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Manufacturing Bodies:
A (Re)Description of the Undocumented Sweatshop Worker in the US

Ricardo Andres Garza Wicker

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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ABSTRACT

Manufacturing Bodies:

A (Re)Description of the Undocumented Sweatshop Worker in the US

Ricardo Andres Garza Wicker

This thesis analyzes the discursive construction of the undocumented sweatshop worker in the mainstream US media. It is centered on the media coverage of a raid by US authorities on a sweatshop in El Monte, California in August, 1995, in which 72 undocumented workers were found under captivity and extreme working conditions.

Based on a social-constructivist epistemology, this study (re)describes how the undocumented sweatshop worker is constituted, through language, as a subject and it analyzes the implications of such a construction in its social and political context. A selection of US newspaper articles –from the New York Times and the Washington Post- and the exhibition Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present, organized by the National Museum of American History, are qualitatively approached through Critical Discourse Analysis.

Through such an analysis, this thesis problematizes the mainstream US media by (re)describing the dangers of portraying the immigrant sweatshop worker as an absent, alien and criminal subject; as a passive victim and a redeemed resident, and by not emphasizing the interconnectedness of the sweatshop phenomenon to the structural dynamics of global capitalism.

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Table of Contents

Figures, Tables and Illustrations	vi
Introduction. Embarking on a Journey	1
The El Monte Sweatshop and the Media	2
Questions.....	7
Synopsis	8
Where I Stand.....	10
Chapter 1. Knitting Technique	13
Theory and Methodology	13
The Corpus	22
Chapter 2. Raw Materials.....	33
Historical Background	33
Today's Sweatshop	37
The Contracting System.....	40
Capital on the Run.....	43
Policy and Resistance.....	47
Chapter 3. Manufacturing Bodies	53
As Absent.....	54
As Alien	61
As Criminal	71
As Passive Victims.....	78
As Redeemed	92
As A-systemic	103
Conclusion. Packaging.....	112
A (Re)description	115
Bibliography.....	121
Corpus	121
Works Cited	126

Figures, Tables and Illustrations

Figure 1 Flowchart explaining the discursive construction of the Undocumented Sweatshop Worker.....	19
Figure 2 Annual frequency of publication of texts that make reference to the El Monte sweatshop (1995-2002) in the <u>New York Times</u> (15) and the <u>Washington Post</u> (13). All genres are included (Front-page article, news and feature article, column, op-ed and letter).	26
Table 1 Classification of texts by genre and location. All texts are included: Front-page articles, news and feature articles, and column; op-ed and letters to the editor are both included as part of the same category.....	27
Table 2 Classification of texts by sub-topic. All texts are included: Front-page articles, news and feature articles, column, op-ed and letters to the editor.	28
Illustration 1 Exhibit floor plan. Source: <u>Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present</u> . Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 6 Mar. 2005. < http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/intro/floorplan.htm >.	30
Figure 3 Division of the cost of a \$100 garment. Data from Steve Nutter’s “The Structure and Growth of the Los Angeles Garment Industry” p. 200.....	42
Illustration 2 Image accompanying the <u>New York Times</u> ’ feature article “Agency Missteps Put Illegal Aliens at Mercy of Sweatshops” by James Sterngold. 21 Sep. 1995, late ed.: A16.....	68
Illustration 3 Front-page of the <u>Washington Post</u> 10 Sep. 1995, final ed.	80
Illustration 4 Thai workers of the El Monte sweatshop released from captivity. Photo: AP. Image reproduced from <u>No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers</u> . Ed. Andrew Ross. New York: Verso, 1997. 144.	81
Illustration 5 Front-page of the <u>New York Times</u> 4 Aug. 1995, late ed.	82
Illustration 6 “El Monte” section of the museum exhibition, displaying at the center two of the sewing machines that were seized during the raid and surrounded by metallic fence. Source: <u>Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present</u> . Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 23 Feb. 2005. < http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/elmonte/elmonte.htm >.....	83
Illustration 7 First page of the <u>Washington Post</u> column “A Stain on Fashion: The Garment Industry Profits From Cheap Labor. Time to Mend Its Ways” by Robin Givhan. 12 Sept. 1995, final ed.: B01. Illustration by Elizabeth Wolf.....	86
Illustration 8 Image accompanying the feature article in the <u>New York Times</u> “How an American Industry Gets Away with Slave Labor” by Alan Finder. 20 Aug. 1995, late ed, sec. 4: 7. Photo: Stephen Crowley/The New York Times.....	89
Illustration 9 Image accompanying the <u>Times</u> ’ feature article “Manufacturers Fined in Sweatshop Inquiry” by Kenneth Noble, Aug. 16 1995, late ed.: A22.	89

- Illustration 10** Courtroom sketches of defendants listening to court proceedings in Aug. 21, 1995, and of three former El Monte sweatshop workers testifying at subsequent penalty hearing. Both images by Mary Chaney for KTTV/Fox 11, Los Angeles. Source: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present. Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 23 Feb. 2005. <<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/elmonte/3t20.htm>>..... 99
- Illustration 11** El Monte sweatshop workers and community activists celebrating their first day of freedom, Griffith Park, Los Angeles, August 13, 1995. Photo by Julie Su. Image reproduced from: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present. Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 23 Feb. 2005. <<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/elmonte/3t16.htm>>. 100
- Illustration 12** Application for replacement passport based on fraudulent claim of loss and doctored passport with legitimate US visa used to “smuggle” workers. Source: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present. Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 23 Feb. 2005. <<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/elmonte/3t5.htm>>. 110

Introduction. Embarking on a Journey

This research deals with the coverage by the mainstream US media of one specific and significant event: a raid by US authorities on a sweatshop in El Monte, California in August, 1995. I have chosen to focus on the coverage of this particular event because it is one of the few clear examples in which the mainstream US media deal with the too-frequently ignored topic of sweatshop labour. This site of inquiry is, without a doubt, the tip of the iceberg of very important labour and immigration issues within the US and other “First World”¹ countries. This research aims to explore the way the mainstream media portray a specific sector of the “Third World” population that lives and works inside the world’s richest and most powerful nation. Although narrow in scope, this topic offers the possibility of rethinking some communicative aspects of the broader issues of undocumented immigration and sweat-labour² in “First World” economies.

¹ Since one of the premises of this research is to approach language critically, the terms “First World” and “Third World” are always put within quotation marks as a sign of caution: Their use might reinforce and legitimize stereotypes and unequal power relations among nations. I do not pretend to be innovative by doing this. According to Laura Kang, “[m]any scholars have already called for a reformulation, if not an outright rejection, of the First World/Third World distinction. . . . [which] outline[s] an implicitly evaluative distinction and distance . . . in terms of a staggered linear progression” (411). Such hierarchical distancing might increase the ideological gap between the “rich/poor” and “north/south” countries, and might support the notion that a stage of achieved development can be clearly distinguished between a wide diversity of nation-states. My critique of these terms does not imply that attention to underdevelopment should be denied. On the contrary, it is a reminder of the caution that one must exercise when using overarching labels when referring to underdevelopment.

² I have chosen to define the term “sweat-labor” differently than “sweatshop labor” in the sense that in the former the working conditions are not as “extreme” or “denigrating” for the worker. To give an example, a sweat-labor practice might function within the limits of health and minimum-wage regulations, but still be considered an exploitative practice.

The El Monte Sweatshop and the Media

On August 2, 1995, US authorities guided by the Department of Labour³ raided a clandestine sewing company that employed seventy-two undocumented workers, most of them women, who were living in slavery-type conditions⁴. Some of these workers had been undergoing exhausting shifts behind barbed wire for up to seven years.

According to Peter Liebhold and Harry Rubenstein, this sweatshop was “found”⁵ in an apartment unit location in El Monte, California where it had been functioning since 1988. Clothing for diverse retailers and manufacturers was assembled at this production site (“Bringing” 57). The business was owned and run by a family:

[t]he Manasurangkun family obtained workers for the Los Angeles sweatshop operation in Thailand. Recruiters lured the workers to El Monte with promises that they would be sewing in a clean factory, receiving good pay, and having the weekends off. . . . After workers signed contracts (indenture

³ Although most of the literature on the topic attributes the raid to the US Dept. of Labour, a letter to the editor in the Washington Post by the Director of the California Department of Industrial Relations points out that “only three U.S. Department of Labor investigators participated in the raid as compared with 46 state and local investigators” (Aubry, “Thank California, Not the Feds (Cont’d)” A14).

⁴ According to Peter Liebhold and Harry Rubenstein, “[t]he Thai workers were held captive in a two-story apartment building enclosed by a security gate. A five-foot-high cement block wall heightened with corrugated steel panels and topped with rolls of razor wire surrounded it. The operators also partially covered the windows of the apartments with plywood in order to keep the workers from signaling for help. A guard posted outside monitored the workers’ movements between the units. . . . The operators also intimidated the predominantly female workforce by telling them that if they escaped, Mexicans would rape them, and American authorities would capture them and cut off their hair” (“Bringing” 58).

⁵ The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) had been aware of the existence of the El Monte sweatshop since 1991. However, no law enforcing action was ever taken by them. For a detailed account of this see the New York Times’ feature article “Agency Missteps Put Illegal Aliens at Mercy of Sweatshops” cited in the section “Corpus” in Bibliography. More details about this issue are given in Chapter three.

agreements) committing them to repay 120,000 baht (about \$5,000 in 1997 dollars), they were smuggled into the United States using fraudulent passports. (Liebhold and Rubenstein, “Bringing” 58)

The clothes sewn at the El Monte sweatshop were made for labels like Airtime, Anchor Blue, Cheetah, Axle, High Sierra, B.U.M., Clio and Tomato (Su 143) and sold in huge retail stores such as Target, Sears and Nordstrom (Klein 329).

After their detention by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the El Monte sweatshop workers were released and reemployed (Su 145); they were also able to gather four million dollars in overdue wages and overtime with the help of an alliance of activists named *Sweatshop Watch* (Featherstone 248). Thanks to the collaboration of the El Monte sweatshop workers as witnesses, the operators of this business pled guilty to charges of slavery and conspiracy (Su 145). Seven years after the El Monte sweatshop raid, their workers received permanent US residency (AP, “Ex-Sweatshop” A29).

My primary concern in this thesis is not to analyze the conditions of existence of these seventy-two workers but, more importantly, to examine how the development of this event has been (re)created⁶ through the mainstream media in the US.

The central sources of this investigation consist of different texts published in the New York Times and in the Washington Post that focus on the raid at the El Monte sweatshop, as well as a selection of texts from the museum exhibition entitled Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present. I am considering

⁶ Coincidentally Teun van Dijk makes use of the terms “(re-)construct” (“Mediating” 202-3), and of “(re-)interpret” and “(re-)present” (“Mediating” 221). I found out about this in an advanced stage of my research, when the use I make of very similar terms [(re)describe, (re)create, (re)define, (re)produce, (re)present, (re)construct, etc.] had already been developed. My intention in the use of the prefix “(re)” is to emphasize the repetitive and dynamic features of each of the actions defined by the affected verb.

the term “media” in the sense of a mass-produced channel that operates with the intention to inform and persuade specific audiences. As well, I apply the definition “mainstream” to media of which the ideological⁷ content is not consistently and radically opposed to the political and economic *status quo*, or to what Antonio Gramsci calls “Hegemony” (Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s” 423-6). In line with these definitions, it is unusual for the mainstream media to include in its agenda topics, information and opinions that may present a threat to the political and economic interests of the hegemonic class, such as the poignant issue of labour-abused workers. However, in some cases, as the El Monte sweatshop news coverage demonstrates, their “unexpectedness” and “negativity” (Galtang and Ruge qtd. in Hartley 77-9), as well as other codes that will be explained further, make certain issues newsworthy at least for a brief period of time.

While focusing on the case study of the involvement of Nike with sweatshops abroad and its treatment by the media, Josh Greenberg and Graham Knight found that news coverage on sweatshops from 1990 to 2000 in the New York Times and the Washington Post included only 219 articles (“Framing” 156). It is important to note that throughout this period of time the concentration of coverage related to sweatshops peaked during 1995-96, a phenomenon that the authors attribute to two noteworthy events: “the raid by US Labor⁸ Department

⁷ When I refer to the term “ideology” or its derivatives, I am using John B. Thompson’s “*neutral conception*” of it, in which “ideologies can be regarded as ‘systems of thought’, ‘systems of belief’ or ‘symbolic systems’ which pertain to social action or political practice.” According to Thompson “[n]o attempt is made, on the basis of this conception, to distinguish between the kinds of action or projects which ideology animates [sic]; ideology is present in every political programme and is a feature of every organized political movement” (5).

⁸ For the sake of readability I will not indicate “thus in the source” (using the scholarly abbreviation “sic”) every time the term “labor” is taken from sources in which it is spelled correctly according to the language standards of the source’s place of publication. However, in my own writing I make use of the proper spelling for this term (“labour”) in accordance with Canadian language standards.

officials on a sweatshop in El Monte . . . [and] the exposé by Charles Kernaghan of the National Labor Committee (NLC) of Kathie Lee Gifford's signature line of clothing sold in Wal-Mart Stores, in July 1996". It is worth noting that according to this study, after the 1995-96 "boom", the coverage on sweatshops clearly declines ("Framing" 158). If we consider the daily relevance of overseas and domestic garment sweatshops, and the harsh working conditions in these and other sweat-labour sites, where many of the goods we use are manufactured, the attention received from the mainstream media is meager. This points to the fact that such a "boom" in the coverage of sweatshop labour hasn't been sustained, at least in the mainstream media.

Aside from atrocious incidents like the death of fifty-two sweatshop workers in a fire in Bangladesh in 2001 (Bearak 1), the mainstream media's awareness of sweatshops has importantly taken place when the scandal around a celebrity forms part of the story. This is evident in the scandal around the exploitation of Honduran children who manufactured Kathie Lee Gifford's line of clothing (Alvarez 77), or in the extended news coverage on Nike that "has become a celebrity corporation as a result of its high-profile promotional practices, which are responsible not only for its commercial success but also for making it into a salient target for activist criticism" (Greenberg and Knight, "Promotionalism" 543-4).

In a parallel way, Edna Bonacich and Richard Appelbaum observe that, compared to the attention dedicated to labour issues, the press is prone to give a huge amount of space to the business aspects of the fashion industry. In this context, the news coverage about and around the raid at the El Monte sweatshop is exceptional (xii). However, in opposition to the idea that the mainstream news coverage of sweatshops has been scarce, Daniel Bender and Richard Greenwald argue that "a newfound concern about the sweatshop and sweated work has made its way into everyday conversation and popular culture - perhaps more so than any other kind of labor or workplace" (1). Such "newfound concern" might only be temporary

and superficial and can be explained by codes of newsworthiness such as “frequency”, “threshold”, “unambiguity”, “meaningfulness”, “consonance”, “unexpectedness”, “continuity”, “composition”, “reference to élite nations”, “reference to élite persons”, “personalization” and “negativity” (Galtang and Ruge qtd. in Hartley 76-9). It is interesting to ask, however, what is so attractive about garment sweatshop labour that the mainstream media favor it over a very diverse array of sweatshop and sweat-labour practices such as agricultural, construction or domestic work?

Some authors consider that the garment industry has been, historically and ontologically, an emblematic territory for the sweatshop to develop (Green, “Fashion” 37; Greenwald 77). Andrew Ross explains that “[b]ecause the textile and apparel industries have seen some of the worst labor excesses, they have also been associated with historic victories for labor, and hold a prominent symbolic spot on the landscape of labor iconography” (“Rise” 227). Moreover, distinguished from other forms of low-wage employment, the extreme nature of the sweatshop has certain characteristics that can provoke a profound indignation among the US public (Featherstone 260).

I am approaching the case of sweatshops in the mainstream media, and the particular case of the coverage of the raid at the El Monte sweatshop, as a point of entry into a realm that has traditionally been ignored by the mainstream media⁹. More particularly, I am interested in studying how the main actor of this event -the undocumented sweatshop worker-

⁹ I have reached this conclusion from extensive and unfruitful database research around the coverage of sweatshop labour in US and Canadian mainstream media. In the same way, Jonathan Tasini observes that since US newspaper editors have allocated less space and money to labor issues -while increasing business reporting- the amount of coverage around labor has almost vanished (qtd. in Martin 12).

is (re)created through the mainstream media, and the implications of such (re)creation in relation to its social and political context.

The method that I use to approach the aforementioned corpus is that of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Through an analysis of the texts that make up the El Monte undocumented sweatshop worker, I want to (re)define how power relations interact through and around it. As discussed with more detail in Chapter one, the flexibility of CDA is adequate both as a theoretical platform and as a methodology for the development of my research.

A more inclusive, dialogical and open coverage in the mainstream media of sweatshops in general, and of the undocumented sweatshop worker in particular, is a desirable situation *per se*, though not plausible to happen. Beyond this, my study is motivated by the conviction that understanding and (re)describing¹⁰ how discursive constructions interact with the political realm is in itself a way of altering them. In this sense, I privilege knowledge and analysis instead of political activism as a path towards social change. I consider myself among those who don't believe in the need for a radical restructuring of society, but of a gradual opening of space for voices, actions and opportunities within global capitalism, or in other words, a more responsible and responsive type of global capitalism.

Questions

The key questions that guide this research are: What is the historical, political, social and economic context in which the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker emerge as recognizable phenomena? What is the political, social and economic context of the

¹⁰ I borrow and slightly modify the notion of "redescription" from Richard Rorty's work. See the section "Works Cited" in Bibliography.

contemporary undocumented sweatshop worker? Through what mechanisms do the mainstream media (re)create these discursive constructions? What is the political role assigned -throughout the mainstream media coverage- to the undocumented sweatshop worker? Which social actors have a definitional role in this process? Which are held as accountable? What specific values dominate in these representations? What voice(s) is (are) the undocumented sweatshop worker given, if any? In what ways does the discursive construction of the undocumented sweatshop worker help maintain her oppression? Are domestic sweatshops looked upon as part of a global process or as a problem that can be resolved locally? What is left out of the mainstream media discourse and what are the invisible givens and “missing links” (van Dijk, “Interdisciplinary” 112) that help audiences to make sense of these discursive constructions?

To be succinct, this study is guided by two interrelated questions: (1) How is the undocumented sweatshop worker constituted as a subject¹¹ through a discursive construction, and (2) how is such a construction related to her social and political context?

This research is motivated by the notion that an acute inspection of what is -and is not- said about sweatshops and the undocumented sweatshop worker will help to clarify the processes in which these issues and actors function.

Synopsis

Chapter one exposes the theoretical assumptions, tools and procedures that are used to analyze the texts that form the corpus. It explains the basic epistemological issues that are relevant to my research, such as social constructivism and “*Epistemologically over-*

¹¹ I refer here to the notion of “subject” in the Foucauldian sense that Paul Rabinow explains throughout The Foucault Reader. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.

determined thinking” (Åkerstrøm xii). It explains the basic premises of CDA as a method, the particular analytic tools that I am borrowing for my analysis as well as the specific ways in which I approach the texts under analysis. In the second half of Chapter one I offer a detailed description of the corpus of articles and museum texts that shape the discourse of the undocumented sweatshop worker and of the procedures that I use to select them.

Chapter two places my object/subject of research within its/her historical and social background. It acknowledges the evolution of the term “sweatshop” and it offers a summary of today’s sweatshop. Included here, as well, is an explanation of the sweatshop’s *modus operandi* as a contracting system that cannot be separated from a larger economic structure. Chapter two also brings forward the political and economic forces of global capital in relation to labour migration and domestic sweatshops; it looks at migration from the “Third World” to the “First World” as a complex and interconnected phenomenon. It also reviews relevant information as found in state and national labour legislation as well as US immigration policy from a critical standpoint. Complementing this information Chapter two briefly mentions diverse forms of resistance that have emerged to combat the proliferation of sweatshops.

Although some of the information given in Chapter two pre-empt the contents of Chapter three, its main purpose is to serve as a solid platform for the analytical stage of my research. The contents of the first two chapters are synthesized in the final one, which responds to the questions posed in this introduction through the explanation of six dominant assertions. Through a descriptive and hermeneutical process I expose how the undocumented sweatshop worker is discursively constructed throughout the corpus of texts under analysis and how such discourse interacts with its social and political context. By doing so, I also (re)describe the initial discourse under analysis and recommend a possible output for my “findings”. The Conclusion sums up my line of argument by offering a more elaborate

account of the contents I expose in Chapter three and by suggesting other ways to (re)describe the undocumented sweatshop worker.

In this work I am using the feminine pronoun when referring to the undocumented sweatshop worker not only to challenge the extended gender inequalities that take place through language but because it is important to acknowledge that women have been and are the majority of the workforce, not only in the El Monte sweatshop case, but in many other forms of exploitative labour. As the titles of the chapters suggest, the manufacturing process in the garment industry has inspired the structure of this thesis. This has been done with the explicit purpose of emphasizing the intrinsic (re)constructing function that language has: By analyzing the discourse of the undocumented sweatshop worker, I am also generating a new one. But before starting the substantial part of this work, I should add a few words about my own standpoint, which permeates throughout my whole research.

Where I Stand

I was born and have lived most of my life in the “First World” within the “Third World” of Mexico. With this I mean that I was raised in a middle-class family, without having to worry about health and education necessities or class-discrimination matters. I have had contact with diverse social groups sufficient to realize that poor and rich have more in common than what is usually acknowledged.

Recently, my epistemological and political certainties have shifted significantly. I do not believe, if I ever did, that dignity and respect for the person are intrinsic universal moral values that should be appropriated and defended by all members of society. I understand that the subjective choice to defend dignity is as valid as the subjective choice of living a life

without caring for others, in spite of arguments that suggest the following of universal moral norms, like for example those proposed by Habermas¹².

However, I want to emphasize that I do feel concern for the improvement in the quality of life of the undocumented sweatshop worker, but that such concern is not mainly fueled by empathy, compassion or pity. I justify this subjective preference based on the conviction that such an objective can make our world more functional and dynamic. A more equal access to health, education, labour and political participation marks a strong difference in pushing individuals, society and our global community as a whole towards becoming a more desirable place to inhabit. These convictions stem from close personal experiences in the “First” and in the “Third World”, where I have learned that a difference can be made, and that such difference matters in practical terms.

The above convictions have been deeply influenced by the work of Richard Rorty, to the point that I consider myself to fall into his notion of “liberal ironist”. Rorty borrows the definition of “liberal” from Judith Shklar¹³, for whom “liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do”¹⁴ (Rorty xv); and he defines the “ironist” person as one who

¹² See for example, Jürgen Habermas’s Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action. Trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge: MIT P, 1990.

¹³ For more on this see Judith Shklar’s Ordinary Vices. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.

¹⁴ I am aware that such “liberal” position is debatable. The strongest critique would come, I think, from a Nietzschean standpoint, in the sense that morality is a tool of the weak. As Robert Solomon observes, “Nietzsche makes it hard for us to avoid the uncomfortable acknowledgement that, yes, morality does protect the weak against the strong and, yes, it does sometimes seem to be the expression of resentment and, yes, it is often used to ‘put down’ or ‘level’ what is best in us in favor of the safe, the conformist, the comfortable” (58). Nonetheless, I find that such assertion cannot, in spite of its cleverness, be generally applied to every circumstance in social life. As I argue in this thesis, there are circumstances in which a society, in order to become stronger, needs to recognize all of its members. Moreover, Rorty explains that “[t]here is no *neutral*, noncircular way to defend the liberal’s claim that cruelty is the worst

“faces up to the contingency of her or his own most central beliefs and desires -someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance” (xv). In accordance with my own convictions, Rorty is also “a believer in piecemeal reforms advancing economic justice and increasing the freedoms citizens¹⁵ are able to enjoy. . . . [and which is attainable through] the deepening and widening of solidarity” (Ramberg 3.2).

According to Rorty’s “liberal ironist” point of view, “human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one’s world - the little things around which one has woven into one’s final vocabulary - will not be destroyed” (92). Needless to say, such standpoint as well as my life experiences have informed and influenced in a fundamental way the writing of this work.

thing we do, any more than there is a neutral way to backup Nietzsche’s assertion that this claim expresses a resentful, slavish attitude” (197).

¹⁵ I would add here that such “freedoms” should be extended to the non-citizens as well, as this thesis suggests.

Chapter 1. Knitting Technique

“discourse . . . is never unmediated,
never free of interpretation, never innocent”

Susan Suleiman (qtd. in Balsamo 23)

Theory and Methodology

The assumptions that inform and guide the approach that I use in analyzing the discursive construction of the undocumented sweatshop worker are informed by a social-constructivist epistemology. Such a framework can be explained by the general statement that knowledge, attitudes and beliefs are merely a product of socially-produced and -shared language. The main implication of such an approach is that there is not a single Truth that can be *discovered* by science or other means, but that there are many truths that are *constructed* along the process of their “finding”. There are many authors and schools behind this line of thought. The thinkers that I find more representative of it are Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, and more recently, Rorty, whose insights about language as a social construction I describe in the following paragraphs.

