**Talking Trash, Talking Class: What's a Working Class Poetic, and Where Would I Find One?**

for my grandmothers:
Donna Gene (Ewing) Manthey and
Christina Katherina (Sanders) Schultz

I've spent years trying to reconcile being a poet with being working class. Yet, walking home from work one day it occurred to me, such a reconciliation is not only improbable, it is also undesirable. My language comes out of, indeed is exalted toward, the space created where these two identities refuse to meld inside of me. In that messy, dangerous space the possibilities of language are expanded.

What does a “working class poem” look like?
How does it sound?
How does it behave?
What if I'm “too intellectual,” “too confident,” “too experimental,” “too fragmented?”

Growing up working class has given me skills, perspectives, and knowledge which are a part of every decision I make. Growing up working class taught me how to survive. Growing up working class is part of my very breathing.

How are “poetries of identity” created? How are they made normative?
When I say “working class poem,” “working class writer,” what do you hear?

Tillie Olson, Kevin Magee, Mike Amnasan, Karen Brodine, Rebecca Harding Davis, Meridel Le Sueur, Agnes Smedley, Dorothy Allison, Mike Davis, Carolyn Kay Steedman, Barbara Smith.

And who? Who does not survive in our language? Anxiety is a sticky substance infused with fear. Dollar for dollar. Or, for instance, poverty. My own collusion in bourgeois appearances bleeding me dry. The need to be seen or recognized outweighing other emotional vaunts.

This is the most difficult essay I have ever not written, for as much time as I spend writing it, I spend more not writing it, carrying it around knotted and unruly.

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A discourse around class and poetics is lacking, if not invisible. While it is now possible to identify a trajectory of experimental women's writing, to inhabit a vocabulary of gender and sexuality, references to class often remain just that: mere codes. Several problematic issues arise both in the writing of, and writing about, what we might call “working class poetry.”

First, the drive to create “poetries of identity” (a phrase I've been using for some time) tends to solidify normalizing tendencies in terms of form, style, and content, i.e., does a poem have to be narrative, “I”-based and “about” work in order to be considered “working class?” Furthermore, drawing a straight line between one's identity and one's poetics is problematic at best and confuses the biographical information about the poet with poetic works that genuinely seek to explore, unseat, complicate subjectivity.

The obvious point to be made is that identities are infinitely mediated and complex; coming from a particular class, race, gender is not—and should not be—the map through which one can trace a trajectory toward a particular type of poetic expression.

That said, I still consider Lorine Niedecker (along with being a great Modernist, experimental, American, woman writer) to be a great working class writer. It is part of providing myself with a history.

Dear Hilda, Dear Wallace, Dear Michael, Dear Frederick
Dear Marianne, Dear ball and stick, Dear K, Dear K, Dear K, Dear K

A language of provisional objects
A language of hunger

The head of the hammer
flying off and cracking

Or a spade unable to overturn
the solid earth

Does the word “proletarian” refer?
See now, a figure described as my grandmother crossing a room

Replace “I” with “salt in a bag”

In the face of my parents’ illiteracy
all the ravages
My anxieties race through me at a difference pace, clutching at my lungs, my throat, making it difficult to swallow or breathe. My childhood anxiety wasn’t made up of monsters in the closet, or fear of the dark. My anxiety was tied to something which my parents could only haltingly save me from, something which they toiled vigorously to save the entire family from: poverty.

The threat of falling into poverty, losing one’s health, losing a job, looms over the working class and creates particular anxieties, mental health issues, and survival strategies. I learned to take care of myself early because it was required. During much of my childhood, my parents each worked two jobs, and I was often alone. Now in her fifties, my mother faces health problems which I can only attribute to years of overwork.

I took care of myself. I struggled. I got angry. Though the idea that I would go to college was with me from a young age, there was no such thing as a “college fund” to pay for it; my parents had no money to send me to college. If I were to go, I had to figure out the way myself. And I did. I became an incredible overachiever. I racked up academic awards, anxiety, and rage. I knew I must always do more, be better, to prove myself worthy. I took nothing for granted.

Education is like a religion for the working class. It’s the “way out.” Of course, at the present moment, that both is and isn’t true. This news has reached even popular journals, such as Spin, which reports in its October, 1997 article on “Sucker Ph.D.’s”:

> More than one third of all new history Ph.D.’s will never find full-time teaching work, according to the American Historical Association’s own newsletter, paltry numbers given the mammoth amount of time you have to invest to discover your fate. Across all fields, 40,000-plus students will receive their doctorates this year. Few have illusions about what awaits them: a handful of good jobs, each sought by hundreds of applicants; university presses less and less willing to publish the academic books needed to gain tenure; protracted separations from loved ones. Grad school, an option nearly every halfway idealistic college student contemplates, has become an invitation to purgatory (122).

