

‘Not everything that the bourgeois world created is bad’: aesthetics and politics in women workers’ education

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In this article I look into the papers of Fannia Mary Cohn, an immigrant labour organiser, who served the Education Department of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) between 1918 and 1962 and became one of its few women vice-presidents. As an internationally recognized figure in the history of workers’ education, Cohn left a rich body of labour literature, wherein art is central in the ways she conceptualized, designed and organized women workers’ educational programmes and curricula, as well as cultural activities for more than 50 years. For Cohn, however, art and politics were tightly interwoven in what I have called the *artpolitics assemblage* of women garment workers’ life and work. It is entanglements between ethics, aesthetics, and politics, considered in the light of the Rancièrian notion of ‘the distribution of the sensible’ that I discuss in this article.

Key words: artpolitics assemblage, aesthetics and politics, gendered labour history, garment industry, women workers’ education, trade union sexual politics

April 19, 1922

My dear Evelyn,

I wish to repeat what I said in my yesterday’s note to you, that many of my friends have reminded me about my sense of obligation to the labour movement, but that none of them did it so beautifully and heartily as you did. But my answer to you will not be different from what I said to them. I wanted you to know that I never wanted to live in much more comfort than the people with whom I am working do [...]

My life was more exciting, more exhaustive than the life of the average members of our organization, but therefore it was more interesting and gave me a chance for self-expression and that was enough compensation for me [...]

To me friendship means much. There are some of us who must be inspired in order to do their work well—to create. Whether in poetry or in a movement the creative impulse comes from the same source. Real and true and unselfish friendship is essential for my creative instinct. I don’t want to feel for one moment that this friendship is marred by any material considerations.

Well, you may again say that this is bourgeois philosophy. But I don’t consider it an abstract philosophy at all. It is rather an emotion on which philosophies are built. Not everything that the bourgeois world created is bad. Many of their creations are misused or abused, but not all of them are superficial.

Well my dear friend [...] I hope you will understand why I cannot accept your offer, although I highly value your motives.

Tomorrow Thursday between 5 and 5:30, you will find me waiting in my room.

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In the letter above, Fannia Mary Cohn graciously declines her friend's offer to pay for her dental treatment. In doing so she puts forward the argument that friendship as a true inspiration for work and creativity should not get tied to material concerns and obligations. Interestingly enough, she seems willing to admit that her refusal to accept money from her friend could be interpreted as 'a bourgeois philosophy', but her counter-argument to such hypothetical objection is that 'not everything that the bourgeois world created is bad'. I was particularly attracted to this epistolary rhetoric where ethics of friendship are interwoven with the aesthetics of life and politics. Such modes of communication emerge from a rather grey area in the field of gender and education: women workers' educational aspirations, cultural interests and intellectual lives. In excavating this genealogical archive in the history of women's education,² I draw on Fannia Cohn's letters and writings and I frame the discussion within Jacques Rancière's notion of 'the distribution of the sensible' (2009). What I argue is that a genealogical exploration of women workers' writings throws new light on the cultural formations of modernity, particularly highlighting the role of education in reconsidering entanglements between ethics, aesthetics and politics.

Fannia Cohn and Evelyn Preston: stories, contexts and synergies

Fannia Mary Cohn (1885-1962) was an influential figure in the trade union movement in the garment industries in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Coming from a wealthy Russian Jewish family, she got involved in underground revolutionary organizations, but eventually emigrated to the US in 1904, where her position and status radically changed. As a migrant worker in the garment industry she actively participated in trade union struggles and became the first woman vice president in the history of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) between 1916 and 1925. She was instrumental in organizing the ILGWU's educational and cultural activities and served as executive secretary of its Educational Department from 1918 till 1962. Her work not only shaped the philosophy, vision and curricula of ILGWU's educational work, but also had a notable and lasting impact on the history of workers' education in the US and Europe, where she travelled on several occasions, establishing and maintaining intellectual and political relations with an international network of academics, educationalists and activists around workers' education.

