

The Roles and Intersections of Constrained Labour Agency

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Abstract: Ever since labour geography first started demonstrating workers' ability to shape geographies, geographers have problematised the agency of labour. This article responds to a recent intervention by Strauss (2020a; *Progress in Human Geography* 44 [1]:150–159), challenging the sub-discipline to reflect on who counts as a worker and what counts as work. By combining theories of roles and intersectionality, the article poses a related question: *as whom* do workers act? Theoretically, a critical realist approach to labour agency forms the basis for an intersectional reading of the active subject. To illustrate our argument, we juxtapose the accounts of three people who speak for groups of workers or are asked to justify the actions of collective actors like unions or social movements. By showing how these actors improvise their own role incumbency while actively negotiating social identities, the article problematises the epistemology of constrained labour agency while responding to Strauss' call for a rethinking of the ontologies of work.

Keywords: labour agency, roles, intersectionality, role incumbency, representation, activist identities

Introduction

As labour geography has grown into a potent sub-field over the course of two decades, the conceptual underpinnings of its research agenda have attracted commentary. Many interventions attempt to apply and nuance the core concepts of labour geography, including, but not limited to, ongoing discussions around the structural constraints of labour agency (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011, 2023; Hastings 2016), debates around the concept of landscape (Cassidy et al. 2020; Mitchell 2013), similar conversations concerning spatial scale and scalar politics (Savage 2006; Silvey 2004), and efforts to refine the notion of “labour’s spatial fix” (Czifrusz 2021; Doucette 2010). Other commentaries are presented as reflexive criticism of labour geography as an academic project: Tufts and Savage (2009) called for a clearer political project to emerge among labour geographers, Castree (2007) clamoured for improved analytical clarity and connectiveness, Das (2012) criticised labour geography’s lack of a proper class analysis, while Peck (2018) saw opportunities for exploring the “combinational potential” of

different strands in the field. In turn, others have called for an embrace of lived experiences in labour geography research (Dutta 2016; Rogaly and Qureshi 2017) and encouraged a stronger feminist and postcolonial sensitivity (McDowell 2008).

More recently, Strauss tied together many of the above insights in a set of reports in *Progress in Human Geography* (Strauss 2018, 2020a, 2020b) wherein she assessed both the strengths and weaknesses of extant labour geography, advocating that this literature should strike up deeper conversations about the racialisation of work, the politics of precarity, and researchers' own knowledge production. In combination, conceptual refinement and reflexive criticism have offered labour geographers sharpened tools of analysis while ensuring an ongoing conversation about the sub-field's *raison d'être*.

In this article, we want to contribute to both these projects. Ever since Herod (2001:15) gave labour geography its licence to operate by claiming that "workers, too, are *active* geographical agents", the concept of labour agency has been actively employed in geographic research articles. After we reviewed and critiqued this conceptual usage and suggested the term "constrained agency" as better suited for analytical purposes (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011), attempts to develop the concept of (constrained) labour agency have mushroomed. According to Google Scholar, hundreds of articles have direct references to (constrained) labour agency in their title or as a keyword. A substantial share of this published output presents doctoral research, indicating that an emerging generation of labour geographers finds utility in this conceptual apparatus.

As has been repeatedly pointed out (Castree 2007; Coe 2013; Hastings 2016), the literature is dominated by theoretically informed case studies of particular worker struggles and experiences. In principle, this prepares the ground for theory-building, but thus far labour geography falls somewhat short of this potential. Already back in 2007, Castree (2007:858) proposed that labour geographers need "to set these case studies in context, both theoretically and comparatively, so that their full import can be registered" (see also a more recent commentary by Brookes and McCallum [2017]). Since then, the (constrained) labour agency literature has diversified considerably. This development is certainly welcome, given the concept's historical trade union bias, but it makes the challenge of conceptual and explanatory integration even greater. In this article, we grapple with this thorny problem. Our own positionality informs our motivation for doing so. As much of our own scholarly work is placed within a labour geography tradition, and as we have seen the growing interest in this analytical toolkit among younger peers, we believe that there is purchase in trying to push the theoretical development of this sub-discipline further without creating a conceptual straitjacket. We argue that a precondition for theoretical bridging work is a more rigorous conceptualisation of the agent(s) in question. Labour agency, after all, seems to imply an active subject, but questions remain over how individual and collective actors relate to each other, as well as over the identities and subject positions implied in the category of labour.

Our point of departure is Strauss' (2020a) intervention, where she discerns among labour geographers a tendency to prioritise an epistemology of agency over an ontology of work. She argues that while labour geographers are sympathetic to feminist and postcolonial critiques, the sub-discipline as a whole still fails

to “acknowledge differences in ontological positions underpinning the understanding of who counts as a worker and what counts as work” (Strauss 2020a:154). Strauss is certainly not the first to point out a trade union bias in the literature’s theory-building efforts, but she helpfully identifies several overlooked subject positions in extant labour geography, including racialised worker identities, precarious working lives, and non-wage reproductive labour in the home and beyond. Given labour geographers’ longstanding inclination to make sweeping claims about what labour *is*, what labour *can do*, and how labour *produces space*, a tendency to narrowly interpret the acting subject is indeed problematic. We would also suggest that overcoming these blind spots requires a rethinking of the ontologies of work in tandem with, not as a substitute for, a refined epistemology of (constrained) labour agency.

