

## Bad Education

Debra A. Castillo

In this article I study the U.S. 2005 documentary film, *The Devil's Miner*, co-produced by Kief Davidson and Richard Ladkani. Like many other internationally produced documentary films of this sort, it combines an ethnographic view of its subject with a mission of critique, in this case, the denunciation of child labor in the extremely dangerous and physically exhausting environment of the Cerro Rico mine in Potosí. The general message to the viewer is an emotionally-laden appeal to support children, an inarguable good. The resolution falls back on cultural approaches directed toward the future, specifically, toward keeping children in school, and increasing formal educational possibilities. There is a way in which this universal panacea misses an important point bluntly and correctly outlined by Saskia Sassen, when she argues that economies relying on a significant pool drawn from the laboring precariat tend to be based on a shared understanding that the nation is afflicted with a surplus population (too many migrants, too many children, etc), and for that very reason there is tacit permission to render a significant category of workers temporary and disposable. Indeed, the economy requires this body of workers, and in this context education—while an evident good for the small numbers of children who achieve it—does not address the fundamental underlying conjunction of needs: for workers on the one hand, for survival on the other. To propose education as the solution, then, seems an unintended distraction from a difficult challenge posed by globalized economic systems. In Bolivia, the children's union UNATSBO has taken a different approach, arguing for the rights of children as workers.

**KEYWORDS:** documentary, UNATSBO, Potosí, *Devil's Miner*, precariat, Kief Davidson, Richard Ladkani, globalization

We see children carrying loads, working in shops, selling small items (or themselves) on the streets and understand (or think we understand) that there are specific geographies associated with this phenomenon. Child labor is generally associated (deflected onto) specific Southern locations on the globe, and associated with nefarious breakdowns of presumed shared values of family and social order. In the best of cases, we recur to what Sassen calls the "counter-geographies" of globalized labor exploitation and the conceptual frameworks we use to make sense of (or ignore) these phenomena. What I want to discuss here is the way the working child crystallizes a series of questions—often implicitly or explicitly displaced across borders into other countries and alternative geographies—about social responsibility and the shape we imagine for our national futures, often through sensationalist displacement onto little-known (by the North) geographies. For purposes of the discussion here, I study the U.S. 2005 documentary film, *The Devil's Miner*, co-produced by Kief Davidson and Richard Ladkani in association with Latino Public Broadcasting, Independent Television Service (ITVS), and Public Broadcasting Service, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.<sup>1</sup> Like many other internationally produced documentary films of this sort, it combines an ethnographic view of its subject with a mission of critique, in this case, the denunciation of child labor in an extremely dangerous and physically exhausting environment.

Frequently framed in the context of progress towards the mil-

lennium goals,<sup>2</sup> national survey results from many countries as well as the findings of reputable international organizations like UNICEF and the International Labor Organization (ILO) have all pointed in the same alarming direction: despite multiplying programs and efforts aimed at alleviating poverty, child labor rates and risks continue to rise throughout the world. Thus, as of 2012, 40% of the nations in the world are still considered to be in the category of extreme risk in this respect (Maplecroft). Reflecting on this study, Fox business analyst Elizabeth McDonald notes that "Children are either forced by governments into labor, or governments ignore companies that forcibly employ them, in Angola, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Burma, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, India, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Thailand and Uzbekistan, among others."<sup>3</sup>

I am interested in this formulation ("forced by governments... or governments ignore companies") not only because it indicts governments as violators of their own national labor laws, while also assuming that rights-based talk applies universally to all cultures around the world, but also because it does not take into account the many children who do not work for those large companies alluded to in McDonald's comment: the ones that governments presumably cannot ignore, and whose violations they nonetheless studiously disregard. For many children, survival needs may push them into other, noncorporate, more marginal locations ranging from self-employment on the streets or in the homes of more affluent

members of society, or work in small businesses. Bolivia is a case in point: nearly one tenth of the population, somewhere between 800,000 and a million children and adolescents, work ("Poderoso lobby"), and in that country, the children working in the old silver mines (the focus of *Devil's Miner*) do not work for big companies; in general they work with families on small concessions ("Digging"). In marginal jobs like these, workers are, to use Guy Standing's distinction, "denizens" rather than "citizens"; they belong to a growing class he calls the precariat, where documentation or citizenship is irrelevant, and all workers irrespective of age or legal status might as well be undocumented border crossers.

