OBJECTS OF DESIRE: FEMINIST INQUIRY, TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM, & GLOBAL FASHION

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the conventions used to frame and represent sweatshops in and to the U.S. Employing qualitative research methods this dissertation examines U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, analyzing how the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker are made into exceptional objects of inquiry, and considers what kinds of truths and subjects are garnered from them. This dissertation argues that U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse frames sweatshops as an inherently foreign problem, and that this framing contributes to U.S. exceptionalism and savior ideology. This framing positions U.S. subjects as the primary agents of change whose relation to sweatshops is crucial to their eradication, and renders causal blame upon the racialized poor within the U.S. I argue that this framing undergirds the proliferation of new ethical markets that reproduce dislocation, dispossession, and displacement within U.S. borders via retail gentrification. Ultimately, this dissertation asks what truths are made possible through a mobilizing discourse whose foundational premise is contingent on the imagery of the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker.
“Reciprocally, a sense of the foreign is necessary to erect the boundaries that enclose the nation as home.” –Amy Kaplan

Chapter One: Introduction

“Reciprocally, a sense of the foreign is necessary to erect the boundaries that enclose the nation as home.” –Amy Kaplan

One Child, Global Accountability

A young, South Asian woman sits outdoors, wearing brightly colored clothing. The young woman’s gaze does not meet the camera. The young woman is not smiling, and her body language, knees drawn into her chest, hands hidden behind them, lend a feeling of mistrust, apprehension, and solitude. In *The Huffington Post* article “One Child, Global Accountability,” authors Laura Gutierrez and Laura Wagner present the story of Sumaya, a fifteen-year old girl and former employee at the Tazreen Fashions factory, the factory that caught fire November 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2012 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. As Gutierrez and Wagner explain, after undergoing surgery for trauma to her face, Sumaya’s right eye “began to bulge and lose vision,” and after a biopsy in July of 2013, it was confirmed that Sumaya has a rare and difficult to treat cancer. As the authors state, Sumaya began “slipping into depression…stopped eating and asked to go home to die” (Gutierrez and Wagner “One Child”). The authors identify Walmart as one of Sumaya’s employers, and inform the readers that while many global retailers have committed to compensating the victims of the Tazreen fire, Walmart remains the sole exception to this agreement.

The frames used to introduce and convey Sumaya’s story conform to a convention that is prevalent in accounts of the global assembly line, but specifically when discussing the fashion industry. The authors use the past tense, and they do not provide the reader with an update of

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1 A. Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity” 582.
Sumaya’s condition. The use of the past tense imparts an impending sense of death and doom, and frames Sumaya as already in the past. Bangladesh in this article is not a place with its own history, people, and traditions, but rather a culture of death, poverty, and ongoing grief; as the authors state, the site of the factory is now “a haunted village,” as many of the victims are still missing, unidentifiable after the fire (Gutierrez and Wagner “One Child”). In a section entitled “Who is responsible for Sumaya?” the authors state that the retailers that “we North Americans support every day are under no obligation to help her” (Gutierrez and Wagner “One Child”), effectively hailing the reader through the use of the pronoun “we,” and implying that Sumaya’s condition is the responsibility of U.S. consumers. In the lower right hand corner of the image of Sumaya, one of the author’s names is visible: “Laura Gutierrez.” Gutierrez is identified under her photo and name as an anthropologist, and it is probable that Gutierrez took Sumaya’s picture while working in Bangladesh. Gutierrez’s writing partner, Wagner, is identified under her photo and name only as a “Fulbright Researcher,” a designation for persons participating in the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs student exchange program. In these professional designations both women are granted a level of authority over the topic at hand: they are highly educated, embedded experts. They are presumed qualified to communicate the suffering of others in places that are not their nations of origin because they possess the training to do so. Gutierrez and Wagner are likely conducting research in Bangladesh, and relaying stories like Sumaya’s is a part of this research. Gutierrez and Wagner’s decision to tell Sumaya’s story, framed within a moral provocation (i.e., “who is responsible for Sumaya?”) is intended to compel their readers. What specifically are Gutierrez and Wagner accomplishing in their re-telling of Sumaya’s story? Who is this article written for? What are they attempting to compel from their readers, and what does it have to do with Sumaya?
Introduction

I introduce the article above because it so readily conforms to a moralized narrative structure that is now quite common in accounts of sweatshop use and abuse in the global assembly line. Underlying the logic of the preceding article is a presumption concerning the reader’s relationship to the image that suggests that if the reader really knows the cost of their clothing they will act differently. As Rey Chow reminds us, quoting Frederic Jameson: “the visual is essentially pornographic…Pornographic films are…only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body” (Jameson qtd. in Chow 29). Gutierrez and Wagner’s decision to utilize Sumaya’s image participates in this pornographic display, and asks their readers to do so as well. In their use of Sumaya’s image and their attendant framing, Gutierrez and Wagner attempt to compel a particular kind of identification from their readers. This identification is contingent on the use of Sumaya’s image, and, as Chow argues “a process in which ‘our’ own identity is measured in terms of the degrees to which we resemble her and to which she resembles us” (Chow 34). By providing descriptions of Sumaya’s life and health, and reproducing her words and actions, Gutierrez and Wagner attempt to “combat the politics of the image…by showing the truth behind, beneath [or] around it” (Chow 29). In Gutierrez and Wagner’s framing, the “truth” behind the image, and thus their means of combatting the politics of it (including “the gaze of the Western scholar” that obtained and reproduced it) is the moralized narrative concerning sweatshops and consumerism (Chow 34). Providing readers with Sumaya’s story is an attempt to expose readers to the “true cost” of their Walmart clothing. By seeing Sumaya, the readers will presumably see themselves in terms of the degree to which they resemble her, and to which she resembles them, and correct their practices accordingly. Through the image, and its accompanying text that details and frames it,
the audience will *really* see the ways in which their clothing comes at a high price. This dissertation takes this logic as its point of departure, and asks: what kinds of subjects are hailed through a mobilizing discourse that depends on the imagery of the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker? What kinds of lessons are imparted when this logic that employs the tools of documentary realism to convey global suffering, is utilized in the service of Western and U.S. subjects? Why is this the convention used to discuss, explain, and understand the structure of labor in the global fashion industry? Is there a way to frame, and represent the fashion industry’s labor problem that does not necessitate the production and circulation of persons made exceptional objects of inquiry, yet remains cognizant and attendant to the inequities wrought through processes of globalization?

This dissertation explores the conventions used to frame and represent fashion’s labor problem. In this dissertation I assert that U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse frames sweatshops as an inherently foreign problem, and that this framing contributes to U.S. exceptionalism and savior ideology. This framing positions U.S. subjects as the primary agents of change whose relation to sweatshops is crucial to their eradication, and renders causal blame upon the racialized poor within the U.S. I also assert that this framing undergirds the proliferation of new ethical markets that reproduce dislocation, dispossession, and displacement within U.S. borders. I turn to the topic of ethical consumerism because it is often held up as the resolution to sweatshops, and I argue that this logic is drawn from the binary conception of globalization that frames sweatshops as the result of poor consumer choices in the U.S. I argue that this framing renders sweatshops inherently foreign, and some U.S. subjects as superior saviors and others as obstacles to global progress. In other words, I see ethical consumerism as a crucial part of the imperial framing at play in the article discussed above. In this dissertation I do not attempt to ‘resolve’ or prescribe
practices or strategies for sweatshop’s eradication; that is not the point of this study. This
dissertation is concerned with the ways in which framing and representing the sweatshop and the
sweatshop worker as exceptional objects of inquiry fosters particular kinds of subjects and truths.
Specifically, I am concerned with how the binaries necessary to the objectification of sweatshop
workers are productive, and am interested in attending to the complexities and possibilities such
framings effect when deployed within, and for a U.S. audience.

In what follows I present the theoretical frames and concepts undergirding this
dissertation. I turn first toward the postcolonial and transnational feminist scholarship I bring to
bear on U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse. Discussing this body of scholarship, I outline the ways in
which I approach and select my object of study, U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, and how
postcolonial and transnational feminist theory informs the structure of this dissertation. In this
chapter I highlight three concepts discussed at length within postcolonial, U.S. Third World, and
transnational feminist scholarship that are central to discussing the representation of sweatshops:
criticism of the world systems theory and binary conceptions of power, the production and
circulation of the Third World Woman,² and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of epistemic
violence; in what follows, I discuss these three concepts in more detail so as to articulate some of
the tensions in representing sweatshops. In this way my method in this dissertation is best
captured by what Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal refer to as transnational feminist cultural
studies, a point I discuss further below. The discussion below highlights some of the key
concepts guiding the structure of this dissertation, and as such, I return to them in subsequent

² My use of the term “Third World Woman,” is intentional in that in this chapter I am discussing a very
specific figuration captured in this term. Referring to the Third World Woman, I am interested in
examining her production and circulation in U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse. Likewise, my use of the
“first/third” descriptors is drawn from my interest in interrogating their production, and the productive
tensions within, and effected by these binaries.
chapters. My aim in the discussion below is to mark the terms with which I engage each in the over-arching arguments in this dissertation.

**Transnational Feminist Criticism**

At the forefront of the power dynamics examined by transnational feminist criticism is the way in which national borders operate under late capitalist globalization. Starting in the early 1990s, global political economists and international systems theorists began to question, if not outright discard, the nation-state as a unit of analysis. This move stems from the belief that under globalization, the nation-state ceases to provide a useful category of analysis because global markets make the actions, and thus the power of nation-states increasingly irrelevant (Wallerstein 2011; Wallerstein et al. 2015). This move within global political economic theory produced the world systems theory, largely credited to Immanuel Wallerstein, with which many transnational feminist scholars specifically take issue. Working from the conception of the world as an open, unified market, world systems theory suggests that national categories fall under “center” and “peripheral” demarcations wherein imperial nations (the center) direct and determine markets through financial planning, investing, and consumption, while the formerly colonized nations (the periphery) operate under the benevolent purview of the center (for instance through structural adjustment policies) and provide the labor and raw materials for global capitalism.

Many transnational feminist scholars rightfully challenge this theoretical framework that views “the world as constituted only through margins and centers,” which on a discursive level retains colonial relations (Kaplan, Alarcón, and Moallem 4). World systems theory does attempt to account for the legacies as well as the contemporary realities of colonialism, as the imperial powers operate as the center, and the formerly colonized nations the periphery. However, as
several transnational feminist scholars argue, this conception contains some serious elisions in its formulation. Most prominent is the retention of a binary model rooted in colonialism and imperialism that while at its best attempts to maintain some level of transparency or honesty about the structure of the world’s power and wealth, at its worst actually functions to maintain it discursively via a conceptualization of power wherein the West acts, and the rest is acted upon, vulnerable to all-encompassing cultural and financial hegemony. This production of a binary along colonial legacies “can’t move us out of colonial discourse,” and certainly “cannot account for the terrible conditions under which some people live in the so-called center” (Grewal and Kaplan, “Introduction” 9-10). Further, as Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón and Minoo Moallem assert, “the rhetoric of margins and centers is complicitous in the production of inner and outer boundaries” that they argue “may be better tracked through the rhetoric of the ‘double concept of the border’” (Kaplan, Alarcón, and Moallem 8). What both of these texts point toward is the multidirectional flow of capital, people, commodities, and culture, rather than a monodirectional, predetermined movement across borders. This distinction is significant because while the center-periphery model is in some ways attentive to cultural and economic imperialism, such imperial encounters are not only presented as inevitable, but the ways in which they will happen are already known. Further, these texts rightly suggest that while the U.S. moves across borders, so too do the places and people it travels to (in ways not always readily apparent). This porosity is important because as Kaplan, Alarcón, and Moallem argue: “The discourses of the ‘international’ or ‘global’ feminism rely on political and economic as well as cultural concepts of discrete nations who can be placed into comparative or relational status, always maintaining the West as Center” (12). This conception of “discrete nations” is
implausible when considering the porosity of borders and that “Western culture is itself, as is every cultural formation, a hybrid of something” (Grewal and Kapan, “Introduction” 8).

In response to the binaries entailed in these “global” analyses is a conception of “the transnational.” In their genealogy of the concept of transnational across disciplines, Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and JT Way provide a concise observation concerning the theoretical significance of the category of transnationalism:

> Transnationalism has been a diverse, contested, cross-disciplinary intellectual movement that in some of its manifestations has been bound together by a particular insight: in place of a long and deeply embedded modernist tradition of taking the nation as the framework within which one can study things (literatures, histories, and so forth), the nation itself has to be a question- not untrue and therefore trivial, but an ideology that changes over time, and whose precise elaboration at any point has profound effects on wars, economies, cultures, the movements of people, and relations of domination. (Briggs et al 628).

The nation as an object of interrogation, rather than an accepted, discrete entity or container within which one observes and studies, underpins the theoretical charge in “transnational.” Transnational in this sense is the thing that cuts across national boundaries, attentive to the people, commodities, capital, and histories that inform those very boundaries. The transnational is distinct from the global in the sense that while the global dichotomizes power, regions, and people, the transnational routes them along particular circuits; in effect, the global perspective implicitly accepts nations as fixed entities, while the transnational explicitly acknowledges the processes central to nations’ making (and un-making). Thus, central to the theoretical investments of transnational feminist cultural studies is the concept of “linkages.” Drawing on
the work of Spivak, Kaplan and Grewal assert that transnational feminist cultural studies attend to the “linkages and travels of forms of representation as they intersect with movements of labor and capital in a multinational world” (“Transnational Feminist” 357). As Kaplan and Grewal state:

[I]t is Spivak’s own methodologies that enable us to question any emphasis on similarities, universalisms, or essentialisms in favor of articulating links among the diverse, unequal, and uneven relations of historically constituted subjects. Within humanist paradigms, similarities imply bonding between full subjects. Linkages suggest networks of economic and social relations that occur within postmodernity vis-à-vis global capital and its effects. Linkage does not require reciprocity or sameness or commonality. It can and must acknowledge differentials of power and participation in cultural production, but it also can and must trace the connections among seemingly disparate elements such as various religious fundamentalisms, patriarchies, and nationalisms. (“Transnational Feminist” 359).

Linkages in this sense are counter to the universalizing moves in some forms of what Kaplan and Grewal refer to as “global feminism,” in that rather than attempting to unite all feminisms, women, or feminist practices under a hegemonic conception of gender, linkages map the connections made possible through global processes, subject to various scattered hegemonies (Grewal and Kaplan, “Introduction” 17-19). As Grewal and Kaplan argue, rather than a global conception of power and domination wherein power flows from the West/North and works to homogenize the East/South, a transnational feminist practice orients its analysis to the flows of

3 “‘Scattered hegemonies,’… are the effects of mobile capital as well as the multiple subjectivities that replace the European unitary subject” (Grewal and Kaplan, “Introduction” 7).
people, commodities, capital, and ideas that cut across and problematize the “purely locational
politics of global-local or center-periphery” (“Introduction” 13). This linking is possible for
Grewal and Kaplan through the concept of multiple peripheries which “can link directly the
domestic policies of a world power such as the United States to its foreign policies”
(“Introduction” 20). In this way, attention to linkages provides the means with which to chart
connections transnationally without simultaneously erecting the very binary conceptions of
power that uphold universalizing paradigms, such as global feminism.

Similar to the modernist presumption concerning the discreteness and interchangeability
regarding the nation-state, postmodern and/or poststructuralist moves within women’s studies
have interrogated the discursive limits to the category “woman.” As Anne Marie Goetz observes
in her 1988 article:

‘Women’ as an ontological category and organizing concept, and women’s
experiences as occupiers of systematically inferior positions in all spheres of life
in most societies, have produced the historical identity upon which feminist
epistemology and politics have been based. Perhaps the most explicit way this
commonality of identity has been expressed, and political purpose pursued, has
been in feminist concern over the effects of modernization upon subordinated,
low-income women in developing societies. (477).

Goetz’s observation points to several important conceptual assumptions contained in what
Grewal and Kaplan refer to as “global feminism.” Global feminism (also sometimes referred to
as the “global sisterhood” model) elides “the diversity of women’s agency in favor of a
universalized Western model of women’s liberation that celebrates individuality and modernity,”
and as such, has often “stood for a kind of Western cultural imperialism” (Grewal and Kaplan,
“Introduction” 17). Further, as Mimi Thi Nguyen observes, in its universalizing tendencies that elide the “structuring violences of geopolitics and transnational capital,” global feminism “often draws on North-South disparities and discourses of patriarchal states or ‘backward’ cultures through which a politics of comparison constructs Western women as ethical and free and as saviors of oppressed women around the world” (370-1). As such, this feminist framework is contingent upon certain epistemological assumptions. As Goetz observes, global-minded feminist epistemology has been constructed upon a presumed set of experiences (as well as ontology) shared by women globally. This logic concerning feminist epistemology suggests that “experience is…the origin of knowledge” and “the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built” (Scott 777). In this way, and as Joan Scott argues, “Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured, about language (or discourse) and history- are left aside” (777). This logic takes experience (without the social determinants Scott identifies above as shaping it) as accepted fact of difference and as the basis for explanation and analysis, rather than as “a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (Scott 777). In this way, experience becomes an essentialized fact, or facet of identity, rather than a means with which to understand how particular identities emerge or exist. Experience taken as such, and then used to constitute the categorical boundaries of “woman” can only ever elide the ways in which those experiences are themselves mediated and constructed by various ideological systems, and when brandished by those in hierarchical positions to discuss Others (as Goetz observes above), works towards a form of epistemic imperialism. As Trinh T. Minh-ha asserts on this point: “Just as man provides
an example of how the part played by women has been ignored, undervalued, distorted, or omitted through the use of the terminology presumed to be generic, woman more often than not reflects the subtle power of linguistic exclusion, for its set of referents rarely incudes those relevant to the Third World female persons” (16). Trinh’s comments point towards both the limits and consequences the category “woman” presents when used to speak for, or about Third World female persons, but also the imperial epistemology undergirding it.

The imperial dynamics at play in global feminist epistemology are most prominently discussed in Spivak’s foundational essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” which interrogates the limits of Western knowledge production about the Third World. Examining how the Third World subject, specifically the Third World Woman, is represented in Western scholarship, Spivak argues that Western intellectual production, regardless of claims to “worker solidarity” or good intentions, remains “complicit with international economic interests” (27). More specifically, Spivak argues that Western intellectual production positions itself apart from, rather than as operative within, the ideological realm. As Spivak states: “the concrete experience that is the guarantor of the political apparatus of prisoners, soldiers, and schoolchildren is disclosed through the concrete experience of the intellectual, the one who diagnoses the episteme,” which works towards an “unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual” (275).

Spivak’s attention to the role of ideology is important here because, as she further argues “It has helped positivist empiricism, the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism, to define its own arena as ‘concrete experience’ and ‘what actually happens’” (275). So troubling here, and what Spivak points towards, is the way in which the Other, the “prisoners, soldiers, and schoolchildren,” are made authentic subjects so as to perform a form of self-referential labor for
the Western intellectual, and in many ways, the West broadly. As Spivak argues, this framework of knowledge production not only fails to grapple with the ways in which individuals are made into subjects through social relations, but it also fails to account for the Western intellectual’s own positioning within those relations, and “its production by the imperialist project” (291). In effect, it is a form of “masculine radicalism that renders the place of the investigator transparent,” and by fetishizing the presumed authentic and/or concrete (i.e., the Other), it ultimately works towards the reification of the Western intellectual’s own epistemic privilege (namely, “brandishing concrete experience,” Spivak 295; 275). Understood as such, the motivations undergirding the Western intellectual’s pursuit are self-explanatory, a move Spivak asserts is “located, simply, in desire” (273).

As Chow argues, there is a two-sided analysis at play in Spivak’s argument concerning the representation of the subaltern woman. As Chow states: “The charge of Spivak’s essay…is a protest against the two sides of image-identification, the two types of freedom the subaltern has been allowed- object formation and subject constitution- which would result either in the subaltern’s protection (as object) from her own kind or her achievement as a voice assimilable to the project of imperialism” (35). Chow’s observation points towards an aspect of Spivak’s argument that often manifests as a response to it. As Cynthia Wood observes, one tendency in acknowledging Spivak’s argument concerning epistemic violence and the subsequent “silence” of the subaltern is an attempt to include and search for “authentic” voices (2001). As Chow states:

As we challenge dominant discourse by ‘resurrecting’ the victimized voice/self of the native with our readings…we step, far too quickly, into the otherwise silent and invisible place of the native and turn ourselves into living agents/witnesses
for her. This process, in which we become visible, also neutralizes the untranslatability of the native’s experience and the history of that untranslatability. (332).

As Wood argues, this search for the authentic voice belies the very desire Spivak identifies as motivating in the first place, because Spivak’s analysis suggests that “Third World women only achieve subjectivity in the context of development by actualizing the development academic and practitioner’s desire to be desired,” which Spivak captures in her distillation: “White men are saving Brown women from Brown men” (Wood 441). However, in the search for the voice to the voiceless “we need Brown women (mediating agents we define in homogenous terms that best satisfy our desires) to need us…It thus also serves to reproduce the needs of its agents to re-enact (perpetually) the satisfaction of their desires through the practices of development” (Wood 441). In other words, the move to give voice to the voiceless is a move that, like the circulation of the silent subaltern, seeks to satisfy an imperial desire to be needed, to be saving, in the first place. As Chow argues: “The question to ask is not whether we can return the native to her authentic origin, but what our fascination with the native means in terms of the irreversibility of modernity” (36).

The criticisms outlined in this section inform the present study, and as such, I return to them throughout this dissertation. In the next section, I explain how these theoretical concepts and frameworks inform this dissertation’s overarching argument and point of entry for examining U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse.

Transnational Feminist Cultural Studies in the U.S.

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4 I capitalize the descriptors “Brown,” “White,” and “Black” when used in this dissertation because they mark social and historical processes and locations specific to certain groups of people.
In this dissertation I am concerned with the ways in which anti-sweatshop discourse in the U.S. circulates the figuration of the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker, and what this figuration makes possible, or not. This dissertation employs a transnational feminist cultural studies method in this analysis. This dissertation draws on the concepts of linkages in its analysis of the framing devices and conventions used to generate and present knowledge on the global division of labor, with specific attention to the fashion industry. More specifically, this project examines the production, circulation and consumption of the figuration of the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker in U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, and the modernist agendas underpinning these mobilizations. Undertaking this analysis, I examine the cultural texts and products that I have compiled over the six years of research behind this dissertation draft. Many of these cultural productions are representative of an anti-sweatshop discourse in the U.S.; although they are not all produced in the U.S. they circulate within it via fashion magazines and blogs, news media, anti-sweatshop organizations, and emergent fashion markets. My decision to focus on U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse is first and foremost a decision drawn from my physical location within it; it is the best option for me to undertake research because it requires the least amount of capital to do so. Additionally, my decision to focus on U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse is an intentional decision concerning methodology, knowledge production, and the overarching argument I make in this dissertation, that in its most distilled version asserts that the representational practices employed to frame sweatshops in the U.S. both reflect and re-enact imperial power relations. To quote Kamala Visweswaran, part of my intention in examining U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, and the representations that explicitly circulate within the U.S. is an intentional “attempt to locate myself in a field of power (the West) and in the production of a particular knowledge…It is an effort at ‘accountable positioning’ (to use Donna Haraway’s term), an endeavor to be answerable
for what I have learned to see, and for what I have learned to do” (Visweswaran 97). My attention to the transnational culture that is specifically centered on the circulation, production, and consumption of the sweatshop and sweatshop worker in the U.S. is an attempt to counter the norms I see structuring anti-sweatshop discourse in the U.S. that necessitate “participating in spaces that are marked as transnational [that] are already determined by one’s access to U.S. media outlets, retail spaces, language formations, and dollars that can be used for consumer subjectivity” (Brooks XXVI). I add to this list the dollars for embedded, international research and solidarity trips that are a part of the larger set of norms that constitute the convention of framing and representing sweatshops in the U.S. Thus, locating my study this way I ask: Whose voice is authorized to speak about sweatshops in the U.S., and how? How are sweatshops qualified in the U.S., and how do these qualifications influence perceptions of labor exploitation broadly, but in the fashion industry specifically? How does one “do” research on sweatshops and/or global production, and how do these methods overlap or align with cultural, intellectual, and/or economic imperialism? The norms these questions point towards, and to which I return, are part of the modernist underpinnings I see as organizing U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse.

In this way this dissertation queries the methods and objects of inquiry employed to make claims about global production in the U.S., manifest in anti-sweatshop discourse, and to complicate the binary understanding of power these conventions employ and disseminate. Thus, this study is attentive to location, not as a means with which to “naturalize boundaries and margins under the guise of celebration, nostalgia, or inappropriate assumptions of intimacy,” or so as to “construct similarity through equalizations when material histories indicate otherwise” (Kaplan 139), but rather to account for the ways in which a transnational analysis is “anchored in the premise that the local and the global are not defined in terms of physical geography or
territory, but exist simultaneously and constitute each other” (Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes Revisited” 86). In this way, I examine U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse both as a site within which conceptions of the foreign are distilled and circulated through the figuration of the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker, but also, and necessarily as a site of production for the national “home.” By attending to transnational cultural productions in the U.S., I aim to resist the global-local binaries that position the U.S. as local, and the global as elsewhere, and/or free-floating across local cultures.

I stress that at the risk of producing a Euro-centric, Western-centric, or re-centered Western subject, in this dissertation I explicitly orient my analysis to U.S. transnational cultural productions because this runs counter to the discursive conventions I find problematic in framing and representing sweatshops. In this way I draw on Leela Fernandes when she argues that: “a feminist analysis of the trans/national implications of the production, representation, and consumption of the Third World text necessitates a shift from the ‘fact’ of the (un)translatability of the ‘subaltern Third World Woman’ (that is the question of whether she can speak) to questions of how she is being made to speak and in what context her speech is being heard” (“Reading India’s” 149; emphasis added). This dissertation employs the context of the U.S. in order to examine how “her speech is being heard,” and to consider what it makes possible. In this way, I employ location strategically in order to “destabilize unexamined or stereotypical images that are vestiges of colonial discourse and other manifestations of modernity’s structural inequalities” that circulate in U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse (Kaplan 139). Further, by locating my analysis in U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, I am trying to resist producing sweatshops and sweatshop workers as exceptional objects of inquiry, for circulation and consumption in the U.S., and instead attempt to attend to the production and effects of these conventions. As Spivak
argues: “what I find useful is the sustained and developing work on the *mechanics* of the constitution of the Other; we can use it to much greater analytic and interventionist advantage than invocations of the *authenticity* of the Other” (294). In this dissertation I am resisting an analysis that entails proper objects in exchange for an analytic attentive to the structural and historical processes that produce certain persons and groups as objects in the first place. My intention to complicate the binaries held-up in U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse is also an attempt to consider whether other routes of inquiry are viable for understanding and framing the structure of labor in the fashion industry.

In what follows I turn to the body of texts whose organizing principle is participation in an anti-sweatshop discourse that is contingent upon representing the Third World sweatshop worker. These texts are both academic and public in their orientation. My selection across different spheres of textual production (i.e., academic, activist, public scholarship) is intentional; it is my aim in this section to chart the terms of an overarching discourse through which I may track the ways in which sweatshops are framed and represented to a U.S. audience as a mobilizing discourse. I use the term ‘mobilizing discourse’ when referring to the anti-sweatshop texts and the discourse they participate in because it is prescriptive and moralizing in its orientation to the reader (a point I elaborate on in chapter three specifically). I stress that it is not the fact that this discourse is mobilizing that it is of primary concern, but rather how subjects are interpellated, and for what ends. I provide a brief review of literature on the sweatshop and labor in the fashion industry below, and situate this project and its methods within it. Before concluding this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the following chapters and their role in the overarching argument of this dissertation.

**Review of Literature**
In this dissertation I am primarily concerned with literature and cultural products whose organizing principle is an explicit anti-sweatshop orientation. This orientation cuts across a wide and diverse body of literature on the global assembly line, the fashion industry, and U.S. sweatshop culture that together constitute the literature concerning labor in the global fashion industry. For instance, texts that discuss the political economy of global production with specific attention to the apparel industry (Bonacich et al 1994; Bonacich and Applebaum 2000; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994; Rivoli 2005), while attentive to the political and economic conditions that orchestrate global markets, trade legislation, and production routes, tend to limit analyses to the economic realm, and in doing so, most often elide the socio-political dynamics crucial to understanding anti-sweatshop discourse. While this literature is present in this dissertation, it is not the focus or object of my study. A similar body of literature (Bao 2001; Chin 1998; Collins 2003; Louie 2001; Phizlacklea 1990), explicitly orients its analyses to the study of sweatshops, with specific attention to the social dynamics and struggles for labor reform within them, and tends to provide some analysis regarding the gender dynamics of apparel manufacturing. These studies are unique in that they are specifically oriented towards documenting and analyzing how the space of garment production both draws on, and gives rise to particular social identities, communal bonds, and forms of social capital. Many of these texts approach the space of garment manufacturing with specific attention to the role of racial and ethnic identity. For instance, the text *Sewing Women* (1998) by Margaret Chin attends to the ways in which the U.S. garment industry has historically, and is currently constituted by immigrant women’s labor, and explores the communal structures and power dynamics this generates. Along a similar vein are those studies whose focus is the historical conditions of garment manufacturing (Green 1997; Gamber 1997; Enstad 1999; Bender 2004; 2003; Bender and Greenwald 2003), and home-sewing
This area of research is vast, and a full review is beyond the scope of this chapter. Of particular relevance to this dissertation are those studies whose contributions are significant to complicating, or broadening the terms of fashion’s labors. For instance, Nan Enstad’s study of the garment girls in New York City provides a compelling argument about how attention to economic class and gender complicate cultural studies’ theoretical conventions regarding consumption, and its relation to studies of labor (1999). Likewise, the anthology *Sweatshop USA: The American Sweatshop in Historical and Global Perspective* (2003) is one of the only studies thus far that examines the U.S. sweatshop’s cultural history and politics, a field of inquiry this dissertation aims to contribute; many of the essays in this anthology are referenced significantly in this dissertation. Additionally, there are those texts that while anti-sweatshop in their research focus, explicitly adopt this stance from the perspective of garment workers’ struggles for labor reform (Bao 2001; Louie 2001; Carracedo 2007). These texts are distinctive in their approach from the anti-sweatshop discourse I examine in this dissertation in that they do not attempt to mobilize the audience, but rather demonstrate the ways in which the actual persons performing this labor wield it as a tool of resistance, actively shaping the terms under which the industry operates. These texts frame their critique within the U.S., and may best be understood as social movement documentation; they document individuals coming together to collectively organize on behalf of their shared interest, for and by themselves. In this way these texts stand in contrast to the U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse I outline below and discuss at length in this dissertation. In a similar vein, there is scholarship that, while adopting global production as its object of analysis, resists the conventions I outline below. This scholarship is most valuable in that it often accounts for the contradictions globalized production necessitates, both in terms of structural norms, as well as the subjects it hails (Lynch 1999; Ong 1987; Salzinger 2003;
Siddiqi 2000, 2009). These studies are welcome departures from the very conventions I outline below, and have widened the terms of engagement and debate considerably; as such, they deeply inform the present study. These studies focus less on whether global production narrowly worsens or betters women’s lives, and instead considers the “inconsistent and often contradictory effects on the lives of women workers and their families” (Siddiqi 157; 2009). In this way, this literature resists the very binary framing persistent in the texts constitutive of U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse.

In addition to the research concerning sweatshops and garment manufacturing labor, there is a growing body of literature centered on exploring fashion’s cultural production. Early work that charted a research path in cultural studies in fashion (Wilson 1985; Craik 1994) constitute some of the first forays into this field of study. These texts provide extensive overviews of some of the ways cultural studies in fashion might pursue further research, and remain well-referenced in many of the studies cited in this section. More recent scholarship, such as Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu’s *The Beautiful Generation* (2011) and Minh-ha Pham’s *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet* (2015) extend earlier analyses by examining how Asian, and at times Asian-American identity provides certain kinds of capital particularly, and uniquely legible and valuable with the fashion industry. These texts mark a new path in studies of labor in the fashion industry in that they not only attend to areas of fashion’s production previously, or rarely examined (i.e., fashion design and fashion blogging, respectively), but also the ways in which the presumed ‘distance’ between the cultural and material production of fashion are not necessarily as distinctive for some persons and/or groups, and that this provides unique kinds of capital within this industry. Similarly, Ashley Mears’ *Pricing Beauty* (2011) and Elizabeth Wissinger’s *This Year’s Model* (2015), contribute to studies of cultural labors in fashion by providing in-
depth, ethnographic studies of fashion modeling. I stress that these texts stand in contrast to the broader scholarship in cultural studies in fashion or fashion studies in that they are specifically attuned to the study of fashion’s labor, albeit on the cultural rather than assembly end. This distinction between fashion’s manufacturing (most often referred to as the sewing, cutting, and trimming that constitutes apparel production) and fashion’s cultural production (the modeling, designing, blogging, retailing, and editorial work of fashion magazines and branding) is a crucial aspect to understanding the ways in which the sweatshop is rendered foreign, and contributes to what Anne Marie Strassel refers to as a “complimentary crisis of recognition,” wherein the labor of manufacturing is visible only through the lens of crisis (such as the Tazreen Fashions factory fire that is referenced in the article opening this chapter) while the labor of fashion’s creative workers, although hyper-visible, remains culturally unrecognizable (“Work it!”). Strassel’s concept concerning visibility and labor is quite relevant to the present study, and I return to the topic of fashion’s cultural workers specifically in chapter four of this dissertation.

In addition to this body of literature are those texts whose organizing principle is an explicit identification with an anti-sweatshop politic. These texts span the 1980s, 1990s, and early to present 2000s. I narrow my study specifically to texts adopting an anti-sweatshop frame because I am interested in how anti-sweatshop discourse in the U.S. crafts particular identities, markets, and truths concerning the structure of labor in the global fashion industry. This study charts the parameters of this discourse (i.e., what are its terms? What are its organizing principles and conventions?) and considers its material and discursive effects. This research is informed by my own observations on an emergent trend within U.S. fashion and mainstream discourse (i.e., news media, fashion magazines, fashion websites and blogs, and fashion retailers) that incorporates many of the conventions of framing and representing sweatshops that I outline...
below. In what follows I review the conventions employed in anti-sweatshop literature. Across these texts, several conventions consistently emerge: a form of linguistic framing that Laura Hyun Yi Kang refers to as “spatial and temporal distancing,” the use of testimonies intended to provide authentic representations of workers and activists, the privileging of mobile capital over and against both the nation-state and the sweatshop worker, and a “persistent embodiment through photographic and linguistic modes of visualization” (Kang 410). These conventions constitute a broader strategy present across the texts that aims to demystify a geographically dispersed, global production line through the use of the tools of documentary realism. This logic frames the problem of sweatshops as not only contingent on the Western and/or U.S. consumer’s ignorance or enlightenment (that only needs to “see” the truth), but in doing so, positions these very subjects as the primary agents of change in eradicating sweatshop exploitation. As Sandra Soto argues, documentary realism “is an extremely powerful tool in argumentation, partially because it appears to reveal objective truths;” however, “Presenting and consuming visual/visceral representations as accurate and unmediated reflections of reality at once denies the politics and limitations of representations and leaves intact the epistemological and ideological frameworks that define reality in the first place” (425). My concerns with the conventions employed across the following texts are centered on what kinds of truths they make possible, and the discursive and material effects these truths entail, and effect.

In order to more thoroughly discuss the variations across these texts, and the kinds of mobilizations they attempt to compel from their readers, I distinguish and categorize the literature across three time periods: the 1980s, the 1990s, and 2000s. I want to stress that my decision to categorize these texts along a historical line is less about reproducing, or even asserting a teleological movement, but more so about understanding the ways in which a
convention has been deployed over time, and the attendant shift in what it is put to work for. I do not assert discrete shifts, or boundaries between the conventions employed in the texts that follow; in each section I cross-reference texts when discussing particular conventions. What is distinct across them is the way in which an anti-sweatshop discourse that is explicitly tied to the U.S. consumer-body emerges, and adopts an especially consumer-based mode of combatting and understanding the persistence of sweatshops. Alongside this consumer-activist framing is a conception of the U.S. nation tethered to the figuration of the sweatshop as foreign, that works towards reproducing the binary conception of power that dichotomizes the local and the global, the liberated and the oppressed, and the saviors and the saved.

The first body of literature consists of texts produced largely under the banner of global feminism that attempt to provide analyses of women workers along the international division of labor. As Dina Siddiqi observes, while these texts “were quite path-breaking for their time,” like all of the texts discussed at length in this genre, they readily employ frames that easily fit within pre-existing narratives about Third World culture broadly, but Third World women specifically (156). The second body of texts is more directly related to the anti-sweatshop and anti-globalization movements within the U.S. in the mid to late 1990s. These texts often figure prominent U.S. activists from this time, as well as reflections on various campaigns (such as the national boycott against the athletic brand Nike). In contrast to the preceding body of texts, this literature most often employs testimonies from workers and activists as evidence to support claims made about transnational solidarity movements. These testimonies most often serve as the experiential evidence with which the authors stake their claims; personal experience in this sense is taken as a form of unmediated truth used to advance particular claims about global production. As I outline further below, these texts mark the shift towards ethical consumerism (that I discuss
at length in chapter three) in that they most often frame the action necessary as one reducible to consumerism. The last body of texts I present are more contemporary, they are produced largely post the start of the millennium, and reflect a turning point in how anti-sweatshop frames are deployed in that they explicitly endorse a shift in personal consumption practices as the primary route of transformation and/or engagement; many of these texts are produced by, or involve actual fashion retailers or industry affiliates (such as Women’s Wear Daily or ELLE magazine).

These texts, like the preceding two, employ the convention of presenting accounts of exploitation that reproduce and readily conform to pre-existing cultural scripts about the Third World, however they differ from the preceding two in that they point their audience to carefully crafted, branded campaigns presented as the means with which a “revolution” in fashion will happen.\(^5\) I string these texts together so as to highlight how while the grounding logic behind the invocation of these images may have shifted, the convention itself, documentary realist, witness accounts of exploitation that readily conforms to pre-existing cultural scripts, remains.

The 1980s: Patriarchy on a Grand Scale

Starting in the 1980s, a body of texts centering an analysis of global capitalism on the plight of a sweatshop worker carried “a considerable intellectual currency among feminist and left-wing critics internationally” (Siddiqi 156). Most often studies of the global economy, these texts share several visual and linguistic strategies that support the overarching tendency in the 1980s to frame the problem of sweatshops within an analysis of patriarchy that makes resolution possible, and legible via global feminism. Most prominently these strategies include: an essentializing categorical deployment of “woman,” a comparison between conditions in the late

19th and early 20th century U.S. (and often European nations, such as England and France) to late 20th century nations of what is homogenously referred to as the Third World, and a naturalization of the “logic” of capital, coupled with an un-interrogated reproduction of government advertisements. These strategies are consistently utilized across this body of texts in order to frame the problem of sweatshops as one reductive to a global structure of patriarchal domination.