Evelyn Preston was a wealthy and well-educated young woman with a passionate interest in the labour movement. She was 23 years old when she met Cohn, who was 37 years old, and despite or maybe because of their age difference they developed a warm friendship and spent time together, going to dinners, the theatre and even swimming at Coney Island: 'I am looking forward to having you chauffeur me around in your four cylinder Buick ...', Cohn wrote to Preston in September 1923.³ Preston left New York to follow a Master's Degree in labour history and Economics at the University of Wisconsin and spent extended periods in Europe and particularly in the UK. Later in life and through her relationship with Roger Baldwin she became actively involved in the American Civil Liberties Union. Preston became one of the

most important financiers for Cohn's educational projects, although their friendship gradually faded and so did their correspondence.

Cohn and Preston met in 1921, a year that was significant in the history of women workers' education in the US: it was the year that the Bryn Mawr summer school for women workers was established, Brookwood Labour College was founded and also the Workers' Education Bureau was created.⁴ Cohn was a crucial figure in all of these important developments in the history of workers' education in general and women workers' in particular: she was vice president of the Bureau and trustee of Brookwood, although not immediately involved in Bryn Mawr, as she was initially skeptical of its cross-class collaborations, despite her own personal relationships. But it was these relationships with tutors and faculty members of Bryn Mawr, like Preston, that warmed her heart and made her visit the summer school year after year, following its numerous activities during the 17 years of its history (1921-1938).

Cohn was a tireless labour organizer and an uncompromised socialist, but as her letter above shows, she lived on a very low budget and refused to be supported by her well-off family, although she always accepted their donations towards her educational projects. In the same vein, it was Preston amongst other benefactors that for years financed a number of educational activities and institutions that Cohn was passionate about (see Orleck, 1995). Indeed, the movement for workers' education in the US was funded by the dues of the union members, but was also supported and sustained by middle-class enlightened intellectuals, renowned scholars and established academics, who would leave their ivory towers and offer lectures at the 'Workers' University'⁵ and other educational institutions for workers that the labour movement had established over the years. Cohn was quite fearless when approaching university professors—a woman who would not take 'no' as an answer. The following extract from an interview with Gus Tyler, a socialist activist, who worked in the ILGWU educational department, vividly depicts her attitude:

There was a determination and sincerity about her and no sense of humility. She had a quiet matronly air of chutzpach (effrontery). She would go to the head of the history department at Columbia university and say: 'My name is Fannia Cohn. I come from the garment workers, the girls. They want to know about history. I want you should come and give me a lecture.' They all came. She got the top faculty at Columbia to come and give lectures. (Cohen-Myers, 1976, p. 128)

As her correspondence also reveals, her relationship with academics, always had two sides. Over the years she became a tireless advisor for a number of graduate students who were doing their dissertations on the labour movement. In a letter written on March 25, 1929 to Professor Gulick, at the Department of Economics at Berkeley, she offered advice to a student who was trying to write the history of the ILGWU:

I wonder what aspect of the Union he is studying; is it the political, industrial or economic, although I believe that industrial and economic conditions influence political events [...] Our Educational Department is always eager to assist students in their studies of the Labor movement.⁶

But apart from ad-hoc communication, such as the above, Cohn was in constant correspondence with John Dewey and Charles A. Beard, who would firmly support her educational, cultural and political activities in the union and beyond. In a letter written to Cohn on Labor Day in 1945, Beard would recall ‘that those of us who labored years ago to strengthen the workers’ education movement know that we had many toilsome predecessors and had many helpers whose names are unknown [since] such is the nature of History in the making’. Beard would further reflect on the ideas that underpinned their struggle for workers’ education, including their efforts to avoid ‘dogmas on the labor movement and seek to make the education programme flexible—so as to allow for changing times.’⁷ Interestingly enough it was on the question of ‘dogmas’ that Dewey had also written a letter to Cohn about, inviting her to a conference ‘to discuss the problem of independent political action’⁸ at Brookwood College, during a crisis that eventually led to the demise of the college as its director Abraham J. Muste left in 1933, when the majority of the faculty voted to reject revolutionary Marxism as ‘a dogma’.

