

‘Ping Ping Ping / I break things’: Productive Disruption in the Working- Class Poetry of Jan Beatty, Sandra Cisneros, and Wanda Coleman

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Abstract

This essay explores how working-class lives are represented in the poetry of three American women poets, Jan Beatty, Sandra Cisneros, and Wanda Coleman. It discusses how the poets’ working-class backgrounds affect their poetics and their perceptions of poetic craft. Through analysis, I show how their poetry shares a sense of defiant resistance, communicated through imagery of violence, labor, and sexual pleasure, responding to societal and institutional limitations placed on working-class women and working-class women writers.

Keywords:

Poetry, working-class poetry, working-class women poets, American literature

Introduction

In January 2018 the satirical news show *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* featured a segment about media coverage of the American working class. It emphasized that media coverage since the 2016 U.S. presidential election has disproportionately focused on the lives and concerns of white male industrial workers despite the fact that the working class is much more diverse, in terms of gender, race, and job type. In the segment, Bee failed to find any working-class people to interview in a bar because the workers, all white male industrial laborers, were already being interviewed by members of the media. After this failed attempt, Bee was taken to a room full of working-class folks who were not already bombarded with interview requests, all women and people of color. Their conversation, though funny, highlighted serious issues that these workers face, including quality of life matters and real economic anxiety, not the coded ‘economic anxiety’ that came to stand in for racism and xenophobia during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Bee cheekily concluded that these media-neglected women and minority workers need a Bruce Springsteen-esque anthem to garner the attention of the mainstream media. The proposed solution, though hilarious and obviously in jest, seemed a bit futile. There have already been numerous hit songs about working-class women and people of color, including Tracy Chapman’s ‘Fast Car,’ Donna Summer’s ‘She Works Hard for the Money,’ Dolly Parton’s ‘9 to 5,’ and The Bangle’s ‘Manic Monday,’ yet the media and cultural imagination still overwhelmingly link the label of working-class to white male industrial workers.

Thanks to the work of scholars, including Paul Lauter and Janet Zandy, working-class women poets have not been as neglected as the women workers in Bee’s segment. But, contemporary

working-class women poets still have not garnered the critical attention and treatment that they merit. Scholarship on recent American working-class poetry written by male poets, such as Philip Levine, still outpaces that focused on their female colleagues. To try and address this disparity, in this article I will explore how working-class lives are represented in the poetry of several contemporary American women poets, Jan Beatty, Sandra Cisneros, and Wanda Coleman. I chose to analyze the work of these poets in part because they are from different geographical and racial backgrounds in order to highlight the richness and diversity of American women's contemporary working-class poetry.

Despite these differences in their backgrounds, there are many commonalities to be found in their poetry. Their work shares a sense of defiance and resistance, created by destructive and/or violent imagery, imagery of labor, and explicit depictions of sexuality. The proletarian poets who saw art as a weapon spring to mind when reading their poems. Proletarian poets believed that literature should be used to change people's minds. Cary Nelson, discussing poetry written between 1910-1945, much of it proletarian, claims that the poetry '[h]ad the power to help people not only come to understand the material conditions of their existence but also to envision ways of changing them' (Nelson 1989, p.124). Similarly, the work of Beatty, Cisneros, and Coleman seeks to explore and represent the lives of the working class and to alter others' conceptions of working-class women and working-class women writers. Their work enacts the disruption necessary to carve out a space for themselves as writers, which sometimes involves pushing back against the expectations of their working-class communities, and often requires breaking down barriers in the writing establishment. They resist the scripts assigned to working-class women. Part of this resistance is an insistence on physical, often sexual, pleasure. This celebration of sexual pleasure runs counter to societal expectations of women's behavior; emphasizes that their bodies are their own, not just vessels for work or objects of pleasure for men; and resists the numbing effects of capitalism.

Solidarity: Backgrounds and Connections

Beatty, Cisneros, and Coleman began regularly publishing poetry in the 1980s and 1990s. In the same time period, many influential volumes of poetry that explored working-class lives appeared, including Philip Levine's National Book Award winning *What Work Is* (1991); Jim Daniels's *Punching Out* (1990) and *M-80* (1993); and Jeanne Bryner's *Blind Horse* (1999). Several critics offer hypotheses about why the 1980s and 1990s in particular saw such robust representation of American working-class poetry. In *Inside Jobs: Essays on the New Work Writing*, Tom Wayman cites 'increased access to post-secondary education since World War II' as one reason for the uptick in working-class poetry (Wayman 1983, p. 24). As Jim Daniels, a poet who frequently writes about working-class issues and lives, points out in his essay 'Work Poetry and Working-Class Poetry: The Zip Code of the Heart,' several presses and literary journals dedicated to publishing poetry of work emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, including Bottom Dog Press and *Blue Collar Review* (Daniels 2005, pp. 115-116). I would add to this list of possible reasons for the increase in publication of working-class poetry during that time period economic shifts that affected the working class—including deindustrialization, the rise of the service economy, and the weakening of unions. Criticism of Reagan and George H.W. Bush's 'trickle-down economics' and how it squeezed the U.S. middle and working classes also augmented cultural awareness of working-class issues and impelled writers to voice these concerns and represent the lives of people dealing with these realities. The emphasis on the working class during this time period can be seen in other sectors, such as the entertainment industry, which saw the television sitcom *Roseanne* near the top of the ratings for the late 1980s and the better part of the 1990s; successful films including *Do the Right Thing*, *9 to 5*, and

Silkwood; and numerous hit songs by musicians including Tracy Chapman, Dolly Parton, Billy Joel, Donna Summer, John Mellencamp, and Bruce Springsteen.

