

## Rethinking Working-Class Literature: Feminism, Globalization, and Socialist Ethics

Today Marx's ghost needs stronger offerings than Human Rights with economics worked in, or the open-ended messianicity of the future anterior, or even "responsibility" (choice or being-called) in the Western tradition. The need is to turn toward ethical practices—care of others as care of the self—that were *defective* for capitalism.  
—Spivak

Can we speak of a collective subject of feminism within economic globalization? Whose interest does staking a claim for such a heterogeneous class subject—one that figures “unity in dispersal”—serve? What are the conditions and constraints for conceptualizing historical agency and class struggle according to these terms, given that we occupy a conjuncture that has been described by some in epochal terms as the “feminization of the proletariat,” by others as the “NGO-ization of feminism”?

In the 1980s, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's admonition was addressed to a certain group of theorists who ignored the international division of labor in their efforts to stage globalized resistance, a staging they appended to a poststructuralist critique of the sovereign subject of the West (“Can the Subaltern Speak?”). Undoubtedly, today, more than ever, her cautionary remarks must also be heeded by Marxist-feminist thinkers, even as we reach to articulate the terms of a feminist class politics in the shadow of economisms like “comparative advantage” and “outsourcing.” And yet, from different, sometimes opposing, sides of the international

division of labor, working-class writers like Tillie Olsen (from the United States) and the *Dabindu* (Sweat)<sup>1</sup> worker-writers (from the free trade zones of Sri Lanka) figure a critique of such economisms. They remind us that measures of chronology—important dates, periods, and “events” in labor history—do not let us into quiet moments that are “too late” or “too early,” into secret places where chance meetings and haphazard alignments take place. They do not lead us to quiet passages that cannot be read as message or manifesto. Such writers expand the scope of working-class literature and political fiction beyond the particularly resplendent periods in organized labor, a moment of crisis or planned insurgency, and ask the question of the lasting ethical transformation that can alone secure the political.

Whereas working-class literature has conventionally been associated with transparent documentary realism and testimony, this essay diverges from these emphases to highlight feminist texts whose ideology and ethics explicitly strain the norms of aesthetic and political manifestos. Characterized by an unfinished and therefore *necessarily collaborative* form, the working-class feminist writings discussed here anticipate a new shape and ideological grounding for the concept of a collective subject and other collectivities.

### *Rethinking Working-Class Literature*

“Marxism is not a historicism,” and neither is working-class literature.<sup>2</sup> This essay reads Olsen’s field-defining literature from the 1930s alongside the Sri Lankan *Dabindu* writings representing the new proletariat within globalization. The incongruous pairing of a single-author novel with the collectively authored and edited free trade zone periodical is deliberate. I want to call attention to the figure of a collective subject and the critique of individualism shared by different, changing traditions of women’s and feminist texts of labor. If we isolate these writers by literary periods or *conventional* rules of genre, we overlook points of comparison that are suggested by other sociologies and ideologies of form. Characterized by interruptions, speech interferences, anti-*Bildung*, and strategic anonymity, these texts produce the concept of working-class history as always partial, uncompleted, and antidevelopmentalist. Whether through the serialized narrative sequences of the *Dabindu* free trade zone periodical or through the interrupted rhythms and particular style of Olsen’s writing, history is figured as “the everyday,” not as the exceptional revolutionary event. No unified, centered subject of counterglobalist class

struggle emerges; instead, in both texts a collective nonsubject protagonist displaces the heroic proletarian of hegemonic narratives.

In terms of the cultural politics of working-class studies, E. P. Thompson's figure of "the free-born Englishman" remains an ideal construction, not only emblematic of the British working class but also significant generally for the field of working-class historiography.<sup>5</sup> From within traditions of Indian Marxism, Dipesh Chakrabarty's important intervention, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, presents the other side of the story of the industrial revolution and the organized working classes in England—that of the colonial working class in Bengal. However, in the current economic conjuncture of globalization, what we understand as the new international division of labor is predicated on the cheap labor of (mainly) women workers in neocolonial countries with national economic policies of export-oriented industrialization. And yet, proletarian writing, according to the old system of signs and notations, remains synonymous with icons and codes of masculinity and the metropole.

In the contemporary historical moment, the "new proletariat"<sup>4</sup> is best represented by the figure of the woman worker in the periphery. Separate from organized labor in industrialized countries of the North, the occluded agent of production in this "postindustrial" age is the super-exploited worker in postcolonial, "developing" countries with extraverted rather than autocentric economies.<sup>5</sup> In the terms of government-issued business brochures targeted at foreign direct investment, she is sold as "cheap," "docile," and "famous for her manual dexterity." In terms of U.S. feminism, she cannot be easily written into labor history because she represents, disturbingly, the containment of the wage bargaining power of struggling women workers closer to home.<sup>6</sup> (Tillie Olsen's "I Want You Women Up North to Know" is an interesting exception. But more on this in the concluding section.) In terms of nationalist historians and trade unionists, she is *not* identified with the revolutionary conjuncture. In fact, proletarian literature seems unable to produce a script for her. She appears ill suited to its narrative conventions, especially its dominant archetypes and idealized constructs. Despite the interventions of feminist genre critics, our available language is limited. Spivak, in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, frames the problem in this way: "[W]e see [in] the establishment of the International Workingmen's Association [. . .] in 1866 [. . .] a foreclosure of the woman who will be the agent of Marxism today in the inevitable docketing of European as 'international' and organized internationality as men's" (75). This essay is an attempt to open up questions

of genre as well as debates on aesthetics and politics in the service of this figure excluded from the literary-critical calculus. It builds on the intuition of U.S. feminist critics who have astutely drawn our attention to the fact that “thirties feminism,” its conventions, notations, ideologies, and ethics, has been overlooked in the history of ideas forging ahead toward the logical conclusion of postmodernist, antifoundationalist variations, even by some trends within single-issue postcolonial feminisms. What gets lost in the ideological break between the old left and the new is (1) the Marxist-feminist critique of the autonomous subject; (2) how to think a comparative, not competitive, model for internationalized feminism; and (3) how to think feminism and class struggles outside reified narratives of organized resistance.

Too often, in literature and criticism alike, the working class is seen and represented as masculine, metropolitan, and revolutionary. Women’s texts of nonrevolutionary socialism, however, present us with new figures and concepts for thinking unorganized resistance, everyday experience, and the shape of the ethical within globalization. Bracketing these anomalous, unfinished, dialogic, anticipatory texts, theoreticians of proletarian literature confront the problem that its celebrated narratives are tied to the logic of revolutions and the mindset that is supposed to accompany them. Since the literary internationalism of the “radical” 1930s, the development of proletarian literature beyond short-term political agitation, codings of crisis, and revolutionary romanticism remains an issue for the political and literary history of working-class writing. According to a corpus of representative texts and standard, minimal Marxist definitions, the “proletariat” of proletarian literature is, by definition, revolutionary, by implication, male; this is the specific subset of the working class entrusted with the historic mission of abolishing the class system. Nonrepresentative texts by proletarian women writers from different historical periods propose a more counterintuitive model, one not connected to the conditions and constraints of the revolutionary conjuncture, but to other measurements and templates for thinking socialist ethics.

