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Book Reviews

Volume 8 Issue 1: Editorial

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At the end of 2022 we hoped that 2023 would bring us further scholarship and stories relating to working-class people around the world. This June issue certainly does so, and we are delighted to offer seven scholarly articles, two personal essays, a poem and five book reviews.

The topics covered are wide-ranging and cross continents, and the issue begins with an examination of the fight for an Irish-language school in a working-class neighbourhood in Dublin, Ireland in the early 1970s. In his article, ‘‘Sure why would they need Irish?’: Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, Ballymun, and working-class decolonisation, c.1970-73’, Kerron Ó Luain outlines the determination of the local working-class community as they fought for the right for their children to be educated in Irish and also points to the decline in conditions that made the school possible such as access to secure housing. With housing insecurity increasing in many places around the world, Ó Luain’s article serves not only as an historical analysis, but also as a reminder of the destructive forces of neoliberalism.

Ireland also features in Jordan Kirwan’s study of Irish academic activists – ‘Experiences of academic-activists in Ireland: comfortable and uncomfortable activism in the current institutional environment’. In his article, Kirwan looks at the differences experienced by academics from working-class backgrounds compared to their more privileged counterparts and the ways in which academics from marginalised groups are more likely to engage in the kind of activism that is not rewarded by their institutions. While it seems clear that precariously employed academics might face more pressure to not get involved with activism that could lead to them being labelled as ‘troublemakers’, Kirwan also notes that race, gender and class identity are big factors in whether an academic is concerned about how their activism might be perceived (and judged).

The next two articles focus on working-class culture, with Billy Williams’ ethnographic study of demolition derby participants in Arkansas, USA. In ‘Demolition Derby, Working-Class Identity and Capitalist Geographies’, Williams considers how working-class people deliberately create spectacles and create meaning through their engagement with the subculture while being fully aware of how this culture is perceived outside of their working-class communities.

Mikkel Jensen follows with a comparative study of three films set in deindustrialised locations, one from the US, one from Denmark and another from the UK in ‘Laughing all the Way to the Closed Factory: The Deindustrialization Comedy’. He looks at the use of comedy to provide both some escape for working-class viewers through the hopeful elements contained in the films, but also served as education of the consequences of deindustrialisation, particularly on men as they lost their jobs and sense of identity as workers.

The attention then turns to literature, with three articles looking at different aspects of working-class literature. In ‘Problems and possibilities for Swedish working-class literature in a neoliberal age’, Magnus Gustafson looks at some examples of contemporary Swedish literature and considers whether the authors demonstrate clear class perspectives and representation of

labour movements, or whether their work has turned to more individual and therefore, neoliberal concerns.

Ronald Paul follows with an analysis of the fiction of Dorothy Hewett and Ruth Park, who both wrote about working-class Sydney in the 1940s and 1950s. ‘‘Typical characters under typical circumstances’: The Slum Fiction of Dorothy Hewett and Ruth Park’ considers the kinds of representations of working-class people in their books and asks which of the authors captured the lives of working-class people more successfully.

The last article focused on literature is James O’Donoghue’s ‘Dropping Voices: Southern Black Agrarian Revolt in Charles Chesnutt’s Fiction’ in which he looks at the intersections of class and race in Chesnutt’s work and offers some criticisms of a perceived middle-class individualism in his work.

Two personal essays follow – Bob Zecker’s ‘They Died from Misadventure and Accident’: Learning from our Missing Ancestral Failures’ offers a narrative based on his own family history, and a ‘missing’ ancestor who may, or may not, have been present during a terrible fire in a 1900s Newark lamp factory. Zecker uses his family stories to point to the ways that working-class people have, and continue to be placed in dangerous conditions to produce the goods that people want to buy.

In ‘Invisible Laborers: A storied love letter to other working-class mothers in academia, Miranda Cunningham uses personal narrative to explore how working-class mothers in higher education experience and respond to classism.

A poem by Ian C Smith follows – ‘The Laughing Face of Youth’, a prose poem about a young worker unloading trucks and his memory of his unforgiving boss who is described as a ‘swine’ and ‘gripped by a demon’ (many workers would be able to relate to this kind of boss!).

There are also five books reviews, edited by Christie Launius, which once again show that there are many books out there that explore working-class life and experience, even if they do not always use the term ‘working class’ in their titles. These are books that working-class studies scholars believe are of value and make important contributions to the field. The topics of the reviewed books are diverse, and include queer theory and Marxism, advice for marginalised workers, cooperative housing in New York City, the role of universities in taking over neighbourhoods in parts of the US, and the effects of the Covid pandemic on the US workforce.

This editorial and the production of this issue has also crossed continents, with Sarah working from Australia, the US and Germany while travelling for work and to visit family. The chance to travel to these places has been a great privilege, and Sarah still sometimes finds it hard to believe that the former girl from the council estate now has these kinds of opportunities. But the travel between these very different places also shows what needs to change to improve the lives of working-class people[1]. In US cities, homelessness is very visible, as is the lack of affordable health care, as people’s suffering also spills onto the streets. Immigrant workers in the US often work in very poor conditions. In Germany, there is also visible homelessness, particularly around main train stations in the large cities. Germany’s rate of homelessness is rising, and although there are multiple reasons for the high rate – a lack of affordable housing

[1] While we use the term ‘working class’, we are also including those who are not employed.

is a large factor. Affordable housing is also an issue in Australia, with large increases in rents making it increasingly difficult to find somewhere to live for many workers. The decline in social housing has contributed to the problem, with long waiting lists for social housing leaving people waiting for years for secure homes. Secure housing has many positive flow-on effects, and its importance can not be overestimated.

Moving between countries also shows that there are many universal aspects to working-class lives. The sense of community runs strongly through all, as does the wishes for decent and secure housing, jobs with good wages and conditions, and access to quality healthcare and education. Working-class studies scholars and activists continue to advocate on behalf of working-class people, and this Journal hopes to play some part too.

‘Sure why would they need Irish?’: Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, Ballymun, and working-class decolonisation, c.1970-73

Kerron Ó Luain, Dublin City University **Abstract**

This article examines the struggle carried out by working-class Irish-language activists in Ballymun to found a gaelscoil (Irish-medium school) in the early 1970s. The article is based on archival research and interviews with two key participants involved in the campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, Éilís Uí Langáin and Colm Ó Torna. The campaign to establish the school is viewed through the lenses of class and decolonisation. Firstly, the long-term socio-economic and political contexts to the campaign are outlined. Secondly, the social base and the pre-existing networks and ideology which allowed the campaign to develop are explored. Following this, the emergence of the campaign and its politics are examined. Finally, the lasting impact of the struggle for the school both locally and nationally is discussed. The conclusion reached is one that is of the utmost importance for Irish language, gaelscoil and decolonial activists, namely that it will be difficult to replicate the success of Ballymun again today in the neoliberal context because the material basis in terms of secure housing and a tight-knit urban community does not exist. At a time when there has been much talk in Irish revivalist circles about promoting Irish in Dublin with the launch of the Baile Átha Cliath le Gaeilge (Dublin For Irish) scheme, the history of Ballymun and Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch demonstrates how a secure home is the lynchpin on which real communal progress with regard the Irish language must be based. It is therefore necessary for those who wish to see the Irish language flourish in the city to learn the lessons of history and improve, first and foremost, the day-to-day lives of ordinary Dubliners by becoming active on the burning question of housing.

Keywords

Class, ideology, Irish language, gaelscoil, decolonisation, Irish republicanism, cultural nationalism, Ballymun

Although a small community had existed in Ballymun prior to the 1960s, the towers which came to represent the area and feature in so much government, press, and literary output, were built during the years 1965-69. Dublin’s inner-city housing had become unsafe and what housing that did exist was scarce. This prompted the state to construct homes on a mass scale and in a short time frame. The National Building Authority (NBA) was established to build and oversee the construction of the Ballymun Flats and by 1969 nineteen towers of various heights had been built, housing some 20,000 residents (Boyle 2005:183). As Mark Boyle has commented ‘as a grandiose public spectacle that embraced the Keynesian economic management philosophy of the day, and that displayed the latest Fordist technologies of housing construction, Ballymun served as a showpiece of Ireland’s new ambition. Ballymun was Ireland’s beacon of modernity, a statement of its intentions to serve as a basing point for international capital, and a benchmark of its drive for modernization’ (2005: 183). However, the notion that the Ballymun Flats could be held up as a showpiece for state housing was soon cast aside. Despite spending £10,000,000 on the construction of the flats in Ballymun through

the NBA, the state discharged responsibility to Dublin Corporation. The state's economic programme in the 1970s, based as it was on foreign direct investment, failed to deliver a budgetary surplus. Consequently, underfunded from the outset, Dublin Corporation washed its hands of providing decent services and amenities to the newly constructed housing in Ballymun (Boyle 2005: 183).

In similar fashion, from the mid-1960s, the state had also begun to wash its hands of the Irish language. No longer would there even be the pretence of delivering the serious funding needed for the language in the social and educational spheres if it were to survive in an Anglophone dominated world. In 1964 the publication of the government report *Athbheochan na Gaeilge: the Restoration of the Irish Language* signalled the state stepping back from offering serious support to the language (1964). Then, in 1965, under OECD influence, the *Investment in Education* report was published. The report further emphasised the Irish language as a hindrance to economic development, this time in the educational sphere (Daly 2016: 220-21). These two reports foreshadowed the abandonment of the cultural revival project which had been ongoing since the 1920s. That project, however, was never allowed to fully develop. Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin has highlighted the failure of the state to redistribute its resources in a way that would have saved the strongest Irish-speaking districts during the twentieth century (2007:207-8). Conchúr Ó Giollagáin and Tamás Péterváry, meanwhile, have emphasised the neo-colonial nature of the state and its various departments. Postcolonial states, they argue, often find it difficult to cast off the damage done by colonisation. According to David Llyod, whom the authors draw on, 'the consequence has been an effort, common to imperialism and the national state, to marginalise inassimilable and recalcitrant social groups, cultural forms and political projects' (Ó Giollagáin, Péterváry 2016; 36). This manifested in the culture of government departments, such as the Department of Education, where the demand for Irish-medium schooling was often met with apathy or hostility. If we view the obstinacy of such government departments through this prism, then, logically, the work of countering this mentality and democratising and Gaelicizing a section of the educational system can be viewed as decolonial.

By the 1960s, both Ballymun and the Irish language at a state-wide level were being abandoned due to an austere monetary philosophy that had been sinking its roots deeper since T.K. Whittaker *First Programme For Economic Expansion* 1958 further embedded the Twenty-Six County State's economy into the globalizing capitalist system. Paradoxically, by the late 1960s, there was a rise in the proportion of GNP devoted to social expenditure, on education, health and welfare (Daly 2016: 252). Whittaker's programme created an economic boon at a state-wide by the early 1970s. Thus, as the welfarist state was becoming more prosperous and spending more for the benefit of its citizens, it was retreating from its support for the Irish language. When Fianna Fáil under the leadership of Jack Lynch won the election of 1969 Patrick Hillery was appointed as Minister for Foreign Affairs. The move augured a campaign to join the European Economic Community (EEC) to further reap the rewards of newfound prosperity. Yet, despite some arguing that membership of the EEC would herald a move to break from English influence, as Robbie McVeigh and Bill Rollston have recently written, the move, in fact, belied a 'continued dependency' since there existed 'no viable project to join the [EEC] *independent* of the UK' (McVeigh, Rollston 2021:172-3). Although there was a multiplicity of opinion among Irish speakers, a strong campaign by some sections of Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League), highlighted the loss of sovereignty (Nic Oireachtaigh; *Inniu* March 1970). The state's position of only paying lip service to the Irish language was underscored in the negotiations with the EEC. In the summer of 1971 Hillery informed the bloc

that the Dublin government would only be seeking the much diminished 'Treaty status' – instead of that of a full working language – for Irish (Ráiteas: 1971).