According to Rorty, suggestions about the construction of truth rather than its discovery were brought up about two centuries ago in Europe (3). Rorty mentions that the “Nietzschean history of culture and Davidsonian philosophy of language see language as we now see evolution, as new forms of life constantly killing old forms - not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly” (19). According to this, Truth is created by sentences and does not exist independently from human languages; human languages in their turn are a creation of the human mind (Rorty 5). Consequently, instead of an essential Truth that is waiting to be “found”, there are many truths, as many as there are descriptions of the world. As Rorty

observes, “in a Nietzschean view, one which drops the reality-appearance distinction, to change how we talk is to change what, for our own purposes, we are” (20).

My own research exemplifies this last point, since one of its fundamental aims is to analyze the mainstream media coverage of the undocumented sweatshop worker while at the same time I (re)describe¹⁶ it. While doing this I am also (re)creating myself at a personal level by acquiring, using and modifying diverse “vocabularies”¹⁷. But making full acknowledgement of Rorty’s concept of the “contingency of language”¹⁸ entails facing the problem of relativism and/or skepticism. If there is no essential and organizing Truth to seek, what is the point of doing research and acquiring knowledge? To this I can only respond that there are less or more complex “vocabularies” and that comparing the differences and similarities between them -and by doing so, (re)creating them-, is an exciting, worthwhile and complex process.

I also approach my object of study through the epistemological position that Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen calls “*Epistemologically over-determined thinking*”, which is not mainly concerned with approaching an object of study with the question *what* but with the question *how* (xii). More precisely such a perspective asks:

¹⁶ I am aware that I used the term “(re)create” earlier in a similar way. I am using both terms interchangeably in order to emphasize the social-constructivist assumption that (re)describing entails (re)creating.

¹⁷ Rorty’s work has particularly influenced my epistemology through what he calls the “contingency of language” which is explained as “the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of all possible vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling” (xvi).

¹⁸ See previous footnote.

In which forms and under which conditions has a certain system of meaning (such as a discourse, a semantics or a system of communication) come into being?

What are the obstacles to understanding the possibilities of thinking within - but also critically in relation to- an already established system of meaning?

How and by which analytical strategies can we obtain knowledge critically different from the already established system of meaning? (xii)

In conformity to what has been said this far, I have chosen CDA as my working methodology, which, in accordance to Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy, “offers new opportunities for researchers to explore the empirical ramifications of the linguistic turn that has worked its way through the social sciences and humanities in the last 20 years . . . [and it] goes one step further in embracing a strong social constructivist epistemology” (2). Needless to say, this embracing of the linguistic turn is in theoretical accordance with Åkerström’s “*Epistemologically over-determined thinking*”.

It is accurate to say that when working with CDA, theory and method cannot be separated from one another. Both assume that “social reality is produced and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning” (Phillips and Hardy 2). Norman Fairclough explains the three basic implications of considering language as a fundamental structure of shared practices: “Firstly, that language is a part of society, and not somehow external to it. Secondly, that language is a social process. And thirdly, that language is a socially conditioned process, conditioned that is by other (non-linguistic) parts of society” (22). Furthermore, it is crucial to point towards the unavoidable political implications of language in society.

According to Siegfried Jäger, “[a]s ‘agents’ of ‘knowledge (valid at a certain place at a certain time)’ discourses exercise power. They are themselves a power factor by being apt to induce behaviour and (other) discourses. Thus, they contribute to the structuring of the power relations in a society” (37). This thesis offers one of many possibilities to (re)describe oppressive power relations in discourse. But to get a better notion of the procedure in the analysis of the corpus, I must first mention the constituent aspects of the methodology that I deploy.

The first characteristic that should be pointed out about CDA is that it consists of an inter/multidisciplinary method, which is engaged with the examination of language constructions and their relation with the social, economic, cultural and political context. Parallel to social constructivism, CDA acknowledges that language is not an independent reflection of social reality but that it constructs such reality by being performed. Furthermore, Ruth Wodak stresses the political agenda of CDA by defining it “as fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse)” (“CDA” 2).

In spite of the consensus that has been reached in describing the basic premises of CDA, there is a broad span of methodologies that may range from ethnographic and fieldwork research, to small or large qualitative case studies (Wodak, “CDA” 3). In relation to this, Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodak dictate that “CDA has never been and has never attempted to be or to provide one single or specific theory, and one specific methodology is not characteristic of research in CDA” (12).

The main reason for adopting CDA as a working methodology rests in its appropriateness to my object/subject of study and the questions I ask about it/her, as well as

the priority that CDA gives to the social, political and historical context while studying the relationship between language and power.

As will be explained further, I customize my own way of doing CDA for the purposes of this study; however it is important to mention that I borrow specific analytical tools from Teun van Dijk's work, such as identifying who gets to speak (Elite 30), the "number games" (Communicating 371-2), the binaries of "Us" and "Them" (Elite 247), distancing from racism (Elite 229), "positive self-presentation" (Racism 187-8) and "implication" (Elite 256). All of these discursive strategies are explained in greater detail in Chapter three where they are helpful to analyze the discourse under study. I am also relying on the analysis of what van Dijk calls "*structures* or *strategies* of text and talk" which are composed, among others, by "graphic layout, intonation, stylistic variations of word selection or syntax, semantic implications and coherence, overall discourse topics [see the classification of texts by sub-topic in table 2 of this chapter], schematic forms and strategies of argumentation or news reports, rhetorical figures such as metaphors and hyperbole, speech acts, and dialogical strategies of face-keeping and persuasion" (Elite 12). In addition to this, I also borrow van Dijk's approach to the structure of headlines. According to him, headlines are usually read first and the information expressed in the headline is strategically used by the reader during the process of understanding in order to construct the overall meaning, or the main topics, of the rest of the text before the text itself is even read. . . . Headline information is also used to activate the relevant knowledge in memory the reader needs to understand the news report. (Racism 50)

As will be seen in Chapter three, very special attention is put on the headlines of the corpus of texts under analysis.

Another important influence on my methodology has been the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in which they elaborately explore how everyday metaphors, which are most commonly taken for granted, are of fundamental importance in shaping the ways we perceive and act out our social realities (Metaphors). But now it is time to explain in more detail how I approach the newspaper and museum texts that make up the discourse I analyze and (re)describe.

Like any other discourse, I consider that the one constructing the undocumented sweatshop worker is an incomplete entity in the sense that the selection of texts comprising it are unstable in form and content and subject to additions, curtailments, modifications and constant (re)descriptions; these characteristics are in accordance with Rorty's aforementioned concept of the "contingency of language".

My use and understanding of the notion of "discursive construction" has been mainly inspired and adapted from Foucault's work. In his own words:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation*. (Archaeology 38)

Another definition that helps to clarify my own conception of the term is that used by Ian Parker, in which a discourse can be defined as something that begets an object (or a subject) into existence through an interrelated set of texts and their construction, distribution and reception practices (qtd. in Phillips and Hardy 3). Figure 1 further explains the framework I use to understand and work with this notion.

Within a social, political and ideological context, the interrelated sets of texts (spoken language, images, sounds, etc.) that construct the sweatshop worker also support one another

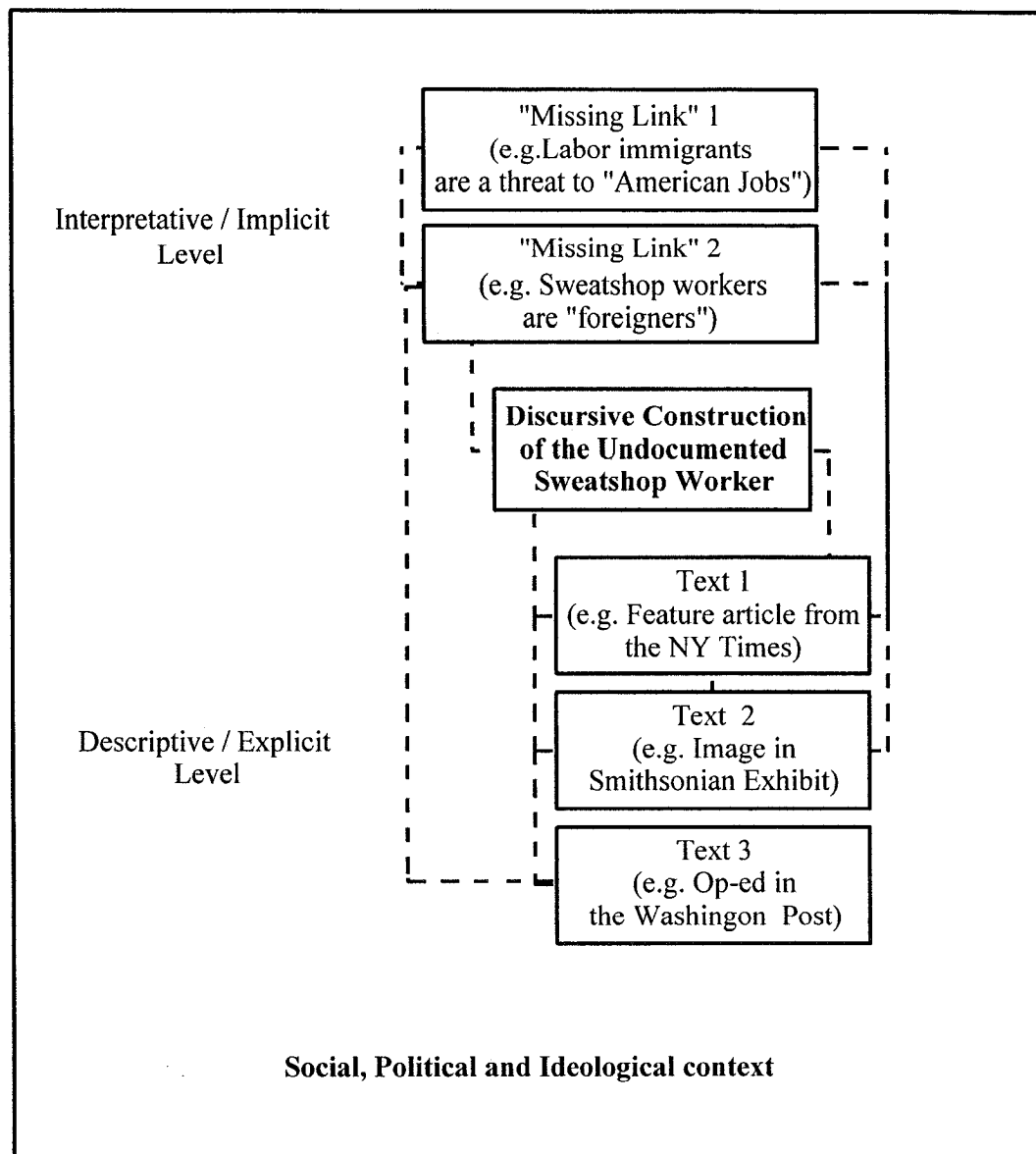


Figure 1 Flowchart explaining the discursive construction of the Undocumented Sweatshop Worker.

in validating the discourse through its dissemination and repetition in society. At this level, the content is manifest and can be easily described if the reader is acquainted with the language in which the texts were encoded in. However, the reader also relies on socially shared knowledge, beliefs and values which aren't explicit in the text but which are needed in order to make sense of it (van Dijk, *News* 62-3).

What van Dijk calls “missing links” are indispensable elements for the understanding of any discourse. They are not evident in the text, but latent or implicit, and therefore they can be (re)described from an interpretative level. It is important to stress that texts and “missing links” are not independent entities, but are intrinsically connected to, and buttress each other.

Figure 1 is also useful to explain my methodology. The two levels through which I approach the discursive formation of the undocumented sweatshop worker are the descriptive and the interpretative¹⁹. These two interrelated and complementary approaches do not belong to any methodological canon, however they work based on the basic premises of CDA. The rest of this section gives more details about my methodology.

In addition to the analytical tools that I am borrowing from van Dijk’s work, when approaching the corpus, I am unfolding the most significant elements of each text through a careful reading. This descriptive approach considers form as well as content. For example, attention is given to the layout of each text by asking: Which kinds of headlines are used? What is their position? What do they bring up from each text? How do they get the attention of the reader? What wording is being used in the copy? What are the most frequent or outstanding words? How does the general presentation reinforce the contents? What images are present? What are the technical aspects of these images (size, contrast, definition, etc)? How are these images related to their footnotes, and vice-versa? While doing this descriptive work I also consider the symbolic weight of each article in relation to its physical background, in both the newspaper layout and the museum exhibition.

¹⁹ I have borrowed and adapted Fairclough’s methodology for analyzing texts, which consists of the three stages of “Description”, “Interpretation” and “Explanation” (26).

I also pay attention to what is the main topic of each text, for instance who are the main actors? Which actors get to talk and which are talked about? Under what kind of “tone” (positive, negative or neutral) are they talked about? What are the evaluative inclinations in the text? Who has access to speech? Whose interests are protected? What is the narrative pace and how is the story framed? What is the relation between the content of other texts in the corpus? From which ideological perspective is the text speaking? Which values are promoted and which aren’t? How is the reader subjectivized? Who are the actors or what objects are presented in the images? How are they explained in relation to the copy?

On the other hand, the intentionally hermeneutical aspect of my analysis is concerned with “discovering” the invisible givens and “missing links” and by doing so also (re)describing the initial discourse that emanates from the corpus. According to van Dijk, “[o]ur shared, social knowledge . . . provides the numerous “missing links” between the concepts and propositions of the text, which is, so to speak, a semantic iceberg of which only the tip is actually expressed, whereas the other information is presupposed to be known by the readers” (van Dijk, “Interdisciplinary” 112).

In search for this implied information, the interpretation of significant elements from the corpus of texts is aided by the historical, social and political research outlined in Chapter two. Another fundamental aspect of this interpretative approach is that it is developed keeping in mind the relations between the discursive construction of the undocumented sweatshop worker and its context.

By using this hermeneutical approach I am interested in looking at what is *not* explicitly stated in the corpus but which can be deduced from certain signs in the text, in the topics that the text makes reference to, or in its context. The results that I expect from this methodology are, in Foucault’s words, to see “the loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things, and the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive

practice” (*Archaeology* 49). It is with the tools described in this chapter that the questions posed in the introduction are being answered in Chapter three.

The Corpus

The raid at the El Monte sweatshop has had a considerable impact in the US and on international public opinion. Most of the academic literature concerned with sweatshops published during the last five years mention this event as an outstanding example of exploitative labour practices. The selection of texts that make up the corpus has been made keeping in mind the ideological impact that the mainstream media institutions have in the overall structure of society and at the international level. The texts that compose the corpus emanate from the two most influential newspapers and a recognized cultural institution from the most powerful country in the world.

Although these sources complement each other and enrich the analytical spectrum of this study, it is important to stress that they construct the undocumented sweatshop worker differently by virtue of their institutional specificities and their political agendas.

In contradiction to the way museums traditionally operate, a critical aspect of contemporary news making -of which the two newspapers that I am examining are a good example- is the commercial nature of their operation. Since a considerable part of their profits comes from advertising, newspaper organizations are subject to policies that defend and reinforce the good standing of their clients. According to John Hartley, news-making is similar to many other forms of commodity manufacturing, with the particularity that what news organizations produce are readers, in order to sell them to their advertisers (130). Aside from the promotional roles and economic dependency between corporations and news

organizations, news also purposefully disseminates ideologies that endorse “dominant beliefs and opinions of elite groups in society” (van Dijk, News 83).

Another significant variation is that the process of message construction is different in these institutions; Christopher Martin observes that journalists and editors frame the story within their own common sense, which in most cases suggests to the audiences a reinforcement of traditional and conservative thinking (8), limiting the way to look at social issues within the limits of the journalist’s or editor’s cultural and political background (which is not infrequently narrow). As Gaye Tuchman notes, “[n]ews stories eschew analysis, preferring instead an emphasis on the concrete and the contingency of events as well as a present-time orientation. They avoid structural linkages between events” (180); in opposition to this, museums usually follow a more critical and informed process in the (re)production of messages. However, museums are exemplary sites of ideological interests.

As opposed to traditional descriptions of the museum as an objective and unquestionable realm of knowledge, today’s museums are controversial sites. According to Steven Dubin, museums “no longer merely provide a pleasant refuge from ordinary life, nor are they simply repositories of received wisdom. Museums have moved to the forefront in struggles over representation and over the chronicling, revising, and displaying of the past” (5). As the controversy around the exhibition Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present exemplifies, today’s museums are often not free from pressure coming from very diverse social actors. Richard Kurin explains how the diverse interests involved in a museum exhibit are “brokered” by the curator in ways analogous to those involved in the negotiation of economic or political transactions. Some of the actors and factors considered in these negotiations are “the meanings held by the participants, the public, and the press, the power of the people involved, and the fiscal resources, expenditures, and impacts” (13). According to Kurin, the nature of historical exhibitions have

the particular characteristic of compressing time and space in a confined location, condensing into a “symbolic world” a discourse that becomes particularly influential when the museum exhibit has a *national* character (78). As Kurin notes, “history, when done by the Smithsonian as a public institution, when presented as an exhibit, a public display that has a permanence, a solidity, and a powerful location, is not so easy to ignore” (73).

It is important to stress that the New York Times and the Washington Post as well as the Smithsonian Institution are considered separate entities from the state, a fact that helps to legitimize their respective voices. Kurin notes that even if exhibits organized by the Smithsonian have an *official look*, “[t]he Smithsonian, though certainly responsive to the state, is not an agency of government. . . . scholars and curators are neither beholden to government nor entirely free to pursue their own individual interests²⁰” (80-1).

In addition to the differences I have pointed out, it is important to elaborate in the criteria that I used when selecting the materials used in my analysis. According to Liebhold and Rubenstein, a considerable amount of information -842 newspaper, wire service and magazine stories- were generated as a consequence of the raid at El Monte (Between 12 n29). Since the amount of available news items is massive, I have decided to focus primarily on the most representative and important media that covered this event. The justification for working with the New York Times and the Washington Post is based on the fact that, as Greenberg and Knight argue, they both have “a crucial agenda-setting role they play not only in relation to influencing public opinion and policy making in the United States, but also because they are frequently used as ‘sources of record’ by other media outlets, both within North America and internationally” (“Framing” 156).

²⁰ In spite of what Kurin says, an article in the New York Times mentions that “[e]ach house of Congress names three members to the board of regents [of the Smithsonian Institution]; by tradition, the majority party names two and the minority party one” (Molotsky, “Furor” B12).

In addition to these news items, my analysis also relies on the controversial museum exhibit entitled Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present developed by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History (NMAH) where a replica of the El Monte sweatshop was the centerpiece of the display (Liebhold and Rubenstein, "Bringing" 60). This museum exhibition is a good example of how a political issue can influence public opinion from a typically "cultural" site. According to Kurin, the work done by the Smithsonian "is important, and it is perceived by Americans as connected to our public life. According to a nationwide survey, the Smithsonian uniquely stands for what Americans would hold up to the world as illustrating who we are as a nation²¹" (72). Additionally, both newspapers in the corpus make reference to this exhibition and to its controversy; it would be a regrettable mistake not to include this exhibition as part of the corpus. Another advantage of working with such different sources is that they influence and inform each other through the discourse they mutually share and create.

I found fifteen texts that relate to the El Monte sweatshop raid in the New York Times by correlating the results of both the New York Times' database on ProQuest Historical Newspapers and the Lexis-Nexis database. In a similar way, the thirteen texts in the Washington Post were found with the use of Lexis-Nexis. As figure 2 shows, the time frame of these articles spans from (August) 1995 to (November) 2002.

It is worth noting that most of the texts date from 1995, when the raid at El Monte occurred. Although they continue to present the "running story" (Galtang and Ruge qtd. in Hartley 78) for some time, the coverage dramatically decreased as the newsworthiness of this event declined. According to the codes of newsworthiness, the coverage of the raid on the El

²¹ Kurin refers here to the 1995 manuscript "Smithsonian Institution Marketing Study: The Smithsonian in the Minds of Americans" by William C. McCready and Leo J. Shapiro.

Monte sweatshop was shaped by its “simplification”, “dramatization”, “a sense of the unexpected” (Ericson et. al 140-48), “frequency”, “threshold”, “meaningfulness” and “negativity” (Galtung and Ruge qtd. in Hartley 76-9). The correspondence between these codes of newsworthiness and the corpus of news articles under analysis is also explained in the analysis made in Chapter three.

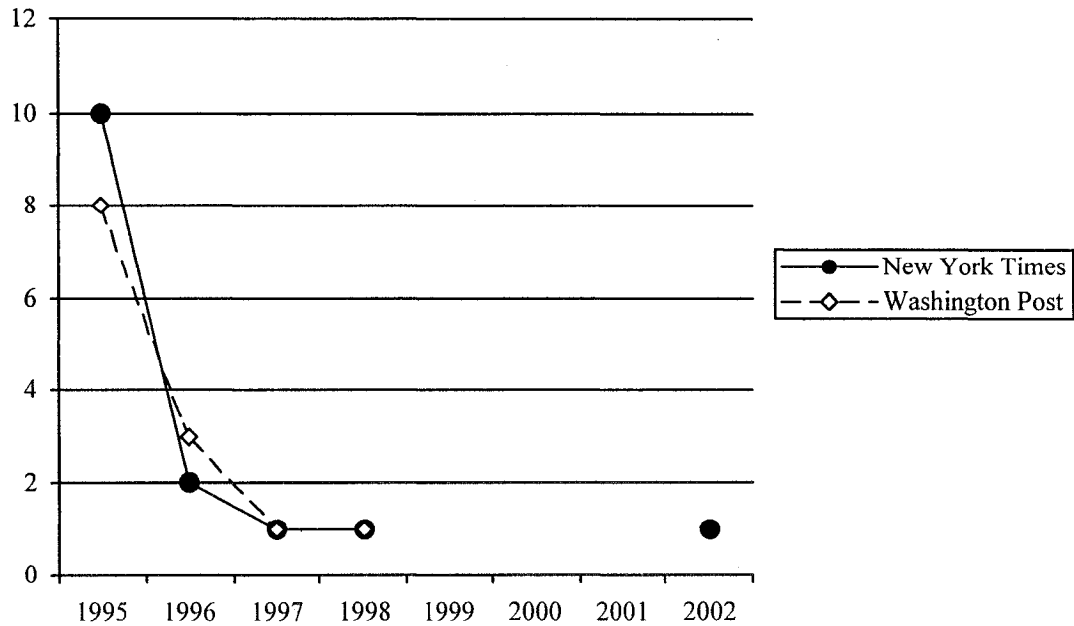


Figure 2 Annual frequency of publication of texts that make reference to the El Monte sweatshop (1995-2002) in the New York Times (15) and the Washington Post (13). All genres are included (Front-page article, news and feature article, column, op-ed and letter).

The continuity of coverage until 2002 is due to a news article in the New York Times that reports on the granting of US residency to “ex-sweatshop workers” (AP, “Ex-Sweatshop” A29). Besides the aforementioned recognition of these newspapers, it is also important to mention their circulation estimates in order to get a more concrete sense of their impact. According to the Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media, during 1995,

when most of the coverage took place, the Times had a daily circulation of 1,187,950 (1515) while the Post had one of 852,262 (400)²².

The twenty-eight texts that constitute the news part of the corpus are representative of the wide coverage given in the mainstream media to the El Monte incident. To better map the formal aspects of these texts, table 1 shows their genre and location in each newspaper.

	<u>New York Times</u>		<u>Washington Post</u>	
	n	%	n	%
Front-Page	1	6.7	2	15.4
News Article	5	33.3	5	38.5
Feature Article	7	46.7	3	23.1
Column	0	0.0	1	7.7
Op-Ed/Letter	2	13.3	2	15.4
Total	15	100	13	100

Table 1 Classification of texts by genre and location. All texts are included: Front-page articles, news and feature articles, and column; op-ed and letters to the editor are both included as part of the same category.

However different the style of each text, they are all considered as part of the corpus. This includes the letters to the editor, since they also generate public opinion and therefore shape the discursive construction of the undocumented sweatshop worker. It is worth noting that in terms of genre, the largest percentage of texts in the Times is made up of feature articles, while news articles are the most used genre in the Post. This might indicate -along with the fact that the total number of texts by the former is higher- that the New York Times gives more importance to the event. Although diverse in form and style, the unifying theme of all of these texts rests in their inclusion or reference to the El Monte sweatshop. Under this

²² Curiously, the circulation numbers of both newspapers has decreased since then. The 2004 edition of the Gale Directory reports a daily circulation of 1,113,00 copies for the Times (1310) and of 746,724 for the Post (332).

umbrella topic, a classification of sub-topics illustrates the scope of the coverage. The following table was made by conducting a close reading of all the newspaper texts to intuitively identify the predominant matter in each one of them.