Our insistence on treating these epistemological and ontological challenges in combination also relates to the methodological practices sustaining theories of labour agency. While there are certainly exceptions, labour geographers share an affinity for using qualitative methods (Peck 2018). Often, this involves conversations between researchers and workers, or with their representatives. Through interviews and focus groups, particular individuals are—implicitly or explicitly—asked to speak on behalf of others (Alcoff 1991), ultimately leading to intellectual claims about labour’s ability to act (or to make space) in general (Coe 2013). Notwithstanding the theory-building potential of qualitative case studies, the sometimes-generalising claims emanating from labour geographers call for an acute awareness of how power and agency are exercised, collectively and individually, through privileges and exclusions in the world of work. We therefore align ourselves with the growing chorus of voices calling for intersectionality to become an integral part of theorising among labour geographers (McDowell 2008; Peck 2018; Rutherford 2010; Strauss 2020a).

The promise of intersectional approaches notwithstanding, we are cognisant of scholarly critique of its perceived “lack of a well-defined relationship between structure and agency, as well as between structures themselves” (Martinez Dy et al. 2014:459; see also Rebughini 2021). In what follows, we thus attempt to integrate an intersectional reading of the active subject with an understanding of how individuals become part of collective agency and structural conditioning based in critical realism. In so doing, we aim to address two analytical challenges which have hitherto proved tricky: how to capture the various, often intersecting, identities and subject positions that workers draw upon when they act, and how to reconcile individual and collective expressions of agency in theoretical accounts of labour. We thereby extend Strauss’ challenge of defining “who counts as a worker” by asking “*as whom* do workers act”. The article continues, in the next section, with a brief overview of the breadth of active subjects in existing scholarly work. We then suggest how the notion of “roles”, as developed by critical realists (Archer 2000; Elder-Vass 2010), offers a productive entry point into this complex terrain of individual and collective agency. Following from that, we discuss intersectional analyses of labour agency (e.g. Kelliher 2017; Lewis and Mills 2016; Martinez Dy et al. 2014), to better capture the complex identities that motivate working people to act, individually or collectively.

The last part of the article supports our argument by introducing the accounts of three individuals whose experiences often involve speaking on behalf of other workers. Our choice of people who are neither regular workers and community members, nor authoritative union leaders, was deliberate. Still, all three have been able to take part in decisive collective action in their own political context, holding authorities and the public accountable and making them aware of the rights of workers. To illustrate how individuals improvise their role incumbency within structural constraints, we have spoken to activists who find themselves either in the rank-and-file or on the outskirts of formal worker politics. Moreover, we use their own reflections on how they have navigated class, gender, and racial identities to conclude that an intersectional approach to roles is suitable for qualitative labour geographers in their conversations with “representatives of labour”.

Agency Everywhere—or Nowhere?

Before we proceed further, it is worth acknowledging the true diversity of the field as it has evolved over the last few decades. Recent work seems more receptive to the challenge posed by Strauss (2020a) in asking who is recognised as a worker and whose work “counts”. Cross-fertilisation between labour geography and intersectionality studies show how employment experiences and class identities intersect with gendered spaces (e.g. Smith 2015), migrant status (e.g. Kynsilehto 2011), ethnicity and race (e.g. Pulido 2017), age (Carswell and De Neve 2013), and sexual identities (e.g. Lewis and Mills 2016), often in complex combinations. As a result, recent case studies explicitly work with the notion of “labour agency” through *acting subjects* that depart from the stereotypical: incarcerated labour (Cassidy et al. 2020), Muslim middle-class professionals (Williams et al. 2017), and queer migrant workers (Lewis and Mills 2016), to name a few. As a result of this ethos of inclusion, labour geography now represents a diverse politics and draws on lived experiences from six continents. Without this broadening of focus, labour geography would soon have found itself lacking relevance and resonance. In fact, showcasing the breadth and diversity of workers and worker organisations through scholarly research is performative in and of itself.

There has been a noticeable diversification of studies along distinct, yet interrelated, levels of social praxis—from human bodies (Waite 2007) to class formations (Ağar and Böhm 2018)—through which labour agency is performed. Labour geographers’ growing recognition that agency is enacted in, through, and onto human bodies, is particularly relevant for our focus on how individuals take part in collective action. Among the first to actively acknowledge the body as constitutive of worker agency was Waite (2007), in her study of alcohol consumption among Western Indian labourers. Migration practices are another avenue for conceptualising labour agency, as working bodies traverse space in search of employment. While Rogaly (2009:1975) sought to acknowledge and explore “the agency of individual migrant workers”, Deshingkar (2019:2641) focused on how “[migrant] brokers help migrants in exercising agency”. Finally, Williams et al. (2017:1268) have included the “negotiated politics of embodiment”, expressed through workers’ own bodily management in the workplace, in their

conception of agency. Still, the relationships between working bodies and collective agency remains under-theorised. Within human geography, yet detached from the labour geography literature, Cidell (2006:196) has explored how individuals can be understood in “the politics of scale”. She includes in her exposition not only the body as a scale of activism, which she finds “almost certainly doomed to lose” unless it is rearticulated at other scales of engagement (Cidell 2006:200). Interestingly, she also describes individuals as “sites of multiple scales”, referring to the roles and identities that comprise a person. While she is primarily focused on policy makers of considerable power, this lens is certainly applicable to the worker activists typically given the pulpit in labour geography case studies too.

