cheaper real estate had already made it an option for offshore labor.

Increasing industrialization in the New South and the acquisition of Puerto Rico became critical pieces in the global competition and expansion. The South provided cheaper migrating labor in the form of poor rural yeoman farmers losing their land, and Puerto Rico provided cheapest offshore labor in the form of colonized rural families in need of wages due to dramatic changes in the commodities trade of coffee, tobacco, and sugar. The U.S. government played an explicit role in fostering the contracting of needlework and garment manufacturing to the island. Congress passed the 1901 Hollander Act, which imposed a tax on the assessed value of rural property with the goal of forcing Puerto Rican households with “idle lands” either to sell to the sugar industry or enter employment to obtain the dollars necessary to pay taxes.⁴¹ Often “idle lands” had allowed households to farm for subsistence or local markets, harvest fruits, and share with people who needed to live on borrowed plots—but the colonial government wanted industry or property taxes. These rural women and girls took in more needlework to earn the dollars necessary for taxes or for food and consumer goods.⁴²

The increasing bureaucratic monitoring and quantification of trade, investment, production, and consumption were also crucial aspects of U.S. imperialism. They were as important as the military occupation and the colonial governing authority. In 1902, the DCIA was renamed the Bureau of Insular Affairs (BIA) and expanded as a civilian agency to oversee

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⁴¹ Ayala and Bernabe, 37-38 and 48-50. The majority of Puerto Rican land was in the hands of a few hacendado landowners. That concentration of land ownership was a legacy of Spanish rule, but U.S. governors and industries wanted any remaining small land holdings to generate quantified value.
the customs and trade issues of Puerto Rico. It began with an accumulation of statistics, data, qualitative descriptions, and photographs, and the next section discusses how this endeavor expanded and intensified under the New Deal administration.

As in the New South, public education and training programs developed to serve the needs of textiles and garments. In 1909, the Departamento de Instrucción Pública, a U.S. colonial agency, offered classes for women in crochet, embroidery, and sewing and encouraged piecework. The U.S. government funded the Departamento de Instrucción Pública’s partnership with manufacturers, retailers, and the Philadelphia Textile School to implement the needlework curriculum, which reached over 26,000 women by 1926.

When the Great War started in 1914, it redirected more U.S. attention to Puerto Rico’s role in the textile and garment operation as European manufacturing shrank. The needlework

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43 Ayala and Bernabe, 29-30. The BIA was also responsible for Cuba, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti at various times after the U.S. government sent the military to quell conflicts and occupy those places. Throughout the early twentieth century, the U.S. military regularly occupied places in the Caribbean. The 1904 “Roosevelt Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine declared the U.S. had the exclusive right to military intervention in the Caribbean on behalf of the “civilized nations.” The U.S. established a customs receivership in the Dominican Republic in 1905; intervened in Cuba in 1906, 1912, and 1917; occupied Haiti 1915-1934 and the Dominican Republic 1916-1924; acquired the Virgin Islands from Denmark in 1917; and intervened in and then occupied Nicaragua in 1927.


industry increased most in the impoverished coffee areas, which had lost much of their Cuban trade without gaining any to the mainland. Two types of insular labor arrangements grew simultaneously: the homeworker system multiplied, with an increasing number of agents putting out pieces, and new urban factories appeared. Government and business experts from both the mainland and island promoted Puerto Rico’s potential.\textsuperscript{48} In 1918, Mayagüez had four large apparel and home goods manufacturers and adopted a complete needlework curriculum for all its public schools. Ponce had two plants that employed more total workers.\textsuperscript{49}

The 1917 Jones Act was a pivotal piece of legislation for constructing a mode of imperialism that increased the island’s ties to the U.S. while insistently defining Puerto Rico as not part of the federal government. Its residents could be obligated to the state yet not included in benefits distributed and overseen by the state—clarifying the template for future EPZs. The Jones Act specifically granted Puerto Rican citizenship in the U.S. and established an insular government with three branches. However, it allowed the appointed governor or U.S. president to veto the Puerto Rican legislature and continued limited representation in the insular government.\textsuperscript{50} The act also opened the way for implementing a military draft for the expanding war. Citizenship within the sovereign nation was not a promise of statehood or

\textsuperscript{48} Juarbe, “Anastasia’s Story,” 16-18. E.E. Pratt (Chief of Bureau) to William C. Redfield (Sec. of Commerce), Textiles in Porto Rico and Jamaica (Special Agent Series No. 137, report prepared by W.A. Tucker), dated February 14, 1917; Centro No. 47, Reel #1: Records of the BIA, 1900-1934; N.A. Arrangement: Files 2718 Textiles, Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY. In February 1917, E.E. Pratt, who served as chief of the BIA, sent a report titled “Textiles in Porto Rico and Jamaica” to the Secretary of Commerce, William C. Redfield. It discussed the various kinds of fabrics and knit goods imported to the two islands.

\textsuperscript{49} Ayala and Bernabe, 46-47.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 28. And an island representative was elected to only a ceremonial federal position.
constitutional protections but an attempt to preclude resistance or independence. A House Committee overseeing the legislation said, “Porto Rico has become [a] permanent territory.”

This approach to the island as a permanent site of acute selection, exclusion, and exemption, rationalized by a narrative of progress for backward people in need, impacted women workers in particular ways. Like the South, Puerto Rico had a history of worker activism despite the cultural narrative of passivity and backwardness. In 1901, the Federación Libre de Trabajadores (FLT) established an affiliation with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Many in the FLT appreciated the U.S. government and resented “bourgeois” Puerto Rican demands for immediate self-rule. They feared independence would entrench criollo hacendando exploitation of the poor. Many working women chose to join organizations that conducted strikes and debated political and economic issues. When these activists pushed the U.S. government to enact the first island minimum wage law in 1917, it exempted tobacco strippers and homeworkers—the lowest paid women’s jobs. About 75% of needlework employers reduced or closed their factories and increased the use of contracted homework.

Such similar, but not equivalent, combinations of racialization, rural poverty, migration, government-industry collaboration, and public funding for vocational education pushed changes in the New South and Puerto Rico. One clear distinction between the two workforces involved Jim Crow segregation. The de jure segregation of southern towns and occupations restricted the access African Americans had to mills, often limiting them to

51 Ibid., 58. Governor Arthur D. Yager said the Jones Act meant “the American flag will never be lowered in Puerto Rico.”
52 Santiago Iglesias, Pan-American Federation of Labor letter regarding the AFL and ILGWU support of workers in Puerto Rico, dated August 5, 1918; Box 2, Folder 1, ILGWU, Benjamin Schlesinger, President, Records, 1914-1923, #5780/009, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library; Ayala and Bernabe, 17 and 61.
sharecropping. In the 1910s, some black men could find employment in the dirtiest and heaviest mill jobs, like unloading cotton bales and tearing them open for the blenders and pickers. An even smaller number of black women were permitted jobs cleaning the restrooms and floors. As discussed in chapter two, they would not gain access to skilled textile and garment jobs until the 1960s, when a combination of civil rights actions, federal contract provisions, union organizing, and new industrial employment options for whites forced the jobs open.

The almost complete segregation of southern mills and representations of Puerto Rico’s backwardness helped to constitute notions of whiteness and the American working class. Yet the Puerto Rican homeworker and sweatshop systems expanded at the same time as large textile and garment companies constructed new southern mills and updated older ones. Several of the largest companies, like Cone Mills and J.P. Stevens, also started buying enterprises throughout the eastern U.S. as they built conglomerates with diverse holdings that included carpeting and household goods like linens. By 1920, the multiplying southern mill towns relied on a racialized family labor system in which white women and children worked, with white men in some skilled machinist jobs. In the dominant narrative of the American working class, such white workers labored in grimy or heavy local industries.

54 A few company executives, like Warren Coleman of North Carolina, tried to run black-only mills at the turn of the century, but they were short-lived. Rowan, 49.
Despite another narrative of passivity promoted by New South boosters, mill hands also coordinated resistance to many mill practices. Benefits for factories in the South had less to do with worker compliance and more with the availability of cheaper land, child labor, increasing numbers of rural poor, lower wages, local and state involvement in strike breaking, and the general support of an anti-union perspective. Although many labor scholars focus on higher wages as a measure of success, southern mill hands had a range of concerns, including convoluted labor contracts, unfair pay forfeitures, overbearing “bossmen,” bullying, improper treatment of women, rigid rules about the time to start and stop machines, fines for fabric assessment, unfair terminations, and various forms of the stretch-out.

Decades of southern worker resistance and union organizing laid the foundation for the TWUA drive from 1963 to 1981 and Crystal Lee’s participation from 1973 to 1975. Memories shared around a kitchen table, anecdotes swapped at work, newspaper clippings, and photographs of these activities fashioned an informal archive for southern workers. In addition, they built networks of communication, tactics for taking on managers, and alliances between workers and union representatives. Walkouts, wildcat strikes, and union pickets often occurred because of unfair dismissals, like a 1900 strike at the Haw River mill in North Carolina, where Crystal Lee and her parents would work fifty years later. A 1913 walkout at the Fulton Mill in Atlanta dovetailed with the first United Textile Workers (UTW) campaign.


Dowd Hall, et al., 77-78.

Clifford M. Kuhn, Contesting the New South Order: The 1914-1915 Strike at Atlanta’s Fulton Mills (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 83-90; Dowd Hall, et al., 211. Like other labor scholars, I use the term “bossman” because mill hands used it for a particular position in the hierarchy. A stop-checker or a foreman/forelady was a mill hand who had some status over the others. Bossmen were management as floor supervisors who had close contact with the mill hands and had status and substantive power over the workers. Mill managers and other supervisors had even higher status and power over the mill hierarchy.
in the South in over ten years. Although it ended without major concessions, the union received company recognition.\textsuperscript{60}

The Great War impacted the South as well. An unprecedented series of strikes spread through the U.S. textile and garment industry in 1919 in reaction to the promises of the war propaganda versus the subsequent recession. The downturn hit southern mills particularly hard. Workers had experienced celebrations of their patriotic contributions, calls for democratic economic security, and federal intervention on their behalf. The end of the war reduced U.S. government interest in maintaining production so southern mills locked out workers and shutdown to sell surplus and wait out the recession. Organized strikes continued for months. Workers gained several contract provisions, including a 55-hour week and favorable wage calculations.\textsuperscript{61}

The Northeast remained a vibrant part of the national textile and garment industry in the early twentieth century. All three regions increased their bales of cotton consumed and spindle activity from 1890 to 1920.\textsuperscript{62} Although 1920 marked a turning point for the Northeast, when the number of bales and spindles started to level off, it does not indicate a predetermined end of northeastern industry or its irrelevance. Rather, as an early site of very dense manufacturing, the initial stages of disaggregation greatly impacted the Northeast. Disaggregation rather than deindustrialization serves as a more accurate descriptor of the larger system.\textsuperscript{63} While workers in a specific neighborhood with a precise point of reference

\textsuperscript{60} Kuhn, 91-110.
\textsuperscript{61} Dowd Hall, et al., 186-189; Rowan, 58-60.
\textsuperscript{62} Rowan, 55.
\textsuperscript{63} This project uses the term “disaggregation” to denote the twentieth-century process of breaking manufacturing into separate steps and constantly rearranging and relocating these steps around the world to achieve the highest rate of investment return or lowest cost configuration for any given time. Experts and corporate management throughout have used various terms like send, move, transplant, and relocate in their discussions and comments on the process. “Runaway shop” is a distinct term specific to unions. Workers and union agents use the term for unionized factories that close in one site to open in another as a means to escape union contracts.
saw “deindustrialization” of their immediate location, overall U.S. industrial capitalism was disaggregating the processes of manufacturing—first with textile and garments and later with electronics and automobiles. In the next section, we see that a key part of these developments was the recruitment of Puerto Rican women, already established as offshore laborers, to the older mills and plants of the Northeast that continued to run.

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The economic swings of the 1920s and 1930s, culminating in the Great Depression and New Deal, pushed rapid change through and structure formalization into this industry along the Atlantic U.S. As a result, the three regions became more tightly linked via manufacturing arrangements, investment, and migrations of labor even as industrial sites diversified and spread. This paradox of robust connections within disaggregation, as well as constructed gender, racial, and citizenship distinctions between various locales and employees, lies at the center of misconceptions about the supposed linear, geographic deindustrialization of the Northeast. Excessive attention to the areas of greatest quantities and the biggest factories has also contributed to a simplistic misunderstanding.

The history in this section shows the intensification of influences that had percolated at the turn of the century. It also highlights the importance of the New Deal in the entrenchment of these correlative regional and colonial options for industry leaders and investors. The New Deal was crucial to the contradictory development of both differential wages and regulations and federal protections for union organizing. This odd combination cultivated an explosion of labor activism in the industry during the 1950s and 1960s. The 1935 Wagner Act provisions, especially creation of the NLRB, became the primary mechanisms for building the labor
movement. When Crystal Lee joined the TWUA in 1973, that campaign and her activism depended on this history, which became erased in *Norma Rae*.

The end of World War I triggered a recession that impacted the textile and garment industry in complicated ways. A focus on the South might give the impression that most factories closed or reduced production. In the Northeast, however, immigration restrictions after the war limited its primary source of skilled low-wage labor. So more manufacturers sought alternatives in Puerto Rico. By 1920, the island had a system of contracting agents and a growing number of factory owners who had relationships with mainland managers, importers, and retailers. The lower wages in Puerto Rico meant increased production on the island. Mainland manufacturers and department-store owners worried that skilled Puerto Rican women could not be trained in enough numbers to produce the work at the speed and cost they wanted. Several developed pre-cut designs they shipped to Puerto Rico to reduce time and cost. They quickly increased the contracting of Puerto Rican women to finish and embroider undergarments, apparel, handkerchiefs, and linens. These practices further realigned Puerto Rican women’s textile and garment work toward mass production. Eileen Boris argues these practices in the 1920s established the island as “a nascent ‘off-shore’ production facility for the mainland.” As noted in the previous section, however, this process had already started years before World War I.

A reporter’s description captures this reconfiguration of the Atlantic U.S. industry. The article would also sound familiar to readers who have followed debates about late

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65 Korrol, *From Colonia to Community*, 31.

twentieth-century trade agreements and tax policies. He noted that in Ponce, a city four centuries old, he discovered a modern concrete building with the sound of sewing machines and the sign “A. Blaustein & Co., Blouse Manufacturers.” The reporter said the industry came after U.S. reforms. “[The sweatshop] seemed young and hopeful to Porto Rico, and now it goes by the name of industrial progress. In the United States, the sweatshop is recognized as a menace… in Porto Rico it is thought of as the bearer of a kind of industrial salvation, and is welcomed by the government, business organizations, and the unemployed.”67

The journalist made a comparison to southern mills and mentioned New York manufacturers, recognizing the corresponding links. He said U.S. manufacturers often preferred the Puerto Rican sweatshops to southern mills because of the island’s highly skilled women at a much lower cost. While the piecework industry had encouraged sweatshops with sewing machines, he noted that handcrafts had not ended. There was a system of contracts all over the island “made by New York concerns.” The reporter believed any legislation on behalf of workers or limiting Puerto Rico’s advantages over the mainland would be “interpreted as discouraging new industries.”68

In 1929, Luis Muñoz Marín also wrote about the sweatshops, a few years before his political compromises with some U.S. economic policy. He said the island had become “a factory worked by peons, fought over by lawyers, bossed by absent industrialists, and clerked by politicians. It is now Uncle Sam’s second largest sweat-shop.” He went on to describe a manipulative process in which U.S. companies developed land or pushed external investment

into Puerto Rico only to extract profit and dividends from cheap labor in the form of exports—yet then declare “a favorable trade balance.”

The recession also prompted an increase in the number of northeastern owners and investors researching options in the South, charting comparative land, wage, and tax rates. Large conglomerates with resources bought most of the older mills in the South even as some built new facilities. In the 1920s, the conglomerate that would become Cone Mills purchased the Haw River mill outside Burlington from the Holt family. The Simmons Mattress Company, which J.P. Stevens would absorb in the 1950s, bought all six of the Patterson family mills in Roanoke Rapids. As described in chapter two, Crystal Lee would work in these two North Carolina towns for both conglomerates between 1958 and 1978.

Southern expansion or relocation was not the only option. The Naumkeag Mill in Massachusetts illustrates the intricate financial research and considerations. Directors of the mill decided not to move South during the post-World War I recession because they had upgraded after a 1914 fire. Managers instead used the speed-up to increase profits. In 1930, they researched another southern mill and decided not to move. Realignments included relocation within the Northeast. For example, the Princeton Thread Mill moved from New York to Watertown, Connecticut, in 1930 for cheaper costs. During the late 1920s, the number of looms running in the Northeast did start a quantitative decline. The array of mills,

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69 Luis Muñoz Marín, “The Sad Case of Port Rico,” in *The Puerto Ricans*, 174-175.
71 Chomsky, *Linked Labor*, 52-54 and 57.
factories, workers, investors, and corporations continued to disaggregate and adjust to manufacturing options, which sprawled beyond the South and Puerto Rico to Colombia, Japan, and Mexico. At the same time, Puerto Rican women heard about better pay and work conditions in the Northeast, and the number of migrating women increased. Many of them had accrued contacts with mainland representatives and familiarity with U.S. manufacturers and specifications. Citizenship opened the way for more fluid and frequent migrations by women as well as more labor arbitrage by enterprises. Although northeastern mills and factories continued to employ European and Québécois labor, companies in New York City and Philadelphia recruited Puerto Rican needleworkers. The Bureau of Employment and Migration opened in 1930 in New York as an agency of the Puerto Rico Department of Commerce and Industry. Its Identification and Documentation Program produced thousands of English-language cards for employment.

Many U.S. corporations relied on this incipient pattern of employing mobile women available for lowest-wage insular and lower-wage mainland manufacturing, with malleable obligations to the workers. Companies with the right contacts could constantly move their


75 “Agency History,” The Records of the Offices of the Government of Puerto Rico in the United States, 1930-1993 Finding Aide, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY. The bureau later transitioned into the Migration Division from 1947 to 1948, when it became a much larger agency with regional offices active in the recruitment and distribution of needleworkers.
manufacturing and change their hiring within such related but nonsequential currents. The differentials in turn encouraged the migration of Puerto Rican needleworkers to locales with better wages and conditions, improving their own financial circumstances yet adding to a larger destabilization of employment. In the late 1920s, Doña Eulalia, Minerva Torres Ríos, Lucila Padrón, Luisa López, and Eva Monje worked in New York City sweatshops and factories. Padrón and her sisters had helped their mother with piecework on the island, where they received pre-cut fabric to sew and finish. She walked the streets of New York in 1927 to find a job and noticed the dresses and robes she had made for $3 a piece on the island selling for $100. When López arrived at the apartment where her parents lived, she learned her mother, sister, and brother took turns sewing coffee bags so the machine ran all day. She eventually got a job in a dress factory. Monje moved to New York in 1919 and took a job in a garment factory in 1927. When Louise Delgado arrived in 1923, her mother and sister also ran the sewing machine all day in their apartment.

Within this powerful industrial array, many women workers continued to resist exploitation or demand better conditions. The majority of the early Puerto Rican diaspora

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77 Whalen, “Sweatshops Here and There,” 45-68, provides a brief post-WWII history of the U.S. government and manufacturers’ reliance on Puerto Rican and later Dominican women as low-wage garment workers both on their islands of origin and as migrants to the U.S. mainland. The currents of Puerto Rican needleworkers and later Dominican women encompassed not only their own migrations, but also remittance payments and consumer products, which pushed money and goods through the global array of trade, production, and consumption.

settled in Brooklyn and East Harlem and organized groups like the Liga Puertorriqueña e Hispana and Alianza Obrera. Radicals of the Alianza Obrera followed both U.S. and Puerto Rican political and economic issues, and women like Luisa Capetillo were active in that network. In the 1920s, she brought socialist ideas to labor and women’s issues, organized for the FLT, and published a text in defense of women’s rights. Less radical women like Monje and Delgado became active with the ILGWU, initially as members and shop stewards.

Like Puerto Rican women who moved from rural areas to cities like Mayagüez or left for the Northeast, many southern workers quit and relocated. Transience and migration could provide a means of individual and collective empowerment when jobs were available. After World War I, most white yeoman farm families did not have enough land or enough income to deal with fluctuations in commodity prices and increased costs. They created a surplus of mill hands when farm families moved to mill towns seeking industrial work, which was not a possibility for black farmers and sharecroppers.

In the midst of such unpredictable change, Jim Crow segregation and racial status were important to constituting the new identity of white mill hands. Until the 1960s, segregation of towns and occupations restricted access to mill jobs, which paid better than most farm or service labor and gave poor white workers a limited financial advantage as well. Even white

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79 Translation: Puerto Rican & Hispanic League and Worker Alliance.
80 Ayala and Bernabe, 66-68.
82 Some mill hands used quitting and relocating to find better opportunities and others to protest abuses, Dowd Hall, et al., 105-107 and Chapter 1 “Everything We Had,” 3-43 and 153; Byerly, Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls; Rowan, “Part Five: The Negro in the Textile Industry.”
mill hands often hired black women as domestics to help around the house, especially in families where the mother had to work. The practice was necessary to maintain the household and to reinforce poor white racial superiority.  

When the Great Depression deepened, however, the growing labor surplus of rural outsiders worked to the advantage of textile and garment enterprises. Manifestations of the stretch-out spread, with some workers having to work faster for the same pay, some roles reclassified as piecework for less pay, and many jobs reassigned to multiple beams or looms. Managers could fire workers and require higher productivity from remaining mill hands without a fear of strikes because they were able to find itinerant rural outsiders to take lower wages or cross the pickets. Sometimes mills even laid off workers as they sold surplus stock, planning to rehire when purchases increased.  

The debilitating economic spiral led to an explosive 1929, with strikes in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee due to the stretch-out. One of the most famous strikes occurred in Gastonia, North Carolina, at the Loray Mill. It was the largest mill in town, then owned by the E. Jenckes Company of Rhode Island, which had exhibited at the 1901

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85 Bryant Simon, “Rethinking Why There Are So Few Unions in the South,” The Georgia Historical Quarterly 81, no. 2 Labor in Georgia (Summer 1997): 465-484.
86 By the late 1920s, the mill town where Crystal Lee would work as a teenager also had a major rayon manufacturer. Spencer Love, son of a Harvard professor and grandson of a Carolina slaveowner and textile manufacturer, joined the family’s textile ventures after the war. He started Burlington Mills Company, which became the largest textile manufacturer in the nation because he chose rayon. That decision led to increasing profits and physical expansion because of demand for rayon as a popular, less-expensive alternative to silk for sheer stockings, preferred by women wearing newly fashionable shorter skirts. Burlington Mills even expanded during the economic collapse of 1929-1933, with hosiery workers considered higher status. They had their own Hosiery Workers Union, choosing to model elite craft organizing rather than forge unity with the cotton workers of the UTW. Fifty additional mills with more precarious employment and more frequent work disruptions operated just outside the city limits in the unincorporated villages, where twenty years later Crystal Lee and her family would work. See Salmond, The General Strike, 202-206; Dowd Hall, et al., 239-240 and 255-256.
87 John A. Salmond, Gastonia, 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 1-9; Byerly, Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls; Dowd Hall, et al., 197-199 and 212-218. The two women who falsely accused the young black men of gang rape in 1931 in the case that became know as the Scottsboro Boys were both southern mill hands riding the rails in search of jobs.
Charleston Cotton Palace and purchased the mill in 1919, becoming one of the first national conglomerates.\textsuperscript{88} The National Textile Workers Union (NTWU) had just been founded in Massachusetts in 1928 as a radical opposition to the moderate AFL and its affiliated UTW. The NTWU sent representatives to Gastonia to organize an official strike. Although workers gained few concessions, it increased worker solidarity and networks of communication while drawing attention to the horrific working conditions.\textsuperscript{89}

From 1933 to 1934, in the depth of the Great Depression, worker actions erupted along the Atlantic U.S., including Puerto Rico, in response to the economic contractions and distressed circumstances. Scholars have often discussed these strikes in a southern perspective because of the militancy of cotton mill workers and their anger about managers manipulating and evading National Recovery Administration (NRA) codes. The strikes, however, were national if fractured, with intersecting and related actions from Maine to Alabama to Puerto Rico.\textsuperscript{90} The dominant concern for workers in Puerto Rico was the pay structure, which had always benefited mainland firms and their island agents. When the worsening depression caused the growing surplus of poor rural women migrating to mills in the South, those managers could lower wages and increase their use of the stretch-out. So Puerto Rican needleworkers on the island had to bear large cuts in their piece rates because manufacturers could get work completed cheaply in the South while avoiding freight charges and agent commissions.\textsuperscript{91} Island needleworkers from both homework and sweatshops went on strike in August 1933. In Mayagüez, more than 2,000 workers from almost seventy shops were

\textsuperscript{88} Dowd Hall, et al., 201. The conglomerate was the Manville-Jenckes Company.  
\textsuperscript{89} Salmond, \textit{Gastonia}, 12-20, 28.  
\textsuperscript{90} Salmond, \textit{The General Textile Strike}, ix-x; Dowd Hall, et al., 301-302; Conway, 3.  
involved in fights with police. As in the South, owners and managers called the police to protect their property, and officers wounded several striking women, killing at least one.

Some workers stoned the factory of Representative María Luisa Arcelay, the only woman in the Puerto Rican legislature and a contractor who went on to represent insular business interests at the 1934 NRA code hearings.  

The FLT and ILGWU responded to the insular unrest, using it to push for the organization of sweatshop workers. Teresa Angleró, an FLT activist, led the effort to use the NRA and its codes to bring in more needleworkers. She worked closely with Rose Pesotta, an ILGWU organizer sent from New York City in 1934, to establish the Needle Workers’ Union Local 300. The women wanted to bring in members, support worker actions, and improve lobbying. In response to their campaign, more than three-fourths of the factory and sweatshop workers organized that year and received a pay increase of 15-25% in mediation—but most contracting agents neglected to tell workers in remote areas and kept the rate increases for themselves.  

Angleró continued organizing with the ILGWU after this wave of strikes.

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92 Radiogram CK 132 Fourteenth 0431, Folder 3: Needlework Amendments, Box 1, Entry 601, National Recovery Administration: Territorial Office for Puerto Rico, Records Relating to the Needlework Industry, Mar 1934-Jan 1936; Puerto Rican Records, Research Group 009, National Archives, New York City; Administrative Order No. 58, August 6, 1940, Folder 6: Special Investigation Case Files, Box 1, Entry 18, Records of the Wage and Hour and Public Contracts Divisions, Records of Industry Committees Investigations, Records of the Puerto Rico Industry Committee, Aug 1940-Jan 1942 Cigarettes, etc. Miscellaneous Handiwork Division; Puerto Rican Records, Research Group 155, National Archives, New York City; Ayala and Bernabe, 96; Boris, “Needlewomen,” 39.

93 Letter from Teresa Angleró, December 4, 1934, Folder 8: Piece Rates Commission, Box 1, Entry 593, National Recovery Administration: Territorial Office for Puerto Rico, Office Files of Boaz Long, Nov 1933-Nov 1935; Puerto Rican Records, Research Group 009, National Archives, New York City; Rose Pesotta, report on Needle Workers’ Union Local #300, undated, describing her confidence in president and organizer Teresa Angleró; Wm. D. Lopez of the Department of Labor in Government of Porto Rico, letter to Charles Zimmerman of ILGWU, dated July 30, 1934, describing meeting between Pesotta and Angleró, in Box Number 30, Folder 10: Needle Workers’ Union of Puerto Rico Local 300, ILGWU Charles Zimmerman Papers, #5780/014, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library; Ayala and Bernabe, 96; Boris, “Needlewomen,” 38-39.

In the South, striking workers were responding to a variety of issues. In addition to lay-offs, managers’ tactics included replacing men with women, replacing people with machines, speeding up machines, increasing the number of looms per operator, hiring more job-watchers, and installing clocks on machines.\textsuperscript{95} The profits from such tactics were enough for some mill owners to shelve modernization plans.\textsuperscript{96} Several strikes led to lock outs when owners closed a mill hoping to purge surplus stock and troublesome workers.\textsuperscript{97} Most remote southern mill hands did not know of the strikes, but the actions drew attention to textile and garment workers and promoted union networks across many towns.\textsuperscript{98} The national end to the strikes came in October 1934, when the UTW accepted the recommendations of a mediation committee. After refusing to intervene to avoid a general strike, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the committee to end it and reduce hardships on destitute workers. The UTW agreed to the terms because of an order for a Textile Labor Relations Board. Unfortunately, the UTW had little power so mill supervisors and managers reasserted control over hiring, wages, and hours—including the stretch-out.\textsuperscript{99}

The Great Depression, outbreaks of worker activism, and coordinated management and police violence prompted ongoing federal involvement. The New Deal compiled a complicated and often incongruous set of policies, regulations, and subsidies. These helped to solidify gendered, racialized, and colonial rationales for differentials in the South and Puerto Rico even as they legitimated some labor demands. The New Deal also formalized particular

\textsuperscript{95} Salmond, \textit{The General Textile Strike}, 1 and 8-9.
\textsuperscript{96} Clark, \textit{Like Night and Day}, 26-28.
\textsuperscript{97} The southern UTW organizers decided to copy the “flying squadrons,” which the United Mine Workers (UMW) had developed. They functioned like mechanized pickets with union representatives driving fleets of cars and trucks from mill to mill, urging workers to join them. Salmond, \textit{The General Textile Strike}, 46-56.
\textsuperscript{99} Roger Biles, \textit{The South and the New Deal} (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994, revised 2015), 84-86; Dowd Hall, et al., 349.
modes of state intervention in markets. Its bureaucratic orchestration of trade, investment, real estate, production, and migration gathered large amounts of data. While labor unions benefited from direct and fairly steady collaboration with the federal government and gained vital legislative protections, companies and investors maintained their advantaged position vis-à-vis the state. As part of the expanding scope of public-private collaborations, the New Deal increased the number and extent of government-industry opportunities that served corporate and industrial interests in ways not fully counterbalanced by its relationships with unions.100

The New Deal administration continued the Progressives’ practice of pairing the New South and Caribbean. In the 1910s and 1920s, physicians, public health experts, economic tours, and agricultural specialists identified the South and Caribbean as places of distinctiveness. Their people and needs were not the exact same, but they were associated as requiring attention. Experts who had been stationed in colonies like Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American War worked in the Progressive-era South and influenced New Deal policymakers. They argued the eradication of problems would “stimulate productive labor in the new colonial possessions as well as in the New South and generate more wealth for the nation.”101 As a result, the New Deal acted more directly and often in these regions, entrenching them as sites of exemption. Their exemptions would become norms in the 1980s.

Eleanor Roosevelt’s efforts reflected and sustained the entwinement of the South and Puerto Rico. She and her closest advisor, Lorena Hicks, traveled through both areas (see

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100 In this project, the term “public-private” serves as an umbrella descriptor, denoting any relationships between government agencies and private organizations rather than specific collaborations with corporations. The term “government-industry” indicates these particular arrangements. Such differentiation allows us to see the many forms of public-private activities and the diverse ways the state acts with many types of private organizations: unions, nonprofit agencies, churches, environmental groups, etc. as well as corporations and investment banks.

Figure 9). In 1934, Roosevelt showed careful attention in Puerto Rico, and one of her top priorities was to learn about the needlework industry. She visited a women’s prison where they made fine lace for 50% of the proceeds. While traveling rural coastal roads, Roosevelt saw women carrying bundles of material. One seamstress said that she earned 60 cents a dozen for nightgowns, making only one a day due to the intensive appliques. The woman earned ten cents a dozen for handkerchiefs that sold for 50 cents a piece on the mainland. The tour culminated in Mayagüez, the center of industrial needlework, and Roosevelt toured a factory with 200 workers as an example of the clean shop system.\footnote{“Mrs. Roosevelt Inspects 12 Towns: Hears Seamstresses’ Plea in Puerto Rico,” \textit{Daily Boston Globe}, March 13, 1934, 28.}

Roosevelt expressed alarm about the conditions, but she had to moderate her comments to align with FDR’s Good Neighbor Policy. Upon her return to Washington, D.C., Roosevelt spoke to friends and allies and encouraged them to visit Puerto Rico. Some of them later invested in new industries on the island and promoted tourism. Planners for a model island city even named it “Eleanor Roosevelt” as a means to celebrate her support. At the same time, Roosevelt gathered multiple reports about the South and continued to propose policies for that region, supporting recovery and a campaign against lynching.\footnote{“Model Puerto Rican City Named Eleanor Roosevelt,” \textit{New York Times}, June 15, 1936, 1; “San Juan’s Poor Greet ‘First Lady,’” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, March 11, 1934, 1. Blanche Wiesen Cook, \textit{Eleanor Roosevelt: The Defining Years, 1933-1938} (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 166-174.}

The 1933 Puerto Rican needlework unrest was a prelude to a general strike of sugar workers in January 1934, which pushed FDR and his administration to address the island more formally.\footnote{By that time, the First New Deal had already begun. Early recovery legislation had included the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) with the National Recovery Administration (NRA) to manage cutthroat industrial competition. It had also established the 1933 Civil Works Administration (CWA) and 1933 Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). FDR and his administration were promoting passage of the 1935 Works Progress Administration (WPA) to employ mostly white men and some women in public works projects, public service programs, public art, and job training.} The first intervention was the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration

\footnote{The first intervention was the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration}
under the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA). At this time, FDR consolidated colonial
governance of Puerto Rico. The mainland Puerto Rico Bureau of Employment and
Identification became the Migration Division with expanded offices.\textsuperscript{105} He also transferred
colonial planning and oversight from the BIA in the War Department to the new Division of
Insular Territories and Possessions (DITP) in the Department of the Interior.\textsuperscript{106} It worked with
the New Deal’s Puerto Rican Policy Commission to formulate a plan to shift away from “blind
development” toward a balanced economy.\textsuperscript{107} Rexford Tugwell, a prominent Columbia
University economist and recognized member of FDR’s “Brains Trust,” also participated in
assessments and reports regarding Puerto Rico’s economic conditions.\textsuperscript{108} That effort led to the
creation of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA), which grew into a vast apparatus.

Many industry leaders, investors, lobbyists, and government officials continued to
promote the rationale that Puerto Rico needed lowest-wage, industrial employment for export
in order to improve its economy and encourage social progress. While their ideas appeared
progressive, their concepts built on and adapted the colonial notions regarding civilization and
advancement. As a result New Deal economic quantification and management intensified
Puerto Rico’s ties to the continental U.S. without altering the imbalances. Federal policies
exacerbated the selective exclusions for Puerto Rico, particularly regarding wages and work

\textsuperscript{105} Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship,” 15.
\textsuperscript{106} Ayala and Bernabe, 97 and 102-103. However, when FDR needed to appoint an insular governor that year, he
appointed General Blanton Winship who had served in the Spanish-American War and World War I. Winship
became infamous for his repressive actions as governor from 1934 to 1939. The DITP was part of a U.S. insular
reorganization, with the Philippines receiving commonwealth status as a transition to independence in the
Tydings-MacDuffie Act of 1934 and Cuba receiving formal independence with the repeal of most of the Platt
Amendment.

\textsuperscript{107} Robert David Johnson, “Anti-Imperialism and the Good Neighbor Policy: Ernest Gruening and Puerto Rican
\textsuperscript{108} Rexford Guy Tugwell, \textit{The Stricken Land: The Story of Puerto Rico} (New York: Doubleday & Company,
1947). He believed government planning and Keynesian economics could reduce the crises and waste of
capitalism but was not an advocate of permanent relief/welfare programs. Tugwell first addressed mainland
agriculture and banking crises before turning to Puerto Rico. Ekbladh, 18-19.
conditions. For example, a 1934 PRRA report stated that due to the higher costs of credit and logistics, “the only industries which have important possibilities for development are those which can progressively profit by the utilization of a large supply of labor that is ‘cheap’.” The report supported Act No. 40 of 1930, which exempted new manufacturing facilities from taxes for ten years.\footnote{Edward Leon, letter to Mrs. Charlotte Westwood, dated December 1, 1938, Centro No. 154; Edward Leon, “Puerto Rico and Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938,” report on Puerto Rican needlework industry, no date, Centro No. 148; Reel #3: Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323: N.A. Arrangement: Records of the Washington Office General Records, 1935-1945; Labor, 1937-1939; FLSA, 1938-1939; Needlework, 1938-1941; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY; “To Seek Wages Act Exemption,” New York Times, August 24, 1938, 4.} Edward Leon, a New York attorney involved with the PRRA, sent a letter to the Department of Interior. He included a report from the Department of Agriculture and Commerce about a 1938 needlework crisis and said the island needed stable employment at an appropriate low wage as a solution.\footnote{“Issues for Industry in Puerto Rico,” report dated 1934, R.V.S. 18S36; Reel #1, 1935-1970, Library of Congress, Materials Relating to Puerto Rico; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.}

That reasoning distressed labor activists who understood how labor markets affected each other. The Council for Pan American Democracy, a popular front organization, argued the sweatshop conditions of New York were “in part due to the working conditions in Puerto Rico. One part of trade cannot be controlled without controlling the other.”\footnote{Donald W. McConnell, Economic Trends and the New Deal in the Caribbean, New York: Publication of the Council for Pan American Democracy, 1940, 8.} Despite these criticisms, New Deal rationales for exemptions, which perpetuated earlier U.S. colonial practices, became presumptions of economic development that persisted and undergirded future economic and political projects.

Data generated by the PRRA and other New Deal studies intentionally and unintentionally made Puerto Rico more legible as an option for trade, production, and migration. New Deal agencies provided information and tools that lobbyists, investors, and managers could use to hone their decisions and advocate for their interests regarding Puerto
Rico. The information and tools worked to support established businesses and contractors and to attract new enterprises. An extensive 1935 report on “Planning Problems and Activities in Puerto Rico” included statistics for dividend payments, interest payments, real estate rentals, freight charges, and bonded indebtedness. It noted that U.S. occupation exacerbated problems like population growth, landlessness, and unemployment, but without any suggested restructuring or reduction of colonial intervention, the report cultivated imperialism and an overall imbalance.\textsuperscript{112} Reports also used “needlework” for the quantification and management of women textile and garment workers, covering the variety of paid labor they performed. This term sustained the ongoing distinction from mill workers in New England, garment workers in New York, and mill hands in the South who all did similar work. The New Deal solidified such employment differentiations based on race, ethnicity, citizenship, and geography that obscured the women’s participation in the same interconnected industry.

Such New Deal state projects proved particularly mixed for women workers, for whom visibility often meant not leverage but vulnerability or surveillance.\textsuperscript{113} The “Planning Problems” report listed eighteen areas for research and projects, including farm debt, tariffs, and shipping but also public “beneficencia,” house-to-house slum surveys, tuberculosis, nutrition, and activities of school children. The latter topics involved women and their circumstances as mothers, making them subject to public policy debates and initiatives. Questions of poverty and overpopulation increasingly focused on poor women and motherhood rather than on systemic economic reform. Public health officials from the


\textsuperscript{113} Hong, 70-100.
mainland and Puerto Rico directed more attention, research, and money toward birth control efforts with a mix of motives that included concern for women’s health as well as eugenics, experimental pharmaceuticals, and sterilization ideology.\footnote{Iris Lopez, \textit{Matters of Choice: Puerto Rican Women’s Struggle for Reproductive Freedom} (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Briggs, \textit{Reproducing Empire}.}

Debate and negotiation surrounding the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) demonstrates the construction of the South and Puerto Rico as regions of differentials and exemptions. It was a pivotal piece of legislation for improving wages for some, but also a site for entrenching the rationales and regulations that marginalized certain workers and created options for corporations and investors. The Puerto Rico Needlework Association (PRNA), a trade group on the island, wrote multiple times to FDR’s administration about the FLSA. It demanded either tariff protections or wage and hour exemptions. These owners and managers of Puerto Rico’s textile and garment enterprises recognized global realities and the need to constantly remake choices based on labor, tax, and regulation arbitrage. Rather than pushing for a small or weak state, the PRNA, like many later neoliberal projects, advocated for a strong interventionist state capable of making and enforcing exemptions to its own laws in order to orchestrate market mechanisms.

The association’s argument about tariffs, minimum wage, and employment contained several ideas that future “free trade” advocates would reiterate. A 1938 letter said the needlework industry ranked second in importance for Puerto Rico. It then stated the FLSA represented the “highest human achievement” but could not be enforced on the island because of a clause stating it would only be enacted “without substantially curtailing employment or earning power.” The PRNA argued tariff protections for mainland manufacturers allowed them to meet the minimum wage. Without either tariff protections or wage exemptions, the
letter argued, island manufacturers could not survive. If tariff protection was not possible, the
association suggested maintaining the NRA needlework code of $1.00 a day for inside work
and 40 cents a day for outside work. A similar 1938 letter from a former president of the
PRNA said “unpardonable ignorance” had veiled certain facts from the U.S. government. It
said the FLSA minimum wage would cause unemployment and collapse of the industry.

Insular labor activists navigated the debate, attempting to counteract the PRNA. In a
1938 statement, the Commissioner of Labor allowed that needlework needed an exemption of
some type to maintain the industry. He advocated a combination of compliance with any
FLSA amendment for Puerto Rico along with implementation of “adequate remedies… to be
applied to local conditions by the insular legislative assembly.” One key concern was home
needlework. The commissioner wanted it regulated and even prohibited in some cases. The
Department of Labor of Puerto Rico also supported an attempt to create a bureau of minimum
wage and industrial homework, but the PRNA fought any effort to include women
needleworkers in insular regulations or minimum wage laws.

115 The Puerto Rico Needlework Association, Inc., Daniel Nadal – Secretary, letter to Hon. Franklin Delano
Roosevelt, dated September 26, 1938, Centro No. 156; Reel #3: Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction
Administration, Record Group 323: N.A. Arrangement: Records of the Washington Office General Records,
1935-1945; Labor, 1937-1939; FLSA, 1938-1939; Needlework, 1938-1941; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter
College-CUNY. The letter noted the industry had an estimated value of $20 million and over 100,000 workers. It
said executives and owners had made requests for tariffs for almost 40 years, but the U.S. government had failed
to protect island businesses.
116 Victor E. Domenech, letter to Hon. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, dated October 26, 1938, Centro No.
157; Reel #3: Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323: N.A. Arrangement:
Records of the Washington Office General Records, 1935-1945; Labor, 1937-1939; FLSA, 1938-1939; Needlework,
1938-1941; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY. Domenech highlighted his
American citizenship and ten years as a commissioned officer in the army to support his request.
117 “Urges Puerto Rico to Act on Wage Law: Labor Commissioner Indicates Island Should Be Exempt,” New
York Times, August 20, 1938, 4; P. Rivera Martinez, “Puerto Rico and the Wage and Hour Law: Viewpoint of the
Commissioner of Labor,” article from 1938, Centro No. 151; Reel #3: Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction
Administration, Record Group 323: N.A. Arrangement: Records of the Washington Office General Records,
1935-1945; Labor, 1937-1939; FLSA, 1938-1939; Needlework, 1938-1941; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter
College-CUNY.
118 “Labor Through 1937-1938 in Puerto Rico: The labor situation and the activities of the Insular Department of
Labor,” article from 1939, Centro No. 153; Reel #3: Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration,
After months of letters and lobbying, Congress and FDR’s administration decided Puerto Rico did need minimum wage exemptions, particularly for needlework. A 1939 summary for S. 2682, the FLSA amendment regarding island wages, explained. It stated that industry committees would have the power to determine special minimum wages, and rates could be lower than the U.S. “Needlework in establishments” was the first industry listed in one of the tables. As the FLSA exemplifies, despite the progressive intentions of the New Deal, its policies and programs often solidified Puerto Rico’s condition as both bound to the U.S. yet excluded from major aspects of national incorporation and citizenship benefits. The New Deal strengthened the state not only through its public works and interventions, but also through its ability to enact exemptions.

The New Deal also fostered the system of contracting in the name of industrial progress and global competition (see Figure 10). Handkerchief production, one of the island’s largest exports, highlights the relevance of the contracting system for U.S. global ambitions. A 1938 radiogram mentioned the need to preserve the insular handkerchief industry through both lower wages and a “reciprocity agreement with Switzerland and other ruinous competition.” That same year, the U.S. Tariff Commission requested information comparing Puerto Rico and China’s handkerchief trade. A 1939 PRRA discussion of handkerchief production outlined the basic conditions: “Puerto Rico has no part in the ownership of material, the planning of products nor the marketing of the manufactured goods…. in other

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119 “Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands” and “S. 2682,” summary and text of the bill in Record Group 323: Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Fair Labor Standards Act: Proposed Amendments; Reel #3: Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323: N.A. Arrangement: Records of the Washington Office General Records, 1935-1945; Labor, 1937-1939; FLSA, 1938-1939; Needlework, 1938-1941; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY. Below the table, the summary noted that “the Women’s Bureau in 1933-1934… showed 93.9 per cent receiving less than 4 cents per hour in needlework done in homes.” McConnell, 12-13.
words, Puerto Rico[‘s] concern is only with labor and this is contracted.” Of the fifty handkerchief manufacturers on the island, only six were headquartered there.\textsuperscript{120}

Island owners, agents, and supervisors were particularly effective at lobbying the federal government to establish Puerto Rico as a specific niche in the global textile and garment operation. Representative Arcelay said that due to the costs of shipping, hurricane insurance, and acquisition of materials, the Puerto Rican industry required careful planning. Such additional costs had to be offset with lower wages.\textsuperscript{121} Leon, the New York attorney for the industry, made similar arguments and said that although wages remained very low, they had increased over time, bringing some improvement.\textsuperscript{122}

That system of mainland and insular investment in a mix of factories and contracting, all modified with tax, labor, and wage exemptions, required a vast apparatus. U.S. offices, industry lobbyists on the mainland and Puerto Rico, mainland companies, island leaders, and island managers had parts to play. In 1940, New Deal and island administrators hired Arthur D. Little, Inc., an engineering, management, and financial consulting firm headquartered in

\textsuperscript{120} It listed the handkerchiefs produced, tariff rates, and world production excluding Puerto Rico and listed China’s production from 1934-1937. Radiogram Confirmation from Mr. Fairbank to Mrs. Graham, PRRA San Juan to Washington, D.C., dated September 25, 1938, Centro No. 162; “The Needlework Industry and Its Crisis in the Year 1938,” report from the Department of Agriculture and Commerce, Division of Commerce, no date, page 3 reference to tariffs with Switzerland and China, Centro No. 155; “Importations of Handkerchiefs into the United States with the Exception of Puerto Rico, Similar and Competitive with Those Produced in Puerto Rico,” dated December 1, 1938, Centro No. 153; Reel #3: Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323: N.A. Arrangement: Records of the Washington Office General Records, 1935-1945; Labor, 1937-1939; FLSA, 1938-1939; Needlework, 1938-1941; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.

\textsuperscript{121} “The production for Puerto Rico has to be planned ahead of time, materials and trimmings bought in advance, and gambling has to be done on styles……” Maria Luisa Arcelay, “Memorandum and Complaint from San Antonio, Texas,” no date, Centro No. 147; Reel #3: Records of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, Record Group 323: N.A. Arrangement: Records of the Washington Office General Records, 1935-1945; Labor, 1937-1939; FLSA, 1938-1939; Needlework, 1938-1941; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.

Boston, to develop a comprehensive economic plan for Puerto Rico. The consultants noted the sovereignty, investment, and labor arrangements with approval. Its plan would become the foundation for Operación Manos a la Obra/Operation Bootstrap, which would serve as a model for later neoliberal projects involving EPZs and trade agreements.

When southern politicians and industry leaders negotiated around the New Deal, they had to consider Puerto Rico as well as the Northeast. Many histories have described southern business interests as opposed to northern circumstances or from a national perspective in which the mainland stands for the entire United States. As the evidence from Puerto Rico makes clear, the differential arrangements in the South were not unique even if the nuances were specific to each state. As in Puerto Rico, industry leaders reacted quickly to the NRA to draft their own code and form the Cotton Textile Industry Committee (CTIC) with ten southern manufacturers, six New England manufacturers, and four marketers from New York. Most managers in textile and garment enterprises still did not abide by their own codes. The one area where the CTIC demanded full compliance was the chart of wage differentials. In the South, differentials not only lowered wages in comparison to the North, but also lowered wages further for black workers. Since black workers labored in the heaviest, dirtiest, and lowest-paid occupations, their wages were already lower. Southern NRA wage differentials

124 Schmidt, In Search of Decision. I share the Spanish and English terms for Puerto Rican programs so readers are aware of both and can recognize them in other sources in both languages. Then for this project, I continue with only the English term.
functioned to cut costs and to reinforce racial segregation and union fragmentation as white and black workers diverged even more.\textsuperscript{126}

FDR depended on Dixie Democrats for overall support of his legislative agenda and reelection campaigns, so he and his administration often deferred to southern Democrats on program implementation.\textsuperscript{127} Since New Deal administrators worked with and through southern leaders, the concerns of industry, not the requests of workers, received top priority. As a result, interventions of the New Deal played out in different ways in different locales and resulted in limited improvements for textile and garment workers.\textsuperscript{128}

In the South, the New Deal also strengthened government-industry relationships even as managers and investors demanded “less government” regarding worker and union issues. Executives and mill managers had relationships with southern boosters and local, county, and state officials who passed ordinances and legislation favorable to business.\textsuperscript{129} Through such networks, many southern government offices found ways to align funds from public programs like the WPA with private industry. For example, Ellisville, Mississippi, misused a WPA allocation to construct a “vocational school.” The school was operated by the Vertex Hosiery Company as it relocated from Pennsylvania with 36 knitting machines and “students” in a 40-hour week.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{128} The CWA put 1,600 men to work in the Burlington area, where mills had laid off thousands. However, many elites did not pay the required full CWA wages. Salmond, \textit{The General Strike}, 207; Cook, 162-164; Suggs, 102 and 145.
\textsuperscript{129} Cobb, \textit{Selling of the South}, Chapter 3 “The Sellers of the South,” 64-95; Conway, 51-55.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 7 and 12-15. If New Deal agencies did not offer the industrial development a state wanted, leaders appropriated New Deal discourse. Governor Hugh Lawson White hired his own “legal brain trust” and promoted the idea of “general welfare” in support of his Mississippi Industrial Act of 1936. White appealed to fiscal conservatives by discussing how to retire local bonds without tax levies and to New Dealers by alluding to FDR’s
Although the New Deal did not transform overall wages or conditions to the extent textile and garment workers had hoped or foster union membership in the numbers leaders had expected, the 1935 Wagner Act proved momentous. The NLRB, federal recognition of unions, and formal grievance procedures improved the platform for organizing and legitimated unions. The 1938 FLSA was problematic but improved some wages and validated grievance claims. Union representatives expanded their contact with Puerto Rican needleworkers and southern mill hands who had never seen organizers or heard about labor conferences. Organizers and members also intensified the connections between workers across many sites, increasing communication and awareness.\textsuperscript{131} That legislation and network would provide the basis for the TWUA southern organizing drive in 1963 and Crystal Lee’s grievance following her termination in 1973.

As industrial hubs in the rest of the world constricted, Japan expanded production during the 1930s. It is necessary to understand this aberration because Japan’s textile industry base would serve U.S. postwar foreign economic at mid-century, when the State Department and other agencies adapted Puerto Rican practices and spread them to “third world” countries. Within the overall global trade of the 1930s, Japan ranked third behind the United Kingdom and the U.S. Cotton textiles became one of its important exports, surpassing England, France, and Germany in 1933. In 1940, even after its invasion of China, cotton comprised 70% of its raw imports, and textiles represented 40% of its industrial exports. As with U.S. enterprises, the initial increase in Japanese production relied on cheap labor from the migration of rural

\textsuperscript{131} Biles, Chapter 5 “Labor and the New Deal,” 83-102.
women. Girls and young women came from poor households and needed money for a dowry or for the family’s subsistence farm. They lived in dorms under a paternalist supervisory system, making labor costs in Japanese mills even lower than in India.\textsuperscript{132} It is necessary to understand this aberration because Japan’s textile industry would become a core part of U.S. postwar foreign economic policy.

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World War II sparked rapid changes in and multiplication of the lines connecting the global textile and garment operation. It also marked a period of unprecedented U.S. geopolitical and economic power, allowing the federal government, industry, and U.S.-dominated institutions like the World Bank to promote their agendas without effective opposition from most parts of the world. Increased production during the war years carried into an industrial and consumer boom that led to sustained manufacturing over the next ten to fifteen years.

Southern mill hands did not experience many improvements as a result of the boom. Mill towns and plants remained racially segregated, with workers and unions often hampered by these fractures. In most southern states, elites continued to funnel federal subsidies and state benefits to managers, owners, and investors. The development agencies that evolved from the New Deal planning boards emphasized industrial growth and production over economic planning and work conditions. Although they could not demand the types of exemptions and special conditions granted in Puerto Rico, southern elites expanded on

previous practices. Towns and cities increased the offers they made granting municipal bonds, tax waivers (abatements and temporary exemptions from property, excise, and income taxes), building subsidies, license fee reductions, reimbursement of moving costs, and exceptions to pollution or water regulations.¹³³

The nonsequential currents of manufacturing and labor with Puerto Rico nurtured the boom on both the island and northeastern mainland. In 1940, Muñoz Marín had become President of the Senate. He and other insular leaders in the dominant Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) made the decision to focus on poverty rather than colonial status. They promoted cooperative, if sometimes tense, policymaking with FDR’s administration. In 1941, FDR appointed the esteemed but controversial Rexford Tugwell as governor. Tugwell and Muñoz Marín pushed 1942 legislation that created the Compañía de Fomento Industrial/Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company (Fomento or PRIDC). Their plan had a theoretical emphasis on the government side of government-industry partnerships and an economic emphasis on the need to divide and apportion large sugar plantations.¹³⁴

The PPD and PRIDC cooperated with U.S. officials and businesses from the mainland and island in the implementation of Operation Bootstrap. As previously mentioned, Arthur D. Little was hired in 1940, conducted research, and submitted an extensive report with economic and industrial recommendations for Puerto Rico. The report launched a massive program that articulated a template for future EPZs and other trade, investment, and manufacturing arrangements. The program relied on the colonial structures of nonincorporation within a sovereign nation, vigorous state market orchestration, and sweeping exemptions combined

¹³³ Cobb, Selling of the South, Chapter 2 “Buying Industry After World War II” and Chapter 3 “The Sellers of the South,” 35-95.
with investor incentives, but reports avoided references to colonialism. Operation Bootstrap revamped the colonial rationales of progress and development that had been adapted from earlier discourses of civilization and advancement. It also began as a dual program, intended to contour the related but nonsequential currents by further encouraging lowest-wage industrial development on the island and cheap labor migration to the mainland. The same wage differentials and work conditions that made Puerto Rico appealing to industry still made the mainland appealing to needleworkers—and together these currents constituted a labor market manipulation that undercut higher wages overall.\(^\text{135}\)

Efforts to dismantle aspects of New Deal extended to Puerto Rico. Conservatives on the island and in Congress attempted to block government oversight of Puerto Rican land ownership or regulation of business. They also set out to unseat Tugwell and lean the PRIDC toward corporate interests and large private landowners. The pressure induced the PPD to align more with business executives. In 1945, PPD leaders cooperated with the PRIDC board to pass a resolution authorizing it to construct buildings for private firms, sold or leased at below-market rates. Later that year, the PRIDC went further with Aid to Industrial Development (AID), which provided building subsidies more substantive than those evolving in the South.\(^\text{136}\) Conservatives liked to see the PRIDC as part of a shift that eliminated early New Deal state capitalism, marginalized import-substitution efforts, and favored exports and external direct investment.\(^\text{137}\)

As part of Operation Bootstrap, Muñoz Marín joined other policymakers in 1947 to extend the 1917 individual and business federal income tax exemptions. They also ended

\(^{135}\) Whalen, “Sweatshops Here and There,” 50.

\(^{136}\) Ayala and Bernabe, 142-146; Dietz, Economic History, 207-209; Findlay, 9.

\(^{137}\) Ayala and Bernabe, 179-180 and 183-184; Whalen, “Sweatshops Here and There,” 47; Dietz, Economic History, 193-194.
import duties to the mainland and exempted qualifying firms from license fees and property, excise, and municipal taxes.\textsuperscript{138} Puerto Rico’s status as a nonincorporated possession allowed the U.S. and insular governments to experiment with such extensive exemptions, beyond what was possible in the South.\textsuperscript{139} Companies like Textron took advantage, building a mill in Puerto Rico in 1948 and planning five more.\textsuperscript{140} These policies continued to appease conservative business interests on the island, but Puerto Rican women continued to organize with the ILGWU (see Figures 11-12).\textsuperscript{141}

When Muñoz Marín became the first elected governor in 1948, his administration continued to support Operation Bootstrap and accelerated the recruitment of industrial plants to the island and the migration of poor laborers to the mainland. A 1949 New York Times article declared “Puerto Rico Urged on US Business” and said a hypothetical textile company in Puerto Rico could retain almost twice the profit due to the tax exemptions and low-wage, skilled workers. A pamphlet from the Office of Puerto Rico attempted to persuade managers and owners to relocate their manufacturing for the abundant, orderly workers who appreciated jobs due to the island’s unemployment. It promised women needleworkers with great dexterity. By 1950, the island’s homework and factories had increased dramatically due to investment from mainland capital and finished products exported to the U.S.\textsuperscript{142}

Formal programs also encouraged women’s migration. During the 1940s, rural population continued to surpass economic development. Piecework rates in rural areas did not

\textsuperscript{141} Paul Winslow, former ILGWU district manager for western Massachusetts, telephone conversation with the author, notes, March 14, 2019.  
\textsuperscript{142} Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship,” 27-28; Ayala and Bernabe, 190-191. Boosters from the island and mainland celebrated Puerto Rico as an option for manufacturing, and women accounted for a large portion of the new industrial employment. They held 60% of the new jobs by the early 1960s, Whalen, “Sweatshops Here and There,” 47-48.
improve, and the PRIDC and Operation Bootstrap subsidized primarily urban factories. Many women chose to migrate either to island cities or the Northeast. The insular government established a Women’s Bureau from 1945-1952 to supervise needleworkers and encourage modernization with employment in cities and family planning. U.S. officials coordinated with insular policymakers to expand offices for the government of Puerto Rico in the U.S. These intensified the recruitment, transportation, and hiring of workers, and island leaders encouraged permanent migration to the Northeast as part of its economic development strategy. From 1948 to 1989, the newly reorganized Migration Division under the Puerto Rico Department of Labor served as an employment agency. Its staff took an active role not only in housing and hiring, but also in describing Puerto Rican culture and traditions to mainland organizations and neighbors. Regional offices operated in New York, Rochester, Boston, Hartford, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Miami.

Most scholarship on the Migration Division analyzes farm workers and centers the history of men’s migrations, but it was integral to the relocation of women needleworkers. In New York City, for example, dozens of textile and garment factories submitted Puerto Rican Labor Department forms to the Migration Division’s Employment Program of New York. They requested sewing machine operators, cutters, finishers, floor girls, and packers. In 1951, Howard Clothes in Brooklyn completed multiple order forms, including a request for three hand sewers and seven trimmers for men’s coats. Fairway Skirt on Houston Street had two openings in April 1952 for sewing machine operators, and the Employment Program sent Sixta

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144 Findlay, 98-103; Briggs, 87-90, 111-114; Korrol, From Colonia to Community, 30-46.
and Laura Rivera. The program also held regular meetings about job applicants, employer services, counseling, and training. The staff and presenters were Puerto Rican and focused on improving employment and living conditions.\textsuperscript{146}

Informal associations supported the movement of women needleworkers as well. Some women attended rural training programs but grew frustrated with the piece rates. Sewing instructors spoke openly about earning more money in urban factories or the U.S. In island cities, workers with information about the Northeast discussed the higher wages. Most women knew family or friends who had been in the Northeast, including hundreds of women needleworkers by the late 1920s.\textsuperscript{147} Their letters and remittances carried an informal network to the next generation, and their connections helped women get hired after they arrived in Philadelphia and Chicago as well as New York.\textsuperscript{148} A 1953 survey of needlework operators in San Juan indicated migration to the U.S. as the primary reason women workers quit.\textsuperscript{149}

Despite a history of labor activism on the island, women from Puerto Rico often worked as non-union labor in New York City in the 1940s due to a lack of outreach from the ILGWU and Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) or discrimination within the unions. ILGWU locals in New York had strong ethnic identities tied to Italian and Jewish neighborhoods. Some Italian and Jewish women used various means to block Puerto Rican women from union membership, such as negative stereotypes about “newcomers” and “laziness” or outspoken support of entrenched male leadership.\textsuperscript{150} Many Puerto Rican women,

\textsuperscript{146} “Howard Clothes,” dated April 20, 1951, Centro No. 266; “Fairway Skirt,” dated April 2, 1952, Centro No. 213; multiple job orders, Reel 351, Box 2054, Folders 1-24; “Employment Program Staff Meeting,” dated June 4, 1964, Centro No. 1100; Reel 351, Box 2055, Folders 9-11, in Easy Jobs?: Puerto Rican Employment Program in NY, 1948-1991, Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.
\textsuperscript{148} Juarbe, “Anastasia’s Story,” 15; Ayala and Bernabe, 180-181; Whalen, “Colonialism, Citizenship,” 1-2.
\textsuperscript{149} Whalen, “Sweatshops Here and There,” 49-50; Korrol, From Colonia to Community, 35-47.
\textsuperscript{150} Ortiz, “‘En la aguja’,” 64-67.
however, knew the union stories of their abuelas, mothers, aunties, and sisters and advocated for membership. By the 1950s, some had become shop stewards, chairladies, and business agents, and they strengthened currents of organizing with the island (see Figure 13).\textsuperscript{151}

Delgado exemplifies these women. She confronted her shop owner when he threw a dress in a woman’s face after she made a mistake. Delgado announced a shutdown, called her ILGWU chairman, and said, “I don’t give a darn if he does it to her, then he’ll do it to me, do it to my sister, do it to the one…. And I will not stand for that you know, because after all, we’re human beings, and we’re all ladies, you know.”\textsuperscript{152} In another case, Maria R. demanded better pay because she was the only sewing machine operator who could use the zig-zag machine in an underwear factory. When the boss fired her, she contacted the ILGWU. The union agent required the boss to let María R. sew, clock the time, and compensate accordingly. She got better pay but did not forget the humiliation. She found another job at a swimwear factory with even higher pay and left despite the original boss offering her more.\textsuperscript{153}

World War II spurred the production of completely synthetic fabrics made from petrochemicals. Cotton was no longer absolute king. The South already had a petrochemical sector, and the PRIDC campaigned to develop one. By 1956, Caribe Nitrogen, Gulf Caribbean, and Commonwealth Oil Refining Company were running. A 1957 study of the synthetic fiber industry noted Puerto Rico did not have immediate access to hydrocarbon raw materials but was “a low labor-cost area and thereby furnishes an alternative.” The author


\textsuperscript{152} “Louise Delgado,” 8/15/84, 20 and 26, Box 227, Folder 8; Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Collection, Series XIX: Audio-Visual (1973-1999), Oral History Transcripts, Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.

argued that the Gulf Coast contained a large portion of the nation’s crude petroleum and natural gas, so it was a primary site for synthetics. He predicted that by 1975, 80% of U.S. synthetic textile production would be in the South and Puerto Rico. In the case of Puerto Rico, as leaders had argued since the turn of the century, the added costs of fuel and transportation needed to be offset with lower wages.154 By 1961, the PRIDC was promoting a larger petrochemical complex to include the manufacture of synthetic fibers.155

As a major engine of global capitalism and vital component in U.S. ambitions, textiles and garments took on a critical role in postwar foreign economic policy. The position of the Atlantic U.S. industry within overall national policy was downgraded as the State Department and military command prioritized their worldwide agenda and Cold War politics. Occupied Japan became a priority because the U.S. wanted to rebuild it as a political and economic ally in the Pacific. They did not want to do that with industries related to militarization, so textiles provided the means for enforcing and supporting an alliance. Due to synthetics, silk was not profitable, so offices for the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) decided on cotton. In 1947, SCAP outlined targets to rebuild Japan’s textile production with objectives for the allocation of capital, materials, and coal, and it provided extra food rations for textile workers. SCAP and the State Department also managed a renewed raw cotton and textile trade between Japan and its former colonies in Asia. When that avenue proved inadequate, SCAP acquired cotton from India and Egypt. Japan was to be the hub of a free trade, anti-communist

154 New fabrics included nylon, Orlon, Acrilan, dynel, and Dacron, which were different from previous synthetics like rayon and acetate manufactured from natural polymers. Joseph Airov, *The Location of the Synthetic-Fiber Industry: A Case Study in Regional Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1959), 2-8 and 148-149.
155 Dietz, *Economic History*, 253; Ayala and Bernabe, 192.
network in the Pacific Rim, and the textile and garment industry was to continue as a significant but realigned component in U.S. global dominance.\textsuperscript{156}

In 1948, President Harry Truman established the Point IV program as part of a Cold War strategy. It encouraged export-oriented industrialization in poor regions. The program offered technical and financial assistance to “third world” countries and sent people to research Puerto Rico as a model. Marketing materials from the State Department encouraged students, experts, and politicians from Africa, Asia, and South America to travel to Puerto Rico and see its economic results. In some cases, the State Department funded the research trips.\textsuperscript{157}

In the 1950s, the intertwining and diffusion of the textile and garment industry included the Pacific and Mexico along with the Northeast, South, and Puerto Rico. The efforts served several related U.S. interests, like Cold War geopolitical positioning, peace through trade and economic relations, the reduction of corporate manufacturing costs, and lower consumer prices.\textsuperscript{158} President Dwight Eisenhower lobbied hard for Japan’s 1955 admission to the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT). The International Cooperative Association (ICA), a foreign aid agency, also spent millions of dollars on reconstruction and new construction of textile and garment factories throughout East Asia.\textsuperscript{159}


\textsuperscript{158} In 1950, the Bureau of the Budget said foreign economic policy should focus on political-security issues as much as financial concerns, and in 1953 the National Security Council urged the import of Japanese products to the U.S. to address economic deterioration that could lead to communist subversion, Stein, \textit{Pivotal Decade}, 6-8.