	NY Times		W Post	
	n	%	n	%
Raid on the El Monte sweatshop	1	6.7	2	15.4
Punishment of contractors/manufacturers	2	13.3	3	23.1
Government warning to Retailers	1	6.7	1	7.7
Federal/State agencies' claim for responsibility	1	6.7	2	15.4
About the "problem" of sweatshops	5	33.3	1	7.7
About the "problem" of "illegal" immigrants	1	6.7	0	0.0
Back wages/Grant of residency to workers	2	13.3	2	15.4
Smithsonian Exhibit	2	13.3	2	15.4
Total	15	100	13	100

Table 2 Classification of texts by sub-topic. All texts are included: Front-page articles, news and feature articles, column, op-ed and letters to the editor.

Evidently, the coverage in the Times is more oriented towards the general description of sweatshops as a “problem” in the industry that needs to be solved, while the coverage in the Post is more focused on the blame, prosecution and punishment of the “responsible” agents, as well as who is to blame or to be congratulated within the government for taking (or not taking) action during the El Monte sweatshop raid.

The second constituent part of the corpus is the aforementioned museum exhibit. Since the exhibition is no longer on display, the documents that I rely on in order to approach this site is the website of the Smithsonian Institution’s NMAH as well as the exhibition’s catalogue which was put together by its curators (see the section “Corpus” in Bibliography).

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present opened in Washington on April, 1998 by Alexis Herman, US Secretary of Labour, and lasted

until the month of October of that same year. The show was originally developed as a traveling exhibition but a shortage of money and the “problematic” issues that it portrayed kept it from going too far. In spite of this controversy, the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Museum of Tolerance in LA opened its doors to the exhibition, where it was displayed from November 1999 to April 2000, allowing hundreds of thousands of visitors to see it (Leibold and Rubenstein, “Bringing Sweatshops” 67-70; Sanger, David E. “What’s Doing” 5:10). According to the curators, the controversy that the exhibit generated during its developing phase was mainly fueled by garment executives, the California Fashion Association, the San Francisco Fashion Industries, a Congress Representative from Texas, and the American Apparel Manufacturers Association. Moreover, many manufacturers and retailers felt that mentioning the El Monte case was detrimental for the industry (“Bringing Sweatshops” 63-68). Some of the newspaper articles included in the corpus talk about this controversy.

The exhibition deals mainly with the garment industry, although other kinds of exploitative labour are lightly mentioned (e.g. agricultural work²³). The overall structure of the exhibit is divided into six complementary sections (illustration 1): “Introduction”, “History”, “El Monte”, “Fashion Food Chain”, “Good Industry Practices” and “Dialogue” all of which I briefly describe in the following paragraphs.

The “Introduction” features an overall approach to the exhibition and an overview of the historical development of the sweatshop, as well as a list of contributors and donors²⁴. More than half of the 3,300 square feet of the exhibition were used for the “History” section,

²³ For more on this see “Harvest of Shame” in the section “Works Cited” in Bibliography.

²⁴ Curiously, the main granting agencies listed are: Kmart Corporation; National Retail Federation; Special Exhibition Fund, Office of the Provost, Smithsonian Institution; and Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE). For a complete list of supporters see “Contributors & Donors” in the section “Works Cited” in Bibliography.

which dealt with “the complexity of the issue and how trends in manufacturing, retail, immigration, and reform efforts affected sweatshops production at a particular time”

(Liebhold and Rubenstein, “Bringing” 68).

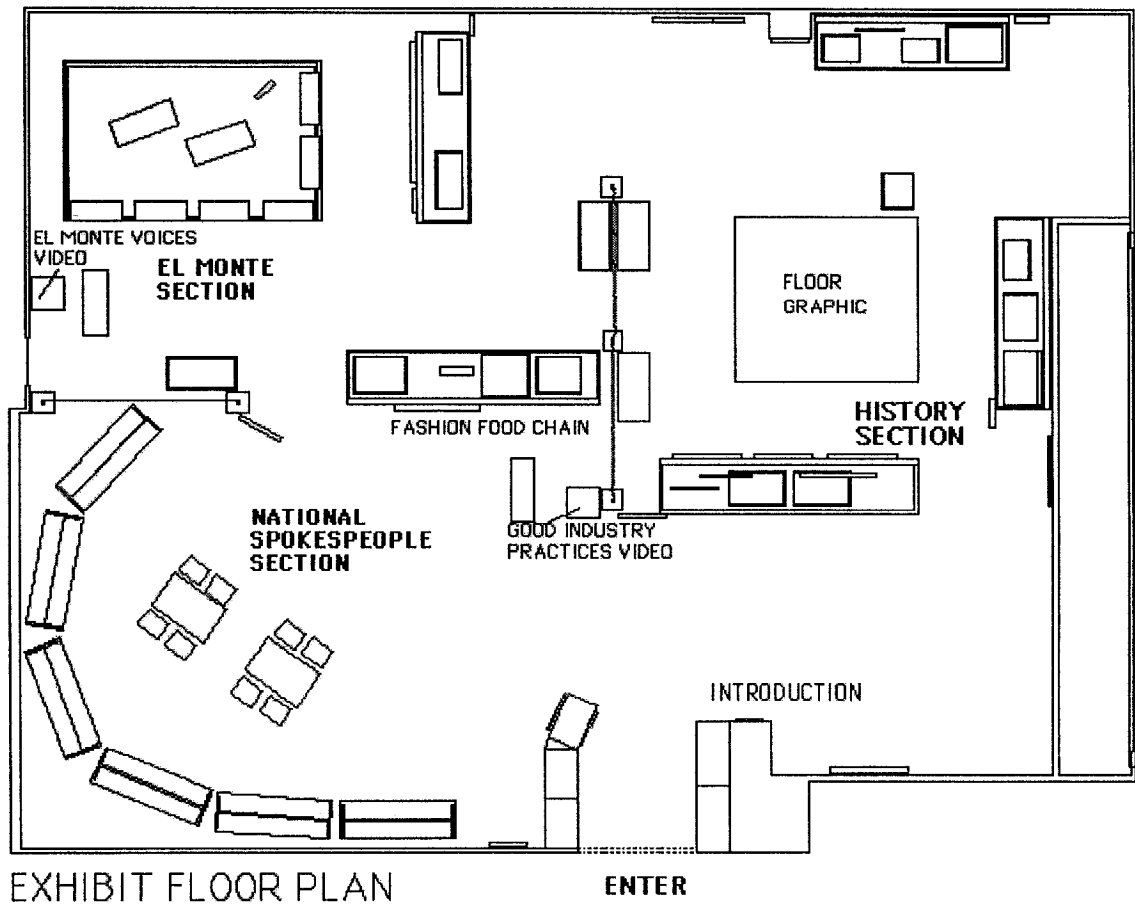


Illustration 1 Exhibit floor plan. Source: *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present*. Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 6 Mar. 2005. <<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/intro/floorplan.htm>>.

The “El Monte” section is the most striking one in the exhibition, as it displays objects such as the counterfeit passports that the workers used to travel to the US, personal letters withheld from the workers, a sample of the actual sewing machines that were found at the El Monte sweatshop, personal items that belonged to the workers (for example, a rice

bowl and personal health items), the tip letter that led the authorities to the sweatshop and courtroom sketches of the operators' prosecution. All of these items are half-surrounded by a metal fence that adds a dramatic effect to the display. This section also includes the nine-minute long video El Monte Voices, which consists of interviews made with some of the workers and law-enforcement officers who participated in the El Monte raid²⁵ (Liebhold and Rubenstein, "Bringing" 68; Between 71). A closer approach to these and other elements is given in Chapter three.

The section entitled "Fashion Food Chain" maps out the global structure of manufacturing and retailing in the form of a production flowchart. The "Good Industry Practices" section consists of a video -created by an apparel industry production company under the supervision of the curators (Liebhold and Rubenstein, "Bringing" 68-9)- in which the main message is that "[g]arments do not have to be produced in sweatshops. Today, good-quality, reasonably priced clothing is being made in the United States and abroad in safe working conditions by workers receiving acceptable wages" ("Good Industry Practice"). Finally, the "Dialogue" section presents the responses of six "representative" voices²⁶ to the question "What should Americans know about sweatshop production in the U.S.?"

²⁵ Since getting this video was not possible, an edited transcription of the interviews with two of the workers was used instead. El Monte Voices was directed by Selma Thomas, Liebhold and Rubenstein conducted the interviews, and Chanchanit Martorell was the interpreter; see "Interviews" in the section "Corpus" in Bibliography.

²⁶ Even though the central piece of the exhibit is the reproduction of the El Monte sweatshop, none of its workers act as "spokespeople" explaining what Americans should know about sweatshop production in the US. The six "spokespeople" of this section are: Kathy Lee Gifford, co-developer of Wal-Mart's "Kathie Lee Collection" clothing line; Maria Echaveste, who previously worked as administrator of the US Department of Labour's Wage and Hour Division where she was dedicated to the Department's anti-sweatshop endeavor; Jay Mazur, president of UNITE; Floyd Hall, CEO of Kmart; The attorney for the Asian Pacific American Legal Center representing the El Monte sweatshop workers, Julie Su; and Robert D. Haas CEO of Levi Strauss & Co. ("Dialogue").

(“Dialogue”). For purposes of this research, I am mostly focusing on the “El Monte” section of the exhibition, although I am considering the overall context of which it forms a part²⁷.

Before continuing, it is important to bring forward the methodology I used in constructing the following chapter, which offers a general approach to the topic of sweatshops while emphasizing the contemporary role played by the undocumented sweatshop worker. Most of the material in Chapter two was found through an extensive database search in local university libraries and in journal article databases. The gathered material consists of current and relevant texts with specific relation to the history, political economy and sociology of sweatshops as well as updated accounts of the processes of transnational labour and globalization. I acknowledge that the selection of sources that I have made in order to back up the information in Chapter two are far from being the only ones that cover the topic under analysis, and that by choosing them I have also (re)created the socio-political context of the undocumented sweatshop worker in a very unique perspective.

Aside from the obvious allusion to the “raw materials” that will help to develop this thesis, the title of Chapter two also makes reference to the crude reality of a system that allows and encourages unequal relations of production, while diminishing the options of its most disadvantaged members. The justification for the inclusion of this chapter is based on van Dijk’s suggestion that it is easier to understand a discourse if we know more about the events and topics that have shaped its existence (News 145).

²⁷ For a precise account of the texts that I am working with see “Corpus” in Bibliography.

Chapter 2. Raw Materials

“Hay, es cierto, un tercer mundo dentro del primer mundo
y un primer mundo dentro del tercer mundo.”

Carlos Fuentes²⁸

Historical Background

As early as the fifteenth century, the term “sweating” as a figure of speech, was associated with extenuating circumstances in the work environment (Green, Ready-to-Wear 156). Pre-definitions of the sweatshop, as Laura Hapke recounts, date back to the early nineteenth century; a time in which “‘sweating’ . . . had become an umbrella term for a quota system of subcontract [sic] in which the employer demanded outwork (or home piece work) while operating a centralized place of production” (48). In spite of the broadness of such a pre-definition and even before an idea of the term “sweatshop” existed, it was conceived as “a kind of workshop characterized by the ‘lowest paid, most degrading of American employment’ and . . . a symbolic labor environment for sweated labor conditions” (Leon Stein qtd. in Hapke 48).

As with many controversial terms, there isn’t a unique and clear origin for “sweatshop”. According to Bender and Greenwald, the US Industrial Commission -while undertaking the task of tracing the connections between industrial chaos and the nation’s recently arrived immigrants- gave an initial label to the “sweating system” by 1901. It is important to note the explicitly racist definition the members of the Commission “and its

²⁸ “True, there is a Third World [sic] within the First World [sic], and a First World [sic] within the Third World [sic].” Personal translation. Source “Carlos Fuentes Sobre Chiapas.” Indians.org. <<http://www.indians.org/welker/carlosf1.htm>> 11 Jan. 2005.

expert witnesses” gave, as they considered that “these immigrants were distinct races, vastly inferior physically and morally to American ‘stock’”. Furthermore, the Commission considered that the sweatshop “was a disorderly, immoral, dangerous workplace that reflected the racial inferiority of its immigrant workers and owners” (3).

In a parallel fashion, Hapke reveals that the term “sweatshop”, as we know it today, dates to the late nineteenth century when it was associated with clusters of foreign ethnicity (mainly Eastern-European Jews and Italian), criminality, mess, disgusting odors, prostitution, immorality, disease and filth. According to such early conceptions, these clusters were often manifested as urban shops located in tenement buildings where people both lived and worked (48-60). It is worth noting the implications of “otherness”, “weakness”, and “threat” that the initial discourse around the sweatshop worker had since its origin. Such allusions have, as I argue in Chapter three, continued till today.

In more advanced investigations concerning the origins of the term, Nancy Green curiously observes that “no country wants to take credit for its origin. The Oxford dictionary attributes it (as distinct from ‘sweating’) to the United States (in 1892). New York State factory inspectors, however, defined the sweatshop as a ‘foreign method of working’ in contrast to the clean, neat ‘American idea of doing business’²⁹.” (“Fashion” 48).

Besides the racist, degrading and pathological description of sweatshop workers, the initial shape of the sweatshop discourse clearly acknowledged it as an adverse working environment (Green, Ready-to-Wear 160). These descriptions were used in such a way that, around the 1890’s worker alliances “depended on the concept of the sweatshop itself as a primitive capitalism easily fixed by economic progress, efficiency, and government

²⁹ Green refers this last sentence to: New York State Office of Factory Inspectors 12th Annual Report. 1897. 47.

regulation. Such understandings helped set sweatshops laborers apart as foreign, potentially contagious, even immoral” (Bender and Greenwald 6).

Although they originated predominantly in the US, these nineteenth-century definitions aren't exclusive to one country. For example, in France, social reformists and doctors pointed out the morbidity of the sweatshop by describing and over-emphasizing the lack of health, misery, disease-propagating and repulsive conditions of female homework (Coffin 255). Such descriptions were remarkably similar to the first notions of the sweatshop in the US. In line with Daniel Bender's historical account, these descriptions were elaborated by a group of inspectors, politicians and correspondents who shared their impressions after delving into the Italian and Jewish immigrant neighborhoods of New York. They gave a particular emphasis to the portrayal of the clothing-manufacturing sites as repulsive shops in the Lower East Side filled with immigrants. Politicians distinguished these garment workshops by calling them “sweatshops” in clear contrast with the “American” plant (19-20). According to Bender, such disapproval of sweatshops included denigration of immigrants and of uncontrolled immigration as a threat in the form of “racial degeneration”. Such critiques contended that “immigrant groups were part of distinct races capable of ascending or descending a complex and unstable hierarchy. In this way, understandings of the economics of the sweatshop became intertwined with notions of race” (20).

Bender also mentions that other observers believed that “the dynamics of economic competition favored those immigrant races willing to work in abominable conditions . . . [fearing] that the least resilient, the most immoral, and the least civilized immigrant races . . . were reproducing faster than American stock” (21). Clearly, the origin and development of the sweatshop discourse has been consistently associated with parallel notions of ethnicity, nationality and immigration. As well, notions of intense labour and economic dynamism have been implicit since the early “sweatshop” labeling.

According to Eileen Boris, “[t]he U.S. Department of Labor in 1896 defined sweating as ‘a condition under which a maximum amount of work in a given time is performed for a minimum wage, and in which the ordinary rules of health and comfort are disregarded’”. Once such characterization of the sweatshop was formed, it has been relatively stable for the last hundred years (204).

From a different perspective, Bender and Greenwald suggest that since the beginning of its use in the US, the term signals concern about the consequences of global capitalism: “American, Canadian, and European policy makers in the 1890’s who first defined the sweatshop exchanged concerns, methods of industrial investigation, and theories of social reform - they even shared the very word *sweatshop*” (2-3).

It is worth mentioning here, as a part of the symbolic development of the sweatshop, what some authors have recently called the “Return of the Sweatshop” (Mort, “Return”; Bonacich and Appelbaum 1-25). It is understandable that such an appealing phrase may have been inspired by the aforementioned “celebrity” scandals in the media during the past ten years (e.g. Kathy Lee Gifford’s line of clothing, activism against Nike, and the “discovery” of the El Monte sweatshop). Nevertheless, Green argues that, far from a reappearance of sweatshop contracting practices,

there is a historic *continuity* in the forms of labor organization within the industry that are linked to the underlying extreme volatility of demand. [In which f]lexibility of production time and space have characterized one hundred years of garment work, and they have repeatedly led to excesses and abuses of the subcontracting system. (“Fashion” 39).

But it is important to acknowledge that there have been some ups and downs in terms of labour improvements along the history of garment sweatshops. Supporting the notion of the “Return of the Sweatshop”, authors like Alan Howard point out that in “the mid-1960s,

more than half of the 1.2 million workers in the apparel industry were organized and real wages had been rising for decades” (151). In relation with this, it is important to pay attention to what happened to such reforms by comparing this period of relative improvements with the contemporary state of affairs.

Today's Sweatshop

Sweatshops have not gone out of fashion. They belong to the last hundred years of labour history as much as they belong to our days, in which the horrors of the past are far from over. For example, in May 1993, one of the worst industrial fires in recent history occurred, when 188 workers were killed and 469 injured at the Kader toy factory in Bangkok. In Naomi Klein's words, “the building was a textbook firetrap, and when the piles of plush fabric ignited, the flames raced through the locked factory . . . taking more lives than the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire that killed 146 young workers in New York City” (332). Labour standards seem to have frozen over time, when the only changes that appear to happen are those of where the sweatshops are located. In relation to this, Green's “*continuity*” argument points out that “[t]oday's workers suffer from bronchitis and asthma . . . air standards have only been as successful as garment-industry regulations in general. New chemicals used to treat some fabrics have added new fire hazards” (Ready-to-Wear 157). Furthermore, Green questions the historiographic dichotomy of the return/continuity of the sweatshop by asking: “Is the twentieth-century use of a late-nineteenth-century term simply a reformer's ploy, or does it imply a continuity of form and indeed of content?” (Ready-to-Wear 159). It is important to look at the actual conditions of sweatshop production in order to answer this question.

Based on the calculations of a 1994 General Accounting Office (GAO) report, Ross has pointed out that “over a third of New York’s 6,500 garment shops are sweated³⁰, as are 4,500 of LA’s 5,000 shops, 400 out of 500 in Miami, and many others in Portland, New Orleans, Chicago, San Antonio, and Philadelphia” (“Rise” 228). The El Monte sweatshop was one of these 5,000 factories in Los Angeles, which represent a major source of employment for more than 120,000 garment workers who toil in them. It is important to note that in line with the El Monte sweatshop employees, around twenty percent of all garment workers are contracted by factories that form part of an “underground economy” (Nutter 199).

From a different perspective, Miriam Ching Yoon Louie mentions that more than half of the 22,000 garment-manufacturing shops that operate within the US are classified as sweatshops by the Department of Labour (26). Following the historical analysis in the first section of this chapter, it is important to look now at a contemporary definition of a garment sweatshop. According to Jo-Ann Mort, it

usually means a combination of several things, including piece-rate or payment below the minimum wage, few or no health benefits, unsafe working conditions, mandatory homework, and unregulated working hours. In many cases, there are also violations of child labor laws, no tax withholding, and cash payment or no payment at all, especially when illegal immigrants are involved who have no legal recourse to force payment. (“Return” 364)

In addition to this contemporary definition of the sweatshop, it is worth mentioning Ross’s contribution of the term “The Year of the Sweatshop” which he mentions in an essay

³⁰ According to Ross, “[t]he GAO defines a sweatshop as ‘an employer that violates more than one federal or state labor law governing minimum wage and overtime, child labor, industrial homework, occupational safety and health, workers compensation, or industry registration’ (“Rise” 229).

dedicated to exploring activists' contributions to public awareness on exploitative labour issues ("After"). Ross names "The Year of the Sweatshop" the period of 1995-96, during which the mainstream media coverage of exploitative practices in garment and shoe manufacturing was relatively high. This brief period of media awareness has been described by Klein as a time in which "North Americans couldn't turn on their televisions without hearing shameful stories about the exploitative labor practices behind the most popular, mass-marketed labels on the brandscape". Klein mentions scandals involving such popular brands like the Gap, Guess jeans, Disney, Mattel, Nike, Adidas, Reebok, Umbro, Mitre and Brine, as well as the scandal around Kathie Lee Gifford's collection of sportswear sold at Wal-Mart (327-9). Klein questions why "the Year of the Sweatshop" occurred in 1995-96 and not in another time, suggesting that what happened:

was a kind of collective 'click' on the part of both the media and the public. The cumulative response to the horror stories of Chinese prison labor, the scenes of teenage girls being paid pennies in the Mexican maquiladoras, and burning in fires in Bangkok, has been a slow but noticeable shift in how people in the West see workers in the developing world. . . . Much of this has to do with timing. Concerns about child labor in India and Pakistan had remained at the level of a steady drone for more than a decade. But by 1995 . . . the issue seemed urgent and exotic. (322-4)

It is important to acknowledge that public awareness has, at least temporarily, been (re)directed towards exploitative labour issues. But limiting the scope of this chapter to the discursive level of the garment sweatshop would be shortsighted. For this reason, the following two sections are dedicated to explore, if briefly, the national and transnational economic dynamics of sweatshop labour.

The Contracting System

Sweatshop workers are at the bottom of a complex and extremely competitive production system in which responsibilities and the intensity of labour are passed on from retailers to manufacturers, and from manufacturers to contractors who deposit the work burden on their employees. These practices are widespread. Mort reminds us that around two-thirds of all the garment-sewing sites in Los Angeles are sweatshops, many of which are easily identifiable. Furthermore, the industry in this city is mainly not unionized (“Immigrant” 87).

In their research about New York’s garment industry, Roger Waldinger and Michael Lapp mention that it has traditionally employed immigrant workers, -regardless of the legality of their immigration status-, “whose lack of skills, capital, and English-speaking ability restricted their opportunities in other industries” (98). The authors suggest that new waves of immigrants replace the old ones, restocking in this way the industry’s human capital. The authors also say that such new waves are not, at least in New York, necessarily undocumented. Differing from this view, Bonacich and Appelbaum mention that, although they do not have evidence, they believe that undocumented workers have a higher employment rate in the Los Angeles apparel industry than in the rest of the job market (274).

As the El Monte case shows, it is not uncommon for employers and employees to belong to the same ethnic group. According to Xiolan Bao, several reports indicate that this way of organization is advantageous to both workers and bosses³¹ (126). Richard Appelbaum and Gary Gereffi, point out that “[t]he contracting system, which maximizes the

³¹ The author refers this observation to Bernard Wong’s “The Role of Ethnicity in Enclave Enterprises: A Study of the Chinese Garment Factories in New York City.” Human Organization 46 (1987): 120-9.

flexibility of manufacturers, is often based on friendship and kinship networks that reduce the workers' sense of the need for an explicit contract" (57). Again, as the El Monte case demonstrates, language and cultural barriers are a strong bond that make the undocumented sweatshop worker specially vulnerable to her same ethnic-group employers.

As mentioned above, the contracting system is basically composed of four different and identifiable agents: Retailers, manufacturers, contractors and workers. According to Bonacich and Appelbaum, retailers have a crucial role in influencing, at a national level and sometimes at a global level, what kind of garments will be produced. In this sense, manufacturers are vulnerable to the huge control that retailers exercise (80). Manufacturers, in turn, are responsible for the design and the image of clothing and its branding. They also share a big part of the control since they acquire raw materials and organize production, although the actual sewing is managed by the contractors (27-8). Some retailers also fulfill these functions, while directly assigning jobs to contractors (Howard 159).

As Bonacich and Appelbaum explain, the contractors are in charge of most of the actual clothing production, which takes the form of either assembly or sewing. A few others take care of cleaning, finishing or cutting. The contractors, and their employees are in charge of the most labour-intensive stages of production (135). As indicated by James Loucky et al., manufacturers compel contractors to pay low wages, distancing themselves from workers, and depositing the whole responsibility of the working conditions on the contractors (349). In turn, contractors, who are pressured by competition and short deadlines, are basically forced to reduce salaries and working conditions to the bare minimum, while stressing their employees to work faster and better (348).

Avoiding any accusations of particular firms or power groups, it is useful to observe the tremendously unequal relations between the main actors of the garment industry. According to Steve Nutter, in Los Angeles these power relations can be seen as a pyramid in

which few retailers control a major part of the operation from the top, placing their orders to 1,000 manufacturers, which in turn distribute the jobs to 4,000 contractors that employ around 120,000 workers at the base (200).