In her 1991 essay “Under Western Eyes,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty forcefully identifies and argues against reproducing imperial practices within feminist scholarship. Similar to the critique Grewal, Kaplan, and Nguyen present regarding global feminism is what Mohanty refers to as the “global sisterhood model.” This framework, used in Western knowledge production, employs the category “women” as its organizing object of analysis. As Mohanty states:

While radical and liberal feminist assumptions of women as a sex class might elucidate (however inadequately) the autonomy of particular women’s struggles in the West, the application of the notion of women as a homogenous category to women in the Third World colonizes and appropriates pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks. (“Under Western Eyes” 71).

This practice of deploying the category “woman” in the service of a global analysis of patriarchy is quite apparent in the global assembly line literature of the 1980s. For instance, the following passage from an essay included in the 1983 anthology Of Common Cloth, a cross-cultural and transnational unification of women as women is invoked in response to globalized production:

In the re-creation of hierarchies of authority which accompanies the expansion of textile production, it is the assumption of women’s ‘domesticity’ which is being transported along with the plant and machinery. And it is this assumption,
commonly buttressed by a variety of other religious and cultural notions of male superiority that links the experiences of women textile workers the world over. (Lown and Chenut 37).

In this passage “women” across the globe are united as a group via their relation to men; the category ‘women’ is not interrogated or contextualized, and perhaps importantly, neither is the category of ‘men.’ Male superiority in the preceding passage is also presented as the same “the world over,” eliding the ways in which distinctions across race and nation (to name a few) may supersede hierarchies of sex or gender. Further, the passage above assumes that the effects of patriarchy not only manifest the same everywhere (i.e., “assumption of women’s domesticity”), but necessarily entail the same strategies (i.e., women as logically opposed to men). In effect, this framing exports one manifestation and analysis of patriarchy (i.e., the West and/or the U.S.) and applies it with universalizing assurance elsewhere. This logic is quite evident in the following passage, from Linda Y. C. Lim’s “Capitalism, Imperialism, and Patriarchy: The Dilemma of Third-World Women Workers in Multinational Factories”:

Because patriarchal social relations are at the bottom of women’s subjection to imperialist exploitation, it is logical to turn to an attack on traditional patriarchy as a means of improving the position of women. The successful elimination of patriarchal institutions and attitudes, discrimination, differential socialization by sex, and the sexual division of labor within the family would equalize male and female employment opportunities and incomes, ending the sex segregation of the capitalist labor market. (86).

In this passage, imperialism is presented as a manifestation of patriarchy rather than a vehicle for Western patriarchy, a discursively productive distinction to make. In this sense, patriarchy is a
free-floating, transcendental structure of domination that both precedes and colludes with the interests of men everywhere; in this way, colonized men are agents of oppression, accomplices to imperialism. This framing exemplifies Spivak’s analysis of Western knowledge production in that it tasks Western women with “saving Brown women from Brown men.” Further, this analysis presumes that ending forms of discrimination based on sex will necessarily end all inequities between men and women, a hierarchy that does not necessarily depend on sex difference alone.

In addition to the deployment of the category “woman,” these texts evidence the conditions for global sisterhood via a teleological framing that parallels conditions within 19th and early 20th century imperial nations (i.e., the U.S., England and France) to mid to late 20th century postcolonial nations. For instance, the following passage from the pamphlet *Women in the Global Factory* (1983), employs a comparative device quite common in anti-sweatshop and global assembly line literature from this time. Immediately after the opening vignette that details one Malaysian woman’s story of labor exploitation, authors Barbara Ehrenreich and Annette Fuentes begin: “In the 1800s, farm girls in England and the northeastern United States filled the textile mills of the first Industrial Revolution. Today, from Penang to Ciudad Juarez, young Third World women have become the new ‘factory girls,’ providing a vast pool of cheap labor for globetrotting corporations” (5). This strategy effects what Kang refers to as a form of spatial and temporal distancing that, through linguistic descriptions such as “developed/developing,” “industrialized/industrializing,” and comparative devices such as the one presented above, the U.S. is positioned as modern along a teleological line of progress that other nations (contained under the designation “the Third World”) are simply working towards. In effect this language works towards fixing, “diverse yet interrelated- as well as simultaneous-political and economic
situations on a single trajectory of progress” (Kang 413). In the above example, this fixing and
temporal framing is evident in their descriptions, such as “the first Industrial Revolution,” and
“new factory girls.” Oddly enough, this pamphlet also discusses the presence of sweatshops
within the U.S. at the time of its publication, which seems to contradict their opening statement
that frames U.S. sweatshops as a thing of the past. As Ehrenreich and Fuentes state: “In Los
Angeles, New York, Boston- anywhere the garment industry has taken root- unlicensed,
substandard garment shops are springing up by the hundreds. Exact numbers are hard to come by
since they operate illegally, on the fringes of the economy” (48). In this instance “fringes of the
economy” works towards the spatial distancing of labor exploitation in/to Asia, Mexico, Central
and South America (among other places contained within the projection of the “Third World”).
This spatial distancing is accomplished through linguistic phrases, such as “fringes of the
economy,” “underground economies,” “the Third Worlding of the First World,” “illegal
markets,” and “ethnic labor markets,” that “separates them from the rest of the domestic
economy and imbues them with a sense of surreptitiousness, of inconsequent marginality, when
they are in fact a pervasive U.S. phenomenon” (Kang 414). In effect, these discursive framings
work towards cementing the belief that sweatshops are not only a thing of the past, but that they
are an inherently foreign entity, not actually a persistent part of U.S. culture.

The discursive strategies outlined above are also cemented visually through the texts’
modes of visualization. For instance, the cover of the 1986 text, Common Fate: Common Bond,
Women in the Global Economy, visualizes the global sisterhood model that elides the hierarchies
across and among women, while emphasizing a shared experience of women as women. Mitter’s
text presents women of different races and ethnicities, marked by their dress, labor and skin
color, framing the text’s title, Common Fate: Common Bond. Many of the women are pictured
holding an item presumably representative of their labor: several women are holding up cloth, another appears to be placing a ball in a box while another is working on an assembly line, and yet another is holding a computer. The faces of the women appear to share the exact same eyes, nose, and lips, yet are distinguishable in dress and skin color, lending a sense of the same woman, interchangeable, the world over. Similarly, the pamphlet *Women in the Global Factory* presents portraits of women working in garment factories across the globe, with images accompanying the text of each section’s regional focus. However, in this pamphlet when discussing the U.S., the imagery used is largely from the late 19th and early 20th century despite the author’s discussion of contemporary working conditions in U.S. sweatshops (48-9, 51). The one image in the “Made in the USA” section that is not from the turn of the twentieth century displays a Black woman bent over an item on what may be an assembly line (Ehrenreich and Fuentes 53). The reader can assume that she is working in Silicon Valley assembling electronics because the image appears under that particular heading, however the photograph’s citation says only that it is from the “Women and Global Corporations” slideshow (Ehrenreich and Fuentes 53). This is unusual as all of the other images of women working throughout the pamphlet are identified in geographic and/or temporal place; it is the only one that does not have locational or temporal specificity. The image’s inclusion in the “Made in the USA” section and its lack of locational and temporal framing not only render it interchangeable and unchanging across time and space, but it discursively elides the specificity of sweatshop conditions in the contemporary U.S. Similarly, the cover of *Of Common Cloth* frames two images against each other: one of Brown women wearing saris working an industrial loom, and below it, an image of White women wearing in-descript clothing, hand-sewing a piece of cloth. The women in the latter image are historically dated in clothing and hairstyle, while the women in the former image are
dated to the present. Many of the women’s hairstyles in the lower image appear to resemble the bobbed, “flapper” style of the 1920s, and their technological apparatus— a needle and thread—locates them as in the past. In contrast, the image on the top positions the women as both traditional (they are wearing saris), yet technologically modern in their labors (an industrial loom); these signifiers work towards securing the very temporal framing that situates sweatshops and garment manufacturing as in the West’s past, and in contradistinction to the ‘modernizing’ (though not yet modern) Third World. In these images, modernity is signified temporally: garment manufacturing is in the West’s past, symbolized in the historical image of White women, and it is just starting elsewhere, evident in the women wearing traditional dress yet operating an industrial loom. This framing of the contemporary Third World against the presumed First World’s past is confirmed on the copyright page, that cites the top image from “The Standard Charter Review” (geographically located as “India”) while the lower image (“the Netherlands”) is from the Tilburg Textile Museum. In this instance, garment manufacturing and sweatshops are literally cited as historical in the Western world. These collective visualizations of sweatshop labor, by framing sweatshops as in the West’s, and more specifically, the U.S.’s past interpellate the readers consuming the texts as modern subjects, liberated from this stage of capitalist development and thus well-positioned to ‘help’ other women. Even when sweatshops

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While I cannot track the specific ways in which these texts have and do circulate, there are ways of identifying an intended, or presumed audience. Perhaps the most obvious example is the language used: English. More precise however is the authors use of personal narratives that frame the texts themselves. For example, Mitter opens her text with a personal story that starts in London, and Of Common Cloth includes a postscript by Cynthia Enloe that details buying clothing in the U.S. These narratives provide the starting and departing points for accounts of travel (travel to production zones in both cases). Similarly, in Women in the Global Factory, the U.S. occupies linguistic specificity, while a wealth of other nations are contained within “the Third World.” In this way, a particular (the personal narrative, the U.S.) is contrasted with a universal; or in another way, a local perspective is carried out to a global context.
are acknowledged as present within the contemporary U.S., they are framed as external to a national body via an elision of temporal and spatial specificity.

Lastly, these texts participate in reifying the logic of capital that not only effaces the agency of national governments and transnational corporations, but in doing so actually naturalizes and rationalizes these organizations’ actions. Another quote from *Women in the Global Factory* is useful in demonstrating this effect: “Women everywhere are paid lower wages than men. Since multinationals go overseas to reduce labor costs, women are the natural choice for assembly jobs” (Ehrenreich and Fuentes 12). A similar passage appears in Lim: “It is labor-intensive industries, then, that tend to relocate manufacturing plants to developing countries, thereby becoming multinational in their operations. This is a rational competitive response to changing international comparative cost advantages” (72). These kinds of passages, wherein the decisions and actions of multinational corporations are described as “natural” or “rational” reappear across the literature concerning offshore production. These kinds of generalizations are dangerous because they tend towards framing wage differentials as a priori to globalization and imperialism, rather than as highly structured, intentional effects. The passage above from Ehrenreich and Fuentes even suggests that wage differences based upon sex are uniformly and flatly consistent across time, rather than as part of a highly differentiated, historical process. As Kang argues on this point: “Imbuing an aura of ‘rationality’ and ‘sense’ renders invisible and innocuous the complicated web of planners and actors who compete and cooperate to structure and sustain the global assembly line with its differential wage levels for diverse, conflicting political and economic interests” (419). Similarly, the following passage from Ehrenreich and Fuentes (also reproduced in Mitter 46) actually reinforces some of the stereotypes that the multinational corporations and governments that they are critical of employ: “Crudely put, the
relationship between many Third World governments and multinational corporations is like that of a pimp and his customers. The governments advertise their women, sell them and keep them in line for the multinational ‘johns’” (6-7). Kang also highlights this passage and argues that it: “inappropriately gives a further sexual charge to the situation. The metaphor of pimping in effect echoes orientalist representations of Asian women as sexual objects and Asian men as greedy, corrupt traders of ‘their’ women’s bodies” (425). Kang’s observations are apt; Ehrenreich and Fuentes’ framing not only accepts and reifies the language of the governments, but it easily conforms to Western cultural scripts concerning Asian women and men. Many of the government advertisements that these texts discuss explicitly employ sexualized, racist imagery in order to attract foreign capital, and it is concerning that in all of them this language is accepted and reproduced as factual, transparent commentary, rather than analyzing or problematizing it as a discursive production that is drawing upon specific historical legacies steeped in imperialism. Instead, the texts present it as transparent, and employ an analysis of patriarchy that accepts the sexualized imagery and circulation of women, framing the problem as one of sex and gender. This acceptance on the part of the literature leaves the imagery intact, and does little to intervene on the framing that conforms to pre-conceived scripts concerning the Third World in the West.

The 1990s: Anti-Sweatshop Activism in the U.S.

The second body of texts are representative of activist and scholarly writing undertaken in the 1990s that is often identified as loosely and/or directly connected to the U.S. anti-sweatshop movement. For example, the anthology Students Against Sweatshops (2002) contains personal narratives and essays written by U.S. university students constituting the anti-sweatshop organization the United Students Against Sweatshops. Similarly, the anthology No Sweat:

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7 I have included this text in this section because although not published in the 1990s, the text details actions and events that occurred then.
Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers (1997) contains essays written by scholars, fashion industry writers, and prominent anti-sweatshop activists. Many of the essays in these texts present detailed, historicized accounts of particular campaigns, and provide compelling examples of student activism; in many ways, some of these texts and the organizations that they represent are astute in their analyses, and have made substantive advances in labor reform within and beyond the U.S. In this section I am specifically concerned however with the way in which certain conventions employed in this literature informs the legibility of anti-sweatshop consumerism, and the ideological presuppositions concerning economic class and consumerism in the U.S. that undergirds it. Specifically, in this section I am concerned with the way in which these texts represent the problem of sweatshops through the use of personal testimonies, and frame their analyses through a binary conception of power that positions the U.S. as the privileged site of agency in global matters.

Anchoring these texts is an invocation of personal experience that conforms to an overarching framing wherein brand-targeted boycotts and personal consumption practices are endorsed as the primary routes for change in the global supply chain. In this way, these texts depart from the previous literature in that the emphasis on global patriarchy is abandoned for a framing that conforms to a protest model mirroring the local-global binary conception of power, wherein the West/North acts, and the East/South is acted upon. In many ways, this departure reflects the shift in representation practices of the Third World that calls on academics to “listen to the previously silenced voices” (Chowdhry 39). Through the use of personal testimonies these framings make appeals to persons within the U.S. to consume differently (most often supporting a boycott of a particular targeted brand). The testimonies in these texts shift between those of the author, presented as an act of witnessing exploitation abroad, and in other cases, it is the
testimonies of the workers themselves used as a form of grounding evidence. In this use of testimonies, these texts enact the “persistent embodiment through photographic and linguistic modes of visualization” that permeates U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, and locates globally dispersed processes of production in the individual bodies of workers (Kang 410). Consider the following passage, from Elinor Spielberg’s “The Myth of Nimble Fingers” (also cited in Siddiqi 158):

There’s a saying among girls in the slums of Bangladesh: If you’re lucky, you’ll be a prostitute- if you’re unlucky, you’ll be a garment worker. Pinky was both lucky and unlucky. She was sold into a brothel when she was 11. At thirteen, she was living at a shelter for victimized women and girls in the capital city of Dhaka and working at Expo World Wide Garments. Undernourished since birth, then fed according to nutritional standards of a pimp, the bird-boned girl stood on her feet for up to fourteen hours a day, six to seven days a week, for the equivalent of $12.50 a month. The foreman came on to her all the time. No doubt he could sniff out her background. But that wouldn’t have made a difference. No, not for a pretty one like that in a garment factory. Just threaten to fire them and they’re yours. A girl in the labor force means she’s unprotected. Either her family has abandoned her, or the family men are too poor and desperate to make trouble. (Spielberg 113).

The passage above opens an essay that continues to detail the author’s observations and interactions with child workers in Bangladesh. Spielberg spends a considerable amount of space in the essay detailing the physicality of the children before moving on to a discussion of the ways in which efforts to unionize children present unique hurdles for union organizers (121). The
essay from which this passage is excerpted is also part of an anthology that is itself framed by longer, detailed worker testimonials (in addition to the testimonies contained in many of the individual essays). Discussing this passage, Siddiqi asserts that she “has never in my nearly two-decade-long research on the garment industry” ever come across the saying about prostitution outlined above (158). As Siddiqi outlines, this passage conforms to cultural scripts concerning “the passive, helpless third world woman, always already sexualized and victimized, and preyed on by lustful and exploitative ‘native’ males, therefore urgently in need of rescue” (158). I agree with Siddiqi’s reading, particularly because the author goes on to compare the agency afforded persons in the U.S. against those in Bangladesh, framing the U.S. subject as uniquely positioned to save children in Bangladesh (Spielberg 121).8 The sensationalized force of the author’s observations is, as Siddiqi argues, intended to compel the reader to ‘save’ the women and children ‘over there’ (159). Missing from Spielberg’s essay is any discussion of how, or why they visited Bangladesh in the first place, or how Bangladesh became a leading center for garment production. In this framing, the author’s observations are shared as self-evident, and through the use of language that affirms the social conditions as social certainties (“no doubt,” “wouldn’t have made a difference”), the author locates the potential for change and transformation elsewhere. Power in this framing is an either/or; one has it, or one does not.

These kinds of testimonials are pervasive across the anti-sweatshop literature of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, and continue to serve as the primary means with which the sweatshop is represented to U.S. audiences. These testimonials exist across texts such as the one cited above, in addition to short documentary films (“Child Labor” 2006; “The Hidden Face” 2003;
“Zoned for Slavery” 1994)\(^9\) and speaking tours (“The Human Face” 2004).\(^{10}\) Many of these short films and testimonials are, like the passage above, framed within a larger analysis concerning sweatshops and global production, yet they are not treated as voices of criticism; rather these testimonials (both those of the witness and the worker) are employed as unmediated sources of evidentiary experience. My concern with this aspect of the testimonials is not necessarily because I doubt or question the veracity of their claims, but rather resides with the way in which they entail “the ideological construction that not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge, but that also naturalizes categories…treating them as given characteristics of individuals” (Scott 782). This naturalization of categories, such as the sweatshop worker, is evident in the persistent move towards embodiment in representing globalized production. In the passage above, the author’s attention to the physicality of the girl, her “malnourishment” and “bird-boned” body, while highlighting the effects of severe impoverishment do little to actually advance one’s understanding of how that impoverishment is made possible. Further, what kinds of actions does this framing make possible? What kinds of power relations does this framing make legible?

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\(^9\) Many more short, testimonial documentaries may be viewed at the Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights’ (formerly the National Labor Committee) Youtube channel: https://www.youtube.com/user/nlenet.

\(^{10}\) I attended one such speaking event in the Fall of 2014, held at the University of Arizona. This event had U.S. organizers from the organization United Students Against Sweatshops traveling to college campuses with a woman employed by a garment factory in Central America. The event centered on the woman sharing her experiences working overtime, being withheld pay, and her reasons for sharing her story with people in the U.S. Student attendees were encouraged to examine their relationship to the garments they purchase that garment workers, like the woman speaking, produce. While I attended this event hurriedly, my observations regarding the event’s emphasis (communicating the ‘horror’ of sweatshop conditions) were captured by Dina Siddiqi in her 2009 article, “Do Bangladeshi Factory Workers Need Saving?” In this article, Siddiqi acknowledges her own experience at one such speaking engagement, also by USAS: “My refusal to recount the horrors of Bangladeshi factories and insistence on critically assessing the collusion between rights discourse and neocolonial relations of domination were met with a studied silence from an audience eager to ‘set things right’” (159). I have yet to locate any critical literature that specifically focuses on these events, and have not encountered another speaking engagement since.
As Wood and Chow argue, the use of testimonials in development literature and knowledge on the Third World is best understood as a response to the criticisms posed by postcolonial and post-structuralist feminist theories, most prominently Spivak. As Wood outlines, the consistent articulation that scholars and/or development practitioners “need to listen to the silenced voices of third world women” evidences the response to Spivak (432). This approach is often touted as making women “participants in, rather than recipients of, the development process” (Chowdhry 39), however other scholars, such as Spivak, Wood, and Chow remain critical of what the invocation of “authentic” voices makes possible. As Wood outlines “The result of listening to ‘previously silenced voices’ in this context is to replace the vision of the third-world-woman-as-victim with the no less essentialist vision of third-world-woman-as-authentic-heroine” a move that, while providing a different representation, leaves the hierarchies that undergird such representations intact (433). As Soto argues on the force of the documentary image: “The visuals in and of themselves- devoid of any systemic critical analysis of the immensely complex set of power relations installed under global capitalism- can…only fail when we expect them to provide us with ‘obvious’ choices and ‘simple’ answers” (427). When power is conscripted to a binary of saviors and saved, or liberated and oppressed (as it is in the excerpted passage above) then the “simple” and “obvious” answers become possible. Further, “Because the interpretation of testimonies and the activism on the world’s shop floors and in various localities are then performed under the auspices of (Northern) public relations imperatives, the courage and complexity of those testimonies are often sacrificed in exchange for sound-bite appeal” (Brooks XXIX). In other words, because these testimonials are presented as evidentiary forms of truth-telling, rather than highly-structured, edited, and strategic imperial encounters, they perform the very reductive, essentializing framing that is necessary for
“Northern public relations imperatives.” In this way, the urge to find or provide “authentic”
voices so as to counter the critiques of the silent subaltern render such voices malleable to the
imperatives of the scholar or anti-sweatshop activist citing and editing the testimonial. While the
representation may change (i.e., silent image to speaking testimonial), the power relations
undergirding and framing it remain.

The 2000s-Present: Anti-Sweatshop Consumerism

In this section I briefly discuss contemporary, mainstream anti-sweatshop texts. These
texts are not produced under the auspices of universities or research institutes, and do not have
affiliations with anti-sweatshop organizations; indeed, what is distinct about these texts is their
shared discourse concerning sweatshops and consumerism. Consistent across these texts is the
explicit emphasis on personal consumption practices. This emphasis on personal consumption
practices manifests both as an evidentiary cause (i.e., sweatshops exist because people consume
too much, or consume the wrong things) and the solution (i.e., adopt consumption practices that
do not entail sweatshops). Across these texts this framing is explicit, and serves as the primary
route with which the audience is encouraged to understand the problem and persistence of
sweatshops. For instance, this exact logic is evident in the promotional materials for the 2015
documentary film, *The True Cost of Fashion* (which I received at my office because, as the ad
suggested, it is an “excellent teaching tool” and “a potential classroom aide”). The advertisement
features three people, with black shopping bags over their heads that match the bags overflowing
with clothing at their feet. The figure at the forefront appears to be a White woman wearing a
bright, pink, cocktail-style dress, the color of which matches the font of the film’s title, *The True
Cost*. The title of the film, *The True Cost*, when paired with the image suggests that consumers
(presumably feminine, female consumers) are duped into “bad” consuming, and that their
ignorance merely upholds the global supply chain. They are duped because they cannot actually see the truth, as they are symbolically blinded (i.e., the bags) by their consumption practices. Similarly, the popular text *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion* (2013), frames the problem of global production as one pivoting on the consumer choices of persons in the U.S. The author, Elizabeth Cline, opens her text discussing the amount of cheap clothing available to her, and goes so far as to actually count all of the items she owns as evidence of the U.S.’s shopping problem (1-5). Cline’s text does provide a useful overview of the transition to global production in the apparel chain, and the ways in which the effects of this transition are evident in clothing quality, cost, and consumption; however, Cline consistently returns to, and frames the problem as one stemming from U.S. consumers’ reluctance to purchase differently, or re-think their individual consumer habits, which Cline herself does in a narrative arc of personal enlightenment.

This emphasis on the consumer in relation to global production, or a discussion of sweatshops is not inherently wrong; there are most certainly merits in examining consumer practices and re-thinking ways to live sustainably. What I take issue with is that when framed as an exclusive binary of consumers and producers, this framing necessitates a savior model and a discourse that reveres the most economically privileged in the U.S. at the expense of the most economically vulnerable. Further, this framing bears critical examination because of the way in which it produces, and circulates the figuration of the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker. As Brooks states:

*The tactics of singling out the sweatshop have…appropriated signs that depend on the languages and practices of consumption with a double-sided granting of agency, creating the sweatshop as something to be consumed by both activists and*
consumers. Because the tactics are directed at consumers of ready-made garments in the U.S., privileged agency is given to consumers of signs and commodities, the very appropriation of the sweatshop as part of the system of signs that circulate in advertising and public relations puts forth the notion that it is only through the consumption of the sweatshop that activism can be carried out. In other words, there is an assumption that those who consume have the right to act as potential agents through the fact of their purchasing power. (XX).

In this framework wherein the cause and resolution to sweatshops is located in the agency of the U.S. consumer, economic privilege is the exclusive route to transformative action. This aspect of analysis is particularly troubling because, as Brooks highlights in the passage above, this analysis necessitates a framing wherein the sweatshop exists as a singularly exceptional entity of exploitation, rather than a site in a multi-sited line of production; in this way, other labors crucial to producing the fast fashion the authors decry is entirely elided. For instance, across the texts that employ this framework, the retail workers that market, stock, and sell this clothing are absent from their analyses. The absence of this particular population is especially confounding, because given one’s consumer practices (i.e., going to stores to purchase clothing), one is likely to see and interact with them, more so than say a garment manufacturer. Further, retail workers constitute a significant portion of the working-class population in the U.S.; their elision from these studies is concerning both because they are a crucial part of fashion’s labor, but also because they are the very population whose consumerism is deemed an obstacle to progress (a point I discuss further in chapter three). My critical concern resides not in the representation of sweatshops as something that is exploitative and wrong, but rather what this framing and its attendant elisions make possible. Namely, who does this framework presume as its consuming
subject? How does this framing contribute to the figuration of the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker as an object for public consternation and/or consumption? More specifically, how does this framing impart a particular way of seeing, or not seeing labor? Across these texts and evident in the conventions they employ is a framing that positions the sweatshop as an inherently foreign entity to the U.S. As outlined above, these texts and the conventions they employ necessitate a form of spatial and temporal distancing that entails travel beyond the national borders of the U.S.; sweatshops are presumed external to the U.S., even when they are physically present within national borders. Further, this spatial and temporal distancing is evident in the framing that positions the personal consumption practices as the primary route of transformation over and against those whose consumer habits are deemed causal to sweatshops existence and persistence. Thus, in this dissertation, I ask: What kinds of truths are made possible by externalizing the sweatshop, by framing it as an entity and form of labor exploitation foreign to the U.S.?

Outline of Dissertation Chapters

In the following chapters, I continue my examination of U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, and the kinds of subjects and truths this discourse effects. In chapter two, “The Politics of Feminism in the Shadow of the Sweatshop,” I examine how sweatshops are framed and represented in U.S. news media coverage. Discussing the 2014 “this is what a feminist looks like” t-shirt controversy between the British newspapers, The Daily Mail and The Guardian, I suggest that the narrative structure both newspapers employ draws on an historical precedent, wherein journalists adopt an explorer role and employ the tools of documentary realism so as to provide readers with sensationalized, newsworthy accounts of sweatshops. Turning to the news accounts from the turn of the twentieth century and the near twenty-first, I argue that these
explorer accounts frame the sweatshop as inherently foreign, and that this practice of reporting and framing sweatshops continues into the 2014 newspaper debate. In chapter three, “The Personal is Purchasable,” I discuss the sweatshop-free fashion retailer American Apparel alongside the blog, People of Walmart. I argue that the anti-sweatshop discourse that frames the problem of sweatshops as one contingent on U.S. consumers participates in a form of civilizing discourse that positions the racialized poor that both work and consume at Walmart as backwards, inferior, and wholly Other to the “enlightened” ethical consuming subject. I argue that both cultural productions depend on the rhetoric of choice, and that when sutured to anti-sweatshop discourse, provides the justifying foundation for displacement, dislocation and dispossession of the racialized poor in the U.S. via retail gentrification. In Chapter Four, “Fashion Interns, Immaterial Labor and Doing What You Love,” I shift my analysis slightly, by attending to a site of fashion’s cultural production that shares with sweatshops what Strassel refers to as a “complimentary crisis of recognition.” As Strassel argues (and as I outline in chapter two) sweatshops are visibly sutured to a lens of crisis and sensationalism in U.S. discourse. Conversely, fashion’s cultural workers, such as fashion interns, are widely visible in U.S. culture yet their labor remains culturally unrecognizable. In this chapter I examine the labor of fashion interns, and consider how their cultural representation (for instance in popular television shows), influences the ways in which their exploitation is rendered unrecognizable through a discourse of “doing what one loves.” Discussing the historical Wages for Housework Campaign and the autonomous Marxist concept of the social factory, I argue that the analysis put forth by Wages for Housework provides a compelling lens with which to make claims and articulate labor exploitation in regards to “doing what one loves.” The Wages for Housework campaign predates contemporary Marxist theories concerning immaterial and affective labor,
and when considered in relation to U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse and the proliferation and pervasiveness of precarious laborers, points towards a deeper argument concerning the ideological production necessary to seeing, or not seeing labor. I argue that the Wages for Housework texts provide a useful analytic for understanding labor exploitation that interrogates the ideological presuppositions necessary to naturalizing labor, and in the process, making labor a quality of one’s nature, rather than a mode of exploitation. In the following section, my Conclusion, I review the main points of this dissertation, and identify areas for further research
Chapter Two: The Politics of Feminism in the Shadow of the Sweatshop

Abstract: In this chapter, I continue to examine how sweatshops are framed and represented in the U.S. by turning to what is for many people the primary way that they learn about them: news media coverage. At both the turn of the twentieth century (roughly 1890-1920) and the near twenty-first (late 1970s-1990s), news media played a pivotal role in conveying the dangers of the sweatshop, and persuading the middle and upper classes to take up the sweatshop as their cause. Evident in both eras of anti-sweatshop discourse is a narrative structure of exploration and sensationalized revealing that frames the problem of sweatshops as one foreign to the U.S. I assert and evidence how the figure of the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker are appropriated by news media through sensational, newsworthy stories that in their claims to know sweatshops through documentary, realist accounts, belie cultural anxieties concerning the global flows of people, goods and capital. In what follows I explore the implications of a rhetorical device that depends upon the sensationalized imagery of the sweatshop and sweatshop worker, and how this framing renders sweatshops foreign to the U.S.

Key Words: exploration/immigration/news frames/“return” of sweatshops/sensationalism/

“The only cure for the sweating system is in the restriction of immigration… sweatshops are in no sense a product of American conditions, but are purely an imported survival of foreign medievalism.” -Chief O’Leary11

“Installing proper fire exits may turn a sweatshop into a legal workplace, but it remains a low-wage atrocity.” –Andrew Ross12

This is What a Feminist Looks Like

Starting in the Fall of 2013, fashion magazine Elle UK launched a series of public events centered on their commitment to bring together the fashion world and feminism so as to successfully “rebrand” feminism, and thus make “feminism more accessible to all” (Swerling “ELLE Rebrands Feminism”). Dedicating their entire December 2014 issue to “feminism,” Elle UK partnered with England-based fashion retailer Whistles, women’s rights organization The Fawcett Society, the UN, and selected, senior, British female politicians in a star-studded campaign meant to market feminism as hip to their young, magazine reading audience.

11 A New York City factory inspector, explaining the sweating system in 1898. O’Leary 361.

12 Ross, “After the Year” 296.
Producing t-shirts and sweatshirts with the slogan “This is What a Feminist Looks Like,” the special issue contained a photo-spread with young, famous women, such as U.N. Goodwill Ambassador and *Harry Potter* actor Emma Watson and fashion “it” girl Alexa Chung sporting the tees. *Elle UK* encouraged readers to purchase the shirt (sold exclusively at Whistles stores), and to photograph and upload their image to social media with the hashtags “#ELLEFEMINISM” and “#thisiswhatafeministlookslike.” Sold for $72.00, proceeds of the shirt were intended for The Fawcett Society, whose mission is to “empower women in the labor force” (“About Us”).

The campaign popularity reached national fervor in England when the Deputy Leader of the British Labour Party, Harriet Harman, wore her shirt during the Prime Minister’s question session in the House of Commons in late October (Pearlman “Why is David”). Other Labor Party leaders, including Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg, also sported the shirt publicly, with Miliband taking part in the *Elle UK* spread (Pearlman “Why is David”). Amidst the campaign’s rapid publicity, controversy exploded when *The Daily Mail*, in the article “62P an Hour: What Women Sleeping 16 To a Room Get Paid to Make Ed and Harriet’s ‘This is What a Feminist Looks Like’ T-Shirts” (hereafter, “62p”) revealed that the shirts were produced in sweatshop conditions on the island of Mauritius (Ellery “62p”). In an article with over 1 million social media shares, *The Daily Mail* presented reactions to the original exposé, using one popular Tweet for its title: “This is What a CHUMP Looks Like” (Allen and Doyle “This is What”). In the image preceding the text of “62p,” one of the (presumed) women employed by the factory in question holds one of the shirts with the caption: “We do not see ourselves as feminists. We see ourselves as trapped” (Ellery “62p”). In the weeks that followed, debate continued over the legitimacy of *The Mail’s* original story, the worker’s accounts, the labor conditions endemic to a globalized industry, and
the question as to whom the onus of responsibility should befall. It was finally concluded in a
Guardian article that while the workers did not receive wages that would allow them to actually
purchase the shirts, their labor conditions were in fact “ethical” (Johnston “Feminist T-Shirts”).
Considering this story, I am curious: What does this debate between the two newspapers tell us
about how the West frames sweatshops? What does this story tell us about the role of news
media in framing and representing sweatshops? How are garment factories qualified as
‘sweatshops,’ or as ‘ethical’ manufacturers? What does this story tell us about how people in the
West broadly, but the U.S. specifically see sweatshops?

Introduction

I introduce the preceding story because it highlights the framing devices and narrative
structure used to “reveal” and represent sweatshops in the West. While this sensationalized
framing device became popular in the U.S. in the 1990s through anti-sweatshop campaigns
targeting consumers, it bears historical precedence in the anti-sweatshop campaigns of the early
twentieth century. Evident in both eras of anti-sweatshop discourse is a narrative structure of
exploration and sensationalized revealing that frames the problem of sweatshops as one foreign
to the U.S. In this chapter I continue to examine how sweatshops are framed and represented in
the U.S. by turning to what is for many people the primary way that they learn about them: news
media coverage. At both the turn of the twentieth century (roughly 1890-1920) and the near
twenty-first (late 1970s-1990s), news media played a pivotal role in conveying the dangers of the
sweatshop, and persuading the middle and upper classes to take up the sweatshop as their cause.
The important role the news media possess in relation to the sweatshop highlights what
Annemarie Strassel refers to as the “complimentary crisis of recognition” that structures U.S.
conceptions of labor in the fashion industry. As Strassel argues, any imperatives for change in
sweatshop conditions require horrific events and disaster, conveyed through sensationalist frames, while the creative work of fashion remains culturally unrecognizable ("Work It!"). In other words, in the U.S., sweatshops’ visibility is restricted to a lens of sensationalism that I argue renders them foreign to it (even when existing within U.S. borders). The news stories like the one in The Daily Mail discussed above rely on sensational frames in order to emphasize both the newsworthiness of the story, but also the exceptional status of a particular sweatshop story; in other words, sensational news frames are employed so as to distinguish the particularly egregious nature of one sweatshop, distinctive from all others. These news stories share similarity to the anti-sweatshop texts outlined in chapter one because in their sensationalist discourse, they employ the tools of documentary realism characteristic of the anti-sweatshop genre, most especially the use of personal testimonies (i.e., the explorer-journalist’s) and the “persistent embodiment through photographic and linguistic modes of visualization” (Kang 410).

In this chapter I examine this sensational, documentary realist narrative structure via a historical review of the emergence of anti-sweatshop discourse in the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century (1890-1920), and the discourse of the “return” of the sweatshop in the post-Fordist 1980s-1990s. Both eras within the U.S. mark a high point in anti-sweatshop activism and discourse, and share a narrative structure of exploration and “revealing” that belies cultural anxieties concerning immigration, job loss, and race. I bring these histories to bear on The Mail and The Guardian’s articles and consider how the debate narrated sweatshops. I take these articles as useful objects for my larger argument because of the ways in which the narrative they put forth conforms to a broader discourse concerning sweatshop use and abuse. I employ these articles as objects because news media possess a unique role in the public’s understanding of sweatshops. As media scholars Josh Greenberg and Graham Knight observe, news media “bring
events that occur half a world away ‘closer to home,’” which is crucial to the topic of sweatshops because “the vast majority of North Americans are physically separated from the production sites where…products are made” (155). The significance of geographic distance is quite apparent in the competing stories, as readers must rely on either The Mail or The Guardian in assessing and reporting on the conditions at the factory in question. This sense of distance and spatial difference is to the advantage of the news media whose sensationalism depends on the reveal, because framing the story as one dependent upon exploration lends documentary credibility to the “truth” the journalist reveals. The Guardian’s claims were delegitimized largely because no one from that paper actually visited the factory in question (as several readers observed in their online comments in response to the original Mail article). I highlight this not because I doubt the veracity of The Mail or The Guardian’s claims, but because it demonstrates how claims to know sweatshops are framed and substantiated.

Additionally, as news media these texts offer a means with which to examine how a public concern, sweatshops, is “taught” to readers. As Greenberg and Knight argue, while news media may not exactly tell readers what to think about a particular problem, they do bear a significant amount of influence in how readers will think about a problem (154). This influence does not mean that news media “supersede the direct experiences of the world” but that when it comes to the “sorting of issues in public concern, news media play an active, rather than simply reflexive, role” (Greenberg and Graham 154). The Gramscian conception of ideological production and dissemination suggests media texts represent a site of struggle over meaning wherein dominant groups attempt to secure hegemony, and oppositional groups attempt to subvert this control, which means that this sphere of ideological production is never fully closed, and never operates solely for dominant purposes (Gramsci 12-13; 369-71; 376-7). Rather, as a
field of contested meaning ideology is an attempt to secure coherence and dominance in the midst of contradiction and competing interests; this does not mean that contradictions are erased, but rather that they are managed so as to “naturalize the social and historical, universalize the particular, and represent contradiction and division as difference” (Greenberg and Graham 155-6). To be clear, this does not discount the institutional privilege and control some groups and individuals possess in relation to media power, which has and often does determine what constitutes “news.” However, what I am most concerned with in this chapter is the extent to which the structure of the news story in debate both draws from a larger, older discourse concerning sweatshops, and disseminates a particular way to think about them. Exploring these concerns requires attention to what Todd Gitlin refers to as “frames,” which “organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely solely on their reports” (Gitlin 7). In other words, frames operate by “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality [to] make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman 52). While news frames cannot ever guarantee a particular reading or interpretation on the part of the audience, they do possess a crucial role in limiting, and structuring the range of probable decodings the readers will acquire within a specific context (Hall 117-27). In this way, framing devices lend news stories a means with which to impart, if not privilege, certain definitional parameters and logics.

