Mapping Class, Gender and Race in Resistance Literature

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I am low enough already. I want to rise.
And push everything up with me as I go . . .

—Esperanza Quintero

Preface

Salt of the Earth, the film made in 1953 by a group of blacklisted filmmakers who were among the best and the brightest Hollywood talent of the day (including screenwriter Michael Wilson, director Herbert Biberman, and producer Paul Jarrico), is the only blacklisted film in the US history as a result of that country’s anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s. Featuring a Mexican American family [Ramon and Esperanza Quintero] stuck in the middle of a bitter mine strike, the movie is about the story of miners fighting against a giant company, of Chicanos and Anglos, and of minors and their wives, or as Wilson says with mixed excitement and surprise, “It’s a story of the people and the conflict is very complex. There are battles for equality taking place here on so many levels I am hardly unskein them yet myself” (Biberman, 39).

As Bernard Dick notes in his in-depth studies of the Hollywood Ten, “In the long run, what may be significant is not the film [Salt of
the Earth] itself but its history" (Dick, 70). This is a quite pertinent observation. But I would like to add that what may be significant is not only its history, but also the fact that the film itself is a piece of history. In fact, I should pay credentials to George Lipsitz whose idea I borrowed and applied to the *Salt of the Earth* case. The method he employed to study the working class in his highly acclaimed book *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* is, to state in a simplified way, putting mass culture in a certain historical moment and examining its relevance with that particular time, thereby gaining the knowledge about labor history.

By drawing theoretical resources from George Lipsitz and taking *Salt of the Earth* as a case study of the cultural representation of resistance, this paper attempts to address the important question of "the indivisibility of equality" raised by the movie's creators (Biberman, 39).

**Cinematic Political Convictions: Narrating Class, Gender and Race**

Blacklisted by the Hollywood studios, a number of blacklisted film artists formed their own production company in 1951 and sought to "make a movie about real-life people; traditionally unintimidated Americans" when told about a strike by Local 890 of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union against the New Jersey Zinc Company in Bayard, New Mexico (Biberman, 2). Before and during the writing of the screenplay of *Salt of the Earth*, Michael Wilson had several trips to the Local, which was composed largely of Spanish and Mexican Americans and had been expelled from the CIO in 1950 for alleged Communist influence. Biberman in his memoir about the film recorded Wilson’s remarks after one of such trips, which serve as a key to understand the structuring and motif of the film.

Because the men can’t overcome company discrimination against
them unless they overcome their own against their women. A people will either unify itself for the real struggle—or fail in it. That's it! The theme: The indivisibility of equality. The story: A husband's struggle to accept as his equal the wife he loves. A wife's insistence that love include respect. The resolution: The women lead the men to victory on all fronts because in social struggle they call on and embrace every soul in their community—the men included. (Italics in original, Biberman, 40)

The filmmakers' cinematic political convictions are evident in this quotation: the institutionalized social hierarchies are so tied together and systematically related that any resistance should be multidimensional, based on the "indivisibility of equality" and that any individual resistance should be incorporated into people's collective struggles. Therefore, the filmmakers put the story in a framework of multidimensional social categories including class, gender and race.

1) Narrating Class First of all, the class paradigm is important in the study of labor and working-class history, since this is certainly not a classless society. Narrations of class conflicts, and working class consciousness of Mexican American workers employed at very minimal pay run through Salt of the Earth. The film is about a highly political subject: a controversial strike by New Mexico zinc miners, whom the general public viewed to be either Communists or Communist-influenced. In fact, during the union meeting discussing whether to continue the strike or not, a union leader said, "I just want to say this—no matter which may decide, the International will back you up", which states explicitly the communist influence on the union members (Biberman, 343).

Class conflicts have a full expression in the movie, especially when the workers are talking about the Taft-Hartley Act, which attempts at stopping them from picketing. "Equality's the one thing the bosses..."
can’t offer”, inequality resulting from class difference can be seen from the Union leader’s words (Biberman, 322). Communism as an ideology and political practice breaks down social hierarchies drawn along the class line and aims at the reorganization of all the people and the equality for all the people. It is an intelligent, powerful, board force, appealing and accessible to the working people, capable of drawing them together for mass struggles. If “greater equality is achieved by collective action,” Communist Party can be a good social organization (Ryan, 164). “The Communist Party itself ... was the most successful multiracial class struggle political organization ever built on the US Left, even though its legacy leaves at least as many problem to haunt us as it does admirable achievements to inspire”, Alan Wald argues for “the indispensability of social organization” (Wald, 6).

2) Narrating Race Because the film is about a Mexican—American community, the story focused on a Chicano community at a time when attitudes about Chicanos were changing. Throughout the Great Depression, official attitudes toward Mexican immigration and trans-border migration had grown increasingly hostile, as Anglos clamored in the depressed economy to take jobs that had traditionally belonged to Mexican immigrants. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the movement towards closing the porous border at the Rio Grande had culminated in “Operation Wetback” in 1953, a government program designed to find and deport illegal Mexican aliens.