The genre of proletarian literature remains to be analyzed in connection with the changing terms of gender and sexuality. In her important contribution to feminist historiography of women’s working-class texts, Paula Rabinowitz exposes the ideological biases of prevailing thirties generic taxonomies where codes of proletarian realism, naturalism, and the idea of the (rational) subject come to be automatically associated with masculinity and, by extension, proletarian writing, whereas techniques of modernism

and/or realist (domestic) fiction and any and all depictions of interiority are associated with women's writing (1–16, 63–96). More than a simple re-counting of the forgotten numbers of women proletarian writers, Rabinowitz's broader epistemological critique acknowledges the pitfalls of an essentialist logic (subscribed to by certain feminist critics themselves) that reifies a dichotomous rendering of difference refracted through the oppositions between realism and modernism; factory and home; male and female. Ultimately, however, Rabinowitz, along with other contemporary feminist historians of the genre, falls prey to the terms of her own critique. While unmasking the politics securing the privilege of the thirties male literary critical establishment and their rules of genre, she replaces this standard of judgment with the criteria of liberal feminism. That is, the project of feminist historiography becomes the recovery of the lost subject, sometimes part of "the search for our literary foremothers." Infused with this mission, which becomes inextricably personal, the feminist critic is quick to recognize in the writings of women worker-writers and organic intellectuals of the period versions of the bildungsroman, arguably the norm of high feminist criticism allied to the later mainstream Euro-American idea of consciousness raising. Olsen's *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, understood to be a hallmark text of U.S. literary radicalism, for example, has been construed (misconstrued, I will argue) as an example of a novel of self-formation.<sup>7</sup> Along these lines, what has been overlooked in a certain tradition of a materialist-feminist historiographic practice is the *rejection* of the idea of the individual subject at the very core of texts by proletarian writers.

In this essay, I will read, in relationship to the works of North American proletarian writer Tillie Olsen, a selection of poems, political commentary, and short fiction produced by the worker-writers of the *Dabindu* collective from the Katunayake free trade zone region in Sri Lanka. The period under consideration is 1984 to 2001, which covers the passage of *Dabindu's* transformation from a workers' collective organized loosely around the free trade zone periodical and other forms of alternative organizing into an internationally funded NGO. Neither Olsen nor the writers of the *Dabindu* collective choose the form of the bildungsroman to represent the nonsubject of history. Each writer in her own way undercuts the "development" of an essentialist feminine consciousness. Rather, what is at stake for these *proletarian* writers (from different sides of the international divide) is the critique of the subject, as well as a critique of historicist thinking. In the place of the style of the individualist utterance are elliptical marks, interruptions, and interferences that take the measure

of moments, not monuments. A concept of a nonindividual subjectivity brings these writers together under the rules of a different sociology of form. Antiessentialism and the decentered subject are considered to be the provenance of deconstruction or high postmodernism, but the calculus changes when we consider feminist working-class texts as our object. Ultimately, both *Dabindu* and Olsen undo the concept of working-class writing as a canonical genre or even as a unitary authorial construct and, instead, keep it alive as an “oppositional transformative.”<sup>8</sup>

Consider this curious passage in Olsen’s *Yonnonidio*,<sup>9</sup> a moment of “speech interference” that communicates the writer’s resistance to the transformation of the working-class novel into a fetishized, canonical object. At a critical juncture, an angry voice interrupts the story: “And could you not make a cameo of this and pin it onto your aesthetic hearts? So sharp it is, so clear, so classic” (20). In terms of Olsen’s plot, the speech interrupts at a point where a terrible mining accident has occurred in a small mining town in Wyoming. The ominous death whistle has blown, and the members of the mining families are standing about, gathered in tense suspense to discover who has been lost to the explosion and who will be lifted up from the rubble. At this point, the focalization of the scene shifts away from Mazie, the girl-child protagonist of the story, to a disembodied voice that cuts in to save the episode from the literary critic’s desire to crystallize the moment into a “classic.” During this moment of text interference, the separation between what is constituted as “the social”—the historical event, always in the past—and “the personal”—in Raymond Williams’s words, “this, here, now, alive, active, ‘subjective’” always in the present—is momentarily collapsed.<sup>10</sup> The narrator’s discourse breaks abruptly with the third-person past tense—the value-neutral, objective prose of history—becoming, instead, an immediate, direct, angry address to the reader-critic:

*Surely it is classical enough for you—the Greek marble of the women, the simple, flowing lines of sorrow, carved so rigid and eternal. Surely it is original enough—these grotesques, this thing with the foot missing, this gargoyle with half the face gone and the arm [. . .]. You will have the cameo? Call it Rascoe, Wyoming, any of the thousand mine towns in America, the night of a mine blowup.*

And then, answering her rhetorical question regarding the aesthetics and politics of representing working-class struggles, the speaker concludes:

“A cameo of this, then. Blood clot of the dying sunset and the hush. No sobs, no word spoken. Sorrow is tongueless [. . .]” (20). In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Vološinov defines “speech interference” as the “merging of two *differently* oriented speech acts [in which we sense] the *integrity* and *resistance* of the reported message behind the author’s transmission” (140). In this autoreferential passage punctuated by deictic indices, as elsewhere in *Yonnondio*, an impossible ethical paradox is made visible: something might be irretrievably lost when Olsen’s book—“this” writing—acquires the status of a canonical, “classical” object. The rhetorics of this passage, the prose-poetry of its language, allows the writer to say something unsayable in the voice consciousness of her characters, struggling for representation and visibility. Indeed, such a declaration would be unthinkable for an impoverished labor activist and writer struggling for recognition and validation during the hard times of Depression-era America. Yet the language performs the impossible task.

Is it possible to represent without monumentalizing a necessarily provisional structure? Olsen outlines a representational strategy for working-class writing other than reportorial realism or romantic idealism. She turns to a philosophy of literature, rather than a system of (official) history, to figure the terms of an ethos of working-class writing that is *not* defined in relationship to a moment of crisis or a single, material yet emblematic, instance; it is connected, instead, to other durations. “This” literature is not a monument to the casualties of labor history; rather, it is categorically unfinished, antiessential: not a Greek statue, but “this thing with the foot missing.” A conceptual shift from historical prose to literary language is most transparently underscored in the anonymous protest letter that signs off the segment: “Dear Company [the unsigned letter reads], Your men are strangling for breath—the walls of your company town have clamped out the air of freedom [. . .]” (20). The movement from the philosophy of History to that of Literature is charted as the buried workers become allegories of history and the “facts” of the past are transformed into a larger figural logic.

Postcolonial Sri Lanka, transnational corporations, and the writings of export-oriented garment industry worker-writers might seem exorbitant to the moment that Olsen writes about in the thirties U.S., but the poetry, short fiction, and serialized novels of the monthly free trade zone newspaper—always unfinished, always awaiting the next supplement—figure the dilemma addressed in *Yonnondio* (and also in Olsen’s later stories, “I Stand Here Ironing” and “Tell Me a Riddle”). Of what is history made as

it happens? How do we write about the necessarily disappearing objects of working-class literature without sentimentalizing them—without freezing them into emblematic objects? The periodicals of the Sri Lankan free trade zone workers are here a supplement—both supplying a gap and adding an excess—to the rhetorics of the working-class novel of the United States. But as I begin this section on contemporary Sri Lankan working-class writing, I want to keep in mind the difficult lesson of *Yonnondio*. Even as the pathetic figure of the “nimble fingered” garment industry worker threatens to become a “classic” with a certain iconic status within contemporary discourses on globalization and the feminization of labor, I want to be mindful of the lost parts in the telling of the story. In a Sri Lanka riven by an inter-ethnic war, working-class history is daily being erased and reconstructed by political institutions such as the Sinhala Commission.<sup>41</sup> To this end, I do not construe the (Sinhala) *Dabindu* periodicals as *the* representative example of modern industrial fiction, but rather as one example, among the many ignored texts of labor at the limits of metropolitan discourse studies, within the changing terms of the international division of labor.