In my attention to the framing devices employed by The Mail and The Guardian, I also employ Ann Cvetkovich’s scholarship concerning sensationalist and realist narratives. In

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“Marx’s Capital and the Mystery of the Commodity,” Cvetkovich explores the use of sensationalist rhetoric in Marx’s *Capital*, and examines how this rhetorical device both frames (in the news-framing sense) and also affectively appeals to audiences via linguistic descriptions of the worker’s body. *The Daily Mail*, a tabloid newspaper, is perhaps an obvious object of study for sensationalist rhetoric; however, the sensationalism that permeates *The Mail’s* “62p” has less to do with *The Mail*, and more to do with the way in which sweatshops are framed and represented in the West. As Cvetkovich outlines, Marx spends a significant portion of *Capital* describing the effects industrial exploitation and labor has on the (male) human body so as to visualize and provide tangible evidence of the negative impacts of capitalism. Such rhetorical devices are quite similar to the “linguistic modes of visualization” Kang identifies as characteristic of Western representations of the sweatshop and its Third World Woman worker. This comparison and similarity is not lost on Cvetkovich, who identifies the Third World Woman sweatshop worker as the proletariat’s contemporary counterpart. As Cvetkovich states: “Marx’s factory worker has his contemporary counterpart in the figure of the Third World Woman, the invisible subject who must be represented in order to draw attention to the exploitation that is structured around racial, national, and gender hierarchies, not just class divisions” (202). In this way, the figure of the Third World Woman sweatshop worker is made the “archetypal victim,” whose representation is appropriated for the interests of global feminism, critics of imperialism and capitalism, and human rights activists (Siddiqi 156). In this chapter I assert and evidence how the figure of the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker are appropriated by news media through sensational, newsworthy stories that in their claims to know sweatshops through documentary realist accounts, belie cultural anxieties concerning the global flows of people, goods and capital. In the last section I explore the implications of this rhetorical
device that depends upon the sensationalized imagery of the Third World Woman, and how this framing renders sweatshops foreign to the U.S.

In the next section, “A Foreign Method of Working,” I examine the historical conditions that gave rise to the sweatshop as a particular form of labor, conceived as distinctive from other kinds of production and as an inherently foreign method of working. The turn of the twentieth century marked a transition to industrial capitalism that entailed mass migration to the U.S., new technological developments and modes of production (specifically in the garment industry), and new social theories and movements concerning race, health, and civilization. These conditions gave birth to the concept of the sweatshop, conceived as a “foreign method of working” to the American factory system. The popularization of the sweatshop as a term and a social problem was made possible through the news stories in local newspapers and national magazines that, employing documentary realist accounts, framed the problem of sweatshops as one of concern to middle and upper class consumers. In the next section, “Post-Fordism and the Return of the Sweatshop,” I chart the forces that gave rise to the discourse claiming the “return” of the sweatshop in the late 1970s to the early 1990s. As I outline below, the discourse of the “return” of the sweatshop reflects many of the U.S. cultural anxieties concerning the conditions of post-Fordism: deindustrialization and the onset of increasingly global flows of people, goods, and capital. This discourse of the “return” of the sweatshop, like the preceding era, highlights how efforts to define and reform the sweatshop reflect other social and cultural fears, to which the sweatshop is attributed. In the following section, “This is What a Feminist Looks Like, Part II,” I return to the t-shirt story, and discuss how the news media’s debate over the label of “sweatshop,” illustrates how popular representations of sweatshops (in this specific instance, newspapers) possess an important role in defining and framing sweatshops in the West that,
ultimately, teaches people how to see them. I argue that the narrative structure employed in this news story, like the documentary realist accounts detailed in the previous sections and chapter, render the sweatshop an inherently foreign entity, and secure a conception of the problem of sweatshops and thus their resolution, as one residing in the U.S. consumer’s agency.

**A Foreign Method of Working**

As *Sweatshop USA* editors Daniel Bender and Richard Greenwald argue, “the persistence of the sweatshop, both on an economic landscape and in the discourse about labor, represents an ongoing anxiety about immigration, race, gender, and work,” wrought from the conditions of global migration, industrial capitalism, and (currently) late, global capitalism (5). Examining the historical emergence and early campaigns targeting sweatshops, one cannot extricate the term from cultural fears concerning immigration; in many ways, this anxiety undergirding the sweatshop both permeates, and directly informs its definitional emergence. While it remains difficult to identify its exact location and date of origin, the *Oxford English Dictionary* pinpoints the earliest documented use of the term ‘sweatshop’ to 1892 (Green 48). This date aligns with Bender’s research which locates sweatshops, as both a social problem and an economic term, around the same time (the 1890s) on both sides of the Atlantic, within industrial, urban centers (Bender, “A Foreign Method” 26). This definitional emergence is drawn from the government inspectors, social reformers, policy makers, and journalists whose exposé style accounts of the garment shops they visited invented, and popularized the term (Bender, *Sweated Work* 4). In this section I outline the forces that gave rise to the sweatshop, with special attention to the ways in

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14 In this chapter my focus tends to be on the garment industry in New York City. Because New York City predominates the literature on sweatshops and bears a longer historical trajectory than Los Angeles, most of the research in this chapter reflects this. For a detailed examination of the Los Angeles garment industry see: Edna Bonacich and Richard Applebaum, *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry* (2000).
which an anti-sweatshop discourse premised on exploration and sanitation (that belies fears based in race and gender) contributed to a conception of the sweatshop as inherently foreign that, as I show in the subsequent section, continues in the anti-sweatshop discourse of the late 1970s to 1990s.

As Bender, Greenwald, and Nancy Green argue, the sweatshop, as both a cultural concept and new form of garment manufacturing, emerged from a constellation of forces involving technology, immigration, racial science, and gender. Most prominently, the invention of the sewing machine in 1851, and the cutting knife in 1876, radically altered the garment industry. These devices allowed for the production of ready-made clothing, a commodity whose demand rose quickly during the Industrial Era in the U.S. (Bender, Sweated Work 33; Cline 20). This technology made the system of contracting characteristic of garment production possible. Before the invention of the sewing machine and cutting knife, a garment manufacturer produced a whole garment, with the item’s entire production contained within one shop. This changed with the proliferation of new technology that allowed for many small spaces that could complete one task in an assembly-line style of production, spread across several small shops (Bender, Sweated Work 8). Because this technology was relatively inexpensive and small, individuals purchased them and started home garment operations (Bender, Sweated Work 33). Several small shops meant that workers who did not yet own (or perhaps did not have the space for) all of the necessary equipment, who were small in family size, or who could not keep up with production demands could contract out the labor necessary to a particular item’s production.

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15 The exact date of the invention of the sewing machine is contested, and is attributed to several different inventors, including Elias Howe and Isaac Singer. The date I provide corresponds with Singer’s patent. I cite Singer because many of the sources I rely upon in this chapter do as well. On Singer’s role in the mass production of sewing machines, see: “The Sewing Machine,” by Hellen Chenut, in Of Common Cloth: Women in the Global Textile Industry, 69-9.
competition fostered by this system meant that more contractors were willing (and probably at
times forced) to subcontract labor, which in turn placed a downward pressure on wages (Bender,
Sweated Work 8). Although new technology, outsourcing, and immigration has altered the
constitution of the workforce, this system has remained largely unchanged in the U.S.

These shifts in technology coupled with the massive influx of Eastern and Southern
European immigrants between 1880 and 1920 ignited cultural anxieties concerning job loss and
disease on the part of U.S. citizens. For instance, in 1891 prominent American economist Francis
Walker expressed a popular concern over the “shock” the nation was experiencing from the large
influx of immigrants, and proclaimed that the standard of living would necessarily decrease
because of the increase in the “foreign-born” (Kvidera 1133). This fear manifested sharply in
relation to jobs and (perceived) job loss. In one of the first Congressional Hearings investigating
the ready-made garment industry (1892), John B. Lennon, the Secretary of the Journeymen
Tailors Union of America, testified on behalf of union members that immigration, and not
technological innovations or industrial capitalism, was to blame for job loss and shifts in the
garment industry (Bender, Sweated Work 7). This emphasis on immigration quickly became the
route with which anti-sweatshop advocates and journalists focused their attention. Evident in the
government committee research of the time, such as the seventeen volumes of the Reports of the
Industrial Commission (1900), the nineteen volumes of the Report on the Condition of Women
and Child Wage Earners (1909), and the forty-two volumes of the United States Immigration
Commission (1911), is the linking of racial categories with labor that worked so as to connect the
economics of industries (such as the garment industry) and the conditions of workshops to the
immigrant populations that worked within them (Bender, Sweated Work 5-6). Drawing on the
racial science of the time, these reports framed immigrant groups as racial categories whose
biological distinctiveness was evident in the “foreign method of working” that was “imported to the U.S. from the least civilized sections of Europe” (Bender, *Sweated Work* 46). Throughout the reports, government officials and factory inspectors framed the sweatshop as the product of a system wrought from “green hands, that had just been brought from the Castle Garden,” and the “foreign-born and newly arrived” (Bender, *Sweated Work* 46). Thus, in 1892 when the House of Representatives hearings advanced a definition of the sweatshop as reflective of a system of contracting and subcontracting, they also asserted that “the wide development of the contract system…is a phase of immigration” (Bender, *Sweated Work* 46). In this way, immigration, and specifically the “foreignness” of immigrant labor, could account for, and explain the conditions and proliferation of sweatshops rather than the competitive wage system and technological developments that accelerated them. As Chief O’Leary, a New York City factory inspector speaking to his colleagues at an 1898 convention in Boston stated: “The only cure for the sweating system is in the restriction of immigration…Sweatshops are in no sense a product of American conditions, but are purely an imported survival of foreign medievalism” (“Civic and Educational Notes”). O’Leary’s statement captures an ideology pervasive to U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse: that sweatshops are the product of immigration and/or immigrants, rather than the system of flexibility and competition inherent to ready-made clothing production. This ideology reflects the ways in which the sweatshop, at the turn of the twentieth (and the twenty-first) century could contain cultural anxieties about immigration. Thus, in this way, the discourse of sweatshops is founded upon and co-emergent with a cultural anxiety concerning unrestricted immigration, threatening to the U.S. national body.

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16 As Bender states: “A greenhorn was an immigrant fresh from the old world whose obvious visual characteristics, like their style of dress or a full beard for men or a covered head for women, belied a lack of assimilation” (*Sweated Work* 26).
These determinations regarding race reflect the ways in which the racial science of the Progressive Era (1890-1920) emerged in an attempt to secure social hierarchies threatened by mass immigration. This relationship between racial science and immigration is evident in the U.S. immigration system documents of this time. Nationality-as-race was explicitly incorporated into the U.S. immigration system through the Dictionary of Races or Peoples (1910) that detailed a hierarchy of races that not only biologized national categories, but in doing so, attempted to erect a scientific basis for social structures threatened by immigration (namely, U.S. white supremacy). Indeed, post-adoption of the Dictionary, the Industrial Commission on Immigration stated that “the new classification of immigrants according to race rather than nationality” best measured the “effects of immigration” (Bender, Sweated Work 36; emphasis added). The “effects of immigration” or rather, the concern to the Commission, was the racial make-up and maintenance of a racial hierarchy in the U.S. As Eithne Luibhéid observes: “Immigration control was a key institution through which the renegotiation of whiteness occurred,” and that through the simultaneous privileging of European family reunifications, and systemic methods of exclusion for Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Fillipino, and Asian Indians “the immigration system ultimately helped to constitute European couples and their children as ‘white’ and reaffirmed that white families were desirable and consonant with the interests of the nation” (6-7). Thus, as a site of race-making, the immigration system both borrowed from, and participated in the construction of “scientific” racial categories that upheld white superiority in the U.S. In the conception of race proffered via the Dictionary (as well as the eugenic discourse of the time), “civilization” understood as “a measure of moral and physical conditions” served as a metric with which various groups were accorded social value and/or inferiority (Bender, Sweated Work 36). In this way, immigrants’ living and working conditions were seen as a reflection of their racial fitness,
and could be used to measure their “state of civilization.” This conception of race directly informed the ways in which government inspectors, social reformers, and journalists saw the garment workers as racially inferior and “uncivilized.”

The emphasis on the racial composition of the garment industry’s workforce was most publicly reinforced and popularized through the numerous local newspaper and national magazine stories that employed an ethnographic account of garment shops. These exposé style reports adopted a frame of exploration, and when discussing the garment industry specifically (located in New York City’s Lower East Side), was described and heralded as “a New York ghetto…an inexhaustible mine of interest and information for those who delight in studying the life, manners, and customs of a race which is unique among the races of the globe” (The New York Times, 1897, qtd. in Bender, Sweated Work 36). In the previous passage, immigration is not a representation of various nationalities, but of different races; one can simply visit “the New York ghetto” to see and study people. This passage exemplifies the tenets of racial science that not only frame people as various races, but also as potential specimens of scientific study. Further, framed as a distinct geographic, cultural, and racial space, the garment shop is construed as foreign to the rest of the city. In their descriptions that detail both the perceived squalor and the disgust it incites, these accounts perform a moral-distancing that positions the investigator as both foreign and morally superior to the shop’s inhabitants. This kind of anthropological frame is evident in one reporter’s statement that he was a “student of humanity” examining the “daily drudgery and toil of these immigrants” (Bender, Sweated Work 35). As Bender notes, many of these exposés conform to a narrative structure that locates the investigator (i.e., the journalist) as an explorer-outsider, aghast at the conditions within garment shops (described in graphic, linguistically-visualizing detail), who is tasked with communicating these deplorable conditions
to a middle-class audience, presumably with which the writer is also a part. The language employed in these accounts, such as ‘race,’ ‘peoples,’ and (in others) ‘taxonomies,’ highlights the writer’s, as well as the audience’s understanding of race as rooted in biological and evolutionary processes. In this way these accounts borrowed from the racial science of the time in their methods of ethnographic observation and “scientific” analysis.

The explorer-journalistic accounts of the garment shops are important because they informed the government inspectors and social reformers who adopted the sweatshop as their object of interest in anti-sweatshop campaigns. Framed within a broader campaign oriented towards public health and immigration reform, the earliest days of the anti-sweatshop movement were guided by deeply held beliefs that the labor that fueled sweatshops (i.e., newly arrived immigrants) was not only fundamentally distinct from other ways of working and producing, but that it was inferior and threatening to the American public. Informed by the journalistic exposés outlined above, this conception of garment work as a “foreign method of working” depended on the comparative device that framed sweatshop labor as fundamentally distinct from other kinds of industrial labor prevalent during this time, most prominently the American factory system. Held up as “efficient,” “civilized,” and “sanitary,” the American factory was all the things the sweatshop was not: filthy, haphazard, and inefficient (Bender and Greenwald 3). The sweatshop, unlike the American factory, presented a risk to the U.S. national body because: “work in a crowded and unhealthy district…leads to…low morals and low intelligence, where the condition of human beings is scarcely above that of animals” (Bender, Sweated Work 50). Filth in this sense was taken as evidence of the workers lack of morality and thus low racial fitness (i.e., “low intelligence”). This conception of the sweatshop is inextricable from the very persons working in them; as Bender outlines, between 1880-1910, the character of the immigrants working in
sweatshops (particularly Eastern-European Jewish people) as “a race comfortable in filth and too physically weak and undisciplined for factory work” emerged as an explanation for sweatshops existence (Sweated Work 8). In this way, the sweatshop needed to be reformed for the sake of the (American) race. Legislation for reform was not undertaken on behalf of the workers then, but for public health:

Fears of disease, coupled with concerns about the evolutionary challenges posed by the arrival of immigrants shaped the first regulations of sweatshops…especially in the U.S., (where the legal precedent restricted the scope of industrial regulation) these laws linked anti-sweatshop campaigns to larger efforts for immigration restriction, public health legislation, and urban sanitary reform. (Bender, “A Foreign Method” 26).

Efforts to reform and eradicate sweatshops then were oriented towards the threat they posed to the American citizenry, rather than the quality of life the workers experienced living and working in these conditions.

In addition to public health and government reform, consumer groups adopted these explanations when campaigning against sweatshops. These early campaigns against sweatshops sought to protect middle-class consumers rather than the workers themselves (Bender, “A Foreign Method” 26). These campaigns saw the garments produced in sweatshops as items of contagion whose proximity to middle-class consumers, most especially women, were dangerous and grounds for social reform (i.e., anti-sweatshop legislation). For instance, the Consumers League of New York (a group of middle-class women taking up the sweatshop cause), “declared sweatshops a ‘menace to the home’- not only to middle-class consumers who might purchase infected clothing” but the familial norms sweatshop labor threatened (Bender, “A Foreign
Method” 30). Informed by the journalist and inspector reports that emphasized the filth of the sweatshop and the “feebleness” of the workers in them, these campaigns for reform reflected the explanations proffered in the journalistic exposés and government reports. The degree of filth and squalor emphasized throughout the exposés, and its proximity to middle class consumer goods, was the point of concern in these groups’ campaigns. The League feared that the filth outlined in the exposés could transmit tuberculosis, smallpox, cholera, and scarlet fever through the clothing, and thus supported legislation that would require a label to be sewn into clothing produced “under conditions judged to be humane and healthful by the League itself” (Soyer 41).

Similarly, the blurred gender lines the sweatshop presented to inspectors and journalists induced moral panic on behalf of wealthy women’s groups, like the Consumer’s League, and public health officials. Unlike the American factory with its revered male breadwinner, in garment shops the entire family worked to produce a meager income. Women working alongside men raised fears concerning sexual immorality, and gave rise to a conflation of female garment workers with sex workers, a conflation that persists to this day in anti-sweatshop discourse (Enstad 91-2; Siddiqi 159). Garment workers, most predominantly young women, instilled public concern because they were young women working, and less so because of the conditions of the labor itself (Enstad 91-2). As workplaces most often located within the home, these shops muddled the gendered spheres crucial to the national economy and sex categories; a space neither “work” nor “home” the sweatshop threatened the sacred sphere of the home, and thus the sex/gender system within the U.S. The significance of gender to anti-sweatshop anxiety is evident in the campaigns and legislation that intended to eradicate homework. As Bender outlines, one of the first campaigns undertaken to reform the sweatshop, the end to homework,
reflects an attempt to bring the sweatshop to U.S. standards of labor that upheld the male breadwinner and female housewife as the ideal (Sweated Work 12).

The historical emergence of the sweatshop points towards the ways in which from its very first usage, the sweatshop has mirrored cultural anxieties about the “global flows and exchanges of people, goods, culture, and capital” (Bender and Greenwald 2). This definitional aspect of sweatshops continues to operate as a cultural placeholder for these very anxieties, albeit with some modifications. As Bender and Greenwald observe, “understood at the beginning of the twentieth century as the dangerous outgrowth of unrestricted immigration and urbanization” at the beginning of the twenty-first century “the sweatshop is cast as the worst expression of the new, unregulated global economy” (2). In other words, while the structure of the market may have changed, the cultural anxieties undergirding the sweatshop remain much the same. In the next section, I examine the discourse of the “return” of the sweatshop emergent in the U.S. in the late 1970s to early 1990s. Similar to the foreign method of working logic established and circulated in the previous era of anti-sweatshop discourse, the “return” of sweatshops is framed as resulting from increased immigration to the U.S. As I outline below, the discourse of the “return” of the sweatshop belies the cultural fears wrought from the conditions of post-Fordism: de-industrialization in the U.S. on the one hand and an increase in overseas production on the other, increased migration to the U.S., and the state-sanctioned breaking of unions. These events, when coupled with the technological shifts in the garment industry, gave rise to a discourse centered on the “return” of sweatshops.

**Post-Fordism and the Return of the Sweatshop**

As several scholars note, the 1980s marked “the return of the sweatshop” to the U.S. (Ehrenreich and Fuentes 1983; Waldinger and Lapp 1992, 1993; Ross 1996; Kang 1997;
Applebaum and Bonacich 2000; Green 2003; Greenwald 2003). This discourse of “return” appears as early as 1977, and is evident across the many local newspaper and national magazine stories (Buck 1979; Koeppel 1978; Yaeger 1978; Kerr 1977a, 1977b; Greenhouse 1978; English 1984; LaRosa and Thompson 1988; Lum 1988; Mazur 1979, 1986, 1989; Mort 1988; Serin 1983) and government and policy reports (Leichter 1979, 1981, 1982; “The Reemergence of Sweatshops” 1981, 1982; USGAO 1988, 1989) that emerged to announce, and account for the return of the sweatshop. Across this literature, the “return” of sweatshops is premised on a historical end that has been interrupted due to the intense competition posed by globalized production and low-cost imports, and the availability of low-cost immigrant labor in the U.S. In this way, sweatshops and immigrant labor are proffered as “last ditch efforts” in an attempt to curtail global competition, explained as a result of the Reagan administration’s anti-union agenda and loosening labor regulations (Green 51). This narrative frames sweatshops as previously eradicated through union strikes (especially those of 1909-1910 in response to the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire), and subsequent industrial regulation and legislation that standardized production and wage levels. However, as economist Michael Piore notes observing this “return:” “Actually, we have no hard evidence that the sweatshop has seen a revival in the last decade and, in fact, it never entirely disappeared” (140). In this section I explore the ways in which the return of sweatshops in the 1980s was explained, and assert that the “return” is less about an actual manifestation of increased sweatshop exploitation, but rather a cultural response to the shifting social and economic conditions wrought from post-Fordism in the U.S.

Throughout the news articles, labor union research, and government reports there is an evident lack of agreement on what exactly constitutes a sweatshop. One article claims that sweatshops represent “a state of mind” (Mort 82), while the New York Department of Labor
defines sweatshops as specifically referring to “hazardous and unsanitary working conditions” (1982), or shops that “regularly violate both safety or health and wage or child labor laws” (USGAO, “Sweatshops in the U.S.” 16), while still another observer claims that unionized sweatshops include the worst examples of sweatshop conditions (Kwong qtd. in Waldinger and Lapp, “Back to the Sweatshop” 11). This lack of coherence and consistency in definition is important to the discourse of “return” because in its definitional tractability, the problem of sweatshops is open to interpretation (a point I return to below). What is consistent across this discourse is the invocation of immigration, and specifically a new and rapidly increasing undocumented immigrant population, as the driving force of this “return” (I. Ross 1978; Mazur 1979, 1986, 1989; Leichter 1981; USGAO 1988, 1989). However, as I discuss below, this explanation points more towards cultural fears regarding the conditions of post-Fordism, and the racist and xenophobic conceptions of the U.S. national body that emerged within them. I emphasize that this is not to discount or deny the ways in which undocumented status impacts one’s working conditions, but rather is an examination of how new immigrant populations were attributed causal blame for a “return” of sweatshops when (as I outline below) sweatshop conditions never actually went away. Also, I do not deny the existence of exploitative working environments in the garment industry, but rather am critical of how a conception of such conditions contained in the “sweatshop” is framed, explained, and identified. Thus I ask: How did the discourse of the “return” of the sweatshop reflect other social fears tied to an increasingly globalized economy? How was the “return” of sweatshops evidenced? What does the discourse of the “return” of sweatshops tell us about how the U.S. sees labor exploitation? I assert that the discourse of “return” is indicative of several interrelated events that are crucial to understanding how, and why the sweatshop became a site for public debate and consternation through the
1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, leading up to and including the present day. These events are central to the restructuring of global capitalism starting in the 1970s, but continuing with increasing pace during the 1980s and 1990s. Some of the major shifts in the national and international economy include: the entry into manufacturing for export by many impoverished countries (who often experienced liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, and subsequently entered loans with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund), occurring in tandem with the decline in welfare state programs and the onset of deindustrialization in the U.S., a decrease in job security and increase in part-time employment in the U.S., an increase in migration from poorer nations to wealthier ones (with attendant anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiment), and a push towards de-unionization in the U.S. that continues today. These changes are part of the global restructuring that marks post-Fordist capitalism in the U.S. and the onset of neoliberal economics that prioritize a form of flexible accumulation, heralded as the economic promise of the free market, free trade, and global competition. These legislative and economic changes bore profound effects (discussed below), and I argue that they influenced the ways in which the problem of the sweatshop manifested as a specifically racialized topic in U.S. public consciousness. In order to understand how, and why the sweatshop returned as a social problem in the 1980s, I examine these changes in relation to the U.S. apparel industry at length below. I then discuss how these changes inform the return of the sweatshop, and the ways in which news media frame sweatshops as an object of concern.

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One of the most prominent effects of the transition to a global economy, and a specifically post-Fordist economy within the U.S., is the re-location of manufacturing to other nations. While apparel manufacturers within the U.S. have always sought to move production so as to circumvent unionized, high-wage labor for low-wage, non-unionized labor within U.S. borders, the move to production sites beyond national borders (what is referred to as “offshore” production in global supply chain and anti-sweatshop literature), did not start happening with consistent frequency until well after World War Two (Applebaum and Bonacich 54). However, even this early offshore production differs vastly from the global production lines in operation today. Up until the 1990s, the apparel industry was regulated by the Long Term Agreement (hereafter, LTA) established in 1962, and then primarily the Multi-Fibre Arrangement, from 1974-2005 (hereafter, MLA). Both the LTA and MFA were intended to ensure strict import controls on textiles and clothing so as to protect certain national markets. For example, access to European and North American markets were restricted, and allowed to increase at a rate of roughly six percent a year (A. Brooks 68). Bilateral arrangements between nations were allowed so as to maintain protections, and through consistent re-negotiations (1977, 1982, 1986, and 1991), trade patterns shifted so as to foster market growth while controlling imports (A. Brooks 68). This system benefitted wealthy, imperial nations because “they were slowly able to adjust, rather than experiencing the ‘shock’ to their economies” that many other poor, or less wealthy nations experienced in the transition to a global economy (A. Brooks 68). Further, tight restrictions of imports ensured a moderate and steady supply of low-price garments for Northern and Western consumers, while many manufacturing jobs in these nations remained protected.
These were the very conditions that allowed for a flourishing of consumerism, and the consumer activism and advocacy that marked the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s in the U.S.\textsuperscript{19}

However, the momentum towards neoliberalization initiated during the Reagan administration and continuing throughout the 1980s and 1990s bore effects quite evident in the apparel industry. The anti-union agenda initiated during the Reagan era, coupled with the Federally-funded incentives to move production offshore effectively drove up the number of apparel imports within the U.S. (Harvey, \textit{A Brief History} 25, 168; Kernaghan 79-80). As Applebaum and Bonacich observe: “in 1962 apparel imports totaled $301 million. They had tripled by the end of the decade, to $1.1 billion, increased another five-fold by 1980, to $5.5 billion, and nearly another fourfold by 1990, to $21.9 billion” (6). This dramatic rise in apparel imports has a correlation in employment and manufacturing: employment in apparel manufacturing peaked within the U.S. in 1970, with 1,364,000 people employed (Applebaum and Bonacich 16). Since then it has steadily dropped, in 1980 to 1,264,000, in 1990 to 1,036,000, and then in 1997, to 813,000 (Applebaum and Bonacich 16). For instance, in New York City alone, the U.S. fashion capital, the garment manufacturing industry lost an average of 2.8 percent of its jobs every year between 1970 and 1987 (Chin 19).

The re-location of U.S. manufacturing was driven in part by the power and living-wage labor unions and collective bargaining had achieved by the 1970s (Bonacich and Applebaum 6; Cline 40-50; Harvey, \textit{A Brief History} 11-12; 24-6; 167-8; Mitter 13; 20; 54-64; 74-79). As Mitter outlines, the real rate of return on all manufacturing investments in the U.S. of 15.5 percent in the years 1963-66 fell to 12.7 percent in 1967-70, then to 10.1 percent in 1971-74, and reached an average of 9.7 percent in 1974-80 (25). At the same time (1974-1980), the average advertised

\textsuperscript{19} On the politics of mass consumption in the U.S. post World War Two, see: Lizabeth Cohen, \textit{A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Consumption in Post-War America} (2003).
to corporations looking to maximize their bottom line heralded as much as a 33 percent return on investments in Mexico, Central and South America (Mitter 25). These disparities in wages continue today; although U.S. garment workers are paid poorly by U.S. standards, they make more than four times as much as a Chinese garment worker, eleven times more than Dominican garment workers, and thirty-eight times more than Bangladeshi garment workers (Cline 42). I emphasize, like Kang, that these wage differentials do not represent a priori values, and especially at this particular historical moment highlight the degree to which structural adjustment programs and neoliberal “shock” economics, products of U.S. imperial architects, worked to establish a global economic system advantageous to multinational corporations and banks. This logic is often reproduced throughout the globe; when factory workers organize, strike, and collectively bargain, their employers most often re-locate. Indeed, the mobility of capital is a significant factor in apparel industry job loss in the U.S. (and elsewhere), but it is not the sole explanation.

Equally important to the shifting patterns of employment and production in the U.S. garment industry is the role of technology. A crucial part of making garment production mobile is the development of technology that de-skills its necessary labor as much as possible. This is accomplished through technological developments that limit the role of human labor so as to

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20 In her research (carried out before 2012), Elizabeth Cline cites the average New York City garment worker wage at $12-15.00 an hour, and an advanced pattern maker’s at $17-18.00 hour. According to government statistics however, the average wage of a sewing-machine operator in the U.S. is much lower, at $9.00 hour, or $1,660.00 a month (in 2012). In the free trade zones in the Dominican Republic, the average monthly wage is less than $150.00, in China, $117-147.00 a month, and in Bangladesh (which raised its minimum wage in 2010), it is $43.00 month (Cline 42-3).

21 For more on the work of the Chicago School economists and “shock” economics see: David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (2005), The New Imperialism (2003), and Naomi Klein, The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism (2007).

decrease, if not entirely dissolve the need for skills development and/or training that incurs “unnecessary” costs. Many of the technologies currently in operation in the garment factories around the globe (including the U.S.), were greatly accelerated in the late 1970s via new advancements in computerization. I highlight the role of technology because while the cost benefits of off-shoring are often invoked in anti-sweatshop, as well as nativist discourse concerning job “loss,” it is crucial to note that even before off-shoring began to alter the U.S. garment industry, technology was rapidly eradicating jobs. Further, technology that reduces the need for workers concentrates power in managerial and factory-owning positions, which contributes to the decimation of unions and union power (A. Brooks 246). For instance, open-end spinning machines (invented in 1963), accomplish in one process what traditional spinning did in three, and in use replaced 200 jobs in one factory alone in just two years; one machine needs only one employee and one mechanic, at most (Gloster, McDevitt, and Chhachhi 19). The open-end spinning machine is only one example of many technologies developed post-1960 to increase profits, and thus decrease the cost or need for human labor.23

The simultaneous increase in apparel imports and decrease in apparel manufacturing jobs was only exacerbated with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (hereafter, NAFTA), which took effect in 1994. In the first year post NAFTA’s passage, the city of Los Angeles experienced a sharp decrease in garment jobs, and the wages for the few that remained plummeted (Cline 55; Bonacich and Applebaum 7). The creation of the World Trade Organization in 1995 (hereafter WTO), that was heralded as the means with which to expand labor and consumer markets, also contributed to the decimation of the U.S. garment industry (Pham 29; Cline 54). Ruling that the quotas established under the MFA presented an unfair trade

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advantage for wealthy nations, the WTO ended the MFA, which was carried out in increments over a ten-year period and completed in 2005 (Cline 54). The end of the MFA immediately bore negative effects for U.S. garment workers. For instance, it was found that post the MFA employment in Los Angeles garment factories “dropped precipitously,” and that “wages dropped nine percent” within the first year (Cline 54). These changes impacted the working class and working poor most profoundly; for instance, many of the Los Angeles garment workers who lost their jobs were non-English speaking immigrants, who were pushed into even lower paying jobs in the domestic worker economy (Cline 54). Similarly, between 1997 and 2007, the New York City garment industry lost 650,000 apparel manufacturing jobs (Cline 37). Most of these manufacturing jobs were re-located to Southeast Asia, South Asia, Mexico, and/or Central America, where wages hover at around $7,200 per year across nations (Bonacich and Applebaum 4). Additionally, the end of the MFA in 2005 meant that imports from other nations into the U.S. were no longer regulated, and a sharp increase was immediately apparent; for example, imports from China of cotton trousers increased by 1,500 percent, and cotton shirts increased by 1,350 percent (Cline 37). The cumulative effect of these changes positioned Asia as the world supplier of apparel, with the U.S. as its biggest consumer (Bonacich et al 5). These changes are evident in the availability of low-priced clothing in the global North. Post-2005 witnessed a decrease in clothing prices, falling 17.1 percent within the U.S., and as much as 26.2 percent within Europe, stimulating a rise in apparel consumption (A. Brooks 68). The relaxed controls on imports and quotas meant a wealth of low-price clothing options for those in the global North, most prominent in the emergence and steady rise of fast fashion retailers such as H&M, Forever 21, and Zara (A. Brooks 68). Simultaneously, jobs in the U.S. apparel retail sector (and the broader retail sector generally) have steadily grown, and it remains one of the
primary employment industries in the U.S. with expectations for continued and consistent growth ("Employment Projections: Occupations"). In sum, the U.S. apparel industry underwent a series of significant changes starting as early as the 1970s, the impact of which began to emerge in the 1980s.

These changes in the U.S. and global economy provided the conditions of possibility for the “return” of the sweatshop, that suggests that the increased competition and growing immigrant population fueled the resurgence of sweated labor. Undergirding this discourse of “return” is an implied break, or period wherein sweatshops did not exist in the U.S.; however, this premise does not accurately represent the conditions of garment production throughout U.S. history. As Green outlines, while union organizing and government legislation have throughout history worked to curtail the worst abuses, “numerous indicators of historical continuity within change persist” (49).24 As Green is apt to observe, in the 1980s garment workers’ unions such as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (hereafter, ILGWU), launched national campaigns and published reports extolling the past successes of the labor movement that in effect, secured “a linear interpretation of betterment,” while at the same time, decried the return of the sweatshop (49).25 I agree with Green in her assertion that this is not necessarily contradictory, in that the specific notion of “return” does some important discursive work in maintaining on the one hand the progress narrative of the labor movement, while at the same time “castigating current conditions… as anathema to everything for which the union stands” (Green 50). However, in this framing memory and history brush up against one another,


25 For more on the ILGWU’s (as well as other U.S. labor unions) nationalist, progress narrative rhetoric see: Dana Frank, Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism (2000).
competing for narrative coherency over the presence, or absence of sweatshops in the U.S. historical record. As Green, Piore, and Richard Greenwald assert, sweatshop abuses have persisted throughout U.S. history, both at the turn of the century, and throughout the period preceding the supposed “return” (Green, “Fashion, Flexible Specialization” 37-52; Green, “The Sweatshop as Workplace” 137-160; Piore 135-142; Greenwald 77-87). The emphasis on labor movement at the turn of the century (especially the strikes of 1909-1910 post the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire) in comparison to the 1980s both elides their presence throughout the historical record, but also works towards securing a historicized understanding of sweatshops that “is reused… because it can be consciously harnessed as a mode of denunciation of current conditions in relation to contemporary standards” (Green 51). In contrast to what many understand as a recurrence, Green views as the persistence of the conditions of flexibility that have characterized the ready-made clothing industry since the beginning. As Green asserts: “Flexibility, competition, and speed all seem to favor poor working conditions” and have always dictated the terms of ready-made clothing’s production (51). Importantly, Green notes that while there have been periods of safer working conditions, as well as those with less regulatory compliance, there have also been periods with “more or less public interest in exploring and exposing workshop and homework conditions” that greatly influence the public’s perception of the problem (Green 50). In other words, sweatshop use and abuse has persisted throughout the U.S. historical record, while news coverage of sweatshops has not.

Equally important to the discourse of return’s coherence is the assertion that the number of sweatshops was (at this time) rapidly proliferating. In many of the news articles and reports claiming a return of sweatshops, the same figures appear again and again. These figures are, as

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26 I discuss the invocation of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in more detail in chapter three.
sociologists Roger Waldinger and Michael Lapp evidence, drawn from New York State Senator Franz Leichter’s three-volume report on the resurgence of New York sweatshops (*Back to the Sweatshop* 10). Leichter’s 1981 report provides figures that suggest an estimated 3,000 sweatshops with as many as 50,000 workers in Chinatown, the South Bronx, and Manhattan, up from less than 200 hundred shops mostly in Chinatown a decade earlier (*Part II* 4, 31). These figures are cited repeatedly throughout much of the news articles concerning the “new sweatshops” of the time (LaRosa and Thompson 1988; Lum 1988; Mort 1988; Bagli 1989; Powell 1989), and are duplicated in the 1988 and 1989 United States General Accounting Office (hereafter, USGAO) reports, the latter of which claims that Leichter’s estimates are “the most credible estimate of the number of sweatshops and people working in them” (*Sweatshops in the U.S.* 23; *Sweatshops in New York City* 22). In other words, they serve as the evidentiary basis for many of the claims regarding the “return” of the sweatshop. However, as Waldinger and Lapp assert, the evidentiary basis for Leichter’s evidence “has never been established” (“Back to the Sweatshop” 10). In Leichter’s first report (*Return of the Sweatshop* 1979) he asserts that there are “thousands of undocumented workers” employed in “horrendous surroundings” and claims to have found evidence for “well over 100 in the northern Manhattan area,” and by his third report claims that there were as many as 60,000 persons working in sweatshops (*Sweatshops to Shakedowns* 1982). As Waldinger and Lapp argue, Leichter’s ability to convey such a large and ominous figure to the press was the result of the definitional parameters he used to define a sweatshop. Leichter’s definition both employs the term ‘sweatshops’ as a catch-all for garment contractors generally (*Return of the Sweatshop* 2-3), and as encapsulating hazardous and unsanitary working conditions, illegal practices, and health and safety violations broadly (*Return of the Sweatshop*). Waldinger and Lapp argue that the return of the sweatshop problem is
severely over-stated, in large part due to Leichter’s figures and the broad definition employed to reach them (“Back to the Sweatshop” 11). Further, the lack of definitional precision employed by Leichter is incapable of evidencing the sweatshop problem as “an entirely new direction of economic development,” which is necessary to his claim that “New York City is the ‘sweatshop capital’ of the country, and sweatshops are New York’s fastest growing industry” (Waldinger and Lapp, “Back to the Sweatshop” 11; Leichter, Part II 31).

In addition to the figures drawn from Senator Leichter’s government reports, the high influx of immigrants to the U.S. is repeatedly cited as evidence of the sweatshop’s return (Leichter 1981; Mazur 1979, 1986, 1989; USGAO 1988, 1989; I. Ross 1978). These arguments draw from the anti-immigrant discourse of the time that claimed that immigrants were displacing “native” workers. For instance, the Report of the Senate Judiciary Committee on the 1985 Immigration Reform and Control Act concluded that:

> [W]e believe that there have been adverse job impacts, especially on low-income, low-skilled Americans, who are the most likely to face direct competition, even though we also perceive a degree of short term economic advantage from the use of ‘cheap’ labor. Such adverse impacts include both unemployment and less favorable wages and working conditions. (Qtd. in Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 97).