Sandra Cisneros, Jan Beatty and Wanda Coleman, directly identify as workers and as writers committed to representing the working class. In the author biographies from some of their books, in addition to emphasizing their writing accolades, their self-descriptions include a litany of other jobs. On her webpage, Cisneros describes herself as ‘an activist poet, short story writer, novelist, essayist and artist. Writing for over 50 years, her work explores the lives of the working-class’ (Cisneros 2018). Her 1995 volume of poetry *Loose Woman*, mentions that ‘[s]he has worked as a teacher of high school drop-outs, a poet-in-the-schools, a college recruiter, an arts administrator, and most recently as a visiting writer at a number of universities around the country’ (Cisneros 1995). Beatty’s bio in her 1995 book *Mad River* indicates that she: ‘has held jobs as a welfare caseworker, a rape counselor, and a nurse’s aide. She has worked in maximum security prisons, hoagie huts, burger joints, jazz clubs, and diners’ (Beatty 1995). Wanda Coleman’s author description in her 1998 book *Bathwater Wine*, includes the following: ‘As a struggling young welfare mother, she was determined to become a writer. She has worked as a medical secretary, magazine editor, journalist, and scriptwriter’ (Coleman 1998). Including these jobs in literary biographies next to their awards and fellowships shows how these writers value work. These inclusions also emphasize that these writers had to work in order to support their literary production. They want this fact to be known because it shows the material conditions affecting working-class writers, specifically working-class women writers. These lists show respect for other people working those jobs, that their labor and societal contributions should be respected, and also that people working in those jobs are more than those jobs. The medical secretary or diner server has interests beyond their position and might also be a poet or an artist. Listing the jobs also emphasizes that people who work in those jobs should be represented in poetry, in art. Workers’ lives are valuable, interesting, and important.

Jan Beatty is a Pittsburgh poet who, as we can see in the epigraph from her 2002 book *Boneshaker*, links her recurrent poetic subject of working-class life with the act of poetic creation: ‘What is the current that makes machinery, that makes it crackle, what is the current that presents a long line and a necessary waist. What is this current. What is the wind, what is it?’ (Beatty 2002). Although Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* might not immediately conjure associations of working-class life, in the context of Beatty’s work—the poem that opens the book is titled ‘Machine Shop of Love’—Stein’s words evoke the industrial settings, sexuality, and electricity that pervade her poems.

She frequently writes about her own working experiences and those of others, as we can see from a small sampling of her poem’s titles: ‘A Waitress’s Instructions on Tipping or Get the Cash Up and Don’t Waste My Time,’ ‘Cruising with the Check-out Girls,’ ‘The Waitress Angels Speak to Me in a Vision,’ and ‘My Father Teaches Me Solidarity.’ In ‘Sticking It to the Man,’ Beatty’s respect for other working-class women is conveyed in the description of one of the poem’s subjects, a bank teller:

Lateeka’a working, my favorite teller—
she’s got wild nail art & fire red/
feather extensions. [...]
Lateeka & I always talk hair & makeup,
she’s in school for accounting. (Beatty 2013b p.58)

Beatty's speaker knows details of the bank teller's life and her aspirations, has a friendly relationship with her, which starkly contrasts with the impatient man in line behind the speaker who shouts about the wait and storms out of the bank. This is just one example of care for other working-class people in Beatty's poems, which even show concern for difficult working-class customers in poems describing work as a waitress, including the eponymous woman in 'Louise' who inexplicably wants 'a cheeseburger with no cheese,' not 'a hamburger' (Beatty 2002, p. 31). This sense of sympathy probably stems from recognition that these people also had to face the difficult situations that Beatty describes in 'I Knew I Wasn't Poor,' deciding whether to 'buy tampons or birth control pills,' combating hunger by hoarding leftovers from rich restaurant customers instead of tossing the food, and foregoing insurance for a car (Beatty 2017, p. 41). The speaker's solutions to these problems aren't always legal (shoplifting) or wise ('thr[owing] parking tickets in / the backseat with a flurry,' but instead of feeling 'shame,' the speaker feels 'accomplishment' for figuring out 'how to live' in difficult circumstances, just as Lateeka, Louise and other working-class women have to do (Beatty 2017, p. 41).

