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Historian Aimee Loiselle has made a valiant effort to bridge political economy and culture through the lives of two women textile-garment workers: Gloria Maldonado, a Puerto Rican garment worker, and Crystal Lee Sutton (Jordan), a US Southern textile worker who inspired the iconic 1979 labor film, Norma Rae. Loiselle focuses the reader’s attention on an apparent arena of cultural politics, one defined by a vast asymmetrical power dynamic that operated in the shadow of an equally daunting global economic context. The book attempts to tell a story of collective worker agency though those fights for dignity and independence are too often silenced or falter in endless and seemingly impossible-to-win power struggles.

Part of Beyond Norma Rae is Loiselle taking the reader through the history of the making of the film Norma Rae and its relationship to the real-life story on which it is mostly based. She then traces the iconic nature of the film in the subsequent years by reviewing how the “Norma Rae moment” (when Sally Fields stands on a factory work desk and holds a sign with the word “UNION”) appeared in various television shows and later in text media. The book's cover evokes this Norma Rae moment dynamic and Loiselle’s argument in a split image: the top image has the title of the book being held ostensibly by a worker’s hands, but the lower image is a tinted picture of rows of diverse garment workers hard at work, obscured by the power of capitalist, neoliberal storytelling.

For the other part of the book, the author turns the reader's attention to a history of labor activism overlooked by Norma Rae. Interwoven is Loiselle’s account of a public history effort to engage the history of women garment workers in the radio documentary “Nosotras Trabajamos,” broadcast on several local radio stations in 1985 and, after getting several accolades, re-aired in 1987. “Nosotras Trabajamos” serves as an example of a
more accurate and collaborative cultural effort to
tell the story of women workers, one that was in
marked contrast to the hyperindividualism—what
Loiselle labels "neoliberal individualism" of the
emerging post-1960s era—that shaped *Norma Rae*.
The latter was marred by silences of the collective
nature of the J. P. Stevens textile unionization
drive as well as the film's use of gender stereo‐
types, an all-too-common phenomenon in Holly‐
wood films of the past and present. The strengths
of the book are in these varying details. Several of
the book's conclusions, however, are unsurprising,
and its argument about worker agency in enga‐
ging cultural politics is sometimes unclear or not
compelling.

The book consists of an introduction, six
chapters, an epilogue, and a final section entitled
“Preview.” Chapter 1 explores the history of wo‐
men workers in the garment trades through the
mid-twentieth century in the Atlantic with an em‐
phasis on Puerto Rico. Chapter 2 expands to an
evaluation of Puerto Rican women garment work‐
ers and Gloria Maldonado’s life through the 1970s
as they experienced the industry's increasing glob‐
alization. Chapters 3 and 4 engage more deeply
the story of Crystal Lee and the J. P. Stevens union‐
ization drive as well as the making of the film.
Chapter 5 documents the process of how *Norma
Rae* crystallized into a story of individual heroism
while chapter 6 documents the uses of the Norma
Rae moment, as noted above. The epilogue offers
concluding observations that connect the stories
of neoliberalism, globalization, and the contesta‐
tion over the cultural production of the working
class.

The final preview section reiterates an under‐
lying argument in the book: the process of defin‐
ing who constitutes the working class and the
nature of its political engagement remains ongo‐
ing and often takes on a dramatic, theatrical fram‐
ing that mirrors the larger political economy,
which, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first
centuries, means a neoliberal ethic. Loiselle re‐
counts the recent Amazon worker unionization
drive here as an apparent repeating of the histor‐
ical dynamic of a working class fighting simplistic
narratives that silence worker solidarity and collect‐
ive action for the neat framework of heroic in‐
dividualism. The author uses a vast number of
primary sources and archival records to docu‐
ment this history, including interviews conducted
by the author, other oral histories, a wide array of
periodicals, contemporary films, and several labor
union records. Readers will find interesting data
on international trade laws that allowed for glob‐
alization to expand over time, at least for the gar‐
ment and textile industry and especially as it in‐
volved Puerto Rico.

Loiselle’s arena of cultural politics consists of
the contested production of depictions of the
working class. The book seems to argue that wo‐
men workers challenged gender expectations and
tropes, categories that elevated white masculinity
and normativity over ethnicity, race, and women
workers. As a historical dynamic of the post-1945
era, this makes general sense. However, a some‐
what frustrating thread throughout the book is the
sometimes-narrow interpretations of various mo‐
ments as well as the deeper context and framing
of what constitutes culture. The significance of
worker agency is sometimes muddled. Loiselle's
interpretations of film scenes and other phenom‐
ena are not as clear cut as she outlines.

