

# Editorial: Welcome to the Journal of Working-Class Studies

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The *Journal of Working-Class Studies* brings together the work of scholars, writers, artists and activists who are committed to the study and representation of working-class life. We aim to publish writing about the global working class – a diverse group of people whose commonality is their position in classed societies.

The *Journal of Working-Class Studies* is also the journal of the Working-Class Studies Association, an international interdisciplinary organisation dedicated to the study of working-class people and their culture. The work of the organisation, and this journal, is underpinned by a key question – who are the working class? Many scholars have offered possible, often contested answers to this question, from fields including sociology, political economy, history, literary studies, and cultural studies, among others. For members of the Working-Class Studies Association, the working class are call centre workers in the UK, factory workers in China, miners in Australia, farmers in India, steel workers and Uber drivers in the US, garment workers in Bangladesh, retail workers in South Korea and so on. Working-class experience includes struggle, oppression and exclusion, but also collectivism, solidarity, and a will to fight the exploitation of labour.

Working-class history and culture has long been explored by academics, commentators, activists and interested citizens. We seek to add to the scope and depth of those ongoing conversations. In addition to the excellent work that already exists, this journal aims to provide a unified space and a dedicated outlet to magnify working-class voices.

Working-Class Studies writers always aim for accessibility. The work we publish should be general-audience friendly, and not overly reliant on academic jargon. This is not to say that such work won't be academically rigorous – clear, lively prose does not mean simplistic ideas. To understand the complexities of working-class experience, it is also important to acknowledge how class intersects with other sites of experience and identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion and ability. Our aim is to provide a platform to explore the depth and diversity of the working class, and we warmly invite academics, writers, activists and engaged citizens interested in working-class issues to submit work for consideration. New readers and contributors to the field are especially welcome.

We have chosen to publish this journal independently, using an open access format. Although we do not print in hard copy, all articles are downloadable as small PDF files that should be readable on most devices. Unless otherwise indicated, the articles in each issue will have been through academic or industry peer review, a process that differentiates the content in our publication from opinion or journalistic commentaries

in the popular press. Having said this, at times articles in the journal may present opposing arguments or discuss recent events that may still be unfolding – and we encourage submissions that challenge dominant power relationships or assumptions.

Working-Class Studies scholars produce work with a commitment to demonstrating how our ideas and arguments apply to the lives of working-class people. Often authors will share their own class experiences as a way of grounding and further complicating their analysis. Personal stories provide access points for readers as well as platforms to explore broader patterns of power relations.

The essays featured in our first issue offer a mix of contemporary commentary as well as histories of Working-Class Studies as it has developed, giving readers an opportunity to get to know the field and to think about what Working-Class Studies can do. Working-Class Studies Association founders Sherry Linkon and John Russo reflect on some of the major questions and tensions that have shaped the discipline of Working-Class Studies. This article provides important touchstones in the development of the field, and is an excellent place to start if you're new to Working Class Studies.

Michael Zweig, director of the Center for the Study of Working Class Life at the State University of New York-Stony Brook, looks at the changing structure of the working classes in the United States as people move from full-time permanent work to casual and part-time labour. Zweig considers how these changes have weakened working class power, affecting labour organising and trade union membership, among other modes of resistance. Crucially, Zweig emphasizes the importance of power and culture as the primary social forces through which Working-Class Studies has taken shape.

Jack Metzgar presents an extract of a full-length work in progress that demonstrates how autobiography can animate questions at the heart of Working-Class Studies. Metzgar, like many scholars in the field, comes from a working-class background. Generous in its personal detail, his account serves a larger purpose: to explore how the author's nostalgia for the 'century of the common man', or the period of unprecedented working and middle-class US prosperity between 1945-1975, is driven at least in part by the steady erosion of such standards witnessed since. The essay serves as an exciting preview of the larger work to come.

Reflecting on her 'discovery of self' through reading personal narratives by other scholars from the working-class, Deborah Warnock discusses how the many collections of autobiographical writing she's engaged with reveal patterns of experience unique to working-class academics. The existence of such collections, she argues, proves that social class needs to be taken more seriously as a form of diversity in higher education – especially considering how student loan debt and an increasing reliance on adjunct labour, among other factors, have made upward class mobility more elusive than ever for academics from working-class backgrounds.

In her essay, Editor Sarah Attfield considers what happens when working-class people decide to reject respectability. She demonstrates that this often subtle, coercive type of oppression has profoundly influenced how working-class people are valued by others and by themselves. She provides a detailed account of the existing work on the

subject, drawing from her personal experience as a working-class youth growing up on a council estate in London and now as a working-class academic in Sydney, Australia.

This first journal issue also includes reviews of three recent books of relevance to Working-Class Studies—a novel, a poetry collection, and an economic history. Such texts demonstrate the range of artistic and academic approaches one can take to the representation and study of working class life and politics.

The *Journal of Working-Class Studies* has launched at a time when the working class is under threat in many parts of the world. Political unrest and distrust of traditional information outlets has left many feeling unclear and uncertain about their futures. Now, more than ever, is a time to unite and focus. We hope that the articles here, and those to follow in future issues, will be read widely and make a difference. We strongly believe that acknowledgement of how class works is vital if we want to move towards more just and equitable societies. We warmly welcome you to the first issue of the *Journal of Working-Class Studies* and invite your readership and participation.

# Twenty Years of Working-Class Studies: Tensions, Values, and Core Questions

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## Abstract

From the beginning Working-Class Studies has been a balancing act – between academic and activist work, among class and other analytic and social categories, among ways of defining and studying class. Twenty years in, we have not resolved the tensions among the disparate approaches to and elements of this field. And that, we would argue, is one of our strengths. Working-Class Studies is a dynamic and contested terrain of multiple methodologies and academic disciplines. While this means we sometimes repeat old debates, because we haven't resolved them and because new people join the fray, as a field we benefit from the complexity and open-endedness around a few core issues.

## Keywords

Class, working-class studies, interdisciplinarity, interality

As early leaders of Working-Class Studies, we are often asked to look back at the work of the past two decades. Readers who want to know about the history of Working-Class Studies or about our personal histories with the field can find those stories in several places: the introductions to two of our books, *Teaching Working Class* (Linkon, 1999) and *New Working-Class Studies* (Russo and Linkon, 2005); in an interview published in the *Minnesota Review* (Cohen, 2005), and in our article “Border Crossing: Interdisciplinarity in Working-Class Studies” for *Labor History* (Russo and Linkon, 2012). In this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Working-Class Studies*, we instead want to look forward, by mapping out some of the central tensions that have animated this field and by considering how they are developing in the current economic, political, and academic context.

We see four central questions shaping Working-Class Studies, which – of course – connect with each other and suggest additional issues. Like any academic field, Working-Class Studies is complex but also defined by its debates. These debates reflect definitions, theories, methods, scope, and purpose. Most important, in our view, these tensions reflect on-going concerns. They have been at the heart of this field all along, though the details and contexts of the debates change over time. We can think of these issues as a set of enduring and unresolvable questions. Every practitioner in Working-Class Studies must wrestle with at least some of these, and

many of us have, over time, answered these questions in different, even contrasting ways. We expect to continue to do so. Even more important, we believe that asking these questions and debating the answers are defining elements of Working-Class Studies.

### **What do we mean by ‘class’?**

As we wrote in 2005 in *New Working-Class Studies* (and as we have explained to countless students, colleagues, and journalists), Working-Class Studies embraces this question but refuses to provide a simple answer. In part, what we mean by class changes depending on the situation in which we are using it, but our varied answers to this question also reflect the varied interests and assumptions of members of our scholarly community. Nearly all of us begin with an understanding rooted in Marx but without privileging Marxist analysis over competing theories and practice. That is, class involves relations of power, based in economic positions that shape individuals, culture, history, and interests. Within the field, however, that fundamental definition leads in diverse directions. Sometimes, we use class as a category of analysis, a way of explaining and interpreting events, issues, and texts of all kinds. In this sense, class is a position, a relationship, a social force. When we focus on class as an analytic category, we trace the way the contrasting interests and power of people in different class positions play out within capitalism, sometimes by looking at specific cases but also by looking broadly at economic, social, and political conflicts and changes. On the other hand, Working-Class Studies is also interested in the varied conditions, perspectives, and lived experiences of working-class people. When we take this approach, we emphasize class as a social category and a culture, which we study by identifying the shared values and practices of working-class culture and by tracing how people express or enact that culture through actions and expressions.

Within Working-Class Studies, some individuals are firmly committed to one approach or the other, but some move between them and many see them as two sides of the same complex coin. Consider, for example, two key books in the field: Michael Zweig’s *The Working-Class Majority* (now in its second edition, 2000; 2012) and Barbara Jensen’s *Reading Classes: on Culture and Classism in America* (2012). Zweig examines class in terms of politics and power, while Jensen approaches class as culture, articulating the difference between working- and middle-class cultures. Both books offer significant, useful definitions of class, and even as they argue for different emphases, both acknowledge that their approach is not opposed to, or separate from, the other. Zweig demonstrates that to understand how power works we need to look not only at statistics and structures but also at how people experience and respond to them. To understand culture, Jensen shows, we must recognize that cultures emerge from (and contribute to) hierarchical structures of power. In part because these books engage with the debate about how to approach class, without insisting on a single correct approach, other scholars have found their concepts and vocabularies useful in framing new analyses.

The ongoing debate between class as a category of analysis and class as a culture means that none of us can take our approach to class for granted. It also means that, as a field, we demonstrate the capaciousness and significance of class as a concept (or perhaps more accurately as a set of concepts). Our work is better because we have to

stipulate what we mean by class and why. As we have often argued, Working-Class Studies should resist embracing any single definition of class.

### **How does class relate to race and other social categories?**

Class cannot be separated from other social categories that work with and against class to shape power, relationships, social practices, and identities. But what does that mean in terms of how we study working-class life, culture, history, and politics? How do we articulate the significance of class as a central force – some would say as *the* central force – in social difference, inequality, and conflict? Here, it's harder to identify "sides" in a debate. Rather, the relationship between class and race – the dyad of difference that seems most problematic – presents a persistent, resistant knot whose strands can be stubbornly divided yet also hard to untie.

Working-Class Studies emphasizes class, which is the organizing principle, the shared interest, that defines this field. Yet Working-Class Studies has also always resisted the idea that class is more important than race or any other category. Across the field, we recognize that 'the working class' is not white (or male, or heterosexual), and we challenge approaches that ignore this complexity. From the beginning, much of our work has focused on particular intersections between class and other categories, most often gender, as in Paul Lauter's early essays on working-class women's writing (1990) or Janet Zandy's anthology *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings, an Anthology* (1993). Other work tackles intersectionality in more complex ways, as in Julie Bettie's *Women Without Class* (2002; 2014), a study of teenage girls that considers themes and variables of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Indeed, one of the challenges we face in Working-Class Studies is that we understand that 'the working class' is a broad and in many ways vague category. Working-Class Studies also includes research on how race has divided the working class, including how white working-class people have created and reinforced racial and ethnic boundaries within the working class, as in the work of labor historians Theodore W. Allen (1975; 2006) and David Roediger (2005; 2007).

Yet race, more than any other category, remains a problem for Working-Class Studies, not least because this field is, despite the good intentions and progressive politics of most of its members, predominantly white in both its scholarly focus and its membership. While we reject the critique that 'Working-Class Studies' really means 'white Working-Class Studies,' in practice a significant portion of the research in our field focuses on white people. This reflects a problematic truth of the field: we do want to create an academic space for talking about working-class whites – not because they're white but because they are marginalized and demonized on the basis of class. As we do that, we must wrestle with the way racial difference and racism have played out within the working class while also resisting the tendency – in the U.S. but also in the UK and elsewhere – for societies to assign racism as a social problem exclusive to the working class.

Further, crucially, Working-Class Studies must foster and support research on race and ethnicity, as well as other social categories. As recent Working Class Studies Association (WCSA) award winners make clear, emerging work in the field often focuses on working-class people of color, often incorporating gender, sexuality, immigration status, and other categories. Projects like Julie M. Weise's

book *Corazón de Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South Since 1910* (2015) or Gregory Rosenthal's dissertation on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hawaiian working-class migrant laborers (2015) not only expand the range of research in Working-Class Studies, they also model ways of digging into the intersections in ways that use class and race, often along with other categories, as overlapping, complementary analytical lenses. In his contribution to our collection, *New Working-Class Studies*, David Roediger acknowledged the difficulty of, as he put it, looking at 'more than two things at once' (2005: 32). A decade later, scholars whose work focuses on race and ethnicity are helping us learn how to do just that.

Still, like the work of defining class itself, we will not likely resolve the question of how class relates to race in any simple or final way. Working-Class Studies must continue to wrestle with this knot. We must more often turn our class lenses on the lives of working-class people of color, but we must also bring greater awareness of race, ethnicity, and sexuality to our studies of white working-class people. And as with the question of defining class, our work is better when we engage critically with the way class works with and against other categories, and our field is strengthened when that critical engagement yields a range of approaches.

### **How is class changing?**

Working-Class Studies has always had a strong interest in the past. The history of labor and political activism, working-class literature, class formation, and work dominate the field. Working-Class Studies emerged in the 1990s, about a decade after deindustrialization, as economic restructuring began to undermine the structures and experiences of work that had played central roles in the formation of the working class. Some contend that the field is driven by nostalgia for the working-class agency and culture that was lost to deindustrialization. No doubt, many in this field have been drawn to the working class of the industrial era, and the half-life of deindustrialization has also been a central and important concern. But this is not a matter of simple nostalgia. Even if we set aside critical arguments about the multiple forms and potential productivity of nostalgia, as laid out by Working-Class Studies scholars like Tim Strangleman (2005; 2011), history matters, both for its own sake and as a source of insight into how class works.

At the same time, the conditions that have shaped working-class life are changing with economic restructuring, technology, and globalization in a few key ways. First, industrial labor has not disappeared. It has migrated and mutated, and discussions of working-class life, culture, and politics today ought to include attention to contemporary versions of manufacturing and mining labor as well as to service work. But, of course, it is not only work that has migrated. Workers, too, have become more mobile, sometimes as a matter of economic choice as people from less developed countries move to western Europe, Australia, Canada, and the U.S. in search of better opportunities, but also as a matter of political necessity and survival, as we see so dramatically in migrants from the Middle East and Africa who have fled violence in search of safety and stability. To say that the working class is global is nothing new, but as these movements remind us, it is global today in ways that it was not in the past. This opens a range of new possibilities and challenges for Working-Class Studies as a field. Imagine, for example, how we might read key works like Jack Metzgar's *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (2000) or Christine Walley's

*Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (2013), books that focus on family and community in the context of labor and the steel industry, alongside studies of Chinese migrants who leave their home villages behind to work in giant factories producing smart phones and computers. We can also see the future of Working-Class Studies in books like Sonali Perera's *No Country: Working-Class Writing in the Age of Globalization* (2014), which reads fiction from India, South Africa, and other colonized regions of the English-speaking world alongside the work of Tillie Olsen (1974). If nothing else, our increased awareness of the global working class should generate a more comparative, or at least a more contextualized, approach to the study of class.