Bracketing exclusions within excluded categories for the moment (I return to this question in the penultimate section of my article), the proposition still holds: given that working women of the global South are the new proletariat in this age erroneously dubbed “postindustrial” by some, we must attend to the specific ways in which *they* supplement previous aesthetic and political debates over working-class representation. In *Yonnondio*, the text itself is a split subject. In her epigraph, Olsen marks that her unfinished book, published in 1974, is pieced together from rough drafts begun in 1932, “in arduous partnership,” as she puts it, “with that long ago writer.” With regard to *Dabindu*, I ask, how is the subject put together in these stories and poems from postindependence Sri Lanka? How is woman as subject *for* history imagined? In Olsen’s staging of the diachronic autobiographical subject, we are given the writer straining to reconnect with a past self, the working-class subject from the forgotten 1930s. By contrast, in *Dabindu* (1984–), we are presented with a heterogeneous collective subject, a group of women free trade zone workers writing in and against the history of the present—within globalization and counter-globalist struggles. And yet, while the text of the free trade zone periodical is produced by a “collective,” it does not offer us a model for a “synchronic” subject in the readily available sense; that is to say, it does not represent some seamless cultural unity of contemporary women’s working-class struggles. Rather, the subject of *Dabindu* figures a



“unity-in-dispersal”—heterogeneity and contradictions gathered under a collective signature. Writings are contributed by named and unnamed garment factory workers and mediated by the interventions of volunteer editors. In the context of its publication history and material production, the very concept of (private) authorship becomes unstable, evoking, perhaps, the situation that Terry Eagleton describes when he proposes that “community and cooperative publishing enterprises are associated projects, concerned not simply with a literature wedded to alternative social values, *but with one which challenges and changes the existing social relations between writers, publishers, readers and other literary workers*” (216, my emphasis).<sup>12</sup> He goes on to describe a concept of (British) working-class writing that portends the interrogation of unitary authorship and, indeed, “ruling definitions of literature.”

Eagleton (as always) is preoccupied with the example of the worker-writers movement in Britain, but the point resonates with the example of the free trade zone worker-writers collective also. If we consider the form of the free trade zone newspapers, we see that the text itself is a creative mishmash of genres—bits and pieces of political analysis and cultural critique interspersed with romantic melodrama, nationalist poetry, letters, didactic leftist literature, reportage on local strikes, and international labor news. Considering content, it is important to note that while the periodical is composed of writing contributed by garment factory workers, pieces are sometimes edited and selected by feminist activists and cultural workers. While these two constituencies (of feminism and the working class) are not always mutually exclusive, as Kumudini Samuel points out, the periodical’s editors belong to different formations within organized feminism in Sri Lanka, reflecting *Dabindu*’s shifting political tenor over the span of different editions.<sup>13</sup> Kumudhini Rosa, one of the conveners of the collective and the founding editor of the periodical, explains *Dabindu*’s historical conjuncture in these terms: “[I]n Sri Lanka, the new wave of the women’s movement arose in the late 1970s, at the same time as the FTZ [free trade zone]” (“Conditions” 75).<sup>14</sup> Along these lines—and also in its current incarnation as an internationally (and locally) funded NGO—it goes without saying that the *Dabindu* collective categorically cannot lay claim to some ideologically uncontaminated space outside relations of capital and class within globalization.<sup>15</sup>

Thus a seamless or idealistic concept of “the collective” gives way to a more complex, historical transaction between class politics and feminism. Just as we mark that Olsen’s 1930s *Yonnondio* comes to us in

some way mediated by the author's own hand—guided by the projects and interests of 1970s U.S. feminism—we must note that *Dabindu*, too, is mediated by changing waves of feminism within globalization. But then again, arguably, neither Olsen nor *Dabindu* (the collective signature, *Dabindu*) claims to offer us unmediated access to some authentic working class “voice from the factories.” Instead, they both illuminate a vital, if overlooked, exchange between Marxism and feminism in different historical conjunctures. *Dabindu*, perhaps, presents us with a particular type of collective subject—resolutely nonindividual in its figuration. Following signs of anti-*Bildung* and speech interferences, I will attempt to trace the itinerary of such a collective subject in my close readings of these short stories, poems, and serialized novels. But first, in the absence of a formalized institution resembling the working-class novel, and given that *Dabindu* and global feminism are not immediately part of the history of other Sri Lankan traditions of working-class writing—for example, Tamil protest literature and oral narratives composed by laborers of the tea plantation regions—it is necessary to begin by saying something about the protocols of the text, as well as something of the history of the present.

**“—All that is present and moving . . .”:  
Sri Lankan Free Trade Zone Periodicals**

Most of the signs in contemporary war-torn Sri Lanka mean “crisis.” As I sort through research materials, archival papers, handwritten notes from interviews, I come across a photograph that recalls me to a place where the writing on the walls reads: *Mavbima Koti Kate! Sinhaleyini Avadivav!* (Motherland is in the tiger’s mouth! Wake up, all ye Sinhalese!). The urgency of this message is belied, however, by the subtext of a watchmaker sitting directly under the poster. Oblivious to the blarings of racist, nationalist propaganda overhead, he appears to be putting into order the remains of old, broken timepieces, curls of wristbands and cracked faces. Shaded by the awning of his stall, against the backdrop of that raucous lettering, it looks as if he is selling crisis. This conspicuously odd figure, exorbitant to the time frame and setting of nationalist histories, represents something about the calculated untimeliness of this project. My research into forms of working-class literature does not conform to the expedient demands of the day. Lawyers, policy makers, and human rights activists *rightfully* turn their attention to constitutional reform and relief work. Instead, my objective is to collect examples of literature by

garment industry workers: letters sent home by foreign domestic laborers and literature of and by the tea plantation workers. Instead of the founding documents of the nation-state, I turn my attention to the working-class writings of the garment industry factory workers whose stories, essays, and poems are defined by narrative durations other than “crisis.”

The free trade zone paper *Dabindu* (as mentioned above, currently the publication of the NGO of the same name) traces its origins to a date of little-known “historic” significance in September 1984 when a group of women workers, newly employed in the free trade zone regions, joined together with cultural workers and grassroots labor activists to devise an alternative means of communicating in a climate where trade unions were effectively prohibited and speech was censored. Sri Lanka’s first free trade zone region was created in 1978 under the auspices of the World Bank and IMF as one of the conditions for global aid. These plans were implemented by the rightist United National Party (UNP) government, whose national economic policies charted a shift from welfarism to development. Dismantling the infrastructure of labor laws put into place as the hard-won gains of the 1950s anticolonial working-class movement, the new free trade regime of the UNP promised investment protection, tax holidays, and the availability of cheap labor to foreign capital. In 1980, the Jayawardene presidency broke the general strike, devastating the trade-union movement. Seven years after the first factories were built and operational, the *Dabindu* collective first met to discuss the strange separate space that they inhabited. Here, by fiat of the GCEC (Greater Colombo Economic Commission), their workplaces were declared exempt from the Trade Unions Ordinance, the Maternity Benefits Ordinance, as well as the Factories Ordinance and other laws of the country.

In the beginning, there were no resources for a printing press. The founding members of the group pieced together a first edition from photocopies of anonymous letters, protest poems, testimonials, and worker biographies. They distributed these copies free of charge in the cramped quarters of the boardinghouses where many of the garment factory workers lived. After the first installment, it was discovered that the paper would find its way down the assembly line to factory notice boards. In other instances, it would be smuggled into the premises slipped in between the sheets of the dailies that they used as wrapping paper for their meager lunches. Since the first meeting in September 1984, regular publication was discontinued just once, for a three-month period in 1989, coinciding with the second JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) insurgency following

the disappearances and murders of some of the worker-activists connected with the collective.<sup>16</sup> During that time, *Dabindu* was proscribed as an anti-government publication. Since the old days of forbidden pages smuggled into the factory, the periodical has received some measure of visibility with the *Dabindu* collective's transformation into a local NGO.