\textsuperscript{159} Many in the U.S. government wanted to open American markets to Asian textiles—and eventually garments—to sustain the open trade, anti-communist political and economic ties, and U.S. military dominance in the Pacific. From 1954 to 1956, the Trade Agreements Act reduced Asian textile tariffs each year, and imports to the U.S. grew accordingly, Rosen, 29-42; Shenin, 49, 134.
conglomerates increasingly saw Japan and Taiwan as viable options for their manufacturing and labor catalogues.

At that time, U.S. trade and immigration offices began talks with Mexican policymakers, industrialists, and investors about Japan and its rapid postwar export-oriented industrialization. The discussions were part of an effort to develop a manufacturing zone in northern Mexico for seasonal migrant farm workers. The Mexican Secretary of Industry and Commerce led a delegation on a tour of garment and electronics manufacturing in Japan, Taiwan, and Korea.\textsuperscript{160} The idea would eventually evolve into the 1965 Border Industrialization Program (BIP)—designed with Arthur D. Little, the same Boston consulting firm that coordinated the 1940-1950s plan for Operation Bootstrap. As in Puerto Rico and Japan, much of the initial funding for the BIP, an EPZ often called “the maquiladoras,” came from the U.S. government.\textsuperscript{161} The consequences of these foreign economic policies for most working Americans would hit in the 1970s.

As the industry shifted and the cotton regime lost its guaranteed position in the U.S. economy, southern industrialists sought to maintain their own positions by adapting as they had throughout history. Many invested in chemical research and synthetics. In 1958, construction began on “The Triangle” in North Carolina with the support of the Research Triangle Committee coordinated by Governor Luther H. Hodges, a former executive at Fieldcrest Mills. Karl Robbins, a retired textile magnate, offered the land. Robbins had acquired the four thousand acres for the industrial research park with the goal of attracting

more sophisticated industries to the university-dense Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill region. Chemstrand, a synthetic textile company, and the American Association of Textile Chemists and Colorists were two of the first companies to lease space.\footnote{Cobb, \textit{Selling the South}, 171-174; Conway, 4-5. Three research institutions, Duke University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and North Carolina State University, anchored the eight-county region.}

That same year, Crystal Lee got her first job in a cotton textile mill in the Haw River section of Burlington, North Carolina. She worked on archaic looms just 30 miles west of “The Triangle.” This proximity demonstrates industrial capitalism’s opportunistic tendency to use any available means to generate revenues. Cone Mills owned the turn-of-the-century mill and had updated limited pieces of machinery. In 1958, Crystal Lee was a high school student who filled the cotton yard batteries at the end of each machine. An older woman had taught her the steps for feeding the wooden shuttles of yarn into the metal boxes on the sides of the looms.\footnote{“Crystal Lee Sutton” in \textit{Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls}, 201-202.} When Crystal Lee got home from school each day, she changed clothes and went to work second shift until midnight.\footnote{Leifermann, \textit{A Woman of Inheritance}, 4-20.}

About 70 miles east of Burlington, the TWUA ordered a strike in Henderson in 1958. The local accused mill managers of bad faith negotiations and efforts to decertify the union. The very existence of TWUA locals gave Henderson a reputation as a union town, which worried the new generation of southern boosters. When a strike seemed imminent because management was manipulating contract negotiations, these young white southerners wanted to avoid any hint of unrest. Unlike many of the returning African American veterans who became involved in civil rights activism, most white veterans hoped for stability as an appeal to modern industries. They associated new technologies with the cutting-edge equipment they had seen in World War II and the Korean War. Older members of established mill families,
however, still served as regional executives and board members. They wanted to provoke a strike and use it to break the TWUA. A couple months into the 1958 strike, members of a prominent mill family hired outside strikebreakers, and violence erupted.

Governor Hodges provided National Guard troops to protect the Henderson mills. In Burlington, Crystal Lee heard about the strike and the beatings, knifings, sabotage, and National Guard patrols. Her parents viewed it as an indicator of the futility of unions and the trouble they caused for mill hands. Hodges wanted to end the crisis, so he ordered a private investigation. The NLRB also began to look into charges of unfair labor practices. These two efforts pushed managers to make a weak contract offer, but mills continued to operate with white rural strikebreakers. Without the ability to stop poor transient whites from taking jobs and lacking support from any politicians, the TWUA lost the strike by attrition.

In 1958, Puerto Rican women also walked out with the ILGWU in the Northeast, and Maldonado most likely would have participated because she was a member. Thousands filled Seventh Avenue in New York because the union had increased its outreach to the contracting shops to show managers they could not evade union wages. Workers from fifty non-union and several contracting shops joined striking ILGWU members, and regional union leaders organized the walkout for seven northeastern states. They were concerned about manufacturing and workers moving to factories in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey. The strike lasted five days and won a wage increase and severance plan.

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166 Clark, 143-166 and 168-200. Mill owners’ use of strikebreakers and National Guard troops to neutralize a strike and eliminate local unions was a regular practice in the South since the agricultural and textile depression began in 1921, creating a large pool of surplus labor. See Simon, 465-484; Dowd Hall, et al., 193-195; Frederickson, 173.
167 “Supplementary Unemployment and Severance Benefits,” Justice, 47 issue 16, August 15, 1965, 6-7, ILGWU at DigitalCommons@ILR; Whalen, “‘The Day the Dresses Stopped’,” 133-138.
As this history makes clear, southern and Puerto Rican women became interconnected laborers in an American industry already involved in a global operation. They worked on fabrics, towels, sheets, handkerchiefs, and apparel in the same array of enterprises and for the same large conglomerates. They found ways to gain employment and resist exploitation as individuals and shared these tactics with other women. They also joined labor unions and participated in walkouts, wildcat strikes, and pickets. Bringing mill hands and needleworkers together in one history that includes the Northeast, South, and Puerto Rico addresses the particulars of each region while acknowledging the women’s shared navigation of plantations, homework, mills, factories, petrochemical plants, shipping lines, and retailers.

The chapter began at the turn of the century, as the U.S. government, textile and garment enterprises, state leaders, and investors consolidated a national cotton regime that positioned the U.S. as a world competitor. The 1901 Charleston Exposition and Downes v. Bidwell decision highlighted the emerging interconnections between southern mill hands and Puerto Rican needleworkers. Realignments during the Great Depression, New Deal, and postwar intensified the links, and women workers’ simultaneous actions in 1934 and 1958 asserted their overlapping concerns as changes continuously rippled through the industry. Despite these dynamic events, issues, and women, southern mill hands received media coverage and popular representations as “American workers.” Puerto Rican women did not. As a result, in the 1970s, the New York Times and Macmillan Publishing will draw attention to one worker, Crystal Lee, after she joins a TWUA campaign and attempts to improve conditions and raise awareness for the working poor.
“I did do right. I know I did. I’d go down for this, if I had to, for my black brothers and sisters.” Lucy Sledge, 1979, Rise Gonna Rise: A Portrait of Southern Textile Workers

“I started in the canteens, on the break time. I would talk union to my friends, and I started getting a lot of membership cards signed.” Crystal Lee Jordan, 1975, Crystal Lee: A Woman of Inheritance

CHAPTER TWO
THE SOUTH AND CRYSTAL LEE IN A CHANGING INDUSTRY: HER EXPERIENCES AND THE EXTRACTION OF A “LIFE STORY”

In 1968, a J.P. Stevens plant in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, laid off two terry inspectors, Lucy Sledge and a white woman. Sledge came from a family of black residents who labored in cotton picking and mills. Her supervisor completed a termination form that rated her a worker of good quality and quantity and recommended re-employment when possible. A few months later, however, Sledge found out the plant had hired white women with less experience and education. During the fall 1969, she learned the plant had hired four white women as terry inspectors but no black women. Sledge tried to get a job by waiting with others outside the personnel office, but supervisors only called in white people.¹

Her husband had recently been fired from a J.P. Stevens plant when supervisors heard he was active with the union at his second job for the A&P grocery. In addition to entrenched racial segregation, southern companies had become anxious since black workers were strong supporters of unionization, and they were a majority of new TWUA members. Sledge called her cousin, who put her in touch with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

¹ Conway, 96-103, 106-113.
(EEOC). In 1970, she filed a discrimination complaint. EEOC staff from Atlanta visited and sent a lawyer who gathered papers. Sledge became the lead complainant in a class-action suit on behalf of black employees at the eight J.P. Stevens plants in Roanoke Rapids. The TWUA and AFL-CIO supported the suit as intervenor-appellees. In 1973, Sledge had fears about testifying at the district court in Raleigh. “I was afraid something was going to happen to me,” she said. In October 1978, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit upheld a previous finding of discrimination and reversed an earlier decision that had not supported Sledge’s personal action. “I did do right,” she said. “I know I did. I’d go down for this, if I had to, for my black brothers and sisters.”

During the 1960s and 1970s, Crystal Lee worked in two apparel factories and a J.P. Stevens plant in Roanoke Rapids. Like Sledge, she had taken maternity leave when necessary but also sought job training and opportunities. In 1973, Crystal Lee joined the TWUA. Her parents did not support unions, but she had heard stories and knew members, and her second husband was a steward at his paper mill. Crystal Lee told a reporter, “[C]otton-mill workers are known as trash by some, and I knew this union was the only way we could have our own voice, make ourselves better.” A few weeks later, a supervisor fired Crystal Lee. He stated the termination was due to improper use of the telephone and taking breaks, but it happened the day she had copied a company memo. The lead TWUA organizer in town wanted the exact wording to file a grievance with the NLRB because the memo used language about black employees and the union to antagonize racial tensions and scare white workers. Other mill hands had tried to copy it, but the bossmen scared them off so Crystal Lee determined to do it. She stood on her towel-folding table with a UNION sign as a message to her coworkers before

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3 Leifermann, “The Unions Are Coming,” 25.
the police forced her to leave the building. A couple days later, Crystal Lee filed a grievance
with two other fired mill hands. An NLRB decision in 1978 forced J.P. Stevens to give them
their backpay and former jobs.

These two stories show black and white women were active in challenging the
discrimination, exploitation, and obstructionism of the textile and garment conglomerates.
Sledge, Crystal Lee, and others understood formal institutions like government offices, unions,
and courts could help them demand fair treatment and equity. Building on the energizing
convergences of civil rights and labor activism, the TWUA had launched a multi-pronged
national campaign in 1963 to unionize more factories by organizing J.P. Stevens. Black
members fueled the southern organizing drive after passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Yet
white southern mill hands received most popular media attention.

In 1973, when a freelance journalist called the TWUA in Roanoke Rapids, the
organizer recommended Crystal Lee. It was a strategic decision based on a desperate need to
attract white members, and she appealed to a cultural fascination with poor white southerners.
Her family worked in the mills, she knew her town well, and she was a pretty young married
mother. Although Crystal Lee was conventional in many ways, she was an outspoken woman
who defied gender norms regarding submissiveness. As is so often the case, this combination
made her an excellent spokesperson and a target for criticism. National media proceeded to
extract dramatic moments in her life from the larger raw material—the decades of work,
struggle, and labor movement that constituted the circumstances of her TWUA activism.

This chapter tightens the analytical lens and turns it to study the South and Crystal
Lee’s place in it in the 1960s and 1970s. Within the larger textile and garment industry of
chapter one, the South underwent noticeable changes as black workers entered the mills.
Without the civil rights labor achievements of previous years, the TWUA campaign would not have gained momentum. The TWUA, however, needed the majority white workers to join and become vocal if it was going to press J.P. Stevens into contract negotiations. In addition, the heightened visibility of black demands coexisted with a general American interest in poor whites. From the 1940s to 1960s, novels, stories, television shows, and movies had created many depictions of poor white southerners.

This chapter’s intention is not to detract from the significance of Crystal Lee’s assertive voice and vibrant participation in the labor movement, but rather to celebrate her actions within the broader context. As Crystal Lee said, there were so many others. She always saw a movement rather than a solitary stand. This chapter is not a thorough biography. It describes events and situations, both regional and personal, which drew Crystal Lee to the TWUA. Rather than a comparison to the movie for accuracy, they become part of a more sophisticated labor history. The chapter also analyzes how national media began to construct her “life story” and the importance of capitalist financial and legal mechanisms as well as gender, race, and class in that process. Crystal Lee did not seek out the reporters, publishers, and producers, but she participated in their projects, advocating for mill hands, the TWUA, and worker organizing. In her candor and vehemence, Crystal Lee asserted her perspective while inadvertently providing media with the means to refine the substantial and intricate historic raw material into an easily accessible article, television segment and biography.

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Employment in southern mills remained associated with poor whites well into the postwar years.⁴ Race formation and segregation were central to the construction, arrangement, arrangement,

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and management of mill towns, which were primary sites for reconstituting race and its intersections with gender, class, and sexuality. Many local white elites relied on that formal, legal racism to protect and sustain the informal, fluctuating cultures of racism that maintained white supremacy and kept the working poor fragmented. These racialized and gendered layers of status hindered working people from building political or economic leverage, but most poor white mill hands valued the social clout they derived from white supremacy.

Some white workers embraced the racial hierarchy without question, others collaborated with white supremacy and its enactments because the rhetoric and organizations forged by elites marginalized alternatives. Even as the racial discrimination protected and reinforced class inequality, ranks of status, and access to wealth, most southern white workers did not actively question segregation. The racial segregation of the mills was so assiduous, owners and management rarely used black workers as strikebreakers, even during a long walkout. Most towns had a segregated area on the fringes, where black residents lived without public services or paved roads. The black residents did the dirtiest and heaviest jobs, like ditch digging, cleaning privies, and laundering.5

Much of southern labor segregation conformed to legal ordinances about race mixing, but the fine print allowed for mutable exceptions if the employer needed workers. When mill owners and managers sought more workers than they could find among white households and poor white migrants, they hired African Americans but implemented occupational segregation. In this practice, hiring relegated the dirtiest and heaviest labor to black men, such as working in the yard, moving bales of cotton, and unloading wagons, boxcars, and trucks. They could

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5 Salmond, General Textile Strike, 11-12, 15-16, 181; Kuhn, 25 and 34; Salmond, Gastonia, 36, 49, and 141; Dowd Hall, et al., 372-373; Conway, 46-49, 184, and Part Four “Civil Rights,” 90-129.
also work in the opening and picker rooms, where raw cotton was prepared for carding.\(^6\) Sledge’s uncle did this type of work in Patterson Mill.

Mill managers did not hire black women in any substantial number until the mid-1960s. The few black women who did work in mills labored as scrubwomen. Southern employment practices forced most black women to seek wages in domestic and laundry service or the tobacco industry. So even as some mills underwent a limited integration of the overall workforce in the 1910s-1920s, the employment practices and social expectations of work perpetuated internal occupational segregation by race and gender.\(^7\)

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, mill managers also manipulated racial tensions. For example, when the Fulton Mill owners sought to maintain overall calm by offering welfare capitalism in 1918, they did not extend it to the few black workers. The company announced its initiatives in a cartoon showing three caricatured black faces peering over a fence that displayed posters for a cooperative grocery store, day nursery, laundry, and subsidized cafeteria (see Figure 14). In the 1930s, when radical organizers and socialists attempted to build parallel white and black and even interracial union drives in Memphis, municipal civic and police leaders spread the fear that a “dictatorship of the pro-latitude” would “lead to social equality” of the races. Race-baiting and red-baiting complemented each other.\(^8\) The mutually reinforcing rhetorics served the dual purposes of undermining overt leftist challenges to capitalism while further driving a wedge between working people.

Despite the power and pervasiveness of white supremacist ideas and practices and the severe legal constraints, some radical organizers realized the need to address race. They called

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\(^6\) Kuhn, 217, 221; Honey, *Southern Labor*, 20; Dowd Hall, et al., 66.


on workers to recognize the mutually reinforcing effects of race and class oppression. But cumulative tactics were often contradictory, sometimes appealing to white racial outrage and sometimes pushing for parallel union drives or interracial alliances. The desire to increase membership by any means could lead to short-term maneuvers that canceled each other out. Some organizers were not above stoking white working men’s anxiety about income and status, encouraging them to join the union for a combination of class and race solidarity.  

In the South, interracial organizing in the textile and garment industry appeared to be less controversial because mills had so few black employees. The NTWU and its influential communist organizers attempted to expand membership by including African Americans. The Communist Party rhetoric, however, was often idealistic and not aligned with local realities. The Daily Worker reported in 1929 that a black Communist Party organizer spoke at a rally in Gastonia, but that was not true. He had arrived, but the crowd refused to let him speak. As noted in Crystal Lee’s biography, “bossmen, politicians, and preachers always told poor mill hands, whatever a mill hand is, he is at least above a n***r.” For many low-wage white workers, their working-class identity was tied to race and the psychological, social, and ideological status it conferred. Such status could make up for the alienation of poverty and exploitation in labor and economics regardless of the presence of black workers.

\[9\] Fones-Wolf, Struggle for the Soul. For example, when Fulton Mill evicted striking workers in 1915, they hired black laborers to remove their possessions. The UTW recognized the potential white racial outrage and placed photos of black men carrying items out of the company houses on broadsides. These were sent to meeting halls even though UTW permitted black organizers to speak at union halls and rallies, Kuhn, 217-218.

\[10\] Salmond, Gastonia, 65-67. The Communist Party also declared a National Negro Week in May to reinforce its commitment to racial equality. NTWU representatives held a public debate about admitting African Americans to the Loray Mill local. A majority of white members did vote to invite African Americans to join, but it was a tense situation that cost the NTWU several active white members and did not result in many black members.

\[11\] Many southern mill hands in the mid-twentieth century believed only blacks used welfare. See Dowd Hall, et al., 157; Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 33-38. Asterisks added by author.

While southern labor unrest and racial divisions remained trapped in racial politics, the civil rights movement accelerated. Efforts for legal and constitutional rights by groups like the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) overlapped with black labor organizations. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, established in 1925 and led by A. Philip Randolph, and groups within the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), founded in 1935, attracted black members and political interest. The two world wars prompted dramatic change in U.S. racial dynamics as well as in the global industry. More African Americans moved from the deep rural South, relocating to southern, midwestern, and northern cities. Wartime production created streams of income for improving a household’s class and status and created the means for black workers to demand better pay and union membership. Black soldiers and pilots returned with assertive expectations regarding veteran benefits and basic rights.

World War II in particular caused a massive increase in civilian production and military recruitment, spurring more black population shifts and the opening of more low-level industrial jobs. The federal government made indispensable contributions to this momentum with executive orders from FDR, Truman, and Eisenhower regarding racial discrimination in companies with federal contracts. The desegregation of the military by Executive Order 9981 in 1948 pushed reform. Furthermore, massive funding for military research and development


triggered postwar changes in the textile and garment industry as new materials entered civilian markets. Military and synthetic textile production expanded, escalating a restructuring of the industry that tempered the position of cotton and strengthened ascendant petrochemical ventures. Although these latter changes did not directly target hardened racial divisions in the South, they sapped the sense of permanence and inevitability from entrenched mill towns and their racialized labor practices.  

In 1958, when Crystal Lee started at the Haw River mill, the regional industry was undergoing these racial shifts in addition to the reconfigurations of global currents. For the teenage girl, however, she was following generations of white family and neighbors. She could not have imagined her eventual return to Roanoke Rapids, her commitment to the TWUA, a Hollywood movie based on her life, or a celebrity actress winning an Academy Award for portraying her actions. Her parents had worked first shift in Roanoke Rapids during the 1940s—Albert as a loom fixer and Odell as a weaver. He often hustled to her call to get a loom moving, since the bossmen measured how much cloth each weaver turned out to track individual productivity. Searching for a vague promise of new opportunities in 1955, Albert had moved the family 135 miles to Burlington, where Odell was on third shift, midnight to morning. Crystal Lee found a part-time job at a florist shop for fifty cents an hour, but she could make a dollar an hour in the mills. So at age seventeen, Crystal Lee took a job in the unionized Haw River mill where her parents worked but were not members. Cone Mills, one of the largest conglomerates, owned it. Her parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older sister were mill hands, so Crystal Lee knew what to expect. She did not comprehend the dangers of filling batteries with yarn while the looms were running, but she knew the floor was

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15 Fones-Wolf, *Struggle for the Soul*, 23-28; Cobb, Chapter 5 “Too Busy to Hate”-Chapter 7 “The Emergence of the Sunbelt South”; Rowan, 92-96 and 119; Airov, *Synthetic-Fiber Industry*. 

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oily and slippery and people often saw snakes. She hated the lint and cotton dust that coated her hair every night.\textsuperscript{16}

Unlike government, industry, financial, and union leaders, most North Carolina mill hands did not have extensive knowledge of the global textile and garment operation, the related but nonsequential manufacturing and labor currents with Puerto Rico, Arthur D. Little, or postwar SCAP projects in Japan. They did, however, have an awareness of the history of southern mill towns, the change from paternalist family companies to large corporations, the ongoing exploitation of the stretch-out, and the constant efforts by workers to resist or improve their working and living conditions.\textsuperscript{17} That regional context did not predetermine Crystal Lee’s experiences and identity, but it influenced her ideas, forming meanings and shaping parameters for her choices. The history of southern worker activism and labor unions as well as the contemporary circumstances provided her with the understandings and inspirations that sparked her decision to attend a 1973 TWUA meeting in a black church.

The notion of the parochial mill hand endured even as the array of homeworkers, sweatshops, mills, and factories adjusted to changes in technology, trade agreements, real estate, labor supplies, raw materials, and government regulations. The extent of that global industry functioned beyond the perspective of mill hands even as their work routines changed. Although still called “mill hands,” by the 1960s and 1970s the majority did not labor on archaic cotton textile looms. As conglomerates bought and built complexes in the South, they diversified production. Apparel factories appeared, sewing casual clothing like t-shirts and sweatpants. Enterprises expanded to include carpets, synthetic materials, and products for

\textsuperscript{16} “Crystal Lee Sutton” in \textit{Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls}, 201-202; Leifermann, \textit{Woman of Inheritance}, 20; Dowd Hall, et al., 60-65. They describe a phenomenon of children following parents and older siblings into the mills during their free time, often watching the work or helping their family members. Those initial familial experiences intensified the job pathways leading to the mill.

\textsuperscript{17} Dowd Hall, et al.; Conway, 11-22.
defense and aeronautical industries. Many newer plants took in raw cotton and shipped out finished housedresses, sheets, and towels with mill hands that cut edges, trimmed fraying threads, and folded items for packaging.

The changing production did not appear to change the fact mills dominated North Carolina. A sense of shared history and close families permeated the towns. While their intentional social isolation constricted their understanding of the larger industry, it fostered connections between workers and neighbors. These relationships were close if fraught with the tensions of gender, race, class, and status that ran through small towns. For example, at Crystal Lee’s first job the older woman who trained her asked that Crystal Lee not tell any of the kids in school. Crystal Lee knew her son, but the older woman was leaving the mill and clearly wanted to leave behind any association. Crystal Lee bristled at the request but understood the fear of prejudice. “I thought to myself, she had the audacity to say that to me and here I was a teenager working in the mill taking over her job,” she told an interviewer. “But I never said anything to her about it and I never mentioned it at school either.”

Crystal Lee’s resentment about class discrimination and the status of mill hands surfaced long before her concerns about the physical work conditions. She had noticed at school that “the smarter students came from the families with a little bit more money” and not from the textile workers’ families. She disliked the prejudice because of her family’s work. “I always got the feeling when I was in school that textile work was something to be looked down on…. I wasn’t ashamed of what [my parents] did but I would rather not been asked because there were doctors’ children in the room.” As Crystal Lee struggled to get her homework done on break, she realized that the “higher class kids” were not more intelligent, but they got help from parents and more time because they did not have mill jobs. They could

do their homework, act in plays, and become cheerleaders—a teenage aspiration that would resurface in Crystal Lee’s TWUA organizing. “They definitely dominated the school. I resented that very much,” she said. “I felt like we [mill kids] needed more attention.”

Growing up in a white mill family shaped not only her outlook, but also her options as a young adult. Crystal Lee did not enjoy high school, but she continued because of her father. He had expressed frustration about the possibility that none of his kids would graduate. “The only reason I finished school was because of Daddy,” she said. “I hated it because of the way the teachers treated the working-class kids.”

The last few months of her senior year followed a routine: she got up for school, came home to change for work, tried to do assignments on break, got home after midnight. The drain of that rigid and demanding routine affected her grades, so Crystal Lee had to attend summer school. But she did finish, along with many classmates who worked at the mills.

Crystal Lee also met Junior Wood, a handsome young man home from a tour with the Marines. He hoped to attend college on a football scholarship, so he drove to tryouts at Chapel Hill while working as a general laborer. When Junior did not receive the scholarship, he wanted to marry Crystal Lee. He tried to get a job at Western Electric but did not have enough math classes. Instead, he found employment in the mills. They got married in August 1959, when Crystal Lee was eighteen years old.

Crystal Lee and Junior moved to a small apartment, and she got a different job. A friend had told her she could make more money at Glen Raven Mills. So Crystal Lee...
became a stop-checker, timing weavers to track their speed rethreading a loom, unstopping a spindle, or completing a run of towels. Although she liked the money, Crystal Lee felt uncomfortable because she knew the bossmen at her parents’ mill had used stop-checkers to reduce weavers from twenty per section to four. Mill hands understood the time-and-motion studies and stopwatches as instruments of exploitation and the stretch-out.22

Crystal Lee stayed because Junior worked at Glen Raven Mills too, and they were happy the first year of marriage. Like many young women mill hands, Crystal Lee got pregnant right away and gave birth to a baby boy in October 1960.23 Then Crystal Lee grew jealous of the time Junior spent drinking with men from the mill or softball team. “‘Course the wives, they couldn’t go, which was always disturbing to me,” she said. “And of course it was twelve or one or two in the morning when Junior did come in, and I was mad as hell.” They argued one night before Christmas 1960 and slapped each other. After Junior passed out, Crystal Lee took the car keys and drove with the baby to her parents’ house.

Several weeks of conversations led to a reconciliation, but before Crystal Lee could return to the apartment, Junior died in a car accident. She had said goodbye to him as he left for Alamance County Technical Institute, where he was taking math classes. He stopped for beers on the way home with a friend and ended up drag racing. Drinking at mill town bars and stores often led men into arguments, fights, and competitions, but residents understood them as a “rough element” rather than as the majority of people.24 Junior left Crystal Lee and their toddler a small life insurance inheritance, but her father had to serve as guardian. “That was so damn strange, here I was married, widowed, and a mother, and I couldn’t even write my own

22 Dowd Hall, et al., 208-209.
24 The mixture of alcohol, hanging out at the local store, and masculine competition led to violence and conflicts in many mill towns. See “Crystal Lee Sutton” in Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls, 204; Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 26-33; Dowd Hall, et al., 164; Leifermann, “The Unions Are Coming,” 25.
checks. I thought that was stupid,” she declared.25 She already questioned both class prejudice and gender discrimination.

While living with her parents, Crystal Lee ran into a former boyfriend. He was attending the University of North Carolina but was home to work at his parents’ dime store. They went on a few dates, and she had sex with him twice. After the second time, Crystal Lee immediately felt like she was pregnant so she avoided the young man until she knew for sure. She eventually told him, and he offered to marry her, but Crystal Lee did not think he was mature enough to be a father to two toddlers. She also worried that if he married her, he would “always resent that fact, that I was the cause of him having to quit school.”26

Pregnant with her second child in the summer of 1961, Crystal Lee continued to work as a stop-checker at Glen Raven Mills until a bossman fired her when she refused to run after a weaver bolting from loom to loom. The weaver taunted her and dared her to keep up. “I tried to tell him the faster you work, the more work they’ll put on you,” she said. Crystal Lee was alone, nobody knew about her pregnancy, and she was living with her parents. Fear and isolation pushed her to apply at the Alamance County welfare office in November even though it went against her father’s beliefs. He said welfare was what blacks got.27

Welfare offices in the South like the one Crystal Lee visited in 1961, had often served as mechanisms for directing black women toward domestic service. White mill families who could afford low-wage housekeeping paid black women to babysit and do cooking and laundry. White mill families without means knew to try the local welfare office. Many

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26 Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 36-37.
27 Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 35-38. “[T]he most disapproving words were spoken when a child was born out of wedlock,” Dowd Hall, et al., 171. Many southern mill hands in the mid-twentieth century believed only blacks used welfare. See Dowd Hall, et al., 157; Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness.
southern social workers told black women they had to do the domestic work or be taken off welfare. Crystal Lee applied for her own welfare case despite these racial politics.

Three factors made southern mill towns critical sites for postwar racial dynamics to converge with the labor movement. First, mills were vital components in massive textile and garment conglomerates that were national and increasingly transnational. By the early 1960s, J.P. Stevens, Burlington Industries, Deering-Milliken, and Cone Mills had bought dozens of southern mills. Although J.P. Stevens began as a nineteenth-century woolen mill, it had become one of the largest “textile” corporations in the U.S. Its facilities made apparel cloth, sheets and towels, industrial filters, fiberglass fabrics, and carpets. This prominence brought increasing rates of return but also made the company vulnerable to publicity and oversight. Secondly, mill towns were intimate spaces for living the legal structures, social practices, and cultural expectations that had perpetuated racial segregation and discrimination. Postwar industrial reconfigurations and the escalation of the civil rights movement intervened in these close spaces. Lastly, mill towns were primary loci for southern white workers’ sense of identity at a time of accelerating technological and global changes. While social isolation had worked to constrain options and perceptions, it had fostered a distinctive identity with an appearance of stability that was fractured by the increasing pace and breadth of change in the 1960s and 1970s.

When Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act abolished discrimination in employment, it had a major impact on southern industry—particularly on mills. The NAACP began offering legal aid and filing suits against the mills for discrimination, and J.P. Stevens,

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29 “Two Rewettable Fabrics Have Built-In Adhesives,” Marine Engineering, vol. 76, August 1, 1971, 71. “Two rewetable 100 percent fiberglass fabrics have been introduced by the Glass Fabrics Division of J.P. Stevens & Co., Inc., for such insulation applications as shipboard lagging and jacketing materials.”
Burlington Industries, and Cone Mills were sued many times. It also started a community organizing project headquartered in South Carolina called Textiles: Employment and Advancement for Minorities (TEAM). Several groups funded TEAM, which paid field workers to visit mills, urge managers to hire black workers, and help local people apply. In 1969, the Department of Defense delayed contracts to the three largest firms, J.P. Stevens, Burlington Industries, and Dan River Mills, because they had not done enough to hire and promote black workers.\(^{30}\)

Successful employment discrimination suits like *Sledge v. J.P. Stevens* grew from a convergence of individual black workers’ resistance, civil rights activism, and labor union organizing in mill communities. In 1963, the TWUA had decided to reinvigorate its efforts in the South and to include black workers, who were more prevalent in the mills than during the campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s.\(^{31}\) Leaders felt optimistic about recruiting black workers because they had increased in number yet remained locked out of higher-paying jobs due to occupational segregation. The TWUA chose J.P. Stevens as a target because it was well known and employed 36,000 people in North Carolina. Strategists assumed a breakthrough at such a conglomerate would dissolve the myth that the South could not organize.\(^{32}\)

Through the late 1960s and early 1970s, black workers in the southern mill workforce increased from less than 5 percent to almost 25 percent, but they still earned the lowest wages.\(^{33}\) The TWUA drive repeatedly signed more black than white mill workers and held

\(^{30}\) Windham, 107-114; MacLean, 84-87; Minchin, “Don't Sleep with Stevens!”, 70, and Hiring the Black Worker.

\(^{31}\) Minchin, “Don’t Sleep With Stevens!”, 70; Conway, Rise Gonna Rise.


meetings at more black churches.\textsuperscript{34} The determination of black workers and the progress of the civil rights movement, with its federal legislation and initiatives for employment equity, made the TWUA drive viable (see Figure 15). It would have gained no traction without the initial black members. The TWUA also capitalized on the regular media coverage of civil right marches and major NAACP lawsuits and started to publicize its own demonstrations, NLRB hearings, and J.P. Stevens’s intransigence in similar ways.

The TWUA faced a major challenge with J.P. Stevens. It had a history of breaking unions or shutting down mills. During the 1960s and 1970s, J.P. Stevens continued its anti-union policies, with executives encouraging managers to remove organizers from the edge of mill property, cover or throw out union bulletins, harass organizers, and threaten or fire workers who spoke with the union. J.P. Stevens’s lawyers also dragged out NLRB hearings and filed counter motions in every case.\textsuperscript{35} These obstructionist practices constrained the TWUA’s ability to recruit the majority white mill hands, who did not want to lose their jobs. Most of them knew about earlier organizing campaigns and their limited success in the face of the labor surplus and officials willing to use the police and National Guard to break up strikers. In the late 1960s, the TWUA decided to diversify its tactics to include congressional testimony, legal challenges, outreach (especially to liberal politicians and college students), and publicity. J.P. Stevens’s opposition drew increasing media attention at a time when newspapers and nightly broadcasts still covered a labor beat. Despite the multiple tactics, the

\textsuperscript{34} Minchin, “Don’t Sleep With Stevens!”, 2-3 and 24-25, and Hiring the Black Worker; Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 109.

\textsuperscript{35} “Who Won the Marathon?,” Forbes, May 25, 1981, 12-14. Managers did not completely abandon physical intimidation and harassment. However, starting in the 1970s and increasing in the 1980s, “a new breed of management consultants began to teach employers” how to use coercive speech and legal tactics to discourage union organizing. See Windham, 24-25, 32-33, Chapter 3 “Employers Close the Door,” 57-81.
lack of signed union cards barred elections in the plants and led TWUA leaders to debate their ability to continue targeting J.P. Stevens.\textsuperscript{36}

Although Crystal Lee was not directly involved in the civil rights and labor activism of the 1960s, their dynamism produced the conditions of her union involvement. Crystal Lee repeatedly emphasized the importance of other mill hands and organizers even as she took a vocal role in union activities. As discussed in chapter three, during the early movie development in 1978, she would express concern that the screenplay depicted her as the sole instigator for the union.

While the civil rights labor activism and TWUA campaign were growing, Crystal Lee was focused on her children. In February 1962, she gave birth to a second baby boy. She believed her father was pleased. “I felt like he was glad because, well, there he had me again to where I’d have to stay at home and depend on him,” she said. After giving birth, Crystal Lee spoke with a lawyer about child support and sent the father a certified letter asking for a meeting. Even as a young woman, she sought institutional and formal ways to rectify a difficult situation. Their lawyers eventually agreed to a $4,000 out-of-court settlement.\textsuperscript{37}

Helping her mom and the boys, two-year-old Mark and six-month-old Jay, took most of Crystal Lee’s time. Occasionally she left Burlington to visit her older sister, Syretha, who had stayed in Roanoke Rapids. Syretha told Crystal Lee she should get a fresh start by returning to town and mentioned a man named Cookie Jordan. Syretha’s husband worked in the unionized paper mill with him. Crystal Lee realized she did not want to stay in Burlington.

\textsuperscript{37} Leifermann, \textit{Women of Inheritance}, 40.
Too much in the town reminded her of Junior, and she did not appreciate the looks she got from friends who knew she had given birth to an “illegitimate child.”

Crystal Lee was able to move in the summer of 1962 because she had a small income from Social Security child-survivor death benefits plus the lump child-support settlement prompted by state law. She packed the necessities and drove the three hours to Roanoke Rapids. The night Crystal Lee arrived at her sister’s place, she suggested Syretha’s husband bring Cookie by the house after second shift. When the two men arrived at midnight, Crystal Lee and Cookie sat in the living room and talked. Cookie was going through a divorce and raising his daughter. Crystal Lee invited him to come for Sunday dinner while her sister and brother-in-law were at church. During that dinner, she and Cookie watched Syretha’s six children and her two boys, as they did on many dates.

Crystal Lee and Cookie decided they would get married after they got to know each other better. Crystal Lee used the settlement money for a down payment on a small house, which she fixed up and moved into with the boys. Cookie dropped by the house a couple times a week, sometimes spending a weekend night. Her father did not like that because he thought people would gossip, so they got married as soon as Cookie’s divorce was final. Crystal Lee felt the romance evaporated immediately. In addition, Cookie believed Crystal Lee could not make enough money to cover a babysitter, so she stayed home all day.

Her growing dissatisfaction with the expectations and limits of traditional femininity and marriage fueled Crystal Lee’s interest in union activism as much as her resentments about the status of mill hands and her critiques of the work conditions. Her union activism occurred at that intersection of gender, class, status, and the means of production. Soon after Cookie’s

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38 Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 38-42.
39 Ibid., 75-77.
daughter went to live with his ex-wife in 1965, Crystal Lee had a third baby, a girl named
Elizabeth. Crystal Lee wondered what she had been like before children. Cookie did not stand
up to her father, who often took Crystal Lee’s oldest son to Burlington. Cookie did not offer
her any relief from the monotony, like nights out. The discontent led her to a brief affair with
the town “ladies’ man” in 1968. The liaisons caused her terrible guilt, so Crystal Lee avoided
the man, hoping the affair would fizzle. Instead he showed up at her house, and after she said
the affair was over, he slapped her. When Cookie got home from third shift the next morning,
Crystal Lee admitted what had happened because she was afraid the conflict might escalate.
Cookie drove to confront the man, but he had gone out of town.40

After the affair, Crystal Lee still aspired to something more. She pushed against the
gender expectations of maternalism and wanted a job at least but had no intention of returning
to a cotton mill. She did not have a concrete idea until a new vocational school, Halifax
County Technical Institute, opened on the outskirts of Roanoke Rapids in 1969. Cookie let her
take two courses and even hoped she would get a part-time job. The growing children had
more expenses and prices kept going up. Syretha was working as the head waitress at a motel
restaurant, so Crystal Lee took a waitressing course. In case Syretha could not get her a job,
Crystal Lee also took a power sewing course, figuring apparel was better than weaving or
filling batteries.41 She was savvy about exploring and creating employment options.

At the end of the two-week waitressing course, a motel that catered to northern tourists
offered Crystal Lee a job. For several weeks she earned excellent tips during the day and
completed power sewing classes at night. Then the manager asked if she wanted to do “dates”
with VIP guests, and Crystal Lee never returned. She went to work with Syretha and lasted for

40 Ibid., 78-84.
41 “Crystal Lee Sutton” in Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls, 204; Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 88-90.
over a year before growing bored. She took a job as a power sewer at an apparel plant thirty miles away, then at another plant twenty miles away. Like Puerto Rican needleworkers, many mill hands moved in and out of a variety of textile and garment jobs. Even with the drive, Crystal Lee made a lot of money—more than at the mill or the motel. But during one of her tired drives home, she saw a car accident and decided the money was not worth the risk. Crystal Lee returned to waitressing and put her name in at J.P. Stevens. Syretha got a job at the plant first, then Crystal Lee was hired as a gift-set operator: folding fancy towels and fixing them in a box for $2.25 an hour. She stayed a gift-set operator in the put-up department from February to August 1972, when a previous boss offered her a hostessing job at the nightclub he was opening. That sounded more exciting than folding towels for eight hours.\footnote{``Crystal Lee Sutton'' in Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls, 205; Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 94-97.}

At about that time, Cookie joined a “political club” in response to increasing racial tensions he saw throughout the country. He was concerned with “all those riots in New Jersey and all up North. Black people were just stealing everything that wasn’t tied down.” Cookie heard about a freedom march planned for Roanoke Rapids and did not want to let people “tear up what little mess I got.” He joined with some other white men and started the Young Men’s Club to plan for a possible race war. However, he did not tell Crystal Lee details because she thought differently about race. Her mindset was not “a put on,” and he knew she did not promote or encourage racial prejudice or divisiveness.\footnote{Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 98-99.}

Crystal Lee enjoyed hostessing, but her husband did not like the hours or the men customers. She stayed for two months because she liked wearing nice clothes, using makeup, and keeping her hair long. Instead of standing at her kitchen counter or the dull folding table, Crystal Lee chatted with nightclub members. She made sure the waitresses were on schedule
and tables were arranged. It was fun, but the arguments with Cookie increased in occurrence and volume. He told her it was wrong to work there. So in October 1972, she returned to the J.P. Stevens Delta #4 plant. She hated walking back into the mill. For consolation, Crystal Lee bought a rug to give her legs some cushion while standing on the concrete for eight hours and told herself that workers in the weave room had it worse.\(^{44}\)

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Throughout the early 1970s, civil rights labor activism and the TWUA campaign were intensifying. Sledge filed her EEOC complaint against J.P. Stevens in 1970 and the attorney built the class-action suit that they submitted in 1973. Crystal Lee had sought personal ways out of the drudgery and low wages of the mills by earning certificates and taking other jobs. These had not been successful, but when she returned to Delta #4, the TWUA was on a streak of successes. The campaign now included NLRB hearings, EEOC grievances, lawsuits, lobbying politicians, the southern organizing drive, press releases, demonstrations, and plans for a possible boycott. Between 1970 and 1973, J.P. Stevens faced three major class-action suits in the Carolinas. By August 1975, the EEOC had received 178 charges of Title VII violations against J.P. Stevens.\(^{45}\)

A foot injury in December 1972 took Crystal Lee out of work until April 1973, when she again stood at her folding station. During Crystal Lee’s first shift back, she noticed a poster on the bulletin board announcing a TWUA meeting at a black church. It reminded her of a letter from J.P. Stevens she had received while at home on medical leave. The letter had apologized for firing workers who joined the union, promised not to discourage membership,

\[^{44}\text{“Crystal Lee Sutton” in } \text{Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls, 205;}\]
\[^{45}\text{Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 100-105.}\]

\[^{45}\text{Mary Thornton, “The Union versus the Mill: At 85 J.P. Stevens Textile Plants Across the South, There’s a Quiet Kind of War,” Boston Globe, March 19, 1978, A1;}\]
\[^{45}\text{MacLean, 80-83; Minchin, “Don’t Sleep With Stevens!”}, 70.\]
and vowed not to threaten or shadow employees involved in union activities. In 1972, after six years of litigation, J.P. Stevens had been held in contempt of two court orders. One required backpay to ten people fired for joining the union, and the other demanded an apology letter mailed to all employees and read aloud by an NLRB agent to each shift at every mill. There had not been a decision like that in the history of the mills.46

Crystal Lee was intrigued by the coincidence of the letter and prominent poster. Her father and Syretha warned her against getting into trouble, but Crystal Lee wanted to see for herself. She had also been watching Cookie and his activities as a shop steward in the unionized paper mill. After listening to those union meetings and his comments as shop steward, Crystal Lee thought, “[I]f he could be in a union, I didn’t see why textile workers couldn’t have a union too.” Cookie had more money, his birthday off, and decent insurance. She also knew his father had been active in the CIO Southern Organizing Campaign in the 1940s and remembered the woman who was a shop steward at her first mill job in 1958.47 That woman always smiled and went to the supervisor’s office to talk. Crystal Lee had not pursued the union then because she was a teenager and accepted what her father said.48

In early May 1973, Crystal Lee reflected on three issues that fueled her curiosity: the prejudice against mill hands, her children’s future, and her parents’ lives. “It got me thinking … cotton-mill workers are known as trash, and I knew this union was the only way we could have our own voice, make ourselves better,” she said. Crystal Lee worried for her three children. She feared that they would follow her into the mills and get swallowed up. “They been raised just like I was, same story over and over. [The mills] have… in a way,

47 Fones-Wolf, Struggle for the Soul, Chapter 5 “The Bible Speaks to Labor,” 113-146.
brainwashed the parents: they wore out,” she said. “All their life, all the children ever hear is JP.” Even complaining was a type of programming, preparing children for the grind. And her parents still worked, struggling to pay their bills through illness and pain after all those years.

Crystal Lee did not want to go to the union meeting alone, so she asked her friend Liz. They left their children with Cookie, who expressed wariness about white women going to a black church. But Cookie knew he could not stop Crystal Lee and she did not have any hesitation. When Crystal Lee and Liz arrived, black workers filled the parking lot and church pews. They did not notice any white people except for a man and woman at the pulpit. 49 Eli Zivkovich had planned that meeting and made sure J.P. Stevens management hung the posters. Zivkovich was not a mill hand, but he had years of organizing experience. In early 1973, he had lost his job with the United Mine Workers (UMW) due to divisive internal politics involving corruption and ongoing challenges to entrenched leadership. 50 While sitting in the Steelworkers Union office with a friend, he heard about the TWUA drive in the South. Zivkovich took the job because he did not want to leave the labor movement. 51 These intertwined union networks extended throughout the Atlantic U.S.

The TWUA, which had already been focused on J.P. Stevens for ten years, assigned Zivkovich to North Carolina where the effort—leaflets, union-hall meetings, secret conversations, demonstrations, and NLRB hearings—had produced some results. At about that time, Robert Freeman launched a TWUA drive to organize the Cannon Mills plants in Kannapolis, southwest of Roanoke Rapids. 52 After Zivkovich met with the regional director in

52 Windham, 107-118.
Charlotte, he started putting together a strategy. He handed out leaflets with response postcards at mills around North Carolina, looking for at least one town where workers might be responding to the unprecedented apology letter. When 350 postcards came back from Roanoke Rapids, Harold McIver, chief of southern organizing, sent Zivkovich.

Roanoke Rapids also had a history as a center of organizing, with enough worker support to hold union certification votes in 1946, 1949, 1958, and 1964. A majority of mill hands voted union in 1946 but split between the UMW and TWUA, so they did not obtain representation. In 1948, the TWUA won an election and opened contract negotiations at the River Mill, part of the Simmons Company that J.P. Stevens bought in the 1950s. TWUA organizer Virginia Keyser helped to coordinate another membership drive in town from 1963-1969, collecting membership cards and grievances with NLRB testimony. So when Zivkovich arrived in 1973, he was not the only union representative mill hands had supported.

At his first TWUA meeting, all the workers in the hall, except one, were black. Zivkovich moved into a room at the Motel Dixie and used it as his office. Margaret Banks, a mill hand from upstate New York, joined him as a full-time organizer. The first workers to show up with membership cards were two white men. Then a black man named Joseph Williams came with his father and brother. Williams brought another fifty signed cards from black workers and became very active. Supervisors and bossmen quickly targeted the black men, cornering them and demanding they confine their leaflets to the canteens. Despite the official apology letter and its promise to respect NLRB rules, Williams was fired.

Crystal Lee did not know about these events, but Zivkovich did. He decided he needed a dramatic display of strength to really launch the North Carolina drive, which he believed had been haphazard. He wanted bosses and workers to know that whatever had happened during

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53 Conway, 184-196.
A few days after the harassment of black workers, Zivkovich noticed a clause in the court order regarding the backpay and apology letter. It said the union had the right to inspect every bulletin board at least once a week. Without that federal order, his appearances in the mills were not possible.

No union organizer had been inside the fence of a J.P. Stevens mill in more than a decade. Zivkovich went to the city supervisor for J.P. Stevens mills in Roanoke Rapids and asked to visit the plants. The man provided a guide, and Zivkovich made a show at each one. (Crystal Lee might have seen him if she had not been on leave for her injured foot.) The bossmen helped his cause with their attempts at intimidation. By greeting him at the gates and following him through the buildings, they created a commotion. The workers noticed as Zivkovich moved any paper or cloth covering union materials. At one mill, several boxes and bolts of cloth blocked an entire board in a loading area, and he demanded the bossmen move them. They refused and circled around him, but five black men appeared. Nobody spoke until the bossmen ordered the black men to move the items. Zivkovich earned his visibility and learned about the mills. These details provided the substance of the speech he gave the night of Crystal Lee’s first meeting.

Zivkovich immediately noticed the two white women willing to cross gendered racial lines. Crystal Lee had an intense look, and he directed a few lines of his speech right to her—not only because she appeared invested, but also because he knew the TWUA could not coordinate union elections without the majority white mill hands. In 1973, J.P. Stevens had 3,700 workers in Roanoke Rapids, and only 700 were black. As soon as the meeting ended, Zivkovich found Crystal Lee and Liz and asked Banks to talk to them as well. He wanted

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54 Leifermann, *Woman of Inheritance*, 118-122.
55 Ibid., 122-125.
white card signers and believed Crystal Lee had the energy to bring in other white mill hands. He called Crystal Lee the next day and asked her to come to more meetings and bring her white friends.  

Crystal Lee signed a union card, grabbed the biggest TWUA button, took an organizer’s card, and joined the statewide team. She brought membership cards to work and talked about the TWUA in the canteen. Within days, Crystal Lee recruited several white members. She also took more serious risks, like smuggling an “opinion survey” out of the mill because it asked about the union and required a signature. The NLRB had prohibited such company surveillance. Within three weeks, she was going to the TWUA office almost every day and even brought her children. If Banks needed help with paperwork or Zivkovich needed envelopes stamped, Crystal Lee offered assistance (see Figure 16).

By the end of May 1973, Crystal Lee was a vocal advocate for the TWUA. She cooperated with other mill hands who had been active in Roanoke Rapids for months. Several black workers had already been fired and reinstated after NLRB grievances. Zivkovich advised everyone to carry a notebook and write anything management said. Bossmen began calling Crystal Lee to their offices and reprimanding her for talking, bathroom use, and time in the canteens, and she wrote the incidents in her notebook. Then Zivkovich heard about a four-page memo from J.P. Stevens posted in the Delta #4 mill. The black mill hands said it had the usual anti-union rhetoric but included a section warning that the union would put black workers above whites. They could not copy it because the bossmen were always following them.

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56 Ibid., 126-128.  
57 Ibid., 111 and 130-131.  
The historic white supremacy, racial segregation, and management race-baiting came together in that one memo. Zivkovich wanted the exact words as soon as possible to initiate legal action. He asked one woman, but the foreman scared her. Crystal Lee tried to copy it to surprise Zivkovich, but the assistant overseer appeared and told her she could not. Yet Zivkovich concluded Crystal Lee was the person to get it. She seemed fearless and knew everyone at the mill. Crystal Lee and a friend took turns attempting to memorize lines to write them down in the bathroom. When that did not succeed, Crystal Lee called Zivkovich at the Motel Dixie, and he expressed in clear terms that he needed the exact words.

Crystal Lee got a clipboard from her sister, waited for a quiet time, and took it to the bulletin board. She flipped through the memo, writing in her notebook as fast as she could. A bossman walked up behind her and reminded her she could not copy the memo. She kept going. It appeared to be the usual warning about the union causing people to lose their jobs—but then she reached the paragraph to black mill hands. In a “special word to our black employees,” it advised them against the union’s false promise that “by going into the union in mass, you can dominate it and control it in this plant, and in these Roanoke Rapids plants, as you may see fit.” Crystal Lee became angry because she knew less than 20% of J.P. Stevens workers were black, but if white mill hands read the letter, they might think the union supported black power and it would not win an election.59

Other bossmen came and went, warning her to stop and asking her to go to the supervisor. She told them she would go after supper break. Although nervous, she went to the “safety supper” the plant was providing to celebrate time without accidents. Union members

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knew others had tried to copy the memo, and workers had seen Crystal Lee at the bulletin board. It was a collective event, discussed by her peers. When they asked what happened, a few said she had “guts.” Crystal Lee told them the supervisor said he was going to fire her so “y’all can expect anything.” When she finished, she returned to her folding station, where the assistant overseer arrived and asked her to go to the general supervisor.

Crystal Lee saw several bossmen and her forelady waiting. The supervisor asked her why she was using the payphone on company time. The people in that office knew her from years of living in town. At the motel restaurants and nightclub, she had served them food and danced with a couple of the men. Nobody spoke up for her as the general supervisor listed her supposed infractions. Crystal Lee resisted, asking the men for their names and titles instead of pleading with them to take pity. They looked confused, and the supervisor stood up and shouted that she should call her husband. “Tell him to pick you up. I want you out,” he yelled. At first she stayed and said he would have to get the police. Perhaps if Crystal Lee had complied with the patriarchal gender norms of the mill town and called her husband so he could take responsibility for her, the situation would have ended with a simple termination.

Instead she was noncompliant. She stood up, without any plan, and said she had to get her own pocketbook. She walked to her folding station and noticed the other workers staring at her. Mary Mosley, a black woman in her section, asked what happened. “He fired me,” Crystal Lee replied. A Pinkerton guard arrived and then a policeman. Crystal Lee asked Mosley for a marker, wrote UNION on a sheet of cardboard from the towel packaging, stood on her table, and held it up. Crystal Lee later said she made the sign because she was angry.

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and wanted to make a push for the union inside the mill since it was probably her last opportunity. At a 1994 tribute to McIver, who had become organizing director for the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department, she reiterated the point, “I held that sign up for the workers in that plant to see and little did I realize it was going to get the attention that it has.”

She intended the “UNION” sign as a backstage gesture, a term used by visual culture scholars to describe a display staged in a limited area where public viewing was not available. Backstage gestures rely on a level of “reciprocal familiarity” and function as a means of “communal identification” within a particular group. When the public or a wider unexpected audience views such a gesture as if it was a “frontstage” performance, they can mistake it as the act of one self-possessed person. That imaginative process transforms the gesture from a vernacular, unifying signal to a highly individualistic iconic performance.

Crystal Lee understood her “UNION” sign as a message to her co-workers. It was a collective group with an awareness of the history of textile and garment union activism in the region and knowledge of the recent organizing drive, whatever their opinion of the TWUA. The towel-folding table, their shared setting, the familiar bossmen, the recognized magnitude of any opposition to supervisors and police, and the sign written on a gift-set insert all had specific backstage, idiomatic meaning for the mill hands. As Crystal Lee stood, co-workers gave her the V for victory sign. Her forelady, the bossmen, and Syretha plead with Crystal Lee to get down, but she stayed on the table, turning to see some giving her the V sign, and still more holding fists in the air. They were quiet but clear.

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63 Tribute to Harold McIver on October 28, 1994, recorded on personal video cassette, file cabinet, drawer #1 and Pam Woywod article dated 1979, file cabinet, drawer #2, folder 7, Crystal Lee Sutton Collection, Alamance Community College, Graham, North Carolina.
64 Kimble and Olson, “Visual Rhetoric,” 553-554.
She got down, sat on a stool, and laid her head on the work table before the police chief appeared, a man Crystal Lee knew. He was the husband of her cousin, who lived around the corner. Chief Drewery Beale had heard details about her “illegitimate child” and affair with the town “ladies’ man.” Standing at her folding table, he said, “Lee, this doesn’t have anything to do with the union.” She told Chief Beale she wanted a taxi and the door opened for her. “I am a lady,” she told him. The notion of “being a lady” had significance for working-class women of many backgrounds and ethnicities. It was recognizable in southern mill towns and constructed intersecting boundaries of class, femininity, and race. In the 1950s, Louise Delgado also used the term “ladies” when challenging the treatment of needleworkers in her New York City shop.

After Crystal Lee retrieved her pocketbook and rug, she requested a written note promising that Chief Beale would escort her home. He started to write but stopped himself and grumbled, “I don’t have to do this.” The supervisor then asked for Crystal Lee to be removed from the premises. As the police escorted her, Chief Beale said to remember that he did not force her into the car. Crystal Lee did not like that comment and saw only a lieutenant and police car in the lot, so she said she would return to the office and call her husband. The chief and lieutenant moved toward her. Crystal Lee lunged back to the fence, dropping her notebook and rug and clinging to the chain links. But the policemen picked her up and stuffed her into the car.

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66 Mill hands were not usually referred to as ladies, but they used it to claim respect and dignity despite the larger social practices, Conway, 44. For Louise Delgado, see page eighty-nine of this project.
They took her to the town jail and charged her with “disorderly conduct.” Crystal Lee refused to speak but requested her phone call, ringing the Motel Dixie. Banks answered and said she would find Zivkovich, who arrived to get Crystal Lee out as union organizers often have to do. She went with him to the motel where she called her husband. Both Zivkovich and Cookie were shocked at how far she had pushed. The next day, Zivkovich and another organizer met with the town manager and police chief. Zivkovich said his union would not tolerate such treatment, and the police were liable to be sued for conspiracy with the company. After that, the police left Crystal Lee alone and stopped openly spying on the Motel Dixie.68

The short time in jail caused Crystal Lee to wonder about her children. “I was thinking what effect this was going to have on the kids when the other children found out that their mama had been in jail,” she said. She feared the supervisors and anti-union mill hands would tell her children about their different fathers. She did not like anyone having something to hold over her head or upset her children. When she got home, Crystal Lee retrieved her file box with photographs and documents from the boys’ fathers. She explained how the boys had different dads. Then she talked about meeting Cookie, marrying him, and having Elizabeth.

She gained strength from realizing the children saw her in a new way. “My children know what I am, but they also know that I am an honest woman, and I believe in standing up for my rights,” she said. “That really set me free, because then I had nothing to hide, nothing to be afraid of…. After that I got even more deeper involved with the union campaign.”

Although many mill women conceived children with different men and experienced the loss of those fathers in different ways, Crystal Lee had spoken the truth. In addition, her defiance with the bossmen and police in front of fellow mill hands loosened her from the expectations

of mill town life. Their shared history and community—including social customs, gender norms, and the battles of labor activism—infused her actions on behalf of the union with deep vernacular meaning.

Crystal Lee continued working with the TWUA as it organized for a union vote and the reinstatement of fired workers. At Zivkovich’s request, McIver reluctantly agreed to put her on the payroll. McIver’s hesitation derived from the reaction of several regional union officials. Considering Crystal Lee was a mill hand and a woman, her stand struck them as shocking. They labeled her insubordinate and unpredictable. A few even called her “that stripper” who got up on the table and “hootchy-kootchied,” which deeply disappointed Zivkovich. He had to convince them to move ahead with her NLRB case for unfair termination, and he wondered how many good cases had been ignored due to southern attitudes about women obeying men. After she was hired, Zivkovich relied on Crystal Lee as his chief aide, more valuable than Banks because she understood the towns.

When McIver submitted the June 1973 “Charge Against Employer” to the regional NLRB, it contained the cases for three employees who had carried membership cards and worn union buttons. It summarized the May 30 termination of Crystal Lee for improper use of the phone and canteen; the harassment of Ricky Martin until he signed a write-up for inferior work and talking; and the harassment of McArthur Winborne regarding a write-up for tardiness and smoking. Crystal Lee’s affidavit filled seven pages. She listed all the concerns she had mentioned to supervisors regarding office meetings, locked gates, and the attitude of

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69 Albrecht, 43; “Crystal Lee Sutton” in Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls, 211-212; Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 161-163.
70 Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 163-165.
71 National Labor Relations Board Charge Against Employer, Name of Employer J.P. Stevens, dated June 7, 1973 and Letter from Harold McIver to Mr. Reed Johnston, Regional Director, NLRB, dated June 7, 1973, file cabinet, drawer #2, Crystal Lee Sutton Collection, Alamance Community College, Graham, North Carolina.
bossmen in addition to the harassment the night of her termination.\textsuperscript{72} She recognized the charge as an opportunity to raise collective concerns about employment conditions and the treatment of union members. These three cases against J.P. Stevens for unfair termination moved through the NLRB process for years, with the company using every tactic to delay reinstatement or remuneration.\textsuperscript{73}

Zivkovich believed Crystal Lee’s commitment and kept the regional leaders’ derogatory comments to himself. Since he traveled often, he depended on her, especially to coordinate a workers’ organizing committee of mill hands still working for J.P. Stevens. Crystal Lee welcomed the white and black workers to her house for meetings. She also got signed membership cards and mill hand statements Zivkovich and Banks were not able to get as outsiders. Zivkovich held weekly rallies to keep enthusiasm high and to counter anti-union actions, which included stretch-outs, cutting the hours of union members, and anti-union letters. One said the AFL-CIO had taken $75,000 of member dues and given it to the NAACP to wipe out all racial segregation. Crystal Lee also noticed discarded copies of a newspaper she did not recognize, \textit{Militant Truth}, which accused the unions of fostering communism and race-mixing. The newspaper had a tradition of using Biblical passages to criticize communism and civil rights while calling on people to repent. The editors also had relationships with companies and groups like the Southern States Industrial Council that promoted free enterprise and individualism as antidotes to communism and Soviet authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{74}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} Crystal Lee Jordan, Affidavit, State of North Carolina, dated June 21, 1973.
\item \textsuperscript{73} By the 1970s, many corporations realized it was more cost effective to use legal and bureaucratic obstruction to block union activities, even if they were fined. Windham, \textit{Knocking on Labor’s Door}.
\end{itemize}
In early June 1973, Henry P. Leifermann called the Motel Dixie to ask about the J.P. Stevens campaign. He was a 31-year-old freelance journalist in Atlanta with an interest in the textile and garment industry because he grew up in South Carolina and had family in the mills. Although he had heard conditions were improving, Leifermann was skeptical. Zivkovich answered questions and directed him to several workers who were fired for organizing, including Crystal Lee. Leifermann picked her as the central figure for his piece because she was “a real good talker.”

Although she had been an active union supporter for less than two months, Crystal Lee was a sympathetic, attractive example of a fired mill hand—a white, young, pretty mother of three from a mill family—who was also outspoken and comfortable sharing her ideas while subverting norms of gender, class, and race.