Second, changes in work may require us to rethink our already contested definitions of class. Guy Standing argues that the emerging 'precariat' (2014) represents a new class and that its interests are not likely to be effectively addressed with the organizing models of the past. The contingency and low wages of contemporary work undermine the potential for solidarity and pride that workers of the past found in industrial labor. Meanwhile, stagnant wages, increasing student loan debt, and more widespread use of contract and freelance labor have muddied the boundaries between working- and middle-class lives. Where fifty or sixty years ago many working-class people, at least in the U.S., began to acquire the elements of middle-class lives – sending their children to college, moving to the suburbs, buying homes, cars, and boats – today, middle-class people increasingly find themselves living paycheck to paycheck, with college degrees and student loans but without steady employment or comfortable earnings.

It is not surprising that a recent Pew Research Center<sup>1</sup> study found that younger Americans are more likely to identify themselves as working class these days or that the latest round of the General Social Survey finds more Americans self-identifying as working class (Malik et al, 2016: online). As economic structures change, our definitions of class and our ways of studying class will shift. We see this already in studies like Jennifer Silva's *Coming up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (2013), which challenges long-standing ideas about the centrality of belonging and solidarity in working-class culture. We might also consider how a novel like Hari Kunsru's *Transmission* (2005), which follows a young computer programmer from India to Silicon Valley and then to Seattle, revealing how his dream of success in America is dashed by exploitative contract labor, reflects but also revises the classic American working-class immigrant tales of the early part of the twentieth century.

As we can see, asking questions about how class is changing also necessarily invites us to consider the relationship within Working-Class Studies between the specific and local, on the one hand, and the shared and global on the other. Working-Class Studies has long been dominated by Americans, in part simply because the field began in the U.S. Building an international organization is, of course, challenging in many practical ways, not least the time and cost of travel. It may be that paying more attention to transnational commonalities and global shifts, including the specific

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<sup>1</sup> The Pew Research Center is an independent think tank based in the U.S., <http://www.pewresearch.org/>

experiences and interests of working-class people in particular places, will help us become a more truly international field.

### **Working-Class Studies for whom?**

Working-Class Studies began at the series of conferences we and our colleagues organized at Youngstown State University, starting in 1995. We might have stopped after one conference, of course, but we were inspired by a number of people who told us during the first conference that they had felt like orphans, isolated and hungry for opportunities to talk with colleagues, across the disciplines, who shared their interest in working-class history, culture, and politics. We wanted to create a community that would support these academics (many, but not all from working-class backgrounds).

Yet from the beginning, we also worried that Working-Class Studies would become too focused on serving the needs of its participants rather than looking outward to create change for working-class people. We saw the value of anthologies like *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, edited by C.L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (1995), in which working-class academics described and reflected on the challenges they had faced in navigating the middle-class (and often elite) institutions of higher education. Yet, as Sherry wrote in the Introduction to her 1999 anthology *Teaching Working Class*, relatively few of the students we teach would go on to academic careers. Surely Working-Class Studies should have something to offer them? John had a similar sense from his experience of teaching in local union halls. Working-Class Studies ought to make a difference for the steelworkers, autoworkers, nurses, and government employees he taught.

When we asked attendees at the first Youngstown conference what a Center for Working-Class Studies ought to do, the answers ranged from ‘start the revolution’ to ‘provide a good education for the children of steelworkers.’ Relatively few of the responses focused on purely academic work. The idea that Working-Class Studies should serve the interests of working-class people is written into the mission of the WCSA, which includes the goal of ‘creating partnerships that link scholarship with activism in labor, community, and other working-class social justice organizations.’ We do this in a variety of ways, from teaching in community settings and marching on picket lines to writing for public audiences or making films to advocating for worker justice within our own profession. Some of us also do research on advocacy and activism beyond the labor movement. Betsy Leondar-Wright models both the scholarly and hands-on activism of the field, through her work with Class Matters and United for a Fair Economy, as well as in her book, *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures* (2014).

Because we recognize the importance of crossing the academic/activist border, questions of audience and purpose should always drive our work. Part of what makes books like Zweig’s, Jensen’s, and Metzgar’s so important, and part of why Walley’s translation of her (already quite accessible) autoethnography into a film<sup>2</sup> is so significant is that these texts exemplify the potential for Working-Class Studies to reach broad audiences. As a field, we must continue to ask questions that matter and

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<sup>2</sup> The film version of Walley’s 2013 book is also titled *Exit Zero*. More information on the film can be found here: <http://www.exitzeroproject.org/>

to write about them in ways that can engage multiple audiences, including academics outside of our areas of specialty. This does not mean ‘dumbing down’ our writing. As a field, we have already demonstrated that it is possible to write about specialized knowledge in ways that will engage diverse readers. If we keep asking for whom we are doing this work, we can produce more research that makes a real difference. And as we know from the experience of editing the *Working-Class Perspectives* blog ([workingclassstudies.wordpress.com](http://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com)), this sometimes means that we must break out of traditional academic modes.

We also need to maintain our commitment to teaching. WCSA conferences always include multiple panels on working-class students and working-class pedagogy, as many of us teach courses on work, class, inequality, organized labor, and social movements. Early on, collections in the field, such as Janet Zandy’s *What We Hold in Common* (compiled in 2001), included essays about teaching, as did our 2005 anthology *New Working-Class Studies*. As more working-class students attend college, and as discussions of higher education draw more attention to economic diversity in higher education, we need to update our shared body of knowledge about class in education. We also need to connect more fully with colleagues in primary and secondary education and those who train future teachers.

In the end, if Working-Class Studies is going to matter, for workers, for communities, for our students, or for us, we must recognize that we cannot focus too narrowly on ‘our’ work. We cannot work only within academic settings. We need to continue to connect our research and teaching with emerging forms of activism and struggle among working people. To make a difference beyond the academy and to ensure the sustainability of the field, we need to be organizers. We know from recent projects like Alison L. Hurst and Sandi Kawecka Nenga’s recent collection *Working in Class: Recognizing How Social Class Shapes Our Academic Work* (2016) that twenty years after that first Youngstown conference, we still have colleagues who feel like orphans. We need to reach out within our institutions and across disciplines, to follow the example of Lisa Kirby at the Texas Center for Working-Class Studies ([iws.collin.edu/lkirby](http://iws.collin.edu/lkirby)) and find those who share our interest in the working class. We need to work together to establish more academic programs, build closer ongoing relationships across academic disciplines, organize more conferences, edit more collections, and develop more partnerships. If we do the organizing, Working-Class Studies can be a vibrant and sustainable academic field and a significant ally and partner for working-class movements.

We see great promise for Working-Class Studies, in part because so many of us remain actively, critically engaged with these questions. Through these debates, the field is deepening and sharpening its work, and new scholars continue to join the discussion. We are excited to see younger people taking on leadership roles and contributing smart, creative new research, pedagogical strategies, and models for collaborating with working-class activists and movements. This journal, too, represents an important step as we move from the field-building era to working on sustaining, expanding, and promoting our work more widely.

## Author Bios

Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo co-directed the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University for 17 years. Together, they wrote two books, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (University Press of Kansas, 2002), now in its eighth printing, and *Reading Work: An Online Resource on Critical Reading and the Meaning of Work* (on-line textbook, 2012). They also co-edited a collection of essays, *New Working-Class Studies* (Cornell University Press, 2005). Their most recent joint publication is the article, "Contested Memories: Representing Work in *The Wire*," written with Alexander Russo, Associate Professor of Media Studies, Catholic University, which appears in *The Wire: Race, Class, and Genre* (University of Michigan Press, 2012).

Sherry is a Professor of English and Director of the Writing Program at Georgetown University. Along with her collaborations with John, she edited three collections, including one on teaching working-class students and working-class studies. She is currently working on a book analyzing contemporary American literature that addresses the long-range effects of deindustrialization. She served as the founding president of the Working-Class Studies Association. She has also been active in the growing field of scholarship of teaching and learning. In 2003, she was named Ohio Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Her most recent book is *Literary Learning: Teaching the English Major* (Indiana, 2011).

John is a visiting scholar at the Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor. He is professor emeritus at Youngstown State University where he served as the Coordinator of the Labor Studies Program in the Warren P. Williamson College of Business Administration. He has written widely on labor and social issues and is recognized as a national expert on labor unions and working-class issues. At YSU, John is one of just two professors ever to have won distinguished professor awards in all four categories: scholarship, teaching, university service, and community service. He has received the Working-Class Studies Association Lifetime Achievement Award and also served on the Board of Directors of the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative.

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# Rethinking Class and Contemporary Working Class Studies

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## Abstract

The field of working class studies is forming in the context of dramatic changes in the labor process and crises in capitalist economies. Workers have historically been slow to adjust to such changes with new organizing strategies. As we seek our bearings among the changes in order to develop the field in ways that enhance the organizational and intellectual capacity of working people, we should hold onto a key point of continuity: whatever the new labor processes or changes in the economy, the working class continues to exist in capitalist societies, within capitalist class dynamics, in which the organization of production underlies material, cultural, and political experience. Race and class continue to be mutually determined. While each is distinct, neither can be properly understood or challenged in isolation from the other.

## Keywords

Working class, labor organizing, union participation, capitalism, racism, labor process, labor history, populism, Bernie Sanders

Without doubt, the working class in the United States is undergoing dramatic structural changes. Since the 1990s these have involved, most importantly, the spread of contingent labor in its many forms and the growth of global supply chains. Each development has fragmented the labor force compared with earlier, more coherent organization within single employers, most of whom afforded long-term employment to a largely full-time workforce.

These changes have unfolded as the neo-liberal economic agenda, enforced by the U.S. and its G7 allies, has come to dominate the United States and much of the rest of the world. In the process, the working classes in most countries have undergone significant structural transformations. In the developing world of ‘emerging markets,’ these have reflected the dynamics Marx long ago identified as the process of primitive accumulation.

In the U.S. and most of the industrialized world, these changes have been accompanied by the weakening of unions, labor and socialist parties, and other forms of collective working class power. The result has been a long-term decline in working class living standards and a sharp increase in economic inequality, now so widely recognized around the world. All in all, the working class has suffered for decades as the balance of class forces has swung decisively in favor of capital.

Working people have been slow to develop forms and methods of organizing that meet the new conditions. But this is not surprising. There is a long history of profound changes in the capitalist labor process accompanied by lags in effective working class response to the new ways capital organizes labor. It takes time to understand what is happening as structures slowly change and old habits hold their grip. To understand the challenges of the current turmoil in labor relations, it is useful to review that historical pattern.

In the United States, after the take-off of the industrial revolution in the Civil War era, it took at least a quarter century before the American Federation of Labor (AFL) consolidated around a new model of worker organization: unions based in skilled trades. Earlier attempts such as the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor failed as one or another form of attempted class-wide response to industrialization. Samuel Gompers and other AFL founders were finally able to structure a lasting organized labor response. They chartered craft-specific unions to defend the authority and livelihoods of artisan labor which had traditionally been exercised by independent craftsmen. The new unions protected them as they were being drawn into wage-labor employment.

However, this form of organization, appropriate as it was to the dominant capitalist labor process at the time, consolidated a form of labor organization that lent itself to exclusion and narrow focus. Even though Gompers was a socialist, the inherent logic of AFL trade union organization encouraged racism, male chauvinism, and nativism – all elements of workers’ attempts to bolster their bargaining power by limiting their numbers; trends that Gompers and other AFL leaders did nothing to challenge but much to promote.

These characteristics of AFL unions made it impossible for them to respond to further changes in the U.S. labor process that capitalism imposed on workers as mass production got underway in the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The workers drawn into these new mass-production processes were largely immigrant and often unskilled, or semi-skilled at best. Once again, working people were delayed in fashioning an organizing model that could defend workers within a new set of work relations.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), founded in 1905, was the most important early attempt to break through the narrowness of the AFL. Its leaders championed ‘one big union’ for the entire working class - men and women, skilled and unskilled, of all races and nationalities. But this class-based approach to labor organizing couldn’t survive government suppression after World War I. During the 1920s, in addition to the virtual destruction of the IWW, the percent of workers in AFL unions fell by nearly a third (Putnam: 2001, 81) as employers rescinded a degree of union acceptance (and desire for ‘labor peace’) prevalent during the War and resorted to their traditional hostility to all unions. Workers still had no government protection for union activity.

It wasn’t until the 1930s that workers finally managed to consolidate a new form of labor organizing appropriate to the labor process of mass production that had begun forty years before. The industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), prefigured by industry-wide union organizing among immigrants in garment

shops and textile mills, finally achieved an approach to the new forms of work that could accomplish for industrial workers what the AFL unions could not. But that occurred a full twenty years after Henry Ford's introduction of the assembly line in 1915.

Compared with the mid-1900s, current global supply chains and contingent labor have again changed the structure, culture, and experiences of the working class profoundly,<sup>3</sup> and the historic lag in workers' effective response to changes in the labor process is again with us. For at least twenty years, workers and the labor movement have been trying, so far with limited success, to invent new strategies appropriate to the consequences of global supply chains and contingent employment. Existing unions have experimented with union-community coalitions to address worker concerns outside the workplace. Worker Centers and labor organizations not engaged in collective bargaining have joined unions in central labor councils and at higher levels of the AFL-CIO. Meanwhile, despite these forays, the now-traditional forms of union organization are battered and atrophied, shrunken in size, diminished in respect from their members as well as in political capacity. We live in the resulting world of capitalism triumphant, and the recently ascendant right-wing populism that it has engendered, especially in the United States and Europe.

Capitalism takes many forms across countries at a given time, and in any particular country over time. In their economic institutions, political structures, and technical capacities, the United States, Austria, Brazil, South Korea, and India are quite different from one another, yet they are all capitalist countries. The United States today is radically different, in a host of economic, political, technological, and cultural ways from what it was in 1880. Yet in both eras the U.S. has had a capitalist economy. Throughout its history, capitalism has produced crises that have profoundly transformed countries' economies and political systems, yet these crises have not ended capitalism (Heilbroner: 1985).

The field of working class studies has arisen in such an environment of crisis: it is the context in which the Working Class Studies Association was formed in 2004. We are in an extended period of economic, political, and social instability in which old economic and political norms, born in the New Deal response to the Depression and labor's ascendancy in the immediate post-WWII period, are unraveling into an uncertain future. Instability generates fear and confusion. The crisis of an old order usually leads to a crisis in understanding, to intellectual confusion. But while trying to sort through the forces at play in a new phase, we should be careful not to deny the continuing relevance of old understandings.