The newspaper was originally conceptualized as a medium for interrogating false rumors, publishing workers' correspondences, factory reports, and news of struggles with management, and for bringing together national and international labor news. It was also, however, conceived as a means of publishing the "beginning/amateur" literary efforts of worker-writers. The preface to the 1988 International Women's Day commemorative booklet titled *Stri Nirmana* (Women's Writing)<sup>17</sup> addresses a general feminist readership: "Therefore, because [the writings] found here are only amateur ("adhunika"—also, in some traditions of literary history, the word for "modern") creative efforts, we hope in the event of shortcomings and failures, for your unbiased response." In their creative writings, the garment workers formed a political picture of the organization of society counter to the new mythologies constructed by the state, which simply extolled the virtues of their obedience and manual dexterity. For example, in poems such as "Apatada Nidahasak Natha" (For Us, There Is No Freedom)<sup>18</sup> they write of themselves as set apart from the declarations of independence sounded by political parties in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The unsigned poem, published on the cover of the February 1998 edition to coincide with postcolonial celebrations of fifty years of freedom, is a critique of the nationalist rhetoric of independence as well as an exposition of the terms of economic imperialism. The first two stanzas read:

*Although fifty years ago today  
This land received its freedom  
O for the sisters of the zone  
There is still no freedom from enslavement.*

*Today, as then, under foreign rule  
They are  
Like prisoners  
O, when do they become free?*

The writing is a mix of colloquial and literary Sinhala. Each stanza registers a different meter. On some occasions we find words shortened with literary license according to some metrical scheme impossible to isolate: signs of collaboration, text interferences.

Recent studies of the *Dabindu* papers have focused mainly on segments of prose writings as sociological evidence of working-class consciousness among the women of the Sri Lankan garment industry. There are, for example, wonderful texts such as grotesque cartoons personifying the World Bank, comparative studies of the exploited garment industry workers in Bangladesh, opinionated discussion pieces on the international implications of U.S. child labor legislation.<sup>19</sup> However, in an otherwise close reading of the vocabulary of “class” in the free trade zone factories of Katunayake, anthropologists Sandya Hewamanne and James Brow briefly dismiss the fiction pages, generalizing, “In their fictional writings however, the heroines unfailingly overcome the pressures of outside forces to uphold moral values [. . .]. It could be that some of the writings are addressed to a general readership in an attempt to convey the message that there are ‘moral heroines’ within the FTZ” (22).

In addition to tales of moral heroines,<sup>20</sup> the *Dabindu* periodicals encompass a vast heterogeneity of other narrative forms, ranging from worker biographies and realist reportage to short stories about recanting JVP insurgents, romantic melodramas with the interethnic civil war as their backdrop, didactic stories critical of Sinhala ethnonationalism, poems dedicated to soldiers on the front lines, poems addressing the Tamil tea plantation workers, free verse (*Nisandas*) poetry addressing that abstract entity named the Multinational Corporation (Bahujathika Samagama), socialist fiction celebrating great Russian and Latin American Marxist leaders, love stories and other elliptical utterances—and perhaps most poignantly, stories and poems mourning lost opportunities for higher education in the university system.<sup>21</sup>

These bits and pieces may not be particularly useful to the projects of data retrieval for UN statistical reports on gender and free trade. While much has been written by anthropologists and economists about the internationalization of production and the feminization of labor, I focus on these poems and stories, especially the parts summarily dismissed by social investigators as less useful, to return to my central question: How is woman as subject for history constituted in these writings? What, if any, recurring conventions and notations make up the figuration of her identity? In “For Us, There Is No Freedom,” we discern the traces of a nonindividual subject in the irregular lines and erratic rhythms of the unsigned poem. On the other hand, “Padada Pathum” (Vagabond Wishes [Perera]) appearing in the June 1994 edition, imagines the abstract entity of the multinational corporation as a speaking subject whose sovereign speech act brings into being the terrible order of things. The poem reads in colloquial Sinhala:

Garment<sup>22</sup> for girls  
 Army for boys  
 Heavenly comforts for us . . .

*Say the Multinationals*  
*Together with those-who-lay-waste-to-the-country . . .*

කෙල්ලන්ට ගාමන්ට්ටි  
 කොල්ලන්ට හමුදාව  
 අපිට සුරසප . . . . .

කියති බහුජාතික සමාගම්  
 එක්ව දේශයේ පාලිවන් හා . . .

“Wishes” briefly anatomizes the national sexual division of labor in terms of the militarization of the state. Its form is quite simply a short list of actors in a staging of postindependence Sri Lankan history. The list includes working-class women of the export-oriented garment industry, men of the Sri Lankan armed forces fighting a savage war to maintain a unitary state, as well as multinational corporations (Bahu Jathika Samagam) and a set of unnamed agents, “those who ruin” or “lay waste to the country.” The English translation fails to capture the stark brevity of that final line as well as the planned slippage between the words for those who “rule” (*deshapalana/palaka*) and those who “ruin” (*deshapaluwan*). In the contemporary context, the poem is crucially significant in that it shifts the focus of dominant narratives of the Tamil-Sinhala interethnic conflict, placing blame not on Tamil separatist nationalism, but on the governing elite who collude with global capital to perpetuate the war industry. Perera’s poem uncovers a hidden complicity between “free trade,” the slogan of the MNC (multinational corporation), and “freedom,” the patriotic rhetoric of the postcolonial Sinhala-Buddhist government. (Less “literary” techniques mediate the language of the antiwar statement of the Committee for Democracy and Justice in Sri Lanka published in the 1995 September/October edition.)<sup>23</sup>

“Vagrant Wishes,” written in the short, staccato language of the pamphleteering tradition, represents the macropolitics of nationalism-as-an-alibi-for-global capitalism in terms of a compact, accessible, gendered logic. Deepika Thrimala Vitana’s 1994 “Chintanaya Nidahas Nam” (Thinking Freedom), on the other hand, dramatizes the micropolitics of internalized gendering in a modernist short story that stages the interior monologue of a former “Marxist”<sup>24</sup> insurgent. The time frame is the present, after

the 1989 abortive JVP insurgency in the southern part of Sri Lanka. The protagonist, Sahra, is the only one in a group of operatives who manages to escape her captor, but only after an army officer brands her face with his cigarette, leaving her permanently disfigured. The narrative of this scarring, however, is withheld in the order of narrative sequencing. Opening with a scene in which we see Sahra walking out on her lover, the story moves backward and forward as bits and pieces of the heroine's life story are given as a series of retroversions through reported speech, but without quotation marks. The title, here translated as "Thinking Freedom,"<sup>25</sup> also underscores a movement in the text as the former JVP recruit gives up the phraseology of mechanical Marxism—the *harabara vachana, tharaka vada*, "heavy duty words and logical arguments" of "the organization"—to discover her "self" through a sequence of uncollected thoughts, disconnected sentences, a collection of textual interferences, rather than the speech of the autonomous, intending subject.