But, to return to the local. Resistance manifested in Ballymun to the twin problems of underinvestment in the community and in Irish-medium schooling in the area from around 1970. In writing the history of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, the first gaelscoil[2] (Irish-medium school) established in Ballymun in the early 1970s, P. Ó Ceallaigh noted how the school was born 'in the teeth of fierce opposition from the Irish educational establishment; opposition which stemmed from the somewhat patronising belief that children from a working class Dublin background would not have the intellectual capacity to cope with being educated entirely through the medium of Irish' (Ó Ceallaigh 1960: 11). Not only had the founders of the school to contend with macro-economic forces such as capitalism, and a state that for neo-colonial reasons was either apathetic or hostile towards Irish, but, because they were working class, the added dynamic of classism compounded matters for those seeking a gaelscoil. This article traces the story of these founders and the issues of class and classism they encountered.

Most of the state- and national-level histories of the 1970s period either ignore completely or gloss over the emergence of the gaelscoil movement (Ferriter 2013; Foster 2007; Lee 1990). Thomas Walsh, in his book *Primary Education in Ireland, 1897-1990: Curriculum and Context* argues that 'department policy was supportive of extending the network of gaelscoileanna, owing to the positive results they were achieving in the Irish language' (Walsh 2012: 229). Meanwhile, in terms of Ballymun, Boyle has asserted that 'community activism in Ballymun dates from the mid1970s' and that 'it was not until the rapid decline of the estate in the early 1980s that real community politics took off' (Boyle; 185). As the following pages will go to show, the Department of Education was certainly not supportive of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch. Furthermore, the activism which led to the foundation of the school in spite of deep-seated opposition dated from the early 1970s. First, the socio-economic and political contexts to the campaign are examined. Second, the social base, pre-existing networks and ideology on which the campaign drew is interrogated, followed by detail on the emergence of the campaign and its politics. Lastly, the legacy of the struggle for the school in both Ballymun and further afield is discussed.

Class Composition, Networks and Ideology

Who were the gaelscoil activists who waged this campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch? Importantly, these activists did not function in a vacuum but instead were part of a burgeoning movement. In other parts of Dublin, such as Raheny, and in Galway and Belfast, parents and educators were mobilising to counter the erosion, or invisibility, of the Irish language within the school system locally. In Dublin, as sociolinguists Pádraig Ó Riagáin and Mícheál Ó Gliasáin contended in 1979, the growth of the gaelscoil movement from 1969 onwards was 'related to the suburban expansion of the last twenty years' (1979: 23). In the newly built estates, whether middle class like those in Raheny or working class such as the flats in Ballymun, the lack of amenities, especially community centres, created an opening for the gaelscoil. Irish-medium schools could function at once as centres for linguistic rights and education, but could also act as public hubs in places that were lacking an essential communal glue (Ó Riagáin, Ó Gliasáin: 146).

[2] At the time the schools were called variously 'Scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge' or 'Scoileanna lán-Ghaelacha' (All-Irish Schools), but later came to be popularly known as gaelscoileanna, so I will deploy this latter term for simplicity.

Nevertheless, the bulk of support for the gaelscoil movement in Dublin in its early years came from middle-class areas: Scoil Neasáin, Raheny (1969); Scoil Mobhí, Glasnevin (1972); Scoil Naithí, Dundrum (1973) and Scoil Chrónáin, Rathcoole (1975) were mostly located in such localities (POBAL 2006; Bunliosta, 2021). Indeed, by comparison with Dublin City more widely, the occupational status of fathers whose children attended the gaelscoileanna was relatively high. Most the fathers (65%) were employed as professionals or in state or semi-state companies at managerial level. Of the fathers 33% had third level education and the figure for mothers stood at 17%, in contrast to 7% of people in Dublin at large (Ó Riagáin, Ó Gliasáin: 33). The gaelscoil founding committee for Scoil Neasáin in Raheny was strongly middle class as shown in one list of its founders. The list included a 'business executive', 'teacher', 'sub-editor', 'journalist', 'civil servant', all males, and five 'housewives', while another woman was listed as a 'civil servant' (List: c.1969). The same class composition was discernible among the gaelscoil movement that was coming together on a supra-local level in Dublin and Galway from 1970 onwards and which eventually coalesced into Comhchoiste Náisiúnta na Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge in 1973/74 (Ní Fhearghusa: 17-18). The predominance of the middle class was a trend in keeping with the turn of the twentieth century Gaelic revivalists in Conradh na Gaeilge (McMahon: 139). Moreover, the emergence of the gaelscoil movement of the late twentieth century can be usefully theorised using Ronald Inglehart's idea of 'post-materialism'. This refers to the transformation of the objectives of social groups from primarily materialist – that is, seeking food and shelter – to agitating for broader concerns about autonomy, self-expression and culture (Inglehart 1977: *passim*).

This is not the full story, however. As Ó Riagáin agus Ó Gliasáin explain, 'notwithstanding the pronounced leaning towards middle-class areas and families, the schools appear to draw support from a very wide range of social and occupational groups' (1979: 38). Hence the importance of Ballymun and Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch as an exemplar of the working-class demand for a gaelscoil in the late twentieth century. The school's founding group arose from the grassroots Ballymun Tenants Association and Ballymun Parents Committee (*Inniu* 8 October 1971). The group comprised mostly working-class men and working-class housewives (Ó Torna 2021, Uí Langáin 2021). Although material issues were still a concern for many of the gaelscoil activists in Ballymun, where lack of services and social issues were constant problems, the key activists held secure jobs, and, due to the housing policy of the time, secure tenure (*The Ballymun Experience*: 7-8). A recent study by Baumgartner et al. has highlighted 'the foundational role of tenure security for … multiple health outcomes' (2022). It is my contention that this relative material security and its clear link to less negative social impacts, even in deprived areas such as Ballymun, created the context for gaelscoil activism.

One of the housewives involved in the campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch was Éilís Uí Langáin. I conducted an interview with her by phone in early 2021. The interview could not be conducted in person due to the corona virus pandemic. Contact was established through pre-existing networks within the gaelscoil movement. As advised by Patricia Leavy in her chapter on research design for oral history projects, 'a letter prior to a phone call is recommended, so that people are not put on the spot. A letter also allows you an opportunity to provide some introductory information about the study' (Leavy 2015: 35). An email was sent to Uí Langáin outlining the project and then phone contact was established.

Originally from Cabra, Uí Langáin moved to Ballymun in 1968 where she got a flat with her husband who worked for the *Irish Press* and their young child. Uí Langáin had only 'school Irish' and was not fully fluent when she first moved to Ballymun. She had been the only girl

from her road in Cabra that went on to secondary school in the 1950s, the majority going straight into work. Her father, a Dublin man, instilled the importance of culture in her. By contrast, her mother, a Galway woman who had Irish, 'had no interest in it, like a lot of people at the time'.[3] Her mother associated Irish with poverty and was not too pleased when Éilís sent her children to the gaelscoileanna. The first Uí Langáin heard of the proposed gaelscoil for the Ballymun area was on the programme *Seven Days* around 1968 (Uí Langáin 2021).

Colm Ó Torna was the second person interviewed regarding Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch. As with Uí Langáin, contact was made through pre-existing networks within the gaelscoil movement and an interview took place over the phone during the corona virus lockdown in 2021. Unlike most of the other gaelscoil activists agitating for Scoil an tSeachtar Loach Ó Torna did not reside in Ballymun. He lived outside the area in Artane and was employed as a civil servant. He was, nevertheless, central to the campaign there, particularly in terms of publicity and he took part in the Ballymun Parents Committee meetings. From early on in his involvement Ó Torna began delivering Irish classes four mornings a week in different flats and houses around Ballymun. He was keen to stress, however, that although he contributed to the campaign 'this is the story of the people of Ballymun, not Colm Ó Torna's story'. Ó Torna's own experience of the Irish language within his family was positive. His father, from Drumcondra, published works in the language. Ó Torna received his primary schooling in Scoil Cholmcille on Marlborough Street, one of the few 'all-Irish' schools in the city, and then in Coláiste Mhuire, a secondary private school run by the Christian Brothers that used Irish as the medium of instruction. Following his schooling, Ó Torna emigrated to England and when he returned with his family secured a job as a civil servant with Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, as a *timire* (a travelling teacher/activist) for the organisation Glór na nGael. He was not involved in politics, but was a member of a Catholic sodality while he also participated in educational campaigns in the Gaeltacht, such as those around schools in Dún Chaoin, Oileán Chléire and Ráth Chairn (Ó Torna 2021).

Other people both interviewees mentioned as being involved in the campaign or as being members of the Ballymun Parents Committee included Francis P. O'Toole/Proinsias Ó Tuathail and his wife Phyllis, Eithne Bean Uí Mhuireagáin and her husband John Morgan, Helen Nic Giolla Rua and her husband Antain Mac Giolla Rua, Cáit Mhic Chárthaigh, John and Eileen O'Connell, and Brendan Pringle (the latter the first Chairman of the Parents Committee) (Ó Torna Notes 2021) (Uí Langáin 2021). Ó Torna described both O'Toole and Pringle as 'well educated' and having great ability. According to Ó Torna, Pringle was an adept public speaker and highly effective at arguing his case (Ó Torna 2021). Both Pringle and O'Toole were members of the local Tenant's Assocation, while they had also been active in the Credit Union movement are were trade union members where they worked in the postal sector. As noted in *The Ballymun Experience: a Case History of a Community Problem* pamphlet 'neither had any previous connection with the Irish language movement and both had forgotten most of the Irish they had learned at school, but now came to the conclusion that without the Irish language, not only the Ballymun community, but the whole Irish nation, would suffer' (*The Ballymun Experience*: 7-8).

Although the Ballymun Flats birthed a new community who demanded the right to have their children educated in Irish, there were pre-existing networks of Irish speakers in the area on

[3] The interviews were conducted in Irish and any quotations used have been translated into English. Likewise, segments from newspapers or periodicals such as *Inniu* and *Comhar* have been translated from Irish to English in most cases.

which to build. When Riobard Mac Góráin of Gael Linn spoke on the television programme *7 Days* in 1976 and exclaimed that Irish-speaking communities had been cropping up in different areas for a number of years due to the founding of the gaelscoileanna one Ballymun resident, Gus Cribben/Aibhistín Ó Cribín, was less than impressed. Cribben, who was active in the campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch and a member of the Irish language youth group Ógras, wrote to the *Irish Press* to set the record straight:

> Alas! As those of us who have laboured to establish All-Irish schools know to our very great cost, the opposite is the case. All-Irish schools are the product of existing communities who have had to fight tooth and nail for the right to have their children educated through the medium of Irish, and footing the bill all the way themselves.

Cribben further explained that there was 'a solid Gaelic community in the Ballymun-Santry district when I first came into the neighbourhood in 1941, and the Irish school now established is but one of the extensions of that community' (*Irish Press* 1976). Indeed, Ó Riagáin and Ó Gliasáin have pointed to a correlation between higher than usual percentages of Irish speakers (between 13% and 20%) in the 1926 Census in places like Drumcondra, Glasnevin, Clontarf, and Blackrock, and the emergence of strong gaelscoileanna in, or near, those areas in the 1970s (Ó Riagáin, Ó Gliasáin 1979). Elsewhere, as in Raheny in 1969 and later in Bray in 1977, the emergence of the gaelscoileanna were preceded by the founding or revitalisation of local branches of Conradh na Gaeilge (Ní Fhlathartaigh 2021: *Irish Independent* 1975). In Belfast, meanwhile, Feargal Mac Ionnrachtaigh has demonstrated how the emergence of Bunscoil Phobal Feirste in the city in 1971 was built on the previous foundations of Cumann Chluain Árd (a social club founded by radical Irish speakers) and the urban Gaeltacht of Bóthar Seoigh (Mac Ionnrachtaigh 2013: 86-90). Therefore, the gaelscoileanna clearly did not emerge in an organisational vacuum. One useful lens for understanding their emergence is through *Resource Mobilisation Theory*. The contention is rather straightforward; there will be a higher chance of a group being mobilised towards activism if there are pre-existing organisations and networks that share similar objectives already operating in the community in which the group exists (Connolly 2007: 14-15).