This invocation of immigrant labor as inherently low-cost and as direct competition to “native” workers is reproduced throughout the “return” of the sweatshop discourse. In many of these accounts, both documented and undocumented immigrants are cited as causal to the “return” of sweatshops; in both instances, the argument states that because immigrants will take and perform any work without complaint, sweatshop conditions are allowed to grow. Undoubtedly,
citizenship status influences one’s ability to live and work in the U.S., however it does not, and cannot solely explain the claims made in Leichter’s much cited report, or the claims made throughout the news media that frames the return of sweatshops as an immigration problem. As Waldinger and Lapp evidence, the violations Leichter employs as definitional to sweatshops exist across industries, not just those with a high immigrant presence (“Back to the Sweatshop” 11). To frame these labor violations as the result of the workforce, rather than the industry’s structural conditions blames the employee, rather than the employer for their exploitation, and fails to articulate how a sweatshop is different from other kinds of low-wage, hazardous, exploitative labor. Further, the minimum wage violations presented in Leichter’s reports had already presented a serious problem as early as 1970, “before immigrants could reasonably be expected to have greatly affected working conditions” (Waldinger and Lapp, “Back to the Sweatshop” 11). This is not to say that undocumented status does not influence one’s labor conditions. Rather, I stress that the invocation of increased immigration as evidentiary evidence for a (supposed) “return” of sweatshops in the U.S. elides the persistence of certain labor conditions over time within a particular industry, and locates the explanation for said conditions upon the industry’s workforce. I assert that given the persistence of sweatshop conditions across time (the eradication of which undergirds their “return”), the lack of definitional coherence, and the lack of evidence to suggest that minimum wage levels fell with or because of immigration, the causal link between immigrants and the return of the sweatshop is worthy of interrogation as well because of the social and economic climate within which it emerged.

In addition to the shifts in garment manufacturing, legislative changes in U.S. immigration policy play an equally important role in understanding how, and why the discourse of the “return” of the sweatshop emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s. The most significant of
these legislative changes was the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (hereafter, INA). The INA presented a significant shift in U.S. immigration policy, particularly for Asian migrants and persons emigrating from Mexico. As Luibheid outlines, while the INA adopted a race neutral language that distinguished it from the U.S. immigration legislation that preceded it, its effects belie a racist preference system (22). In effect, the INA granted preference to Southern and Eastern European immigrants, whose admission had been restricted since 1924, while restricting immigrants of color who had been “substantially excluded” from entering the U.S. until 1965 (Luibheid 22). Drawing on years of structural exclusion, it was rationalized by immigration officials that since Asian immigrants did not share the same familial advantage that immigrants from southern Europe possessed, there would (the logic goes) be far fewer Asians emigrating (Luibheid 22). Despite this, the INA did lift Asian exclusion laws in place since 1892, which allowed for many previously barred from entering to do so. In addition to the passage of the INA, the increasing move to offshore production and geopolitical actions of the U.S. government helped facilitate the routes of migration from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean that fueled increased immigration (Luibheid 23). Similarly, U.S. legislation regarding refugees contributed significantly to the immigration rates of the 1970s and 1980s; the passage of the Indochina Refugee and Assistance Act facilitated emigration to the U.S. from Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War, and in 1980, the Refugee Act was also passed (Luibheid 23). Thus, by 1970, immigration rates in the U.S. rose significantly. According to the Migration Policy Institute and

27 I want to note that the restrictions on Eastern and Southern European immigrants put into place in 1924 overlaps with the era cited in much of the 1970s-1990s anti-sweatshop literature as effectively eradicating the sweatshop (i.e., late 1920s-1970s). As I’ve already acknowledged, no such period exists within U.S. history, however given the sweatshop’s definitional emergence and relationship to this particular immigrant group, and increased immigration generally, it is interesting that these two phenomena (i.e., the “eradication” of sweatshops and a lull in immigration to the U.S.) overlap. This coincidence seems to suggest further evidence regarding the relationship between U.S. anti-sweatshop and anti-immigrant discourse, a point for further research.
the U.S. Census, immigrants accounted for 9,619,300 persons in the U.S. in 1970, and 14,079,900 in 1980. This era was the start to a steady rise in immigration rates in the U.S. that continues today. This rise is in contrast to the previous era, between 1930 and 1970, when immigration rates in the U.S. had been steadily declining (Gibson and Lennon).

This shift in immigration to the U.S., when coupled with de-industrialization, provided the conditions for renewed xenophobic and racist sentiment. These shifts in immigration policy and the routes of migration made possible through U.S. international actions (both military and financial) meant that during the 1980s, Asian persons accounted for “nearly half of all legal immigrants to the United States” (Lipsitz 72). When coupled with the rapidly globalizing economy (outlined above), the conditions for renewed anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S. were well underway. As George Lipsitz outlines, “the rise of Japanese business as competitors with U.S. firms, the painful legacy of the war in Vietnam, the stagnation of real wages, and increasing class polarization combined to engender intense hostility towards Asia and Asian Americans” during the 1980s (Lipsitz 72). These events, when coupled with the increased immigration of Asian persons within the U.S., fostered intense anti-Asian sentiment that identified “Asians in America as foreign enemies” (Lipsitz 41). This sentiment manifested most violently when in 1982, Chinese American Vincent Chin was murdered in Detroit by two former autoworkers; one of the assailants remarked during the act, “It’s because of you we’re out of work,” revealing their assertion that Chin was not only Japanese, but as such, was responsible for their job loss (Lipsitz 71). I highlight this event because as Lipsitz observes: “Hate crimes enact the rage of individual sociopaths, but they also look for justification to patterns of behavior and belief that permeate the rest of society in less extreme form” (71). In this way, the murder of Vincent Chin conveys the extent to which Asian Americans and Asian persons within the U.S. were attributed causal blame
and resentment for the economic changes made by neoliberal economists, politicians, and policy makers. As Lipsitz argues, this misplaced hostility towards Asian Americans and Asian persons was fostered by President Reagan and his neoconservative allies, who:

[M]obilized a cross-class coalition around the premise that the decline in life chances and opportunities in the United States, the stagnation of real wages, the decline of basic services and infrastructure resources, and the increasing social disintegration stemmed not from the policies of big corporations and their neoliberal and neoconservative allies in government, but from the harm done to the nation by the civil rights, antiwar, feminist and gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. (74).28

In this way, anti-Asian racism could be harnessed to salve the blunt of the post-Fordist U.S. economy that (as the Reagan administration and its allies argued) threatened “the privileges and prerogatives of the possessive investments in whiteness, in masculinity, in patriarchy, and in heterosexuality” (Lipsitz 74).29 This hostility is not unrelated to the discourse of the “return” of the sweatshop.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, immigrants have long provided the labor necessary to the U.S. garment industry. From 1870 to 1965, the U.S. garment industry primarily employed Italian and Eastern European Jewish immigrants (Pham 28; Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 103). During World War Two, the Italian and Eastern European immigrants

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29 Lipsitz’s concept of the possessive investment in whiteness refers to the socially constructed and institutionally enforced system in the U.S. that attaches special privileges and incentives to whiteness and white persons, while exploiting and subjugating all minority groups rendered “non-white.” For more, see *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics, Revised and Expanded Edition* (2009).
began to leave garment manufacturing for better-paying jobs made available via the war (Pham 28). These vacancies were filled by the African Americans departing the South during the Second Great Migration, and Puerto Rican immigrants who were emigrating with increasing frequency to New York City (Pham 28). Up until as recently as 1970 however, the industry’s labor force remained predominantly White, both native-born and immigrant (Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 103). After World War Two, the industry was predominantly non-immigrant (Chin 18). Management positions were held by White ethnic groups until the mid-1970s, at which point Asian-Americans and Asian immigrants increasingly worked within the industry and ran shops (Pham 28). This was due to several reasons. As outlined above, between 1970 and 1980 the number of persons in New York City reporting employment in the apparel industry shrank by as much as ten percent, however various racial and ethnic groups experienced this shift differently. Native-born and immigrant Whites “virtually disappeared from the industry,” and African Americans and Latino Americans also experienced a drop in employment rates, however for these two latter groups the decline was not significantly disproportionate to the overall decline in apparel employment opportunities (Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 103). For instance, Latino Americans constituted exactly the same number of garment employees in 1980 as the previous year (Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 103). A change is evident however in the number of immigrants working in the industry, most prominently those from Asian nations (Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 103). Previous to the INA, Asian persons constituted a small portion of the garment industry workforce; starting in 1892, Asian exclusion laws that specifically barred Asian workers (especially women), prevented Asian persons from participating in this industry (Pham 28). However, as African-Americans began to leave the garment industry post the passage of the
1964 Civil Rights Act for higher waged work, the Chinese, Korean, and South Asians emigrating to the U.S. quickly filled these positions, while the Chinese Americans who had worked within the industry since the 1940s and 1950s expanded their control over shops (Chin 18).

Additionally, White persons largely left the industry due to the white flight occurring across New York City during the 1970s, and the aging White garment worker population that was leaving the industry also created more employment vacancies (Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 103; Waldinger and Lapp, “Back to the Sweatshop” 21). In 1980, the garment industry’s labor force was aging, and the oldest workers fell within White ethnic communities: 41 percent were 55 or older in 1980 (Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 103). With white flight from the city and an aging work force, Asian immigrant communities were well positioned to enter the industry. In other words, rather than “displacing native-born minorities” Asian immigrants stepped in as “replacements for departing whites” (Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 103); a move that continues the pattern of immigrant succession within the U.S. garment industry, but also runs counter to the anti-immigrant discourse that frames immigrants as displacing “native” workers. This shift in the constitution of the garment industry workforce coincides with the emergence of the “return” of the sweatshop discourse, yet it reflects a long pattern of immigrant succession within an industry that has always relied on the labor of immigrants.

The succession of immigrant communities, most especially Asian immigrants within the U.S. garment industry in the late 1970s and 1980s illustrates several different phenomena, not

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30 For a more thorough discussion concerning white flight and the gentrification of urban spaces during the 1970s and early 1980s (especially as these forces intersect with gay and/or queer communities), see: Christina Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (2013) and Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). I also return to the topic of gentrification as it refers to U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse in chapter three.
solely reliant on the “return” of the sweatshop. As Minh-ha Pham argues, the racist stereotypes regarding a superior Asian work ethic directly contributed to the material realities and discursive logic that rendered Asian women the ideal garment industry employee. As Pham states:

Racial and gendered stereotypes about Asian model minority workers have structurally advantaged them in hiring decisions while historically disadvantaging African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and (to a lesser extent) Dominicans seeking jobs in the garment industry, who suffer from corresponding stereotypes about laziness and a quickness to complain…Stereotypes about this socially disenfranchised group of workers’ racially gendered docility and willingness to accept substandard work conditions have resulted in a new international division of labor in which the largest portion of the world’s apparel manufacturing is done in Asia. (32).

In this way, the very logic employed in government advertising abroad that praised Asian women’s “natural” manual dexterity and work ethic (for a low price) informed cultural biases in the U.S. garment shops, contributing to Asian Americans and Asian person’s participation in the industry. Further, as Margaret Chin outlines, within the U.S. the ethnic networks that often constitute immigrant communities meant that Chinese American and Chinese garment factory owners often hired Chinese American workers and documented Chinese immigrants (Chin 122). For instance, a 1969 Colombia University survey found that twenty-three percent of New York City’s Chinatown residents were working in apparel manufacturing at that time (Chin 19). These kinds of hiring practices are not unique to Chinese persons, but rather point to the ways in which immigrant and ethnic communities (in this instance Chinese), often form welcoming networks for new immigrants because of restricted kinship and language barriers, and ethnic communities
based on racial and ethnic identity because of white supremacy. Conversely, some shop owners intentionally hired new immigrants in an industry that has always (as briefly outlined above) relied on the labor of immigrants. For example, Chin observes that Korean factory owners (during this time) most often employed undocumented Mexican and Ecuadoran workers in their shops (Chin 159). Asian immigrants also filled what was otherwise an underemployed industry; the aging workers with advanced sewing and tailoring skills left vacancies that garment shops needed to fill. The well-publicized decline of the industry, with its wage stagnation spurred by globalized production meant that native-born young people were unwilling to “make the type of commitment that they need to in order to learn the most advanced tailoring and sewing skills” (Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 104). Additionally, garment work has relied on the labor of immigrants because it requires little skill upon entry; the ability to run fabric through sewing machines does not require language acquisition or much training.  

In sum, while the industry continued to thrive on the labor of immigrants, predominately women of color, the changes in the global economy and immigration policy meant that new immigrant groups quickly entered the industry, shifting the racial majority.

This shift in the racial make-up of the garment industry’s workforce is what journalists and government inspectors consistently cited as the cause of the poor working conditions they observed. Throughout the news media and government reports “new immigrants” are cited as the reason for sweatshop’s return. For example, in Leichter’s 1981 report on the state of sweatshops in New York City he claims that undocumented immigration is one of the major reasons sweatshops are “such a growth industry” (Part Two 4). This opinion is affirmed throughout

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much of the news and union literature (Mazur 1979, 1986, 1989; I. Ross 1978; USGAO 1988, 1989). This emphasis on the role of undocumented persons is contested however, especially in regards to the industry’s Asian workforce (Chin 18, 141; Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 99-100; Waldinger and Lapp, “Back to the Sweatshop,” 14-17). I highlight the contested nature of this logic because, while it does not dispute the ways in which undocumented status impacts one’s chances of exploitation, it does call into question the logic presented in the news media, union articles and government reports that asserts that it is the causal factor for a resurgence of sweatshops. However, because undocumented status bears negative consequences to individuals without citizenship privilege (i.e., there is incentive to “hide” it), I am also hesitant to fully place confidence in any numbers as correct in this regard. What is consistent across the literature is that most of the Asian persons working in the garment industry in New York City between 1970 to the mid 1990s were either American citizens or documented, which tends to contest rather than affirm the claims made in the news media and government reports (Chin 18, 141; Waldinger and Lapp, “Why Immigrants Stay” 99-100; Waldinger and Lapp, “Back to the Sweatshop,” 14-17). This discrepancy in perceived citizenship status reflects both the historical and cultural attitude that sweatshop labor is inherently foreign, but also the racist and xenophobic sentiment that Asian persons are foreign to the U.S. (an especially pernicious ideology in the 1980s when this discourse emerged). Further, framing the problem of sweatshops as one of immigration fails to account for the persistence of sweatshop-like exploitation throughout the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (discussed earlier) before immigration could, or would have presented a significant factor. Thus, similar to their predecessors of an earlier era, for these journalists and government inspectors, race could explain the existence (or re-emergence) of the sweatshop, rather than the working conditions endemic and consistent to the industry itself. In
this way, both the liberal and conservative factions of the time endorsed a shift in immigration policies as the best method in remedying the “return” of the sweatshop. For instance, conservative perspectives of the time not only framed immigrants as direct competition for U.S. jobs, but as “an underclass outside the law” whose surreptitious presence operated beyond, or outside of the law, thus warranting heightened immigration restrictions (Keely 42 qtd. in Waldinger and Lapp “Back to the Sweatshop” 22). Conversely, the head of the ILGWU during the 1980s, Jay Mazur, argued that the best way to curtail sweatshop use and abuse was to re-draft U.S. immigration policy so as to provide amnesty to all undocumented persons in the U.S. (“The Return of the Sweatshop”). While Mazur’s advocacy for full amnesty for all undocumented persons in the U.S. certainly bears merit in regards to exploitation, his argument that this alone will prevent sweatshop exploitation does not reflect the research that Chin, Waldinger, Lapp, Green, or Greenwald provide that points to the persistence of sweatshop conditions throughout time, and within shops whose employees are unionized and documented. In other words, this argument most certainly addresses structural problems concerning immigration, but does not adequately point to the persistence and particularities of garment production that depend on low wages, flexibility, and increasingly intense competition (that today most often manifests as global mobility).

This insistence on the role of immigration in the 1980s, rather than the conditions consistent and persistent in the garment industry over time, is drawn from the anti-Asian racism and anti-immigrant discourse of the time, and the enduring belief that sweatshops represent a foreign method of working. Speaking to the heightened anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S. during the 1980s, Yen Le Espiritu observes:
In a time of rising economic powers in Asia, declining economic opportunities in the United States, and growing diversity among America’s people, this new Yellow Perilism- the depiction of Asia and Asian Americans as economic and cultural threats to mainstream United States- supplies white Americans with a cultural identity and provides ideological justification for U.S. isolationist policy toward Asia, increasing restrictions against Asian (and Latino) immigration, and the invisible institutional racism and visible violence against Asians in the United States. (90).

Espiritu’s observations are apt, and reflect the ways in which journalists, union officials, and government employees, at the turn of the twentieth century and the twenty-first, framed the problem of sweatshops as one stemming from immigration, and thus solvable through national restrictions. The “depiction of Asia and Asian Americans as economic and cultural threats” to the mainstream U.S. manifested in the “return” of the sweatshop discourse that framed the problem (i.e., the “return”) of sweatshops as one caused by increased immigration, most especially Asian persons. Espiritu’s comments point towards the ways in which individual persons were, and are made to embody the cultural fears drawn from a rapidly globalized economy rather than the architects of this very economy. Perhaps most importantly, framing sweatshops as an immigration problem, rather than an industry problem, contains the exploitation that constitutes sweatshop conditions as foreign to the U.S., as something that is an aberration to what is otherwise a non-exploitative system. In other words, it affirms a cultural identity to the U.S. that presumes labor exploitation, such as sweatshops, as antithetical and foreign to it.
This conflation between the “foreign” and the sweatshop warrants critical consideration because of the way in which it presents labor exploitation as both a thing of the past, but also as something that is “natural” to some people, groups and/or places. As Bender and Greenwald argue: “Sweatshop labor is constructed as foreign because it is associated with the labor of ‘foreigners’ and because it is still perceived as an alien form of labor, contrary to powerful ideas of male breadwinning and of the mechanized industrial workplace” (8). This conception of sweatshops and the sweatshop worker continue to shape Western conceptions of labor exploitation; namely, as something that is natural and/or inherent to some locations or persons. Most glaringly, in this sense, labor exploitation is both natural to racialized, immigrant groups, and a foreign threat to the white, male (factory) worker. As Kang observes, and as I have attempted to outline in this section, the “return” of the sweatshop that has been present in U.S. discourse since the 1980s and early 1990s co-emerged as part of “an increasingly shrill attack on immigration and more specifically the predominantly Asian and Latino composition of immigrants to the United States after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965” (414). Not coincidentally, these groups constitute a large portion of the garment industry workforce, in New York City and Los Angeles respectively (Chin 140-7; Bonacich and Applebaum 169). However, as noted previously in this chapter, some of the shifts that mark post-Fordism most severely and negatively impacted these very groups, who already possessed a significant foothold in the industry. Additionally, the changes in the garment industry workforce represent consistent historical patterns and responses to geographic and demographic transformations of the time, rather than a “return” of sweatshop conditions. In other words, the notion that immigration was to blame for the “return” of the sweatshop says more about the cultural anxieties and biases that
journalists and government inspectors brought to their documentary realist accounts, and less about the actual proliferation of sweatshops.

These historical moments concerning anti-sweatshop discourse are relevant to the t-shirt debate because of how the newspapers involved chose to frame and represent sweatshops. Evident in both of the previous eras reportage is a reliance on the explorer-journalist’s experiential observations in conveying and defining sweatshops. As the newspaper coverage of the 1890-1920s shows, first person accounts describing foul smells, filth, and squalor informed the ways in which government inspectors and anti-sweatshop groups came to see and define sweatshops. This practice continued in the late 1970s and 1980s, when for instance the Leichter reports conveyed the existence of sweatshop conditions through the Senator’s firsthand accounts (i.e., what he saw and interpreted as a “sweatshop” constituted a sweatshop). In both instances, the definitional parameters of what constitutes a sweatshop reside in the observer’s opinion of what a sweatshop looks like, and in this way “renders the place of the investigator transparent” (Spivak 295). In other words, in these journalistic and government framings, the act of witnessing, of visiting and visually and/or linguistically describing what one sees constitutes the legitimacy, and veracity of the claims to know sweatshops. I have attempted to outline how this documentation and definitional method influences how sweatshops are framed (i.e., why they exist and how best to “solve” them), and evidence how these kinds of visual interpretations are subject to, and most often co-emergent with other ideological belief systems concerning the national body.

In the following section, I return to the t-shirt debate carried out across *The Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*, and continue my interrogation of how news media frame and represent sweatshops in the West. I assert in the following section that both news institutions upheld a
framing of sweatshops as foreign that was conveyed through the tools of documentary realism, most especially the explorer-journalist’s accounts and the documentary image. I examine the debate between the two news institutions because it illustrates the ways in which claims to know sweatshops are revealed and represented in the West, and how the visibility of sweatshops is both restricted and sutured to a lens of sensationalism and disorder. This framing is most evident in *The Mail’s* story, that, as I outline below, draws explicitly on a structure of revealing sweatshops that renders them sensational, newsworthy stories. At root in both newspaper’s framings however is a debate about what sweatshops “look” like to the West.

**This is What a Feminist Looks Like, Part II**

Crucial to understanding the convention structuring the t-shirt debate is the distinction between the two media institutions involved. A more liberal media institution, *The Guardian* gained international readership and recognition when in 2013 journalist Glenn Greenwald, with documents leaked by Edward Snowden, broke news about the U.S. National Security Agency’s Prism program. This particular news story, when coupled with other award winning coverage, lends an air of journalistic integrity and respect *The Daily Mail* does not share. In contrast to *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail* is a self-identified tabloid newspaper; its reportage not only operates on sensationalism, but its aim is to produce it. For instance, in addition to stories like the t-shirt scandal, *The Mail* publishes a large amount of celebrity-related content. In sum, *The Guardian* exists as a more credible news institution while *The Mail* caters to a wider, more

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33 For example, *The Guardian* was named “newspaper of the year” in 2014 for its reportage on government and international surveillance at the British Press Awards. See: Kevin Rawlinson, “Guardian Wins Newspaper and Website of the Year at the British Press Awards.”

34 As Paul Manning outlines, *The Mail’s* emergence as a British daily intended to target the newly literate “lower-middle class market resulting from mass education, combining a low retail price with plenty of competitions, prizes and promotional gimmicks” (83).
populist, if not solely entertainment-oriented audience. Indeed, their institutional statuses as liberal (*The Guardian*) and conservative (*The Daily Mail*) news outlets make the t-shirt debate an especially appealing site with which to examine anti-sweatshop discourse, as both stories highlight the limits and terms to the conventional structure that frames sweatshops as foreign, regardless of partisan orientation. Considering this contrast in media identities, I outline below how both news outlets’ coverage of the Mauritius factory maintained a discourse of the “problem” of sweatshops as foreign. Further, as journalistic exposés on sweatshops, these stories illustrate how claims to know sweatshops in the West rely on the tools of documentary realism, most especially the journalist-explorer’s experiential observations, that as the previous sections evidenced are not value neutral, but rather reflect and draw upon the cultural anxieties concerning the global flows of people, goods, and capital.

Published April 1, 2014, Ben Ellery’s original article for *The Daily Mail* launched several claims against the shirts touting feminism, the most prominent of which was the low wages the factory workers were receiving for making the shirts. Headlining the article were claims that the women workers made a mere 62 pence an hour (roughly $.87, or 58.00 rupees).35 As *The Mail* article goes on to note, these wages are a quarter of an average monthly wage in the area, and Ellery argues that this wage is “half of what a waiter earns” within the region (Ellery “62p”). While *The Mail* does not provide citations for these claims, it does assert that the factory workers earn 6,000 rupees a month, roughly $90.00 (64.00 British pounds). In another article discussing *The Mail*’s claims, U.S. news source *The Huffington Post* asserts that the wages reported are (according to The National Empowerment Fund), below the minimum poverty income level in

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35 All monetary figures in this chapter were converted from British to U.S. dollars using the online money conversion site “X-Rates.” The original sums (from England and Mauritius) are provided in text as well. All conversions were accessed as of February 1, 2016.
the region, roughly 6200 rupees a month, or $93.00 U.S. dollars (66.00 British pounds; Goldberg “Feminist’ T-Shirt”). However, when taking the $.87 an hour wage and factoring a forty-hour work week, the weekly wage comes to $34.80 a week, or $139.20 a month, a figure far higher than $93.00. Similarly, Ellery states that while the shirts cost a mere $12.70 to make, they retail for $63.50 (45 British pounds), which would take one of the women making them “a week and a half to earn” (Ellery “62p”). Again, Ellery’s figures are inconsistent. At $.87 an hour (and thus $6.96 a day for eight hours) it would take a worker two weeks- not one and a half- to afford one of the shirts.

These revelations regarding wages (however inconsistent) were only substantiated through the use of photographs of the factory in question. Headlined by a quote from one of the workers is an image of three women holding one of the feminist t-shirts. The speaker, who remains anonymous because the reporters were not allowed to speak to the staff, asks: “How can this t-shirt be a symbol of feminism when we do not see ourselves as feminists? We see ourselves as trapped” (Ellery “62p”). One of the women is smiling, while the other two maintain neutral expressions. The reader is left to presume that one of the women in the image uttered the above quote; however, as the article details, Ellery and his photographer toured the factory with the managing director, Francis Woo. Woo instructed them that they were under no circumstances allowed to interview or speak with the workers, and (according to the report) Woo instructed all of the women to smile in the photos (which may explain the woman smiling in the image). The quote used to headline the story was supposedly acquired when Ellery and the photographer clandestinely spoke with a worker (Ellery “62p”). The terms of this conversation however, remain unknown.
In a counter-article, “Feminist T-Shirts Made in Ethical Conditions,” published in *The Guardian* just days after the original article in *The Daily Mail*, reporter Chris Johnston provides statements from The Fawcett Society CEO, Dr. Eva Nietzert intended to contradict the assertion that the factory in Mauritius is a sweatshop. While in the previous article Neitzert expressed concern and an imperative to investigate the claims made by *The Mail*, in her response Neitzert merely states that all workers were, and are paid above the region’s minimum wage, that workers’ wages reflect their skill level and years of service, and that the standard work week is 45 hours with pay for overtime (Johnston “Feminist T-Shirts”). In other words, rather than challenging the wage figures in *The Mail* article, *The Guardian* via Neitzert both accepts them as factual, and asserts that they are compliant with minimum wage standards within the region (Johnston “Feminist T-Shirts”). In a press release Neitzert states:

The evidence we have seen categorically refutes the assertion that the ‘this is what a feminist looks like’ t-shirts produced by Whistles were made in a sweatshop. An audit into the CMT factory was carried out in October 2014 by an independent not-for-profit organization and this did not reveal any material concerns on the working conditions, the welfare, or the health and safety of the workers. (Johnston “Feminist T-Shirts”).

Neitzert’s statements were well-received quickly. In response to this statement, *Elle* magazine, who originally commissioned the shirts for their feminism campaign, stated that they are “confident that their production conforms to ethical standards” (Johnston “Feminist T-Shirts”). Similarly, *The Guardian* sought out Laura Harvey, a lecturer in sociology of media to provide the following comment: “It was a cynical political move against an important feminist campaigning organization. If *The Daily Mail* really cares about workers’ rights why aren’t they
running stories about the garment industry more widely and the campaigns to improve workers’ rights?” (Johnston “Feminist T-Shirts”).

Across both of the articles is a mode of representation that in its sensationalized use of documentary realism works so as to distance and contain the specter of sweatshops as a foreign problem. Of critical importance to this debate is the way in which *The Guardian*’s grounds to refute the claims made by *The Mail* depend upon the colonial binary that positions the world within a First/Third dichotomy. In Neitzert’s claims above, the low wages reported in the original article are not refuted, but merely re-framed as consistent with the conditions in Mauritius. As Kang argues, “Wage differentials between countries in the post-colonial era do not reflect some discrete, primordial, precolonial conditions,” but rather signify historical legacies, and contemporary structures that maintain imperial relations of rule (403). Neitzert’s re-framing relies on Western cultural scripts regarding the Third World that suggest that impoverishment is an a priori condition, rather than a product of Western imperialism. Framed as a problem of nation, rather than transnational relation, Neitzert’s claims concerning wages re-enact the spatial and temporal distancing that situates the Third World as simply lagging behind the First; in this way, the wages reported need not be interrogated as exploitative, because the Third World has simply not yet reached the level of modernity the First represents. Rationalizing the wages this way, The Fawcett Society, speaking through *The Guardian*, works towards securing a spatial and temporal distancing that, in effect, “fix[es] diverse yet interrelated- as well as simultaneous- political and economic situations on a single trajectory of progress,” so as to both naturalize these global inequities, but also, to render them necessary to a particular conception of progress wherein the West benevolently “helps” the rest of the globe (Kang 413). In this way, *The Guardian* participates in the spatial and temporal distancing that (as discussed in chapter one)
renders sweatshop exploitation outside the U.S. as a necessary step towards capitalist development. Additionally, this criticism is equally relevant in regards to *The Mail’s* original claims regarding wages, because in their inconsistency they suggest a reliance on cultural scripts regarding the Third World (i.e., low wages), rather than a commitment to accurately report wage exploitation.

The inconsistencies in coverage within *The Mail’s* original article however were also deflected through their reliance on the images from the factory. As Sandra Soto asserts, “documentary realism- particularly the still photograph—is an extremely powerful tool in argumentation, partially because it appears to reveal objective truths” (Soto). The photograph that headlined the original *Mail* article (three women, standing together holding one of the “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” shirts), works as visual proof of the existence of the conditions outlined by Ellery. In other words, *The Mail’s* framing of the wage figures with quotes and images obtained from the factory in Mauritius lent the article a sense of documentary credibility, that successfully deflected any criticism concerning their wage figures. As numerous commenters on *The Mail’s* article assert, Ellery’s visit to the factory constitutes the veracity of *The Mail’s* claims against *The Guardian’s*; in other words, because *The Guardian* did not visit the factory in question (so the logic goes) the claims they make are unreliable. The claim that the factory in Mauritius is a sweatshop then was substantiated not by the actual wages the worker’s may or may not have received, but whether or not the journalist conveying the claim had actually explored the factory in question.

Similarly, in both *The Mail* and *The Guardian’s* articles Western “experts” debate the veracity of the supposed worker’s claims. In *The Guardian’s* response, grounding evidence to refute *The Mail’s* assertions are drawn from the testimonies of “experts:” Neitzert (a CEO with a
PhD), a university lecturer (in sociology), and union representatives. That none of the quotes *The Mail* provides are bound to an actual person (i.e., they are unnamed and unknown sources), while explained within the article, does not confirm their credibility; on the contrary, they only frame the factory as one wherein workers cannot speak for themselves. As such, neither article can actually substantiate any of the worker’s claims, yet the documentary proof offered by the photographic image, when coupled with the silence of the women workers, lends documentary credibility to *The Mail*. Thus, regardless of whether or not the women uttered the phrases within the article, *The Mail* and Ellery are the agents of speech whose credibility rests on the women’s silence.

*The Mail’s* acquisition of the information concerning the factory in Mauritius belies an adherence to a sensational structure of “revealing” that characterizes the lens with which the West “sees” sweatshops. Of crucial importance here is the way in which *The Mail* came to report about the factory in the first place. As the article states: “The factory was the focus of an exposé in 2007 when it was revealed that workers were being paid just four pounds a day to make clothes for Sir Philip Green’s Kate Moss range at Topshop” (Ellery “62p”). In other words, the staff at *The Mail* were aware of this factory because they had visited it, and reported on it, in much the same way before: a reveal of sweatshop conditions, a celebrity-led campaign, and graphic, linguistic depictions of workers depressed, desperate, hopeless, and exploited (Sears “Topshop Accused”). *The Mail’s* choice to recycle research and reportage exemplifies the very structure used to narrate sweatshops that Kang, Siddiqi, and Brooks identify as commonplace; in this particular story, the sensationalized reveal is so normalized when concerning sweatshops that in this instance, it literally repeats itself in a move meant to shock and stir an audience. This framing characterizes much of the news stories concerning sweatshops in the West, particularly
the U.S., since the late 1990s, when several anti-sweatshop organizations adopted this tactic as a means with which to hold celebrity-brands and clothing companies publicly accountable for their production practices. Perhaps the most prominent of these sensationalized reveals happened in 1996, when National Labor Committee activist Charles Kernaghan confronted Kathie Lee Gifford on live, national television about the young Honduran women assembling her Walmart clothing (Featherstone 107). In this particular instance, the confrontation and reveal was intended to compel Gifford to take action; the story received significant news coverage in large part because it involved a celebrity, and in this sense is dissimilar from the many other public confrontations and reveals Kernaghan and the National Labor Committee, as well as other similar organizations, undertook on behalf of sweatshop workers throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s. Despite anti-sweatshop organizations seeming abandonment of this tactic, it remains a valuable tool with which to obtain a newsworthy story. In 2016, pop superstar Beyoncé Knowles became the most recent target of sweatshop allegations. Knowles’ athletic wear brand, Ivy Park, upon release was accused of utilizing sweatshops in order to manufacture its clothing (Mills “Exposed: Sweatshop”). In a statement Ivy Park representatives responded quite similarly to Neitzert, stating that the company seeks and utilizes audits, provides wages consistent and fair to the region, and provides paths to advancement for all of its employees (Mills “Exposed: Sweatshop”). Thus, not only is the structure that reveals sweatshops consistent, but the response intended to pacify consumers and critics is as well.

36 These campaigns are discussed further in chapter three.
37 For instance, as recently as 2005 and 2007, Kernaghan (on behalf of the National Labor Committee), was launching public campaigns against the National Basketball Association, the National Football League, and St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City for possible affiliation with sweatshop use. See: Sullivan “Labor Group Says,” and Picker “Protests Calls.”
As Edna Bonacich and Richard Applebaum observe: “Under the current system of production, it is virtually impossible for a manufacturer to avoid using sweatshops,” as the industry is structured so as to render sweatshop conditions the norm, rather than the exception (168). This is not to excuse worker exploitation, but to consider the motivations and effects of framing and reporting sweatshops through the lens of sensationalism. As Strassel argues, sweatshops remain sutured to a lens of crisis and disorder, compelling action only through horrific tragedies (“Work It!”). What The Mail and The Guardian’s stories and subsequent debate illustrate is how what is actually quite pervasive to the apparel industry (i.e., sweatshops), becomes exceptional and newsworthy through a lens of sensationalized revealing; in this way, exploitation is rendered a rare manifestation in an industry that is otherwise ethical. Further, it is only when communicated through this sensational lens, and the disorder that ensues, that the West “sees” sweatshops, despite their pervasive nature. The debate between the two newspapers, or between Gifford and Kernaghan, or Knowles and her critics, highlight that while sensationalism might expose sweatshops, it does little to actually illuminate the structure that necessitates and relies upon them; while sweatshops may be “seen,” they are framed as aberrations, rather than pervasive, consistent features of an industry.

Conclusion

As a convention used to represent sweatshops, the documentary realist accounts examined in this chapter circulate the figure of the sweatshop so as to perform the very self-referential labor that “makes the place of the investigator transparent,” a discursive move that lends cultural supremacy and exceptionalism to the West, while naturalizing the labor conditions contained within the sweatshop elsewhere. This rhetorical move depends on constructing the sweatshop as both a site of exception to other forms of exploitation, as well as an inherently “foreign method
of working.” Drawing on the work of transnational, post-colonial, and U.S. Third World feminist scholarship, I have shown how a colonial, dichotomous conception of the world and global power aids in the spatial and temporal distancing that constructs the problem of sweatshops as foreign. Additionally, the production and circulation of the Third World Woman sweatshop worker, whose voice remains silent in such representations, lends authenticity to the positivist-empirical accounts of sweatshop exploitation; in such representations, the place of the investigator is not only presumed transparent, but is made exceptional via their ability to communicate the suffering of others.

In this chapter I have evidenced the tensions in representing sweatshops within the West. Considering the t-shirt debate between *The Guardian* and *The Mail*, I have shown how the representation of sweatshops, always through sensationalized, documentary like methods, does little to illuminate the structure that fosters sweatshops’ existence. As my discussion of the news coverage of sweatshops at the turn of the twentieth and the (near) twenty-first century illustrates, sweatshops are framed in ways that reflect larger cultural anxieties, and the convention of representing sweatshops through the tools of documentary realist methods works to render these anxieties objective. In other words, through documentary realist modes of representation, the ideological motivations and biases of the investigators (i.e., journalists, factory inspectors, and politicians) are rendered transparent; I assert that this is dangerous because these representations impart understandings with which individuals learn how to “see” sweatshops. When sutured to the lens of sensationalism that renders sweatshops “an especially abhorrent species of labor” in “a moral class of its own,” it not only elides the structure that makes sweatshops possible, but it critically influences the visibility of labor exploitation broadly (Ross 296). At the end of his 1997 anthology, *No Sweat*, Andrew Ross points towards a problem underlying the conceptual glue of
anti-sweatshop activism and ideology, that speaks to the problem of “seeing” sweatshops. Ross states:

One unfortunate consequence of [sweatshops] special status is that people are then more inclined to accept or tolerate the existence of labor conditions that cover the legal standards, but not barely. Sweatshops are seen to be morally and politically apart from the lawful low-wage sector, which is condoned as a 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 the 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. (Ross, “After the Year” 296).

Ross points to a troubling, and perhaps uncomfortable acknowledgement in how persons in the West have tended to conceptualize sweatshops as an exceptional, or particularly “abhorrent” form of labor that in its particularity, actually works towards condoning (in Ross’s words) other forms of low-wage labor violations. This aspect of sweatshop’s visibility is evident in The Guardian article; in its defense of the factory in question, The Guardian only highlights that what looks “ethical” in production practices still looks and operates very much like a sweatshop. In many ways then, the debate between the two newspapers is not actually about the factory in question, but about what constitutes exploitation that is “sweatshop” in character. In the next chapter I consider how the label of “sweatshop-free” evades the kinds of labor atrocities Ross outlines above yet remains exploitative, and consider what an anti-sweatshop discourse that extolls the promise of ethical consumerism makes possible.
Chapter Three: The Personal is Purchasable (As Long as it’s Sweatshop-Free)

Abstract: In this chapter, I examine how consumerism became the means with which U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse “explains” sweatshops. Examining the U.S. anti-sweatshop campaigns and discourse that emerged in the 1990s, I evidence how consumer practices became the primary means with which sweatshops were explained and resolved. I assert that this framework, that reduces anti-sweatshop practices to shopping, draws on the classic tenets of liberalism, most especially the philosophies espoused in the writings of John Locke. Speaking to this point, I examine two advertisements from sweatshop-free, U.S. retailer American Apparel, and images from the blog, People of Walmart. In the last section of this chapter I outline how U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse provides the justifying foundation for dislocation, displacement, and dispossession within the U.S. via retail gentrification. In this chapter I assert that the conventional paradigm that frames the problem of sweatshops as one solvable through personal consumer practices contributes to the discursive figuration of the sweatshop as foreign, and thus American exceptionalism.