The broadening of the acting subject in labour geography serves as an important counterpoint to its longstanding trade union bias (see also, on the trade union “fetish” in labour studies, Atzeni 2021). Yet, the relationships between individuals and collective actors are largely left unexamined. Moreover, strikingly dissimilar social phenomena are sometimes treated interchangeably as workers’ expressions of agency. This leaves the field at something of an impasse, for two interrelated reasons. First, there is a tendency to continually expand what “counts” as labour agency, with seemingly less concern for how different agential practices relate to each other. Strauss (2020a:154) provocatively calls this “seeing worker agency everywhere or nowhere”. Second, attempts to conceptualise different modes of labour agency seem to stall in a typologising impulse. While distinguishing between different categories of agency might be useful as a starting point, and is understandable given the marked broadening of the field, typologies provide little in the way of explanation.

To us at least, both these trajectories may be reaching their limits, both analytically and politically. The challenge moving forward, as we see it, is to move beyond delineating different modes of agency to exploring their interplay. In particular, better conceptual tools are needed to explain how the agency of individuals and collective forms of action coalesce in theorising the agency of workers, and how both are constrained by, and act on, structural conditions. We recognise the balancing act we are engaging in by applauding an ontologically more inclusive labour geography whilst at the same time calling for epistemological rigour. We believe concepts based in critical realist thinking can aid this task. Still, this should not be read as an appeal to theoretical uniformity. Other scholarly approaches that share a commitment to clarifying and exploring the agential and structural dimensions of the politics of work could also inform our endeavour.

Roles and Their Intersections

Labour geographers have a tradition of exploring collective expressions of worker agency and have found their niche in exploring how such collective agency is conditioned by social space and geographical difference. The interest in individual, embodied agency has, as shown above, largely been added to the catalogue as new examples of how labour agency can be performed. To overcome this conflation of individual and collective agency, we need to conceptually explore how

they are internally related. Among many empirical and theoretical possibilities, we have chosen to unpack this relationship through asking how particular workers find themselves in positions whereby they act or speak on behalf of other workers. A similar curiosity can be found in the work of Gleiss (2014, 2015), who puts the concepts of labour agency and representation in contact with each other (see also Jordhus-Lier 2013). Gleiss studies labour activists in China and their efforts to speak for vulnerable groups of workers while simultaneously building legitimacy among the same constituency. Working in an authoritarian context, she includes discursive and subtle expressions of cultural resistance in her understanding of workers' representation.

In this article, however, we use the concept of *roles* in critical realism to explore the interplay between the personal and the social, and between the structural and the contingent (Archer 2000; Elder-Vass 2010). Indeed Herod (1997a:1) himself explicitly set out to understand “the *role of workers* in making the economic geography of capitalism” (emphasis added). While the “role of workers” is a readily available formulation used to challenge capital-centric accounts of economic geographies—typically in positive-sounding epithets such as “important roles in shaping landscapes” (Herod 2001:5), or “the active role of workers in making their own history” (Hastings 2016:310)—geographers have yet to give the concept of roles careful consideration.

Margaret Archer's “detailed account of the development of selfhood and collective social action” is widely seen as one of the most sophisticated attempts to integrate the personal and the political, even by scholars who do not subscribe to her version of critical realism (Jessop 2005:42). Archer (2000:76) defines a role as “both a source of reasons for action and a vehicle which gives a person control over his [*sic*] own social life”. Roles thus motivate and enable individual agency. When we take up roles, and perform these according to our own and to others' expectations, we change ourselves *and* the roles in the process (Clark 2022; Jaeggi 2014). Individual agency is thus performed both when norms are resisted and when they are conformed to (Shachar and Hustinx 2019). For many people, an increasing number of roles are made available throughout life—becoming a partner, a parent, an employee, or taking on organisational responsibilities—which allow them to exert power, expose them to domination, and/or let them maintain privilege. By growing up and (often) filling the roles expected of them, “young people's agency in the (re)production of broader power relations and inequalities ... can endure throughout the lifecourse” (Holloway et al. 2019:468). But the availability of roles is of course dependent on an uneven distribution of resources within and between societies (Archer 2000). Gendered role exclusion marks many labour markets (Ledwith 2012; McDowell 2011), and formal workplace hierarchies often fail to integrate migrant and minority workers (McDowell et al. 2007), as do union organisations, for that matter (Alberti 2014).

Roles not only inform individual agency, however. To critical realists like Elder-Vass (2010:153), it is also through inhabiting roles that individuals “contribute to the causal influence of the organisation”. Through role incumbency, individuals thereby co-constitute the emergent properties of collective agency. Archer (2000) distinguishes the *primary agency* of groups, in other words the aggregate status of

people sharing life-chances, from the ways in which groups act together in coordination, which she labels *corporate agency*. Primary agency can be enacted by large groups of people and have transformative effects on societies, such as when groups start using certain digital devices or decide to work from home, but it is not actively coordinated by the group itself. Corporate agency, on the other hand, which corresponds to Elder-Vass' (2010) synonymous term *political agency*, is motivated by the desire to remodel structures. Both primary and corporate agency are performed by groups, but only corporate agency is strategic.