To turn now to the question of ideology. As mentioned above, state ideology was underpinned by both a neo-colonial and a capitalist rationale. The gaelscoil activists were diametrically opposed to this logic – not least due to the cultural revivalist tradition on which they drew. From the time of the mid-nineteenth century, the Young Ireland movement promoted education as a key means of reversing the language shift that had occurred as a result of the expansion of British colonialism and capitalism into Ireland (Matthews 2003: 25-38, 136). The first real advance in this regard was the introduction, in the strongest Irish-speaking districts in the west, of a bilingual program for education in the national school system in 1904 following a campaign by Conradh na Gaeilge (O'Donoghue, O'Doherty, 44-52). Subsequently, Pádraig Pearse, the revolutionary and educationalist, laid the blueprint for the founding of autonomous Irish-medium schools when he established Scoil Éanna in Dublin in 1908 (Atkinson 1967: 70). P.J. Matthews has highlighted the progressive nature of turn of the twentieth century Gaelic revivalism. The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Irish Agricultural Organisations Society, and Conradh na Gaeilge, although drawing on elements of custom, sought to create an 'alternative modernity' where tradition was a means 'towards innovation and change rather than a barrier to it'. At the core of this activity was a philosophy of self-help and a desire to establish enduring physical institutions (Matthews 2003: 2-3, 23-28, 148).

Little wonder then that the gaelscoil activists who sought to found Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch

drew on this tradition. There also existed a healthy suspicion of Anglophone cultural dominance and West-British/Unionist politics. As Ó Torna relates, on one occasion Breandán Pringle took on arch anti-nationalist and Labour TD Conor Cruise-O'Brien telling him sarcastically that 'we don't really need you lot, you've no time for Irish, why shouldn't we just have a better way off and have it all coming from London?' (Ó Torna 2021). Meanwhile, Francis P. O'Toole wrote to the *Irish Press* in March 1971 regarding Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch and remarked how the Irish were 'fast becoming a race of West-Britons-cum-Americans-cum-British Commonwealth nobodies' (*Irish Press* 1 March 1971).[4] For other gaelscoil activists entry into the EEC presented another worry in terms of potential cultural absorption (*Irish Press* 11 March 1972). But this was no insular nationalism. The school's name, Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch (The School of the Seven Heroes) refers to the seven signatories of the republican proclamation of 1916 – signatories whose names were also given to the seven tallest towers of the Ballymun Flats. Moreover, there was a strong influence from the radical socialist and Irish language activist, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, in the writing of Colm Ó Torna in an article about the school which appeared in *Inniu* in 1976:

> caithfear obair na scoile a thuiscint i gcomhthéacs obair na Gaeilge ar bhonn náisiúnta, agus is i dtreo fíorú físe Mhic Phiarais agus Uí Chonghaile a bhí muintir Bhaile Munna ag saothrú, le go mbeadh Éire Saor agus Gaelach agus acmhainn éirime agus fisiciúil na tíre á saothrú ag muintir na hÉireann agus faoi smacht mhuintir na hÉireann (*Inniu* 1976).[5]

Much of this decolonising mentality can be usefully situated in a global framework laid down by key twentieth-century writers on decolonisation such as Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Fanon, for example, attacks the 'national bourgeoisie' who cultivate neo-colonialism and turn their back on ordinary people following the formal withdrawal of the colonial power. In his view this 'caste' (consistent in the Twenty-Six Counties of Ireland with the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties who dominated twentieth century politics), did 'nothing more than take over unchanged the legacy of the economy, the thought and the institutions left by the colonialists' (Fanon 1961: 142). It is with such institutions – in particular, the Department of Education – which the gaelscoil activists had to contend. At a certain level, their goal was to break what Albert Memmi called the 'mythical and degrading portrait' that the coloniser had constructed of the Irish people and of the Irish language, in particular (1974: 131). The contours of such activism have been put forward by wa Thiong'o in whose writings can be delineated three cornerstones of decolonisation: self-respect, self-belief and self-reliance (1986: *passim*). The struggle for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch was infused with each of these three decolonial qualities. As indigenous education scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith contends, 'decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power' (1999: 98). The building of gaelscoileanna, including in working-class areas like Ballymun, can be viewed as part of that long-term decolonial undertaking. This grassroots drive towards decolonisation which emerged through the gaelscoil movement in the state from the 1970s onwards is thus qualitatively different to the top-down bureaucratic revival efforts that Dublin governments oversaw between the 1920s and 1950s.

[4] 'race' here is used in the twentieth century meaning of the word, that is interchangeably with 'people'

[5] 'We must understand the work of the school in the context of the work for the Irish language on a national level, and it is towards the realization of the vision of Pearse and Connolly that the people of Ballymun are working, so that Ireland would be Free and Gaelic and the intellectual and material resources of the country would be produced by the people of Ireland and under the control of the people of Ireland.'

In addition to this nationalist and republican decolonial agenda with global resonance there was a strong working-class identity among the Ballymun gaelscoil activists, especially evident in Uí Langáin's thinking. There was a refusal to be treated as second-class citizens. This necessitated a struggle to gain the same educational rights as middle-class Irish speakers. There was also a pride in this working-class identity. Unlike Scoil Neasáin in Raheny, Scoil Lorcáin in Monkstown and the privately run Coláiste Mhuire, Uí Langáin was keen to stress that Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch was 'the first [gaelscoil] in a working class area' (Uí Langáin 2021). For Ó Torna, who was, to a degree, looking in from the outside the Ballymun gaelscoil activists although not unemployed were seeking something that was amiss in their lives and striving for a broader cultural expression than was available to them at that time in Irish society (Ó Torna 2021). Also clear from *The Ballymun Experience* pamphlet, perhaps co-authored by Pringle and O'Toole, was a rejection of the homogenising forces of post-1960s social change, conveyed through new media such as television:

> The problem of identity in Ballymun is not only one of community identity. It is also for many one of national identity and of personal identity. To some the results of these man-made problems are inhuman; they tend towards the depersonalisation, de-ethnicisation and alienation of those who live in large new urbanised areas planned without full awareness of human and social needs (*The Ballymun Experience*: 5-6).

Ultimately, the decolonial movement of the gaelscoileanna of which the campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch formed an integral part – by demanding a central place for Irish language education within the Irish state *and* the necessary material resources to that end – challenged both the historic neo-colonial mentality and the capitalist and homogenising *zeitgeist*.

The Origins of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, c.1970-73

Though Uí Langáin had heard mention of a gaelscoil being founded in Ballymun in the late 1960s, it was not until 1970 that concrete proposals were made. Ó Torna recalls how one woman, Peggy Walsh, suggested at a meeting of the Ballymun Tenants Association that a gaelscoil should be established (Ó Torna Notes 2021). Breandán Pringle and Francis O'Toole were selected to investigate the feasibility of the proposal in April 1970. In July that year the two men met with Captain Seán Ó Dunagáin, Secreatry of Comdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, who put them in touch with the already established Scoil Lorcáin. The meeting convinced them of the necessity of a fully immersive 'all-Irish' school (*The Ballymun Experience*: 6). *The Ballymun Experience* pamphlet, published by Pobal in late 1971, details the first year or so of the campaign between mid-1970 and mid-1971. Despite the Parents' Committee distributing 3,000 leaflets in the parish and receiving interest from the families of 30 children, the local clerics would not budge. They instead stated that there was 'no demand' for a fully immersive Irish-language school. The settlement arrived at by the autumn of 1971, and following negotiations between the Parent's Committee and the Department of Education, was for an 'all-Irish' stream in the Virgin Mary National School – a settlement the parents were unhappy about and believed to be only temporary. 'All-Irish' streams within English-medium schools did not satisfy those founding gaelscoileanna at this time, as they realised the dominant language, English, would prevail in the school yard among children, among teachers, and throughout the school in general. The parents of Ballymun had investigated the success of Scoil Lorcáin on Dublin's Southside (founded in 1952) and come to the conclusion that their school should also 'be a separate school having its own special identity and environment' (*The Ballymun Experience*: 7-19). The scene was thus set for the continuation of the campaign into 1972.

Around this time Ó Torna and his wife Eibhlín were attending an Irish language class organised by Cuallacht Mhuire gan Smál, a Catholic Sodality, on Gardiner St. in the city. One night Pringle and O'Toole burst into the class unannounced. 'They were full of the vision and looking for support', according to Ó Torna, who that evening set up a meeting with the determined pair in one of the rooms under the Ballymun Flats, thus commencing his involvement in the campaign (Ó Torna Notes 2021). The participation of Peggy Walsh, and her colleague Tomás Mac Gib/Tommy Gibson, is also worthy of note. Ó Torna describes them as 'sort of left-wing agitators' who were hugely supportive of the Irish language. Both sought to improve life for the people of Ballymun, and to do so from a left-wing perspective. They thus promoted the foundation of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch as part of that improvement (Ó Torna 2021). Walsh and Mac Gib, along with several others including Peadar Kelly, were also involved in the Ballymun News – a newspaper/magazine focused on community news and general social and cultural commentary that called for a rent strike and honoured Official IRA volunteer Joe McCann following his killing by the British Army in Belfast in 1972. The same publication criticised some of the already established gaelscoileanna for what it deemed was the 'snob value' attached to them and called on parents in Ballymun to become involved with Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch so as to keep 'anything elitist' from becoming 'attached to it' (*Ballymun News* 1973).

Although the origins of the idea emanated from this left-republican grouping in Ballymun, and they fully supported the initiative along the way, it was a group of working-class Irish speakers without any real political affiliation who drove the campaign (Ó Torna 2021). In this way they can be viewed as part of a broader national movement for Irish-medium education and the preservation of the Gaeltacht that was gaining momentum in places as far apart as Belfast, Dún Chaoin, Donegal, Galway and Dublin around 1970. Gluaiseacht Cearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta (The Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement) was also founded around this time. The movement highlighted the underdevelopment of Gaeltacht areas and held a number of key demands such as the establishment of a Gaeltacht authority and radio station. This also occurred within the context of the emergence of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the struggle which had broken out there in the late 1960s for equal rights for Catholics before it escalated into an anti-colonial war after the summer of 1969 (Ó Tuathaigh 1979: 111-23). Events in the North had an impact on the discourse, politics and mobilisation of people in the Twenty-Six Counties (Hanley 2019: *Passim*). According to Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh these movements must be placed alongside 'the global dynamics of youth politics and civil rights movements of the late 1960s' (Ó Tuathaigh 1979: 111-23).

In Dublin, in 1970, Irish language organisations such as Na Teaghlaigh Ghaelacha (a group of gaelscoil activists who were rearing their children through Irish) were highlighting the absence of a developmental plan for Irish-medium education in the newly constructed estates of Dublin's periphery (*Kerryman* 1970). Therefore, Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch in Ballymun, along with the founding of Scoil Neasáin, Raheny, Scoil Mobhí, Glasnevin, Scoil Naithí, Dundrum and Scoil Chrónáin, Rathcoole, which all emerged in or around Dublin during this period, can be placed as part of a milieu of *New Social Movements*. According to Linda Connolly, these global movements, which emerged from the sixties onwards and focussed on issues such as the environment, gender, and language, could contain different class and status groups. The common denominator, however, was that modernisation impacted on them in some negative way (Connolly 2007: 23). In the case of the gaelscoileanna, the further globalisation of the economy – which brought with it a more pervasive Anglophone dominance in media, commerce, politics and education, combined with the dislocation felt in newly built suburban

estates – inspired a pushback from activists. Thus, paradoxically perhaps, although the activists found themselves adrift in the sprawling towers of Ballymun, the abovementioned security of tenure allowed them the ability to wage a campaign for a gaelscoil.

What little Fianna Fáil had done to maintain the vitality of the Irish language during their almost continuous hold on power from 1932 onwards was being curtailed around 1970, thus bringing into sharper relief the position of Irish speakers, and Irish speakers in Ballymun, as a marginalised minority language community. The aforementioned Francis P. O'Toole wrote to the *Irish Press* in January 1971 to raise what he viewed as the treachery of Fianna Fáil. He poured scorn on them for having been in power for thirty-five years and for failing to revive the language. He mentioned the Irish-medium schools in the Gaeltacht being closed and alleged that not a single gaelscoil had been founded outside the Gaeltacht by the Department of Education. O'Toole also alluded to the obstacles faced in founding a gaelscoil – a local committee needed to be founded, a declaration signed by parents indicating support for the school had to be produced, and a site had to be acquired from the Catholic Church, local business people or be secured independently. After that, the committee had to receive commitments from teachers that they would teach in the school. At that point, and only then, would the Department of Education offer assistance. 'What happens if you want your children taught in a foreign (English) language', he wrote. 'You walk 400 yards to the nearest school, put your child's name on the register and, "hey presto", no further problems' (*Irish Independent* 1971).