As working class studies unfolds in coming years, we will be struggling to understand the new arrangements of labor and capital. Yet as we do this it will be critical to hold onto the basic understanding, born of the entire history of the industrial revolution

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Janice Fine, *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream* (Ithaca: Cornell University ILR Press, 2006) ; Eric Hatton, *The Temp Economy: From Kelly Girls to Permatemps in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Harry Katz, et al., *Labor Relations in a Globalizing World* (Ithaca: Cornell University ILR Press, 2015); Angela Hale and Jane Willis, *Threads of Labour: Garment Industry Supply Chains from the Workers' Perspective* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

and capitalist development, that, whatever changes in the experience of working people, they still constitute the working class in an economic order that is still capitalism. Whatever form the labor process takes, in whatever geographic reach, governed by whatever political arrangements, we will still be experiencing and witnessing the working class in relation to, and in conflict with, the capitalist class. Class will continue to be a question of power, a relationship that emerges in the dynamic conflict of labor and capital (Zweig 2012).

As it changes shape and composition in a dynamically changing labor process, the working class is not disappearing. It is not becoming a thing of the past. Labor precarity and global supply chains do not represent fundamentally new class relations. For working class studies, a central task is to identify, describe, and analyze these new elements in the labor process while deepening our understanding of the underlying continuity of capitalist class dynamics.

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The field of working class studies encompasses two broad areas of investigation: the organization and deployment of economic power in the labor process and in the military and political arenas; and the creation and operation of culture and identity. Our field addresses each area in its contemporary as well as historical forms of development, and within specific countries as well as internationally. Working class studies is such an extraordinarily rich field because class dynamics permeate all aspects of society.

These two broad areas of society, economic power and culture, are intimately linked. Each operates in its own realm, but also in connection with and conditioning the other. As we develop the field in one particular aspect or another, it will be important to at least be aware of the broader contexts of power and culture in which our particular subject operates.

In areas of cultural studies, for example, I think our basic question is: How does culture, in its myriad forms, reflect and reproduce, and how does it challenge, class dynamics in the economic sphere? In its reciprocal form the question becomes: How do the dominant forms of economic relations shape the means and content of cultural expression? These questions suggest a materialist approach in which the pluralism of identities and interests people express is grounded in the complex dynamics of economic production and social reproduction. Barbara Jensen has taken this approach as she locates differences in working class and middle class cultures in the material experiences of working class people, as distinct from those of the professional middle class (Jensen: 2012). Sociologist G. William Domhoff similarly grounds the culture and identity of the ruling class in the material circumstances and social roles of that class of people (Domhoff: 2013).

The interactions among culture, identity, and class are perhaps nowhere more complicated or more socially consequential than in the area of race, especially in the United States. We know that the experience of the U.S. working class is deeply divided by race; what white workers experience, as workers, is profoundly different from what black workers experience, as workers. Yet black and white workers alike experience class subordination to capital. There are common cross-racial experiences

that tend to unite the class at the same time as there are uniquely racial experiences that tend to divide it.

Similarly, there is no uniform experience of race. For black as well as white (and for Asians and Native Americans, and within ethnic communities, genders, and populations of different sexual orientations), experiences are common in certain regards, but distinct in others associated with class. The histories of black freedom struggles and battles for women's rights must take into account the different and sometimes contradictory roles in these movements of participants from different class positions within the respective communities.

Central to the agenda of working class studies must be the analysis of these complex entanglements of class with race, gender, and other identities and cultural groups. To guide these investigations, I suggest a couple of points of departure and frames of thought.

First, the field of working class studies should develop its intellectual content broadly, in the context of social movements of working people. Just as black studies emerged in the era of intense civil rights campaigns, and modern women's studies emerged in the context of Second Wave feminist campaigns, so we who are developing working class studies should associate ourselves with the challenges working people face. Overall, our intellectual work should be grounded in the lived experience of working people, now, in history, in the United States and across the globe. But that experience is dynamically changing and consistently in conflict with capital. In this context, recalling Bob Dylan's song 'You Gotta Serve Somebody' and Florence Reece's labor anthem 'Which Side Are You On?', working class studies should develop in ways that advance the organizational and intellectual capacity of the working class.

This, then, has immediate implications for our definition of class and our approach to race and other aspects of working class identity and culture. I focus here on issues of race because racism is such a powerful and continuing destructive force in American life, but parallel observations are in order for questions of gender, ethnicities, and so forth.

The definition of class within sociology, economics, cultural studies, and other fields engaged in working class studies begins with categories as diverse as education, prestige, income, wealth, property ownership, lifestyle, values, culture, and power. Each has its legitimacy and many are correlated. One way to choose among them is to consider implications of the choice for its ability to support interesting or important further study. In this regard, only a definition of class based on power relationships grounded in economic structures can point working people and their social allies in the direction required to challenge the basic conditions of their lives. If we are to develop our studies in ways that enhance the intellectual and organizational capacity of working people, we need to start with the economic structure and dynamics of capitalism and, as Jensen, Domhoff, and others do, ground political, cultural, and other dimensions of class experience ultimately in those dynamics.

This approach also opens the door to observing and understanding connections among class, race, and gender. Race and gender are widely accepted as matters of power in an intellectual framework that emerged from close investigation of the lived

experience of black people and women in their oppression and their resistance. Basing our fundamental understanding of class in terms of power allows us to investigate directly the interactions among class, race, and gender through this common factor.

Grounding class in structures of economic power is the key to organizing the political processes required to overcome racial divisions that have bedeviled American political and social life for 400 years. Racial slavery was introduced to the Colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a means to divide the population of indentured laborers, the European from the African, who had shown signs of militant united action in opposition to the ruling British authorities (Allen: 2012). The agenda of working class studies needs to include careful investigations of the legacy of this division as it has continued, to the present, to poison working class political, cultural, and trade union activities. In the U.S., class and race have been and continue to be mutually determined. Each, while distinct from the other, cannot be understood or challenged in isolation from the other.

Addressing racism by stressing cultural and ethnic ‘diversity’ is inadequate at best, counterproductive at worst. Racism is not simply a matter of personal preferences or prejudices that can be overcome by moral persuasion. If one champions respect for difference outside the historical context of race and white supremacy in their material economic role, championing difference can too easily reinforce racial divisions and open the door to the white nationalism we have seen come into the U.S. political mainstream in Donald Trump’s election. If we have black history month, why not white history month? The only answer lies in the recognition that black and white are not “differences” but categories of class oppression that have been central to capitalist economic domination over labor for centuries. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka made exactly this point when addressing the international convention of the United Steelworkers in 2008, challenging racism in his call for workers to vote for Barack Obama.<sup>4</sup> Racial and cultural identities in the U.S. are embedded in the historical power dynamics of labor and capital and need to be analyzed as such.

Bringing class questions to the fore should never be a recipe for ignoring racial, gender, and ethnic claims for justice and equality. Contextualizing these identities, cultures, and historical experiences in class dynamics deepens our understanding of them. It leads us to acknowledge and confront these oppressive structures and attitudes in ways that suggest the united force required to challenge them, and the system they support, as they operate today. ‘White’ is not a guilt trip. It is an historical construct that has to be understood by white people for the role it has played, in the course of which anti-racist politics will come more easily and naturally to white people.

This is different from traditional class-based left politics that have sought to submerge race issues completely into class issues. Bernie Sanders, particularly in the first months of his campaign for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 2015, tended in this direction. He stressed his challenge to the ‘billionaire class’ on behalf

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Trumka, address to the United Steelworkers, July 1, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QIGJTHdH50>, accessed December 4, 2016

of working people – *all* working people, evidently thinking that that was enough to explain that black people would benefit from his policies, as would whites and all working people. But in a society with deeply engrained structural racism, a rising tide does not lift all boats.

Realizing this, many of his supporters in the labor movement kept stressing to the campaign that Bernie needed to address structural racism as such, in its current manifestations in voter suppression, police violence, and mass incarceration. It took many months, and Black Lives Matter movement confrontations with him, before Bernie began to articulate a message of racial justice distinct from but in the context of the class politics he put forth.

Yet even towards the end of the 2016 primary season, Bernie neglected race while emphasizing class in relation to the basic question of democracy. He correctly condemned the threat to democracy coming from the billionaire class, their money freely and secretly flowing after the Citizens United decision.<sup>5</sup> But he did not pair this with a challenge to the more profound threat to democracy coming from voter suppression laws that followed the Supreme Court's 2013 decision that crippled the federal voting rights act (Liptak: 2013). Sanders' relative lack of connection with the African-American community was instrumental in his loss to Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary race. The suppression of the black vote was arguably more important than dark political money in bringing to power a unified Republican government implacably hostile to the entire working class, and to women and people of color.

Donald Trump won on a wave of so-called right-wing 'populism'. But right-wing 'populism' of the contemporary variety is not properly populism in the traditional sense (Lilla: 2010). Historical populism of the late 1800s, the Progressive Era, and the New Deal period were all movements that called for government intervention in defense of the livelihood of workers, farmers, and small business owners by limiting the power of big business in the form of railroads, banks, and manufacturing trusts. These were genuine popular movements that resulted in meaningful limits on the power of capital through the creation of regulatory bodies like the Food and Drug Administration, Securities and Exchange Commission, and National Labor Relations Board. Donald Trump's 'populist' movement is the opposite: a nativist mobilization manipulated by capital to undermine government defenses of working people in such areas as public education, housing, and health care; his 'populism' also promises to put the federal government on the side of big business through less regulation, lower taxes, and weakened labor rights.

In a political environment lacking class understanding, decades of identity politics finally brought forth white identity politics as a major force, echoing the outright racist politics of the Jim Crow era, and slavery times before that. The traditional cross-class alliance that constitutes whiteness has again hijacked populist sentiment, just as populist movements in the past have foundered on racial division. Trump's so-called 'populism' again jettisoned the needs and interests of women and people of color. It has brought to power the most reactionary and dangerous set of plutocrats to

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<sup>5</sup> For details on the Citizens United case see, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/08-205.ZX.html>, accessed December 4, 2016

run the United States in at least a century, if not in its history. While the majority of white people who voted for Trump were not out-and-out militant white supremacists, they were willing to overlook the racism, misogyny, and nativism that characterized his campaign. That willingness to overlook, that silence in the presence of reactionary forces, is what working class studies must educate against.

We cannot now know how the new constellation of forces brought to power by Trump's victory and his administration will affect the labor process, although it is likely that labor precarity and global supply chains will persist. But it is clear that working people will suffer great harm as capital runs rampant. It is certain that public as well as private sector unions will be subject to more intense attacks and further weakening, before working people can create the next forms of organization appropriate to the projection of working class power. At some point, perhaps sooner, perhaps later, a vibrant working class movement will again challenge the powers that control the country. In this context, if we are to advance the organizational and intellectual capacity of working people, it will be essential to ground working class studies in the clear recognition that it is capitalism we are dealing with. And as we make sure that working class studies develops in ways that explain and help to reverse the divisions in the working class that capital has fomented, we need to contextualize racism and white supremacy in class dynamics. This won't be easy for anybody.

### **Author Bio**

Michael Zweig is professor *emeritus* of economics, and former director of the Center for Study of Working Class Life at the State University of New York, Stony Brook. Recent publications include, *What's Class Got to Do with It? American Society in the Twenty-first Century* (ed.) (Cornell University Press, 2004) and *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cornell University Press, 2012). He has been active in United University Professions (American Federation of Teachers Local 2190), and has served as an elected member of the union's state executive board.

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# Nostalgia for the 30-Year ‘Century of the Common Man’

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## Abstract

Jack Metzgar grew up in a steelworking family during the best 30 years in U.S. history for common people, what the French call the Glorious 30 (*trente glorieuses*) from 1945 to 1975. It was a time of extraordinary economic prosperity that was widely shared. Average real incomes rose faster than ever before or since, with the bottom income quintiles advancing faster and stronger than the middle or top. This unprecedented shared prosperity did not lead to complacency and mindless consumerism, as was feared at the time, but rather to a golden age of collective action and a string of liberatory movements beginning with the black civil rights struggle and followed by the beginnings of the women’s and gay liberation movements, among many others. The following is an excerpt from an auto-ethnography Jack is writing about his experience of working-class and professional middle-class cultures from those times to today.

## Keywords

Working class, nostalgia, steel workers

‘The lost U.S. paradise is associated with the country’s beginnings: there is nostalgia for the era of the Boston Tea Party, not for Trente Glorieuses and a heyday of state intervention to curb the excesses of capitalism’.

Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, p. 350

‘The future ain’t what it used to be’.

Yogi Berra<sup>6</sup>

In 1982 I turned 39 and was making \$15,000 a year, having recently given up a somewhat higher-paying administrative job to take my first full-time teaching position. My brother-in-law Albert Mikula had just been laid off as a machinist at U.S. Steel in Johnstown, where he had been making \$26,000. (In today’s money that would be the difference between \$37,000 and \$65,000.)

I remember these amounts because at a meeting of progressive academics in Chicago, I made reference to the prospects of Albert and his family if the Steelworkers union accepted the kind of wage concessions the steel companies were asking for in the Fall of 1982. I was taken aback when Joe Persky, an economist who was skeptical that

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<sup>6</sup> Berra was an American professional baseball player.

our anti-concessions stance was correct given the potential danger of mills closing, made a crack that Albert ‘probably makes more than you do as a professor.’ I responded too concretely at first – revealing Albert’s wage and my salary, and pointing out that Albert and Judie’s sister, Peg, had six kids, while Judie and I had only one. I then went off in self-righteous Lefty mode about Albert’s and other steelworkers’ working conditions-- the alternating heat and cold, the hard physical labor standing all day, the crazy swing shifts, the tight supervision. By comparison, my job hardly seemed like real work at all, and then I got the summers off. It was only fair that Albert should be paid more and be able to retire earlier than people like me and Joe.

Joe responded that fairness had nothing to do with it, arguing that steelworkers made more than we did because they were productive labor, whereas we were living off the economic surplus they produced – plus they had a union and we didn’t. Joe’s point was not that academics should necessarily make more than steelworkers, but that their incomes were large enough to allow steelworkers to take a financial haircut if it meant saving jobs and entire mills. In retrospect, Joe was probably more right than I was, but my view of fairness was popular then among our small group of academics – and was not outrageously out of whack with general professional middle-class opinion at the time. Today, of course, it would seem outrageous in middle-class settings for a factory worker to be paid more than a professor, as higher education is now a key measure of every kind of worth, including financial.

Concrete moments like this stick in memory for a reason. One of the reasons this one stuck, I think, is that it occurred at a turning point in both my and Albert’s life, and part of the remembrance is about what we did not know then, but do know now. I didn’t know that I was at the beginning of the best decade of my life, followed by some other pretty good ones. Or that Albert was at the beginning of his worst decade followed by some more bad ones. I also didn’t know the Glorious 30 had ended seven years earlier – or indeed, that it had been glorious.

## **Nostalgia**

My nostalgia for the Glorious 30 and the brief glimpse of a ‘century of the common man’ it provided is not based on how great those three decades felt at the time nor even on how much was accomplished during those 30 years (which was a lot). Unlike my parents’ generation, who often reminded us youngsters of how good things were in comparison to the preceding years of Depression and War, my appreciation for 1945-75 is founded on what has happened since – an initially dramatic but then steady erosion of working-class living standards and working conditions that by now has seeped into the mainstream of the professional middle class. What’s more, working-class culture is not as strong and proud, nor as self-assured, as it once was, and middle-class culture is more crabby and tense, more self-centered and less willing to acknowledge and explore more than its ‘one right way.’

