



Figure 1. Cheers—protesters taking a group picture. *Lesbian Factory* (dir. Susan Chen, Taiwan, 2010)

Sentimental Activism as Queer-Feminist Documentary Practice; or, How to Make Love in a Room Full of People

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Within the last two decades, a noticeable wave of migrant-labor-themed films has emerged on the global cinematic landscape. Popularized by the work of independent Chinese filmmakers, this wave has become a legible strand of global art house cinema, especially in the realm of fiction still dominated by male directors, and includes such award-winning titles as Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (China, 2006), Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (US/Mexico, 2008), Midi Z's *Poor Folk* (Taiwan/Myanmar, 2012), and Francis Lee's *God's Own Country* (UK, 2017).¹ That these films and their common representation of displacement and precarity successfully tour the international festival circuit is not only a sign of their timeliness. As film scholars have argued, the aesthetics and contents of so-called world cinema—as visual record of the dark side of globalization—are very much shaped by the film festival market with its targeted funding and curatorial politics.²

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This article offers a different, albeit related, angle: it situates the popular exhibition of migrant precarity in contemporary art house film as a larger trend in arts and media reflective of the rise of liberal politics as global currency. The overall success of these films, I propose, can tell us something about new forms of capitalization in the post-Cold War neoliberal era, where the visibility of migrant lives under duress offers symbolic capital for state and market institutions. Under this logic, official validation of certain kinds of minority differences (among them racial, ethnic, and sexual) asserts the end of social injustice while masking the continuous devaluation of populations that have historically been denied citizen rights and material resources and do not conform to patriarchal family norms. Moreover, political calls for minority inclusion uncannily resonate with market imperatives of free access and circulation, tying an institutional agenda of equal rights and recognition to the pursuit of global market integration.³ Given this logic, how do filmmakers respond to the appropriation of liberal values, especially when they are committed to advancing social justice and prompting concrete change? What strategies do they use to remain morally and aesthetically legible to majoritarian decision-makers and a wider public while insisting on the need for structural transformation?

I seek to work through these questions by moving away from the field of acclaimed global art house film and toward the lesser-known documentary work of women's and women-dominated migrant labor activism in East Asia. This work offers particularly valuable insight into a strategy I summarize as *sentimental activism*: the simultaneous repetition and radical decentering of liberal rights discourse and its sensorium of human legibility. Specifically, I focus on *Lesbian Factory* (dir. Susan Chen), a 2010 documentary shot by Taiwan's major migrant worker NGO, the Taiwan International Workers' Association, and produced by the archipelago's prime public broadcasting service, PTS (Public Television Service). As a record of the collaborative effort of local female activists and Filipina migrant workers to push for greater migrant labor rights, *Lesbian Factory* differs in its explicit political investment from the observational, long-take approach of much of migrant-worker-

focused art house cinema. Yet the film's dramatized demand for social change also stands out from human rights documentary's common arousal of sentiment to prompt audience identification and mobilization for action.⁴ As I will demonstrate, *Lesbian Factory's* engagement of tropes of love and suffering to convey a sense of human urgency consistently recalibrates the very lexicon through which a social justice demand can be made. *Lesbian Factory's* use of a liberal rights rhetoric—verbal, visual, and affective—works as much to posit populations deemed disposable as valued human subjects as it challenges the circumscription of the subject of humanity itself. While the documentary deploys video recording of lived conditions to gather evidence and publicize its political cause (thereby gesturing to the agentive power of activist documentary in bringing about actual change), my primary concern lies with the film's sentimental narrative as a means both to center queer, female migrant workers as historical protagonists in struggles for social justice and transformation and to engage them as inspirational source for a radical aesthetics. Specifically, by offering the phrase *sentimental activism*, this article tracks how *Lesbian Factory* creatively draws on transnational feminist and queer world-building practices to forge a political sensorium that simultaneously references, stretches, and undoes official rhetorics of progress, freedom, and equality.⁵

Liberalism's Imperial Underbelly

After centuries of serial colonization—including Han-Chinese settlement, Japanese occupation, and almost four decades of martial law under the Kuomintang regime exiled from mainland China (1949–87)—Taiwan, also referred to as the Republic of China (ROC), has emerged as a poster child of democratic development and global market integration.⁶ For instance, as of 2019, the hotly debated same-sex marriage bill—the first of its kind in Asia—is waiting to pass Taiwan's Parliament. While a 2018 referendum rejected the inclusion of same-sex marriage into the Civil Code, the legal protection of same-sex couples continues to be supported by the ruling Democratic Progressive Party and large parts

of the population. In fact, the Constitutional Court ruled the Civil Code unconstitutional for denying same-sex couples the right to marry and, thus, the right to equality and freedom of marriage. Even before the court's ruling, many had hailed Taiwan as the continent's most progressive polity. However, such validation has not led to the ROC's recognition as a sovereign nation-state, leaving it instead under the constant shadow of the People's Republic of China. What is more, Taiwan's liminal position requires its government to continuously prove its progressive commitment to an outside world (primarily through the assertion of human rights and minority inclusion) while omitting mention of the ongoing discrimination and exploitation of local minorities, among them indigenous, queer, and migrant worker populations. As Petrus Liu provocatively maintains, the government's "rhetoric of tolerance, liberalism, and progress is a political ruse designed to win over the sympathy of the American public, since Taiwan's continuous *de facto* and imagined future *de jure* status as a sovereign nation-state depends on American military protection and support."⁷ From this perspective, the ROC's "democratic exemplarity" emerges as a tactical embrace of liberal discourse to assert political autonomy from mainland China⁸ but simultaneously endorses an ideological apparatus that justifies US military-capitalist presence in the Asia Pacific and Taiwan's own "subimperial" expansion into the global South.⁹ As scholars of critical Asian studies and transnational American studies have convincingly argued, the universalizing language of an imperial US human rights discourse—further extended in the ideal of global governance and responsible democracy so heavily espoused by the United Nations—promises inclusion and independence for people and states by reproducing paradigms of domination and control.¹⁰