The central point about the years 1971-72, as Ó Torna recalls, was that 'something was happening in terms of the Irish language, without a doubt' (Ó Torna 2021). The mobilisation of sections of the population of the Gaeltacht, and of other gaelscoil activists throughout the country, including in Ballymun, began to form into a national movement, with various local campaigns impacting on, and influencing, one another in different ways. In terms of Ballymun specifically, it is difficult to trace the precise chronology of protest during the years 1971-72 which led to the establishment of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch. Some of the large meetings and open letters of protest are recorded in the newspapers. But much of the smaller protests cannot be placed accurately on a timeline due to a lack of sources and the passage of time – the interviewees memories could locate them only broadly and sometimes their accounts conflicted in terms of precise dates.

Following the April 1970 meeting of the Ballymun Tenants Association and the suggestion that a gaelscoil should be founded the Coiste Bunaithe na Scoile (School Founding Committee) submitted a formal application for a gaelscoil to the Department of Education and the local priest, an tAthair Dónal Ó Scanaill – himself an Irish speaker from the Baile Bhúirne Gaeltacht in Cork and his father in the upper echelons of Conradh na Gaeilge – rejected it. According to Ó Torna, he, as well as the Department, told them 'jobs, not Irish, is what they need!' (Notes). Uí Langáin relays how Ó Scanaill informed them that 'Irish language education is only for children of academics and people who can afford to educate their children. It's not for the working class' (Uí Langáin 2021).

There existed a long history of clashes between Gaelic revivalists and clergy, going back to that between Conradh na Gaeilge at Cath Cúl an tSúdaire (The Battle of Portarlington) in 1906. The local branch of Conradh na Gaeilge challenged both the local priest and bishop on the issue of co-education. Two Conradh activists, both civil servants, needing to make up numbers for an Irish-language class, sought to mix girls and boys – separate classes would not have functioned. A shop assistant lost his job as he would not sign a letter of apology to the priest.

Ultimately, however, the Conradh won and the classes were held on a co-educational basis (Garvin 2005: 112).

The more immediate context to the decision by the local priest and the Department of Education not to allow Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch open is also of importance. As the correspondence of one Department official, Tomás Ó Floinn, with Archbishop John Charles McQuaid in 1970 on the topic of a 'boys home' in Finglas demonstrates, there existed a markedly deferential attitude among civil servants as it related to ecclesiastic power. Ó Floinn used the term 'Your Grace' no less than five times within the space of a short one page letter and he concluded with the words 'perhaps Your Grace will be good enough to write to me on this point in due course'. Ó Floinn also failed to challenge McQuaid on his comments about those in the 'boys home' whom he termed 'lost souls' – comments evidently rooted in an upper-class Catholic and classist disregard for the working class (Ó Floinn 1970).

Despite the classism prevalent in the Department of Education and the Church, the Dublin Diocese had begun to make moves in the late 1960s to accommodate a democratic demand among parents for more involvement in local secondary schools. The Diocese began to assist parents in founding parents committees in the late 1960s (Martin 10 March 1969). This was done in response to the fear that 'a national Parent Association as such could bring undesirable pressure to bear on schools as far as educational matters are concerned' (Mother Jordana 1969). Although this relates to secondary schooling, it shows a shift in the thinking of some sections of the Dublin Church hierarchy. Significantly, the Church leadership realised there would be stumbling blocks with various local clerics. Father Liam Martin, the Diocese Secretary, wrote to Monsignor Fitzpatrick on the matter and claimed 'that certainly at the moment the parish clergy are not ripe for such a development since they have not yet accustomed themselves or, to put it another way, have not been educated to the idea of the participation of parents in school matters' (Martin 31 March 1969).

This proved to be the case in Ballymun when members of the local clergy made it known that they were hostile to the democratic involvement of parents in the running of schools. As Uí Langáin recalls, the same clerics were not averse to using red scare tactics to beat back this democratic demand; 'I was labelled a subversive, a communist, everything' (Uí Langáin 2021). Although those on the left involved in the campaign for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch had secular objectives in mind and sought to separate church and state in the running of the school, the majority of parents had no qualms with the Church itself. Rather, their issue was with one or two of the parish priests (Ó Torna 2021). Ó Scanaill had made his feelings known early on. But in the summer of 1971 another cleric weighed in. An tAthair D. Baicéir announced at mass one Sunday in June that there would be no standalone gaelscoil but instead that Irish would be taught in the pre-existing classes and schools. Breandán Pringle told *Inniu* that such a settlement would not suffice as they needed a school with 'an Irish environment in which all subjects would be taught in the language'. Baicéir had already refused to allow the parents use the old school building of Scoil Naomh Pappin as he claimed 'no demand had been demonstrated' for such a move. Pringle believed the Church was attempting to split the Parents Committee with the unsatisfactory offer. He stated to *Inniu* that the parents were attempting to find out 'if there was any truth to this talk [by those in power] about conserving our Irish heritage'. He finished by telling the reporter, 'we're of the working class here in Ballymun, but we demand our right to all-Irish education for our children' (*Inniu* 18 June 1971).

In response to Baicéir's offer of having Irish taught in local English-speaking schools, Coiste Tacaíochta Bhaile Munna (Ballymun Support Committee), a group of Irish-language activists

and educationalists mostly from around Dublin, organised a meeting in the Crofton Airport Hotel on 13 October 1971. A press statement was issued in advance declaring that the meeting was called to raise 'the question of primary education through Irish generally. And to specifically discuss the question of Ballymun' (*Inniu* 8 October 1971). Breandán Pringle slammed the prospect of small Irish-medium streams existing in large English-medium schools and he demanded a fully Irish-medium school like Scoil Lorcáin in Monkstown. Echoing early revivalist ideas about a link between cultural and material wealth, Pringle conveyed his belief that 'the public was drowning in the culture of England. It was evident from the poor result of the 'Buy Irish Products' campaign, for example, that this question of culture disproportionately impacts Irish industry, and us the workers'. The mood of the meeting was militant and Maolsheachlainn Ó Caollaí, President of Conradh na Gaeilge, told the crowd that the Conradh had 'learned a lesson' as it was now clear 'that for twenty years the Department of Education has been working against the Irish language'. Canon Coslett Ó Cuinn, who introduced himself as an 'unapologetic Protestant from the north', condemned the Southern government for their stance in offering only streams; 'they asked for fish and got a snake, the same trick that was played in Rann na Feirste and Dún Chaoin'. Ó Cuinn finished his speech by urging the crowd to create a stir as politicians would not do what is necessary so they ought not be allowed 'rest nor respite'. Riobard Mac Góráin, President of Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, an umbrella body for the various Irish-language organisations, sought to shift blame away from the Department of Education and onto the local clergy. Likewise, Críostóir Ó Floinn, a journalist and activist who had been involved in founding Scoil Neasáin two years previously, stated that 'I am no communist … but a Catholic, and it is my opinion that the Catholic Church is the main problem here'. When two local politicians, Jim Tunney of Fianna Fáil and Mark Clinton of Fine Gael, rose to speak both were heckled. Clinton had to abandon his speech altogether. The meeting closed with a motion, accepted unanimously, to remind the Department of Education of its own rules which stated that the responsibility for managing a school need not be left to the parish priest, as another person or committee could be put in his place (*Inniu* 22 October 1971).

The Crofton Airport Hotel meeting was perhaps the high watermark in terms of making a national Irish-language issue out of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch. A national gaelscoil movement had been coalescing in the run-up to the meeting. Earlier that same year, 1971, also saw a large protest in Dublin which some of the Ballymun activists attended. The march called for Scoil Dhún Chaoin in the Kerry Gaeltacht to be kept open and for an improvement in socio-economic conditions there. At one point during the march, as it halted outside the GPO on O'Connell Street, several of the protestors were brutalised by Gardaí (Ó Snodaigh 2017: 139-155). Ó Torna is keen to emphasise that the Irish language movement, nationally, was 'fully behind' the Ballymun campaign. They received support from Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, Conradh na Gaeilge, Gael-Linn, and from Gaeltacht activists such as Donncha Ó hÉallaithe (Ó Torna 2021). There were also strong ties to Bunscoil Phobal Feirste in Belfast and Uí Langáin recalls being highly impressed with the urban Gaeltacht there – 'they had things we didn't have' – as well as feeling an affinity for the grassroots nature of the movement in the Northern capital. Casting her mind further afield, Uí Langáin emphasises the international connections with other minority language groups that were fostered; 'there were people from Scotland and Wales and from Brittany … Basques … There were always people like that coming to Ballymun' (Uí Langáin 2021).

In early 1972, once it became clear that Scoil Mobhí would open in middle-class Glasnevin in September 1972 it appears the Department and Church changed tack once more. Instead of forcing the children of the Ballymun parents who wanted Irish-medium education into local

English-medium schools, they would now be sent to a gaelscoil, but one outside of the area (Ó Torna 2021). This created a further fissure in the campaign, according to Ó Torna (Notes). Uí Langáin balked at the idea of sending the children to Glasnevin. The Glasnevin people were not seeking a gaelscoil, she recalls, but the Ballymun people were. Moreover, 'there was a massive difference between the people of Glasnevin and the people of Ballymun and we understood that' (Uí Langáin 2021). Refusing to send their children to Glasnevin, the Parents Committee managed to secure an Irish-medium stream for the children which operated in a prefabricated building in the Virgin Mary National School in Ballymun, a Church-controlled school which functioned through English (Uí Langáin 2021). The settlement was less than satisfactory for parents, but even still it did not last long. Uí Langáin recounts how one priest informed the parents – perhaps in early 1972 – that the stream would cease to function for the 1972/1973 school year, leaving them with nowhere else to go (2021). At this point, some of the parents decided to send their children into the city to the gaelscoileanna there, Scoil Mhuire for girls and for boys Scoil Cholmcille, on Marlborough Street (Ó Torna 2021). Since these two gaelscoileanna were located on the grounds of the Department of Education, Uí Langáin recounts how the women of the campaign – herself, Eithne Uí Mhuireagáin, Helen Mhic Giolla Ruaidh and K. Mac Cárthaigh – seized the opportunity to exert pressure on the civil servants within the Department and demand a standalone gaelscoil for Ballymun. This they did on a daily basis as they waited to collect their children (Uí Langáin 2021). One day while demanding a gaelscoil in Ballymun, a civil servant in the Department inquired as to the names of their children. When the women provided the names – the names were modern English-language names rather than Irish-language names – the civil servant responded that they had 'nothing to do with Irish' (Ó Torna 2021). Uí Langáin frames one protest where she left a letter into the Department of Education in the context of the classism people from Ballymun experienced and the democratic rights they demanded. 'I'll never forget the response of [one man] – 'you can't speak English in Ballymun. Why are you looking for Irish?' *Ghearr sin mo chroí* [that cut my heart]. As if we were second class citizens up in Ballymun' (Uí Langáin 2021).

Another form of protest used was the *scoil scairte* (hedge school). On one occasion a *scoil scairte* was held outside the offices of Pádraig Faulkner, the Fianna Fáil Minister for Education. Uí Langáin recalls: 'what we did was we went into the Department, we put the chairs in a circle, the women sat around, and this oul' fella started teaching us Irish. Right under the window of Pádraig Faulkner!' (Uí Langáin 2021). The protest gained a good deal of publicity. Ó Torna is keen to highlight the respectability of the protestors during the *scoil scairte* and other protests and how this may have influenced Faulkner (Ó Torna Notes). However, on another occasion Uí Langáin and a group of women, along with an old Jesuit priest from Rathfarnham, an tAthair de Hindenburg, pushed their way into the Department of Education unannounced. This, she says, led to them being granted the prefabricated buildings for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch and thus removed the question of the streams or being forced to Glasnevin. 'We had a terrible fight', says Uí Langáin, 'everyone was against us – everyone who had power' (Uí Langáin 2021).