‘Nostalgia’ is a word that often has no real meaning, but just a strongly negative connotation. Like ‘liberal,’ ‘petty-bourgeois’ or ‘mediocre,’ it simply evokes something you don’t want to be, and is often used as an efficient way to dismiss someone else’s point of view without having to explain why. Insofar as it has meaning, the negative aspect of nostalgia is appropriately defined as a sentimental

yearning for an irretrievable past, and this is thought to be backward-looking in a way that is unproductive for moving forward. I admit to some yearning for key elements of this past, but I don't think any of those elements are irretrievable, and I argue that my yearning is rational, not sentimental – or, at least, not only sentimental.

I have not directly experienced what Geoff Bright (2016) calls the 'social haunting' of those who lost their livelihoods and lived through the deterioration or complete disappearance of their communities and ways of life. Sometimes nostalgia is not a self-indulgent, gauzy remembrance of good old days, but a powerful, often overpowering process of grieving for what has been palpably lost. I am a witness to that grieving, not a participant in it. As such I have witnessed stages of grief that often end up with what I'd call a restorative nostalgia – a spontaneous sorting out of what could be and what cannot be retrieved, often expressed at the end of a reverie as 'at least we ought to be able to . . .'

### **Golden Age**

This paper is the beginning of that kind of sorting out.<sup>7</sup> It is a precursor to an interpretive case that the thirty years after World War II were a Golden Age not only for the American working class, but for wage labor as a whole. The main evidence, as has been thoroughly documented by others, is economic. But there was a lot of gold in the cultural transformations that occurred during that time. In addition to the string of liberatory movements, there was an elaboration of ancient yearnings in working-class life for a stable and autonomous space with more free time and money for what you will. There was also an emerging cultural hegemony of middle-class professionalism that was expansively exploratory for a time. Two strong and vital class cultures flowered, with a complicated commerce between them, allowing both independent elaboration and a wonderful (if sometimes painful) mix of conflict and cooperation. The two cultures had deeper historical and personal roots than anybody at the time suspected, as we all made an effort to cast off various pasts. These cultures have endured for longer, and more strongly, than the economic transformations. But the loss of a growing economic base – the jettisoning of working-class prospects and possibilities as wages and conditions have been systematically attacked and successfully eroded over the past 40 years – has weakened middle-class professionalism too, economically a little (so far), culturally quite a lot, I think.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, when both Albert and I retired, I was making about \$67,000 and he was still somewhere around \$25,000 – a spread in 2016 dollars between \$81,000 and about \$31,000, and a complete and utter reversal of where we had been in mid-life. Both the U.S. Steel and Bethlehem Steel mills in Johnstown were long gone, though pieces of them were still in operation by various smaller companies. Albert went back to work, after three years of unemployment, at one of these pieces – back to a severely sped-up job at a much-reduced wage and with meager benefits (Metzgar: 2000). His younger son got work at one of the pieces that had been Bethlehem, and his older son works at a furniture store, both making less than the median wage for all full-time U.S. workers now. Three of his four daughters have worked sporadically at Walmart, usually for much less than the median, and the other has had steady work as an administrator at a credit union with what all describe

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<sup>7</sup> This paper is part of an early chapter in a longer work.

as ‘decent wages and benefits’ – though what counts as ‘decent’ is not what it was when she was born in the late 1960s. Albert and Peg subsist on Social Security and a collection of very small pensions – the largest one from his 18 years at U.S. Steel before it closed, a tiny one from his 20 sporadic years at U.S. Steel’s successor companies, and another bit from the National Guard for his decades as a weekend warrior operating several generations of tanks.

Albert has been through his stages of grief, and I have spent some incidental bar time with him as he expressed and recounted some of it. Shortly after he retired, he told me he was finally at peace because ‘there’s nothing left they can take away.’ The ‘they’ who had taken so much away from him was ill-defined and impersonal, but it clearly was not intended to include me. I had a vague but powerful sense, however, that it should.

We were once roughly equal. He had a higher income and a more plentiful standard of living, and I had work that didn’t wear me down day-by-day as I got older. I had greater prestige ‘as the world goes,’ but in our extended working-class family he had a lot too as a decidedly better hunter of game and fixer of physical objects. Likewise, he was thought to have more common sense than me as even though my various credentials were respected (even bragged on), my actual ‘book-learning’ was generally seen as of doubtful relevance. Now I have everything – more income and more wealth, and now a more secure and fulsome retirement that includes expensive vacations (from retirement!). Even my relative prestige is enhanced, certainly as the world goes, but also within our working-class culture because more than three decades of deterioration in the material conditions of their lives and in the prospects for their children have sowed doubt about their ways of doing things and living a life.

I only occasionally feel guilty about this, and I have little inclination to give up much of what I now have. But I do have a profound sense of regret and loss, and of intellectual embarrassment at not having appreciated what our society had when we had it. I really can’t say it was ‘a better world’ then, as a great deal was worse, much worse, than now. But our trajectory, the direction we were going during those 30 years was better, way better, than the direction we are going now and have been going for the past 30 and more. It’s not just the increasing standard of living and expansion of free time for what you will among the working classes that I’m nostalgic for, but for the way shared prosperity from the bottom up tends to enhance both aspiration and generosity across the board (Friedman: 2005).

I have my own class interests to protect, and a good part of what I’m nostalgic for is a time when middle-class professionalism had not only its characteristic status-anxiety and competitive success ethic, but also a countervailing willingness and drive to conscientiously explore what a good life might be in the absence of scarcity. Today there’s no time for that as nearly all our conscientiousness is forced into mobilizing our social and cultural capital so we can pass on our class advantage to our children and, in my case, grandchildren for fear they might fall into that swirling downward economic spiral that is working-class life today. But with its increasing isolation from and active avoidance of working-class life and culture, it’s harder and harder for middle-class generations to see the attractions and value of working-class ways, let alone learn from and borrow some of those ways. It was not always so, and that too

is a reason to be nostalgic for 30 years that were not-so-bad in themselves and actually pretty glorious compared to the directions we're heading now.

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# Paradise Lost? Patterns and Precarity in Working-Class Academic Narratives

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## Abstract

Through an analysis of eight collections of autoethnographic essays written by working-class academics and published over the span of thirty-two years, I identify stable themes and emergent patterns in lived experiences. Some broad and stable themes include a sense of alienation, lack of cultural capital, encountering stereotypes and microaggressions, experiencing survivor guilt and the impostor syndrome, and struggling to pass in a middle-class culture that values ego and networking. Two new and troubling patterns are crippling amounts of student debt and the increased exploitation of adjunct labor. I emphasize the importance of considering social class background as a form of diversity in academia and urge continued research on the experiences of working-class academics.

## Keywords

Working-class academic, cultural capital, class identity, precarity

I was curled up in my second-hand reading chair, a faded pea green and suede monstrosity I had saved up money to purchase during my second year of graduate school, and the tears flowed down my face. I was reading *Limbo* by Alfred Lubrano (2004), in which he shares the stories of professionals who had been upwardly mobile. I saw myself reflected in the stories and for the first time I finally began to understand why I had felt so out of place and conflicted about my own upward mobility through higher education. The book even gave me a new name for myself, a community of others who had similar experiences – I was a ‘straddler’ (Lubrano 2004, p. 2). I don’t even remember how or when I found this book, but I do remember the night I sat in my chair immobile and crying until I reached the last page. Those stories helped me put a name to my pain and made me realize that, following C. Wright Mills’ (1959) sociological imagination, what seemed to be individual troubles were indeed social issues, that the alienation and grief I felt as I struggled to join a new class and culture were common experiences. My experiences echoed those of Renny Christopher (2008, p. 34), who writes of her time in graduate school:

‘At first I felt utterly, completely lost. Eventually I learned to name that sense of being lost as being a working-class academic. Forming, defining, and claiming that identity took a lot of work and a lot of pain. I count it as the true subject matter and methodology I learned in graduate school, more than the disciplinary knowledge I was supposed to be learning.’

This discovery of self in the writing and work of other working-class academics is a theme that emerged from the writing of working-class academics.

Since that night I have found and read many more collections by working-class academics. I have contributed to the most recent collections by telling my own stories. I have worked with first-generation and working-class students to share their own experiences and to find community on campuses where they are too often invisible minorities. I have watched others experience the reflection of themselves in stories and the relief at seeing that they are not alone in this, the same relief I found when reading *Limbo* as a graduate student ten years ago.

The power of narrative and storytelling is real. Muzzatti and Samarco (2006, p. 3), in the introduction to their edited collection, identify autoethnography, or the use of personal narratives to explore social systems, as an ‘outsider’s methodology’ appropriate for interrogating the working-class academic’s outsider position. While some have criticized what they see as being a narcissistic and less than empirical method (Sparkes 2000), others have noted its usefulness as a form of visibility and resistance in opposition to the hegemonic middle-class academic experience (Bhabha 1990, p. 301; Holt 2003). Muzzatti & Samarco (2006, p. 3) also identify the usefulness of collections of autoethnographies for their ability to ‘allow patterns to emerge.’ In this article I draw upon the patterns revealed through the narratives in this and other collections in order to present a written portrait of the working-class academic experience.

I read eight collections of autoethnographic narratives of working-class academics, coding them for themes.<sup>8</sup> While these collections are not a representative sampling, they can provide us some insight into the lived experiences of the working-class academic. Similar to work on first-generation college students, it is possible that those who feel most affected by this particular identity or experience are more likely to identify as such (Stuber 2011). As Hurst (2010) writes, college students from the working-class employ different strategies to navigate the middle-class culture of college campuses. It is possible that professors employ similar logics and that those who seek to more fully assimilate may be missing from these narratives as they may be more likely to distance themselves from their origins. However, using survey data from the Canadian professoriate, Haney (2016) found that professors from working-class backgrounds differ in important ways from those from the middle-class. And, as the reader will see in this article, the same themes and experiences, although

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<sup>8</sup> Dews, C. L. B. & Law, C. L. (eds) 1995, *This fine place so far from home: Voices of academics from the working class*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA.; Hurst, A. L. & Nenga, S. K. (eds) 2016, *Working in class: Recognizing how social class shapes our academic work*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD.; Muzzatti, S. L. & Samarco, C. V. (eds) 2006, *Reflections from the wrong side of the tracks: Class, identity, and the working class experience in academe*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD.; Oldfield, K. & Johnson II, R. G. (eds) 2008, *Resilience: Queer professors from the working class*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.; Ryan, J. & Sackrey, C. 1984, *Strangers in paradise: Academics from the working class*, South End Press, Boston, MA.; Siegel, C. (ed.) 2014, *Rhizomes 27: Working-class academics: Theories, mythologies, realities*, viewed 20 July 2016, < <http://rhizomes.net/issue27/index.html>>; Tokarczyk, M. M. & Fay, E. A. (eds) 1993, *Working-class women in the academy: Laborers in the knowledge factory*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA.; Van Galen, J. A. & Dempsey, V. O. (eds) 2009, *Trajectories: The social and educational mobility of education scholars from poor and working class backgrounds*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

sometimes identified by different terms, emerge again and again through a set of collections that span decades. Here I present my findings from the collections – the themes and patterns that recur when working-class academics write about their own experiences.

In addition to identifying recurring and stable themes across the collections, I also wondered if particular themes had become more or less resonant over time. The earliest collection included here (and from which this article draws its title) is *Strangers in Paradise*, edited by Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey and published in 1984. The latest collection included is *Working in Class* edited by Allison Hurst and Sandi Nenga and published earlier this year, in 2016.<sup>9</sup> As I coded these autoethnographic essays, I noted the year in which they were originally published in order to examine the extent to which emergent patterns changed over time. Indeed, as I detail below, I found discussions of precarity and debt to be overwhelmingly more present in the collections published in the past decade than in the preceding volumes. I conclude this article with a discussion of how the lived experience of the typical working-class academic (the skill sets, the values, the struggles) intersect with the current sociopolitical climate of higher education to further degrade our possibilities for both opportunity and success within academia.

### **The Working-Class Academic**

In this section I present the themes that emerged from the coded autoethnographic essays to paint a portrait of the identity and experiences of the working-class academic.

*Alienation.* The working-class academic is first and foremost characterized by a sense of alienation. In every single autoethnographic account, alienation is either directly named or described in different terms. In addition to Lubrano's 'straddler,' working-class academics use a variety of terms to describe the cognitive dissonance of upward mobility. Working-class academics often describe themselves as 'outsiders,' part of a 'transition class...living on the margins of two cultural worlds but as members of neither' (Gardner 1993, p. 50). Christopher (2008, p. 42) describes being 'not either-or,' saying she moves 'back and forth.' LeCourt (2006, p. 83) shares, 'In the academic realm, I am both self *and* Other simultaneously. I reside in Homi Bhabha's 'third space' – the space of the hybrid, of ambivalence and possibility.' A number of academics invoked DuBois's (1903) 'double consciousness,' while others describe being 'nowhere at home' (Overall 1995, p. 209). Ryan and Sackrey (1984, p. 5) posit that the working-class academic 'internalizes the conflicts in the hierarchy of the class system.'

As I describe below, for a variety of reasons many academics feel less than at home in their destination class, yet struggle with maintaining ties to their class of origin as well. Todd (2009, p. 46) describes becoming 'an imposter in her home', an experience echoed by many working-class academics who return home from college or graduate school only to find that they can no longer bridge the cultural gap that

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<sup>9</sup> As this collection is not composed entirely of essays by working-class faculty, I coded only those chapters written by those who self-identified as such.

their education has created. Still others learn to navigate between the two cultures. As Parks (2009, p. 35) writes, ‘I do more code-switching than a cryptographer.’ In order to cope with the feelings of loneliness and isolation caused by this sense of limbo, a number of working-class academics seek comfort in alcohol and drug use with some developing problems of substance abuse (Jensen 2014).

*Cultural Capital.* While not always named as such, a majority of the essays describe the fundamental mismatch between middle- and working-class tastes and behaviors emblematic of a lack of the dominant (read: middle-class) form of cultural capital. Following the work of Bourdieu and Passeron, Lamont and Lareau (1988, p. 156) define cultural capital as ‘institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion.’ Many specific examples of the working-class academic’s lack of cultural capital, and the problems this lack creates, appear throughout these collections. Indeed, as Siegel (2014) shares, ‘my appearance, my taste in food, art, and lovers, my approach to life, my spending habits, my manners are all so wrong, apparently as to call for intervention.’ It is not only the lack of cultural capital, but the signals this lack emits of difference-- read by the middle-class as inferiority or lack of dubiously defined ‘fit’-- that lead to social, cultural, and professional exclusion.<sup>10</sup>

Examples also abound throughout these collections as to the specific consequences of this lack of cultural capital and knowledge, such as when Rothe (2006, p. 57) details her inability to be reimbursed for conference travel because she did not know to keep receipts. She was never told that this was a requirement – the assumption was simply made that she would possess this form of knowledge that those with professional parents are far more likely to have. This lack of cultural capital, as well as the faulty assumption on the part of her graduate school program, literally lost her money, as it does for many working-class academics, along with opportunities and jobs.