In view of these paradoxical dynamics underlying Taiwan's liberal agenda (and liberalism's history more broadly), the following analysis probes how *Lesbian Factory's* queer-feminist repetition of a lexicon of rights and recognition might intervene into liberalism's uneven promise of inclusion—that is, who gets to be a rights-bearing subject as shaped by Cold War hierarchies, patriarchal nationalisms, and the development of neoliberal capitalism.¹¹ By

employing sentimental activism as an analytic, I explore the film's politico-aesthetic strategy to engage what I conceptualize as an affective lexicon of rights and recognition for radical ends: how the documentary pushes for change on the ground by using a legible mode of representation (what feels familiar) and how it simultaneously recalibrates this very mode (familiar feelings) by drawing on migrant women's life-making practices, their capacious forging of queer and cross-communal socialities, to offer us new models of the social. I argue that *Lesbian Factory's* radical gesture lies precisely in emulating the protagonists' tactics of reworking conditions of displacement and surveillance to render them seemingly benign: just as the women respond to their capitalist exploitation and nationalist and heteropatriarchal interpellation by building unexpected socialities, so too the documentary employs seemingly conventional tropes of sentimental storytelling that make place for imagining the social world otherwise. If documentary radicality describes, as Jane Gaines says, documentary's inherent ability to register the material conditions of social relations (including its own positionality) and "prepar[e] the political moment," then *Lesbian Factory's* radicality originates in the film's aesthetic extension of the women's everyday practices.¹² That these radical tactics appear at times more accommodating than revolutionary—perhaps most tangibly felt in the documentary's conventional form—does not foreclose their transformative potential but rather makes possible ways of inhabiting existing institutional structures that do not reproduce the same old patterns. As a direct response to the historical conditions undergirding the ROC's official politics, specifically the seemingly benevolent mobilization of new migrant visibilities, this particular film affords a vantage point to strategize more broadly how activist media can navigate the difficult line between change and co-optation, between the making of public culture and forms of state and market domination, in this historical moment.

Opening the Scene

Lesbian Factory opens with a scene of protest. We see a group of women gathering behind a rally sign that reads, "Fastfame Com-

pany Abused Migrants. No Salary. No Food. No Jobs. Please Help!!!” As the film informs us, these women are Filipina migrant workers disputing a local company’s misconduct. We learn about the closing of Fastfame, a company known for manufacturing computer parts, and its sudden dismissal of 120 Filipina workers. Like many other local businesses, Fastfame decided to relocate its factory to the PRC to save money—but without paying out its foreign workers in Taiwan. The protest calls on the Council of Labor Affairs to intervene in the situation and help the contract laborers receive their withheld salaries.¹³ Recounting how in view of the government’s noninterventionist politics the migrant workers turned to the Taiwan International Workers Association (TIWA) for support, *Lesbian Factory* voices the women’s major concerns: “Will workers be repatriated? How will they survive without food allowance? How can they get back their salary arrears? Can migrant workers get severance pay?”¹⁴ Without institutional support, the workers’ legal stay is jeopardized and their being compensated nearly impossible.

However, despite the somber outlook of the protagonists’ future, the opening scene also depicts surprisingly cheerful and excited workers in distress. We witness the women giggling and vivaciously chatting during the protest, taking group pictures in front of the protest banners whenever possible (fig. 1). At times, the atmosphere resembles a high school reunion more than a political gathering. In fact, the film continuously alternates between cheerfulness and gravity, activist organizing and the Filipinas’ intimate lives, reflecting not so much two separate life realities but the dense and often incoherent affective texture of their daily experience. As the voice-over shares, “At first, we just wanted to record the struggles of the migrant workers, but as we were filming, many sweet lesbian couples appeared in the film. So this documentary accidentally developed into a love story.” The remainder of the film follows the volatile journey of seven Filipina couples and their love relationships—some of them established, others newly formed and first-time same-sex relationships—during the fight for social justice.

Lesbian Factory was filmed over the course of five years (2004–9) by TIWA core staff Susan Chen and Jingru Wu and pro-

duced by Taiwan's Public Television Service.¹⁵ Chen, a labor activist and trained journalist, founded TIWA in the mid-1980s to rectify the lack of institutional support for incoming Southeast Asian workers, their numbers growing as a result of Taiwan's neoliberal "Go South" policy.¹⁶ To this day, the NGO is the primary organization for migrant labor issues in Taiwan, consisting of nine full-time employees, almost all of whom are women, feminist, and often queer identified.¹⁷ The visual material for *Lesbian Factory* was spontaneously recorded on a digital video camera to document TIWA's collaborative organizing with the Filipina workers, recalling a tradition of Taiwanese activist documentary that developed alongside the rise of civic movements in the late 1980s and the availability of video. However, whereas these documentaries were shot by male street protesters pressing for bottom-up democratic reform and often sold for little money on the spot to promote the cause for political participation, *Lesbian Factory's* call for change is women-centered and structured by a narrative of bliss and pain. The first half hour focuses on establishing the protagonists through their coming-out stories and shared explorations of same-sex desire abroad; in turn, the film's latter part zooms in on the women's heartbreak due to forced separation. How to reconcile real politics with the emotional schmaltz of women's love stories? The video's postproduction was funded by PTS, Taiwan's first and major public television service (which owns the documentary's distribution rights). PTS itself was founded by the government in 1998 post-martial-law Taiwan to foster a new civic public—thus frequently drawing media scholars' criticism that Taiwan's public broadcasting system resembled the archipelago's democratic reform: a top-down, "elite-driven" project.¹⁸ The network's institutional infrastructure certainly boosted the film's circulation across different media platforms. After broadcasting on one of PTS's prestigious documentary programs in 2010, *Lesbian Factory* was circulated via government-sponsored screening events, a theatrical release, and as part of a national documentary showcase. In total, the video screened more than two hundred times to local audiences (albeit not the Filipina migrant worker community specifically) before entering the international film festival market, where it circulated

both as a work of migrant labor activism and a distinct media product made in the ROC.¹⁹