Leifermann’s investigation was part of a national media interest in J.P. Stevens. Throughout the postwar years, reporters wrote about the textile and garment industry, and J.P. Stevens in particular. The name was a regular on the business pages. Such conglomerates were major players in the economy and its global competitiveness. By 1973, manufacturing, productivity, and trade were also troubling topics as the reconfigurations of industrial and capital currents that had started in the early twentieth century accelerated. Stories about

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import fears, layoffs, and the collapse of opportunities for working-class Americans, constructed primarily as white men in heavy industries, appeared.77

In addition, most newspapers still had a labor beat with articles and columns about workers and unions. Reporters for print and television covered economic events like the oil embargos, currency instability, “stagflation,” and competition from German and Japanese enterprises from both business and industrial union points of view. More specifically, the media reported on mill towns, southern work conditions, NLRB hearings, court cases, and brown lung. Images of mill hands—hardworking poor white southerners, especially women—circulated with the stories.78

The coverage of southern mills and J.P. Stevens’s confrontations with the TWUA relied on, participated in, and adapted a longstanding popular fascination with “the South” as a region of special practices and concerns (see Figure 17). Depictions related to that fascination fell into two broad categories: the realm of large plantations or the grim conditions of poor whites. The representations and interpretations came from novels, memoirs, movies, articles and advertisements, scholarly books, television shows, and commercials. In the first category, plantations could appear as places of romanticized gentility, confused racial identities and decline, or extreme racism and violence. In the second category, poor white southerners could

appear as degenerate simpletons, exploited ignorant laborers, dignified if parochial working people, or dangerous racist “crackers.”

The fascination led to many 1960s visual representations of poor southern whites. Television shows like *The Real McCoys* (1957-1962), *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), and *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1963-1971) encouraged warm depictions of southern whites with quirky habits. Hollywood studios tended to foster a voyeuristic scrutiny of the peculiar South and its problems, including poor whites who needed correction, in movies like *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Easy Rider* (1969), and *Deliverance* (1972). *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) used the shifting intersections of racial, social, and economic categories that resulted from desegregation. It followed a black police detective from the North who became the trusted partner of an intelligent white police chief in the South as they addressed the dangers posed by “crackers from hell.” These movies participated in a construction of white poverty and racism as distinct problems of “the South” and its irredeemable poor or authoritarian whites.

The fascination also appeared in newspapers and nightly news. For example, they reported on Volunteers in Service to America programs (VISTA) in the South and Appalachia with an emphasis on the need to help the extreme poor whites. President Lyndon Johnson and others promoted such stories to show the War on Poverty did not serve only black urban recipients. As such news coverage proliferated, it circulated edited stories, photographs, and

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videos of southern mill towns. The affecting representations infused both the mill town setting and the appearance of textile workers with feelings of poignant significance and virtue.  

When Leifermann initiated his research in Roanoke Rapids, he joined, advanced, and shaped that national conversation. Crystal Lee agreed to an interview and understood it as an important part of TWUA outreach. Zivkovich told her it was crucial because more workers needed to understand unions. “He explained to me about how important it was for union people to learn about unions, doing education work and everything,” she said. Leifermann chose her as the thread that ran through the long article. Crystal Lee served the popular interest in workers and fascination with poor white southerners. She lived, labored, and organized in that geographic and imagined space and embodied a gendered twist on the struggling working class, a twist that clicked with the profusion of highly diverse and visible feminist activisms of the 1970s. The women’s liberation movement had demanded, created and opened new ways to talk about and represent women in mainstream culture. Women of various backgrounds and feminist ideologies had formed collectives, published books, organized political groups, and founded communal living arrangements. The National Organization for Women (NOW) and Ms. magazine were only two of the most recognizable liberal feminist examples in a movement that included more radical groups like the Combahee

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83 Hale, A Nation of Outsiders, 3, 60-61, 103.
River Collective, Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, Redstockings, W.I.T.C.H., Lesbian Feminist Liberation, Hijas de Cuauhtémoc, and Boston Women’s Health Book Collective along with dozens of local consciousness-raising groups.

As the movement became more established, mainstream media produced many reports, often with greater attention to liberal feminist activism and predominately white middle-class activists. At a time when talk shows like the Merv Griffin Show (1962-1986), Phil Donahue Show (1967-1996), Dick Cavett Show (1968-1974), Dinah’s Place (1970-1974), and Dinah! (1974-1980) still discussed recent events and issues with prominent authors and intellectuals, feminist writers and activists appeared on daytime television. Hollywood studios adapted contemporary feminist rhetoric and styles and the demands of women’s liberation to the genre of women’s films, creating movies like Up the Sandbox (1972), Stepford Wives (1975), An Unmarried Woman (1978), and 9 to 5 (1980) with white, heterosexual main characters. Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore (1974), about a divorced mother working as a waitress, triggered a flurry of reviews, commentary, and studies and led to the television series Alice (1976-1985). Newspapers, reviewers, and talk show hosts called these “women’s lib movies.”

Leifermann capitalized on these three contemporary cultural interests in the working class, poor white southerners, and women’s liberation to make his article sellable. His final piece appeared as a three and a half page spread in the New York Times Magazine on August 5, 1973 (see Figure 18). Its prominence in a national Sunday newspaper was not a coincidence. The cumulative years of TWUA organizing and publicity plus coverage of J.P. Stevens converged with Crystal Lee’s personal appeal, Leifermann’s storytelling, and the three contemporary cultural interests. “The Unions are Coming: Trouble in the South’s First Industry” began with Crystal Lee describing her arrest and telling her children about their

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86 Ibid., Chapter I, Old Form, New Appearance to Chapter II, New Choices for a New Ideal, 39-93.
fathers. Editorial layout centered a close-up photograph of her with a thoughtful expression, captioned “Crystal Lee Jordan, Southern textile worker.” So although the piece discusses the southern textile industry, the first page draws readers’ attention to Crystal Lee and her personal story as a mother with a family problem. At the bottom of the first column, after the account of Crystal Lee crying as she told her sons about their fathers and her affair, Leifermann notes that she had joined the TWUA and changed her life because she wanted better for her children.  

Personal facts from Crystal Lee’s life, without names or examples of other mill hands, punctuate the article. The overall piece provides a brief generic history of the cotton textile industry in the South and then hones in on J.P. Stevens, the TWUA campaign, and Roanoke Rapids. Leifermann interjects Crystal Lee’s personal story to drive the article. He expresses concern about two worrisome issues as he saw them: textile mills were central to southern industry yet rarely mentioned in accolades for the New South; and dead-end, low-wage, unhealthy mill employment led to problems with poverty, alcoholism, and violence. “Mill hands are the bedrock of the Deep South’s economy, religion, politics, industry,” he says. “They are also the lowest paid industrial workers in the South and the nation…. [T]heir wholly non-average life is plagued by alcohol, sex, violence, and an image of themselves as deserving no better than what they get.”

In advocating for the southern mill hands, he redeployes the narrative of the problematic and peculiar South.

On the second page, editors selected four photographs showing mill workers at four stages of production, set next to the column where Leifermann defines jobs like hopper feeder, carder, spinner, doffer, side hemmer, and terry loader. The piece then returns to Crystal Lee

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and her first mill job as a teenager and how her mother cried with relief because the household needed the money. In the next couple paragraphs, Leifermann covers Crystal Lee’s marriage at eighteen, her first son, Junior’s death, the “short affair” with her prom escort, and the birth of her second son. On the third page, he summarizes a spring 1973 article from a newspaper in South Carolina. It had quoted two social workers who said the mills encourage parents to bring their children to work, limit educational opportunities, and keep families trapped, leading “to a society in which sex and alcohol were the only outlets and the pursuit of which led to violence.” Leifermann mentions that fourteen mill companies placed a full-page ad in that same newspaper stating their workers were a positive force for good and “the backbone and strength of our community.”

In such a situation, many mill hands saw the company as their defender against the critiques of well-meaning but condescending do-gooders.

Leifermann fills the remainder of the third page with facts about the TWUA campaign and its targeting of J.P. Stevens. He notes size made the company an industry leader that had great success blocking unionization, so the TWUA was still measuring its progress with signed union cards not with plants organized. Two major law firms that specialized in anti-union tactics earned a mention as well as race-baiting and the four-page company memo with the lines regarding black workers taking over. The magazine included a photograph of a small town street with local businesses and a few late-1960s cars captioned, “Mill town: Roanoke Avenue, the main street of Roanoke Rapids, N.C.” The article starts the fourth page with a brief explanation of the increasing number of black workers. Leifermann argues that the requirements for federal textile contracts and a dwindling pool of poor rural whites had caused the percentage of black mill workers at J.P. Stevens to jump from 12% to 20% in four years.

89 Leifermann, “The Unions are Coming,” 25.
The article ends with the story of Crystal Lee’s attempt to copy “an antiunion letter,” her stand on the folding table, the UNION sign, and the arrival of Chief Beale. The final paragraph does not emphasize Leifermann’s points about the structure of the South’s economy or the systematic obstruction of workers’ attempts to organize. It does not emphasize Crystal Lee’s view of the prejudice against mill hands and the importance of the union. Instead, it captures a personal stand against mill town society, with an affecting moment in which she pressed against gender and class prejudice. The last line is a quote about her personal response to the police escort. “I said to Drewery Beale, ‘I’ll tell you one thing: you’re going to open that door for me to go out of here.’ I said, ‘I am a lady.’ Because see,’ Crystal Lee said, ‘Drewery knows things. He knows me.’”

Leifermann wrote about the South without links to the larger global industry. That choice does not reflect incompetence but rather the cultural fascination with the South as a distinct and marginal place and the pervasiveness and perpetuation of a dominant narrative in which the textile and garment industry had “relocated to the South” and was stuck there. It sold books, movies, and stories. An emphasis on the mainland as “the U.S.” fostered that narrative. As discussed in chapter one, however, government, industry, finance, and labor experts understood southern mills as one shifting component in an array of plantations, mills, factories, banks, and distribution centers. J.P. Stevens had subsidiaries and affiliates in Japan, Mexico, France, and New Zealand. Leifermann could have included information about the TWUA advocating strict import quotas as early as 1945. He could have explained how GATT, the Point IV program, and bilateral trade agreements fostered “third world” development via textile and garment exports, with expanding imports to the U.S. In the 1960s,

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90 Ibid., 26.
Congress had passed the Trade Expansion Act (1962) and a revised quota regime under the U.S. Tariff Schedule with Item 807 (1963) that further disaggregated global assembly and multiplied textile imports. The Mexican and U.S. governments had hired Arthur D. Little in 1961, sending Richard Bolin to conduct a study that included data from Puerto Rico. He reached out to transnational companies to create the BIP/maquiladoras, opposed by the TWUA and ILGWU but formalized in 1965.92

The 1973 New York Times Magazine article missed the TWUA lobbying campaign regarding trade policy that it conducted alongside the southern drive. Starting in the 1960s, AFL-CIO newspapers published articles about the global changes, sent memos to Congress, submitted testimony to federal hearings, met with pro-labor politicians, and encouraged people to buy American-made textiles and clothing. A 1969 article in the AFL-CIO News addressed the eroding conditions of workers in both Mexico and the U.S. due to the BIP—especially for labor-intensive industries like apparel and electronics. A national newspaper said U.S. unions were opposed to the Mexican program because “plants below the border exploit low incomes and deprive Americans of jobs” while the industry’s principal response was to discourage attention. It stated the U.S. government was pleased with the Mexican program because products had American content and competed effectively with Japanese and Hong Kong imports, which had “a favorable effect on the balance of payments problem.”93

From 1971-1973, the TWUA and ACWA lobbied hard for the Foreign Trade and Investment Act (Burke-Hartke Trade Bill), which addressed both trade and currency issues in

92 Schmidt, 146-302.
an effort to support domestic manufacturing. It would have ended tax breaks for transnational corporations and given executive offices the ability to restrict the export of capital if they believed too many jobs were at stake. Unions sent materials to prominent organizations like the League of Women’s Voters and Council of Negro Women, recruited co-sponsors, and communicated with members about understanding the bill and contacting their representatives. Despite union pressure, officials with the White House, State Department, and U.S. Trade Representative continued to negotiate and support trade agreements that opened U.S. and international markets to textile and eventually apparel imports from Asia and Latin America. These changes contributed to the exploitative conditions in the South.

Major news outlets were aware. Newspapers with national circulations covered the building tension regarding Japan, Mexico, and China as well as U.S. negotiations with smaller players like Taiwan and Hong Kong. Media coverage by 1973 not only acknowledged the rise of imports and their impact on domestic textiles, but also analyzed the entangled relationships between the U.S., Asia, and Latin America.

94 Windham, 124. The 1970s were a pivotal decade for such debates and legislative wrangling, Schulman, *The Seventies.*
96 Rosen, Chapters 3-6.
textile and garment industry relocating in a direct path from North to South, however, this percolating narrative of “globalization” did not yet have widespread cultural recognition. The more established narrative of a domestic progression also had exceptional potency because it centered the U.S. mainland and was infused with the American fascination with the South.

Leifermann’s article follows only Crystal Lee within southern mills and among poor whites, tuning out the larger global operation. It also emphasizes personal and maternal aspects of her experiences rather than any structural argument about the national or world economy. This creative professional decision initiated the extraction of a “life story” from the southern and civil rights influences as well as the national and global currents. The clarity and affective appeal of the cultural narrative of a mother caring for her children was an advantageous writing choice and served Leifermann well. It also had repercussions at a few levels.

The New York Times piece attracted readers and comments throughout North Carolina and impacted Roanoke Rapids. The publicity triggered infighting among the mill hands who felt Crystal Lee was receiving too much attention, especially considering other workers had suffered harassment and termination. Zivkovich had also relied on Crystal Lee during the fall of 1973, asking her to keep the Motel Dixie headquarters open whenever he went out of town. By December, the infighting erupted into open arguments and malicious gossip about Crystal

Lee doing a stag film. When the gossip lingered, Zivkovich secretly asked three people implicated in the rumor whether any tape had ever existed, and they told him a firm “no.” Regional TWUA leaders ordered Zivkovich to get a separate motel as his personal residence anyway, so the Motel Dixie would be associated with only official union business.

Three incidents near Christmas 1973 led to Crystal Lee’s one-week suspension. The first involved a union cheerleading squad and the second a TWUA parade float—but conflicting versions of the incidents appear in the historical record. The 1975 biography based on Leifermann’s interviews stated that Crystal Lee proposed both activities. Crystal Lee, however, told a scholar in a 1986 oral history that Zivkovich came up with the two ideas and asked her to coordinate. A cheerleading squad suited Crystal Lee because she had wanted to be one, but mill hands did not have the time and encouragement to join such activities. She had noticed only girls from certain parts of town became cheerleaders. So either with Zivkovich’s permission or at his request, she organized a group of girls and sewed the red and white TWUA outfits. The idea was to get parents involved with the union and raise awareness. “I never will forget all those patterns we cut out,” Crystal Lee said. “That was an exciting part of my life because I was doing something I didn’t even think I could do.”

Crystal Lee had longed to be a high school cheerleader, but that was not an option. Now she had the chance to create a squad just for working-class girls. She recruited twenty girls between the ages of eight and sixteen who wrote cheers and practiced every Friday. Trouble arose when a sixteen-year-old girl whose mother was on the workers’ organizing committee asked to be the group leader, and Crystal Lee refused. Zivkovich supported her, saying he wanted an adult to chaperone. The girl’s mother said Zivkovich was being unfair.

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The second conflict involved the Christmas parade and a union float, which either Zivkovich or Crystal Lee suggested. Zivkovich needed to travel for union business, so Crystal Lee and a few members spoke with the town committee and decided to rent a float and drape it with a banner reading, “Good Tidings and Merry Christmas from the Textile Workers Union of America.” Cookie was assigned to pull the float, and Crystal Lee planned for the cheerleaders to ride on it. It was a noticeable effort because mill families were not usually included in the parade. “[N]one of us mothers had ever been cheerleaders or been on a float,” Crystal Lee said. The day of the parade, another mill hand pulled up with his station wagon and said he would tow it because the Jordan family had received enough attention. A physical altercation flared between Cookie and the man until Zivkovich stepped between them.  

The final argument that culminated in Crystal Lee’s suspension happened at the motel headquarters. Feeling sidelined, Margaret Banks had not appreciated Crystal Lee’s daily hours and increased influence, so she left. The TWUA sent Zivkovich another full-time organizer, Peter Galladet, who did not know the town either. When an argument between Crystal Lee and Galladet turned loud, Zivkovich snapped and told her to get out. Despite the gossip, tension, and arguments, Zivkovich kept Crystal Lee on the payroll, and she returned to organizing. She was the most committed of the mill hands, standing at gates every day to give out materials at shift changes and traveling every night to homes to talk to workers. As she said, “The company just did me a favor [firing me] because that just gave me more time to work for the union.”

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In January and February 1974, Crystal Lee was doing union work from morning to night, sometimes only going home to sleep. If Zivkovich needed to learn about a mill hand, a bossman, a plant, or an area of town, he asked Crystal Lee. That reliance exacerbated the friction between her and Galladet. Her disagreements and quarrels with Cookie also worsened, especially when he asked if she was in love with Zivkovich or complained about her lack of housework. He thought he was losing her to the TWUA and did not understand her commitment to a union that seemed to offer her little. But she said, “Hell, let the housework go. I’ll do it some time. I can do it, I don’t need sleep. I can sleep when I’m dead.” Crystal Lee clearly had a personal and emotional stake in the success of the drive beyond her often stated goal of improving the lives of working people. The union gave her the opening to act and lead in ways she had not been permitted in other parts of her life. She believed her stubborn dedication, Zivkovich’s strategy, the workers’ organizing committee, and TWUA resources would sway enough mill hands to sign membership cards and vote for the union in an election. By early 1974, almost 2,000 people had signed membership cards—more in six months than in the previous six years. Crystal Lee was not going to leave the campaign, but she would eventually leave Cookie.¹⁰¹

At the same time as these union and marital issues, a production crew from the PBS-Ms. magazine television show Woman Alive! arrived in Roanoke Rapids. They planned to create a short television segment about Crystal Lee. Leifermann’s piece had caught the attention of staff at Ms. magazine in New York, which had started in 1971 as a special insert in New York magazine. Ms. appeared as its own issue in January 1972. By early 1973, four women—Patricia Carbine, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Gloria Steinem, and Marlo Thomas—had established the Ms. Foundation for Women to share women’s voices and create positive

change. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) had sent out a call for proposals for a new “women’s show” at that time. KERA-TV, the PBS station for Dallas-Fort Worth, submitted a proposal for a show that would utilize the talents and resources of Ms., and it won a $71,000 grant. Steinem and the Ms. staff were interested in expanding its media reach and agreed to work with KERA-TV to air a show created, written, and produced by women for women to highlight “new possibilities, alternatives, and choices.” The grant covered one episode, which would be the property of KERA-TV.

In the summer of 1973, their teams began the partnership to produce the pilot for Woman Alive! and decided to include short documentaries on everyday women. They selected Crystal Lee. Although CPB asked that the show not use the Ms. name, because such a reference could be misconstrued as an endorsement of a commercial product, Ms. staff did the research and preproduction work. The PBS station provided camera crews and technology and television expertise. A joint production team traveled to Roanoke Rapids in October 1973 and January 1974 to interview Crystal Lee and film her activities with the TWUA (see Figure 19). They tried to talk to a J.P. Stevens representative and film inside a mill, but the company did not respond.


In February 1974, as the arguments between Crystal Lee and Cookie escalated and Zivkovich pushed for a union election, the KERA-TV/Ms. team edited the first electronic media version of Crystal Lee’s story.\(^\text{106}\) In March 1974, the production team screened the *Woman Alive!* episode for multiple panels and focus groups throughout the U.S. Their survey requested viewer responses to each segment and to the overall concept of the show. All the preview audiences liked the segment about the “North Carolina Union Organizer,” with many mentioning Crystal Lee by name. They used the words “real” and “courageous,” and most liked that she and Cookie cooperated and got along.\(^\text{107}\) One woman on the panel appreciated that Crystal Lee presented her husband in a “favorable way,” like he was “a real man” who also helped around the house. Only two viewers had negative reactions: one disliked the use of children as union cheerleaders and another thought the show’s depiction of what one woman could do was “unrealistic.” The consultants who ran the panels recommended ending the program with Crystal Lee since viewers thought it was the most positive piece.\(^\text{108}\)

The same month as those focus groups, arguments between Crystal Lee and Cookie evolved into regular arguments. Crystal Lee packed her and her children’s clothes and moved in with Syretha and Walter. “I just didn’t need that kind of crap,” she said.\(^\text{109}\) Meanwhile, Zivkovich told his regional supervisors that it was time to call for a union election in Roanoke Rapids. In April 1974, Zivkovich invited them to a TWUA rally at the paperworkers’ hall, where the leaders saw the enthusiasm and agreed to file for a union vote with the NLRB.

\(^\text{106}\) Multiple newspaper articles, file cabinet, drawers #1 and #3, Crystal Lee Sutton Collection, Alamance Community College, Graham, North Carolina.
\(^\text{107}\) In another segment, a couple with college degrees described their tensions and disagreements as the wife became a full-time academic advisor and professional and the husband took care of the home. Although many panelists expressed curiosity about what happened to the couple (they divorce), they did not like them.
These regional supervisors, who had not spent much time in town during the yearlong organizing drive, became more involved as the union filed paperwork. Differences over election tactics and union roles led to arguments between Zivkovich, Galladet, and the regional leaders, prompting Zivkovich to resign. In May 1974, he returned to his family in West Virginia. When he left, Crystal Lee resigned and went to stay with her mother in Burlington. She thought she might find a good job away from Cookie and her notoriety.110

By this time, following weeks of separation, she and the children were still staying with family in Burlington because Cookie refused to leave the house Crystal Lee had bought using her lump child-support settlement. Crystal Lee’s attorney was trying to negotiate with Cookie’s lawyer to come to an agreement regarding the living arrangements.111 Yet the Woman Alive! segment about Crystal Lee depicted their marriage as stable and Cookie as supportive of her public union organizing. It spent quite a bit of time highlighting the importance of her husband’s pride in her fight and his willingness to step beyond traditional gender roles in their home.

Woman Alive! aired on PBS affiliates in June 1974, keeping Crystal Lee’s story in circulation and broadening its reach (see Figure 20).112 The pilot presented a short documentary about a couple in western Massachusetts, two performances by singer Melissa Manchester, a consciousness-raising group in Iowa, a comedic studio piece with Lily Tomlin, a Ms. staff discussion with members of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO),

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and the short documentary about Crystal Lee. By the time the episode aired, both Zivkovich and Crystal Lee had left the TWUA, which was on the verge of a successful NLRB election. Yet the segment presented the drive as Crystal Lee’s individual, local effort rather than one part of a national TWUA campaign that had started ten years earlier and overlapped with civil rights labor activism.

The episode did not have a host because producers had made a concerted plan to avoid hierarchy and elitism. Instead it opened with a collage of black-and-white images that displayed many different women—some famous and some not—and a voiceover saying, “What does it mean to be a woman alive today, facing the excitement of change and the challenge of self-discovery.” From this beginning, the show framed feminism through personal growth and self-actualization. Crystal Lee appeared in three of the photos. The show then cut to a separate series of color shots of celebrities like Shirley Chisholm, Judy Collins, and Bette Midler. A close up of Crystal Lee was the final image before the segments began. The first piece followed the married couple in western Massachusetts who were reversing roles after the wife took a full-time job in the Everywoman Center at the University of Massachusetts. They openly debated whether either of them felt supported in the marriage.

Woman Alive! then covered a circle of women in a “rap session” about work and wages in Iowa. After a couple entertainment segments, the show cut to Steinem and staff at the Ms. offices speaking with women from the NBFO. The show transitioned to the Crystal Lee piece via their conversation, which presented her as a “new” blue-collar woman rather than one of

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114 In late March 1974, Crystal Lee left Roanoke Rapids with her three children to get away from Cookie and seek a job in the mills in Burlington, NC. In early May 1974, after ongoing disagreements with TWUA leadership, Zivkovich also left town. Crystal Lee returned to her house in Roanoke Rapids in June 1974, after Cookie moved to an apartment. Zivkovich returned temporarily in August 1974 to witness the union election. See Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 179-190.

115 Cohn, 38.
many southern women and men with an established history of challenging mill owners and managers throughout the twentieth century.

Steinem: “The woman’s movement is often stereotyped as white and middle class. In doing this, reporters not only ignore black and other third-world women, but they ignore the changes being made by blue-collar women as well.”

Ronnie (Ms. staff and one of the producers) responds: “There was a recent study done by Social Research, Inc. What it really showed was that blue-collar women, who had traditionally been the most stable unchanging voice, or one of the most stable and unchanging voices in society, has emerged [sic] as a very new political, economic, and social voice interested in the environment, consumerism, and in moving out and changing the world a little bit.”

As the introduction continued, it did not mention the long history of southern unions and organizing, the TWUA’s ten-year campaign targeting J.P. Stevens, or the black workers who first joined. Instead, it presented Crystal Lee as the person initiating the effort and pressing as a singular voice.

Steinem: “There’s a story that really says this in very human terms. It’s Crystal Lee Jordan who is a mill worker in North Carolina. She lives in the town of Roanoke Rapids. The influence of the company in the town is still so substantial that it’s very difficult for workers like Crystal Lee to dare to even discuss a union. And yet the working conditions are, well, for instance the average work week is six days, you work eight hours a day and for those eight hours you are literally locked in the factory. You cannot leave. You get a twenty-minute lunch hour, which means you have to eat at your place of work. There’s no seniority, there’s one week of paid vacation. These conditions are really almost accepted out of fear because even to discuss a union is such a challenge to people who are so dependent on J.P. Stevens. It’s one of the major textile manufacturers, one of the oldest in the country. They really dominate the town. Crystal Lee Jordan is trying to break that domination, trying to unionize, and this is her story.”

The segment opened with images made familiar by American fascination with the South and representations of poor mill hands: the rolling North Carolina landscape, a small town street with old signs, a river with a large mill, a worn white church. The first shot of Crystal Lee showed her standing by a mill gate, singing a labor song, “The union makes us strong, solidarity forever.” Although the audience heard only her voice, two other women stood near her and children mingled with them as they offered membership cards and pamphlets to workers. The next shot focused on Crystal Lee at the fence as her voiceover said, “I got involved because it gives me the opportunity to be the woman I always wanted to be, because I can stand up and fight. And I know I’m gonna win this fight.”

During the next few minutes, Crystal Lee described in voiceover an interaction with “an older white woman.” The woman told Crystal Lee that she had thrown out the membership card because she had only taken it to meet Crystal Lee because she felt sorry for her. The woman said, “You have no respect for yourself.” Viewers then saw Crystal Lee moving around her kitchen with her three children sat at the table. She told the off-camera interviewer, “I said, ma’am, please don’t feel sorry for me. And I pointed to my son, and I said, that’s my son and I love him.” She continued to explain the situation, “When I got fired, I didn’t want J.P. Stevens to have any weapon to use against me, and I thought they might dig into my past and they might use it to try to shut me up.” As she gave the kids food and grabbed dishes, she concluded, “The word illegitimate is still a bad word, but to me it’s not… I don’t have anything to worry about anymore.”

The next scene showed Crystal Lee and Cookie sitting at a round table, most likely in their living room. Cookie spoke to the off-camera interviewer, “She is just not afraid. And her rights, she’s gonna get them. And I’m proud of her for that. I wouldn’t want it any other way…. They will not stop her.” The two of them talked to the interviewer about the town and the power of J.P. Stevens. “People are not afraid of the union,” Crystal Lee said. “They are afraid of J.P. Stevens because J.P. Stevens owns six plants in Roanoke Rapids…. The people are afraid that if they are for the union, and the union comes in, that J.P. Stevens will shut the plant down.”

The segment ran through short scenes: Crystal Lee working at what appeared to be the union headquarters as a few black and white women and men chatted about the plant; Cookie moving around the kitchen; and Crystal Lee sewing TWUA letters on a cheerleader jacket. In a voiceover, she expressed annoyance that men from the paper mill, which had a union, refused to let their wives organize for TWUA. Viewers then saw her speaking to the camera, “A lot of men tell me… I can’t wash dishes and cook for my wife… like it would take away from his manhood…. I am proud of the fact that [Cookie] wants to help me around the house and making the children’s breakfast and even washing the clothes… cuz I couldn’t hold up…. [S]ince I was a child, it seemed to me like the man, he could do what he wanted, but the woman, she couldn’t do nothing. She had to stay home.”

The next shot showed Cookie making egg sandwiches in the kitchen. Viewers heard him in voiceover, “I do what I feel what is right, and know that when a man and a woman both work, I mean, she gets tired… and it’s a marriage and it’s a partnership.” He added, “Not that it wouldn’t be really nice, I mean, to come home from work and fall down in the chair and holler for your wife to come in and put these slippers on and draw me a mug of coffee.” The
show then cut to Crystal Lee saying that she thought getting out in public made her a better mother because “I have never been the type that likes being home all the time.”

The final scene showed the cheerleaders and Crystal Lee at a union hall, but viewers were not given any overt indicator. (Most likely, it was the paperworkers’ hall that the TWUA was using for meetings and rallies.) She said, “We are serious about this organizing campaign, and we are proud to be part of the union, and the union is the people.” She declared that workers of all races and ages were gathering. The camera panned over the variety of mill hands in the hall. “A lot of people don’t understand why I am acting like I am. They think I just don’t care about myself, but I do. But I want the entire town to know I believe that strongly in the union. We are organizing in Roanoke Rapids.”

Crystal Lee emphasized that the union was “the only answer” for the town, especially for older workers without other options and for children whose parents could not afford college. Singing rose in the background as she said in voiceover, “They aren’t gonna get me. They’ll have to kill me first.” The final tracking shot showed the crowd singing from booklets titled “TWUA Songs,” and the audience heard Crystal Lee’s voice as she sang, “The union is behind us, we shall not be moved. Just like a tree that’s planted by the water, we shall not be moved.” The camera spent a lot of time on three white men and two black men as they sang. The segment ended with a close-up on Crystal Lee’s face. Then the show cut to Manchester singing the closing song as credits rolled.118

When Crystal Lee explained the union, she repeatedly described a collaborative effort and used the pronoun “we.” She mentioned women as the core of the picketers and emphasized the involvement of black women and men. She said the two main obstacles to a successful election were the fear of J.P. Stevens and men refusing to help around the house so their wives could participate. Crystal Lee repeated concerns she had expressed since her youth regarding prejudice against mill hands and the limitations on women, who were discouraged from doing things men could do.

Viewers, however, heard only her personal maternal life story, not the recent history of the TWUA drive or the longer history of union campaigns and civil rights labor activism. Although other mill hands appeared in the background and margins, the segment did not clarify if they were organizers or members. They had no voice in the piece except in the brief conversation in the union office, where a few anonymous mill hands made general comments about the effort to get membership cards and grievances at the plant. But they had no names and no assertive role in how the union was represented. Even though Crystal Lee’s comments worked against the overall *Woman Alive!* perspective as she repeatedly used “we” and defined the union as “the people,” the potent imagery and story editing framed her as a singular force and even as the leader. The effect was to articulate a story that overlooked years of TWUA efforts and organizing by other women, including Puerto Rican needleworkers and black women. Producers and editors created a short documentary that focused on Crystal Lee with the camera tracking her.

The segment also ignored the history of blue-collar and working women’s complex relationship to feminist activism because Steinem was looking to refute the dominant narrative of women’s liberation as middle class. Throughout the twentieth century, working women
advocated and organized for a variety of issues related to their employment. Some of their interests and demands triggered debates about which strategies better advanced women’s equality. Many women in factories and restaurants wanted protections and benefits provided specifically for women, such as shorter hours, limits on overtime and heavy lifting, and maternity leave. Other feminist activists decried such goals as maintaining the inferior status of women. In addition, women with union membership often viewed their organizing and shop floor leadership as part of their activism for women, a perspective frequently ignored by feminists focused on women’s rights in political participation, higher education, property and inheritance, and professional fields. A similar split existed for black women, as middle-class women in club and church groups often emphasized uplift, respectability, formal education, and the vote while black women in service and low-wage work, like laundry, tobacco, and mills, demanded access to better jobs, pay and conditions, leisure time, and seniority.¹¹⁹

The *Woman Alive!* segment was unable to capture the building arguments between Crystal Lee and Cookie about gender roles and marriage. It did not expose her dissatisfaction with the marriage, the emotional toll of union organizing on their relationship, the discomfort Cookie expressed at the family’s public exposure, or the pressure on Crystal Lee to take responsibility for the home as mother, wife, and caretaker. Their marriage appeared to adapt to her union activism and her absence from the household without contestation. Even as she became a public figure of the union and defying social taboos, their gendered behavior apparently adjusted without friction. The depiction indicated they both worked outside and inside the home, and she easily maintained her femininity and Cookie his masculinity.

The historical record does not make clear specifically who fueled that construction of their marriage. Editors in the KERA-TV/Ms. team could have decided to formulate that impression through selective use of the footage, especially after focus-group panelists said they liked the couple. Zivkovich could have asked Crystal Lee and Cookie to appear positive and cooperative to avoid negative publicity for the union drive. For example, in the spring of 1974, he asked Crystal Lee to return to Cookie and the house because Cookie was threatening to go to a newspaper with the story that “the union had taken his wife and children.”

Zivkovich also could have asked them to avoid airing their disagreements to encourage other men to support their wives’ union activism. Cookie could have agreed to participate only with certain criteria, like a positive representation of himself as a husband. Or the affirmative images of the household could have arisen organically, without any self-conscious decision, from an intuitive effort to perform like “a good family.” The motivation most likely did not come from Crystal Lee’s desire to defend or insulate Cookie. In a variety of other sources, she openly expressed her dissatisfactions with the marriage and Cookie’s response to her hostessing and organizing. She often described their conflicts without softening her words.

The Woman Alive! pilot elided most of the collective union effort and ignored extensive complex histories to construct Crystal Lee as an underdog feminist hero. The editing and camera angles centered her, presenting her as an emblematic individual woman of

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courage and conviction.\footnote{122 The suffrage and women’s rights movement of the early twentieth century appropriated Harriet Tubman for the same purpose. See Milton C. Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 150-164.} Shots of the neighborhoods, main streets, mill, union hall, and serious but silent faces deployed the town setting and appearance to evoke the feelings of poignant virtue associated with poor white southerners. The result constructed Crystal Lee as the unexpected hero, the successful “rebel,” an outsider who became self-conscious and acted in oppositional ways.\footnote{123 Hale, *Nation of Outsiders*, 4 and 126.} The substantive resistance—the generations who had lived with and navigated exploitation and derision, the years of complaints, protests, walkouts, and organizing, the arrests, beatings, and deaths, the civil rights demonstrations, lobbying, acts and lawsuits, the TWUA campaign to build a powerful national union inclusive of southern workers—was subsumed by the simple hero narrative and the potent feelings the show evoked. The piece provided a spirit of authentic outsider rebelliousness, which *Ms.* used to make Crystal Lee an appealing individual and diversify its pantheon of feminist heroes.

Two months after *Woman Alive!* aired, NLRB and TWUA officials monitored a union election in August 1974. Crystal Lee had returned to town earlier that month after signing a 30-day agreement in which Cookie promised to move to an apartment so she and the children could have the house.\footnote{124 Handwritten letter from Crystal Lee to Joan Shigekawa at *Woman Alive!*; dated Aug 1974, 6, Box 7 Special Projects: Film Radio & TV, Folder 2: *Woman Alive!* 1974 Special Gen Jul 1-Dec 1974, Ms. Foundation for Women Records, 1973-2008 - in process, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.} She went to Delta #4 for the vote and submitted a ballot that went into a separate pile with 71 others, from workers the TWUA considered wrongfully terminated. J.P. Stevens was contesting any ballot from former employees with continuing NLRB cases for reinstatement, but Crystal Lee participated inside the mill (see Figure 21). Zivkovich also arrived in town to watch the results and hopefully celebrate with the mill hands. Two of Crystal Lee’s bossmen, Mason Lee and Tommy Gardner, served as J.P.
Stevens observers. They watched silently as the NLRB counted the ballots, 1,448 for the company and 1,685 for the union. The mill hands began shouting, and TWUA members cheered. Crystal Lee joined in the celebrations.125

Zivkovich headed to his room at the Holiday Inn, where mill hands and union organizers gathered for a party. According to Zivkovich, he had kept in touch with Crystal Lee and Cookie and had promised to see them, agreeing to help Cookie attempt a reconciliation. Cookie came to the motel and the men talked until morning, Cookie unloading about all the disappointments in his life. At sunrise, Zivkovich phoned Crystal Lee, and the men went to the house. Zivkovich stayed for a few minutes, then said goodbye. He thought about the importance of the day, of organizing a southern plant in a large textile conglomerate. As he stood outside the union office, a young man handed him a letter. J.P. Stevens recognized the union vote, acknowledged the requirement to bargain for a contract, but said it would continue with “operational decisions and changes arising continually and daily.” Zivkovich handed off the letter and said goodbye. Meanwhile, Crystal Lee and Cookie talked, and she told him about the parts of the marriage that made her unhappy. After they each said their piece, they decided to try working it out. Their effort lasted a little over a year.126

During the chaotic months of 1974, other media interest in Crystal Lee’s “life story” had not receded. The New York Times Magazine article had also caught the attention of editors at Macmillan Publishing. They signed a contract with Leifermann for a full biography and did not offer her any payment, which is standard practice. Throughout 1974 and early 1975, Leifermann conducted interviews and research with a focus on Crystal Lee and Cookie’s childhoods, families, and first marriages. His primary sources were Crystal Lee, Cookie, and

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125 Minchin, “Don’t Sleep With Stevens!”, 73-74; Conway, Part One “Victory in Roanoke Rapids,” 2-9.
126 Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 186-190.
Zivkovich as well as their relatives and friends. TWUA members and employees of J.P. Stevens also contributed.\footnote{Ibid., Acknowledgements.}

During the process, Crystal Lee expressed some complaints about Leifermann’s techniques, especially the way he wrote about Cookie and their marriage. She felt he favored Cookie’s account of their problems and disagreements. In an August 1974 letter to the producer of \textit{Woman Alive!}, she expressed anger at Leifermann’s conversations with Cookie that summer, when Leifermann returned to Roanoke Rapids to see the vote. Crystal Lee wrote, “I’ll admit I was concentrating a lot on what I was planning to do when Hank [Leifermann] was down, and, I wasn’t myself. But, then again, Hank is just another man in my book. He’s got a lot to learn about life himself yet.” She appreciated that Leifermann helped her to calm down when union leaders acted in disrespectful and dismissive ways toward her, but she believed Leifermann too easily accepted Cookie’s version of their marriage.\footnote{Handwritten letter from Crystal Lee to Joan Shigekawa at \textit{Woman Alive!}, dated Aug 1974, Box 7 Special Projects: Film Radio & TV, Folder 2: Woman Alive! 1974 Special Gen Jul 1-Dec 1974, Ms. Foundation for Women Records, 1973-2008 - in process, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.} Crystal Lee participated in the book anyway, because Zivkovich said it was important for the union and for working people. She believed in union education and hoped “to see something I believe in do people good.”\footnote{“Crystal Lee Sutton” in \textit{Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls}, 216 and 218.}

In October 1975, Macmillan released the biography, \textit{Crystal Lee: A Woman of Inheritance} (see Figure 22). The only explanation Leifermann provided for his title is an epigraph: “‘According to the tribes of your fathers ye shall inherit’—The Book of Numbers.” The Book of Numbers is part of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish Torah and tells the story of the Israelites’ march to the land promised them by God after their exodus from Egypt. They suffer
many hardships, fears, and punishments from God. The biblical book emphasizes the concept of inheritance and how tribes and families shall pass on their titles, land, and belongings.

Leifermann’s centering of inheritance reiterates a theme from his 1973 article, the repetitive quality of mill town lives across generations. The theme connects to the fascinations with the South and the notion that it does not change, focusing on the persistence of poverty and certain social customs rather than on economic volatility, global trade, and postwar activism. He expanded on that idea of the sameness of mill families across time in the 1975 biography. Like other biographies of working-class households, most people Leifermann describes lack any feeling or aspiration that some change can or should be made in “the general pattern of life.” The daily work schedule became the driving force of the existence of everyone in working-class households, displaying a refusal to recognize any complicated thoughts, emotions, or ambitions. Rather than a deep economic examination or rich psychological exploration, the book tells a tabloid-style life story of an interesting, sensual woman who pushed against (but did not break) the constraints of mill town monotony.

*Crystal Lee: A Woman of Inheritance* does not have a table of contents, but it is divided into seven parts. Part 1 tells the history of the Pulley family, with some stories about Crystal Lee’s parents and her father’s extreme attentiveness. It also describes a lot about her adolescence, education, work, relationships with boys, and the birth of her two sons. In Part 2, Leifermann turns to the family history of Larry Jordan, Jr., otherwise known as Cookie. His parents and childhood receive a lot of coverage, as well as his first marriage to Eloise and the

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early years with his daughter Renee. The story of Crystal Lee meeting Cookie, their brief courtship, simple wedding, and the death of her father fill much of Part 3, but the remainder of the section follows Crystal Lee’s work history and ends with her leaving the hostessing job at the club to return to the J.P. Stevens mill.

Readers discover the first mention of her interest in the TWUA on page 109 in Part 4, over halfway through the 190-page book. Leifermann includes a description of Zivkovich’s history with the labor movement, his arrival in North Carolina, and his plan to implement a strategy in Roanoke Rapids. Part 4 finishes with Crystal Lee joining the union campaign but still working inside the mill folding towels. Part 5 covers only a few weeks—the month Crystal Lee became more active in the union, attempted to copy the four-page memo, and found herself fired and arrested. Part 6 follows the union drive from the summer of 1973 to 1974, and closes with Crystal Lee and Zivkovich leaving the TWUA as it was on the verge of the NLRB vote. In a brief Afterword, Leifermann describes the August 1974 union victory in Roanoke Rapids without any mention of several other mills that also won union representation. The book ends with Crystal Lee’s words, not about exploitation or the union, but about her personal life. “See, I was a daddy’s girl. My daddy loved me too much. He did. Too much,’ she says. Crystal Lee told Cookie she would try. Perhaps, she told herself, they could start all over again.” The biography reiterates an odd daughter/wife/mother love story.

Although Leifermann made a clear effort to include the TWUA and describe the extensive organizing of Zivkovich and Banks before Crystal Lee joined, the book was positioned as a life story. The perspective emphasizes Crystal Lee’s relationships with her father, men, and her second marriage. The storyline follows the outlines of Crystal Lee’s
personal events, culminating with the campaign for J.P. Stevens and crisis in her marriage. The TWUA’s national fight and southern organizing drive become conflated into a single vehicle for Crystal Lee’s emotional liberation rather than tremendous social forces pushing for economic redistributions in the U.S. economy and the global working class.

Book reviewers noticed that Crystal Lee, while creating a profile of an intriguing woman, was a simplistic biography. They argued it lacked historical, social, and psychological depth. A reviewer for Library Journal described the book’s focus as limited, calling it, “the true story of a woman’s involvement with the Textile Workers Union in a small Southern mill town… [in which h]er commitment to the union becomes the vehicle for her self-realization as a human being.” She went on to express a desire for more history of the industry and southern society. In notably feminist terms, the reviewer for Kirkus Reviews wrote, “[Crystal Lee’s] union organizing advanced both her social and personal goals, by providing a kind of consciousness-raising which in turn forced her to confront the apparent pointlessness of her life…” The writer went on to question the larger purpose of the biography, saying that Crystal Lee was neither extraordinary nor ordinary, that her struggles were hard and praiseworthy but not unique, and that she was not a feminist.131

Crystal Lee struggled even as national media capitalized on her life story. Her TWUA activism from 1973-1974 caused her to be blacklisted, leading her sons to use different names when applying for jobs.132 Although Crystal Lee continued to support the TWUA in interviews, the regional leaders distanced themselves. They focused on the ongoing

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negotiations to finalize a contract with J.P. Stevens, which would take another six years. As part of that effort, they organized a national boycott and a “corporate campaign” that addressed the company’s financial partners and creditors as well as shareholders. Many union leaders continued to see Crystal Lee as a problem, an insubordinate woman who did not respect their authority. Crystal Lee firmly believed unions were the best option for workers, but she admitted union leadership did not always have a good plan and ostracized her at times.

Crystal Lee attempted to find work in Roanoke Rapids throughout 1975 and 1976. The mills knew her and refused employment, but she eventually found jobs in fast food and motel cleaning. Her marriage to Cookie continued to deteriorate, with ongoing arguments about the children and money. They divorced in 1976—Cookie said he had had enough and Crystal Lee was done with the marriage. Late summer of that year, her daughter Elizabeth went to live with Cookie while the two older boys stayed with Crystal Lee. She was overwhelmed with bills. She had kept in touch with the Woman Alive! producer Joan Shigekawa (see Figure 19) and in October 1976 wrote to her describing the family crisis. The Ms. staff wrote to Crystal Lee in November and said they had sent a package to Elizabeth to cheer her. The women were also looking for a lawyer for Crystal Lee, “not just a lawyer—but someone with a practice and contacts that can give legal help and also personal support. As soon as we can get some help to you—we will.” They told her to call the offices collect because they wanted her to be able to talk to someone if she needed. A handwritten note from Steinem was included with the

typed letter. She asked Crystal Lee not to grow hard and assured her that Elizabeth was “a whole person” who would survive the tough situation.\textsuperscript{135}

A pivotal step in creating \textit{Norma Rae} occurred around that time in 1976, when two female producers decided to turn Crystal Lee’s story into a Hollywood movie.\textsuperscript{136} Alexandra Rose, one of the first women producers in Los Angeles, had come across the 1973 \textit{New York Times Magazine} article and was captivated by the story of a mother facing jail and needing to tell her children about their different fathers because she feared company gossip. Rose said, “[M]y heart went out to her. That’s how it started for me.” Rose was working for Roger Corman’s distribution company at the time and did not believe the moment was right. Three years later, in 1976, she teamed up with Tamara Asseyev to start their own company, Rose & Asseyev Productions, and they contacted Macmillan and Leifermann to get film rights to the biography. The “Crystal Lee story” was their first project.\textsuperscript{137}


\textsuperscript{136} Alexandra Rose and Tamara Asseyev were two of the first women producers in the modern movie era, however, women had been producers and writers in the earliest formative years. Since the 1920s, women continued to work as typists, clerks, tinters, splicers, script girls, and casting assistants. See Smyth, \textit{Nobody’s Girl Friday} and Hill, \textit{Never Done}.

“I’m not concerned that people know about my personal life, but I wanted people to see a strong union film. I’d hoped Leiferman’s book would get the point across and it didn’t. And I thought Barbara’s film would offer just one more chance to get the importance of the union struggle across to the people.”

Crystal Lee Sutton, 1979, Los Angeles Times

CHAPTER THREE
FROM CRYSTAL LEE TO “CRYSTAL LEE” TO NORMA RAE:
A WORKING WOMAN CONTESTS THE MAKING OF HER STORY

In November 1977, Crystal Lee signed a contract with director Barbara Kopple to make a movie about her experiences in the TWUA drive. That agreement included a $1,000 payment, the right to script approval, and a percentage of the profits. Steinem had put the two in contact because Kopple won an Academy Award for her 1976 documentary Harlan County, U.S.A. It told a nuanced and complicated history of the coal miners’ strike in eastern Kentucky in the early 1970s. Kopple had filmed in union halls, at homes, and outside the mine. The Harlan County, U.S.A. poster included nineteen photos of different residents. At that time, Crystal Lee was very disappointed with Rose & Asseyev Production’s screenplay and ideas for a “Crystal Lee” movie. Throughout 1977, Crystal Lee negotiated and contested the storyline and movie development until Rose & Asseyev, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Ritt used financial and legal maneuvers to remove her from the production. They and Leifermann had already marginalized her from any of the capital investment and potential revenues from the biography and film. After December 1977, they also eliminated her from creative input.

These decisions resulted in the 1979 movie *Norma Rae*. Again, if Crystal Lee had been compliant and accepted her unpaid and low-status position in the Hollywood industry, she might have seen a movie with her name as the title. Instead she asserted her disappointment in their creative decision to focus on one woman and to fabricate a sexualized relationship between her and the organizer. She also shared concerns regarding her family, who she worried would suffer consequences for their association with her and the union. Rose & Asseyev, Ritt, and Field had heightened stakes in the success of the movie, so they did not have any interest in deviating from racialized cultural expectations or the Hollywood tendency to make every complicated situation into the story of an unexpected individual hero. They all wanted the movie to be a major commercial success, so they eliminated Crystal Lee and celebrated the depiction of *Norma Rae*. They did not simply repeat long-running stereotypes without question—they jettisoned other ideas and reconstituted an accessible marketable narrative.

This chapter continues to track the extraction of Crystal Lee’s “life story” and its refinement into a polished Hollywood movie. From the *New York Times* article to the PBS-*Ms.* television segment to the biography, events from Crystal Lee’s life had been selected and ordered to create a story of unexpected heroism and individual transformation. She had participated with the goal of reaching workers and spreading information about union organizing. In those early productions, Crystal Lee met the authors and producers and regularly interacted with them. She even called and wrote to *Woman Alive!* staff. The terrain changed as soon as Rose & Asseyev acquired an option for *Crystal Lee*. The next steps took place entirely within the system of Hollywood studios and investors and their mastery of its
usual practices and intellectual property. The tighter lens now studies Crystal Lee’s relationship to these Hollywood creative professionals, including the producers, director, studio executives, and actors (see Figure 23). In this system, Crystal Lee was not a worker. Her status as an outsider, as a low-wage woman worker without experiences or resources in the movie industry, shaped her position. She contested not her conditions as labor but her ability to influence a popular culture product derived from the raw material of her life, the TWUA, mill hands, and thousands of women in the textile and garment industry.

Some labor historians study the popular culture and expressions of working people, but this chapter examines a working woman’s attempts to control a dominant multi-million dollar popular culture product about her life. It reveals the ways capitalist mechanisms like copyright, financial releases, corporate accounting, contracts, insurance requirements, and entertainment lawyers, even in the hands of well-intentioned professionals, marginalize low-wage people. When we study movies as expensive high-risk industrial products, the mechanisms and their power become clear. Their relevance lies not with questions about the accuracy of a movie or the fact imaginative compressions have to occur. Films cannot be measured for accuracy or their compressions and composites. Neither is the chapter telling a simple story of cosmopolitan professionals taking advantage of a “country bumpkin.” After months of proposals and discussion, Crystal Lee came to better understand the Hollywood industry and adapted her responses. Chapter five shows the improvement of her tactics as she reclaimed her life story to critique the film, promote herself as “the real Norma Rae,” and use the movie’s success to make financial demands.

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3 Letter and Contract for Rose & Asseyev Productions, January 19, 1978, attached Distribution List #1 from Morton H. Smithline, Subject: “Norma Rae,” Basic Property; Box 23, Folder 235: Norma Rae, Legal 1977-1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
This chapter emphasizes the importance of capitalist mechanisms in the arena of cultural politics, especially regarding questions of who contests and shapes the visibility and meanings for “worker” and “American working class.” Crystal Lee’s interest in telling a history of collective activism by many workers without the false sensationalism of sexual attraction did not influence the movie. The resulting product reiterated the cultural narrative of an American working class as white individuals in local industries. It obscured the disconcerting complexities of a global working class with diverse and migrating people and the realities of contentious but reciprocal labor and civil rights activism.

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Rose & Asseyev started pitching the Crystal Lee story to major studios in early 1977. They made this decision because the popular and critical success of Rocky in 1976 had proven that a so-called “negative pick up” could be a hit. Rocky was the first movie without a studio’s greenlight and budget to be a tremendous commercial success. More than this, it was the story of a working-class unexpected hero, a “paean to an underdog-triumphant white identity.”

Asseyev and Rose had extensive experience in the industry. Both women previously worked with Roger Corman and in multiple jobs at other studios. Their creative business logic would have guided their realization that a commercial movie about a working mother achieving her personal liberation while fighting for a union in the precarious textile industry, at a J.P. Stevens mill, held appeal on many levels for a wide audience.

Rose & Asseyev started looking for a director and pitching to studios for funding. They went to the director Martin Ritt with their idea. Ritt had experience as both an actor and director in the proletarian tradition, having started in the Popular Front New York theater

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4 Jacobson, Roots Too, 17, 96-98.
5 Borda, 109; Mollie Gregory, 146-148.
scene with the Workers Laboratory Theater/Theatre of Action in the late 1930s. Ritt directed the movie *Edge of the City* (1957) about New York City longshoremen before deciding to focus on the South. The depiction of poor white southerners was a subgenre in the proletarian tradition. Short stories and novels about mill hands had helped to establish it in the 1930s with books like Mary Heaton Vorse’s *Strike!* (1930) and Sherwood Anderson’s *Beyond Desire* (1932). The 1933 novel *God’s Little Acre* by Erskine Caldwell, one of the bestselling books of the 1930s and 1940s, told the story of a salacious Georgia family split between sharecropping and the mills. Ritt said he fell in love with the South while playing football from 1932 to 1934 at Elon College outside Burlington, the mill town where Crystal Lee lived.

By the 1970s, Ritt had weathered the postwar red scare and found measured success. He had shown a professional commitment to directing films about working people and African American families. He used phrases like “affirmation of the human struggle,” “the human equation,” “moral note,” and “liberalism” in describing his work. One movie reviewer described Ritt as “a veteran director of commercial films with a conscience. His pictures show a humanitarian concern and often focus on American classes and cultures otherwise seldom seen in Hollywood.” Rose & Asseyev knew attaching him to the movie would give it legitimacy. He agreed to consider the “Crystal Lee” project if the successful couple, Harriet Frank, Jr. and Irving Ravetch, wrote the script. Ritt had worked with them on *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958), *Hud* (1963), and *Hombre* (1967)—all starring Paul Newman, as well as *The

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6 Although Ritt said he never joined the Communist Party or received any subpoenas, in the early 1950s he dealt with a short period of FBI surveillance and brief blacklisting from television work, Jackson, 27-38.


Sound and the Fury (1959), Sounder (1972), and Conrack (1974). The couple had won awards for adapting books to screenplays.

The producers also approached Leifermann to buy the film rights to the biography Crystal Lee. When Leifermann learned of their interest, he wrote to Crystal Lee in the summer of 1977 to get her signature on a full film release for a token $1 payment. Crystal Lee, trusting him and misunderstanding the offer, instead sent Leifermann a dollar with her signature.\(^{12}\) He received $35,000 for the story rights.\(^{13}\) Then Rose & Asseyev went to the studios in search of the millions of dollars needed to make a movie. They started with Columbia Pictures, where an executive, unable to call two businesswomen “producers of the project,” stumbled on the “p” in p-p-producers. Columbia said no. Asseyev and Rose eventually convinced Twentieth Century-Fox by telling executives that Crystal Lee was a “female Rocky,” a determined working-class underdog. Twentieth Century-Fox had just distributed and promoted Rocky, garnering popular attention, commercial revenues, and Oscar accolades.\(^{14}\) The studio executives would have also been aware of the recent “women’s lib movies” that had been commercially and critically successful.

Rose & Asseyev reached out to Crystal Lee to procure her support and input on script details but did not offer her any payment. Crystal Lee had received a couple vague inquiries about making a movie. Since Rose & Asseyev had a director and the interest of a major Hollywood studio, she decided to enter into discussions.\(^{15}\) At this time, Crystal Lee could not

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12 Albrecht, 43; Eunice Field, “Real Norma Rae ‘not bitter’ over not receiving any money,” The Hollywood Reporter, 14 March 1980, 28, clipping; Box 10, Folder 9, ACTWU's Textile Division Records, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

13 Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, Production Budget Title “Norma Rae,” March 17, 1978, Box 22, Folder 229: Norma Rae budget, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

14 Borda, 109; Mollie Gregory, 146-148.

be sure the producers would get the funding and team to get a movie made. It was all just a possibility. Over the next few weeks, however, Ritt cut his usual salary in half, from $595,000 to $297,497, in order to get the $5 million investment from Twentieth Century-Fox. The movie development went into process, each step quantified by budgets and timelines.

Frank and Ravetch received an initial disbursement toward their $158,903 salary and began the first draft of “Crystal Lee.” The Hollywood industry had established a specific plot formula to increase the possibilities of commercial success. The postwar industry consensus dictated the “conversion of all political, sociological, and economic dilemmas into personal melodramas,” placing focus on the individual and the emotional redemption of a reluctant hero. The Frank-Ravetch script eliminated all the history and even the regional labor organizing. In an interview, Frank shared a condensed version of their storyline, “We couldn’t believe how people survived in [those Southern mills]. Then suddenly there’s this ballsy woman who says she’s going to get a union in there. She was at risk. Her economic life, such as it was, could be utterly swept away. But that woman stood up and said, ‘This far and no more.’ That was dazzling. More than dazzling. It was spectacular.”

To tell Crystal Lee’s life story as an accessible commercial movie, the Frank-Ravetch script relied on the Hollywood tendency to recycle the cultural narrative of a charismatic and captivating if unexpected individual working alone to solve complex social, economic, or political problems. Crystal Lee provided the vehicle for the emotional redemption of that

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Box 23, Folder 232: Norma Rae Correspondence 1977-1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
16 Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, Production Budget Title “Norma Rae,” March 17, 1978, Box 22, Folder 229: Norma Rae budget, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
17 Ray, 18 and 47-59.
18 Mollie Gregory, 149.
reluctant hero.\textsuperscript{19} The resulting script, while not predetermined, was limited by established conventions.\textsuperscript{20} The article, television segment, and biography had already selected key personal events and ordered them in a way that highlighted her transformation. The script went further by making Crystal Lee not only the main character, but also the only person pushing the union drive. She appeared as the authentic folk rebel. History and any prevailing strands of worker organizing were eliminated. This step in refining her life story into the Norma Rae icon was crucial. The tendency meant the erasure of any historical legacies, complexities, or collaborations and prompted much of Crystal Lee’s criticisms. In addition, Ritt wanted to guarantee the “Crystal Lee movie” would be entertaining, so he and the Ravetches “came up with the relationship between the organizer and the girl.”\textsuperscript{21}

After she read the Frank-Ravetch screenplay, Crystal Lee conveyed her suggestions and concerns to Rose & Asseyev. Throughout the fall of 1977, the production company and Ritt engaged in increasingly contentious negotiations with Crystal Lee while also finalizing arrangements with Twentieth Century-Fox. Before the studio would disburse any more money, the production needed errors and omissions coverage (E & O coverage) and other types of insurance and agreements meant to reduce its liability for accidents and lawsuits. For both Rose & Asseyev and Ritt, evidence indicates their top priority was meeting the studio’s demands, confirming a budget, and moving from pre-production to filming. Ritt did make a late attempt to garner a payment for Crystal Lee, but it did not happen.

Despite the title change and Ritt’s frequent statement that the movie was not based on Crystal Lee, the archives clearly contradicts that version. The many letters, memos, legal

\textsuperscript{19} Ray, 47-59.
\textsuperscript{20} Maza, “Stories in History,” 1498-1500.
agreements, and articles reveal a tense and even combative dynamic with Crystal Lee as the producers and director sought her compliance. From the first script through the 1980 Academy Awards, however, Crystal Lee challenged the movie and resisted its erasures of the long TWUA campaign as well as its reliance on melodrama. Zivkovich participated in some of the 1977 negotiations, and they had a legal foundation for contesting the script. Unlike New York and California, North Carolina stipulated that a subject cannot be portrayed on screen without explicit agreement, regardless of other out-of-state agreements like the releases Leifermann had from her. 22

Perhaps the most decisive evidence that the movie Norma Rae was based solely on Crystal Lee’s life story appears in material from early movie development. Producers purchased the rights to Leifermann’s book and for months the title on screenplay drafts was “Crystal Lee.” When Rose & Asseyev contacted Sol Stetin about locations, they mentioned only Crystal Lee. Stetin had been president of the TWUA at the start of the J.P. Stevens campaign in 1963 and arranged a 1976 merger with the ACWA to form the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). When Rose & Asseyev wrote to Stetin, then the ACTWU Vice President, they said, “We are planning to produce a film for Twentieth Century-Fox based on the book CRYSTAL LEE: A WOMAN OF INHERITANCE by Henry P. Leifermann and to be directed by Martin Ritt. As you know Crystal Lee Jordan was instrumental in organizing the J.P. Stevens mill in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. We would appreciate your cooperation in locating a mill which would be amenable to a pro-union motion picture being shot on its premises.” 23

22 Taylor, T5.
23 Tamara Asseyev and Alexandra Rose, letter to Sol Stetin dated August 1, 1977, Box 23, Folder 236: Norma Rae Misc. 1977-1981, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
An October 1977 Warner Brothers inter-office memo to Ritt had the subject, “Timing of ‘Crystal Lee’.” It made a clear request about reimbursement. “Dear Marty: Enclosed please find Betty Abbott Griffin’s invoice for timing of script CRISTAL LEE which we have paid. Please send this to Twentieth Century Fox so we can be reimbursed.” That same month, Ritt wrote to his friend Paul Newman. The note stated, “Here is the first draft of CRYSTAL LEE. I am curious to know what you think.”

Months into pre-production, executives still used the title “Crystal Lee” for the project. A November 1977 rush invoice confirming the deal with Ritt had the formal subject, “‘Crystal Lee’ - #558 Martin Ritt.” The body of the memo stated, “We have entered into a development deal with Martin Ritt as director of this picture, if made. He is to receive a Development Fee of $50,000 (against his Director’s Fee) and the entire Development Fee has now accrued upon delivery of the first-draft screenplay of the Ravetches.”

The decision to change the title from “Crystal Lee” to “Norma Rae” derived from three separate pressures that reinforced each other. Due to the blacklisting and anti-union attitude of potential employers, Crystal Lee was nervous about the production using her name and the names of her family. She was still living with the consequences of reactions to her activism, her media attention, and the divorce from Cookie. Yet Crystal Lee hoped for a strong union film and an increased awareness of workers and organizers in the mills, so she did not sign a

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25 Martin Ritt, letter to Paul Newman dated October 6, 1977, Box 23, Folder 232: Norma Rae Correspondence 1977-1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
26 Morton H. Smithline to Susan McIntosh, Invoice #000776, Re: development deal for “Crystal Lee,” November 23, 1977, Box 23, Folder 235: Norma Rae, Legal 1977-1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
simple release but rather attempted to negotiate. On the other hand, Rose & Asseyev and Ritt sought to assert full creative, legal, and financial control over the life story. They were annoyed at Crystal Lee’s demands for changes to the script, like more attention to other union workers and removal of the sexualized flirtation between the main character and organizer. In addition to these two pressures, the film insurance company raised its own concerns about Crystal Lee’s potential future claims against the production. It refused to issue E & O coverage without a signed release from Crystal Lee and Zivkovich—and Twentieth Century-Fox made its contracts with both Rose & Asseyev and Ritt contingent on acquisition of E & O coverage.

Ritt attempted to make a conciliatory offer to Crystal Lee because he did not like that Rose & Asseyev had not paid her. He asked Alan Ladd, Jr., president of the film division at Twentieth Century-Fox, to pay her $25,000. Ladd agreed to the additional line item. Ritt put forward the offer to Crystal Lee’s attorney Sydenham Alexander, who repeated her request for script approval. Ritt again refused to relinquish any control. In the confusion of different letters, phone calls, and proposals, Crystal Lee did not receive either script input or payment.

To address Crystal Lee’s concerns about her family and the insurance requirements, while not giving up any creative and legal control, Ritt worked with Frank and Ravetch to create new character names. At the same time, legal staff for Rose & Asseyev compiled a full

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28 Albrecht, 43.
29 Taylor, T5.
32 Eunice Field, “Real Norma Rae ‘not bitter’ over not receiving any money,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 14 March 1980, 28, clipping; Box 10, Folder 9, ACTWU's Textile Division Records, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library; Vernon Scott, B5, Crystal Lee spent about $3,000 in legal fees during this time.
release with specific conditions, including a token $10 payment. Lawrence P. Mortorff, the lead attorney for Rose & Asseyev, met with Alexander in late 1977. Mortorff pressured the lawyer for a signed release from Crystal Lee, informing Alexander of several ways the production could get around her participation yet still use details from her experiences. He said there were other women with “stories basically similar to Crystal Lee’s” and Crystal Lee “did not see the unionization fight through to its conclusion.” But Mortorff also insisted “J.P. Stevens” and the legend “based on a true story” were “essential to this project” and pressed Alexander to review the release with his client and get a signature. The negativity of that meeting appears to have spread into later discussions and perhaps spoiled any possibility for compromise.

