

# Toward a Theory Of Working Class Literature

By Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson

The dominant tradition of 20th Century American literature is one of realism and naturalism. It has produced a literature that has told us, in concrete terms, the cost of American civilization.

— James T. Farrell

In these pages, we wish to propose that the intellectual life of our nation would be richer if those of us from the working class brought with us into the academy our own literature and culture.

Just as women's studies, African American studies, Native American studies, and other recently developed programs have enriched the academy, so too is there a place for the serious study of working-class literature and culture.

We mean by working class the blue-collar, wage-earning sector of our society, where people tend not to have college educations or financial assets beyond the market value of their labor. We see this economic

sector as possessing a culture that differs in values and aesthetic from the nation's dominant middle-class culture.

For our purposes here, we define the literature of the working class as works written by working-class people about their class experience.<sup>1</sup>

There is no shortage of this sort of working-class writing, but there is no agreed-upon definition of working-class literature. In fact, since the 1930s, there has been little discussion of working-class literature, and the definitions of the '30s are inadequate to the circumstances of the present.

We need to move beyond, as Constance Coiner notes, those 1930s "Marxist assumptions about working-class literature that place a resistance culture in binary opposition to bourgeois culture":

Working-class literature is, at best, a subspecies of bourgeois literature, just as any culture of

---

Renny Christopher teaches American literature at California State University, Stanislaus. She is the author of *The Viet Nam War/The American War* (University of Massachusetts), and *Viet Nam and California* (poetry; Burning Cities Press). She is writing a memoir. Carolyn Whitson, also a poet, teaches medieval literature, women's literature and film, and American working-class literature at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul. The authors are co-writing a study of 20th century American working class literature.

## 'Class' is almost always ignored in the contemporary critical discourse of 'race, class, and gender.'

---

resistance remains, for the historical moment, a subspecies of bourgeois culture.<sup>2</sup>

"Class" is almost always ignored in the contemporary critical discourse of "race, class, and gender." Many working-class authors, such as Toni Morrison, have received critical attention as writers, but not as working-class writers. They are tagged instead "African American" or "woman," as in Morrison's case, or "lesbian," as with Dorothy Allison. Other working-class authors, such as Carolyn Chute, remain thoroughly marginalized, without any tag at all.

Why so much resistance to examining the classed nature of literature? Literary studies has not been willing—or able—to take on this class nature simply because embracing a classed approach would mean rethinking many of the most fundamental questions of literary theory, genre, and criticism.

Working-class literature, at base, cannot simply fit into the status quo of literary criticism.

One example: If working-class literature is defined as work by an author with origins in the working class, then authorial biography is integral to literary criticism, a position contrary to the "death of the author" notions central to much recent critical theory.

Working-class literature also

challenges genre definitions as well. If the plot of the novel requires movement, a quest, a journey, mobility of some kind, and working-class lives are defined by lack of such movement, how can a work of fiction addressing working-class experience even be a novel?

Likewise, if poetry is defined as an intense distillation of language, rather than a portrayal of experience, and a working-class poem is one rooted in working-class experience, can a work even be said to be a working-class poem?

**L**iterary criticism, especially in the context of so-called "high theory," demands only an intellectual relationship to the work being studied, no different from a scholar's intellectual relationship to a math problem.

This intellectual relationship moves literature into a purely abstract realm and severs the connection between thought and action so integral to working-class conceptions of the world.

Most working-class literature, by contrast, calls for action by the reader, calls for change in the conditions detailed in the literature (as, indeed, does much feminist literature and literature by writers of color).

To deal with working-class literature as if it only had an aesthetic dimension is to fail to under-

---

## Working class writers seek to reproduce the boredom of mindless repetition, of humans acting as machinery.

---

stand the fullness of this literature. Likewise, to deal with such writing only as sociological documentation is also to fail to understand the fullness of working-class literature.