My interest in *Lesbian Factory* lies in this arguably contentious movement across disparate political realms whereby minority activism converges with state-curated dissemination and policies, turning the visual documentation of a government's neglect to protect its foreign workers into a national showcase of democracy. Following Liu and other cultural critics who situate a global rights discourse within the history and afterlife of Cold War hierarchies, I contend that the film's institutional circulation mediates the rise of liberal politics as global currency. *Lesbian Factory*'s strategic promotion to (international) visibility disseminates the message that the ROC cares for its minorities and sharply contrasts with mainland China's notorious breaching of human rights. The film's sentimental tone, characterized by the deliberate capturing of laughter and tears, seems particularly advantageous to accrue symbolic capital and draw international support for the not yet independent nation-state. Yet I argue that the documentary's migration from an activist's camera to national media outlets and international film festivals does not only speak to the co-optation of progressive social movements into nationalist projects, a Northern hemispheric imaginary of the "good world," and the expansive scope of neoliberal capitalism. Instead, even as TIWA's documentary work gains traction through liberal and capitalist channels, the film's expansive circuiting also produces potentialities that allow other meanings, relations, and possibilities to emerge.²⁰ By drawing on a sentimental lexicon of rights and recognition to center women's cross-communal alliances and queer migrant erotics as antihegemonic lifeworlds, *Lesbian Factory* powerfully breaks with a performative institutional iteration of uneven inclusions for a more just, more livable, and more pleasurable present.

Sentimental Activism

According to the National Immigration Agency, there are almost 700,000 legally employed foreign workers in Taiwan. More than a fifth come from the Philippines, with most of the remaining

laborers arriving from Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand.²¹ The majority of these laborers are contract workers in the industrial and domestic service sectors, supplementing Taiwan's labor shortage in manufacturing and construction and taking over the work of caring for the archipelago's middle- to upper-class citizens. Since a large number hail from the poorer countries of South-east Asia, these workers are commonly seen as unwanted intruders who take jobs and resources away from the local population. That is, they don't "deserve" to pull attention away from the more pressing issues concerning Taiwan's civic space, such as cross-strait relations, party elections, and the protection of civil freedoms.²² Moreover, these workers are subject to constant legal and physical monitoring.

Lesbian Factory targets such discrimination by using a sentimental narrative of love and pain to raise sympathy for the cause of migrant workers. The documentary deploys a set of familiar feelings to discursively frame migrant laborers as human beings with the right to safely share in Taiwan's public space. "Sentimental activism" describes this particular narrative arrangement of minoritized subjects into valued human legibility for social justice mobilization. Simply put, *Lesbian Factory* engages repetition with difference: in employing archetypal images of bliss and struggle, the documentary brings forth relatable characters worth standing up for. This includes the film's formal rendering—in particular, its seemingly conventional engagement of interviews, crosscutting, and the intrusive camera—which, as I show, nonetheless moves us to feel otherwise.

To be sure, the use of sentimentality as "soft" politicization is not new. This tactic has a long tradition in progressive cultural production, including rights-based documentary, though its effectiveness remains subject to contentious debate.²³ Deemed a rather "mawkish, nostalgic, and simpleminded"²⁴ feeling that is "characterized by apparent emotional excess, in the form of exaggerated grief or dejection or a propensity toward shedding tears,"²⁵ sentimentality is commonly seen to indulge in personal suffering, obscuring systemic injustice, and stalling actual change—for instance, by keeping its audience (un)comfortable on the couch.

Cultural critics have repeatedly pointed out the ways in which the state and other authorities mobilize sentimentality for manipulative purposes. In both Taiwanese and Philippine cultural history, for instance, sentimental storytelling bears a strong association with state censorship and a depoliticized patriarchal cultural mainstream.²⁶ Whereas *Lesbian Factory* also calls on viewers' susceptibility to narratives of suffering and love by engaging normative images of filial piety and female vulnerability, the film stands out in its pragmatic use of sentimental affect to move viewers into action while simultaneously challenging the norms of reproductive nationalism that underwrite liberal measurements of social justice. Its use of sentimental activism indeed foregrounds the ideological fluidity, or flexible stickiness, of feelings considered essentially human and, in so doing, scrutinizes the logic of liberal humanism as normative gauge for access to rights. It also suggests—again, in rather pragmatic fashion—sentimentality's usefulness, if not necessity, in contemporary struggles for inclusion, to justify and bring about the very change such liberal-humanistic logic seems to foreclose.

Scenes of Love

After setting up the initial context of the workers' labor dispute, the film introduces the protagonists through couple interviews. How did the women's relationships begin? How did they know the other liked them back? By documenting the women's responses to these questions, *Lesbian Factory* offers us an archive of mesmerizing love stories, evoking sympathy as emotional hook. "If somebody likes you, you will recognize it easily. It's different from friends," says Bing, a butch-appearing Filipina worker, as she describes the beginning of her relationship with fellow worker Yam. Asked how she knew that Yam was more than a friend, Bing responds, "Because she made me like that," and mimics an affectionate embrace. The gesture is followed by loud laughter, not only from the two interviewees, but from the other women who are present in the room. The cheerful atmosphere continues with Lan and Pilar before the camera. Lan, a leading figure