In relation to the practical “convenience” and the reproduction of the contracting system, Bonacich and Appelbaum indicate that it “provides at least five major benefits to apparel manufacturers . . . : It externalizes risk, it lowers the cost of labor, it enables manufacturers to evade moral as well as legal responsibility for violations of labor laws, and it helps to thwart unionization” (136). Finally, it is also useful to see how the money paid for a garment is distributed among the actors who play a role in its production and distribution. Figure 3 reveals how the cost of a \$100 garment sold in Los Angeles is distributed. Although this information corresponds only to the Los Angeles garment market, it reflects trends in a nationwide system of production.

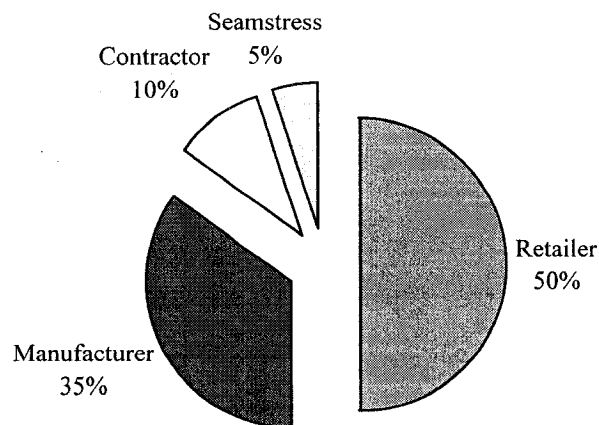


Figure 3 Division of the cost of a \$100 garment. Data from Steve Nutter’s “The Structure and Growth of the Los Angeles Garment Industry” p. 200.

But it would be a mistake to analyze the sweatshop as a phenomenon within national boundaries. According to Bender and Greenwald, the sweatshop can also be understood as an international structure: “[t]he contracting and subcontracting system that was once limited to a single nation or, more likely, a single city, is now global. . . . [for example] Nike has become, for antisweatshop activists, the archetypical sweatshop employer” (7). Following this transnational standpoint, the abuses that the sweatshop worker -and more particularly the undocumented sweatshop worker- is subject to, have deeper and extended roots, which in order to be understood need to be analyzed keeping in mind the travels of raw materials, management, finished products and labour.

Capital on the Run

This section is concerned with the relations between labour migration and globalization of capital as complex and interconnected movements. Although it is an evident fact that globalization has had a long and multifaceted history of several hundreds of years, improvements in technology and capital-driven enterprises, including warfare, have dramatically accelerated the globalizing pace.

In this new world order, the immigrant sweatshop worker is located at the bottom of a complex political and organizational structure that, as Saskia Sassen observes throughout her work, partially and indirectly promotes migration from the “Third World” to the US and other “First World” countries, where many migrants end up in situations that are far from what they expected. It is not surprising that garment-manufacturing workers are among those who have been most affected in this process, given that, as Edna Bonacich et al. point out, this is one of the most internationalized production practices in the planet (“Garment” 3).

As huge investment firms move their production plants to “Third World” economies in the search for cheap wages and weak labour legislation, inside the US there has been a proliferation of small and medium low-wage manufacturing industries -like the garment one- that employ mainly Asian and Latin American women immigrants (Kang 413-4). As Immanuel Ness mentions, besides the over-emphasized mobility of goods and technology, a fundamental part of globalization has to do with the transnational traffic of workers (172). Additionally, Bender and Greenwald, point out the tendency of modern critics to see the “reappearance” of the sweatshop as an aftermath of multi-national trade agreements since the 1970s (7).

Sassen examines how foreign investment in the “Third World” disturbs the already established occupational organization, unbalances the job market by employing a large amount of women, and creates westernizing bonds, all of which may add up to pre-existing economic conditions, boosting the desire by many “Third World” citizens to leave their country (Mobility 21). Sassen criticizes classic economic analysis by pointing out that it is a common mistake to assume economic decline, poverty and overpopulation as the chief reasons for the existence of “Third World” flows of emigrants into the US. She gives the example of many “Third World” countries that have at least one of these characteristics and that are not important sources of emigration (Mobility 3). According to her, emigration is seen as an alternative because of certain structural conditions -like direct foreign investment- that circuitously promote it (Mobility 20). She stresses the importance of realizing that these are not causes in themselves but that “the *combination* of poverty, unemployment, or underemployment *with* the emergence of objective and ideological linkages probably operates as a migrant-inducing factor” (Mobility 9).

In garment production, the cycle can become a retro-fed circuit as some US-based companies seek out cheap labour among “Third World” countries, modifying their economy

and life style, while indirectly promoting migration flows to the “First World” that in some cases can take the acute form of undocumented immigration (Ness 170). For instance, strategic business developments in South East-Asia after World War II and the Korean War have had an important impact in promoting emigration to the US (Sassen, The Mobility 8-9). Thailand, the country from which the workers and contractors of the El Monte sweatshop emigrated, is a significant example given that it was strategically chosen “as a ‘rest and recreation’ (R&R) retreat for American soldiers by a 1967 treaty between the U.S. military and the Thai government” (Kang 408), indicating a very plausible link between US intervention and its correspondent emigration backlash.

Aside from the acute analysis Sassen makes in relation to the causes of immigration to the US, she also mentions that more and more, global cities act as economic-control centers for the rest of the world (Mobility 2). It is not a coincidence that many immigrants’ final destination within the US are huge metropoli like Los Angeles, Chicago and New York. In this respect, Sassen notes: “Global capital and the new immigrant workforce are two major instances of transnational categories/actors that have unifying properties across borders and find themselves in contestation with each other inside global cities” (Globalization xx).

However, not all critics see sweatshops as the sites of particularly exploitative practices. As some would argue, the other side of the coin is that “Third World” workers (either living in the “Third World” or within the “First World”), get paid wages that -even if miserable by US standards of living- are considerably superior if compared with the income they are capable of earning in their home countries. Advocates of free-trade policies like Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn, praise sweatshops in Asia as a real opportunity for economic growth that otherwise wouldn’t exist; in their own words: “the campaign against sweatshops risks harming the very people it is intended to help. For beneath their grime,

sweatshops are a clear sign of the industrial revolution that is beginning to reshape Asia” (170).

From a parallel point of view, Leslie Kaufman and David Gonzalez argue through a news article about labour reforms in a Salvadorian factory that there is a radical contradiction between improving working conditions and paying higher wages on one hand, and still being economically competitive in a global market scale on the other. According to them, a rigorous enforcement of labour laws entails the risk of losing the production contract from the manufacturer or retailer, which would mean no jobs at all (“Labor”). Quite obviously, in a competitive global market scale, poor-paying jobs and working conditions like those of sweatshops are preferable to having no jobs at all.

Interestingly, these authors hardly see any option beyond these two alternatives, such as an improvement of sweatshop labour conditions on a global scale in “First” and “Third World” countries, eliminating in this way the threat of cutting production orders if working conditions improve. These authors insist that if a free-market economy path were to be followed, life standards would eventually be improved for those who are willing to pay the price. According to this line of thought, “Third World” countries such as Mexico would be able to benefit economically, as some East Asian economies have done (Bonacich et al., “Offshore” 163). Unfortunately this doesn’t seem a very plausible scenario, at least in the mid-term future, as sweatshops worldwide and the particular case of the El Monte sweatshop demonstrate.

In contradiction to the “neo-liberal” perspective mentioned above, other authors see the process of receiving immigrant workers in the “First World” as a drain of valuable human resources from the “Third World”: As the nurturing and education of a significant part of the life of the immigrant worker takes place in her country of origin, the receiving country saves a considerable expense, becoming only “responsible” for her preservation (Sassen, Mobility

37). In relation to this, Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich mention that: “we can conceive of labor migration to advanced capitalist countries as the absorption of new sources of labor power” (31).

In today’s global economy, poverty and wealth have become trans/intra-national, giving certain groups a tremendous decision power over other social groups. Among these last groups are those formed by undocumented sweatshop workers who, after managing to get inside the “First World” with the hope of improving their conditions of existence, still remain trapped in exploitative systems, embodying Doreen Massey’s concept of “spatial imprisonment” (63). Of course, these abuses are not ignored by governments and civil society, which is why the following section examines their efforts to improve these circumstances.

Policy and Resistance

The undocumented sweatshop worker is under a complex and sometimes contradictory set of laws: On the one hand those laws that regulate labour and on the other those that control immigration. There is no doubt that many of these laws are well-intentioned in terms of improving working conditions, and protecting the economic development of the US. Unfortunately, as with many laws, there is frequently a gap between the written text and its practical enforcement.

According to Sassen, there has been a recent tendency of the US Congress to cut back on the privileges of documented and undocumented immigrants (Globalization 11). Consequently, the undocumented sweatshop worker’s sphere of action has been remarkably reduced. As Luocky et al. point out, workers are surrounded by an ambiance of fear and threats to their job and to their residency in the US, which serve as mechanisms of control for

their bosses (352). As Bonacich and Appelbaum note, it is illegal to employ undocumented workers under the US Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)³². An important mission of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) is to uncover all undocumented workers. This is in plain contradiction with the Fair Labour Standards Act (FLSA, explained further on), which is applicable to all workers, regardless of their immigration status (237). As Mort suggests, it is unlikely that such immigration laws will discourage tens of thousands of undocumented apparel employees of LA from continuing to work outside the law (“Immigrant” 87). By breaking immigration laws, bosses and undocumented workers are in collusion against the government, inside a system that the same government has created. Complicity may even give the impression of loyalty between bosses and employees. As suggested by Bao, ignorance of labour laws and rights may promote some employees to feel compelled to work harder for their boss if she or he gives them some kind of protection against immigration enforcement (126). The undocumented sweatshop worker lives in oppressive circumstances, in which the fear of deportation is a strong obstacle to protest (Chang 67), or to organize. Such conditions notably deteriorate her political options.

Nutter argues that policies like the IRCA have been counterproductive, in the sense that they have pushed contractors employing undocumented workers into a state of further secretiveness, worsening their working conditions. Moreover, some employers have opted to

³² The 1986 IRCA “features a limited regularization program that enables undocumented aliens to legalize their status if they can prove continuous residence in the United States since before January 1, 1982, among other eligibility criteria. A second provision of the law seeks to reduce the employment opportunities of undocumented workers through sanctions against employers who knowingly hire them. The third element is an extended guest-worker program designed to ensure a continuing abundant supply of low-wage workers for agriculture” (Sassen, Globalization 33). According to Bonacich and Appelbaum, “[i]mmigration laws, especially the [IRCA] . . . have created an enormous hidden economy of falsified legal documents for which immigrants pay between \$300 and \$500. The owner typically turns a blind eye to false documentation, sometimes even helping employees to obtain it” (193).

hire undocumented immigrant workers because of the obvious advantages that their vulnerability presents (208). In a similar way, Bonacich and Appelbaum note that the attractiveness of undocumented workers to employers promoted by immigration laws is contradictory to these laws' original purpose, namely, to eradicate undocumented immigration (272).

But immigration laws are only one of two axes that regulate the legal actions of the immigrant sweatshop worker. It is important as well to look at US federal labour laws. According to Bonacich and Appelbaum, the Wage and Hour division of the federal Department of Labour, which operates under the FLSA, states

the payment of minimum wage, specifies wages and conditions for overtime work, and prohibits both homework and child labor (the minimum working age is sixteen). It also requires that employers keep records for each worker, including social security number, forms that establish legal United States residency, and a breakdown of hours and compensation. (227)

It is by infringement of these laws that the contractor's shop becomes a sweatshop. Without a doubt, this law has promoted certain improvements in hygiene; nonetheless as Green points out, past and present are not as dissimilar as they may seem, given that inadequate working conditions still abound today ("Fashion" 40).

Even though it is inclusive of undocumented workers, the major deficiency of the FLSA rests in its blunt contradiction with the IRCA. As Bao observes: "With few employment alternatives, many immigrant workers fear that any form of cooperation with law enforcement agencies or organized labor will cost them their jobs. . . . Working underground, they fear that a visit from the Department of Labor to their work place will bring in a raid by the Immigration and Naturalization Service" (129).

It is important to note that this federal law can also be used against sweatshop labour in other ways. According to Bonacich and Appelbaum, a section of the FLSA that prohibits goods crossing state borders if they are found to be in violation of the law, was used by staff of the Wage and Hour division to threaten many LA manufacturers that broke the law. The staff also made use of agreements that would oblige the manufacturers to work only with contractors who fulfilled the FLSA (228-9). Unfortunately, aside from obligatory self-monitoring efforts such as this one, enforcement of the law has been generally weak. As Bonacich and Appelbaum reveal, most violations are unlikely to be exposed, since the Department of Labour conducts merely 300 investigations per year (233).

But not all the responsibility to make and apply the laws that regulate sweatshop labour resides at the federal level. According to Bonacich and Appelbaum, a Concentrated Enforcement Program (CEP) that operated in California from 1978-83 has been one of the best-orchestrated efforts to diminish labour abuses. The Division of Labour Standards Enforcement (DLSE) ran such a program, which was highly successful as it actively searched for labour abuses, conducting more than 5,000 inspections in the LA garment industry. Unfortunately, the CEP's efficiency was eventually diminished when it became part of the Bureau of Field enforcement. From 1992 onward, all the state-law enforcement of the garment industry was managed by the Targeted Industries Partnership Program, which was created by the DLSE (223-4). This program coordinated the efforts of federal, state and local agencies in order to educate bosses and workers about the law and to enforce the law itself (238). In addition to this, a section of the California Labour Code, known as the Montoya Act, is concerned exclusively with the apparel industry, as "[i]t requires all garment manufacturers to register with the state, sets forth bonding requirements, defines misdemeanors, and establishes civil and criminal penalties (including confiscation)" (Bonacich and Appelbaum 224).

Comparing the written law with its actual practice indicates that the system of enforcement has not been efficient: The Department of Labour employs only 800 inspectors to supervise two million places of work (Howard 164). How can these deficiencies be explained? From a perspective beyond national laws, Ness blames the “neo-liberal” policy behind transnational capital movements as one of the main pressures that have provoked the sudden loss of workers’ rights and empowerment (172).

Although they have played a fundamental role, the political power of garment workers unions has been in a steady decline³³. Aside from them, a wide range of non-government organizations such as anti-sweatshop coalitions, left and anarchist organizations, immigrant and worker’s advocates, human-rights defenders, student activists and religious groups have played an important role in influencing legislation enforcement and in creating more transparent labour practices. Furthermore, as Ross notes, the eradication of “the global sweatshop” has been a unifying objective for activists’ energy throughout the anti-globalization movement (“Rise” 225). However, as Bender and Greenwald note, in spite of the recognition of sweatshops as transnational circles of production and consumption by many NGOs, unions and politicians, most of their efforts are not aimed beyond a national level of organization (10). Another weakness of these organizations is that their effort has largely been of little help to the undocumented sweatshop worker. As Ness mentions, it is difficult for the undocumented worker to convert isolated protests into more lasting forms of

³³ According to Ross, the “ILGWU [International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union] membership decreased from 457,517 in 1969 (when 70 to 80 percent of New York factories were union shops) to less than 200,000 by the time of its 1995 merger with the ACTWU [Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union]. With its employment peak of 1.45 million in 1973, domestic apparel jobs had fallen to 846,000 by 1995 (which saw a year’s loss of 10 percent in the first big wave of NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] losses)” (“Introduction” 30).

political organization. Furthermore, undocumented workers usually don't trust or count on the support of non-governmental organizations, not to mention governmental agencies (170).

Yet other critics, such as John Cavanagh, assign a good deal of weight to the agency and responsibility of the consumer (50). An intrinsic problem of such an approach rests in the fact that besides outbursts of publicity, consumer opinion and action is dependent on consistent media exposure and, as this thesis explains, issues around sweatshop labour have not been consistently included in the mainstream media.

Aside from consumer agency, some authors are of the view that unionization and enforcement of the law are the strongest remedies to solve the problem of sweatshop labour (Bao 137; Piore 139). Others put all their faith in the creation of a transnational labour movement that will empower workers worldwide (Loucky et al. 360). However, along with Bonacich and Appelbaum, I am of the opinion that "these forces *by themselves* are unlikely to succeed" (295). Rather than placing the responsibility in particular social actors, I think (along with Ross) that an extensive, inclusive and transnational collaboration of a wide range of people and organizations is needed if any significant change is to be realized ("Introduction" 37). In this context, the present thesis is a small contribution complementing the work of many others who share the belief in the importance of making a difference. If, as Rorty says, those who suffer the most have lost their voice (94), this thesis is interested in (re)describing how they and their condition of existence have been discussed.

Chapter 3. Manufacturing Bodies

“Il n’y a pas un, mais des silences
et ils font partie intégrante des stratégies
qui soustendent et traversent les discours”

(Foucault, Histoire 39)

In this chapter I present the results of my investigation. It is divided into six sections which deal with the dominant assertions that discursively manufacture the bodies of the undocumented sweatshop workers throughout the corpus, namely, as *absent*, *alien*, *criminal*, *passive victims*, and as *redeemed*, and that manufacture the sweatshop as *a-systemic*.

Representative selections from the texts that form the corpus are included in each section as the evidence for each assertion and for its corresponding critique. Both bodies of newspaper texts are analyzed conjointly while the selection of museum texts is differentiated by including it at the end of each section. In most cases I have placed in **bold** specific words from these texts to emphasize their importance. Needless to say, particular attention is paid to what is *not* said but is implied in the corpus.

In my analysis, the descriptive and the interpretative approaches of the texts in the corpus are bonded by chains of signification, (re)describing the sometimes distinct, but always interdependent, assertions of each section. Each section buttresses the other in fundamental ways; the purpose of separately focusing on each one of these assertions is not only to divide the discursive construction that shapes the identity of the undocumented sweatshop worker, but also to problematize it from distinct angles.

It is worth referencing here that van Dijk has similarly identified a “Prejudice Schema” in which the “First World” stereotypical conceptions of ethnic minorities

consistently fall into three simplified thematic categories; namely “under the general label of (perceived) “threat”: threat to our social identity (autonomy, norms, or rules), to social order (safety, well-being), and to our [mainly economic] interests” (Communicating 61). At one point or another the six following assertions fall into one or more of these thematic categories. It is important to note that I reached my “findings” before I was aware of van Dijk’s categorization and that in a certain way his observations confirm some of mine, particularly in the assertions that identify the mainstream media discursive construction of the undocumented sweatshop worker as alien (a threat to social identity) and as criminal (a threat to the social and the economic order). In spite of these similarities I avoid trying to make my findings “fit” into van Dijk’s observations; rather I present them as a complement to his and to other approaches to the study of the discrimination of minorities.

As Absent

The first assertion that permeates the mainstream media (re)presentations of the undocumented sweatshop worker is that of her *absence*. It is an everyday fact that among immense quantities of advertised products and services it is extremely rare to hear about the conditions of production of such commodities. This is especially accurate for the garment industry, in which the advertising of fashion plays a key role. In relation to this Sut Jhally, while making a revisionist analysis about the Marxist notion of “the fetishism of commodities”³⁴ and the role that contemporary advertising plays in it, explains that in a

³⁴ According to Jhally, “Marx called the fetishism of commodities a disguise whereby the appearance of things in the marketplace masks the story of who fashioned them, and under what conditions. Were it thought to be important for us to hear this story, our being deprived of it would constitute a systematic misrepresentation or distorted structure of communication within the world of goods itself” (50).

capitalist society consumers are misinformed about the process of production. In particular he (Jhally) mentions the systematic hiding of:

[T]he process of planning and designing products; the actual relations of production that operate in particular factories around the world; the conditions of work in factories; the level of wages and benefits of workers; whether labor is unionised [sic] or non-unionised [sic]; quality checks and the level of automation; market research on consumers; the effect on the environment of producing goods through particular industrial processes; the renewable or non-renewable nature of the raw materials used; and the relations of production that prevail in the extraction of raw materials around the world. (50)

In spite of this tendency of erasure and as the El Monte scandal demonstrates, issues about labour abuses are reflected in public opinion once in a while. In order to explain this phenomenon, it is important to keep in mind the codes of newsworthiness that this event illustrates. According to Richard Ericson et. al, the coverage of an event such as the raid on the El Monte sweatshop is guided by certain situational and contextual judgments that govern the journalistic practice such as “simplification” which entails that the event under coverage is unambiguous yet eventful (140); “dramatization” which is the recognition of an event as important in relation to its context and competition of attention from other events (141) and “a sense of the unexpected”, that is, “a major development that has political, legal, ethical, and moral implications” (148). In a similar way the coverage of the El Monte sweatshop case corresponds to some of the codes of newsworthiness enlisted by Galtung and Ruge such as “frequency” which is exemplified by the short time-span taken by the raid on the El Monte sweatshop; “threshold”, that is, the intensity and drama of present-day slavery; the “meaningfulness” of an event that is in harmony with the cultural background of the

journalists who write about it and the “negativity” of the abusive conditions in which the sweatshop workers were “discovered” (qtd. in Hartley 76-9).

In accordance to these codes of newsworthiness it is also possible to understand why day-to-day labour abuses and mistreatment of undocumented workers go, for the most part, unreported in the mainstream media. These issues are not easy to report by using simplistic schemes and catchy headlines; they are usually not strictly dramatic and short-term events, they are not unexpected, they are an extended practice and they are not “negative” enough to be included in the agenda.

But even in the rare cases when these issues are given attention, the bodies that are mainly in charge of the production are kept invisible for the most part. In a parallel way to Jhally’s analysis, Martin explains five key frames that the US mainstream media have used in the structure of the coverage of labor stories in the 1990s. Worth mentioning here is the frame that functions with the premise that: “*The process of production is none of the public’s business*. The role of the consumer is to decide whether or not to buy a product or service, and not to inquire about the production process. Yet, aside from a few government labeling laws, it is nearly impossible to know anything about the means of production of a product or service” (9). Keeping these points in mind, this section analyses the absence of the undocumented sweatshop worker among the texts in the corpus.

While all the texts under analysis are related in one form or another to the El Monte sweatshop raid, very few speak directly about the sweatshop’s workers. As figure 2 (see the section “The Corpus” in Chapter one) demonstrates, the frequency of publication of texts that make reference to the El Monte sweatshop drastically declines after its newsworthiness wears off. Furthermore, based on the information from table 2 (see the section “The Corpus” in Chapter one), it is evident that the main way to frame the story by the Times is to distantly approach sweatshops as a “problem”, while the Post dedicates the highest percentage of its

coverage to the punishment of contractors and/or manufacturers. The bodies of the workers are systematically excluded from the coverage.

For instance, even in the article in the Post that first announces the raid on the El Monte sweatshop by government authorities, more importance is given to the detention and prosecution of the eight operators of the sweatshop than to the conditions of existence of its far more numerous workers. The headline of this text reads: “**8 Arrested in L.A. on Charges They Enslaved Thai Immigrants**” (Reuter A17). The reference to slavery resonates here with the American history of black slavery and intensifies the blame that is deposited in the eight operators of the El Monte sweatshop, while the workers become secondary to the story. The emphasis on punishment diminishes the attention that audiences could give to the conditions of production of the workers. This mechanism works in a similar way to Lakoff’s and Johnson’s notion of “highlighting and hiding” in which focusing on certain aspects of a concept hides, at the same time, other aspects of that concept (Metaphors 10).

In another article in the Times, which accounts for the actions taken by the US Labour Department to stop sweatshops, the headline reads: “**U.S. Warns Big Retailers About Sweatshop Goods**”; in this same article a sub-headline quoting the voice of the US Labour Secretary says: “Time for major **retailers** and brand-name **manufacturers** to assert some **control**”. In this article the US federal government, through the validating voice of a Secretary of State, encourages the garment industry to monitor its own production practices. The protective figure of the government gives a slap on the wrist to the misbehaving parties. However it is important to call attention to the fact that in this interchange between the public and the private sector, the people who are at the bottom of the production pyramid and who actually *do* the work and who apparently trigger off this “warning” are erased from the dialogue.

In a similar way, a letter to the editor of the Washington Post written by the Director of California's Department of Industrial Relations claims that "[t]he workers in El Monte are free because of **state and local authorities in California**, not **the federal government**. The INS, by several accounts, learned of the slavery situation three years ago but eventually closed the case" (Aubry, "Thank California, Not the Feds" A22). Clearly this epistle is giving far more importance to the dispute for credit between the state and the federal government authorities than to the sweatshop workers, nullifying in this way the workers' political competence while implying their absence from the dispute. Once again, highlighting certain aspects of an event (e.g. who is to blame and who is to be praised for the heroic actions) obscures other aspects that are more significant such as how do these conditions of production take place, how extended they are and, more importantly, what kind of people are trapped in them. In relation to this accenting/obscuring mechanism an article in the Times explains that "**the abuses** [of the El Monte sweatshop case] **have been swept up in Presidential politics**, inciting bitter exchanges today **between officials of the Clinton Administration and Gov. Pete Wilson of California** – not over how the abuses can be stopped or their ominous economic significance, but **over who is to blame**" (Sterngold, "Raids Link" A16). The central notion of this text is self-explanatory as it (re)produces the body of the undocumented sweatshop worker as absent and as far less important than "Presidential politics" or than "stopping the abuses" and their "ominous economic significance".