The appeal of this conceptual apparatus to labour geographers should be obvious. In the labour market, people are often part of several primary agents at once: by actively taking part in the labour process, being household members in the sphere of social reproduction, or perhaps traversing borders in search for work. But to act politically, to take part in corporate agency, individuals must become *role incumbents*. Archer (2000) explicitly mentions the emergence of trade unions and other organised interest groups as instrumental to the historical rise of corporate agency in modern capitalism. Conflicts over who can fill roles, and who these roles are allowed to represent, are of interest to labour geography. Across the world of work, the roles available to workers are unevenly concentrated. In some places, a rich array of formal roles is available, including becoming a union representative, an OHSE officer, a supervisor, or a board member (Karlsson 2020). In other parts of the world, where formal systems are weaker or absent, informal roles might function as substitutes for institutionalised co-determination.

Still, the distinction between primary and corporate agency has made few inroads into labour geography (although Faulconbridge [2008] would count among the few exceptions). Rather, case studies developed to demonstrate labour agency often fail to distinguish at which end of the primary–corporate agency spectrum they are operating. Moreover, in studies where the interplay between primary agency and corporate agency is problematised (e.g. Kiil and Knutson 2016; Rodriguez and Mearns 2012), this is done through less precise terms such as individual/collective agency, or by deploying Katz's (2004) conceptual triad resilience/reworking/resistance. Arguably, a more conscious understanding of roles would make labour geographers more sensitive to the capacities in which they encounter workers. There are some instances where this indeed has been made explicit, including Ford and Dibley's (2012:306) study of "the agency of strategically placed individuals" in post-tsunami reconstruction efforts in Aceh and the work of Routledge et al. (2016) on imagineers in global justice networks. While our choice of individuals in the subsequent sections also illustrate positions of relative privilege, a critical sensitivity towards roles could inform studies of groups of workers and community members whose partaking in corporate agency is embryonic.

As role incumbents, workers are often expected to represent other workers or social groups, and these representative roles are geographical in and of themselves. Spokespeople and stewards do not only represent *someone*, but also *somewhere*. For workers elected to a union position, this can become a personal experience overnight as they try to maintain legitimacy in particular constituencies: they might struggle to represent particular sections of a workplace or

organisation (Warren 2019), defend a spatial scale of bargaining that is rejected by employers (Herod 1997b), or try to reconcile national and transnational loyalties in global union federations (Cumbers et al. 2008; Magdahl and Jordhus-Lier 2020). It is therefore important not to exaggerate the stability of roles. While they offer individuals scripts informing them how to act as a collective (Elder-Vass 2010), these scripts are open to interpretation and ambiguity (Kemp and Holmwood 2012; Koustelios et al. 2004). At the workplace scale, role ambiguities can result from conflicting role expectations from employers, co-workers, and clients, often built on gendered and racialised stereotypes about job suitability or work ethic (McDowell et al. 2007). Ambiguity can also stem from juggling representative roles in the realm of capitalist production and/or in the political system with myriad social roles in the sphere of reproduction, thus intersecting primary and corporate agency.

Future applications of this conceptual apparatus might develop a more discriminatory grasp of the tensions between the agency of specific role incumbents and the actions of collective actors. In labour geography, this pertains most particularly to analyses of “movements within the movement”, for instance union renewal initiatives in the 2000s (Savage 2006; Tufts 2007; Wills 2001) or various forms of labour environmentalism (Cha et al. 2022; Paul 2018; Stevis et al. 2018). This is a question of methodology as well as epistemology. In this literature, labour activists and unionists often figure as sources, collaborators, and audience, and their accounts become a central tenet in the academic narrative. While this strand of the discipline has drawn criticism for selectively seeking out success stories (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011; Hastings 2016), another way of formulating the critique would be to ask whether it shows an affinity for role incumbents who over-perform their own role expectations. This would in turn raise interesting questions about the structural and agential conditions for union renewal.

Intersectional Labour Geographies

But how can we reconcile this conceptual project of understanding the agency of collectives with our commitment to acknowledging the multiple identities and subject positions informing worker action?

To do so, we need to reconnect with Strauss' (2020a) arguments about labour geography's ontology of work: not only does labour geography still display a bias towards paid work and sites of capitalist production, but these social locations also privilege certain identities, mobilising frames, and vectors of oppression. Even as recent interventions have gone some way in showing the diversity of worker subjects and collective forms, expanding our notion of “who acts”, the sub-discipline still struggles to explain “as whom labour acts” in a rigorous manner. Put differently, the myriad actions we understand as expressions of labour agency do not necessarily reflect the interventions of those who think of themselves as workers, or of their actions as being motivated by class or other work-based identities. Recognising the political intersections of class and gender encourages us to rethink generalised accounts of labour agency, and rather discern expressions of “gendered agency [which] contests labor geography's tendency toward

teleological definitions of working-class people in narrow terms of opposition or accommodation to capital" (Smith 2015:578). Conversely, when workers do engage in collective action and openly oppose the structures of capitalism, we must not retreat into stereotypical categories. Kelliher (2017:170), for instance, warns against assuming that labour agency in the form of solidarity-building is "something that white people do", pointing to the support striking miners received from feminist, LGBT, and Black activists in Thatcher's Britain. Against this backdrop, we can therefore still state, as Ince et al. (2015:141) did some years ago, that labour geography remains "rather silent on the intersections between class, race, and gender".