in women's organizing along with Bing and Yam, explains how she wanted her mother to retire from working abroad in Kuwait and traveled to Taiwan to take over the role of the family's breadwinner. After a year, her partner Pilar (whom Lan teasingly introduces as "the very fat one") wanted to return home; but when she learned that Lan needed to stay longer, she decided to extend her stay as well. "You know, I love her very much," Lan concludes. Her statement earns collective approval from other migrant women clapping and cheering in the background. Further confessions follow in the next interview, this time featuring Ellen and Elsa. Ellen, a pudgy, good-humored character, describes how she, too, came to Taiwan to financially support her family and met her partner Elsa there. Ellen calls herself "so lucky" and remembers the overwhelming shyness she felt the first time she saw Elsa. "I see her, and I didn't say anything. I didn't say 'Hi, hello.' I can't say a word because I am too shy to see her." Elsa, in turn, recalls her struggle when realizing that she desired another woman. She remembers insisting, "No I don't like you . . . because we are the same sex." Yet she could not help it: "Every time, if I see her, I'm



Figure 2. Elsa (left) and Ellen (right) during the protest.
Lesbian Factory (dir. Susan Chen, Taiwan, 2010)

happy.” Elsa’s account elicits loud laughter from everyone in the room with the exception of her partner Ellen, who is so moved by the words that she starts crying. “So touching,” Ellen weeps as she wipes off her tears.

Such scenes of public disclosure, of coming out and sharing details about one’s intimate life, immediately align the audience with the protagonists. When TIWA staff member Jingru Wu asks Lan and Pilar about their personal story, to which the two respond rather generally, “Then we talk talk talk talk talk, and then one day, we’re together,” Wu insists on learning more details. “That’s too simple,” she counters. “Nobody will be satisfied with your answer like that.” What an audience wants (or what is needed to get at them), her statement implies, is a juicy love story ending in the women’s unification. Here, love is more than an object featured on screen: by conveying a shared human experience, it becomes a narrative device binding viewers to the political cause of precaritized workers. To paraphrase Lauren Berlant, the seemingly authentic feeling of romantic love offers a sense of belonging: it affords the language of a perceived common world where everyone loves.²⁷ Love, then, makes subjects legible, relatable, but in so doing also frequently reinforces hegemonic ideologies. For instance, *Lesbian Factory*’s channeling of the protagonists’ same-sex stories through patriarchal ideals of dutiful daughters and caring members of the OFW (overseas Filipino workers) community uncannily overlaps with Philippine state propagations of women as reproductive citizens.

Ever since Corazon Aquino’s presidency in the mid-1980s, female overseas workers have been hailed as pious daughters and heroic mothers of the nation. Vicente Rafael maintains that such sentimental rhetoric has effectively covered up “the inability of the state to provide for its people” while tying women’s sense of self to a religiously inflected norm of sacrifice.²⁸ Love for one’s family and love for the nation are measured and expressed in long cycles of absence and suffering and the ongoing deliverance of remittances. Here, love glues together the fractured and transnationally dispersed bionational family. To draw from Elizabeth Freeman’s

Time Binds, love “binds a socius.”²⁹ Freeman’s reference is less an explicit engagement with love and more a critique of the streamlining of lives “toward maximum productivity” (3) through particular temporal arrangements. Still, I find her concept of temporal binding helpful to grasp how love as a feeling of shared human quality synchronizes people and their relationships into what she calls “socially meaningful embodiment” (3), thereby enabling biopolitical projects of nation-building and capital accumulation. Expanding Freeman’s critique, I wish to highlight how *Lesbian Factory* makes use of love’s binding quality for activist ends. While TIWA’s documentary does organize its interviews around the trope of selfless love, it simultaneously refracts the latter’s hegemonic service by tying it to migrant labor politics and the “unruly” intimacy of migrant women workers. Chen’s crosscutting enhances this point, strategically alternating images of love and protest to call for legal amendments.

The film reveals that the Council of Labor Affairs has rejected the workers’ appeal for support—perhaps unsurprising given the role of the high-tech industry that includes Fastframe in Taiwan’s economic success history.³⁰ Penalizing Fastframe for moving overseas and abandoning its blue-collar foreign contract workers would mean setting a precedent for limiting the market’s free rein and putting Taiwan’s economic future at risk. In this future, the migrant woman’s labor is indispensable, but her life is not. Her image might circulate through public broadcasting, local theaters, and international film festivals, proving the ROC’s “inclusive” public space. Yet through existing legal mechanisms, her corporeal body is rendered transient, removable, and biologically unthreatening (how convenient that the “lesbian” in TIWA’s documentary won’t reproduce with local men). Once she is gone, so is the abject sexuality she signifies. Ironically, the repetition of uneven inclusions—by which the ROC itself remains outside a league of independent nation-states—makes the archipelago’s liberal sovereignty legible or, at the least, imaginable.

In response to the council’s noninterventionist politics, TIWA and the workers decide to make their grievances public and



Figure 3. Workers demanding their rights in front of the Council of Labor Affairs. *Lesbian Factory* (dir. Susan Chen, Taiwan, 2010)

organize a protest in front of the government building. The film's opening images are drawn from this event. In between shots of demonstrating workers, the camera lingers on the women taking time out, leaning against and softly teasing each other. By cross-cutting iconic images of raised fists and megaphoned speeches with these intimate moments—and, furthermore, by interweaving them with the couples' confessional anecdotes—*Lesbian Factory* offers a deeply humanizing portrayal of the Filipina migrants as loving and lovable human beings who deserve the “right to have rights.”³¹ In an interesting twist, love becomes the primary reason for enforcing stronger labor rights. If the women have no say in their work assignment, they are likely to be separated and randomly distributed to new positions across the island: no human rights, no right to future love—to love is to be human. But, rather than dwelling in ontological claims about the human condition—that love makes us equal and that we all love equally—TIWA's video mobilizes love as we know it in order to ask: Who and what counts as rights-bearing to begin with?

