

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

LINDA K. CULLUM, *Narratives at Work: Women, Men, Unionization, and the Fashioning of Identities*. St. John's: ISER Books. 2003, 383 p.

Linda Cullum's book has several interwoven and overlapping purposes. It tells the story of women and men who worked as fish and/or blueberry processors at Job Brothers fish plant in St. John's between approximately the late 1930s and the mid-1960s. It also recounts the formation of, and women's experiences within, a union called the Ladies' Cold Storage Workers Union (LCSWU) from 1948 until its demise with the closure of the Job Brothers Southside Road plant in 1967. However, it is how these stories are told that is a distinguishing feature of this book. Cullum employs a multi-faceted, reflexive, feminist post-structuralist narrative analysis of the many interviews she and other researchers conducted with the women and men who worked at Job Brothers, as well as of newspaper accounts, trade union documents and other textual sources relevant to these stories. As Cullum explains, this book "is about the telling and interpretation of stories, about how we use language to bring into being – to create and re-create – ourselves and others in particular gendered, classed and racialized ways in the social world, and how we constitute social relations in and through our everyday talk" (p.11).

Within these stories, Cullum's primary focus is the women workers at Job Brothers: their lives at paid work and in the home; their relationships with each other and with the men in their lives, at home and at the fish plant; and their recollections of their involvement in, and attitudes about, the LCSWU – a women's union that was unusual for the time in which it was formed, a time of significant structural and social changes in the Newfoundland fishery. Cullum explains that her initial interest was in the LCSWU, and that she had hoped to be able to tell a story about working-class women, their work and their union experiences, a story, like so many others of its kind, that has been invisible in most labour history, anthropology and sociology. As her research unfolded, however, Cullum discovered that the women's interviews were limited or ambiguous in their discussion of the LCWSU – for many women, the union seems not to have been a primary interest or concern in their lives – but were effusive in their recollections of their work and working relationships at Job Brothers. Consequently, it is in these latter areas that the book's emphasis lies.

Cullum provides a nicely-detailed description and assessment of the Job Brothers Company and its Southside Plant, its expansion over time and the impact of technology – such as the introduction of fresh-freezing and the

assembly line – on the quantity and quality of women’s work at Job’s. She documents the changing division of labour at Job’s, as specific types of work, and work spaces, come to be defined as appropriate for women or for men, with women’s work routinely undervalued and paid less relative to men’s work. The men’s union at Job’s – the Longshoreman’s Protective Union (LSPU) – is complicit in the devaluation of women’s work, particularly in its paternalistic relationship to the founding and operation of the LCWSU (which occur under the watchful eye of the LSPU leadership) and its ongoing role in negotiating for women’s wages at lower rates than men’s.

Cullum’s book is especially vivid in its discussion of women’s – and to a lesser extent, men’s – narratives of their work at Job’s: how women came to work at Job’s; the nature of the work itself; how women’s bodies and actions were monitored and evaluated by surveillance on the job and the pacing of women’s work on the plant assembly lines; women’s relationships with their female and male co-workers and with the male management; and the ways in which women resisted on the job, individually and collectively.

Social geography, family ties, gender, class and race unite and divide Job’s workers in myriad ways. Cullum’s narrative analysis underscores the shifting subject positionings of individuals in relation to these categories, and argues that the narrators create fluid and complex meanings, subjectivities and relationships as they tell and re-tell their “partial, incomplete, and contested” (p. 316) stories in conversation with one another and with Cullum (and other researchers). In my view, however, Cullum’s efforts to deconstruct the workers’ narratives are not always effective. For example, because of the women workers’ varied and often limited engagement with, and remembrance of, the formation and activities of the LCSWU, and the few written texts (e.g., meeting minutes) available about the LCSWU, Cullum’s narrative analysis at this point relies to a large extent on speculation about why the union was formed and the union’s impact on the women workers at Job Brothers. Consequently, while the unionization of the women workers at Job’s appears prominently in the book’s title, and is a theme anticipated throughout much of the book, ultimately the reader is left with many questions about the significance of the LCSWU, both to the women directly affected by it and to the history of women’s labour struggles in Newfoundland more generally.

Having said this, however, Cullum’s methodological reflections on her narrative research are important not only for this book, but have a more general relevance for writers and readers of qualitative research. She intriguingly explores how her participants came to be a part of her study and how their narratives interconnect in complex ways and for diverse reasons; what she learns from those subjects who declined to participate; how remembering and forgetting shape narratives; and how narrators’ and researchers’ “will to coherence” (p. 300) strive to make often disparate and contradictory narrative accounts fit to tell a complete story. But as Cullum rightly notes, stories such as these are always partial and shifting, and often

contested. And in presenting her readers with a compelling account of “narratives at work”, Cullum has produced a text worthy of attention by scholars and students of women’s labour history and sociology, and those interested in learning more about the complexities and rewards of doing feminist research.

Patricia Baker, Mount Saint Vincent University

© Canadian Sociological Association/La Société canadienne de sociologie