After a few failed attempts to gain the right to script approval from Ritt, Crystal Lee decided to open discussions with the director Barbara Kopple, who Steinem recommended. Kopple had just won a 1976 Academy Award for her documentary about a UMW coal miners’ strike, Harlan County, U.S.A. It followed several men and wives over the course of a 1973 strike in Kentucky and included scenes of strategizing, debating, and adjusting tactics. Kopple filmed in union halls, at family homes, on the roads outside the mine, and at a demonstration in New York City. The Harlan County, U.S.A. poster included nineteen photos of different

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33 Martin Ritt, letter to Sidney E. Cohn dated February 27, 1978, Box 23, Folder 232: Norma Rae Correspondence 1977-1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
34 Lawrence P. Mortorff, letter to Rose & Asseyev Productions dated November 16, 1977, Box 23, Folder 235: Norma Rae Legal 1977-1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
35 Taylor, T5.
37 Cathy and Jay Jordan, conversation with the author, 2013; Taylor, T5.
residents for and against the union. In November 1977, Crystal Lee and Kopple signed the agreement with a $1,000 payment, right to script approval, and a percentage of the profits.

Rose & Asseyev and Ritt knew about the contract but did not stop their production. At that point, they decided to abandon the legend “based on a true story.” Ritt then prompted Frank and Ravetch to also change the mill company’s name, which became O.P. Henley. They added a qualifier at the end of the movie credits that stated the “events, characters, and firms depicted in this photoplay are fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or firms is purely coincidental.” Crystal Lee and Cookie had signed various requests and releases between 1973 and 1977, during the time she was confronting a lack of employment options. They signed at least two releases for Leifermann, as well as others in 1974, 1976, and 1977—all tracked down by Mortorff to show the insurance company and Twentieth Century-Fox. Crystal Lee contested at least one of them that had a disclaimer, but the production team used the releases, removal of the name “Crystal Lee,” and subsequent revisions to acquire the E & O coverage. The cosmetic name revisions and acquisition of the coverage ended Crystal Lee’s participation in the production, and she did not meet Field until months after the movie appeared in theaters.

Documents show Crystal Lee did have concerns about her ability to find a job and aspirations for a movie that celebrated the mill hands of North Carolina and the TWUA. They

39 Taylor, T5.
40 Elizabeth Stone, “‘Norma Rae’: The Story They Could Have Told” *Ms.* May 1979, 33; *Norma Rae*, Rose and Asseyev, Ritt, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1979, DVD, 2001.
42 Morton H. Smithline, letter to Ritt with the contract for Norma Rae, dated January 19, 1978, Box 23, Folder 235: Norma Rae Legal 1977-1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
43 Nancy Shryock, “Real Norma Rae continues her fight for worker’s right to form a union,” *Globe-Democrat*, 1980, clipping; Box 13, Folder 25, ACTWU's Textile Division Records, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
also show the production’s interest in finding any means to maintain legal and financial control, separate her from the script, and meet the insurance company’s demand. The end result can be seen in the title “Norma Rae” and the superficial changes to signal fictionalization. The first documented use of the title “Norma Rae” appears in a December 30, 1977, letter from Ritt to Dustin Hoffman asking for comments.44 These steps undertaken by the Rose & Asseyev and Ritt sparked the Norma Rae phenomenon by establishing the separate entity “Norma Rae.” This character was an even more consolidated and refined version of Crystal Lee’s extracted life story.

Ritt quickly moved ahead with script revisions, financial plans, and contacting lead actresses. After weeks of discussion, Ritt received a Twentieth Century-Fox signature on a $5 million budget offer for “Norma Rae.” Ritt also announced that he was scouting locations. Stetin and the ACTWU threw their support behind Rose & Asseyev and Ritt, with Stetin contacting multiple mills and factories to help find a functioning location. Such progress, with backing from a major studio, inhibited investment in Kopple’s project, but she continued seeking funds and writing a script.45

Explanations for the removal of Crystal Lee and creation of “Norma Rae” remained contested from 1977 until Crystal Lee’s death in 2009. What was never in question, however, was the fact the only property the production purchased was the biography Crystal Lee. The Twentieth Century-Fox contract states the Frank-Ravetch screenplay was based on that property, the materials in Ritt’s papers relate only to Crystal Lee, and all the key scenes in the

44 Martin Ritt, letter to Dustin Hoffman dated December 30, 1977, Box 23, Folder 232: Norma Rae Correspondence 1977-1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
movie enact events from her biography.\textsuperscript{46} Ritt and Sally Field’s subsequent insistence that the movie was based on many southern textile workers rings false due to the utter lack of evidence.\textsuperscript{47} Capitalist mechanisms that included right releases and contracts as well as entertainment lawyers and studio accountants had been rallied to remove Crystal Lee from the investment and revenues and even from the creative production.

Asseyev and Rose, two of the first women producers, Ritt, and Field had to maneuver within industry financial standards and studio demands. The four of them also worked under an added pressure of having to prove themselves, which meant complying with movie industry tendencies as much as possible. The socio-economic context of the 1970s and the trend of successful movies about southern, working-class, and women heroes formed the right social and cultural milieu for success with “Norma Rae.” They knew as experienced creative professionals they could maximize that opportunity if they conformed to the imperative of making a commercial hit.

As a result, Ritt decided with “Norma Rae” to avoid any explicit statement about collective organizing or politics. “I’ve been overtly polemical before, but not in this film,” he told a journalist. He described \textit{The Molly Maguires}—a movie about Irish coal miners in Pennsylvania who organize a secret group and sabotage the unsafe mines—as “the most


painful experience of my professional life.” It “cost a lot of money” but was “a total failure.” Ritt admitted that he did not “understand why ‘The Molly Maguires’ got no audience” but decided that union films did not have appeal. As Ritt said, “[W]e don’t want a union or labor film; we wanted an entertaining commercial one.”

His pain from *The Molly Maguires* fueled Ritt’s pragmatism about his industry obligation to make a movie that would earn a respectable net profit if he wanted to keep getting hired. He expressed concern that both *The Molly Maguires* (1970) and *Casey’s Shadow* (1978) were not financial successes although each one starred a celebrity actor, Sean Connery and Walter Matthau. Ritt was particularly disappointed by the performance of *Casey’s Shadow*, in which Matthau played a horse trainer who raises an orphaned colt with his sons. Ritt had predicted it would earn higher box office sales than his other movies. *The Great White Hope* (1970), *Sounder* (1972), and *Conrack* (1974) had generated decent revenues and critical acclaim, but they were not financial blockbusters. In an interview, Ritt said that he told his wife during post-production on *Conrack* that their grandchildren would “live off” the movie, but it never achieved that level of profit.

When he spoke with Ladd in support of the Rose & Asseyev proposal, Ritt assured Ladd that he “didn’t want to start a film that had no chance of making money.” He told him it

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49 Taylor, T5.

50 Harmetz, D1; Martin Ritt, letter to Becky Wild regarding latest projects dated September 14, 1977, Box 41, Folder 522: Wild, Becky 1966-1982, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

51 Article from *L’Express Magazine* about Cannes, June 1979, clipping without page or title, Box 23, Folder 240: Norma Rae Publicity, 1979-1981, Martin Ritt papers; and oral history transcript, 58, Box 1, Folder 392: Ritt, Martin 1987, SMU Collection of Ronald I. Davies Oral Histories on the Performing Arts, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Harmetz, D1.
was not a depressing movie because it was “about a girl who turns into a woman who can work, who can love, who can fight, who is as close to a complete woman of superior dimensions as any in film history.” Ritt assured Ladd that the movie would not be a “downer.” After several film stars turned down the lead role, Ritt approached Field and pushed the studio to accept her. In defending his choice of Field, Ritt said he “wanted that kind of feisty little girl who would defend her kids with every drop of blood, somebody Middle America could relate to.” Ritt clearly used a gendered framing for the movie and the character Norma Rae. It positioned her as experiencing personal growth into womanhood, the type of relationship he fostered with Field. Ritt was a catalyst by which the Crystal Lee mill hand story of unionization was further extracted and refined into the Norma Rae story of one woman’s liberation by activism with a man of superior intellect and sophistication. Field’s long-term professional relationship with Ritt through the 1980s mirrored this dynamic.

Field had made a conscious decision to develop her leverage in the industry. She said she “had a desperate, very personal need to establish [her]self as a serious actress.” Field had grown up in Van Nuys in a family with ties to the television and movie industry, including a stepfather who worked as an actor and stuntman with connections throughout the business. Field had taken acting classes at Columbia Studios, performed roles since she was a teenager, when she became a member of SAG. At age eighteen, she bought a house in the Hollywood Hills with the income and royalties from Gidget, which had become a hit in reruns. In the

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52 Harmetz, D19.
53 Borda, 109; Mollie Gregory, 146-148; Carlton Jackson, 181.
early 1970s, following three situational comedies, Field stopped taking any roles and committed herself to studying drama, voice, and dance at the Actors Studio.

She wanted a particular type of career with the income and status it carried, so she accepted only roles that would demonstrate her credibility and legitimacy. For three years, she focused on technique and pursuing substantive roles. Independent casting director Dianne Crittenden said she had to push hard against typecasting to get serious roles for Field.\(^\text{57}\) By the late 1970s, she had starred in *Sybil* (1976), *Stay Hungry* (1976), and *Heroes* (1977), and joined her high-powered boyfriend, Burt Reynolds, in the action-comedies *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), *The End* (1978), and *Hooper* (1978).\(^\text{58}\) While she had not yet become a top-tier Hollywood actress, Field had established a stable career with box office success. Her background and union membership, as well as her celebrity status and its accoutrements, gave her the tools to demand not simply fair pay but proportional pay aligned toward that of the producers and director. Her name also appeared on screen in large letters on its own as a declaration of her contribution. That leverage brought her the offer for *Norma Rae* and the ability to ask for a high salary and other perks.

Crystal Lee did not have that leverage or ability to ask for payment. Field’s February 1978 contract reveals the level of inside professional knowledge, legal skill, and specification required for agents to secure full and explicit compensation for an actor and for movie producers to acquire a valuable actor as an asset. Field had professional agency representation plus membership in the powerful Screen Actors Guild (SAG). By that time, she had also

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\(^{58}\) In *Sybil*, Field costarred with Joanne Woodward, wife of Paul Newman and close friend of Martin Ritt. In *Stay Hungry*, she costarred with Jeff Bridges, brother of Beau Bridges, her costar in *Norma Rae*. *Smokey and the Bandit* was the second top-grossing movie of 1977.
created her own company, Fogwood Films Limited. So the contract permitted the “borrowed” use of Field from Fogwood to the *Norma Rae* movie production based on specific criteria: $150,000 for two weeks of rehearsal, approximately two months of principal photography, and three looping days; $25,000 deferred payment; an additional $15,000 if the film reached $30 million net profits; transportation to the location for herself, another adult, and two children; $1,000 for expenses per week away from Los Angeles; first star onscreen credit; and full screen card with 100% of title (meaning her name would appear alone in the same size as the title).59 The extensive and multi-faceted contract stands in stark contrast to the $10 or even $25,000 offered to Crystal Lee, whose experiences and actions as a worker provided the material for the movie.

In addition to eliminating Crystal Lee’s demands and planning an uplifting movie about a feisty woman rather than labor politics, Ritt wanted to film in a mill that appealed to the American fascination with poor white southerners. Stetin hoped to connect Rose & Asseyev and Ritt with a union-friendly mill. Most mill owners and managers, however, were not receptive because of the ongoing ACTWU campaign to organize J.P. Stevens and textile and garment companies in general. The mills with managers who agreed to work with Rose & Asseyev were in the northeast, in Philadelphia and Paterson, New Jersey, but Ritt wanted a southern location. Stetin tried to find one in Georgia but was not successful.60

Opelika Manufacturing in Opelika, Alabama, finally agreed to permit shooting full interior and exterior scenes.61 Finalizing details with the manager as well as with corporate

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59 Pink memo dated February 20, 1978, Box 23, Folder 235: Norma Rae Legal 1977-1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
60 Sol Stetin, letter to Tamara Asseyev dated October 14, 1977; Box 13, Folder 26, ACTWU’s Textile Division Records, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
61 “Shoot ‘Norma Rae’ in Dixie?,” *On Location: The Film & Videotape Production Magazine*, Nov/Dec 1978, 60-67, clipping, Box 23, Folder 239: Norma Rae Publicity 1978-1979; and copy of a letter from Anne Rivera of
executives required “negotiations and a lot of PR work.” When Rose & Asseyev raised the location payment from $25,000 to $100,000, the company finally agreed. The mill manager said he had the option to turn the parent company down, but the executives and Opelika Chamber of Commerce hoped the production would “be good for the community.” Governor George Wallace and Phil Cole of the Alabama Film Commission encouraged the deal as well. Cole had established the commission in January 1978 after helping to bring 40% of Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* to Mobile in 1976-1977 and documenting the economic boost to the city.  

Frank and Ravetch joined Ritt on a visit to Opelika to plan for any necessary adaptations of their scene descriptions or dialogue. Ritt said he “fell in love with Opelika” the moment he saw it and described it as a “Norman Rockwell cover” for the *Saturday Evening Post*, “typical Americana.” The people had “that certain stamp of southern pride on their faces. I know it’s going to proffer some of the most exciting photography ever captured on film.” Such an evocation supports the point that the southern milltown setting and images of its textile workers were imbued with the feelings of poignant authenticity and virtue. Ritt recognized the cultural power and carried that sentimentality into the shooting and editing of the movie.

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63 Mollie Gregory, 148.

Even changes to the script highlight the importance of creative decisions in contributing to commercial success. The big scenes and peak dramatic moments all come from the previous constructions of Crystal Lee’s “life story.” Ritt made five key revisions that shaped the entire arc of the movie. In the most obvious, Norma works on an antiquated cotton textile loom in a loud mechanical space filled with banging machines and cotton lint. The first script had placed Norma, like Crystal Lee, at a folding table with piles of towels flowing toward her on a moving line, but handwritten notes inserted the phrase “weave room” next to these scene descriptions and subsequent scripts have her on the looms. Frank and Ravetch in particular liked the drama of the looms. As discussed previously, such textile imagery aligned with the American fascination with poor southern mill hands, whereas someone standing at a clean table folding fancy towels for retail packaging did not.

The next two changes were also noticeable. In the “Norma Rae” scripts, the TWUA organizer is not a former-UMW organizer from West Virginia with a family, but rather a Jewish intellectual from New York City with a feminist girlfriend and love for poetry. Ritt did not leave any indicator as to the reason for this change, but it clearly serves the narrative of the problematic South and its poor whites in need of help. The character, Reuben Warshowsky, hews close to the type of people Ritt would have known during his years as a New York theater actor and director with ties to Popular Front artists. Reuben’s secular Jewishness marks him as an external savior, someone coming to rescue the South, and he mirrors Ritt. Ritt was a Jewish New Yorker drawn to the South and to helping Sally Field’s career.

Making the organizer a New Yorker also helped the third important script revision, the relationship between Reuben and Norma. He becomes her Pygmalion, inspiring her to funnel

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65 Mill description on page 2 and pages 20, 38, 40, 44, 55, script by Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, Jr., Norma Rae, Box 22, Folder 225: Norma Rae Script - undated, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Mollie Gregory, 149.
her rebelliousness and defiance into purposeful union organizing. There is no ongoing southern drive or years of civil rights labor activism. The two of them, with their sexualized but unconsummated attraction, launching and sustaining the TWUA in town. Instead of meeting at a black church, Reuben and Norma meet at her parents’ house. Reuben knocks on the door and asks her father for a recommendation on a place to stay. He is alone, walking the streets of the un-named southern town. Her father tells him to take his union stuff and hit the road, but Norma shows obvious curiosity. She has her first conversation with Reuben at a motel later that night. He is staying alone in a room that he also uses as his office, and Norma is meeting an older man for a tryst. After her time in bed, which occurs off-screen, she ends the affair and the man smacks her. Reuben sees Norma outside and asks if she wants some ice, and they chat in his room, one-on-one in an intimate setting. The scene sets up the possibility of a romance they never pursue. Although the two characters do not kiss or have sex during the movie, a sexualized flirtation envelops them from the beginning—an important element to the critical and commercial success of the movie discussed later.

These alterations involving Reuben appeared in the original screenplay and prompted much of the recurring criticism from Crystal Lee. She felt the script was a betrayal of the union campaign and her trust. In interviews, Crystal Lee emphasized the years of effort by many workers and union organizers and her awareness of southern union members like her second husband and his father. She also repeatedly said Zivkovich was like a second father,

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66 Pygmalion is a figure in Greek mythology, a king of Cyprus who fell in love with a beautiful statue of a maiden that came to life as a woman shaped to his aspirations. He became the subject of several Victorian plays and burlesques, which inspired George Bernard Shaw’s 1913 play. That play then inspired the 1956 musical *My Fair Lady* and the subsequent 1964 movie.

and she respected his guidance on labor issues and worker organizing. She was open in multiple sources about her relationships with other men and the affair she had during her marriage. After that transparency, Crystal Lee said it was dishonest to portray the TWUA organizer as a solitary man who had sexual tension with Norma. She told a reporter from Raleigh, North Carolina, “And remember, I didn’t swim naked in no pond.” She knew such ideas diminished the reputation of the union as well as the substance of her dedication.

The fourth major story change involved Norma’s second husband, Sonny in the archived scripts. Instead of working in a unionized paper mill and serving as a shop steward, Sonny labors in the same textile mill as Norma but does not join any aspect of the union effort. The initial decision to put them in the same mill clearly compresses time and space. A plot line in which Norma met a man in a separate mill would have required many more pages. The more fascinating aspect of this modification is Sonny’s complete indifference to the union. Rather than taking the approach that Sonny supported unions and the organizing drive but not his wife’s participation, Sonny does not express any positive thoughts. Perhaps Ritt understood, like the producers of Woman Alive!, that viewers would not feel sympathy toward a husband who supported a union for himself and criticized and undermined his wife’s efforts to get one.

In the fifth and most intriguing change, Ritt decided on a final scene invented for the movie at the time of filming. Multiple script drafts and several charcoal drawings for storyboarding and set design show Norma with a crowd of TWUA workers cheering inside and outside the mill at the end of the movie. On location, Ritt decided to end with Norma standing alone after Reuben drives away. In 1974, Crystal Lee stood with dozens of co-

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workers, black and white, behind a TWUA banner when the yes-union vote was confirmed. In *Norma Rae*, Norma and Reuben do not get into the mill for the ballots, and Reuben drives away in his car after the vote. Norma becomes the woman lead contained and isolated, standing alone outside the mill rather than in a large supportive crowd of union organizers, co-workers, and neighbors. This solitary concluding image plays to two Hollywood conventions, the romantic goodbye and the individualistic hero (see Figure 24).

On March 17, 1978, Rose & Asseyev and Ritt’s Saugatuck Productions received their final signed budget from Twentieth Century-Fox. The budget form allows readers to observe Hollywood movies as an industry, with every aspect quantified in ways similar to Taylorized manufacturing. It did not mention Crystal Lee or Zivkovich. The studio set the filming start date as May 1, 1978 and the finish as July 7, 1978—clearly noting the time span as 57 production days and 2 holidays—all in Opelika, Alabama. The budget form enumerates dozens of expenses categorized under story rights producer, director, cast, extras, staff, art costs, set costs, operating labor and materials, and miscellaneous. Each of those categories includes cost subsets plus possible taxes and tax reductions from local or state waivers.

Twentieth Century-Fox promised Ritt the highest salary at $297,497 and then Rose & Asseyev garnered $150,036. Field had the top actor salary at $150,000 with Beau Bridges earning $85,000—more than the primary supporting actor, Ron Leibman, who accepted $70,000 to play the union organizer. Bridges was an established Hollywood asset with a recognizable family name, while Leibman was a New York stage actor, with some movie

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69 Black and white photo, victory handsigns, undated, Box 41, Folder 29, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union Labor Unity Photograph Files, #5981P, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
70 Final pages, script by Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, Jr., *Norma Rae*, Box 22, Folder 225: Norma Rae Script – undated; sketches, undated, Box 24, Folder 244: Norma Rae Sketches – undated, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
credits, who Ritt most likely knew from shared theater connections. The final allotted budget tallied $4,447,791 for explicit items plus $533,735 for overhead, totaling $4,981,526. Ritt prided himself on coming in under budget. Ritt believed that allowed him to keep working.\textsuperscript{71}

The line items of the budget highlight the priority of the Hollywood industry: quantifying the investment, expenses, and revenues. Studios function to increase rates of return, with the goal of each movie making the greatest profit possible. As such, studio executives seek to control costs, but that does not occur in a neutral way. Although Crystal Lee provided the substantive material for the production, she was a low-value asset with little leverage. The payment and acknowledgement for her contributions were forcibly driven to zero. Field was a high-value asset with leverage in an industry that relies on name recognition and celebrity, so the payment and acknowledgement for her contributions could be pressed down by Rose & Asseyev and Twentieth Century-Fox but not forcibly driven to the minimum.

Production managers arrived in April to make arrangements for the locations in Opelika. Any minor adult roles not filled by actors in Atlanta would be opened in Opelika. They assigned 500 local extras to crowd scenes but noted that some might appear as nonspeaking background characters.\textsuperscript{72} At each location, Ritt constructed his imagined version


of a typical southern mill town. He had the effects crew blow cotton dust into the weaving room to give it ambience. Costumers with instructions from Ritt dressed the extras.\textsuperscript{73}

Ritt welcomed Governor Wallace to the set on June 13 in appreciation of the Opelika Manufacturing deal. Rose & Asseyev and Ritt would not have been able to find a manager willing to negotiate without Wallace’s assertive support. Wallace presented cast and crew with commemorative belt buckles, watched a scene, and posed for photographs, including two with Field (see Figure 25 and 26). He also invited the cast and crew to a dinner, which Field did not want to attend because of Wallace’s past defense of legal segregation. Ritt told her to “quit being so childish” about the business of making movies and said Wallace’s power was dwindling anyway. Field went to the dinner but did not change her opinion of Wallace. Frank and Ravetch, however, did not interact with Wallace at all.\textsuperscript{74}

Ritt did not leave a journal about the daily filming in Opelika. Principal photography wrapped the last week of June 1978, and the studio scheduled \textit{Norma Rae} to appear in theaters March 1979.\textsuperscript{75} Early movie posters used a black-and-white image of small houses clustered together, dominated by a large mill with a smoke stack (see Figure 27). That image was imposed over a gray shot of Field’s face with a concerned look. The tag line read, “The story of a woman with the courage to risk everything for what she believes is right.” These components created a somber feeling, one that would vanish as the movie gained increasing success and the marketing department created new posters (see Figure 28).


\textsuperscript{74} “Wallace Meets Sally,” photo caption, \textit{Opelika-Auburn News}, June 14, 1978, 1; Carlton Jackson, 182-183; LoBianco, \textit{Norma Rae} Film Article.

\textsuperscript{75} Herb Wallerstein, Inter-Office Correspondence Subject: Picture Cost Report Norma Rae, dated July 26, 1978, Box 22, Folder 229: Norma Rae budget, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
When audiences watched *Norma Rae* in 1979, they were in darkened theaters with the movie larger than life on a big screen with surround sound. Movies had tremendous physical and cultural power at that time. Television offered only three network channels. Cable television, VCRs, DVDs, and the Internet were not yet fragmenting the American audience. *Norma Rae* swept viewers into a sensory experience and became a topic of media coverage at a time when it would have been a shared phenomenon. The following analysis notes several illustrative examples of extracting specific events or words from Crystal Lee’s life. Again, the argument is not about accuracy but about the process of refining these for a multi-million dollar production, a process contested by Crystal Lee.

The final version of the movie starts with music and visuals that speak to the American fascination with the South and the poignant virtue of poor rural whites. A mellow country song “It Goes Like It Goes” plays as a series of evocative images appear with the opening film credits. Shots of the interior of an archaic textile mill alternate with photos of Norma throughout her life: wizened men and elderly women monitor dozens of industrial spools of thread; Norma has a bow in her hair as a little girl, graduates high school, holds a baby, and smiles in her waitress uniform. The sequence has a sepia tone as the woman vocalist sings folksy lines like “so it goes like it goes, like the river it flows,” “maybe what’s good gets a little bit better, and maybe what’s bad gets gone,” and “bless the child of a working man, she knows too soon what she is.” The nostalgic ambience encourages a sentimental distance

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77 “It Goes Like It Goes,” single by Jennifer Warnes, written by David Shire and Norman Gimbel. It won the 1979 Academy Award for Best Original Song over such nominees as “Rainbow Connection” sung by Kermit in *The Muppet Movie*. 

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between most viewers and the realm of “old-fashioned” southern labor that appears in *Norma Rae*.

Even the decision to use a motif of family photos for the wistful opening most likely derived from a story Crystal Lee told Leifermann. Her mother was viewing and sorting family photos one evening when Crystal Lee arrived with a ring from her high school boyfriend. When her father saw the ring, in a drunken outburst, he yelled about the disappointments of his children. He grabbed the box of snapshots from his wife’s hands and set it on a table while he went looking for his car keys. Crystal Lee grabbed the ones she could before he returned. He left with the box, and Crystal Lee never saw the photos again.78

The movie’s quiet opening abruptly ends as it cuts to the loud noise of a weaving room, all clanging and bangs, where Norma threads multiple machines. Women workers go to the canteen for lunch, where the movie establishes Norma’s personality. When her mother cannot hear her talking, Norma grabs her arm and rushes to the company doctor’s office. The doctor says to Norma that hearing loss happens all the time. Norma leans toward him and snaps, “Well, it doesn’t happen to my mama!” He offers to give her mother a note to go home for the day, so Norma takes hold of her and says, “Come on, mama. They don’t care anything about you.” The audience knows Norma is a feisty woman who fights for her family, refuses easy excuses, and uses her voice where others are docile.

The next scene establishes Norma’s father as the traditional patriarch who stands in regressive contrast to her conspicuous defiance. In the scene, Norma arrives after work at her parents’ house with her two young children. She encourages them to do their homework but goes to the bedroom to change into a clean t-shirt. Field as Norma wears tiny, form-fitting t-shirts throughout the movie, consistently emphasizing her petite figure and breasts. When her

father says he will drive her into town, she dissuades him in a sarcastic voice, saying she is going to get a bra and Kotex. At that point, her father answers a knock at the door and finds Reuben. Her father sends him away, saying that union guys get people thrown out of their jobs. Although she does not say anything especially welcoming, Norma looks intrigued.

Norma sits in a motel lobby in the third scene, which extends the scope and futility of her rebelliousness while also setting Reuben as her Pygmalion. Reuben arrives and says hello. The movie then cuts to Norma in a dim motel room in her bra and underwear breaking off an affair with an older but sturdy man. He shouts disparaging comments about her decency, calls her a “hick,” and slaps her. Norma ends up in Reuben’s room, getting ice. The Pygmalion relationship begins when Norma notices his books. Reuben talks about poetry and his girlfriend, who also works in the labor movement. Norma and Reuben chat about his Jewishness, and she comments that he does not “have horns” like she had heard. The interchange reinforces her southern backwardness and need for his enlightenment. In this scene, his initial kindness toward Norma pivots into mentoring her in the opportunities and curiosities of the larger world, activism, and belief in herself. Even though Norma experiences feminist consciousness-raising and liberation, it is a man who serves as the conduit. Without Reuben, she might have continued funneling her defiance into unproductive sexual affairs.

The next scenes depict Norma and Reuben’s daily lives and the increasing overlap. Unlike Zivkovich, who had been organizing in the area for weeks and had contacts throughout Roanoke Rapids and North Carolina, Norma and Reuben interact on a weekly basis because Reuben struggles alone in the town. She sees him standing at the edge of the mill lot, trying to get workers to take pamphlets and sign membership cards. Norma grows more comfortable
talking with him. She tells him to change the words in the handouts so mill hands can understand them. Black mill hands pass in the background but do not appear central.

At the same time, the bossmen notice Norma’s interest in Reuben and comment on her years of loud demands for longer breaks and Kotex machines in the bathrooms. One bossman says she has the biggest mouth and needs to be given more responsibility to keep her focused on the mill. He promotes her to spot-checker to time co-workers’ productivity. One young man, Sonny, races around the mill machines and spool bins, forcing Norma to chase him. He laughs and pokes fun. The scene allows Ritt to include the fact that Crystal Lee worked as a stop-checker, comment about the way management uses such techniques to monitor labor, and build dramatic tension. Sonny stops by her parents’ house and asks Norma for a date. They end up at a local dive bar drinking beer and listening to country music on the jukebox, and Reuben joins them at Norma’s invitation. Reuben also approaches her at a softball game and buys her a hotdog. At the concession stand, she bumps into the father of her illegitimate child, and they bicker. Reuben, again acting as her Pygmalion and mentor, tells Norma she is too smart for what is happening to her.

Norma’s position as stop-checker leads to tensions with co-workers and an uncomfortable scene when she has to push her father. This reversal of strong patriarch and defiant girl-child uses gender norms to heighten the dramatic tension. Norma chooses to return to weaving. Meanwhile, Sonny and Norma take their kids to a stream for a picnic. He says he wants a wife and she needs a husband, so they should get married. She seems hesitant, but Sonny says they can help each other and their children. To encourage her, he says, “Kiss me, and if that’s alright, everything else will be.” The movie then cuts to their wedding at a small office with a clerk and a couple friends. In the next scene, Norma reads the TWUA flyer
about the black church meeting after weeks of chatting with Reuben about his union work. Reuben and her experience as a stop-checker, rather than Crystal Lee’s lifelong resentments, labor analysis, and awareness of unions, push Norma to the TWUA meeting.

The subsequent scenes show the building of Reuben’s efforts and Norma’s increasing involvement. At the black church, Reuben speaks to an integrated audience sharing the personal experiences of his grandfather and the history of solidarity among different workers. He says the textile industry is the only one without a strong union so companies can lie and cheat. In the next scene, taken directly from Zivkovich’s experience before he met Crystal Lee, Reuben arrives to inspect the mill. Norma watches him enter with confidence, and she smiles at him. He finds his mandated union flyers covered by large barrels in front of the bulletin board. When he asks the bossmen to help him move the barrels, they grow visibly tense. Black men step forward to assist Reuben yet their allegiance does not highlight their position as a crucial foundation for the TWUA effort. It spotlights the goodness of Reuben as a white man who earns their support as opposed to the bad southern white men.79

That performance of masculine confidence leads Norma to join him at the motel, where she tells him, “You got me,” and signs a union card. The audience sees Norma with a union pin talking to co-workers in the canteen and outside her white church asking her reverend to use it for a union meeting. When he says no, she expresses her disappointment. This scene most likely derived from Crystal Lee’s comment to Leifermann that she never knew of a white

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church that supported the TWUA, only black churches. So Norma has a union meeting at her and Sonny’s house, which sits in a cluster of cottages that includes one of the bossmen’s. Sonny expresses concern about having black men in mixed company at their home. Norma says she does not care and waves at the bossman. During the meeting, workers raise several issues, including their workloads, standing on their feet for hours, and working while menstruating—the third reference to women’s periods in the movie. The idea for the scene clearly came from the fact Crystal Lee hosted numerous workers’ organizing committee sessions, but instead of workers designing and coordinating a strategy for building TWUA membership, it is portrayed as a complaint session with Reuben as the authority.

A montage set to music then shows the increasing closeness and cooperation between Norma and Reuben. They talk with many recognizable southern types on farms and dirt roads, like the aged farmer by a tractor and men in overalls whittling on the porch of a general store. The imagery harkens to an earlier time, again using nostalgia to foster sentimental distance. Its imagery of an old textile mill, worn houses, and elderly farmers also depicts the labor exploitation as a remnant of “bad” early industry, disconnected from contemporary modernization. Although set in the 1970s, televisions, telephones, and even radios make very limited appearances in Norma Rae. The montage stops on a hot sunny day, when Norma and Reuben decide to skinny-dip in a stream. Their flirtation reaches its titillating peak when Reuben says, “You’re the fish I wanted to hook,” and Norma swims closer to him. Reuben always floats away, refusing to touch her, so they leave without consummating the flirtation.

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80 Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 113.
81 Cathy Stanton, “Performing the Postindustrial: The Limits of Radical History in Lowell, Massachusetts,” Radical History Review 98 (Spring 2007): 81-96. She argues that even when modern displays like those at the Lowell National Historical Park Visitor Center and museums represent the economic tensions and exploitation of nineteenth-century mill girls, they often have nostalgia to create a temporal distance between “bad” industrial capitalism and “good” postindustrial technological capitalism. As such, the exhibits replicate characteristics of neoliberal capitalism and become a ritualized reconciliation of past and present, of exploitation and the insecurity of capitalism.
Ritt had directed Field to flirt with Leibman but had not told Leibman about it because he wanted to create a voyeuristic look.\textsuperscript{82} The effect marks Reuben as the responsible Pygmalion who does not take advantage of the woman he has chosen to uplift.

After one of their trips around the backroads, Norma makes phone calls from her kitchen at night. Sonny shows up angry, asking about dinner and laundry. He says the milk is sour and the kids need her time. Norma yells and bangs the pans. She throws dirty clothes into the sink and tells him if he wants “to make love, then get behind” her while she irons shirts. Sonny calms down and laughs. Their marriage remains intact.

In the next scene, Norma is back in the motel room at night, typing memos and putting together files. Reuben arrives upset and lonely. They talk about his girlfriend who works as a labor lawyer. Norma asks, “Why she’s so smart?” and Reuben answers, “Books.” He gives Norma a collection by his favorite poet, Dylan Thomas. The flirtation continues, yet Reuben has clearly defined the boundaries as platonic and refuses to use his mentoring to have a sexual liaison. Despite their efforts, the church is empty at the next union meeting, again making it appear as if Reuben and Norma are the only stable contributors to the drive. When they go door-to-door, they discover the mill has everyone on a stretch-out, with three-day weeks. Mill hands have to work twice as long each day for less pay. The mill hands are tired and scared of losing their jobs. Neighbors, kids, and old folks watch them, but slam the doors.

But then Norma’s father dies at work after a bossman refuses to give him a break for chest pain. The TWUA motel headquarters fills with people, including black men. Although Norma provided the outreach and union availability, it is the patriarch’s death not her determination that prompts the membership increase. Norma’s intensity also escalates.

a man shows up late for a planned activity, she yells at him and gets in his face. Reuben tells her to shut up and get out—a depiction of the incident in which Zivkovich asked Crystal Lee to leave and take a one-week break after she argued with Galladet. When explaining afterward, Reuben tells Norma that she “can’t come down that hard on a man and leave him his balls.” She says the union is the only way workers can get their “own voice,” a line taken directly from Crystal Lee.83

The following scene encapsulates the questions that arose around Crystal Lee and Zivkovich when some mill people and neighbors gossiped about her and spread rumors of a sexual relationship between them. Regional and national TWUA leadership expressed concerns to Zivkovich about Crystal Lee’s prominence in the drive and loose sexual reputation. In Norma Rae, nameless union leaders of some level (indicated by their suits and authoritative suggestions) arrive at the motel and advise Reuben to use Norma less. They tell Reuben that she has an illegitimate child and sleeps around. He responds, “She’s broken her ass [for the union], what the hell do I care if she’s got round heels.” Norma offers to quit, but Reuben refuses—an interesting choice by Ritt. Crystal Lee never expressed any interest in quitting. Quite the opposite, in Woman Alive! she said she knew people tried to silence union women by calling them “whores,” but that was not going to stop them.84 The scene in Norma Rae, however, serves to heighten the sense of Reuben as her masculine protector, defending her reputation and choices. The two of them emerge as a chaste pair united against three opponents: management, mill hands’ fears, and sexist union leaders.

83 Leifermann, Woman of Inheritance, 111; “The Unions Are Coming,” 25.
The movie progresses toward its dramatic climax after establishing this platonic but intense attachment. A notice appears on the bulletin board saying the union will put black men above white men, so some white men assault a black mill hand by the delivery doors. Norma breaks up the fight, erasing the years of interracial union cooperation and emphasizing her unique heroic quality. Reuben arrives outside the fence just at that moment. The white main characters become the saviors, ideal white selves as brave, generous, firm leaders, and the black characters act as devices. They provide a shallow racial visibility that reinforces the positive quality of the white characters. The conflict between bigoted whites versus Norma and Reuben makes a statement about them rather than about black mill hands. Norma and Reuben manifest the dignified image of white saviors as they bond against a fourth opponent, racist bad southerners.85

After the assault ends, Reuben tells Norma through the fence that she has to get him the letter. Norma and her friend try to memorize the letter and write it down in the bathroom, but when she hands the paper to Reuben, he asks, “Where’s the rest of it?” Then he shouts at her that he needs the letter in its exact words, just as Zivkovich spoke to Crystal Lee. The movie cuts to Norma in the mill with a firm grimace stomping to the bulletin board and using a pencil to write the exact words of the letter onto some crinkled papers on a clipboard. Four bossmen appear behind her as she copies, and she refuses to stop. References to the safety supper that Crystal Lee attended after copying the letter had been crossed-out in the initial script and removed from later versions. In the movie, the bossmen escort Norma directly to the supervisor’s office and he asks for the paper, but she puts the notes under her shirt. Unlike

Crystal Lee’s experience, no forelady appears. The gender dynamics heighten the perception of Norma as a solitary woman fighter against men’s oppression and the sense of “bad” old industrial exploitation resistant to the changes of modernity and feminism.

The supervisor fires her, so Norma asks for their names and starts writing in her notebook. One man starts to give his name, but the supervisor gets angry and tells her, “Out!” Norma goes to a work table and sees police arriving. So she writes UNION on a piece of cardboard and stands on the table. The camera stays on this moment for over two minutes. The shots cut between an upward angle on Norma’s emotional face and close-ups of her mother and co-workers as they watch with upturned eyes. Each one turns off her machine until the weaving room becomes silent. The policeman tells her to get down. As she climbs down, Norma asks where they will take her, and the officer says off the property. But when she reaches the fence, she sees a police car and a cop opening the door. Norma fights, lunging against the men’s grip on her arms. They lift her into the car as she yells, “No, you promised!”

The next scene shows her entering the local jail, refusing to speak to the clerk, and weeping alone in a small cell. Reuben bails her out, and she cries in his truck on the way home. Once there, she wakes her two children and Sonny’s daughter and gets a box of papers and photos from her closet. Reuben and Sonny watch from another room as she tells the children about their fathers. Sonny steps into the kitchen with Reuben and expresses concern. Reuben says, “She’s a free woman. Maybe you can live with it, maybe you can’t.” Later, when Norma gets into bed, Sonny asks if she has slept with Reuben. She says no, “but he’s in my head.” Sonny tells her he wants to grow sick and old with her, nobody else, and they hug. The three white men in her life—her father, Reuben, and Sonny—are the primary participants in and influence on her personal liberation.
Norma Rae ends with the counting of ballots in a yes-or-no union certification vote in the one mill. The scene indicates that Reuben and Norma have gathered enough signed membership cards to hold the election, but does not offer any explanation of the efforts by other union members, the role of TWUA leadership, or the NLRB process. The camera pans the faces of workers stacked in rows around a large room within the mill—but not Norma or Reuben. The workers represent many different ages, genders, and races as well as people who are against the union. They wear work clothes, bandanas, and mill caps, indicators of the southern poignant virtue that intensifies the affective appeal of the scene. In this depiction, the characters’ appearance harkens back to mill hands in the 1930s, when Ritt lived in North Carolina as a college student, rather than to those in the 1970s. In an ACTWU photograph after the actual vote, many mill hands are wearing dresses, skirts, dress shirts, and sports jackets (see Figure 21). They clearly viewed the certification election as an important, formal event and wanted to represent themselves as dignified union members not as stereotypical mill hands.

In the movie, a black mill hand in overalls sits with a white company representative wearing a suit as they count the votes. Their race and clothing mark their opposition. The camera cuts to Reuben and Norma standing alone outside the chain-link fence, off the mill property. A distant cheer goes up, and they smile at each other. The movie cuts to the inside of the mill where dozens of workers cheer, smile, and hug. Norma Rae does not make clear that a successful union certification vote is only the first step in a long process that often takes months or years of negotiations and hearings to come to agreement on a contract with improved wage, employment, and safety criteria.

86 Black and white photo, victory handsigns, undated, Box 41, Folder 29, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union Labor Unity Photograph Files, #5981P, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
Norma and Reuben do not join the celebration but rather turn to leave. The mill yard and side streets are empty, erasing communal aspects of the historic TWUA drive and mill hand families. He asks Norma, “What are you gonna do now?” and she says, “Live.” When Reuben offers to send her a copy of a Dylan Thomas book, she answers with a smile, “I bought one.” His role as Pygmalion comes full circle because Norma has given up her sexual liaisons, focused on labor activism, relied on him as a platonic mentor despite their attraction, and bought a book by his favorite poet. The camera moves closer to them, focusing on their faces and bodies. He smiles and says, “Nobody can do anything for you.”

Norma looks at him and says solemnly, “You’ve done something for me. A lot.”

“Well, you did something for us,” he replies.

Their conversation ends on a personal note, when Reuben says, “Thank you for your companionship, your stamina, horse sense, and 101 laughs. I also enjoyed looking at your skin, your hair, and your shining face.”

Norma gives a big smile and replies, “Reuben, I think you like me.”

“Norma, what I’ve had from you has been sumptuous.” They shake hands and music begins as the mellow opening song plays for the closing. Reuben gets into a dilapidated packed car and drives away. The final shot shows Norma standing alone, from a distance, down an empty side street, small and solitary in front of the big industrial mill (see Figure 24). She has experienced liberation but without any peers or community. She succeeded while remaining contained and unthreatening, mentored by a masculine white savior who leaves

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87 When Field won her second Academy Award for Places in the Heart in 1985, she adapted this line for her famous acceptance speech, “I haven’t had an orthodox career, and I’ve wanted more than anything to have your respect. The first time I didn’t feel it, but this time I feel it. And I can’t deny the fact that you like me. Right now, you like me! Thank you.”
rather than a nationwide movement. She hovers in the background, bound within her marriage to a local man and isolated from any future activism, organizers, or even co-workers.

Reuben’s exit also reinforces the impression of “bad” old industry finally catching up to “good” modern practices. The urban union organizer and the assertive woman have pressed the mill forward, and it appears as if the mill will advance further without any more extensive effort, defiance, and organizing. The actual situation with J.P. Stevens required certification elections in multiple mills and another seven years of negotiating and boycotting along with an innovative corporate campaign that targeted investors as well as shareholder meetings.

Hollywood movies are not perfectly coherent texts. Different viewers can read the moments of defiance and liberation in Norma Rae in a variety of ways. Even such individualistic depictions can prompt viewers to act within their households or join a community organization. Norma ends contained, but a viewer might read it as imperfect and imagine possible alternatives for a woman activist. Although she remains married and Sonny expresses devotion to her, Norma expresses hints of ambivalence. The overall tendency of studio products demands that complex political, sociological, and economic dilemmas be resolved in an unexpected individual hero. If a woman propels the plot, she must be neutralized by the end, even if her efforts succeed. But viewers might see potential for more.

The press quickly found Crystal Lee and began the process of constructing the separate identity of “the real Norma Rae,” which she then appropriated, cultivated, and used for her own advantage. She used it to critique the movie and to advocate for unions, present her own advantage. She used it to critique the movie and to advocate for unions, present her own advantage.

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ideas, and make claims against the revenues of Twentieth Century-Fox. Although Ritt and Field regularly denied the movie was based on Crystal Lee, *Norma Rae* most likely benefited from the association with a true story. Studios often use the tag line “based on a true story” or “inspired by real events” to market their movies.

At the time of the movie’s release, Crystal Lee was employed as a motel maid and overwhelmed by bills, yet still open about her personal and union experiences. In April 1978, NLRB procedures had finally reached the point when several J.P. Stevens workers were awarded their former jobs and backpay. J.P. Stevens had played out all its possible appeals and obstructionist tactics. Crystal Lee returned to the Roanoke Rapids Delta #4 mill for two days to claim her position and receive her check for $13,000 after taxes before quitting and returning to Burlington. She had recently married a third man, Lewis “Preston” Sutton, Jr., who had found a job in the shipping department of a unionized Cannon Mills plant near Burlington. They remain married until her death.

Just over a year after the studio removed her from the production, Crystal Lee was talking to journalists. Most comments were not about style or celebrity, but about narrative. As Crystal Lee said to one journalist, “I wanted it to be about more than two people, because it took more than two people to win a campaign involving over 3,000 workers.” She described her experiences with Rose & Asseyev and Ritt and shared her first impressions of *Norma Rae*. It is unclear how the reporters learned about Crystal Lee, but Ritt’s reaction makes clear he did not release the information. Most likely Kopple told her press contacts about the November

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90 Davin, 15.
1977 contract she had signed with Crystal Lee to make a different movie of her participation in the TWUA campaign from 1973-1974.

The first newspaper and magazine articles discussed the creative and legal disagreements about the rights to Crystal Lee’s life story and her role in the production. The articles reveal Ritt’s inability to resolve the inherent contradictions of his position as both a director interested in telling humanist stories of poor working Americans and a businessman in an industry that avoids risk, complexities, and experimentation in making multi-million dollar products. Ritt responded in various ways over the next year but did not offer any apology or payment to Crystal Lee and her family. At different times he defended the movie as a positive treatment of the labor movement, stated the movie was not about the labor movement but about a woman’s personal growth, justified making the movie by the producers’ purchase of the rights to Leifermann’s biography, and argued the movie was the fictionalized composite of several southern women activists.

A substantial Los Angeles Times article coincided with the release of Norma Rae in March 1979. In the center of the page, a close-up photo of Field as Norma is set next to one of Crystal Lee. The image with the UNION sign had not yet become the primary representation of the movie, so the photo is a shot of Norma talking. The article provides a detailed description of the conflicts over the production and rights to the life story. The reporter presents the situation using information primarily from Ritt and Kopple’s point of view, with a few lines from Crystal Lee and her lawyer. It is not a flattering impression of Ritt, who argues the movie was a “fictionalized” version of Crystal Lee’s story. The reporter describes Ritt as “embittered even condescending toward his once-beloved subject.” The article says Kopple was moving ahead with her project as well and had an approved script by Stuart Werban and
Todd Merer. Kopple told the reporter, “I think the film [Norma Rae] stands on its own, but I think the story of Crystal Lee has yet to be told.”

Ritt acknowledged that both Leifermann and Rose & Asseyev had given Crystal Lee an “inequitable deal.” He asserted, however, that when he began the project as director, he knew she had sold the rights to her story to Leifermann, so Twentieth Century-Fox had a legal right to it. Rose told the reporter that she thought Leifermann was going to split his payment with Crystal Lee, but Leifermann could not be located and his representative at Sterling-Lord Agency hung up when questioned. The reporter noted that Crystal Lee refused invitations from Twentieth Century-Fox to attend a screening and applaud the film. The only direct quote from Crystal Lee expressed her concern that commercial movies exploit “the sexual aspect of life” when she wanted “to see a strong union film.” She hoped Kopple’s would be a chance to get “the importance of the union struggle” out to people in the South.

A couple weeks later, People magazine printed the first use of the phrase “the real ‘Norma Rae’” in the title of an April 1979 article that centered its interview with Crystal Lee. The opening paragraph celebrated the movie, stating it was “one of the year’s heartwarming Hollywood success stories.” The reporter said Norma Rae was already getting enthusiastic reviews, calls for an Academy-Award nomination for Field, and an impressive box office intake with $8 million gross in less than two months. The rest of the article contrasted that success to the conditions for Crystal Lee. It shared details about her trouble finding jobs and current employment as a motel maid. Crystal Lee expressed her commitment to unions and love of labor organizing even though she acknowledged representatives of the ACTWU were cool towards her when she won the reinstatement and backpay in April 1978. This reporter

91 Taylor, T5.
92 Ibid., T5; I found no statements or interviews with Leifermann after the movie appeared in theaters and attracted media attention. He died in 2016 at his home in Georgia.
also called Ritt “bitter” about Crystal Lee’s reaction and her plans for a project with Kopple. In both articles, he was quoted as calling her “a middle-class bourgeois woman who doesn’t want anyone to know about her life.”93 His willful disinterest in her actual circumstances added cruelty to the defensiveness of his statements.

Two feminist magazines, *Off Our Backs* and *Ms.*, also published pieces about *Norma Rae*. These show the appeal of a woman’s heroic inspiration and the affective response despite the intellectual awareness that deeper complications and historic situations exist. The April 1979 review in *Off Our Backs* and a reader’s response highlight the different opinions viewers could form based on their interpretations of how the movie used Crystal Lee’s life story. The reviewer, who wrote regularly for the magazine, celebrated *Norma Rae*. While she acknowledged the mythic aspects and “suspension of time,” which ignored the realities of long union campaigns, she found it “an inspiring, heart-warming film with a wide streak of old-fashioned idealism.” She said the unrealistic focus on “the power of individual heroic figures to effect change” was counterbalanced by attention to the realism of the southern mill town and the complications of family, union activism, and company opposition. Ritt’s imagining and design of the sets and costumes were so attuned to the American fascination with the South and its images of the bad old mill industry that this reviewer celebrated the “realism.”

A reader’s letter, however, emphasized the lack of realism and “truth.” She said she appreciated that *Norma Rae* was “a story about a woman, and her character is not succumbed to the development of male characters.” Yet she found it lacking any attention to the issues behind the J.P. Stevens union campaign, the important activities of black workers, and the conflicts with the husband. Without mentioning Crystal Lee by name, she said the movie

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93 Albrecht, 43.
watered down working people’s real struggles, whitewashed blacks’ roles, and gave a false image of men.\textsuperscript{94}

In May, *Ms.* magazine printed an article about the divergences between the movie and Crystal Lee’s life story, “‘Norma Rae’: The Story They Could Have Told.” It covered much of the same content but added some simple textual analysis. The author applauded the sympathetic depiction of black workers, mill hands, and the union. But she said the movie was “popcorn politics” and misleading. “Ritt and Company want to *use* Jordan’s story rather than *tell* it,” so Norma’s motives for joining the union “are trivialized, stemming only from sexual attraction that the noble Reuben resists and channels into activism.” The reporter noted that without the context of labor union history and the textile industry system “Norma’s character loses dimension. Ritt was left, then, with a sublimated love story, and the camera… gapes interminably at Sally Field’s nipples, as they bob under her V-necked T-shirts.” The reporter most likely did not know Ritt, Frank, and Ravetch had intentionally built the script around that sublimated love story in a play for greater commercial success.

Ritt again responded with contradictory and defensive justifications. He even questioned Crystal Lee’s commitment to women and working people, setting himself up as more politically conscious while demeaning her. “If [Sutton] is as interested in women and the working class as I am… she will see ‘Norma Rae’ as one of the singular films of our time. Besides, how many times can a girl turn you down? I went down to North Carolina and met with her lawyers… I wanted to explain that [her demand for script control] was irrational…. I’m sorry I hurt her feelings, but I don’t feel I did anything that was wrong.”\textsuperscript{95} 


\textsuperscript{95} Elizabeth Stone, “‘Norma Rae’: The Story They Could Have Told” *Ms.* May 1979, 25-26, 33.
undermined her challenge to his script by equating it with sexual refusal and categorizing her requests as irrational and emotional rather than politically and creatively motivated.

The articles about Crystal Lee declined over the next few months as Field accumulated more accolades for her elevation to “serious actress.” Although attention would return to Crystal Lee when Academy-Award season arrived from January to April 1980, Field received media attention that continued through the 1980s. The further refinement of Norma from the larger textile and garment industry and labor histories depended on the 1979-1980 media frenzy around Field. The image of her as Norma eventually became linked not only to the movie, but also to her transformation from television cutie to film actress, an asset that could demand some of the highest pay in the world. This association further removed Norma Rae from Crystal Lee, southern mill hands, and the larger global industry. The long histories and context were left behind as Field became the liberated Norma and also the determined actress working her own way to success.

The articles appreciated the notion of an individual woman’s liberation without any discussion of the longer history of the ways blue-collar women complicated feminism. Even though the articles, like Woman Alive!, did not dive into this history, their attention to one woman’s personal transformation had many possible readings for audience members.96 At a time when women of diverse backgrounds were becoming more visibly and vocally active in formal politics, feminist groups, and demands for equal pay, such an inspirational story could have profound meaning. Some women might have identified Norma with their own efforts and activism in a workplace, community or formal organization. Others might have begun to

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96 Hallam, 173-175. She acknowledges that ethnographic research has revealed how women readers and viewers can “face a range of contradictory responses to texts,” but she argues feminist work on textual interpretation and analysis is a necessary correlative because public discourses should include a feminist perspective. In addition, films with major popular appeal and reach create a high level of shared enjoyment around shared themes and notions, particularly when watched in the “collective atmosphere” of a theater.
question the structures and institutions that held them in a particular position. But the
Hollywood tendency to convert complex histories, conditions, and issues into a single
internally motivated act of rebellion, to reduce it all to the individual, is important for two
principal reasons. One, as already stated, it obscured the complicated histories of diverse
women in the global working class. Two, as discussed in chapter five, the reduction to an
individual converged easily with a neoliberal cultural formation in the 1980s. It underscores a
postwar pop culture process by which liberation and rebellion became loosened from any
particular context, community, or ideology, and transformed into a free-floating platform
available for any posture.  

Journalists who celebrated Field usually emphasized *Norma Rae* as a decisive turning
point in her career. In a March 1979 article that also coincided with the movie release, the
famous *New York Times* reviewer Vincent Canby said the movie provided Field “with the
plum role of her career, an opportunity to demonstrate once and for all that she is an actress of
dramatic intelligence and force, someone who no longer need be referred to in terms of her
television credits.” In a longer piece a few days later, Canby said Field’s *Norma Rae*
“represents a number of triumphs,” especially her own performance. He described it as “the
kind of complete performance one associates with theatrical films…. There’s nothing held
back here, no reserve of the public personality… one of the more common problems when
television personalities switch to films.”  

97 Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*. She argues that when affluent and middle-class white youth began performing the
folk in an affective bid for connection and authenticity, they severed the music, lyrics, and clothing from their
historical context and celebrated the emotional resonance of being an outsider without actually giving up the
privileges and material benefits of being an insider.

98 Interview with Lawrence Grobel, “Playboy Interview: Sally Field,” *Playboy*, March 1986, 49-57; Vincent
Canby, “Sally Field’s ‘Norma Rae’ Is a Triumph,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1979, D19 to 24, and “Film:
‘Norma Rae’ Mill-Town Story,” March 2, 1979, C10; Richard Phillips, “The Escape from Acute Cuteness,”
*Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 5, 1979, C1, clipping; Frank Rizzo, “Sally Field Did What Couldn’t Be Done,” *New
Haven Journal-Courier*, March 1, 1979, 40, clipping; Jill Jackson, “Ex-Flying Nun is Flying High,” *Times-
Coverage of Field spread from newspaper movie sections to popular magazines like *MacLean’s, Redbook*, and *Teen*. Field, like Ritt, said the movie was not political but rather about a woman and “her immediate environment.” In mainstream media, they both insisted the “the character of the woman” not the labor movement was the impetus for the film and its success. Field stated she did not base her performance on Crystal Lee but on how Field related Norma, “the small-town woman, to her own life.” The *MacLean’s* piece described Field’s decision to leave television and focus on movies. “*Norma Rae* was her lifesaver,” the reporter stated. The writer for *Teen* said there were “great parallels between the fictional character and Sally herself.” Norma became the vehicle for Field’s “personal and professional achievements.”

Kenneth Turan for *The Progressive* wrote that Field’s Norma is that most “unusual screen personae, someone who matures and changes before our eyes in a way that is neither cute nor forced.” He said her performance was the one superb asset of *Norma Rae* and proved Field had forcefulness and range.

Admiration for particular versions of women’s liberation often fueled praise for the Norma character while celebrating Field at the same time. Canby in the *New York Times* said Norma had her consciousness raised in a platonic affair with Reuben. He liked that despite her flaws, Norma was capable of learning, growing, and changing. In his articles, he applauded Field for coming into her own as a serious actress. *MacLean’s* announced that Field got tough and won, and European critics were congratulating her on portraying a young woman who

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*Picayune*, March 1, 1979, Section 2, 8, clipping; Box 23, Folder 239: Norma Rae Publicity 1978-1979; more clippings in Box 23, Folder 242: Norma Rae Reviews, 1979, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.


“discovers her social conscience in the labor struggle.”

Even years later, in a 2002 book about women in Hollywood, the author stated, “Norma Rae liberated Field from the flying nun and from television.”

In other cases, writers noted the women’s liberation aspects of Norma Rae without addressing Field. The reviewer for the New Leader said the movie was “really a post-woman’s lib love story” because a man of superior culture and education enlightens a downtrodden woman without having sex with her. It was “Cinderella with a truly liberating ending” as Norma was freed from her chains and from Reuben (the reviewer misses the fact she is still married with three children at home). In a magazine for older adolescents, the reviewer said Norma Rae was not a labor film but “the story of a woman learning that she can make her life count.”

Criticisms of the movie in the mainstream press overlapped with the two feminist magazines. They took issue with Reuben’s solitary and “unassailable” presence, his Pygmalion role in Norma’s life, and the lack of attention to the great number of mill hands and organizers needed to succeed in a union certification vote. Some pieces even noted that the ending was like a “fairy tale” and ignored the many procedures, negotiations, and demonstrations that must continue after a vote to get to a fair contract. The most common complaint involved Ritt’s directing and the habit of pushing his liberal messages right to the surface. Some argued Ritt’s liberalism was too simplistic and naïve, harking back to the films

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101 Deans, “Sally Field: The Girl Next Door Gets Tough and Wins,” 4-5; Canby, “Sally Field’s ‘Norma Rae’,” D19 to 24, and “Film: ‘Norma Rae’,” C10; Movie review, Seventeen, March 1979, clipping without page number, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.
102 Mollie Gregory, 147.
of the 1940s. Turan said Ritt was “an old hand at this kind of movie-making” and though his sentiments were sincere, there was a “paint-by-the-numbers approach.”

The most sophisticated review in the spring 1979 volume of Cineaste was also the first piece to use the image of Field with the UNION sign as the primary representation of Norma and the movie. Previous articles either did not have photographs or used different shots of Field as Norma—a close-up of her talking to someone off-camera, Norma calmly standing by a textile loom with her work apron, or the police carrying her as she yells and kicks through a chain-link fence. The photos came from stills in the Twentieth Century-Fox press packet.

In the Cineaste piece, the earliest germination of the Norma Rae icon comes into view because of the editorial decision to highlight the image of Field with the sign.

At this point, it is still a wider cropping that shows the scenery around Norma, but use of this image still allowed wider audiences—unexpected and unanticipated by Crystal Lee—to conceive of the stand with the sign as a frontstage performance by Norma rather than a communal backstage gesture by a mill hand with her fellow union members, co-workers, and neighbors. Readers could easily mistake it as the act of one self-possessed person, transforming the stand with the UNION sign from a vernacular, unifying signal between co-


105 Photo of Sally Field with the sign, “‘Norma Rae’ Takes on the Textile Giant,” International Musician, June 1979, 19-20, clipping; photo of Field carried to police car and photo of Field with the sign, “Cannes 1979,” Film en Televisie, 1979, 12-16, clipping; Box 23, Folder 240: Norma Rae Publicity, 1979-1981; collection of photos and headshots, Box 23, Folder 241: Norma Rae, Publicity Press Kit 1979; Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
workers in a regional union drive that had built on decades of recognized activism into a highly individualistic iconic performance of rebellion.  

The author, Pat Aufderheide, was a media scholar and regular contributor. In this particularly nuanced review, she expressed high praise for Field’s performance and tempered admiration for Norma Rae’s liberation, along with criticisms of Reuben’s character as an overdrawn caricature, the misrepresentation of union organizing, the lack of attention to Crystal Lee’s life story, and Ritt’s decision to oversimplify the issues and characters. Aufderheide also made several insightful points about the unfortunate decision to center “sexual purity” in Norma’s liberation, and the use of black characters and Norma’s kids as simplistic props to her growth.

She noted that Ritt did care about unions even if he knew what sold tickets and repeatedly emphasized Norma Rae was the drama of a woman’s growth. In a thoughtful conclusion, Aufderheide encouraged more “fictionalized portraits of courageous people like Crystal Lee Sutton” because it was exciting to see the drama of working people’s lives in an entertainment movie. As with other reviewers, she said Field’s performance saved the movie in an “exhilarating” depiction of a woman learning to “assess, value and use her strengths….

Field shows us a girl growing into a woman, making mistakes and learning from them…” Aufderheide, unlike other writers, did not conflate Field’s transformation from teen television personality to serious Hollywood actress with Norma’s liberation.

By the time McCall’s published its profile of Field in April 1980, it was Academy-Award season. Field had already won more prizes in a single year for Norma Rae than any other American actress—the Best Actress award from the National Society of Film Critics, Ki


Pat Aufderheide, “Film Reviews: Norma Rae,” Cineaste 9, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 42-43.
New York Film Critics, National Board of Review, Los Angeles Film Critics, Golden Globe organization, and Cannes Film Festival, where the movie got a standing ovation.\textsuperscript{108} That month, Field also won the Academy Award, beating Jill Clayburgh in Starting Over, Jane Fonda in The China Syndrome, Marsha Mason in Chapter Two, and Bette Midler in The Rose.

The experience of the production and its success bonded Ritt and Field, who would go on to make two more movies together, Back Roads (1981) with Tommy Lee Jones and Murphy’s Romance (1985) with James Garner. Field wrote him an effusive note thanking him for all he did for her. In her own handwriting, she said, “Dear Marty, Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for teaching me. Thank you for appreciating me, as an actress, and a person.”\textsuperscript{109} In multiple interviews, Field expressed disappointment that Ritt was not nominated for an Academy Award as director. Field told The Post of West Palm Beach that she had to talk Ritt into attending the 1980 ceremony. It also upset her that Crystal Lee had not acknowledged “her debt to Ritt.” “It’s a shame it hasn’t occurred to her that she can thank Marty Ritt for much of the recognition she’s receiving,” Field said.\textsuperscript{110}

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\textit{Norma Rae} and the Academy Award elevated Field’s career to the most elite echelon of the Hollywood movie industry. That status allowed her to ask for hundreds of thousands of dollars above union scale pay while keeping the protection of SAG. As discussed in chapter five, it also revived interest in Crystal Lee. In addition to participating in media interviews and union parades, the ACTWU hired her as a spokesperson. The leaders planned to use the


\textsuperscript{109} Sally Field, notecard, undated, Box 38, Folder 477: F – Miscellaneous, 1952-1990; Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

attention from Field’s Academy Award to promote its boycott and corporate campaign against J.P. Stevens, which were successfully putting pressure on the company.\textsuperscript{111} From February to June 1980, Crystal Lee would travel with a professional publicist who managed her calendar and sat in on interviews, adding clarifications from the union leadership’s point of view.\textsuperscript{112}

As the evidence in this chapter shows, the move from “Crystal Lee” to \textit{Norma Rae} is not a straightforward tale of exploiting a poor woman. Differences over the script played out in the capitalist system of Hollywood production, and elite creative professionals brought its mechanisms of legality, contracts, and accounting to bear on Crystal Lee. In addition, the creative contests did not involve a simple difference about storyline; they were about how to represent working-class people’s activism. Crystal Lee recognized the larger stakes and used the resources at her disposal to demand a position in the production as a creative contributor who had provided value and assets to the movie—her experiences, her “life story.” Although she did not succeed in this round, she persisted in her claims.