Missing from the book is a key cultural con‐
text from the post-1960s moment, the period of
primary focus in *Beyond Normae Rae*. It would
have been useful to integrate the story into the
growth and vibrancy of labor and social history in
the 1960s and 1970s history-from-below move‐
ment. Analyzing this phenomenon would have
broadened the arena of cultural politics in rele‐
ant and perhaps interesting ways. Indeed, Lois‐
elle’s work indirectly calls for such an expansion,
but the focus is narrowed in too linear a fashion at
times as in the comparison of *Norma Rae* and
“Nosotras Trabajamos.” In addition to the monu-
mental work produced by labor scholars from David Montgomery and Herbert Gutman to Susan Benson and Alice Kessler-Harris, there was an active public history effort that paralleled this.

Consider for example the publications of Jeremy Brecher’s *Strike!* (1972) and Sidney Lens’s *The Labor Wars* (1973), books tailored for a larger public and which remain in print, the former updated as recently as 2020 and which included prefatory contributions from Sara Nelson, international president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL–CIO, and Kim Kelly, labor journalist and author of *Fight Like Hell*. [1] As illuminating was the influential work of oral historians including one of the deans of the field, Studs Terkel. His collections *Hard Times* (1970) and *Working* (1972) demonstrated the power of the voices of individuals when they have a platform to tell their rich personal stories. Along similar lines, Alice and Staughton Lynd’s *Rank and File* (1973), another working-class oral history, focused on labor organizing that fought against labor bureaucrats and status quo labor politics. [2] Oral history made its way into film with such gems as *With Babies and Banners* (1979) and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980), both offering hard-hitting narratives that centered class and gender in labor history. Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (1980) was indicative of this decades-long effort to center ordinary people and their countless efforts to resist and fight against their oppression and marginalization. [3] It would have indeed been interesting to see Loiselle connect her narrative to this larger cultural arena that spoke of the hardship and the long struggle of ordinary folk for freedom and dignity. She brushed over one potential interesting connection, when Maldonado helped organize a visiting exhibit, *Working Americans*, in 1975 that highlighted the history of unions in the country (pp. 63–64). This exhibit was later displayed in the 1976 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in celebration of the bicentennial.

If the 1619 Project, despite all its flaws, and DEI-oriented education have shaped cultural debates in the last few years, it seems that the New Deal era of the mid-twentieth century, the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the varying identity politics of the 1960s were joined by these vibrant class, social history developments whose influence was likely quite pervasive. It’s perhaps not much of a leap to argue that this phenomenon shaped some decisions in filmmaking, especially some of the dynamic 1970s working class-oriented films. Films such as *Rocky* (1976), *Harlan County USA* (1976), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *F.I.S.T.* (1978), *Blue Collar* (1978), and *9 to 5* (1980) offered raw depictions of the alienating qualities in modern capitalism while engaging diverse workplaces, urban settings, and creative forms of escape. *9 to 5*’s social commentary, as expressed for example in the many job reforms implemented by the Lily Tomlin, Jane Fonda, and Dolly Parton characters such as childcare and flexible work schedules, is striking to the modern era for its social welfare cadences and prescient anticipation of work issues that came to light for many only during and after COVID. A 1979 made-for-TV movie, *The Triangle Factory Fire Scandal*, directed by Mel Stuart—who also directed *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) and *Wattstax* (1973)—highlighted the exploitative nature of capitalism and the need for unionization and worker solidarity to contain such exploitation. [4]

Later classics, such as *The Killing Floor* (1984) and *Matewan* (1987), explored more explicitly the intersection of community, class, and race despite being released in the airy, neoliberal 1980s. [5] Such rich work could be released in the midst of the Reagan Revolution and after the horrific failure of the PATCO strike. Most of these films were centered on men and/or engage earlier periods. Yet historically oriented films nonetheless, like all art and film embedded in historical narratives, are direct and indirect commentaries of the present. Regardless of the best hopes and intentions of writers and directors, it is unclear to what extent
they may have educated, inspired, or empowered anyone or for what ends. While the voices from below and their successful artistic expressions had minimal influence, their existence indicates a lively and persistent resistance to the hegemony of capitalist political economy.

In light of such a truism, it is unclear what exactly would have been achieved if the film *Norma Rae* had not relied on gender stereotypes or emphasized the collective nature of the J. P. Stevens textile workers’ unionization struggle. It is not difficult to imagine how later films, TV shows, and other media would have easily found other images and symbols to emphasize bland moralistic and individualistic value-oriented messages. That is, there seems to be another truism that media (TV, film, advertising, social) is cannibalistic in its search and use of images and simplistic packaging.

The value of Loiselle’s *Beyond Norma Rae* is in its rich details. The needed context of globalization and disaggregation of the garment industry tells a familiar story of worker disempowerment and the role of the state in perpetuating this dynamic. It is also clear that media in a capitalistic society will emphasize individualism and downplay collectivism. Loiselle’s enlivened study clearly demonstrates this tendency.

Notes


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