It is not our goal to establish, as a substitute for middle-class conformity in academic discourse, some sort of proletarian conformity. We see working-class cultures and working-class literary productions as too radically diverse to be encompassed by a single grand theory. As bell hooks writes:

In Donna Haraway's essay 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs,' she warns feminist thinkers against assuming positions that 'appear to be the telos of the whole,' so that we do not 'produce epistemologies to police deviation from official women's experience.' Though Haraway is speaking about mainstream feminist practice, her warning is applicable to marginalized groups who are in the process of making and remaking critical texts that name our politics and experience.<sup>3</sup>

Working-class studies need to heed this warning. We should take what is useful and patch together ("cobble together," maybe, to reference a now-outmoded working-class trade) our own theory, not a grand or totalizing theory, not a theory expressed in inaccessible jargon,

but a theory aligned closely to the literature by writers with origins in the working class, a theory aligned with both our own intellectual orientations and our gut feelings.

**W**orking class literature reproduces, in literary form, the conditions of the working class. Working class writers attempt, in various ways, to record the realistic speech patterns of people who do not speak standard English nor conduct conversations along intellectually analytic lines.

Sandra Cisneros's collection of short stories, *The House on Mango Street*, offers several examples of this recording: Girls discuss the onset of puberty by way of their jump rope rhymes and rhythms.<sup>4</sup> Broken English and staccato Spanish express Mamacita's frustration and growing alienation as her infant, her only companion during the day, begins speaking English against Mamacita's will. "No Speak English"<sup>5</sup>—the title—goes from being a statement Mamacita makes about herself to being a plea with her child.

When working-class writers take work itself as their subject, they seek to portray a pace of activity controlled by machinery, supervisors, or a time clock. They attempt to reproduce the boredom of sameness, of mindless repetition,

The challenge for these writers is to portray a place where individuality is not only not valued, but suppressed.

---

of humans acting as machinery.

Their challenge is to portray a place where individuality is not only not valued, but suppressed. They seek to portray the consequences of living, hour after hour, with such suppression.

Jim Daniels addresses the tension between the idea of literature as “beautiful” and the reality of the workplace in “May’s Poem”:

*“May, I’m gonna make you  
a beautiful poem,” I say  
and I turn and grab her  
and hug her to me  
pick her up  
and twirl her in circles ...*

*But she’s heavy  
and I have to put her down.  
The manager stands there:  
“Play time’s over. Break’s over.”  
Everyone walks away  
and goes back to work.*

*This isn’t my beautiful poem, I know.  
My poem would have no manager no  
end to breaks.  
My poem would have made her lighter.  
My poem would have never put her  
down.<sup>6</sup>*

Daniels paints a picture of a work environment that is both physically unpleasant and controlled by the manager who polices employee behavior. The poem alludes to an unwritable “beautiful poem,” unwritable because the dictates of literary aesthetics exclude

short-order cooks, dishwashers, and waitresses from the realm of beauty. But Daniels’ poem is the beautiful poem that it claims not to be. This is how we must understand working-class literary aesthetics.

Writers not writing about work because their subjects are out of work are more concerned with dimensions of life at the level of raw survival. They spin narratives of starvation, of job search, of standing in welfare lines. These narratives of waiting for change—because you’re paralyzed or without options—often have a style that dilates time and mimics the state of consciousness that an inoperative machine produces.

An illustration from John Giorno’s “An Unemployed Machinist”:

*An unemployed  
machinist  
An unemployed machinist  
who traveled  
here  
who traveled here  
from Georgia  
from Georgia 10 days ago  
10 days ago  
and could not find  
a job  
and could not find a job  
walked  
into a police station  
walked into a police station  
yesterday and said:*

---

## The working-class aesthetic usually also involves a distrust of authority and an aversion to its paternalism.

---

*yesterday  
and said:*

*"I'm tired  
of being scared  
I'm tired of being scared."<sup>7</sup>*

The working-class aesthetic usually also involves a distrust of authority and an aversion to paternalism. Law, court systems, and bureaucracies don't do as much for working-class people as they do for middle-class people. These institutions seem to exist to keep working-class people in their place and protect the rights of property.

Bobbie Ann Mason's character Jeannette in "Big Bertha Stories" is a woman whose Viet Nam veteran husband has to stay away from the house in order for her to collect welfare for herself and their child. The husband seems too overwhelmed by post-traumatic stress syndrome to ever become a consistent worker, parent, or spouse.