Months of gruelling campaigning at the grassroots and national levels had laid the basis for victory. However, it appears that it was only rubberstamped at the highest political levels due to a looming election. Afraid of losing votes in the upcoming electoral contest of 1973 to Fine Gael, the incumbent Fianna Fáil government relented and granted full recognition to Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, meaning that its teachers would be paid by the Department of Education and that its maintenance would be mostly funded. Fianna Fáil TD for Dublin North-West, Jim Tunney, delivered the news to the Ballymun Parents Committee. As it transpired, Fianna Fáil lost the election and the task of opening the school officially in early 1973 fell to the new Minister for Education, Dick Burke, with Tunney watching on in the crowd (Ó Torna Notes).

Not long after the official opening, the split that had been percolating within the Ballymun Parents Committee came to a head in July 1973. Breandán Pringle sent his children to Scoil Mobhí in middle-class Glasnevin rather than to the newly opened Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch in the heart of working-class Ballymun. Antain Mac Giolla Rua, another member of the Parents Committee, subsequently asked Pringle to relinquish his role as Chairman of. It remains unclear whether these tensions related to issues of class. In the event, the split meant the number of students enrolled dropped from around twenty-five to eighteen. Luckily for the Committee they were able to reach the threshold of twenty again by registering two children (both only three years old), one of whom was Ó Torna's son (Ó Torna Notes).

Post-recognition

Following the official opening, Ó Torna contends that things got easier once they were 'inside the system' (Ó Torna 2021). However, Uí Langáin recalls more difficulties in subsequent years. The Department of Education refused to employ a fourth teacher during the mid-1970s despite the school by then having seventy pupils. There were also plumbing problems and problems with the buildings, which were often filled with rats. Uí Langáin believed the Fine Gael government and the Department hoped the school would fail. But she pointed towards the voluntary efforts of local trades people who carried out constant repairs and upgrades to the buildings. There was also great financial assistance from the wider Ballymun community during fundraising events and collections (Uí Langáin). However, not everyone in the community supported Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch and at least one West-British crank did rear his head. Patrick J. Murphy wrote to the *Irish Independent* in March 1974 to accuse the school supporters of sending him letters and making telephone calls calling him a 'traitor, jackeen (or seoinín), West Briton etc etc' (*Irish Independent*, 19 March 1974).

An important factor about Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch's development in the years after its founding, according to Ó Torna, was the work of Pádraig Ó hEarcáin as principal. Ó hEarcáin, a republican from Omagh, County Tyrone, drove the growth of the school from its inception and built a strong ethos based around the Irish language, Gaelic games and traditional music. It was Ó hEarcáin, along with Antain Mac Giolla Rua, who coined the Irish republican inspired name for the school, Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch. Though a staunch republican, Ó hEarcáin believed that explicit political ideologies ought to be left at the door of the school, at one point notifying the school's board of management he would leave when an attempt was made to introduce what Ó Torna described vaguely as 'left stuff' directly into the school (Ó Torna 2021).

The tension with the Catholic Church was resolved when Archbishop Dermot Ryan moved Ó Scanaill out of the parish. He was replaced with a more amenable priest, an tAthair Ó Coigligh, who was appointed to Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch's Bord of Management. However, Uí Langáin was appointed chairwoman of the Bord, essentially the School Manager – the first woman in the state to take that role in a school under Catholic patronage, although she was unaware of it at the time (Ó Torna Notes)(Uí Langáin 2021). In 1974, the Department of Education introduced a new structure for the boards of management of national schools as well as the gaelscoileanna. The Christian Brothers put forward a counter-proposal to maintain a clerical majority on local management boards. Unsurprisingly, the move jarred with gaelscoil activists who had been running the boards of the schools they had helped found on a more democratic basis. A delegation from several Dublin gaelscoileanna, including Éilís Uí Langáin and Eithne Uí Mhuireagáin of Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, managed to win a concession from Archbishop Ryan when they met him in the Dublin Diocese headquarters in Drumcondra. The boards of

management of the gaelscoileanna would continue to operate with only one clerical representative and a majority of teachers, parents and 'supporters' of the Irish language (Report, Gaelscoileanna 1975). At the same meeting Ryan even apologised to Uí Langáin and Uí Mhuireagáin for Ó Scanaill's behaviour, stating that a parish priest ought to be there to assist the parishioners, not go against them (Uí Langáin 2021).

Fundraising endeavours continued into the late 1970s. In the summer of 1977 a group of teachers and parents walked between Cork and Dublin to raise money for the school. The walk was organised by Dónal Ó Loinsigh, a teacher and later a principal of the school. Ó Loinsigh himself, as well as S. De Singletúin, Seán Ó Muireagáin, Proinsias Ó Brioscáin, Peadar Ó Cealaigh, Seán Ó hÓgáin, Dónal Ó Loinsigh and Tomás Mac Gib also took part. *The Irish Examiner* labelled the men 'the magnificent seven'. They aimed to raise £5,000 and they had sponsorship from the supermarket chain Superquinn. As the *Evening Echo* of Cork explained, they were sponsored at a rate of '£1 for each pound of weight lost on the walk, so the more grueling the walk the better. The men were weighed in today before they set off and will be weighed in again in Dublin by former international boxer Mick Dowling' (*Evening Echo* 1977: *Irish Examiner* 1977).

It took ten years for Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch to get a permanent school building. In 1983 there was a long piece about the new school building in the *Irish Press* entitled 'Scoil faoi na hárasáin' (School under the flats). The principal, Ó hEarcáin, was interviewed and he pointed to the growth of the school over the previous decade, from 43 pupils in 1973 to 300 by 1983. He also told the reporter how there was 'not often positive stories regarding this area in the news and the people of Ballymun are proud of this development'. Ó hEarcáin also highlighted the area's social problems and the fact that school dropouts rates were high. In terms of progression for the children from Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch he noted how 'the secondary all-Irish schools are middle class and too focused on academic affairs'. To address this, he suggested an Irish-medium technical school for Ballymun and the gaelscoil in Blanchardstown, Scoil Oilibhéir (*Irish Press* 19 April 1983). At the time of writing, and despite the subsequent founding of a second Irish-medium primary school in the area, gaelscoil Bhaile Munna, Ballymun still awaits a secondary school that operates through the medium of Irish.

Legacy

The efforts of the gaelscoil activists in Ballymun left a number of indelible marks on the community and the wider gaelscoil movement. They opened the way for working-class involvement in the gaelscoil movement – a movement which grew exponentially for over 20 years after the 1970s. A largely middle-class decolonial movement at the outset, though not hostile to working-class involvement, was compelled to accommodate the demand coming from working-class communities for gaelscoileanna in their areas (Comhchoiste Memo 1973). Indeed, having faced down opposition from church and state in Ballymun, some of those involved went on to found or administer schools in other working-class areas such as Cabra, Harmonstown and Finglas. Uí Langáin herself was instrumental in establishing Gaelscoil Bharra in Cabra and Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin (named after the abovementioned Pádraig Ó hEarcáin) in Finglas in the years after helping to found Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch (Uí Langáin 2021). Ó Torna argues that Ballymun broke the mould not just in terms of how the Department of Education or the Catholic Church, but wider society, viewed who Irish belonged to. In the early 1970s, he says, Irish society generally, barring those in the Gaeltachtaí, viewed the language as only belonging to the middle class – to teachers and civil servants (Ó Torna 2021).

The campaign also energised working-class people in Dublin in other settings to become involved in the Irish language movement. *Comhar*, an Irish language literary publication aimed mainly at the professional classes, commented on a Irish-language protest meeting, primarily about RTÉ's lack of broadcasting in the language, in the Mansion House in 1975 on the 'hopeful prospect' witnessed by the diversity of those in attendance. There were 'not the usual speakers' in attendance only. A woman from Ballymun spoke with confidence in Irish about the state of the language, much to the delight of *Comhar*. There was also another person 'speaking on behalf of the working-class of Jacobs [Biscuit Factory]. He explained that he and his co-workers in the factory were learning Irish and that they would keep going until they were fluent [and] he offered the support of his co-workers' (*Comhar* 1975).

For both Ó Torna and Uí Langáin, the importance of their efforts was framed in decolonial terms around self-reliance and self-respect. Ó Torna, for example, refers to the necessity of an inner spiritual heritage which needed to be served for any local or wider community to sustain itself. If that is lost 'you're imitating others and looking outside your own country for the answers'. Ultimately, 'if a community doesn't have self-respect, it will not succeed into the future' (Ó Torna). Similarly, Uí Langáin argues that the Irish language makes a child more confident; 'it's us, the language, the culture … it makes you feel whole'. Everyone, she says, should have that opportunity to access the language, regardless of money or where you live; 'you're Irish. It's your entitlement to have your culture'. What does the future hold? 'I may not be alive to see it', says Uí Langáin again speaking about material and psychological independence, 'but I'd like to see our country stand on its own two feet again' (Uí Langáin 2021). As mentioned above, these themes of decolonisation – of reclaiming political and psychological autonomy through linguistic and cultural self-respect – are recurrent in the works of the key twentieth-century decolonial advocates (Fanon; Wa Thiong'o; Memmi). Moreover, the construction of a gaelscoil (a material decolonial institution) to educate children through the medium of Irish, the democratic challenge to the Catholic Church (an institution exceptionally powerful in Ireland by European standards *due* to the colonial legacy), and the involvement of parents in Irish language classes (reclaiming a language denied them by the history of colonisation), indicate a rigorous, though implicit, decolonial process.

But could what happened in Ballymun – where an organic working-class movement grew from the grassroots up, founded a school, ran regular Irish language classes and empowered its participants – happen again? Uí Langáin thinks not and emphasises the specificity of the time; 'I didn't know what it was, but there was something there' (Uí Langáin 2021). One writer for *Comhar*, Éamonn Mac Murchú, felt in 1972 that among the working class of Dublin and the Gaeltacht there was 'a revolutionary spirit in the air'. Mac Murchú pointed to the 'respectability' of the mainstream language movement as a stumbling block to the language making serious headway. He argued, instead, that the working class ought to take the lead as 'there was an incalculable well of energy and commitment to be found by the Irish-language movement among the working class' (*Comhar* 1972). Despite these sentiments being validated by the more clearly working-class and radical revival that has subsequently unfolded in the Six Counties since the 1970s, and the potential outlined by Mac Murchú fifty years ago *vis-à-vis* Dublin and other towns and cities in the Twenty-Six Counties, the Irish language movement in the South, with a few exceptions, remains predominantly middle class in character and moderate in its politics. Moreover, as Ó Croidheáin pointed out with regard to the gaelscoil movement more widely in his 2006 book *Language From Below: the Irish Language, Ideology and Power in 20th century Ireland*, 'without developing wider political critique of society such movements may lose their collective force and be assimilated back into the dominant ideology of the state' (2006; 278).

In Ballymun itself, the €2 billion regeneration project that began in 1997, saw the demolition of the towers from 2004-2015 and the construction of more than 2,000 social homes in the area to which the residents were moved (*Irish Times*, 22 September 2015). As a recent important article has pointed out, the neoliberal doctrine of 'regeneration' deployed by Ballymun Regeneration Limited during the 2000s saw the dispersion of the locality's tight-knit communities. The area's 'vast network of community organisations', which had been largely autonomous, was 'corralled and subsumed' into a state-controlled entity known as the Ballymun Neighbourhood Council. In almost Machiavellian fashion this council was then dissolved within a few years, 'taking several generations of advocates and activists with it' (Kelly 2021).

Ultimately, three critical factors – the overly middle-class nature of the Irish language movement generally, the breakdown of working-class communities by gentrification or dispersion, and the absence of newly constructed housing on a sufficient scale – mitigate against the likelihood of an Irish language revival worthy of the name. Future revival efforts in urban areas in the Twenty-Six Counties of Ireland must do two things: 1. Focus on gaining more working-class adherents and 2. Inject the politics of housing, community and environment into their program. As, without a coherent community on which to build – one that is secure in its housing at the very *least* – the likes of what was achieved in Ballymun during the 1970s will be difficult to replicate.