Sahra remembers episodes of university life, of leaving the university to work full time for "the organization," of a failed love affair and the scarring of her face. Rooted to the spot of the river where the primary action of the story takes place, she also inhabits the present. She overhears the village women discussing the marks on her face: "One of those 'Che Guevara' types, when these words beat against Sahra's ears she feels incredible pain. That she had committed herself on behalf of their children no one seemed to acknowledge" (4). In the final turn of the story, Sahra contemplates her reflection in the water and resolves to no longer ask for validation from disaffected party ideologues or grieving family members. "If she died in that jungle that would have been something. Now how do you keep an unmarriageable woman in the house?" Their comment is a statement, rather than a question. In the closing scene, the protagonist counters this moralism with her own philosophy of Marxism, feminism, and history as she reconstructs her image in the water:

*She began to feel the strong need for independence of thought. There is no possibility of returning to university to continue [her] studies. Well, whatever happens, tomorrow by first light [she] must go to the fair and find some greens, potatoes, yams. Life is beautiful, but there must also be independence of thought. She saw on her face a strange beauty from under the water.*

Ultimately, Vitana's short story connects the narrative of the gendered revolutionary working-class subject to a different duration than

either “crisis,” on the one hand, or “development” (the proletarian female bildungsroman), on the other. By contrast, “Chintanaya” (along with S. Udayalata Menike’s “Mai Dinaya” [May Day]) is an autocritical text of *nonrevolutionary* socialism. The protagonist’s final thoughts register as a hymn to ordinariness, a rededication to inglorious, mundane affairs. “Chintanaya” strains to connect the rhythms of the daily task to the historic event of the revolutionary conjuncture. Vitana’s protagonist, like the indomitable figure of the mother in Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing,” measures history and socialist ethics not in terms of the logic of revolutions, but in the unceasing back and forth movements of daily life that construct and erase the present.

Over and against the wide-ranging and anomalous texts discussed here, I find it particularly telling that the best known *Dabindu* poem, originally published in the 1987 July–August edition of the periodical and since reproduced in local and foreign development NGO and human rights publications, is K. G. Jayasundera Menike’s realist testimonial, which describes with play-by-play precision the factory scene at Star Garments.<sup>26</sup> Here, we find stanzas organized by segments of clock time as Menike’s poem faithfully replicates the mind-numbing mechanical rhythm of the working day at a garment factory. Caught within this exacting tempo, bound to the factory floor, I would suggest that we cannot begin to imagine different times and other measures for thinking collectivities beyond trade unionist socialism and class politics as usual. Still, despite the unresolved critical debate on Marxist aesthetics, the relationship between working-class writing and literary realism continues to be taken as dogma. Tony Davies writes,

*That relationship, in one strong tradition, is simply taken for granted. According to this view, working-class writing is realistic in the most unpremeditated and unselfconscious fashion: autobiographical, documentary, or commemorative, rooted in the experience of family, community, locality, it “tells it as it is” (or, more often was) in plain words, valued for their sincerity and simple truth. (125)*

Still, beyond realism and the genre of testimonial writing, then, how are the truth claims of working-class literature constructed—and according to what terms? These working-class women have been dubbed by some as “the good girls of Sri Lankan modernity.”<sup>27</sup> But they actively write against such crisis-management myths of the state. We might ask how, in fact, they



themselves define the interruption that is the “modern” (*adhunika*), that is the new. Theirs, as we see, are collaborative writings, not self-writing in any smooth, seamless way. They are not necessarily rooted in family or locality. Strategic achrony, not clock time or nation-building projects, constitute their measure. In the *Dabindu* periodicals, I believe that perhaps the most politically imaginative (but at the same time tenuously situated) writings are a group of Sinhala poems, stories, and letters addressing and identifying with the stateless Tamil women workers of the upcountry tea plantations/estates.

Some of these pieces haphazardly blur the lines between collective identity and class interest. For example, in one segment of a long-running, anonymous epistolary novel, one protagonist (a free trade zone factory worker) compares her marginalization to the disenfranchisement of Indian-origin, “recent” Tamils:

*Just like those plantation workers . . . . . [t]hey, too, were brought over from India . . . . . got their work done by them . . . . . After that they were discarded like dirt. Did anyone think about what happens to these people? . . . . . No . . . . . How many years has this been going on? Still these people don't have citizenship.  
That's how we are . . . . . (Hasuna [Letter] 7)*

Despite numerous palliative reform measures, ever since 1948 (the year of Ceylon's independence from Britain), countless numbers of Indian-origin Tamils by birth and descent have been denied national citizenship. Here, the narrator reaches for a comparison, invoking a national scandal to give meaning to her own sense of social betrayal. But the historical analogy is forced.

Other texts approach the plantation workers' struggles more cautiously, acknowledging limitations and marking communication failings. “From Zone to Plantation” (Kalapayen Vathukarayata), for example, resists the ethically compromised stance of recognition through assimilation. The exergue preceding the heading identifies this writing as the second part of a serialized letter, but there is no specific addressee. “Put together,” not written by, as the credits disclose, it disclaims unitary authorship and, as such, metonymically mirrors the bricolage aesthetic of the *Dabindu* page. Part reportage, part analysis, part journal entry, embedded speeches (translated, we are told, into Tamil by Sinhala-speaking Tamil activists) take aboard the challenge of opening a collective dialogue in the face of race war (*jathi vadaya*). As one labor activist puts it, calling

for solidarity in alienation, “I, too, am a garment factory worker. I don’t own what I produce. Plantation workers are the same. Production has no caste, race, or religion. And yet we remain divided in that way” (“From Zone” 9). From the margins, though, a personal observation (submitted by “the compiler”) provides a quiet counterpoint to slogans. Upon entering the line rooms, she notes:

*They welcomed us with love. But how do we inquire about their day-to-day lives? We don’t understand Tamil. But this doesn’t pose a problem for us because Arumugam speaks Sinhalese. The other brothers and sisters that accompanied us could also speak both Sinhala and Tamil. I felt a sense of shame because the only language I know is Sinhalese. (8)*

Written fruitlessly, perhaps, across the Tamil-Sinhala linguistic divide, a perfect example of “destinerrance,” of a message irreducibly errant from the intended receiver, reaching, reaching, these poems, stories, “letters,” and essays gesture to the possibility of a working-class internationalism and other modes of collectivity.<sup>28</sup> Counter to the communalizing ploys of the Sinhala commission, texts such as these, as well as others like “Plantation Worker-Woman” (“Vathu Kamkaru Striya,” [Galappaththi]) and “Tear Drops from the Hills” (“Kandurelle Kandulu Binduva,” [Dhammika]) both written in the voice consciousness of the plantation worker, imagine cartographies of labor that displace competing nationalist imaginaries.

### ***“I Want You Women Up North to Know”***

The rhetorical protocols of Tillie Olsen’s texts—interruptions interspersed with “heteroglossic crossfire”—certainly resemble the writing (or properly speaking, the “graph”) of the *Dabindu* page. And it is tempting to claim the necessarily collaborative aspect of the unfinished text, writing under the sign of text interferences, whether it be the “serialized poetics” of the free trade zone periodical awaiting the next installment or writing cut short because of the inexorable regulation of the working day and the demands of others (*Yonnondio*), as categorically feminist. However, to focus only on formal similarities as transparent signs of ideological content is to replay, albeit in a different way, the historicism of those who ordain postmodernism the cultural logic of capital.<sup>29</sup> By simple reversal, the form of feminist interruption becomes “the prose” of counter-globalization. Notwithstanding the fact that the literature of labor and

especially the literature of women's labor has been overlooked in literary historiographies charting the passage from realism to postmodernism, we risk collapsing a formalism into an ontology if we claim some seamless unity between the aesthetics and politics of *Dabindu* and Olsen. There is no "organic" connection between these texts. Indeed, separated by time and geography, these two very different examples of working-class literature are positioned such that they seem to illustrate perfectly what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri might describe as the failure of proletarian internationalism today—the incommunicability and *untranslatability* of different working-class struggles via a common system of meaning making. As they put it: "There is no common language of struggles that could 'translate' the particular language of each into a cosmopolitan language. Struggles in other parts of the world and even our own struggles seem to be written in an incomprehensible foreign language" (57). Furthermore, even as they bracket feminism and the global South as constitutive objects in their study of globalization, Hardt and Negri advance the case that when proletarian internationalism was alive and active, it was so because "international solidarity had to be recognized not as an act of charity or altruism for the good of others, a noble sacrifice for another national working class, but rather as proper to and inseparable from each national proletariat's own desire and struggle for liberation" (49–50).<sup>50</sup>

But this rationale does not account for today's emergent "new trade union initiatives" bringing together different "national" labor unions across the North-South divide (India and the United States, for example) to produce a unified platform against the divisive ploys of outsourcing.<sup>51</sup> Neither, in fact, does it account for the ethicopolitical strategy of Olsen's 1934 "I Want You Women Up North to Know," written in the interest of the garment factory worker of the "global South," in this case, Chicana women in the U.S. garment industry. Olsen writes not in the service of the U.S. working class, but in the service of a heterogeneous, collective subject of feminism. What do we make of texts such as these, which negotiate the countercurrents of "intranational class differences"? Via a reading of Olsen's poem, this final section of my essay considers global feminism as a language—properly speaking, a translation or mediation, never pure, not always clear, sometimes ideologically compromised—that facilitates communication (amid misfirings) across the North-South divide.