*Language and Communication.* Of the various forms of cultural capital, the most frequently mentioned in these collections is that of language and style of communication. The working-class scholars in this study communicate in a ‘restricted code,’ including more limited vocabulary size and usage, informal speech patterns, tendency to use anecdotes or stories to make points, passionate and emotional styles of communication, use of humor and profanity, and presence of accents marking one as working-class (Bernstein 1971). Each of these traits related to working-class education and upbringing may result in the speaker being taken less seriously or viewed as less authoritative on the subject matter. The regulation of emotion in particular is one of the most commonly discussed ways in which working-class scholars struggle to acclimate. As Presdee (2006, p. 36) explains, ‘It was all confusing. Now I had to learn to argue without anger, reason and not hit, lose without seeking retaliation.’ Garger (1995, p. 42) dubs this communication style mismatch the ‘Bronx Syndrome.’ The working-class academic must learn a new and different language and way of communicating while often being taught that their own natural style is inferior and not welcome or effective.

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<sup>10</sup> See Lynn Arner’s (2014) excellent description of the working-class academic’s difficulty with the academic hiring process.

*Dress and Comportment.* In her description of the difficulties faced by working-class women at the MLA interviews, Arner (2014) draws upon Bourdieu's concept of the 'bodily hexis' to discuss how class is coded, often unconsciously, through the body. From hairstyle, clothing fit and style, body size and shape, and how one carries oneself, even among working-class academics who seek to 'pass,' class is often physically signaled. When these signals differ from middle-class norms, they are often interpreted to mean that the person is a poor 'fit.' Some write about being openly teased by colleagues and students or assumed to be less intelligent on the basis of their attire. About a working-class academic who wrote an award-winning paper, a graduate school peer exclaimed, 'He may look like a country bumpkin, but he's actually very smart' (Blanton & Ewalt 2014). Rothe (2006, p. 55) describes the contradiction between the working-class value of, and pride in, thriftiness and the middle-class insult of being cheap. Specifically, she writes that a response of how little she paid for an item of clothing to a colleague's compliment of the item would be considered crude instead of the positive reinforcement she could expect from another working-class person. Soria (2016, p. 134) indicates the importance of clothing in passing as middle-class, describing how she covers her black metal t-shirts with cardigans.

*Stereotypes and Microaggressions.* Working-class academics often encounter hurtful stereotypes and microaggressions from colleagues and students and must decide whether to "out" themselves by engaging with the offending speaker. These microaggressions, which begin as early as grade school and continue through graduate school, occur when teachers and fellow students talk about the working-class and poor as the inferior and distant 'other' (Law 1995, p. 3). Haney's (2016, p. 150) survey study of the Canadian professoriate found that 40% of participants reported classist language. Importantly, working-class faculty were significantly more likely than their middle-class colleagues to have witnessed class-based microaggressions, which suggests that middle-class faculty are less aware of class-based inequalities in academia. In addition to these microaggressions, enduring stereotypes of the working-class paint its members as racist and homophobic (Siegel 2014).

*Questioning the Meritocracy.* While one might think that working-class academics would be the first to trumpet a belief in the meritocracy, analysis of the autoethnographies suggests the opposite. Working-class scholars are much more likely to identify themselves as the exceptions that prove the rule, the rule being class reproduction and rigidity. Many write about their own naïve beliefs in education as an equalizer until their experiences showed them otherwise; others were never believers to begin with. But none of these works espouse blind faith in the meritocracy and most, including those authors who have been successful on middle-class terms, acknowledge that the meritocracy is either broken or virtually non-existent. We were often successful in spite of, not always because of, our schooling experiences, which tended to cater overwhelmingly to the needs of middle-class students. We also know that one's educational level does not determine one's worth or value to society, despite its claim to do so.

Indeed, when it comes to the possibilities of upward mobility in the contemporary higher education climate marked by mounting debt burdens and rampant exploitation of adjunct faculty, it bears to question if the term working-class academic truly

remains a contradiction in terms. Ryan and Sackrey (1984), who write of the structural conditions and national policies that allowed for the wave of upward mobility through education from which their contributors benefitted, predicted the demise of that very short-lived period of educational expansion.

*Awareness of Exploitation.* A related theme that emerged from these collections was an awareness of and discomfort with exploitation. As Siegel (2014) states in her introduction to the *Rhizomes* volume, ‘We know that some have because others don’t, that the poor pay in suffering for what the more affluent enjoy.’ This realization leads to a mistrust of authority that can manifest in maintaining distance from, as well as an exaggerated sense of deference to, campus leadership. Along with this sense of uneasiness around those in powerful positions, working-class academics confess to feeling more at home with campus service staff, who remind us of our friends and family. Many working-class academics also describe a reluctance to delegate tasks to departmental support staff, feeling ill at ease with the possibility of authority that accompany our roles as faculty. This reluctance to exercise power extends to the classroom, where many working-class faculty are loathe to require their students to use honorifics such as ‘Doctor’ or ‘Professor’ (Muzzatti & Samarco 2006, p. 76). This cognitive dissonance is also present in the tenure-track or tenured working-class academics’ reckoning with the increased use of adjunct professors (Warnock 2014).

*Luck and Survivor Guilt.* It is this acknowledgment of exploitation that undergirds the survivor guilt common to the class straddler. The term ‘survivor guilt’ implies an escape from a near-death experience or assault. While colleagues from the middle-class complain about what they see as being low pay and overwork, working-class academics feel like they ‘won the lottery’ (Sackrey and Ryan 1984, p. 290). Coincident feelings of luck and guilt pepper working-class academics’ accounts of their upward mobility. Enjoying the benefits of being middle-class, like earning a living wage and working in safe and secure environs, can be difficult when one compares their own position with friends and family ‘left behind.’ Indeed, because the professional class is expected to be geographically mobile and working-class academics must often move far from friends and family to pursue their career, friends and family are literally left, a move that is anathema to working-class values of community and which only further enhances feelings of guilt. Part of the denial of social class differences espoused by the myth of meritocracy provides some working-class academics with a sense of guilt simply by referring to their families as ‘working-class’, a term and identity which the families themselves may not claim and which may be interpreted as further insult or betrayal (Annas 1993, p. 171).

*Education as ‘Escape.’* The myth of meritocracy often casts those who are upwardly mobile as the ‘hard-working’ and meritorious few that managed to steer clear of the trappings of poverty (Hurst & Warnock 2015). This language, while usually questioned in these narratives, does exist in the accounts of working-class academics. Many write of their love of school, books, and reading as being the ticket out and serving as a sort of distraction from crippling poverty or less than ideal home conditions. In many of these accounts, the families also endorse the notion of education as escape mechanism from lives of poverty, and many academics write of the sacrifices their families made so they could pursue an education. However, as described above, there is an ‘emotional cost’ to their quest for upward mobility through education that many fail to predict (Cannon 2006, p. 104).

For others education is an escape from poverty marked by familial abuse. Kadi (1993, p. 90) wanted to attend university because she ‘wanted out. Out of my home town, out of an abusive family, and, in my ignorance, out of the working class.’ For many working-class children, class consciousness comes early and brings with it an internalized classism and sense of shame, which many report as they move through their academic careers.

*The Impostor Syndrome.* Almost every working-class academic writes about the sense of inferiority she feels relative to her middle-class peers and the fear that she will be found out for a fraud and summarily terminated. This feeling of the ‘eternal game of catch-up’ (Appel 2014) manifests as nervousness or anxiety that may be off-putting to middle-class colleagues (Arner 2014). Working-class academics often overcompensate for these feelings of inferiority by working longer hours and overproducing. Others respond to these feelings of inferiority with silence and a paralyzing fear that they do not have anything valuable to contribute to the academic discourse.

This pressing need to demonstrate one’s worth and deservingness also reinforces frictions about the definition of hard work and the tendency for working-class academics to feel as though their work is somehow lacking compared to the ‘real’ work that their families did. About her desire to be back on her family’s farm baling hay rather than writing her dissertation, Lehrermeier (2008, p. 19) writes, ‘At least hay baling is real work. At least you sweat. At least you can see the reason behind it. It’s hard, but it has a point. What was the point of my dissertation, anyway?’

*Ego and Networking.* The middle-class values of self-promotion and competition run in stark contrast to those of humility and community espoused by the working-class (Lareau 2003). Drawing attention to oneself, and debate for the sake of debate, were frequently mentioned as confounding behaviors in the new middle-class world of academia. Behaviors that appear to the working-class academic to signal arrogance are viewed by the middle-class as markers of confidence and self-assuredness. Attempting to engage in these behaviors often leads to a greater sense of alienation and discomfort in the working-class academic. Failure to properly self-promote makes the act of networking incredibly difficult and even impossible for many from working-class origins. Because self-promotion and networking are necessary to professional middle-class success, the working-class academic is once again at a disadvantage.

*Passing.* Although the social trappings necessary to network successfully elude most working-class academics, many still write of attempting to ‘pass’ or fit in with the middle-class academic culture. Working-class academics do this through manipulating dress, behavior, language, and any of the other characteristics that may give them away as different.

*A Note on the Deficit Perspective.* It is important to state that, while many of the attributes and experiences of the working-class academic described above place us at a disadvantage within a world that favors middle-class norms and values, these should not be considered as deficits. Too often, as I have described, working-class academics believe themselves to be somehow inferior, but it is the system that perpetuates class inequalities that we should be questioning and not the working-class academic’s traits

and values. Rather than suggest that working-class academics are at fault for their position in academe, the goal of this article is to suggest the ways in which structural class inequalities obstruct success for and fail to recognize and reward the strengths of the working-class academic.

### **Paradise Lost?**

In reading these autoethnographic accounts I admit to being unsurprised as to how similar experiences of working-class academics in 1984 appear to be to those in 2016. Many of the same themes appeared across the 32 years within which these collections were published. The notable exception can be found in the drastically increased accounts of financial exploitation in higher education both through the rise of the reliance on student debt to pay for college and the increased utilization of adjunct professors.

*Student Debt.* Student loan debt is now the largest form of debt in the United States and has been since 2010 when it surpassed credit card debt (Kantrowitz 2010). Median student debt among college graduates now exceeds \$30,000 (Gallup & Purdue University 2015). The rise in student debt is concomitant with the decline in federal and state aid spending for higher education and the growth of tuition prices over the past few decades (Mettler 2014). These trends, along with the growth in merit aid and colleges' aggressive recruitment of wealthy students, have made upward mobility through education a less attainable goal for the contemporary working-class student (Warnock 2016). Among the more senior academics in these collections who began their careers in the 1990s or earlier, there are more mentions of being able to work their way through college or of family paying the bulk of tuition. As Kautzlarich (2006, p. 39), who began attending a community college in the 1980s, shares, 'My parents indicated that they would be able to cough up the \$13 per credit hour for my studies.'<sup>11</sup> Baker (2006, p. 205) credits her upward mobility to the 'macrolevel phenomena' such as the Basic Educational Opportunity Grants and other 'well-funded' financial aid programs available in the 1970s.

Reading through the most recent collections, and particularly the pieces written by more junior scholars who are still in graduate school or have only recently completed their degrees, the differences are striking. Student loan debt, while it did not go unmentioned in earlier volumes by senior scholars who tended to rely on a mixture of family support, work earnings, grants, and loans to finance their education, is described by more junior scholars as no less than crippling. Quintela (2016, p. 92) writes of the 'massive student loan debt with which [she is] burdened.' About the debt she accrued to complete her Ph.D. Appel (2014) fears 'that what was supposed to have served as a pathway *away* from the poverty of my childhood...could become the albatross around my neck ensuring that I would never escape that particular demon.' Arner (2014) describes the consequences of such debt and the stress and anxiety that often accompany it as being both a catalyst for taking a job quickly and prohibitive due to the desperation that potential employers may misread as incompetency.

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<sup>11</sup> It was also not uncommon in these narratives to find that working-class academics began their educational careers at community colleges due to concerns about cost.

In these more recent essays, debt is more than another way to pay the tuition bills – it has become another roadblock to mobility, one so large that some working-class academics question whether they will find financial stability or success in academia at all. As Todd (2009, p. 50) writes, ‘A future in academia may elude me.’

*The Exploitation of Adjunct Labor.* Working-class academics are significantly underrepresented among the American professoriate (Arner 2016, p. 50). Part of this underrepresentation stems from the strong relationship between social class background and educational attainment. Access to a college education has become less attainable for academically strong, low-income students than it was 40 years ago (Kahlenberg 2004) and low-income students remain drastically underrepresented at the most prestigious colleges and universities (Carnevale and Strohl 2010). When they do make it to graduate school, working-class graduate students encounter greater difficulties, both financial and cultural, than their middle-class peers (Grimes & Morris 1997; Warnock & Appel 2012).

Meanwhile, the availability of full-time tenure-track positions has declined by 50% over the past 40 years with tenured and tenure-track faculty making up a scant 29% of the academic workforce (American Association of University Professors 2016). Women and faculty of color are overrepresented in contingent positions (Bousquet 2008) and Soria (2016) suggests that this is true of faculty from working-class backgrounds as well. Adjuncts and contingent faculty often teach classes at multiple institutions, earning poverty-level wages for the equivalent of a full-time teaching load. The increased reliance on adjunct labor reinforces and accentuates class hierarchy in academia, treating adjuncts as ‘second class citizens’ thereby weakening faculty governance and reducing graduation rates (Bettinger and Long 2004, p. 2). Apart from being underpaid, adjunct professors suffer from the stress, anxiety, and depression that accompanies the lack of respect and uncertainty of the position (Reevy & Deason 2014). Adjunct professors are less likely to engage in scholarship, largely because they lack the time and resources to do so (AAUP 2016). Wilson (2006, p. 164) argues that through the increased reliance on invisible and devalued adjunct labor, ‘exploitation becomes normative’ on the college campus.

While some senior scholars in these collections recall working as adjunct professors prior to or while earning their Ph.D., increasingly this has become the new normal for working-class academics. Especially because working-class academics are less likely to graduate from prestigious programs, which are more likely to lead to tenure-track positions, coupled with the fact that we struggle to find our way in a culture that is largely foreign and at times even hostile, the outlook is less and less rosy for today’s working-class academic (Arner 2014).