Even the script, locations, and costumes of \textit{Norma Rae} were not simply unthinking reproductions of stereotypes. Rose & Asseyev, Ritt, and Field all wanted a major commercial success to prove themselves and advance in the industry. They knew about Crystal Lee’s contentions regarding the union and thousands of people involved. Although Leifermann’s biography had a limited historical range, they had read his material about the larger TWUA drive. The producers, director, and writers knew an individual woman hero on a personal journey would attract a bigger audience. Ritt also understood the American fascination with the South and enhanced the functioning Opelika mill, locals, and clothing to appeal to that

\textsuperscript{111} Minchin, “Don’t Sleep With Stevens!”.
\textsuperscript{112} Memo on publicity tour and “Norma Rae” events; Box 10, Folder 2, J.P. Stevens, Crystal Lee Jordan, Gail Jeffords – Public Relations 1979-1980, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
popular culture draw. These capitalist maneuvers and creative choices for increased revenue had consequences beyond the loss of Crystal Lee’s vision. They also allowed this version of working Americans to endure and adapt for another audience. As the next chapter shows, Puerto Rican needleworkers and scholars asserted their own concerns, ideas, and stories in their effort to participate in making meanings for the American working class.
“An organizer is a person who tries to bring in a shop that is non-union. They talk to the people and tell them about the benefits of having a union and try to convince them to join the union and to sign a card.”
Gloria Maldonado, 1984, Nosotras Trabajamos en la Costura

“My sister-in-law brought me here. She took me to American Thread. I applied and in less than a week I got a job as a machine operator. Then I wrote my cousins to come here to work.... It was easy to find jobs when I came here in 1969.”
Patria, 1986, “Menea Esas Manos”

CHAPTER FOUR
THE NORTHEAST AND GLORIA MALDONADO IN A CHANGING INDUSTRY: HER EXPERIENCES AND TRACKING ARCHIVAL FRAGMENTS

In the 1960s, Gloria Maldonado grew frustrated with the monotonous, low-wage daily work of the factories and asked herself, “What am I doing here? I know English, I know Spanish. I gotta better myself.” She had joined the ILGWU a few years ahead of Crystal Lee’s 1973 TWUA membership, and now Maldonado decided to become active with Local 66, known as the Bonnaz, Embroideries, Tucking, Pleating and Allied Crafts Union. At the beginning, she attended union meetings and events and reported worker concerns to the shop stewards.¹ Maldonado eventually advanced within the ILGWU and the Central Labor Council, which coordinated activities across several unions in New York City.

While Crystal Lee was raising children, attending vocational training for power sewing, and taking jobs in mills, restaurants, and apparel plants in North Carolina, Maldonado was involved in similar pursuits in New York. Just like Crystal Lee as a southern mill hand, Maldonado had many characteristics and experiences typical to a Puerto Rican needleworker,

¹ “Gloria Maldonado,” 8/8/84, 11.
but gained attention as one who openly and knowingly pushed against norms of class, gender, and race. She was an assertive woman and vocal organizer willing to question company management and men in union leadership. In 1970, the ILGWU offered Maldonado a job because, in her own words, she had been “opening my big mouth, you know, being critical.” She was making $180 a week for 35 hours of garment work but the organizer job paid only $110. She did not take it due to the pay cut, but union representatives called her two weeks later and said they would start her at $110 and meet in six weeks to discuss a raise. Maldonado called it a gimmick but decided, “Well, this is my only chance so I’ll sacrifice myself.” She got the raise six weeks later.²

By the mid-1970s, Maldonado was a recognized activist in the city who had greater opportunities for education and travel than Crystal Lee. The labor movement in New York included the ILGWU, ACWA, established central labor councils, and vibrant labor studies programs that brought workers together with students at institutions like the City University of New York (CUNY). Maldonado is rendered invisible in dominant American culture not because of a lack of endeavors or achievements, but due to limited and racialized popular representation; the cultural camouflaging of U.S. empire; and the thinness of archives for Puerto Rican women in industry.³ Although the Norma Rae icon renders Crystal Lee invisible, the popular image paradoxically and simultaneously granted her an opening to a public platform that she chose to use.

This chapter, like chapter two, begins where the first one ended—on the verge of the 1960s. The year 1958 presents a bright kaleidoscope of the currents moving through the textile and garment industry. It was a year in which the fluctuating intersections of women workers, racialized labor markets, capital investment, geographic sites, and popular representations manifested in vibrant ways that might appear anarchic if viewed in isolation from the first chapter’s longer history of the industry from the turn of the century. As with a kaleidoscope, however, the shifting colorful parts were moving in relation to all the others.

We already saw that Crystal Lee took her first industry job in 1958 in a unionized but segregated turn-of-the-century mill then owned by the postwar conglomerate Cone Mills. That year, the TWUA held an election in Roanoke Rapids, where Crystal Lee’s sister Syretha still lived and where J.P. Stevens had recently taken ownership of the plants. The union did not win a majority in that round, but TWUA locals at the Harriet and Henderson mills seventy miles northeast of Burlington voted to strike.

Governor Hodges, a former Fieldcrest Mills executive, ordered National Guard troops to protect the old Harriet and Henderson mills during the strike but also oversaw the official groundbreaking for “The Triangle.” The first two companies to join that modern industrial park were in the expanding petrochemical synthetic fabric business. In 1958, the Northern Textile Association also declared that for the first time more spindles had been liquidated in the Southeast than in New England. Yet God’s Little Acre, a Hollywood movie based on the bestselling 1933 novel, opened in theaters around the U.S. It depicted poor white southerners as cotton sharecroppers and mill hands in gritty work clothes. The movie culminated with a dramatic scene in which mill hands attempt to break a lockout by occupying the factory.

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4 Minchin, Empty Mills, 31.
That same year, *West Side Story* was published after opening to celebratory audiences in the fall of 1957. The musical, in which the two main female characters labor as Puerto Rican needleworkers in a romanticized New York City dress shop, dominated Broadway and sparked talk of a movie production. In the play, Maria sings “I Feel Pretty” while dancing through the tulle and silks of fancy dresses. Yet it was during these months in 1958 that the ILGWU called a seven-state strike in the Northeast and demanded a severance plan for jobs lost to the shop relocations out of New York City to surrounding states. Unlike Maria and Anita in *West Side Story*, Puerto Rican needleworkers from dress factories and contracting shops walked out with striking union members. After decades of labor migration and union organizing, Puerto Rican women had substantial membership and some union positions.

ILGWU leaders in New York City called the strike because manufacturing and workers were moving to Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The constant reconfigurations included this postwar diffusion of manufacturing within the Northeast. Costs declined in New England as fewer young white wage workers wanted mill jobs and transnational companies acquired older factories at low cost. The corporations also relocated plants within the South, crisscrossing those state lines as part of their constant adjustments.

This chapter redirects the tighter analytical lens from chapters two and three to study the Northeast and Maldonado’s place in it in the 1960s and 1970s. The Northeast underwent noticeable changes as transnational corporations, capitalizing on policies from U.S. trade

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6 Multiple interviews, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Collection, Series XIX: Audio-Visual (1973-1999), Oral History Transcripts, Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.
offices, came to dominate global currents. Just as chapter two closed in on southern mill hands and Crystal Lee’s choices and actions in that context, this chapter tracks Maldonado’s history in context to the extent possible from the record. The reconfigurations of manufacturing, investment, migration, and labor strands continued to disaggregate from the previously dense northeastern hub, with currents increasing and running through the South, Puerto Rico, East Asia, and Mexico. Northeast production was not expired, however. Some mills and plants remained as a reservoir of older low-cost properties, and many managers recruited Puerto Rican women from the island and New York City into New England.

This chapter adds kinetic pieces to the long history while working to locate and trace the labor and activism of Gloria Maldonado from limited archival fragments. During the 1960s, Maldonado became active in the labor movement, including the ILGWU, Central Labor Council, and Hispanic Labor Committee. The linking of Crystal Lee Sutton’s and Gloria Maldonado’s stories, constructed from asymmetrical archives with a refusal to abide by strict chronological order, does not result in chaos. Rather, it creates a history that has embraced simultaneity, multivocality, and unevenness in order to advance a new analysis. This history questions the dominant narrative paradigm of U.S. industry undergoing a sequential relocation of manufacturing from North to South; the scholarly separation of “mill hands” and “needleworkers”; and the cultural politics that fostered their different meanings and visibility.

At the end of the chapter, the tighter lens tracks Puerto Rican needleworkers from the fourth phase of the 1960s to 1970s to their navigation of the industry during the 1980s. That

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decade marks the fifth and final phase of a coherent domestic U.S. textile and garment industry. Almost all northeastern and most southern mills and factories closed during that decade. They shuttered not as a result of union pressures and high wages, but from a combination of global disaggregation, anti-union efforts, and New Right financial policies.

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Puerto Rican women filled the New York City industry in the late 1950s. They had jobs with all types of employers, including 8,000 women in skirts and sportswear across 322 union shops. Another 1,000 women labored in coats and suits. In addition to recruitment by the Migration Division and informal networks, reductions in the cost of airfare—from $180 to $75 for a commercial flight from the island to New York—fostered the growing numbers of people leaving Puerto Rico for the Northeast. Direct flights also increased from the island to airports in New Jersey and New England. These conditions encouraged the increase in Puerto Rican needleworkers in the Northeast. By 1960, women had decades in the industry, substantial numbers in U.S. enterprises, a history of organizing, and expanding migration through the Northeast.

In January and February 1958, ILGWU negotiators met with New York City employers’ associations but could not reach a renewal of the dressmakers’ collective agreement. Union organizers, shop stewards, and workers in New York City, Eastern, Out-of-Town, and Northeast departments began setting up strike machinery like Picket, Hall, and Settlement Committees. On March 3, Mayor Robert F. Wagner intervened in an attempt to

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avoid a major strike.\textsuperscript{11} Union negotiators dropped the requested wage increase from 22 to 15%, but the employers’ associations refused and offered 5% instead.

ILGWU President David Dubinsky countered that workers had gone without a raise for five years despite hikes in the cost of living. Section work, in which one woman makes one part of a garment, had spread, deskilling jobs and driving down wages.\textsuperscript{12} In addition, the union wanted a severance plan, a critical component that reflected growing precarity in the industry.\textsuperscript{13} Dubinsky suggested the idea at the 1950 convention because he saw employers make their fortunes in manufacturing, but then close their city shops to invest in Wall Street, real estate, or cheaper outlying shops. Meanwhile, workers who had labored 20 or 30 years were left without a job and limited opportunities. Between 1953 and 1961, the proportion of dressmakers working in the garment district near Seventh and Eighth Avenues had decreased while Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx had slightly increased. Wages and real estate were lower in uptown and the outer boroughs, and some companies relocated manufacturing even further out.\textsuperscript{14} Maldonado and other women workers understood this situation. “You see shops closing because of the rent,” she said. “[T]hey tripled the rent in the garment area.”\textsuperscript{15}

Puerto Rican women were important participants in the ILGWU strike on March 5.

New York Local 22 Dressmakers and Local 23 Skirtmakers had many Puerto Rican members

\textsuperscript{11} “Set N.Y. Dress Strike Machinery; Talks Go On,” \textit{Justice}, 40 issue 4, February 15, 1958, 3-4; “105,000 in 7-State Dress Strike,” “Demand Pay, Enforcement Gains,” “N’East, EOT Gird for Dress Strike,” \textit{Justice}, 40 issue 5, March 1, 1958, 1-9, ILGWU at DigitalCommons@ILR; Whalen, “‘The Day the Dresses Stopped,’” 130-137.

\textsuperscript{12} Manufacturers handle all aspects of production and sales, jobbers design and sell apparel or make special orders of apparel but are not involved in large retail, contractors complete only production and assembly work.

\textsuperscript{13} Whalen, “‘The Day the Dresses Stopped’,” 133-138.


\textsuperscript{15} “Gloria Maldonado,” 2/17/1985, 49.
and joined thousands of women walking to Madison Square Garden for a massive ILGWU rally. Maldonado worked in a garment factory at that time. Although no available record exists of her participation, she became an organizer in the 1960s so she most likely knew about the walkout. Saby Nehama, a Jewish man who headed Local 22’s Education Department and worked closely with Puerto Rican members, showed his solidarity by giving a rousing speech in Spanish. Eva Monje, an ILGWU steward, shut down her housecoat factory to support the strike. In addition, the ILGWU had increased its outreach and grievance actions in contracting shops, where many Puerto Rican women worked. The ILGWU wanted to show managers they could not evade union wages by contracting. Many of these women without union membership participated.

The strike lasted five days in New York City, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. Although it was one of the shortest general strikes, it was one of the largest in terms of geographic areas cooperating as a single walkout. In Connecticut, to cover the scattered factories, shop chairladies were responsible for coordinating strike times, signs, and picket numbers at their sites. Chairladies formed committees in Bridgeport, Stamford, Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury. Reporters had noted that Bridgeport relied on hundreds of Puerto Rican workers in its garment industry, and

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16 “Registration Trophy,” Justice, 40 issue 1, January 1, 1958, 11, Yolanda Cisneras, a shop chairlady, won a tv set in the Permanent Personal Registration raffle; “60th Anniversary: La Prensa,” Justice, 42 issue 13, July 1, 1960, 12, “the Spanish-speaking elements chiefly from Puerto Rico—who provide the new human resources of this great organization.”


18 Whalen, “‘The Day the Dresses Stopped,’” 121-150.

19 “N’East, EOT Gird for Dress Strike,” “Nutmeg Chairladies Keystone of Strike,” Justice, 40 issue 5, March 1, 1958, 4, ILGWU at DigitalCommons@ILR. Winslow, telephone conversation with the author, 2019.
Sunbeam Dress in New Haven employed Puerto Rican women.\textsuperscript{20} A Puerto Rican woman who moved to Wallingford for a more residential community expressed the difficulty of changing from an ILGWU city shop to a Connecticut shop with lower pay.\textsuperscript{21}

The ILGWU action won an 8\% wage increase and severance plan. That plan required companies to contribute to a severance fund, announce their relocations, give workers time to find another job, and pay severance. Severance also became part of the new collective agreement for skirts and sportswear signed a few months later without any strike.\textsuperscript{22} The vibrant participation of Puerto Rican women like Maldonado illuminates the migration of women workers from the island through the Northeast. It also highlights the force of their identities as working women. Their actions contradict the characters of Maria and Anita in \textit{West Side Story}, who appear as exotic beauties. Maria and Anita dance and socialize as the “dark Other” from a distant island. They have no expression of identification with the American working class, as wage earners or as union members. Commentary about the musical then further contributed to cultural narratives of urban outsiders and troubled youth rather than of workers and labor.

In contrast, in oral histories about this time period Puerto Rican women describe their hard work and fights for fair pay and treatment, and they do not sound like victims in a “dying industry.” They used various tactics to deal with their conditions, from union membership and confrontation to transience and circumvention.\textsuperscript{23} They did not see “a dead industry.” Union

\textsuperscript{22}“Raises, Severance for N.Y. Sportwear Workers,” \textit{Justice}, 40 issue 8, April 15, 1958, 5, 11; “‘We Have Won More Than Ever in Our History’,” \textit{Justice}, 40 issue 6, March 15, 1958, 7.
leaders and company managers expressed ongoing concerns about cheap imports, but they continued to negotiate with the federal government regarding quotas and tariffs. The almost complete closures of the late 1980s were not inevitable.

The currents moving through the Atlantic U.S. in the 1960s can appear driven simply by “capital flight.” Without an intentional effort to interrogate the role of ethnicity, colonialism, and worker mobility, the narrative of “capital’s quest for compliant cheap labor” has a certain logical determinism that appears to explain everything. Workers become rooted and an outsized cause of capital relocation. Capital becomes monolithic. For example, in Cowie’s study of RCA from the 1930s through the 1980s, he argues the company had the ability to move to more compliant workers and adjust to changes because the “geographic terrain inhabited by capital was far larger than labor’s niche.”

Ellen Rosen and Jane Collins each question a homogenous view of capital. They argue that local businesses and regional companies do not compete or adapt with the same agility or reach as large corporations. Capital cannot be seen as operating in a singular manner. When federal trade agreements after World War II developed complicated quota systems and globalized options like the BIP in Mexico, large corporations had the systems and capital flexibility to take advantage. Regional companies closed in the face of plunging consumer prices.

This project further complicates the idea of capital and labor currents by involving Puerto Rican needleworkers and migrating women who labor across the Americas. Certain forms of capital and labor can each inhabit a large geographic terrain, even if the two function

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24 Cowie, *Capital Moves*, 4. He argues RCA relocated for a variety of reasons, including the social changes its plants triggered in local sites, but still frames the Northeast as a starting point as manufacturing moved southward to an endpoint in Mexico.

with unequal resources, information, risks, and rewards. The span of the terrain does not have the significant role. Although Puerto Rican women might not form the highest quantity of workers, they perform crucial functions as labor and connective tissues for an industry and economy. Migrating workers move and adapt without the resources, information, and leverage corporations can deploy, but they move. Asymmetrical power impacts the agility and pace, not the reach. Capital flight was not the problem of twentieth-century capitalism.\textsuperscript{26} Capital migration has been a basic characteristic of capitalism, and labor migration interacts with it. As such, capital flight does not exist as a problem at a point in time with a solution but as capital currents in need of monitoring, accountability, and distribution.

Just as Maldonado provides a case study for Puerto Rican needleworkers, the American Thread Company provides a case study for the shifting and diffusing array of investment, manufacturing, conditions, and labor in the 1960s. It also illustrates multiple links to Puerto Rico. American Thread formed when two companies headquartered in Scotland formed a holding company that bought mills in New England in 1898. These included the Willimantic Linen Company in Connecticut.\textsuperscript{27} American Thread built its first new southern factory in Dalton, Georgia, in 1925. Throughout the 1950s, it consolidated manufacturing while expanding product lines. The consolidation was not full closure in New England with relocation to the South, but rather closures and updates in both.\textsuperscript{28} For example, it closed plants in Fall River, Massachusetts, and Bristol, Tennessee, during that decade.

\textsuperscript{26} Cowie, \textit{Capital Moves}, 11.
\textsuperscript{28} Rosen writes an astounding history of the textile and garment industry regarding trade policies and the responses of industry groups, but she makes the mistake of stating, “The move to the South was completed by 1960,” Rosen, 77.
In the 1960s, American Thread’s annual reports repeatedly state its top problem as cheap imports. Its main competition came from Japan and Hong Kong, where SCAP and the State Department had helped build postwar textile and garment industries. Despite this concern, the company developed a 1963 plan for updating its mill in Willimantic and building a new plant in Transylvania, North Carolina. The new technology for Willimantic, which came from Germany rather than the New England manufacturers it had used in the past, included equipment for synthetic materials. The company also began recruiting Puerto Rican women to work in Willimantic and opened new sales offices and distribution points in Puerto Rico to service manufacturers on the island.²⁹

The 1960s brought growing attention to the intricacies of financial arbitrage. In 1961, American Thread’s controller and related departments moved from Manhattan to Willimantic, and then its entire headquarters relocated to an industrial park in Stamford, Connecticut, in 1969 in order to save real estate and tax costs.³⁰ The company also organized a cotton-dealing subsidiary in Delaware, a state still known for lenient credit and financial reporting laws. American Thread executives decided in 1968 to buy cutting-edge data processing computers for a new Technology Center, installed in a large warehouse in Willimantic, to improve efficiency and allocation for the global company as a whole.

Reconfiguration with consolidation across its array of enterprises continued. Older plants in Troutman, North Carolina, and Newman, Georgia, closed while a new facility opened in Marble, North Carolina, in 1966. American Thread established more sales and distribution points in Indiana, California, and Puerto Rico in the 1960s. Even with declining consumer retail, 1972 saw the highest sales and earnings in the company’s history with strong reliance on its industrial products, like Normex for NASA and the Apollo missions.\textsuperscript{31} Puerto Rican women filled a growing proportion of the labor force in Willimantic, where white mill workers and managers noted the change.\textsuperscript{32} Unlike the single RCA plant Cowie tracked in his insightful book, Capital Moves, American Thread’s numerous equipment updates, closures, new plants, and labor migrations reveal the complicated mesh of a global company.\textsuperscript{33} And the movement of Puerto Rican women belies the notion that only capital had a wide range.

American Thread was not the only corporation that increased its interactions with Puerto Rico. In the early 1960s, the island remained a model for U.S. foreign economic policy and government-industry partnerships that relied on incentives for external investment in lower-wage exports.\textsuperscript{34} For example, President John F. Kennedy appointed Teodoro Moscoso, head of PRIDC and Operation Bootstrap, as coordinator of the Alliance for Progress following the Cuban Revolution.\textsuperscript{35} It was intended to foster economic cooperation between the U.S. and Latin America in line with the Puerto Rico model. In 1963, the idea for an insular petrochemical complex gained momentum when Presidential Proclamation 3663 changed the

\textsuperscript{31} Gisele Desautels Russo, conversation with the author. 1973 was the peak year for domestic textile jobs in the U.S., Windham, 115.
\textsuperscript{32} Gisele Desautels Russo, conversation with the author; “Millworkers of Willimantic, 1979-1980,” Box 45, University of Connecticut, Center for Oral History Interviews Collection. Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
\textsuperscript{33} In Capital Moves, Cowie tracked an RCA electronics plant from the 1930s in New Jersey to Indiana, Tennessee, and ultimately Mexico in the 1990s.
\textsuperscript{35} Ayala and Bernabe, 202.
limit on oil imports to Puerto Rico. The island began importing more petroleum to process for export to the mainland, which increased revenues for the Commonwealth Oil Refining Company, Caribbean Refining Corporation (a subsidiary of Gulf), and Union Carbide. It attracted investors to a capital-intensive industry in addition to those investors and retail companies already involved in the island’s labor-intensive textiles and garments.\textsuperscript{36} It was also a step toward developing synthetic fabric production.

Despite the accolades and millions of dollars funneled through the PRIDC and Operation Bootstrap, the 1960s were years of shrinking insular employment. The number of textile and garment factory personnel increased from 55,000 to 81,000, but home needleworkers declined from 51,000 to 10,000. The migration of women to the Northeast resulted from and simultaneously masked these employment contractions.\textsuperscript{37} Women like Esmeralda Santiago’s mother found their first wage job on the island in the 1950s and moved to the Northeast for better opportunities in the 1960s. Santiago’s mother expressed pride at having her own income when she commuted from her village to sew in a brassiere factory. She flew to New York City in the early 1960s for better pay and medical care for her son. She had to start as a thread cutter although she had been a sewing machine operator in Puerto Rico. After a few months, her mother paid for the remaining children to fly up as well.\textsuperscript{38} In the late 1960s, the number of Puerto Rican residents on the mainland corresponded to those on the island. Insular Puerto Rican women faced a loss of homework, while those on the mainland


were incorporated into low-wage manufacturing undergoing deskilling and global
disaggregation. It was not a secure economic position.

The relocation of Puerto Rican women from New York City into New England
continued throughout the 1960s. Puerto Ricans moving to Bridgeport and Hartford,
Connecticut, and Springfield and Holyoke, Massachusetts, established substantial
demographic percentages. Textiles and garments were entwined with these migrations. Elco
Dress Company of New York bought the old Arrow Dress Company factory in Holyoke in
1962. In 1968, Lesnow Manufacturing and Totsy Manufacturing both opened garment
assembly shops in old factories near downtown Holyoke. Silk and rayon mills remained in the
city. Listings in the Holyoke directory often included people’s employer, and dozens of
Latino names note employment at mills, dress companies, and apparel factories, like Maria
Garcia who worked at Bay State Mills producing synthetic textiles as late as 1972. After that
year, the directory changed its format and content.

The Hartford office of the Migration Division became very active in the 1960s. It
provided a script for how staff should approach employers. It emphasized efforts by “citizens
from Puerto Rico” to “better themselves economically and socially.” The field representative,
Gilberto Camacho, encouraged staff to explain that Puerto Ricans are skilled, satisfied, and
“good workers” with “great speed in all work requiring the use of their hands.” Although the
memo does not mention textiles and garments, hand speed was a common way of endorsing

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needleworkers. The Greater Hartford Chamber of Commerce invited Oscar Nieves, Regional Director of the Puerto Rico Department of Labor, to enroll the office as a member. Sewing factories along Franklin Avenue hired Puerto Rican women for machine operation, cutting threads, and sewing labels into dresses. The ILGWU stayed active too, pressing for an agreement with the Southern New England District, particularly for those contracting shops that made garments for jobbers registered with the New York Dress Joint Board.

Puerto Rican women continued to move to Willimantic to work at American Thread during this time. In her study of Puerto Rican women in the 1980s, Norma Esther Boujouen found that the majority of Puerto Rican women in her sample moved to Willimantic between 1965 and 1969. Some joined family members, some were recruited, and some came because they heard about jobs at American Thread and Hartford Poultry. Patria told Boujouen, “Well, my sister-in-law brought me here. She took me to American Thread. I applied and in less than a week I got a job as a machine operator. Then I wrote my cousins to come here to work…. It was easy to find jobs when I came here in 1969.” Daria came to Willimantic from Puerto Rico in 1970 because her uncle had written to her parents saying young women could get good jobs in the Connecticut town.

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41 Memo to Flavio Reverón from Gilberto Camacho, dated December 23, 1964, Out of the Barrio: The Puerto Rican Migration Beyond NYC, Regional and Field Offices: Hartford. 0095, Reel 151, Box 2494, Folder 1 to Box 2495, Folder 1; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.

42 Hartford Federal Savings letterhead, to Oscar Nieves from Kathleen M. Butler, 196?, Out of the Barrio: The Puerto Rican Migration Beyond NYC, Regional and Field Offices: Hartford. 0078, Reel 151, Box 2494, Folder 1 to Box 2495, Folder 1. Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.


44 “N’East Ups Pay for 5,000 in New England,” Justice, 43 issue 8, April 15, 1961, 4.


Some women felt pride in their employment, especially if they met quotas. Others worried about the speed and expectations. Many recalled a particular supervisor who regularly called out, “Menea esas manos,” which translates to, “Keep those hands busy.” Gabriela liked her time at American Thread, saying, “I enjoyed looking at my machines filling with thread. Everything looked so beautiful. I did a good job because I was careful. My bosses praised me for my work.” Tatiana had a different experience. “I was almost always nervous because of the constant pressure to make quota,” she said. “I got nervous every time the bosses came to check my work. I felt I had to hurry up.” Another woman, Renata, described the training process. “I learned to operate the machines in two weeks. The difficult part was to achieve dexterity to produce the quota. It took me about three months to make the quota.” Lupe, however, easily learned and went beyond the quota in a few weeks.

Puerto Rican workers viewed the quota as making basic money for the company. Completing extra piecework, or “pizual,” was earning money for themselves. Dolores, who worked at American Thread as a machine operator from her arrival in Willimantic in the 1960s until it closed in 1985, liked the job. “I like sewing,” she told an interviewer before her last day. “I never had any accidents. The work there is divided into piecework and the task. The task is what you are supposed to produce in order to earn your salary. Piecework is what you produce after your task… so that we can earn extra money.”

For Puerto Rican women in New York City who lost jobs to manufacturing relocations out of the city, severance was still an option during the 1960s. When the ILGWU celebrated the first round of official severance payments to women workers in cloak, dressmaker, and

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undergarment locals, several Latinas were in the crowd. Acela Contreras and Mary Lopez appear in photographs of the March 1961 ceremony, where they each received checks from the Supplementary Unemployment-Severance Benefits Fund.\(^48\)

Puerto Rican women like Maldonado continued to labor in the New York City’s industry as well. In 1961, the dressmakers renewed their collective agreement without a strike and gained a 5½% raise, higher minimum wages, a piece-rate schedule, and quota numbers for imports.\(^49\) The Migration Division in New York remained a recruitment and employment agency for textile and garment companies. Job orders for hand sewers, sewing machine operators, section workers, hand label sewers, applique workers, garment line workers, cutters, sorters, binding needleworkers, floor girls, and packers all passed through the office in the 1960s. Companies and shops that produced dresses, men’s suits, children’s clothes, skirts and blouses, undergarments, hats, belts, handbags, handkerchiefs, and towels submitted requests. For example, Jorge Ortiz handled a November 1963 job order for Uptown Handkerchief in its search for a sewing machine operator for hemstitching.\(^50\)

Maldonado was active with the ILGWU in New York City through the 1960s. Unlike Crystal Lee, she understood the union as a way to push against import competition as well as to demand better work conditions and treatment. The ILGWU is an illuminating case study for the efforts by unions to address three interrelated concerns: circumstances at local sites, the migrations of workers, and the manipulations of global disaggregation. Throughout the twentieth century, the ILGWU organized workers at plants and mills in Canada, the


\(^49\) “Pact Averts Dress Strike,” *Justice*, 43 issue 5, March 1, 1961, 1, 3.

\(^50\) Uptown Handkerchief, 0802, and Multiple Job Orders, “Easy Jobs?: Puerto Rican Employment Program in NY, 1948-1991,” Job Orders; Industrial Workers [Clerical, Farm, Household, Industrial, Professional, Service, Training] [1957-1990], Reel 314, Box 1838, Folder 6 to Box 1839, Folder 6; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.
continental U.S., and Puerto Rico. It had representatives and stewards, successful activities, and collective bargaining agreements in all these regions. A July 1964 issue of Justice, the union newspaper, provides an illustrative example. The cover story discusses organizing in the South while articles in the rest of the newspaper highlight events and negotiations in New York City, Montreal, Toronto, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Puerto Rico.\(^5\)

The ILGWU and its representatives like Maldonado addressed migration not only with membership campaigns, but also with language and social programs to integrate workers from Puerto Rico, China, and the larger Caribbean. As with many unions, these broad efforts often contradicted the immediate politics of some locals, where discriminatory practices could marginalize migrant and immigrant women or limit their access to authority and leadership. Despite these sometimes tense situations, national leaders, representatives, and Education Departments extended services. The ILGWU coordinated beach trips, visits to the United Nations, and parade floats with invitations in multiple languages.\(^5\) A 1962 article in Justice celebrated unity, shared union information in Spanish and Chinese, and included photographs of workers of many ethnicities. A 1964 ILGWU contest sent letters in Spanish and English to


encourage workers to participate in a simple test to register with the Board of Elections and offered a trip to Puerto Rico as a prize. A photograph of Luz Santiago waving her registration card accompanies the article.53

The ILGWU, TWUA, and ACWA were involved in lobbying and negotiating with presidential administrations and members of Congress to manage tariffs and quotas. Maldonado was aware of such international issues and commented on the need to reduce imports, especially from Japan, China, and India. She understood that nations gamed the quota system, with China buying Panama’s unused quota numbers so its larger manufacturers could import more to the U.S.54 As early as the 1950s, long before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of the 1990s, unions were researching imports and advocating policies to maintain U.S. jobs. The concern was not yet obvious to all rank-and-file workers, but the unions as well as regional companies were aware. In 1961, ACWA President Jacob S. Potofsky warned that imports threatened to eliminate the domestic industry and called for strict enforced quotas.55 The ILGWU remained staunchly anti-communist but was not so immersed in “business unionism” to avoid questions of class, capital migration, and global exploitation. It encouraged Americans to buy union-made U.S. products and built relationships with workers in other countries.

55 Minchin, Empty Mills, 49; Koistinen, 193-194.
Such efforts have been lumped into a generic and limited conceptualization of “protectionism,” yet most of the proposals and activities were not simple provincial or isolationist reactions. Unions had a larger strategy when they challenged U.S. foreign economic policy. They pursued the dual objectives of maintaining domestic employment and preventing global exploitation. Like regional companies, however, unions did not have the clout to counteract an expanding foreign economic policy that relied on trade agreements to achieve multiple goals, including peaceful international relations and Cold War strategic alliances. Since the 1934 RTA, the President and executive trade offices, not members of Congress who could be pressed by constituents, determined trade agreements. By 1945, the U.S. had entered 32 bilateral trade agreements with 27 countries under the theory that tariff reductions would increase trade and peace. GATT launched in 1948 to further reduce trade barriers with periodic bargaining. As early as 1958, the New England Governors’ Textile Committee complained about the rise of foreign imports and the fact “underdeveloped countries are taking strong protectionist measures…” U.S. presidents from the 1930s to 1960s went ahead anyway, constructing a scaffolding of rationales, mechanisms, and procedures upon which 1990s advocates for “free trade” would build their bigger treaties.

Maldonado fought not only for the Puerto Rican women around her. She expressed concern about the working conditions in importing countries and the global increase in sweatshops. “The people in the higher echelons [of these underdeveloped countries] are the ones that are getting the benefits from it, not the poor people,” she said. During the 1960s, large transnational companies increased in number and reach. They linked enterprises,
investors, and contractors around the world and lobbied the federal government for lowered tariffs, higher quotas, and other international agreements beneficial to corporations of their scale. The ILGWU tried to respond with international outreach as well as domestic lobbying. It celebrated union efforts in places like Hong Kong and attempted to connect mainland, Puerto Rican, Canadian, and Asian workers. At times, textile and garment unions even aligned with local businesses and regional companies that also wanted to raise tariffs and lower quotas to protect their manufacturing stake.

In the late 1960s, Maldonado and other Puerto Rican needleworkers noticed a change in the ability of unions to get new members. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Hart-Celler Act) had significant implications for the conditions of textile and garment employment when it ended the national origins formula that had been used since the 1920s to determine immigration quotas. It increased the number of people arriving in the Northeast from Caribbean nations like the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Haiti. The act triggered not only documented immigrants, but also increased the currents of undocumented immigrants who followed friends, family, and comparatively higher wages to the U.S. Maldonado and other needleworkers described an increase in sweatshops and homework throughout New York City as the number of undocumented workers grew. They believed employers and managers


preyed on fears to pressure and exploit them. Maldonado told an interviewer, “There’s a lot of undocumented workers that are scared to join the union because, you know, it’s an ‘institution thing’.”  

The manipulation helped businesses avoid unions, minimum wages, overtime pay, and tax reporting. Although many documented and undocumented Caribbean and Chinese immigrants wanted to join unions, and even tried to organize shops, employers fired such workers. Other managers went so far as to trigger raids by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to block unionization.

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That larger context was growing complicated in these ways just as Maldonado decided to get involved in Local 66. It was in that situation, she became a vocal and active member. The ILGWU offered Maldonado a job in 1970 because she was so confident and outspoken. That momentum led to work with the Central Labor Council and Hispanic Labor Committee. At the council office, she picked up a leaflet about a Cornell University program in Labor Studies and asked her ILGWU supervisor if he could get funds to pay for her to attend. But he said he could teach her everything she needed to know. So Maldonado applied for a scholarship from a Puerto Rican leadership group and attended the Cornell program without his support. As with Crystal Lee, some men in leadership did not want Maldonado stepping beyond her prescribed position. She leapt anyway. The ILGWU soon made Maldonado a head organizer for Local 66, and between 1971 and 1973 she became Education Director.

64 Windham, 52-54.
Her first appearance in the archival record comes from this time (see Figure 29). It is a photograph of Maldonado attending a 1973 class in which women improved their skills on new industrial sewing machines at the local’s headquarters. Maldonado stands with a manager, William Schwartz.\textsuperscript{67} Although Justice ran dozens of stories every month and included the names and photographs of white men leaders, Maldonado and most Puerto Rican women stewards, business agents, and organizers did not receive coverage. Puerto Rican needleworkers earned occasional mentions within larger stories or appeared in photographs of an event, but did not receive the targeted attention of municipal and regional men leaders.

In 1974, Maldonado received an Outstanding Leader Award from the Central Labor Council because she had been a strong secretary for the Hispanic Labor Committee, an Education Director, and active in her local and the ILGWU for years. Like Crystal Lee, such acknowledgment came with tensions—Maldonado’s own concerns about other active union members and some resentment from colleagues. “I didn’t think that I deserved [the award] because I didn’t have that many years, you know,” Maldonado said. “I hadn’t paid my dues for that long…. [I]t brought me problems because my [ILGWU] boss did not like that I got it, that award. And he was very… he said it was tokenism and that I shouldn’t have gotten it because they didn’t talk to him.”\textsuperscript{68} Such condescending union leaders did not want Maldonado or Crystal Lee to leave membership or activism, but they wanted the women constrained.

As part of her expanding activism, Maldonado made connections with Puerto Rican and Latino labor organizers. Just as Crystal Lee built connections with workers and spoke

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{67} “Gloria Maldonado,” 8/8/84, 11-17. Members of Local 66 learn to improve their skills at machines installed in a classroom at the local’s headquarters, with Manager William Schwartz at the Embroidery Workers Local and Education Director Gloria Maldonado, 10/1/73, Finding Aid, Local 66, Box 19, Folder 2, ILGWU Justice Photographs #5780/102 P. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
\item \textsuperscript{68} “Gloria Maldonado,” 8/8/84, 12-13.
\end{itemize}
about the collective efforts, Maldonado described other workers and organizers. Eddie González helped her get a job at the Rutgers University Labor Center. The center wanted a Hispanic woman to develop programs. Maldonado left New York City for New Brunswick and taught a labor extension class, “Working Women in American Society.” She noted, “I was scared… It was scary. But I said, ‘Well, you gotta do it.’ And I introduced myself and told them, I says, ‘This is my first job [controlled laugh] as a teacher, you know, my first teaching job.” She had forty students and invited speakers to the class to share their experiences, including a black woman, a Puerto Rican woman, an organizer, and a woman politician. 69 Although the position was short-lived, Maldonado attained a position in the labor movement beyond organizing and membership and developed new skills, a broader identity, and connections beyond the city.

Maldonado attracted media attention in the 1970s for her labor activism at the same time as Crystal Lee. The Central Jersey Home News reported on two Rutgers Labor Center events related to her. In 1974, the center held a seminar with forty-five Latino workers to discuss the effects of inflation and the recession. The article said, “Miss Gloria Maldonado, an associate extension specialist at the center, is serving as program coordinator.” A year later, the Rutgers Labor Center hosted an exhibit, “Workers and Allies: Female Participation in the American Trade Union Movement, 1824-1976.” The reporter spoke to Maldonado, who said, “The exhibit has been assembled by the Smithsonian Institution as a salute to American women workers during the nation’s Bicentennial celebration and this year’s observance of International Women’s Year.” The exhibit traveled with another titled “Working Americans”

69 “Gloria Maldonado,” 8/8/84, 14-16.
with funding from the Smithsonian and AFL-CIO. Maldonado moved through expanding circles and came into contact with national institutions and public history specialists just like Crystal Lee came to know feminist activists and media professionals.

A year after Maldonado started, however, the Rutgers administration cut funding across several programs. She received a pink slip and returned to New York City. She became an Education Director for the Joint Board, which disappointed her because it was “not too gung ho on education and I had a lot of ideas in my head but they didn’t come through… Nobody helped me, you know.” When her friend Louise Delgado retired a few years later, she suggested Maldonado take her position as an ILGWU business agent. Business agents serve as the liaison between union and management during negotiations and grievances, monitor contract enforcement, and encourage worker involvement. Maldonado took the job with 48 shops and handled issues regarding wages, terminations, and seniority.

Her ongoing activism earned her a trip to Switzerland to tour the International Labour Organization (ILO) with union organizers and leaders in the 1970s. Maldonado’s supervisor again tried to prevent her from joining the trip, but one of her mentors, Murray Gross, intervened on her behalf, not unlike Zivkovich for Crystal Lee at about the same time. Gross went to the president and asked him to talk to Maldonado’s boss so she could go. Although she did not receive approval until a few days before the flight, she said, “I had gotten my passport and everything [laugh] and gotten ready…. And when [the boss] found out that I had everything, he was very angry. When I came back from that [trip], which was something that

71 “Gloria Maldonado,” 8/8/84, 16-17.
I’ll never forget, you know, he was very different with me. And my co-workers, it’s hard to say, were… started giving me, you know, like ostracizing me.”72 Unions were sites of contest as well as collaboration, and some peers resented Maldonado’s elevation. Both she and Crystal Lee had to face coworkers who attempted to limit their progress and prominence.

Maldonado expressed an explicit awareness of the potential for negative reactions.

“I’m known for my straightforwardness,” she said. “A few people don’t like to hear the truth, you know, sometimes I have to, you know, just knock them down. Really, some people don’t like me because of that.”73 Crystal Lee made similar statements when she was asked about her TWUA activism. She mentioned conflicts in the motel headquarters and the way union leadership treated her after Zivkovich left. Yet they continued as outspoken women advocating worker organizing.

Maldonado worried as unions struggled to fight U.S. foreign economic policy and its encouragement of imports during the 1970s. She had a sense of the global arrays, which many southern mill hands could not see due to social structures that obstructed their vision. “We are being attacked by imports, attacked by sweatshops, by homeworkers coming back,” Maldonado said.74 Smaller local and regional companies became “domestic manufacturers” in an industry that included more transnational corporations.75 Unions cooperated with these domestic manufacturers in lobbying for import limits even if they fought each other over organizing. For example, Cannon Mills executives testified and petitioned alongside union leaders for limited imports even as they obstructed worker organizing throughout the 1970s.

72 “Gloria Maldonado,” 8/8/84, 12-14.
73 “Gloria Maldonado,” 8/8/84, 16-27.
74 “Gloria Maldonado,” 8/8/84, 29.
and 1980s. Maldonado understood the complexities. “On the import bill [anti-union companies and politicians in the South are] backing us…. [b]ecause they have a lot of textile mills there.” Maldonado said the U.S. should not be opening its markets to imports when Japan and Europe did not allow similarly high numbers. “So if all the work, or most of the work is sent out there, then we are suffering…. Japan and other European countries, they won’t let in any imports. They protect, they have protectionism, you know.” She participated in labor activism as an organizer and spokeswoman—and as part of a union movement attempting to influence the way globalization developed.

The ILGWU and TWUA lobbied for the Foreign Trade and Investment Act (Burke-Hartke Trade Bill) in 1973-1974. The bill had three goals: to maintain the production of goods “historically produced” in the U.S., to encourage the return of production that had “transferred abroad,” and to support new production. It proposed an amendment to the Internal Revenue Code of 1954 that would stem the outflow of U.S. capital, jobs, technology, and production. For example, backers wanted to end tax breaks for transnational corporations and give federal executive offices the option to restrict the export of capital if they believed too many jobs were at stake. The TWUA wrote letters to political, civic, and labor organizations, like the Negro Women Council, requesting their support with Congress. It also encouraged the rank and file

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77 “Gloria Maldonado,” 2/17/85, 46.
78 “Gloria Maldonado,” 2/17/85, 45-46.
80 Windham, 124.
to understand the bill by distributing “Technical Explanation” cards and asked workers to contact their congressional representatives.  

Industry lobbyists, investors, and trade groups representing transnational interests coordinated multiple fronts against the bill. Although most industrial nations like Japan, France, and Germany, and the European Economic Community (EEC) founded in 1957 had tariffs and quotas to protect domestic manufacturing, U.S. critics attacked Burke-Hartke as “dangerous protectionism.” The powerful New York Chamber of Commerce and business figures like Henry Ford II lobbied against it. Republican Congressman H. John Heinz III of Pennsylvania slammed the bill because it would “damage” the U.S. economy by imposing quotas on all imports, eliminating tax provisions favorable to U.S. overseas investment, and regulating international capital transactions. He argued the bill would destroy jobs and burden American consumers with high prices. Heinz suggested “adjustment assistance” for displaced workers, an approach that tried to use unemployment statistics and federal funding to offer job training for new careers. The ILGWU, TWUA, and ACWA did not support adjustment assistance because past trade bills under President Kennedy had promised funds and facilities that either did not happen or were offered in inadequate numbers.

Earlier economists, lobbyists, and politicians who had defended holding U.S. markets open used to focus on Cold War strategy, with attention to communist subversion and

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81 Letters, fact sheets, and “Technical Explanation” cards, Folder 12 Burke-Hartke Trade Bill 1971, Box Number 10, Room 415. ACTWU’s Legislative and Political Department Records, #5619/033. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
82 Stein, 8-13, 95, 156-158.
84 Rosen, 66-76.
international alliances. In the 1973-1974 debates, however, these groups emphasized economic growth, rates of return for U.S. investors, and consumer prices. The advocates defended their position even though in 1973 wages started to stagnate and the U.S. experienced its first merchandise trade deficit since 1893. Burke-Hartke did not become law and any plans for adjustment assistance were bumped to later debates. Most unions eventually accepted adjustment assistance in trade or labor bills as a way to address increasing lay-offs.

Large U.S. transnational corporations did not need any high tariffs and low quotas. They had technology and investment mechanisms to react in multiple ways. For example, in response to protectionism by other nations, such corporations built facilities behind the trade barriers. In 1971, Caterpillar Tractor was already buying foreign parts for its domestically assembled products and planned to expand this model to multiple countries. That year, President Richard Nixon convened the Commission on International Trade and Investment Policy, chaired by an IBM executive. It called for monetary policy, not manufacturing and employment policies, to address the trade deficit. Its main suggestion was to “eliminate all barriers to international trade and capital movements within twenty-five years.”

U.S. government trade offices eventually served as a catalyst for manufacturing disaggregation in all sectors, including electronics and automobiles. In the 1970s, their offices changed tariff laws and quotas along the lines of what they had already done with textiles and garments from the 1940s to 1960s. In the early 1970s, U.S. corporate investment in foreign countries increased at a rate 50% faster than their investment in the U.S. The results allowed not only more cheap imports from foreign-based corporations, but also reduced barriers to

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86 Stein, 12, 37-40.
U.S. corporations manufacturing in other nations or importing pieces for domestic assembly.\textsuperscript{87} J.P. Stevens was such a global corporation, with subsidiaries and affiliates in Japan, Mexico, France, and New Zealand.\textsuperscript{88} Its fight with the TWUA in the South was a small part of its operations and more ideological than financial.

Maldonado understood that just as Puerto Rican women gained leverage in the national industry, global economic conditions and federal trade policy undermined the status of U.S. manufacturing, particularly textiles and garments. Starting in 1973, a series of intertwined crises shook the U.S., commencing with the oil price inflation of late 1973 and reaching a frenzy during the recession of 1975-1976. Judith Stein and Greta Kripner argue these crises exposed the inability of leftist and centrist liberalism, with familiar Keynesian policies, to respond effectively to intense inflation, world currency fluctuations, global competition, and rising domestic unemployment. As a result, advocates of neoliberal economic solutions gained traction. The postwar political assumption that capital and labor should prosper together was replaced with the ideology that promotion of capital would eventually benefit labor. These advocates did not question the openness of the U.S. consumer market as the primary destination for the world’s production.\textsuperscript{89}

Neoliberal economic policies undermined domestic manufacturing in a second way because they led to financialization, the process by which financial markets and institutions gain greater influence over economic policies, objectives, and outcomes. This process elevates

\textsuperscript{87} Multiple documents, Folder 36: Trade Adjustment Assistance 1979-1983, Box 1, Room 515, ACTWU's International Affairs Department Records 1976-1984, #5619/032. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library. Stein, 12, 37-40; Rosen, Chapter 4 “The Emergence of Trade Protection for the Textile and Garment Industries,” 55-76.

\textsuperscript{88} McConville, “5 Years After Union Victory,” A2.

the financial sector and transfers resources and capital from other sectors, like manufacturing, into its drive for short-term capital gains. Stein sees the Revenue Act of 1978 as an important triumph for financial capital over other sectors, especially manufacturing.

This shift of overall political-economic policy to accentuate the financial sector also played out in the northeastern municipal areas where Puerto Rican needleworkers had settled. In Hartford, the Chamber of Commerce and corporate executives assumed increasing influence and pushed economic policies “linked to downtown development.” Their strategy favored real-estate speculation, office construction, and upscale retail and restaurants rather than manufacturing and fair housing, which benefited Puerto Rican households. Using New York City as a case study, Kim Phillips-Fein makes a similar argument regarding the Wall Street sector and investment bankers who stepped into the 1970s economic crises to offer their version of a solution. It relied on corporate tax cuts, investment tax waivers, and subsidies for commercial real estate in return for backing municipal bonds.

Maldonado expressed dismay at these city policies. “[W]ith Mr. Koch, there, you know, allowing this [sic] real estate developers to take all of Manhattan and triple the rent, the people are just not making it, there’s more shops that are closing up,” she said. “It affects our people, our generation of Puerto Rican women who have been there… and all of a sudden the

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91 In several ways, the Revenue Act of 1978 granted financial capital more benefits than other forms of capital. In an example relevant to textiles and garments, the bill substituted rate reductions to rich individuals (with the idea of spurring investment, which Wall Street firms preferred) for corporate investment tax credits (which had supported the development of physical assets, like new machines and factories). See Stein, 193-195.
93 Phillips-Fein, Fear City.
man [who owns the shop] has to close.”

Maldonado was one of many Puerto Rican New Yorkers responded to the subsequent cuts in public services. The Young Lords, an organization modeled on Third World Liberation and the Black Panthers, made a series of demands for public health clinics, public daycare, and regular trash pickup. When the city announced it would end subsidized tuition at Hostos Community College in the Bronx, the majority Puerto Rican students coordinated walkouts and petitions.

The economic crises that started in 1973 and surged in 1975 crushed Puerto Rico’s economy with greater ferocity than the mainland’s. U.S. agencies, the insular government, and PRIDC had constructed the island’s economy around sugar, textiles and apparel, and a burgeoning petrochemical sector. In the early 1970s, Wal-Mart buyers still noted that much of its children’s apparel came from Puerto Rico as well as Japan.

This situation would change by the end of the decade and decimate women’s established job options. By the recession in early 1974, external investors owned 70% of all productive wealth in Puerto Rico. Despite millions of dollars in tax waivers, public subsidies for corporations, and the constant increase in external investment, however, PRIDC ideas that these would spur economic growth proved false. Between 1969 and 1975, only 28.7% of the jobs promised by PRIDC-promoted firms had materialized. The rate was even lower in the touted petrochemical industries.

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The response that U.S. and insular officials selected for the 1970s recession would become a decisive instigator of Puerto Rico’s 2014-2016 fiscal crisis. The administration of PPD Governor Rafael Hernández Colón lobbied Congress to change Section 931 of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code. It allowed U.S. corporations manufacturing in Puerto Rico to place profits in banks on the island or in other U.S. possessions. Upon liquidation of their Puerto Rican enterprises, U.S. corporations could then transfer these accumulated profits to the mainland without federal taxes. Corporations often held their revenues in Guam or speculated in currency until they closed their Puerto Rican enterprises and extracted the profits. PPD lobbyists convinced Congress that by allowing U.S. corporations to transfer their profits to the mainland without taxes at any time, the U.S. could recuperate millions of dollars and boost Puerto Rico’s industrial development. In 1976, Congress passed Section 936, extending the tax waivers for external corporations.98

From 1976 to its peak in 1993, this new section spurred the creation of many “936 corporations.” It attracted more capital-intensive enterprises like pharmaceuticals and precision manufacturing rather than labor-intensive plants like textile and garments, which declined. The new facilities, however, employed fewer workers per unit and functioned even more often as subsidiaries of U.S. corporations.99 By 1977, for the core industries with 57% of manufacturing output, external ownership averaged 98.3%. The insular government increasingly relied on the transfer of U.S. federal funds via Social Security, food stamps, and veteran benefits or funded its own services with public debt. Much of the funds from the federal transfers went to buying imports from the mainland, not into the Puerto Rican

98 Ayala and Bernabe, 268-269.
99 Ortiz, “Puerto Rican Women Workers in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Appraisal of the Literature,” in *Puerto Rican Women’s History*, 50-51. Mainland involvement and investment in pharmaceuticals has a history on the island that dates to the 1920s. Margaret Sanger, the Rockefeller Foundation, and others had been developing projects for years. López, *Matters of Choice*; Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*. 

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In 1996, Congress legislated a ten-year phase of Section 936. Corporations began reducing and closing their island enterprises in preparation for the 2006 end of the tax exemption.

On the mainland, Maldonado and other Puerto Rican labor activists supported the ILGWU and newly formed ACTWU’s intensified battle against cheap imports. The ILGWU coordinated demonstrations throughout the Northeast and South from 1976 to 1977. These actions included small New England cities with substantial percentages of Puerto Rican workers, like Springfield, Massachusetts, and Pawtucket, Rhode Island. The ACTWU linked its campaign against cheap imports with its late-1970s boycott of J.P. Stevens (see Figures 30-31). Since the successful 1974 Roanoke Rapids certification vote, the union had filed multiple NLRB grievances for obstructing contract negotiations and firing union members. Crystal Lee’s 1973 demand for reinstatement and backpay awaited decision until 1978. The ACTWU sent out ILGWU flyers that asked consumers to insist on the union label with its own pamphlets asking consumers, retail stores, hotels, and restaurants not to buy products from J.P. Stevens. The importance of textiles and garments to the soaring Asian economies impeded their success. By the late 1970s, with the assistance of the increasingly


102 The ACTWU formed in 1976 when the TWUA and ACWA merged to build leverage for the ongoing fight to force J.P. Stevens to agree to a contract.

103 Finding Aid, Imports: Import Demonstrations, April 12, 1977, Box 4, Folder 2, ILGWU Justice Photographs Collection, #5780/102 P. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

opened U.S. consumer market, textiles comprised one-third of South Korea’s exports, and China was the sixth largest exporter of textiles to the U.S.\(^{105}\)

Even under the threat of imports, Maldonado and thousands of Puerto Rican women sought jobs and worked in the textile and garment industry. Irma Medina’s mother, Aracelis Martínez, learned industrial sewing at the Ana Roqué High School in Humacao in 1962. She then moved from Puerto Rico to New York City in 1964 for better wages, returned to the island and worked in another factory for a few years, and went to New York again in 1970. She was a sewing machine operator in an undergarment factory in the city.\(^{106}\) Maria Salgado-Cartagena’s paternal grandmother was recruited from the island to work in a New York City factory during the early 1970s. She was a senior seamstress there for ten years.\(^{107}\) The Migration Division still received orders from companies like Fremitex, West Side Textiles, Zevon Textiles, Latch-On, D.C. Dress, Uilin Fashion, Regalle Handbags, Pioneer Embroidery, and Kingley Trimming.\(^{108}\)

New York City was such a consistent center of employment for Puerto Rican women, their work caught the attention of feminist activists outside the labor movement. A bilingual feminist newspaper for the Third World Women’s Alliance was interested in the problems of racism, imperialism, and sexism and published a 1974 article about Puerto Rican women in garment factories. Rosario Morales, a power sewer in the city, complained about the conditions and lack of vacations and daycare. While acknowledging the importance of

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\(^{106}\) Irma Medina, conversation with the author, at residence, Springfield, MA, February 17, 2018; Aracelis Martínez, written interview questions from the author, translated by Irma Medina, Springfield, Massachusetts, February 10, 2018.

\(^{107}\) Maria Salgado-Cartagena, conversation with the author, Route 66 Diner, Springfield, MA, December 3, 2017.

\(^{108}\) Multiple Job Orders, “Easy Jobs?: Puerto Rican Employment Program in NY, 1948-1991,” Job Orders; Industrial Workers [Clerical, Farm, Household, Industrial, Professional, Service, Training] [1957-1990], Reel 318 Box 1843, Folder 1 to Box 1843, Folder 16; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.
imperialism and racism, the author encouraged working women to unite along class lines to demand better employment.\textsuperscript{109}

Opportunities for Puerto Rican women continued outside New York City as well. Martínez eventually paid for Medina’s flight from the island in the mid-1970s, and they moved to Springfield, Massachusetts. Martínez worked at Gemini Mill, a former Carter’s factory that was owned and managed by Joel Gordon. He was an industry executive from eastern Massachusetts and had attained contracts for OshKosh B’Gosh and Izod. Gordon said he often struggled to find workers with the interest and sewing skills, but Puerto Rican women had the necessary experience.\textsuperscript{110} In the early 1970s, Salgado-Cartagena remembers her mother, Maria Berrios, completing piecework in Swedesboro, New Jersey. Her mother made octagonal needlework pieces, sewed them together in a pattern, packed them in boxes, and shipped those to New York City. Berrios would then receive a paycheck and another box of materials. As a little girl, Salgado-Cartagena helped her mother with packing and labeling. Her mother also made embroidered doilies for their apartment, carrying on the original cultural tradition from Puerto Rico even as she applied her skills to industrial manufacturing. In the late 1970s, they moved to Holyoke where Berrios worked for the Elco Dress Company until it closed in the mid-1980s.\textsuperscript{111} American Thread still hired Puerto Rican women in Willimantic through the 1970s, sometimes paying them to fly to the island and recruit workers.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{111} Salgado-Cartagena, conversation with the author, 2017.
\textsuperscript{112} Boujouen, “‘Menea Esas Manos’,” 95-96.
Decades of disaggregation had left the textile and garment industry precarious, however, so when the recession deepened in the mid-1970s, the effects were immediate. The situation grew uncertain at American Thread after 1974. Annual reports show high revenues and expanding sales in 1972 and a stable year in 1973, but the tone and content changed dramatically the next year. The 1974 report stated that the company experienced a “sharp dip” in contrast to the three previous years. It argued the U.S. was in its worst business condition since 1937-1938, with a dramatic increase in unemployment, under-utilized capacity, lower retail sales, and reduced production in the manufacturing American Thread served, like apparel and automotive. In 1975, it lost customers, orders, and revenues as the economic crises expanded. The annual report says the nation was “at the bottom of a severe recession” with slow demand improvement. But even as executives reduced hiring, they planned for new packaging capability in Willimantic. In 1977, the corporation installed an energy conservation system and computerized order processing and inventory control at the Connecticut facilities.113

By the mid-1970s, U.S. government offices no longer promoted Puerto Rico as a prominent export manufacturing model, but the island remained a site of exemption, especially for financialization. The pharmaceutical industry grew as textiles and garments and petrochemicals collapsed. In the 1970s, pharmaceutical plants increased from 47 to 84 companies, but they were heavily automated.114 Yet the island’s model of lowest-wage textile and garment export manufacturing in an enclave of permanent exemption did not vanish.

Government offices, corporations, and investors replicated it in adapted versions throughout Asia, Central America, the Caribbean, and Africa. The United Nations even became involved.

In 1974, just as Maldonado won her award from the Central Labor Council and the TWUA won its vote in Roanoke Rapids, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) convened a working group. Its objective was to create an agency of export processing zone experts. Richard Bolin, the Arthur D. Little consultant who had helped design Puerto Rico’s 1940s-1950s Operation Bootstrap and Mexico’s 1965 BIP, received a UNIDO contract to establish the World Export Processing Zone Association (WEPZA). Two years later, Bolin founded the Flagstaff Institute in Arizona for the promotion and organization of such zones around the world. WEPZA officially launched in 1978 as a council of government representatives and regulatory authorities, but that would change in the 1980s to include private businesses and corporate representatives. Bolin celebrated Puerto Rico, saying it was pivotal to his conceptualization of EPZs as enclaves. He participated in EPZ development in South Korea, Taiwan, Iraq, Egypt, and China, which became the touted contemporary examples.115

The fight against cheap imports, especially in textiles and garments, persisted even as federal and international agencies planned for the further disaggregation of manufacturing.116

Unions relied on targeted alliances with industry lobbyists in Washington, D.C., and local

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116 Multiple documents with testimony and memoranda regarding imports, adjustment assistance, unemployment, changes in international economy, Folder 2 Trade Act of 1974; and multiple documents related to various types of apparel and the nations Yugoslavia, Italy, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Uruguay, Folder 1 Import Statistics 1975, Box 10, Room 415, ACTWU’s Political and Legislative Department Records 1947-1993, #5619/033. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
trade groups and regional companies from New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, Virginia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas. In 1978, the American Textile Manufacturers Institute and the chairman of Burlington Industries joined with union leaders to denounce the devastation of cheap imports. Unfortunately, the same lobbyists, trade groups, and companies that allied with unions around cheap imports continued to block unionizing. As Lane Windham argues, these contradictory strategies undermined the influence and leverage of unions, inhibiting their ability to fight imports and shape the terms of globalization.

Unions also had allies in the federal government, including some regulators in the Council on International Economic Policy (CIEP), Government Accountability Office (GAO) and Department of the Treasury. In 1971, the CIEP advised Nixon to prioritize domestic economic conditions over diplomacy and to enforce trade and anti-dumping laws. The ACTWU participated in numerous congressional hearings, like the House Ways and Means Committee’s 1977 discussions of consumer prices and imports. Union leaders sent reports and testified in front of the U.S. International Trade Commission regarding multiple products. They pursued targeted research and lobbying, such as an ACTWU effort to reduce cheap gloves from China. The GAO criticized weak federal efforts to control dumping from other

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118 Unions and workers were not complacent, and globalization did not have to cause collapsing and weak unions. German unions remained strong due to national labor policy. But the drop in U.S. textile and garment union membership and confidence due to 1970s employer union busting—which included threatening workers with globalization rather than collaborating with them to address it—meant a weak counterbalance to the finance and retail sectors that lobbied for U.S. markets open to capital currents and cheap imports. See Windham, 108, 117, 120-126.

Staff in the State Department and U.S. Trade Representative, however, continued to advocate for holding U.S. markets open to imports and facilitating U.S. foreign investment and fluid capital currents. During President Jimmy Carter’s administration, American banks and corporations almost tripled their foreign investments to $530 billion. In 1978, the Carter administration pressured textile and garment industry executives and trade associations to break their alliance with unions and back off opposition to tariff reductions and increased imports. White House offices collaborated with powerful members of Congress to urge a “select group of industry and union leaders to meet as soon as possible with Special Trade Representative Robert Strauss to discuss the tariff issue.” An observer commented that the “tight coalition of apparel, textile, fiber, and union groups might be in danger of crumbling.”\footnote{Richard Wightman, “Mfrs. Pressured to Ease Opposition to Tariff Cuts,” \textit{Daily News Record}, Aug 18, 1978, 1, 13, Folder 22 Holland Tariff Bill 1978, ACTWU’s International Affairs Department Records 1976-1984, #5619/032. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.}

In addition, the 1978 Revenue Act replaced the traditional practice of granting companies

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investment tax credits tied to physical assets. Instead, it reduced taxes for wealthy individual investors, granting them opportunities without any requirement that they invest inside the U.S.—let alone in U.S. infrastructure, training, research and development, or manufacturing capacity. 122

As the 1970s came to a close, Maldonado had an established ILGWU career after years of working and organizing in garment factories. Although the peak years of her activism were behind her, Maldonado continued as an ILGWU business agent and union advocate. Puerto Rican needleworkers remained an important part of the labor force in northeastern factories tied to transnational corporations. Even though the density had thinned, Puerto Rican women built careers and households on the wages of the industry. The disaggregation of textile and apparel manufacturing, however, accelerated. The earlier experimentations with colonial Puerto Rico had inspired a key component of that disaggregation, the EPZs with their malleable lines of sovereignty and citizenship.

It was in these circumstances that Rose & Asseyev and Ritt became deeply invested in the 1977-1978 development of the “Norma Rae” script. Even though Puerto Rican women had been part of the industry since the early 1900s, African American women had entered the southern mills in the 1960s, and East Asian and Mexican women had already become significant workers in transnational textile and garment manufacturing, Ritt created an isolated and individualistic poor southern woman. Norma Rae secured popular national attention and generated an iconic image of a textile worker for the 1980s. At the same time as that major movie release, however, the first generation of New York Puerto Rican Studies scholars

122 Previous federal support for business growth had relied on the investment tax credit, “offered to those who added to the stock of physical assets.” A secondary option had been tax reductions for corporations that met certain production criteria. Both of those standard tax practices promoted material capital formation. In the Revenue Act of 1978, “[t]he Treasury substituted rate reductions to rich individuals” with no guarantee that money would be invested productively for the U.S. domestic economy. See Stein, 194-204.
collaborated with needleworkers to produce their own public stories. Their project gave
Puerto Rican needleworkers a forum for sharing their histories, activism, and bilingual
voices—a shot at shaping who were the visible members of as well as meanings for the
American working class.