Author Bio

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Experiences of academic-activists in Ireland: comfortable and uncomfortable activism in the current institutional environment

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Abstract

While there is a lack of academic-activist themed literature within the Irish context, it is evident that academic-activism is becoming an increasingly relevant topic given this period of undoubtable social change. The emergence of literature depicting academia as an unsupportive environment suggests that activism is not supported in a higher educational setting. This paper draws on the experiences of 33 Irish-based academic-activists and investigates the concepts of comfortable and uncomfortable academic-activism which were identified during the analysis. By exploring the experiences of academic-activists at varying career stages, this article argues that an academic's ability to exercise academic freedom is influenced by the type of activism, the sociopolitical identity of the individual and the institutional environment. Overall, this paper offers interesting comparisons between disadvantaged/marginalised academic-activists in comparison to those in more privileged positions.

Keywords

Academic-activism, class, gender, race, neoliberalism, academic freedom.

Introduction

Higher education's relevance depends on the ability of academics to express their academic freedom (Lyons, 2021). In Ireland, The Irish Universities Act of 1997 provides a clear definition and assurance of academic freedom. According to the act, academic staff members in universities have the right, while adhering to legal boundaries, to freely question and evaluate established knowledge, present innovative concepts, express contentious or unpopular views and engage in such activities within or outside the university. Importantly, the act explicitly states that exercising academic freedom should not result in any form of disadvantage or unfavourable treatment by the university (Reville, 2023). Through academic freedom[2], those

[1] Authors two and three are the research supervisors of the main author.
[2] While the intention here is to discuss threats to academic freedom in a broader context, I acknowledge that the term itself can be subject to different interpretations and may be utilised by diverse groups with varying beliefs and value systems to my own. Generally, I feel it can be agreed that academic-activism involves standing up against conservative or mainstream standpoints. It is hoped that this acknowledgment will help to ensure a more

within higher education can engage in the delivery of academic output that can encourage positive social change (i.e. academic-activism) (Baird, 2020), but the conditions under which academic freedom and academic-activism can thrive is complicated. The context of the broader economic, political, social and the institutional environment can create barriers to expressing academic freedom and potentially limit the individual's ability to engage in academic-activism (Altman, 2018). Academic-activism has taken a reserved position within the academy, thus curtailing the prominence of academic research that is intended for matters concerning social justice (Choudry, 2019; Sobande, 2018). As a result, academic research is more likely to be conducted to aid the reputation of the academy or to contribute to performance metrics (Altman, 2018; Pease, 2015). This has revealed a significant disparity between academics experiences of academic-activism based on the individual's identity, academic role and the type of activism while part of a conservative institution.

This paper is concerned with academic-activism as a demonstration of academic freedom and how this is dependent on the individual's role within academia. Specifically, this will focus on the overarching theme of uncomfortable and comfortable academic-activism which has been identified through 33 interviews with academic-activists in Ireland. The findings will be contextualised through an overview of academic-activist themed literature. The concluding remarks will offer insight into my own personal motivations and how my own identity as a white, working-class, male lends itself to the research.

The Academic Landscape

Recently, the term 'academic freedom' has been used more frequently in mainstream media given an apparent threat to academic freedom on a global scale (Humphreys, 2021; Power, 2021; Reville, 2020). As a broad example of this, political interference and institutional censorship in countries such as Turkey and Hungary have meant that academic-activism (or expressions of academic freedom) have become a much contested practice (Acar & Coskan, 2019; Donmez & Duman, 2021). Central to this research is an exploration as to whether academics are able to exercise their academic freedom in the form of academic-activism, or if they are restricted by the demands of their institutions and the broader environment (e.g. political). Social activism can be defined as a means for actively promoting social change (McConochie & Leung, 2010). Therefore academic-activism, within this research, is defined as actively promoting social change through writing, research, teaching, as well as more traditional activism-based activities such as rallying, marching and protesting.

The academic literature examining higher educational institutes third-level institutes[3] suggests that white, middle/upper-class men are afforded a range of advantages to exercise academic freedom while women in academia, working-class academics and ethnically diverse academics experience greater levels of precarity, a lack of support and restricted access to avail of grants and research funding (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019; Clarke et al., 2015; Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Crew, 2020; McGuire, 2020; Pease, 2015; Warnock, 2016). However, the emergence of literature pertaining to the experiences of women academics, working-class academics and ethnically diverse academics rarely merges with academic-activism and instead focuses on narratives regarding negative work experiences within academia.

nuanced understanding of academic-activism within this article while considering the potential interpretations and associations that may arise within different disciplinary and political contexts.

[3] In Ireland, a third-level institute typically refers to an institution of higher education beyond secondary school level. These institutes offer tertiary education and include universities, technological universities, and institutes of technology.

At present, O'Flynn and Panayiotopoulous's (2015) academic-activism study remains the sole empirical examination of academic-activism in the Irish context. O'Flynn and Panayiotopoulous (2015), as precarious academics, found that activism could thrive within the academy, but it was reliant on a continued dialogue between left-leaning groups such as trade unionists, academics, independent researchers, activists, and the general population (O'Flynn & Panayiotopoulous, 2015). A dialogue of this kind has been tough to establish while the structural conditions of academia promote an element of insecurity within academics (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015). Although research relating to the experiences of precarious or marginalised academics seldom references academic-activism explicitly, other research summarises recommendations for permanent staff struggling to overcome the barriers to engage in academic-activism (Flood et al., 2013). These studies generally omit the experiences of precarious workers and marginalised academics who are otherwise prohibited from engaging in academic-activism.

While there is a lack of academic-activist themed literature that conveys the experiences of marginalised academics, particularly within the Irish context, it is evident that academic-activism is becoming an increasingly significant topic in academia. Alakauvklar (2020) argues that the academy must reimagine itself as a community-led space. Within this re-imagined academy, an emphasis on competition and individualism are replaced by a focus on addressing the structural inequalities that exist within society (Alakauvklar, 2020). Through the inclusion of academics at varying career stages and diverse sociopolitical identities, this paper provides a relevant insight into the experiences of academic-activists who are facing challenges within academia relevant to their identity and type of activism.

Academic-Activism within Altering Societal Contexts

Through the course of my PhD, the academic landscape within Ireland has changed rapidly. Since 2020, there has been an increased awareness of the level of casualised, precarious work in academia which has caused concern for academics whose uncertain futures have limited their output capabilities, restricted their opportunities to mobilise their career and lead to a rise in instances of mental health issues amongst those in non-permanent roles (Simpson, 2023). Arguably, this increased awareness has been accelerated by University and College Union (UCU) strikes in the UK (more notably in Northern Ireland) which has resulted in heightened media coverage of the current issues facing academics on the island of Ireland as a whole (Casey, 2022; Donohoe, 2022; Meredith, 2023; Shearing, 2023). This form of activism appears to have had a knock-on effect with the rise in the mobilisation of postgraduate workers movements and the forming of postgraduate workers unions which has resulted in Simon Harris (the Irish Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science) launching a review into the supports offered to PhD Researchers (Gilbert, 2022; McGuire, 2022; O'Brien, 2022; Postgraduate Workers Organisation, 2023). While academic-activist themed literature is limited within the Irish context, it is apparent there has been a spike in specific forms of activism (mainly academic worker's rights) given the current social climate (e.g. cost of living crisis; housing crisis, etc.) in line with pre-existing issues with academia. Additionally, the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased immigration within Ireland has brought about recent forms of activism (e.g. demonstrations, protests, marches in response to far-right groups) given an increased understanding of the challenges facing those who are most marginalised and disadvantaged within Irish society (Wilson & Gallagher, 2023).

At present, both nationally and globally, there is a heightened awareness of the current academic environment in a time where there is arguably a radical change occurring within society (e.g. rise of political activism, union-based activism, environmental activism, civil rights campaigns, etc.). This has resulted in calls from academic-activists to go beyond what is expected of academics with regards to traditional academic output (e.g. publishing a paper) and to do something meaningful and impactful within society (Rynor, 2023). In this sense, there seems to be an increasing need for academics to express themselves in a way that is accessible to those external to academia (Rynor, 2023). However, this call for greater expressions of academic freedom is restricted within the current institutional climate (e.g. lack of tenured positions; inconsistent support for academic-activism; lack of collegiality amongst staff) which is perhaps further restricted by specific equality, diversity and inclusion aims that are typically agenda-driven (e.g. focusing on one specific marginalised or disadvantaged group) (Sullivan & Suissa, 2022).

Sullivan and Suissa (2022, para 3) claim that a recent 'overreach' by higher education institutes to 'reshape the university in line with a narrow ideological agenda' related to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) having previously 'contained activists' is concerning. So, while there are broader claims to increase academic-activist work related to EDI (e.g. activist lobby groups; research on gender inequality, etc.) and increase diversity within academia, Suissa and Sullivan (2022) find that this ideological imposition is often misplaced and does not result in widened participation or equality within academia. So, while there is an increase in the call for greater participation and representation within academia, Sullivan and Suissa (2021) believe this is set against current structures that have consistently supressed activist research and resulted in blacklisting, harassment and smear campaigns on academic-activists.

At a recent Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) conference[4], a motion was carried unanimously following growing concerns that particular EDI initiatives (such as Athena Swan) have deviated away from its stated goal and fails to consider the impact of inequality on a wider scale. In addition, various charters have been unable to explain instances of inequality (e.g. precarious work from a gendered perspective) given their one-dimensional design and implementation (Sullivan & Suissa, 2022). Given these current issues with the promotion of EDI, higher education institutes (namely EDI staff and networks) need to reimagine the way in which they promote genuine equality, diversity, and inclusion to allow for meaningful reform which can encourage greater promotion of academic freedom overall (Sullivan & Suissa, 2022).

This research offers a much-needed exploration of such environments and movements from the diverse experiences of academic-activists in the Irish context.

Methods

Recruitment and Sample

This article draws on the semi-structured interviews conducted with 33 academic-activists based in Ireland. In a previous study as part of this PhD project, participants were invited to take part in an online survey through purposive snowballing sampling techniques. On the final page of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to indicate their interest via email. 34 survey participants emailed indicating their interest in taking part in an interview. Following

[4] See tweet here: https://twitter.com/ifut/status/1654857888278388739.

seven dropouts, purposive recruitment was carried out based on the researcher and supervisory team's knowledge of a potential participant's suitability. This ensured that participants had relevant experience and were suitable to the main purpose of the research (Dusek et al., 2014). Participants in this study included: Professor (n=1), Associate Professor (n=4), Head of Department and Senior Lecturer (n=1), Senior Lecturer (n=4), Structured Lecturer (n=1), Lecturer (n=10), Researcher (n=1) Postdoctoral Researchers (n=1), and PhD Researchers (n=10). Of this participant group, 18 identified as cisgender female, 14 identified as cisgender male and 1 identified as gender nonbinary. 83% of participants were from White Irish backgrounds with the remaining participants identifying with Black, Asian, white European, white British, white North American and white Latin American backgrounds. There was a near even split between class groups with 52% identifying with middle-class backgrounds and 48% identifying with working-class backgrounds.

77% of participants were from Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) with 23% of participants coming from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) backgrounds. Participants were engaged in varied types of activism such as: political, trade union, teaching/research, feminist, community-based (e.g. class, religion, LGBTQI+, adult education, etc.), postgraduate union, work-based (e.g. social care work), human rights, criminology-based, environmental, reproductive rights, and medical/health science.

Interview Procedure and Ethics

Following institutional ethical approval, the participants were provided with details and instructions regarding the online interview (via email). This information consisted of a project information sheet and a consent form, which participants were asked to virtually sign. Interviewees were provided with an interview schedule prior to the meeting. Before starting the interview (Zoom), participants were assigned a pseudonym which is in the form of a unique number (e.g. 'Participant 30').

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using an reflexive thematic analysis approach in line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phased guideline. In addition, the reflexive thematic analysis was conducted within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodological framework. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of themes while actively engaging participants in the research process; promoting collaboration and transformative action throughout (Pecorelli 2015). PAR is conducted with a main objective of enacting social change with specific actions (MacDonald 2012). Generally, researchers use PAR to learn and work with marginalised or activist groups in order to produce research that offers solutions for their needs (MacDonald 2012). Braun and Clarke (2012) state that thematic analysis aligns well with PAR as it requires researcher reflexivity and encourages the input of collaborators which is useful when reviewing, reflecting and defining codes and themes.