The concept of intersectionality, originally conceived of by Crenshaw (1994:94) to refer to "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experience", has become widely used across the social sciences and in human geography to explore "mutually constitutive forms of social oppression rather than on single axes of difference" (Hopkins 2019:937). Intersectionality has entered the labour geography literature through studies of vulnerable groups of workers. Ham and Gerard (2014), for instance, showed how sex workers use strategic invisibility as a form of agency, deciding when and where their work counts in order to navigate the regulatory frameworks of the state. Lewis and Mills (2016:2485) documented how gay workers seek to escape "complicated patchworks of restrictive and protective policies as well as everyday homophobia in workplaces and communities" through labour migration. By being attentive to processes of "being and becoming" (Holloway et al. 2019:468)—in other words how people grow up, come out, and move to new places—as constitutive of workers' agency, we can also appreciate how transformative experiences involve "shifts in subject positions over time" (Deshingkar 2019:2645). Lassalle and Shaw (2021), in turn, consider the constrained agency of women migrant entrepreneurs associated with their role as "trailing spouses". Jeffrey (2012:246) focused on stages of the lifecycle and the category of age when arguing that the "intersecting structures of power" facing young people as they gradually are integrated into labour markets lead them to different modes and temporalities of action. In Valentine's (2007:19) seminal text on the intersections of gender and other identities, she used a women's life journey through a number of workplaces and other social spaces to explore the differentiated "abilities of individuals to actively produce their own lives". Indeed, some labour geographers have since used life stories as a method to explore the intersections of structure and agency throughout life (Dutta 2016; Kynsilehto 2011).

Being able to change scholarly conversations has not made the intersectionality concept immune to criticism, however. Martinez Dy et al. (2014:448), for instance, observe that intersectional analyses "have tended to pay less attention to questions of agency and privilege". The production of privilege represents the flipside of oppression and should also be read intersectionally. In the world of work, "privilege is highly geographically contingent and reconfigured across in different spaces" (Duplan and Cranston 2023:333), but remains a methodological challenge for empirically grounded researchers, as privilege is "normalised and made to seem natural". Intersections of privileges and oppressions must therefore

not be solely based on the realm of experience—accessible through interviews and observation—but by analysing their structural underpinnings (Martinez Dy et al. 2014:456). Bonds and Inwood (2016), for example, explored categories of privilege in their study of how racism and class struggle were negotiated within the Occupy Movement. More squarely in the labour geography tradition, Thomas and Tufts (2020) explore the production of privilege in the strategies of police unions and their “Blue Lives Matter” campaigns.

Ferguson (2016) has been critical of the tendency in intersectional scholarship to treat categories of oppression as ontologically distinct, rather than as historically specific and internally related. Parts of this argument can be found in Brown’s (2014) critique of critical realism, that he sees espousing a fragmented ontology of what is essentially a social whole. The “positional approach” put forward by Martinez Dy et al. (2014) can be read as a response to such concerns. Drawing simultaneously on intersectionality scholar Floya Anthias and the critical realism of Margaret Archer, they argue against rejecting or essentialising social categories, and rather using them as “abstractions with real social, political, cultural and economic implications within their respective contexts” (Martinez Dy et al. 2014:458). These abstractions in turn can help researchers understand how actors are constrained, as “generative structural mechanisms of oppression and privilege can emerge from the durable yet dynamic intersections of social categories” (Martinez Dy et al. 2014:463). Strauss (2019) reminds us that specifying such mechanisms is in itself no neutral task. Rather, it is part of the politics of doing research. Still, we argue that unless we are willing to analytically disentangle the structural *and* the agential dimensions of work (see Fletcher [2017] for a concrete example of how to do so), we risk resorting to “an economic geography devoid of workers, both as individuals and as members of social groups” (Herod 2001:23).

So how do the identities that underpin agency translate into logics of collective action? Strauss (2020a:155) cautions us against treating intersecting identities as optional additions, or as “minor ingredients”, to existing theory building. Still, insofar as there is such a thing as intersectional labour geographies, it remains curiously silent on the role of collective actors. Exceptions include case studies of organising strategies among informal workers (Lindell 2010) and of the tactics of migrant worker campaigns (Alberti 2014; May et al. 2007), which help us understand what Strauss (2020b:1214) aptly called “the precarity of agency itself” from the standpoint of organisers and campaigners. Defining the mobilising subject of a particular organisation or campaign is always context-dependent and implies the demarcation of a “we” that is subject to continuous examination. When workers speak or act on behalf of others, or sanction others to do so, they perform collective agency in ways that represent some people and places, and silence others.

We will return to the tricky task of speaking for others in the next section, but before doing so, we should grasp the opportunity to reconnect with our previous discussion of roles. After all, roles themselves are intersectional. Most people “wear many hats” when they enter associational life. Elder-Vass (2010:200) dwells on this point: because organisations are spatially disarticulated social structures, meaning that “they can operate in the absence of any specific set of spatial

relations between their parts”, they become radically open to intersectionality. Not only can individuals be members of many collective actors simultaneously, but the structural emergent properties that co-produce individual actions often stem from several norm circles at once. When exploring the politics of work *through* collective actors, we should therefore be actively asking: as whom do workers act (consciously or not) when they do so? Combining role sensitivity and intersectionality allows us to critically deduce the agendas of collective actors from individual accounts. Put simply, intersectionality helps us understand how identities inform action, while role theory helps us understand in what capacity workers’ collective agency is enacted. Multivocal subject positions inform role incumbents whenever they fill any given representative role. This can entail that various scripts—e.g. formal organisational resolutions, gendered and racialised experiences, or personalised agendas—emerge in a single research interview. In the next section, we attempt to trace this complexity from the abstract to the concrete by introducing three personal accounts of worker activism.