Jeannette goes to a free mental health clinic seeking advice on how to help her husband and their son, who is affected by his father's nightmares. The therapist doesn't realize that Jeannette's problems are social, not psychological:

His name is Dr. Robinson, but she calls him The Rapist, because the word therapist can be divided into two words, the rapist. He doesn't think her joke

is clever, and he acts as though he has heard it a thousand times before. He has a habit of saying, "Go with that feeling," the same way Bob Newhart did on his old TV show.

She told him about Donald's last days on his job at the lumberyard—how he let the stack of lumber fall deliberately and didn't know why, and about how he went away after that. When Jeannette suggests that she bring Donald in, the therapist looks bored and says nothing.

"He had another nightmare when he was home last," Jeannette says. "He dreamed he was crawling through tall grass and people were after him."

"How did you feel about that?" The Rapist asks eagerly.

"I didn't have the nightmare," she says coldly. "Donald did. I came to you to get advice about Donald, and you're acting like I'm the one who's crazy. I'm not crazy. But I'm lonely."<sup>8</sup>

To say the least, Jeannette and Dr. Robinson are at cross purposes. He is practicing an essentially middle-class form of individual development, while Jeannette has come to him, as an authority on mental problems, to seek practical advice on how to help a troubled man and, through that assistance, help her son and herself.

## Working class people know themselves to be individually powerless, so there is no celebration of individuality.

---

Jeannette is clear that she is not the one with the mental problem, but Dr. Robinson sees every person as someone seeking to know their own inner workings.

Jeannette needs Dr. Robinson's advice to restore her family's economic stability and closeness. The Rapist, from her perspective, wants to pry into her personal business and play head games. Mason shows here, in one simple and cutting passage, how the middle-class institutions designed to help the poor profoundly misunderstand and at times demean them.

The middle-class literary aesthetic, as well as middle-class culture, focuses on the individual and promotes the individual's sense of worth.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the middle-class aesthetic, the working-class literary aesthetic does not focus on individuality. Because working-class people live in harsh conditions and know themselves to be individually powerless, working-class culture, as a result, does not celebrate individuality. It instead recognizes the interdependence of units of people: family, community, friends, unions.

Dorothy Allison notes in "Steal Away" that the books on the shelf of the narrator's professor are not the simple means to "betterment" the professor considers them to be. Allison's narrator is infuriated by the ways these books deny the exist-

tence and humanity of her own people. In a kind of guerrilla intellectual terrorism, she steals the books and writes her working-class values into the very books that deny them:

I studied their words, gestures, jokes, and quarrels to see just how they were different from me. I limited my outrage to their office shelves, working my way through their books one at a time, carefully underlining my favorite passages in dark blue ink—occasionally covering over their own faded marks.<sup>10</sup>

The middle-class novel usually focuses on individuals and their trajectory toward individual success or failure. The working-class novel more typically will focus on crisis, and that crisis is usually, one way or another, about loss: loss of persons through death, loss of job or means of survival, loss of values through a quest for upward mobility, or a loss of some element that made someone's life meaningful—religion, perhaps, or an immigrant's high hopes.

Working class novels are often episodic, without a plot in the traditional sense or a single protagonist. Working class novels that do become novels of upward mobility often focus on what's lost along the way of the climb.

These works raise to a level of

---

## One form of resistance literature is the ‘anti-Horatio Alger’ narrative of unhappy upward mobility.

---

abstraction the givens of working-class life and make these lives not inconsequential in the eyes of potential middle-class readers who might be inclined, in their real lives, to consider these same lives entirely inconsequential.

**M**ost of the writers of working-class literature published by mainstream presses have worked their way out of the working class and into the middle class economically, and those who haven't have at least some college education.

These writers are writing for at least a mixed-class audience, if not for an entirely middle-class audience. Their books are published and marketed in such a way that they will not reach a large segment of the working-class readership. That is, their books will not ordinarily be available as affordable mass-market paperbacks in supermarkets, drugstores, or discount chains.

We are not claiming here that the category of work normally classified as “pop culture” has no value. Works written for and marketed to a predominantly working-class readership, such as “rags-to-riches” celebrity autobiographies or labor songs and other cultural productions, could also be the subject of legitimate critical study.