The film then returns to the interviews. The emotional intensity that arises as the protagonists remember the beginning of their relationship—love at first sight, embarrassment, confusion—further increases when Wu wants to know how they make love in a room shared with fellow workers. The responding couples erupt into loud giggling, expressing their simultaneous amusement, shock, and embarrassment in sharing such intimate details. We see Pilar hiding behind pillows and Lan pressing a tissue against her mouth. Lan then admits, with a big grin, that Pilar “is very noisy.” Yam and Bing chuckle also, stating that the women sleeping above them on the top bunk of the bed are a couple as well and therefore “get it.” Yet before the secret to having quiet sex in common spaces is revealed, laughter and giggling overtake the interview again. As affective bursts that puncture love’s governing circuits, the women’s giggling not only interrupts a teleological narrative; it also relays a collective social resistance to what Elizabeth Freeman calls “meaningful embodiment,” introducing instead a repertoire of migrant erotics.³²

Drawing on Freeman’s erotics, I locate migrant erotics in queer, intimate encounters that are deeply embodied and viscerally felt. Migrant erotics are informed by experiences of border crossing and displacement and differently inhabit temporal orders of belonging and exclusion. Relevant to *Lesbian Factory*, the formation of same-sex relationships among otherwise straight-identified OFW during their stay abroad—captured in the term “OFT” (only for Taiwan) and mentioned in the documentary, too, as Amie Parry points out³³—suggests an intimate repurposing of the spatiotemporal governance of citizen-subjects and foreign labor. Yet migrant erotics cannot be fully divorced from nationalist and patriarchal scripts of proper heterosexuality and Filipina womanhood. As the film shows, here female bodies “made” for care do not refuse to reproduce for nationhood and global capital. Rather, they diligently reproduce and in so doing come to exceed the purpose of their labor.³⁴ By embedding migrant erotics in a story of love and protest, the documentary brings us directly to the heart of activism: it affords visibility to bodies rendered surplus while stretching and remaking the collective order that romantic love and its prevailing

narrative of reproductive nationalism normatively circumscribe. To repeat, the women's emergence as rights-bearing subjects affectively reorients the protocols defining who bears rights to begin with. The following section delves further into the ambivalent pairing of pleasure, hope, and exploitation for different visions of the social. By looking at the other half of *Lesbian Factory's* sentimental narrative—the documented pain of lovers torn apart—I examine how the seemingly ruthless exhibition of suffering by the camera reinforces the workers' disenfranchisement yet also elicits acts of coming together differently.

The Tears of Lovers Torn Apart

In the scene “The Morning of Separation,” we witness the women moving out of the dormitory and gathering in a different building to learn about their new jobs. “If you can't be in the same factory,” the filmmaker anticipates, voicing what occupies everyone's mind in the room. Yam immediately responds, “Miserable. I don't want to answer that question. . . . Look at our eyes. We cannot sleep tonight.” With puffy eyes, she and her partner Bing try to smile and act playful before the camera. However, when Bing stops to say, “I feel bad. I don't like that we separate,” Yam breaks out in tears. Yet Chen refuses to turn off the camera and continues to capture the gravity of feelings as the women assemble in a large hall to await the announcement of their future workplaces. She describes the process as follows: “Each migrant worker has an assigned number. Agents choose workers by picking numbers from the booklet. Migrant workers have no rights to express their wishes and do not know where they will go.” In the scramble for profit led by invisible corporate enterprises and enhanced by the inaction of the Council of Labor Affairs, the protagonists appear as mere numbers. Only two out of the seven couples are hired by the same company, and their expression of gratitude—Ellen states, “God is so good to us. This is our destiny”—stands in stark contrast to the tears of grief shown on the faces of the remaining laborers. “Good friends and gay partners were heartlessly sepa-

rated,” Chen summarizes. In contrast, “Those who were chosen by the same factory were like hitting the jackpot.” While voicing these comments, Chen directly points the camera at the “losers” of the game despite the women’s apparent discomfort about being filmed at their most vulnerable moment. Only after Yam hides behind a seat and waves Chen away does the director finally stop following. The camera’s intrusion highlights the ethical limitations of activist documentary practice, begging the question: Why insist on exhibiting the suffering of others if it exacerbates their sense of precarity? By continuously exposing the women’s intimate life for political mobilization—sometimes with “good” feelings as in their sharing of love-making secrets, sometimes with brutality as in the exhibition of their pain—*Lesbian Factory* thus prompts reconsideration of activism and the condition of possibility for social change through the lens of documentary ethics. On whose affective labor and visual exposure does the work of social justice rely? When do attachment and visibility, as acts of public inclusion, become a violent force?

For Paula Rabinowitz, “Shedding tears is central to the labor documentary,” in that it mobilizes public sentiment against “political authority.”³⁵ At the same time, however, as Rabinowitz’s discussion of the gendered discourse of sentimentality suggests, the hypervisibility of on-screen tears also accommodates a patriarchal worldview by evoking an original social order that must be restored under all circumstances. Likewise, Pooja Rangan rejects the trope of suffering in humanitarian documentaries, arguing that the rationale of rescue and emergency can quickly “turn into an alibi” to oppress and erase “the particular, embodied facts of difference” for a norm of universal humanness.³⁶ Recent scholarship in feminist and queer cultural studies from Taiwan echoes this claim. Expanding on Rangan, Rabinowitz, and other feminist documentary writers, authors such as Josephine Ho, Jen-peng Liu, Naifei Ding, Hans Tao-ming Huang, and Petrus Liu offer a powerful critique of sentimental discourse in the context of seemingly progressive movements. Specifically, these scholars explicate how Taiwan’s state feminism has traditionally relied on a rhetoric

of female victimhood to outlaw marginalized populations, including local sex workers and low-income foreign workers.³⁷ Here, sentimentality equals social exclusion, moral disciplining, and state surveillance.