From the Actor’s Point of View

In the introduction, we made the point that labour geographers tend to encounter these intellectual problems not through abstract expositions of social theory, but in case study research where they engage with people as informants. These encounters bring to the surface many of the dilemmas raised in Alcoff’s (1991) essay “The Problem of Speaking for Others”: who are empowered and who are silenced by letting certain individuals speak on behalf of others? And, would *not* speaking on their behalf empower or disempower these groups? These questions are as relevant to labour geographers in their scholarly practice as they are to the informants who deal with them in their daily politics.

By way of illustration, we present three individuals in this section who have in common that they have been able to speak on behalf of other workers in the political contexts they find themselves in. In addition, each of them has developed a relationship to researchers through their activism, and some of them have even been featured as case studies in labour geography (e.g. Gastaldi et al. 2022). It is not our intention to present them as archetypical workers. But put together, their experiences can tell us something about how some workers embody roles and engage in collective agency, while navigating complex identities in the process. Their encounters with academic research also offer perspectives on how strategically positioned individuals can inform our knowledge of broader social categories—such as Polish migrant workers in Europe, domestic workers in Indonesia, or petroleum workers in a green transition—and hint at the limitations of such generalisations. In 2022–2023 we conducted Zoom interviews with each of them where we encouraged them to talk about their roles as spokespersons for others. We also asked them to reflect on how they navigate different identities in their activism. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed for common themes and significant differences. After writing up a first draft of this article, all three were asked to read and comment on the way we have presented their stories. What follows is their revised accounts.

The first interview was with Lita Anggraini, who is the national chairperson of the Indonesian domestic worker network JALA PRT. Lita's activism stretches back to her involvement in the feminist student movement in the 1980s. Throughout the 1990s she helped establish support networks and educational facilities for domestic workers, first in the Yogyakarta region, and subsequently right across the Indonesian archipelago. Through establishing JALA PRT in 2004, the domestic worker movement found a national platform for a decades-long struggle to implement a Domestic Workers Protection Bill in the Indonesian parliament. It is therefore easy to see how Lita's activism is integrated in the corporate agency of the domestic workers' movement in Indonesia. Still, Lita has never been a domestic worker herself and is from a middle-class family. Still, her commitment is very personal. In 2015, she and four domestic workers gained international attention when they went on hunger strike to protest the lack of legislative action. In addition to her political lobbying, she has collaborated with researchers and contributed to academic publications (e.g. Liem et al. 2023).

Charlie Sandoval is a refinery worker and union leader in California, USA. As an elected union representative of the United Steelworkers (USW), he is also part of the NextGen group in USW-California, where younger industrial union leaders are given institutional backing and encouraged to interact with each other. Through his various positions, Charlie is negotiating different formal mandates with more informal expectations to speak on behalf of particular groups of workers: through his NextGen involvement he often speaks on part of "the young" in the labour movement; as a refinery worker he represents "the industry" in debates on climate change; and he also uses his speaking opportunities to highlight his background as a worker of colour from a minority community.

In this way, Charlie has been able to shape the agenda of the organised labour, in the workplace as well as in a much broader political context. His activism has brought him into contact with various academics, and he was interviewed for a report mapping the views of US workers and communities on just transitions (Cha et al. 2022), and spoke at the US Congressional Briefing (part of the Build Back Better and #BuildBackFossilFree series) on 26 March 2019.

Ewa Sapieżyńska is an author and activist who has lived in Norway for 20 years. She was born in Poland, has a doctoral degree in sociology, and has taken part in debates on issues of Polishness, stereotypes, and xenophobia in Norwegian society. The title of her Norwegian language debut book from 2022 translates into English as *I Am Not Your Polak*, and in the time following this publication she has been able to speak up for Polish people living and working in Norway. As a political subject, Polish migrant workers have been widely studied in European social sciences, including in labour geography (e.g. Datta and Brickell 2009; Rye and Slettebak 2020). While many talk and write *about* Polish workers in Norway, few representatives of the Polish population themselves have been able to have their voices heard in the way Ewa did in 2022. To reconnect with our analytical framework, Ewa's discursive re-representation of Polish migrants in Norway has played a small but meaningful part in establishing what is still an embryonic corporate agency among this group. Unlike the other two individuals, Ewa's role as a spokesperson is informal and contested. While she has been able to gain

significant attention through media coverage and political debate, her representation of Polish workers lacks an institutional foundation.

Filling Intersecting Roles

These three people inhabit roles in contrasting ways, demonstrating the complex processes of representation from the individual's point of view. Of the three, Charlie is the one who has the most clearly articulated relation to the formal positions he has been elected to. He makes a distinction between his social self and the role of union steward:

Where we work at, we're employees, right? Of the company. Or union members. So, at any given moment, an issue can happen and I automatically transition myself to steward. At that point in time, I'm a steward and I can hash it out with the company. And at that point, we're equal to each other.

This excerpt is from a documentary where Charlie explains to workers from other countries how he embodies his union role (Price 2022). Embodiment is also place-based. In our interview, he explains how he fills his role as a union representative in a more assured way at his own workplace, where his representation of workers is personalised, than when he acts a leader of the grievance committee in other workplaces. In fact, Charlie's engagement in the union movement has allowed him to fill multiple roles, for the most part through being elected or appointed, and he stresses how each role comes with different expectations about how he should relate to other workers (e.g. as a mentor, as a representative, or as a liaison). In a passage of the interview, he reflects on how being an oil worker carries different stereotypes in different places. In public functions in California, being an oil worker makes it harder to get support from an audience than a union teacher or a union nurse. He contrasts that to experiences he had visiting the Texas oil industry, where being a blue-collar oil worker "means that you're top of the hierarchy".