Although Cohn was counting on the support of university professors and wanted them involved in her educational projects, she did not trust universities to take over workers’ education, as she believed that workers themselves should have control over it. Her reluctance to be on the board of the Bryn Mawr summer school, as discussed above, is indicative of her position. This is what Ernestine Friedman, a YWCA industrial secretary,⁹ who served the school for years, wrote to her in response to her views, just after her first visit to the school in July 1921:

This is just a little personal note to thank you for your visit and especially for the moments we had together on our trip in to Philadelphia. It was very helpful to me because I think you realise that I have been thinking over the question of workers’ control of their own education very seriously during the days of the Summer School.¹⁰

Cohn’s communication with Ernestine Friedman also shows that apart from established academics and intellectual and political celebrities, such as Dewey and Beard, workers’ education was also supported and sustained by a number of labour educationalists, as well as younger scholars like her friend Preston, who would teach in summer schools, weekly seminars or weekend classes all the year round, but would also serve the numerous committees, including support of their always shaky budgets. ‘We are aided in our studies by tutors, daughters of wealthy families, young women amazingly tall, who never had to bend over a sewing machine [...] and who always had proper food. They too, learn from us about the world of work’, Rose Pesotta simply laid out the particulars of cross-class encounters and synergies, in her political autobiography, *Bread Upon the Waters* (1987, p. 16).

Pesotta’s educational trajectory was indeed exemplary of the radical transformations that women workers’ education could bring in women’s lives. She arrived in New York in 1913 as a young Jewish immigrant, was employed in the garment industry as a dressmaker and it was through her involvement in ILGWU that she educated herself, first at Bryn Mawr and then at Brookwood. She then climbed the hierarchy of the union to the point of becoming its third woman ever elected vice-president between 1934 and 1942. (see Tamboukou, 2013) In the words of Mollie Friedman, who actually unseated Cohn as vice-president in 1925:

I am a product of that education. Working at the machine or sticking pins in dresses does not do much for the education of the members, but [...] I was offered an opportunity by my organization to study [...] Our International found out that teaching girls how to picket a shop was not enough and they taught us how to read books.¹¹

What Mollie Friedman had not understood at the time she made this passionate declaration, while addressing the American Federation of Labor Convention in Saint Paul, Minnesota, June, 1918, was that if it were not for Cohn and a line of passionate women organizers before and after her, she would have never been taught ‘how to read books’, a critical point that brings me to the next section of this paper, discourses and power relations at play around women workers’ education.

Work, Education, Art and Life

To those of our friends within the Labor Movement, who insist that we should not concern ourselves with purely cultural subjects, such as literature we wish to contrast the way in which this subject is presented in a university and in a workers’ college. In the former art as expressed in literature, is entirely divorced from life. The teacher is generally concerned mainly with the form and the art of the content rather than with its social significance. On the contrary, in a Worker’s College literature is presented as an expression of life, and a study is merely of the social forces, which it expresses [...] All things that are human are of concern to men and women who toil. But in workers’ schools they will be studied as living forces.¹²

The extract above is from an unpublished paper that Cohn wrote on November 2, 1923 as a response to several criticisms that her educational and cultural activities received throughout her years of service at the ILGWU Education Department. In writing this paper, Cohn felt the need to defend the idea of including cultural subjects in the workers’ education curricula, as well as to show the difference that teaching culture to workers made. What is important to highlight here is Cohn’s idea of ‘art as an expression of life’ and as a field of ‘living forces’. Art and life are thus tightly interwoven in the politics and aesthetics of workers’ education. But what were the conditions of possibility for this paper to be written, what was the battlefield of forces it emerged from and what were its consequences and effects? These are the questions I want to address in this section.