If, as Hardt and Negri contend, internationalism needs to be recognized not as altruism, but as self-interest, Olsen's "I Want You Women Up North to Know" occupies an uneasy position in the canon of literary

internationalism. Based on Felipe Ibarro's letter to *New Masses* (1934), Olsen's poem, at a very rudimentary level, reads as antisweatshop boycott politics. Ibarro documents labor violations based on evidence gathered from interviews with Chicana workers in San Antonio. In an interesting variation upon the genre of worker's correspondence poetry, Olsen the working-class poet rewrites the activist journalist's impassioned rhetoric, translating it into lines of poetry. But the first stanza follows Ibarro's opening salvo almost word for word:

*I want you women up north to know  
how those dainty children's dresses you buy  
at macy's wanamakers, gimbels, marshall fields,  
are dyed in blood, are stitched in wasting flesh,  
down in San Antonio, "where sunshine spends the winter."*

The central metaphor, predictably perhaps, translates women's bodies into commodities. But the narrative logic of the poem also relies on another metaphoric scheme—alternative regionalisms—depicting an economic and ideological divide between “the North” and “the South.” Several decades before the documents of the Brandt commission, which mapped the world in the simplest, starkest terms, divided between rich nations (the North) and poor (the South), Olsen adopts their rhetorical strategy, investing the historical North-South divide in the United States with new meaning—one that is all too familiar to us now, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Written during a period of hard-won gains for the U.S. labor movement, at the height of proletarian internationalism, Olsen's poem anticipates the age of comparative advantage, multifiber agreements, and NAFTA. As Charlotte Nekola, among others, has noticed, “‘I Want You Women up North to Know,’ about Mexican needleworkers, is unusual [in the context of standard surveys of thirties literature] in that it not only details the conditions of work itself but also outlines the relationship of third world workers to a capitalist economy” (132). Here, Olsen takes it upon herself to write in the class interest—though significantly *not* in the voice consciousness—of Mexican American workers. She calls our attention to ever-shifting contours of cartographies of labor reminiscent, perhaps, of Antonio Gramsci's concept of “the South,” or of Raymond Williams's construct of “the country and the city.” According to Olsen's narrative of global capital, the country, here, is down/South where workers are exploited; the city, in this context (up north), identifies the metropolitan centers of consumption. Similarly, New York, Chicago, and Boston are

explicitly named in Ibarro's letter. (Note Olsen herself is living in San Francisco at this time.) Olsen assigns "the North" a subject position and connects it with the figure of the American Woman as consumer. The last two lines are an exact replica of Ibarro's oath: "I tell you this can't last forever/ I swear it won't."

There are other significant moments, however, where Olsen's writing departs from exacting fidelity to the original, taking on an ideological and ethical discursive life of its own. In Ibarro's letter as in Olsen's poem, the North-South divide is inscribed as Northern women consumers versus Southern women workers; the poem, however, beyond naming these women according to their documented names (as Catalina Rodriguez, Maria Vasquez, Catalina Torres, and Ambrosia Espinoza), does not hypostasize national difference. Ibarro makes a point to call attention to the fact that these superexploited women are "*American-born Mexican*" (emphasis mine). But in what might seem a questionable omission from within the ideological and disciplinary maneuvers of (liberal) multiculturalism and identity politics, Olsen does not comment on cultural, ethnic, or indeed national difference in her narrative.<sup>52</sup> Some might make the case that twice removed from the lived context of their stories and struggles, Olsen is merely ventriloquizing these women. But I would argue that her position might be understood in terms of a system of socialist ethics put in the service of the worker as opposed to an ethics of the immigrant worker—or the *legal* (American-born) immigrant worker. Elsewhere, as we know, she writes critically of the current overemphasis on race, ethnicity, and identity politics. Overall, in this, her first publication, oversimplification of terms becomes her ethicopolitical strategy. The women "up north" constitute a faceless monolith, but the southern women are named, given subjectivity—sometimes collectively ("maria catalina ambrosia"), sometimes individually. All the northern women are consumers; all the southern women are workers; but the working-class poet is brave? Ultimately, we do well to read Olsen's thirties poem keeping in mind the richness and complexity of Chicana protest poetry as a necessary supplement to discourses on borders and borderlands—collective selves and others.<sup>53</sup>

Olsen's own critique of individualism and identity politics cuts across period and genre divisions. While her novel and poem are appraised and studied separately, a comparative study illuminates linkages as well as divergences between history and an ideology of form. Thus it is interesting to compare the reception and discursive life of *Yonnonidio* with that of "I Want You Women Up North to Know," her first publication. Olsen (then

Lerner) was twenty-one (or twenty-two) when her poem first appeared in *The Partisan Review*. Its theme of divisions and differences notwithstanding, “I Want You Women Up North to Know” finds a home in feminist working-class studies. *Yonnondio* is generally celebrated as the hallmark text of U.S. literary radicalism. It is widely anthologized in authoritative retrospective collections of the period. What does it mean to celebrate the cultural legacy of the U.S. left in *this* moment? While hardly expansive, Olsen’s corpus of texts provides constant counterpoints to an agenda of triumphalist recovery projects and celebrations of self-interest. As such, it is immediately relevant to the critical task facing feminism in globalization today. In her poem, as in *Yonnondio*, once again, there is a hesitation around the commodification of resistance—a question as to how “this” (her own) writing might be received and formalized. Once again there is a warning note addressed to “the bourgeois poet.” If in *Yonnondio* the message to the corporation cannot/will not be sent, here it will be but must be rerouted via the Northern woman as consumer. Marking its shortcomings, “I Want You Women Up North to Know” is unique in that it anticipates with uncanny prescience feminist negotiations within globalization.

### *Coda*

In the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami and in the wake of the detritus of peace negotiations in contemporary war-torn Sri Lanka, we see how crisis management becomes a pretext for staging unity and industrial peace in order to get new trade measures passed. With the expiration of the multifiber agreement in January 2005, the December tragedy brings with it an opportunity, as a case is made for special preferences and tariff reciprocity for Sri Lanka’s clothing exports. The Sri Lankan textile and garment conglomerate comes forward to ventriloquize the working-class subject addressing the United States and the European Union, stating, “[W]e want trade, not aid.” As goodwill is translated into aid dollars and the falling rupee gains strength, competing nationalist and manufacturing interests propose trade measures to alleviate the human crisis. Caught in the interregna where finance capital and world trade cross lines, in this new era of disaster capitalism, global reconstruction, and national development, we cannot approach the subjectivity of the working women of the global South by means of narratives of romantic revolution. The unfinished text is connected to the *longue durée*. “Reader, it was not to have ended here,” reads the postscript to Olsen’s novel from

the 1930s. We cannot help but register “here” as a deixis, marking the place of a provisional ending (to the book), yes, but also pointing to “here” as in “this place,” “this time”—the brief U.S. proletarian moment. These anomalous proletarian writings are defined by unverifiable outcomes and ethicopolitical agendas beyond statist realms, or indeed international civil society schemes, of rational planning. Perhaps it is more pressing than ever to attend to such narratives, to focus on moments, not monuments, of feminist internationalism and on the figure of a collective subject of counterglobalist struggle.