Born in Chicago, growing up there and in Mexico in a working-class family, later living in San Antonio, Sandra Cisneros explores the lives of working-class people, frequently Chicanas, in her poetry. As we see in Beatty's work, Cisneros also connects laboring with writing. In the titular poem from her 1995 collection *Loose Woman*, Cisneros's speaker declares:

I am the woman of myth and bullshit.
 (True. I authored some of it.)
 I built my little house of ill repute.
 Brick by brick. Labored,
 loved and masoned it. (Cisneros 1995, p. 112)

Playfully using terminology of construction, the speaker depicts her identity formation, as a woman and a writer, as an act of physical labor. The epigraph by Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt, another independent woman artist, from her 1987 volume *My Wicked Wicked Ways: Poems* echoes that stanza's casting of artistic creation as work: 'I can live alone and I love to work' (Cisneros 1987). She gives a voice to those workers, especially working-class Chicana women, underrepresented in literature, and categorizes her own writing as work. In this way she is not apart from the working class but a part of it; her work is to represent their lives.

In 'Las Girlfriends,' a poem that depicts snapshots of the lives of the speaker's working-class friends, we see this solidarity enacted in the opening stanza:

Tip the barmaid in tight jeans.
 She's my friend.
 Been to hell and back again.
 I've been there too. (Cisneros 1995, p. 105)

The speaker implores the reader to treat her friend well and pay her for her work, acknowledging that they have both lived through tough times. At this point, the speaker's command seems directed at a generic reader, but the first word of the second stanza, 'Girlfriend,' reveals that the speaker is addressing a specific reader, a girlfriend, a woman, or a person who identifies and sympathizes with women, who can relate to the speaker's contention that, though she 'believe[s] in Ghandi,' 'some nights nothing says it / quite precise like a Lone Star / cracked on someone's head' (Cisneros 1995, p. 105). Other girlfriends are

introduced in the poem, their often violent transgressions detailed or hinted at, such as ‘Little Rose of San Antone,’ ‘the queen bee of kick-*nalga*,’ of whom the speaker advises, ‘When you go out with her, / don’t wear your good clothes’ (Cisneros 1995, p. 106). The speaker includes her own act of violence when she ‘kicked a cowboy in the butt / who made a grab for Terry’s ass,’ claiming ‘it was all / of Texas I was kicking, / and all our asses on the line’ (Cisneros 1995, p. 105). These acts of violence are not characterized as isolated events, but connected, each one performed in defense of all the girlfriends and the trauma that they are made to endure, being harassed on the job and on their leisure time, treated as if they are servants or objects for others’ pleasure. At the end of the poem, someone declares of the girlfriends, ‘Ya’ll wicked mean,’ but the speaker denies it, characterizes the outbursts as somethings deeper than meanness:

I tell you, nights like these,
something bubbles from
the tips of our pointy boots
to the top of our coyote yowl. (Cisneros 1995, p. 106)

The girlfriends’ frustration and anger is ever-present; they keep it to a simmer until something sets them off to cause it to ‘bubble’ over. It’s a shared state of existence, difficult to endure, that Cisneros acknowledges and honors.

Wanda Coleman lived and worked in Los Angeles and made her experiences and those of others who lived there the subjects of her poems. Although Coleman wrote drama and fiction, the fact that so much of her writing takes the form of poetry is not by chance; as Jarvis McInnis points out, she predominantly wrote poetry because she could do so in the brief spaces of time between her various jobs and responsibilities, including waiting tables, typing, and caring for her children (McInnis 2014, pp. 190-91). Much of Coleman’s work explores the intersections of gender, race, and class, as we can see in ‘South Central Los Angeles Death Trip, 1982’ from her collection *Mercurochrome*, a poem that presents a series of individuals’ encounters with police violence. Each section emphasizes the victim’s gender, race, and work to create a picture of each individual’s life—such as the 8 ½ months-pregnant woman who ‘had just gotten home from working / the register at the club and her feet were / killing her’ (Coleman 2001, p. 144)—and to emphasize that poor and working-class minorities, particularly African-Americans, are too often the victims of police violence.

In addition to their on-the-job and life struggles, Coleman shows the difficulties of finding work for working-class women of color. In ‘Job Hunter’ from her 1987 volume *Heavy Daughter Blues* Coleman casts the speaker as an outlaw in a western, the job interview a ‘showdown’ (Coleman 1987, p. 18). The speaker stresses that as an interviewee, she must combat the racial prejudice of the bosses, typically white men. The speaker wonders ‘what’s it about me that frightens these dough-flesh / desk-riders? Something outlaw’ (Coleman 1987, p. 18). Although the speaker claims her undoing in a second interview is due to ‘the sheriff’ ‘an IBM executive’ typewriter that ‘shoots 120 words per secretary’ and is ‘too fast for [her],’ the poem shows that the real killer is the racial discrimination that ends the interviewee’s chances before the interview even begins, leading to the speaker’s rejection or ‘death,’ which Coleman characterizes as ‘an elevator on its way / down to the lobby’ (Coleman 1987, p. 18). The poetry of all three writers conveys a sense of solidarity among others through shared experiences, represents a community of working-class people, a feature common to working-class writing observed by critics including Paul Lauter, Janet Zandy, and Karen Kovacik (Lauter 2014, p. 65; Zandy 1990, p. 11; Kovacik 2001, p. 35).