Susan Stone Wong has argued that the history of the ILGWU’s educational movement could be charted as a downside curve ‘from soul to strawberries’ (1984). What started in the 1920s as a vision for workers’ education that would become ‘the soul’ of the union movement for social change was ultimately transmuted to a narrow project of ‘labour education’ as a source of material happiness, aiming to instruct workers to cope with their world instead of inspiring them to change it. In 1923 Cohn was writing at the peak of the revolutionary dream, but as already discussed in the previous section, she was trying hard to keep away from strawberries while working for social change through education. But why was art so important for the struggles of the labour movement? Cohn’s vision of workers’ education was underpinned by social unionism, the idea of attending to workers’ economic as well as spiritual needs, beautifully encompassed in the ‘bread and roses’ verse, famously endorsed by the

Lawrence textile strike in May 1912 (see, Watson, 2005). But Cohn was also very much interested in the gender politics of the labour movement and saw education as a way not only of organizing women, but also of opening up new ways of thinking, living and acting:

Man must be convinced of the desirability and possibility of organizing women. An effective way to make this appeal to them is through the medium of Workers' Education—a field in which women have greatly distinguished themselves. [...] Workers' education reveals to woman her importance in industry and gives her confidence.¹³

Cohn had first hand experiences of workers' education and its shortcomings. As an immigrant worker herself she had gone through the various education programmes that the union was organizing, had become disillusioned and had actually dropped out. She has recounted some of her educational failure experiences in a letter to a friend: 'Miss Mary Dreier [...] prevailed upon me that I go to Chicago, to attain a training school for organizers [...] I and a few more of the students, decided that it was not a training school and left it.'¹⁴ Her experience was not unique. Pesotta has recorded in her autobiography how unimpressed she was by her early educational experiences as an immigrant worker and how it was through literature and library work that she managed to learn English, an essential prerequisite for her further education in the labour movement (Pesotta, 1958, pp. 246–247).

In thus organizing the ILGWU education programme, Cohn knew only too well that the desire for personal development was at the heart of women workers who were the majority of the worker students' population. What Cohn had not realized when writing the essay above is that her male comrades in the union were indeed convinced of the power of workers' education in organizing women, but the problem was that they did not really want active women in their organization, although they were rather pleased when they could collect their dues. It was against this stubbornness and sexism of the union male members that women organizers had to fight against. Indeed, it was Cohn's conviction that it was through a liberal art education programme that women workers could re-imagine their lives and re-invent themselves.

In light of the above, what I therefore want to argue is that the union's educational and cultural activities that Cohn organized and co-ordinated for over 50 years, constitute an important intervention in what Rancière has theorized, as 'the distribution of the sensible', an ordering system where inclusion and exclusion work hand by hand in defining the grounds, subjects and implicit laws of certain communities of practice and thought:

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed (2009, pp.12-13).

In Rancière's analysis then, 'the distribution of the sensible' configures the boundaries between what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, audible and inaudible, in short, distribution denotes both inclusion and exclusion. Moreover these boundaries do not only operate as a top down hierarchical mode of distribution,

separating the workers from the bourgeoisie. As Cohn's paper above in defense of the idea of teaching literature to workers shows, it was perhaps amongst workers themselves that 'the distribution of the sensible' was even more difficult to be discerned and opposed, particularly when gendered politics and power relations were involved. In this context, Rancière has most persuasively argued that the division between the intellectual as thinker and the worker as doer cannot be grasped or contested by historical interpretations framed within the analytics of workers' resistance: 'the worker, who without having learnt to spell, tried his hands at making verses to the taste of the day, was perhaps more dangerous for the existing ideological order than the one who sang revolutionary songs', Rancière has boldly suggested (2011a, p.181). It was thus not through open confrontation, but actually through their entanglement and conversations with 'the bourgeois other' (Reid, 2012, p. xxi) that workers intervened in the socio-political and cultural formations of their times, disrupting in this way 'the distribution of the sensible'. Cohn's epistolary phrase, 'not everything that the bourgeois world created was bad', addressed to her bourgeois friend Preston, succinctly summarises and confirms Rancière's analysis and further sustains his argument that 'there is "an aesthetics" at the core of politics' (2009, p.13) that I further want to consider.