Key Terms: American exceptionalism/ consumer choice/ ethical clothing/ retail gentrification/ sweatshop-free

“[P]rotests don’t employ people, but new stores do…Protests don’t help communities, revitalized neighborhoods do…Protests don’t help lower the cost of living, but new shopping options do.” –Steven V. Restivo

“We as consumers like to be able to buy ever-greater quantities of ever-cheaper goods, every year. Somebody is bearing the cost of it, and we don’t want to know about it. The people bearing the cost were in this fire.” –Richard M. Locke

“[T]he denial of imperialism still fuels a vision of America as an exceptional nation, one interested in spreading universal values, not in conquest or domination.” –Amy Kaplan

Introduction

On November 24th, 2012, the same weekend “Black Friday” took place in the U.S. (what is touted as the largest, most lucrative retail day of the year), the first of two internationally

38 Wal-Mart Senior Director of Community Affairs, in an op-ed. Restivo “Protests Don’t Help Communities.”
40 A. Kaplan; “Where is Guantanamo?” 832.
41 For a more focused discussion of Black Friday, see: Kenneth Rogers, “Black Friday: Crowdsourcing Communities of Risk,” Women’s Studies Quarterly, vol. 40, no. 1/2, Spring/Summer 2012, pp. 171-86.
recognized garment manufacturing tragedies happened in Dhaka, Bangladesh. As U.S. news outlets reported, after smoke alarms alerted occupants to a small fire on the first floor of the factory, employees were instructed to remain at their positions and continue working (Hossein and Alam “Walmart Admits”). As the fire grew, and workers attempted to leave it was discovered that not only were the exit doors locked, but the fire extinguishers located within the building did not work properly (Hossein and Alam “Walmart Admits”). This fire resulted in 117 deaths, 200 injuries, and an untold, but undoubtedly large number of traumatized workers (Ahmed “At Least 117”). The news story was revealed to Western audiences on Friday, November 25th, at precisely the moment when thousands of U.S. consumers were flocking to retail outlets, some camped out in front of the store’s doors for days in advance in hopes of securing low-priced commodities. Additionally, in many retail locations across the U.S., these same Black Friday shoppers were met by picket lines comprised of retail workers and their allies, protesting their employer (Walmart) for a litany of grievances, the most prominent of which was, and continues to be, a demand for a living wage (“Wal-Mart Worker Uprising”). 

The disparity of the situation was not lost on some, who critically noted that not only was the fire itself unjust, but that the commodities U.S. shoppers were literally trampling each other (and Walmart workers) to purchase were coming at a deadly price. In the weeks that followed

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42 Here I am referring to the 2012 Tazreen Fashions factory fire, and the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse, both in Bangladesh, and both receiving international news coverage in large part because of their high death tolls.

43 In this chapter I use “Walmart,” without hyphenation, as the retailer does. However, when sources do hyphenate, I have retained their spelling for citational consistency.

44 In 2008, 34-year old Walmart employee Jdimytai Damour was killed by a crowd of Black Friday shoppers when he attempted to close the store’s doors. Rogers (2012, cited in my bibliography) explicitly discusses this death in his analysis of Black Friday. Black Friday deaths are a consistent feature of the event, warranting both a website dedicated to documenting Black Friday-related deaths and injuries (www.blackfridaydeathcount.com), and a publicly published letter from the United States Department of
the fire, news outlets revealed that activists in Bangladesh had discovered clothing with the label “Faded Glory,” a brand sold exclusively at Walmart, scattered throughout the debris (Bajaj “Fatal Fire”). While other major U.S. retailers were also later discovered to having used the factory for its production services, Walmart was overwhelmingly singled out in the media accounts, in large part due to their refusal to acknowledge culpability, or pay remunerations (Ahmed “At Least 117;” Chen “Bangladesh Factory Fire;” Kinniburgh “Nothing to Lose;” Neuman “Bangladesh Factory;” “Wal-Mart: Bangladesh”). In the weeks, months, and years following, Walmart continues to occupy the media spotlight in relation to this event, especially on the eve of Black Friday (Chen “This Is Black Friday;” Chen “The Other Side;” “Justice for Bangladesh”).

How does one located within the U.S. make sense of these events, all happening the same day, and all connected by the transnational corporation Walmart? One observation might point towards the retailer’s much maligned record of worker exploitation, and leadership in the Black Friday induced mayhem that entails the consumer practices that economist Richard Locke describes (in my epigraph) as underlying the Tazreen Fashions factory fire. Locke is not alone in his observation; many others also connect the desire for low-priced commodities with the fire in Bangladesh (Chen “This is Black Friday;” Chen “The Other Side;” Clark “Outsourcing Injustice;” Kinniburgh “Nothing to Lose;” Mayerowitz “Shoppers’ Habits”). Locke’s observations are illustrative of how the center/periphery conception of the world (derived from world systems theory) perceives global supply chains; in Locke’s analysis, the U.S. operates as the center whose consumer choices negatively impact and determine the production practices in

Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health office, urging retailers to take precautions to prevent worker injuries during the holiday sales. To view the letter, including a “Crowd Management Safety Tips” sheet for retailers, go to: https://www.osha.gov/asst-sec/blackfriday_letter_2012.html. Importantly, the articles cited do not discuss the impact of Black Friday on the Walmart retail workers.
the periphery, Bangladesh. As discussed in chapter one, this is an important relation worth acknowledging (i.e., the division between consumers and producers of the globe), yet discursively maintains a colonial dynamic. While I acknowledge the dynamic structuring the global North and South as one unequally and unjustly attributing wealth and labor, I am also critical of how this conception retains colonial relations at a discursive level, and informs U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse. Thus, in this chapter I am concerned with what this conception of global production and its attendant analysis makes possible. Specifically, if U.S. consumers such as the Black Friday shoppers at Wal-Mart are to blame (as economist Richard Locke suggests), or serve as the primary site of power in the global supply chain, then “the new shopping options,” Wal-Mart Director of Community Affairs Steven Restivo references (also in my epigraph), such as sweatshop free, locally produced, or ethically-sourced (all offerings touted as solutions to the persistence of the sweatshop in this analysis) really are the solution. In this framework buying differently, and more importantly, buying better is the moral imperative, because if only the global center (the U.S.) were to act benevolently when shopping, transnational corporations would be forced to change their production practices. I am troubled by this analysis because: whom does this framework benefit? Whose participation is deemed integral, and who is held responsible or deemed an “obstacle” to change? Who greedily consumes low-priced goods? In sum, how did ethical consumerism emerge as the primary means with which sweatshops are resolved, and what does this ideology belie?

I highlight the events of 2012 because they so poignantly capture the transnational linkages global production generates, and the tensions that a binary conception of power that divides the globe between the First and the Third, the producers and the consumers, the West and the Rest, pushes against. In the preceding example, the workers in Bangladesh and the Walmart workers
and shoppers in the U.S. are linked through a globalized system of production that is premised upon the consumption of low-priced commodities, albeit with distinct historical legacies and contemporary proximities to U.S. imperialism. However, as Locke’s observations evidence, these linkages were, and often are, framed as a binary wherein persons in Bangladesh (and the Third World broadly conceived) produce in sweatshop conditions so that persons in the U.S. (and the West and/or First World, broadly) can greedily consume. For instance, the news coverage after the fire in Bangladesh centered on how U.S. consumers’ shopping practices were influenced or not by news of the fire. As one article insisted: “The consumer can care. They can buy from companies that are committed to fair trade and try to seek out these companies” (Mayerowitz “Shoppers’ Habits”). This quote is from Dov Charney, the former CEO and founder of sweatshop-free retailer American Apparel, and his comments capture the ways in which an ethics of care has been sutured to consumerism within U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse. Charney’s comments, and the ethics they put forth, suggest that if one does not buy ethically (i.e., purchase fair trade and sweatshop free items) than one is not truly committed to fair trade, or workers’ rights; one does not care if one does not purchase properly. This is a popular narrative that the mainstream press, and ethical and/or sweatshop free retailers consistently return to: that if one truly cares about the workers in Bangladesh, or any sweatshop worker, one must purchase differently. In this narrative, U.S. consumers provide the instigating force and logic for sweatshop’s existence; consumers seeking commodities for low, low prices, such as those at Walmart on Black Friday, are to blame for the persistence of the sweatshop because corporations are merely responding to the demand consumers present. In this way, U.S. consumers are not only credited as the instigating force of sweatshop use, but are simultaneously positioned as the agents of change, in possession of the power to determine the direction and
operation of global supply chains.

As noted in chapter one, while the center/periphery framework has merit in that it attempts to account for the imperial relations between nations, it also elides the scattered hegemonies across them, and “cannot account for the horrible conditions with which some in the so-called First live” (Grewal and Kaplan, “Introduction” 7; 9-10). In other words, this binary conception of power, while attentive to some contemporary realities, elides others. Thus, in this chapter I remain attentive to the global asymmetries of power, and in an attempt to avoid retrenching these very binaries aim to elucidate those sites Grewal and Kaplan refer to as “multiple peripheries,” so as to, “…link directly the domestic politics of a world power such as the U.S. to its foreign policies” (“Introduction” 20). In this chapter I argue that the binary framing employed to understand the persistence of sweatshops that positions the U.S. as a consuming nation upon whose shopping practices the system of globalized production depends, attributes causal blame for sweatshop’s existence to poor persons within the U.S., and contributes to the discursive convention of representing sweatshops as an inherently foreign problem.

When applied to the problem and persistence of sweatshops, the binary conception of power outlined above absolves the most economically privileged within the U.S. of their position and participation in the global economy, while attributing causal blame for sweatshops’ existence and persistence to the U.S.’s economically disadvantaged. For instance, in Locke’s observation, consumers of “ever-cheaper” commodities are invoked as the reason for the 2012 fire, and sweatshops in Bangladesh generally. Again, while remaining attentive to the asymmetries in power between the U.S. and Bangladesh, I ask: who, or what is absent from this analysis? Who, or what is visible, and under what conditions? How is this framing productive of other truths concerning labor, consumerism and wealth distribution in the U.S.? I highlight the
events of November 2012 because they exemplify how U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse has framed the problem and persistence of sweatshops as one pivoting on the consumer practices of persons in the U.S. In this framing, there is “an assumption that those who consume have the right to act as political agents through the fact of their purchasing power,” and that purchasing power alone provides the means with which transformation in the global supply chain occurs (Brooks XX). In this chapter I do not, nor is it my intention, to debate the effectiveness of a particular anti-sweatshop strategy, but rather intend to examine how the U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse that heralds consumer practices of persons in the U.S. as the primary route for change advances particular truths over and against certain populations in the U.S. Further, I share Ethel Brooks’ concerns regarding the ways in which a political strategy premised on consumption enacts a “double-sided granting of agency, creating the sweatshop as something to be consumed by both activists and consumers” (XX). As Brooks argues:

The tactics of singling out the sweatshop have…appropriated signs that depend on the languages and practices of consumption with a double-sided granting of agency, creating the sweatshop as something to be consumed by both activists and consumers. Because the tactics are directed at consumers of ready-made garments in the U.S., privileged agency is given to consumers of signs and commodities, the very appropriation of the sweatshop as part of the system of signs that circulate in advertising and public relations campaigns puts forth the notion that it is only through the consumption of the sweatshop that activism can be carried out. (XX).

Brooks’ assertions highlight how the emphasis on consumption in regards to anti-sweatshop activism and practice is founded upon the “singling out of the sweatshop” that represents sweatshops as an economic aberration, whose existence is separable from the social and
geopolitical conditions wrought through U.S. imperialism. In this way, the problem of sweatshops becomes an exclusively economic one (i.e., exploitative production practices), with strictly economic solutions (i.e., anti-sweatshop consumerism).

Undergirding the “singling out of the sweatshop” is a conception of the U.S. as exceptional. When separated from the historical and geopolitical conditions that fuel sweatshops’ existence, it performs a form of containment. As Brooks argues: “This singling out of the sweatshop…creates a site of exception to the normal day-to-day functions of business, a site of abject materiality that can be located, and bounded, outside the consumption centers of the U.S.” (XX). Located and bound beyond the consumption centers of the U.S., the sweatshop remains foreign to it, and thus, the singling out of the sweatshop Brooks outlines above contributes to the broader U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse that frames sweatshops as an inherently foreign problem. By containing the sweatshop as a foreign phenomenon, foreign to the consumption centers in the U.S., sweatshops are framed through a spatial and temporal distancing that works to maintain “a vision of America as an exceptional nation, one interested in spreading universal values, not in conquest or domination” (A. Kaplan, “Where is Guantanamo?” 832). In other words, by framing sweatshops as a foreign phenomenon whose existence depends on the benevolent actions of U.S. consumers, the imperialism that undergirds global supply chains is circumvented, in a move that positions the U.S. as exceptional. As Amy Kaplan asserts, American exceptionalism, “sees the foundation of the nation as unparalleled, unprecedented, and timeless” (“Imperial Melancholy” 21). As a nation “unparalleled, unprecedented, and timeless,” the U.S. is able to position itself as the metric with which all other nations and places are measured against, while simultaneously denying the ways in which it fosters inequities and asymmetries in its economic and geopolitical favor. In this chapter I assert that American exceptionalism (as Kaplan articulates it), manifests
in U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse. For instance, the spatial and temporal distancing Kang identifies as consistent in representing sweatshops (and that I discuss at length in chapter one) reproduces the belief of America as exceptional by attributing an unparalleled historical record (that continues into the present) with sweatshops and labor exploitation. As discussed in chapter one, this aspect of spatial and temporal distancing most often manifests in the framing device that locates sweatshops as something in the U.S.’s past, overcome through collective action and government reform. However, as discussed in chapter two, this narrative is inconsistent with the historical record that evidences sweatshop conditions throughout the twentieth century. Further, as chapter two outlines, the conception of sweatshops as part of the U.S.’s past fostered the belief that sweatshops’ “return” (in the 1980s) was a product of immigration, rather than a manifestation of what is a consistent and pervasive U.S. phenomenon. As chapter two evidenced, even when in the past, sweatshops were framed in anti-sweatshop discourse as a product of foreign invasion, rather than U.S. racial capitalism and imperialism. This framing of sweatshops as foreign, that relies on spatial and temporal distancing (among the other conventions outlined in chapter one), reflects and upholds the ideology of American exceptionalism that positions the U.S. as unparalleled and exemplary. This aspect of spatial and temporal distancing is evident in the way in which U.S. commentators, in the wake of the 2012 fire in Bangladesh, consistently compared the fire to the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, stating that the 1911 fire “galvanized a movement” and that the same needs to happen in Bangladesh (Clark “Outsourcing Injustice;” Drew “Lives Lost”). For instance, Secretary of

45 I use the term racial capitalism in reference to Cedric Robinson’s conceptualization of capitalist development. As Robinson states: “The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, [and] so too did its ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism” (2). For a more thorough discussion see: Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition, 2-5; 9-28.
Labor Hilda L. Solis stated:

Just over a century ago, in March 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City burned to the ground, killing 146 people, mainly young women. That fire was our call to action. It galvanized support for stronger worker protections and institutions to enforce them, from workplace health and safety to workers’ right to organize and bargain collectively…The U.S. Department of Labor stands ready to help, with technical assistance and expertise, to work with the government of Bangladesh to ensure that this horrific tragedy becomes a watershed moment for Bangladeshi workers’ rights. (“Statement by Secretary”).

Certainly workers and concerned persons should take action to remedy their conditions of labor, I do not take issue with that; what is troubling is the way in which this framing not only positions all places, peoples, and nations on a single trajectory of progress, but also frames the U.S. as the model, as exemplary of how labor reform should happen. This locates the U.S. on an exceptional plane, with which other nations and people should aspire, and elides the integral role the U.S. Department of Labor occupies in allowing transnational corporations such as Walmart from any sort of accountability in any country, but especially (in this instance) Bangladesh. In this example, the U.S. is made exceptional through the denial of imperialism, but also, the denial of labor exploitation fostered and allowed within U.S. borders. Thus, in this chapter I ask: what does the spectacle of the sweatshop make visible, and simultaneously invisible? How does the framing of sweatshops as a foreign problem belie U.S. exceptionalism, and thus bolster imperialist ideology?

In this chapter, I examine how consumerism became the means with which U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse “explains” sweatshops. Examining the U.S. anti-sweatshop campaigns and
discourse that emerged in the 1990s, I evidence how consumer practices became the primary means with which sweatshops were explained and resolved. I assert that this framework, that reduces anti-sweatshop practices to shopping, draws on the classic tenets of liberalism, most especially the philosophies espoused in the writings of John Locke; namely, because this framework affirms economic privilege (defined in this instance as the ability to purchase without economic restraint) as antecedent to political enfranchisement. Further, because this framework suggests that consumers determine the processes of production (i.e., that demand determines supply), it easily conforms to the consumer subject theorized by liberal economics, whose rationalized decisions exemplify the merits of a free market. Following Spivak, I assert that the documentary realist accounts (discussed in chapters one and two) that permeate U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse have provided the foundation for new fashion markets, evident in the advertisements of American Apparel. Thus, in this way I consider how the “singling out of the sweatshop,” as well as the larger discourse from which it gains legibility, relies on a form of positivist empiricism that Spivak asserts has provided the “…justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism” (275). These ads were produced by former American Apparel CEO, Dov Charney in response to the garment factory fire in Bangladesh in 2012, and the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013. Refusing cosmetic retouching, and insisting on “real” models only, Charney’s ads participate in the documentary realism that characterizes U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse and intends to lend a sense of authenticity to the retailers’ image. As I outline below, American Apparel reflects how new fashion markets have emerged and are made possible through the U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse that singles out the sweatshop. I contrast these ads with images obtained through the blog People of Walmart. An online cache of images readers submit to the blog’s administrators, People of Walmart illustrates the degree to which a moral
stigma, manifesting in bodily comportment, personal hygiene, and gender norms characterizes persons who patronize Walmart. No other U.S. retailer has a blog premised on anthropological witnessing and documentation, and no other retailer’s tarnished public image reflects so severely upon its patrons. I emphasize that this is only one of many cultural productions centered on evidencing the foreignness and depravity of Wal-Mart shoppers. These images are taken surreptitiously and without the subjects’ consent, and thus contributes to the blog’s overarching frame of ethnographic exploration and witnessing. This aspect, when coupled with the unedited, unprofessional photography, works to secure a form of documentary realism intended to evidence, objectively, the backwardness of Walmart shoppers. I argue that this cultural phenomenon is indicative of how the economically disadvantaged in the U.S. are attributed causal blame, and rendered obstacles to global progress. This belief is affirmed in U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse that extolls personal consumption as the necessary practice to eradicating sweatshops. In this chapter I assert that the convention that frames the problem of sweatshops as one solvable through personal consumer practices contributes to the discursive figuration of the sweatshop as foreign, and thus American exceptionalism.

In the next section, “U.S. Anti-Sweatshop Activism and Buying Better,” I turn to the anti-sweatshop campaigns of the 1990s so as to highlight how an ethic of personal consumption became sutured to anti-sweatshop activism and practice. Providing a brief synopsis of some of the central events in the 1990s that rendered the sweatshop a newsworthy issue in the U.S., I then turn to media scholars Josh Greenberg and Graham Knight’s research on U.S. anti-sweatshop news coverage. As Greenberg and Knight’s research outlines, U.S. news reportage of sweatshops

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46 The internet is replete with photo galleries and videos dedicated to documenting Walmart shoppers; listing them all is beyond the scope of this chapter. A simple Google search (October 28th 2016) of “Walmart shoppers” yielded 6,160,000 results.
framed the problem of sweatshops as one rooted in the agency of consumers. As I discuss below, Greenberg and Knight’s research affirms Brooks’ ethnographic research on transnational anti-sweatshop campaigns that suggests that the dynamics of the international division of labor are reproduced in the politics of transnational solidarity and protest. Specifically, what is evident across Greenberg, Knight and Brooks’ research is that the anti-sweatshop campaigns that received the news media’s attention also worked to establish the problem of sweatshops as one resolvable through consumption. Greenberg, Knight, and Brooks’ research is important because it both highlights how the problem of sweatshops is rendered exclusively economic (i.e., divorced from the legacies of imperialism and geopolitical investments of the U.S. nation-state), but also how consumerism plays an integral role in the “singling out of the sweatshop.” In my next section, “Liberalism, Consumption, and Choice,” I attempt to complicate some of the assumptions undergirding an ethics and political practice premised upon personal consumer practices. In this section I briefly outline how Locke’s liberalism theorizes the relationship between private property and political enfranchisement, and how the legacy of this philosophy is both reproduced in the free market ideologies of Chicago School economists such as Milton Friedman, but, more importantly, the U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse that reduces the eradication of sweatshops to purchasing differently. In the following section, “Real American People,” I turn to the images from American Apparel and People of Wal-Mart. Discussing each set of images, I highlight the cultural significance each retailer has in regards to anti-sweatshop discourse. In the last section, “Anti-Sweatshop Practices and Retail Gentrification,” I outline how the U.S. anti-

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47 I have selected to emphasize the discourse produced in the U.S. media, rather than the organizations themselves because I am interested in how a popular discourse, that extends beyond the grassroots groups and organizations that adopt the sweatshop as their cause, frame sweatshops as a matter of consumer choice and agency. While many of the articles I cite and that Greenberg and Graham cite in their study quote anti-sweatshop activists, my interest in this chapter is not how the campaigns were configured or the tactics employed, but rather, what kinds of discursive truths were garnered from them.
sweatshop discourse that employs the tools of documentary realism and extolls the promise of consumer choice provides the justifying foundation for retail gentrification, and thus the displacement, dislocation, and dispossession of persons within the U.S. via “ethical” shopping options.

**U.S. Anti-Sweatshop Activism and Buying Better**

Following the popular discourse of the late 1970s and 1980s that proclaimed the return of the sweatshop, the 1990s were well-positioned for a renewed emphasis on anti-sweatshop activism. In a move that foreshadowed the decades plus worth of focus, and started the U.S. anti-sweatshop movement, in 1990 the non-profit, non-governmental organization, the National Labor Committee (now the Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights), adopted sweatshops as its signature issue (Krupat 71-78; Featherstone 106). That same year in the Netherlands, the prominent anti-sweatshop, non-governmental organization The Clean Clothes Campaign was also founded (Featherstone 106). In 1992, anti-sweatshop activist Jeff Ballinger began a campaign in the U.S. to expose athletic retailer Nike’s abusive labor practices in Indonesia; the campaign grew quickly and came to constitute the face of the anti-sweatshop and anti-globalization movement in the U.S. (Featherstone 106). In 1995, the organization Sweatshop Watch was founded in California in response to the discovery of a sweatshop in an apartment building in El Monte, California. The El Monte discovery forced the issue of sweatshops into U.S. consciousness, having received significant news coverage (Liebhold and Rubenstein 57-71). The El Monte case was touted as the “first recognized case of modern day slavery” in the U.S. since the abolishment of slavery in the press, as seventy-two Thai nationals were found working under conditions of economic, legal, and physical force (Liebhold and Rubenstein 58-60). In 1996, in large response to the El Monte discovery, President Bill Clinton, along with a coalition
of apparel companies, unions, and human rights groups, drafted a unified code for apparel
companies and established a monitoring body, the Fair Labor Association, to enforce it;
however, the Association was “so thoroughly controlled by manufacturers that it would stymie
any efforts at real reform,” and instead worked so as to “calm concerned consumers and persuade
them that the problem was under control” (Featherstone 10). In 1997-1998, in its initial planning
stages, the Smithsonian exhibition, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place,” was criticized for
covering the El Monte shop; the event’s critics claimed “bias” against the U.S. retailers who
were connected to the shop (Liebhold and Rubenstein 63). In an event of similar magnitude to
the El Monte discovery in the U.S. news media, in the Spring of 1996, on live national television,
National Labor Committee activist Charlie Kernaghan ignited a media storm when he confronted
daytime talk show host Kathie Lee Gifford about the armed guards that were forcing young
Honduran women to manufacture her Walmart brand clothing (Featherstone 1; 7; 107). Claiming
she did not know about these labor conditions, Gifford cried on air and appeared “shocked” that
this was not only happening, but was done so in her name (Featherstone 1; 7; 107). In November
of 1999, in what is a long building culmination of anti-sweatshop and anti-globalization
movement, thousands gather in Seattle, Washington to protest the World Trade Organization,
expressing dissent in regards to globalization, free trade, and U.S. economic imperialism. In
1999, author Naomi Klein detailed many of these events in her best-seller, No Logo, crediting the
anti-sweatshop campaign against Nike in particular, as the first of its kind in “taking aim at the
brand bullies” (Klein 365-96).

This overview is a very brief synopsis of the major events that influenced and contributed
to U.S. public consciousness concerning the issue of sweatshops in the 1990s. I highlight these
events because they demonstrate the degree to which anti-sweatshop activism became a
newsworthy item in the U.S. during the 1990s. As Greenberg and Knight observe, this newsworthiness stemmed largely from “the way [the sweatshop] conforms to the narrative requirement that news reports involve conflict, normative disorder, and the presence of identifiable victims” (158). As Greenberg and Knight outline in their analysis of U.S. sweatshop news coverage between 1995-2000, a measurable surge in the coverage of sweatshops occurred in the mid 1990s, which the authors attribute to the raid by the U.S. Labor Department in El Monte in 1995, and the confrontation between Kernaghan and Gifford in 1996 (158). Both the El Monte raid and the confrontation with Gifford conform to the narrative requirements of newsworthy events: conflict, disorder, and identifiable victims. However, absent from this narrative is the distinct, and identifiable cause of either event. As I outline further below, in both instances, no clear, definitive power upon which effective blame may be attributed exists.

Examining how news coverage of sweatshops was structured between 1995-2000 (the high point of anti-sweatshop activism in the U.S. during the 1990s), Greenberg and Graham observe that a significant portion of the reportage was opinion-based in format (i.e., op-eds, editorials, letters to the editor, etc.). This aspect of the coverage is significant because opinion discourse “generally signifies an imperative on the part of news media not only to report issues and events…but, more importantly, to evaluate and pass judgement on those issues, events and the key participants by allocating responsibility and blame” (160). In other words, the practice of presenting a particular issue within an opinion format invites and encourages readers to evaluate and assign blame, as it remains open to moral interpretation. Presenting the issue of sweatshops within an opinion format imparts a sense that the issue is not systemic, but rather one of moral choice; one could find something wrong with the issue, or not. As I discuss further below, this aspect of the sweatshop news coverage is crucial to understanding how the issue of sweatshops became one
primarily understood through the lens of consumerism.

As Greenberg and Graham evidence, the voices most cited in the news coverage of sweatshops were U.S. activists and their corporate targets. U.S. activists were most cited in the news coverage of sweatshops in large part because of the way in which the news reportage emerged in response to the activist tactics that targeted brands and individuals.\(^{48}\) For instance, the confrontation between Kernaghan and Gifford provided a newsworthy event because it involved a recognizable celebrity, conflict, and a moral evaluation (on the part of the audience). Similarly, corporate voices were included in response to the tactics targeting them (161). This aspect of the news coverage demonstrates Brooks’ assertions regarding the ways in which transnational protest campaigns that target (what are often) U.S. based corporations and retail centers reproduce the dynamics that constitute the international division of labor (Brooks XXV). As Brooks argues, European and U.S. actors construct and define the tactics of transnational protest, and these strategies are oriented towards the corporations with retail outlets in the global North so as to target the European and U.S. consumers of these very corporations (XXV). For instance, as Brooks insightfully and carefully evidences, the 1993 campaign to end child labor in Bangladesh that significantly involved U.S. actors, effectively sidelined the needs of the Bangladeshi children and workers (Brooks 1-25). Initially targeting Walmart (and to a lesser extent K-Mart and Sears because of their use of these facilities), the campaign involved U.S. anti-sweatshop activists, politicians, consumer groups, and United Nations organizations. As Brooks argues, because the campaign targeted the images of U.S. retailers and the Bangladeshi employers appealing to these very retailers, the needs of Bangladeshi children and workers were

\(^{48}\) See Bartley and Child, “Shaming the Corporation: The Social Production of Targets and the Anti-Sweatshop Movement,” (2014) cited in my bibliography, for a more thorough discussion of how corporations and brands were targeted and produced in and through these campaigns.
largely ignored. Funding for schools, childcare and lost family earnings were absent from the resolution, and instead, the campaign focused on restoring brand integrity to the targeted retailers and the nation of Bangladesh. As Brooks’ argues, this campaign is illustrative of how U.S. actors influence and determine anti-sweatshop campaigns, effectively reproducing the dynamics of the global division of labor. Further, as Brooks argues, locating and containing the problem to Bangladesh, framed as a nation that endorses working children, worked to naturalize the exploitative practices of the industry as a whole. As Brooks states: “Part of this naturalization includes viewing Bangladesh and South Asia as the particular site of the problem, creating the necessity for U.S. and European consumers and government officials to act in the name of garment workers in Bangladesh in order to normalize these particularly aberrant shop floors” (3). Thus, not only is this campaign demonstrative of how U.S. activists influence and often over-determine the terms and structure of anti-sweatshop campaigns, but also evidences how this organizational aspect to transnational anti-sweatshop campaigns works to “single out the sweatshop.” “Singling out the sweatshop” this way renders the problem strictly economic in nature, but also as an aberration within what is otherwise a fine and ethical capitalist system. The problem in the previous example is not the global division of labor, but the labor structure of Bangladesh; in this instance, America is made exceptional in theory (i.e. the U.S. does not employ children), but also in practice, because the tactics, strategies, and resolutions employed reflect the needs and values of the U.S. actors (i.e., the U.S. “knows better”).

This dynamic between U.S. actors and Third World sweatshop workers was reproduced in the news coverage of anti-sweatshop campaigns. As Greenberg and Graham’s research outlines, the prominence the brand-targeted tactics obtained worked so as to give the U.S. activists a significant degree of influence over the popular discourse that framed and represented
sweatshops. For instance, the student group United Students Against Sweatshops (hereafter, USAS), in particular appears consistently across Greenberg and Graham’s research, in large part because their tactics often employed newsworthy direct-actions. As individuals whose relationship to sweatshops was based on their identity as consumers (rather than producers), their strategy, that centered on establishing buyer codes of conduct at universities, was not only reproduced in calls to boycott particular brands and companies and to buy “sweat-free,” but worked to make “the ethical dimension of global manufacturing more salient in the coverage,” (Featherstone VIII; Greenberg and Graham 163). For instance, in the following Washington Post article, the positionality of the university students becomes the focal point of the discussion:

What motivates these well-fed, comfortably housed students to fight for workers thousands of miles and a language away? A concrete answer seems to elude even the most ardent activists… Some cynics say these students are motivated by guilt at their own affluence, or bored by the stability and security of their lives, or even brainwashed pawns following persuasive rhetoric. The activists resent the criticism, pointing to the irresponsibility of people who don’t stand up for the rights of the exploited. (Palmer “Few Causes”).

In this passage, the students’ motivations to act on behalf of people they do not know and likely will never know, overshadows and, because of the structure of the news coverage that privileged activist and corporate voices, over-determines the issue of sweatshops. In other words, because for these organizations their investment in the issue of sweatshops was founded on moral principle, this element of their tactics, strategy, and relation to sweatshops was what was interesting to, and thus made salient in the media accounts. While the ethical dimension of global manufacturing is certainly important, when framed as a consumer practice, the ethics are reduced
to one of consumer choice. The prominence of USAS and other similar organizations then, whose investment in eradicating sweatshops was premised on a moral evaluation (rather than their livelihoods, a shared relation to the apparel industry, etc.), worked so as to frame the problem of sweatshops, as well as global manufacturing, as a problem that could be remedied through morally-driven consumer practices. This understanding of sweatshops was legitimated in the structure of the news coverage that privileged activist and corporate voices, effectively framing the problem of sweatshops as one between U.S. consumers and corporations.

In contrast to the prominence activist and corporate voices were given in the U.S. media accounts, the voices of government officials and garment factory workers were largely absent. As Greenberg and Graham’s research evidences, government officials constituted a marginal number of voices cited in the news coverage. While Greenberg and Graham attribute this aspect of the news coverage to the shift in the role of the state “from one of regulatory intervention to one of facilitation and mediation between the corporate sphere and civil society,” it is unclear why exactly news media refused to incorporate government voices in their news coverage (162). What is clear however, is that this elision of the state in the news coverage tended to reproduce the framing that suggests that the problem of sweatshops is one between consumers (located in the global North) and transnational corporations, including their retail sites and brand ambassadors (such as Gifford). This framing not only emphasizes the role of consumption as a solution, but at the same time reinforces the negligence of the state in regulating corporate behavior and malfeasance. This elision of the government’s role in facilitating free trade zones, tax incentives for transnational corporations, and the mobility of capital renders such actions acceptable, and the production practices of corporations as moral deviations in the otherwise
“good” system of racial capitalism and imperialism.\(^{49}\) Further, this discursive move lends a sense of power and authority to finance and capital over and against other forms of institutional power, such as the U.S. nation-state, rather than addressing them as co-constitutive. As Brooks states on this point:

> The duality of the nation-state versus flows of capital helps to reinforce hierarchical notions of capital as something above or outside the nation-state that can be reined in by bringing corporations back home…to the realm of the national…When appeals are made directly to corporations, in the arena of the retail outlet and the stock exchange, they help legitimize finance capital as something both outside and above the workings of the nation-state. Corporations, in this model, become the final authority and are accorded the ultimate power to grant concessions in their labor practices. (XXI).

Thus, similar to the framings of 1980s anti-sweatshop texts discussed in chapter one, in these news stories, the agency and mobility of capital is accepted as fact, and the actions of consumers become the point of pressure and contestation. This framing elides the ways in which the U.S. nation-state, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization occupy crucial roles in orchestrating the global economy that encourages, and indeed, makes possible the mobility of transnational capital in the first place (Ehrenreich and Fuentes, 1983; Chapkis and Enloe 1983; Harvey 2003, 2005). In this framing, the structure of the economy is less the problem than the actions of a few bad transnational corporations. Further, this duality between activists and corporations came at the expense of the workers, whose voices remained largely absent from news stories. As Greenberg and Graham outline, workers were

\(^{49}\) On the role of U.S. state institutions and governmental bodies in facilitating labor exploitation abroad, see Ehrenreich and Fuentes (1983) and Chapkis and Enloe (1983), cited in my bibliography.
most often represented through the “discursive struggle between activists and corporate representatives” (162). As Greenberg and Graham observe in regards to the structure of the news coverage: “For the bulk of the coverage, [workers] were treated more or less passively, subjected to sweatshop practices and attempts at their elimination and portrayed as subjects of debate and struggle between corporations and activists over their best interests” (165). As the example above regarding the 1993 anti-child labor campaign illustrates, this discursive move bore material effects that negatively impacted the very workers invoked in these campaigns. In this way, the voices of U.S. actors, both activists and corporate representatives, determined the scope and terms of the anti-sweatshop discourse that framed the problem as one between consumers and corporations.

As a debate between anti-sweatshop activists, whose political identities reside in their role as consumers, and the corporate retailers of clothing brands, the U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse became less about establishing safe work environments, living wages, and healthcare, and more so about how to consume “sweat-free.” As Greenberg, Graham, and Brooks argue, the causal explanation provided by both anti-sweatshop activists and corporate representatives consistently resides in the U.S. consumer’s tastes and agency. On both sides of the debate, the consumer is both the reason that sweatshops exist, as well as the key to eradicating them. This very explanation was offered by Gifford when asked how, and why her brand employed sweatshops:

Nobody expected the huge demand there was for my line…Sales tripled Wal-Mart’s expectations, and suddenly it was like ‘uh-oh, we need to get 50,000 more blouses and fast.’ I think that’s part of how all this came about. Maybe we just grew too fast. (Qtd. in Strom “A Sweetheart Becomes”).

Gifford’s explanation reiterates the statements opening this chapter; namely that because of
consumer desire, suppliers are forced to resort to sweatshops in order to meet consumer demand. Under this logic, because suppliers are responding to consumer demand, if consumers made different demands (i.e., sweat-free clothing), then suppliers would be forced to not use sweatshops. In this way, the consumer becomes responsible for the corporation’s production practices, rather than the corporation. Of course, missing from Gifford’s comments (as well as those opening this chapter) are the ways in which demand itself is conditioned by supply; namely, this logic ignores “the massive promotional apparatus that attempts to seduce consumers into desiring what producers wish to supply” (Greenberg and Graham 168). While advertising, marketing, and consumer research do not determine individual’s consumer choices, they bear a considerable influence in shaping consumer tastes, buying patterns, and identifications (Miller and Rose 1-36). In sum, demand does not rely solely on the consumer, nor is it an autonomous process from production. Despite this, anti-sweatshop activists and their allies employed this explanation as a rallying cry for U.S. consumers. This explanation is evident in the following editorial:

Consumers and workers of the world unite- Just do it! If you do, you can affect the behavior of manufacturing giants such as Nike, for whom image is everything…Enforceable global labor standards will not come easily. In the meantime, there is something called the marketplace, and it gives consumers the right to make judgements. (Dionne “Bad for Business”).

This manipulation of Marx’s call to arms captures what appears over and over in many of the anti-sweatshop editorials during this time that urge consumers to act with their wallets to help end sweatshops. When used by anti-sweatshop activists (as opposed to corporations) it is just as troubling, largely because “If political action takes the form of a boycott or embargo of products
of a particular brand or country, the action itself depends on people with access to money and sites from which to buy the boycotted or embargoed product” (Brooks XXIX). In many ways then, this protest strategy reflects its origins within an economically privileged population within the U.S. (both in the 1990s and the 1890s), because it restricts political participation to those with the economic means to purchase differently. In both instances, the role of the consumer is held-up as crucial to ending sweatshops.