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Before the coherent domestic textile and garment industry dissipated in the late 1980s,
Puerto Rican Studies scholars in New York City recorded needleworkers who had labored in
so many roles and places. Maldonado participated in that public history project, which El
Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College-CUNY coordinated as part of its
mission to promote the study of the Puerto Rican diaspora and experiences that connected the
island and mainland. In 1980, Professor Rina Benmayor spearheaded an effort to establish
an oral history taskforce at El Centro. Benmayor was one of several activist scholars who had
helped to establish both the Puerto Rican Studies Program and El Centro, a repository for
collections related to the diaspora. She and her colleagues submitted applications to the
National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Ford Foundation, and the New York
Council for the Humanities. The broad umbrella project, “Puerto Ricans in New York: Voices
of the Migration,” built on fifteen years of El Centro’s research. The funding allowed for three
years of oral history interviews with pioneros, garment workers, and community leaders, and
the retrieval of hundreds of primary source materials.

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123 Whalen, “Radical Contexts: Puerto Rican Politics in the 1960s and 1970s and the Center for Puerto Rican
Studies,” Centro Journal 21, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 221-255.
124 Benmayor, “For Every Story,” 3-5.
125 Translation: early community settlers. Handwritten notes about doing oral history and trainings, timelines for
launching oral history component at Hunter College, most with Benmayor’s name, Box 158, Folder 2 Notes,
undated, 1981-1987; Oral history budgets, grant applications, “Puerto Ricans in New York” proposal, Box 158,
Folders 6-8 Puerto Ricans in New York: Voices of the Migration, 1982-1987; “Puerto Ricans in New York”
proposals, Box 159, Folders 1-5 Puerto Ricans in New York: Voices of the Migration, undated, 1982-1985; Rina
Benmayor, et al., undated 1988, “Oral History Task Force,” Box 159, Folder 7 Stories to Live By: Continuity and
Under that umbrella, Benmayor developed a public history project dedicated to the migrations, labor, and activism of Puerto Rican needleworkers. Maldonado spoke with Benmayor, Celia Alvarez, and Blanca Vázquez in three different sittings. Benmayor’s handwritten notes reveal a commitment to coordinating as many interviews as possible, a public exhibit, and a radio program in three versions. She planned for the project to unfold from 1983 to 1985. The pastiche formed “Nosotras Trabajamos en la Costura.” Benmayor and women colleagues conducted interviews during 1984 and 1985. Alvarez emphasized the importance of this oral history process as a space for sharing both individual voices and the collective experience of Puerto Rican working women. “In the collective space we created, we have publicly been able to validate ourselves, learn from each other and gain strength in our struggle to fulfill our human potential… [I]n moving beyond our own individual lives we can come to appreciate the connections between us, the continuity and the change, and dispel fears which keep us apart.”

Sharing collective history was as important to the Puerto Rican scholars and needleworkers as it was to Crystal Lee, Zivkovich, and Kopple.

In September 1984, Benmayor and El Centro presented a workshop “Interviewing Ladies Who Worked in the Garment Industry,” which included several needleworkers and opened questions to the audience. That same month, they sent out large posters promoting another event, “Nosotras Trabajamos en la Costura,” which included a display of photographs and a panel with needleworkers sharing their stories in a bilingual format (see Figure 32). The

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126 Handwritten notes about doing oral history and trainings, timelines for launching oral history component at Hunter College, most with Benmayor’s name, Box 158, Folder 2 Notes, undated, 1981-1987; Series XII: Research Task Forces, 1950-2001; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY; Alvarez, “El Hilo Que Nos Une,” in Stories, 42.
local community radio station also broadcast the project’s audio documentary, which used narration and lines from the women needleworkers to describe the history of their work.127

Like Field and Norma Rae in 1980, Benmayor and the radio program won awards. Out of 140 programs, the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB) selected five winners for best community broadcast in 1985. Benmayor and El Centro won with “Nosotras Trabajamos,” which the NFCB said typified “the unique contribution community radio makes to the American airwaves.” The National Commission on Working Women gave the radio documentary third place in Radio Public Affairs/Documentary at the Women at Work Broadcast Awards. Benmayor wrote to Donna Shalala, president of Hunter College, to share news of these awards for women’s stories and to encourage “more work in media.”128

Through this public history project, Maldonado gained visibility that led to some criticism. The complicated results of Crystal Lee and Maldonado’s participation in popular media manifested with nuances according to their context and media reach, but the blowback indicates the difficulties women workers faced if they spoke too candidly to broader audiences. New York City ILGWU leadership, including other Puerto Rican women, apparently criticized Maldonado for her comments about discrimination in the union. Maldonado must have contacted Benmayor and the Oral History Task Force, but her frustrations do not appear in her own words in the archive. Instead, a letter from Benmayor to Maldonado reveals the predicament. Benmayor expresses concern on behalf of the task force

for the difficulties Maldonado experienced as a result of the broadcast of “Nosotras Trabajamos.” She says the negative responses to Maldonado’s comments appeared to derive from confusion.

Benmayor assures Maldonado that the radio program placed responsibility for the difficulties of garment workers on “those who move jobs and capital around the world, with federal support and sanctions,” not on the union. In the short letter, she also says the misunderstanding might have arisen from listeners blurring “our statement that Puerto Rican and Black women have not risen to the top ranks of leadership” with Maldonado’s statement that she was the only Puerto Rican woman leader in her local. Benmayor wonders if listeners might have misconstrued these two different comments to mean Maldonado said she was the only Puerto Rican woman leader in the whole ILGWU, “but neither you nor we say this.” After mentioning where the task force sent the script for Maldonado’s approval, Benmayor asks Maldonado to let them know if there is “anything you feel uncomfortable with” before the next radio broadcast. Maldonado’s situations throughout her labor activism align with those experienced by Crystal Lee for talking too much at the TWUA motel headquarters, taking too much public attention, and criticizing Norma Rae.

“Nosotras Trabajamos” generated additional media productions as well. Two academic articles appeared in a 1988 issue of Oral History Review. The author of each piece, Alvarez and Blanca Vázquez Erazo, had participated in the collection of oral histories and had personal connections to women in their families who had worked in garment factories. In addition, a New York State-sponsored curriculum used “Nosotras Trabajamos” as part of a

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lesson plan it promoted for public school students. In the early 1990s, Benmayor submitted a book prospectus for *Pioneras: Women’s Voices of the Early Puerto Rican Migration*. Temple University Press published it in 1994 as the “first book of women’s testimonial accounts of the Puerto Rican migration experience in New York from the 1920s to the present.”

The production of “Nosotras Trabajamos” and its success as an early 1980s public history project demonstrate the significance of textile and garment enterprises in the Northeast into the 1970s. The voices of Puerto Rican women, who had increased their presence in these factories and mills after the presumed “death of the industry,” expose the racial and colonial fragmentation of the workforce and the archives with the resulting erasures. During the 1980s, however, textile and apparel jobs throughout the Atlantic U.S., including the Northeast, South, and Puerto Rico, shrunk dramatically. Most of the remaining plants functioned as sweatshops with increasing numbers of undocumented immigrants from the Caribbean and Asia.

ILGWU and ACTWU membership had declined by the early 1980s due to the ongoing global dispersal of manufacturing and assertive efforts by employers to resist and break union organizing. When U.S. enterprises faced the economic crises of the 1970s, many saw unionizing and labor costs as two related factors within their control. They sought new ways to deter and block NLRB certification elections, such as hiring new consulting firms, like Modern Management Methods, that specialized in such tactics. George Meany, AFL-CIO

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131 Book prospectus, Box 158, Folder 3 Pioneras: Women’s Voices of the Early Puerto Rican Migration, undated, 1994; Series XII: Research Task Forces, 1950-2001; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY.
President, declared in 1977 that union busting was experiencing a resurgence, but the new “labor relations consultants” carried briefcases instead of clubs and left no physical marks.132

In the arena of national politics, conservative economists, corporate lobbyists, and advocacy groups, from the established National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and U.S. Chamber of Commerce to the new Business Roundtable and American Enterprise Institute, sharpened their anti-union tactics. They wanted to dismantle labor’s formal political power, which had accrued over five decades, more often than they wanted to block specific collective bargaining and wage increases.133 As a result of these two levels of anti-union strategy, union leaders at various levels had reduced leverage in both the regional negotiations of work conditions and the national politics that shaped globalization.134

The larger context worried Puerto Rican workers like Maldonado, but they continued to pursue the best incomes they could earn, often remaining in the industry until the leveraged buyouts and closures of the mid-1980s. Several events were pivotal to accelerating the disaggregation and to the round of closures during that decade. In the Northeast, even high-end New York designers, who had prided themselves on the quality of their domestically sewn clothing, decided to relocate manufacturing offshore. The lower labor and tax costs in East Asia and Mexico were not the only appeal. More designers studied and followed the Liz Claiborne model, a company that exploded in the 1980s by emphasizing brand image over high quality. Heavy brand recognition and identity allowed Liz Claiborne to shift focus from

133 Windham, Chapter 3 “Employers Close the Door,” 57-81; Stein, 189; Phillips-Fein, Invisible Hands, Chapters 5-6, 16-17, and especially Chapter 8 “Turning the Tide” and Chapter 9 “Building the ‘Business Activist Movement’,” 166-211; Cowie, Stayin’ Alive, 229-232.
134 Stein, Chapters 5, 6, 8; Minchin, Empty Mills, Introduction, Chapters 2 and 4; Collins, Chapters 1-2; Rosen, Chapters 4-6; Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-1960 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
manufacturing and quality to the maximization of revenues by contracting with a reliance on new logistics technology, like satellite transmission and containerization. The prevalence of barcodes with scanners was especially significant. Introduced by Wal-Mart in the early 1980s, they quickly spread through the retail sector. Such computerized inventory control made the use of cheap foreign contractors at lowest-wage sites more transparent and manageable.135

The quality of design and sewing declined, but prices stayed high because of the growing appeal of brand names. When Robert Riley, a top designer since the 1940s and head of the lab at the Fashion Institute of Technology, left that institution in the 1980s, he criticized the new habit of holding the designer’s name above the beauty and craftsmanship of the clothing. He said well-known designers now earned prestige due to the “right publicity” rather than from making “exceptional clothes.” The brand practice allowed celebrities to get into clothing lines. Joe Namath contracted to create a line of men’s clothing in the 1980s and upset Maldonado, who slammed his decision to approve a proposal to make all the clothes in China. “The thing is that, even though [all of Joe Namath’s men’s clothing items] are made there for less money, it’s [sic] not sold here for less money like years back. The cut up is four times as much, or maybe ten times…”136

U.S. foreign economic policy continued to emphasize transnational corporations, global trade, and capital currents over domestic employment stability. For example, President Ronald Reagan’s administration expanded incentives for EPZs and for trade agreements that opened U.S. markets to the Caribbean. The malleable lines of sovereignty, citizenship, and

exemptions that U.S. and insular governments, manufacturers, and investors had experimented with in Puerto Rico came full geographic circle. Mexico and the BIP/maquiladoras had adapted them in the 1960s, and in the 1980s EPZs appeared in places like the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica. The 1983 Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act (CBERA) also established the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), a unilateral trade agreement that included a variety of provisions. It has been reformed and amended over the years but remains in place.

To qualify for inclusion in the CBI, countries could not have a Communist Party government or property nationalized from a U.S. citizen or corporation. In return, the CBI offered Caribbean nations a “mini-Marshall Plan” and a “Puerto-Rico style special relationship” with the U.S. It included investment supports and tax exemptions to diversify export manufacturing, along with trade preferences and duty-free access to U.S. markets. Supporters argued this diversification would reduce the region’s vulnerability to market fluctuations in its traditional raw material exports, such as sugar, coffee, and bananas. Puerto Rican officials and managers worried about CBI impacts as the U.S. government extended the exemptions it had granted Puerto Rico. Some argued the CBI even placed Puerto Rico at a disadvantage with investors and enterprises because it had to comply with limited aspects of U.S. labor and environmental regulations while Caribbean nations did not. In 1985, Governor Colón promised to use much of the $700 million deposited in the PRIDC to fund loans and investment in CBI nations. It was an attempt to insert the island in the CBI and to

garner support for continuing Section 936. In 1986, the Reagan administration modified Section 936 and mandated that $100 million of the $15 billion on deposit in Puerto Rican banks go to loans in CBI countries.

CBI nations became eligible for a range of U.S., state government, and private business development programs, including trade and investment financing and technical assistance. The act required that monetary assistance circulate through private businesses and non-governmental organizations, with most of the $350 million disbursed to the private sector rather than to public infrastructure or balance-of-payments support for governments. The Reagan administration’s objective was “investment for trade, not aid.” In addition, the CBI was intended to facilitate “the development of stable Caribbean Basin economies by providing beneficiary countries with duty-free access to the U.S. market.” CBI exports to the U.S. were also exempted from Import Merchandise Processing Fees. U.S. corporations that held conventions in CBI nations could deduct the costs from their U.S. taxes, and specialized subsidiaries of U.S. corporations could form in CBI nations and receive full tax benefits. Military expenditures in CBI nations escalated at a rapid pace, as the Reagan administration

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140 Rosen, 135.
imagined the islands as a means to address its concerns about Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Grenada.\textsuperscript{143}

As in Puerto Rico during the first half of the twentieth century and in Mexico since the 1960s, U.S. offices and investors targeted textiles and garments. The 1983 CBERA appeared to bow to the historic political clout of the domestic textile and garment industry by excluding particular items from preferential treatment.\textsuperscript{144} As with previous trade agreements, however, the act contained loopholes that transnational textile and apparel corporations could manipulate, and these grew larger with time. The 1990 CBI Textile Program allowed garments manufactured in eligible Caribbean nations with U.S. yarns and fabrics to enter the U.S. “free of quota and duty.” That expanded to include yarns and fabrics from designated CBI nations. In the 1990s, apparel and clothing accessories, both knitted and non-knitted, became the largest U.S. import from Caribbean nations. The amount grew from 5.5\% of CBI exports to the U.S. in 1984 to 48\% by 1998.\textsuperscript{145} When the George H.W. Bush administration promoted the Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Expansion Act (1990), it also noted Puerto Rico in several provisions, intending to make the island more of a facilitator for the CBI. The act permitted materials made in Puerto Rico to be used in CBI exports to the U.S. It formally linked CBI nations to Section 936 by allowing Puerto Rican banks to lend to investors at one to two points below market rate for enterprises in the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{146}

The cumulative effects of U.S. foreign economic policy, cheaper imports, branding, financialization, and logistics technology transformed domestic conditions during the 1970s and 1980s. A narrow focus on the mainland or on a particular conglomerate or union has

\textsuperscript{143} President Ronald Reagan, “Caribbean Basin Initiative,” 4-5; Rosen, 132-133; Polanyi-Levitt, 253, 266-267.
\textsuperscript{144} Dypski, 105.
\textsuperscript{146} Dypski, 110; Gautier-Mayoral, “The Puerto Rican Model,” 1-26; Polanyi-Levitt, 274-275.
encouraged a tendency to blame unionization for relocations. While unions and workers navigated, contested, and shaped the currents, they by no means drove these reconfigurations. By the mid-1980s, textile and garment production had fully disaggregated into a global labor force constantly adjusted for lowest costs, which included real estate, local taxes, duties and tariffs, safety equipment, transportation, energy sources, and pollution controls as well as wages, worker benefits, and labor agitation.

By 1984, 50% of clothing sold in the U.S. was imported. China was already the world’s biggest textile producer and the fourth largest exporter of textiles and garments to the U.S. If the U.S. tried to restrict Chinese imports, China refused U.S. cotton, soybeans, and chemical fibers. Textile and garment factories in New York City increasingly functioned like warehouses as managers traveled to other parts of the world and returned with items for finishing or distribution. Most managers no longer wanted sewing machine operators. They sought floor girls and packers, and skilled Puerto Rican needleworkers bore the brunt of that shift.\footnote{Transcript of radio program, typed with edits, undated, Box 158, Folder 1 Nosotras Trabajamos en la Costura: Puerto Rican Women in the Garment Industry, 1985-1989; Series XII: Research Task Forces, 1950-2001; Centro Library & Archives at Hunter College-CUNY. Minchin, \textit{Empty Mills}, 68-69.} A set of apparel could be cut in New York, sewn in Taiwan or Haiti, finished in Puerto Rico or Mexico, and sent to New York and London for distribution.

The ultimate closures of Atlantic U.S. mills and factories in the late 1980s derived not only from this disaggregation and U.S. foreign economic policy, but also from changes to domestic financial practices. Even if remaining sites in the Atlantic U.S. produced reliable earnings, “restructuring” with financial maneuvers and closures rather than manufacturing management usually produced a greater short-term return or tax windfall. In the 1980s, leveraged buyouts (LBOs) became popular. Such practices started in the 1970s when Michael Milken promoted the use of high-yield or “junk” bonds, the low-rated bonds of small or weak
companies, to make large capital gains. His firm, Drexel Burnham, began underwriting such
deals, which produced high yields for investors and massive advisory fees for Drexel. In an
LBO, a large corporation, finance firm, or investor group buys a company by borrowing
against the assets of that company, which usually generates a spiked payment to shareholders.
Even when such deals fail and the share value collapses, scavenger investors like Warren
Buffet at Berkshire Hathaway often buy the cheapened company for purposes like the break-
up of its enterprises or tax-beneficial closures. Reagan administration banking deregulation
made such deals easier just as it cut Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) oversight.\(^\text{148}\)
Drexel even hosted an annual “Predators’ Ball” in Beverly Hills during the 1980s.\(^\text{149}\)

In some LBOs, an acquired manufacturing enterprise paid fees to the shell finance
company for “consulting services.” This structure eliminated the SEC income-disclosure
reporting required for senior management of public companies. For example, in spring 1986, a
primary investor partnered with Drexel to attempt a hostile takeover of Warnaco, an apparel
manufacturer earning steady profits with Hathaway shirts, Olga bras, and WhiteStag
sportswear. The investor group provided about 1% of the financing with Milken raising the
rest with junk bonds. The primary investor became chairman of the Warnaco board of
directors. He had no interest in managing an apparel corporation and drew no salary, instead
cashing in his equity stakes and receiving a monthly “consulting fee” through his shell finance
company. Between 1986 and 1989, that investor paid himself $9 million in fees, which made
him one of the highest-paid executives according to \textit{Forbes}.\(^\text{150}\)

The closures of textile and garment enterprises due to the convergence of all these
forces hit Puerto Rican and African American women in the U.S. particularly hard. In the

\(^{148}\) Rodgers, 71-76; MacLean, 312-313.  
\(^{149}\) Rodgers, 80-81; Adler, 234-242.  
\(^{150}\) Adler, 246-248.
mid-1980s, the Fiber, Fabric and Apparel Coalition for Trade (FFACT) argued their domestic businesses were “the nation’s greatest manufacturing employers of women and minorities.” More than half the workers were female, and the percentage of minorities had risen dramatically in the 1970s. During the 1980s, Puerto Rican needleworkers lost the employment that had served as a foundation for their income and household stability since the turn of the century. Many older Puerto Rican women had no choice but to retire and attempt to survive on Social Security income. Other laid-off needleworkers struggled to find secure jobs, applying for unemployment insurance and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) welfare payments to survive. Like Crystal Lee, thousands of displaced Puerto Rican women found jobs in lower-wage service fields like home attendant, nurse’s aide, and office cleaner.

To continue the American Thread case study, in the early 1980s it reduced its workforce and closed distribution points in Puerto Rico. Although the Puerto Rican women in Willimantic were represented by ACTWU Local 460T, the union had little leverage. Several Puerto Rican women expressed appreciation for the union and said wages and conditions would be much worse without it. But a few said the local was weak and did not fight enough for workers who had grievances, suspensions, or unfair terminations. The main complaint was the union’s inability to prevent management from raising quotas, lowering piecework rates, and using time-motion studies to calibrate the numbers. Some women said they distrusted unions because representatives made promises that they did not keep. Lupe believed older workers were afraid of losing their jobs so they kept the union weak, choosing not to confront

151 Minchin, Empty Mills, 7.
management and voting to accept company offers. Yet most of the women disagreed with the idea of striking due to possible violence and loss of earnings. Ligia said, “[W]e have this economy that is hard to find jobs. What is the use of losing four weeks of work to end up signing the same contract? The money workers lose in a strike is never recovered.”

In July 1984, American Thread announced that it planned to close the Willimantic mill. When the company proceeded with the 1985 closure, it created a noticeable increase in Puerto Rican unemployment and workforce uncertainty for the city. Kendall Company, which produced a synthetic fabric for disposable diapers, had already closed in 1983, and Brand Rex had reduced its employees from 800 to 650 in 1981 and to 460 in 1983. Many Puerto Rican women in Willimantic could not find industry jobs, so they went on unemployment insurance. Some found jobs in service industries like office cleaning and others had to rely on AFDC welfare. Similar conditions played out in other small New England cities. In 1989, the Gemini Mill in Springfield closed after two years of effort by the president to keep it operational. When the Gemini Mill closed, Medina’s mother took a job as a janitor in the city school district. The last mill in Holyoke closed in 1989. Salgado-Cartagena’s mother operated her own “hustles” after the Elco Dress Company closed. For

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153 Boujouen, “‘Menea Esas Manos’,” 118-120.
154 Ibid., 118, 121-129.
example, she cooked food in her kitchen and packaged it for take-out orders. People in the neighborhood knew the days she cooked, and many ordered ahead of time.\textsuperscript{158}

Although Puerto Rico was no longer a functioning model and needleworkers were losing jobs on the island and mainland, the legacy of the colonial arrangement continued. In 1985, WEPZA reorganized as an independent entity, separate from the UN. Instead of membership gathered from public and government agencies, the new WEPZA allowed for a hybrid membership with government and non-government members, including private EPZ developers, operators, and consultants. The Flagstaff Institute, under the lead of Bolin and his son, took over management of WEPZA. Membership grew to 60 EPZs and 66 countries by the late 1980s. It offered trainings, conferences, and workshops dedicated to EPZs as “vehicles for development” and published a journal that provided statistics and rationales.\textsuperscript{159}

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This chapter tells the history of Gloria Maldonado and Puerto Rican women workers and their maneuvering in the insular and northeastern industry. Their connections to southern mill hands and the narrative of U.S. industry have been elided due to the fragmentation of race, ethnicity, and colonialism. The fragmentation arose from the persistent social categorizations, served labor market manipulations, and was reconstituted through adjustments in the textile and garment industry. The repercussions of these fragments ripple through area studies and labor history. Targeted attention to specific groups of women workers contributes a great deal to our understanding of the twentieth century, but the women were also linked across divisions of race, ethnicity, and colonialism. The links were not physical and personal. Most of the women did not often interact, talk, or shake hands. The links were the currents of global

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\item \textsuperscript{158} Salgado-Cartagena, conversation with the author, 2017.
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capitalism, the strands along which corporations and governments moved resources and recruited women. The links were the policies and agreements that shaped the related pathways along which women navigated. They were the union organizers’ knowledge of so many other women in other regions also migrating for low-wage work to try to better their situations. It is possible to celebrate diverse identities and recognize different experiences while acknowledging these connections and related moves in the same larger system.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Maldonado and thousands of Puerto Rican women joined unions and demanded decent collective agreements. Many understood their relationship to the global industry and its intensifying changes but still sought fair pay and safe work conditions in textiles and apparel. They also knew the importance of sharing their stories as individual women with struggles as part of a collective workforce and labor movement. They wanted more than simple inclusion in jobs and culture. The Puerto Rican women were U.S. workers. They wanted to shape the popular narrative of the American working class. But their strength in the industry coincided with a massive push in the 1980s to remove most obstacles to U.S. foreign investment going out and cheapest imports coming in. And American popular culture also relied on gendered, racialized, and colonial narratives. Puerto Rican women as tough workers in U.S. industry did not have broad familiarity or commercial appeal.

Despite the related pressures of disaggregation, anti-union tactics, domestic financial policies, and EPZs, the textile and garment industry and unions still had some political clout with representatives who still had sites in their state.\footnote{Windham, 115-118.} In congressional sessions in 1985-1986, 1987-1988 and 1990, domestic manufacturers and unions joined to push against “free trade” and the willingness to hold U.S. markets open. That industry-union alliance, however,
continued to emphasize the control of imports rather than the control of capital currents.\textsuperscript{161}

Without attention to both issues, domestic manufacturing collapsed as global contracting became the norm in textile and apparel. The last legislative efforts to protect domestic employment would end in 1990 as negotiations for a trade agreement between Canada, the U.S., and Mexico took off.

\textsuperscript{161} Windham, 124; Minchin, \textit{Empty Mills}, 9.
“[Sally Field] deserved that award but she could have talked about the union or the boycott or the workers who made it possible for her to get that award. I don’t see how she could have forgotten to say something in front of a million people. She didn’t take the chance to help when she could.”
Crystal Lee Sutton, 1980, Washington Post

CHAPTER FIVE
THE NORMA RAE ICON:
THE ASCENDANCE OF NEOLIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM

Although “Nosotras Trabajamos” did not have the capacity to compete with Norma Rae for popular attention, a movie by renowned documentary filmmaker Barbara Kopple had the potential. In the early 1980s, Kopple continued to pursue her Crystal Lee project, wielding her 1976 Academy Award, progressive filmmaking bona fides, and connections with Hollywood distribution companies. A movie about the TWUA drive with Kopple’s name attached had the chance to reach a national audience and even shift popular conversation. Kopple’s style indicated a likelihood her film would push against Norma Rae’s narratives of the circumscribed white American working class and individualist rebellion.

The predominance of Norma Rae and generation of the icon were not guaranteed. Norma Rae’s profound popular triumph depended on a battle to dominate the cultural scene. Once again, financial capital and its related mechanisms, in the hands of elite professionals, tilted power to the Hollywood studio. Twentieth Century-Fox eliminated alternatives using coordinated actions, such as an alliance with the ACTWU to block Kopple. In January 1980, three months before Field would win the Best Actress Academy Award, ACTWU leaders received Kopple’s script from Twentieth Century-Fox. Neither the studio nor the union

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appreciated Kopple’s version. They celebrated *Norma Rae* and its white mill hand who succeeded in leading a drive in a remote southern mill. One of their actions involved attaining Crystal Lee’s compliance by persuading her of the movie’s beneficial impact and offering her union money. Labor movement friends like Richard Koritz also told Crystal Lee that the movie was bringing good publicity to unions.¹ She accepted the union offer while bending events to her advantage when she could. Kopple did not attract enough investors to fund her production, leaving *Norma Rae* to stand alone.

The alliance between Twentieth Century-Fox and the ACTWU exposes how elites in the national union had incongruous solidarities. Leaders like Stetin identified as union men with a commitment to the working class and its dependence on wages, yet they were also elites with assets, social capital, and status above that class alliance. The field of art, media, and cultural production plays out within such overlapping fields of class, status, and power.² Stetin related to the high-status professionals of Twentieth Century-Fox executives and accepted the commercial tendencies of the Hollywood studio, with its use of Crystal Lee’s life for an individualized story. Stetin threw his social capital and status behind the movie even though the ACTWU’s decision to give its unconditional support to *Norma Rae* undermined its own public significance. When it finally negotiated a contract with J.P. Stevens in late 1980, many articles gave *Norma Rae* credit.³

The ACTWU thought it could capitalize on the success of *Norma Rae*, but the movie’s nostalgic fascination with an imagined South and erasure of contemporary labor organizing did not help its campaign against cheaper imports. Some observers even argued the images of

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¹ Richard Koritz, conversation with the author, telephone interview, February 10, 2016.
the bad old linty industry helped to alienate young people from supporting workers and the union. Crystal Lee also sought to capitalize on the movie’s success. She gave interviews, got a temporary ACTWU gig, and marketed herself as “the real Norma Rae” for public speaking. Crystal Lee even sued the studio and received some remuneration, but when opportunities to make money as “the real Norma Rae” dwindled, Crystal Lee had to pursue service jobs. Perhaps the person who benefited most from the movie was Field. Although her career was already on track for fame and financial gain, Norma Rae elevated her to the most exclusive echelon of actors. Over the next forty years, Field repeatedly thanked Ritt. He appears in multiple chapters of her 2018 memoir In Pieces, but Field mentions Crystal Lee in only one line.

Without any alternative stories of Crystal Lee and the TWUA, the Norma Rae icon had the space in the cultural scene to multiply, further detached from context or history. The icon emerged through repeated use of the image of Field with the UNION sign and the phrase “Norma Rae moment” in a variety of media. The attitude that studios have the finances and networks to make blockbuster movies that produce popular fun without consequences misses the fights for influence as well as the cultural structuring of meanings and dispositions. Capital plays a vital role in the creative contests that impact the arena of cultural politics. Studios deploy massive resources on behalf of their versions of gendered, racialized, and classed narratives. Even when low-income people have an opportunity to participate as creative partners, like Crystal Lee, they do not have an equitable position to influence choices.

As stated on page seven, “the Norma Rae icon” denotes both the close-up image of Field as Norma with the UNION sign (the visual representation of individualist rebellion without any ideology, movement, community, or even context) and the phrase, “Norma Rae moment” (the linguistic expression of the essence of the icon, the representation of an isolated, personal, and transitory individualist defiance). Their decontextualization allows the icon to be deployed for many different types of desires and purposes.
In this case, the Norma Rae icon that emerged is not simple silly fun. It served an ascendant cultural formation in the 1980s and 1990s.

Cultural texts interact with others to foster thinking and emotional patterns. In this combination of cognition and affect, culture structures ways of knowing and acting in the world. In the 1980s, libertarian economists, right-wing politicians, and evangelical activists also produced channels of discourse, imaginaries, sound bites, and images with a narrative and affective emphasis on the individual. Even as a totally different type of text with roots in unionizing, the Norma Rae icon converged with these expressions of hyper-individualism. As an icon of individualist rebellion loosed from the sources and history of its production, the image and phrase could be adapted and deployed for many purposes. The icon contributed to an aspirational discourse of the free and triumphant individual, doing work to make neoliberal political and economic projects both more rationalized and more alluring. Television shows are particularly interesting for studying the use of the iconic phrase, usually to mock someone’s personal defiant stand. The use of the image accelerates with the increasing availability and accessibility of the Internet and websites repeating the image. But the obscuring is not absolute. For viewers curious enough to look deeper, the icon can provide a means for pushing into its long and complex development and basis in labor history.

As with many unions, the ACTWU deployed a range of tactics to different ends, and they sometimes undermined each other. Despite a sophisticated corporate campaign that built on decades of organizing, negotiating, and lobbying, ACTWU leaders supported Norma Rae without question and without offering its own popular images. They saw only the widespread attention and not the possible consequences of allowing Hollywood industry to create a
narrative of the American working class. Ladd and Rose & Asseyev did not prioritize the labor movement; they targeted box office sales.

During the late 1970s, the ACTWU had implemented an innovative tactic to force J.P. Stevens to bargain fairly. The corporate campaign expanded on the established repertoire, which included rank-and-file membership drives, labor rallies, NLRB grievances and motions, outreach to students and civil rights activists, lobbying politicians, demonstrations, and a national boycott of J.P. Stevens products and any hotels and restaurants that used them (see Figures 30 and 31). Ray Rogers, an experienced boycott strategist, designed the corporate campaign because J.P. Stevens sold few of its products directly to consumers. As a global conglomerate, it marketed products under many brands. Rogers saw the campaign as a way to leverage investors, banks, insurance companies, and executives.⁵

In 1977, Rogers coordinated more than 600 individuals and organizations to purchase a share of J.P. Stevens stock. He scheduled dozens of people to attend the annual shareholder meeting or allow proxies. Rogers then targeted board members and corporate allies of J.P. Stevens. ACTWU staff investigated J.P. Stevens’s large stakeholders, like Metropolitan Life Insurance and other corporations and banks with interlocking directorships and multimillion-dollar loans. They wrote letters to executives, demonstrated at their offices, and demanded they “restrict the availability of financial or credit accommodations” because J.P. Stevens was not bargaining in good faith. Pressure from this ACTWU campaign triggered the resignation of corporate officers from the boards of Manufacturers Hanover Trust (then the fourth largest

U.S. bank), New York Life Insurance, and J.P. Stevens. The vice-president of corporate and industrial relations for J.P. Stevens said the campaign to sever the corporation from the financial community was the most effective tactic by far. He argued the NLRB litigation and boycott had less effect. In 1980, this corporate campaign along with the cumulative effects of seventeen years of southern membership organizing, six years of negotiations, and five years of the boycott forced J.P. Stevens into a contract (see Figure 33).6

Even as it celebrated the corporate campaign, the ACTWU participated in the promotion of Norma Rae and attempts to corral Crystal Lee. After the movie’s release, Stetin and other union leaders arranged showings for labor audiences and sometimes coordinated the dates with Twentieth Century-Fox. Anne Rivera of the ACTWU requested publicity material from the studio’s National Coordinator of Marketing and planned articles for the monthly magazine, Labor Unity. The April 1979 issue was dedicated to Norma Rae. In an interview for that issue, a union representative said, “As far as the ACTWU is concerned, ‘Norma Rae’ could not have been any more effective if they had produced it themselves.” The reporter did note that a few trade unionists complained about the movie’s happy ending, which made it appear like the certification vote corrected all the wrongs when it merely moved the process one step forward. ACTWU headquarters, however, sent Ritt a thank-you note for Norma Rae, and the AFL-CIO gave him an award.7


7 Paul Swaity, letter re: Norma Rae film, April 24, 1980, Box 3, Folder 15 J.P. Stevens Norma Rae; ACTWU Organizing Department Records, 1960-1995, #5619/007, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library. Eddie Kafafian, memo about showing for The Workmen’s Circle at
The ACTWU invested more than indirect support. They had hitched the union to *Norma Rae* and its popular image of one woman’s fight for victory, sacrificing the notion of collective history and identity for personal transformation. The studio and union had to eliminate counter-narratives and alternatives. Since leadership decided *Norma Rae* and Ritt were good for the union, it explicitly undermined Kopple. She had honed her techniques for representing intricate collective histories, efforts, and identities with *Harlan County, U.S.A.* In that documentary, Kopple presented interviews with both union members and their spouses to reveal the historic and systemic exploitation of coalminers and their ongoing efforts across generations.

Kopple planned her “Crystal Lee” project as a feature film. She developed the script with two writers and again represented a collective union drive with all the complications of organizing hundreds of workers. It also highlighted the civil rights labor activism that sparked the Roanoke Rapids drive. The screenplay does not start with Crystal Lee, but rather with an actor portraying Zivkovich speaking at a black church to an African American audience, rallying them to join. The next scene cuts to the union’s motel headquarters with Zivkovich talking to another white TWUA organizer about Roanoke Rapids and the history of the mills in town. In the third scene, three African American men, Joseph, Lester, and Jessie Williams, arrive at the motel room to join, and they hand Zivkovich 60 signed membership cards. 

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8 Union memo, concerns about Prime Time interview and Kopple film, Box 3, Folder 15 J.P. Stevens Norma Rae; ACTWU Organizing Department Records, 1960-1995, #5619/007, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
character of Crystal Lee does not appear until the seventh scene, after the TWUA drive has launched and Zivkovich has received support from several black workers and inspected all the mill bulletin boards. In the seventh scene, Crystal Lee and Cookie discuss their difficulties in paying household bills, but when her oldest son offers to get a job, she tells him that she will not let him work in the mills. Scene eight follows Joseph Williams as he hands out TWUA pamphlets and cards, and scene nine shows several women at the mill doctor’s office seeking treatment for nerves and hearing.

Crystal Lee’s first interaction with the union comes in the next scene, when she walks away from her towel folding station and its conveyor belt covered with mounds of finished towels to look at the bulletin board. She discovers a black woman reading the J.P. Stevens’s apology letter required by the NLRB and a notification for another union meeting at the black church. When Crystal Lee mentions the TWUA to her sister, Syretha says, “That Union meeting is at a n****r church. No whites are gonna go there.”

Kopple’s script exemplifies her techniques of foregrounding history and collective activism. It depicts the union effort in Roanoke Rapids as an imperative drive to address the exploitation of mill hands and as an interracial alliance of committed workers. The union appears fraught with the tensions that are part of any endeavor with so many people and so much at stake. The remainder of the screenplay closely follows the events of the 1973-1974 TWUA drive and includes the conflicts around Crystal Lee’s role at the motel and the personal arguments between her and Cookie. One of the last scenes shows Zivkovich and Crystal Lee driving to Joseph Williams’s house to say goodbye after they have each decided to leave their union organizing jobs due to personal considerations and disagreements with regional union

9 Kopple script, 1-17; Box 10, Folder 8 Roanoke Rapids; ACTWU’s Textile Division Records, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library. Asterisks added by author.
leadership. Zivkovich worried about the way these leaders were taking control of the certification process. An onscreen paragraph then notes that the TWUA won the union certification vote but still had to cope with multiple grievances for the reinstatement of members and several years of contentious contract negotiations. In the final scene, Crystal Lee enters the J.P. Stevens mill in 1978 to officially accept her reinstatement and backpay before quitting two days later to return to her home.10

The script acknowledges the union’s flaws and its achievements, depicting a complex historical and social situation. ACTWU leaders, however, criticized it. In their defensive opinion, the script focused on “inter-staff rivalries and animosities rather than basic issues. It portrays some staff as heroes and others as incompetent and disloyal… The script is largely personalities with vendettas against others.”11 Initially, Stetin tried to connect with Kopple to influence her production, but when his efforts failed, he talked with union leaders and executives about his apprehensions. Stetin and other ACTWU leaders communicated with Twentieth Century-Fox to derail Kopple’s movie development. For different reasons, the studio and union each wanted to block her nuanced, collective representation.12

Twentieth Century-Fox learned Kopple had already paid for a final script in the fall of 1979, so the studio set out to garner Crystal Lee’s cooperation. About a year after eliminating her from its production and changing the title to “Norma Rae,” Twentieth Century-Fox sent lawyers to approach Crystal Lee, Zivkovich, and Cookie with an offer. In January 1980, the studio agreed to jointly pay the “principals of the story line of ‘Norma Rae’” an initial

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10 Kopple script, 112-117, Box 10, Folder 8 Roanoke Rapids; ACTWU's Textile Division Records, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
11 Paul Swaity, ACTWU Inter-Office Memo, January 25, 1980, Box 10, Folder 8 Roanoke Rapids; ACTWU's Textile Division Records, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
12 Series of memos and letters, Sol Stetin and ACTWU leaders, attempts to coordinate phone calls about Barbara Kopple, Box 10, Folder 6 Kopple, Barbara 1978-1979; ACTWU's Textile Division Records, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
$70,000, with the possibility of two sequential payments of $35,000 if the movie earned net profits of one million dollars and two million dollars. A fourth payment of $30,000 was possible if the movie reached three million dollars.\textsuperscript{13}

The agreement promised additional payments if the studio produced a “Norma Rae” television series, which was in development. Twentieth Century-Fox offered $450 for each 30-minute television show, $825 for each show longer than 30 minutes, and $1300 for each show over 90 minutes. (NBC funded a pilot in 1980 and promoted the one-hour episode as a “sequential television project” that focused on Norma’s “struggles to fight a reputation as a free-living and unconventional woman in her small, industrial Southern town.” The father of one of the sons of this fictional Norma attempts to take custody of his child by claiming she had an affair with an eighteen-year-old black mill worker. The television show was not picked up.\textsuperscript{14}) The studio offer was contingent on the principals’ ability to “break the assignment of their rights in an exclusive contract to Kopple.” Studio executives hoped this would “mess up” Kopple’s NEH grant for $750,000.\textsuperscript{15}

In memos and letters, ACTWU leaders expressed their support for the studio’s offer and continued to criticize Kopple’s screenplay. They said her script was “nonsense” and had the potential to damage the entire union campaign. They did not want a movie that

\textsuperscript{13} Memo to the Officers, From Pam Woywod, Re: Status of Legal Representation for Crystal Lee Sutton/Kopple, stamped May 14, 1980; Walter L. Swanson, Chief Production Counsel, to Robert F. Levine, Esq., Re: “Norma Rae,” April 30, 1980; Handwritten letter To SS, From HB, 1/22/80; Box 10, Folder 8 Roanoke Rapids; ACTWU’s Textile Division Records, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.


\textsuperscript{15} Memo to the Officers, From Pam Woywod, Re: Status of Legal Representation for Crystal Lee Sutton/Kopple, stamped May 14, 1980; Walter L. Swanson, Chief Production Counsel, to Robert F. Levine, Esq., Re: “Norma Rae,” April 30, 1980; Handwritten letter To SS, From HB, 1/22/80; Box 10, Folder 8 Roanoke Rapids; ACTWU’s Textile Division Records, #5619/038, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.
represented unsettling complications, like internal TWUA politics or the long fight for employee reinstatements and a finalized union contract. Crystal Lee was also changing her mind based on the persuasion of labor colleagues and friends. They convinced her that *Norma Rae* was doing well and even though it had deficiencies, it helped the movement.16 As a result, Crystal Lee did not approve Kopple’s script as required by their contract. Kopple had already scouted locations, including an old Rhode Island mill, and started to cast anyway. So Stetin was advised to talk to an entertainment lawyer about “possible controls which could be exercised by Crystal,” like terminating her contract assigning the rights to Kopple.17 At about that time, Crystal Lee filed a suit against Twentieth Century-Fox with a claim on revenues, and she received a small payment of $52,000 that she told a reporter was used to pay bills.18

In support of *Norma Rae*, the ACTWU hired Crystal Lee to do a press junket with radio and television interviews as well as lectures at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and UCLA. It included a public relations specialist, Gail Jeffords, who the union paid to direct Crystal Lee’s comments. It was a carefully planned tour to eliminate Kopple’s version, constrain Crystal Lee’s criticisms, support *Norma Rae*, and garner media attention for the ACTWU. Jeffords contacted reporters ahead of interviews to try to get a set of prepared questions.19 She noted

18 Brady, B1; Christy, 23-24; Cathy and Jay Jordan, conversation with the author, 2013.
that she advised Crystal Lee on how to make statements that avoided criticism of the movie and promoted the ACTWU instead. Jeffords compiled several reports with details about the radio and television stations, excerpts from interviews, and subsequent local newspaper coverage. Despite coaching, Crystal Lee shared her own ideas, like expressing concern about the film’s lack of attention to exploitation in the mills. And she told one photographer who asked her to smile, “I’m not an actress. I don’t put on airs to have my picture taken.” But she usually added that she appreciated the educational value of the movie. At the Dayton Convention Center in Ohio, Crystal Lee told the audience gathered for a benefit showing, “If that movie taught one person what a union is, it was well worth it.” She said even with its faults, it was the best pro-labor motion picture ever made. Crystal Lee also told a reporter in Boston, “I’m a woman. Not a lady. A woman.” Seven years after the New York Times piece where she emphasized that she was a lady, Crystal Lee articulated this revision of her identity.

During the press junket, Crystal Lee briefly met Sally Field on March 16, 1980, at a union event at the Berwin Entertainment Complex in Los Angeles. It was the only time the two spoke. The powerful SAG union had organized a benefit for the J.P. Stevens boycott, and Field was scheduled to make a quick appearance. It served as an arranged photo opportunity to associate Crystal Lee, the J.P. Stevens campaign, Field, and Norma Rae, despite statements by Ritt and Field that the film was not about Crystal Lee but rather a composite of women used to tell a woman’s story, not make a labor movie. Since Crystal Lee was a seasoned

22 Christy, 23.
23 Flyers, memo, program, schedule of Crystal Lee’s flight and event appearance, Meet Crystal Lee Sutton Rally, Los Angeles, March 16, 1980, Box 14, Folder 8 Meet Crystal Lee Sutton Rally; ACTWU’s Textile Division
labor organizer with experience at union events, Field asked her what to say to the crowd.\textsuperscript{24} After Field shared a few words, she grabbed Crystal Lee’s hand and raised it in a familiar representation of solidarity (see Figure 34). That solidarity did not carry over to other events, including Field’s acceptance speech at the Academy Awards ceremony a month later. Ritt and Field also continued to insist the movie was not about Crystal Lee, despite the 1976 purchase of film rights from Leifermann, the studio’s 1980 offer to the “principals of the story line,” the ACTWU press junket, and the Los Angeles photograph.\textsuperscript{25}

In most statements about \textit{Norma Rae}, Crystal Lee had described Field as an entertaining actress who did a good job. Crystal Lee argued that the movie focused too much on one woman and created an erroneous, misleading sexual tension with the labor organizer, but she liked Field’s depiction. Her only concern about Field prior to the Academy Awards was the distraction of her relationship with Reynolds. Crystal Lee said, “She portrayed me well but I wish they had cast an unknown actress—someone who wasn’t known for being Burt Reynolds’s girlfriend.” Field’s speech at the Academy Awards in April 1980, however, truly disappointed Crystal Lee. Field said \textit{Norma Rae} was “a gift given” to her by Ladd and Twentieth Century-Fox, Rose and Asseyev, the Ravetches, the other actors, and mostly given by Marty Ritt. “Marty Ritt is Norma Rae,” Field said. “He has fought all his life to put on films that are courageous… that have the box office potential of seventy-five cents.” Crystal Lee told a reporter, “[Field] deserved that award but she could have talked about the union or the boycott or the workers who made it possible for her to get that award. I don’t see how she

\textsuperscript{24} Koritz, conversation with the author, 2016.

\textsuperscript{25} In 2019, Field gave Crystal Lee a little allowed but still said the script for \textit{Norma Rae} “was loosely based on Crystal Lee Sutton.” Told to Jennifer Ferrise, “First Person: Taking a Stand,” \textit{InSTYLE}, March 2019, 126.
could have forgotten to say something in front of a million people. She didn’t take the chance to help when she could.”26

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Successful Hollywood movies trigger more than their theater showings. They set in motion further circulation, exchange, and reproduction as well as imbuing those people related to the movie with increased social capital and status. Crystal Lee understood the potential for capitalizing on Norma Rae’s success. When the ACTWU junket ended, she launched a business out of her home, promoting herself as “the real Norma Rae” available for union events, public speaking, and college workshops. Crystal Lee made a tactical decision to deploy the prominent movie name as a way to reclaim her life experiences, raise her own profile, and earn income for her expertise as a worker and union organizer (see Figures 35-37). She remained critical of certain aspects of Norma Rae even though she had participated in the interviews to support the ACTWU campaign and used the name. Richard Koritz, a postal union representative, labor organizer, and close friend, helped Crystal Lee design a brochure. They had met in Boston in 1980 when she was speaking at a union event as part of the junket. Crystal Lee went on to ride in two parades in Michigan with the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) and requested reimbursement for her “long dress” in addition to her speaking fee, clearly operating as a professional who deserved payment. Several college campuses, including Muskegon Community College in Michigan, invited her to talk, and the

Quad Cities Peace and Justice Coalition of Davenport, Iowa, gave her its Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award. 27

In 1984, an international affairs representative for a Soviet trade union invited Koritz and Crystal Lee to attend a youth symposium in Moscow. According to Koritz, he went with Crystal Lee to get a visa, and they traveled to the U.S.S.R. They toured textile and garment factories and served as delegates at the symposium sponsored by the Textile and Light Industry Workers’ Union. Crystal Lee saw that workers in the Soviet factories had daycare, medical care, and vocational training. That same year, Crystal Lee requested a 35 mm film print of Norma Rae to show at her speaking events, but Twentieth Century-Fox staff decided amongst themselves that it was “definitely not feasible.” For a few more years, Crystal Lee spoke at public events, but offers for paid gigs dwindled over time.28

By the mid-1980s, Crystal Lee received only three bookings after sending out 250 letters with her brochure for “the real Norma Rae.” The small payment from Twentieth Century-Fox had gone to expenses, loans, and a used car for her husband, Preston. He kept a steady job earning $6 an hour in the shipping department at a unionized Cone Mills plant in Haw River, near where Crystal Lee had her first mill job. She worked in a non-union mill inspecting women’s garments for about a year in 1984, at a drive-up film and photo booth in 1985, and as a security guard for Burns Security in 1986, but none of the jobs lasted long. She was laid off from the non-union mill just before Christmas and heard the boss hired other

27 Letter from Crystal Lee, offering services to speak as the real Norma Rae, March 23, 1984, black folder, file cabinet, drawer #3; letter to Jim Renfroe from Crystal Lee, re: May 10-16 1982, Holland Michigan parades, grievance filed July 17 for dress reimbursement, manila folder #4, drawer #2; letter from Muskegon Community College, November 1979, file cabinet, manila folder #14, drawer #2; Crystal Lee Sutton Collection, Alamance Community College, Graham, North Carolina.
28 Koritz, conversation with the author, 2016; Cale Jordan, “Crystal Lee: Influence on Union in America,” Final Paper, HIS 218, March 21, 2011, emailed to author from daughter-in-law, February 23, 2016; Inter-Office Memo, To File, From Brooke, August 6, 1984, subject Crystal Lee Sutton-Norma Rae Print, several subsequent memos in an exchange; Box 24, Folder 245: Norma Rae, Sutton, Crystal Lee 1980-1985; Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
women but would not give her another job. Crystal Lee believed that as soon as managers heard the gossip and recognized her, they found reasons to get her out. Meanwhile, working people still called Crystal Lee for advice on dealing with bosses or taking steps to organize, but Twentieth Century-Fox and Field did not respond to her letters or phone calls. She told a reporter for the *Washington Post* in 1985 that the mill owners “don’t care about people like me,” and the movie people are in “their own world” and “forget.”29

At that time, Crystal Lee decided to file a second suit against Twentieth Century-Fox, this one for invasion of privacy. The conditions of that settlement included a confidentiality clause. Her adult children did not even know the details, but Crystal Lee received a large enough payment to finalize the purchase of her small house in Burlington. In 1988, she attended a nurse’s aid certification program at Alamance Community College, the local college near her home. When she did not like the physical strain of that work, she opened a daycare in her house, which she ran until 1994. Photographs of Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela hung on the walls of the playroom. Throughout the rest of her life, journalists and activists continued to contact Crystal Lee for interviews and endorsements of labor campaigns, but she did not work again as a paid union consultant or organizer.30

Despite the ostensible mutual opportunities in the ongoing relationship between the ACTWU and Twentieth Century-Fox, the cooperation served the movie production and


emergence of the Norma Rae icon much more than it helped the union and textile and garment workers. The shared publicity actually drew attention away from decades of organizing and labor union history, years of layered ACTWU tactics, and months of the corporate campaign that had actually pressured J.P. Stevens to negotiate fairly. Instead, many reporters announced that *Norma Rae* forced the corporation into a contract. Even Crystal Lee, who had been involved in a variety of union activities, told a reporter in October 1980, “[I]f it hadn’t been for the movie, I think we would still be fighting the battle.”

As the ACTWU faced declining membership due to layoffs and anti-union consultants, the elite Hollywood professionals involved in *Norma Rae* experienced extraordinary career advancement. Even after the movie’s run in national theaters, it had repeated showings on television. Before the proliferation of VHS cassettes, DVDs, and online streaming, popular films often cycled through network television as “movies of the week” and “midnight movies.” *Norma Rae* had an extended reach as a result, with multiple showings on ABC.

For the first time as a director, Ritt traveled to six cities and met with the press. He understood the exclusive opportunities that would open for him if *Norma Rae* earned the highest net revenues possible and won prestigious awards. As discussed earlier, Ritt had

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33 Janet Martineau, “Ritt’s Movies Bullish on People,” clipping without source or date, Box 23, Folder 240: Norma Rae Publicity, 1979-1981, Martin Ritt papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
experienced several years of low box-office movies in the 1970s and intended *Norma Rae* as an antidote. Although Ritt continued to say in most interviews that *Norma Rae* was not a union movie, when speaking to a labor audience or magazine, he was willing to highlight the historical source material and the union.  

Ritt appealed to each audience by any method he thought most appropriate—celebrating *Norma Rae* as a movie about a Rocky-style loser who becomes a winner, a liberated woman who finds her inner strength, a mother who loves her children and wants something better for them, or a union member seeking fair treatment. He went on to make five more Hollywood movies with celebrity actors like Barbra Streisand, Richard Dreyfuss, Jane Fonda, and Robert DeNiro, and he worked again with Field and with the screenwriters Frank and Ravetch. His last film was *Stanley & Iris* (1990), which the married couple had translated from a novel. Several organizations invited him for honorary and lifetime awards, which included an appointment as the 1985-1986 UCLA Distinguished Director in Residence, a 1988 tribute at Boston University, and a 1989 Great Director Award from the USA Film Festival.

Elites involved in the movie had enhanced social capital and status that carried into networks with other elites. As *Norma Rae* gained widespread viewership and critical

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attention, it stirred responses from feminist celebrities and women’s groups. At a dinner for women activists and professionals, Betty Friedan told the producer Alexandra Rose that *Norma Rae* was a “watershed film.” Ritt and his wife received an invitation in the mid-1980s to attend a dinner on behalf of Bella Abzug organized by the Hollywood Women’s Political Committee. In such audiences and interviews, Asseyev, Rose, Ritt, and Field described Norma as a “liberated woman” or the movie as “feminist.” In an interview, Field said, “I was always a liberated woman,” in reference to her experience with *Norma Rae*. Ritt told a Pennsylvania newspaper, “I was not interested in the story of trade unions; I wanted to tell the story of this one woman… ‘Norma Rae’ is a pro-feminist film, not a pro-union film.” For Ritt, *Norma Rae* could not be feminist and pro-union. The categories were split.

Field and Ritt also began development under a Paramount contract for *Back Roads* (1981), in which Field would portray a southern prostitute who hits the country road with a drifter played by Tommy Lee Jones. In 1981 negotiations for the legal thriller *Absence of Malice*, Field was able to demand the same title credit size, credit placement, and stills approval as her co-star, Paul Newman, who had been acting in Broadway plays and major movies since the 1950s. Field’s company, Fogwood Films, was also entitled to 5% of the gross proceeds after breakeven. *Norma Rae* had launched Field into the most exalted level of the acting business. A few years later, Field won her second Academy Award for Best

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Actress for Edna Spaulding in *Places in the Heart* (1984). The character is a single mother in rural Texas in 1935 struggling to raise two boys and save her farm in the face of poverty and a tornado—another defiant, individualistic southern woman. Field used Fogwood Films to acquire the script for *Murphy’s Romance* (1985), which Frank and Ravetch adapted from a 1980 novella and Ritt directed. James Garner co-starred in the May-December romance as a small-town pharmacist who helps Field’s character, a divorced mother, to succeed at a southwest horse ranch after a bad divorce.

This exclusive celebrity status intensified the media spotlight on Field—extending the attention and broadening interest in her life off-screen. She appeared in women’s and entertainment magazines throughout the 1980s, well beyond the 1979-1980 *Norma Rae* campaign. *Playboy* chose her for its March 1986 cover, in which Field poses in a bunny costume and fishnet stockings, looking over her left shoulder with her buttocks tilted out (see Figure 38). In this general publicity for Field and her career trajectory, the image of her as Norma Rae with the UNION sign became a component of many stories. The icon was loosed from the film’s already distant context to become an exemplar of Field’s individual achievement as a serious talent and dramatic actress. The image became more iconic as the focus on Field increased, and editors often cropped the still to emphasize her rather than the scene’s large industrial setting. The repetition of the cropped photo as a marker of Field’s

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40 This is the speech that adapted her line from *Norma Rae* when Norma says to Reuben, “I think you like me.” Field said, “The first time I didn’t feel it, but this time I feel it. And I can’t deny the fact that you like me. Right now, you like me! Thank you!”

individual perseverance in advancing from sugary television actress to respected movie star contributed to it becoming iconic.

Such use of the image for Field as a determined actress allowed readers—who may or may not have seen *Norma Rae*—to imagine the stand with the UNION sign as if it was a frontstage performance by Field rather than a communal backstage gesture by Crystal Lee with her fellow union members, co-workers, and neighbors. While the image did not completely lose its deepest roots in collective resistance to exploitation and labor union history, which imbues the icon with its enduring marrow of authenticity, readers could easily interpret it as the act of one self-possessed person.

Through the articles, the stand with the UNION sign became more decontextualized. It had already been transformed from a shared message between co-workers and union members in a historic union drive into a pivotal moment for one woman leading a drive in her one mill. Now it became a highly individualistic iconic performance of an elite woman’s grit and determination. The media inadvertently served the further refinement as the image with the sign was part of Field’s experiences as an actress.

The coalescence of the Norma Rae icon relied on and overlapped with these articles, but its full realization came when it was no longer associated even with Field. The repeated image and phrase became loosed from all specific referents other than defiance. Throughout the 1980s, television shows and periodicals used the phrase to signify an individual’s stand against some convention or behavior that the person perceives as unfair rather than to describe collective or cooperative action. The first television reference to a “Norma Rae moment” came in an October 1981 episode of *Archie Bunker’s Place* (1979-1983), the spinoff from *All

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42 Kimble and Olson, “Visual Rhetoric,” 553-554. One can also imagine that the image appeared on the screen during Field’s television appearances as well.
in the Family (1971-1979). In this early manifestation, the phrase was still linked to women workers, but it marked Archie’s personal stand on behalf of one of his friends. In episode four of season three, titled “Norma Rae Bunker,” a white woman known only as “Mrs. Canby” who hangs out at Archie’s bar in Queens takes a job folding clothes for a sweatshop. When the manager cheats her out of half her pay, Archie has his Norma Rae moment and goes to the sweatshop to demand her money.\footnote{“Norma Rae Bunker,” Archie Bunker’s Place, October 18, 1981, director Gary Shimokawa, Tandem and Ugo Productions for CBS Television; IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078562/} In a revealing cultural transplantation, the writers applied a reference derived from the experiences of southern mill history to a northeastern sweatshop with an Anglo-American woman. Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Chinese women remained invisible as American workers in another depiction of a white ethnic worker.\footnote{Thomas Sugrue and John D. Skrentny, “The White Ethnic Strategy,” in Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s, eds. Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 171-180; Jacobson, Roots Too and Whiteness of a Different Color.}

As the icon emerged from images and references to a personal “Norma Rae moment,” the ACTWU persisted in its efforts to stabilize employment with proposals that critics attacked as simple protectionism. ACTWU actions and outreach were not able to leverage the movie for labor movement success. They could not match the Hollywood limelight around Norma Rae and Field, which obscured more than it illuminated economics and labor history. And economics and labor conditions were becoming more complicated and changing faster. In addition to manufacturing diffusion, cheaper imports, legalistic anti-union tactics, and “right to work” laws, discount retailers gained a tremendous amount of political and economic leverage and asserted interests that directly contradicted those of domestic manufacturers and workers. The increasing power of retail aligned instead with the historic influences and policymakers that supported open U.S. markets and capital currents.\footnote{Rumelt, telephone conversation with the author, 2019. Windham, 108, 123-127; Lichtenstein, The Retail Revolution, especially chapters one, two, six, and eight; Moreton, To Serve God and Wal-Mart, Chapter 13} While some newspapers addressed
political and legislative debates about these complicated economic issues, the coverage could not approach the popular presence of *Norma Rae* and Field. The ACTWU and its publicists could not compete with the movie it had helped to promote.

The 1985 fight for the Textile and Apparel Trade Enforcement Act (H.R. 1562) exposed the way reconfigurations of global markets, with the concomitant splintering of the domestic industry, left advocates like the ACTWU without the resources to bring pressure on behalf of its interests. More than 250 domestic garment factories had closed between 1980 and 1985. Domestic manufacturers and unions were unable to fight the political power of the transnational corporations that now imported finished goods as well as pieces; the major finance investors moving capital around the world; and new discount retailers like Wal-Mart. Scholars often discuss the loss of H.R. 1562 simply as the result of weakened industry and dying unions, as if these were inevitable, natural declines. As the previous chapters show, however, labor and manufacturing manipulations with colonial Puerto Rico, U.S. foreign economic policy, financialization, and management consultants had reshaped and impaired the domestic companies, U.S. employment, and union membership. The resulting global markets granted retailers a formidable influence in any contest. Subsequent revenue and job losses for the domestic industry in the 1980s occurred throughout the Northeast, South, and Puerto Rico rather than in a linear relocation. That dominant narrative grants these rapid and multivalent shifts a reassuring teleology—even if it is one that ends in a gloomy outcome for workers. It allows current workers to conceive of a point in some past linear relocation to


which they might return, which is much more manageable than scrutinizing and intervening in U.S. foreign economic, tax, financial, and currency policies in addition to federal and state labor and employment legislation.

By the 1980s, transnational corporations had become experts at manipulating quotas, circumventing the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA), and using transshipments through third countries to enter U.S. markets. Multiple bilateral agreements essentially nullified most legislation to control textile and garment imports and stabilize U.S. employment. Remaining local and regional companies, the ACTWU, and ILGWU contacted political allies like Strom Thurmond and the Congressional Textile Caucus to pass H.R. 1562. As Windham points out, during these years companies continued to undermine their own union and worker allies with anti-union obstruction and regulation. But their respective leaderships did cooperate in legislative agendas regarding trade. The ACTWU and ILGWU even joined the industry-based American Fiber, Textile, and Apparel Coalition (which later became FFACT). Union leaders coordinated outreach with that coalition of textile, hosiery, knitwear, sportswear, and other manufacturers with whom they fought regarding contracts, wages, and work conditions.

Representative Edgar “Ed” Lanier Jenkins, a Democrat of Georgia, was an active advocate of H.R. 1562 not only for political reasons, but also because he believed domestic companies were modernizing and becoming more efficient. He argued they needed a fair chance to compete when Asian, Mexican, and Caribbean manufacturing facilities paid lower wages and had fewer safety and pollution regulations. Jenkins knew it would be a difficult and delicate fight for passage, but he had acquired the support of several congressional Democrats

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48 Transshipments occur when a nation has met its quota of towel imports to the U.S. so its trade office makes an agreement with another country on behalf of its manufacturers to send excess towels to that country, which has not met its quota. That country then ships the towels into the U.S. on behalf of the nation of origin for a fee.

49 Windham, 120-126; Minchin, Empty Mills, 95-104.
because most companies still had plants in the North and South, and they understood that all domestic textiles and garment enterprises were linked in success or failure. Jenkins also consulted with like-minded executives, such as those at Harmax. Harmax had thirty-three factories throughout the U.S. and actively advocated for its businesses and employees, as well as for the communities it supported via employment benefits and a stable tax base. Secondary suppliers to mills and factories, like companies that provided parts, machine repair, and water testing, also participated. Unions emphasized the importance of these jobs for women and the racial diversity of the labor force. Union posters and flyers represented white, black, Latinx, and Asian-American workers in various types of jobs. The National Puerto Rican Coalition gave its support to H.R. 1562, arguing Puerto Rican communities were suffering a great deal due to the cheap imports from Asia.  

Large transnational corporations that relied on recognizable brands while contracting manufacturing overseas, such as Esprit and Liz Claiborne, opposed H.R. 1562. So did the largest domestic manufacturer, Levi Strauss, which was in the process of dispersing its production into Asia from its West Coast headquarters in a bid to become a transnational brand rather than a manufacturer. Brand corporations argued the bill was not in the interests of consumers. This viewpoint aligned with recent U.S. economic policy that increasingly attended to Americans as consumers rather than workers. The American Farm Bureau Federation and agricultural lobbies also opposed the bill because they feared trade retaliation, in which nations like China would not buy U.S. wheat and other farm commodities. Retailers pushed their own opposition, with the National Retail Merchants Association and K-Mart meeting with politicians and reiterating the word “protectionist” in the narrowest, most negative connotation of blocking growth and raising prices for consumers.

