

Be Labouring Women's Imagery: The Work of the Women's Labour History Project

A Personal/Public Narrative

Sara Diamond

The Women's Labour History Project initially came into being in 1978, when I was both a student and employee at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. This institution was a site of militant student organization and feminist union activity throughout the 1970s. I had left high school at the early age of sixteen, worked in clerical positions since that time with the exception of a brief stay in a rural commune and a journey to Latin America. Prior to university, I had participated in organizing clerical workers at the University of British Columbia where I had worked as the coordinator of the Real Estate division of the Commerce Department. In this capacity I was responsible for the education of all of the real estate agents for the area of Vancouver, overseeing their courses, curriculum and examinations.

This position was particularly ironic because I had already invested in a profound hatred of private property. My job felt like a ritual reenactment of the Myth of Sisyphus on a repetitive basis. Each night, riding home on the bus or driving in my ancient push button Valiant (a slant six no less) I would ponder the Marxist tautology that being creates consciousness. I could imagine no greater quantity of alienation than that which I experienced.

The Coffee Wars

My union activity did not begin in Vancouver. Before coming to the West Coast hinterland I was of Toronto, that central Canadian city, with its antiseptic streets, and poignant desire to emulate New York (at least in its relationship to artistic production). I did little exotic, other than participate in anti-war demonstrations, Marxist study groups and union activity. Working at "City Hall", I landed in the Planning Department (undoubtedly foreshadowing my later career in real estate), the only division of city government that was non-union. To add insult to the injury of unpaid overtime and low wages, we clerical women were required to make coffee twice a day, serving it to the planning commission and all three floors of the planners.

I saw "red". First, I convinced my co-workers that we should not have to serve coffee. Then, with Mary, my faithful companion, I mounted a campaign. We slowly withdrew the top floor of planners from coffee service; we aged the coffee grinds after use and recycled them (only to our horror to receive complements); we mixed coffee and tea; we arrived late with coffee for the planning commission; we spilled beverages on the floor, on planners and desks. Finally, we declared our intention, provided a new plan which rotated beverage production and went on full coffee strike. Amazingly, it worked!

Emboldened by this success, I proceeded to contact the Canadian Union of Public Employees, asking them for union sign-up cards. I went from worker to worker, but coffee was one thing. Signing a card offered by a solitary eighteen year old brat employee was quite another. What protection would they have if discovered? To my shock I was quickly dragged into the office of the Chief Planner, admonished for my activities and swiftly fired.

Soon after, I spent weeks of my unemployment assisting striking furniture workers at a South African owned plant in Toronto's suburbs. Most of the employees were immigrants; this was a left-wing Canadian union and the Toronto police lived up to the reputations of their Los Angeles counterparts and waded into strikers on a regular basis with motorcycles, truncheons and dogs. The various juvenilia of the left organized support and the strike became a cause celebre, with significant public sympathy. It was not enough to help them win the strike though. Eventually the plant shut down.

There were some strong older women involved in the organization and support of Artistic Woodwork. Madeleine Parent had unionized the Quebec textile workers and gone to jail for her efforts. The textile women and men continued to work between sixty and eighty hour work weeks when they organized in the late 1940s and 1950s, only to be brutally suppressed with the help of the Quebec police, the fascist labour legislation of the Duplessis government and the Catholic Church. Role models like Madeleine were few and far between.

LOOKING FOR UNIONS MADE

Several years later I would be in Vancouver, summoned to British Columbia by the election of a soft socialist government and my friend Heather who was organizing clerical workers at the University of British Columbia in a first drive to form an independent feminist union, the Association of University and College Employees. Eventually, we were able to win members on the major provincial campuses and form a solid organization. For me, it was an on the ground lesson in union tactics, public speaking, solidarity and the power of political action, such as strikes to transform women's consciousness. I remained an activist in this union for many years, sitting on local and provincial bodies.

The solitary status of Madeleine Parent continued to haunt me. In the early 1970s, when I entered the labour picture, there was virtually no history of working class women in this province, a relatively new entity itself, where union organization in general had only started with miners wildcats and Native labourers' revolts in the 1860s. B.C., like Oregon and Washington states was primary industry, the stomping ground of Wobblies, tough industrial union tactics and guys. The militant and conscious history of working class women, both in single industry communities and in the workplace was invisible and unrepresented. But it was there.