Beyond showing solidarity with working-class people in their poetry, Beatty, Cisneros, and Coleman have repeatedly shown solidarity with each other. Beatty cites both Cisneros and Coleman as influences, as people ‘who gave me permission to write through their writing’ (Beatty 2013a). Beatty had Cisneros as a guest on her long-running radio show *Prosody* and in her 2013 book *The Switching/Yard* she has a poem titled ‘Reading Wanda Coleman on the California Zephyr’ which includes the lines ‘Iowa needs some Wanda Coleman, someone who’s / not afraid to say it hard’ (Beatty 2013b, p. 25), high praise from a writer whose most recent collection of new and selected poems *Jackknife* begins with the dedication, ‘for women everywhere / who are told to be nice / and to shut up—’ (Beatty 2017). Coleman wrote a poem ‘Thunderhead’ in *Mercurochrome* based on Cisneros’s ‘Cloud’ in *Loose Woman*. Cisneros and Coleman have written blurbs for Beatty’s books. Of Beatty’s 2002 book *Boneshaker* Cisneros writes: ‘“Wild girl fire” is what Jan Beatty calls it, “that white-hot tearing” that ignites into art or self-destruction. Poetry against all odds. Poetry as the death-defying act. Poetry as the wild choice for a girl running reckless from the working class. Between odd jobs and odd loves, Beatty writes from the tender heart without flinching.’ Beatty’s 2008 *Red Sugar* inspired Coleman to claim:

Having mastered the art of fury, Jan Beatty does not merely write a poem, she wrenches it into being, slaps it on the page, applies the flames of her passions, then gentles it into the sweating fleshy sweetness of childhood hungers, longings inspired by loneliness or loss, starkly erotic yearnings—all served in deliciously monstrous proportions, to be savored like a long slow French, that perfect tongue of a kiss that sets the soul on throb.

These assessments of Beatty’s work are equally applicable to the poetry of Cisneros and Coleman. Theirs, too, is a poetry that ‘ignites,’ ‘wrenches,’ and ‘gentles.’ A ‘wild choice’ ‘to be savored.’

Isolation and Marginalization

Working-class women with creative aspirations face many obstacles, even in comparison to working-class men. The difference can be seen in Philip Levine’s award-winning poetry volume that focuses on working-class lives, *What Work Is*. In the collection we see working-class people with artistic ambitions, but they are often male. For example, the speaker’s brother in the volume’s titular poem works the night shift at the Cadillac factory and spends his days studying German so that he can sing Wagner (Levine 1991, p. 18). Smart, creative working-class women are depicted differently in the book. About a female classmate in ‘Coming of Age in Michigan,’ described as ‘a skinny whiz in Math and English,’ Levine’s speaker states,

Noel Baker
did not become a famous woman: it was too late
to enter the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald, too early
for her to become the governor of Michigan,
which hardly makes you famous. (Levine 1991, p. 66).

The options left to Noel Baker to achieve success in the late 1940s during which the poem is set are sparse. Playing on her last name, which she shares with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s character Jordan Baker from *The Great Gatsby*, Levine’s speaker deems Noel Baker too late to be

represented in such literature, let alone as possessing the option of penning literature like Fitzgerald or Levine himself, despite her English skills. At the time, as Levine's speaker notes, opportunities in politics for women were also rare. Levine captures the difficulties that women faced in the contrasting lines 'boys growing into men' and 'girls fighting to be people' (Levine 1991, p. 67). While boys face growing pains, girls must struggle to be recognized as humans. Near the poem's conclusion, the speaker recalls seeing Noel Baker again years later 'talking too much and too loudly' in a liquor store, suggesting that these gendered societal limitations drove her to alcoholism.

Although the poetry of Beatty, Cisneros, and Coleman often depicts events that occurred later than the 1940s of Levine's poem, it frequently describes the difficult position of working-class women poets, recalling the frustrations experienced by Noel Baker. To become poets, working-class women writers often defy familial and social expectations, creating a sense of isolation from people they love. They also face resistance from the writing establishment, one that is overwhelming middle and upper class and publishes male writers with far greater frequency, leaving them marginalized. On top of it all, they must balance the economic pressures that accompany working-class life with the time and energy required for poetic production.

In Beatty's 'My Father Teaches Me to Dream,' a poem that captures a lecture from her late father, a working-class Pittsburgh man, in his voice, the speaker declares '*all this other stuff you're looking for— / it ain't there. / Work is work*' (Beatty 2002, p. 25). His sentiment echoes Levine's thought of Noel Baker, that she had limited options in life, that work isn't something that fulfills one's dreams or passions. The poem conveys the familial tensions that many working-class writers experience. To pursue a career that differs from those of the family creates confusion, rifts. Some of this tension may stem from a place of protection, not wanting the budding writer to face rejection from those who may see her as an outsider because of her class. Some of the resistance may result from the conflict between the concept of work as one's passion and work as a means to an end. Beatty's father's conception of work acts as a coping mechanism for him, as a way to get through the experience of work that doesn't fulfill him. Obviously Beatty chose another path and turned words dissuading her from pursuing something other than unfulfilling labor into art, simultaneously legitimizing her voice, her stories, and the voice and story of her father. But, that path is one that often results in a distancing from family members, creating a sense of isolation which is compounded by the feelings of isolation that are inherent to working-class identity.¹

