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Book Review: Unraveling the Garment Industry: Transnational Organizing and Women's Work

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Unraveling the Garment Industry: Transnational Organizing and Women's Work.

E. C. Brooks. 2007. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 243 pp. (Includes bibliography; index; illustrations; photographs). \$22.50 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Joanne Kilgour Dowdy, Ph.D.¹

*Nobody can write your book
Nobody can write your song
Start your school
Nobody can give your speech
Build your house
Nobody can steal your divine gift
Nobody can do what you were sent to do
Don't let anything or anybody
Steal your Spirit. ---- Iyanla Vanzant*

Ethel C. Brooks places herself in the middle of the storm that is discussed as a labor movement organized to protest the abuses that have become representative of the garment industry in the U.S.A and satellite states overseas. Focusing on women's experiences in Bangladesh, San Salvador, and New York, Brooks takes her readers on a whirlwind tour of what it means to be non-white, female, poor, and a political activist in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds represented by the wealth of multinational corporations. Confronting the question of what it means to protest abusive labor conditions, Brooks helps her readers understand that there is "no free lunch" for workers, union organizers, management, or the consumers of the products made in these factories.

Brooks looks at three protest campaigns against sub-par working conditions in international garment manufacturing. The focus on working conditions on the shop floors, production processes, and international activist organizations allows Brooks to investigate the "logic, origins, objectives, and consequences of transnational campaigns for workers' rights" (xiii). Taking the stance that the global manufacturing garment industry is a new form of colonial labor organizing, Brooks is able to use the lens of the American abolitionist movement to make sense of the ways in which gender, sex, race, and class are manipulated to appeal to the conscience of consumers who benefit from the products of the "slave" labor that is still housed outside of most sites where goods are being sold for profit.

Each of the book's six chapters unravels the inner workings of the daily life of people who create clothing for international companies. Starting in Bangladesh and describing the scenario that led some international companies to provide education for the thousands of children who were employed in the garment factories as an effort to improve the working conditions for them and their families, the book moves on to similar sites of distress in El Salvador and New York City. Along the way, Brooks never loses sight of her pursuit of the truth from the standpoint of the working women who are

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overwhelmingly represented in the garment industry. Referencing the debacle of Kathie Lee's line of clothing and the media frenzy that accompanied the disclosure of the conditions under which her designs were being executed in sweatshops, Brooks makes a compelling argument for the way in which the symbols of White, female, Christian, and middle class were manipulated to salvage Lee's image in the face of protests about her profiting from the labor of non-white, non-middle class, non-American women.

It is the final chapter of the book that makes the most impact on this reader. By reiterating the fact of her own privilege as a White woman, in academia, with the prospect of making a profit from the publication of the book about mostly non-white women workers, the author gains the respect of those of us who are often spoken about but very rarely spoken with in the analysis of the global women's movement. Brooks states that the: "privileging of particular relations and particular tactics of contention and symbolic politics determines which issues are brought to the forefront of transnational campaigns" (171). In that statement she sets forth the manifesto for the work that she has done to promote an international women's discussion about who gets to investigate what in the international factories and how they get to display their knowledge about the lives of those who do the labor. This peeling away of layers of symbols and meanings is a cautionary tale for all those who enter as "others" into the lives of people who do not look like the investigator and find people who are willing to share their lives through their stories.

The strength of this book's historic approach to labor abuses in this country and abroad is the writer's ability to raise difficult questions. Describing her position as a White, female, privileged professional woman who has ties to the upper crust of management, Brooks sets the scene for unpacking how she comes to understand that in "portraying relations under globalization's two-dimensional struggles between transnational corporations and victimized workers in the South, the racial, gender, class, local, and national histories of organizing are neglected." (172). She enters each country under discussion with a working knowledge of how her privileged position in the social hierarchy allows her to see and interpret information that is usually kept under wraps for the privileged upper crust of the moneyed hierarchy. The writer's informed sensibility about how the complicated layers of the everyday lives of the workers, particularly women and children, have been neglected, or strategically manipulated, for narrow political gains in transnational campaigns is palpable throughout the text.

If there is a weakness in this text, it may be in the fact that the writer has invested a great deal of time in documenting the minutiae of Kathie Lee's experience at the hands of an unsympathetic press in New York. By giving attention to this story of the well-intentioned Christian female entrepreneur's survival in the face of the destructive media bonanza, the symbol of White purity and power is given precedence over the stories of women who were brought to the United States from El Salvador to speak against the working conditions that international companies supported with their contracts abroad. Using the voice of Sojourner Truth as a symbol of those who suffer under the burden of the oppressor's hand demands that a similar voice be underscored in the story of present colonial tactics against those who are being oppressed. Are there women who speak outside of the "clubs" that international labor organizations promote for their protests against imperialism? Are there women who are not used and abandoned by "foreign" labor activists in their quest for supremacy in their negotiations with multinational

corporations? We need to find those women in order to honor this book's reference to the abolition movement in the U.S.A.

Unraveling the Garment Industry will be of interest to anyone interested in women's experiences in politics, education, social life, religion, and family ties. Graduate and undergraduate students who want to understand the effect of race, class, and gender on the global women's movement and union organizing will find a concrete example of these issues in this book.