I am not an economist or labor activist, of course, and I want to look at the way this issue is refracted in cultural production, and how this particular film, and this documentary subgenre more generally, falls into a familiar arc that runs from denunciation of injustice to resolution through education. *The Devil's Miner* is a highly-regarded documentary film about child miners in Bolivia. It is also a film that highlights boundary conditions of all sorts: between the town of Potosí and the Cerro Rico mine, between formal schooling and apprenticeship as a miner, between dominant society and indigenous practices (though not overtly developed in the film, this subtext is evident in the halting, accented Spanish, the use of the Quechua language by several informants, and by rich allusions to an indigenous cultural substratum). Alongside these concerns are more spiritually constructed boundaries: sky and underground, Catholicism and indigenous beliefs, God and the Devil. The insistence on the child as the point-of-view figure in the film represents a temporal boundary condition as well as an efficient point of entry for international empathy; the general message to the viewer is an emotionally-laden appeal to support children, an inarguable good. In this project, as in others like it, the precocious child trapped in an awful situation evokes the (implicitly western) audience's pathos at the revelation of talent without agency, of potential on the cusp of being lost or wasted. And while the legal status of the child worker has recently changed in Bolivia, the film continues to circulate in Northern classrooms and tourist sites targeting visitors to Potosí with the same discussion guide as 2006, perhaps because it so neatly fits our Northern expectations about the global South.

Children provide an ideal point of entry in the cinema of censure other senses as well, since they are less likely to bring national politics or national identities into play. In this sense, "the child" becomes something like a universal signifier. Interestingly enough, this unanchored social understanding aligns perfectly with national ideology. In general terms, because of their protected status, children are defined most often as conceptually outside any national identity project except insofar as their future patriotic potential may be referenced (as, for instance, in curricular proposals). Their voices are presumed to be subsumed under those of their adult parents and guardians. As children, they cannot exercise citizenship in any meaningful way; they cannot legally work, or vote, or serve in

the armed forces, although in many countries, many children do all of these things.

In their commentaries on the making of this documentary, the filmmakers describe a their trip to Bolivia and their decision to do a project on Cerro Rico<sup>4</sup>. After seeing so many children working as miners, they decided to focus their film through the voice and perspective of a child, and to do so without a voiceover narrator; their challenge, then, was to find a child who could carry the story. After interviewing ten families, they were introduced to Basilio Vargas, who "captivated them with his positive energy, intelligence, and articulate speech." From the sixty hours of material they shot, the filmmakers stitched together a story about the precarious existence of these miners, who are proud of their work, although they know it is terrible and deadly, anchoring it through the narrative arc of this adolescent's story.

For the analyst, the thinking child is accessible partly in her memories of her own past (almost by definition a very different sort of past) and our presumably shared understanding about goals and prospects for the future. When the project is denunciation, which it is in this film as in so many others, the resolution almost universally falls back on cultural approaches directed toward the future, specifically, toward keeping children in school, and increasing formal educational possibilities. This future, obviously, reflects the past of the educated spectator/commentator, and while it would be very odd indeed to argue against education, there is a way in which this universal panacea misses an important point bluntly and correctly outlined by Saskia Sassen. She argues that economies relying on a significant pool drawn from the laboring precariat tend to be based on a shared understanding that the nation is afflicted with a surplus population (too many migrants, too many children, etc), and for that very reason there is tacit permission to render a significant category of workers temporary and disposable ("Savage" 26). Indeed, the economy requires this body of workers, and in this context education—while an evident good for the small numbers of children who achieve it—does not address the fundamental underlying conjunction of needs: for workers on the one hand, for survival on the other.

To propose education as the solution, then, seems an unintended distraction from a difficult challenge posed by globalized economic systems. Simply put, there is no possibility of eliminating child labor without better education programs (though the content of those programs would be a matter of considerable debate), and yet education alone is not enough to solve the problem.<sup>5</sup> When we engage the logic of boundaries to analyze this conjuncture, what geographical (or counter-geographical) locations are most meaningful or revelatory? What historical/cultural trajectory will make this precarious story (this story from the precariat) legible, either in Bolivia or in the international film circuit?<sup>6</sup>

*The Devil's Miner* is advertised with the tagline "the story of a child's survival."<sup>7</sup> It focuses on fourteen-year old Basilio, whose family—including his mother, his twelve-year-old brother, Ber-

nardino, and his little sister, Vanessa—has been displaced from their agricultural background and moved to Potosí to work in the Cerro Rico following his father's death. As the filmmakers remind us in brief introductory captions, as well as in the supporting material for discussion on their film's website, Potosí was once associated with the richest silver mine in the world during the Spanish colonial period. With its resources largely played out now, small-scale entrepreneurs risk their lives (and die very young) to extract remaining traces of minerals that can be sold in the town below.<sup>8</sup> At the time of the filming, Basilio had already been working in the mines for four years, and his younger brother had also begun working alongside him. Unlike salaried work for a company, for an hourly rate, something that in any case would be illegal in Bolivia since the boys are underage, the time of labor in these marginal mining enterprises can be a 24-hour-long double shift, that they sustain by chewing coca leaves to combat hunger and exhaustion. Only if the boys find saleable mineral do they get any income from their dangerous and backbreaking efforts.