In the prefatory poem to the rerelease of her 1987 volume *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, Cisneros depicts her decision to be a poet as one not offered to her, as a crime that she committed to escape her limited options that resembled those of Levine's Noel Baker:

My first felony—I took up with poetry.
For this penalty, the rice burned.
Mother warned I'd never wife

Wife? A woman like me
whose choice was rolling pin or factory.
An absurd vice, this wicked wanton
writer's life. (Cisneros 1987, p. x)

¹ Indeed, when Beatty describes her difficult customer Louise, mentioned earlier, she claims 'I know her faded rose blouse and lumpy / wool skirt say: working class: apart' (Beatty 2002, p. 32).

Cisneros eschewed domestic labor represented by the rolling pin and physical labor as a factory worker, but, interestingly, her casting off of these options is described using a verb that conjures the factory: ‘Winched the door with poetry and fled. / For good. And grieved I’d gone / when I was so alone’ (Cisneros 1987, p. x). That Cisneros ‘winched the door with poetry’ suggests that she does not leave the working-class behind when she departs to become a writer. Her poetry is her work. Despite this connection, it was a struggle to carve out a new option, one that brought a sense of loneliness and pain.

In her poetry Wanda Coleman expresses the difficulties of her writing life as an African-American working mother and often stresses the differences between her experience as an artist and those of other poets with different, more privileged, subject positions and material conditions. In one section of *Mercurochrome*, ‘Retro Rogue Anthology,’ in the words of Malin Pereira from her article on that section, ‘Coleman supplants, corrects, appreciates, extends, and critiques many of the poems in a 1969 anthology titled *The Contemporary Poets: American Poetry Since 1940*, edited by Mark Strand, as well as other poems by recognized poets of the modern period’ (Pereira 2014). Pereira’s article focuses on how Coleman’s poems claim a space in the American poetic canon, but the poems also emphasize the challenges and realities of a working African-American woman poet. In one poem after Allen Ginsberg’s ‘A Supermarket in California’ titled ‘Supermarket Surfer,’ Coleman’s speaker is not shopping for images like Ginsberg’s was, but more mundane ‘pudding and citrus-free hand lotion,’ does not find Whitman in her 2am shopping trip, declares ‘hang ten toward checkout is a certainty,’ while Ginsberg’s speaker somehow never passes the cashier (Coleman 2001, p. 194; Ginsberg 1982, pp. 182-83). Coleman concludes the poem on a more solitary, somber note than that of Ginsberg’s:

the only Walt here is Disney
the pork chops are killing me
i am a nobody angel
my heart is a frozen delicacy (Coleman 2001, p. 194).

Although, as Pereira also observes, there is unmistakable reverence for Ginsberg and his poetry in Coleman’s poem, Coleman stresses the differences between the material conditions she experiences and the ones that Ginsberg did (Pereira 2014). Hers offers lackluster goods and does not end by communing with a poet mentor. It takes care to emphasize the material concerns that keep her grocery shopping thoughts more down to earth than Ginsberg’s. Also, as we’ve seen in Beatty’s and Cisneros’s poems, there is a sense of isolation here. The speaker doesn’t feel the immediate connection with writers past and present or with other shoppers in the store.

Embodied Resistance

Work’s effects on the body are addressed by all three writers, as we can see in Coleman’s ‘Identifying Marks,’ a poem that lists the physical marks on the speaker’s body, most of which can be attributed to the stresses of a life as a working-class woman writer. These include the writing-related finger callus from ‘pencils & pens held too firmly’; ‘assorted dark splotches’ from ‘stasis dermatitis,’ caused by ‘acute and/or / chronic stress’; pregnancy stretch marks; multiple scars from fights with lovers including a ‘puffy right lip’ from a ‘drunk louisianan boyfriend who stole ten dollars from purse’; a spot under an eye from a ‘severe skin eruption following employer’s threat to fire / & sudden expected return of estranged second husband’;

and finally, ‘shadows circling eyes,’ undoubtedly resulting from the stress that all of these mark-leaving experiences caused (Coleman 1987, p. 198).

Beatty emphasizes how working-class women’s bodies are commodified in the workplace. In ‘The Waitress Angels Speak to Me in a Vision’ the waitress speaker describes ‘4:00 am flashbacks of men / trying to put their hands on me, regulars / who think they own me,’ showing how sexual harassment haunts victims (Beatty 2002, p. 55). In ‘Shooter’ the speaker dreams of shooting multiple men who harassed her on the job, including a customer who ‘asked about [her] ‘hole,’’ a ‘cook who grabbed me from behind in the restaurant kitchen,’ a ‘boss who gave [her] a ride home wanted a blow job/pushed [her] head down,’ and a ‘restaurant manager who told [her] to grow a thicker skin & wear a skimpy uniform’ (Beatty 2008, p. 14). This imagined revenge violence recalls Cisneros’s speaker’s actual violent act in ‘Las Girlfriends’ when she kicks a man in the butt because he tried to grab her friend’s.