Lesbian Factory offers somewhat of a counterexample to these crucial insights, approaching sentimentality not as the deadening of social life but a means to attend to and extend minoritarian world-making practices. For one, since the workers' payment depends on institutional support, the women's visualized suffering can serve to woo a conservative audience and pressure, through unwanted publicity, a neoliberal government into action. Sentimental activism indeed responds to the very real challenge of activist endeavors like the one we follow in *Lesbian Factory*—that is, of having to navigate multiple moral economies to gather public support and negotiate legal reforms, reaching from patriarchal nationalist values to market liberalization and a global human rights discourse. By keeping its protagonists always sufficiently relatable, the video asserts OFWs' equal standing with local citizens while also insisting that a more just, more livable, and more pleasurable present for those relegated to the socioeconomic margin is necessary and, outside the paradigms of legibility, always already in the making. Let's not forget that the protagonists are shown as informed community organizers in a foreign place with limited political, legal, and linguistic access—and that the tears we see flowing in sentimental abundance are shed over their same-sex lovers. In fact, the film consistently mobilizes around the women's forging of uncalculated kinships that collectively figure an alternate model of un-reproductive transnational belonging.

Repeated scenes of nightly socializing among migrant workers and TIWA staff further emphasize this claim. Here we witness a close-knit female community of often queer-identified women eating, drinking, and singing together in the workers' dormitories, suggesting ways of being with each other beyond the liberal renderings of patriarchal and capitalist regimes. During one of these nights, the Filipinas approach Chen to hand over to her their secretly prepared gift. Perhaps for the first time, the director lets

go of the camera to accept what turns out to be the workers' collective donation to the NGO. Chen appears visibly moved in the frame, switching for a moment from professional expert and the recording's decision-maker to receiver of others' care. With everyone squeezed together on bunk beds, the intimate gathering undeniably blurs distinct roles and power distributions between the filmmaker and the filmed.

This is not to say that the documentary does away with power discrepancies. As activist instrument, the camera consistently exposes vulnerable subjects to the public's gaze. But the women's capture by Chen's stubborn pointing of the camera (capturing both bliss and pain) also makes viscerally available to viewers how uneven distributions of power and participation inevitably inform the project of freedom and justice without suspending it. Significantly, from beginning to end the documentary's use of sentimental activism—to repeat, the visual and affective arrangement of minority subjects into legibility and appreciation to call for structural transformation—stretches the women's right to humanness away from ontological identity into the realm of unanticipated socialities. In closing, I seek to intimate how *Lesbian Factory* might offer an alternative model of the social that, reiterating the lived experience of migrant women workers, refracts and reimagine post-Cold War neoliberal orderings.

Of Other Presents

After the protagonists' assignment to new companies across the island, several of the new employers turn out to be scams. In other cases, the Filipinas are sent to the heavy-industry sector, where they are given the most demanding and dangerous jobs. And they are miserable: alternating shots of a metal factory with the protagonists' accounts of the intensity of heavy physical labor, *Lesbian Factory* relays clear exploitation. However, just when there seems to be no hope for betterment, the collaborative effort of TIWA, Yam, Bing, Lan, and others finally pays off. The Council of Labor Affairs adjusts its foreign labor regulations. From now

on, we are told, blue-collar migrant workers will have a say in their assignment process and can change workplaces without leaving the country (and thereby spending large amounts on brokers and placement agencies, travel and readmittance). In addition, hiring companies are preexamined for fraud. Migrant women have written labor history. At long last “they get to be treated with respect, like a human being,” director Chen maintains.

While the successful push for legal amendment suggests not least the power of the camera in contributing to change—as means to record and expose unwanted facts—the film is careful to avoid a happy ending of restored human dignity. Rather, TIWA closes its narrative with long shots into the sky highlighting the unfinished project of social justice—and, as always, with feeling. Accompanying these last shots, we hear the voice-over ponder, “In the flux of space and time, the coming and going of love is unpredictable. But the stories of love and migration always continue,” reminding viewers that further migrations, separations, and heart-breaks are lying ahead, but so are alternative life-making practices, pleasures, and intimacies. Reflective of the women’s emplacement in seemingly antagonistic realities, the documentary mobilizes an affective matrix, or political sensorium, in which, to follow Rey Chow, “accommodation, compromise, and settlement” also engender “possibilities for perversion, subversion, and diversion” that do the social and bring people together differently.³⁸

In this sense, my interpretive take on the exhibition of pain and tears, of blissful silliness and love, in *Lesbian Factory* is not offered as a political dead end. Rather, I approach these tactics as part and parcel of a necessary response to this historical moment in which liberal values have come to substantiate hegemonic regimes and where, consequently, the only way to bring about genuine change might lie in the simultaneous interpellation of and refusal to repeat the limiting fictions by which existence becomes meaningful. I have argued that *Lesbian Factory*’s sentimental activism engenders such a “balancing act” (or as I have written before, a repetition with difference) by repurposing an affective lexicon of rights and recognition for radical transformation: it asserts minoritized populations as rights-bearing subjects through a seemingly

conventional form while rearranging the terms of legibility around minoritarian worlds. In so doing, TIWA's work puts forth obscured relationalities of domination and alternative world building, linking the protagonists' life-making practices with Taiwan's aspiration for equal membership on the global stage.