The film follows Basilio from his work with a very small operation to his decision to join a somewhat larger collective of miners in the hope of increasing his income, all the while making his basic dilemma brutally clear. He knows that there is no future in the mines except for an early death from an explosion, or a more lingering death from silicosis. Basilio, thus, serves as a synecdoche of an exploitative system of labor (rather than an exploitative company), in which national policy implicitly ignores excess population (poor, indigenous), for whom the question of survival is at the very heart of their individual dilemmas. Their survival is not, however, a national priority. He dreams of education as a way to escape, but in the meantime, he has to feed his family, all of whom agree that he has taken on the paternal role.

One of the goals of ITVS is educational; their documentary films are often used in US schools and in community education projects. Thus, the organization helpfully provides a discussion guide for this film, including background on the film itself, on Bolivia, Potosí and Cerro Rico, as well as suggestions for further reading and for taking action. The discussion questions are divided into four sets: "general," "childhood," "poverty," "religion." Here are the ones on childhood:

- How are the boys' lives like the lives of children you know? How are they different? How do their attitudes toward school compare? What do you think accounts for the differences?
- How do your beliefs about childhood influence how you feel about the boys' childhood? How does Basilio's or Bernardino's daily life match or contradict what you think of as appropriate for children?

- In your view, what is a child's responsibility to his or her family? At what age is it acceptable to ask a child to contribute financially? Why?

These questions are too easy a target for facile deconstruction, and seem oddly out of joint with a local reality where child labor laws exist, but do not match the presumed norm of ITVS viewers. Likewise, in this particular context, child labor is widely culturally accepted, partly because this labor prevails in marginal situations of poverty and extreme need. What I want to specifically trace here, though, is the presumption of underlying shared values about childhood, and specifically about the role of education, in a country where one third of the children are laborers.

From its very title, *The Devil's Miner* sets up an expectation of a discussion framed in terms of good and evil. While Vanessa plays in the background, too young to be caught up in this brutal reality, Basilio and Bernardino are constructed almost as a vacuum that everyone around them rushes in to fill. There is good education and good spiritual practice; there is also the reverse, the bad education that gets the most screen time in the film, and that is clearly the most titillating to the ethnographic eye.<sup>9</sup> The representatives of good education are the usual suspects: the teachers in the public school, the priest. Good education involves learning about the solar system and about Jesus Christ's plans for humanity. On the other hand, there are the mentors in the mine, young men like Saturnino Ortega (who, at approximately 35 years old is suffering from silicosis, looks much older than his years, and is nearing the end of his life) and Braulio, the foreman in the larger mine. These men teach Basilio the basics of the miners' work, as well as the lore around "el Tío", the devil of the film's title. Where Catholic mass involves the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ; on the mountain above a llama is sacrificed, and its blood is spread on the mine opening and the miners' faces as a tribute to el Tío. Thus, education in the city below focuses on abstractions related to life and God's goodness; in the mountain above, sacrifice (of llamas and of miners) is literal and el Tío is a far harsher deity.

There is a Christian cross outside every mine, and miners cross themselves before entering. Inside, in every mine opening, there is a statue of a very different god, an anthropomorphic figure often graced with horns, glass-shard teeth, and an enormous erection: el Tío. Before beginning work, the miners make offerings to el Tío: coca leaves, cigarettes, alcohol, and—on special occasions—llama blood. Saturnino, in one of the few explicit descriptions comparing el Tío to the Christian concept of the Devil, comments: "afuera, nosotros creemos en Díos...que es el Salvador... Pero entre la mina llegamos, las cosas cambian. Es el mundo de Satanás, dentro de la tierra. Entonces, en esa parte tenemos que creer en Satanás, en el Diablo." Other commentary throughout the film, however, makes it clear that el Tío is called "el diablo" primarily for the benefit of outsiders. The miners in general do not identify el Tío with the Catholic Devil. Likewise, anthropologists who have studied the phenom-

enon note that images of Supay, the Andean God of Death and spirit owner of the mountains, the forerunner of this contemporary figure, were common in mines in precolumbian times, though the intensified mining of the colonial period gradually changed the miners' relation to this deity (Salazar-Soler).

The lore about el Tío is passed on orally, along with other instructions about mining safety. Saturnino, a senior miner and father figure in the beginning of the film, teaches Basilio, and in an important scene early in the film, Basilio, explicitly described as a father figure for his siblings, teaches his younger brother, Bernardino: "nunca debes de dejar de creer en el Tío. Porque si lo odias, no ofreces más ofrendas, él también te va a castigar. Hasta te puede matar... Mata al minero... Lo mata y su alma se lo come." Bernardino admits he is afraid. Basilio reassures him: "no tienes que tener miedo al Tío... Tienes que tener fe en el Tío... para que te de merced, para que te cuide de los accidentes." Here, Basilio is already exercising in some sense the role that he has imagined for himself as his dream for the future: as the head of a family, but also as a man who has finished his high school education and can become a teacher in some other society, one that for the moment is more imagined than real.