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## Notes

- 1 The literal translation would be “drops of sweat.” *Dabindu* is the name of the free trade zone periodical (currently the publication of the NGO of the same name). It is also the name of the initial worker-writers’ collective. The Sinhala word is also, on occasion, translated into English as *Da Bindu* by founding members. See also Abeygunewardene et al., “*Da Bindu*—A Space for Women Workers.” All translations from the Sinhala are my own, but I am extremely grateful to Professor Victor Hapuarachchi, formerly of Colombo and Kelaniya Universities, for taking the time to review my work.

The epigraph quoting Spivak is from “From Haverstock Hill Flat,” 7.

- 2 This particularly concise formulation belongs to Louis Althusser. “Marxism is not a historicism,” he writes, calling for a critical and epistemological reading of the object of history in Marx. In a significant chapter of *Reading Capital*, he argues his case by first analyzing the politics of the turn to historicism and humanism by Antonio Gramsci and others as a “vital reaction” against the mechanism and economism of the Second International. Acknowledging these debates between major theoreticians of a particular period and the justified basis for their critique, however, he then goes on to direct attention to the significant ways in which Marx rethinks the concept of Hegelian totality. As he puts it,

“[T]he reduction of and identification of the peculiar history of science to the history of organic ideology and politico-economic history ultimately reduces science to history as its ‘essence’” (133). The feminist critique of historicism (proposed in this essay) owes to thinkers like Althusser and Balibar, but it also builds on the simple facts that Marx’s texts on class remain unfinished and that it is a mistake to posit reified theories of capital and class relations or stagist modes of production narratives based on any specific historical instance. The feminist critique proposes a comparative (but not cultural relativist) approach to the changing object of working-class literature.

- 3 Thompson dedicates a chapter to the “free-born Englishman” in *The Making of the English Working Class* (77–101). Also, see Chakrabarty’s commentary on this touchstone in *Rethinking Working-Class History* (221–30).
- 4 Swasti Mitter’s phrase. See the preface and first chapter of her *Common Fate Common Bond* (1–24).
- 5 See Samir Amin, *Unequal Development* (203–14), on the origins of extraversion. Some might say that globalization has made Amin and Mitter merely historical. On the contrary, I would point out that the structures of the international division of labor that they describe persist today, even in the interstices of global finance capital.
- 6 We see that the lines here are opposed. There is no easy way of crossing this aporia, but, difficult as it is, this structural opposition must be acknowledged.
- 7 While there are moments in her reading that suggest productive contradictions, Barbara Foley still classifies *Yonnondio* under the heading of “proletarian bildungsroman,” bypassing the fact that it is actually not quite a book—that the author publishes it as an uncompleted girl-child’s coming-of-age story. I agree, rather, with Constance Coiner, who observes that “*Yonnondio*’s heteroglossia and the novel’s four narrators represent an attempt to move beyond an individual point of view toward more collective forms” (181). To her, *Yonnondio* prefigures a postindividualistic form for novelistic discourse. See Foley, *Radical Representations* 321–61. It should be noted that she quotes Coiner as a counterexample to her own reading. See also Coiner, *Better Red*.
- 8 In “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Culture Studies,” Spivak wonders, “Yet is there something particularly disqualifying about ‘working-class’ becoming a canonical descriptive rather than an oppositional transformative? [C]ertainly the basic argument of Jonathan Rée’s *Proletarian Philosophers* would seem to suggest so” (273).
- 9 *Yonnondio* tracks the various dislocations of the working-class Holbrook family as they move from region to region in search of work. They start out in a small mining town in Wyoming, move to a farm in South Dakota, and finally end up living and working in the packing houses of an (unnamed) city. The narrative, we notice, shifts in focalization from the girl-child/subject of the story, Mazie, to the mother, Anna, to—on occasion—the father, Jim. A crucial subplot of the story involves the breakdown and recovery of the working-class mother. The staging of her “recovery” complicates the text in productive ways. More on this point presently.



- 10 See Williams's chapter on "Structures of Feeling" in *Marxism and Literature* (128–35).
- 11 In August 2001, a militant nationalist organization naming itself the Sinhala Commission recommended to the government that it retroactively deny citizenship to the descendents of Indian-origin Tamil workers, imported as indentured labor to serve on the coffee and tea plantations of the colonial period as a means of righting British colonial wrongs: a scandalous use of the epistemology of postcolonialism in the service of Sinhala nationalism.
- 12 "It is because such ventures interrogate the ruling *definitions* of literature that they cannot so easily be incorporated by a literary institution quite happy to welcome *Sons and Lovers*, and even, from time to time, Robert Tressel," writes Eagleton (216). I am grateful to Peter Hitchcock for calling this passage to my attention.
- 13 This again underscores the fact that *Dabindu* represents a heterogeneous, dynamic collectivity, rather than a synchronous collective class subject. I am indebted to Kumudini Samuel for drawing my attention to the point that the changing volunteer editors of the periodical (who are not identified or credited in later editions) are affiliated with a range of different feminist and human rights groups in Sri Lanka. I am also grateful to her for her insights into the unwritten history of ideological battles and left party politics (such as those of the RMP [Revolutionary Marxist Party]) associated with the convening of the initial organizational group. I am also indebted to Kumari Jayawardena, Fara Haniffa, Sepali Kottogoda, and Ranjith Perera for energizing conversations, especially in their responses to a version of this article discussed at the Social Scientists' Association in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on June 16, 2005.
- 14 See also Rosa's "Strategies of Organisation and Resistance."
- 15 It is a matter of record that some of *Dabindu's* worker education projects were funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) during the 1998–2000 period. However, I find it particularly interesting to note that commemorative histories and "self-representations" of *Dabindu* tend to omit the specific details of the group's transformation into an NGO. See, for example, H. I. Samanmalie's "The Birth of *Dabindu*" (more on this presently). For now, I wonder if we can read this omission symptomatically? Many theorists of globalization have commented on the structural limitations of the "NGO-ization of feminism." Others have celebrated global NGO culture as the rise of international civil society. However, bracketing the polarizing debates for a moment, we do well to bear in mind the complex prehistories of different NGOs, such as *Dabindu*. We might question, for example, what brought these groups together before they became NGOs. What existing structures are NGOs built upon? For more commentary on NGOs and left politics, see Deborah Mindry's "Non-governmental Organizations, 'Grassroots,' and the Politics of Virtue." Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri share a slightly different critical viewpoint, even as they characterize NGOs as empire's "instruments of moral intervention" (35–38). By contrast, for an illuminating reading of the categorical demonizing of NGOs—especially as this stance relates to the contemporary political scene in Sri Lanka—see Kumari Jayawardena's "The NGO Bogey."