I was already interested in history for yet other personal reasons. My mother had died when I was a child and my fascination with recovering strands of memory, whether fictional or actual, revolved around my efforts to construct the lost maternal space. The blend of women's marginalization from the institutional record and the agency associated with the construction of an active femininity was irresistible, I started to uncover the women.

I started the Women's Labour History Project because I was interested in three issues. Understandably, I was invested in putting women into the labour history record as instrumental subjects, not as victims of male exclusion, but as conscious agents in their own rights. A related goal was to provide a working model or set of images about the contradictory constructions of feminine consciousness: what moved working class women into activism and what role did awareness of gender and race as well as class play. Beyond what moved them,

I was fascinated to discover what strategies they had used to speak to and activate other women and men. I was interested in the relationship between hegemonic representations of femininity, whether in media, folklore, working class communities, political and religious institutions and those self-representations which women themselves produced.

As projects grew I raised money and was able to train and hire others to work on productions. As we've continued to work our mode of address has become more sophisticated, yet our original audience base in the labour and women's movement stays in tact. I remain in the position of producer and director, working closely with our staff of four. I currently teach in the Labour Studies Program at Capilano College in North Vancouver, at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design and as a visiting artist at the California Institute of the Arts.

Over the years I produced a bibliography of research sources; an extensive oral history collection with women activists from all over British Columbia and from a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. These tapes are in major archives in the province. Some such as Josephine Charlie began their working lives in the late 19th century, others in the 1950s; they were cannery workers, community activists, secretaries, government and wood workers, to name just a few. From the interviews came publications. As the research expanded more women came to work with the Women's Labour History Project and a photography collection was constructed and eventually an exhibition, The Working Image, a photographic and text history about the photographic representation of working class women in British Columbia curated and still touring.

In 1988 I began our first videotape Keeping the Home Fires Burning. This video is a two-part exploration of the relationship between ideology and commonsense in the consciousness of the many women war workers in the province's expanding shipyards, aircraft factories, service industries and wood mills. The first half of Home Fires chronicles the experience of women on the shop floors and in the homes of wartime Canada. It plays off wartime propaganda, the popular culture of the time and interviews. The segments of material chosen from the women are ironic, anecdotal, anti-heroic and analytical. In the first part of the video there are a number of short agit-prop re-enactments of scenarios.

Most people worked because they needed a job and they were from all over. People could start getting their kitchen fixed. I fixed my kitchen. I lived in this awful kitchen with the clothes dripping over my head. We used to have coffee in the Sugar Bowl, a little place in North Vancouver. Everyday I bored everybody to death about this kitchen. One fella, who was an old left-winger, he called me "bourgeois". I didn't know what "bourgeois" meant but I didn't like the sound of it, so I looked it up. Boy was I upset. I really went after him. I said, "I work for this money. I live in that kitchen and I cook and I have a right to a nice kitchen.

Jonnie Rankin

The mini-dramas are played by current day labour activists and accelerate through the second part of the video which concentrates on women's very active

role in union organizing during the war, ending with the anti-climactic experience of post-war lay-offs or a return homewards. The dramas both quote a strong workers' theatre tradition which existed throughout the 1930s and 1940s in this left-leaning province. At the same time, they provide a deconstruction of the otherwise readily documentary mode of the first half, reminding the viewer that critical distance is required when looking at all history, whether it be the fictional constructions of documentary or of theatre.

2 Our next video was called Ten Dollars or Nothing¹⁵. Part of a series of short experimental documentaries about the early and depression years in the province, this video revolves around a narrative by Josephine Charlie, an elder of the Capilano people. In the video, I use segments of her interview which speak to the spaces where gender, cultural identity and class cross and create bonds of solidarity amongst women and men performing the arduous work in the province's canneries. She describes working and living conditions in the Northern canneries, ending with a description of her successful efforts to win a raise for all the workers in the plant.