Another example of the overwhelming absence of the sweatshop worker in the coverage of the El Monte raid is the controversial debate about the museum exhibition. In an article in the Times entitled "**Furor Builds Over Sweatshop Exhibition**" the dispute about whether the display should or shouldn't take place largely features the museum curators and representative members of the clothing industry (Molotsky B12). Evidently, in this debate the

voice of the main “attraction” of the exhibition, the worker herself, is completely ignored. Dealing with the same issue, a headline of an article in the Washington Post reads: “Clothing Industry Rips Into Planned Sweatshop Exhibit; Smithsonian Focus is Called **Biased in Favor of Labor**”; and the third paragraph of the copy informs: “While some of the **problems** can be traced to **semantic differences between business executives and academics**, clothing manufacturers are ‘**furious**’ that the issue of sweatshops is being illustrated primarily through clothing industry examples” (Rosenfeld C01). In these texts the emphasis is being put on the outrage created by the theme of the exhibition, eclipsing the abuses to the sweatshop workers and the workers themselves. By translating the problem to the abstract sphere of “semantic differences between business executives and academics” the more thorny matters of labour abuse are downgraded to a matter of “balanced representation”. Moreover, the clothing industry is portrayed as a victim by implying that other industries that abuse their workers are not being included in the exhibition, but the workers themselves (from the clothing industry or other trades) do not form part of this debate.

Fortunately, and in spite of the controversy around it, the museum exhibition did take place. However it also (re)produced, although to a lesser extent, the notion of the sweatshop worker as absent. For example, a text in the exhibition states: “The discovery of the El Monte sweatshop **shocked the nation**. What many **consumers** thought took place only in other **countries** was happening at home” (“A Watershed Event”). This text emphasizes the shock suffered by the consumers when they ingenuously “discovered” that the clothes they wore had been made in an underground slave-shop. It is interesting to note how in this context “the nation” appears to be principally formed by “consumers” -as opposed to politically active citizens- that are mainly moved by guilt instead of genuine concern. But if the consumer/citizen was deeply affected by the “shock” of the El Monte sweatshop, the “shock” of years of labour abuses that the El Monte sweatshop workers lived through is not being

sufficiently emphasized. It is through mechanisms like this one that the sweatshop workers can be absent even when they are being talked about.

I am not saying, however, that the voice of the workers is *completely* absent in the coverage. For instance the El Monte Voices video gives an output to the voice of the workers. In contrast with El Monte Voices the “Dialogue” section does not include any of the workers among the six “spokespeople” who answer the question of “What should **Americans** know about sweatshop production in the U.S.?” The emphasis is being put, once again, on the consumer and not on the worker. Moreover, this is a good example of one of van Dijk’s discursive strategies; according to him “[t]here are two basic modes of the role of discourse in the reproduction of racism³⁵, namely, as discourse between majority and minority group members, and as discourse among majority group members about minorities or ethnic relations” (Elite 30). In accordance with this typology the “Dialogue” section of the museum exhibition is formed only by élite persons³⁶ of the majority talking about the “problem” that a minority faces (or is), but the voice of such minority is absent from the dialogue.

Throughout the examples of this section I have demonstrated how the sweatshop workers are systematically excluded throughout the corpus and by extension in the bulk of the mainstream media coverage. In support of my argument it has been extensively demonstrated that news coverage of “Third World” issues in “First World” mainstream media is in short supply (Dahlgren and Chakrapani 46); more significantly the mainstream media also ignore the “Third World” within the “First World” and, as Ericson et al. point out, even when there is concern in the mainstream media for minorities they are addressed with the terms of the hegemonic culture (140).

³⁵ According to van Dijk “the emphasis on culture and cultural differences has become the modern variant of racial differentiations of earlier western ideologies” (Racism 26).

³⁶ See footnote 26 in the section “The Corpus”, Chapter one.

But the undocumented sweatshop worker is *not* absent in the material reality of everyday life. She contributes to the development of the US and of many “First World” economies through her long hours of work and bare-minimum wages. She manufactures many of the basic and luxurious commodities that we use and that most of the time we take for granted. Because a more inclusive coverage of her and other sweat-labour workers in the mainstream media is not a very plausible thing to happen, this section invites audiences to approach the alternative media³⁷, and to the alternative media producers to do a more critical writing of the place that the undocumented worker does *not* have in the mainstream media, which speaks about the kind of society we live in.

As Alien

One of the most pervasive assertions that is stated and/or implied in the corpus is the one that constructs the undocumented sweatshop worker as *alien*. By this I mean that the worker is subjectivized as the “other” in a significant way. Following a tradition of more than a hundred years of (re)presenting sweatshops and sweatshop workers as foreigners (see the section “Historical Background” in Chapter two) the contemporary version of this discursive construction continues to position her as stranger.

Associated with this foreignness are the previously mentioned fears of disease propagation, filth, of diluting “American whiteness” in the form of racial degradation, of the loss of “American jobs”, and of disruption to the social order. According to Bender and Greenwald, foreignness continues to permeate the popular imagination of sweatshop labour

³⁷ I am relying on Nick Couldry and James Curran’s definition in which alternative media is “media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations” (7).

and the archetypal sweatshop worker (8). As they observe “labeling a workplace a sweatshop casts its workers as foreign, alien, and dangerous” (12). There are many examples of this *alienation* through language within the corpus of articles examined. In the following paragraphs I enlist some of the most representative.

I want to start by making reference to an implied suggestion of the “alien threat” that the US Secretary of Labour, Robert Reich, makes as he states in an interview in the New York Times:

The cutting and sewing end of the garment industry in the United States has had **a sad history** of worker abuses for more than a century. **Immigrants**, some of them legal, some **illegal, crowded** together in **unsafe, unsanitary** conditions working for **very little money** have characterized cutting and sewing shops since the turn of the century” (Finder, “How an American” 4: 7).

Interestingly, the vocabulary used by Mr. Reich is very similar to that one used by inspectors, politicians and journalists about a hundred years ago (see “Historical Background”) to describe the sweatshop and its workers. Although in this paragraph Mr. Reich speaks about a self-evident fact, the use of such terms as “illegal, crowded, unsafe, unsanitary” and “very little money” associate today’s sweatshop worker with the filth, diseases, immorality, degradation and extreme poverty of the past. These are stereotypical and limiting ways of portraying the sweatshop worker. In this example van Dijk’s analysis results are useful to understand how “truisms” and “common sense” can also reproduce discrimination. He mentions that “[a] critical analysis of the meaning of news discourse focuses particularly on various types of implication. Implications are meanings (propositions) that are not explicitly expressed in the text but may be inferred from words or sentences in the text, as well as from the mental models constructed during understanding” (Elite 256).

Moreover it is crucial to point out that Mr. Reich's statements are rooted in a specific rhetorical context, namely that of the "official radiance" that a speech act performed by a Secretary of State has. Such statements are framed within a context of paternalistic concern yet they (re)produce, with the weight and severity of a high governmental authority, the most typical and degrading aspects of sweatshop workers. It is crucial to point out the racist (but still "politically correct") character of this discursive construction. As van Dijk observes, in western cultures the recognition of socio-cultural differences (e.g. nationality) between distinct human groups in the form of ethnicism has replaced racism (Racism 28). As he states: "While seen as morally less reprehensible, the emphasis on culture and cultural differences has become the modern variant of racial differentiations of earlier western ideologies" (van Dijk, Racism 26).

Keeping this in mind, it is important to note that several texts of the corpus make an explicit reference to the nationality of the workers, even though many of them had already been living and working in the US for several years by the time the El Monte sweatshop was "discovered". A couple of examples will suffice to illustrate this "politically correct" ethnicism. The front-page article in the New York Times that informed of the raid two days after it occurred announced through its headline: "**Thai Workers Are Set Free In California**" (Noble). About a month after this text came out, a front-page article in the Post was named: "Sweatshops Instead of Paradise; **Thais** Lived in Fear as Slaves at L.A. Garment Factories" (Branigin).

The inclusion of the sweatshop workers' nationality in these headlines serves to implicitly emphasize their "otherness". To better understand this mechanism, it is useful to observe that in most news stories (written in the US media) that deal with US citizens, the label of "American" is not used in the same way that "Thai" is used along the corpus. This shouldn't be a surprise if we keep in mind Sassen's observation that in a process of

accelerated economic and cultural globalization, “[t]oo often immigration and ethnicity are constituted as otherness” (*Globalization* xxxi). In relation to this point van Dijk observes that: “A large part of the hidden point of view, tacit opinions, or the usually denied ideologies of the press may be inferred from . . . lexical descriptions and identifications of social groups and their members” (*News* 177). Making an effort to avoid the (re)creation of “otherness” through language I have consciously kept away from labeling the El Monte sweatshop workers as “Thai” during the writing of my thesis.

The observations in this section help to understand how the stereotype of the undocumented sweatshop worker is shaped; a language construction that, according to Hartley, once it has been formed “will never be selected as newsworthy unless it does or says something that fits the stereotype” (116). In this respect a good illustration of the repetitive use of the stereotype of the sweatshop worker as the “other” is given as part of an interview in a *Washington Post* column:

“You walk down Eighth Avenue [in Manhattan] and you get to 39th Street and down, and there are **waves of immigrant workers**. Who knows what kind of conditions they’re working in?” says David Rees, **manager and buyer** for Linda Dresner, which largely **works with established European manufacturing companies**. “Do we know what the factories are like? Absolutely not,” Rees says.

Traditionally, garment workers have been **immigrants, women and children**. They **didn’t need English** to do their jobs. **Women** knew how to sew. And **children simply would do what they were told**. (Givhan, “A Stain” B4)

Relying on collective images from the past, this example shows how the stereotype of the sweatshop workers crystallizes in the form of multitudes (“waves”) of anonymous,

ignorant, submissive and, most importantly, *foreign* women and children who toil in mysterious factories. In this respect van Dijk's identification of the discursive strategy of what he calls "the numbers game" allows us to understand how the immigrant sweatshop worker is negatively (re)presented. Speaking about such a "numbers game" van Dijk observes that "[f]igures need not be lied about or exaggerated. It is the way they are presented or extrapolated that makes them impressive" (*Elite* 107). In a parallel way, "[a]n even more effective and stereotypical way to emphasize numbers or masses are the frequently used 'flood' metaphors. . . . The negative connotations of such metaphors hardly need comment. Obviously, [the] immigration is categorized as a natural disaster . . . tidal waves are a threat to the country and its population, which might "drown" (Van Dijk, *Communicating* 372).

It also is crucial to observe who gets to speak in this example; the assertion under analysis is constituted through the validating voice of an implicitly prominent businessman (a "manager and buyer") who "works with established European manufacturing companies". Moreover, this stereotype contributes to the positioning of the undocumented sweatshop worker in the axis where the discriminatory categories of female, foreign, poor, ignorant, unskilled, young, non-white and undocumented overlap. Not surprisingly such stereotype (re)produces the hegemonic conditions of the people that possess and enact the opposite categories, that is, the predominantly male, "American", middle-class (or upper-class), educated, skilled, mature, and white. Not coincidentally these categories also apply to most journalists and museum curators, but of course they are not pointed out as variations, since they are, by "commonsense", the norm. Van Dijk stresses these binaries as he says:

From the point of view of a 'white man's world', minorities and other Third World [sic] peoples are generally categorized as 'them', and opposed to 'us' and . . . as not belonging if not as an aberration in white society. Similarly,

events in the ethnic communities are defined by the white authorities, such as the police and the politicians, and minority voices are effectively excluded.

(Racism 21)

Another text, this time in a front-page article in the Washington Post informs that: “Labor Secretary Robert B. Reich called the conditions that state and federal investigators found during an Aug 2. raid in El Monte, Calif., east of Los Angeles ‘the **most heinous thing** we’ve seen. This **really** was **slave labor** inside the United States,’ he said in an interview” (Swoboda and Pressler, “U.S. Targets” A1).

As van Dijk observes, it is the authoritative voice of the federal government (through the figure of Mr. Reich) that labels these practices (and indirectly, the victims affected by them) with the “distancing” and alienating terms “most heinous” and “thing”. Indeed, van Dijk notes that in the press and among groups of influential people racism and, I should add, labour abuses are generally (re)presented as happening elsewhere (Elite 229). The text under analysis portrays the labour abuses of the El Monte sweatshop as unconceivable and as something that should not be happening “here”. Furthermore, the Secretary of Labour, by exclaiming that this is the “real thing”, is implying that other forms of labour abuse are less reprehensible because of their “not-so-extreme” status.

Aside from alienating the workers who manufacture the garments that fulfill the needs of many US citizens these shocking descriptions also shape, by contrast, the social identity of the hegemonic group that labels them. Consequently, the implied opposition to these alienating descriptions are those of the “American”, clean, ordered, healthy, efficient, civil, transparent and legal US industry and labour force. Wodak gives a good explanation of this mechanism of definition-by-opposition as she writes: “Discourse about others is always connected with one’s own identity, that is to say, with the question ‘how do we see

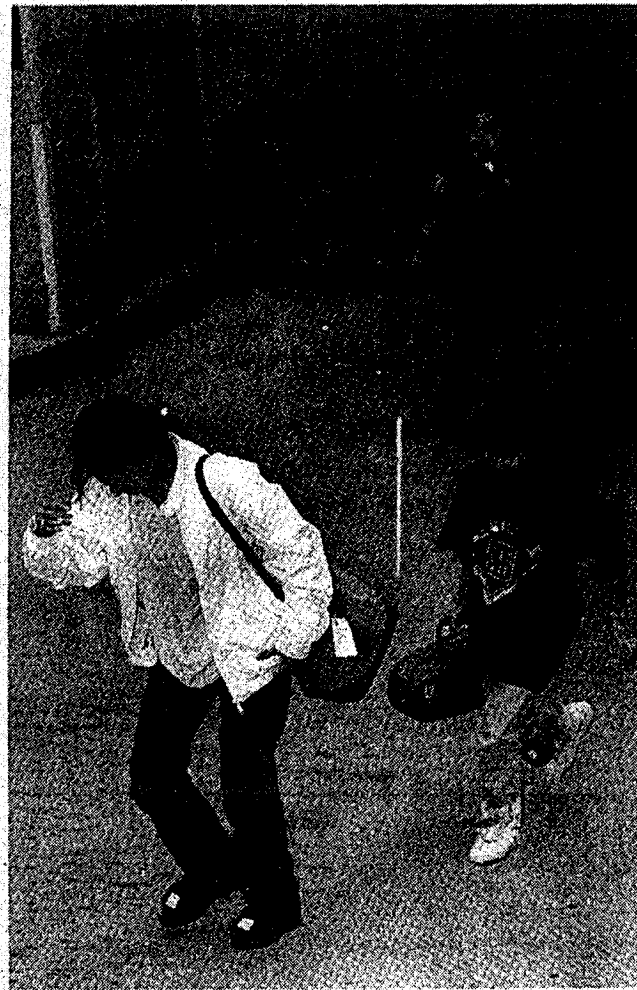
ourselves?'. The construction of identity is a process of differentiation, a description of one's own group and simultaneously a separation from the 'others'" ("The Genesis" 126).

A straightforward example of the use of terminology that subjectivizes the undocumented sweatshop worker as the "other" can be found in a headline in the New York Times that claims: "Agency Missteps Put Illegal **Aliens** at Mercy of Sweatshops". An image in this article displays two dark-skinned persons walking with their heads down and carrying their personal belongings while a security guard stands vigilantly in the shadows (illustration 2); this accompanying image is "anchored" (Barthes 38-9) by the caption: "Two illegal **aliens** found in peonage at a sweatshop near Los Angeles left a detention center last month after being held as material witnesses" (Sterngold A16).

Within this context, the association of "illegal" with "alien" appears to be a natural one; moreover, the association of dark skin with otherness is also evident. The notion of the undocumented worker as a furtive subject at the mercy of whatever fate awaits her (or in this case him) is reinforced by the beaten-up look of the two bodies that have just been released and by the perspective in which this picture was taken (tilted down), which also associates the "other" with inferiority and submissiveness. In the image, the threat of these "strange" bodies, which are now being put on the street, is controlled by that shadowy image of the police officer in the back, which represents the legitimate use of violence that has the alien workforce at its mercy.

It is interesting to note that even though the assertion of the sweatshop worker as alien is extremely powerful and pervasive through implications and associations, the number of times the explicit term "alien" is used to refer to her throughout the corpus is relatively infrequent: it is used only six times in the New York Times, five in the Washington Post and none in the museum exhibition. The newspaper examples that I have used in this chapter are only a few

of the many texts in the corpus that frame the sweatshop worker as the “other”, as a threat to health, social stability and cultural identity.



Two illegal aliens found in peonage at a sweatshop near Los Angeles left a detention center last month after being held as material witnesses.

Illustration 2 Image accompanying the New York Times’ feature article “Agency Missteps Put Illegal Aliens at Mercy of Sweatshops” by James Sterngold. 21 Sep. 1995, late ed.: A16.

Complementing these observations, a text from a very different materiality and institutional practice, the exhibit Between a Rock, states: “The working and living

conditions they [the investigators from the California Department of Industrial Relations] found **horrified** even these **seasoned professionals**" ("Tip Letter").

What kind of revolting site would have moved so deeply the "toughened" and "experienced" (and by implication "prepared") authorities from the Department of Industrial Relations? The central metaphor at work here describes the El Monte sweatshop as a dreadful place, a place that is so disturbing that even those who are in contact with labour abuses on a regular basis feel disgusted by it. The key question here is that if the mere site of this place and the way it operates is so dreadful, what can be expected from the bodies that make it function? The notions about the horrors of extreme labour abuses are transferred to the abused by semantic association. In such a way the sweatshop workers are not only the passive recipients of abuse, but become the abuse itself. These bodies may be so disgusting that the only way to approach them is through the label "them".

It is important to stress that many of the examples given in this section and in the rest of this chapter can be interpreted keeping in mind Peter Dahlgren and Sumitra Chakrapani's account of western "ways of seeing" the other through news. Indeed through their analysis of TV news coverage of the "Third World" and following the methodology of structural anthropology they identify "three major themes or motifs in coverage of the Third World [sic] Each major motif and its opposite gives rise to a primary feature that defines the relationship . . . between the audience and the portrayed Third World [sic]". The authors explain these motifs and their opposites as follows: Social Disorder vs. Order/Stability; Flawed Development vs. Successful Development; Primitivism vs. Modernism (48). Dahlgren and Chakrapani's study is also useful for the particular topic of this section, namely the process of "othering" the undocumented sweatshop worker. In accordance with this scheme the authors say that:

“they,” the people and societies of the Third World [sic], appear as unstable and prone to violence. Incessant glimpses of disorder and violence serve as a reminder that these societies continue to act out their essential character

“We,” on the other hand, the industrialized West, are typified by order and stability, a higher form of civilization. (53)

But even though the undocumented sweatshop worker is importantly described by the mainstream media through a differentiating and racist discourse that represents her as a threat to health, jobs, cultural identity, social stability and development, she is *not* alien. She lives, works and shares the same streets and cities in which the people who buy her products live in. She is a fellow member of our society who, as most of us, looks forward to the improvement of her conditions of existence.

The (re)writing of the coverage of the undocumented sweatshop worker that I propose should acknowledge these facts, and by doing so, shorten the much-too-wide breach between the basic producer -the sweatshop worker- and the final consumer. However, because of the structural relations of institutions and power, I am aware that hoping for this improvement in the mainstream media is for the most part naïve. What remains is to suggest to the mainstream media’s audiences, through works like this thesis, to consult the alternative media in order to get a better informed perspective. A more inclusive reading and writing of the undocumented sweatshop worker’s (re)presentation as alien would value her long hours of exhausting work, regardless of the ethnicity, legal status or age of the body that toils. As Rorty mentions “[t]his process of coming to see other human beings as ‘one of us’ rather than as ‘them’ is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like” (xvi).

As Criminal

Deeply interrelated with the assertion of the undocumented sweatshop worker as alien, the notion of her as *criminal* is present throughout the corpus. Not surprisingly this is more evident in the coverage made by both newspapers than by the museum display. The main foundation of this portrayal derives from another social construct: The immigration law (see “Policy and Resistance” in Chapter two). Some “missing links” that help to make sense of her “criminality” are those of the undocumented sweatshop worker as a voluntary invader who surreptitiously comes to take advantage of social benefits, who threatens “American jobs” and social stability and who poses a health hazard. Indeed, as van Dijk observes, the “[c]riminalization of minorities is one of the most serious, persistent, and widespread forms of racism” (Elite 223).

According to the law, “they” should stay in “their” country and stay away from “our” resources. But the fact is that in many cases their country has too little to offer them because, among many other factors, “First World” interventions (see the section “Capital on the Run” in Chapter two) have interrupted their country’s economic development. Moreover, the US, as any other “First World” country, needs cheap labour. And what better way to get it than “regulating” its flow? As Sassen points out, “*selective* enforcement of policies can circumvent general border policies and protect the interests of economic sectors relying on immigrant labor” (Mobility 37). A good example of such demand for cheap labour is given by the spokeswoman of the American Apparel Manufacturers Association, Allison Wolf, as she is quoted in the Washington Post saying that “[t]he **biggest problem** my members have is **finding workers**” (Rosenfeld, “Clothing Industry” C01).

The most evident illustration of the reproduction of this *criminalizing* aspect along the discursive construction under study is given by the use of the term “illegal”, which

encapsulates the aforementioned “missing links” around criminality. Moreover, the number of times the notion of “illegal” is used in order to refer to the undocumented sweatshop worker throughout the corpus is revealing: Thirty-three times in the Times, thirteen in the Post and two in the texts of Between a Rock. These results are also helpful to understand the type of political agenda with which each particular institution operates. Overall, the museum exhibition appears to be the most “neutral” while the Times clearly (re)produces the subjectivization of the undocumented sweatshop workers as criminal, followed by the treatment in the Post. But more concrete examples need to be explored in order to better understand such discourse.

A feature article in the New York Times has the following headline: “Raids **Link Organized Crime to Sweatshops**”, while the first paragraph reads:

Raids by Federal officials this week have turned up evidence that Asian **organized crime** rings may be bringing **Asian and other foreign workers** into Southern California **illegally**, specifically to work in **sweatshops** in the area’s booming garment manufacturing industry. (Sterngold A16)

Although the headline makes a distinction between “organized crime” and “sweatshops”, both terms are semantically associated by the reference to the intervention of the authorities, reinforcing the link between criminality and labour abuses. Indirectly criminality is also associated with the abused workers. In the first paragraph of the body, the terms “organized crime”, “foreign workers”, “illegally” and “sweatshops” create a chain of signification that reinforces the notion of the sweatshop worker as foreign (in this particular case as “Asian”) and as a threat to social order. In this paragraph, the operators of the sweatshop are given more importance than their workers, since the emphasis is being put on the “organized crime rings”. However, the authoritative radiance of the “federal officials” reveals the link between the scapegoat of the story and its victims. Although most of the

blame is placed on the “organized crime rings”, their criminality is associated with their employees: Both actors share the label and the shame of criminals, the former actively whilst the latter passively. It is also important to note that since the emphasis of wrong-doing is exclusively placed on the “organized crime rings” it is hard to see beyond that and question how much responsibility other social actors -the INS, the retailers, the manufacturers and the federal government- share in the exploitative practices of the El Monte sweatshop case (see also the section “As A-systemic” in this chapter). Also in this paragraph the use of the term “illegally” reinforces the idea of the sweatshop worker as the illicit invader, which posits a threat to social well-being. Based on van Dijk’s suggestions, the employment of the term “illegally” not only means that the El Monte sweatshop workers have broken the law; it also associates the rest of the sweatshop workers and immigrants with crime (“Interdisciplinary” 114).

The sixth paragraph in the copy of the same article reads: “72 Thai woman who **immigrated** here **illegally** were found being held in slave-like conditions in a factory in El Monte, in eastern Los Angeles County, some for as long as seven years”. The classification of the workers actions as “illegal” makes “them” (as opposed to “us”) criminals, which in turn helps to nullify their social and political status. In this respect van Dijk notes:

News stories are chiefly about people like Us, or about news events that may interest readers like Us. Ethnic news is often about Them, and such out-groups tend to be represented as essentially different or deviant, if not threatening to Us, as is the case for such groups as communists, leftist radicals, terrorists, pacifists, and others who are seen as a threat to Western or white dominance of the sociopolitical status quo. (*Elite* 247)

An indirect consequence of this assertion is the perpetuation of exploitative relations. If the undocumented sweatshop worker is a criminal, by contrast the huge retail and

manufacturing companies, which may also operate outside the law, are not described as such throughout the vast majority of the texts in the corpus. In spite of this, and as Grace Chang observes, “[I]llegality lies not with the immigrants who do the most scorned work for a pittance; the true crimes are perpetrated by exploitative employers of undocumented workers and by the government, which facilitates these abuses³⁸” (110).