As of 2016 working-class academics are competing for fewer tenure-track job openings, while struggling under a mountain of student loan debt, in addition to facing the same issues and difficulties first described back in 1984. The consequences, while certainly felt at the individual level, are institutional and societal as well. Heavy reliance on adjunct labor reduces student retention rates and is threatening to academic freedom (AAUP 2016). However, by not enfranchising working-class academics, who are underrepresented among tenured and tenure-track positions, academia is also silencing valuable and necessary voices in the classroom and in scholarship. Haney’s (2016) survey study along with the accounts of multiple

working-class academics indicate that they are more likely to seek out and mentor working-class students, a group that is particularly vulnerable to attrition. In addition, if working-class academics do not have the time and support to engage in scholarship, important and different viewpoints will inevitably be lacking in the production of knowledge. Even if working-class adjunct faculty do find the time to engage in scholarship, the lack of security in their positions compromises their academic freedom to write about potentially controversial topics such as social class hierarchies in the academy. Finally, the need to repay student loans may drive working-class academics who are unable to find living-wage work out of academia altogether.

### **Moving Forward**

Given the problematic and exploitative trends of the corporatized university, what steps can we take to ensure a more hospitable climate for the working-class academic? I conclude with policy and research directions for addressing these pressing issues.

*Class as Diversity.* For all of the reasons listed above, it is imperative that social class background be identified and prioritized as a diversity criterion for academic hires. Failing to diversify the professoriate on the basis of class background will continue to relegate valuable and underrepresented voices to insecure and underappreciated positions. Working-class academics have the potential to disrupt the class hierarchy within higher education, which may be why class has not been prioritized in conversations of increasing faculty diversity (Oldfield 2007). Our presence alone both reinforces and challenges the myth of meritocracy.

However, recruitment of working-class faculty could aid in university missions of student retention. Low-income and first-generation students are especially vulnerable to attrition (Howard & Levine 2004) and working-class academics are dedicated to serving this student population (Haney 2016; Stricker 2011). Working-class faculty, who are especially sensitive and attuned to class hierarchies on campus, could also be valuable resources for fighting the continued and future exploitation of faculty labor. Finally, it is important to note that, similar to members from other underrepresented groups, working-class faculty have overcome myriad challenges and hurdles to persist in academia, making us valuable role models and mentors. Prioritizing social class background as a form of diversity in hiring would recognize the unique strengths the working-class academic has to offer.

*The Continuing Importance of Narrative.* Because social class remains largely invisible in the academic realm, drawing awareness to the experiences of working-class academics and students remains critical to improving conditions for these groups. Storytelling can help to reduce the sense of alienation and fears of inferiority which plague many from the working-class, whether faculty or students. Working-class ‘others’ in academe must learn that we are not alone and that our voices are valuable. Student- and faculty-organized groups for first-generation and working-class students can help to raise awareness and to spur activism on campuses (Warnock & Hurst 2016). In addition, the First Generation Digital Storytelling project founded by Jane Van Galen, one of the editors of the collections analyzed for this

article, is a great example of the power and importance of narrative in disrupting class hierarchies in academia.<sup>12</sup>

*Class and Intersectionality.* Too often the term ‘working-class’ exclusively conjures images of older, white men. Indeed, the first autoethnographic collection analyzed for this article was composed almost entirely of the stories of white men. While further volumes presented a more diverse set of voices and some, such as Tokarczyk and Fay’s (1993) volume on working-class women and Oldfield and Johnson’s (2008) collection of narratives from queer professors of the working-class, focused exclusively on the intersections of class with an additional social identity, there is a continued need for greater diversity within the field of working-class studies. While many narratives do discuss the intersection of race, ethnicity, and class, a volume dedicated to this form of intersectionality would be a welcome addition to the canon of working-class autoethnographies and would provide a more accurate and nuanced picture of the American ‘working-class,’ a group in which white men are the minority (Zweig 2011).

*Future Research Directions.* While autoethnography remains an important and powerful tool for interrogating the experiences of working-class academics, there is a need for quantitative and longitudinal data on our educational and career trajectories. While these narratives taken together paint a powerful picture of the working-class academic, we remain less certain about the extent to which working-class academics persist in academia, the percentage who find work on the tenure-track, and the extent to which student loan debt affects professional outcomes, to name a few. The invisibility of class background as an important or relevant social marker is partly to blame for this omission, often requiring academics who wish to study these questions to collect their own data sets rather than relying on nationally representative data (Grimes & Morris 1997; Haney 2016; Warnock and Appel 2012). To better understand the ways in which class background affects academic trajectories, we must have access to better data. And access to better data requires that nationally representative surveys of students and the professoriate include questions about class background.

This brings me back to my original point. Class matters. Class is not a switch that is flipped once you graduate college or complete a graduate degree. Class, while malleable, imparts lasting and tangible effects on the upwardly mobile, those ‘crossovers’ and ‘straddlers’ who seek to enter a world that offers greater financial security. What I fear is that this already difficult journey has become next to impossible within the new academic climate of class exploitation. While academia was never friendly to the working-class, conditions are now downright hostile. In order to earn a degree working-class students mortgage their futures by taking on debt and those who seek to enter the storied world of academia are less and less likely to find secure and financially stable work. What I fear is that for many would-be working-class academics, education represents no longer a dubious pathway to upward mobility but a likely pathway to downward mobility and a lifetime of repaying the debt accrued only to subsist on poverty-level wages as an adjunct professor. I fear that the paradise we strangers once sought has been lost and that instead of labeling ourselves as academics *from* the working-class, we will continue

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<sup>12</sup> <https://firstinourfamilies.org/about/>

to face class exploitation within the academic realm as academics *of* the working-class. If our crucial voices remain absent or disempowered, new generations of working-class youth will lose access to the powerful and revelatory experience of seeing themselves and their struggles reflected on the academic page.

### Author Bio

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# Rejecting Respectability: On Being Unapologetically Working Class

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## Abstract

Many working-class people have aspired to respectability – maintaining cleanliness in the home, presenting an image of ‘niceness’ through neat modes of dress, or speaking ‘proper’. This respectability is intended to show those in power that working-class people are worthy of their attention and assistance. But what happens when working-class people refuse to be respectable? When they choose to use strong language and won’t speak in soft tones? What happens when working-class people do not defer to their ‘betters’ and instead articulate their anger loudly and assertively? Critiques of class systems and calls for social justice are arguably more threatening when presented in a loud and direct manner. This article considers how the politics of respectability are used against working-class activists.

## Keywords

Working class, respectability, representation

The concept of ‘respectability’ when applied to working-class people is limiting and controlling. According to British sociologist Beverley Skeggs (1997, 1), respectability is not only a significant marker of class due to its influence on how people speak, act and who they associate with, but also because it has been used to create and maintain class systems (Skeggs: 1997, 2). Respectability has been used to classify and divide the working class into those who *are* and those who are *not* deserving of assistance and sympathy – classification that has its roots in Enlightenment desires to categorise and order people and things (in order to control them) (Skeggs:1997, 4). According to Skeggs ‘respectability was a central mechanism through which the concept of class emerged’ (1997, 2) and the concept has been enduring. Working-class people (of all ethnicities) have been labelled as ‘dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary’ (Skeggs: 1997, 1) and therefore needing to be controlled to prevent them from challenging the authority of the ruling classes. The idea of respectability has been central in the attempts to keep working-class people in check.

What then does it mean to be respectable? Respectability involves being polite, speaking in turn, remaining calm and dressing appropriately. Respectability is something that many working-class people have aspired to – manifested in efforts to maintain cleanliness in the home, present an image of ‘niceness’ through neat modes of dress, to speak ‘proper’ and avoid coarse language. Respectability should not be confused with respect, which, according to bell hooks is about ‘being seen and treated like you matter’ (hooks: 2000, 20). Respectability is arguably intended to show those

in power that working-class people are worthy of their attention and assistance. Working-class people are expected to behave in a respectable way in order to be taken seriously by the dominant classes. But what happens when working-class people refuse to be respectable? When they choose to use strong language and are proud of their working-class accents? What happens when working-class people do not defer to their 'betters' and instead articulate their anger loudly and assertively? I'm suggesting that when working-class people (both ordinary citizens and public figures alike) refuse to act respectfully they can find themselves attacked in the mainstream media and described as obnoxious or 'mouthy' (loud and brash).<sup>13</sup> Their ideas can be dismissed and their approach labelled as aggressive. I'm suggesting it's possible that criticism of class systems and calls for social justice are more threatening when presented in a loud and direct manner. This seems to be particularly the case when the calls are being made by working-class women (as I will discuss later).

### **Autobiography as a research tool**

This article is partly autobiographical and also contains analysis of some media representations of working-class people in the UK and Australia in the context of respectability.<sup>14</sup> Autobiographical elements are important in the field of new working-class studies<sup>15</sup> because the discipline is centred on the lived experiences of class (Linkon and Russo: 2005, 11), and also because many scholars working in the area (such as myself) have working-class backgrounds. Working-class life for me is therefore not abstract, or based on the experiences of 'other' people but is lived, felt and continually influencing. Working-class autobiography has often been dismissed by academics due to a perception that it is overly nostalgic or because the stories of 'ordinary' people have not been valued (Strangleman: 2005, 138). Scholars within the field of working-class studies, such as Strangleman, have found autobiography to be of 'tremendous value' (2005:140) and important as a resource for study into working-class life and social class. McKenzie (2016) also points to the importance of narrative in working-class communities, and describes storytelling as a method of making sense of the world and of understanding position in a classed society (6). Storytelling has been used in the formation of identity, and for marginalised people is an important way of learning how to exist within a classed, gendered and racialised society (White: 2001, 1).

Despite my formal education and my current employment as an academic, I still identify as working class. No longer economically, but culturally. I am different from

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<sup>13</sup> An example can be seen in the conservative press on British comedian-turned-activist Russell Brand: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2859473/PIERS-MORGAN-TV-tantrum-shows-revolutionary-Russell-Brand-really-just-revolting-hypocrite.html>.

<sup>14</sup> My work tends to stretch across continents due to my British background, current residence in Australia, and the connections I have made with American working-class studies colleagues.

<sup>15</sup> New working-class studies emerged in the mid-1990s in the US initially. Scholars and writers in the field renewed an interest in the study of working-class experience and came together from a wide range of academic disciplines and activist backgrounds. New working-class studies follows on from the work of scholars such as E.P. Thompson (*The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963), Richard Hoggart (*The Uses of Literacy*, 1957), Raymond Williams (*The Long Revolution*, 1961), Tillie Olsen (*Silences*, 1965), Jonathan Cobb & Richard Sennett (*The Hidden Injuries of Class*, 1972) among others. I have not used these classic works in this paper but they form an important backdrop for any scholarly discussion of working-class experience.

my middle-class colleagues. My experiences have not been like theirs and I still do not possess their levels of cultural capital. I relate very strongly to working-class people, not just my family and old friends, but the working-class people I encounter every day. I am angered by the impact of austerity measures and the continuing lack of working-class representation in political and cultural spheres. I stand in solidarity with my working-class brothers and sisters around the world and acknowledge the ways in which class intersects with race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability and religion. Despite some cultural differences, working-class people world-wide are affected by class structures every day.

## **Representation**

Media representation is important because it is through representation that working-class culture is known to those on the outside. Hall argues that representation is one of the 'central practices which produce culture' (1997: 1) and helps to create the shared meanings that constitute a culture (Hall: 1997, 1). Hall states that cultural meanings 'organise and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects' (1997:3), which is why representation must be analysed and challenged. People outside of the working class are likely to be those with the power to make policy that directly impacts on working-class people. If working-class people are represented negatively and in ways that suggest a lack of 'moral value' (Skeggs: 2005, 48), this not only impacts whether policy makers consider working-class people to be worthy of aid, but such 'symbolic violence' (Skeggs: 1997, 11) can also lead working-class people to internalise negative representations and attempt to distance themselves from the types of people portrayed as negative. This creates divisions between working-class people who might otherwise be aligned. But this does not mean that working-class people are passive and generally accepting of such representations. Working-class people resist negative depictions in what Skeggs refers to as a 'site of class struggle' (2005:49).

The mainstream media frames working-class people in particular ways that impact on how working-class people are perceived, both from inside and outside the working class. Stereotypes are created and used to justify the 'superior positions' of middle and upper-class people and paint pictures of inequality that serve the agendas of those in power (Kendall: 2011, 2). Rather than considering or analysing the structural reasons for poverty, the mainstream media focuses on individuals, thereby shifting the blame from oppressive systems of power onto individual working-class people (Kendall: 2011, 83). Stories of working-class people in the mainstream media tend to present poverty as something that is pathological (Kendall: 2011, 86) but also something that can be overcome by individuals (providing they are willing to try). Kendall refers to 'inspirational' stories of working-class people who have managed to lift themselves from poverty as examples of 'exceptionalism framing' that doesn't acknowledge that such stories of class mobility are actually rare (Kendall: 2011, 109-111). Media framing also reinforces negative stereotypes of working-class people as lacking respectability and therefore undeserving of sympathy due to 'moral irresponsibility' (Webster: 2008, 294). Poor people are portrayed as the 'other' and working-class people encouraged to disassociate themselves from feckless individuals (Kendall: 2011, 215). Society is therefore absolved of any responsibility. Beider (2015) focuses on the portrayal of white working-class people in the media and suggests that they are often depicted as a 'negative rump...an undifferentiated block

who are welfare-dependant, leading chaotic and dysfunctional lives...’ (1). Such treatment does not take into account the diversity of working-class communities – reducing people to a homogeneous group makes it easier for them to be dismissed by those in power.

### **Respectability as Control**

Respectability as a method of controlling working-class people has a long history in Western Europe and North America<sup>16</sup>. The idea of respectability as a virtue embodied by the bourgeoisie became established in the late eighteenth century and has been the subject of study since. According to Duncan and McCoy (2007) respectability was linked to white nationalism and associated with the white bourgeoisie (36). The concept really took hold in the nineteenth century as the white bourgeoisie carved out positions for themselves as superior to the working classes, and based their behaviour on the perceived attributes of the genteel aristocracy (Smith: 2002, 27). Victorian ideas of the working-class as ‘socially undesirable’ began to take hold and the working-class were portrayed as too fertile, criminal<sup>17</sup> and lacking restraint (Webster: 2008, 299). Measures of respectability were gendered and used particularly to judge the behaviour of women (Skeggs: 1997, 3). Women were seen as possessing the ability to ‘civilise’ (through childrearing) and their sexuality, childcare approaches and domestic orderliness was scrutinised (Skeggs: 1997, 47).

In the United States, the epitome of respectability was Benjamin Franklin, who outlined a number of ‘virtues’ required to be considered respectable (Smith: 2002, 108). These virtues were markers of social standing and were attributes that could be aspired to (Smith: 2002, 204). Franklin listed virtues such as ‘temperance’, ‘frugality’, ‘chastity’, ‘cleanliness’, and ‘moderation’, with ‘self-indulgence’ seen as a lack of virtue (Smith: 2002, 109). Virtues became associated with bourgeois respectability and indicated ‘moral competency’ (Smith: 2002, 210).