The Sisterhood, the Brotherhood. That's the only union that we had. But I joined that because I heard that wages were good in Butedale cannery. They were getting six dollars or nine dollars a ticket. The hours were seventy-five cents an hour and here they were paying only twenty cents an hour. I told the ladies, "Go into the netloft and we're gonna call the manager." "What are you going to do Josephine?" "I heard this," I told them. I talked to the leader, I knew who would do alot of loud talking. "You know what we're gonna do? I'm gonna put the manager as chairman, so he can't have nothing to say." "Chairman? What's that?", they said. "You'll see.", I told them. We sat down, we talked. I told the manager, "We want to go in the same as everything in the other canneries, Butedale and everywhere else, the same wages." He nods his head, I guessed he meant yes. He couldn't say anything, he was the chairman. We got up, we started to go back to work. Our wages were up. In the meantime, I turned around. "What is it Mrs. Charlie?" "Ten dollars or nothing," I told him. "Ohhhh," he got redder than ever. He had a pipe, he started smoking fast. "Alright," he says, "alright." Oh, they all screamed and ran for me, my hair was just like that where they were grabbing me.

J o s e p h i n e C h a r l i e

3 The video is not simply a reproduction of a narrative. It addresses two other issues. All of the photographs, films and video images which I was able to find in Canadian archives were created by institutional sources, never by the cannery workers themselves. There were many company promotional films, government of Canada productions which pushed investment into the West Coast fisheries, photographs and films by ethnographers and tourist guides, eight mm films made by a nurse. I wanted to use an editing strategy which highlighted the spoken for qualities of this footage. I wanted to undermine any sense of the visuals standing in for "truth", I wanted them to work as recontextualized constructions.

My other intention worked with the first issue. I wanted to present the

4 narrative potential of history in a non-linear, non-causal construction. I wanted to provide the sensory nature of memory as the same time as a narrative image appeared, or pose images in opposition. In order to underscore the produced nature of the images and the produced nature of historical experience and reading I edited Ten Dollars or Nothing so that at least two levels of images appear in constant relationship to each other. The larger series is entitled Daughters Have Courage, Mothers Take Heart. One video will examine domestic work for women both as paid labour and in the family in the period up to WWII against a consideration of maternity and femininity and a second the struggles of unemployed urban women during the depression to surmount their invisibility. This last space parallels the disappearance and privatization of architecture and historical public spaces in Vancouver to the mythic construction and historical of the last Great Depression.

From late 1989 to early 1991 we worked on a four part series for television and other contexts called The Lull Before the Storm. Two parts of the Lull are "fiction" and two are documentary. The dramatic portion of The Lull explores the histories of working class women and men in the post-WWII transition. It centres on changing definitions of femininity and the impact of these on family and working life. We made this piece as a broadcast co-production because it focuses so intensively on the advent of Canadian television--it just seemed essential to send it out over the airwaves.

Drawing on popular, theoretical and media representations of women's "nature", The Lull juggles these around a central, yet discontinuous narrative. This is ostensibly the story of Dorothy Sanderson, her son Bobby, and her husband, George. Dorothy moves between waitressing, the aircraft assembly line, homemaking and child-rearing. George traverses the logging industry, combat duty and construction while Bobby gets older and gets Oedipal.

Despite the many markers of historical "fact" and personal identity, The Lull is not a classic narrative or docu-fiction. Little changes in this representation of Dorothy and George's lives; this is little resolution for women in the fifteen years under consideration. Although referenced in extensive research, The Lull fictions speak more to the growing role of media in this era in shaping definitions of "self" and our sense of a period's history, then to a set of actual lives. It is a non-documentary approach to a period which invested in the objectivity of media and the truth of its voices.

The Lull is bound together by a narrator, the superego of the post-war, a source of contradictory wisdom, combining the stylistic approach of erudite Canadian public television and the National Film Board's perpetual voice-of-god narrator and kitchen sink drama, to the fantastic realism of The Twilight Zone and the advertising seduction of early television. Dramatic styles flip from soap opera, the women's film, docudrama, Hollywood musicals, romance fiction and ad fantasies.

If the dramas speak of the impossibilities of shifting the blue skies of the 1950s, then the documentaries suggest the storm clouds to come. The documentaries are based on a set of video interviews with a group of women whose lives revolved around the province's largest industry: wood. Married to loggers and millworkers, their lives were deeply touched by the economic cycles of the industry, conditions in single industry towns, and isolation.

Concentrated in the logging heartland of Vancouver Island, women from South Asian and white backgrounds attest to parallels and differences in their arrivals into logging camps or towns, to home life, housework, childrearing and healthcare. Each group had its own institutions and priorities, from the International Woodworkers of America's Ladies Auxiliary, to the Sikh temples at Mesachie Lake and Paldi. These organizations were essential to the construction of community, creating support systems for their female members and better conditions for all. These programmes combine personal testimony, location visuals, excerpts from cinema, television and stock shots and stills from the time. A reunion between female members of the Sikh community and a conversation between two former auxiliary activists provide for lively discussion and humour and allow the women to interview themselves. The documentaries provide a sense of feminine agency despite the barriers to activism prevalent in popular thinking about the post-war era.