- 16 See note 29.
- 17 See the prefatory address by the editorial committee. Actually, the literal translation of this title would be “Women’s Creative Production/Making.” It is worthwhile pointing this out, taking into consideration also the general project of feminism within which these worker-activists are engaged. For the native speaker, it is impossible not to hear the phrasing “building of women” in “*Stri Nirmana*.” I am grateful to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for always listening with “a translator’s ear for difference.” It should also be noted here that the *Stri Nirmana* booklet is the collaborative effort of certain *Dabindu* writers and feminist activists of the Women’s Education and Research Center in Kandana.
- 18 It is important to underscore the point that some of the *Dabindu* writings have no author’s name attached to them. This point has been misrepresented and or dismissed by recent scholarship on *Dabindu*.
- 19 See “Mulu Bara Janathava Matha” (The Entire Weight Lies upon the People). A pinstripe-suited, seven-headed G7 monster rides upon the shoulders of the World Bank, personified as riding the “common man,” while sticking a sharp stick (labeled, in English, “condition-alities”) into his rear end. The man is shown sweating in his attempt to grab the money bag (labeled \$) that the wb (World Bank) dangles just out of his reach. It seems particularly interesting that here *Dabindu* represents “the People” in neocolonialism in terms of a sarong-clad man. See also “Bangladeshaye Kanthavange Aithivasikam” (The Question of Child-Workers in Bangladesh”) and “Bangladeshaye Lama Kamkaru Sevaka Prashna” (Bangladeshi Women’s Rights).
- 20 But the range, diversity, and creativity of *Dabindu* texts undermine the production of this monolithic heroine. See also, for example, Hewamanne’s recent reappraisal of *Dabindu* in a piece titled “Pornographic Voice.” Here, she actively marginalizes *Dabindu* writings to focus on other “resistant” reading practices—such as the communal reading of porn magazines—among free trade zone workers. It is not clear to this feminist theorist, at least, how reading porn constitutes resistance or transgression. I would argue that such a reading, or should I say, diagnosis, is possible only if we take as our premise (as she does) a sweeping culturalism (i.e., all/most of the free trade zone workers are sexually repressed because of internalized Buddhist/Sri Lankan—not Sri Lankan/Christian?—gender norms). Once again, I would argue that she overlooks how desire is narrated in the *Dabindu* narratives.
- 21 See Deepika Thrima Vitana, “Chintanaya Nidahas Nam” (Thinking Freedom); Charuni Gamage, “Nonimi Ginna” (The Unstoppable Fire); Deniyaye Arosha, “Mavu Kusin Nova Mihi Kusin SiriLanka Upan Viru Daruvane . . .” (O Heroic Children Born Not of Mother’s Womb, but of the Earth of Mother Lanka . . .); D. W. Vijayalatha, “Vathu Kamkaru Striya” (The Plantation Worker-Woman); Swarna P. Galappaththi, “Vathu Kamkaru Striya” (The Plantation Worker-Woman); A. C. Perera, “Padada Pathum” (Vagabond Wishes); S. Udayalata Menike, “Mai Dinaya” (May Day).
- 22 “Garment” (identical to the English word) is shorthand for the garment industry. Properly *Aghalum Karmanthaya*, here the colloquialism, deriving from the English word “garment,” is

- rendered phonetically in Sinhala. It is important to consider the “universality” of this lexicalization across South and Southeast Asia, where “garment” always “means” garment industry or garment factory, lexicalized into the mother tongue.
- 23 See the proposal advocating decentralization and devolution by the Committee for Democracy and Justice in Sri Lanka, “Let’s Defeat the Call for War and Push for a Parliamentary Solution.”
- 24 The JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna), “People’s Liberation Front,” needs to be distinguished from the Trotskyite old left parties in Sri Lanka. While the JVP, it has been argued, was once the voice of the Sinhala-educated unemployed, it is now, since the 1971 insurgency, better defined as a pseudo-Marxist party in the service of Sinhala nationalism. It continues to be routinely and *incorrectly* described as “Marxist” in newspapers. For a more nuanced reading of this complex phenomenon (which cannot possibly be contained within a footnote), see the chapter on “The JVP and the Ethnic Question” in Kumari Jayawardena’s *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka*. For a general historical overview of Sri Lankan Marxist parties, see also Kearney.
- 25 The translation would actually involve a subjunctive mood construction: “if [. . .] were,” as in: “If there were freedom of the act of thinking.”
- 26 K. G. Jayasundera Menike’s “Jivithaya” (Life) is quoted in its entirety in Rosa’s “The Conditions and Organisational Activities of Women in Free Trade Zones,” as well as appearing in *A Review of Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka*. There, the translator, Punyani Gunaratne, gives the title as “Menike’s Sorrows.” She qualifies her contribution as *an* English translation.
- 27 I am thinking here of a piece of cultural anthropology in which the author, through a painstaking analysis of the language of presidential speeches, reports, and interviews with factory bosses, finds the free trade zone women workers to be unwittingly complicit with a nationalist development agenda. It is over and against the ideological construction of “woman” in these official texts of historiography that I read the literature of these factory workers in an attempt to approach how woman as subject for history is imagined. See Lynch’s “The ‘Good Girls’ of Sri Lankan Modernity.”
- 28 An internationalism that also struggles to remain alive in grassroots organizations such as the Sinhala-Tamil rural women’s front, as well as in fora like *Gami Kantha* (Rural Women), a newspaper dedicated to foreign domestic workers.
- 29 This phrasing, of course, calls to mind Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. I would argue that such a systematization (of “dominant” cultural logic) is possible only by bracketing other residual aesthetic practices and ideologies of form such as those discussed here. Throughout, it has been my objective to show that the calculus changes if we consider heterogeneous examples of working-class literature from across the gendered international division of labor. Also see Spivak’s crucial last chapter on “Culture” in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (312–421).
- 30 It is true that Hardt and Negri do not use the term *proletarian* as a contemporary descriptor of

working-class relations in the new international division of labor. As they put it, “the proletariat is not what it used to be, but that does not mean it has vanished. It means, rather, that we are faced once again with the analytical task of understanding the new composition of the proletariat as a class” (52). And yet, they do not consider the feminization of labor or the history of social movements of the global South as impacting their analysis and our collective endeavor in any pressing way. Elsewhere, in *Empire*, they maintain that ethicopolitical agency has shifted from the proletarian collective subject to “the poor.” See, for instance, the lyrical passage that postulates that

*once again in postmodernity emerges in the blinding light of clear day the multitude, the common name of the poor. It comes out fully in the open because in postmodernity the subjugated has absorbed the exploited. In other words, the poor, every poor person, the multitude of poor people, have eaten up and digested the multitude of proletarians. By that fact itself the poor have become productive.* (158)

Furthermore, according to Hardt and Negri, the signs of life that register proletarian solidarity are those that are intelligible as world historical “events”:

*The fact that the cycle as the specific form of the assemblage of struggles has*

*vanished, however, does not simply open up to an abyss. On the contrary, we can recognize powerful events on the world scene that reveal the trace of the multitude’s refusal of explanation and that signal a new kind of proletarian solidarity and militancy.* (54)

- 31 On November 30, 2004, Ananya Bhattacharjee, Ashim Roy, and V. Chandra, among others, presented “A New Path for Indian Labor? International Solidarity in the Age of Outsourcing?” at a forum on outsourcing and organizing convened by the Cornell Global Labor Institute in Ithaca, New York. The conference brought members of the New Trade Union Initiative in India together with a coalition of u.s. unionized workers (affiliated with Jobs with Justice) to discuss prospects for dialogue, solidarity, and effective compromises on a global scale.
- 32 Some readers might point to the fact that these names are rather decidedly ethnically marked. My point is that Olsen does not feel the need (as Ibarro does in her plea) to qualify that these workers are “American-born” and therefore entitled to consideration.
- 33 I am thinking here, for example, of Gloria Anzaldúa’s amazing poem “*Cihuatl*,” *Woman Alone*” as one of the many works that negotiate the complex figuration of a collective Chicana subject (*Borderlands* 175).

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