It is through mechanisms like the one described above that the undocumented sweatshop worker’s field of action in society is discursively limited to a considerable extent. As van Dijk explains, even one phrase suffices to galvanize meaning at different levels of personal opinions and social attitudes (“Discourse-Knowledge” 103). In a larger context, comparing the discursively (re)produced spatial limits of the undocumented sweatshop worker with the increasingly broader mobility of commodities across borders during the past few decades, throws into sharp contrast the systemic inequalities between capital and the bodies that generate it.

Continuing with the examples that support my line of argument, a paragraph in another article in the New York Times describes:

The Los Angeles metropolitan area is the main **battlefield** of the **Government’s war on illegal sweatshops**. Fed by an **influx of immigrant labor** from Asia and Latin America, the city’s apparel industry **has surpassed** New York’s to become **America’s biggest**, with \$15.2 billion in sales last year and **one-quarter of the nation’s million garment workers**.
(Adelson, “Look Who’s Minding” 1: 34)

³⁸ According to Chang, “[s]everal immigration scholars have proposed that illegal immigration is not merely tolerated but actively encouraged by the US government. Much historical evidence suggests that the INS and Border Patrol function to regulate the flow of immigration to ensure a reserve army of labor” (110-1).

The work of Lakoff and Johnson is particularly useful for understanding this text. According to them, the metaphorical structuring of war (“on illegal sweatshops”) entails the preexistence of the concepts “enemy”, “threat”, “strategy”, “intelligence”, “forces”, etc. They say that this metaphor is not just a way of seeing the world but a permit for action. More importantly, these authors would agree that this metaphor highlights certain aspects of reality (e.g. the “threat”, the “waves of invaders”, the “uncontrollable growth of foreign bodies”) and hides others (156) (the economic benefit of cheap-labour, the cultural richness that foreign workers bring with them and the influence of US foreign policy in many “Third World” economies).

It is also crucial to acknowledge the use of the terms “influx”, “America’s biggest” and “one-quarter of the nation’s million garment workers” (see van Dijk’s notion of “the numbers game” in the previous section) of “illegal” immigrants. Like in any battle, there are friends and foes, and the prime enemy in this war is the (undocumented) sweatshop worker, who threatens “American jobs” by overfeeding the production apparatus. This text also implies that the number of “invading” workers is huge and that there could be considerable costs if such war is lost. Once again, the linking of the terms “illegal” and “sweatshops” perpetuates the association between the threat of social disorder and exploited workers.

The construction of the immigrant worker as criminal and as the enemy that threatens “our” security and who urgently needs to be defeated can also be explained by the psychological defense mechanism of projection which, according to Uta Quasthoff, is “a radical trick by which the ego manages to establish the outmost separation between itself and that which is dealt with as a threat to the ego: The forbidden desires are projected on other - ‘strange’ - people” (190). Following this explanation, the discursive construction of the sweatshop worker as criminal and as the enemy can be interpreted as the paranoid delirium of

the greed and aggressiveness that is projected upon her, since these characteristics cannot be openly accepted as “American”.

Aside from this, it is also important to talk about the above-mentioned contradiction between bringing “illegal” immigration to a halt (through its criminalization) and the need for cheap labour. The fourth paragraph of a news article in the Washington Post notes: “The **freed** Thai nationals are **being held** at an Immigration and Naturalization Service detention center here pending an investigation into their immigration status” (Reuter, “8 Arrested” A17). Aside from the evident semantic contradiction of the use of the terms “free” and “being held”, this paragraph helps to understand the complex situation of a “freed” criminal who is waiting to be assimilated so she can continue to do her work (see also the section “As Redeemed” in this chapter).

One of the main reasons for the criminalization of immigration is the fear that the invading body will “eat away” the resources of the nation (re: through the use of social benefits) perpetuating what Chang calls “the myth of immigrant welfare dependency” (28). In the meantime the texts in the corpus hardly talk about the resources that each immigrant worker brings with her. As Cheng and Bonacich point out, immigrant workers and undocumented immigrant workers are especially helpful for the receiving economy: “Immigrant workers contribute to the development of the country to which they have moved . . . while their country of origin loses some of its most ablebodied and productive members” (2). In spite of this, the construction of the undocumented worker as “illegal” (re)produces the contradiction of being portrayed as a criminal on demand to be hired.

Throughout this section I have examined some of the ways in which the mainstream media manufacture the sweatshop worker’s body as criminal. Such assertions favor and promote her own exploitation and consequently make her subject to prosecution, mistreatment, inferior working conditions and social exclusion. Moreover, the examples used

in this section coincide with Dahlgren and Chakrapani's scheme in which "[t]he bipolar opposite of the motif of social disorder is, of course, social order, or stability. The submotif of violence is contrasted with harmony and the resolution of conflict by 'civilized' means" (53). This subjectivization adds up to the constant discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, education and income. But the undocumented sweatshop worker is *not* criminal.

Leaving one's country because the conditions of existence are unbearable, working long hours in harmful conditions for a miserable pay and contributing to a country's economic development are actions that, although "illegal", aren't intrinsically wrong.

One way of stopping the (re)production of this situation is by making use of a more "neutral" vocabulary, both in everyday talk and in the alternative media. For example, as the title of this thesis suggests, instead of "illegal" the word "undocumented" can be used to describe those who leave their country and risk their lives in search for what they believe may be better conditions of existence. Another less problematic way of naming the "illegal alien" would be that of "economic refugee". It is also recommended that the intrinsic and complex relations between US intervention and immigration are discussed in a more thorough way in the alternative media. As Cheng and Bonacich clarify, "migration is a product not of discrete and unconnected factors in the sending and receiving societies but of historical connections between the countries. It is not fortuitous; it is systemic" (2). Furthermore, undocumented sweatshop workers should be (re)described as valuable human resources that have helped to build, generation after generation, the economic supremacy of the US while abandoning their family, culture and place of origin.

If because of structural reasons the mainstream media cannot incorporate these recommendations, at least the alternative media producers can be more critical towards the politics that involve issues of labour migration, and this way offer a different perspective to their audiences. However, doing such critical writing might be a difficult undertaking in our

times; as Ness points out, “[t]o improve the living conditions of migrant workers, it is necessary to assert their rights as global citizens and workers. This is a formidable task in a post-9/11 political environment of nationalism and xenophobia” (172).

As Passive Victims

Aside from the denigration that derives from the assertions of alien and criminal, it is also important to be aware of the dangers of a less explicit assertion, namely that of the undocumented sweatshop worker as a *passive victim*. The critique of this assertion is based upon the observation of the dangers of subjectivizing her as “socially and politically powerless” not only by the law (Sassen, *Mobility* 37), but also by the discourse that spreads through everyday language. I don’t want to imply that she is *not* in a very disadvantaged position. However, my critique is aimed at the complete lack of agency that the discursive construction about her as a passive victim (re)produces. Moreover, I also criticize that throughout the corpus of texts under analysis the will to make a change is fundamentally deposited in other social actors such as consumers, retailers, manufacturers, and governmental agencies. As Ethel Brooks criticizes, “[b]ecause the sweatshop in its newer and older forms is both the excess of and integral to capitalist manufacturing, it is only representable as an *other* space, and its workers as victims of excessive abuses or static models of resistance who can only be saved through the agency of those on the outside” (283).

The most evident fact that supports this passive role of the sweatshop workers is that she has to be spoken about. In the newspapers’ texts and in the museum exhibition under analysis there are very few occasions in which the El Monte sweatshop workers speak with

their own voice, and when this happens it is in the form of an interview which is moderated by the journalist or the museum curator.

Such stereotype of disempowerment and submissiveness is not exclusively enacted by whom ever gets to speak for the sweatshop workers but also by the *way* in which they are being talked about. In the particular case of the El Monte sweatshop, the “missing links” that help to construct the assertion of passivity and victimization around its workers are also influenced by their ethnicity. As Laura Kang claims through her article “Si(gh)ting Asian/American Women as Transnational Labor”, the unbalanced representations of the Asian/American female worker body (re)enforce her passiveness, submission and docility.

But it is now time to talk about this assertion with more concrete examples. An overall look at the allocation of space to news items in the front-page layout of the Washington Post of September 10, 1995 offers a formal model of how the El Monte sweatshop workers are downgraded to passive victims (illustration 3). The left column of the layout covers the “dramatic” match between the tennis players Steffi Graf and Monica Seles. Center top is allocated to “cuts in D.C.’s budget review”, while the center of the layout is dedicated to an “African American” march and the growing political strength of the Christian Coalition. Below this is an article featuring Colin Powell’s presidential aspirations and at the bottom right of all these news topics, occupying no more than an eighth of the front-page’s layout, is an article entitled “Sweatshops Instead of Paradise” accompanied by an emblematic image of the El Monte sweatshop workers sitting on the ground (illustration 4).

These passive victims have been allocated the least favorable space in relation to the rest of the front-page layout. Their sitting position in the picture combined with the place it occupies in the layout implies that the workers are supporting the weight of the rest of the political and cultural elites which, in spite of their personal struggles, seem to be closer to “Paradise” than the workers.

Maryland Stuns North Carolina, Navy Rout's SMU—DI

The Washington Post

Weather
Today: Partly sunny, breezy.
High: 64. Low: 44. Wind: 10-20.
Monday: Mostly sunny, High: 74.
Low: 52. Wind: 10-15.
Tuesday: Partly cloudy, High: 74.
Low: 52. Wind: 10-15.
Full Moon: 10:15 p.m. on Sept. 23.

Sections
1. Front Page
2. News
3. Metro
4. Business
5. Sports
6. Entertainment
7. Classifieds
8. Reader Service
9. Index
10. Back Matter

11th Year No. 279 WASHINGTON, SEPTEMBER 10, 1992 \$1.50

OPEN AND SHUT



Michael Smith of Kentucky, shown, excited after finishing off Atlanta Braves, before, in three runs to capture the U.S. Open women's title in New York.



Graf Stops Seles, Wins U.S. Open

Final Emotions Unmatched in Revival of a Rivalry

By Jennifer Gray
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK, Sept. 9—Steffi Graf spent her first weeks in the United States in a whirlwind tour of appearances and interviews. She was in New York for a press conference and a television interview. She was in New York for a press conference and a television interview. She was in New York for a press conference and a television interview.

D.C. Faces New Curbs, Cuts in Budget Review

By David A. Vine and Howard Schneider
Washington Post Staff Writers

Congressional Republicans are considering new restrictions on the power of federal officials, additional cuts in the 1993 budget and more federal jobs, even if that means a rough review of the city budget this week.

In recent years, nearly all congressional Republicans have voted against the District's budget. To win GOP support this year, even moderates are looking to scale back the autonomy of local elected officials. Among the proposals under consideration:

• A \$100 million annual pay raise from the federal government, must pass the approval of a Republican caucus.

• A \$100 million annual pay raise from the federal government, must pass the approval of a Republican caucus.

United They'll Stand, March On Washington

October Event Intended To Uplift Black Men

By Michael A. Fletcher
Washington Post Staff Writer

If all goes as planned, the march will number into the Capital Beltway before dawn Oct. 16, starting by the Lincoln Memorial and ending at the White House. They will converge in the heart of Washington, and they will march to the Mall for what organizers envision as a solemn display of moral fortitude and political strength.



The crowd responds enthusiastically to a Christian Coalition convention speaker's message at the Washington Convention Center.

Christian Group Flexes Newfound Muscles

GOP Presidential Hopefuls Heed Maturing Coalition's Grass-Roots Calling

By David S. Broder
Washington Post Staff Writer

On its sixth birthday, the Christian Coalition is a growing political force. It is not just a religious group, but a political organization that is beginning to exert its influence on the national scene.

Goal for Coalition
The Christian Coalition's goal is to gain substantial influence, if not full control, over the Republican Party apparatus in all 50 states, as president Pat Robertson told an enthusiastic crowd of 4,000 activists.

They see as the worst threat of a conservative, secular culture that undermines religious and ethical norms.

INSIDE

Serbs Accuse U.N.
A Bosnian Serb politician charged that U.N. arbitrators double-billed civilians with a bounty outside Sarajevo.

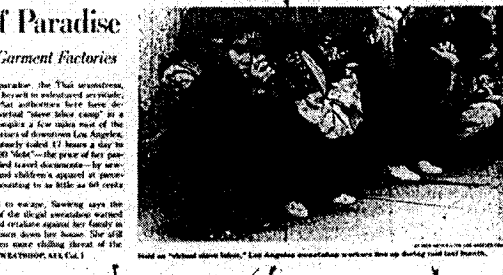
Whitton Dies
A House U.S. Whip, a retired Missouri Democrat, was shot and killed by a sniper in the U.S. House and died at 65.

Sweatshop Instead of Paradise

Thais Lived in Fear as Slaves at L.A. Garment Factories

By William Bradford Huie
Washington Post Staff Writer

Instead of paradise, Thai garment workers found a world of sweat and tears. They lived in fear as slaves at L.A. garment factories.



Thais lived in fear as slaves at L.A. garment factories.



Illustration 4 Thai workers of the El Monte sweatshop released from captivity. Photo: AP. Image reproduced from No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers. Ed. Andrew Ross. New York: Verso, 1997. 144.

Comparing the space and place that the same image occupies in a New York Times' front-page layout (illustration 5) which appeared about a month before, featuring the raid on El Monte, is useful to see how a more or less symbolic importance can be given to any event and to the people involved in it. Not surprisingly the Times headline is also more positive than the one in the Post: "Thai Workers Are Set Free In California" (Noble).

The form and content of the aforementioned image (illustration 4) also constitute strong evidence of the portrayal of the sweatshop workers as passive victims: The picture was taken almost at ground level and it is slightly tilted down, implying the inferiority of its subjects.

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition
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60 CENTS



Arrangement in Bombing

Prisoners say they had been brought to New York from Jordan yesterday, was the driver of the van used in the bombing of the World Trade Center, Page B1.

Croatian Army Begins Attack On Rebel Serbs

By RICHARD BROWNER
SARAJEVO, Croatia, Friday, Aug. 4 — Croatian Government forces opened an assault on the headquarters of the rebel Serb army in Sarajevo yesterday, marking the start of a new phase in the conflict. The attack came just hours after the United States announced that it had begun a series of air strikes against the Serb army.

M.T.A.'S CHAIRMAN SEEKS TO INCREASE TOLLS AND FARES

SUBWAY WOULD BE \$1.50

Giuliani Reacts Harshly, and Paraski Spokesman Says He Has Not Approved Plan

By RICHARD W. PERKINS
The head of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority proposed a sweeping set of fare and toll increases yesterday that would raise the cost of a subway ride from \$1.25 to \$1.50 and add as much as 25 cents to using commuter railroads, bridges and express buses, which are the most heavily used modes of the M.T.A. board, which is expected to meet today to discuss the plan.



Nearly 20 Thai garment workers at El Monte, Calif., were released from what agents called virtual slavery.

House Spending-Bill Votes Reveal Faults in Party Unity

By JEFFREY R. TRAVIS
WASHINGTON, Friday, Aug. 4 — A series of roll-call votes on the House floor yesterday revealed deep divisions within the Republican Party over the House's new spending bill.

BILL TO DECONTROL PHONES AND CABLE TIES UP THE HOUSE

AN ACCORD TO DELAY VOTE

D.O.P.'s Tactics Are Criticized by Democrats as a Clifton Veto Threat Remains

By RICHARD W. PERKINS
WASHINGTON, Friday, Aug. 4 — House Democrats yesterday blocked a bill to decontrol telephone and cable services, tying up the House's agenda and delaying a vote on the House's new spending bill.

Thai Workers Are Set Free In California

By RICHARD W. PERKINS
EL MONTE, Calif., Aug. 3 — In a surprise move, a federal court yesterday set free nearly 20 Thai garment workers from what agents called virtual slavery.

House Spending-Bill Votes Reveal Faults in Party Unity

By JEFFREY R. TRAVIS
WASHINGTON, Friday, Aug. 4 — A series of roll-call votes on the House floor yesterday revealed deep divisions within the Republican Party over the House's new spending bill.

5 Youths Are Held In The Fiery Death Of A Homeless Man

By RICHARD W. PERKINS
There were a young group with their own names, and they were the only ones who were left when a fire broke out in a homeless shelter in New York City yesterday.

U.S. Power Project Is Doomed in India

By RICHARD W. PERKINS
NEW DELHI, India, Aug. 3 — A \$1-billion U.S. power project in India has been abandoned after the Indian government decided to build a new power plant.

INSIDE

State Dept. vs. Pentagon
Star Wars Plans Revived
Focus on Hillary Clinton
Economic Under Attack
News Summary

For Figure in Oklahoma Inquiry, Ties of Blood and Something More

By JOSEPH B. TREMPER
The Oklahoma City bombing inquiry has taken a new turn as investigators look for a link between the bomber and a woman who was a close friend of the victim.

In Moscow Again, Clubs Cater to 'Members Only'

By ALEXANDER HAMILTON
Moscow, Aug. 3 — Members of the Russian elite are flocking to Moscow again, but this time they are going to clubs that cater to "members only."

The Sister's Story

By JOSEPH B. TREMPER
A woman who was a close friend of the victim in the Oklahoma City bombing has a story to tell.

Table with 2 columns: Item, Price. Includes items like 'The New York Times', 'The New York Times Magazine', 'The New York Times Book Review', etc.

Continued on Page A1, Column 1

Continued on Page A1, Column 1

Illustration 5 Front-page of the New York Times 4 Aug. 1995, late ed..

Of the seven women who appear sitting on the floor only two are facing the camera, but they are not looking at it, implying the passivity of the looked-upon. Most of them have their hands near their face and the two faces that get to be seen have clear signs of anxiety and stress, implying their positions as victims. In a parallel way, a look at the overall display of the “El Monte” section in the museum exhibition (illustration 6) is also revealing.

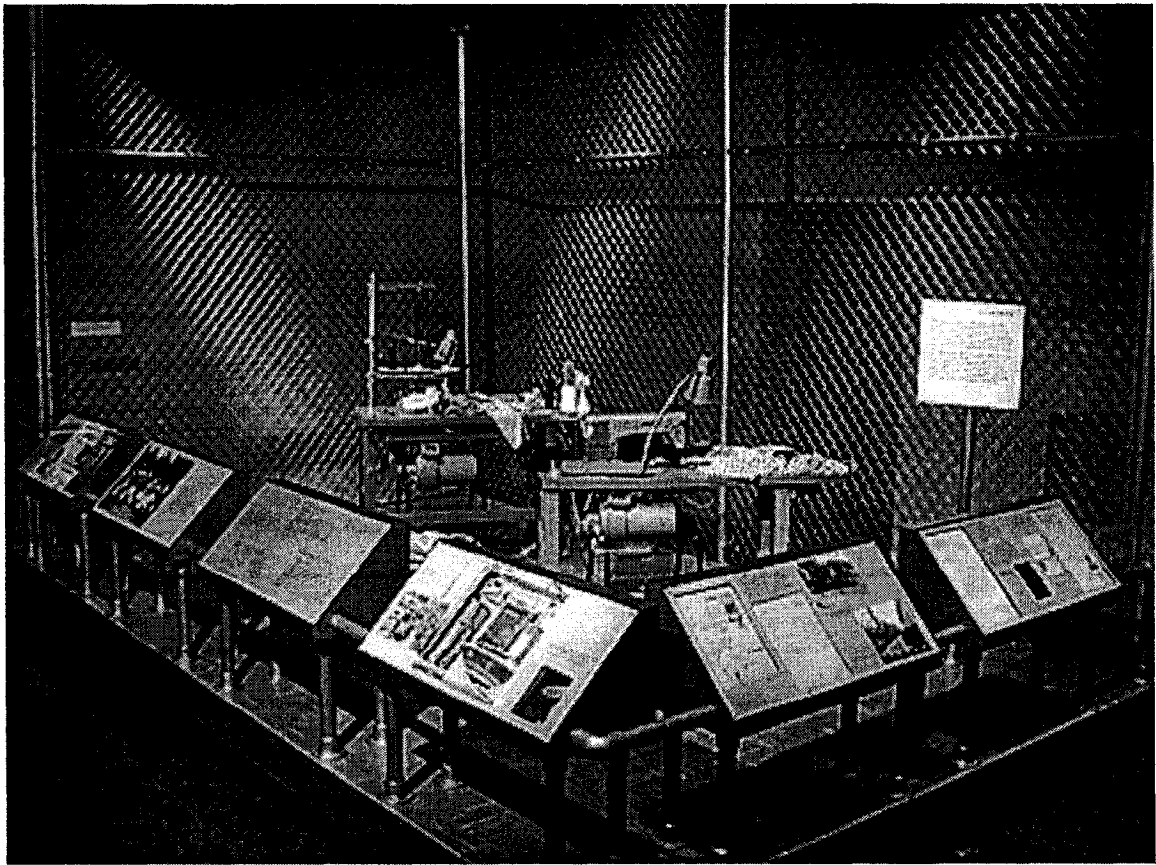


Illustration 6 “El Monte” section of the museum exhibition, displaying at the center two of the sewing machines that were seized during the raid and surrounded by metallic fence. Source: [Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present](#). Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 23 Feb. 2005.

<<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/elmonte/elmonte.htm>>.

The dramatic effect of the two sewing machines, the metal fence and the dim illumination of the display manufacture the workers’ bodies not only as victims of abuse but

also as subservient. Moreover, these graphic (re)presentations (re)enforce the undocumented worker as the “Third World” body inside the “First World”: A colonized, submissive, denigrated and pitiable body that by its opposition shapes the identity of the “First World” body as colonizer, active, clean, civilized, prosperous and efficient.

But if according to this assertion, sweatshop workers have no agency, who can take them “out of their misery”? Within the corpus, an important rescuing role is given to the consumer. A column in the Post by Robin Givhan entitled “**A Stain on Fashion**” is an unmatched example of the subjectivization of the concerned consumer as a benevolent savior and thus of the sweatshop worker as a passive victim. A selection of paragraphs from this text is quite clear on the matter:

Some have called it a **shopper’s high**. It’s that feeling of intoxication that comes from getting a deal, finding a sale, **circumventing the system**.

Americans hold one quarter of the world’s purchasing power. We want quality, style and selection.

We want it cheap.

And we got it.

Pocket T-shirts for \$20. Private-label turtlenecks at \$9.99. Cashmere sweaters for \$99.

But the price was much higher than any of us had dared to imagine. . . .

Those inexpensive pants that you boasted were made in America may have been assembled in Los Angeles by **Thai workers imprisoned** behind barbed-wire fences. . . . Activists argue that **consumers will have to get riled**.

They’ll have to **be angrier about child labor** thousand of miles away than they are about teenagers hiking up their skirts for a Calvin Klein ad. They’ll

have to stop demanding the impossible deal. They'll have to hold companies accountable. (B1 and B4)

As this text emphasizes, US consumers get extreme pleasure from what they do, and sometimes they can even “outsmart the system”; US consumers are super wealthy, and their power to change things rests on their purchasing power. US consumers are demanding and they are sure of what they want; but they have been innocently “deceived” and they have a right to know under which conditions their clothes are being made. Moreover, the time has come for US consumers to get serious and take the necessary actions to rescue the toiling souls that submissively work for them. Throughout the text, there is no space for a doubt that US consumers are in control; if they want to, they can change the *status quo*. But, what about the agency of the workers? Are they hopelessly at the mercy and changing fashions of consumers? This shouldn't be surprising at all if we keep in mind Edward Herman and Robert McChesney's study on the globalization of the media in which they argue, among other things, that “[o]wner and advertiser domination give the commercial media a dual bias threatening the public sphere: they tend to be politically conservative and hostile to criticism of a status quo in which they are major beneficiaries; and they are concerned to provide a congenial media environment for advertising goods” (6).

This column is accompanied by a drawing (illustration 7) that reinforces the written text: An adult, slim, white-skinned woman with a hand on her hip is wearing a long dress that reveals a group of minimized women who are bent-over their sewing machines and fixed with shackles in their ankles. Because these women are bent-over, their faces cannot be seen (compare to the picture of the El Monte sweatshop workers, illustration 4), however their skin seems to be darker than that of the woman under whom they are toiling, thus suggesting a “foreign” ethnicity.

Commentary

A STAIN ON FASHION

The Garment Industry Profits From Cheap Labor. Time to Mend Its Ways.

By Robin D. Givhan
Washington Post Staff Writer

Some have called it a shopper's high. It's that feeling of intoxication that comes from getting a deal, finding a sale, circumventing the system. Americans hold one quarter of the world's purchasing power. We want quality, style and selection. We want it cheap.