But we choose here to discuss

“literary” works, hoping we can begin to build a bridge that will lead to the study of other productions as literary works and not as folklore or anthropological artifacts.

We have also chosen the category of works that cross class lines because these works illuminate working-class issues most effectively for literary scholars.

How, then, do we develop a working-class literary theory? What existing foundations can we draw on? One way is to see working-class literature as “resistance literature.” This can help us understand its function, aesthetics, and its marginalization within canons of literary study.

One form of “resistance literature” that working-class writers use is the “anti-Horatio Alger” narrative of unhappy upward mobility. In these resisting narratives, upward mobility carries a price that is often too high to pay, as in Jack London's *Martin Eden*.<sup>11</sup>

*Martin Eden*, the title character of London's autobiographical novel, is totally disillusioned by his education and entry into the world of the middle class, which he finds hollow, empty, and devoid of meaning. He cannot rejoin his working-class world, nor find a place for himself in the middle-class world.

A famous writer, he finds all he has worked toward to be a chimera, and his first inclination is to run

## By their representation of the price of upward mobility, these writers contest the dominant 'Horatio Alger' myth.

---

away to an island: "And he would forget the books he had opened and the world that had proved an illusion."<sup>12</sup>

In the novel, a painting comes to symbolize the nature of the illusion of the middle-class world. When Martin Eden first sees this painting as an uneducated working-class man, and looks closely, he notices that, up close, the brush strokes don't add up to the image seen from a distance. Eden thinks the picture a trick. Then, later, after some education, he understands his "mistake." But, still later in the story, Eden finds he was right in the first place. The painting is an illusion.

Eventually Eden finds himself a passenger, rather than a crewman, on a ship.

Well, here he was, the great man on board, in the midmost center of it, sitting at the captain's right hand, and yet vainly harking back to forecastle and stoke-hole in quest of the Paradise he had lost. He had found no new one, and now he could not find the old one.<sup>13</sup>

And the pain of this is so great that Eden drowns himself.

This work and others like it, such as Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*, which ends with the protagonist's exile, constitute a form of "resistance literature," because by their representation of the price of

upward mobility they contest the dominant "Horatio Alger" myth.

**H**aving outlined some of the issues in defining and analyzing working-class literature, we turn now to issues related to the teaching of working-class literature.

When we from working-class backgrounds arrived at elite institutions to earn our Ph.D.s, we justified to ourselves our presence in such a self-promoting activity by pledging that we would do something communitarian with our educations. We would, as teachers, bring the value we learned to other working-class students and help them develop the tools for fuller political, intellectual, and economic participation in the world.

By being "out" about our class backgrounds, we would also give these students the visibility we had always lacked in our own higher education experiences.

This was our dream, but it has been compromised by our own assimilation into middle-class culture, its mannerisms, and the authority it wields. Our working-class students can't imagine that we were ever really like them.

These students are conflicted. They feel that they need to get from us what they know middle-class students get from their professors: the stamp of approval for pursuing



## Discussion of these works, we believe, cannot be about pity for the poor subjects depicted in this literature.

economic success.

Still, we feel there is hope for creating equity and diminishing the alienation these students will encounter through our interaction with other professors via professional discussions and scholarship. We want to reshape the discourse among faculty who might teach working-class literature in any context, such as part of multicultural literature. We want to see this literature taught in a way that recognizes that it represents the painful realities of the lives of working class students and that to reduce this literature to mere language games is to trivialize both the literature and the experience.

Just as it is necessary to recognize that representations of race in American literature relate directly to a world outside the text, we point out, so too do representations of working-class lives.

Discussion of these works, we believe, cannot be about pity for the poor subjects depicted in this literature. These discussions must entertain the possibility that the working-class world represented is a whole one, with a viable set of values equal or, in some cases, even superior to middle-class values.

Too often, when scholars or teachers acknowledge working-class oppression, it is to lament the very existence of working-class cul-

ture, to consider membership in that class itself a degraded state. To these scholars and teachers, the objective should be to “lift” working-class people—whom they conceptualize as culturally deprived, morally handicapped, and economically exploited—“up” to the middle class.

Teachers who take this stance frequently encourage working-class students to repudiate their working-class origins. “Sure you came from that,” they say in effect, “but your personal ability allows you to transcend your unfortunate class origins.”