These tensions were made more complex by the fact that many “Mexican—American immigrants” had, in fact, been on their lands longer than those lands had been a part of the United States, becoming U.S. Citizens by virtue of the Treaty of Huadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican American War in 1848. Esperanza begin the story with talking about the town as it used to be, “This is my village. When I was a child, it was called Marcos. The Anglos changed the name to
Zinc Town, New Mexico, U.S.A... Our roots go deeper in this place, deeper than the pines, deeper than the shaft... In these arroyos my grandfather raised cattle before the Anglos ever came" (Biberman, 315). This is such a powerful narration. Rapidity of corporate capitalist development took the town from local Mexican people and renamed it, turning the grandchildren of free cattle raisers into the underclass of unfree wage labors.

A counterproof of the film’s successful representation of political and racial issue is Congressman Donald L. Jackson’s attacking of the film as a “new weapon for Russian... deliberately designed to inflame racial hatreds to depict the US as the enemy of all colored people” (Biberman, 86).

3) Narrating Gender The film Salt of the Earth is also a movie of the female testimony to the sophistication and power against women and their evolution from men’s subordinates into their allies and equals. It tells the story of a Mexico American family stuck in the middle of a bitter strike. Against a backdrop of social injustice, a riveting family drama is played out by a miner and his wife. In the course of the strike, Ramon and Esperanza find their roles reversed: an injunction against the male strikers moves the women to take over the picket line, leaving the men to domestic duties. The women found themselves on the picket line being attacked by force, arrested in droves.

When Esperanza shouted at her husband, “You can’t win this strike without me! You can’t win anything without me”, she has clearly the role women played in this cross-gender strike, “And so they came, the women... they rose before dawn and they came, wives, daughters, grandmothers....” (Biberman, 367, 351)

4) Intellectual Integrity and Political Action The cultural politics of Communist Party led the American Left to look into grass-roots labor organizations like Local 890. In 1950s resistance literature, Alan...
Wald sees cross-cultural relationships "founded more on common feelings about the reigning US social order than ever before" (Wald, 160). Biberman's memoir well illustrates the Leftist intellectuals' "common feelings" towards working people, "Culturally and socially, as well as politically and economically, vast number of our American people had been blacklisted for centuries. Had they not been, we might never have been. Were we, the new blacklisted, to blacklist the older ones? Keep them unexpressed and unfulfilled?" (Biberman 43)

Literature is, of necessity, political. Biberman shows his intellectual integrity and commitment to radical politics as he faces the post-war McCarthyite witch-hunt and insisted, "The best I've got is what it's going to get. In my job. Making movies" (Biberman, 5). And the movie he went to make on the desert of New Mexico came out to be "a triumph of determination and dedication" (Cole, 356). This serves as a telling example of Alan Wald's observation on the radial cultural activism, "On the whole, this generation's [of Marxist cultural workers] devotion to social changes at considerable risk to their personal well-being may not have been matched by their successors" (Wald, 3).

Cultural representation is not just literature; it is itself history. It is also a kind of agency that Leftist cultural workers affected and changed the politics of the nation. When commenting on radical culture and politics, Alan Wald takes the popularity of Salt of the Earth in the 1960s as "an remarkable instance" of the survival of the Communist cultural tradition "even after the near destruction of the Communist Party as a credible political force in 1956-58" (Wald, 3).

The Matrix of Domination: Intersecting Class, Race, and Gender In their preface to Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology, the editors propose a new approach of studying social structure—"the approach of a matrix of domination", by which they mean the way of in-
terrogating social structural patterns on "multiple, interlocking levels of domination that stem from the societal configuration of race, class, and gender relations" (Anderson et. al., xi). In the same vein, some social historians advocate "to write a rich history that complicates categories, suggesting how class, gender, race and/or ethnicity combine across a wide range of economic and social landscape" (Boris and Janssens, 1).

Made nearly fifty years before the publication of these books, Salt of the Earth is such "a rich history", the history of "the Mexican–American's struggles for equality on all levels" (Biberman, 2). Not only the issues of class, gender and race are all well represented, but they are represented in a way of intersecting and interrelating each other. The following is an analysis of the matrix of domination in Salt of the Earth from three aspects: racializing class, classifying race, and engendering labor movement.