And we got it. Pocket T-shirts for \$20. Private-label turtlenecks at \$9.99. Cashmere sweaters for \$99. But the price was much higher

than any of us had dared to imagine.

One of those \$20 Gap T-shirts in our chest of drawers could have been made by a Central American teenager who says she regularly labored for 18 hours a day in a garment factory. The bargain dress on your back might have been made by kids who couldn't go to the bathroom without a pass from their boss. Those inexpensive pants that you boasted were made in America may have been assembled in Los Angeles by Thai workers imprisoned behind barbed-wire fences.

The dark underbelly of the fashion industry has been revealed. Again. Turn-of-the-century sweatshops reborn. On Aug. 2 in El Monte, just outside of Los Angeles, government officials raided a sweatshop housed in a trim apartment building. The complex was filled with Thai immigrants who were said to be virtually imprisoned and forced into labor. Days later, three more raids. More sweatshops. More oppressive conditions.

And there was the tour. Judith Viera and Claudia Molina, two Central American teenagers, traveled around the country describing the inhumane conditions under which they worked in El Salvador and Honduras. Ear-splitting music was piped in to force them to work faster, Molina said. Only two bathroom breaks in a 14-hour day. And that \$20 Gap T-shirt would net a worker in El Salvador only about 16 cents for her labor.

Consumers recoiled in horror. The U.S. Labor Department snapped into action. Labor Secretary Robert B. Reich is holding a "summit meeting" at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology today. He invited the nation's largest department stores to collectively search for ways to clean up the garment industry. But its multiple layers, myriad players, fickle consumers and inherent pressures make that a daunting task.

"I think consumers haven't really been exposed to the general deterioration of conditions in the garment industry," says Jeff Hermanson, director of organizing for the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE). "Labor is the most easily depressed cost. . . . That doesn't make it right, but that's the fact."

"We have to start thinking about what we buy," says John C. See COMMENTARY, B4, Col. 1



Illustration 7 First page of the Washington Post column "A Stain on Fashion: The Garment Industry Profits From Cheap Labor. Time to Mend Its Ways" by Robin Givhan. 12 Sept. 1995, final ed.: B01. Illustration by Elizabeth Wolf.

The implied meaning of this image can be read as if the woman, who is gazing at the distance, is not aware of the hard labour that is needed in order to produce the elegant dress that she is wearing. The hand placed at her hip is a clear sign of control, an affirmation that if they want to, consumers are in the position to improve the working conditions of those who suffer. Moreover, the women who toil under her dress are in a complete state of submission and below any standards of dignity.

They are captive and focused only on their job; there is no minimal sign of rebelliousness. This illustration is “anchored” by the headline “A **Stain** on **Fashion**”. As this metaphor suggests, however beautiful the woman and the dress may be, there is an annoying imperfection: The abusive labour practices *under* the dress. But not everything is lost. As the column explains, the US consumer has options to “erase” this “stain” from her conscience, saving in the meantime these politically numb and passive “victims of fashion”.

The passiveness and victim-hood with which this article subjectivizes the sweatshop worker can be developed further if we keep in mind the analysis made by Martin through another frame that structured the coverage of labor stories in the 1990s which posits that: “*The consumer is king*. Because the consumer and his or her consumption is fundamental to the U.S. economy and culture, treating the individual consumer as a hallowed entity is the unstated assumption of all news. Likewise, this is a consumers’ democracy. Americans are told they are blessed with an abundance of choices and can “vote” with their pocketbooks” (8-9).

In a similar consumer-empowering vein, an op-ed by Robert Herbert in the Times which is bannered “**Buying** Clothes Without Exploiting Children” emphasizes that “[t]he best thing **consumers can** do is let American companies know, emphatically, that they do not want to **buy** goods made by child laborers, or by workers of any age who are exploited”

(A27). Once again, the political capacity of the worker is eclipsed by the purchasing power of the consumer, who may have the power to influence the decisions of huge enterprises.

A feature article in the Times in which the US Labour Secretary, Robert Reich, is interviewed in relation to labour abuses in the garment industry and their plausible solution is entitled “How an **American Industry** Gets Away With Slave Labor”, while a sub-headline reads: “**The Labor Secretary**, saying **most Americans** don’t want clothes made in sweatshops, appeals to higher-ups in the ‘garment food chain’” (Finder, 4: 7). Within this article, sweatshops workers are barely mentioned, and when they are, they are subjectivized as passive victims. An example of such an assertion is when Robert Reich states in the aforementioned interview the following: “Undoubtedly consumers are interested first and foremost in **price and quality**. But most **American consumers** probably don’t want to **buy** clothes made by slave laborers in the United States” (Finder, 4: 7). Once again, the consumer is subjectivized as a key actor. Evidently, her political agency is supported by her purchasing power. But what about the sweatshop workers? The authoritative voice of Mr. Reich doesn’t question if they want American consumers taking decisions for them. Furthermore, the debate in this article is framed as happening exclusively between the government and the garment industry while the consumer is being granted a lobbying role. There is no doubt that all of these social actors have a share in the responsibility for labour abuses, however, my critique points out that the workers’ agency is basically reduced to nothing.

It is evident that within the corpus the positioning of the sweatshop worker as a passive victim is importantly reinforced by images. For this purpose I want to compare the image of Mr. Reich that appears accompanying the aforementioned interview (illustration 8), with another image from the Times in which the El Monte sweatshop workers appear kneeling and praying with their hands together (illustration 9). In the former image Mr. Reich is photographed from a slightly tilted up angle, which implies a position of authority.



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Secretary Reich: a plan to prod manufacturers and retailers.

Illustration 8 Image accompanying the feature article in the New York Times “How an American Industry Gets Away with Slave Labor” by Alan Finder. 20 Aug. 1995, late ed, sec. 4: 7. Photo: Stephen Crowley/The New York Times.



Associated Press

Thai immigrants, who were freed from prison-like conditions in a garment shop, prayed at a temple in Los Angeles last Friday.

Illustration 9 Image accompanying the Times’ feature article “Manufacturers Fined in Sweatshop Inquiry” by Kenneth Noble, Aug. 16 1995, late ed.: A22.

He appears to be sitting in his office. He is wearing a tie and we can see his watch, probably not a cheap one. All of these are signs of status. Mr. Reich appears with his mouth open and has a hand extended, giving the impression that he is about to grab something or give an order. These are patent signs of action and a promise for intervention. The caption of this image reinforces its content by stating Mr. Reich's status and power to speak/act:

“Secretary Reich: a plan to prod manufacturers and retailers”. The central metaphor at work in this caption is that of the willingness of the Secretary of Labour to push or thrust the actors that are on the top of the production pyramid. This statement highlights the power and protectiveness of the federal government, while it hides its weaknesses and deficiencies in facing the huge economic power of retailers and manufacturers (for more details see the sections “The Contracting System” and “Policy and Resistance” in Chapter two).

By contrast, the latter image was taken with a tilted down angle and presents a group of kneeling women with their heads down and their hands together; evident signs of docility and passiveness. Moreover, the image caption (re)enforces the ethnicity and thankfulness of the workers that appear in the image, implying in this way their position as passive victims: **“Thai immigrants, who were freed from prison-like conditions in a garment shop, prayed at a temple in Los Angeles last Friday”**. In a manner similar to the other iconic examples given in this section, most of the workers' faces can barely be seen, a reminder of their alien bodies. Making a comparison of these two images points to the conclusion that Mr. Reich is framed as an active and powerful player who is willing to act, while the workers are described as humble, passive and submissive: Obvious signs of their political numbness.

The final example that I want to give in this section belongs to a feature article in the Times whose headline reads: “Look Who's Minding the Shop” while a sub-headline explains, “California **Garment Makers** Try to **Police** Workplace” (Adelson, 1: 33). As these lines suggest, the sweatshop worker is positioned as a passive victim while part of the agency

that should correspond to her is given to the same people who contribute to her exploitation. In addition, the same companies that break labour laws take the role that the government cannot fulfill. Further on, the article describes such a contradiction: “For their part, the unions representing garment workers decry the new monitoring system as a case of **the fox guarding the hen house**” (34). The unions in this case are given speech through the journalist’s voice, only to metaphorically describe the garment workers as “hens”. Lakoff and Johnson say that “[m]etaphors have entailments through which they highlight and make coherent certain aspects of our experience” (156). In the example under analysis the construction of the sweatshop worker as a passive victim is not only taking place by the material impossibility to speak with her own voice, but also by the representation of her as a defenseless, captive animal that is usually killed after its productive life is over. According to Lakoff and Johnson’s approach, this representation helps to make coherent the concept of the sweatshop worker as a passive victim while it hides her political agency.

Throughout this section I have argued that the mainstream media coverage under analysis gives clear signs of the undocumented sweatshop workers as politically mutilated and as passive victims. However, they are not.

Someone might argue that portraying the sweatshop worker as a victim could be read as a positive sign because it helps to rouse the empathy of the audiences with her situation. I argue that positioning her as a passive victim is more likely to (re)enforce the stereotype of a voiceless, passive and politically impotent body that is waiting to be rescued by “stronger” bodies and institutions. But the undocumented workers are *not* passively waiting to be rescued by consumers, the industry, the government or other organization. As Cavanagh notes: “Exploited workers in the apparel and footwear industries have seldom been silent “victims” in the face of sweatshop conditions. Workers around the world have fought these

conditions, and joined with workers in other industries and allies in the religious, farm, environmental, and other activist communities to fight for dignity and justice” (39).

A more favorable writing of the sweatshop worker would incorporate a more dignifying and active image, in both the written and the visual languages that (re)present her. Such (re)description would include her voice as independent and legitimate. More importantly, such an approach would actively acknowledge her own share of agency, along with the rest of society, to change her situation. But the undocumented sweatshop worker is not only subjectivized as absent, as alien, as criminal and as a passive victim along the discursive construction under analysis. Two more assertions need to be explored in order to better understand how language (re)produces her conditions of existence within our socio-political context.

As Redeemed

After the raid on the El Monte sweatshop occurred the workers as well as their contractors were detained. According to their legal representative, Julie Su, after the workers were released thanks to the support of many community members, they were helped to find another job and were reemployed in the garment industry within two months. The operators of this business pled guilty to charges of slavery and conspiracy (Su 145), and some manufacturers were fined³⁹. State labour officials reimbursed the El Monte sweatshop workers a partial amount of the wages that were owed to them. Seven years after the El

³⁹ According to Liebhold and Rubenstein, “[d]uring the raid officers seized labels, orders, and work tickets that showed that a number of manufacturers and retailers were directly contracting with the El Monte sweatshop” (*Between* 65) this evidence most probably served as a lead for their prosecution.

Monte sweatshop scandal their workers received permanent residency from the US government.

This section criticizes the mainstream media (re)presentation of the sweatshop worker as “rewarded” for her years of slave-work. A key point of this critique is the assumption that such coverage aids at managing the crisis that the “discovery” of slavery in late 20th century US provoked through a mechanism that operates in a similar way to the discursive strategy that van Dijk calls “positive self-presentation”⁴⁰ in the sense that the white authorities appear, after all, to be tolerant and benevolent while at the same time they degrade the sweatshop worker through their condescending position. Furthermore my critique (re)describes such coverage as a way of diverging attention from “less reprehensible” practices of labour abuse by presenting the “extremely” abused workers of the El Monte sweatshop as *redeemed* and implying that a similar scenario will never happen again. This mechanism permits making allowances of other sweatshops and sweat-labour as relatively acceptable practices. I also criticize this crisis-management process because it gives the initial impression that justice has been achieved and that all the damages have been paid back. In what follows I am exclusively focusing on the aftermath of the El Monte sweatshop case. However, my observations may also serve as a parameter to understand how mechanisms of “damage recovery” may work in parallel circumstances.

Two days after the raid at the El Monte sweatshop the New York Times published a front-page article on the event which was accompanied by an emblematic image of the

⁴⁰ According to van Dijk, “one major strategy in many types of discourse about minorities is positive self-presentation. In this strategy white people try to convey the opinion that they are not racist or prejudiced Whereas speakers or writers in this way try to make an impression of tolerance, at the same time they [sic] will try to convey a negative impression of the people they speak or write about” (Racism 187-8).

workers (illustration 5). The title of this article, “Thai Workers Are **Set Free** In California”, gives a very favorable portrayal of the US authorities if we consider that the INS knew about the El Monte sweatshop years before and no action was taken in order to interfere⁴¹. The authorities are thus positioned as heroic. The copy reinforces this way of framing by explaining: “**Before** the workers were **freed** in a pre-dawn raid **by immigration officials** on Wednesday, **they had lived** a life in which they were locked up and guarded each night and **threatened with harm or death** if they tried to escape” (Noble, “Thai Workers” A1). The description of the atrocious conditions that they were living in also helps to construct the image of the government as the heroic rescuer, thus making a “positive self-presentation”.

The step that automatically followed after the “discovery” of the sweatshop was the need to have an agent to blame for the abuses. A considerable part of the coverage of both newspapers puts emphasis on the punishment of the operators and the enforcement of the law. As table 2 (see the section “The Corpus” in Chapter one) explains, 13.3% of the coverage in the Times and 23.1% of the coverage in the Post deals with the sub-topic of the prosecution of contractors and manufacturers. A more concrete example of this “redemption” through the application of the law can be seen in a news article in the Washington Post in which the headline reads “Plea Deal **Ends** Garment Trade **Sweatshop Case**” and the second and third paragraphs inform:

⁴¹ About a year after this front-page article was published, another article in page sixteen of the first section of the Times explained: “In mid-May 1991, Phil L. Bonner Jr., a special agent with the immigration agency here [LA], wrote several memorandums proposing raids on five garment sweatshops because he had information that perhaps 200 illegal immigrants were being held there. . . . No action was taken. Mr. Bonner says he was disciplined, apparently because of a personality clash with supervisors, according to a pending discrimination suit he filed against the agency in July 1992. The suit says he was not allowed to speak Thai in the office or to pursue any cases related to Thais. Mr. Bonner says in his suit that he was discriminated against because he married a Thai woman and speaks Thai, and that the ill will toward him caused the agency to mishandle the inquiry” (Sterngold, “Agency Missteps”).

The plea agreements, which could lead to sentences of up to seven years in prison, **ended a case that outraged many Americans** and intensified public scrutiny of the U.S. garment industry.

“These are among the **largest sentences** ever agreed to in a modern slavery case,” said Deval L. Patrick, assistant attorney general for civil rights. “They are nearly **twice as high** as normally provided for under **federal sentencing guidelines.**” (Branigin, A14)

This text emphasizes both the “end” of the sweatshop “case” and the severity of the operators’ punishment, while the federal government is portrayed as the redeemer who is “closing the case” that “outraged many Americans” (in contrast with the case in which workers were abused for many years, while the authorities knew about it). The mention of the large sentences functions to demonstrate that justice is being achieved to its greatest extent. As will be mentioned in the next section, such *redeeming-through-a-scapegoat* mechanism is intrinsically related to the portrayal of the undocumented sweatshop worker as unconnected to a system that allows and, to certain extent, promotes her exploitation.

In support of my argument, another headline in the Times states “Manufacturers **Fined** in Sweatshop Inquiry”, summarizing the announcement by California’s Labour Commissioner, Virginia Bradshaw, that seven manufacturers doing business with the El Monte sweatshop were fined for avoiding state registration of their operations at \$35,000 each (Noble, “Manufacturers” A22).

The act of redeeming the El Monte sweatshop workers is not limited to the punishment of their contractors but also emphasized by the fines to the manufacturers that ordered clothing from them. As mentioned already this type of example fits into van Dijk’s observation that the ways in which many newspapers “count” (bodies, economic figures, etc.) has a specific rhetorical function that emphasizes objectivity and professionalism. In line

with this, another news article in the Times is named “Sweatshop Workers Share **\$1.1 Million**”. In this article the first paragraph informs: “Thai and Hispanic^[42] garment workers who were forced to toil in a compound ringed with barbed wire for less than \$1 an hour **got back-pay checks today totaling \$1.1 million**”. Evidently this article is focused on the considerable amount (exemplifying van Dijk’s “numbers game”) that the workers received. An average reader who quickly examines the newspaper headlines would get the impression that justice is taking place and that the workers are indeed being “rewarded”. However, a closer look at this article would reveal that, as the last paragraph informs, “[a] department spokesman, Dick Rice, said the workers were owed a total of **\$9 million** in back wages. ‘But we squeezed every penny we could to get the **\$1.1 million,**’ he said” (Reuters, “Sweatshop Workers” 1: 11). Obviously there is an important difference between these two amounts; however the headline gives no sign of such difference. Moreover, an article in the Post (“Former Sweatshop Workers” A09) informing about the same monetary compensation, does not mention the full amount of the debt at all, giving the impression that this “reward” washes away any reminiscence of abuse the workers may still have.

Another newspaper example, which illustrates the discursive construction of the El Monte sweatshop worker as redeemed, has to do with the official change of her immigration status. Seven years after the “national shame” of the “found” slave-shop at El Monte, a

⁴² Besides the El Monte sweatshop workers that this thesis mainly talks about, other sweatshop workers were also “compensated” because of the labour abuses to which they were subjected. As explained in the museum exhibition Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present: “S&K Fashion (also known as S&P Fashion and D&R Fashion), a small manufacturing operation in the Los Angeles garment district run by the El Monte operators, fronted for the [El Monte] sweatshop. Working from two locations, the shop’s 50 to 80 Latino employees provided the theoretical source of garment production when representatives from retailers and manufacturers came to inspect facilities and the merchandise they ordered. However, even this shop was in violation of wage and hour codes” (“S&K Fashion”).

felicitous news article in the Times redeems the “illegal” sweatshop workers under the headline “California: **Ex-Sweatshop Workers Get Residency**”. The first lines of this article explain: “Thai immigrants who were **freed** seven years ago from slave-like working conditions at a sweatshop have been **granted** permanent residency. The Immigration and Naturalization Service recently notified the 71 [sic] immigrants of their **new legal status** and will **provide** green cards within six months” (AP, “Ex-Sweatshop” A29).

Once again, the term “freed” functions as a reminder of the central metaphor that frames the government as a rescuer. This time, however, the government’s generosity is not limited to rescuing but to finally redeeming the workers into residents, by sublimating them with “legal status” and giving a happy ending to this narrative of labour horrors (in relation to this, notice the use of “Ex” in “Ex-Sweatshop Workers”). Their suffering has been at last fruitful and now they are authorized to officially pursue the “American dream”. The government turns out to be, after all, the just and providing father that completely washes away the shame of 20th-century slavery. It is also important to note that the US residency is being “granted” and that the green cards will be “provided” to the workers, an act that (re)enforces the assertion of the INS as active and of the (now documented) sweatshop workers as passive receivers.

A text that exemplifies the main argument of this section can also be found in Between a Rock: “**Law enforcement** officers **arrested** eight operators of a Chinese-Thai, family-owned garment sweatshop and **freed** 72 illegal Thai immigrants” (“El Monte”). After the “discovery” of the El Monte sweatshop someone *had* to be accountable, and what better scapegoat than its operators? The government, through the description of its “enforcement officers” is portrayed as fair, benevolent and efficient, legitimizing in this way its authority and capacity to defend justice while their responsibility for negative actions is concealed. It is

also interesting to note in this example the contradictory use of the terms “freed” and “illegal” as they refer to the same subject.

Another example of the importance given to the prosecution of the operators within the corpus is the inclusion in the NMAH’s exhibition of the courtroom sketches that show the operators of the El Monte sweatshop listening to court proceedings and that show three former workers testifying at subsequent penalty hearings (illustration 10). In a parallel way to that of the newspaper coverage of the operators’ judicial process, the content of these images can be interpreted as a Manichaeic portrayal of the “evil” contractors (see the way they are gathered around the “brain” of the operation who is standing up in a defying posture) and the “good” workers (portrayed as the submissive bodies that cooperate with the law, which is represented in this sketch by the judge and the US flag).



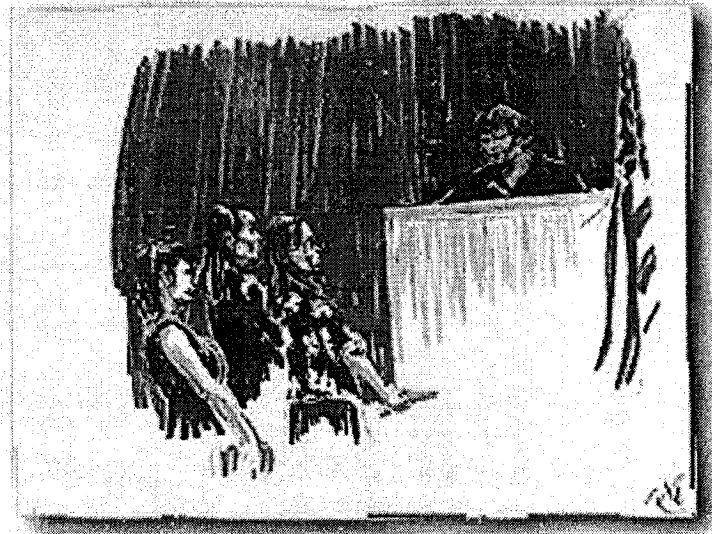


Illustration 10 Courtroom sketches of defendants listening to court proceedings in Aug. 21, 1995, and of three former El Monte sweatshop workers testifying at subsequent penalty hearing. Both images by Mary Chaney for KTTV/Fox 11, Los Angeles. Source: *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present*. Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 23 Feb. 2005. <<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/elmonte/3t20.htm>>.

Once again, these illustrations (re)enforce the notion of the punishment of the operators and of the redemption of the workers, cleaning the “stain” of shame and pointing towards public oblivion.

The mainstream media coverage also portrays the workers as happy and thankful for the justice that has been, finally, achieved. An example of this is an image forming part of the “El Monte” section of *Between a Rock* that portrays numerous smiling workers, which are “celebrating” their “first day of freedom” in the park (illustration 11). This image is emotionally moving while at the same time positions the workers as “reborn” and, from now on, as and “immune” from any type of struggle. It appears as if the suffering of many years has been magically washed away and now they are ready, as in a Hollywood-style happy ending, to pursue the true “American dream”.



Illustration 11 El Monte sweatshop workers and community activists celebrating their first day of freedom, Griffith Park, Los Angeles, August 13, 1995. Photo by Julie Su. Image reproduced from: *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present*. Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 23 Feb. 2005. <<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/elmonte/3t16.htm>>.

The text that “anchors” this image which is named “**The First Day of Freedom**” states, among other things, that: “**Concerned** for the workers’ safety if returned to Thailand, the **federal government granted them** legal residency with the right to work in the United States. All expect to apply for citizenship after residency requirements have been met”. Evidently, the federal government is presented as the caring and paternalistic figure that generously grants “them” (“those aliens”) the status of legality. The sweatshop workers are being redeemed and “sanitized” while being saved from the dangers that await them in their “dangerous” home country. The central metaphor at work of this example makes reference to a rebirth (“The First Day”) of the sweatshop workers that is being granted by the

generous/heroic/father donor of life. Aside from this, it is ironic that after years of forced labour they are finally being granted the right to work in the US.

Because “they” have been submissive, hard-working and resilient, “they” are now entitled to a piece of “paradise”. It is worth mentioning here that there is an ideological similarity between the notion of gaining a place in “paradise” through hard and rigorous work and the most basic premise of the protestant ethic.

In his influential work the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism Max Weber argues that the protestant ethic encouraged the acquisition of wealth, through hard labour, as a sign of predestination of being among those who had their place assured in heaven, and that this ethic of discipline and accumulation is paramount to the development of capitalism. Although the workers of the El Monte sweatshop were far from wealthy, I find that there is an specific ideological link between the protestant ethic and the depiction the article under analysis makes of the undocumented sweatshop workers in the sense that hard labour is, after all, recognized and rewarded with a piece of “paradise”.

Such use of language (re)enforces the belief that, as Bonacich and Appelbaum ironically describe,

[i]mmigrants are so much better off here [in the US] than they were in their homelands that they are grateful for the jobs the industry offers them.

Through hard work one can work one’s way up the ladder and become a millionaire. . . . The United States is a land of opportunity for everyone, and while there may occasionally be a little injustice, things are far better here than they are anywhere else in the world. (22)

Complementing these ideological constructs of the US as the land of limitless opportunity for everyone, regardless of one’s gender, ethnicity, education and social stratum,

the mainstream media coverage under analysis also gives important attention to the economic “rewards” that the workers received for their resilience and years of hard labour.