Yet, in the poetry of all three writers, the body of the woman speaker is most often described in terms of her own physical pleasure. Part of this reveling in pleasure seems to push against notions of ‘the good girl,’ as we see in the titles of Cisneros’s poetry collections *Loose Woman* and *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, but there is also an element of reclamation in the descriptions of pleasure, claiming their bodies, the experience of inhabiting their bodies, as their own, not as objects to give men pleasure or as vessels to perform work to uphold capitalist society. This reclamation and celebration of sexuality is particularly significant because of the pejorative ways that working-class women’s sexuality has been stereotyped, often as promiscuous and lacking moral standards. The ‘classy vs. trashy’ dichotomy frequently employed when describing women’s sexuality illustrates this stereotype as does research that suggests a class dimension in the phenomenon of slut-shaming². Racist stereotypes and religion-based cultural norms further impact the expression of sexuality for many working-class women of color. Instead of self-repressing by avoiding the subject of sexuality in their poetry or trying to combat these stereotypes with reactionary portrayals of chastity or purity, Beatty, Cisneros, and Coleman assert sexual agency in a way that underscores working-class women’s personal autonomy.

Cisneros’s poems unapologetically celebrate sexuality and pleasure, as we see in the speaker’s self-description in ‘Loose Woman’: ‘Rowdy. Indulgent to excess. / My sin and success— / I think of me to gluttony’ (Cisneros 1995, p. 113). In ‘Christ You Delight Me,’ the title playfully, subversively blending sex and religion, the speaker revels in the memory of encounters with a lover and declares that, despite being away from the lover, she has to ‘hunker / My cunt close to the earth, / This little pendulum of mine / Ringing, ringing, ringing’ (Cisneros 1995, p. 133). Boldly owning her indulgences, Cisneros asserts her body as her own while flouting traditional expectations of womanhood, including passivity and chastity, especially pronounced in Latino/a culture. As Laura Paz describes in her article analyzing Cisneros’s prose:

The traditionally ‘proper’ role of a Mexican woman is to be submissive to the male figures in her life, to be sexually inactive, and to take care of the home and children. A woman who breaks out of these constraints is someone who is considered a whore—a woman whom men will use for sex but will never marry. [...] [Cisneros]

² ‘‘Good Girls’’: Gender, Social Class, and Slut Discourse on Campus’ by Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Laura T. Hamilton, Elizabeth M. Armstrong, and J. Lotus Seeley, 2014, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 77, no.2, pp.100-122, explores the role of class in slut-shaming, concluding that women from higher social classes have more sexual privilege and are not as harmed socially by it.

employs such archetypes not to instruct girls on how to behave properly, but rather to question society's construction of them, and in turn, a Mexicana's sexuality. (Paz 2008, p. 12)

Cisneros's speaker in 'Loose Woman' does not conform to these archetypes, nor is she a woman who is being used by anyone. She acts on her own desires as she sees fit, defining her own identity.

Racist historical narratives characterized African-American women as hypersexualized. According to several theorists, efforts by African-American women to combat these harmful stereotypes, including the promotion of Victorian morals, eventually led to 'a 'politics of silence' by black women on the issue of their sexuality' (Hammonds 1994). Angela Y. Davis identifies African-American women blues singers, figures that she links to the working-class, as positive, independent models of black female sexuality. Davis characterizes the blues singers as 'emphatic examples of black female independence' who 'assert[] their right to be respected [...] as truly independent human beings with vividly articulated sexual desires' (Davis 1998, p. 20). Wanda Coleman frequently references and invokes women blues singers in her poetry, including Billie Holiday in 'Lady Sings the Blues 1969' when the speaker claims, 'i haven't been conceived yet / haven't been born / yet Lady Holiday is singing my blues' (Coleman 2003, p. 11). And, notably, Coleman's depictions of sexuality recall the sexual agency that Davis identifies in the blues women's songs, as we can see in 'To an Interloper.' Coleman's speaker tells the interloper who wants to romance her 'you are a foreigner here. / this is my skin' (Coleman 2001, p. 143), asserting her agency and independence. The speaker explains, 'the heat that cracks and dries your consciousness / is my breath on my lover's chest. you have no claim here' simultaneously acknowledging her desirability and denying the interloper access to her body (Coleman 2001, p. 143). The speaker commands respect from others while celebrating her sexuality.

By actively seeking pleasure, the poets' speakers resist a numb existence, which the stresses of working-class life, compounded by the stresses of being a woman or a woman of color in a patriarchal society plagued by racism, can lead to. Kathi Weeks describes the connection between the American work ethic and prizing of heterosexual marital monogamy under U.S. capitalism:

One of the most persistent elements of the work ethic over the course of US history is its valorization of self-control in the face of the temptations and what Daniel Rodgers characterizes as a faith in the 'sanitizing effects of constant labor' (1978, 123, 12). This same productivist asceticism, which was designed to encourage work discipline and thrift, has also served to animate the ideal of heterosexual marital monogamy' (Weeks 2011, pp. 164-65).