For Rancière, politics essentially involves opposition to 'the police order' that underpins and sustains the distribution of the sensible; politics emerges as a challenge to the 'distribution of the sensible' by those who are excluded, 'the part which has no part' (2004, pp. 29–30). In this context 'the distribution of the sensible has a double sense in Rancière's work: it is both a form of symbolic violence, but also a form of resistance, in the sense of the possibility for redistribution, which is inherent in the very notion of distribution. But how does Rancière conceive the notion of redistribution?

In his reading of nineteenth century workers' poetry, prose, as well as letters and diaries, Rancière has actually highlighted 'the thinking of those not "destined" to think' (2012), as a historical exemplar of 'redistribution of knowledge and truth'. Rancière has particularly written about the surprises and unexpected findings he encountered while doing archival research with workers' writings:

I set out looking for wild expressions of revolt, but I came across politely written texts, requesting that workers be treated as equals [...] I came across letters [...] about a Sunday in May when [a carpenter] set out with two companions to enjoy the sunrise on the river, discuss metaphysics at an inn, and spend the rest of the day converting the diners at the next table to their own humanitarian and social gospel (2012, p. ix).

Against the dominant idea within the social and historical sciences that 'the vocation of workers is to work [...] and to struggle and that they have no time to waste playing at flâneurs, writers or thinkers' (Rancière, 2012, p. viii), what workers needed, he argued, was time and space away from labour obligations, so as to be able to think, read and write, activities that since Plato's *Republic* were only the privilege of citizens who relied on slaves, women and artisans to look after the material necessities of life. It was thus conditions of possibility for such intellectual and existential needs that the movement for workers' education has historically created.

Such possibilities, enacted and facilitated within the structures of the union were particularly important for women workers: unlike Rancière's carpenter and his friends, women workers would never have the leisure of strolling on a Sunday since their home/labour shift was even more difficult to resist, challenge or escape. Women workers' lack of time was structured on the intersection of both waged and domestic labour and in this light a Sunday stroll was barely an option at least for those women workers who had a family to attend to. It is no surprise that the few women trade unionists like Cohn, Pesotta in the US, or Jeanne Bouvier in France led solitary lives: 'I hear saying that women should stay at home [...] I have never stayed at home, I have no home. I could not have one as I had to earn my bread',¹⁵ Bouvier wrote in a newspaper article in 1922, in response to her comrades in the labour movement in France who had argued that women should stay at home and make it 'a bastion against capitalist encroachment', the *femme au foyer* discourse that Rancière (2011b) has bitterly criticized.

It was I argue, this intersectional exploitation of women workers' time that Cohn's vision of a liberal arts curriculum was addressing within the wider horizon of workers' education for social change. In this light, the union was crucial in opening up possibilities for redistribution through involving workers with the world of literature, drama, philosophy and science. These were all areas heavily laden with bourgeois ideas, traditions and values: but as already noted above, it was through their encounter with these values that workers realized that a different world was possible and that they could become part of it. As Rancière has lucidly put it, '[workers seek] to appropriate for themselves the night of those who can stay awake, the language of those who do not have to beg, and the image of those who do not need to be flattered' (2012, p. 22). In this context, Rancière argues there are no linear causalities between exploitation and class consciousness or collective actions; instead 'we must examine the mixed scene in which some workers with the complicity of intellectuals [...] replay and shift the old myth about who has the right to speak for others' (pp. 22–23). Cohn's friendship with Preston is, I suggest, such an exemplary mixed scene, one of those Rancière has invited us to explore. What is important to emphasize here, is that 'redistribution' should not be taken as an act of simply rearranging the existing order of things; it should rather be understood as an event that has the possibility of initiating a process of radical transformations. As Cohn simply put it in her essay about the need to study literature above, workers' education may draw on literary outputs of the bourgeois world, but it radically transforms them into life forces.