The interview recordings were transcribed on a Word document where initial themes and codes were assigned before forwarding to participants for review. Following the return of each reviewed transcript, original suggestions and further inputs from participants were reviewed and reflected upon. After the initial coding and categorising process, it was clear there was some overlap with themes. This called for further review and reflection before collapsing and defining a set of themes that were coherent with the experiences of participants.

Analysis & Discussion

Findings from semi-structured interviews with 33 Irish-based academic-activists have uncovered a specific tension between academic work and activist commitments: comfortable and uncomfortable academic-activism. The terms comfortable and uncomfortable were noted by participants during the interview stage when discussing their experiences as academic-activists in the current climate. Below, uncomfortable and comfortable academic-activism will be defined before outlining the experiences of academic-activists within these themes.

What is Uncomfortable Academic-Activism?

This section will begin by exploring the concept of uncomfortable academic-activism. Briefly, uncomfortable academic-activism is activism that may potentially cause controversy (in wider society and/or academia) and is often separate to your contractual obligations as an academic. Findings have shown that uncomfortable activism has seen academic-activists blacklisted, isolated and overlooked for promotion in some instances. Those engaged in uncomfortable academic-activism were often from marginalised backgrounds or openly aligned with left-leaning political ideologies which clashed with the neoliberal attitude of the academy. The discussion on uncomfortable academic-activism will be done so in relation to (1) the fear of being penalised; (2) impeded mobility and stifled creativity; and (3) isolation and loneliness.

The Fear of Being Penalised

Academia is an environment whereby only those with tenure/permanent contracts are granted the ability to engage in academic-activism (Nkomo 2009). This is representative of each of the twelve early-career academics who felt academic-activism at their career stage is 'risky'. Although each of the twenty more senior academics in this study issued a word of caution to those at the early career stage (e.g. Participant 11: 'don't stick your head above the parapet'), early-career academics still engaged in academic-activism, which signaled to the importance of activism that was evident amongst early career academics. However, whether the activism informed academic work or vice versa, those at the beginning of their careers were subject to the fear of being penalised for their engagement in activism, and how they may be perceived in the academic environment as their careers progress.

Participant 05 (white, working-class male, political/trade-union activist) declared that, 'my card is marked'. While he has been given a certain degree of latitude by his supervisor and department to engage in left-wing political campaigns, he worries that as he approaches the end of his PhD his 'activist commitments' will impact how he is 'perceived'. In an environment where the future of academic staff is uncertain (Grey, 2013), Participant 05 states that those at early-career level are conscious of 'rocking the boat' through public facing scholarship which is rarely valued above meeting performance metrics, i.e. publish or perish (Altman, 2018). As Participant 27 (white, middle-class woman, reproductive rights/feminist activist) states: 'There's no way that anybody could possibly be creative and inquisitive and challenging in those contexts.' This indicates that the ability to exercise academic freedom can be hindered based on your type of activism, as well as your individual identity and academic role.

Impeded Mobility and Stifled Creativity

This fear of hindered career progression and restricted creativity was a reality for more experienced academic-activists, particularly for those who engaged in activism that related to

their own sociopolitical identity. This often resulted in delayed career mobility as a result of their expression of academic freedom and activist thought. Where this was not experienced explicitly, participants suggested that they would be naïve to think their activist work did not delay their mobility within academia, namely those from trade union backgrounds. Other interviewees felt their progression was delayed in a more direct manner as a result of being engaged in political and community-based activism. When overlooked for promotion, academic-activists cite informal and formal feedback from interview panels such as: 'we fully support the work you have done and eventually you will be recognised for it' or 'you're just not our type of person' (Participant 10, white, working-class woman, community-based activist). In a telling quote from a participant, the perception of potential damage to their career is clearly expressed:

I know that being an activist has damaged my academic career and has damaged my academic prospects, but I'm going to continue to do it and eventually maybe the conservative institute I work with will catch up with my activism (Participant 19, working-class male, LGBTQI+ activist).

At present, academic-activists are depicted as 'modern day cranks' (Rhodes et al., 2017, p. 6) for resisting the discourses presented by the economic and industrial motivated academy. While activist work is not completely excluded or restricted from receiving external funding or having outside impact (e.g. climate change academic-activism), there is a need for academies and activism to coexist beyond neoliberal values and expectations present in third-level institutes. This means evaluating research on its potential for external influence and impact on society as opposed to its 'market-based justification' for economic gain (Rhodes et al., 2017, p.7). The existing structural conditions and industry-based strategies of higher education in Ireland present a challenge to the creativity academic-activists as:

True activism is activism that goes against the mainstream and questions what dominant institutions do. So it questions, what universities do, it questions, what the state does. And therefore it is inherently uncomfortable, particularly in small islands like Ireland (Participant 26, multi-racial, working-class woman, criminology/human rights activist).

Those who challenge the mainstream narrative from within academia are facing the negative repercussions of their activism both personally and professionally. In this regard, engaging in academic-activism becomes a complicated task given the treatment academic-activists receive within their department, as well as wider academic circles.

Isolation and Loneliness

More broadly, it has been shown that uncomfortable activism can lead to delayed career progression and stunted career mobility, but on a more individual level academic-activists have found their activism to 'be quite lonely and isolating' (Participant 15, white, working-class male, trade union/political activist). Participant 26 felt that generally, those from marginalised backgrounds must 'fight really hard to belong to university or to this third level culture' and must compete with those 'from middle class or upper middle class, very white Irish backgrounds' whose activism is 'very mainstream' and 'comes from a very privileged position.' Clarke et al. (2015) state that engaging in research outside of institutional norms/strategies can damage work relationships with both colleagues and institutional hierarchy. This resonates with Participant 21 (white, middle-class woman, feminist/left-wing political activist), who mentioned that her activism: 'makes me unpopular in my department'.

The literature suggests that academic-activists should only engage in activism outside of working hours if they wish to progress within academia (Cancian, 1993; Flood et al., 2013; Pereira, 2016). This appears to contradict the mission of marginalised academic-activists who want to use their position of privilege within the academy to bring their research 'back to the people they grew up with' and give back to people experiencing 'social inequality', 'repression' and 'disempowerment' (Participant 01, 02, 11, 13, 14 and 20) (see also: Brook & Michell, 2012). According to Participant 19, this mission appears to be shackled within academia at present, as uncomfortable academic-activists feel progress is slowed by 'an ambivalent majority who just want to get on with things', leading to a lack of 'appetite for change'. This suggests that marginalised academics, who wish to use their academic role to promote positive social change, must navigate an unsupportive environment that discourages socially motivated academic output.

Summary of Uncomfortable Academic-Activism:

Having outlined the challenges facing uncomfortable academic-activists, it is apparent that the ability to exercise academic freedom is reliant on a number of factors. Concerns about how you may be perceived at the early career stage are realised as you build your career in academia. Initial concerns in the early career stage become reality as those seeking to engage in non-mainstream activism are repressed in terms of their expression of academic freedom. This has been shown through the commonplace immobilisation of an individual academic career; whether this be through explicit actions or more discrete measures. As a result, academics (especially marginalised academics) who challenge the status quo within academia are at risk of becoming ostracised in the current institutional environment. A lack of support and the noticeable isolation experienced by marginalised academics restricts the potential of the academic output to have a more considerable impact in wider society.

What is Comfortable Academic-Activism?

This section will focus on comfortable activism. In short, comfortable refers to academic-activism that is institutionally approved or appropriated for the benefit of the institution's public reputation. Generally, it is academic-activism which contributes to promotion/performance metrics or is carried out through traditional academic outputs (i.e. journal publications, conference presentations, etc.). Comfortable academic-activism is often done within the confines of your contractual obligations and is therefore unlikely to cause friction between colleagues, managers and institutional hierarchy. Comfortable activism will be discussed in the context of (1) career progression; (2) tokenism and symbolic actions; and (3) finding your university.

Career Progression

While activism can be used to progress and enhance your own reputation, it is reliant on certain conditions as eluded to by Participant 27 previously, such as the type of activism, the reputation of institution and the identity of the individual academic-activist (Flood et al., 2013; Lund & Nabavi, 2008). Participant 19 viewed academia as being 'straight, middle-class, white male centric'; an identity which brings certain advantages when navigating the academic space for the purposes of activist research (Pease 2015). This was evident in Participant 02's (white, middle-class male, health science activism) interview. Although Participant 02 shared a similar fear of being penalised much like his colleagues at the early career stage, he was honest about the privileges he possesses in comparison to marginalised colleagues. When discussing more

uncomfortable forms of activism, Participant 02 mentioned that a 'security blanket', as a result of his class background, allows him to engage in activism:

I used to think: why doesn't everyone do what I do in terms of working in an area that involves bringing about social change? But if anything goes really badly for me, I have parents who have a nice home that I can stay in. They've money they can support me with, they can help me access mental health services for example.

In addition, Participant 02 considers his activism to be 'comfortable' and will potentially benefit a career in STEM:

I will hopefully be able to build a very satisfying career on where I can have a positive impact in an area I'm passionate about. So my benefits definitely outweigh the negatives, but it's very comfortable activism in which I don't upset any of my senior employees or anything like that.

Similarly, Participant 07 (white, middle-class woman, community-based activism) pondered as to whether her activism was just her 'middle-class folly' and wonders: 'would I be doing this?' if she was from a lower-class background; a privilege she is 'very aware' of. Activism's place in the academy is often debated with regards to its suitability in higher education (Phakathi, 2014; Rojas, 2013). It can be argued that this may be primarily due to a lack of traditionally published academic-activist material from marginalised academics when compared to those from white, middle-class backgrounds who are vastly represented in academia (Lynch et al., 2012; Pease, 2015 Phakathi, 2014). In this regard, there is a lack of literature that highlights the benefits of living in your area of interest as an academic, i.e. positioning yourself within the research and identifying/empathising with your research sample. A lack of literature perhaps reflects the wider institutional attitude towards certain types of academic-activism (e.g. left-wing political activism). However, it is possible for an institution to alter their stance on academic-activism following changes in societal attitudes and opinions.

Tokenism and Symbolic Actions

As well as the sociopolitical identity of an individual, the reputation of the institute can determine whether an academic is encouraged to pursue activism-based research, or if they will be confined to what is deemed acceptable in a particular academy (Flood et al., 2013; Grollman, 2015). Within academia, activist causes (e.g. gender and racial equality) can be appropriated to enhance the reputation of an institute. In this manner, activist causes can then evolve into a form of comfortable activism from an institutional standpoint. This form of activism is considered to be insincere by academic-activists as it primarily serves to improve the public perception of the academy. Participant 09 (white, working-class, woman, housing/postgraduate union activist) states that institutes are less likely to 'blacklist' you if they realise that your activism brings 'goodwill and clout to your department'. When speaking about her own activism, Participant 09 claims that: 'they weren't going to give up the benefits of having my name associated with the department just for the sake that I was sort of agitating.' In essence, Participant 09 believes that if activist causes become part of 'the national consciousness', academies are likely to engage in 'reputation saving' and appropriate the activist cause for their own benefit.

Nevertheless, the academies recently established backing of activist causes appears to be reserved for more privileged academics who are able to maintain 'neutrality' when engaging

in institutionally adopted activism, according to Participant 25 (Asian, middle-class, gender non-binary)[5]. To illustrate this point, Equality, Diversion and Inclusion (EDI) committees and Athena Swan charters, which are 'appreciated' by marginalised academics, are deemed to be 'totally tokenistic' and 'symbolic' as 'the main benefactors are white, middle-class people' (Participant 25; Participant 26). Current measures (i.e. committees and charters) may have a positive impact on inequality or social justice issues in higher education, but they do not focus on broader institutional practices/arrangements that have caused and maintained such inequalities over time (Runyan, 2018). Paradoxically, Participant 25 mentions that those from marginalised backgrounds are accused of 'having an axe to grind' when speaking out on issues that are now part of the agenda for EDI and Athena Swan committees. For example, highlighting how many ethnic minority staff are on precarious contracts in comparison to white colleagues or highlighting the lack of diverse representation at institutional management level. Given this, Participant 25 states that in the current academic environment: 'an academic-activist is not something that would be seen in a positive way, especially as an ethnic minority'.