The final example, which is a text that shapes the El Monte sweatshop workers as redeemed, belongs to the El Monte Voices video in which Malinan Radomphon, a worker, answers the question “Do you plan to stay in America now?” in the following way:

Yes, I would like to remain here in the US. Now I’m enrolled in classes, so I would like to continue staying here. **My thinking about America has changed completely** now since El Monte. **I hated everyone in this country** and I didn’t think anyone was any good here in this country, but **now I’ve met some kind, generous people**. Now I’d like to remain in this country. **I believe this is a beautiful country.** (Liebhold and Rubenstein, “Interviews” 79)

Malinan appears to be making some progress and even to be satisfied. Moreover Malinan’s “misconceptions” about the US have changed and the “true face” of “this beautiful country” has been revealed. The suffering was long and damaging, but it can now be forgotten. Malinan has been reborn and the US remains being the land of the free.

But in spite of the emphasis that the mainstream media gives to the punishment of the operators and manufacturers, of the joy of the workers’ “first day of freedom”, of the generosity of the back-wages and of the happy-ending that the granting of US residency implies, the undocumented sweatshop workers *cannot* be redeemed. There is no way to repay the years of exploitation that they have lived through.

Moreover, I suggest that a more critical writing would acknowledge that the workers’ *post-redemption* condition is no paradise and that as Julie Su, their legal representative, explains

they have also entered the unenviable world of immigrant garment workers, who toil long hours and struggle to survive on the minimum wage. Their freedom from enslavement has not meant freedom from poverty or a host of other problems stemming from the long years of neglect to their health, physical exhaustion, and psychological abuse. It is difficult to evaluate the emotional costs of their ordeal, and impossible to place a monetary value on each day of freedom from which they were deprived. (148-9)

Finally, it is important to observe that if the El Monte sweatshop was indeed an exceptional case of labour abuse, the outcome of its workers was exceptional as well. Their portrayal as redeemed gives the illusion that a “fair” treatment is given to most undocumented workers. But what about all those undocumented sweatshop workers who remain under the shadows of labour abuses for years? What about those labour immigrants who die trying to reach the US? And what about those workers who get deported after years of hard labour and of contributing to the US economy?

As A-systemic

In this final section I am concerned with (re)describing the discursive construction of the mainstream media coverage of the sweatshop as *a-systemic*. The main support for the critique of such an assertion is based on the structural dynamics of labour migration from the “Third World” towards the “First World” as explained throughout the section “Capital on the Run” (in Chapter two). I argue that a very poor portrayal of the systemic relations between US foreign policy, transnational capital and labour migration is a constant characteristic throughout the corpus of texts under analysis. In a parallel way I also observe that questions

around the contradiction between immigration and labour laws (see “Policy and Resistance” in Chapter two) are chiefly ignored throughout the corpus.

More generally, the social, political and economic context which favors the existence of the underground sweatshop is not given importance, while a considerable part of the coverage focuses on the “illegality” of the workers and contractors as well as the punishment of the latter, isolating their actions from their context. Finally, my critique also takes note of the dangers of discursively constructing cases like the El Monte sweatshop as “extreme” and isolated, since this might promote tolerance towards “less acute” forms of labour abuse such as the proliferating practices of sweat-labour.

In order to make a comprehensive approach, it is important to point out that some texts within the corpus *do* in fact acknowledge sweatshops as an extensive practice; however they are overlooked when they are being compared to the El Monte slave-shop. As an example, a New York Times feature article informs that aside from “extreme” cases like the El Monte sweatshop “many other, more **traditional** sweatshops . . . still fail to pay minimum wage or overtime and often ignore health and safety laws” (Finder, “How an American” 4: 7). Clearly, the term “traditional” here implies tolerance towards these sweatshops. Aside from this, no explanation of the complex relationships between US intervention in “Third World” countries and labour immigration to the US is given in the vast majority of the texts that constitute the corpus. The only exception to this trend is a letter to the editor of the Times written by the Director of Immigrants’ Rights Project, Lucas Guttentag, in which he offers a quite different perspective on the issue of immigration as he writes in the fourth and fifth paragraphs of his letter that

a wise policy recognizes that real solutions can be achieved only by addressing the **root causes** of immigration and by attacking exploitation of immigrants in sweatshops like the one in El Monte, Calif. . . . People come to

the United States **not to receive social services** but because **global events** cause them to be **uprooted** or because unscrupulous employers want to exploit them. (A16)

Evidently this letter is a frontal contestation to the a-systemic view of the undocumented worker that frames her as an unconnected “problem” that needs to be resolved by local and drastic means such as those of tightening the borders and implementing stricter internal surveillance. The use of terms such as “root causes” and “global events” point towards the structural condition of the situation and imply the interrelation between foreign policy and undocumented immigration to the US.

From a very different perspective Kenneth Noble writes in the first two paragraphs of a Times news article:

Almost one-fifth of the garment industry workers in Los Angeles, **many** of them **foreigners** who came to the United States to **escape the crushing poverty** of their **homelands**, are toiling in unregulated, sweatshop conditions, labor officials, economists and union organizers said today.

Exactly how many find themselves bound to employers who take advantage of their legal status, naïveté and cultural alienation **is not known**. But experts said their **numbers were flourishing** despite a host of regulations on labor, health, safety and immigration designed to **flush them out** and shut their employers down. (“Los Angeles” 1: 6)

The central metaphor of this fragment works to frame the migrant worker as a growing “problem” that needs to be sanitized. Once again van Dijk’s work is useful to identify the discursive strategy that he calls “the numbers game” (“almost one fifth”, “numbers were flourishing”, “exactly how many . . . is not known”) and more importantly to see how through the central metaphor of “washing away the problem” (e.g. “to flush them

out”) the undocumented sweatshop worker is portrayed, in accordance with van Dijk’s “Prejudice Schema” as a threat to social identity, social order and to the economic interests. Indeed, the central metaphor of “sanitizing the problem” frames the undocumented worker as an impoverished, ignorant and culturally different “malady” of society. Not surprisingly, this way of framing doesn’t make any reference to how the conditions of existence in the homelands of these “aliens” got to happen in the first place, not to mention any suggestion that US foreign policy might be a factor to consider among the causes of such “flourishing invasion”.

Moreover, as the examples in the previous section have shown, there is a Manichean tendency, in both newspapers and in the museum exhibition, to radically separate the “evil” contractors from their “good” passive victims. I must clarify that I am not arguing that the actions performed by the contractors are justifiable in any way, but it is important to note that they are frequently used as scapegoats in order to hide a *system* that allows and indirectly encourages the exploitation of undocumented workers. In relation to this, Loucky et al. have noted that

working conditions maintained by contractors are, in large measure, imposed by the manufacturers. The presence of an intermediary stratum of contractors distances manufacturers from workers, who perceive only contractors as being to blame for their plight. In this sense, garment contractors perform a classic “middleman minority” function, becoming scapegoats for an entire oppressive system that they did not create⁴³. (349)

⁴³ The authors refer this observation to Edna Bonacich and John Modell’s *The Economic Basis of Ethnic Entrepreneurship: Small Business in the Japanese American Community*. Berkley: U of California P, 1980.

Within the corpus of texts under analysis most of the blame, prosecution and shame is deposited on the El Monte sweatshop contractors, while some manufacturers get fined and the big retailers, who were presumably selling clothes made in the El Monte sweatshop, get only a warning from the government (Noble, “U.S. Warns” A14). It is interesting to contrast this “share” of responsibility with the distribution of the cost of a \$100 garment (see figure 3 in the section “The Contracting System”, Chapter two). This Manichean distinction between the “evil” contractors and their “good” passive victims/workers, narrows the systemic problem of transnational intervention and global capitalism to a family matter.

Explaining how the El Monte sweatshop workers would “get smuggled” into the US, an article in the Washington Post describes in its fourth paragraph:

The women would obtain Thai passports and turn them over to Sukit, [a son of the head of the operation] who would apply for their U.S. visas by including them in otherwise **bona fide** tourist groups, investigators said. Their passports would be sent to the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok along with **false bank statements, marriage documents and other records needed for visa applications**, and the applicants usually never even had to appear at the embassy, officials said. (Branigin, “17-Hour Days” A12)

In this text, both employers and employees collaborate in the process of obtaining false travel documents. However Sukit’s ill-will of fooling immigration officials with counterfeit documents is emphasized, which is contrasted with the naïveté of the workers who “never even had to appear at the embassy”. Moreover this article does not go into the details of explaining the roots that motivate the forging of documents, not to mention the structural causes that motivate migration to the US; portraying in this way the contractors as a-systemic criminals.

My critique of the mainstream media construction of the undocumented sweatshop worker as an a-systemic body has to do also with the coverage of the El Monte sweatshop as an “extreme” phenomenon. Throughout the corpus, the El Monte sweatshop is consistently portrayed as an intolerable exception that must never take place again, deflecting attention away from other forms of exploitative work. For instance, a piece in the Times reports: “Victoria Bradshaw, California’s Labor Commissioner, today called the El Monte situation **an aberration**. She added, ‘**I don’t believe it’s widespread**’” (Noble, “Los Angeles” 1: 6). Clearly other forms of labour abuses are minimized by the “aberration” of the slave-shop; moreover, a sense of relief is implied by Ms. Bradshaws’s words “I don’t believe it’s widespread”. This presents the obvious danger that, as Brooks observes:

Once the egregious abuses, such as lack of bathroom breaks and physical abuse of workers, is taken care of, U.S.-based consumers, activists, and scholars accept the continuation of long hours, low pay, and high production quotas within garment production, all of which constitute the dictionary definitions of sweated labor. We accept these conditions because they *cannot* be represented as part of the resolution of the conflict. (269)

In this way, the label of “extreme” to cases like the El Monte sweatshop serve to admit “more acceptable” conditions of production, such as sweat-labour⁴⁴. Moreover, these “tolerable” labour abuses may become, through this mechanism, “naturalized” (Fairclough 33).

⁴⁴ In this respect, Ross writes: “Sweatshops are seen to be morally and politically apart from the lawful low-wage sector, which is condoned as result. The fact is that virtually every low-wage job, even those that meet minimum wage requirements and safety criteria, fails to provide an adequate standard of living for its wage earner, let alone his or her family. In most respects, it is the systemic depression of wages, rather than conscious attempts to evade labor laws, that is the structural problem. Installing proper fire exits may turn a sweatshop into a legal workplace, but it remains a low-wage atrocity” (“After” 296).

Another example within the corpus, this time from the museum exhibit, only considers some of the forces that motivate labour migration from the “Third World” to the “First World”. In the El Monte Voices video, one of the workers, Praphapan Pongpid, responds to the question “Where do you come from in Thailand?” in the following way:

I’m from Chenglai, Thailand, and I worked in Bangkok, Thailand.

Where I’m from - Chenglai - my parents were rice farmers and we were **always short of money** and resources and funds, and that’s **why I had to migrate to Bangkok**. To find money so that I could help my family and my parents out, but **money was always hard to come by**. (Liebhold and Rubenstein, “Interviews” 71)

By responding this way, Praphapan is alluding to the difficult times that directly motivated migrating to the US. However Praphapan is not aware that there might have been other, less visible and indirect causes for migrating such as the aforementioned cultural and economic intervention by the US in Thailand during the Vietnam War.

A sample of a fake passport and a fraudulent passport replacement form that were used by the workers to enter into the US were showed as part of the “El Monte” section of Between a Rock (illustration 12). It is important to observe that the display of these documents directs the attention of the audiences away from the structural conditions that originally motivated the migration of the workers from their place of origin, thus positioning their “crimes” as a-systemic. The image caption of the passport “anchors” this item by stating: “Doctored passport with legitimate U.S. visa used to **smuggle** in workers” (“Passports”).

Illustration 12 Application for replacement passport based on fraudulent claim of loss and doctored passport with legitimate US visa used to “smuggle” workers. Source: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present. Smithsonian National Museum of American History. 23 Feb. 2005. <<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/elmonte/3t5.htm>>.

In this context the word “smuggle” implies that the workers were treated as objects carried into the US. However, they actually traveled in a “voluntary” way and were aware that they were using false documents (Liebhold and Rubenstein, “Interviews” 75). The use of the term “smuggle” reinforces the assertion of the worker as a passive victim, since it denies the individual will of the worker to migrate to the US.

But the forces that motivate the undocumented sweatshop worker to leave her country of origin in search of better living conditions are *not* isolated exceptions. As explained by Sassen, labour migration is far from being a strictly voluntary decision. Moreover, those who travel great distances and face hazards and discrimination in order to improve their conditions of existence are *not* a-systemic. As Cheng and Bonacich explain, “migration is a product not of discrete and unconnected factors in the sending and receiving societies but of historical connections between the countries. It is not fortuitous; it is systemic” (2).

A more responsible and comprehensive writing of the undocumented sweatshop worker would incorporate these facts. As Mr. Guttentag’s letter to the editor demonstrates, this is not a very complicated task. However, if the mainstream media coverage cannot mend its ways, at least the responsible reader should be aware, through the use of the alternative media, that the motivations to migrate from the “Third World” to the “First World” are not a-systemic, that punishing individual actors represents only a fraction of the solution to labour abuses and that the “extremeness” of cases like the El Monte sweatshop cannot justify and minimize widespread and “less extreme” labour abuses.

Conclusion. Packaging

In this thesis I have critically identified the discursive constructions in the mainstream media that manufacture the undocumented sweatshop worker in the US and that sustain the inequalities to which she is subject. Based on the theory and methodology detailed in Chapter one and the historical, social, political and economic background research that I have outlined in Chapter two, I have recognized six dominant assertions that are explicitly and/or implicitly present in the corpus of texts under analysis. Although some of these assertions can complement and/or be catalogued into van Dijk's "Prejudice Schema" (see beginning of Chapter three), these assertions also structure the undocumented sweatshop worker in a significant way as absent, alien, criminal, as a passive victim and as redeemed. In addition to this they also structure the sweatshops as an a-systemic phenomenon. I am not pretending in any way that these are the only assertions that can be "found" through a rigorous analysis of the corpus. However, they are structurally relevant in terms of (re)producing the exploitation of the El Monte sweatshop workers in particular and of all undocumented sweatshop workers in the US in general.

In my "findings" I have recognized that the undocumented sweatshop worker is barely mentioned in the mainstream media and that when she gets to be included in the agenda, such coverage matches certain codes of newsworthiness such as "simplification", "dramatization", "a sense of the unexpected", "frequency", "threshold", "meaningfulness" and "negativity" like the El Monte sweatshop case demonstrates. Moreover when these bodies are referred to, they are consistently and systematically silenced.

Following a tradition of discrimination for more than a century these workers are significantly portrayed as "others" and as "them". More specifically they are labeled by their ethnicities and they are stereotyped, through language and images, as foreign, filthy,

disorganized, submissive and, in line with van Dijk's argument, as a threat to the dominant cultural identity, to social order and to the economic interests of the receiving "First World". This kind of discourse becomes more pervasive when it is validated through the institutionalized and authoritative voice of a State representative like that of the US Secretary of Labour. In connection with these representations, the undocumented sweatshop worker is also consistently portrayed as a criminal; evidently more so in the newspapers than in the museum exhibition under analysis. This way of seeing highlights "them" as voluntary invaders who illegally arrive at the "First World" as part of "floods" that threaten jobs, social stability, cultural identity and health. On the other hand such depictions hide the undeniable cultural and economic contributions that these workers bring.

I have also "found" a less explicit assertion along the text of the corpus, which subjectivizes the undocumented sweatshop workers as politically numb, docile and fully dependent on the agency of consumers, manufacturers, retailers and governmental organizations. A parallel point to this critique is the fact that in the vast majority of texts under analysis the sweatshop worker has to be spoken for. Moreover, my analysis points out that the ethnicity of the sweatshop worker plays a key role in the construction of her passivity and her portrayal as a victim.

From a different perspective, the coverage of the El Monte sweatshop case also portrays the undocumented worker as "rewarded" for her years of "modern slavery". The main "rewards" that the workers received were in the form of partial payment of back-wages and the granting of US residency. Through this crisis management the authorities maintain a positive and rescuing image while promising a fresh new start. An important part of this critique consists in the omission of the fact that the INS knew about the El Monte sweatshop years before, while no action was taken in order to interfere. Another constituent part of this

critique is the almost exclusive blame and punishment on the operators of the El Monte sweatshop.

Finally, I have also identified that the sweatshop is portrayed as a phenomenon isolated from the dynamic and interrelated structures of global capitalism and labour migration. In this respect neither the newspapers nor the museum exhibition under analysis consider US foreign policy as a factor that might influence the migration of workers from the “Third World”. This critique is complemented by the lack of acknowledgement of the contradictions between the immigration and labour legislations, and the construction of cases like the El Monte sweatshop as “exceptional”, which promotes tolerance towards more common and extended forms of labour abuse.

After analyzing the corpus of articles I am in a position to conclude that the coverage of the two newspapers on the El Monte sweatshop case is not *radically* different from the way the event is portrayed in the museum exhibition. However, it is worth noting that Between a Rock is more critical and cautious in the way that the language it uses (re)produces the conditions of existence of the undocumented sweatshop worker (e.g. by the very limited number of times that the term “illegal” is used in the texts of the exhibit). The museum exhibition is also critical because, by its very nature and institutional setting, it gives a historical perspective on the evolution of the sweatshop as well as its contemporary relevance; elements that are not present in the newspapers’ coverage. As mentioned previously, sweatshop labour has had a fundamental role in the growth and development of the US, and a historic exhibition that explores these issues fulfills a worthy cause, in spite of the critiques that it has been subject to here and elsewhere.

It is important to acknowledge that although most of the stories in the newspapers examined in the corpus have a marginal space in terms of the place and space they occupy, there are a few exceptions that give to the topic of sweatshop labour the relevance that it

deserves (see table 1 in Chapter one). There is no doubt that the mere inclusion of topics like this one has *per se* a positive impact in society in terms of raising awareness. As Julie Su notes, the media coverage of the El Monte sweatshop has promoted public alertness of these excessively harsh working conditions (143).

A (Re)description

Ernesto Laclau notes that if reality is socially constructed by language, then political reality is also malleable and subject to (re)describing interventions: “The essentially performative character of naming is the precondition for all hegemony and politics” (xiv). According to this, the flexibility of political reality rests on its ontology and, if language is used to perform power, it can also be used to create friction from within power. The present thesis encourages audiences to consult the alternative media to get a different perspective of what the mainstream media presents. At the same time, the alternative media producers are encouraged to consider my observations.

Indeed, aside from any responsibility that the reader may have in terms of critically interpreting the silence and discursive construction that the mainstream media has to offer, I encourage the use of the alternative media in order to interrupt the vicious cycle of (dis)information that I have analyzed here. As opposed to the mainstream media, the alternative media provide audiences with the possibility of distinguishing and evaluating the political “reality” that the mainstream media has to offer, giving sense to Laclau’s observation.

Such (re)reading and (re)writing should take in mind how the mainstream media (re)produce the exploitation that the undocumented sweatshop worker is subject to through the discursive construction of her as absent, alien, criminal, a passive victim, redeemed and

of the sweatshop as an a-systemic phenomenon. A critical (re)reading and (re)writing of these mainstream media assertions would emphasize that although the undocumented sweatshop worker is basically ignored by the mainstream media, she is not absent in the material reality of everyday life. That she makes, through long hours of disciplined work and precarious health and safety conditions, many of the commodities we purchase. That she is not a foreigner since we share with her the same streets and cities, and that, in spite of the colour of her skin and of her unfamiliar accent, she is one of “us” rather than one of “them”. The (re)reading and (re)writing that I propose acknowledges that in spite of the tremendous value that immigrant workers supply to the receiving nation’s economic and cultural assets, they still are, as Bonacich et al. observe, confronted with several types of oppression such as racism, sexism, and discriminatory laws for those that are undocumented (“Garment” 11). In addition to this, it is also important to include in this (re)description the historical role that immigrant workers have had in the economic and cultural building of the US and other “First World” nations.

As mentioned before, the alternative discourse that I propose makes use of a more “neutral” vocabulary, for example by using the term “undocumented” instead of “illegal” and by avoiding unnecessary indications of strangeness such as “alien” or unnecessary references to a person’s nationality. Another important point is to keep in mind the persecution and mistreatment that many undocumented workers go through. In this regard, this (re)description acknowledges the blatant contradiction between the surveillance aims of the IRCA towards undocumented immigrants and the inclusive labor rights of workers constituted in the FLSA as detailed in the section “Policy and Resistance” (in Chapter two).

A pillar of the (re)description I suggest is conformed by the recognition that, as Mimi Abramovitz observes, US interests and actions offshore, enacted by public and private actors, function also as a way to watchfully coordinate incoming “Third World” immigration.

Exemplifying this point Abramovitz says that “austerity programs imposed on Mexico and other [“Third World”] nations effectively create situations of debt bondage such that these indebted nations must surrender their citizens, especially women, as migrant laborers to the First World [sic] nations in the desperate effort to keep up with debt payments and to sustain their remaining citizens through these overseas workers’ remittances” (4). This way of (re)describing the structural condition of the undocumented sweatshop worker should also be informed by economic studies like the one made by Sassen (see the section “Capital on the Run” in Chapter two) that bring up the links between labour migration, colonialism and globalization as deeply interrelated phenomena that promote migration from the “Third World” to the US and other “First World” countries. As the approach to the corpus of texts and articles analyzed in this thesis demonstrates, the mainstream media consistently and systematically avoid these issues and it is crucial to bring them forward to better understand the structural nature of the “problem” of undocumented immigrant workers. The (re)description I propose acknowledges that, as Chang observes, many immigrant workers such as nurses, construction workers and waitresses opt to leave their “Third World” homelands as a result of the influence of cultural exchanges and structural adjustment policies imposed by “First World” countries. According to her,

[s]ince the 1980s, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other international financial institutions (IFIs) based in the First World [sic] have routinely prescribed structural adjustment policies to the governments of indebted countries as preconditions for loans. These prescriptions have included cutting government expenditures on social programs, slashing wages, liberalizing imports, opening markets to foreign investment, expanding exports, devaluing local currency, and privatizing state enterprises. (123-124)

Following Chang's argument, the (re)description that I propose explains that poverty, political unrest and overpopulation are elements that, while being allowed by "First World" nations to take place, indirectly benefit them in the form of a cheap labour force in search of better living conditions. Furthermore my (re)description relies on the observation that "the profits of First World [sic] banks and corporations depend on debt reduction and the extraction of resources (both capital and human), [and that] government policies eventually force Third World [sic] individuals 'to follow their country's wealth' to the First World [sic]" (Abramovitz xi).

In addition to this, and according to the critique that I make of the mainstream media portrayal of the undocumented sweatshop worker as a passive victim and as redeemed, I propose a (re)reading and (re)writing of her as a politically active and capable person who struggles, as most of us do, to improve her conditions of existence. Moreover, the undocumented sweatshop worker must be valued, in this (re)description, as a person who significantly contributes -through her experience and work- to the cultural and economic life of the "First World".

Finally, reflecting upon van Dijk's "Prejudice Schema", the (re)reading and (re)writing of the undocumented sweatshop worker that I propose emphasizes that she is neither a threat to our social identity, nor to the social order, nor to our economic interests.

An implicit objective of this thesis has been to (re)describe the immigrant sweatshop worker in a way that promotes a more equal movement of labour (in contrast with the increasing mobility of commodities) between the "Third World" and the "First World". I have directed my research interests towards this topic with the hope that global capitalism becomes flexible enough to allow a freer movement of labour within the system and through gradual transformations. This underlying political aim has been inspired by Fairclough's observation that, "[I]f one becomes aware that a particular aspect of common sense is

sustaining power inequalities at one's own expense, it ceases to *be* common sense, and may cease to have the capacity to sustain power inequalities" (85).

A more inclusive coverage of labour abuses in the mainstream media is desirable and positive for society as a whole. This thesis criticizes a concrete example of the mainstream media coverage of labour abuse and encourages the reader to be more critical while approaching the mainstream media by looking at alternative sources of information. As Hartley mentions, "our critical understanding of news-discourse and of the world constructed within it can change even if the [mainstream media] news doesn't" (9). In a parallel fashion the critical observations of this thesis should inspire a discursive (re)construction of the undocumented sweatshop worker in the alternative media. Furthermore, some of my "findings" may be useful to comprehend the discursive dynamics of other social groups involved in immigration and/or labour abuses, like political refugees or sweat-labour workers.

This thesis is a politically significant investigation in the sense that it acknowledges and incorporates the struggle behind language and the (re)presentation of a clearly disadvantaged social group. Hopefully, the richer and more abundant the truths that there are, the richer the understanding of ourselves will be. By suggesting a new "vocabulary" this thesis is one small step forward towards the "historicist and nominalist culture" that Rorty envisages. A culture that is concerned with "the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still further utopias, as an endless process - an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth" (xvi).

Finally, I acknowledge that through my writing I have placed my political bet in a proactive examination and (re)description of language that will hopefully lead to a more equal access to health, education, work and a richer political life within global capitalism.

Living in a more egalitarian society is a personally desirable scenario, even though I am aware that such aspiration cannot necessarily be everybody's aim.

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