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50 Minchin, Empty Mills, 95-104, 111.
Powerful opposition also came from the Reagan White House and its cohort of economists and advisors who used a rhetoric of “free trade” and “free markets.” After months of negotiations and compromise, H.R. 1562 passed, but Reagan vetoed it a week before Christmas 1985. Workers, union leaders, and domestic executives from across the U.S. joined in a massive effort to override the veto. Norman Kominsky, CEO of Eastland Woolen Mills in Maine, became very active and enlisted Eastland employees in a letter-writing campaign. The ACTWU and ILGWU intensified their efforts at demonstrations, publicity, and lobbying. Five days before the override vote, the Reagan administration announced it had negotiated a tougher MFA with expanded import coverage and mechanisms to block import surges—without acknowledging all the ways transnational corporations and international trade offices evaded such criteria. The Reagan trade representatives argued negotiation, not legislation, was the best way to address the trade deficit and imports. On the day of the vote, Reagan contacted several congressional Republicans and warned them that the achievements of his presidency and the party would be undermined by an override. In August 1986, the override was defeated.51 By 1987, imports accounted for 57.5% of the apparel sales in the U.S.52

The final legislative failures for the domestic industry and its workers occurred in 1988, when Reagan again blocked legislation, and in 1990, when Bush vetoed an import bill. The industry did not attempt any more substantive legislation, and the Bush administration continued to support bilateral agreements with Asian nations as well as the intricate negotiations that would form the basis for NAFTA. Some experts who tracked the concerted legislative efforts of the 1980s criticized *Norma Rae* and its ongoing popularity. Unlike national ACTWU leadership, these executives, regional company owners, and business

journalists argued the movie had portrayed southern mills as backward and covered in cotton lint even though owners and managers were investing in modernization, air systems, and automation. They complained that such anachronistic conceptions of backwardness and regressive stereotypes inhibited their ability to promote the industry, recruit young workers, and advocate for their employees, even after investing $1.5 billion per year in safety and computerization. The investments in automation, however, became another wedge between industry and labor leaders as they contributed to more layoffs and reduced union membership in the late 1980s. The resulting tension further undermined their political alliances.

The accelerating decline in membership and leverage caused by the disaggregation of manufacturing, cheaper imports, anti-union efforts and “right to work” laws, retail, and automation instigated an increasing number of sweatshops. These were not leftovers from the early 1900s but rather new sweatshops that violated contemporary labor and safety regulations. Although sweatshops had not vanished, their numbers had dramatically decreased by the mid-twentieth century when the ACWA, ILGWU, and TWUA organized workers, picketed, gained membership, hired business agents that monitored mills and shops, raised public awareness, and pressed for legislation. As membership declined, however, so did the funds for such organizing and oversight. The ability of unions to help those sweatshop workers who wanted to form or join a local also eroded. The mutually reinforcing downward spiral in both U.S. employment and unions meant that remaining domestic producers could shift to a sweatshop business model with little resistance. In such conditions, managers used fear to exploit

53 Minchin, Empty Mills, Norma Rae references on 134.
undocumented immigrant workers and block attempts at unionization, further diluting labor’s formal economic and political power.54

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Even as the domestic textile and garment industry, workers, and unions lost their numbers and standing in the U.S. economy and political system, the Norma Rae icon became a recognizable meme in American popular culture. The icon fully cohered when the sign image and the phrase “Norma Rae moment” were loosened not only from any reference to labor activism or even Crystal Lee, but also from Field and her career path. It followed an evolution similar to the famous photograph of Ernesto “Che” Guevara at a 1960 funeral service in Cuba. As with the many photographs of Field as Norma (see Figures 39-42), Guevara had dozens of photos available for circulation (see Figures 43 and 44). The image of his corpse after a 1967 assault by the Bolivian police, which the CIA had supported, also gained media attention. The photo of him at the funeral service and rally in Cuba, like that of Field with the sign, is the one that has endured in pop culture memes and revolutionary graffiti.55

Culture scholars and journalists have written about the Guevara photograph and its transmission as a global pop icon in commercial and political manifestations. Alberto Korda (Alberto Diaz Gutiérrez), a fashion photographer hired by Fidel Castro as his personal photographer, attended the service. A Belgian ship carrying explosives for delivery to the Cuban government was sunk off the coast, killing over 100 people. Guevara, with his long

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54 Minchin, Empty Mills, Chapter 5 “A Resounding Blow,” 126-159; Rosen, Making Sweatshops; Whalen, “Sweatshops Here and There,” 45-68.
wavy hair and revolutionary beret, stepped forward on a podium filled with emissaries, and Korda snapped two frames of him, handsome and gazing intensely into the crowd. In the succeeding frames, viewers see Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir standing next to Guevara. As with the Field image, Korda noticed the appeal of Guevara’s face in the two close shots and cropped a photo to eliminate distractions: a man and some palm fronds near Guevara’s head (see Figure 45). Korda knew how to find “the image within the image,” to refine the composition with little attention to whether it removed historical details. The Che icon germinated in that creative decision. Just before Guevara’s death in 1967, Korda gave a copy of the cropped print to a leftist Italian publisher who later used it for a poster to honor the dead man.56

In the weeks following his death, Guevara became the revolutionary martyr Che in dozens of media stories and the Korda image that spread around the world. The image became adapted to all types of uses as a marker of authentic defiance. At first, many of the uses were associated with 1960s leftist politics and 1970s student activism, but transnational brands, seeking to mark themselves as “different” and “rebellious,” increasingly appropriated the Che icon to sell products like sunglasses, clothing, and vodka (see Figure 46 and 47). The Marxist revolutionary, who had advocated the violent destruction of capitalist and imperial governments and traveled throughout Latin America and Africa to participate in collective movements, became an icon for individualist consumerism. Trisha Ziff argues corporations seeking to develop “radically individualistic and perpetually new” identities used the Che icon “to inoculate themselves against accusations that they were in fact selling sameness.” Even

56 Hannah Charlton, “Introduction,” in Che Guevara, 5-8; Casey, Che’s Afterlife, Chapter 1 “Havana, May 5, 1960: A Frozen Millisecond,” 25-50. Casey presents evidence that Korda was also responsible for cropping the photo of Fidel Castro and the rebel commander Camilo Cienfuegos riding into Havana atop a military jeep. Korda’s older brother, Luis, had taken the photo but had no interest in it until Alberto cropped it, 79.
knowledgeable consumers, aware of the gap between radical political action and commerce, buy such products since they take pleasure in the irony.\textsuperscript{57}

Like the Che icon, circulation of the Norma Rae icon did not lead to a “dilution of meaning.” Instead, its ongoing transmission opened “the possibility of endless visual mutation, of stylistic regeneration without ever losing the essence of what the face expresses.”\textsuperscript{58} Without the deeper moral essence and resonance as visualizations of historic shared action, overexposure would have emptied even these attractive representations of a paradigmatic rebellious hero. Neither icon came to stand for the collective radical movement of its original raw material but instead transmuted into an open symbol of rebelliousness available for any instance of appeal or marketing.

Even though broad movements over many decades with thousands of people created the conditions for many people to participate, one person with charisma and determination, Guevara and Crystal Lee, captured media attention. Cropped photographs of the attractive Guevara and Field, the former more immediate to the conditions than the latter, then made the faces captivating. The cropping as much as the facial expression infused each image with individualist appeal. Digital mass commercialization can make an alluring image part of any commodity or marketing. Each popular use of the icons constitutes an “experimental negotiation” between the buried but relevant political content and the new and expanding mass commercial context of societies. So both icons manifest and illuminate the captivating tension between radical collective activism, triumphant individualism, and the ubiquity of commercialization and consumerism. Yet both icons remain tied, usually in unarticulated


intuitive ways with details that must be uncovered—but tied nonetheless, to their roots in profound collective political and economic struggles.  

During the 1980s and 1990s, as the Norma Rae icon extended the remove from labor organizing, mills, and even Field, the embedded narrative simplified even more. The movie *Norma Rae* recycled a cultural narrative of the American working class as tough, white individuals in industrial jobs overcoming local obstacles with personal defiance. The icon further condensed the embedded narrative to one of individual defiance as the answer. It was spare, yet the icon remained suffused with all the poignant emotions and rebellious appeal from the long history. Like a palimpsest, affective traces of the expansive original raw economic and political material endured, but the Norma Rae icon represented a visual and linguistic manifestation of the simplest cultural narrative. Its realization in the 1980s and 1990s, however, coincided not with widespread leftist political or student activism but with the ascendance of neoliberalism and its juggernaut of political, economic, and cultural projects.

An unintended consequence of the combined erasures and compressions in the Norma Rae icon was its convergence with a particular cultural formation that gained traction in the 1980s. A cultural formation is a combination of imaginative, discursive, social, and material processes constituted through many channels—some intentional and some not. Through ongoing and related activities and practices, including media productions and the conversations about them, a comprehensive cultural formation develops. To be effective, it “has to extend to and include, indeed to form and be formed from” the whole of a society’s

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60 Klein, 7-9; Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 117. He says “formations” are effective movements and tendencies in intellectual and artistic life that have significant and sometimes decisive influences on the active development of a culture but have a variable and often oblique relation to formal institutions.
experiences, interactions, and representations. The most effective formations are supple rather than rigid, yet they appear stable. Meanings and notions processed and reprocessed in the formations do not reside sealed and static in texts, sound bites, and images but are generated by constant interactions with other texts, activities, and discourses.

Both the Norma Rae icon’s reductionist narrative and dramatic affect aligned with the nascent cultural formation of neoliberal individualism in the early 1980s. This neoliberal individualism did not arise in a vacuum. It represents a new version of an old American narrative with a long history in culture, politics, and economics. This strain of individualism, however, has distinctive qualities. Neoliberal individualism moves beyond legal protection of individual property rights, social respect for individual achievement, and celebration of individual creativity. It strips away traditional notions of social obligations and the public good and defines rights and responsibilities solely in terms of the individual’s position in the market. The successful individual becomes signified by an aspirational defiance, fighting against the state, the government, unions, and other abstracted collective obstacles to personal achievement in an impartial and uninhibited market. Proponents see massive social crises or inequitable economic distributions as private problems that individuals must cope with. People come to think their difficulties arise from the sum of their personal choices and not due to larger structures or even circumstances. The combative individual stands alone.

Such cultural formations are not created by rational choice to achieve an objective goal or by top-down manipulation as ruling classes interject propaganda, stereotypes, and spectacle to gain consent. Absolute, totalizing hegemony does not exist. Instead, cultural formations are constituted through many types and layers of imaginaries, media, expressions, and discourses. These cohere into a formation through reciprocal dynamics with other structures like legislation, policies, and financial practices. In mainstream neoliberal individualism, American veneration of the individual and freedom became bound to notions of the free market, free enterprise, business, and property rights in very narrow definitions. As a result, the cultural formation contributed to an “erosion of the idea that there is a difference between private wealth and the public interest.”

Like all cultural formations, neoliberal individualism played a crucial role in constituting, rationalizing, and celebrating certain political and economic ideologies and projects. It made them appear logical while helping to conceal the contradictions between the principles and practices, like libertarian economic philosophy versus demands for state intervention and bailouts on behalf of capital markets, or free-market visions of freedom and individualism versus corporations like GE and Wal-Mart that manage in overbearing top-down hierarchies that emphasize uniformity. Neoliberal individualism converged with government reforms that directed agencies away from public services and toward activities that supported corporations and private investment. It also worked on behalf of redistributive tax policies and regulations that favored individuals accumulating capital rather than the overall wage and employment conditions of labor.

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The Norma Rae icon is not the only example of popular culture doing accidental work on behalf of neoliberal individualism—as noted, Hollywood specializes in rebellious heroic individuals—but it represents an extraordinary example. The icon derived from historical raw material that stood in direct opposition to neoliberal ideologies and projects. In addition, it has been more repeated and more consistent than any other images extracted from the working class. Bruce Springsteen has multiple memorable images from his oeuvre, including the covers of *Born to Run* (1975), *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), and *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984). Multiple characters in many movies, such as *Joe* (1970), *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Rocky* (1976), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), and *The Deer Hunter* (1978), stand for working-class white men in outward and frequently violent motion, without a singular repeated immobilized image.

Other than Martin Scorsese’s *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974), about a widow who becomes a diner waitress and moderates her show business dreams to raise her son, representations of laboring working-class white women were limited. Yet the Norma Rae icon has appeared regularly and for decades as one image and versions of one phrase. Historical analysis of the icon highlights the contradictory and slippery relationship between American popular culture and the neoliberal turn. The neoliberal turn did not have a core movement, precise political party, or exact year; it occurred as an overall shift in the global political, economic, social, and cultural milieu. That shift began in the 1960s, intensified in the 1970s, and formalized in more obvious ways in the 1980s and 1990s. Such widespread, cascading transformations that reshape entire systems and practices, like petroleum with automobiles or the spread of the Internet, are neither inevitable nor arbitrary. Multiple forces build on, arise

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*Counterrevolution,* in *Rightward Bound*, 154-155; Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*. 

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from, and respond to earlier structures while interacting in unpredictable ways, sometimes coordinated but often oppositional, to propel the changes and funnel its impact. Since such widespread transformations are neither predetermined nor random, cultural formations are a key element to understanding how they develop and become dominant.\textsuperscript{65}

Rather than contributing an overt ideological slogan, political commentary, or economic conviction, the Norma Rae icon provided narrative validation and affective inspiration.\textsuperscript{66} Rose & Asseyev, Ritt, Twentieth Century-Fox, the ACTWU, and the editors, writers, and bloggers who used the iconic image or phrase had no intention of helping to constitute a neoliberal cultural formation. The icon’s extreme individualist narrative, however, did work to normalize neoliberal policies and procedures. It bolstered the ideological precept that discrete individuals are responsible for big social, political, or economic problems. More significantly, the sensations of its enchanting emotional melodrama mingled with a potent structure of feeling—a pattern of impulses, tones, feelings, and sensations.\textsuperscript{67}

Even without any shared dogma, texts, images, and media that do not appear obviously connected to each other or to formal institutions can share a formative affect, a structure of feeling. They share meanings and values as actively lived and felt with emotional elements of impulse, restraint, and tone.\textsuperscript{68} Such a structure of feeling imbued neoliberal individualism

\textsuperscript{65} Williams, \textit{Marxism and Literature}, 113. He notes that “dominant” is not “domination” because hegemony is never total or exclusive, and alternative and oppositional politics and culture exist as well.

\textsuperscript{66} McAlister, 7-8 with Bourdieu, \textit{Field of Cultural Production}, Part I.

\textsuperscript{67} Williams, \textit{Marxism and Literature}, Chapter 9 “Structures of Feeling,” 128-135. He describes a structure of feeling as “a distinction from more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’ … meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt … elements of impulse, restrain, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feelings against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought …” A structure but still in process, in a living interrelating continuity but with connecting characteristics and hierarchies,132.

with sentiments of an aspirational defiance and a glorification of the individual filled with an emotional richness Americans could “inhabit imaginatively in their everyday lives.”

Explicit neoliberal political and economic projects pushed increasing obligations, responsibilities, and risks onto the most vulnerable individuals in societies and redistributed tax cuts, capital incentives, and wealth toward elite individuals connected to currents of finance. Cultural formations like neoliberal individualism naturalized these projects. Although the Norma Rae icon did not initiate the mainstream cultural formation of neoliberal individualism, it inadvertently helped because of its virtuosity as a condensed narrative and emotional experience. It reinforced the extreme individualist rhetoric and defiant aspirational structure of feeling found in most of the formation’s channels. Neoliberal individualism, however, congealed as a result of several energetic channels that contributed popular imaginative, discursive, and social slogans, images, and texts.

Historians have noted that in the 1970s and 1980s various groups and constituents across the political spectrum came to focus on “individual freedom” as the essence of American liberty. Three highly visible channels in the coalescing New Right illuminate such contributions to the formation of neoliberal individualism because they worked in purposeful

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69 Klein, 8.
70 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 113-114 and 150. He argues that works of art and media by their “substantial and general character” are especially important sources of evidence for grasping the active, formative, and transformational processes of hegemony—particularly the processes of cultural formations within hegemony; and important aspect of a work of art is its “power to evoke response.”
ways to constitute it: libertarian economists, right-wing politicians, and activist evangelicals. Participants in these explicit channels engaged popular media using basic, vernacular language to reach the widest possible audience with principles, ideas, images, and sentiments that helped to form neoliberal individualism. Libertarian economists and right-wing politicians developed two intentional and overlapping channels that also built a broad political movement serving neoliberal projects. They based many of their appeals on extreme notions of individualism and supported plans that reduced public services, dismantled government oversight of banking and manufacturing, and directed public tax revenues towards privatized providers. The third group, activist evangelicals, clearly contributed to neoliberal individualism but with varying degrees of intention. These three channels fostered neoliberal individualism with their emphasis on specific definitions of freedom like freedom from the state, personal choice, success for individuals, and aspirational defiance.

Libertarian economists and right-wing politicians were important contributors, translating neoliberal policies—like the dismantlement of employment regulations and financial oversight, the obstruction of worker organizing, regressive income taxes, tax cuts for wealth and inheritance, monetary policy and interest rates, austerity budgets, and redirected global capital and trade—into appealing popular rhetoric. Many business and political elites in organizations like the American Enterprise Association shifted their identities from “economic royalists” to protectors of “individual liberty.” The cultural narratives embedded in their appearances, speeches, and mainstream books celebrated the individual and personal choice in

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72 “Libertarian economists” go by several names, including free market economists and market fundamentalists.
73 This project discusses the three channels in broad terms, with emphasis on their mainstream and popular presence rather than on the subtle distinctions and nuances between different leaders, groups, and dogmas within each channel. The goal in this project is to highlight their more sweeping public statements rather than a deep dive into historical and social analysis of their development.
74 Moreton, To Serve God and Wal-Mart, 145.
the market as the most potent and valid form of rights, power, and responsibilities.\textsuperscript{75} Their comments usually offered audiences straightforward answers and seemingly hermetic descriptions without disconcerting complexities. In addition, since the 1960s, pundits and politicians from left and right perspectives at all levels have taken on the pose of the outsider or defiant rebel.\textsuperscript{76} As a standard pose, defiant cool requires the constant appearance and tone of rebellion. Even institutional insiders and recognized leaders like scholarly economists, conservative politicians, and Christian evangelicals present themselves as outsiders rebelling against liberal elites and the pernicious status quo.\textsuperscript{77}

Libertarian economists of the 1970s and 1980s built on decades of efforts by conservative business groups to undermine worker organizing, unions, and labor’s political power. The Business Roundtable, NAM, and U.S. Chamber of Commerce used brochures, spokesmen, lesson plans, company events, and individual-based employment benefits to reduce the influence of unions and combat organized labor.\textsuperscript{78} As the 1970s economic crises triggered anxiety and anger throughout the U.S., more public attention than usual turned to economic discourse. Milton Friedman was a very popular figure recognized for speaking in short sentences and offering accessible arguments in support of libertarian economics, which often went by his fashionable term “free market economics.” In support of Barry Goldwater in 1964, he had written a piece for the \textit{New York Times Magazine} stating that his coherent

\textsuperscript{75} Alice O’Connor, “Financing the Counterrevolution,” 154-165.
economic philosophy was committed to “freedom of the individual to pursue his own interests.”

Friedman had a column in *Newsweek*, made regular appearances on *Firing Line* with William F. Buckley (1966-1971 local, 1971-1999 PBS), along with several visits to *The Phil Donahue Show* (1967-1970 local, 1970-1996 national). Friedman gained widespread attention after receiving the 1976 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his research on consumption analysis, monetary history and theory, and the complexity of stabilization policy. He presented himself as an insurgent populist who spoke of freedom and choices. He described the market as a complex but inherently logical set of systems better left to work on its own so the individual could succeed—an oversimplification that appealed to most viewers while mystifying the market as beyond their understanding and influence.

A PBS station manager in Pennsylvania who left the Democratic Party because he wanted to be a “free-market evangelist” persuaded Friedman in 1977 to do a PBS series based on his book *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962). In that book, Friedman states, “To the free man, the country is the collection of individuals who compose it, not something over and above

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him.’”82 A combination of the PBS station’s ideological staff, their effort to cooperate with corporate foundations and donors in constructing a new funding stream, and relentless criticism from Republicans about the bias of PBS gave the series its funding, support, and appearance of “balance.” The proposal and marketing for the 1980 PBS series *Free to Choose* presented it as a neutral and objective show about the “free market” even as Friedman was transparent in his advocacy of particular tax, trade, and currency policies. He proposed cutting public services and government oversight of banking, corporations, and employment because then individuals would have the ability to make free choices. Instead of presenting his argument that “freedom is the ultimate goal and the individual is the ultimate entity” as an interpretation, he shared it as if it were a clear and historic statement of fact. In Friedman’s assessment, capitalist markets had freed the serfs, preserved Jews in Europe, and helped to override the desire to discriminate against African Americans in the South after the Civil War.83 He articulated an appealing if imaginary level playing field, an economic utopia where individuals make choices in a natural and neutral market as they progress through its complicated but logical systems. In this utopia, individuals who work hardest and make the best choices earn financial success.

Viewers wrote to PBS to express appreciation for Friedman’s “spontaneous” arguments and simple points that eluded the elite academics—skipping over the fact he was an elite academic with extensive ties to universities, institutes, and corporate sponsors. Whereas scholars like John Kenneth Galbraith, who narrated the BBC series *The Age of Uncertainty*

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82 Milton Friedman, with the assistance of Rose D. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 1-5.
(1977), discussed a collapse of the certainties of earlier eras, Friedman offered new certainties as a rebel economist. Friedman also dedicated time and resources to getting videotapes of *Free to Choose* to as many high school and higher education students as possible. The Americanism Educational League bought several sets of *Free to Choose* and loaned them to colleges and universities for free. Galbraith even conceded that Friedman was the most influential economic figure of the 1980s despite what he saw as radical and extremist economic ideas. Since the 1970s, right-wing philanthropy has provided key funding for a coordinated “war of ideas” in American popular discourse. Such an organization currently maintains a website called freetochoose.tv that keeps Friedman’s series in circulation along with new shows hosted by contemporary libertarian economists.

The book that came from that television series, *Free To Choose* (1980), co-authored with his wife and fellow economist Rose D. Friedman, became a bestseller with even more vernacular language. After filming the show, Friedman took several months to travel and share his talks, using the feedback to hone the book to potent and succinct points. *Free To Choose* called on readers to “turn the issues over in your mind at leisure, consider the many arguments, let them simmer, and after a long time turn your preferences into convictions.” It culminated with the notion that “human freedom and economic freedom working together came to their greatest fruition in the United States… Fortunately, we are waking up. We are again recognizing the dangers of an overgoverned society.” Such soaring rhetoric and emotions called on readers to stand in defiance, making Friedman an influential example of the

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85 Friedman, *Free to Choose*, xii, 309.
combined narrative and affective work libertarian economists did to constitute the cultural
formation of neoliberal individualism.

Speakers who had name recognition with less celebrity, like Friedrich von Hayek, Ron
Paul, and Thomas Sowell, also participated in popular libertarian economic discourse on
television shows. College groups like Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) took up the cultural
narrative, distributing pamphlets from groups like the Foundation for Economic Education.
One pamphlet for college students declared, “Collectivism as a way of life is a manifestation
of the abyss into which men sink when not motivated by the pursuit of truth and justice.” In
the 1980s, SIFE carried Friedman’s rhetoric and emotions further into the mainstream with
booths in malls and public service announcements for radio and television. They popularized
an elementary-school version of *Free to Choose* with skits. The group’s “business superhero”
SIFE-Man appeared in a cape with a dollar sign on his chest. He was created not from
researched economic theories or intensive policy debates, but from their perception of a
desperate need to defend democratic society, as understood in market terms, from powerful
villains like the state. 86 These students entered adulthood and national conversations on party
politics and policy trained in the language and affect of neoliberal individualism. Libertarian
economists and their followers, however, remained silent on the question of protecting
individuals from those people and organizations that seek to enrich themselves at the expense
of their fellow citizens and neighbors. 87 Such complications remained outside the formation of
neoliberal individualism and its making of meanings and dispositions.

86 Bethany Moreton, “Make Payroll, Not War: Business Culture as Youth Culture,” in *Rightward Bound*, 54-55,
66-70. During the 1970s, the number of colleges and universities offering entrepreneurship and small business
courses had increased from eight to almost 200.
Right-wing politicians participated in an overlapping channel of discourse, imaginaries, sound bites, and images. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is a notable example, and her most famous contribution appeared in a 1987 magazine interview. “And, you know, there is no such thing as society,” she said. “There are individual men and women, and there are families.” Reagan was also a dynamic, assertive speaker who brought clarity and vitality to the formation of neoliberal individualism. Although New Democrats and other center-left politicians eventually advocated neoliberal policies and projects in the 1990s and 2000s, right-wing politicians were important to setting the cultural foundation in the 1980s. Reagan was extremely effective doing cultural work that fostered neoliberal individualism, with his carefully staged photo opportunities and press conferences as well as his pithy narrative about government. In addition to acting, Reagan had years of experience as a GE spokesman, where he perfected his genial persona and practiced sharp rhetoric regarding communism, free-market capitalism, and the conflict between freedoms and government. GE corporate literature emphasized the primacy of the individual in the free market as the site of power, liberty, progress, and responsibilities. For example, when a GE employee complained in the 1950s about not receiving a Christmas bonus, the company response stated, “We feel that every time the state, an employer, or anyone else takes over one of our individual responsibilities completely, we are one step further along the road to socialism and a halt to

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progress.” Reagan did not create such ideas or invent the terminology, but he was an ardent and aspirational persona for them.

Reagan often conflated free-market economics and capitalism, presenting audiences with a simplistic, negative binary comparison in which capitalism and communism were the only options. He held up the U.S. as the exemplar of individual freedoms and free enterprise in contrast to a brutal totalitarian Soviet Union. In a radio address he wrote for September 1976, Reagan quoted Ferdinand Mount from the London Daily Mail. “The U.S. is the first nation on earth deliberately dedicated to letting people choose what they want and giving them a chance to get it. For all its terrible faults, in one sense America still is the last, best hope of mankind…”

In his second inaugural address in 1985, Reagan announced that the time had “come for a new American emancipation—a great national drive to tear down economic barriers and liberate the spirit of enterprise…”

Throughout his political career, Reagan celebrated the individual risk-taker and easily joined the growing discourse of the entrepreneur. His 1964 speech in support of Goldwater said Americans had the choice between individual freedom and totalitarianism. Reagan feared that private property rights were “so diluted that public interest is almost anything that a few government planners decide.” When discussing inheritance taxes, he knew to shift attention away from “the wealthy” as an aggregate group and instead highlight the individual family

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91 Phillips-Fein, Invisible Hands, especially Chapters 4 to 8, quotation from 100-101.
95 Troy, 63.
farm as an example of an inherited estate. His language regarding individualism linked it to grand emotions and idealism, such as his comment that “[f]reedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here than in any other place on earth.” His second inaugural address declared that Americans had decided in 1980 to “strive with all our strength toward the ultimate in individual freedom…”97 He often spoke fondly of Little House on the Prairie (1974-1983), a television show that erased the pervasive poverty of plains settlers, the collective effort many needed to survive, and the ongoing systems and services provided by the federal government. Instead, it celebrated the individual work ethic and family as the means to economic success.98

His most repeated narrative was that government caused the national problems, and so could never be their solution. In his 1964 Goldwater speech, Reagan tied this simplistic narrative to a compelling affective fear when he said, “The government can find some charge to bring against any concern it chooses to prosecute. Every businessman has his own tale of harassment…. Our national inalienable rights are now considered to be a dispensation of government, and freedom has never been so fragile, so close to slipping from our grasp.”99

After his last term as California governor, Reagan said in response to the second oil crisis, “Our problem isn’t a shortage of oil. It’s a surplus of government.” Such a line served three purposes: to remove blame from petroleum corporations that had previously been seen as greedy gougers, to direct blame toward government interventions in the market, and to celebrate free markets as the best plan. When he was not blaming “the government,” he was ignoring the contributions of government programs, agencies, and funds. Without any acknowledgement of the subsidies and public services that supported farms and businesses,

98 Troy, 74.
Reagan said, “[F]arms and small businesses are really the backbone of our free enterprise system—millions of individuals making their own way.”

During his first inaugural address in 1981, Reagan applied this narrative to the U.S. as a whole. “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem,” he stated. Reagan went on to say that it was time to “check and reverse the growth of government which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed.” His most consistent central point was that private individuals wanting to make a profit had driven progress and made the U.S. a great nation. Government was only interference. His second 1985 inaugural address grandly proclaimed, “for the first time in history, government, the people said, was not our master, it was our servant…”

Throughout his campaigns for political office, Reagan promised to use the bully pulpit to “spread the faith of the free market.” Such discourse, imaginaries, sound bites, and images coincided with those of libertarian economists, merging in the cultural formation of neoliberal individualism. Reagan selected libertarian economists, increasingly called supply-side economists in popular media, including Friedman and his protégée Alan Greenspan, as his advisors. They argued that the stagflation and unemployment were not caused by insufficient demand but rather a lack of investment because high tax rates sapped the willingness of people to invest and individuals to work. Along with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Reagan economists emphasized individual freedom, incentive, and personal initiative as the solution.

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103 Phillips-Fein, Invisible Hands, 244.
104 Troy, 67.
In his speeches about welfare reform, Reagan described everything in terms of individuals rather than economic systems and distributions. He declared his reforms were an effort at “salvaging human beings and making them self supporting.” His boosters used the same language and affective pleas. T. Boone Pickens, Jr., who had made millions in petroleum and finance, wrote in *Fortune* magazine, “The American free enterprise spirit is something we will be able to maintain only under a Reagan Administration…. At stake in this election is the future of the free enterprise system.” Through his years speaking to the public, Reagan developed a welcoming style and persuasive rhetoric that instigated fears and then declared glorious individualist solutions, making such notions both comforting and palatable. His contributions to neoliberal individualism imbued it with oppositional assurance and grand emotions as well as narrative legitimacy.

Activist evangelicals yielded another channel serving neoliberal individualism through a variety of tones and media, some more intentional than others. The activist evangelicals of the 1980s did not initiate a Protestant emphasis on the individual. Much of American Protestantism grew from and continues to participate in long-running theological debates about “pietism,” with its celebration of individual piety and one’s personal relationship with the Bible. Pietism imagines personal transformation through a spiritual rebirth that centers on

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107 For the purposes of this project, “activist evangelicals” will denote people of religious and political conservatism who advocate for evangelical Protestants and ministries to become more involved in politics, policy, and government. Precise scholarly and theological questions about distinctions between modernist, fundamentalist, evangelical, born again, Pentecostal, and charismatic Christians are too intricate and unrelated to my emphasis on dominant discourses and mainstream cultural formations. These tend to engage simplistic narrative and affect. For a review of conservative Protestants, see Robert D. Woodbury and Christian S. Smith, “Fundamentalism et al.: Conservative Protestants in America,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 25-56.
individual devotion and reading the Bible as a private and literal experience. The evangelical activism of the 1970s and 1980s sustained and adapted these theological debates while asserting their worldview in more public forums with more attention to policy and legislation. As activist evangelicals became more involved in national as well as state and local politics, Newsweek declared 1976 “The Year of the Evangelical.”

Like economists and politicians, activist evangelicals in the 1980s built on efforts of previous decades. Earlier conservative evangelicals had articulated a rigid opposition to communism and the Soviet Union and equated them with collective movements like worker organizing and labor unions. From the 1930s to 1950s, evangelicals joined corporations as industrial chaplains to fight communism and protect individual freedom by obstructing labor unions. They offered individual religious solutions to the concerns workers had in factories, with higher numbers in the South. General Motors distributed Guideposts to its employees, promoting Norma Vincent Peale’s inspirational mix of anticommunism, individualism, free enterprise, and Christianity. Activist evangelicals believed individual salvation and Biblical interpretation could provide answers to any difficult situation. As the proselytizing manufacturing executive Robert G. LeTourneau said, “[A]n individualistic application of the problems of the Christian gospel will solve the problems of contemporary industrial society.”

The gospels of industrial chaplains downplayed worker solidarity or collective organizing and stressed the company’s care for them as individual people. As with the human resources

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departments that emerged in the postwar period, industrial chaplains believed workers should interact as individuals with managers and administrators. When union membership shrunk in the 1980s, some chaplains remained, emphasizing personal salvation, diligence, and free enterprise as the solution to worker issues.  

During the 1980s, new forms of activist evangelicalism gained momentum. More ministries, radio personalities, and religious organizations pressed the idea that personal salvation should be part of the larger public sphere. Organizations like the Moral Majority, which originally served a narrow fundamentalist community, sought to broaden their membership and assert a public voice for evangelicals as a whole. These groups connected personal salvation to specific politics and policy. Some of their discourse, imaginaries, sound bites, and images overlapped with the two previous channels. For example, right-wing politicians like Reagan frequently linked individualism, freedom, and free enterprise to Christianity and God. At the National Association of Evangelicals, Reagan said, “Freedom prospers when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged…. We will never give away our freedom. We will never abandon our belief in God.”  

The annual National Prayer Breakfast, which started in February 1953 with the support of Conrad Hilton, Billy Graham, and President Eisenhower, attracted an increasing number of evangelicals and politicians from both major parties. Libertarian economists and activist evangelicals also collaborated through partnerships with Christian colleges and corporations like Wal-Mart. Oklahoma Christian University helped to develop Enterprise Square USA, a theme park for free-market capitalism.

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111 Fones-Wolf, “Managers and Ministers,” 113, 120, 124.
Freedom with an emphasis on the individual was a galvanizing concept for activist evangelicals. In the 1980s, many groups promoted freedom from addiction and from the compulsions of drugs, sexuality, and modern secular demands through salvation and reading the Bible. In this perspective, personal freedom does not derive from the ability to make decisions about daily life, marriage, sexuality, gender roles, and medical care. It derives from one’s free and open connection to Christ. Evangelical Christ-centered freedom denounces any behaviors, even smoking cigarettes, that threaten freedom in Christ by dominating or controlling a person. Some conservative evangelicals even argued that the liberal appreciation of personal freedom, with its tolerance and pluralism, was a mask for sinfulness and selfishness. These activist evangelicals did not recognize any conflict between the golden rule, individualism, freedom, and their effort to criminalize drugs and homosexuality and to block gay rights, birth control and abortion access, and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) because most viewed such behaviors as forms of bondage.  

As with Friedman and Reagan, Billy Graham demonstrates the popular discourse, images, and lines from the activist evangelical channel and its contributions to the narrative and structure of feeling constituting neoliberal individualism. Graham was a celebrated voice with bestselling books, television appearances, and newspaper interviews that interacted with other evangelicals in this channel. He did not invent the basic words or ideas and did not have control over them, but rather made the notions and feelings widely admired and accepted. As with Friedman and Reagan, Graham spread the rhetoric to mainstream

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115 Hart, 78-96.
audiences and gave thousands of people more opportunities to absorb the narrative certainty and aspirational affect of activist evangelicalism.117

Graham emphasized the individual as the site of salvation, and salvation as the solution to all the problems in households and the world. In his bestselling 1978 book *How To Be Born Again*, he said, “I have had countless people tell me, in person and by letter, how they were born again and their lives were changed…. [T]he central theme of the universe is the purpose and destiny of every individual…. Lives can be remarkably changed, marriages excitingly improved, societies influenced for good—all by the simple, sweeping surge of individuals knowing what it is to be born again.” In an illustrative story, Graham describes a man named Joe as a thief who had learned that stealing and lying were “good.” Rather than social or economic analysis of Joe’s situation, Graham argues he must recognize his sin and have faith in Christ to become born again as an individual to become free. “Salvation is by Christ alone, through faith alone, for the glory of God alone” without attention to systems, economics, or even good deeds.118

In this worldview, circumstances do not derive from social, political, and economic structures but rather from God, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit and angels that extend constant if unseen ministry to individuals on His behalf. Graham said that not all angels are good because some are demons from Satan who interfere with lives and tempt individuals to sin. Good angels, however, provide guidance for personal salvation to those who remain alert and faithful. Graham was not a deviant authoritarian minister manipulating unthinking

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118 Graham, *How To Be*, ix-x and 86-87 and 141.
audiences and readers. He was participating in a widespread American evangelical discourse and stated that he wanted to provide encouragement to the suffering and “guidance to those who are frustrated by the events of our generation.”119

In the face of disturbing complex economic crises and the frequent world conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s, such right-wing institutions and organizations offered reassurance that an individual could improve situations through choices in the market, hard work, defiant aspiration, and a relationship with Christ. Figureheads like Friedman, Reagan, and Graham disseminated the narrative and emotions through interactive channels of discourse and imagery. “What can the average person do? He feels inadequate, powerless,” Graham wrote. “All of the committees, the resolutions, the changes in governments don’t seem to change society. We see that if mankind is to be saved something radical must be done…. Jesus said that God can change man from the inside.”120 Like many captivating leaders who manifest historic shared ideas, Graham was neither malicious in intent nor a singular top-down autocrat, but rather a charming and articulate speaker who carried a message with deep roots, broad sources, and appeal for big audiences. The individual prominence of Friedman, Reagan, and Graham—like that of Norma Rae—works to obscure the histories, organizations, and collaborative efforts that made their successes and celebrity possible. Their popular presence converged with many others within and across numerous channels constituting neoliberal individualism.

The neoliberal turn relied on and reinforced a mix of cultural formations, elite ideologies, and right-wing policymakers. The economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s and subsequent collapse of Keynesian policies triggered political fumbling that opened the way for

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119 Graham, Angels, xi-xiii and xix.
120 Graham, How To Be, 157-162.
libertarian economists and right-wing politicians to implement their own policies and practices. Unlike the mainstream cultural formation of neoliberal individualism, elite ideologies from economists and theorists at the Mont Pèlerin Society or University of Chicago provided lengthy arguments with intricate rationales to undergird specific proposals while appearing to refute any oppositional worldview. They wrote legislation, policy papers, and presented at conferences for the top echelons of government. The mainstream cultural formation and elite ideological formation served related but different functions in realizing and legitimating neoliberal policies and projects. Ideologies and practices under the neoliberal umbrella often contradicted each other, such as an intellectual emphasis on the necessity of limited government and financial deregulation versus the boosting of global capital currents that fostered interventionist government with intricate regulation of currency rates, bond markets, and international banking. Governments remained active and had a major role in bailouts. Neoliberal cultural formations provided mystification necessary to sustain popular support for such policies and practices even though they did not always line up or provide political and economic stability for most people.

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American popular culture, a fourth channel converging with and helping constitute neoliberal individualism, operated unintentionally but persuasively in the neoliberal turn. The cultural scene exists in relation to other parts of society, and based on historical contingencies specific cultural products join into conversation with certain political-economic discourses.

121 Like evangelicals, the many economists, political theorists, and policymakers ascribed the term “neoliberal” had their own internal debates and nuanced disagreements. The point of this project is to highlight their shared popular formation rather than the intricacies of their discussions.

As discussed previously, directors and writers do not plot how to reproduce ideologies and practices. Their products do not simply reflect society or function as a single text. At the “messy intersections” of different sets of texts and their repetitions, we can study the cultural work of making sense of the world. In this framework, sense is made. It is constructed, contingent, social, and emotional. Events from the 1960s to 1980s brought some popular culture products into conversation with the channels outlined above. Hollywood’s postwar tendency to transform all complicated political, economic, and social issues into personal melodramas of an individual hero did not create deliberate contributions to the mainstream cultural formation of neoliberal individualism. The capital arrangements and financial mechanisms of the movie business, however, required the stripping of disconcerting complications and nuances. As a result, even left-leaning directors like Ritt made concessions to the pragmatic demands of Hollywood studios and produced movies or television shows that reified the individual and personalized extensive public problems. The individualist images and lines they created were rich with emotion, open for interpretation, and available for replication. For example, unions still rely on Norma Rae as an inspirational movie and reminder of collective worker struggles (see Figures 48 and 49). Yet writers for television shows, and eventually for blogs and advertisements, also deploy its embedded individualist defiance for a range of purposes—usually in ways that refuse the possibility of collective organizing, pay no attention to long-term activism, or mock a lone person’s attempt at the slightest social change.

Long after the 1981 episode of Archie Bunker’s Place, television shows continue to refer to a character having a “Norma Rae moment” of defiance, sometimes even holding a sign

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123 McAlister, 6-8.
124 Bourdieu, Field of Cultural Production.
overhead. Figure 50 lists the variety of shows, with the most recent, *Pose*, appearing on FX in the fall of 2018. Many episodes center a character as an individual standing without any cooperative organizing. During season one of *Roseanne* (1988-1997), Roseanne Conner works at Wellman Plastics, where she and some coworkers become frustrated at the lack of supplies in the women’s room. She asks for paper towels after the foreman chastises her for going into the men’s room for some. She laughs and holds a blank paper towel overhead as the women around the breakroom table make jokes demanding paper towels. Roseanne calls out, “Union,” and her sister Jackie says, “Strike,” as they laugh, and the foreman smiles and tells someone to get paper towels for the women’s room. This scene captures the contradictory ways media use the Norma Rae icon. The women in the breakroom share a grievance and even express an awareness that Wellman uses small worries like paper towels to distract them from big concerns like benefits and safety. Their conversation ends, however, with laughter when they get the paper towels. The season’s final episode culminates with Roseanne quitting after a manager requires increased quotas. Some of her coworkers also quit, but again without any collective organizing or plan. They are left drinking in a local bar, without jobs in a town with few options, as Wellman Plastics continues with other workers.

In season six, episode six (2005) of *The Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), a show created by, written by, and about talkative women, the main character Lorelei has to argue with town officials when they want to rename the street where she and two coworker friends run a New England inn. Members of the Town Tourism Board confirm their decision to announce “old timey” names to attract visitors to Stars Hollow, renaming the street with Lorelei’s inn “Sores and Boils Alley” because it used to have the local hospital and leper colony. Lorelei tells her friends that she stood on a bench “all Norma Rae” to demand they keep the current name Third
Street, but she did not succeed. A town selectman had patted her head and said, “Good girl,” after she accepted a deal to save the original name, so she overreacted and threw out the deal. The reference to the Norma Rae icon is again a paradox because Lorelei stands in defiance, but she stands alone and does not succeed.

Some television uses of the Norma Rae icon do encompass a collective effort to organize, but they galvanize around one particular person and do not refer to any long-term movement. Housekeepers in an affluent Connecticut neighborhood go on strike in season four, episode nineteen (1988) of *Who’s the Boss* (1984-1992). The premise of the series depends on a gender norm reversal played for comedy in every episode—Tony, a former New York City boxer, works as a housekeeper for Angela, a high-powered corporate executive. When other women housekeepers find out Tony makes more money than them, an unexamined non-comedic gender norm, they refuse to work until they get raises and health benefits. The group of women includes different ages and ethnicities, a diverse representation of domestic workers. But they are depicted as having the time to share tea and the financial assets to go on strike. At the tea, the women say, “Strike,” but Tony insists that he cannot because Angela is a good boss. The show implies he has higher pay because of Angela’s generosity not because he is a man. Another housekeeper calls him a “scab.” Angela encourages Tony to support his fellow housekeepers. She says those who are more fortunate cannot turn their backs on those who are deprived—plus, Angela notes that a strike will upset her obnoxious neighbor Joanne.

Angela sounds happy until she does not have his labor for an unexpected dinner party for a visiting Japanese client. Angela and Tony engage in a debate about her change of mind, and her young son makes a joke that Tony and his daughter are labor while Angela and he are
management. A few hours before the client dinner, a housekeeper comes to the door as Angela, with a bandanna tied on her head as a babushka, cleans the living room. Angela calls Tony, “Norma Rae,” with a smirk as she opens the front door, a humorous play on the icon’s defiance and on Tony’s gender. The visitor announces that the strike has ended because temps were more expensive than regular domestics. Angela immediately removes her babushka in a transformative return to her upper-class appearance. The obstruction then becomes Tony’s desire for an apology for minimizing his work. Angela and Tony end up complimenting each other, crisis averted. The show closes with them in traditional Japanese clothing at a full table setting. Tony pours sake, and Angela toasts, “To solidarity.” They drink and smile, and she adds, “And to the highest paid housekeeper in Fairfield. You’re getting a raise.” The collective effort of the housekeepers was short and limited to a raise, but Tony’s solidarity lies with his boss and their personal negotiations of money, labor, and sexualized flirtation.

Season two of *The West Wing* (1999-2006) includes a similar joke. In episode six (2000), President Josiah Bartlet and his staff discuss calling a lame duck session of Congress to attempt a treaty ratification. A minor storyline involves an effort by Donna, a senior assistant, to implement Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards for repetitive stress injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome. Leo McGarry, the Chief of Staff, tells Donna that he will not implement the OSHA recommendations because they would cost $18 billion so workers should just “type slower.” Josh Lyman, the Deputy Chief of Staff, calls her “Norma Rae” after she advises workers to slow their typing. He tells Donna that the White House and Congress are exempt from the workplace laws they pass. She notes that is convenient, and Josh tells her to “get past it” and assigns her as a person of “no consequence” to serve as a decoy in a foreign relations situation. She attends a meeting with an Eastern
European diplomat who wants to speak with President Barlet but cannot officially meet him. The OSHA topic ends with Donna talking about keyboard stress injuries as the diplomat asks, “What the hell is this woman talking about?” Donna exits when the president enters.

In this scenario, the office assistants seem to engage in a gesture of collective action although viewers do not see any meetings or debates. The action, however, serves a single short-term goal, is brief, and is done to make a point for Donna’s individual bid to persuade Leo of her OSHA cause. The storyline does link the Norma Rae icon to an uplifting if limited effort by workers to improve their labor conditions. However, the “Norma Rae” is clearly just Donna, not all the office workers, and she does not get the OSHA regulations enacted. In the end, she stands alone and ineffective, yet a solid staff member for Josh. The audience hears nothing more about any office slowdown as the White House continues to function with people and papers moving through Aaron Sorkin’s fast-paced circular set.

All the shows listed in Figure 50 rely on similar references to the Norma Rae icon in which an individual character makes a straightforward demand, asks for a modification on behalf of a small group, or calls another character “Norma Rae” as a way to minimize his or her solitary stand (whether it is serious or ridiculous). None of the examples includes long-term organizing for structural change. In these deployments, long labor histories, Crystal Lee’s participation in a vast movement, and even the movie’s reference to an established union have vanished behind an individualist icon flexible enough for serious union posters about worker events and for breezy television jokes that celebrate and denigrate “Norma Rae” and the associated character at the same time.

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Although Ritt emerged from the Popular Front theater scene and conceived of himself as a director who told stories about real people and refused to pander to studio demands, *Norma Rae* was a Hollywood product. The exertions of Rose & Asseyev, Ritt, Twentieth Century-Fox, and the ACTWU constrained the “Crystal Lee” movie and produced and promoted *Norma Rae* in ways that suited and assisted the extreme individualism cohering in the 1980s. The studio and union even cooperated to block Kopple and any possible alternatives to their version of the story. A depiction of the collective movement did not appear, and Norma Rae stood alone. The enduring success of the icon depends on and helps to reconstitute neoliberal individualism even as its contradictions allow it to maintain the narrative and affect of defiant rebelliousness. But the icon does not become completely removed from its roots and raw material because Crystal Lee and other worker organizers continuously reclaim the movie. They refuse to allow it to operate solely in the realm of that dominant neoliberal turn.
“And then the government doesn’t help us because they have let these quotas get bigger and bigger…. They believe in free trade, that’s what they tell us…. We’re not saying we don’t want imports because we have to have imports to have exports… but not to the extent that our people are gonna be out of work.”
Gloria Maldonado, 1984, Nosotras Trabajamos en la Costura

“I did not want people to turn against joining a union because of what had happened to me. Because I believe that a piece of a union is better than no union at all…. I feel real good about the things I have done to help other people have a better way of life.”
Crystal Lee Sutton, 2008, Reelz Time

CONCLUSION
CONTESTING WHO DETERMINES THE “AMERICAN WORKING CLASS”

A history of Crystal Lee Sutton and Norma Rae could be told as the straightforward story of Hollywood moguls “exploiting” a poor working woman from the South. The simplicity of that tale has the same appeal as Norma Rae—provocative but linear, contained by a familiar conceptualization of poor southern mill hands, and promulgating a direct top-down dynamic as an easy explanation. But when the lens opens to a wider frame and accounts for the larger context of women in the twentieth-century textile and garment industry, a different history becomes possible. The early contours of contemporary globalization appear. Since the turn of the century, government offices, textile and garment manufacturers and retailers, and investment banks collaborated in the construction and manipulation of multiple racialized labor markets. These labor markets functioned in relation to each other as they relied on and

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1 I use the surname Sutton for the remainder of the dissertation. Crystal Lee Pulley Wood Jordan Sutton took the name when she married Lewis “Preston” Sutton, Jr. in 1977 and kept it until her death in 2009. Due to the limited span of this chapter, it is possible to use the surname and note this consistency for the last thirty years of her life.
reconstituted notions of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and citizenship. It was not a synchronized conspiracy, but rather the actions of elites engaged in the building of U.S. empire while pursuing its rewards. In the first half of the century, Puerto Rican women as well as mainland southern mill hands became vital workers who made their own choices within these structures. Even if the great majority of women did not personally know each other, the systems and conditions of their labor were related and shaped the arrangement of neoliberal trade practices. And many union women were aware of the systems.

Sutton’s activism occurred in that profusely globalizing industry and the decades of worker resistance, labor organizing, and civil rights activism, with thousands of African American workers joining in the 1960s. The exploitation she experienced resulted from that globalization and its intersections with labor markets as much as from local southern problems. Sutton also had appeal as an attractive, feminine, married white southern mill hand who spoke with an assertive voice. With the transparency about her personal life, Sutton garnered media attention that drew her into contests about how to represent the American working class. Although Sutton did not discuss the colonial labor market of migrating Puerto Rican needleworkers, she knew the industry and union movement were bigger and more complicated than the story Rose & Asseyev, Ritt, and the Ravetches wanted to tell. In addition to expecting a position in the production, Sutton attempted to negotiate the depiction and narrative of American workers and unions. Even without access to Hollywood resources like lawyers, accountants, and agents, Sutton pushed against the capitalist mechanisms of cultural production and used the movie’s success to assert her own interpretation, reclaim her life story, advocate for unions, and sue for remuneration.
Yet the process of erasing the diversity of women workers in textiles and garments; overlooking the significant role the industry played in U.S. global ambitions; and obscuring the long histories of worker resistance and labor organizing continues with the Norma Rae icon. The icon endures to this day as an open and adaptable representation of individualism and defiance. As a symbol of the American working class, it continues to conceal women of color, colonial labor markets, and the role of government agencies, banks, and investors as well as industrial managers in fragmenting and marginalizing workers by categories of race, ethnicity, citizenship, and sovereignty.

The icon remains a paradox for the labor movement. While it elides histories of worker resistance, the many people of color who have participated, and the tensions and achievements of these efforts, it has also been an invitation for workers to push past the static image and discover the more complete histories. Without that exertion, however, the travels of union organizers throughout the U.S. including the colonies, the talks among neighbors about unionizing, the walkouts and slowdows, the strikes and lockouts with community meals and union funds, the membership drives, union hall debates, fights against corruption, national boycotts, and long contract negotiations vanish in the iconic image of one white woman standing on a table in her moment of personal transformation.

The globalizing of textiles and garments has continued to accelerate in the twenty-first century as well, further diversifying women workers. Women in East Asia, Central America, and South Asia have become crucial labor in a booming industry essential to the escalating currents of capital and consumer desires. Although trade in services currently grows at a faster rate than trade in goods, the circulation of textiles and apparel grows. The quantity and sales of apparel has multiplied with the contemporary practice of fast fashion and its constant
cycling of clothing and accessory styles with minor modifications.\(^2\) As the reliance on diverse women workers increases, so does the engineering of employment regulations, contracting rules, trade agreements, currency exchanges, citizenship, and sovereignty that enforce their marginal status. A notion of the American working class as white and parochial, competing from isolated locales against foreigners and immigrants “taking their jobs,” camouflages these ongoing rearrangements of the markets and currents through which all workers navigate. This dissertation reveals the inaccuracy and futility of the narrative of a parochial white working class and the linear relocation of industry. Workers are not sequential; they do not take jobs in that pattern. Governments, investors, and workers set capital and labor in constant motion. A false linear narrative undermines the ability to build worker solidarity, create labor institutions to impact the terms of globalization, and monitor the complicated currents of capital.

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In the 1980s, Maldonado’s daughter also decided to go to work for the ILGWU. She had attended college and become a social worker serving “juvenile delinquents” with the Board of Correction. When that emotional work upset Maldonado’s daughter, she became an ILGWU business agent like her mother.\(^3\) The fragments in the archives for Puerto Rican needleworkers become scarce and appear to vanish after 1990, but Maldonado retired from her ILGWU position in the 1990s. Since the ILGWU membership collapsed in that decade, Maldonado’s daughter most likely would have lost her job because she had less seniority. Responding to their loss of membership, the ILGWU and ACTWU merged in 1995 to create


\(^{3}\) “Gloria Maldonado,” 8/8/84, 24-25.
the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE). In 2004, UNITE HERE was formed by a merger with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union (HERE). UNITE had money but declining membership, and HERE had a growing number of membership opportunities but little cash or established leverage.

In the twenty-first century, most of Maldonado’s concerns have come to fruition. U.S. government offices continue to cooperate with manufacturing and investment interests in the Caribbean to adapt the CBI. Additional benefits were created for Haiti by amending the CBERA to include the Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement Act of 2006 (HOPE), the Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement Act of 2008 (HOPE II), and the Haiti Economic Lift Program of 2010 (HELP). HOPE created special new rules of origin that made Haiti eligible for trade benefits for apparel imports. It also enhanced sourcing flexibility for apparel producers in Haiti, meaning they could get materials from more places and still receive exemptions. HOPE II modified the existing trade preference programs, and HELP provided duty-free treatment for additional textile and apparel products from Haiti. These preferences are scheduled to expire on September 30, 2025.4

EPZs flourish around the world, often appearing under new names like special economic zone (SEZ) because the subsidized development of low-wage export manufacturing received criticism. Like EPZs that complicate and blur the lines of import/export, borders, and sovereignty, SEZs emphasize fluid currents of capital and trade. China and Vietnam have built SEZs that permit increasing foreign investment as well as private ownership within their communist state-managed economies. The Chinese government has also used SEZs to push

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4 “Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI),” Office of the United States Trade Representative, Executive Office of the President, Preference Programs.
further into South Asia, particularly with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) made of a series of SEZs with textiles and garments as well as electronics. The World Bank and WEPZA remain staunch advocates for EPZs/SEZs and have launched plans to expand them in Africa.

As the textile and garment industry sprawled into more and more countries with multiplying EPZs/SEZs, Puerto Rican needleworkers lost their labor market. Manufacturing on the island shifted to more pharmaceuticals. The New York City sweatshops that appear, disappear, and reappear primarily rely on undocumented Caribbean and Asian immigrant workers who have fewer options for resistance. In the 2000s, technologies of contracting and subcontracting for textile, apparel, and accessories have become so agile, Chinese contract manufacturers and their sewing machine operators have even moved to Italy. They set up fleeting, mobile sweatshops in old buildings throughout regions like Tuscany to make products that must contain the label “Made in Italy” to demand retail prices in the hundreds to thousands of dollars. In such nimble contracting, shipping, and labor structures with tens of thousands of poor women workers and light sewing machines moving on every continent, Puerto Rican women do not have special leverage. The colonial template of exemption has become the global arrangement for lowest-wage manufacturing.

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Sutton retired from regular paid work in 1994 when she closed her home daycare, but her husband, Preston, continued at the mill. Directors of labor organizing and union negotiations still contacted her for endorsements of labor campaigns, and she participated in a few interviews (see Figure 51). But she chose not to comment on the 2003 closure of the mill where she worked in Roanoke Rapids. After a series of financial battles in 1988, West Point-Pepperell (another postwar conglomerate) had acquired J.P. Stevens. Just a year after that acquisition, Michael Milken at Drexel Burnham Lambert took 95% of West Point-Pepperell in a leveraged buyout.8 During the dispersal of assets, Delta Plant #4 became part of a newly formed spinoff company, WestPoint Stevens. In 2003, the plant closed during a Chapter 11 bankruptcy restructuring of WestPoint Stevens. It was the last textile and home goods factory in Roanoke Rapids.9

Sutton did not participate in any pieces about that closure. She wrote on an envelope containing a UNC-TV letter about doing a story on the closing, “Note: 6/17/03 Tuesday I decided not to do this interview.”10 This marginalia reveals that Sutton weighed her options and did not participate in every public appearance or media invitation that she received. The regional press carried stories about the closure, the layoff of its 320 workers, and its relationship to Sutton and Norma Rae. The reporters noted that between 1998 and 2003, 150

textile and garment factories closed in the Carolinas. Levi Strauss also shuttered its last U.S. plants in 2003. The framing of the closures within a dominant narrative of “deindustrialization” and “dying industry” amplified a sense of natural finality for U.S. textile and garment manufacturing. Rather than these articles, Sutton kept her appearances associated with ongoing politics and labor organizing.

In retirement, Sutton continued to push for fair treatment and access to economic resources. When doctors diagnosed Sutton with a brain tumor called meningioma, a usually benign cancer that unfortunately threatened her life, she had to appeal to her insurance company for payment of her treatments. The neoliberal turn included steps that honed “efficiencies” in extracting monetary value and oriented corporate procedures even more toward financialization. Austerity budgets cut high-income and wealth taxes and redirected government services away from the public or financial oversight and toward investors and fostering capital currents. These reforms encompassed federal and state regulation of health insurance companies. Corporate healthcare billing and benefits became stacked with layers of fees, copays, deductibles, and network categories. After two months of Sutton’s appeals and arguments with the insurance company, it finally approved the first of two surgeries and the follow-up drugs and chemotherapy. Preston took a second job to cover the added expenses of deductibles and co-pays, and the North Carolina AFL-CIO asked members to donate to Sutton’s medical fund to support her repeated treatments and medications. The labor

movement, even with the moments of disagreement or tension over the years, remained a resource for her. Even while Sutton struggled with the brain tumor and her health insurance, she contributed her name and time to events when she felt well (see Figures 52 and 53). She made a 2008 appearance with a visiting Haitian labor organizer and supported the campaign to organize Coca-Cola factories around the world. Coca-Cola has plants in several countries making products that include sodas, bottled water like Dasani, juices for Odwalla, and iced teas, and its regional executives resist union organizing and cooperate with regimes known for violent suppression of activism. Sutton and Preston posed in one of the group’s t-shirts in 2009, just a couple months before her death.\footnote{\textit{The Rest of the Story: Norma Rae,”} interview with Crystal Lee Sutton, airdate March 6, 2008, \textit{Reelz Time,} video cassette, white jacket, file cabinet, drawer #1, Crystal Lee Sutton Collection, Alamance Community College, Graham, North Carolina. \textit{Campaign to Stop Killer Coke Update, 4. In Memory of a True Labor Leader and Hero,”} KillerCoke.org, accessed October 26, 2016, http://killercoke.org/nl091102.php. \textit{IUF/UITA: Coca-Cola Workers Worldwide,”} http://www.iuf.org/ccww/.

By 2009, Field had a long successful career and earned millions of dollars for movies, television, and product endorsements. During Sutton’s illness, her family must have sent a letter to Field informing her of the situation. She responded to Sutton’s family with a typed note that shared her thoughts on monogrammed stationary. Although she acknowledged Crystal Lee was the source for \textit{Norma Rae}, Field continued to claim the movie was not based directly on her life story. Field wrote, “My heart and thoughts are with her and you and your whole family. She is a remarkable woman whose brave struggles have left a lasting impact on this country and without doubt, on me personally. Portraying Crystal Lee in \textit{Norma Rae}, however loosely based, not only elevated me as an actress, but as a human being. I give her my everlasting appreciation and my deepest gratitude.” Not until a single line in her 2018 memoir, \textit{In Pieces}, did Field acknowledge that the movie told the story of Crystal Lee Sutton’s life: “The story was based on Crystal Lee Sutton, a heroic union organizer and advocate who...
in the early 1970s bravely stood up against the J.P. Stevens mills for the mistreatment of their workers.” The rest of the two chapters that discuss Norma Rae do not mention the long history of TWUA organizing, Sutton’s activism with the working poor, the 1978 negotiations about the name and title, or even meeting Sutton at the 1980 SAG event in Los Angeles. In a September 2018 blog post for Literary Hub in which Field promoted the memoir by describing her 1980 trip to Cannes, she again chose not to mention Sutton or the TWUA. She focused on Reynolds, Ritt, the Ravetches, and the standing ovation that made her cry.14

When Sutton died in September 2009 at the age of 68, the New York Times published an obituary mourning the loss of “the Real-Life ‘Norma Rae.’” The piece exemplifies the contradictions of attaining popular attention for a movie that ignored her concerns and suggestions and obscured her experiences. The rare honor of receiving a full New York Times obituary comes at a price. Its stature formalizes and entrenches a certain set of facts while erasing others. The obituary celebrates Sutton, describing her as the inspiration for the character Field played in the Academy Award-nominated 1979 movie, Norma Rae. It also says Sutton took a leading role in southern union efforts and implies that her stand on a folding table led to the successful vote to unionize in seven North Carolina mills a few months later.

The consequential decision not to use her name for the title of the movie is explained simply as a legal necessity. The obituary features a haunting 2001 Associated Press photograph of Sutton on her living room couch under a large poster of Field as Norma Rae holding the UNION sign (see Figure 54). While Sutton has grown older and heavier—a real woman worker who bears the physical tolls of repetitive labor and activism—Norma Rae stands young

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and timeless above her. Sutton smiles, appearing fully satisfied and pleased about her association with that iconic image. The piece does not mention her critiques of the movie, let alone the deeper conflicts with Rose & Asseyev, Ritt, and Twentieth Century-Fox.15

In addition to the *New York Times* obituary, activists, worker groups, and regional newspapers published memorials and obituaries. Most of them use the name “Norma Rae” in the title but celebrate the labor movement and the dedication of Sutton’s activism rather than the movie. In these pieces, Sutton becomes one special organizer of many, and the movie serves as a portal into the movement. The *New York Times Magazine* 2009 end-of-year remembrances included a more insightful profile of Sutton titled “The Organizer” with a photo of her from 1974, at the peak of TWUA membership drive. Bruce Raynor, president of Workers United and executive vice president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), had worked with Sutton on the J.P. Stevens campaign. He said, “Our nation lost a great hero and champion of working people. She… is an inspiration to every worker who holds out hope and is prepared to fight for justice and respect at work.”16

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Even into the 2010s, the Norma Rae icon’s ambiguities persist. Figures 55-74 reveal four common ways in which the icon has been used in online media since the rise of the Internet. As noted with Sutton’s obituary, it is able to serve as a portal to the long and rich histories of diverse worker organizing. But the icon appears most often as a simplified if adaptable image of the working class or individual defiance. In Figures 56 and 57, the band Norma Rae and an image from a *Salon* article about the limited media coverage of working people both use the name and icon as a representation of the general “American working class.” The band’s website declares, “Like the heroine from the famous movie, Norma Rae gives a voice to the working class; to the people struggling to make ends meet; to the folks who work hard; to you and me. Norma Rae gets down to the nitty gritty of life, love, and social concerns and blends original lyrics with raw, inescapably Southern harmonies into its Americana sound.” Like the movie and the icon, the band conflates the South, white working people, and “the American working class” in ways that simplify and whiten its meaning.

The next three figures, 58-60, show straightforward playfulness in manipulating the icon’s rebellious pose. These uses take the embedded rebellion and spin it into visual jokes about being quirky—defiance as a general ironic posture. The next two sets of figures show uses of the icon that are more concerned with power. Figures 61 to 64 come from blogs about challenging hierarchies, distributions of resources, or elitist attitudes. None of them call for any collective organizing or long-term change, but the defiance in them is not random or a joke. The defiance is directed toward those with power. Figures 65-68 with Kathy Griffin, the National Science Foundation, Field, and “Bernie” represent active stands made in formal politics. In these cases, the figure appears to stand alone but does represent a larger, if off-screen, campaign. The histories leading to the specific moment in the photos are invisible
because each stand seems to occur within a contemporary referendum or election. People with an awareness of formal politics, however, will understand that years of work by many people led to each moment.