Such teachers may think they’re generously helping a “poor kid” succeed, but what they are actually doing is erasing the idea that working-class culture has its own exceptional people who do not choose to leave their culture.

**T**he idea that any exceptional person will leave the working class and want to become middle class represents a facile acceptance of the myth of the American dream—that upward mobility and “success” are available to anyone deserving.

What is actually at work here, in the propagation of this myth, is something not at all innocuous—the demand that working-class students see their culture of origin through the eyes of the middle class, as something to be aban-

done in order to join the intellectual world.

Similar pressure has historically been applied to middle-class white women and students of color. The message: you are welcome in the intellectual world as long as you don't bring with you any aspects of the culture of origin that the intellectual world disdains.

What might the intellectual world look like if this demand were not placed on nontraditional students?

If working-class people brought with them their culture of origin, instead of conforming to the values of the institution, middle-class people would be forced to see working-class people as their equals.

Middle class students would come to respect working-class professors. Such an interaction might help in bringing about positive social change and a more just and democratic society.

One of the first steps in this process is drawing upon the work that has already been done in feminist studies, ethnocriticism, and

gay studies, because these fields have already begun the process of questioning how the academy both creates and dispenses knowledge.

The most central issue, these fields teach us, is the recognition that knowledge does not pre-exist. Knowledge is created. Keeping that idea in mind allows for an exploration of working-class ways of knowing and the kinds of knowledge created through these ways of knowing. In the fields of feminist, ethnic, and gay studies, pioneering critics shifted perspectives and looked into previously undervalued bodies of work. Students, in turn, showed enormous interest in these fields and enrolled in them. Eventually these fields became institutionalized with departments, majors, and graduate programs.

We would like working-class studies to follow the same trajectory. The result would give working-class literature visibility, respect, and interactive discourse that would augment, not annihilate, middle-class literary studies and discourse. ■

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Lauter, in his foundational essay "Working Class Women's Literature—An Introduction to Study," raises a number of questions about what is meant by working-class literature. He adds in the problem of audience and also raises generic questions by asking if oral traditions and songs might be appropriately categorized as working-class "literature." Lauter suggests it is "best to use relatively loose definitions and broad categories." Paul Lauter, "Working Class Women's Literature—An Introduction to Study," *Radical Teacher* 15 (1980): 16.

<sup>2</sup> Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and*

*Meridel Le Sueur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 140.

<sup>3</sup> bell hooks, *black looks: race and representation* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1992), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 49-52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-78.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Daniels, *Places/Everyone* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 62.

<sup>7</sup> John Giorno, "An Unemployed Machinist," in *Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life*, ed. Peter Oresick and Nicholas Coles (Urbana and Champagne: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 89.

- <sup>8</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, *Big Bertha Stories*, 122-123.
- <sup>9</sup> This is somewhat complicated for middle-class women, whose sense of self-worth is traditionally supposed to come from subordinating themselves to husband and family. But the necessity for the middle-class woman to make a good marriage and create a proper home can easily be seen as an expression of her individuality.
- <sup>10</sup> Dorothy Allison, *Trash* (Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1988), 84.
- <sup>11</sup> Jack London, *Martin Eden* (New York: Penguin, 1984). **other examples are** Agnes Smedley, *Daughter of Earth* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987; Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* New York: Persea Books, 1975.
- <sup>12</sup> London, *Martin Eden*, 421.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 477-8.

### Bibliography

- Allison, Dorothy. *Trash*. Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1988.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Coiner, Constance. *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Daniels, Jim. *Places/Everyone*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Davis, Rebecca Harding. *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1985.
- Giorno, John. "An Unemployed Machinist." *Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life*, ed. Peter Oresick and Nicholas Coles. Urbana and Champagne: University of Illinois Press (1990): 89.
- hooks, bell. *black looks: race and representation*. Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1992.
- Lauter, Paul. "Working Class Women's Literature—An Introduction to Study." *Radical Teacher* 15 (1980): 16-26.
- London, Jack. *Martin Eden*. New York: Penguin, 1984.
- Smedley, Agnes. *Daughter of Earth*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1987.
- Yezierska, Anzia. *Bread Givers*. New York: Persea Books, 1975.