Weeks also unpacks the gendered uses of the word 'tramp,' a male tramp challenges the American work ethic and a female tramp poses a threat to the institution of heterosexual marriage (Weeks 2011, p. 165). The portrayals of sexual pleasure in the poets' work then, most describing sex outside of marriage or not defining the nature of the relationships between lovers, resist the confines of capitalism in addition to challenging gender and cultural norms.

In 'Ostinato Vamp' the speaker, who claims that she is 'the daughter of earthquakes / dissonant and disruptive' is a threat to capitalist society in many ways. (Coleman 2003, p. 32). Indeed

one definition of the word ‘vamp’ is ‘a woman who uses her charm or wiles to seduce and exploit men,’ a more cunning version of the female tramp Weeks describes (*Merriam Webster* 2018). The speaker repeatedly claims that she stole, a true offence to the capitalist system, ‘from god-sliding hypocrites,’ ‘shysters given / judgeships, panderers governing media, sanctioned gamblers’ among other figures who abuse the system of capitalism for their own gain (Coleman 2003, p. 32). Coleman’s refrain of ‘i stole’ is particularly clever as the titular words ‘ostinato’ and ‘vamp’ both refer to a repeated musical phrase, a defining characteristic of the blues and jazz. ‘Ostinato’ has etymological connections to ‘obstinate,’ which is apt since persistence is required to combat those who use their money and power to oppress (*Merriam Webster* 2018). Later, the speaker describes herself and her lover as ‘ready to fornicate,’ but in the next line a parenthetical describing the drudgery of work appears instead of a description of their sexual encounter, implying that the sex itself is an escape from ‘a bad season spent chained to a filing cabinet / bosses like dogs barking for important files / the rain of empty talk riving the intellect’ (Coleman 2003, p. 32). This act of sexual pleasure is form of rebellion against the limitations of work as well a return to and reclamation of the body and the mind, a celebration of, as the speaker puts it in the poem’s ending, ‘[her] splendid rock-and-roll’ (Coleman, 2003, p. 32).

Two poems in Beatty’s *Boneshaker* that depict the speaker reveling in sexual pleasure involve speeding away from her job (waitress in ‘Going Deep for Jesus’ and cashier in ‘Speaking Corvette’) in/on a vehicle (motorcycle and corvette, respectively) with a love interest, both working-class men. The poems depict the jobs and certain realities of the speakers’ lives, including a ‘run-down apartment’ and her mother’s house, as things to escape from, things that stifle pleasure. In ‘Going Deep for Jesus,’ the speaker even wants to forget her name. Sex is something that helps the speaker, as she wryly describes, ‘come / back to my self’ (Beatty 2002, p. 7). Sex is a way to become in tune with herself and her body. The speaker ‘decided god and orgasm / were the same thing’ and that ‘if god were here, she’d shove down / like a two-stroke in a rainstorm, she’d let it fly’ (Beatty 2002, p. 8). These moments of physical pleasure, orgasm and speeding down a road on a motorcycle, are figured as transcendent, and though the speaker longs to escape her job and her material conditions, she doesn’t long to escape Pittsburgh, the place where she is from. The speaker characterizes sex as an attempt ‘to shotgun a moment, to split open / our lives until / we *were* the mills, we *were* the fire’ (Beatty 2002, p. 8). The speaker longs to embody the spirit and energy of the place, she just wishes that her life in that place afforded her a better quality existence.

Carving a Space

All three poets express the need for boldness, invoke images of aggression, destruction or violence when describing the process of writing and claiming a space in the writing community. Coleman writes about the difficulty for women writers to be considered equals by male peers in ‘Poetry Lesson Number One.’ The speaker describes a group of male writers who hang out at a café and notes that ‘[n]o / women were / allowed at that table unless being schemed upon, or of / exceptional beauty’ (Coleman 1987, p. 15). The speaker ‘boldly intruded’ on their group and gave them poems of hers to read, which impressed one of the poets so much that he declared, ‘“You *are* a writer, young / lady. As good a / writer as a man!”’ And though the 19 year old speaker is elated by the praise, goes home ‘glowing in the dark,’ the gender discrimination that women writers face is stressed even in his attempt to compliment the speaker (Coleman 1987, p. 15).

In ‘Obituary,’ a poem modeled after Denise Levertov’s ‘The Springtime,’ Coleman’s speaker laments unread poets, those that are excluded from the writing establishment. She links their unheard verses with the demands of work: ‘the gut-rending / sound of cogs grinding and poets / felled silent’ (Coleman 1987, p. 207). Reworking Levertov’s closing lines: ‘The rabbits / will bare their teeth at / the spring moon,’ (Levertov 1979, p. 82), Coleman imagines a future, aggressive act of the true yet unread poets, revolutionary and defiant: ‘eking out a space at the mean / end of time. They will bare their / teeth and spring at the moon’ (Coleman 1987, p. 207). As Pereira notes, Coleman transforms Levertov’s ‘spring,’ an adjective describing the moon, referencing a season, into an active verb, indicating the struggle necessary for the ignored poets to have their voices heard (Pereira 2014).