In both of the previous examples, consumer tastes and desires are invoked as the cause of sweatshops. This logic shifts blame from transnational corporations and government institutions, but also “makes the issue of global manufacturing appear more complex” because in this framing there is “no longer any definitive center of power to which effective blame can be unproblematically attributed” (Greenberg and Graham 168). The proliferation of this explanation meant that sweatshops ultimately became a problem in the U.S. public discourse not because of the way in which they reflected corporate greed, government negligence, or activist pressure per se, but because they presented “what was assumed to be a growing concern by consumers about the conditions in which their products were being manufactured” (Greenberg and Graham 167). The consumer’s concern about manufacturing manifested in news stories that taught consumers how to purchase “sweat-free.” For instance, in an article published in *The Washington Post* shortly before Christmas, readers were provided advice on how to ensure that their holiday purchases were not made in sweatshops:

> Embedded within many holiday gifts are tales of production-line horror—of labor by small tykes, systematic repression of union organizing, and health and safety violations in factories that can only be described as hell-holes…Take, for example, toys. The average child in the United States receives over $350 worth of toys each
year…Most of these toys are made in Asia under conditions that approach Dicken’s England: six and seven-day work weeks, 12-hour work days, no bathrooms, tiny paychecks…You can also spread the word that buyers do not care about the conditions under which the goods they purchase were produced…Reward the “good” companies like Gap, which have agreed to begin independent monitoring of their overseas suppliers. When you buy at the Gap, leave them a note saying you are doing so in support of their code of conduct. (Broad and Cavanaugh “Checking it Twice”).

This passage explicitly endorses consumerism as the manifestation of personal morals. In this passage, shopping at “bad” retailers is an act tantamount to not caring about the “labor of small tykes,” because, under this logic shopping is always already a vote of moral confidence. As I discuss further in the next section, this logic aligns perfectly with the consumer subject of liberal economic theory, whose rational, atomized actions pivot on the notion of free choice in the marketplace, which suggests that individuals vote with their dollars when purchasing a particular item. In the preceding passage, this theory is drawn upon, and sutured to the figure of the sweatshop in a discursive move intended to appeal to the reader’s morals.

In this section I have outlined how the U.S. anti-sweatshop campaigns in the 1990s became a newsworthy item through a narrative discourse that included conflict, disorder, and identifiable victims. This narrative was produced by U.S. activists who employed tactics and strategies that both centered and drew upon their relation to sweatshops as consumers, and that emphasized the moral motivations undergirding their investment in ending sweatshops. This aspect of U.S. anti-sweatshop campaigns was reproduced in the format of the news coverage, that tended to frame sweatshops as a moral issue, withholding effective blame from any one institution, yet framing the problem of sweatshops as contingent on individual evaluation and personal choices.
Similarly, the news structure reproduced the dynamics of the global division of labor (also reproduced in the U.S. anti-sweatshop campaigns), by privileging the voices of U.S. activists and corporations. Because U.S. activists and corporations (as well as their celebrity brand ambassadors, such as Gifford) were privileged in news coverage, they were granted a significant amount of power in determining the terms and scope of U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, and as such crucially influenced the ways in which the problem of sweatshops became one of consumer choice (as opposed to corporate and/or government malfeasance). In this way, U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse of this time focused on how to consume “sweat-free,” while eliding the role of the U.S. government and state institutions, and ignoring workers’ voices entirely. In the next section, I briefly turn to John Locke’s liberal theory that sutures private property to political enfranchisement, so as to articulate how the ideology of “voting with one’s dollars,” is evident in the anti-sweatshop discourse that frames the problem of sweatshops as one contingent on U.S. consumer practices. Additionally, in the next section I discuss Locke’s theory so as to point towards the ways in which a consumer-contingent framing informs the moral evaluations undergirding both the People of Wal-Mart and American Apparel images, discussed in the subsequent section.

Liberalism, Consumption & Choice

In the preceding section, I outlined how the U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse that emerged in the 1990s worked to frame the problem of sweatshops as one pivoting on consumption. In this section, I continue to discuss how consumerism is held up as a crucial form of political enfranchisement by briefly tracing the origins of this belief to the liberalism articulated by John Locke. I turn to Locke’s philosophy because his theories regarding private property, political enfranchisement, and choice remain the basis of contemporary neoliberal economic theories.
regarding the free market and free choice. Further, Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* remains the most influential text concerning U.S. liberalism; the very language of liberalism, such as “equality,” “rights,” and “property” that predominate U.S. political discourse may be traced to Locke’s important essays (McClure 21). The influence of Locke’s essays is also evident in what is often cited as the foundational text to the U.S. nation-state: *The Declaration of Independence*. As Alexandra Chasin astutely observes, not only does *The Declaration of Independence* borrow significantly from Locke’s writings, but it crucially modifies the minimal things each citizen is entitled to enjoy freely. As Locke outlines in his *Second Treatise*, these things are: “life, liberty, and private property;” *The Declaration of Independence* states: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Chasin 257; notation 10). In what follows I turn to Locke’s theories regarding private property and political enfranchisement so as to outline how “the history of citizenship…has taken shape within consumer culture,” and what this historical precedent means in regards to anti-sweatshop retailers today (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee 6).

Central to Locke’s liberalism is the notion that possession, both in oneself and in one’s property, is necessary to full political enfranchisement. In Locke’s *Second Treatise*, private property, or rather the protection and proliferation of private property, provides the foundation for Locke’s entire political system. As Locke states:

> Through the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a *property* in his own *person*: this no body has a right to but himself. The *labor* of his body, and the *work* of his hands…are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he that mixed his *labor* with, and joined it to something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *property*. (Locke 19).
For Locke the most basic unit to social life resides in the individual. From this individual, Locke establishes that the first and most intrinsic right concerns property, namely the right to own. Having ownership over oneself, one has ownership over one’s labor which may be used to obtain further possessions. Labor as a means with which to acquire property entails the existence and use of a market of exchange, wherein one exchanges one’s labor for wages and/or property. As Chasin argues, the logic of exchange inherent in Locke’s conception of labor means that “[F]or liberalism, freedom is freedom of choice,” in that one has (as outlined by Locke) the “choice” to sell or exchange one’s labor for wages or goods (Chasin 4). In this framework, because all individuals possess themselves in that they can choose to sell their labor, theoretically, individuals enter the market of exchange equally. As Locke further outlines, individuals are also able to acquire property by seizing natural resources (both by removing things from nature and mixing one’s labor with nature), and seizing resources or land that were not “made industrious,” which is a criminal offense in Locke’s system that warrants non-ownership, dispossession, and settler-colonialism (Locke 19; 23-28; 91-100). Property in Locke’s system then is both the basis for the individual (i.e., one is “self-possessed” as in one has possession in one’s labor), and for obtaining property outside of oneself (i.e., that which one mixes their labor with).

Evident in Locke’s conception of property and ownership is the relationship between liberalism, capitalism and nation-states. Government in Locke’s system is established at the point wherein individuals have accumulated enough property such that inequality exists; individuals must enter into civil society at this point and establish a government system so as to safeguard private property relations (Locke 51). Importantly, these unequal relations are circumscribed under the established government because, as an entity in existence to protect private property, those with significant amounts possess the highest degree of political enfranchisement (Locke
In order for those with property to remain so, they must ensure that those without do not obtain access to power that may redistribute or seize it; thus, the right to vote is confined to the propertied class, and the political representation of cities is configured in proportion to the amount they contribute in taxes (Locke 73-5). In sum, one’s capital determines one’s influence over the democratic process, and one’s political enfranchisement. Government in this conception is established by and for the propertied class, and the political ideology Locke articulated, liberalism, outlines its mode of operation. In sum, in Locke’s liberal system, one’s access to capital (namely, one’s ability to generate and maintain it), is the basis for one’s worth, or influence, in a political system.

The relationship between property or capital and political enfranchisement articulated by Locke undergirds the anti-sweatshop discourse that suggests that the U.S. consumer is both the cause, and the resolution to sweatshops. The relationship is best understood through the ideology of the “dollar vote,” which draws significantly from Locke’s conception of property-based political enfranchisement. This ideological position asserts that in a democratic marketplace, each dollar spent or invested effectively operates as a vote. It is as Chasin asserts, a practice made legible through the conception of an “economic democracy,” and relies on the belief that: “With every penny spent the consumers determine the direction of all production processes and the minutest of details of the organization and of all business activities…The market [is] a democracy in which every penny gives a right to cast a ballot” (Von Mises 271 qtd. in Chasin 151). This ideological principle draws on the deep-seated belief in “the liberatory promise of the market itself” and thus aligns with, rather than brushes against the economic theory espoused by figures such as Milton Friedman.50 This understanding of the market positions consumers as

50 See also on this point Thomas Friedman’s *The World is Flat* (2005), and Jagdish Bhagwati’s *In Defense of Globalization* (2004). Both T. Friedman and Bhagwati, followers and champions of Milton Friedman’s
rational, atomized agents of change, because “no one forces you to buy. You are free to go elsewhere…You are free to choose” (Friedman 222-3 qtd. in Chasin 149). In this scheme, one’s consumer choices are calculated votes of confidence in an otherwise competitive marketplace. In effect, this conception of agency produces what Chasin terms “consumer sovereignty,” because in this framework “individual sovereignty can, and must inevitably, be expressed in the free market, which is to say as consumer sovereignty” (Chasin 149). Because U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse frames the issue of sweatshops as contingent on consumer practices, it reproduces the notion that consumers are always already “free to choose” and “free to go elsewhere” when making their purchasing decisions, and that corporations, rather than governments, state and/or financial institutions, are the real targets in the campaign to end sweatshops.

Of course, this ideology contains some crucial assumptions about the ways in which individuals enter and operate within the market. Perhaps the most glaring assumption is that all persons at all times have access to income that may be used without economic restraint; this assumption presumes that individuals enter the market on an equal playing field, with capital to divest or invest in line with their morals or beliefs. Additionally, this ideology suggests that because each dollar operates as one vote, an individual with more dollars has more votes, which also means more influence over the market, perpetuating the cycle of influence and power capital generates. In essence, in this framework those without capital or property do not have access to full democratic expression. Further, in order for this framework to deliver its democratic

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economic philosophy, argue that anti-sweatshop activism is ultimately driven by protectionist interests. This point is explicitly rejected by one of the most prominent U.S. anti-sweatshop organizations, USAS; on this see: “Is the Movement Protectionist?” pp. 17-18, in Students Against Sweatshops (cited in my bibliography). Both T. Friedman and Bhagwati affirm M. Friedman’s economic ideology because (according to them) the issue of sweatshops is irrelevant when consumers can always go elsewhere to shop; i.e., they can choose to support sweatshops, or not, through their consumer practices.
promise, it must presume that all choices are made without external constraints; “choice” in this field is extrapolated from the social, political, and economic constraints within which it exists. As such, the “bad” consumer choices referenced in the previous section (i.e., purchasing items made in sweatshops) is not a reflection of restricted choice, but of “not caring” and thus immoral practices, if not immoral being. This is a dangerous framework for any political campaign, because in its judgements regarding consumer practices, which are always already judgements tied to wealth and wealth management, it contains the capitalist belief that those lacking financial wealth (evident in the desire for low-priced commodities) are immoral. The relationship between poverty and immorality is based on the assumption that economic standing reflects one’s failure to properly obtain or maintain waged labor, manage one’s finances, or comport oneself in ways that are advantageous in a competitive, capitalist system. This value is both circumscribed in Locke’s liberalism, because the fullest scope of ownership and political enfranchisement is restricted to those with the most capital, and reproduced in the anti-sweatshop discourse that frames the problem of sweatshops as one pivoting on consumer choice.

Inherent to liberalism then is a contradiction that Chasin aptly summates: “Theoretically and in practice, there is a tension between the liberal value of individual freedom and the structural inequalities that are also protected by the state” (Chasin 152). In other words, there is a tension between a philosophy that extolls personal consumerism as the political practice, while simultaneously ignoring the structural processes that determines how people are able, and choose to consume. The ideology of “voting with one’s dollars,” which undergirds the U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse that frames the problem of sweatshops as contingent on U.S. consumers, re-enacts this tension by circumscribing political enfranchisement (in this instance, the ability to purchase without constraint, and thus by personal discretion alone) to capital. In sum, the
ideology and practice of “voting with one’s dollars” remains an inherently economically exclusive practice, that tends to retrench rather than resist systemic hierarchies wrought through capitalism.

I highlight the philosophical underpinnings of the anti-sweatshop consumer ideology because, as I discuss below, it provides the organizing principle and justifying foundation for both the supposed moral depravity of the People of Walmart, and the retail liberalism of American Apparel. Evident in both cultural productions is a reverence for the power of consumer choice to radically alter the state of humanity; in the case of People of Walmart, the failure to make proper choices (whether sartorial, economic, or otherwise), justifies non-human status. For American Apparel, choosing to buy sweatshop-free is the only way to counter the ill effects of mass consumption. In American Apparel’s anti-sweatshop discourse, sweatshop-free marks a necessary and enlightened departure from the constraints of capitalist convention. In both instances, the rhetoric of moral choice (exercised through consumption, and thus “voting with one’s dollars”) is conveyed through documentary realist images that purport the merits of choosing better, or the pitfalls of choosing poorly.

Real American People

In this section I turn to two cultural productions whose images demonstratively contrast sweatshop-free, ethical consumerism, and the backwards, inappropriate consumption that characterizes much of the explanations for sweatshops discussed earlier in this chapter. The first set of images are taken from the user-generated blog, People of Walmart. As noted earlier in this chapter, no other retailer is so consistently associated with both the garment manufacturing disasters in Bangladesh in recent years (first in 2012, then again in 2013), and labor exploitation generally. I assert that the rhetoric of moral choice that renders anti-sweatshop and ethical
consumerism legible informs the popularity of the *People of Walmart* blog; namely, because the people in the images are framed as freely choosing agents, the moral stigma the blog produces and mocks is justified. However, as I discuss below, while the blog insists it is humorous in tone, it overtly draws upon the tools of documentary realism in its construction of difference, and in doing so, legitimates the de-humanization of “Walmart shoppers.” I examine two images from the blog in order to discuss how it aims to document moral stigma in the patrons of Walmart, manifesting in bodily comportment, personal and moral hygiene, and gender norms. I argue that the popularity of *People of Walmart* evidences the degree to which the economically disadvantaged within the U.S. are attributed causal blame for the ills of capitalism, such as sweatshops, and rendered obstacles to global progress.

The second half of this section examines the image-making of “sweatshop-free” retailer American Apparel. In this section I examine the broader strategy American Apparel has pursued via its “transparent” images, and a specific image produced in response to the garment factory tragedies in Bangladesh. While American Apparel has experienced a meteoric rise and subsequent demise, it remains the only national retailer with claims to “sweatshop-free,” and thus occupies a unique position in crafting U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse. Although on the fringe of apparel retailers, I assert that this cultural location is crucial to its image as a hip, countercultural brand, whose consumers identify with the company’s anti-mass consumption ethos. I argue that American Apparel’s once carefully constructed corporate image as an “honest” brand was made possible through its “real” model advertising, that employed a documentary realist aesthetic. In what follows I first turn to *People of Walmart*, and then American Apparel. In the next section, “Anti-Sweatshop Practices and Retail Gentrification,” I conclude this chapter with some final thoughts on how U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse provides
the impetus for dislocation and dispossession within the U.S.

Founded in 2009, by brothers Adam and Andrew Kipple and friend Luke Wherry, *People of Walmart* became an almost instantaneous internet sensation (Suddath “That Viral Thing;” Gross “Viral Website”). Initially a platform with which the Kipple’s and Wherry could share photos taken at Walmart with peers, the trio quickly began receiving email submissions from fans. In a matter of weeks, the blog obtained over 300,000 views a day, and in less than six months after the blog’s founding, the site crashed having experienced over one million users in a day (Suddath “That Viral Thing”). The site currently shares images nearly every day, and viewers are encouraged to vote for, and/or rate their favorite photographs. The images are framed with what are intended to be clever, humorous titles and captions, however there is scant original text on the site. Aside from the images, there is a section dedicated to “Horror Stories,” comprised of police reports from Walmarts across the country, and “Hate Mail” which publishes emails critical of the site. It is the images, presumably taken without the subject’s consent (a point I return to below), that largely constitute the blog’s content; it is what appears on the homepage, and it is what is reproduced in the blog’s merchandise, such as the 2010 and 2015 books, and yearly boxed calendar (purchasable from the site under “Books” and “Calendar” respectively). *People of Walmart* is part of a larger network of blogs, encapsulated under the brand “Three Rings Blogs,” which promotes largely image and video-based content intended as humorous. All of the blogs share what is basically the same premise: users obtain photographs and/or content relative to the blog’s title, and then submit them to the site whose broadly defined topic structures the content. Distinctive to *People of Walmart* however, is the anthropological, documentary realism that substantiates the blog’s implicit assertion that Walmart shoppers are inherently backwards subjects, whose inability to choose properly (whether sartorially,
physically, or financially) renders them obstacles to human progress.

Evident in *People of Walmart* is an anthropological framing that casts patrons as non-human through their bodily comportment, gender presentation, and personal and moral hygiene. In the site’s “About Us,” the anthropological undertones structuring the viewer’s gaze are readily apparent: “A collection of all the creatures in their native shopping habitat that greet us with their presence at Walmart, America’s favorite store” (“About Us” *People of Walmart*). Present in the blog’s self-description is the framing of exploration and documentation of people who are, quite often, invoked as non-human through the descriptor, “creature.” “Creature” is a recurring term on the site, used to describe all of the photo’s subjects, as well as a distinctive set of images, entitled “Creature Feature,” that seems to highlight images receiving a large number of comments, votes, and/or ratings (although no actual explanation for this feature exists). As the blog states on the “Frequently Asked Questions Page: What is *People of Walmart*?”:

> You know that creature you spot every time you go shopping at certain chain department stores? That’s *People of Walmart*. It’s like spotting the Loch Ness monster or Bigfoot except, since it’s Walmart, way more common. Take a picture of it then tell us about your creature and your spotting. (“FAQ” *People of Walmart*; emphasis added).

While accompanied with a mocking tone, this anthropological framing positions the patrons of Walmart as specimens of study, and the blog’s founders and photographers as morally and culturally distant. The language of “native” and “habitat” also work to establish this distance, as the viewer, as well as the photographer, are positioned as outsiders in a foreign land. Additionally, the blog explicitly denies its subjects human-status, referring to them as “creatures,” and in the passage directly above as “it.” While the blog insists that it is “for
humorous purposes only” their use of an anthropological frame is only substantiated by the terms with which they measure their subjects of inquiry. As one of the blog’s founders, Andrew Kipple asserted in a 2009 interview:

If you make a bad decision on what you’re going to be out in public wearing, that’s what we’re looking for. If you’re 400 pounds, you shouldn’t be wearing nothing but a pink tube top. Even if you shop at Goodwill, wherever you go, the shirts they sell have sleeves and they have your size. (Gross “Viral Website”).

Kipple’s comments point towards the ways in which the blog’s subjects’ failure to properly comport themselves (defined by Kipple) warrants their objectification. In Kipple’s statements above, bad decisions justify creature-status, because one could always choose correctly (evident in his aside, “even if you shop at Goodwill”). This emphasis on choice provides the justifying foundation for the subject’s moral stigma: the people of Walmart make bad choices, and these bad choices, be they sartorial or financial, are morally reprehensible. Importantly, these bad choices and the moral reprehensibility they elicit manifest, for the blog users and founders of People of Walmart, in the photo’s subject’s physical being. While the rhetoric of choice provides the justification for the blog’s premise, its visual regime locates moral choice in the subject’s physicality, and thus belies a shared truth (among the users and the blog founders) that the “Walmart shoppers” failure to execute proper choices is indicative of their “creature” status.

This emphasis on the significance of choice is evident in the blog’s submission guidelines. Under the question “How do I know if my picture is appropriate?” the blog states:

If you think the person would be classified as a ‘Walmart shopper’ then chances are good it works. Funny looking people, crazy outfits, the creepiest of the creepy, and the ugliest of the ugly will do. HOWEVER, we do not wish to poke fun at people
that, through no fault of their own, are handicapped. Absolutely NO pictures of someone mentally or physically handicapped will be added to the website. (“Submit” People of Walmart).

The blog’s refusal to publish images of the “mentally or physically handicapped” is both grounded in, and further demonstrates, the rhetoric of choice. For the blog administrator’s, mocking the disabled is wrong because they did not, and cannot choose otherwise (i.e., “through no fault of their own”); the ability to choose, and thus choose incorrectly, legitimates the objectification of everyone else. However, while the rhetoric of “choice” might justify the blog’s premise, it stops there. As the previous passage highlights, the blog explicitly draws on visual frames whose organizing principle is implicit, yet collectively shared. This visual code is communicated through the signifier “Walmart shopper,” signifying the “funny looking,” “the creepiest of the creepy,” and “the ugliest of the ugly.” The ability to successfully communicate a visual regime organized through “Walmart shopper” demonstrates the degree to which “Walmart shopper” signifies an undesirable element in U.S. culture. This undesirable element is the ignorance and callousness towards globalized labor exploitation, the lack of standards for low priced, mass-produced commodities, and out of control Black Friday style consumerism with which Walmart is so explicitly associated, located on and within individual bodies; “Walmart shoppers,” on this blog, signify the consumerism and way of being that makes the globalized system of production, like the fire in Bangladesh, possible. I assert that this negative association between “Walmart shopper” and “the ugliest of the ugly,” is not only legitimated through the rhetoric of choice, but is inseparable from the larger discursive “truth” that suggests that global supply chains depend on the moral shopping choices of U.S. consumers. Thus, through the tools of documentary realism, People of Walmart documents the consumers who, because of their
inability to execute proper moral choices, embody, and signify a cultural regression that renders them “creature” status.

A crucial element to People of Walmart is the procurement of images via covert practices that lend the photographs a form of documentary authenticity. While the blog insists that photographers must “have the full consent of the person(s) in the picture(s),” their images say otherwise (“Submit” People of Walmart). People of Wal-Mart’s images are explicitly obtained without the subject’s permission. Not only are many of the subjects in the images turned away from the camera (i.e., the photo was taken from behind them), many more are framed so as to suggest the photo was taken covertly. For instance, in one image entitled “Winter Walmarter,” a clothing display with folded shirts and a “$5” sign is in the immediate foreground, and to the left is a shoe display. 51 Beyond these displays we see a large person, presumably a woman, her back to the camera, who appears to be wearing tapered crop pants with long hair pulled up on top of her head. This woman is looking at a display of snow boots sold for “$8.” The caption asks: “Can you spot what is out of place? (Hint: It’s not the snow boots or long sleeve t-shirts),” inviting the viewer to scan the image for “what is out of place.” Still another person is in view, obscured because she is so far from the camera, and because the camera lens is partially blocked by the “$5” sign. The person furthest from the camera also appears to be a large woman, wearing shorts and what appears to be a bikini-style top. I stress that I selected this image to discuss because it took me several minutes to decipher what exactly was “out of place” in this image; the literal arrangement of objects in view obscured who the actual subject of the photo is so much, that at first glance, I did not even see the woman in the background. Only when coupled with the

51 I have chosen to refrain from reproducing these images in-text. However, should you wish to view them I have provided links in footnotes. This image may be viewed at: http://www.peopleofwalmart.com/winter-walmarter/.
image’s title “Winter Walmarter,” is the most likely subject of the photograph evident, the woman furthest from the camera, because she is wearing clothing “out of place” in winter. The site’s framing of this particular image plays on what is a violation of consent: the subject of the image must be searched for because their photograph was taken without their knowledge, the photographer literally having to hide behind a clothing display. In this way, the image performs an act of documentation: because the subject did not know her photo was being taken, the picture reveals, and communicates some truth about them. In other words, because she did not know her photo was being taken, she could not “hide” anything, or work to alter her presentation.\(^{52}\)

In addition to the covert tactics employed to obtain the images, \textit{People of Walmart} photos frame the moral stigma they traffic in within the subject’s physicality. For instance, in the image discussed above, part of what renders the woman “out of place” is the way in which her clothing violates the gendered norms that dictate “proper” bodily comportment; namely, her body, that does not conform to the thin, hourglass ideal of female beauty, wears clothing intended for those idealized bodies (rather than her own). In my examination of the blog, more than half of the images the blog has published extoll the subject’s for their failure to cover (what are often) their large bodies; I stress that many of these subjects are also women. Indeed, the evaluations of female bodily comportment provided the inspiration for the blog. In a story rehearsed across many of the interviews given, the blog founders assert that after “seeing a stripper…a woman dressed like a stripper…who had a kid in one of those harnesses…that look like a dog leash” they decided to start documenting the people they see in Walmart (McCoy “Creators of People of Walmart”). While the bloggers do not explain what exactly a stripper looks like in any of their

\(^{52}\) In a move signaling the blog’s popularity, and ensuring many more photos taken without consent, the blog announced in 2016 that a smartphone app was in development that would allow users to take and directly upload images to the site.
interviews, they do continue to document many images on their blog in a similar fashion (i.e., identifying women as strippers based on dress). I highlight this story not because I think that a particular aesthetic constitutes “stripper,” but because it points to the way in which the blog substantiates the premise undergirding documentary realism that an objective, moral truth may be obtained through the (covertly captured) image. In the bloggers’ story regarding the founding of the blog, the woman’s dress (“like a stripper”) conveyed a truth about her moral character; they concluded that she was a stripper, implying sexual immorality, and note that she used a leash for a child, implying improper motherhood. In this way, the story highlights how for the bloggers “the body was a legible text, with various keys or languages available for reading its symbolic codes” (Somerville 23). It is also worth stressing that this was the pretext for the blog because, presumably, others would also find the image morally reprehensible if not shocking. This logic directly informs the anthropological discourse of the blog, because it asserts that one’s physicality and presentation reveals an objective moral essence, that may be hierarchically ranked and objectified. Further, as a sexualized characterization (i.e., stripper), the accusation belies the legacies of racial science that inform much more than the site’s description.

The anthropological frame that structures the blog is no more apparent than in its highest rated image. Another image of a large woman, her back turned to the camera, the woman holds the hands of a little boy who stands on what appears to be the top of her buttocks, however this is difficult to ascertain, as it could also be the woman leaning forward. Importantly, the woman and child are both Black. This is one of the only images on the blog that has a list of comments, all of which are about the woman’s buttocks, often framed as a symptom, or genetic trait of Blackness.

53 You can view this image here: http://www.peopleofwalmart.com/get-up-stand-up-2/.
This picture, more so than any other on the blog, explicitly draws on the imagery of racial science, specifically that of the Hottentot, whose body served as a site of race-making in the nineteenth century (Gilman 76-108). As Siobhan Somerville argues, “The racial difference of the African body… was located in its literal excess, a specifically sexual excess that placed her body outside the boundaries of the ‘normal’ female” (26). While large women of various racial groups populate the People of Walmart blog, none are as highly rated as this image, and none contain the comments that so explicitly connect the woman’s physicality (namely her too large buttocks coupled with her Blackness) to her being a “creature” of Walmart. However, this image is not entirely unrelated from the one discussed above, or the woman described in the blog’s founding story. As Sander Gilman observes in his discussion of nineteenth century stereotypes of the Hottentot and the prostitute, the primitive was associated with unbridled sexuality, and it was the figure of the Hottentot and her large, prominent buttocks, that symbolized this association (99). The prostitute and the over-sexualized or improperly sexual woman was visually categorized against the figure of the Hottentot, in a move intended to evidence the scientific basis of white, male supremacy; namely, excess, whether in fatness or large buttocks, warranted an association with both unbridled sexuality and the primitive. As Gilman argues, “fatness is one stigma of the prostitute,” a convention that “became part of the popular image of the sexualized female even while the idealized sexualized female was ‘thin’” (102). The consistency with which fatness, specifically female fatness appears on the blog signals this association with the primitive. Indeed, in some accounts of the story above, the bloggers describe the woman as fat, suggesting that their assessment of her (“she was a stripper”) was motivated by their assertion that Walmart really is a place populated with primitive “creatures” (Gross “Viral Website”). This association between the primitive and fatness is drawn from the racial science that located the origins of the primitive in
the Black female body, captured in the figure of the Hottentot, and the blog’s consistent framing of large female bodies as “creatures,” (as well as strippers) explicitly invokes this association. The blog’s high rating for the image of the woman and child illustrates the degree to which the blog’s “humorous” anthropological framing is actually applied and celebrated quite literally.

In contrast to People of Walmart, is the sweatshop-free retailer American Apparel. Founded in 1989 by (former) CEO and Creative Director Dov Charney, American Apparel moved to its current headquarters in downtown Los Angeles in 1997, and in 2000 began its operation as a primarily cotton-textile wholesaler (Hutchison “American Apparel Files”). In 2002, the retailer began referring to itself as “sweatshop-free,” and shortly thereafter, began its meteoric rise, opening stores nationwide and abroad (Hill “The Rise and Fall”). In 2013 however, American Apparel began its eventual downfall as the hippest “sweatshop-free” clothing company. In 2013, the company’s board of directors unanimously voted to suspend the creative director and CEO, Charney, during an internal investigation concerning alleged misconduct (Bhasin “American Apparel Finally”). Charney had amassed a series of alleged violations, including accusations of misuse of company funds, sexual harassment of employees, and allowing nude photos of a former employee to be posted online (Bhasin “American Apparel Finally”). By far the most egregious of the accusations concerned Charney’s sexual misconduct; in 2004 Charney was famously accused of masturbating repeatedly in front of a reporter, and as of 2014 had several sexual harassment and sexual assault charges pending (Bruni “A Grope”). Additionally, the company had amassed a serious debt in light of decreasing profits. While the company was worth as much as $1 billion at the height of its success, by October 2015, the retailer was filing Chapter Eleven bankruptcy, roughly $200 million in debt (Thomas “Will Bankruptcy”). When American Apparel finally exited bankruptcy proceedings in February of
2016, the company, now owned by creditors and bond holders, unanimously decided to remove Charney from the company he founded (Thomas “Will Bankruptcy”). In April of 2016, it was reported that the new CEO, Paula Schneider, was laying off hundreds of employees and was considering outsourcing some of its manufacturing; however, as Schneider stressed, the products “will still be American made” (Li “American Apparel Lays Off”).

American Apparel’s rise and fall as the hippest sweatshop-free retailer is significant to the present study because of the way in which the retailer’s success crucially depended on its image as a “transparent” and “honest” fashion company. In April of 2007, during the retailer’s successful years, Women’s Wear Daily published a survey that ranked American Apparel the eighth most trusted brand among 21-27 year olds, the very population who, growing up in the 1990s, witnessed (maybe even participated in) the movement that insisted that knowing where and how one’s clothing is made, and using that knowledge to guide one’s consumer decisions, is of the utmost importance to ending sweatshops (Wolf “And You Thought”). This “trust” was established through American Apparel’s carefully crafted “honest” image, that relied on the discourse of transparency in production and its use of “real” models. Operating on a system of vertical integration, wherein all of the company’s necessary processes, such as design, advertising, and garment construction, are completed under one roof in a factory in downtown Los Angeles, Charney was able to market his product as unique in a sea of competitors whose products are likely assembled in a string of locations across the globe, in what are often questionable circumstances. In many of American Apparel’s advertisements, this system of production is invoked as a sort of guarantee; “made in the USA,” or “made in downtown in LA” are often used interchangeably in these ads with “sweatshop-free” in a move intended to ensure that the company’s items are not produced under questionable conditions, or in exploitative
environments. In this way, the company’s rhetoric conflates location with sweatshop conditions, implying that in order for garment production to be considered sweatshop-status, it must happen elsewhere, foreign to the consumption and production centers of the U.S. Further, the invocation of location, when conflated with “sweatshop-free,” suggests that knowing where one’s clothing is made ensures full knowledge of labor conditions, a move quite effective (for a moment) for American Apparel.

In addition to the marketing of its production practices, American Apparel’s “honest” image was obtained through the distinctive advertisements Charney himself produced. The images employ low lighting, and are set amongst what often appear to be intimate scenes, such as disheveled beds, and basement rec rooms, intentionally drawing from the aesthetic styles of late 1970s and early 1980s pornography (Wolf “And You Thought”). Perhaps most importantly, the retailer was one of the first to employ “real” models in their ads: women who, outside of their appearance in American Apparel ads, did not work as models. Many of the women (and the few men) appearing in the American Apparel ads were employees, either in retail stores or in the company’s administrative offices; however, as the company grew in popularity, it regularly received photographs from hopeful models, and began to organize international competitions for specific advertising campaigns (Wolf “And You Thought”). Many of the advertisements prominently displayed women’s buttocks, crotches, and breasts, as well as acne, body hair, and sweat stains, in a move that in a time before the Dove “real body” campaigns and Instagram models, felt quite distinctive. In fact, American Apparel was one of the first retailers to recognize the significance of fashion bloggers, using several in some of its earliest ad campaigns (Wolf “And You Thought”). When contrasted against the heavily photo-shopped advertising of other fashion retailers, American Apparel appeared distinctive, and its promise of “sweatshop-free”
gained credibility through its commitment to “honest” advertising (i.e., images that refuse re-
touching and make-up). In this way, American Apparel offered authenticity in its product to their young, liberal consumers because it provided an item whose production did not depend on the conventions of corporate, capitalist fashion.

This image as an honest, authentic retailer is evident in an advertisement American Apparel produced in the wake of the 2013 factory collapse in Bangladesh. The advertisement (included below), includes a black and white image of a man and woman, appearing above the text “Shop Made in the USA.” The image was set beneath large red text that proclaimed “American Apparel is Sweatshop Free,” and underneath this (and above the image) stated:

We emphasize this because it actually makes a difference. Thousands of industrial workers making our clothing at our state-of-the-art factory in downtown Los Angeles earn an average of $12/hour, plus medical and other comprehensive benefits for themselves and their families, which is in sharp contrast to the $.20/hour wages commonly found at factories abroad. (Berman “American Apparel”).
Evident in this ad is the explicit juxtaposition of American Apparel’s factory conditions against the common-sense definition of sweatshop conditions. In contrast to the conventional images of East Asian, South Asian, and Latin American women bent over sewing machines used to communicate sweatshop conditions, the woman in the image above stares directly into the camera, smiling profusely while she works. The woman is working, in what appears to be the middle of assembling clothing panels; however, this work is not exploitative, her smile assures the viewer. Similarly, the man on the left smiles directly into the camera; he also appears to be working, an item of clothing in his hands, technical equipment signifying the “state-of-the-art” factory within which he works. Additionally, like the other images American Apparel uses in order to legitimate its authentic image, this advertisement includes “real” people; both the man and the woman are outside the aesthetic conventions of fashion photography that reveres young, thin, white models. The inclusion of the man and woman in this advertisement suggests that they “really” work at American Apparel, and that these photos were taken while they were “really” working; in other words, they are not staged photographs, but documentation of a typical day at the American Apparel factory. Both individuals are not only happy to be working at American Apparel, they are happy to be working in the USA. The viewer knows this because the accompanying text tells them that these workers enjoy wages and benefits their peers overseas (and perhaps elsewhere in Los Angeles) do not.

Taking the image and text above at face value, American Apparel does appear quite progressive in the otherwise bleak apparel industry. However, American Apparel’s above claims are inconsistent with the realities of its production practices. For example, the wages advertised as fair in the above advertisement are only progressive when contrasted against Charney’s competitors. While American Apparel’s $12 an hour wage is certainly above the industry’s
global average, it requires context in order to actually signal progress. According to the Berkeley Labor Center, living wages in Los Angeles County (in 2014) did hover at $12.56 an hour, for a single, childless adult; however, should the figure be adjusted to account for the average family size (three members in Los Angeles County, and three point five in the greater unincorporated area outside Los Angeles; “Quick Facts”), the wage becomes less impressive. Assuming both parents of one child are working, each parent would need a wage of at least $14.85 an hour, and for two children, it increases to $16.96 (“Living Wage”). If only one parent is employed, the figures are even higher, at $25.48, for one child, and $28.10 for two, and again higher still for single parents, at $31.12 for two children, and $39.04 for three children (“Living Wage”). $12.00 an hour, in this instance, is not wholly representative of a fair living wage, despite its impressiveness when set against industry averages. Further, the wage listed in the ad above is hourly; this is an important aspect to understanding the quality of life afforded via this wage because it is only livable if a single, childless worker is working a full forty-hour week. The transparent portrait Charney attempts in the advertisement above is intended to compel consumers and appeal to their understandings of what sweatshop conditions “look” like, averting their gaze from his own exploitative labor practices in the process.

In addition to the misleading wages, American Apparel’s history of anti-union tactics mar its image as a labor-friendly retailer. In 2003, workers at the Los Angeles garment factory attempted to organize a union through UNITE. The workers expressed grievances concerning the lack of paid time off and affordable healthcare, hazardous production methods, and mistreatment by supervisors (“The Truth Behind”). The workers’ efforts towards collective bargaining were immediately met with resistance by the company, manifesting in an anti-union campaign and rally which all employees were required to attend, intimidation and interrogation through private
meetings with employees suspected of holding union sympathies, and threats of closing the facility (“The Truth Behind”). When workers filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board (the body that addresses and regulates worker’s legal right to collective bargaining and a fair, safe workplace), the company stated that it would no longer interfere with union activities; however, the company’s tactics successfully instilled fear such that union efforts were stalled. In other words, while the company appears progressive in contrast to its competitors, it remains insufficient in actually meeting its employee’s needs. In this way, American Apparel is able to profit from its position as an industry leader in the eyes of its consumers, while profiting still by underpaying their employees, and refusing to respect their right to collectively bargain.

I present the preceding advertisement from American Apparel because it highlights how the use of documentary realist methods and claims towards transparency not only do not ensure any truer account, but actually facilitate a mode of consumption Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee term “commodity activism.” As Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee argue, while similar to previous moments in U.S. history wherein a form of political citizenship “has been understood and fashioned through consumption practices,” commodity activism is distinctive from these earlier consumer movements because in “its mode of mobilization, the emphasis [has] shifted from larger political goals to consumer’s themselves as the chief beneficiaries of political activism” (6; 11). Commodity activism marks a form of political practice reduced to the level of the self, manifest in ‘better’ consumer choices; for instance, instead of buying any old shirt, one can purchase a sweatshop-free shirt. Further, commodity activism operates on the ideology of “voting with one’s dollars,” because it suggests that through better consumer choices, individuals become better subjects; likewise, as the analysis of People of Walmart demonstrated, poor
consumer choices warrant cultural regression. As Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee argue, the reduction of broader political goals to an individual level works so as to render moral virtue as “consonant with the interests of contemporary capitalism” in a move that infuses consumer choices with a newfound political salience (10). In this way, commodity activism is both symptom of, and in response to the binary understanding of globalization that positions the U.S. consumer and their (bad) choices as responsible for, and in control of global supply chains, because in both ideological positions, consumer choice- above all else- provides the instigating force for progressive change.