The child and el Tío are the symbolic heart of the film, its most spectacular elements, and both of them, in the viewers' perspective, look back toward a premodern past: calling to mind the innocence of the child on the one hand, and on the other, the past of humanity, when such gods held sway. Each of these two images is defined in the first instance by affective potential in a presumed moral universe. The documentary counterposes what from the outside looks like superstition (belief in el Tío deriving from prehispanic indigenous spiritual traditions) to what looks like modern science (studying astronomy, Basilio's ambition to become a teacher and Bernardino's hope to study civil engineering). To the filmmakers' credit, they nuance their story.

Basilio knows the importance of formal schooling, to expand his imagination, but also, more pragmatically, so that some day he can leave the mine for a beautiful place where he will have salaried employment at an easier and safer job. Meanwhile, as he says, the immediate obligation to buy uniforms and to have a particular haircut in order to be admitted to classroom "son las reglas más terribles." In order to save the money for these expenses, the whole family had to cut down on food, except for their baby sister. Thus, access to the Potosí classroom is hard won, and once there, Basilio is isolated and bullied by classmates who know he works as a miner. For his part, the priest comments that the first instinct of an outsider to this culture is to condemn the miners' beliefs; he argues that, on the contrary, it is crucial to understand them, contextualize them, and—paternalistically emphasizing his role as an educator—to teach the people that there is a good God who is even stronger than el Tío.

Up on the mountain, both Saturnino and Braulio highlight their job as teaching the young miners what they need to know in order to survive, for as long as they can survive in such an unforgiving environment. Learning about el Tío is as crucial to safety in the mines as

knowing how to count explosions or identify poisonous gas. Like the people in the town, who send their children to school and then out to play, the miners wish children could stay home, be safe. The good parent/good teacher loves children and would never abuse them; nevertheless, the young miners have to understand very clearly the risks of Cerro Rico and the measures they must take to counteract danger. As Saturnino says, "a los chicos, yo los he enseñado... todo desde un principio... con calma, no de golpes." These more experienced miners are saddened that necessity puts so many children in the mines, flinging "su cuerpo al mismo fuego que nosotros." Yet, their role as instructors to these apprentice workers is crucial, and they see value in their work, both as teachers and as laborers. Braulio adds: "aunque sabemos que vivimos pocos años, aunque sabemos que sacrificamos nuestra vida por la familia. A pesar de todo eso, los mineros somos orgullosos porque somos mineros." In the context of the film, this pride is made visually evident at carnival time, when the miners cross the physical, ethnic, and class boundaries that condemn them to invisibility and abjection in Potosí. They dance their way down the mountain into the city, using their tools as percussive instruments, with a choreography based on how they work in the mines.

Intercut with images from the mines are shorter scenes from the Potosí classrooms, driving home the message about the boys' double education. In each case, the Potosí classroom features abstract western thought, while the mines offer practical knowledge and a tit-for-tat understanding of spirituality. The first classroom scene shows Basilio learning about the solar system, contrasting the highly symbolic gesture of gazing at the stars with the claustrophobic darkness of the mine. In the second classroom scene, about two-thirds of the way through the film, the teacher writes on the blackboard: "contemplando nuestra realidad." Once again, the viewer is poised to contrast two realities; that of dangerous work and an early death, against the anticipated discussion in the classroom of other perspectives on reality. For a U.S. audience where the separation of church and state would suggest a historical or political response to the study of "our reality," the teacher's framing in the Potosí classroom is surprising. "Dios nos devuelve nuestra dignidad," says the teacher, so her key question is, "¿Cómo viven Uds. dignamente? ¿Qué deben hacer?" These questions focusing on a dignified life, albeit coming from a very different world, echo Braulio's observation about the miner's pride in his work even though his life is short. Basilio's answer to his Potosí teacher, like that of his classmates, comes from the city rather than the miner reality, and sounds rote: "siendo yo mismo y creer en Dios."

The film is entirely character driven, hence the charge—to contemplate reality, to be oneself, to believe in God—needs to be taken seriously. Up to this point, I have been following the filmmakers' lead and focusing on the third element in this sequence: the relationship to God/Devil and the doubled belief system that supports traditional spiritual practices in the Cerro Rico. The teacher's own call to contemplate reality is, in fact, immediately directed through

the film's editing process into the contemplation of God, reinforcing this emphasis. Likewise, the mandate to be oneself, curiously, is deflected back onto the image of a child whose fundamental core is precisely defined by this belief. There is a certain obduracy to this. Basilio's answer is clichéd; what about his immediate or imagined reality gives him cues on how to "be myself"? What selfhood is a child (or a presumed child) allowed? And what belief system supports this construction of a self? Basilio's current reality, as a child miner, is harsh almost beyond the viewer's imagining; his projected future as a teacher, or Bernardino's as a civil engineer, sounds as unreachable as the stars and as imprecise as the boys' references to the desired geography for that future life (they want to live and work in the beautiful not-here of other countries—La Paz or Santa Cruz or even Cochabamba, says Bernardino; Europe, says Basilio).