The notions of respectability created by the white bourgeois applied to working-class people of all races, but according to Wolcott (2001), the idea of respectability manifested in specific ways in African American communities (6). In the nineteenth century, respectability was viewed by some African Americans as a way to challenge the negative stereotypes of Black people created by whites. Claiming respectability in relation to cleanliness (of person and home), chastity, and domestic organisation was seen as a way to prove to white people that African Americans were not inferior. Wolcott points to the ways in which some Black female reformers advocated respectability to Black women and positioned themselves as bourgeois and therefore separate from poor and working-class African Americans (2001:6). This notion has been carried into the twenty first century and rhetoric of respectability is still used by some African American community leaders (Wolcott: 2001, 8). Respectability has

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<sup>16</sup> Respectability has also been used to control people in colonised places – this can be seen in various British colonies such as Australia, where bourgeois respectability was seen as way to distance British settlers from convicts and from the Indigenous population. One way that this manifested was in marriage laws that were intended to make partnerships legal and therefore respectable (and chaste) and to prevent relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (McKenzie: 2003).

<sup>17</sup> The notion of working-class people as criminal precedes the nineteenth century and manifested in Britain as severe punishments (such as hanging) for crimes listed in the Black Acts of the early eighteenth century, which were initially created to punish poachers who were also seen as a political threat (Linebaugh: 2003, 18).

also been used as a survival mechanism for Black women, who have viewed the domestic sphere as one site that can be controlled in a racist society (Wolcott: 2001, 7). hooks (2000: 17) points to the ways in which respect for African American women has often been linked to marriage and perceptions of chastity (20) as well as working hard, both in and outside the home (27). According to scholars like hooks, if respectability can be achieved, then African Americans can consider themselves on the same level as the white bourgeoisie, and therefore superior to the 'white trash' who reject respectability (hooks: 2000, 112). Although hooks (2000) points out that despite a perception that white working-class people might sometimes reject respectability, they do still have 'racial privilege' despite their marginal class status (114).

In the 1990s, both in the UK and US, despite class not being a popular topic for academic discussion (Munt: 2000, 3), the rhetoric of respectability in relation to working-class people was renewed. Public figures and politicians began to refer to 'declining moral standards' and blamed working-class people, particularly single parents and those requiring government assistance (Skeggs: 1997, 50). Those living in 'marginal places' (Shields: 1991, 4) such as council estates started to become targets of attacks and were represented as the epitome of the 'rough' council estate (Watt: 2006, 779). Council estates, which had once been a symbol of equality and dignity for working-class people, were described as places to be avoided, as a 'last resort' (Watt: 2006, 779) for those living there. The implication was that no one would live on an estate by choice and therefore tenants must be too feckless (unemployed, dysfunctional) to find other accommodations, presumably in the private sphere. The rhetoric of dysfunctional working-class people was mainly centered on white working-class people in the UK who, by the 2000s were being labelled as 'chavs'<sup>18</sup> (Hayward & Yar: 2006, 10). Chavs were portrayed as lacking in respectability due to their behaviour and their appearance – not due to lack of cleanliness or tattiness, but due to their modes of consumption (Webster: 2008, 301). They were mocked for their choices of brands and their perceived conspicuous consumption (Hayward & Yar: 2006, 18). This treatment put working-class people in a no-win situation. While previous eras (particularly 18<sup>th</sup> century England) had seen consumption of luxury goods such as sugar (Smith: 2002, 3) used as a way of measuring respectability, chavs were demonised for choosing to buy designer brands (Hayward & Yar: 2006, 13). With the chav figure stripped of any 'social value' (Tyler: 2011, 536), the systemic causes of poverty and the related dysfunction it causes were not explored; individuals were simply blamed for making bad life choices. The media was awash with stories of dysfunctional chav families, and this classist depiction of working-class people seemed to be appearing uncritically in the mainstream media (Jones: 2011, 2).

### **The Respectable Family**

When I was growing up, my mother often instructed my brother and me to behave nicely when in public in order to not to 'show her up'. She was very conscious of being judged, and of the need to remain inconspicuous. According to Sayer (2005), this is a common understanding of respectability for working-class people who believe that being 'inoffensive...keeping out of trouble' would prevent them from

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<sup>18</sup> In the US, the term 'white trash' is an equivalent, and in Australia the term 'bogan' is used in a similar way (as well as 'dole bludger').

becoming the target of upper and middle-class ‘moral and aesthetic disapproval’ (177). She wanted to prove to people that she was a respectable woman despite living in public housing and needing assistance from social security (welfare). She had come from a ‘respectable’ working-class family – her father was a bus driver and her mother worked in the bus depot canteen. Her parents owned their own home and they had a car. Her father had been a prisoner of war during WWII, which further added to his respectability. As a young woman my mother had dreamed of travelling, of having adventures. She ended up leaving a respectable job as a local timber merchant company office junior and joined the Women’s Royal Air Force. After a few years she tried something else. She worked in a variety of jobs until she met my father and fell pregnant with my brother and then me. We were eventually housed in a new council flat (public housing project) and my mother was able to win back some of her respectability when she started a full time job as a telephonist with the General Post Office. A few years later, my father had left us, and then passed away, and my mother became dependant on government support. She maintained a sense of respectability by keeping our home fastidiously clean and making sure my brother and I were equally scrubbed and tidy. She prided herself on being able to make us nutritious meals on limited resources and staying out of debt (loans sharks circled regularly on our housing estate). She felt she needed to prove that she was a fit mother and able to hold her head high both in the community and beyond. She’d seen children taken from their families and she was always worried that the ‘social’ would come for an inspection and find a dirty home and take us away.

This striving for respectability was common among working-class people and cut across race, ethnicity and gender lines. On our multi-ethnic council estate there were many well-scrubbed kids of all ethnicities and genders wearing well-ironed shirts and slacks and punished by their parents if caught using bad language. Girls were expected to be ladylike and start their own well cared-for families and boys were expected to become a hard-working breadwinners.

My mother wasn’t happy when I strayed from the path of respectability. Although certain aspects of her values had rubbed off – I didn’t have the strong Cockney accent of my friends on the estate, and I preferred homemade pies to spam and chips – I rejected respectability in different ways. I became politicised from a very young age (Thatcher was responsible for that) and I started to ‘answer back’ at school if I thought a teacher wasn’t treating us fairly. I started to join political and activist organisations. I stopped looking neat and tidy and started wearing ‘alternative’ clothes pieced together from charity shop (thrift store) items. I started to draw attention to myself. This challenged the notion that if working-class people worked hard, kept ourselves nice and didn’t make a fuss that eventually things would improve. It became clear to me from my early teenage years that middle-class people were not impressed with working-class people (particularly girls) making their opinions known. I had plenty of run-ins with teachers (not due to school work, I was good at that) and made a few enemies. I learnt that making enemies with powerful people can backfire, and I have stories of how standing up for myself meant I missed out on opportunities.

### **Becoming Middle Class**

As mentioned earlier, despite my formal education and current employment status as an academic, I have never identified as middle class. My political leanings and interest in gender, race, LGBTI issues, social justice and animal rights didn't take me away from my working-class roots. All of my politically minded friends were also working-class. We didn't mix socially with middle-class people. There was a sense of autodidacticism as we read up on Marxism, feminism and racism and attended rallies and left-wing political events (in between shifts in our working-class jobs). Even years later, as a mature-age student in Australia and then a PhD graduate teaching at a university, I held on to my working-class identity.

And I don't want to be middle class. As a working-class academic I can bring a different way of doing things into my work environment. Class-based obstacles, imposter syndrome and the trauma of class straddling aside (Lubrano: 2004, 2), I see my working-class background as an asset to my work in academia. But there are writers and commentators who describe their working-class backgrounds as something they have been fortunate enough to escape from, as something that needs to be escaped (Hitchcock: 2011, 21). In an article on the inequalities perpetuated by the private school system in the UK, *Guardian* journalist Suzanne Moore (2016) acknowledged the impact of class, but her solution was to encourage people to become middle class rather than improving life for working-class people. She was disparaging of some aspects of working-class culture that she considered trashy, such as 'big tellies', and stated that she was 'forever glad I got away' (Moore: 2016, para.11).

Moore refers to journalist Lynsey Hanley's 2016 book *Respectable*, which charts how Hanley left her working-class background and became middle class. Hanley states that she 'grew up respectable' (in Grant: 2016, para.4), her family lived on a council estate but her father had a respectable, white collar job, and she found the transition from working class to middle class a difficult one due to the 'wall in the head' that initially prevented her from becoming totally middle class (Hanley: 2016, x). This wall included the influence of the council estate and the lingering effects of estate upbringing even after leaving and moving into a middle-class community (Hanley: 2016, x). She refers to council estates as prison-like places that require escape (2008: 5). Hanley claims that working-class people define themselves based on the 'affirmation or repudiation' of respectability (2016:10), and for her, having grown up in a respectable household meant she had respectability on her side, which eventually assisted her passage into the middle class (Hanley: 2016, xi). While she doesn't reject her working-class family, there is a sense that she could only fulfil her ambitions by becoming middle class and taking on middle-class values – these values include 'the act of thinking' (Hanley: 2016, 38), suggesting that intellectual engagement is restricted to the middle and upper classes. I find Hanley's position problematic because it reinforces the perception that being working class is something to overcome. Skeggs (1997) suggests that attempts to 'pass' as middle class and reject working-class identity, leave the class system unchallenged and therefore able to 'reproduce class hierarchies and evaluations which...delegitimize the working class' (91). But I have found that it is possible to maintain a sense of working-class identity while functioning within the university environment, and this opens the space for other working-class academics and students.

## **Middle-Class Reactions to Working-Class Activism**

If working-class people reject middle-class respectability, what are the consequences? And what is so intimidating about a working-class activist? Activists from working-class backgrounds seem to be portrayed as more of a threat than their middle-class counterparts. Is this because they are more likely to be direct? Or more likely to stick to their guns due to firm resolve? Because there is less to lose if you already have nothing? Are working-class activists less self-conscious about speaking out in public, and of how they might be judged? When a working-class activist does gain a public platform, they can face attack from middle-class institutions. There are attempts to bring them down, to 'show them up' (as my mother would say). Their working-class accents and communication styles can be ridiculed. If they are not formally educated, this can be used as an indicator of lack. If they are earning a decent income or working in a middle-class profession (such as academia) this can be used against them, as proof that they have 'sold out' and only have their own interests at heart. They seem to be subject to much more scrutiny than their middle-class activist counterparts.

This was the case when British comedian Russel Brand turned towards social justice activism. Brand has a working-class background and a working-class accent. Since about 2013, Brand has been speaking in public about political issues and using his fame to spread a social justice message, advocating for activist organisations that represent working-class people (such as public housing activists). During this time Brand has been subjected to ridicule from the mainstream middle-class press in the UK for his outspokenness, and many criticisms have focused on his working-class accent, brashness and his lack of formal education rather than the substance of his comments and ideas<sup>19</sup>. Middle-class commentators appear to close ranks when faced with an activist who doesn't look or sound like them. It's possible that Brand's appeal to working-class fans and his wide reach due to his high profile are threatening to bourgeois notions of respectability. Brand's 'bad' behaviour encourages a rejection of respectability. Respectable bourgeois virtues are eschewed by Brand (very loudly). There also appears to be a level of dissonance for middle-class commentators who find it difficult to reconcile Brand's use of extensive vocabulary and sophisticated language with his working-class accent and use of expletives. The combination of 'vulgar' language and long words is confrontational because it challenges the neat categorisation of working-class people into respectable (intelligent) and not respectable (ignorant). Dismissing Brand as a vulgar comedian is arguably a way to diminish the working-class causes he has championed.

Working-class academic and activist Dr. Lisa McKenzie has also been on the receiving end of similar treatment. McKenzie often finds that her direct manner, accent and uncompromising attitude are commented upon by middle-class colleagues (McKenzie: 2015, para.3), who are threatened by her working-class identity. In 2015 McKenzie was described by the British mainstream press as both uncouth and a class fraud, and was ridiculed for her opposition to the gentrification of London's East End (Greenwood et al: 2015). McKenzie has centred her research in working-class communities and has been an outspoken advocate for working-class people and a

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<sup>19</sup> For example, the infamous 2013 BBC interview with Brand presented by Jeremy Paxman, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-24648651>, accessed November 8th, 2016.

fierce critic of middle-class commentators. McKenzie is unapologetic in her working-classness and refuses to identify as middle class. She recalls the ways in which respectability operated in her working-class childhood, particularly through efforts to keep her family clean, and is acutely aware of the ways that working-class people have been the targets of scorn and mockery (McKenzie: 2015, 3). The combination of her Nottingham accent, tattoos and brightly coloured hair with her sociological training and academic position seems to operate as too much of a contradiction for her middle-class critics, who are threatened by her directness as a working-class academic.

In Australia, class is not often openly discussed (or even acknowledged) in the same way as it is in the UK. But the same threat posed by outspoken working-class people does exist. In May 2016, during an episode of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's weekly political affairs panel show 'Q&A', audience member Duncan Storrar asked one of the panelists, a federal government minister, why he wasn't going to benefit from any of the recently announced budget measures<sup>20</sup>. Storrar described himself as disabled, with a 'low education' and working for minimum wage, and explained that lowering the tax-free threshold for someone like him would be extremely significant compared to tax breaks for the rich that they probably wouldn't even notice. Some of the panelists were sympathetic – the federal minister was not – but it is what happened after the show that demonstrates how class works. Almost immediately, a concerned individual set up a crowd funding site to raise money for Storrar and his family. Within days, tens of thousands of dollars had been raised, which suggests that the public were sympathetic to his situation<sup>21</sup>. But the right-wing mainstream media immediately started digging dirt, and Storrar was demonised for his former drug addiction and criminal history<sup>22</sup>. Storrar released statements defending himself, touching on his history of mental illness, and a group of community leaders, commentators and organisations wrote an open letter that asked politicians to 'affirm the rights of Australians to participate in public debate without fear of retribution' (Carter: 2016, para 1). There are often 'curly' questions asked of the panel during Q&A, but the majority of audience questioners are middle class and 'respectable'. The response from the media reveals how threatening an articulate working-class voice can be. When working-class people breach the centres of power, the establishment will work hard to undermine their credibility (Eltham: 2016) and then label them as undeserving and lacking respectability.

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<sup>20</sup> Storrar's question can be viewed here: McCauley, Dana (2016) 'Geelong dad Duncan Storrar steals the election debate from the pollies', *news.com.au*, May 11<sup>th</sup>, <http://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/federal-budget/melbourne-dad-duncan-storrar-steals-the-election-debate-from-the-pollies/news-story/3e3bdcd28baf3005b65f677cf3952271>, accessed November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Chang, Charis (2016) 'How Duncan Storrar will spend his \$60,000 GoFundMe money', *news.com.au*, May 27<sup>th</sup>, <http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/tv/how-duncan-storrar-will-spend-his-60000-gofundme-money/news-story/aaedbf90b0d7fdcd7e007f416010d777>, accessed November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Safi, Michael (2016) 'Duncan Storrar went on Q&A – now his personal life is dragged through the mud', *The Guardian*, May 13<sup>th</sup>, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/may/13/duncan-storrar-ganda-personal-life-dragged-through-mud>, accessed November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

## Rejecting Respectability?

Where then, does this leave working-class activists? Should we learn how to speak like middle-class people? If we do, will we lose the trust of the working-class people we are supposed to be representing? Hearing someone who sounds like you or looks like you in the public sphere is empowering. Seeing someone who is then also speaking truth to power can be transforming. Those in power are aware of this, which is why they try to limit the opportunities for marginalised people to speak back, and when someone slips through the net, they will do their best to try and make them appear unworthy of attention.