In thus excavating Pesotta's, Cohn's and other women workers' literary, historical, political and dramatic writings, what I suggest is that women's intervention in the educational and cultural practices of the labour movement have radically interfered in 'the distribution of the sensible' in the interface of 'the "aesthetic" avant-garde and the "political" avant-garde: the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come', a kind of 'aesthetic anticipation of the future' (Rancière, 2004, pp. 29–30). Art as critique is therefore extended to politics, art and politics becoming constitutive of each other, *the artpolitics assemblage*, within which work, far from being a stumbling block to artistic practices is crucially linked to their condition of possibility.¹⁶

Here it is important to consider Rancière's notion of 'the factory of the sensible, as the formation of a shared sensible world, a common habitat, by the weaving together of a plurality of human activities' (Rancière, 2009, p. 43). But the idea of 'a common habitat' is always an agonistic process for Rancière, a site of struggles and conflicts, 'a polemical distribution of modes of being and "occupations" in a space of possibilities' (p. 43). In the Platonic world of the *Republic* that Rancière has persistently criticized in his discussion of the politics of 'the distribution of the sensible', work takes up time and thus de facto excludes workers from the city politics or from artistic practices. As already noted above, there is a very clear and strict division of roles, activities and responsibilities in the Platonic *Republic*. But starting with Schiller's aesthetic revolution that radically challenged the boundaries between active understanding and passive sensibility, work was rethought of as a crucial aesthetic practice in the distribution of the sensible. Indeed Rancière argues, the Marxist notion of work, as 'the generic essence of mankind' (p. 44) emerged in the context of the aesthetic programme of German Idealism, 'art as the transformation of thought into the sensory experience of the community' (p. 44).

It was in the context of art being transformed 'into the sensory experience of the community' that Cohn was quite convinced that art and literature should become part of the workers' experience and every day life, and through her position in the education department she devised a range of aesthetic practices that would radically intervene 'in the distribution of the sensible'. Indeed, Cohn firmly believed that literature was crucial in workers' lives, since 'it is not knowledge of exploitation that the worker needs [but] a knowledge of self that reveals [...] a being dedicated to something else besides exploitation, a revelation of self that comes circuitously by way of the secret of others' (Rancière, 2012, p. 20) Thus, apart from including literature in the curriculum of workers' education, Cohn organized the book's division of the union through a close collaboration with the New York Public Library (NYPL). Her papers include yearly exchanges with NYPL librarians, meticulously arranging how the library would supply books for workers. Moreover 'the book division' of the union would 'bring good books to the attention of our members [through] annotated bibliographies, interpretive book reviews and discussion on the appreciation of literature', Cohn was writing in her 1946 unpublished essay, 'Books for a troubled world'.¹⁷

Apart from literature, Cohn was also very much involved in the workers' theatre movement,¹⁸ which was at its heyday in the 1930s in the US, since 'it is in the theatre, the new temple of popular aspirations, that one can see the laboring class living its true life' (Rancière, 2012, p. 25). Amongst other activities, Cohn would arrange special prices for workers' theatre tickets, but she would also write labour skits, oversee their production and circulate it to union locals across the country:

You will be interested to know that we are dramatizing important events in the life of our union. A skit based on the life of our new married members is ready for your presentation. This skit requires only four characters—3 women and 1 man. An instructor in dramatics will begin today coaching our members. After a few rehearsals, some corrections will probably be made. If you want to stage it on the coast [LA], I shall be glad to send it to you.¹⁹