Yet of course, being oneself is in the final analysis intimately tied to the contemplation of reality, and this is where the film falls short. In order for the documentary to maintain the focus on the child, Basilio must be portrayed as having a child's dreams, and a child's relation to the institutions of power, whether church, school, or work. In this way, the film can become an exposé, uncovering the invisible labor of the child who occupies the most precarious of all positions in the precariat, while also speaking in general terms about issues of value in a presumed moral universe where the future holds opportunities for advancement. The child, seen as an abstraction, retains the possibility for hope for the future while revealing the harshness involved in contemplating local reality in the present. In this moral universe, invisibility and the inability to exercise the rights of citizenship can be remedied by education, of the proper sort. The child, then, eventually will become an adult who can contemplate a different reality from that of an early death in the mines.

Davidson and Ladkani end the film at this point, with a close up of Basilio's face set against a brooding sky, fading to a glorious sunset and the text: "there are currently about 800 children working in the tunnels of Cerro Rico. Most will never leave the mines."<sup>10</sup> We are, of course, primed for a happy ending for the Vargas family, something the film denies us, but the website and the DVD provide. A year after the film's release, Davidson noted in an interview that "Basilio, Bernardino and Vanessa are in school full time and not working in the mines....As for Basilio, he has learned how to use the Internet and we correspond regularly via e-mail and chat programs."

This rescue through education sounds a little too pat, too expected, too focused on the individual child we have learned to care about, while ignoring the structural issue.<sup>11</sup> The ILO warns that "Children cannot be withdrawn from labour in the mining sector until adequate alternative sources of support for families are in place." ("Digging"). In the case of Basilio's family, according to Davidson's 2006 interview, the German aid society Kindernothilfe "helped the Vargas family relocate off the mountain and open a shop to sell kitchen utensils as an alternative income source," thus outlining a particular small enterprise solution for this family. However, a

2010 website follow-up hints at the kind of failure all too common in small and marginal businesses. The blogger says that Basilio has since moved to another mine, hoping for better pay, and has been lost to view (Daniel).<sup>12</sup> This too is a familiar trope, where well-meaning educational assistance, in failing to address the underlying problems, serves only as a momentary stopgap remedy. This is a point that Sonia Faliero also illustrates in her article on child labor in India. Focused through the story of an eleven-year old head of household in Bihar, the article, "Philanthropy is Not Enough," tells of how an earlier report on orphan Meena Devi sparked international support for her and her two siblings, one older, one younger, along with an offer to pay for their education:

The free hot meal is the reason Meena goes to school. But her teachers routinely skip school, three days a week. When teachers don't come, the school stays shut, and there's no meal. A well-funded, well-intentioned program created to educate and feed poor children fails on both counts: Meena not only learns nothing, she also goes hungry.

But it's the Manjhis' [Meena's aunt and uncle] choices that have had the greatest impact on Meena...Government inefficiency has left the Manjhis poor and hungry, so they have taken control of [her brother's] 14-year-old Anil's earnings. His salary of less than a \$1 a day is paltry even by Indian standards. But for the Manjhis, it was still too much to risk losing. And so they refused to let Anil and his siblings leave for school.

It's not just education that is the panacea, but rather strategic, effective educational programs in the context of social reform to support families. There is another niggling question as well. Documentary film footage, like all ethnographically-tinged interviews of this sort, is always situated and contextual. It is impossible to know to what degree Basilio or Bernardino's aspirations were shaped by dialogue with the westerners who interviewed them during the course of the sixty hours of filming.

However, the path of resolution through education is such a common trope in western reactions to reports about child labor that it begs for a closer look. I suspect that a great deal of its attractiveness for the international audience is that an appeal in favor of education in a film directed to an educational context speaks directly to the consumer demographic. More importantly, it retains for that audience the child's projected passivity and innocence; he is still a node of affective potential, acted upon but not an actor, not yet a self.

But of course, we know that Basilio already occupies an adult role, and despite his physical appearance, at fourteen years old is exactly at the tipping point for child labor laws, which at the time of the filming presumably protected children between four and fourteen in Bolivia. Guy Standing has a more pessimistic view than the

makers of this film, and asks us to take a harder look at the way globalization has been changing labor relations in general. In this respect, the child is not the exception, but the tip of an iceberg. Standing argues that “the precariat is at the centre of the turmoil around multiculturalism and personal identities. A defining feature of all denizens is absence of rights. Citizenship is about the right to possess an identity, a sense of knowing who one is and with whom one has shared values and aspirations. The precariat has no secure identity” (158). In a word: to use the language of Basilio’s Potosí classroom, for people like him there is no self to be, nor will there be a stable identity for anyone in the precariat, at least under current labor practices.