When my children were born, at first we didn't have any problems with discrimination. When they started school then the other kids would do things to them when they rode the bus. They would attack my kids. At first, when they came home, we told them not to say anything. When the other children wouldn't stop we told our children that they could fight back. THEN they began to fight back. Afterwards they all became friends. My neighbours, the white women, were very nice. But when MY children fought back, that was the day they complained. I said, "They are only kids." You gave me that answer once, "they are only kids and they can do what they want". "I am giving you the same answer, mine can do what they want too." After that, nobody every bothered my kids.

Daljit Kaur Gill

We are currently in production with a project entitled On to Ottawa. This broadcast work is being created with a group of very senior citizens who participated in an historic trek across Canada in 1935 to protest unemployment and demand "work and wages". The trekkers were beaten and killed by the police in one of the more shameful moments of Canadian history, The Regina Riot. The government of the day fell as a result and some small level of social assistance brought in. The video is based on a script developed by three of the trekkers and brought to stage as a touring live performance. This work and the additions to the Daughters/Mothers series will be finished in 1992.

In scripting and producing the works of the Women's Labour History Project I am not trying to present a totalizing or all encompassing sense of women's history. If anything, there is a sense of specific communities and how they shifted and survived with change. "Deconstructive devices" intervene to remind viewers that they are watching a media work made from a specific perspective. The project has worked to be inclusive of difference and the possibilities of identification across difference, in interviewing women from a range of racial and regional specificities.

The tradition within institutional labour histories, even those of the male left has been to play up the role of white working class men, to the detriment of Japanese, Chinese, aboriginal and South Asian workers, male and female, all of whom played specific and important roles in the labour force and labour movement of this province. To speak of the fishing industry without speaking of division and solidarity along and across racial lines, or to ignore

the terrible impact of contract labour for both South Asian and Japanese workers in the wood industry would be to revise labour history yet again in favour of the myth of white masculine instrumentality at all others' expense. The construction of racial difference was and remains a key strategy of employers and governments in this province. The Women's Labour History, at the risk of "speaking for" others has tried to build images of a female labour force which was multi-racial. As long as the project of constructing a multi-layered history appears valid, and as long as people from the communities included in the tapes find our efforts valuable, this is the strategy that I would maintain. We will also continue to train and hire women from different cultural backgrounds in order to facilitate their autonomous expression.

In our documentary series for The Lull we worked closely with Nirmal Shahi (now Gerow) who had grown up on Vancouver Island in the Sikh community through all stages of the project. With Ten Dollars or Nothing, which was produced before the strong urgency for complete self-representation in media, was expressed by Canadian First Nations people, we sought and received approval from Josephine Charlie's daughter for the tape. The material chosen for this piece are those excerpts which stress the points of intersection between women of different races. In the drama of The Lull I scripted three characters of different racial groups into in one instance an historically accurate position (a working class black woman who was an office worker and housewife) and in the case of the others, into positions of authority on a panel of experts. The actors were given leeway to improvise and develop their parts based on the scripting. When The Lull was in roughcut stage it was previewed by a group which included activists from various communities and recut on the basis of a whole series of suggestions, none of them having to do with race.

As works, Home Fires, Ten Dollars or Nothing and The Lull Before the Storm were written to cross audiences. Canada continues to have a large unionized labour force (approximately forty per cent). The videos include material in its that speaks to the many unionized Canadians about the role women played in organizing and sustaining the Canadian version of the C.I.O. and its predecessors, including the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood. They reiterate important issues such as equal pay, childcare and racial equality. They try to speak to students both through irreverence and a contemporary approach to history. The experimental relationship to a realist documentary practice have allowed them to speak to museum, festival and gallery audiences.

The women in the videos, audio tapes and photographs are women whose experience is of a different era than my own and many of the listeners and viewers. Their lives were not marked by feminism as a discourse, except as retrospective consideration (and believe me it is one!). Nonetheless, a bond across the decades has been built, one located in an Imaginary which speaks of female agency, resistance and desire.