Lastly, six images engage the icon to call attention to ongoing union actions from certification drives to strikes. The iconic UNION sign serves as a visual lure or shorthand into stories or reports about collective union activism. Hollywood industry had the power to create such an iconic image that eclipses any photograph of actual workers in a group action or walkout. This cultural power allows the icon to dominate but not hermetically seal the meanings for “American workers.” For example, in the case of the 2015 New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) forum, the union members reclaim the stand just as Crystal Lee reclaimed her life story by appropriating the term “real Norma Rae” (Figure 73). The photographs of actual workers using the icon expose its complications. It can serve as a rallying point for collective and long-term organizing by workers demanding better conditions even as it covers and eclipses images of diverse workers engaged in labor activism.

One of the more intriguing examples from this category speaks to the global currents of labor organizing. In 2013, a journalist’s attempt to make light of Cambodian hotel and casino workers in Phnom Penh instead led the union women to discover the activism of Crystal Lee Sutton. When NagaCorp, which operates a resort casino in Phnom Penh for global traveling customers, refused to give its workers raises or address workload, about 90% of personnel went out on strike, including croupiers and drivers. Women in housekeeping were one of the largest and most militant groups. These women had also demonstrated on International Women’s Day and joined the Global Week of Action for Housekeepers. At the dazzling resort casino NagaWorld, they demanded raises of about $80 to $150 per month. Police and casino
security removed the workers and arrested nineteen leaders, and NagaCorp sent a text announcing the termination of 413 workers. Phnom Penh Municipal Court ordered workers back to the casino. Corporate publicists and a journalist described the workers by saying they were “going Norma Rae,” and an online article used the photo of Field with the UNION sign (see Figure 72). 17

The article deployed the Norma Rae icon to mock the women’s efforts at some control over their conditions and to minimize the violence of the suppression. Yet it prompted some of the women workers to research the name “Norma Rae.” On their own, they pushed through the movie into its history and found Sutton and the TWUA national campaign. Chhim Sitthar, the 27-year-old leader of a union of over 3,000 workers at NagaWorld, appreciated the comparison to Sutton. She negotiated hard with NagaCorp to return the 413 terminated workers to the same jobs and proudly appropriates the name Norma Rae as she continues to push for maternity leave, higher pay, a reasonable workload, and an end to sexual harassment. With funding from the SEIU and the IUF (an international federation of food, farm, and hotel workers), Chhim travels with a union vice president to international meetings and strategy sessions with hotel housekeepers throughout Asia. 18

Figure 75 lists a great variety of uses of the icon in text media as the phrase “Norma Rae moment” or a version of it. These uses usually denote a person asserting his or her voice, attempting to change a situation, speaking out to improve conditions, or simply making trouble. Even fish have “a Norma Rae moment” when they die en masse near a controversial

18 Orleck, “We Are All Fast-Food Workers Now,” 21-24; Amsel, “NagaWorld Staff Go Norma Rae.”
Illinois power plant. In Figure 75M, the most notable example, the *New York Times* uses “Norma Rae” for a black woman who was a Cablevision employee with the Communications Workers of America (CWA). It appears to be the first and only time the icon refers to black working people rather than serving notions of the white “American working class.” The term applies to La’kesia Johnson, who stands with several black men also fired when they attempted to speak to a Cablevision executive about dragging out contract negotiations with the CWA. In the article, the name “Norma Rae” can also be read to encompass all the workers of the New York CWA local, particularly the black workers in the photo and Johnson. The article explains the messy situation in which some Cablevision workers have even started to discuss a vote to decertify the union as their representative. As with Kopple’s depiction of the 1970s coal strike, the reporter conveys the mixed emotions, consequences, and debates that come with a union drive.\(^{19}\)

The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority provides one of the more peculiar uses of the icon (see Figure 76). Its 2012 “Take Back Your Summer” campaign targeted American workers affected by the recession who felt pressure to stay at work regardless of vacation benefits.\(^{20}\) In the commercial titled “Norma Rae,” a woman gets on her desk in the middle of similar beige desks. Her wrinkled unremarkable clothing marks her as a regular office worker amidst the cubicles. Phones ring softly and keyboards click. She announces that she has saved 47 vacation days, then smiles and holds up a sign that reads, “VACATION NOW!” A fun star dots the exclamation point. But none of her coworkers join her stand.

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None of them show an interest in even taking the vacation days. The lack of solidarity and the woman’s lonely stand make her defiance the brunt of a joke. The commercial argues that the “real” act of defiance is not labor solidarity or collective action, but the individual consumer willing to take his or her vacation days. The commercial also elides the decades of labor movement and violent confrontations that made vacation benefits possible and obscures the constant labor fights in Las Vegas over fair pay and conditions for hotel and hospitality workers who provide vacation services.

The movie and its icon still capture the attention of even the most successful and affluent creative professionals. John Sayles, known for the acclaimed independent films *Matewan* (1987) about a 1920 coalminers strike in West Virginia and *Lone Star* (1996) about a murder in a Texas town divided by interracial and intergenerational tensions, selected *Norma Rae* as one of the “shining examples of the craft of screenwriting” in a 2012 sidebar for the *New York Times*. In 2017, Broadway producers began development for a possible musical based on “the iconic 1979 film ‘Norma Rae’.” A “talented roster of creatives” was already involved, including Rosanne Cash as composer. But Cindy Tolan, a respected casting director, lost a special 29-hour reading because she wanted the producers to contribute to her Teamsters union health and pension fund. (That special reading is the final step before deciding if a show will go into full production.) Tolan and several professionals had been pressing the Broadway League of producers to recognize them as Teamsters with Local 817. The local already represented Tolan and others when they cast for television and movies. Field tweeted her support for the casting directors’ bid and shared a photograph of herself holding a flyer announcing “I Support Casting Directors”—but not overhead (see Figure 77). Bespoke Theatricals and Fox Stage Productions, which earned $1.5 billion the previous year, did not

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comment on the situation. The Broadway League stated that the casting directors were independent contractors, not employees, and filed a suit that they were operating as a cartel to inflate prices.\(^\text{22}\)

In the summer of 2018, Ryan Murphy launched a new show based on the Harlem LGBT ball scene and glam culture of 1980s New York City. Murphy was coming off a stretch of successful shows that he created, ran, and sometimes directed. He started with *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010), established his career with *Glee* (2009-2015), gained both cult and popular status with the anthology *American Horror Story* (2011-), and elevated himself as an elite auteur with *American Crime Story* (2016-). Murphy approached Miramax in 2015 to buy an eighteen-month option to develop a show based on its property *Paris Is Burning*, the famous 1991 documentary about New York’s drag ballroom scene.\(^\text{23}\)

*Pose* was intended as a show made with, by, and about queer performers of color and trans people, and Murphy promised to donate much of his profits to LGBTQ charities.

Dominique Jackson plays Elektra, a lead character and mother to a group of queer performers at the House of Abundance. Mj Rodriguez plays Blanca, one of Elektra’s “children” who makes occasional political comments and engages in some personal activism that Elektra views as absurd (see Figure 78). In the premier season, episode two “Access,” Blanca wants to demonstrate outside a gay bar in the West Village frequented by white men because it did

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not allow her and members of the house to stay for drinks. Elektra, an older transwoman with more experience managing situations around the city, finds the stand laughable. “You’re a regular transvestite Norma Rae,” Elektra says to Blanca with a smirk. “Don’t get me wrong, I admire your determination…. [Y]ou have always been impossible to stop once you get an idea in your head. But take it from a woman of the world… [t]hese gay white boys don’t want anything to do with you, and never will…. You’re not Rosa Parks, sitting up front of the bus. You’re a tired old queen looking to sip a margarita with some white boy in Sergio Valente jeans.” Blanca eventually leaves House of Abundance to start her own family at House of Evangelista and compete against Elektra at the balls, but long-term political activism is not part of the regular storylines.

Forty years after the release of Norma Rae, the icon continues to have so much cultural power that it appears in a cable show by an illustrious television showrunner. Murphy selected the writers for the show, most from the influential Writers Guild of America, and they scripted the line referring to Norma Rae for a 2018 television show intended to engage contemporary cultural politics with representations of 1980s queer performers. Yet even as the icon stands for an act of defiance in the show, the long history of economic exploitation in the textile and garment industry, generations of labor activism, and Sutton, who made the decision to join a union drive, remain invisible. As with most uses of the Norma Rae icon, the reference reduces Blanca to an individual making a personal stand. While she has a loose connection to gay and

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trans activists in New York City, they remain vague off-screen collectives while she stands alone against the bar and within a house that subverts yet reconstitutes a conception of family and maternalism. The series focuses not on the political and social activism of organized groups like ACT UP that demanded structural changes to fund research and healthcare for HIV-AIDS, but rather on personal relationships and ballroom performances as Blanca challenges Elektra’s dominance of the ballroom scene.

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*Norma Rae* still appears on the Fox Movie Channel and on Turner Classic Movies (TCM), a cable television network dedicated to a core collection of canonized films. TCM’s 2012 listing for the movie in the television schedule states, “Norma Rae (1979). Sally Field, Beau Bridges. Spunky union organizer in Southern mill town. Field tour de force. (PG).”

The movie *Norma Rae* is a financial asset, a product purchased by Ted Turner to be shown on a premium cable channel, and a generator of royalties for its high-level professionals such as the producers, directors, and top actors. It is also a consistent wellspring of cultural discourse, reengaging with cultural politics and contests over meanings of the American working class, activism, and unions, often pulling the conversation back to the sentimental notion of isolated white individuals straining in localized industries.

The potent sentimentality surrounding southern mills and the dominant declension narrative of deindustrialization, with its camouflaging of capitalist reconfigurations shifting markets in many directions, continue to shape the reporting related to Sutton and the industry. In 2016, the abandoned Leshner Mill where *Norma Rae* filmed in Opelika, Alabama, burned down and spurred wistful reflections about both the movie and the southern textile industry.

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The massive building was in the process of being demolished after sitting unused for seventeen years. The sudden loss prompted the editor of the *Opelika-Auburn News*, Troy Turner, to write a contemplative piece. A photo of the mill accompanies his article, with a visual angle that showcases old railroad tracks framed by weeds and the worn outer walls of the mill caught in drifting smoke—melancholy with nostalgia (see Figure 79). Turner starts, “Smoke lingered long after the fire, hanging in the air much like the memories themselves of a long-past way of life that once dominated the South.” He notes that Pittsburgh had steel, Detroit had cars, and the South had textiles, reiterating America’s industrial myths with their visions of localized domestic manufacturing and decline.²⁶

Like *Norma Rae*, the nostalgia in Turner’s article includes a hard-edged acknowledgement of the exhausting work, sore bodies, and stretched hours. Anyone old enough to remember the moon landing “remembered the days when textile mills were kings of the South.” All the people watching the firefighters douse the flames had stories about family in the mills, like Turner’s paternal grandmother who took a job in 1968 after losing her husband. She often came home and soaked her feet in hot water and Epsom salts. Turner celebrates *Norma Rae* for winning its critical acclaim by “candidly depicting some of the harsh conditions many mill workers faced as the main character fought to organize a union and create change.” As with the 1977 “Norma Rae” script, however, Turner elides decades of southern worker resistance and labor activism and the thousands of mill hands and union staff who participated in the 1963-1981 TWUA/ACTWU campaign to organize J.P. Stevens. He completely misses the efforts by unions to foster domestic employment and fight cheap

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imports while improving conditions. Norma Rae’s effort to “create change” appears to arise from her own impulses.

Turner relies on the recurrent and oddly comforting notion of the bad old days, with their dirty industrial manufacturing, as a foil to the good present days, with their clean office-service industries that do not seem to exploit workers because the labor is not physically debilitating or filthy in obvious ways. If the mills, the old kings of the South, pass away from decay and fire, their practices of hard labor and cruel wages must go with them. Turner wishes the mills could be reclaimed, recycled for usable materials or renovated for apartments and shopping—again, contemporary “good” capitalism with its market-based consumer solutions rehabilitating the old bad capitalism with its deprivations and deterioration. He does not mention that the 2008 financial recession, triggered by such contemporary “good” capitalism and its questionable mortgage-based investment products, ended plans to renovate the mill for upscale apartments and condominiums.27

Such depictions continue to conflate the immediate experiences of industrial workers and households in a particular neighborhood with the ways transnational corporations and the economy operate.28 The perspective of local workers and the analysis of specific business hierarchies are each significant and valuable, but mainstream culture rarely acknowledges the more complicated position of workers within the entangled larger systems. That lack of attention means either industries seem to naturally “die” or workers and unions seem to blame for closures. This local point of view captures the important immediate circumstances and

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28 Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds., Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization (Ithaca: Cornell University ILR Press, 2003). This collection offers several studies of a specific site of deindustrialization. As noted earlier in the dissertation, workers and neighbors have immediate and disruptive experiences of deindustrialization in their city or town when a major manufacturer closes. Their perspective is extremely significant to understanding the working class, but it is not descriptive of the overall array of industrial capitalism.
reactions of workers but misses the ways different factories, offices, technologies, and labor function as part of a broader, if not perfectly hegemonic, set of economic structures.

As such, this dissertation does more than enrich the understanding of local deindustrialization and more than complicate the narrative of industrial relocation in a line from North to South. It shows that workers do not “take jobs” from others in a sequence. Labor markets and workers’ navigation of them function simultaneously, in multiple directions and in relation to each other. In addition, worker demands or unionization might spark subsequent responses from management, but they are not driving overall relocations of manufacturing, capital, and labor. The simple narratives set workers in opposition and undermine their affinity with unions—one of the very institutions they could use to influence the terms of globalization and the constant reallocation of employment around the world.

Sutton made the decision to join the TWUA organizing drive in her town but also understood aspects of the larger history and the tensions inherent to that path. She contested the use of her life and the dominant narrative of the working class as solitary white individuals. As her activism continued, Sutton increasingly spoke about the working poor of the world. Before her death, Sutton left her papers at Alamance Community College. She chose the college as the repository of her papers because of its record in providing education for all people. “Thank God for ACC, where even the working poor can come, get financial assistance, and get a new start in life,” she said at the opening of her collection in June 2007. Sutton said in one of her last interviews after her diagnosis, “It is not necessary I be remembered as anything, but I would like to be remembered as a woman who deeply cared for the working poor and the poor people of the U.S. and the world. That my family and children...
and children like mine will have a fair share and equality.”

Her labor, activism, and words continue to resonate and reach other workers not simply because of the prominence of *Norma Rae*, but because Sutton reappropriated it for her own purposes and carried on with her radical claims. Despite Field’s opinion that Sutton should thank Ritt for all the recognition, it was Sutton who attracted the media and then used the spotlight for her own purposes. It was not a gift from Ritt. Without Sutton’s persistence and assertive voice, the movie would stand on its own as a reductionist and adaptable tale of one woman’s personal transformation.

Maldonado and many other Puerto Rican women have also pushed for visibility in political and popular narratives. Maldonado told her story to “Nosotras Trabajamos” and then expressed her concerns about it to the scholars who produced the radio show. She did not offer her story as a passive contributor and step away. For Puerto Rican women workers, the labor, tax, and banking exemptions for the island and the racialized gendered labor force on the mainland continue to impact their access to income and resources. The 2014-2016 fiscal crisis offers an interesting example. As noted previously, Section 936 attracted corporations seeking exemptions on the island until Congress legislated a phase out. After the end in 2006, the insular government cooperated with investment banks and financial advisors to sell bonds to external portfolios as well as island retirement and pension funds. Investors received a steady exempted return on investment, and the insular government operated as if it was not going into deep debt. Colonial constraints locked the island into this regime.

In 2015-2016, President Barack Obama’s administration and Congress could not avoid the escalating crisis but presented it as a problem of Puerto Rico. They did not discuss the decades of colonial policy with its economic malleability. Obama supported H.R. 5278, the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). When it

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29 Sue Sturgis, “Real ‘Norma Rae’ Dies.”
passed the House Natural Resources Committee on a bipartisan basis, the administration stated, “Doing nothing would consign Puerto Rico to a chaotic, disorderly downward spiral that risks a worsening humanitarian crisis.” With this press release, Obama adapted and reiterated the narrative of Puerto Rico as backward, in need of federal intervention on behalf of progress. The federal government avoided all responsibility for the colonial policies that drove the fiscal crisis. In line with the neoliberal turn, PROMESA pushed the risk down to the most vulnerable individuals and demanded austerity budgets to cover debt payments to large creditors who had taken advantage of colonial financial exemptions. In September 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico just as it was grappling with PROMESA and how to restructure the insular government debt. The administration of President Donald Trump perpetuated the narrative of Puerto Rico needing “outside” aid from the U.S. even as the federal government oversaw the PROMESA regime. Although most government offices sustained the adapted colonizing narrative, investigative reports like PBS’s *Frontline* “Blackout in Puerto Rico” presented some of the history.

Many Puerto Rican women, especially public university students, environmental and justice activists, and workers, have joined a series of protests. They challenge the PROMESA austerity budgets, with their cuts to public education and privatization of land and services, and they decry the outmigration of professionals to the mainland. In May 2018, thousands of workers with many visible women engaged in a general strike across the island. They were particularly angry about a PROMESA fiscal plan that included steps to reduce employer costs,  

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Most articles and news segments about Puerto Rico’s fiscal crisis and Hurricane Maria recovery, however, continue to narrate the island as a separate entity. Although it has been entwined with the U.S. since 1898 and its people became U.S. citizens in 1917—with colonial exemptions shaping the distribution of resources and workers laboring on the island and mainland for U.S. businesses—the dominant narrative endures. It articulates Puerto Rico as backward, marginal in the U.S. economy, and in chronic need of federal aid and admonition.

Puerto Rican studies scholars act against this narrative and have enriched histories with studies of Puerto Rican workers, activists, politicians, legislation, environments, and traditions. This project builds on their research and endeavors to bridge such scholarship to that of southern and U.S. labor historians. The dissertation contributes to their challenge of popular meanings for Puerto Rico. It questions historiographies that reiterate the fragmentation of working people by race, ethnicity, geography, citizenship, and sovereignty. The objective is not to move beyond studies by historians of Puerto Rico, the South, and U.S. labor but rather to propose another colorful pastiche in the kaleidoscope of American history. In this intersectional approach, vectors of labor, class, and status converge with vectors of gender, race, geography, and citizenship for one group of Puerto Rican workers. The vectors of labor,
class, and status then move through to intersect with vectors for another group of southern workers in a related labor market. Breaching the boundaries of earlier categorizations of labor, women, archives, and historiographies creates a history that changes how we think about “American workers” and about global capitalism as well as adding to our knowledge of them.

In addition, tracking the extraction of one woman’s story from that intricate history, through to the generation of an enduring popular icon, reveals the power of gender, race, class, and citizenship in constructing dominant representations and narratives. The cultural politics of these representations and their embedded narratives involve conflict over who attains access to the massive financial and technological resources of major culture media. They also involve contests about the meanings and uses of the produced representations and narratives. As this dissertation reveals, increasing the quantity of gender, race, ethnic, class, status, national, and sexual identities in big productions does not necessarily challenge intrinsic narratives of power or the affective proclivities of popular media. Even when such inclusion does subvert certain norms, they still operate within a capitalist nexus that sifts access, ranks contributors’ value, demands revenues, and directs the distribution of millions of dollars.

In popular culture, revenues depend on repetition and simplification. It is possible to legitimate and sentimentalize an inequitable distribution of resources, and marginalize the collective power necessary to challenge such systems, even as the bodies attached to cultural representations diversify. From this vantage, Norma Rae was extraordinary for centering a white working-class woman as the movie hero and showing a union in positive light. Yet it has continuity with previous narrow notions of who are “American workers” and what is “real work” and a potent convergence with the individualization of complex social problems that is inherent to the overall neoliberal turn of the 1980s and 1990s.
FIGURES

Figure 1
Crystal Lee, 1974


Figure 2
Crystal Lee, TWUA postcard, circa 1974

The postcard captures the collective experience of the work and labor organizing with images of African American and white workers, textile machinery, and trucks.

(image courtesy of the blog This Day In North Carolina History, https://nchistorytoday.wordpress.com/2013/08/28/the-real-norma-rae/. Copy also filed in the Crystal Lee Sutton Collection at Alamance Community College)
Figure 3
Anita in *West Side Story*, 1961

Anita as portrayed by Rita Moreno at the sewing machine in a still from the movie set of *West Side Story*
Figure 4
The Norma Rae Icon

(image on multiple websites)
Figure 5

Pamphlet for the exposition in Charleston

The organizers of the exposition imagined Puerto Rico and the Caribbean as part of the Atlantic U.S. and fully linked to their business interests

(photo courtesy of the author, pamphlet from the Osborne Library, American Textile History Museum)
Figure 6
“Uncle Sam to the Children of the Sea,” *The Exposition*, December 1900

*The Exposition* magazine was a periodical series produced by the South Carolina Inter-State and West Indian Company to promote investment, exhibitors, and interest in the Charleston exposition planned for December 1901-June 1902

(photo courtesy of the author, magazine from the Osborne Library, American Textile History Museum)
Figure 7
“Senorita Davila and Her Embroidery,” The Exposition, August 1901

“Some Puerto Rican Work to be Shown at the Exposition at Charleston”
The Exposition: A Magazine Devoted to the South Carolina Inter-State and West Indian Exposition

( photo courtesy of the author, magazine from the Osborne Library, American Textile History Museum)
Figure 8
South Carolina Inter-State and West Indian Exposition, Charleston, 1901-1902

The Cotton Palace at the head of the Sunken Garden

(photo courtesy of the website America’s Best History, https://americasbesthistory.com/wfcharleston1901.html)
Figure 9
**Eleanor Roosevelt tours San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1934**

“3/15/1934 - San Juan, Puerto Rico - Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, wife of the President, standing at the edge of a pool of dirty water swarming with flies in the center of ‘La Perla,’ a street in San Juan. During her inspection trip through this section of town Mrs. Roosevelt came upon this pool and asked the photographer to take a picture of it, ‘to show really what it is like.’ During her shocking journey in squalor and disease, the First Lady was followed by members of the populace clad in rags, naked children and barking dogs. She was deeply touched by the desolate scene and conferred with local welfare workers regarding possible remedies.”

(photograph courtesy of *Wall Street Journal*, Associated Press photo)
Figure 10
Apparel factory near San Juan, 1942

Figure 11
Members of ILGWU Local 600 in Puerto Rico pose with a banner, 1950s

(photo from the ILGWU Photographs Collection, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at the Catherwood Library, Cornell University)
Figure 12
Picketers in front of the Superior Products factory in Puerto Rico, 1950s

Demanding dignified treatment, drinking water, and a fair minimum wage

(photo from the ILGWU Photographs Collection, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at the Catherwood Library, Cornell University)
The article discusses the efforts by the ILGWU to organize from the Northeast to Puerto Rico. The union included Puerto Rican organizers and Spanish-language speeches to build solidarity.
Figure 14
Fulton Mill cartoon celebrating welfare capitalism with racial exclusions, 1918

(image courtesy of Contesting the New South Order by Clifford M. Kuhn, cartoon originally in Special Collections, Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University)
Figure 15

ACTWU Woman Working with Textiles, 1970s

During the 1960s, black women finally gained access to the higher paying jobs in the southern textile and garment mills. They often joined labor unions to demand equitable pay, benefits, and seniority as part of the desegregation of the industry.

(photo courtesy of Memphis-Jackson Joint Board Records, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections and Archives at Georgia State University Library, L1992-11_73)
Figure 16
Eli Zivkovich and Crystal Lee, TWUA organizing drive, 1973-1974

(photo courtesy of the website International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, obituary for Crystal Lee Sutton, https://boilermakers.org/resources/news/norma_rae_dies_at_68)
Figure 17
Popular culture and fascination with poor white southerners

Trouble in the South's first industry

The unions are coming

By Henry P. Leflermann

ROANOKE RAPIDS, N. C. "Yesterday," said Crystal Lee Jordan, a cotton-mill worker, "I took my three children, Mark, Jay and Elizabeth, and my husband was in the room, and I sat down and I told them the story of my life."

First, she told her children she loves them. She said she loves her husband sitting there, and he loves her. Then, for the first time, she told Mark, 12, that his real father had died four months after Mark was born. She told Jay, 11, that she had never married his father, who was another man. And she told Elizabeth, 8, and the boys, that she had an affair with a third man shortly after Elizabeth was born.

Crystal Lee began to cry as she told her children this, and soon they were crying too. In her lap was an old, smudged photo she had brought out of her bedroom and into the living room where they all sat.

"This file box that I kept locked up—I had pictures of Jay's father in there. He was my escort to the senior prom in 1967. I had a few pictures of Mark's father. And I told them, 'I know you'll have wondered why I wouldn't let you go in this box.' I had the settlement papers on Jay that was made between me and his father. I said, 'These are not for me.' I said, 'Mark, this is your life, this is your stuff.' I said, 'Jay, this is your stuff.' I said, 'It's not mine, it's yours.'"

"I said, 'I want you to always feel like that it's nothing that you cannot come to me and talk to me about it, and ask me about it. Any problems, any way in the world, I can help you. You know what your life is. You know what your mother is. This is all I can do for you.'"

She was telling them all this, Crystal Lee Jordan said, because she was changing her life, had already started to in fact, and it was bound to affect them. If they became mill workers, she said to the children, then she wanted life to be better for them than it had been for her. So, she said, she had joined the union, the Textile Workers Union of America, and because of that, Crystal Lee thought she better tell her children these things before someone else did, trying to turn them against her. In her own childhood she had seen the bitter, mean things, the violent wars of the union and mill management. She remembers the 1968 strike in nearby Henderson, N. C., its beatings, inflamed foment, sabotage of mill machines, no fights were ever worse, a brutal history no matter which side you sales, sales are booming, up 19.6%, the $21.5 billion in 1970 to $25.5 billion last year. After-tax profits were this year high-volume, low-profit-margin industry increased from 1.9% per cent of sales in 1969 to 2.6 per cent last year. And the American Textile Manufacturers' Institute predicts this year will set a record with sales of $30-billion and profits of 3.5% per cent or more.

The industry, from floor sweepers to chairman of the board, reaches everywhere in the South. Senators such as Strom Thurmond, Sam Ervin, Herman Talmadge, governors such as John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter started their campaigns with the mill vote. Roger Milliken of Deeing-Milliken, as the world's largest, was one of Richard Nixon's finance chairman in 1968 (as well as one of the John Birch Society's directors in 1962). It is as the sale of the mills who Billy Graham began with—he has gone to Presidents and the world, they in such as the First Scots Presbyterian Church in Greenville, S. C.

Mill hands are the backbone of the Deep South's economy, religion, politics, industry. They are also the lowest paid industrial workers in the South and the nation. Their average income is $8,500 a year before any deductions: their average work day includes 20 minutes for lunch and two 10-minute rest breaks; their average work week is six days, including a scheduled day of overtime; their average hourly wage of $2.79 is 25 cents less than the Southern average and $1.22 an hour below the national average for industrial workers, and their wholly non-average life is plagued by alcohol, sex, violence and an image of themselves as deserving no better than what they get.

Crystal Lee Pulley Jordan was born here in 1949 in the Roanoke Rapids hospital that was built with mill money; she was delivered by a doctor paid by the mill and was one of four children living in a mill-owned house with their father, a loom foreman, and their mother, who would soon become a weaver in the mill. A generation before, Crystal Lee Pulley's grandparents had left the dusty pine woods and rolling fields of tobacco, cotton and peanuts here in eastern North Carolina, giving up farming to work in the mills.

The first mill built here went into production in 1895 on the banks of the Roanoke River. Today out of 14,000 men, women and children living in the town's share in frame houses are trying for "JF". P. Stevens—"the cotton mills. The only tie left to the land and life of their grandparents, Crystal Lee Pulley's children, are the same vegetables, yes, the same vegetables, that have been eaten in eastern North Carolina for generations, and the same vegetables, you know, the same vegetables, that have been eaten in eastern North Carolina for generations.

Figure 18

New York Times Magazine, August 1973

(image courtesy of New York Times Historical database)
Figure 19
*Woman Alive!* producer Joan Shigekawa and Crystal Lee in PBS promotional release, 1974

(image courtesy of the author, document from the Woman Alive! Collection at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University)
Figure 20
Cover of *Image: The Membership Magazine of WNET/13, 1974*

Gloria Steinem and Crystal Lee promoting the pilot episode of *Woman Alive!*

(image courtesy of the author, document from the Woman Alive! Collection at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University)
Figure 21
TWUA members celebrate, 1974

After the successful union certification vote in August 1974, TWUA members gather to celebrate—Crystal Lee wears a white dress and stands in the front row, by the word “ALL” in the banner

(photo from the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at the Catherwood Library, Cornell University)
Figure 22
*Crystal Lee: A Woman of Inheritance* by Henry P. Leifermann, 1975

(image courtesy of eBay)
Figure 23

The Hollywood creative professionals team for “Crystal Lee” to Norma Rae

Alexandra Rose, Tamara Asseyev, Martin Ritt with Sally Field, Harriet Frank, Jr. and Irving Ravetch, and Alan Ladd, Jr.

(photos courtesy of scottibrosglobalstudio.com, imdb.com, geraldpeary.com, the New York Times, and The Hollywood Reporter)
Figure 24

**Norma stands alone—again**

In the final scene of the movie, Norma stands outside the mill as Reuben leaves the town

Figure 25
**Governor George Wallace with Sally Field on the set of *Norma Rae*, A, 1978**

Governor Wallace poses with Field during the filming of *Norma Rae* in Opelika, Alabama, 1978

(photo from the James Hatcher Collection of George Wallace Photographs and Audio Tape at the Alabama Department of Archives and History)
Figure 26
**Governor George Wallace greets Sally Field on the set of Norma Rae, B, 1978**

Field shaking hands with Governor Wallace during the filming of *Norma Rae* in Opelika, Alabama, 1978

(photo from the James Hatcher Collection of George Wallace Photographs and Audio Tape at the Alabama Department of Archives and History)
Figure 27
One of the first movie posters for *Norma Rae*, early 1979

(image courtesy of the blog *Every 70s Movie*,
After the movie received positive reviews and calls for an Academy-Award nomination for Sally Field, the poster image changed to one of uplift.

Figure 29
Gloria Maldonado, in striped dress standing at the left, 1973

“Members of ILGWU Local 66 in New York learn to improve their skills at machines installed in a classroom at the local’s headquarters, with Manager William Schwartz at the Embroidery Workers Local and Education Director Gloria Maldonado, October 1, 1973”

(photo from the ILGWU Photographs Collection, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at the Catherwood Library, Cornell University)
Figure 30
ACTWU supporters in Philadelphia during the national J.P. Stevens boycott, 1970s

(photo courtesy of the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at the Catherwood Library, Cornell University)
Figure 31
Union and labor supporters at a J.P. Stevens boycott demonstration, 1970s

(photo courtesy of the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University)
Figure 32
“Nosotras Trabajamos en la Costura” poster, 1984

(photo courtesy of the author, poster in the collection at The Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College-CUNY)
Figure 33
J.P. Stevens workers celebrate union recognition and a contract, 1980

J.P. Stevens workers in High Point, North Carolina, one of the sites where the union secured bargaining rights in the 1970s, celebrate the company’s decision to recognize the union.

(photo courtesy of the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at the Catherwood Library, Cornell University)
Figure 34
Sally Field and Crystal Lee, March 1980

Field and Crystal Lee raise hands at the March 16, 1980, SAG benefit for the J.P. Stevens boycott and campaign

(photo courtesy of Getty Images)
Sperry Corporation had financial ties to J.P. Stevens and became part of the ACTWU campaign to force fair contract negotiations by isolating J.P. Stevens from its creditors, investors, and insurance companies.
“[They marched at the front of a] demonstration of American Airlines flight attendants whose union was fighting against onerous working conditions, a fight that was successful.”

Ray Rogers also coordinated the 1977-1980 ACTWU corporate campaign against J.P. Stevens and continues to serve as a consultant and organizing director for labor campaigns.
Figure 37
Crystal Lee speaks as “the real Norma Rae,” Minnesota, 1988

Figure 38
Sally Field on the cover of the March 1986 *Playboy*

(image courtesy of the *New York Daily News*, “A Look Back at Iconic Playboy Covers”)
Figure 39
One of the stills from *Norma Rae*, A

(image courtesy of the website *Virtual History*, http://www.virtual-history.com/movie/film/2027/norma-rae)
Figure 40
One of the stills from *Norma Rae*, B

Figure 41
One of the stills from *Norma Rae*, C

This shot comes from the scene immediately after her stand on the table, with the crowd of co-workers that includes fellow union organizers

Figure 42
One of the stills from Norma Rae, D

This shot of her on the table keeps the wider shot of the mill interior that includes a reference to all the workers

(photo courtesy of the website Rotten Tomatoes, http://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/definitive-sally-field-roles/)
Figure 43
Original Korda negative, 1960

Guevara appears in a wider scene with at least another man and the tree

(image courtesy of KMS Holding, http://www.kms.ch/htm/home.htm)
Figure 44
Another photograph of Guevara

Figure 45
The Che icon germinates

The cropped print Korda shared with fellow leftist activists and artists

(image courtesy of the website icollector.com, online collectibles auctions, http://www.icollector.com/Korda-Signed-Che-Guevara-Photo_i10535338)
Figure 46
The Che icon

(image from ebay.com, 2018)
Figure 47
The Che icon in action

Matt Diffee, *New Yorker* cartoon, February 2, 2004

(image courtesy of the blog *Why Evolution Is True*,
Figure 48
North Carolina Women United event for Women’s History Month, March 2015

Free screening of the movie with a panel discussion about women workers and labor organizing.

MARCH 14, 1-4PM
NORMA RAES, PAST & PRESENT

Film Screening & Panel Discussion
Join us for a screening of Norma Rae followed by a panel discussion with workers and organizers about women in the workforce and labor movement, workers’ participation in organizing campaigns and grassroots activism, and the historical and current issues facing North Carolina workers, especially women. RSVP appreciated by not required: eventnormarae@gmail.com

Celebrate NC’s working women, past and present, during Women’s History Month

Sponsored by:
NC Women United
Co-sponsors:
Scholars for North Carolina’s Future,
NC AFL-CIO,
Women Advance

EVENT LOCATION:
NC AFL-CIO Building
1408 Hillsborough Street
Raleigh, NC 27605
Saturday, March 14, 1-4pm

Introductions & film screening: 1pm-3pm
Panel Discussion and QA: 3-4pm

A decision in the Janus case is coming soon:
Regardless of the Supreme Court decision, we must stand united and make it clear that no court case can stand in the way of our fight for the good, union jobs our families, communities, and country needs.

Here’s how you can help TODAY:

**Step 1:** Make your own sign with the word UNION

**Step 2:** Have your picture taken holding the sign (stand on a desk at work like Sally Field in the iconic movie Norma Rae or do your own thing at the coffee shop, the beach, on a mountaintop, or bungee jumping)

**Step 3:** Post the picture on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc) using the hashtag #Union

**Step 4:** Ask a co-worker, friend, or family member to do the same

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(image courtesy of the author, flyer from a Massachusetts AFL-CIO training session regarding Janus, also available on http://www.nyccle.org/news/2018-04/america-needs-unions)
References to a “Norma Rae moment” in television shows:

Roseanne, “Let’s Call it Quits,” Season 1, Episode 23, 1988
Who’s the Boss, “Housekeepers Unite,” Season 4, Episode 19, 1988
Frasier, “Sleeping with the Enemy,” Season 3, Episode 6, 1995
The West Wing, “The Lame Duck Congress,” Season 2, Episode 6, 2000
Queer as Folk, “Poster May Lead to the Truth,” Season 3, Episode 11, 2003
Dead Like Me, “Reaping Havoc,” Season 1, Episode 5, 2003
Gilmore Girls, “Welcome to the Doll House,” Season 6, Episode 6, 2005
Lost, “S.O.S.,” Season 2, Episode 19, 2006
King of the Hill, “Bobby Rae,” Season 12, Episode 2, 2007
18 to Life, “In Sickness and in Health,” Season 1, Episode 11, 2010
The Office, “Whistleblower,” Season 6, Episode 26, 2010
Madam Secretary, “Another Benghazi,” Season 1, Episode 2, 2014
Two Broke Girls, “And the Zero Tolerance,” Season 4, Episode 16, 2015
Orange is the New Black, “We Can Be Heroes,” Season 3, Episode 11, 2015
Orange is the New Black, “We’ll Always Have Baltimore,” Season 4, Episode 5, 2016
Pose, “Access,” Season 1, Episode 2, 2018

Characters in television shows who hold up a sign like Norma Rae:

Roseanne, “Memory Lane,” Season 1, Episode 7, 1988
Glee, “The Substitute,” Season 2, Episode 7, 2010
Figure 51
Crystal Lee and her husband, Preston, at an event for Bill Clinton’s memoir, *My Life*, 2004

Leslie Thompson, who also attended Alamance Community College, President Bill Clinton, and Crystal Lee Sutton with Preston Sutton in North Carolina

(photo courtesy of the website Democratic Underground, https://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=389x6529637)
Figure 52
Richard Koritz and Crystal Lee with Fignolé St. Cyr, January 2008

Koritz, a friend and fellow labor activist, with Crystal Lee and Fignolé St. Cyr, a Haitian labor activist, January 11, 2008, with the original caption, “Richard Koritz and Fignolé St. Cyr stand alongside the real ‘Norma Rae’—Crystal Lee Sutton—in Greensboro, NC”

(photo courtesy the GH Tour, Summer 2008)
Crystal Lee Sutton and Preston support a global workers’ campaign against Coca-Cola, summer 2009

Crystal Lee and Preston showed their support for the global campaign for better working conditions and an end to human rights violations at Coca-Cola factories. Coca-Cola includes Dasani and Vitamin bottled waters as well as sodas, iced teas, and juices produced in countries around the world, including Colombia where union leaders have been killed. A photo of Norma Rae with the UNION sign and a smaller one of Crystal Lee with Zivkovich appear in the background. The photo was taken a few months before her death.

(photos courtesy of the website KillerCoke.org, http://killercoke.org/nl091102.php)
Figure 54
Sutton with the Norma Rae poster in her living room in North Carolina

The 2001 AP photograph of Crystal Lee Sutton in her living room that appeared with her *New York Times* obituary on September 15, 2009

(photo courtesy of the *New York Times*)
The character Mercedes (Amber Riley), who the regular audience knows loves tater tots, makes her stand on the school cafeteria table after the principal removes them from the menu, Season 2, Episode 7

(image courtesy of Steve Garfield, Flickr, https://www.flickr.com/photos/stevegarfield/5184674254/, Glee photo courtesy Fox, Norma Rae photo courtesy Twentieth Century-Fox)

(photo courtesy of the website Final Girl, the “often parodied” link to the blog https://lydiafromtexas.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/glee-mercedes-560x341.jpg)
Like the heroine from the famous movie, Norma Rae gives a voice to the working class; to the people struggling to make ends meet; to the folks who work hard; to you and me. Norma Rae gets down to the nitty gritty of life, love, and social concerns and blends original lyrics with raw, inescapably Southern harmonies into its Americana sound. The stories told are inspired from real life struggles and indelibly sown to that unpretentious, and unpredictable, soggy part of the real South – the part where both good and evil take root in the same soil, and where certainly everything grows…

Norma Rae is: Kelly Amanda Manning (acoustic guitar/vocals), Tyrus J. Manning III (bass/vocals), Andy Robison (drums), and Jeff Soileau (electric guitar). Previously Drew Marler on (bass/vocals)
“The media vs. the American worker: How the 1 percent hijacked the business of news
This Labor Day, we have one simple question for media professionals: Why don't you care
about the middle class?” by Jack Mirkinson, September 2015
“Working people, meanwhile, find themselves lavished with much less attention. And forget
about unions, which, even in their diminished state, still represent millions and millions of
people. The number of outlets with reporters dedicated to covering labor issues has steadily
shrunk in recent years, even as the technological revolution makes an examination of modern-
day labor practices more important than ever.”
Chuck Todd, the host of NBC’s Meet the Press, imposed on Sally Field in Norma Rae as a
representation of the American working class

(image courtesy of Salon, acquired via AP/Charles Dharapak/Twentieth Century Fox,
https://www.salon.com/2015/09/07/the_media_vs_the_american_worker_how_the_1_percent_hijacked_the_business_of_news/)
Figure 58
Playing with Photoshop and the Norma Rae icon, A, 2013

Kevin Maher, writer-comedian, encourages a Christmas season decoration—all in good fun

(image courtesy of the blog ThisKevin, http://thiskevin.blogspot.com/2013/01/photoshopped-penguin-signs.html)
Figure 59
**Playing with Photoshop and the Norma Rae icon, B, 2013**

Kevin Maher, writer-comedian, encourages a dystopian slant

(image courtesy of the blog *ThisKevin*, http://thiskevin.blogspot.com/2013/01/photoshopped-penguin-signs.html)
“Then, suddenly, late in the game, their team behind but beginning to claw back, fans—lots of them, all across the arena—stopped waiving the towels. Instead they held them stretched out above their heads, displaying the slogan ‘BELIEVE MEMPHIS’ like some kind of unintentional homage to the famous scene in the 1979 film *Norma Rae*, in which Sally Field’s heroine stands on a workbench and holds a ‘UNION’ sign up to her textile-mill co-workers. The fan display in FedEx Forum that night had a similarly defiant feel. It was maybe a little corny.”

“I was in a job interview once for a big cooking website. I was perfect for the job and I was getting along with the interviewers and it was looking like the job was in the bag. Then the interviewers started mocking Nilla Wafers. I’ve probably bought two boxes of Nilla Wafers my entire life but it really bothered me that they were making fun of them just because they are not fancy. I couldn’t let it go for some reason so I defended the Nilla Wafer. Just because something isn’t fancy, doesn’t mean it isn’t awesome. I did not get the job and I knew that’s what would happen when I defended the Nilla Wafer but for some reason, this was my Norma Rae moment…. I’d like to say I’m fighting for the little guy but the truth is, I just like to be contrary. Especially if someone is trying to set something up as a new standard.”

(image courtesy of the blog *Love This Space*, http://www.lovethisspace.com/2014/11/)
Figure 62
“Multi” has a Norma Rae moment when it resists allowing tags, 2018

(image courtesy of the website CHEEZburger, https://cheezburger.com/2575588096)
Father wants better libraries for his children

“When I get into my Norma Rae mode, my advocacy isn’t limited by miles!”

(image courtesy of the blog Long Distance Dad, https://long-distance-dad.com/tag/books/)
Figure 64
Bank teller wants respect for their work, 2009

“I’m the Norma Rae of tellers. I’m the gal standing in the lunchroom with a sign that says ‘You CAN’T be SERIOUS!’ Not only must [tellers] dress appropriately, they need to be personable, detail oriented, accurate, compliant, AND cross-sell our 58 different products and services WHILE standing for 8 hours a day. All for about $10.00 an hour. Wow.”

(image courtesy of the blog Denise Wymore, https://denisewymore.wordpress.com)
Figure 65
Kathy Griffin makes a stand for marriage equality, 2009

Figure 66
**Breaking: Political scientists attempt political activity, April 2013**

“Attention political scientists concerned about the future of NSF funding for our discipline: This coming Saturday, at the Midwest Political Science Association conference in Chicago, there will be a roundtable discussion entitled ‘The Role of Congress in Funding Social Science Research.’ It will take place at 4:35 pm in the Red Lacquer Room of the Palmer House Hilton…. No, political action doesn’t come naturally for us, but I think we’re learning.”

Figure 67
Sally Field relives the Norma Rae moment, November 2015

Making her statement for Houston’s Equal Rights Ordinance

(image courtesy of *On Top Magazine*)
Figure 68

**Bernie Sanders Norma Rae button on Etsy, $3.00**

Norma Rae icon adapted for the Bernie Sanders Presidential Campaign, 2016

Writers Guild Strike, 2007

“The Riches’ creator Dmitry Lipkin has a ‘Norma Rae’ moment.”

Norma Rae Icon adapted to a *Daily Kos* blog about IBM workers and a need to organize

“One of these days the Dilberts in the workplace are going to get tired of competing globally and facing declining wages and benefits while their CEO's get rich. But watch out, because the labor rights that Norma Rae had are scarcely enforced and eroding fast. The Middle Class has to call on Democrats to try to pass the Employee Free Choice Act in 2008.”

Kevin Mahoney writes about the defiance of *Norma Rae*, solidarity, Crystal Lee, and unions: “That scene from the 1979 film still gives me chills. I must have been in my early teens and I recall it being one of those small moments of transformation in my life—a moment that showed me that there were people who refused to be intimidated, who would not be derailed from the pursuit of justice. *Norma Rae* was that kind of movie for me because the lead character was not a superstar or celebrity. She did not possess superpowers…. That scene was also moving because one-by-one each worker is called to make a decision—to stand with Norma Rae and shut down their machine in front of the boss and security, or duck-and-cover and bow down to the boss.”

Quoted from the Blu Homes workers:

“When workers at Blu Homes’s facility in Vallejo came together to form a union and request that the company bargain with the Carpenters Union, Blu Homes management was faced with a decision. They could have respected their employees’ rights and recognized the workers’ request immediately and began the bargaining process. Or, they could have chosen a path that is all too typical for a company when workers choose to exercise their rights to free association; hire a prominent union busting law firm and refuse to bargain with their workers. Unfortunately, Blu Homes chose the latter path, hiring one of the Country’s largest and most notorious corporate law firms: Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak, and Stewart.”

(figure courtesy of the blog *Raging Chicken Press*, https://ragingchickenpress.org/2012/07/02/i-can-see-norma-rae-from-here-blu-homes-re-opens-union-busting-wounds/)
“NagaWorld in the capital Phnom Penh—was the subject of a recent strike action by hundreds of croupiers, drivers and cleaners seeking better working conditions and pay raises from around $80 to $150 per month for most workers, and 20% raises for those already making over $150.”

(image courtesy of the website CalvinAyre.com, https://calvinayre.com/2013/06/29/casino/nagaworld-casino-staff-go-norma-rae-on-nagacorp/)
NYSUT teachers union at a community forum directed at Governor Andrew Cuomo, March 2015

Part of the upsurge of public teachers throughout the U.S. demanding an end to austerity budgets, low salaries, and lack of supplies: “‘Only by presenting a united front can we stop this budget,’ said Lansing Faculty Association President Stacie Kropp, whose local was instrumental in organizing the event at the Lansing Middle School, near Ithaca in Tompkins County. ‘We need parents, board members, administrators all working together.’”

Caption, “Vice President Paul Pecorale (right) applauds South Seneca teacher Cindy Brewer’s ‘Norma Rae’ moment during the Lansing Community Forum”

“Big news for graduate students with teaching and research assistantships at private universities: The National Labor Relations Board ruled Tuesday that grad students are students, yes, but they’re also employees, which means they have the right to unionize and be recognized. The decision only affects private colleges and universities; graduate student unions at state institutions, which have become increasingly common in the last decade, are covered by state law.”

(image courtesy of the blog Wonkette, by Doktor Zoom,
https://www.wonkette.com/congratulations-grad-students-nlrb-says-youre-employees-now-raise-hell)
Sample online articles, blogs, and websites (my underline added):


*Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich

“‘Nickel and Dimed’ loosely follows in the tradition of Jacob Riis, Charles Dickens and George Orwell, but it is a lighter, less outraged exercise, and we ought to immediately acknowledge why: The reality confronted is less severe. When Orwell wrote ‘Road to Wigan Pier’ in the late ‘30s, he was documenting savage privation on a mass scale among Northern English coal miners. Ehrenreich’s experiences can best be summed up as indignity—all the little soul-degrading privations of being poor while working like an ox in the world’s richest country. ‘There are no secret economies that nourish the poor,’ she tells us…”

http://articles.latimes.com/2001/may/27/books/bk-2976


“He never envisioned himself the Norma Rae of jocks, but here he is, heading a group called the Collegiate Athletes Coalition, working with the powerful United Steelworkers of America, ticking off the facts of life for athletes: 30 to 40 hours a week of practice and games, offseason workouts, travel, injuries, surgeries. Not that Mr. Huma is complaining. Athletes know the deal—education in exchange for performance—and don’t necessarily mind others making money off of their talents. What ticks them off, he says, is that with all that money pumping through the system, some players still struggle for basics.”

https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB990136856246244177

C. Blog post title: “I just had a ‘Norma Rae’ moment at the Mall-wart,” Dolo Amber, 2004

“I despise that place, but unfortunately unemployed people have to shop where they can afford to... So anyway, I was at the self-scanner thingy, and every time I’d scan something it said ‘Please run item’s barcode across the scanner and then place in bagging area’...which of course, is clearly what I was doing. So then the little attendant person would have to push some buttons or something and reset the stupid scanner thing before I could continue.

After about 10 items I allowed a wee profanity-laced rant to escape... I couldn’t help it, the whole situation was just so absurd...here I am shopping at the evil empire, scanning my purchases myself on a machine that has essentially replaced a live person, and the fucking thing doesn’t even function properly, thus requiring a real live person to make adjustments so it WILL run properly. Wtf kind of crazy shit is this? And so I said as much, in a none too quiet voice.

Thankfully the other shoppers near me clearly felt the same way, as there were several laughs, and a loud ‘Yeah!’.”

http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=105x1317808

“Pity the leadership of the Screen Actors Guild. They’ve been preparing for their “Norma Rae” moment, and by the time they got there, it seems like everybody — including Norma Rae herself — is pleading to just end the movie. After eight months of labor discord in Hollywood, people are plain worn out. And while nobody should applaud the studios for their behavior, there’s no reason to believe they’ll utterly capitulate now, meaning the incremental gains for which SAG continues fighting don’t look worth the threat of bringing the town grinding to a halt from an actual strike or even a pronounced slowdown.”

E. Blog post title: “Norma Rae… Or Norma Desmond?,” 2008

“There is nothing in the Clintonian psychology to suggest quitting. There is only defiance, and a disregard of reality. Those two inner motivations have produced astonishing success for them over the past 20 years. But all things come to an end, and the defiance and disregard of reality now look less like unbeatable ambition and more like psychopathology.

Hillary has spent her entire adult life as Norma Rae: the fighter who defies authority and the naysayers by muscling her way to the top and doing what she needed to do to stay there.

She has now become Norma Desmond: a sad facsimile of her former self, who has everyone around her so terrified that nobody is willing to tell her the truth—that the show is over, the career is over, and that she ought to go gently into that good night.

She won’t, of course, because in her mind, she’s still Norma Rae. But Norma Desmond is shadowing her, emerging now and again, telling anyone who will listen that she’s ready for her close-up.”
https://monicamemo.typepad.com/weblog/2008/05/norma-raeo-nor.html

F. Blog post title: “My Norma Rae Moment at the Eye Doctors,” Lian, 2010

*Norma Rae* would have been proud of me. Satellite Sister Sheila would have joined me. I took a stand yesterday in my (former) eye doctor’s waiting room and I feel fine.

My eye doctor is one of those all-in-one, we-speaking -12-languages, drive-through-dispensaries Eye Emporiums. I have been going there for years, at first because of insurance requirements; then simple laziness and selective memory loss. I had an 11 o’clock appointment yesterday. As I was escorted into the waiting room, my memory returned. The remembrance of my three-hour appointment last year, two spent in the waiting room, and my vow never to return. Ugh. I should have left then.


“A pleasant, ‘Norma Rae’-ish tale of workers triumphing over injustice, the fact-based ‘Made in Dagenham’ is set in 1968 England, at a Ford factory that employs 55,000 men and 187 women. While most of the men work in a modern new facility, the
women (who specialize in sewing car-seat upholstery) sit in an old, leaky building that’s drafty in the winter and miserably hot in the summer. They are paid far less than the men and are categorized as ‘unskilled’ workers. Encouraged by a union representative (Bob Hoskins), factory worker Rita O’Grady (Sally Hawkins) timidly agrees to present the women’s grievances to the union’s local head (Rupert Graves)—and soon finds herself leading a strike, with the women fighting to be classified as ‘semi-skilled.’


H. Blog post title: “Last night’s PEP meeting on Verizon contract and its ‘Norma Rae’ moment,” 2011

Overview: The Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) held a public forum. The blog includes a short video of a woman speaking at a microphone with this caption above the video, “See below, for a ‘Norma Rae’ moment, as Amy Muldoon, a passionate Verizon striker and mom, calls out the DOE for their contempt for workers, kids, and NYC taxpayers, while holding her baby in her arms.” The woman announces herself as a striking Verizon worker, parent, and taxpayer—which makes her different than Verizon, a clear comment on its avoidance of taxes and lack of investment in the community of its workers. She speaks with emphasis and clarity as others in the audience cheer and hold up various printed signs related. Her speech ends with a collective chant, “Delay the vote!”

From the blog post: “Over a thousand parents, teachers, and striking Verizon workers showed up for the pre-meeting rally, and hundreds more filled the auditorium afterwards at Murry Bergtraun HS, chanting, booing Walcott and the DOE, and speaking up passionately for the need for more caring education priorities, and against the $120 million Verizon contract, which will steal even more resources from our children and the company's workers.”

http://thediariesofalawstudent.blogspot.com/2011/08/last-night-pep-meeting-on-verizon.html?m=0


“But then news came two weeks ago that thousands of fish banded together to shut down a power plant sited along a lake in Illinois. It was as if Illinois fish had a Norma Rae moment, standing together in solidarity! Except they were all dead.”

http://www.gracelinks.org/blog/887/another-cruel-cruel-summer-for-power-plants


“As I was driving home today I thought of the classic Sally Field film ‘Norma Rae,’ and how that character (and the woman she’s based on) fought harsh working conditions to get textile workers to rise up. Well, Wisconsin, you need your own ‘Norma Rae Moment.’ We are all holding up the ‘Union’ sign and telling people like Rick Scott, Paul LePaige, John Kasik and so many others what they can go do with themselves.”
“I didn’t mean to go all Norma Rae on you guys this morning. It’s just that I’ve been doing this adjunct work for so long (close to 20 years), and I really had hopes that this whole union thing was going to make a difference. At this point, it seems I was wrong. I should have known better. In the end, every person looks out for him/herself. I’m no different in this respect. I shouldn’t expect any form of altruism on the part of full-time faculty. We adjuncts are like the humpbacked, club-footed, three-breasted stepchildren of the university.”

“Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich attempts an economic ‘Inconvenient Truth’ in the documentary ‘Inequality for All,’ a cinematic listicle of misleading economic talking points.
Reich lectures his Berkeley students on nefarious forces that allegedly rend the American economy, but keeps the talk at such a filmstrip level that it’s hard to believe anyone with much interest in the subject will be satisfied. In his ‘Norma Rae’ moment, he nudges us all toward a solution. Yes, the savior is your old pal from the Jimmy Hoffa era, the labor unions.”
https://nypost.com/2013/09/27/inequality-for-all/

“Last winter, these workers overcame fierce management opposition and voted to join the Communications Workers of America, only to spend nine months in rancorous contract talks. They wanted to ask the vice president if Cablevision was serious about a contract agreement, or if it wanted only to break their union.
They waited for 20 minutes to talk, then 20 more. La’kesia Johnson, 44, grew restless and walked to the front office. A manager told her to go back inside. Then the vice president walked in and asked, essentially: Who’s supposed to be working now?
Every worker, 22 in all, raised a hand.
‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ the vice president said, according to multiple accounts, ‘I am sorry to tell you that you’ve all been permanently replaced.’
‘I said, ‘Whaat?’’ Ms. Johnson says. ‘Replaced? You just fired us? You don’t even know what we want.’
Ms. Johnson says the vice president looked at her and stated: I don’t care what you want….
Ms. Johnson feels guilty she persuaded her colleagues to risk being fired… Her husband is a freelancer; they depend on her health benefits. ‘It’s stressful — the air in our house is very thick,’ she says….
But the bad news piles up for these workers. Last week, some Cablevision workers filed for a vote to decertify the union.
‘Sometimes I break down,’ Ms. Johnson said, and asks herself if she had been selfish. ‘But my husband reminds me: ‘You have a home family and a work family. You must be loyal to both.’”

Overview: Ashbrook is a singer and performer. This page contains a photo of her standing in the back of a hotel conference room leaning on a regular picket sign to occupy “Galliery.”

O. Blog post title: “Norma Rae Moment,” Lauren Lipton, 2015
“For the moment, I seem to be a bit of a Norma Rae figure to mistreated journalists everywhere. It’s a role I’m willing to take on. I, for one, am fed up with the way writers, reporters, editors, photographers and all creative types are treated in this age of cheap, disposable “content.” We professionals are expected to work for next to nothing, or, increasingly, for nothing.
But someone is profiting from our labor: Our media overlords. Arianna Huffington, for example, sold the Huffington Post in 2011 for $300 million and has a personal net worth of $21 million. Would you like to know how much money I have in my checking account today? I’ll tell you: I have $6.76. No joke.”
https://laurenlipton.com/norma-rae-moment/

“Graduate students at the University of Connecticut had many reasons to feel unhappy. An increasing share of their stipends was being eaten up by fees, sometimes for services and facilities they mostly didn’t use. The health-care plan they’d traditionally been offered was taken away, leaving them with coverage many found to be inadequate…. ‘Consistently, things that we cared about didn’t matter to the administration,’ says Cera Fisher, a Ph.D. student in biology, ‘and we felt they could change our conditions on a whim.’
That led to what Fisher describes as a ‘Norma Rae moment.’ A couple of grad students sent out an email to some friends, raising the idea of joining a union. The notion had been floated before at UConn, without any success, but this time it took root. This past April, just a few months after the first email was sent out, 2,100 UConn graduate students formed a bargaining unit within the United Auto Workers.”
http://www.governing.com/topics/mgmt/gov-millennials-unions.html
“A former union organizer teaches a class on world literature and discovers a new interpretation of the dignity of work….
They stood firm. ‘I mean, he does have to go to work,’ someone else said. Others agreed. I got theatrically testy: ‘Seriously — that’s what you would think about if you woke up as a giant dung beetle with a bunch of wavy little legs you couldn’t really control and a hard shell? Getting to work?’
There was a pause. Then another hand went up: ‘His parents are old. They can’t work. His sister is like 17 — she can’t support the family.’ This was Elise T., an English major. She was confident and smart, and her classmates apparently agreed with her. While I absorbed her response, all 20 students looked directly at me; for the first time that semester, no one was looking down or away. Elise’s response struck me as a reverse Norma Rae moment…. I had assumed that my class would put themselves in Gregor’s position and say: Forget work — get me a doctor! But they all seemed willing to accept that work had dehumanized Gregor.”

R. Blog post title: “I’m the Norma Rae of Spin Class,” Dougall Fraser, 2014
“I must give Steve credit for his consistency, as he sauntered in at 9:41am. He tends to average being 10-15 minutes late for every class. In fact, I can safely say that I don’t think he has ever been on time. For a while I have observed how rude I find this behavior. There are young mothers in here who schedule their nanny time around this class, not to mention the hard working people who take time out of their jobs to exercise. Everyone who comes to this class has scheduled their day around the assumption that the instructor will be on time.
In a flash of sheer confidence I raised my right hand.
‘You are my favorite teacher, but you are constantly late and it feels disrespectful to us.’
You could hear a pin drop in that room. I could see the reflection of other students in the mirror with a look of I can’t believe you just said that.
‘And what would you like me to do with that information?’ Steve blankly replied.
‘I’d like you to respect our time and show up when class is scheduled to begin.’ …
As class started, several people turned around and smiled at me. One woman even mouthed the words THANK YOU to me.
As we exercised…. I reflected on how often we tend to disregard our needs in life….”
https://www.dougallfraser.com/im-the-norma-rae-of-spin-class/

After years of struggle, adult performers have banded together to create its first coalition: The Adult Performer Advocacy Committee (APAC).
With an educational focus, the Los Angeles-based meetings, which occur every other month, often begin with a panel of experts discussing specific topics, ranging from “how to deal with personal relationships while working in porn” to things like “banking for adult entertainers.” (In light of last year’s banking controversies, APAC created an alliance with First Entertainment Credit Union to ensure performers banking rights.) After the panels, performers have the opportunity to voice industry concerns or
request topics they’d like to explore further. More importantly, these get-togethers provide a center for adult performers to share experiences with one another and explore available resources.
https://www.thedailybeast.com/porns-norma-rae-moment

“A decade ago, the cries for attention coming from North Fort Collins were audible. Prosperity had all but bypassed the city’s north side, even as the rest of Fort Collins mushroomed with new neighborhoods, stores, offices and restaurants. A vocal group of business owners and residents had had enough. In a collective Norma Rae moment, they raised their voices, formed a business association and an advisory group, supported a city urban renewal authority, and made officials take notice. Today, noise in North Fort Collins comes from earth movers, backhoes, jackhammers, nail guns and power saws. It may have taken more than a decade, but growth has descended on the north side and everyone is paying attention.

*Joy* by David O. Russell
“This is Lawrence’s film though. Understandably, they threw the corn fed dramatic twists in there to give her something more to stand up against, just like Norma Rae. *Norma Rae* be damned. I always preferred *Places in the Heart*. Lawrence has enough material here navigating through Madsen, Ladd, De Niro and Rossellini to carry the day. Watching her move back and forth between various problems presented, solutions created, help offered and received is enough to fill one’s heart with the pleasure of knowing people like Joy exist. Joy will push through, even if the world doesn’t owe her a thing.”
https://coolpapae.com/2016/01/24/joy-norma-rae-can-stuff-it/

“And Gene freaks when his favorite chocolate bar no longer tastes the same. ‘He goes on a one-boy crusade to get the candy company to change back to the original formula,’ says Dauterive. ‘It’s his Norma Rae moment.’”

“Norma Rae was a champion of the rights of workers. So if someone stands up in a meeting against management to ‘stick up’ for her coworkers, she is Norma Rae’ing it!
Me: Did you hear Jill during the meeting sticking up for Janice and Amanda?
Friend: Yeah, she was really Norma Rae’ing it!!

X. Reddit entry title: “I now regularly use, ‘calm down, Norma Rae.’ DAE have a Friends quote they regularly use?,” 2016
Lumpkin started early in her struggle to advance the labor movement. As a teenager, she joined the young people’s arm of the Communist Party. In 1934, while she attended Hunter College in New York City, the college tried to increase milk prices in its cafeteria, leading to Lumpkin’s first ‘Norma Rae’ moment, she told People’s World. The 16-year-old freshman led a milk boycott. Her boycott worked so well that the next spring she helped lead a student strike to protest American militarism, for which she was suspended. Two years later, Hunter sent her home again, this time for helping organize an anti-fascist conference.”
Figure 76
Norma Rae commercial for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, 2012

Still from the television commercial titled “Norma Rae,” made by R&R Partners for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority advertising campaign “Take back your summer!” New York Times caption, “Experts say some companies are tapping the spirit of Occupy Wall Street in ads. In a TV spot for Las Vegas, above, a woman loudly announces that she is going on vacation.”

(image courtesy of the New York Times; Tanzina Vega, “In Ads, the Workers Rise Up… And Go to Lunch,” July 7, 2012)
Figure 77
Sally Field holding a sign in support of Broadway casting directors

Figure 78
Elektra and Blanca, *Pose*, FX, fall 2018

Dominique Jackson portrays Elektra and Mj Rodriguez as Blanca, “a regular transvestite Norma Rae,” in the season one finale

(photo courtesy of the website Fansided, acquired via JoJo Whilden/FX, https://fansided.com/2018/07/22/watch-secure-season-1-episode-8-online-live-stream/)
Figure 79
Firefighters contain the fire at the Alabama mill where Ritt filmed Norma Rae, November 2016

“Smoke blows through a tree while the Opelika Fire Dept keeps putting water on the mill fire. There are several hot spots burning/smoldering. Mill fire day 2 on Wednesday, Nov. 16, 2016, in Opelika, Ala.
Todd Van Emst/tvemst@oanow.com”

(photo courtesy of the Opelika-Auburn News)
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