Additionally, what the documentary-like images of both People of Walmart and American Apparel convey is “who” one might find in either retail location. As discussed above, People of Walmart intends to document the backward-ness of “Walmart shoppers,” and thus implicitly suggests that people who shop at Walmart are the “ugliest of the ugly.” Similarly, American Apparel’s advertisements, like the one discussed at length above, often use their employees in the images, in addition to fashion bloggers, contest winners, and enthusiastic patrons. Capturing each retailer’s consumer image this way is important because “who shops at a store makes a big difference to the shopper...because people look around at other shoppers in a retail establishment and want to see people like them” (Upshaw qtd. in McCoy “Creators of People”). In other words, what a particular consumer looks like matters because “It reinforces that you are in a place that’s right for you” (Upshaw qtd. in McCoy “Creators of People”). If commodity activism sutures politics to consumer practices in such a way that consumers become “the chief beneficiaries of political activism,” then I suggest that one of those personal benefits is the control over space through particular consumer tastes. In the next section, I conclude by

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54 Lynn Upshaw is marketing director for Walmart, expressing concern in this article about the blog People of Walmart.
explaining how “voting with one’s dollars” works so as to dispossess and dislocate those who do not properly make use of the neighborhoods, retail spaces, and markets that reflect their poor choices.

**Anti-Sweatshop Practices and Retail Gentrification**

In the previous section, I examined images from the blog *People of Wal-Mart* and the sweatshop-free retailer American Apparel, and discussed how both, through the tools of documentary realism, suggest that moralized consumer choices bear greater cultural significance. In this section, I conclude my analysis of U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse and consumerism via a discussion of how the U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse that extolls consumerism as the resolution to sweatshops provides the “justifying foundation” for systems of dislocation, displacement, and dispossession within the U.S. through retail gentrification. Retail gentrification suggests that dislocation and displacement of long term inhabitants occurs through processes tied to consumption, namely, because “the tastes of gentrifiers are expressed in terms of consumption that finds its berth in retail outlets” (Gonzalez and Waley 968). In this way, gentrifiers, in their desire to consume in particular ways based on their taste for the authentic (a point I discuss further below) work to displace long-term inhabitants, whose income levels disallow them from affording presence and participation in certain spaces. As Sara Gonzalez and Paul Waley outline in their embedded study of gentrification in London, retail gentrification occurs primarily through three interrelated processes. First, an ongoing urban restructuring occurs that “is orchestrated by the state, and designed to create a privatized and commodified city center experience” (965). As Gonzalez and Waley assert, this aspect of retail gentrification suggests that “the state (generally in this context local government) has subjected specific areas and facilities to a process of disinvestment” (965). However, as Sharon Zukin’s 2009 study of
gentrification in Harlem and Brooklyn, New York outlines, the participation of local government and/or the state is not necessarily crucial to the process of retail gentrification; in the case of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, retailers acted without the assistance of local government, and ultimately displaced long-term Polish residents (Zukin et al.). Second, retail gentrification is integrally related to a wider “process of displacement of the habitual customers of markets” most often those who are elderly, and/or low income, and/or from ethnic and racial minority groups (Gonzalez and Waley 965). This occurs through the installment of new retailers and restaurants intended to attract consumers of a higher income level. Lastly, retail gentrification occurs through the “promotion of markets as a consumer experience through the fetishization of food and the provision of a sanitized and commodified environment” (Gonzalez and Waley 965). I assert that the fetishization of authenticity that Gonzalez, Waley, and Zukin identify as integral to retail gentrification is inextricable from the anti-sweatshop and ethical consumerism ideology that I have discussed thus far in this chapter. While Andrew Brooks argues that ethical fashion marks a de-fetishization of the commodity because it so often intends to demystify the labor process (a lá American Apparel), I disagree strongly, and understand this reliance on the tools of documentary realism in the advertising and marketing of various commodities (most especially clothing, food, and home goods) as reflective of Spivak’s assertion that “positivist empiricism provides the justifying foundation for advanced neocolonialism” (A. Brooks 213; Spivak 275). Specifically, I assert that retailers employing the “demystification” of the labor process marketing technique (in their claims to ethical consumerism and sweatshop-free clothing),

55 I want to note that this difference in retail gentrification between Harlem and Brooklyn highlights how race impacts the ways in which retailers, real estate developers, and new residents may or may not site a particular neighborhood as “safe.” In Zukin’s study, the gentrification of Harlem occurred through significant government involvement, in addition to the participation of long-term Black middle and upper-class residents. A full discussion of the intricacies of Zukin’s research is however beyond the scope of this chapter.
attempt to provide their consumers with an authentic experience, juxtaposed against the
conventions of mass-produced, global capitalism. In this way, this “demystification” fetishizes
what is presented as “authentic,” and as I discuss further below, when sought by those desiring it,
“leads ineluctably to gentrification” (Gonzalez and Waley 969).

As Gonzalez, Waley and Zukin argue, changes in the retail landscape most often signal
what are the initial stages of gentrification. In late, global capitalism, these changes in the retail
landscape most often manifest as boutiques and outdoor markets that provide consumers with
both an “authentic” experience and product. As Zukin argues, the appearance and proliferation of
boutiques in a particular area often signals what is “part of a broad dynamic of post-industrial
change and urban revitalization that may benefit certain residents while deepening economic and
social polarization” that, ultimately, benefits the economically privileged at the expense of the
economically disadvantaged (Zukin et al. 48). Boutiques represent an alternative consumption
practice, that often aligns with the ethical consumer ideology (of which sweatshop-free is a part)
that I have discussed thus far in this chapter. Employing marketing of products that are “made
locally,” “made ethically,” “sweatshop-free,” and/or “fair trade,” these boutiques offer
consumers an alternative experience set against the mass-produced, global production that marks
national chains and big-box retailers such as Walmart. As Zukin asserts: “Alternative
consumption practices often lead to the creation of entrepreneurial spaces like restaurants and
bars, and the resurgence of farmers’ markets offering urban consumers a safe and comfortable
space to ‘perform’ difference from mainstream norms” (“Consuming Authenticity” 727). Thus
“performing” difference from mainstream norms (i.e., shopping at Walmart) necessitates spaces
designated as authentic, in contrast to the inauthentic consumption spaces of big-box retailers
and shopping malls. Importantly, this authenticity offered in boutiques is provided via the
“demystified” product and the supposed authenticity of a particular space. As Zukin argues, alternative retailers “fabricate [an] aura of authenticity based on [the] history of [an] area or backstory of products” (727). In other words, the demystified products of alternative retailers, that provide detailed stories of how and where the garment was produced, lend the item an aura of authenticity, framed as counter to the mass-produced, and presumably sweatshop-made clothing of retailers like Walmart.

The alternative consumption centers whose demystified products provide commodities to ‘perform’ difference also necessitate the use of spaces whose long-term inhabitants and neighborhood culture lend an aura of authenticity, with which the initial retailers rely. This use of space occurs through the anti-mainstream ethos that sites particular spaces as unique. As Zukin observes: “If the churros are greasy and the coffee tastes lousy, these working-class, ethnic spaces are still the anti-Starbucks, and for this reason, they are valued for what they contribute to the discourse of distinctiveness” (“Consuming Authenticity” 735). In other words, it is the co-presence, initially, of the low-income, elderly, and ethnic or racialized long-term inhabitants that provides the sense of distinctiveness that appeals to the anti-mainstream ethos so integral to alternative consumption practices. In this way, the space “attracts consumers to the degree that it mobilizes the distinctiveness of the original source;” namely, the long-term inhabitants and their neighborhood culture (Zukin, “Consuming Authenticity” 738). However, what the authentic-seeking gentrifiers and alternative consumers actually make possible is the dissolution of this very distinctiveness, because “Although keeping a defiant distance from mainstream consumer culture creates a safe zone for non-conformity, it also develops new means of commodifying the spaces themselves” (Zukin, “Consuming Authenticity” 745). In other words, it is the “sweatshop-free” boutiques and “locally-sourced” restaurants that provide the signals to real
estate developers that a particular area is “safe for commercial investment” that will eventually raise rents, the cost of services, and ultimately, displace the very long-term residents and culture that made the place appealing in the first place (Zukin et al. 48).

I highlight Gonzalez, Waley, and Zukin’s research because the very ideology underpinning retailers such as American Apparel not only works to displace the kinds of consumers who might otherwise be characterized as “Walmart shoppers,” but is motivated by a desire to distinguish, and distance oneself from them. To be clear, this is not to suggest that long-term inhabitants, subject to retail gentrification are backwards (or actually “authentic”), but rather that the very rhetoric of moralized choice that renders “Walmart shoppers” culturally backwards or “creature” status, also underpins the process of retail gentrification. Undergirding the objectification of *People of Walmart* and the ethos of ethical consumerism sold at American Apparel is the notion that personal consumer choices, rather than societal structures, uphold systems of inequity, such as globalized systems of production that make sweatshops possible. This chapter opened with a discussion of how the binary understanding of globalization drawn from world systems theory undergirds the explanation of sweatshops that suggests that U.S. consumers determine and control global production lines; this conception of globalization is what makes ethical consumerism legible, because if consumers determine production, then purchasing better can, and will, eradicate the ills of global capitalism. As discussed earlier, part of what signals the depravity of “Walmart shopper” at play in *People of Walmart* is drawn from the tarnished image the corporation Walmart bears in U.S. culture, specifically its role in fostering exploitation along the global assembly line; thus, part of what is so morally reprehensible about “Walmart shoppers” is their morally reprehensible decision to patronize Walmart. This emphasis on consumer choice is also relevant to understanding *People of Walmart*, because as discussed
earlier, objectifying Walmart shoppers is justified through a narrative of choice. Additionally, it is this same rhetoric of personal choices—imposed on the people of Walmart—that is invoked so as to explain Walmart’s actions; namely, because people want low, low prices, Walmart is forced to exploit their workers. For retailers like American Apparel, consumer choice is re-framed so as to suggest that one may participate in consumer culture without compromising one’s values; drawing on the ideology of “voting with one’s dollars,” in this retail strategy, consumers’ tastes become consumer values. In this way, the people of Walmart deserve “creature” status because they make poor choices (like shopping at Walmart), and the American Apparel consumers, who choose to purchase sweatshop-free, deserve neighborhoods that reflect their “values,” because these “values” will eradicate sweatshops.

This conflation between taste and values is important because, as Gonzalez, Waley, and Zukin’s research demonstrates, it influences the ways in which particular people and groups occupy and lay claims to certain spaces. As Zukin argues, this adherence to taste-as-value bears relevance to the topic of retail gentrification because it provides the grounds for the exclusion of others from certain spaces. As Zukin states: “City’s new communities form on the basis of consumption practices rather than on the old divisions of social class, ethnicity, or race…They are united by their consumption of authenticity. And, over time, this norm of alternative consumption becomes a means of excluding others from their space” (Zukin “Consuming Authenticity” 745). Zukin argues that consumer taste is what motivates retail gentrification, taking precedence over economic class or race, at least initially, and that displacement occurs through consumer practices. Further, Zukin, Waley, and Gonzalez’s research suggests that retail gentrification is motivated by a shared desire for an alternative consumer experience, one that is explicitly drawn from the very anti-sweatshop discourse that endorses alternative consumption
practices as the means with which to eradicate sweatshops. As a mode of displacement then, this
discourse both blames and punishes the racialized, elderly, and ethnic low-income people whose
consumer practices are not alternative, or ethical. To be clear, I do not, nor do I have any way to
determine the economic status of the people in the images on the People of Walmart blog. I have
refrained from identifying them specifically as such for this reason; however, I would be remiss
(as would anyone else) to assert that economic class is a non-factor in the People of Walmart
blog, or any individual’s decision to patronize Walmart. People of Walmart regularly invokes
aspects of impoverishment in its mockery of Walmart patrons (i.e., do-it-yourself car repairs, bad
and/or missing teeth, assertions concerning welfare use and/or misuse, etc.). Indeed, part of what
is at work in People of Walmart is a moral stigma that compels viewers to distance themselves
from Walmart shoppers, and, potentially, Walmart (evident in Upshaw’s statements above). At
the same time, American Apparel’s once ultra-hip, “honest” and authentic images compelled
consumerism such that its patrons literally wanted to represent the brand in its advertisements; in
this way, American Apparel, rather than “inserting [their] brand into culture [sought] to build
culture around [their brand]” (Banet-Weiser, “Free Self-Esteem Tools” 52). In sum, it is in
“building culture around the brand,” that alternative retailers provide the organizing principle for
retail gentrification.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined how the U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse that endorses
consumption as the means with which to eradicate sweatshops both renders the economically
disadvantaged causal blame for their existence, while advocating an alternative mode of
consumerism that, ultimately, works to displace elderly, racialized, and ethnic low-income, long-
term residents through retail gentrification. The ideology of ethical consumerism is drawn from
the assertion that U.S. consumers control and determine global supply chains, and that by purchasing better, can eradicate exploitation wrought through globalization. This assertion is rooted in the liberal theories of John Locke that suggest that capital is the legitimate basis for political enfranchisement, evident in the “voting with one’s dollars” ideology that was incorporated into the U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse of the 1990s. Consumerism was explicitly sutured to an anti-sweatshop discourse in the 1990s through the news media coverage that framed sweatshops as a problem rooted in U.S. consumer practices; this framing was made possible through the privileged position U.S. anti-sweatshop activists and corporate voices were given in news coverage. What this anti-sweatshop discourse makes possible is the moralization of consumer practices, evident in alternative, “transparent” retailers like American Apparel, and the morally backwards “Walmart shopper,” an obstacle to global progress.

I end with retail gentrification because, as Zukin observes, this mode of gentrification differs from previous eras. As Zukin goes on to explain, the practices that undergird retail gentrification “while certainly expensive to maintain, are not based on the usual components of social class—income, education, and occupation” but rather, “are based on alternative consumption practices that challenge the mainstream institutions of mass consumption” (“Consuming Authenticity” 738). As Zukin outlines, in contrast to older theories regarding “bourgeois bohemians” whose high incomes and professional credentials provide them entry into the hip communities they seek to affiliate themselves with, the populations Zukin’s research observes “work in low-wage, often temporary jobs, and scramble to make a living as cultural producers…They are patrons as well as staff at the restaurants, bars, and shops…they browse as well as make the art in the galleries…they form squads of roommates to rent overpriced apartments” (“Manufacturing Authenticity” 727). In other words, while these new residents and
alternative consumers lack the financial means of previous generations of gentrifiers, they are similar in that as a group, they still work towards displacing long-term residents of neighborhoods through their presence. In contrast to previous waves of gentrification, these groups often lack financial wealth, largely because they still adhere to their unwavering belief that they may “participate in consumer society without compromising their values,” consuming alternatively, and as I discuss in the next chapter “doing what they love,” rather than doing what they hate, for a living wage.
Chapter Four: Fashion Interns, Immaterial Labor & Doing What You Love

Abstract: In this chapter I shift my analysis slightly in order to examine how the global structure of labor and the conditions of post-Fordist capitalism have altered the nature of work in the U.S. broadly, but in the fashion industry specifically. As chapter two outlined, the shifts in the global economy (starting in the 1970s) marked a transformation in the U.S. apparel industry, and in this chapter I consider how these changes have altered the nature of work. Discussing this shift in the nature of work, I turn to theories concerning immaterial labor in order to examine how post-Fordism has manifested in the (largely) unwaged, cultural production of fashion. In this chapter I examine the proliferation of precarious labor forms through the figure of the fashion intern, and the ideology of “do what you love.” I conclude this chapter examining the analytic put forth by the Wages for Housework campaign, and discuss how this analytic bears unique relevance to the topic of unwaged, precarious, immaterial labor.

Key Words: fashion intern/ immaterial labor/ precarity/ Wages for Housework Campaign

If we didn’t have unpaid assistants working on set, or in the office, magazines wouldn’t get published, film wouldn’t get developed, and fashion shows wouldn’t run so smoothly. –Lauren Sherman

Fashion, it would seem, loathes work, and so it has disguised the labor that produces ideas, brands, and images, as well as the garments themselves. –Annemarie Strassel

Capital had to convince us that it is a natural, unavoidable, and even fulfilling activity to make us accept working without a wage. –Silvia Federici

Introduction

Throughout this dissertation thus far, I have discussed the ways in which U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, through framing devices, narratives, and images that rely on the tools of documentary realism, collectively work so as to foster a misrecognition, if not outright naturalization, of that very labor. In its attempts towards de-mystification (whether to document, sensationalize, mobilize, or market a particular product), U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse works towards securing a conception of the sweatshop as inherently foreign. I argue that this framing of

56 Sherman “Will Prohibiting”
57 “Work It!”
58 Federici 16
the sweatshop as foreign contributes to a conception of America as exceptional, and interpellates U.S. citizens as superior consumer saviors. As the previous chapter outlined, when sutured to consumerism, U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse provides the justifying foundation for retail gentrification via alternative consumption; in these retail sites, authenticity is sold in demystified products whose manufacture is marketed as counter to the conventions of mass-produced, global capitalism. Further, as spaces within which to ‘perform’ difference, these retail sites work towards the displacement of long-term residents whose incomes and consumer tastes do not align with these alternative retailers. In this chapter I shift my analysis slightly in order to examine how the global structure of labor and the conditions of post-Fordist capitalism have altered the nature of work in the U.S. broadly, but in the fashion industry specifically. As Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee argue, the proliferation of commodity activism signifies a broader change in the nature of work in late, post-Fordist capitalism. As Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee state: “This shift into commodity activism must be located within shifts of what constitutes labor and how value is generated within markets…The creation of value continues to drive capitalism, yet the meaning of ‘value’ shifts and is reimagined within the context of neoliberal capitalism” (11, 14). As chapter two outlined, the shifts in the global economy (starting in the 1970s) marked a transformation in the U.S. apparel industry, and in this chapter I consider how these changes have altered the nature of work. Discussing this shift in the nature of work, I turn to theories concerning immaterial labor in order to examine how post-Fordism has manifested in the (largely) unwaged, cultural production of fashion. In this chapter I discuss the problem of unwaged labor in the fashion industry via the fashion intern.

Fashion is not possible without free labor. As Lauren Sherman, writing on the industry website Fashionista states: “If we don’t have unpaid assistants working on set, or in the office,
magazines wouldn’t get published, film wouldn’t get developed, and fashion shows wouldn’t run so smoothly” (“Will Prohibiting”). These “assistants” Sherman mentions are interns: individuals who fill positions within fashion brands, design houses and fashion magazines, under the guise that they will receive professional tutelage and skills, with the promise of a job upon its completion. However, these promises are rarely fulfilled. As the now more than thirty lawsuits filed since 2010 evidence, intern labor most typically does not lead to a paid position but rather another internship, and the “skills” one acquires during these stints are most often the reproductive labor necessary to maintaining any corporate entity and/or business: answering phones, relaying messages, maintaining emails, organizing and cleaning the offices, running errands, and other administrative tasks. However, as Sherman’s quote highlights, despite the crucial function this labor provides, it remains unwaged.

The phenomenon of the fashion intern is part of the broader proliferation of precarious labor forms marked by “instability, the absence of legal contracts (of employment abiding by legal standards), lack of protection and social benefits, lack of collective agreement of employment, and low wages” (“Precarious Labour”). In a 2010 Economic Policy Institute report on the labor of interns, researchers Kathryn Anne Edwards and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez identify the 2008 recession as a turning point in intern labor; this trend manifests specifically post-recession as a corporate move towards replacing waged-workers with the free, or virtually free, labor of interns (Edwards and Hertel-Fernandez, No-So-Equal). This is an important trend that points towards the broader austerity measures enacted in the wake of the 2008 recession; the labor of interns, or rather the proliferation of precarious labor forms, such as interns, adjuncts,

59 The website ProPublica has a running list of pending lawsuits initiated since the class action lawsuit against Fox Searchlight (discussed in this chapter). See “Tracking Lawsuits,” available at: https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/intern-suits.
free-lancers, and other independent-contract workers, are a symptom of a larger shift made possible by neoliberal reforms and the dismantling of what little security was attached to labor pre-the 2008 recession. While no one keeps a precise count of how many paid and/or unpaid internships exist at a given moment, a 2008 National Association of Colleges and Employers report found fifty percent of graduating college students had held internships, a drastic increase when compared to a Northwestern University study that evidenced a mere seventeen percent in 1992 (Greenhouse “The Unpaid Intern”). As Ross Perlin argues in Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy (2011), the proliferation of this labor form has effectively become “a mainstream experience after the recession began” (qtd. in Williams “For Interns”), and as Andrew Ross asserts, the very waged and salary positions held out as promises to interns remain “nice work if you can get it” (2009).

Additionally, I understand this chapter as continuing my attempt at “accountable positioning,” because part of what this chapter seeks to articulate is the mystification of labor exploitation through the ideology of “do what you love.” “Do what you love” suggests that exploitation is something that one can ‘opt’ out of, because if one loves their work, then not only are they not exploited, but they are not working. I see this ideology as integrally bound to the alternative consumption outlined in the previous chapter in that it suggests that one may participate in capitalism without compromising their values. This ideology is relevant to the study of U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse then because it is not only bound up with the alternative consumption outlined in chapter three, but also because it highlights how “seeing,” or not seeing labor in the fashion industry remains mired in what Strassel refers to as the “complementary crisis of recognition.” This crisis of recognition suggests that “imperatives for change in sweatshop conditions require horrific disaster and sensationalism,” while by contrast, “workers
In the creative side of the industry are hyper-visible, the subject of reality shows and fashion magazine editorials, yet their labor remains culturally unrecognizable” (“Work It!”). In this chapter I outline how the work of the fashion intern is one such hyper-visible, yet culturally unrecognizable labor form, and suggest that the ideology of “do what you love” legitimates this misrecognition.

In this chapter I conclude my analysis by turning to the Wages for Housework Campaign whose legacy concerning feminist thought is significant, and whose contributions to the tradition of autonomous Marxism and theories of labor are most often erased and overlooked. I turn to this campaign and organization specifically because their primary project of naming and defining women’s unpaid labor remains highly relevant to the topic of precarious labor, most especially the fashion intern. Examining the global fashion industry, the analytic put forth by the Wages for Housework campaign remains especially relevant to the specific ideological technique of precarious, neoliberal capitalism: the ideology of doing what one loves. I argue that the act of naming, visibilizing, and re-defining work, central to the concerns articulated by fashion interns (as well as other precarious laborers) mirrors the tactics central to the Wages for Housework campaign. I bring these two objects together, unpaid fashion labor and the Wages for Housework campaign, to highlight the ways in which the ideas put forth more than forty years ago by this feminist organization challenge the notion that Mario Tronti’s concept of the “social factory,” central to theories of immaterial labor, truly is a novel emergence unique to this stage of post-Fordist capitalism.

In what follows, I divide the chapter into four sections. The first section, “Immaterial Labor and Doing What You Love,” briefly reviews the concept of immaterial labor in order to understand its relation to the proliferation of precarious labor. In this section I review the
theoretical concept and arguments behind immaterial labor, and why this concept is especially relevant to the topic of the fashion intern. Additionally, I bring the concept of immaterial labor to bear on the ideology of “do what you love.” I assert that the ideology of “do what you love” is crucial to the exploitation of precarious laborers, such as fashion interns (among others), whose immaterial labor necessitates a re-orientation to work. The next section, “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” discusses the existence and normalization of free labor in the fashion industry through a focused discussion of the unpaid labor of fashion interns. I focus on interns in this section because this occupation is most often represented in U.S. media as a glamorous lifestyle, rather than a form of exploitation. These representations highlight the ways in which the fashion industry, like other creative and cultural industries in this moment, compel free labor from workers via an ideology of “do what you love.” I also highlight some of the ways groups and individuals have resisted and challenged this specific manifestation of exploitation. The next section, “Wages for Work Done By Women,” introduces the international campaign and organization Wages for Housework. I review the group and campaign’s emergence, founding members, and campaign goals. I also identify an analytic within the campaign and group’s texts that may be used to understand the labor exploitation and struggle in the fashion industry I have outlined in this chapter, as well as the broader field of precarious labor. I present this discussion in conversation with the subsequent section, “The Social Factory and the Democratization of Feminine Labor,” which examines the concept of the social factory. First conceptualized by Mario Tronti in 1973, and subsequently elaborated by numerous Marxist scholars, the social factory suggests that after a long historical process “all social production has become capitalist production” (Tronti 105). I argue that the presumed novelty of this form of labor exploitation elides the work of autonomous Marxist feminists, namely the Wages for Housework campaign,
and outline why it is important to frame the problem of the social factory within the Wages for Housework analytic.

**Immaterial Labor and Doing What You Love**

The concept of immaterial labor undergirds much of the recent scholarship concerning precarious labor, drawing significantly on the work of autonomous Marxism, specifically Maurizio Lazzarato (2006), Paolo Virno and Michael Hardy (2006), Michael Hardt (1999), and Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's trilogy, *Empire* (2000), *The Multitude* (2005), and *The Commonwealth* (2009). Together, these texts build on earlier work within autonomous Marxism, specifically the work of Mario Tronti (1973), whose concept of the social factory undergirds the contemporary theorization of immaterial labor (a point I will return to below). Sometimes also referred to as “workerism,” autonomous Marxism grew out of the 1960s Italian worker movement, and suggests that the working class is autonomous in its relation to capital, as well as the labor, trade unions, and political parties intended to represent the class. In this conception, workers represent and act on behalf of themselves, and their everyday lives and experiences possess the opportunities for resistance or subversion, rather than the union or a political party.60

In his 2006 article on the topic of immaterial labor, Lazzarato defines it as emergent within “a great transformation” starting in the 1970s, wherein the workforce is “mass intellectualized,” inaugurating a critical shift in the nature of work, and thus the power dynamics of capital accumulation. This transformation marks a specific shift in labor within the Western world; the advancement of technology to the production process, the mobility of capital, and the aftermath of worker revolts of the 1960s and 1970s, worked to transform the labor process so that the worker is expected to become an “active subject.” As Lazzarato states, the

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60 A full discussion of the nuances and characteristics of autonomous Marxism is beyond the scope of this chapter.
transformation of labor marks a stage in capitalist production wherein “a collective learning process becomes the heart of productivity, because it is no longer a matter of finding different ways of composing or organizing already existing job functions, but of looking for new ones” (135). In this way, aspects of life previously considered separate to, or distinguishable from the working day are now subsumed under it. There is a two-part reasoning to the cause of this transformation within this school of thought. The first concerns a broader argument within the autonomous Marxist tradition that draws on Marx’s *Grundrisse*, specifically the idea of “the fragment on machines” that describes the autonomy afforded the worker’s intellect when labor is automated via technological advancement. The automation of labor processes means that labor previously requiring human, manual labor is now accomplished through technological automation, thus reducing significantly socially necessary labor time (if not eradicating it entirely). This transformation in production means that new modes of production, and thus new kinds of labor are emergent, one form being immaterial labor. As Lazzarato asserts: “The old dichotomy between ‘mental and manual labor,’ or between ‘material and immaterial labor,’ risks failing to grasp the new nature of productive activity, which takes this transformation on board and transforms it,” because as he goes on to argue, “it is around immateriality that the quality and quantity of labor are organized” (134).

The second reason behind this transformation in work and production concerns what the autonomists refer to as “the refusal of work,” that refers to the 1960s labor protests both within and beyond Italy, and the subsequent re-organization of work intended to circumvent the daily resistances and refusals to work on the part of all workers. The social unrest of the 1960s provided the terms with which a re-definition, or re-structuring of work became necessary so as to manage an unruly if not jaded populace of workers. This re-configuration pivoted on the
notion that work could become meaningful rather than monotonous and meaningless; it could in a sense become something more than, or perhaps entirely unlike work. As Ross observes, from the 1970s onwards “a long series of management innovations designed to stimulate a jaded workforce” were enacted, such as “quality of work life programs” that intended “to inject some participation into decision-making and deliver more personal fulfillment to employees” (“The New Geography” 35). These kinds of participatory initiatives, coupled with an increasing autonomy afforded to workers (made possible through both technological advancement and the re-structuring of work) instilled a sense that work could be meaningful and feel good, despite the fact that these same changes marked “the onset of a long decline in job security” (Ross, “The New Geography” 35). These causal shifts are evident in the precarious nature of immaterial labors.

Ross’s observations concerning the onset of meaningful work on the one hand, and an increasingly precarious job market on the other, are crucial to understanding the nature of immaterial labor itself. Immaterial labor constitutes the knowledge, social relations and communication crucial to a large swath of commodities and services; it is as Ross observes, the “culture work” of capitalism (“The New Geography” 31). This labor encompasses two aspects, “the ‘informational content’ of the commodity” that refers both to the actual changes in the work process (i.e., the skills utilized are “increasingly skills involving cybernetics and computer control”), and the labor that produces the “cultural content of the commodity,” what Lazzarato describes as “a series of activities that are not normally recognized as ‘work’” (Lazzarato 131). These activities include: “the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and…public opinion” the very cultural and creative work the interns of the culture industries aspire, and most often, perform for free
(Lazzarato 131). This intangibility not only makes the work highly mobile (i.e., it often does not require special equipment or machinery in order to accomplish it), but also it can most often occur anytime and anywhere; indeed, there is a borderless-ness inherent to it, because “an idea or image comes to you not only in the office but also in the shower or in your dreams” (Hardt and Negri, Multitude 111-12). Ideas and creativity travel with the mind, and as such extend the working day in ways that are not always anticipatory or ideal. The boundaries of the working day and work itself are reconfigured rendering work omnipresent. This mobility to work is also a part of the autonomy afforded workers that marks production in post-Fordist capitalism, because work is no longer bound to a specific location. In this sense, subjectivity itself is re-configured as well because immaterial labor is intellectual labor, but also because as intellectual labor it can infiltrate dimensions of life previously or otherwise non-work related. As Jason Read asserts: “For a new mode of production such as capital to be instituted it is not sufficient for it to simply form a new economy, or write new laws, it must institute itself in the quotidian dimensions of existence- it must become habit” (36). In other words, the advent of immaterial labor also necessitates a shift in how subject’s orient themselves to work.

This subject-making power is no more present than in the ideology of “doing what one loves” that permeates the very creative and cultural industries marked by precarity in the present moment. This sentiment was captured in a New York Times article on unpaid internships and the Millenial generation when Breanne Thomas, a young person working several internships is quoted: “Success doesn’t always mean financial success, but doing something you’re passionate about…For some people, being an accountant, taking a safe route, is perfectly fine, but it’s not where my values lie” (Williams “For Interns”). While the mantra itself does not appear in the quote, “doing what one loves” is the guiding logic behind it. Passion and values precede wages
and healthcare for this individual in a route that is decidedly ‘unsafe.’ Indeed, in this quote passion for one’s work and a commitment to pursue work that embodies, if not reflects one’s values is exchanged for actual waged work itself. In this way, “do what you love, and love what you do,” rather than doing what one needs to do to secure adequate wages and healthcare, justifies the precarity that exploits these fields and their workers. Discussing the exchange of meaningful work and increasing precarity Ross asserts: “In return for giving up the tedium of stable employment, there is the thrill of proving yourself by finding out if you have what it takes. Neoliberalism has succeeded wherever its advocates have preached the existential charge of this kind of work ethic, and of the virtues of being liberated from the fetters of company rules, managerial surveillance and formal regularity (“The New Geography” 36). In this way, “do what you love” provides spiritual fulfillment and the existential affirmation of the non-monetary value of one’s work because one does not do it for wages, or a large salary.

The notion that one can or should merely “do what they love” is perhaps the most insidious and successful of neoliberal mantras because, while affirming some individual’s choices to “do what you love,” it simultaneously justifies the exploitation of all workers; while some workers’ choices reflect some kind of higher calling, this mantra makes other workers performing undesirable labor for equally, if not worse conditions of exploitation responsible for their very exploitation, because they could always leave to “do what they love.” This individualistic ideology is both comforting and placating given the precarity of fields within which it is most touted. As Ross asserts, “The market evangelism of neoliberalism has produced so many converts because it exploits the credo that individuals have some control over their economic destinies” (“The New Geography” 38). Under this logic, personal choices rather than capitalist exploitation are to blame for one’s lack of a living wage and health benefits, or even
resentment at the drudgery of work itself, because one could always choose to pursue what they love rather than what they need. Further, this ideology makes the absence of those very life necessities, such as a living wage and health benefits irrelevant, because the ideological presupposition to do what one loves not only makes the work itself the prize (i.e., one gets to do the work, which is the reward because one “loves” it), but also broader demands on behalf of labor become short-sighted. Indeed, “loving your work” reduces the possibility for “new forms of labor organization and even justifies wage stagnation and regression” by compelling labor from individuals for very little, if anything at all (McRobbie, *Be Creative* 26). In effect, this emphasis on personal choice operates as what Angela McRobbie describes as a form of self-management: “There is an expectation of pleasure in the work itself, such that it functions as rationale for embarking on an otherwise perilous career…What starts as an inner desire for rewarding work is re-translated into a set of techniques for conducting oneself in the uncertain world of creative labor” (McRobbie, *British Fashion* 52). In sum, “doing what one loves” provides the mode of governance necessary for precarious capitalism.

Importantly, McRobbie observes that these trends in creative industries dovetail with what she terms the “feminisation of work,” or the “expansion of possibilities for women’s employment across many countries and particularly in the affluent countries where there had been a strong feminist movement in the 1960s” (“Reflections” 66). As McRobbie argues, “The nature of work in a post-Fordist economy favored the large skill pool and the flexibility of the female workforce,” effectively leading to a growth in female workers within the very creative industries marked by precarity, such as fashion (“Reflections” 67). For McRobbie, these historical and social forces point towards a significant correlation between the feminization of the workforce on the one hand (particularly within the creative and cultural industries), and the
growth of post-Fordist production practices on the other. This correlation between the feminization of work and the proliferation of precarity is particularly significant given the lack of precarity in other comparable industries such as technology, whose growth since the 1960s has been significant. An industry whose reliance and embrace of existential mantras and spirituality is notorious, tech interns do not forgo salaries to obtain an opportunity to perform the labor they love. In a 2014 study published in the *The New York Observer*, ninety-seven tech firms were polled about their starting salaries for student workers (i.e., their summer and/or semester-based internships). The highest salaries in this poll, for firms such as Dropbox and Groupon, were between $8,500-7,500 a month, the low end documented Hulu and PayPal at the $6,500-6,000 a month range (Smith IV “The Master”). This means that a summer internship at one of the industry’s lowest paying firms offers $18,000-20,000, a yearly salary for the fortunate few who make a wage in some of fashion’s internships (Williams “For Interns”). I highlight the intern salaries of the tech industry to illustrate how two comparable industries, tech and fashion, whose industry revenues both exceed the billions, distribute wealth in vastly different ways.

Of note is the composition of the workforce: the tech industry is overwhelmingly male and white, with more than half of its workforce white, male-identified (“Diversity in High Tech”). Indeed, McRobbie’s observations concerning the feminization of creative industries with their correlating increasing precarity, does not extend to all similar, socially prestigious professions (such as technology), even though they appear quite similar in other ways.

Of course “doing what one loves” rather than what one has to, is only possible for those who can afford to do so. Discussing the precarity of creative work McRobbie astutely observes

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62 The U.S. apparel market is worth $225 billion, and the U.S. technology industry is worth (as of 2013) $235.6 billion. See: “Software and Information,” and “Facts on the Apparel.”
that “To some extent middle-class status nowadays rests upon the idea that work is something to which one has a passionate attachment” rather than middle-class wages itself (Be Creative 48). However, one can only pursue this path if some middle-class comforts are already secured, such as familial wealth, housing, a post-secondary education, and healthcare, in addition to a relative amount of personal freedom (namely, no children or dependents). As I discuss further below, while an exploited labor class, interns simultaneously possess some amount of social capital that other fashion workers, such as those manufacturing clothes, or even those selling them do not, an aspect of labor stratification in the industry that while still exploitative, is vastly distinct in its effects. The ideology of “doing what one loves” is most pervasive within industries that possess a high degree of social prestige (such as the culture industries of fashion, film, writing and music, as well as academia), and less so within professions that perform more materially necessary labor (such as manual and custodial labor, food and retail services, and the health professions). This distinction points to the ways in which the ideology of “doing what one loves,” in its existential guidance merely calcifies the very structural hierarchies of economic class, race, and sex that its promise implicitly offers to transcend.

Additionally, and perhaps less recognized, “love,” when used to procure labor renders this labor less refusable, less serious, and ultimately, less like labor at all. If one truly loves something then the labor is not only the reward, but it is an act of self-actualization. The danger in this neoliberal ideology is the way in which it reconfigures work as something that is not work at all, and in doing so, makes any and all demands on behalf of one’s labor illegitimate. Under this mantra, work is no longer work, it is something one pursues for spiritual and existential fulfillment rather than a wage and health benefits. In the next section I turn to my discussion of
fashion interns and in my subsequent section return to the significance “love” bears in relation to compelling free labor.

**Nice Work If You Can Get It**

While intern labor is utilized across the culture industries, the fashion industry stands as the most iconic. This iconicity is due in large part to the numerous television shows (not to mention films and magazine profiles) of this worker; it is, as Strassel observes, a “glamorized form of labor” that remains culturally unrecognizable because of this (“Work It!”). Several reality television shows emerging over the last ten years have specifically centered on the figure of the fashion intern: *Running in Heels* (2009), *Kell on Earth* (2010), *The Rachel Zoe Project* (2008-13), *The Fashionista Diaries* (2007), and *The City* (2008-10), a spin-off of another hit reality television series *The Hills* (2006-10). In all of these productions, a young person (usually a feminine woman but also sometimes a feminine man) travels to a big city (most often New York City) in order to “pay their dues” at a fashion industry leader. The audience follows their misadventures and mishaps while they struggle to “make it” in the industry. Unclear however, is what exactly constitutes “making it.” In *The City* for instance, the show’s over-arching narrative follows the main character, Whitney Port, concluding her internship with Diane VonFurstenberg with a position at *Elle* magazine, and then selling a clothing line to Bergdorf Goodman via a successful fashion show in Bryant Park during New York City’s notoriously competitive and prohibitively expensive Fashion Week. Not only is this narrative arc implausible for most every other intern, but it elides terribly the ways in which Port’s lifestyle is impossible based on the incomes and work schedules of actual interns. Further, this narrative arc re-frames Port’s familial background as irrelevant to her success; Port’s familial wealth and social capital warranted her inclusion in the reality television show *The Hills*, (that followed a wealthy set of teenagers in
Orange County, California) that lead to her role in *The City*. *The City*’s portrayal of Port, both documentary realist in its aesthetic and entirely implausible, renders the very factors that guaranteed her success (i.e., familial wealth and social networks that include television producers) irrelevant, and re-frames her rise within the fashion industry as fueled by her “love” of fashion.

In contrast to Port’s implausible account, is the case of Diana Wang. The case that served as the basis for a 2012 class-action lawsuit, Wang’s story both reproduces and departs from the archetypal narrative presented throughout pop culture:

In August 2011 Xuedan “Diana” Wang began her “dream” position as the “head accessories intern” at the legendary fashion magazine *Harper’s Bazaar* after graduating from Ohio State. Upending her life in Colombus, she moved to New York City only to find herself working as many as fifty-five hours a week without pay. She supervised eight other interns, ran menial errands, and hauled bags of clothes between publicity firms. On some days Wang was unable to eat lunch until 4pm and worked as late as 10pm with no break for dinner. Five months after her internship began, Wang concluded her work as a glorified messenger service for the magazine with no job offer and little professional experience that might help her gain a foothold in the fashion industry. It was her seventh unpaid internship. (Strassel “Work It!”).