*The Devil’s Miner* focuses on the child, and the tug between good and bad education, where good education is mostly projected outside the arena of the film and bad education is all too graphically articulated. As it happens, Bolivian children have been in the forefront of world activism, coming forward with a third solution of their own, that also involves education, though of a very different sort, and an assertion of the dignity of the individual self. It is a solution that involves children organizing as a labor union, taking up the claim to their rights as workers and as citizens, and demanding an accounting from the government. It involves expressions of pride and demands for respect. It includes teaching and learning from each other without adult supervision, and confronting/threatening (lobbying/negotiating) with companies and government officials. It looks like the nightmare of adolescent rebellion. It looks like bad education.

It is not even hinted at in Davidson and Ladkani’s film or any of the website supporting materials, although the organization’s local chapter—which included 600 of the estimated 1000 child workers in Cerro Rico during the time this film was made—sponsors weekly meetings in Potosí, and has had significant visibility through its marches, demonstrations, and other public actions. An article by Sara Shahriari in *The Guardian* begins this way:

Rodrigo Medrano Calle is a Bolivian labour leader who meets and lobbies top government officials for his constituency’s rights. That’s not surprising in a country where pay is often low, working conditions harsh and unions play a powerful role in society. What’s unusual is that Rodrigo is just 14 years old, and his union’s members are all children.

This is concise, sensational writing from a major, respected news organ, and creates the hook for the western audience by the very unexpectedness of the last sentence. Medrano Calle’s organization is called UNATSBO (Unión de niños y adolescentes trabajadores de Bolivia, often called by the simpler acronym NAT). It was founded in Sucre in 2003 as a national child worker’s union, and now has expanded throughout the country and has gone on to create chapters in Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Peru. It is not an NGO, nor

is it western-affiliated or sponsored, although it does have a modest facebook profile and has achieved some international funding in recent years, as their marches and demonstrations have attracted European attention. The union currently has about 15,000 registered members, all young people between the ages of five and seventeen (Morsolin).<sup>13</sup> Among the people NAT has lobbied directly is Bolivian president Evo Morales, who met with union leaders in a historic April 12, 2012 event, and formally received from them their legal proposal for a children’s bill of rights.

Of course, NAT lobbies for better educational opportunities for their constituents as well as access to guaranteed health care. The core of their demands, however, is focused on achieving concrete measures of “dignificación” as workers. It is precisely this core concept of dignity—something that noncoincidentally is evoked over and over again by all the “educators” in *The Devil’s Miner*—that becomes the sticking point. Dignity is founded in a sense of self as workers with rights, a concept that in formal education is deferred for the projected future of the fully-formed identity, since it is something that defines the adult citizen, as opposed to the child or the denizen of the precariat’s shadow economy. NAT’s demands are pragmatic ones, but also have implications for how we collectively imagine the role of children, how we see them participating actively in a struggle over the responsibility to bring about a desired future, whether national or international in scope, and what that future implies about our present circumstances and the hierarchies within the countergeographies of globalization (see, eg, Sassen “Women” 503-4).

The government’s most typical response to the child workers’ demands has been that it cannot give children rights since the practice of child labor is illegal. Moreover, like every other recognized nation on Earth, the Bolivian government has subscribed to the millenium goals of achieving universal primary education, seen as one of the significant benchmarks of development, and something that the wide acceptance of child labor makes very difficult. Yandira Pérez, one of the participants in the meeting with the president, described the goals of this high level meeting as breaking through this legal impasse: “Hemos propuesto que se apruebe una ley de protección para menores de 12 años que trabajan, está prohibido sí, pero trabajan por necesidad, y ellos tienen que tener un salario justo y un seguro de salud.” In other words, Pérez, like other NAT leaders, recognizes the law, but argues that it is in conflict with accepted practice; the goal of the union is entirely pragmatic—to find a way to formally acknowledge children as workers. In his response, Morales recognized the knottiness of the issue, commenting that for children to help out in the family is not technically labor exploitation, while other forms of child labor are illegal and often highly exploitative. He also he acknowledged that family need and the law do not always coincide, and he praised the maturity of the NAT leaders: “ellos que trabajan tienen más conciencia social,” a tacit recognition of their status (Morsolin). Two years later, in July 2014, the Bolivian Cámara de Diputados approved Law 321 which creates a legal

opportunity for self supporting children as young as ten years old to work legally ("Bolivia").