1) Racializing Class Racialization in American South grow out of the intersection of imperialistic expansionism, class formation and industrialization. The social relations of New Mexican’s industry helped to produce the class-based characteristics deemed so crucial in the construction of the racial category of "Anglo" and "Mexican". These two racial designations to some extent become class markers. "Mexican" stands for the underclass while an "Anglo", even if an Anglo miner is more better off. As A. Yvette Huginnie puts in an astute way, "Class relations was naturalized in racial categories" (Huginnie, 37). This tendency is tellingly expressed in the film when Esperanza tried to describe her husband's insubordinate position, "The Anglo bosses look down on you, ... 'Stay in your place, your dirty Mexican'—that what they tell you" (Biberman, 367). By naturalizing class hierarchies in terms of race, social inequality is then seem to correspond with the seeming biologically inherited racial differences. This
is perhaps why: "US labour history needs to utilize better 'race' as an historically contingent factor affecting class relations" (Huginnie, 49).

But it is important to note that Salt of the Earth does not just draw a dividing line between Mexican / Anglo and labor / capitalist. When Ramon at the Union conference demanded that "We want equality with Anglo miners—the same pay, the same conditions", he was reminded that "discrimination hurts the Anglo too" (Biberman, 322). And when he showed hostility to Anglo workers, he was told, "You lump them together—Anglo workers and Anglo bosses" (Biberman, 342).

2) Classifying Race I want to begin the discussion with a quotation from the script. The dialogue happens when Ramon protests to the foreman that workers should work in pairs for their safety sake.

Foreman: "You work alone, sawy? You can't handle the job, I'll find someone who can."
Ramon: "Who? A scab?"
Foreman: "An American."
(Biberman, 319)

The answer of the foreman confused me until I read an interesting research paper "Mexican Labour" in a "White Man's Town" by A. Yvette Huginnie about the usage of "American" in the Southwestern America, "Hinting of the imperialism and conquest which lay at the heart of US acquisition of the southwest, the term 'American' was used as a racial designator as opposed to indicating nationality. It fused nationality and whiteness, granting those of 'fair complexion' legitimacy within the region while delegitimizing those of darker complexion regardless of nationality. It associated, on the one hand, conquest with racial superiority, and, on the other hand, defeat with racial inferiority" (Huginnie, 35–36). "Race has seldom confronted workers as a simple dichotomy of black and white", David Mont-
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Montgomery argues for the examination of “Mexicans who had long inhabited the conquered region or who moved into it after it had been annexed by the US” (Montgomery, p. 2).

3) Engendering Resistance A challenging question about the movie Salt of the Earth is “What is the significance that the narrator is female”? By narrating the strike in female voice, women’s participation and contribution to the final success are highlighted. Or in other words, the resistance to oppression is gendered by a woman’s voice.

In her article “Oppression”, Marilyn Frye used an apt metaphor of birdcage to illustrate the oppression as the result of systematically related elements such as class, race and gender, situating and taking effect in larger schemes. “It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon” (Frye, 39). Gender inequality, in her words, is “a network of forces and barriers which are systematically related and which conspire to the immobilization, reduction and molding of women and the lives we live . . . .” (Frye, 41)

Frye is right here. All the dimensions of social inequality add up and interrelate in the experience of oppressed people. Race, class, and gender, simultaneously structuring the experiences of all people in this society, are interlocking categories of their experience. In this sense, the filmmakers of Salt of the Earth accomplished their goal by mapping class, gender and race as a matrix of domination in this brilliant piece of resistance literature when they decided, “to make films about ‘real people and real situation’” (Dick, 77).

Notes:

1) Although the film earned critical acclaim in Europe, winning awards in France
and Czechoslovakia, concerted effort was made to prevent this movie from ever seeing the light projector in the United States until 1965 when the blacklist was lifted.

The film itself is the 1954 winner of Grand Prize of the Karlovy Vary film festival, 1956 winner of Grand Prize and best actress for Rosara Revueltas of Academy du Cinema de Paris. It has also been selected by the Library of Congress as one of only 100 American films to be preserved for posterity and the CD-ROM of this movie available now won the Prix Mobius and the 1995 EMMA (European Multimedia Association Awards) award for Best Media Transfer – Interactive Movies.

2 Bernard F. Dick in Radical Innocence offers a brief critique about the term, “The screenplay ... is a textbook illustration of the reduction of an action to a single theme: 'the indivisibility of equality' ” (Dick, 78).

3 See’s challenging essay “The Classless Society”, when he uses analytical categories other than class to call into the effectiveness of class as a category in the US, “although the poverty - caused misery of the American masses has by no means been eliminated, it is so dispersed and scattered among various segments of the population that it does not constitute a fundamental and unifying issue to mobilize the masses of the people in struggle” (43).

4 Refer to Lipsitz 1994, pp 157 – 181 for a detailed elaboration on the Taft – Hartley Act.

5 The exclusive employment of men in the industry—whether as managers, foremen, miners or labors, —points to gendered aspects of these racial and class categories and relations.

6 Bernard Dick notices this as a great difference between Salt of the Earth and other films documenting or dramatizing strikes, “the conventional voice - over narration ... is an off - camera voice belonging to none of the characters, whereas Salt of the Earth is narrated by the heroine” (Dick, 77 – 78).

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