This brings me to the inevitable discussion of MFA programs. Camille Roy, in a recent discussion on the Poetics ListServe interestingly points out that when she first came to the Bay Area, there were resources available in the community for writers to learn more about their craft, such as the free workshops offered by Bob Gluck through Small Press Traffic. Roy attributes the current institutionalization of such resources into university MFA programs, where people must pay for access, to dwindling funding for the arts.

This is a very difficult situation, and while it is true that few poor and working class people will apply themselves to a graduate program, such as an MFA, which virtually guarantees that they will not find a job, some institutions such as San Francisco State University are historically very working class. Like other working class folks, I worked full-time while completing my MFA in poetry at State. It took me five years to complete the three-year program, and during that time I endured a level of exhaustion and stress which had adverse effects on my health. (I was almost hospitalized in the middle of it in 1993.)

In addition, it must be pointed out that not everyone enters such a program with equal amounts of privilege, and completing a degree, while providing for the acquisition of particular cultural capital, is not a great leveler. Working class people are often worse off when graduating because of the massive student loan debts they carry with them.

So why did I do it? Because my working class heritage has imbued me with a stubbornness which allows one small part of myself to refuse to accept that I am not allowed to have what other people have just because they come from wealthy families and I don’t. I wanted to learn. I wanted an intellectual community. I wanted a writing community. Are MFA programs the best answer to all of that? Certainly not, but I did gain some of what I wanted in all three of those areas. And I existed at State, much more than I did as an undergraduate at Columbia University and Oberlin College, because I could look around and see my experience reflected, and not feel so much the horrible grating of isolation.

> the passage of place
> in desire
> a geometric development
> heretofore opposed to wake
> pronouncements and sedentary acts
> the startling possibility of collectivity
> when money has everything and nothing to do with it
> “I’m just trying to get us both on the same page”

People assume they know who I am because I am white, because I am “educated,” because I am reasonably articulate. But my efforts to be “good enough” have been too successful: they have helped to erase who I am. I pass so well, but you look through me, and what you do not see says so much.

My own writing comes out of those points of pressure and contradiction. The education which introduced me to Anne-Marie Albiach,
Gertrude Stein, Maurice Blanchot, post-structuralism, and experimental narrative, also ensures that I am a stranger to my own family. I now speak at least two languages. I cannot forget, or erase, one in favor of the other in the difficult act of writing. Amphibious, we live in both worlds, but belong to neither.

Writing which brings to bear the full force of one's psychic, material (body and word) power is not sweet or delicate. It is not "safe." To fully inhabit the world of working class subjectivity in a poem requires that I withstand an incredible emotional pressure. I scratch away at the codes or placeholders which seem to want to denote class, and try to find what lies underneath. In the face of silence, only my stutter.

While literacy is certainly an issue when discussing the "accessibility" of innovative works, I have sat with readers with high school educations and Ph.D.'s alike while they encountered similar challenges and delights in unlayering a poem. I refuse to assume or presume my audience—any audience—during my writing process. To assume that the "true" working class poem is only a narrative exposition of working class "experience," is to buy into normative reading patterns established by post-WWII academic poetries in the U.S. This assumption precludes the full possibilities of language, isolating working class poets to a particular kind of expressionism. It would be difficult to find a parallel prescription placed on the depiction of class in other art forms.

The difficulty in discussing class and poetics reflects the larger obfuscation of class within American culture. While Labor is becoming more visible as we near the end of the 20th century, and the intelligentsia faces a job market of dwindling opportunity and wealth is concentrated in the hands of an increasing few, the myth of a "classless" society persists. (Have you pulled yourself up by your own bootstraps lately?)

Too often, class is conflated with race in a fuzzy-headed analysis that fails to account for the conflicting privileges/oppressions of race and class. I continue to believe that it is extremely valuable for white working class people to speak out about their experiences and interrogate what it means to live simultaneously not only with racial privilege, but also under economic oppression. Exploring these kinds of contradictions is the only way that theory will catch up with praxis.

As someone both white and working class, I have often been painfully invisible, particularly in academic environments where it was much more comfortable for white academics to assume that I was "like them" despite evidence to the contrary. One woman at Oberlin repeatedly insisted to my face, "you're like me—your parents have money." The fact that I was not supported financially by my parents was a foreign concept to her, and far too many others. I had to insist on my own existence, insist on the right to my own experience, and avoid being put in the position of taking care of their feelings of guilt.

Writing is thievery, as in stealing time. I will forever be envious of those who are afforded the material conditions and privilege in which to write. Those whose parents paid for them to go to college. Those who grew up blissfully unaware of financial struggle. Those whose families are able to provide them with a crucial safety net in times of crisis. These people have the things that I always wanted, but will never have. I can't go back and change that. I can only fight to harness my fear and rage in a way which returns me to the page in a productive way as a poet who believes that issues of power and privilege are of vital importance.