In reflecting on *The Devil's Miner* against the background of NAT, we realize that the issue of dignity threads through both discussions. It is the first and most important of NAT's demands, the one from which everything else derives. Taking the two formulations together, we conjugate local with international understandings, the former tied to rights, the latter to affect. The film circles around the question of dignity, while always deferring it; in the schoolroom it apparently has something to do with belief in God and care for the self. For the filmmakers, the child's selfhood and dignity are projected into a future time (adulthood) and a different geographical space (Europe, or at least Cochabamba). Likewise, the adult members of the mining precariat and their claims to dignity through sacrifice resonate discordantly against an economic structure that implicitly positions them as disposable elements from an overpopulated third world environment. For NAT, in contrast, dignity means pragmatic legal action to counteract abusive labor practices that had been allowed to continue precisely because they were already unregulatable due to their illegality.

By the same token, "dignity" taps into a different affective nexus than the competing concept of "survival," and the terms play

out differently in Bolivian and international media coverage. Grossberg's recent book on the future of cultural studies is helpful here: "We need to begin to ask how the 'media' themselves are produced, in the contemporary conjuncture. What are the mechanisms that produce 'the media' as having a particular kind of embedded disembeddedness, and as particular kinds of mediating, affective apparatuses?" (221). One of the most striking things about the film, when taken in the context of NAT, is the leaching away of avenues for meaningful change for anyone in the mining communities. Viewer responses on imdb or the film's own website puzzle at the mother's passivity, the miners' lack of agency; they highlight crying buckets over the situation of the three children and being deeply affected by the film's dark poetry, the stark beauty of the mountain where the very concept of survival is deeply ironic.

In contrast, the media depictions of NAT leaders like Rodrigo Medrano Calle or Yandira Pérez, two young people of exactly the same age as Basilio Vargas in the film, describe young people who seem to be breathing a different kind of oxygen. While the precariat is not disappearing any time soon, frankly, I am more enthusiastic about the possibilities outlined by Medrano Calle and his organization, if only because I'd rather cheer for someone than weep over them.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This was also the year (2005) that Len Morris and Robin Romano released their film, "Stolen Childhoods," another highly recognized film on child labor around the world.

<sup>2</sup>Signed by all 193 United Nations members in 2000, the goals' the target date is 2015. Progress has been very uneven.

<sup>3</sup>McDonald's partial list does not include Bangladesh, the world's highest abuser of laboring children between the ages of 5-14. It is striking that Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan are all on the list of the world's ten worst offenders according to the ILO ("Global Employment Trends"). More recently, Sonia Faleiro, in a *New York Times* editorial, wrote that "India, according to UNICEF, now has more child laborers under 14 than any other country."

<sup>4</sup>In the background of this trip is the uncomfortable sense that the filmmakers are following the now familiar tourist route outlined by Regina Harrison, in which—for a modest fee—adventure tourists from the west are guided into the hazardous mines, where they are introduced to el Tío, as well as given a glimpse of the harsh working conditions.

<sup>5</sup>This point is made very clearly in the 2010 ILO report, "Eliminating Child Labor in Bolivia: The Role of Education."

<sup>6</sup>In this respect, "Stolen Childhoods" is more chillingly overt in its politics. The trailer features US senator Tom Harkin (Iowa) who describes child labor as "the breeding ground for Osama bin Laden's army and future terrorists."

<sup>7</sup>Basilio was fourteen years old at the time of the filming, though he looks younger to American eyes, and the scenes in the Potosí classroom look like elementary, rather than secondary education. The filmmakers' insistence that this is the story of a child (rather than, say, the story of a young adult) is fundamental to the atmosphere they develop. Children,

stereotypically, are valued; adolescents are problems to be controlled and contained.

<sup>8</sup>The existence of this capsule explanation at the opening of the film is one easy cue that the film is intended for an international audience, since a national one would clearly already be well aware of this history.

<sup>9</sup>Posted pictures and Potosí websites highlight images of el Tío, clearly one of the major tourist attractions in the region at this time, a phenomenon Regina Harrison also discusses in her documentary, *Mined to Death*.

<sup>10</sup>Other reports, including those from the ILO, suggest the number of children miners is about 5000 in total, and UNICEF cites a total of 750,000 child workers between 5-17 in Bolivia, about 1/3 of all Bolivian children in that age group.

<sup>11</sup>A blog commenter, who interviewed miners at Cerro Rico in 2010 says, "Another point: they told me that all the miners from Potosí were hoping from some help after the movie was made, but nothing happened. This left a quite bitter taste in their mouth" (Daniel).

<sup>12</sup>There is another update on the boys in the Wikipedia article on the film, which I consulted in October 2016. It claims that as of 2014 Basilio has been working as a tour guide in the mines, while also working there part time as a miner and studying tourism on the side, and that the younger brother, Bernardino is married and works in the mines fulltime while also (improbably, given the work hours) studying in the evenings. The link for this attribution is broken, however.

<sup>13</sup>The Potosí branch is called CONNAT'SOP (Consejo de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores Organizados de Potosí), and among its accomplishments are successful negotiations to achieve pay raises for children who sell newspapers on the streets in Potosí.