One thing Lita and Charlie obviously have in common is that they embody their roles wholeheartedly. Embodiment should be understood quite literally in this context. Charlie explains how his formal union responsibilities raise stress levels and affect his sleep. Lita explains that her health has suffered from the stress of seeing parliament fail to pass the Domestic Workers Protection Bill. Her dedication to the struggle for domestic worker rights has led her to live in the office. When asked whether there is anything separating her role in the movement and herself as a person, she answers no. She took her embodiment a step further in 2015, when she was hospitalised following her movement's hunger strike in front of parliament.

Lita's role perception also differs from Charlie's on many accounts. Through a life of activism, she has carved out her own role. While media outlets have referred to her as a "national chairperson" or "national coordinator" of the National Network for Domestic Workers Advocacy (JALA PRT), there was no pre-existing role or mandate to fill when activists initiated the network in 2004. Lita has given her role as a spokesperson a lot of thought, being aware of her

privileged position as an educated person from a middle-class background. In her many media statements, she never assumes the position of a domestic worker, but speaks as a supporter of this group and their rights to decent work conditions. Domestic workers in Indonesia were not organised, nor had a collective identity as workers, prior to the mobilisation in which Lita was a key part (Gastaldi et al. 2022). The network's slogan—*domestic workers = workers*—serves this internal purpose, as well as challenging the disempowering social identity of being helpers, or “part of the family”, that domestic workers carry in Indonesian society. Through establishing schools, support groups, and local unions, JALA PRT has built representative structures and organic leaders that can carry the voice of domestic workers to policy makers and the public. Through her activism Lita has also been able to speak for Indonesian domestic workers in transnational networks such as the International Domestic Workers Federation.

While Charlie has filled numerous available formal positions, and Lita has constructed her own platform, Ewa was well aware that her role lacked legitimacy derived from institutional backing:

You had this question in the interview guide: To what extent is the role you fill clearly defined? And of course, it is not. Because I have not been elected or appointed. And hence, I'm careful to claim that I'm a representative. I'm a representative on some level. And then again, on others I'm not. But I don't have a formal title here.

As an author, Ewa relied on the reception of an audience and a media debate. In combining her own biography with references to research and statistics, and interviews with other Polish people living in Norway, her legitimacy rested on two questions: would her personal story resonate with others? And, was she perceived as a legitimate spokesperson of a larger group? On both accounts, the media coverage that followed the publication was overwhelmingly positive. Her role as a spokesperson rested on her ability to identify and describe a collective role. The state broadcaster claimed that it was “a book full of frustration, grief and well-placed anger towards the role of ‘the stranger’ that was never chosen, but enforced...” (Ekle 2022, our translation). Amidst the praise, she also faced challenges. For instance, one commentator criticised her for placing her sympathies with individuals whose middle-class aspirations were sanctioned by institutional racism, and not the large numbers of working-class labourers living in Norway. Another point of criticism, which she had been prepared for, concerned her choice to frame her intervention as part of the wider debate on racism. Why couldn't she have limited her definition of the problem to one of labour market discrimination?

The word racism is actually feared in Norway. It is also exclusively used about discrimination connected to skin colour. So I also felt I had to explain if I had a place in this debate. If the whole debate unfolding after Black Lives Matter in Norway also had a place for Polish people to participate in.

Ewa's efforts to defend her right to speak to intersecting forms of oppression demonstrate how difficult it is to treat role incumbency and interpretation without examining how she (and others) understand her social identities. This leads us

to the second question we posed, namely: how are identity markers related to the ability and willingness of being a spokesperson?

Negotiating Activist Identities

Ewa and Lita are both from middle-class backgrounds, although Ewa pondered whether she lost her middle-class status upon her arrival in Norway. Reflecting on their own class positionality is therefore a natural starting point for both when describing their own identity. To most Norwegians, Polish workers are associated with manual labour in masculine professions. Hence, Ewa knew she broke with expectations. This arguably made her think more about her own positionality than the average author: “I wrote a book about stereotypes. And hence I was careful not to reproduce stereotypes.” Perhaps this helps explain why she found the accusation of class bias especially troubling:

It may not be accepted that we have different identifiers, apart from the national one which is closely linked with class in the social imaginary, and that, you know, we do not always have being a cleaner as our aspiration in life.

Quoting statistics that show higher average education levels among Polish women in Norway than majority-population women, she suggested in the interview that some reviewers fall into the trap of stereotyping themselves. Throughout the writing process, Ewa constantly thought about the representative claims she made, or refrained from making: could she speak on the part of Eastern European immigrants as a whole? Would her own experience resonate with Lithuanians? At the time of the interview, Ewa realised that she was going to have to process many of these dilemmas again, as her book was being translated for a Polish audience, whose connotations of the identity markers discussed in the book would be different.

Lita describes her middle-class positionality in part as a springboard for her activism, through affording her higher education and access to campus politics. But middle-class privileges, like her father’s salaried job, were also an obstacle to outspokenness during the Suharto era:

If I see something wrong in our situation, I can do nothing. We discussed among [ourselves], like with my father, my grandpa, my grandma, about this situation. But this is only for the family—“don’t take this outside”.