As her letter above clearly puts it, Cohn wanted to dramatize the everyday life of the members, as it was through drama that she could point to gender inequalities without hurting workers' solidarity and the union of the movement. For Cohn labour theatre staged 'imaginary denials and symbolic subversions [...] the momentary reversal of roles needed to restore equilibrium between rulers and ruled', as Ranci re has pithily remarked (2012, p. 25). Indeed the majority of her skits in her papers are about women workers' lives and the difficulty of maintaining women's participation in the life of the union. 'Happiness' in these skits is linked to political activism and involvement in the life of the union, otherwise women would wither away under the pressure of the double shift labour. Workers would warmly respond to such performances, although men were understandably less enthusiastic about the artistic messages of Cohn's skits. The following extract from a letter giving advice about the skit on the life of new married couples in the union, as mentioned above, is indicative of the gendered critique that her skits would convey:

When you select the players for the skit, try and find a full-blooded enthusiastic man for the part of Jack. Gertrude, his wife should be reflective, depressed and be bewildered when the other girls speak to her about the union. She must display animatedly the change that comes upon her when she says 'I am with you'. Dorothy, the dressmaker should be young, flirtatious, charming and one who enjoys everything that transpires at their meeting with Gertrude. Mildred, the shop chairlady, always takes advantage of an opportunity to inject her feelings about the change since she joined the union. Ida, who has more lines to speak than the others, must have good diction and must be a positive type. She talks to Gertrude with conviction and self-reliance.²⁰

In bringing labour drama to the life and experiences of the union members, Cohn created conditions of possibility for workers' active involvement with art. Through the performances, workers not only acted 'but lived through the skit', a distinguished dramatist had commented after seeing a workers' performance.²¹ But while acting their lives workers could also distance themselves from its minutiae and by doing this, they actually became critical of common sense discourses and practices and were inspired to imagine themselves differently and therefore to be geared for social change, which was after all what workers' education was about. 'For the workers of the 1830s', Ranci re has written, 'the question was not to demand the impossible, but to realize it themselves, to take back the time that was refused them [...] by winning from nightly rest the time to discuss, write, compose verses, or develop philosophies' (2012, p. ix). Ranci re has imagined the workers of his studies, winning time, while for the women workers of my research the question was about 'stealing time' from their families and their communities, so as to re-imagine themselves in different times and other spaces:

I Have Stolen Away

I have stolen away from my friends and from the busy street.
From the grind of the wheel, and the sweltering heat;
I have come to visit you, and what you've in store for me.
To tell you of my past Bryn Mawr, and my future through you to see.
But now I must go.²²

As I have elsewhere argued (Tamboukou, 2013), Bryn Mawr, as an important institution of women workers' education opened up heterotopias, different spaces within the margins of dominant institutions and structures for women workers' to reposition themselves and reclaim time taken away from them. The transformative force of their experience in workers' education whether it was an afternoon in the union, a summer at Bryn Mawr, or a year at Brookwood would radically intervene in the sexual politics of time. During the eight weeks that women workers were expected to spend at Bryn Mawr their time seemed to be suspended: they were not required to work, just to read, think and write. For the majority of these women workers this was an unprecedented space/time experience that would irrevocably change the way they saw themselves in the world with others. Indeed a number of photographs as well as a film in the existing literature around Bryn Mawr have visually captured the spatial dimension of women workers' educational experiences in the idyllic landscapes of the campus.²³ Summer school students reading in the portico, sitting and discussing in the cloisters, taking a poetry-reading class on the lawn, or having an economics discussion group under the trees, allow visual glimpses of other spaces and other times in women workers' lives, surely different from the cramped urban sweatshops in which they used to work. Women workers expressed their love for Bryn Mawr's natural surroundings in their autobiographies and poetry (see Hollis, 2004), as already highlighted in the poem above. Thus, although limited in terms of real calendar time, the Bryn Mawr experience would be transformed into an existential experience of non-divisible time, in the long *durée* of women workers' life and work.²⁴