## WORKS CITED

- "Bolivia: Diputados aprueban reforma que permitirá a menores trabajar." *BBC Mundo* 3 July 2014. [http://www.bbc.com/mundo/ultimas\\_noticias/2014/07/140702\\_ultnot\\_reforme\\_ley\\_del\\_menor\\_en\\_bolivia\\_bd](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/ultimas_noticias/2014/07/140702_ultnot_reforme_ley_del_menor_en_bolivia_bd)
- "Children in Hazardous Work." 2011. *International Labour Organization*. [http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS\\_155428/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_155428/lang-en/index.htm)
- "Conflict and economic downturn cause global increase in reported child labour violations – 40% of countries now rated 'extreme risk' by Maplecroft." *Maplecroft* (risk analysis firm). 1 May 2012. [http://maplecroft.com/about/news/child\\_labour\\_2012.html](http://maplecroft.com/about/news/child_labour_2012.html)
- Daniel in Bolivia* (blog). 7 October 2010. [http://danielinbolivia.wordpress.com/2010/10/07/the-devils-miner-trailer-video-cerro\\_rico-cumbre-2-daniel-hofer-blog-bolivien-bolivia-foto-fotograf-photos-reportage/](http://danielinbolivia.wordpress.com/2010/10/07/the-devils-miner-trailer-video-cerro_rico-cumbre-2-daniel-hofer-blog-bolivien-bolivia-foto-fotograf-photos-reportage/)
- The Devil's Miner*. Dir. Kief Davidson and Richard Ladkani. 2005. [http://www.thedevilsminer.com/index\\_new.html](http://www.thedevilsminer.com/index_new.html)
- "The Devils Miner" update." *Independent Lens*. April 2006. <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/devilsminer/update.html>
- "Digging for Survival." (World Day Against Child Labour 2005). *International Labour Organization*. [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/features/WCMS\\_075561/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/features/WCMS_075561/lang-en/index.htm)
- "Eliminating Child Labor in Bolivia: The Role of Education." 7 June 2010. *International Labour Organization* [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/features/WCMS\\_141277/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/features/WCMS_141277/lang-en/index.htm)
- Faleiro, Sonia. "For India's Children, Philanthropy Isn't Enough." *New York Times*. 15 September 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/opinion/sunday/for-indias-children-philanthropy-isnt-enough.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>
- "Global Employment Trends for Youth 2012." *International Labour Organization*. <http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-employment-trends/youth/2012/lang-en/index.htm>
- Grossberg, Lawrence. *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Harrison, Regina. "Mined to Death." Berkeley Media, 2006.
- MacDonald, Elizabeth. "More Countries use child labor, U.S. says." *Fox Business News* 16 December 2010. <http://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/2010/12/16/countries-use-child-labor-says/>
- Morsolin, Cristiano. "Presidente Morales se reunió con niños trabajadores." *Agencia Latinoamericana de información*. April 18, 2012. <http://alainet.org/active/54164&lang=es>
- Peebles, Dana, et al. "2010 Global: Final Report: Evaluation of UNICEF's Programme and Work in Relation to Adolescents and the Participation of Children and Young People". *UNICEF* [http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index\\_59799.html](http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_59799.html)
- "El poderoso lobby de los niños trabajadores de Bolivia." *BBC Mundo*. 7 July 2014. [http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2014/07/140702\\_bolivia\\_lobby\\_ninos\\_sindicalistas\\_lav](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2014/07/140702_bolivia_lobby_ninos_sindicalistas_lav)
- Shahriari, Sara. "Bolivia's Child Workers Unite to End Exploitation." *The Guardian*. 27 November 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/nov/27/child-workers-bolivia-unite>
- Salazar Soler, C. and P Absi. "Ser minero en Huancavelica y Potosí; Una aproximación antropológica." *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*. 1998. [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/jsa\\_0037-9174\\_1998\\_num\\_84\\_1\\_1772%3FluceneQuery%3D\(%252BauthorId%253A\(auteur\\_jsa\\_656\)\)%2BAND%2B\(indexable\\_type%253Aarticlepag%253F\)%26words%3Dauteur\\_jsa\\_656%26words%3Darticlepag](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/jsa_0037-9174_1998_num_84_1_1772%3FluceneQuery%3D(%252BauthorId%253A(auteur_jsa_656))%2BAND%2B(indexable_type%253Aarticlepag%253F)%26words%3Dauteur_jsa_656%26words%3Darticlepag)
- Sassen, Saskia. "A Savage Sorting of Winners and Losers: Contemporary Versions of Primitive Accumulation." *Globalizations* 7.1 (2010). 23-50. <http://www.saskiasassen.com/PDFs/publications/a-savage-sorting-of-winners-and-losers.pdf>
- . "Women's Burden: Counter-geographies of Globalization and the Feminization of Survival." *Journal of International Affairs*. 53.2 (2000) 503-524.
- Standing, Guy. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011.