Her own family took many years to accept her decision to devote all her personal resources to this struggle. Still, her reflexive awareness of her own privileges allows her to understand ambiguous class positions in the political landscapes she now traverses. For instance, the fragile alliance between the domestic workers’ movement and formal trade unions are being challenged by the fact that many trade union members employ their own domestic workers—just like her family did. For Lita, fighting for the rights of domestic workers is much more than a class struggle. When she and other feminist student activists in the 1990s heard that a domestic worker had been tortured by her employer, they realised that:

...this is the issue we must take. This has all the biases: gender bias, class bias, feudalism, race bias. Everything happens to domestic workers. Many contacted us as workers, as women, as citizens, as human beings. So we agreed to take this issue as our priority.

Only women take part in the movement, both full-time activists and domestic workers. An ambivalence can be discerned in the movement's targeting of intersectional oppression, in that difference is emphasised while their struggle is framed as a universal human rights issue. She describes the relationship between herself as a full-time activist and the domestic workers who are active in the movement as one where all are equal and part of the same struggle, although domestic workers are encouraged to stay in employment alongside their activism. Through joint education programmes and a commitment to vernacular language practices, the movement actively builds a common collective identity among activists and domestic workers.

Charlie's introduction of himself during the US Congressional Briefing in 2019 reveals a different class background from that of Ewa and Lita:

This union job is important to me because this has helped me achieve my American dream. I'm a child of immigrant parents, college-educated and of humble beginnings. Growing up in South LA, job opportunities were very limited—and still are. You can find a job, but not a job with a liveable wage.

While the union movement has offered him a series of relatively influential positions in the local industrial relations system, his activism involves complex social identities. When he is asked to reflect on what being a worker of colour means to him, he immediately contextualises his experiences geographically. Describing his Latino background as a "neutral factor" in California, or even one which offers leverage in certain situations, this changes when he travels across the country for union meetings:

I have been in a room where we have a meeting with other unionists and, you know, 99% or 90% of the room is white, you know, older age, probably in their 50s going into their 60s ... And I don't know if it's a natural thing, but when you see another person of colour, that's who you can form an ally with in these meetings, you know. An alliance.

Seniority has traditionally been a prerequisite for taking on representative roles and expressing yourself in the union movement. But Charlie finds that social media empowers younger unionists to think freely and speak up. Not least is this apparent with the issue of climate change, where younger unionists have a different perspective than his older colleagues and are expected to be more involved and become more knowledgeable about green industries.

Charlie, Ewa, and Lita have all played important roles shaping the politics of work. Their accounts illustrate how individuals who speak for groups of workers, or are asked to justify the actions of collective actors like unions or social movements, find themselves in complex and intersecting roles. Filling a role involves a lot of improvisation, and different roles might compete for priority within the same individual. Finally, representative roles are filled by people who are much

more than workers. Charlie, Ewa, and Lita are all actively negotiating social identities through their activism, and their role incumbency is often coloured by these complexities. This entanglement can be a resource, but also a limitation for researchers. It calls for critical reflexivity on both sides of the interview. We are under no illusion that this represents a paradigm shift to anyone based in the critical geography tradition. After all, notions of intersectional identities and role intersectionality are tacit knowledge in much contemporary research practice. Still, we hope that we have been able to make explicit, and even problematise, the unruly relationships between theoretical assumptions and research subjects, and thus offer a useful reminder that we need to diligently employ an intersectional reading of the roles that enable collective labour agency.

Conclusion

Who counts as an acting subject in labour geography and what counts as work (Strauss 2020a)? We argue that labour geography's epistemological and ontological underpinnings co-implicate each other in the question that has guided this article: *as whom* do workers act when they remake socio-economic landscapes? Directing our intervention towards the ever-expanding catalogue of qualitative case studies that have explored the concept of labour agency through a commitment to listening to workers and their representatives, the analysis has both theoretical and methodological implications. Can we learn how labour shapes capitalism by listening to workers? Can we understand the agency of collective actors by speaking to its formal or informal representatives? We believe the answer to both questions is yes. And yet, as we have tried to show, integrating these voices into accounts of constrained labour agency without reducing the agential to the individual, or to static social categories, is difficult.

Labour geographers will not run out of understudied categories of work any time soon. "Whether this expanding research agenda is a blessing or a curse is a matter of perspective", warned Castree (2007:858) over 15 years ago. In this article, we propose a perspective that some might find fraught with ambiguity. Our proposal is to combine role sensitivity and intersectionality in a critical realist framework. Rather than seeing this as a depoliticising move (cf. Hopkins 2019), we believe this approach opens for a critical examination of workers' agential dimensions without losing track of their multi-faceted structural constraints. Gendered and racialised conceptions should function as introductory categories for theorising constrained labour agency alongside the labour-capital binary. At the same time, we agree with Martinez Dy et al. (2014) that intersecting structures of oppression and privilege do not determine how actors in particular social locations experience or react in the world of work.

Therefore, a strong commitment to listen to people directly involved in social struggle should remain an important anchoring point for future explorations of labour agency. As we continue to challenge ourselves with regards to which kind of actors we choose to speak to, and which political struggles we turn our attention to, we need to take questions of rigour and reflexivity posed by intersectional theorising seriously. Not least is this important when we, based on these

interactions, ask workers to speak or act on behalf of particular constituencies, places, and identities, thereby informing our narratives about the (constrained) agency of labour. In the small corner of the world that is critical social science, this sensitivity is what will allow labour geographers to speak for others in a meaningful way.

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Data Availability Statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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