In ‘Loose Woman,’ Cisneros casts the poet-speaker as an outlaw, indeed as ‘*la desesperada*, most-wanted public enemy. / My happy picture grinning from the wall’ (Cisneros 1987, p. 114). She does not conform to traditional notions of womanhood and aligns herself with rebellious figures of the past, including witches. Words are figured as weapons to combat those who disapprove of her life choices. When the angry ‘mob’ arrives, ‘they wobble like gin’ when the speaker ‘open[s] [her] mouth’ (Cisneros 1995, p. 112). Although the poem is a diatribe against limiting societal expectations of women, it can also be read as an *ars poetica*. The disapproving ‘they’ of the poem can be interpreted as patriarchal culture, but it can also be seen as the writing establishment from which Cisneros feels estranged. In this context, the poem’s closing lines ‘Ping! Ping! Ping! / I break things’ show her mission as a writer to break down barriers (Cisneros 1995, p. 115).³

Beatty expresses her exasperation with the poetry establishment several times in her body of work, including ‘Shooter’ in which the speaker fantasizes about shooting, among other men, ‘the famous poet who said there are no great women writers’ (Beatty 2008, p. 14). In the epistolary poem ‘Dear American Poetry’ from her 2013 book *The Switching Yard* Beatty expresses frustration with the homogeneity of the influential annual anthology *Best American Poetry*: ‘I see you’re publishing: / straightman/straightman/white white white how / nice,’ and declares ‘I’m bored to death’ (Beatty 2013b, p. 46). Beatty responds to this boredom with sexually aggressive claims, ‘your sonnet is impotent / and I / have a hard-on,’ and declares ‘I was once fucked by an intellectual in iambic pentameter: / my hand was better, and more responsive’ (Beatty 2013b, p. 46). Although a hilarious take-down, Beatty’s suggestive lines undercut the ‘best’ in the title *Best American Poetry*. That poetry just doesn’t do it for her; it’s certainly not the best she’s ever had. And, although her ‘hand’ is an obvious reference to masturbation, it can also be read as her work penned by her own hand. She sees her work as superior, more ‘alive.’⁴

It is true that changing attitudes and feminist agitation opened more doors to women writers, but to this day women face more difficulty in the publishing industry. Economic conditions, class biases and racial discrimination compound those struggles. Karen Kovacic explores these struggles in her article ‘Between L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and Lyric: The Poetry of Pink Collar Resistance.’ She points out that certain practices in the poetry world, including constraining critical (often binary) categorization, keep these poems and poets on the outskirts. She points

³ For an alternative reading of this passage in the context of a discussion of how Chicana writers have responded to portrayals of women in Rodolfo ‘Corky’ Gonzales’s *I Am Joaquín*, see Leigh Johnson’s ‘Unsexing *I Am Joaquín* through Chicana Feminist Poetic Revisions’ (Johnson 2015, pp. 72-78).

⁴ Beatty’s ‘Dear American Poetry’ was first published in *Court Green* in 2011 (Trigilio & Trinidad 2011). Ironically, two years later another of Beatty’s poems ‘Youngest Known Savior’ was included in *Best American Poetry 2013* (Duhamel & Lehman 2013).

out the relevance of working-class women's poetry in the current economy: 'Surely, in a so-called 'post-industrial' economy like ours, pink-collar poetry deserves a literary category of its own and a criticism alert to its aims' (Kovacik 2001, p. 34). Although I agree with Kovacik's sentiment that working-class women's poetry deserves greater recognition and critical attention, I resist the term 'pink-collar' since it invokes gendered stereotypes that working-class women writers reject. The term is too limiting, especially as it often refers to service work, a category of labor that now comprises the majority of the working-class jobs in the United States, jobs held by people of all genders. In an interview with Mary Kate Azcuy, Jan Beatty expresses concern about her poetry being categorized and claims that in 'poetryland [...] labels are used mercilessly to oppress' (Beatty 2013). Like Beatty, I am hesitant to assign more labels to working-class women poets. I would not like to see them pigeonholed or further marginalized. Instead, thinking back to Samantha Bee's segment on neglected members of the working class, it would be preferable to see more attention paid to their work so that when the subject of working-class poetry is broached, readers and critics think of poetry written by women as readily as they do poetry written by men.

As Beatty, Cisneros, and Coleman have repeatedly demonstrated in their poetry, working-class experiences and perspectives enrich art. It is lamentable how the working-class is exploited, disrespected, and, especially in the case of working-class women and people of color, too-often ignored. This mistreatment and neglect harms our society as a whole and narrows our worldview. In light of the recent presidential election, scholars who study working-class issues are planning more conferences and producing more publications, journalists are penning more think pieces. Because of the misleading over-coverage of working-class white men that is out of scale with reality, scholars and journalists need to consciously balance their coverage and focus their attention on working-class women and people of color, not only out of a sense of fairness or to more accurately represent society, but also because we all have so much to gain from their perspectives.

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