Indeed, by differently imagining and positing institutional forms of the social, the documentary offers the women's feminist alliances and erotic encounters also as concrete openings into shared histories and contact zones that have been actively forgotten by colonial knowledge production and capital's imperative of ongoing expansion. I am thinking of serial colonialisms, masculinist nationalisms, US imperialism, and neoliberal doctrines that have significantly shaped the unequal flows of money and people in the Asia Pacific (and beyond) today—but also of those lateral and unanticipated currents of political and intimate exchange that, as articulated in and by *Lesbian Factory*, creatively rework geopolitical hierarchies and hegemonic social orders. Whereas at the time of this writing, long-standing disputes over the South China Sea between China, the Philippines, and several other states including Taiwan continue to fuel nationalist fantasies and mar international relations, TIWA's documentary work powerfully models how the performative gesture of colonial repetition by which the temporal, spatial, epistemological, and affective paradigms of domination continuously expand themselves—deep into the logic of liberal humanism—becomes rewritten by and into female bodies that yet refuse to reproduce the same old story.

Notes

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1. For a broader context on the Chinese independent film movement, see Zhen Zhang, ed., *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Durham,

NC: Duke University Press, 2007). Yiman Wang offers insight into the relation between politics and aesthetics in Chinese independent documentary in her essay “The Amateur’s Lightning Rod: DV Documentary in Postsocialist China,” *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2005): 16–26.

2. See, for instance, Marijke De Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); Randall Halle, “Offering Tales They Want to Hear: Transnational European Film Funding as Neo-Orientalism,” in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 303–19; Miriam Ross, “The Film Festival as Producer: Latin American Films and Rotterdam’s Hubert Bals Fund,” *Screen* 52, no. 2 (2011): 261–67; and Tamara L. Falicov, “The ‘Festival Film’: Film Festival Funds as Cultural Intermediates,” in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, ed. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (New York: Routledge, 2016), 209–29.
3. For an informative discussion of these developments, see Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). While Melamed develops her critique of “neoliberal multiculturalism” (42), i.e., the particular regime of racial capital in this historical moment, in the context of the US, she deliberately expands the concept beyond national borders, establishing it as a sort of global episteme that jointly sections the globe and its people. In view of the ongoing project of US imperial expansion (through not only military-capitalist infrastructures but also the strategic forging of a liberal human rights discourse) Melamed is similarly relevant for understanding the exploitative dimensions of so-called liberal values outside the US (especially in the context of the Asia Pacific as this article’s regional focus).
4. *Lesbian Factory* was shot on digital camera, and I refer to it alternately as video, film, and documentary.
5. Echoing film philosophers Kara Keeling and Jacques Rancière, my supposition is that politics and aesthetics are inherently entwined, for the particular ordering of images and affects into meaning and narrative sets the conditions of possibility for political thought and action and, thus, “social reality.” See Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and*

- the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), and Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006).
6. While “Taiwan” de facto describes the archipelago’s major island, I use the term interchangeably with “ROC” here for linguistic variation.
 7. Petrus Liu, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 158.
 8. Amie Elizabeth Parry, “Exemplary Affect: Corruption and Transparency in Popular Cultures,” *Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2016): 46.
 9. Kuan-hsing Chen, “The Imperialist Eye: The Cultural Imaginary of a Subempire and a Nation-State,” *Positions: Asia Critique* 8, no. 1 (2000): 60.
 10. Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Josephine Ho, “Is Global Governance Bad for East Asian Queers?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 4 (2008): 457–79; and “Queer Existence under Global Governance: A Taiwan Exemplar,” *Positions: Asia Critique* 18, no. 2 (2010): 537–54; Sarah B. Snyder, “Human Rights and the Cold War,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. Craig Daigle and Artemy M. Kalinovsky (New York: Routledge, 2014), 237–48. That the history of liberal modernity, of rights and freedom for modern man, has always been a history of subjugation, violent disappearance, and uneven inclusions is brilliantly mapped out in Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
 11. While the English film title uses the term “lesbian”—itself already a translation from the original title, which engages the Taiwanese notion of “T-Po” (tomboy-wife) to describe the Filipinas’ same-sex relationships—I choose “queer,” not to replace local categories of sexual identity, but as a capacious term attending to the convoluted dynamics and frictions, including patriarchal nationalism, labor migration, and global capital, along which the depicted intimate formations emerge and develop. “Queer” pertains here not only to nonnormative sexualities but insurgent socialities that question existing paradigms of categorization.

12. Jane M. Gaines, "Documentary Radicality," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 19.
13. The Council of Labor Affairs is a government-established institution centering on labor conditions in Taiwan. Since 2014, it has been operating under the Ministry of Labor.
14. *Lesbian Factory's* voice-over is spoken in Mandarin; the worker interviews are held in English. Quotes are directly taken from the English dialogue or subtitles.
15. Credited as director, Chen recorded and edited the video while Wu served primarily as interviewer and English translator.
16. The transformation of Taiwan from a one-party military regime under the Chinese nationalist party, or Kuomintang (KMT), to a democratically elected government throughout the 1990s went hand in hand with the infusion of neoliberal practices into developmentalist policies, including aggressive market expansion to the South and the privatization of care—both of which have highly profited from Southeast Asian contract labor. See Yun-han Chu and Pei-shan Lee, "Globalization and Economic Governance in Taiwan," in *Growth and Governance in Asia*, ed. Yoichiro Sato (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004), 49–58. In a move that paralleled Taiwan's transformation, Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos opened the domestic market to the world by solidifying a labor emigration system that has made available a large overseas labor force, particularly female, meeting the ever-rising demands for low-paid service work on the global market. See Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, "Toward a Critical Filipino Studies Approach to Philippine Migration," *Filipino Studies: Palimpsests of Nation and Diaspora*, ed. Martin F. Manalansan and Augusto F. Espiritu (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 33–55; Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015) and *The Force of Domesticity: Filipina Migrants and Globalization* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); and Pei-chia Lan, *Global Cinderellas: Migrant Domestic Workers and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
17. TIWA offers legal counseling, language classes, and recreational activities for foreign workers. Documentary filmmaking constitutes a minor aspect of its activist work. Previous to

Lesbian Factory, Chen produced *Hospital Wing 8 East* (2006), a documentary depicting the daily challenges of a Filipina migrant caregiver in Taiwan. In addition, the NGO completed *Rainbow Popcorn* (2012), a sequel to *Lesbian Factory*, which follows the Filipinas' return home and travel to subsequent workplaces across the globe. TIWA has also held documentary workshops teaching migrant women how to make their own short films.

18. Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh Rawnsley, "Public Television and Empowerment in Taiwan," *Public Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2005): 24.
19. Psyche Cho, "Selected Documentaries from 2010 TIDF Set for Free Screening Tour," *Culture.tw*, 17 June 2011, www.culture.tw/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2093&Itemid=235. The film screened primarily at LGBTQ and social justice-themed festivals in China, Hong Kong, India, Korea, Canada, Belgium, France, Germany, and Sweden.
20. Expansive circuiting refers here less to numerical exposure—the film still describes a niche work known only to a select audience both locally and internationally—than its various media, institutional, and political crossings.
21. National Immigration Agency, "106.3 Foreign Residents by Nationality," www.immigration.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=1331161&ctNode=29986&mp=2 (accessed 14 June 2017).
22. Chen, "The Imperialist Eye"; Yen-fen Tseng and Yukiko Komiya, "Classism in Immigration Control and Migrant Immigration," in *Politics of Difference in Taiwan*, ed. T. W. Ngo and Hong-zen Wang (New York: Routledge, 2011), 134–51.
23. For a selection of writings on rights-based or what Thomas Waugh calls "committed documentary" (1), especially with regard to the visual and affective mediation of trauma and social suffering, see Thomas Waugh, *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Jane M. Gaines, "The Melos in Marxist Theory," in *Cinema and the Question of Class*, ed. David E. James and Rick Berg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 56–71, and "Documentary Radicality"; Paula Rabinowitz, "Sentimental Contracts: Dreams and Documents of American Labor," in *Feminism and Documentary*, ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999),

- 43–63; Wendy S. Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Leshu Torchin, *Creating the Witness: Documenting Genocide on Film, Video, and the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). For a broader outlining of sentimentality in American cultural politics, see Jennifer A. Williamson, “Introduction: American Sentimentalism from the Nineteenth Century to the Present,” from *The Sentimental Mode: Essays in Literature, Film and Television*, ed. Jennifer A. Williamson, Jennifer Larson, and Ashley Reed (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 3–13.
24. Earl McCabe, “Depressive Realism: An Interview with Lauren Berlant,” *Hypocrite Reader*, no. 5 (2011), hypocritereader.com/5/depressive-realism.
25. Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 15.
26. For Taiwan, see Sylvia Li-chin Lin, “Engendering Victimhood: Women in Literature of Atrocity,” *Positions: Asia Critique* 17, no. 2 (2009): 411–34; Li-hsin Kuo, “Sentimentalism and Depoliticization: Some Problems of Documentary Culture in Contemporary Taiwan,” *Documentary Box*, no. 25 (2005), www.yidff.jp/docbox/25/box25-2-e.html; Hans Tao-Ming Huang, *Queer Politics and Sexual Modernity in Taiwan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011); and Liu, *Queer Marxism*. Similarly, multiple Filipino studies scholars have written on the use of sentimental discourse by the Philippine state, its colonial legacy, and liberal appropriation. Among these scholars are Vicente L. Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Denise Cruz, *Transpacific Femininities: The Making of the Modern Filipina* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); and Julius Bautista, “Export-Quality Martyrs: Roman Catholicism and Transnational Labor in the Philippines,” *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (2015): 424–47.
27. Lauren Berlant, “Love, A Queer Feeling,” in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 432–51.

28. Vicente Rafael, "'Your Grief Is Our Gossip': Overseas Filipinos and Other Spectral Presences," *Public Culture* 9, no. 2 (1997): 276.
29. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.
30. See Yu-Fang Cho, "Nuclear Diffusion: Notes toward Reimagining Reproductive Justice in a Militarized Asia Pacific," *Amerasia Journal* 41, no. 3 (2015): 2–24.
31. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest, 1973), 296.
32. Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.
33. Amie Elizabeth Parry, "Inter-Asian Migratory Roads: The Gamble of Time in Our Stories," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (2012): 176–88. Bliss Cua Lim shared with me that the theme of conditional romance abroad is a popular trope in OFW melodrama, too. However, while "OFT" implies that these relationships are only temporary and, as the collateral product of labor migration, automatically terminate once the women return home as "full citizens," *Lesbian Factory* and its sequel, *Rainbow Popcorn*, offer a more complicated picture. My forthcoming book manuscript discusses in more detail both films' engagement of the women's incoherent trajectories and multiple self-positionings.
34. Migrant erotics resemble what Neferti Tadiar calls "remaindered forms of life-making" (155), i.e., life-sustaining acts by and for those deemed without value, that "both suppor[t] and corrod[e] privileged forms of sociality" (151). See Neferti Tadiar, "Decolonization, 'Race,' and Remaindered Life under Empire," *Qui parle* 23, no. 2 (2015): 135–60.
35. Rabinowitz, "Sentimental Contracts," 844, 838.
36. Rangan, *Immediations*, 6. See also note 23 above.
37. Ho, "Is Global Governance Bad" and "Queer Existence"; Jen-peng Liu and Naifei Ding, "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005): 30–55; Huang, *Queer Politics*; Liu, *Queer Marxism*. Tsung-yi Michelle Huang and Chishe Li target specifically the sentimental representation of migrant women in Taiwan's broadcasting: "Like a Family, but

Not Quite: Emotional Labor and Cinematic Politics of Intimacy,” in *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time*, ed. Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 211–31.

38. Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations*, 199.

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Figure 4. "I'm so embarrassed." Pilar (left) and Lan (right) during the interview. *Lesbian Factory* (dir. Susan Chen, Taiwan, 2010)