Respectability isn't just about being polite (always being polite can be stultifying). It isn't about keeping your front step clean (although I know my mother and many other working-class women were proud of their clean homes). It's about respecting people's rights to be treated equally and to highlight injustice when it occurs – it's about respecting your neighbour's right to not be poor while also respecting their right to spend what little money they have however they like (and to not judge). It's difficult to shake off the effects of primary socialisation but it's important that working-class people who occupy positions of authority, or who have a public platform acknowledge how the politics of respectability work, and firmly reject methods to control working-class people through judgement and shaming. If the mainstream media are no longer able to divide working-class communities and pit people against each other, then working-class people can find more ways to unite and challenge oppressive class structures.

## Author Bio

Sarah Attfield is a Scholarly Teaching Fellow in the School of Communications at the University of Technology Sydney. Her work is mainly focused on the representation of working class experience in literature and popular culture. She is a regular contributor to the Working-Class Perspectives blog (<https://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/>).

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# Note from the Book Review Editor

**Christie Launius**, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

I am pleased to serve as the book review editor for the *Journal of Working Class Studies*. This role is a continuation of the work that I have done since 2010 for *Working Class Notes*, the newsletter of the Working Class Studies Association, alongside Jack Metzgar. I'd like to extend a huge thank you to Jack for all the work he has done over the years to solicit and edit book reviews; I have benefited enormously from his mentorship. Starting with this inaugural issue, we will now publish book reviews exclusively in the journal, though Jack and Cherie Rankin will continue to produce our Book Notes feature in *Working Class Notes*. Jack has also promised to serve in a behind-the-scenes way with the journal, for which I am enormously grateful.

Our intent is to review books in each issue that feature working-class people, communities, culture, history, politics, and/or experience as a crucial component of their scholarly or artistic vision. If you are interested in serving as a reviewer for the journal, please send an email stating your interest, as well as a brief description of your qualifications to [editorial@workingclassstudiesjournal.com](mailto:editorial@workingclassstudiesjournal.com). Likewise, if you have an idea for a specific book to review and would like to propose to review it, please send me a message and include the following information: 1) a brief statement of how the book or creative work makes a significant contribution to the field of Working Class Studies, or offers a challenging or overdue take on issues of vital importance to the field; and 2) a brief explanation of what the book or creative work has to offer on its own, or how its arguments and insights bring something necessary or 'new' to the conversation(s) it's looking to enter. I will consider all proposals based on their appropriateness and relevance to the journal's aims. Guidelines for reviews can be found here:

<https://workingclassstudiesjournal.com/instructions-for-authors/>

## **Sheard, Tim (2015) *Someone Has to Die*, Hardball Press, Brooklyn, Ny.**

### **Review by Cherie Rankin**

*Someone Has to Die* is the latest installment of the Lenny Moss mystery series written by Timothy Sheard. Lenny Moss, a custodian at James Madison Medical Center, this time finds himself investigating the case of Anna Louisa, by all accounts a first-rate, conscientious nurse whose patient is discovered dead at the shift change, allegedly the victim of misadministered insulin at Anna Louisa's hand. Facts don't add up, however, and Lenny enlists the help of his wide network of co-workers to figure out what really happened and to save Anna Louisa's job and reputation.

Anna Louisa's case is used in the novel to highlight multiple tensions currently plaguing American medicine. One of the primary tensions represented in the book is the pitting of humans against machines in the practice of medicine -- of the difficult but absolute necessity of drawing the line between technology and human care, kindness, and decision making. At James Madison, the administration is heavily pushing a system called ADTP, or 'the Advanced Diagnostic and Treatment Program,' a computer program into which symptoms and history are fed, and which responds with suggested tests, possible diagnoses and courses of treatment. In one early exchange, the issues here become clear. After a patient's history and symptoms are fed into the program, staff looks over the resultant list of possible diagnoses and suggested tests:

Bilici [the presiding doctor] looked over the Fellow's shoulder, frowning. 'Hmm, that's a very long list.'

'Do we have to order all those tests' the female intern asked.

'Yes and no,' said Bilici. 'Technically the computer makes 'recommendations.' But if you don't order one of them and in the end that failure leads to a delay in diagnosis, or worse, to medical complications, you will be roasted alive by the performance improvement people. And of course, the family will sue you from now until you give up your practice and get a job at a McDonald's flipping burgers.'

'No wonder medical care is so expensive in this country,' the intern said.

'Ours is not to reason why, ours is to cover our ass,' said Bilici. (29)

At multiple points in the narrative, the ADTP suggestions run counter to the intuitions of seasoned diagnosticians while patient lives hang in the balance, and Sheard does a solid job in the book of making clear that human intuition and experience are discounted at the peril of patients.

A second tension in the story has to do with workers' right to privacy and autonomy on the job, free from administrative monitoring. Sheard paints an infuriating picture of work life and working conditions for nurses. Nurses are forced to wear GPS devices on lanyards around their necks, which not only record their every move but

also all verbal interaction and conversation: ‘When Mimi heard the dispatcher order her down to Mr. Hatcher’s room ‘STAT,’ she grasped the GPS unit hanging from a lanyard around her neck and silently cursed, knowing the dispatcher could hear every word she spoke. Since curses were a violation of hospital policy, Mimi and the rest of the nurses had learned to silently mouth their curses or to express them with hands signals that expressed their anger and disgust’. The movements of nurses are tracked constantly and they have no privacy, even during restroom breaks (when they can get them) and meals.

Finally, there is the constant battle by administration to maximize profits and cut costs, against the rights of workers to decent wages and working conditions. Labor strife is a major part of the narrative, with Anna Louisa’s case taking place as the hospital system is trying to cut workers’ benefits. The union president says at a rally, late in the book: ‘They want to take away our prescription benefits while they receive million dollar salaries and golden parachutes when they leave! They want you to live on charity or in a shelter when they cut off your pension checks!’. It’s clear throughout the book that the criminal actions being taken in the James Madison hospital system are not those of Anna Louisa; it is the cost-cutting, profit-first hospital administration that is truly putting patients at risk and ruining the lives of hospital workers.

The counter to all these tensions -- the administrative pressure, unfair treatment of workers, and danger to patients -- is clear in the narrative. The counter is solidarity, communality, on the part of the workers. It is Lenny’s network of contacts, built up over years of demonstrated trustworthiness, that he calls on to help solve Anna Louisa’s case. It is years of favors given and then returned that help him do what needs to be done, as workers circumvent the broken system to help Lenny find answers. It is the workers’ willingness to band together and take risks as a group that prevents their benefits and protections from being taken away. We see Lenny Moss’ world in this book, and it is a connected world. Workers protect each other, workers protect their patients, and even the lowest in the order of things are vital to the system, right down to custodians like Lenny Moss.

### **Reviewer Bio**

Cherie Rankin is a Professor of English at Heartland Community College in Normal, IL. She is currently on sabbatical, researching the workers who were employed as part of the William Scully land empire in the midwestern U.S. during the mid-19th and early 20th centuries.

## **Tokarczyk, Michelle M. (2016) *Bronx Migrations*, Cherry Castle Publishing, Columbia, Md.**

### **Review by Jim Daniels**

With the publication of *Bronx Migrations*, Michelle Tokarczyk has put herself on the map as a poet of place. Place, and class, for those two things go hand in hand throughout this powerful debut collection centered on her native turf, the Bronx. Certain ‘places’ seem to be avoided in much of our culture, our literature, and, in particular, much of our poetry—like suburbanites afraid to venture into our big cities.

If not avoided, then distorted, as Tokarczyk details in ‘On *Fort Apache*, the Movie,’ when, in the final section, ‘Lights on, Talking Back,’ she writes: ‘Something weighs in me,/like the heaviness I feel/when I hear Spanish/and understand/only the shouting.//What about the children/playing ball outside the precinct?//Think about the people sitting/in windows staring past/their twelve-hour shifts.’

Tokarczyk, a leader in the Working Class Studies Association and a respected scholar on writing and class, has made an impressive poetic debut with this collection, showing the depth and insight of a veteran poet. *Bronx Migrations* offers up rich details of her childhood—her family history, her personal story—in this rich, autobiographical collection that tells the story of a neighborhood’s transition and the complications of race and class that influence her family’s struggles. In ‘Left Behind,’ she tells the story of one family, the Harpers, who stayed in the old neighborhood while most everyone else left: ‘First Ricky, then Jim, then the Connollys/next door. Then the Burns who lived/down the hall. Even the blacks and Spanish/who moved here years ago...left.’ The price paid for staying? ‘Everyone looked at their Irish eyes/and the subway stop where they got off//and saw failure. ‘White trash,’ they called it.’

What I admire about this collection is Tokarczyk’s awareness of her own biases and preoccupations. She complicates situations like our best poetry does, rather than oversimplify them. For example, in ‘Elegy for a Building,’ in which she revisits her old neighborhood, we might expect a simple nostalgic elegy for what once was. While ‘Empty space holds none of my memories’—the building she lived in is gone—‘the space is a playground, its fence shining/fresh silver paint.’ At this point, we might expect it to be an easy statement acknowledging the rebirth of the neighborhood with new immigrants, but the poem shifts again in its powerful conclusion, recognizing both that the children on the playground are ‘unaware their neighborhood has been reborn’ and that they are ‘oblivious to me, as I mourn.’

The voice in these poems is direct, accessible, and strong. Tokarczyk is an unflinching guide to her community, joining the ranks of poets like the late Patricia Dobler, whose *Talking to Strangers* focuses on Middletown, the Ohio mill town

where she grew up; and more recently Sandee Gertz Umbach, whose *The Pattern Maker's Daughter* focuses on Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

Like those poets, Tokarczyk doesn't gloss over her community's warts, nor does she glorify them—she gives us an honest appraisal full of love and empathy. As she writes in “Poetry at the Bronx Museum,” “Memories made flesh. Made word./Finally heard.” While the migrations take place, we always know where her heart is.

### **Reviewer Bio**

Jim Daniels' next books of poems, *Rowing Inland* (Wayne State University Press) and *Street Calligraphy* (Steel Toe Books) will both be published in 2017. A native of Detroit, Daniels is the Thomas Stockham University Professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University.

**Lakey, George (2016) *Viking Economics: How the Scandinavians Got It Right – and How We Can, Too*, Melville House Publishing, Brooklyn, Ny.**

**Review by Betsy Leondar-Wright**

‘Another world is possible,’ asserts the slogan of the World Social Forum – but how many Americans believe that? Hope is a hard sell in this country of debased politics and a widening wealth gap.

But George Lakey cleverly dodges American discouragement by telling the stories of actually existing fairer societies and how they came to be. The Nordic countries could be models for the United States, he claims. By waging decades of struggle as Scandinavian people did, we too could have their cradle-to-grave benefits: free vocational and higher education, universal health care, paid parental leave, robust labor rights and so on. For half a century Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland have held the world’s records in health and life expectancy, clean democracy, educational achievement and combining high wages with economic growth, innovation and productivity.

The Nordic countries are often presumed to be special cases, impossible to replicate elsewhere, due to their small size, homogeneity and some imagined cultural emphasis on social welfare. But in fact, a century ago they had as much concentrated wealth, widespread poverty and weak safety nets as most of Europe, and as much political polarization. It took a struggle to make Scandinavia into what it is today.

The working class is the hero in these inspiring tales, particularly the Norwegian labor movement. *Viking Economics* makes an important contribution to the field of Working-Class Studies by emphasizing the agency and efficacy of its organized working-class protagonists. They organized unions, labor parties and federations of worker cooperatives. They collaborated with intellectuals and other middle-class allies. They fiercely resisted elite repression, Nazi sympathizers and German Nazi occupation. They sometimes made strategic mistakes, but also made some brilliant moves.

For example, in Sweden, military repression of striking workers in 1931 led to an uprising that took down the government and put the leftist Social Democratic Party into power for over 40 years.

In Norway, waves of strikes from 1919 finally brought the employer federation to the bargaining table in 1937. The labor movement and the employers hammered out a consensus, and the Labor Party came to power.

Most recently, Iceland, when its economy collapsed during the 2008 Wall Street crash, fended off International Monetary Fund demands for austerity – the first country to get IMF loans despite refusing to cut public spending. Instead, thanks to Occupy-like street demonstrations by over 3% of the entire population, they actually increased social spending and successfully revived the economy.

Could a similar transformation happen in the United States? Overcoming the public's aversion to higher taxes and the remnants of Cold War anti-socialism would be a necessary prerequisite to organize a multiracial, cross-class mass movement powerful enough to take on corporate power. The millennials' greater acceptance of socialism is a hopeful sign that we may yet take Occupy Wall Street to scale.

But the movement would need highly developed strategic skills to prevail through the backlash of the entrenched powers that be. Lakey is an unparalleled resource on strategy. He is the creator of the Global Nonviolent Action Database (<http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/>), retired Swarthmore peace studies professor, author of other movement strategy books, and a long-time activist who has trained tens of thousands of activists, including me, through Movement for a New Society and Training for Change. This half-century of experience grounds his analysis of the strategic moves and mistakes made by the Scandinavian movements and his advice on building the global movement we need today.

The book necessarily loses some of its focus in the more critical chapters. Lakey interrupts his crystal-clear case for a positive alternative to portray these countries as cautionary tales as well. Though this disrupts the otherwise smooth flow of the book, it had to be done. If he hadn't covered the rise of right wing anti-immigrant parties or the overreliance on fossil fuels in oil-rich Norway, the book might have idealized societies that are in fact messy works in progress. And to omit a chapter on xenophobia would have undermined race-class intersectionality; you can't analyze one without understanding the other. The Nordic countries fulfill their promise to the extent that they extend their universal benefits to everyone within their borders, regardless of birthplace.

*Viking Economics* is written for a general audience in an enjoyable story-telling style, with first-person narratives from Lakey's time in Norway with his former in-laws, as well as from interviews he did with key players in all four countries. The book embodies the Working-Class Studies ideal of class analysis accessible outside the ivory tower. No reader should be scared off by the 'economics' in the title. This is a story of people organizing to make their societies work better for everyone. If you're a person with a society to improve, it's for you.

### **Reviewer Bio**

Betsy Leondar-Wright, PhD, is the board president of WCSA affiliate Class Action ([www.classism.org](http://www.classism.org)). She teaches the sociology of race and class inequality and social

movement strategy at Lasell College. She is the author of *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures* (Cornell University Press 2014), as well as *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists* (New Society Publishers 2005) and co-author of *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the US Racial Wealth Divide* (New Press 2006).