Diana’s story is unfortunately not unique. In fact, it is quite similar to another fashion intern’s story, Lauren Ballinger, who in her last semester at the American University of Paris “saved one credit before graduating to use toward an internship at *W,*” a leading U.S. fashion magazine (Haughney “Condé Nast”). “Ms. Ballinger was paid $12.00 a day to work in *W*’s Accessories
Department” working from eight or nine each morning until eight to ten every night “packing, organizing, and delivering accessories to editors” (Haughney “Condé Nast”). Further, Ballinger, who took the position as a part of her career training, was not only trained by other interns and thus did not receive the insider industry training she was promised, or the networking opportunities, but the editors refused to provide Ballinger with a recommendation upon the completion of her internship, effectively withholding from her her last remaining academic credit (Haughney “Condé Nast”).

Wang and Ballinger’s stories are not exceptional but are symptomatic of a larger trend in compelling free labor from a largely young pool of educated, ambitious individuals. Overwhelmingly, this labor pool across culture industries is female, with seventy-seven percent of the intern labor workforce woman-identified (“Summer Intern”). This aspect of the labor pool not only reflects the ways in which cultural representations of the fashion intern compels young women and feminine-leaning persons to pursue it, but also points to how the skills crucial to creative industries, such as flexibility, creativity, and an aesthetic sensibility, is gendered largely feminine, whether a male-identified or female-identified person performs it. Speaking to the topic of feminine labor, Donna Haraway suggests:

To be feminized is to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on the obscene, or out of place. (166).

The labor required of interns, free, reproductive in nature, and invisible, with erratic and overly long work hours, is overwhelmingly feminine. As Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu and Minh-ha Pham
observe, the feminine labor that fashion requires contributes to the perceived triviality of fashion, which works towards its dismissal as an object of study or critique. I suggest that the gender of fashion is both crucial to the perpetuation of the kind of labor exploitation characterized by the fashion intern, because in its triviality, invisibility, and lack of a wage it is rationalized as not “real” labor and thus not “real” exploitation, but also, because the persons doing it (i.e., young, feminine persons) are culturally expected to “love” this work; in effect, this labor is naturalized in ways that render it non-work. In other words, the very qualities that constitute precarious labor, such as flexibility and creativity, are not only characteristic of feminine labor forms, but operate as norms within this industry. Thus, to consider the fashion intern is to consider the ways in which feminine labor is valued, or not.

To be clear, while most of the intern workers within the fashion industry are either completing degrees (and the internship constitutes a portion of their education) or possess one, not all intern workers are young, idealistic twenty-somethings. For many individuals working as interns, their hopes of obtaining “success” are diluted through a seemingly endless series of internships, effecting what Alex Williams terms “a permanent intern underclass” whose inability to secure waged employment is upheld through programs forever holding out the promise of a job with a paycheck (Williams “For Interns”). Wang’s story states that her position at Harper’s was her seventh, while in another high-profile case (that also lead to a lawsuit), Eric Glatt, who holds a Masters degree in Business Administration in addition to a Bachelor of Arts, was forty-four and had just finished his fourth internship when he began organizing on behalf of interns (Williams “For Interns”). This age difference makes sense when considering the larger context within which it exists: namely, the dissolution of paid positions within the culture industries and its replacement with unpaid interns. Doing work within the culture industry (whether fashion,
film, or music) means doing it for free, or very nearly so. This phenomenon stands in stark contrast to the promises extended by the internship itself: a future with a paycheck. Internships are held out as temporary stopovers on one’s way to something bigger and better, when in reality, the internship is a mode of work that is both temporary and short-lived, exemplifying precarious working conditions with little end in sight. This exact reality is captured in the case of Alec Dudson, who after completing several sequential internships, at 29 started *Intern* magazine, a bi-annual glossy that provides articles, tips, and inspiration for what *The New York Times* tellingly refers to as “the faceless drones who keep the style industries humming” (Williams “For Interns”). Dudson’s venture is not alone; there is *FindSpark*, a New York jobs network for recent graduates that provides meet-ups and events with themes such as, “follow your passion,” and “your ideal brand” that “draw hundreds” (Williams “For Interns”). There are also several blogs detailing the daily toils of interns in various industries: *Life of an Investment Banking Summer Slave, Anonymous Production Assistant* (for interns working within the film and television industries), *Intern-Anonymous* (all interns), and most relevant to the present study, *Fashion Intern Problems* and *The Devil Pays Nada* (also for fashion interns).63 These cultural phenomena not only point towards the widespread proliferation of this labor form, but also towards the suspended, if not indefinite nature it holds for many. For Glatt, who is a founding member of the group Intern Labor Rights, internship labor operates as “an institutionalized form of wage theft” (Williams “For Interns”). In this way, many individuals express feeling “trapped” in a cycle that, the longer one is in it seems all the more difficult to leave because one has already put in “dues” towards that always already in the future job.

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63 All of these blogs are accessible via a simple Google search.
This aspect of their status as workers is exacerbated by the fact that most intern workers are already fearful of speaking up or expressing grievances because of the competitive and tenuous nature of their position. This level of competition is no more apparent than in the world of high fashion, when in 2012, thousands of individuals bid through an online auction for a chance to intern, and specifically, work for free at Chanel, Balenciaga, and Valentino (Lerévérend “Balenciaga”). It is this level of competition made possible by both the post-recession hiring practices, but also the ideology of doing what one loves, that maintains the pervasive belief that should one leave there is always already someone else willing to fill your space. As Edwards and Hertel-Fernandez outline in their study: “The crucial role of internships in obtaining later employment and the highly competitive market for placement means that no one student has an incentive to report to their employer, even in cases of blatant abuses, since another student will readily work for free” (Edwards and Hertel-Fernandez, *Not-So-Equal*). As one former intern worker, Rachel Watson (not her real name) stated when discussing her lawsuit against British fashion house Alexander McQueen: “How could I confront my employer at the time when they held all the cards to my future in the industry?” (Page “Unpaid Intern”). Watson’s comment speaks to the way in which the very purpose of the internship- industry affiliation- simultaneously serves as the underlying punitive threat. In other words, by offering one’s labor for free in exchange for a promise, one is already at a disadvantage.

This disadvantaged position interns occupy in relation to their employers is structured within the very terms established to prevent their exploitation. Established in 1938, and later strengthened with six guidelines via a 1947 Supreme Court case, the Fair Labor Standards Act (hereafter, FLSA) provides the terms against which the legality of an internship is measured. The guidelines, meant to differentiate between an employee and trainee, do so through the following:
a shared assumption that the labor performed is for vocational and/or educational purposes (and is thus training rather than employment), that the training benefits the trainees, that trainees do not replace regular employees (but work under their supervision), that the employer receive no immediate advantage from the trainee’s activities (and may even experience such training as an impediment), that trainees are not entitled to a job upon completion of the training, and that there is a mutual understanding that trainees are not entitled to wages (“Fact Sheet #71”). If all six guidelines are met, then the “employee” is legally considered to be a “trainee,” or in this case an intern. However, there are several crucial limits to these guidelines, the first of which concerns the wageless nature of this work. Originally intended to establish guidelines for apprenticeships that were for manual labor and production work, these guidelines cannot and do not account for how the U.S. labor market has changed dramatically, exemplified here in the creative labor necessary to culture industries like fashion (Greenhouse “The Unpaid Intern”). As Edwards and Hertel-Fernandez note: “A serious problem surrounding unpaid interns is [that] they are often not considered employees and therefore are not protected by employment discrimination laws,” such as legislation that protects against sexual harassment, and/or discrimination based on race, age, or physical and/or mental ability (Not-So-Equal). This is because the very statutes that are intended to protect employees in the workplace are established on the grounds of a relationship wherein the employer provides the employee with a wage, the very thing that mediates and defines them as such. Further, these guidelines “permit (and even incentivize) the replacement of regular workers with unpaid college students and recent graduates,” because it sanctions the employer’s practice of compelling free labor from intern workers under the guise of “educational purposes.” The supposed “educational purposes” is evident in the mediating body that most often arranges the internships: university programs that possess corporate contracts with the internship
offering agencies (Williams “For Interns;” Greenhouse “The Unpaid Intern”). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any situation wherein free labor is not to the immediate advantage of an employer (or in this case, the educator). It is this aspect (i.e., the “educational purposes” that render the labor unwaged) of the unpaid positions that fosters their growth, because it is always to the employers’ advantage to obtain labor for free, rather than having to invest in a waged worker. This leads to what is perhaps the most glaring problem to the proliferation of this labor: the way in which it limits the participation to students who can afford to work for free, “effectively institutionalizing socioeconomic disparities” (Edwards and Hertel-Fernandez Not-So-Equal).

Fortunately, this phenomenon has not been unchallenged. Starting in 2011, a series of lawsuits have emerged challenging both the FLSA and the industries that profit from this free labor (excluding the university programs). The most legally significant of these lawsuits happened in 2011, when two unpaid interns sued Fox Searchlight Pictures (for whom they worked on the film The Black Swan). This case provided a landmark ruling in 2013 when the state of New York ruled in favor of the interns, providing legal precedent for subsequent lawsuits (Williams “For Interns”). Specifically, this ruling asserted that the interns’ position with the media company violated federal and state minimum wage laws, and thus provided the legal grounds for other unwaged interns to sue for stolen wages; while, many of these cases remain unsettled, the original 2013 ruling settled in 2016, and the interns were awarded $495.00 each (Williams “For Interns;” Siegal “Fox to Pay”). In 2012, Wang’s case against the Hearst Magazine conglomerate (having worked as an intern at the fashion glossy Harper’s Bazaar) came before a judge as well. In July of 2012, a federal court ruled that Wang could continue with her lawsuit as a collective action, which effectively certified a class of unpaid interns who had
worked in the company’s magazine division since roughly February of 2009; however, the following May, the same judge ruled that under New York state’s wage laws the interns could not proceed as a class action lawsuit (Williams “For Interns;” Greenhouse “The Unpaid Intern”). A similar lawsuit was filed in 2013 against fashion magazine powerhouse Condé Nast; although this lawsuit was dismissed, Condé Nast ended its years-long internship program that same year (Weber “Condé Nast”). Likewise, other corporations who had long profited from intern labor also made adjustments so as to protect themselves legally.

What the fashion intern points to then is how the immaterial, precarious labor of the culture industries manifests in highly gendered ways. Represented as a glamorous lifestyle, the fashion intern typically does not earn wages, nor does she (and she is typically a “she”) usually obtain the waged position she was promised. The fashion intern’s labor (like other precarious workers of the culture industries) is feminine in that it remains unwaged and highly flexible, yet performs a socially reproductive function; indeed, her unwaged labor is crucial to fashion’s production. Further, like other precarious labor forms, the fashion intern’s labor is compelled and naturalized through the ideology of “do what you love;” because it is work that one “loves,” one should perform it for free, and because one “loves” it (and is willing to perform it for free), it is not work but rather an extension of one’s highest self. In what follows I turn to the original texts of the international Wages for Housework campaign and organization in order to highlight how the analytic this group articulated provides a compelling and useful analysis for understanding the gendered, precarious exploitation of the fashion intern.

**Wages for Work Done by Women**

The rebellion against compulsory labor performed in the name of love is no more present than in the Wages for Housework campaign. Wages for Housework, as both an international
campaign and network of organizations, began in 1971, when Selma James, a U.S. citizen well-versed and experienced within the Civil Rights struggle and Mariarosa Della Costa, an Italian graduate student of Antonio Negri, met in Padua, Italy. Roughly a year after this meeting, the two published *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*, wherein they outline the specific condition and significance of women, conceived of as a class, in a capitalist system. Emerging from the autonomous Marxist tradition, Wages for Housework examined the struggles of the worker as evident in their daily experiences, and thus conceived of resistance and subversion as necessarily emerging from within the workers themselves (rather than a labor union or political party). For Wages for Housework, that worker was encapsulated in the figure of the working class housewife and her care work: the unpaid and unvalued labor necessary to reproducing workers (James and Dalla Costa 41).

In her article on the transnational aspect of the campaign, historian Maud Bracke asserts that while the campaign did not result in any tangible changes (i.e., actual wages), the campaign did “allow women to reclaim their work, develop a collective political consciousness based on it, and render visible the value of care duties” (628-9). In the years that followed, other central figures, such as Leopoldina Fortunati, Silvia Federici, and Judith Ramirez also published under the banner of Wages for Housework. Other groups quickly emerged in relation to Wages for Housework: Black Women for Wages for Housework, Wages Due Lesbians, the English Collective of Prostitutes, and some years later WinVisible, for women with visible and invisible disabilities (original document, “Women in the Workforce”).64 The different chapters of Wages for Housework spanned across borders, with groups in New York, Britain, Italy, and Canada.

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64 I have obtained original documents from the Wages for Housework Campaign from the Barnard Center for Research on Women archives’ digital collection, “Women in the Workforce.” I have cited this site in my bibliography.
While the various chapters organized different local projects, overwhelmingly two central beliefs informed their vision across borders. The first stemming from their conceptualization of “woman” in a capitalist system, was the refusal of work as the expression of their nature as women. While some contemporary feminists and gender scholars might cringe at the potentially essentialist underpinnings of this aspect of their framework, I assert that it remains fiercely anti-essentialist in politic. Working within a Marxist tradition, these feminists challenged the normative structure that defined “woman” as a person destined to one’s biology, most prominently as mother and caretaker. As Federici states in a 1975 paper on the demand for wages for housework: “It is the demand by which our nature ends and our struggle begins because just to want wages for housework means to refuse that work as the expression of our nature, and therefore to refuse precisely the female role that capital has invented for us” (18). In this passage, the wage is the boundary that distinguishes a social role between “natural” essence and historical worker, and the demand for this wage is an explicit recognition that “the female role” is not a natural category, but rather a role that “capital has invented for us.” Further, as Bracke points out, “The proposal was for the waging of domestic work by anyone carrying it out, including men- although the understanding was that in the majority of cases it would benefit women. No distinction was made between those engaged in waged labour and those not” (628). In other words, the language of “women” in these materials is flexible, rather than fixed; for the Wages for Housework campaign “woman” is a social location, not a biological truth.

Importantly, this assertion has far reaching implications for feminism. The wage in this analysis is less the end goal, and more a means to an end: while it most certainly works to make visible the unpaid, and devalued labor of care work, the wage is not the emancipation itself. On the contrary, emancipation from the work and the attendant identity coupled to it underlies the
demand for wages for housework. Perhaps less recognized, this analytic troubled the presumption that one’s work, whether waged or not, is always or should always operate as some expression of one’s “true” or “authentic” self. In other words, it challenged the assumption that “work” could be or ever is anything other than “work.”

In addition to the refusal of work as the expression of nature, Wages for Housework articulated and challenged the widespread and unspoken expectation to perform or undertake work out of “love.” While perhaps most obviously speaking to the work of child and home care, this aspect of their analytic reached well beyond that realm. As James and Dalla Costa state in their movement-founding text: “Where women are concerned, their labor appears to be a personal service outside of capital” (Dalla Costa and James 35). The work undertaken as love, such as listening to others problems, tidying up after others, and in general, providing comfort to others, is not only gendered in this analysis but it is articulated as work. This aspect of their argument furthers the analytic of the first; the ideology of “love” in capitalist relations effectively works to denaturalize the exploitation and labor made possible through “love.” Articulating a wage for such unpaid labor forces the recognition that it is labor at all. This is the very analytic frame with which the campaign was able to expand to include issues and topics such as sex work, marital rape, female sexuality, and the use value of cultivated attractiveness to capitalism (Costa and James 42; Federici 15-22; 23-27). Additionally, and perhaps less acknowledged, this aspect of their analytic when coupled with the refusal of work as the expression of one’s nature, worked to de-couple a practice, be it waged labor, unpaid labor, or a sexual act, from identity. As Federici argues in another position paper from 1975:

The difference with housework lies in the fact that not only has it been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female
physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from
the depth of our female character. Housework was transformed into a natural
attribute, rather than being recognized as work, because it was destined to be
unwaged. Capital had to convince us that it is a natural, unavoidable, and even
fulfilling activity to make us accept working without a wage. (16).

Again, “wages,” in this analytic are not the goal, but a means to articulate one.

To be clear on this point: “woman” in this sense is a signifier for very specific kinds of
labor; namely, reproductive labor which includes the very literal reproduction of the work force,
as well the “caring” labors necessary to reproducing capitalist social relations. It operates as such
because the critique resides in the dictate of what “woman-status” constitutes. In other words,
thinking about the ways in which this labor is considered natural to “women” is the point. The
criticism put forth by Wages for Housework in this framework is to *challenge* essentialism
through a critical interrogation of the categorical value of “woman” in a capitalist system.

What I find valuable and interesting in these texts is the way in which they so forcefully
push back on the neoliberal conception of the self that is thoroughly enmeshed with one’s
“work” identity in the present moment; namely, the ideology of “do what you love” that suggests
that one’s work should reflect one’s values primarily, and a living wage secondarily. “Do what
you love” sutures one’s work to one’s identity in that it suggests that work does not have to be
“work” because if one chooses to do what they “love” then one can circumvent work and
exploitation altogether. In this way, what one does for work is a reflection of what one “loves” or
values, rather than how one obtains wages. Further, this aspect of neoliberalism (i.e., one’s self
as one’s work) is fueled by the very ideology that the Wages for Housework feminists articulated
as a point of critique in the 1970s: the ideology of love. The labor for which the Wages for
Housework feminists demanded wages (i.e., child bearing and rearing, cooking, cleaning, shopping, physical affection, and emotional labor) is compelled from people under the guise of love. While this labor is most certainly not always performed by woman-identified persons, one cannot deny the ways in which this work and indeed, the ideology of love coupled with it, is gendered feminine. Eliding the gendered nature of unwaged or severely under-waged reproductive labor is to deny both the consistency in the majority of persons performing it, the historical legacy of cultural and educational institutions dedicated to indoctrinating woman-identified persons into it, and the role popular conceptions and norms concerning maternal love (whether a mother or not) influence social structures surrounding femininity. Indeed, the consistent characteristic of feminine labor is that it is largely compelled and obtained for free.

Importantly, these premises were not completely without criticism. While the Left at this time was willing and able to articulate a critique of identity rooted in one’s career or employment, Wages for Housework remained beyond the Left in its rejection of waged labor itself. At the 1972 National Women’s Liberation Movement Conference (held in Manchester, England) Selma James spoke to wages for housework, however, she presented it as “a guaranteed income for men and women” (qtd. in Bracke 629). As Bracke astutely observes: “while [James’] demands (that represented the organization and campaign’s) such as the right to work less, equal pay, women’s control over their bodies, an end to price raises, and free, community-controlled nurseries, were already present within the feminist movement of that time, strong criticism and resistance to waged housework emerged from the conference participants” (629). The criticism voiced at the conference and at the time of the original campaign more generally, was similar; namely, that by obtaining a wage for housework, feminists not only ran

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65 The literature concerning the ideological and institutional training of women into maternal and domestic roles is vast and beyond the scope of this chapter.
the risk of chaining women to this work through the wage, but also threatened a perceived “sacred sphere” of authentic love and femininity. In other words, by exchanging a wage for this labor, the purported “love” that motivates it ceases to exist. In the next section I conclude my analysis by returning to the concept of the social factory, and outline how Wages for Housework’s analytic challenges the premise that the social factory is novel to late, post-Fordist capitalism and immaterial laborers.

**The Social Factory and the Democratization of Feminine Labor**

The proliferation of immaterial labor evident in the culture industries means that a blurred distinction between one’s work life and leisure is increasingly shared by many. This blurred distinction between the work day and the leisure hours is an aspect of contemporary life contained within the concept of the social factory, “the arrival point of a long historical process,” in which “all social production has become capitalist production” (Tronti 105). The concept of the social factory is meant to articulate the ways in which the proliferation of immaterial labor (and thus the re-configuration of work itself) encapsulates all spheres of production within a capitalist mode. As Kylie Jarrett observes, the “re-organization of labor around immateriality extends the influence of the capitalist mode of accumulation…In immaterial capitalism, life processes considered outside of capitalist logics, and necessarily so to maintain their validity, become re-organized so that they reflect the logics of industrialized capital” (31). This extension of the working day means that the distinction between one’s work life is no longer distinguishable from one’s private life, and that one’s work is increasingly blurred with a conception of one’s self. This intermeshing between sociality and the dictates of capital are captured in the concept of the social factory.
Although credited to Tronti (1973), numerous scholars writing within the tradition have articulated its novelty within the current moment.\footnote{For instance, Lazzarato (discussed earlier) and Hardt and Negri all assert that “the great transformation” is a manifestation of contemporary capitalism (i.e., the shift to immaterial labor and the breaking down of the boundaries between the working and leisure hours).} Alarming here however is an assumption concerning the boundaries of the self and work that overwhelmingly elides the work of the Wages for Housework campaign; the assumption rests on the belief that previous to the current moment, all productive activity was attached to, or fell within waged labor. While a few scholars have identified this elision, Jarrett speaks eloquently to this specific oversight: “The assertions of the novelty of the social factory that have crept into understandings of immaterial labor imply that until recently there have been spaces unnecessary to capitalist accumulation and, therefore, outside of its logics” (55). Of course, as James, Dalla Costa, Ramirez, and Federici (to name a few) articulated as early as 1971, the unwaged labor of the housewife (taken as a political figure whose unwaged, and invisible labor encompasses the whole of feminine, reproductive labors under capitalism) is not only crucial to the generation of surplus value, but the value is contingent on it being unwaged (whether explicitly free or disciplined through a familial or part-time wage). In other words, the notion that the social factory is a novel, if not contemporary phenomenon, can only exist as such if the wageless, reproductive labor most often performed by woman-identified persons is accepted as value-less, and the theoretical framework articulated by the Wages for Housework campaign is entirely dismissed.

This elision is all the more troubling given both the constitution of precarious labor forms, but also the gendered labor of immaterial work. As McRobbie observes, the feminization of creative and cultural industries is a considerable factor when understanding the precarity of the fields. Fashion is explicitly gendered; not only is fashion associated with femininity, but the
labor of it, particularly the fashion intern, is overwhelmingly female (as discussed earlier in this chapter), and the representations of this labor are female and feminine persons. This feminization of the work under neoliberal capitalism is in part due to McRobbie’s observation that woman-identified persons are taking up a greater share of waged work, but also because the very work becoming “increasingly precarious, and under-compensated” is explicitly “reliant on ‘soft’ skills such as communication, affect and cognition” (Jarret 18). These modes of laboring are not irrelevant to understanding the proliferation of precarity, particularly immaterial labor’s gender, because as Christina Morini argues, “in cognitive capitalism precariousness, mobility, and fragmentation become constituent elements of the work of all persons irrespective of gender. The model advanced is pliable, hyper-flexible, and in this sense it draws on the baggage of female experience” (4, emphasis in original).

Even when gender is not taken as a primary category of analysis in understanding this proliferation in precarious labor forms and immateriality, the way in which it expands the feminine experience in capitalism is explicit. One such example is Ross’s opening statements concerning increasing precarity: “the precariousness of work in these fields also reflects the infiltration of models of nonstandard employment from low-wage service sectors. The chronic contingency of employment conditions for all low-skill workers and migrants is more and more normative, where before it was characteristic of a secondary labor market, occupied primarily by women working on a part-time basis, or at discounted wages in an era dominated by the ‘family wage’ of the male breadwinner” (“The New Geography” 34). These statements are part of a longer discussion wherein Ross outlines the ways in which precarity increasingly characterizes creative and cultural industries; he does not return to, or discuss gender in the remainder of his text. A similar passing reference to gender occurs in Michael Hardt’s 1996 article, “Affective
Labor” (one of the texts considered foundational and oft-cited in studies of immaterial labor). In this article Hardt states:

Affective labor is better understood by beginning from what feminist analyses of ‘women’s work’ have called ‘labor in the bodily mode.’ Caring labor is certainly entirely immersed in the corporeal, the somatic, but the affects it produces are nonetheless immaterial. What affective labor produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower. (96).

However, like Ross, Hardt does not return to, nor does he adopt gender as a primary category of analysis, despite acknowledging the ways in which the concept of immaterial labor not only draws significantly from earlier feminist scholarship, but marks an explicitly gendered phenomenon. Speaking to the immateriality of domestic work, Jarrett states: “Domestic labor can consist of menial physical work, but it also has a set of immaterial qualities” that, as Leopoldina Fortunati (a founding member of the Wages for Housework campaign) notes, include: “affect, care, love, education, socialization, communication, information, entertainment, organization, planning, coordination, and logistics” (Fortunati 144). Indeed, as Jarret goes on to observe: “Even the repetitive, physical, menial chores of housework are often driven by, or serve as expressions of, the immaterial values of care work. This work also produces immaterial products such as health, dispositions, or esteem. These products and activities map closely onto the types of unpaid labor associated with digital media industries,” and, I would add, the immaterial labor necessary to and exploited within the cultural and creative industries broadly (Jarrett 2).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined how the global structure of labor and the conditions of post-Fordist capitalism have altered the nature of work in the U.S. broadly, but in the fashion
industry specifically. Examining the figure of the fashion intern, I have outlined how the labor of interns performs work crucial to fashion’s production, yet remains largely unwaged. I situate the fashion intern within a broader field of precarious workers, whose labor has been made unstable through the absence of legal contracts and the lack of protection and social benefits, collective agreement of employment, and low wages (if any wages at all). Fashion interns, and the broader swath of precarious workers with which they are a part, are immaterial laborers whose work provides the cultural, communicative, and cognitive content of commodities, and their existence is wrought from the very restructuring of the global economy that has produced and entrenched the global division of labor. I have argued in this chapter that a crucial part of the proliferation of precarious labor forms has been the ideology of “do what you love,” which compels low-wage, or entirely unwaged labor from individuals through the rhetoric of “love.” Through this ideology, labor is rendered less refusable, less serious, and ultimately, less like labor at all; because it is work that one “loves,” one should perform it for free, and because one “loves” it (and is willing to perform it for free), it is not work but rather an extension of one’s highest self. This ideology is most pervasive in the very industries marked by precarious labor forms, such as the fashion industry, and thus bears influence on who can participate in them; in other words, if the labor necessary to the culture industries is unwaged (especially the entry-level positions like internships), then the industry is structurally foreclosed to those who cannot afford to work for free. In this way, the ideology of “doing what one loves,” calcifies the very structural hierarchies of economic class, race, and sex that its promise implicitly offers to transcend.

In the second half of this chapter, I consider how the proliferation of precarious labor and the ideology of “do what you love” re-enact some of the very terms of analysis articulated by the Wages for Housework campaign. Specifically, the campaign’s act of naming, visibilizing, and
re-defining work, central to the concerns articulated by fashion interns (as well as other precarious laborers) mirrors the tactics central to the Wages for Housework campaign. Most importantly, the campaign’s critique of labor compelled for free through the ideology of love, in its act of naming and visibilizing labor, works towards divorcing an identity based on one’s work; in this way, the campaign’s analysis speaks to the spiritual underpinnings of “do what you love” that suggest that one’s work is an extension of one’s self. In the last section, I return to the theories of immaterial labor in order to illustrate how the analysis offered by Wages for Housework pre-dates theories regarding the “social factory.” This elision of the Wages for Housework campaign in theories of immaterial labor, in many ways, re-enacts the very invisibilizing of labor the campaign was quite critical of, and ignores how immaterial labor bears a gendered component.
Conclusion

This dissertation is the culmination of a years-long process of reflection on why, and how I have learned to “see” sweatshops. My knowledge of sweatshops is not drawn from personal or familial experience, but from the news media, daytime talk shows, history class, gender and women’s studies courses, documentary films, and participation in social movements (whether through political education or political organizing). I have undertaken this dissertation curious about how particular forms of inquiry and framing influence the ways in which knowledge becomes “useful.” In this dissertation, I explore how the conventions of explaining, documenting, and framing sweatshops are productive of other truths, useful in ways that exceed the topic of sweatshops. In this section of my dissertation, I review my main points, theoretical framework and overarching argument, re-state my contributions to the field of gender and women’s studies, and highlight some areas for consideration in future feminist research.

In this dissertation, I have examined how sweatshops and the sweatshop worker are framed and represented as exceptional objects of inquiry that foster particular kinds of subjects and truths. Pursuing this topic, I have examined the modes of inquiry and framings employed to represent sweatshops in and to the U.S., and have discussed the ways in which U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse mobilizes subjects for particular ends, and is productive of certain truths. In chapter one, I examined texts whose organizing principle is a mobilizing, anti-sweatshop discourse so as to highlight how certain conventions structure the modes of inquiry and framings used to represent sweatshops in the U.S. Overwhelmingly, the conventions used to frame and represent sweatshops are drawn from the genre of documentary realism; in their desire to demystify the system of global production for U.S. consumers, U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse employs the tools of documentary realism so as to communicate the severity of exploitation.
wrought through globalization. In this dissertation I identify several tools of this genre that re-
occur throughout the texts I analyze: spatial and temporal distancing, the use of personal 
testimonies, the privileging of mobile capital over and against the nation-state and garment 
workers, and the persistent embodiment through photographic and linguistic modes of 
visualization. Throughout this dissertation, I highlight how the sweatshop and sweatshop worker 
are represented through the use of these conventions, and how these representations both secure 
a conception of the sweatshop as inherently foreign, but also, the moral distance of the journalist 
(or scholar) explorer and U.S. consumer audience.

In each chapter I highlight how the tools of documentary realism I identify in chapter one 
are employed in and through U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, and examine the kinds of truths 
gained from them. Thus, in chapter one in my discussion of anti-sweatshop texts, I outline how 
in the 1980s these conventions were used so as to secure both a conception of sweatshops as 
inherently foreign, but also a framing that rendered global feminism necessary to sweatshops’ 
eradication. Likewise, in chapter two, I outlined how the explorer-journalist accounts of the 
1890s and the 1980s framed sweatshops as a foreign method of working, a problem of 
immigration rather than competition, flexible production, and racial capitalism. My analysis of 
the t-shirt debate in chapter two highlights how framing sweatshops through the lens of 
sensationalized, documentary realism does not ensure any truer account, and in its commitment 
to sensationalizing sweatshops so as to compel and mobilize the audience, influences the ways in 
which labor exploitation is “seen” in the West and U.S. Similarly, in chapter three I examined 
how the lens of documentary realism colludes with liberal theories of choice so as to render some 
U.S. consumers monstrous creatures, obstacles to global progress, and others honest, authentic, 
and morally righteous in their consumption practices. On a related but different path of analysis,
in chapter four I query the mystification of the fashion intern, whose labor is often the subject of reality television programs. In this chapter I outline how the fashion intern’s labor is portrayed as a glamorous, ambitious lifestyle in U.S. media, and argue that these portrayals stand in stark contrast to the actual conditions of labor within which fashion interns work. As a highly precarious labor form, the fashion intern exemplifies how the ideology of “doing what one loves,” compels free labor, colluding with the very mystification that portrays fashion intern work as glamorous, ambitious, and fulfilling. Together, these analyses evidence the extent to which the documentary realist conventions I identify in my introduction structure U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse, as well as the truths and subjects garnered from them.

I have pursued my analysis of U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse with the theoretical frameworks provided by U.S. Third World, post-colonial, and transnational feminism. Specifically, in this dissertation I have identified three theoretical concepts crucial to understanding the framings and representation of sweatshops and the sweatshop worker in the U.S.: the criticism of world systems theory and binary conceptions of power, the production and circulation of the Third World Woman, and Spivak’s concept of epistemic violence. Throughout this dissertation I return to each, and the three concepts together deeply inform the structure and interventions I attempt. For instance, throughout this dissertation I attempt to articulate the limits to the binary conception of power derived from world systems theory that structures U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse. In chapter three I address the tensions and limits to this concept most explicitly through my analysis of ethical consumerism and retail gentrification. My interest in problematizing the binary conception of power I see consistently reproduced throughout U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse (and across the proliferation of alternative retailers broadly) is the way in which this framing positions the poor and racialized populations in the U.S. as obstacles to
(global) progress; in other words, those lacking the alternative tastes that consume sweatshop-free clothing are held accountable for sweatshop’s existence. This framing is dangerous in that it tends to blame the most economically vulnerable while revering the actions of the economically privileged, and in doing so, actually works towards a form of moral distancing- and literal dislocation- of the poor, racialized, ethnic, and elderly populations whose consumer tastes are not reflected in the alternative retailers that gentrify. Thus, my analysis of ethical consumerism and retail gentrification is invested in outlining the ways in which documentary realism permeates sweatshop-free and alternative retailers (such as American Apparel), but also how the logic that renders ethical consumption possible (i.e., binary conceptions of power) positions U.S. consumers as either enlightened moral agents whose consumption saves, or moral failures, whose consumption upholds exploitation elsewhere.

The overarching argument in this dissertation is that U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse frames and represents sweatshops as inherently foreign. I assert that through the “singling out of the sweatshop” that represents sweatshops as an economic aberration, whose existence is separable from the social and geopolitical conditions wrought through U.S. imperialism, U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse frames the problem of sweatshops as solely, and exclusively economic in nature. When framed as an exclusively economic problem, with strictly economic solutions (such as ethical consumerism) it performs a form of containment that renders sweatshops an economic aberration. When contained as an economic aberration, sweatshops are rendered foreign to the U.S., rather than a pervasive, consistent, and structural component to the U.S. economy. Thus, when sweatshops outside the U.S. are represented in U.S. news, they are framed through the lens of sensationalism that divorces them from U.S. imperialism, and attributes causal blame to U.S. consumers (as well as “backwards” Third World nations). Likewise, when
in the U.S., sweatshops are framed as a part of an “underground” economy, the products of immigrant communities, rather than the structure of competition, flexibility, and subcontracting that is integral to apparel production (and founded in the U.S. apparel industry). In this dissertation, I have argued that this framing of sweatshops as inherently foreign participates in a conception of America as an exceptional nation, “interested in spreading universal values, not in conquest or domination” (A. Kaplan, “Where is Guantanamo?” 832). In this way, by framing sweatshops as a foreign phenomenon whose existence depends on the benevolent actions of enlightened U.S. consumers, the imperialism that undergirds global supply chains is circumvented, positioning the U.S. as exceptional, and its alternative consumers as exceptional saviors.

I situate this dissertation at the intersection of transnational feminist cultural studies, and studies of fashion, labor, and gender. Part of my interest in examining U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse specifically is rooted in my attempt at “accountable positioning,” in that in this dissertation I “attempt to locate myself in a field of power (the West) and in the production of a particular knowledge,” in order to be “answerable for what I have learned to see, and for what I have learned to do” (Visweswaran 97). As stated in the opening of this section, part of the process of completing this dissertation involved reflection on how I have learned to “see” sweatshops. I understand accountable positioning to necessarily include this process, but also to connect these learned visions, thoughts, opinions, and moralisms, to larger systems of inequity. Additionally, part of my motivation in employing the concept of accountable positioning is to unsettle some of the norms that structure transnational research. As Leela Fernandes observes:

Global and transnational research and theory are driven by the search for spaces
and processes (whether they are cultural, political, or economic) that are not contained within the nation-state. The result is that the space of the transnational becomes territorialized through the search for border-crossing activities and phenomena…Locked in opposition to the nation-state, transnational research often mirrors the borders of the sovereign, bounded form of the nation it seeks to move beyond. (7).

The positioning I employ is an attempt to examine specifically how national borders are produced and productive; I examine U.S. anti-sweatshop discourse both as a site within which conceptions of the foreign are distilled and circulated within the figuration of the sweatshop and the sweatshop worker, but also and necessarily as a site of production for the national “home.” I have sought to articulate how “a sense of the foreign is necessary to erect boundaries that enclose the nation as home” (A. Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity” 582). Thus, in this way, this dissertation contributes to transnational feminist cultural studies in that it is invested in articulating the transnational linkages whose production and maintenance are crucial to systems of imperialism, global capitalism, and nation-making (as opposed to an exclusive focus on transnational phenomena).

This dissertation also makes contributions to theories of precarity and immateriality, especially as they pertain, or not, to gender. I have employed the theories produced by Wages for Housework, specifically their analysis of the reproductive, unwaged labor of the home-worker in my study of the fashion intern. In chapter four, I intervene in contemporary theorizations of immaterial and affective labor that elide the work of Marxist feminist theory, and thus contribute to feminist and Marxist theories of labor. The elision of the Wages for Housework campaign and organization in contemporary studies of immaterial and affective labors is troubling, to say the
least. In many ways, the tendency to omit the Wages for Housework Campaign in studies of immateriality and precarity reify their analysis: that some forms of labor are, in the current system, unrecognizable. However, as evidenced in chapter four, the analytic offered by this campaign remains quite relevant, and the growing tendency towards precarity in a broad swath of cultural industries, unfortunately, renders this important theoretical framework all the more valuable. In chapter four I also bring Wages for Housework’s analytic to bear on fashion labor, and thus contribute to studies of fashion and immaterial labor by identifying the significance of gender. Little research to date has examined how the fashion intern’s socially necessary labor (and I add, interns working throughout the culture industries) re-enacts feminist theories of gendered labor, most prominently those produced by the Wages for Housework Campaign. More critical, feminist intervention regarding the import of femininity to an increasingly precarious economy is much needed in this regard.

In conclusion, I wish to underscore the significance of critical, scholarly attention to identity formations and social processes as related to economic class. My analysis in chapter three concerning the classed dimensions of moralized consumption hints at the classism that permeates the broader Left in the U.S., not excluding feminism and feminist theory. While the tone and attitudes on display in People of Walmart may represent an extreme, the blog signifies a common tendency to pathologize social practices that may be more accurately understood as intimately related to economic class, such as clothing, comportment, self-administered automobile repairs and medical care, dental hygiene, and of course consumer choice. Part of what it means to pathologize is to establish distance, whether moral or spatial, so as to prevent contamination, infection, or any sense of affinity or similarity. This need for distance is evident in the concept of retail gentrification, but also the reluctance to engage economic class as a
structuring principle in U.S. life at this political and historical moment; analyses of race, sex, and
gender require this crucial component, yet all too often it seems, it is not thoroughly considered.
My desire to unsettle the binaries that guide ethical consumerism is drawn from the
pathologizing tendency I see at this practice’s core: to further establish the moral superiority of
wealth in the U.S. as norm. Being accountable to one’s position means reckoning with the kinds
of distance one willingly establishes, and attending to those social phenomena in proximity to
one’s location; thus, addressing the classism that permeates the Left (even if only its more liberal
counterparts), is the work of those who identify with its political ambitions.
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