Disrupting the distribution of the sensible

Rancière has aptly suggested that what distinguishes the aesthetic regime of art today is the recognition that there can be no straightforward connection between political awareness through art and political action. The fact for example that workers became aware of their exploitation, as well as of gendered hierarchies and exclusions within their union, has not necessarily led to political action against such oppressive regimes of power and domination. What Cohn's aesthetic interventions in workers' education has achieved however in the realm of politics is to mobilize 'processes of dissociation: the break in a relation between sense and sense—between what is seen and what is thought, what is thought and what is felt' (Rancière, 2008, p. 12). Rancière maintains that such processes of dissociation create conditions of possibility for a democratic redistribution of the sensible, although he has been careful to clarify that 'the aesthetic regime of art is not a matter of romantic nostalgia' (p. 14), a return to aesthetic utopias. In this light, what I have suggested is that educational and cultural interventions, such as Cohn's have introduced anti-rhythms in the distribution of the sensible and have created interstices, ruptures and lacunae, heterotopic spaces, wherein new beginnings and new sensorial modes might emerge. Here I am in agreement with Rancière that we need to chart 'new passages toward new forms of political subjectivization' (p. 14), hence my interest in women workers' education *artpolitics* that I have discussed in this article. As a radical intervention in the cultural politics of the twentieth century, workers' education has created an archive of

memories, knowledges and narratives that can inform contemporary politics that seek to counterpoise educational discourses, policies and practices within the neoliberal regime.

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Notes

1. This paper is part of my overall project of writing feminist genealogies. (Tamboukou, 2003, 2010)
2. Letter from Cohn to Preston, dated, September 21, 1923. (FCP/NYPL)

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3. The Bryn Mawr summer school has been the object of several studies. See amongst others, Heller 1984, 1986; Hollis, 2004; Kornbluh & Frederickson, 1984; Smith, 1929, Tamboukou, 2013. For a history of Brookwood Labor College see amongst others Howlett, 1993. The Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, houses the WEB records (1921-1951).
 4. The 'Workers' university' at Washington Irving High School was founded by ILGWU in New York in 1918.
 5. Letter from Cohn to Charles A. Gulick, dated, March 25, 1929. (FMC/NYPL)
 6. Charles Beard to Cohn, letter dated Labor Day, 1945. (FMC/NYPL)
 7. Letter from Dewey to Cohn, dated, January, 1933. (FCP/NYPL)
 8. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) was one of the largest recruiters for Bryn Mawr over the years. (See Heller, 1984)
 9. Letter from Ernestina Friedman to Cohn, dated July 26, 1921. (FCP/NYPL)
 10. 'Garment Workers Speak', nd. (FCP/NYPL).
 11. 'Should literature find a place in the curriculum of workers' colleges?' Unpublished paper by Fannia M. Cohn, November 3, 1923. (FCP/NYPL).
 12. 'Women', unpublished essay, nd. (FCP?NYPL)
 13. Letter from Cohn to her friend Emma, dated, May, 8, 1953. (FCP/NYPL)
 14. 'Le travail des femmes dans les temps passés', *Le Peuple*, 9-10-1922. Bibliothèque Historique de la ville de Paris (BHVP), Archives Marie-Louise Bouglé, Fonds Jeanne Bouvier.
 15. For a discussion of the notion of the assemblage, see Tamboukou, 2008.
 16. (FMC/NYPL)
 17. See Hollis 2004, particularly Chapter 4.
 18. Letter from Cohn to Rose Pesotta, dated March 1934, Rose Pesotta papers, General Correspondence; Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. (RPP/NYPL)
 19. Letter from Cohn to Egnor, a union member, dated January 29, 1934. (FMC/NYPL)
 20. *ibid.*
 21. Mary Sekula, *1932 Shop and School*, in Hollis, 2004, p. 141.
 22. See Smith, *Women Workers*, Heller, *The Women of Summer*, documentary film, Hollis, *Liberating Voices*. There is further a rich collection of photographs at Bryn Mawr at the M. Carey Thomas Library at Bryn Mawr College.
 23. I refer here to Bergson's (2002) philosophical configuration of time as duration.