Finding Your University

Interestingly, academic-activists from a 'sanctuary university' (Participant 23, white, middle-class woman, political activist) that housed a 'prestigious national/international research centres' (Participant 17, Asian, middle-class woman, human rights activist) were encouraged to pursue academic-activism. As this was generally part of the institute's ethos, this type of public engagement was 'mandatory' and was included within the academics contractual obligations, according to Participant 20 (white, middle-class woman, community-based activist). It should be noted that academics in this position had secure contracts and mostly referred to their activism as being 'small' or identified as a 'quiet activist'. In keeping with the previous comments from Participant 13 and Participant 21, it would appear that academic-activism that is mandatory or contractually obliged offers less to communities and those outside of academia.

Given the prominence of 'academic capitalism', Participant 13 (white, working-class, environmental/political activist) believes that this may provide opportunities for 'vampire' academics who 'suck out data' for the purposes of a peer reviewed journal with 'nothing ever left for the community'. In this respect, paying 'lip service to public engagement' is a comfortable arrangement for academic-activists who want to 'carve careers out of theorising about social movements but not actually being in them', as per Participant 21. Engaging in more comfortable forms of activism that mainly aim to satisfy performance metrics encourages this narrative of academia as a self-perpetuating system rather than an arena for critical thought and activist measures (Fleming, 2021).

Summary of Comfortable Academic-Activism:

Comfortable activism can aid the career progression of an academic-activist and have a positive influence within wider society. The possibility of career progression as an academic-activist is encouraging following the previous discussion on uncomfortable academic-activism. However, advancing in academia appears to be reliant on certain conditions. Findings have shown that those from privileged backgrounds can take risks with their activism, stating that they could rely on their family's financial support in the event of unemployment. In keeping

[5] Participant 25's type of activism is not listed as they did not explicitly identify as an academic-activist due to the negative connotations associated with doing so as an ethnic minority academic in a predominately white institution.

with the advantages afforded to privileged academics, activism which may have previously been considered risky can undergo a process of social sanitisation. In this event, it was shown that institutes can embrace such activism in order to boost its public reputation. Marginalised academics appear to be perplexed by this supposed shift in attitude as they have received backlash for supporting similar causes in which they relate to on a personal level. Although some academies have encouraged the pursuit of activist research, academic-activists are concerned that the obligation to engage in activism will diminish the potential impact of activism in wider communities.

Conclusion

Initially, I understood academic-activism as a straightforward premise: if you are a permanent academic, you are given the opportunity to exercise academic freedom. If you are a precariously employed academic, you are less likely to partake in academic-activism given the fear of being penalised at the early-career stage (Merga & Mason, 2020). While existing literature and the study's analysis reinforced this early hypothesis, I have since understood academic-activism as a much more complex activity within the context of the broader political, social and economic environment, as well as the institutional environment and the identity of the individual.

Further exploring the complexity of engaging in academic-activism indicated that your experience as an academic-activist varies dependent on your gender, class and ethnic background in the current institutional environment, which piqued my personal interest in the topic as a white, working-class, male, PhD researcher. In a previous article (see: Kirwan, 2023), I reflect on my experience as a PhD researcher in the area of academic-activism in line with my own identity. In light of learning about instances of isolation and limited career opportunities, I have had to carefully consider my identity as an academic-activist as someone who previously considered their academic and activist work as separate entities. At this stage in my career, I find that it is best to do what is comfortable based on my current academic role and overall positionality within the context of the current political, social, economic and institutional environment to both aid the development of my career and to ensure that I have some semblance of personal and economic security.

At present, the current literature is lacking in a relevant exploration of academic-activism whereby individual issues (e.g. precarity) are analysed in line with sociopolitical identities relevant to a particular context (i.e. wider society; academia). This, along with my own sociopolitical identity allowed me to use my own experience as an academic to my advantage when relating to a range of participants and bringing my own identity to the project. Furthermore, this research has granted me the opportunity to network and build support systems with others who self-identify as academic-activists who are encountering similar barriers and restrictions in their academic work.

The findings from this paper have shown that academic-activism is impacted by a number of factors. These factors relate to what is considered to be uncomfortable activism and comfortable activism. Uncomfortable activism is that which is often separate to your role as an academic and is typically conducted with wider societies needs at the forefront (Huerta, 2018). Uncomfortable activism (e.g. trade union activism, LGBTQI+ activism, etc.) was engaged in by academics who identified with the individuals and communities they seek to represent/support. The 'doing' of uncomfortable activism meant that academics had to sacrifice their career progression and risk potentially damaging their own personal and professional

reputation amongst colleagues and institutional hierarchy. Comfortable activism, or activism that is conducted in-line with institutional approval and done within the contractual obligations of an academic, was argued to be a reserved arena. Although comfortable activism can have wider societal impact, those engaged in uncomfortable activism felt it was too mainstream and better served performance metrics than it did disadvantaged individuals and communities.

The findings in this paper are a result of the notion of uncomfortable and comfortable academic-activism being a core theme from the initial analysis. Furthermore, the final analysis of the interviews (as well as the analysis of the online survey) as part of the wider study will contribute to a framework from which to understand the benefits and costs of academic-activism and to develop recommendations for best practice for academics engaging in activism. Having explored the lived experiences of activism by participants, in particular the implications of involvement in social activism from a professional perspective, this paper provides valuable insight about Irish-based academic-activists from a sociopolitical perspective given a lack of literature in the Irish context.

Author Bio

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Demolition Derby, Working-Class Identity, and Capitalist Geographies

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Abstract

In order to understand the formations of identities within a working-class population, this paper draws on ethnographic field research with participants and fans of demolition derby competitions in two regions of Arkansas. It attempts what Arjun Appadurai calls a 'genealogical' reading to discover within semiotic evidence foreclosures of identity that challenge the power of capitalist fixation and movement of value within and through these regions. The paper uses the term 'material integrity' to describe how participants and fans of demolition derby understand the economic dynamics in which they participate. In Northwest Arkansas, a region characterized by the fixation of capital, class is 'read down' by nominating perceived lower classes, but in White County, Arkansas, a region with little fixed capital, class is 'read up.' As a ground-up spectacle and performance, demolition derby reveals the value of material integrity as an integral aspect of a working-class identity and provides some evidence of what Don Mitchell calls 'working-class geographies' and Ben Rogaly's 'non-elite cosmopolitanism.'

Keywords

Critical ethnography, working-class culture, working-class Identity, demolition derby, Northwest Arkansas, precarity, critical geography, Marxist geography

Mobility—or really control over the conditions of mobility—is thus an aspect of class power and struggle.

—Don Mitchell, *Working-class Geographies: Capital, Space, and Place*

> Well, hey, hey, working man, working man like me
> I ain't never been on welfare and that's one place I won't be,
> 'Cause I'll be working, as long as my two hands are fit to use.
> —Merle Haggard, 'Working Man Blues'

In a *New York Times* review, Anand Giridharadas (2018) complains that each book on identity by Francis Fukuyama and Kwame Anthony Appiah is 'a book about books about books.' He admits, 'theorists gotta theorize,' but he goes on, 'with an issue so fraught and a world so full of rage, each author could have made use of a rental car and the Voice-Memos app. For all their strengths, both books lack the earth and funk and complexity of dreaming, hurting human beings.' Giridharadas wants to hear from people themselves about their identities. Michel de Certeau (1984) asks a similar rhetorical question of philosophers like himself as he considers 'the ordinary man.' 'What

are we asking this oracle…to license us, to authorize us to say?' As we try to analyze a living world, we rarely ask whether the living world wants to be analyzed. The 'ordinary man…does not,' de Certeau concludes, 'expect representations' (p. v).

With Giridharadas and de Certeau in mind, I rented a car, bought a digital recorder, and immersed myself in the culture of demolition derby performance in Springdale and Searcy, Arkansas, two communities in some ways similar and in other, meaningful ways, distinct. I attended these demolition derbies with long-time fans and spent time in the 'pit' area talking to drivers, their crews, and families and observing their repertoires of behavior. I arranged longer interviews at their homes and places of work where I asked them questions about their experiences in demolition derby and its place in the culture of their lives.[1] These interviews were expansive and ended up being much longer than I had intended, as everyone was eager to talk about demolition derby. I would ask to talk for a half hour and the conversation would continue for an hour or more. One conversation went on for four hours, as beer cans piled around our lawn chairs under summer shade trees. These conversations were about much more than smashing cars. They opened up vistas into the local construction of identity and the local appropriation and adaptation of more globally-produced representations of working-class subjectivity, such as the yeoman pioneer and the 'hillbilly.' From these interviews, I tried, as Giridharadas suggested, to get the 'earth and funk and complexity of dreaming, hurting human beings.'

I intended my conversations with drivers and fans to introduce some ambiguity into monolithic top-down definitions of working-class identity as they show that 'culture,' as Raymond Williams (2001) points out, is 'ordinary,' not an Arnoldian content narrating an *a priori* transcendent essence. I agree with Williams' point that the meanings that foreclose identities cannot 'in any way be prescribed; they are made by living, made and remade, in ways we cannot know in advance' (p. 15). His description serves as a perfect metaphor for demolition derby, as my conversations with drivers and fans sought to discover how meanings are made and remade 'by living.' Just as mobility is the crux of a demolition derby competition, mobility of meanings is the crux of culture, and mobility of capital is the crux of late capitalism. The discursive meanings of demolition derby reveal working-class negotiations of gender, ethnic alterity, and late-capitalist productive processes. Below, I shall focus on the ways that demolition derby is involved in expressing and creating what Don Mitchell (2005) calls 'working-class geographies.' In response to the power of top-down capitalist modes of moving and fixing capital, these drivers *make and remake* a geography of meaning and literally rebuild the material environment for their own uses. As one driver explained about his battered pink Lincoln Continental derby car, 'It's homemade, man.'

Demolition derby is a working-class spectacle that involves drivers intentionally colliding cars to debilitate their mobility. The rules, which are not produced by any governing authority, are simply disable your competitors' cars. Several preliminary heats provide the competitors for a final heat from which an overall winner is literally the last car moving. Before the spectacle, drivers 'build' their competitive cars out of salvaged commuter cars. The level of preparation depends on the competitor and distinguishes the meanings of the performance as entertainment or prize-seeking.

[1] I interviewed thirteen consultants in Northwest Arkansas, including the organizer of the demolition derby and seven consultants in White County, Arkansas, including the organizer of the event. Though everyone assured me it wasn't necessary, I have changed their names.

Demolition derby is performed and consumed by working-class subjects whose class-consciousness is neither over-determined nor monolithic. Instead, the understanding of one's position within economic and material relations is continuously produced at the local level according to representations that slide both horizontally, along an historical axis and, more importantly, vertically, along a symbolic axis. The symbolic is often overlooked by observers who see demolition derby only as a vestige of historical stylized violence. For example, in his famous essay 'Clean Fun at Riverhead,' Tom Wolfe (2009) relates demolition derby to the gladiatorial spectacles of ancient Rome. 'Since then [300 AD] no game…has successfully acted out the underlying motifs of most sports, that is, aggression and destruction,' he claims (p. 32). He calls on the image of the automobile as power and claims, 'Americans have turned to the automobile to satisfy their love of aggression' (p. 33). His analysis, however, merely traces the spectacle horizontally through time to an arbitrary historical correlative. Such an analysis threatens to fix the audience of demolition derby as an historical anachronism, as if to say they are as gullible as Roman plebeians, stuck in history with an appetite for bread and circuses.

None of my consultants referred to the spectacle as merely 'destruction;' instead, they spoke much more about the 'building' of cars, especially emphasizing the conversion of the consumer products into constituent materials. I interviewed a driver from Northwest Arkansas, Javier, whose cars were known more for their creative decoration than for their formidable performance. In the first Springdale derby I attended, he won the $100 'best-dressed' prize for his Chrysler Newport featuring purple glitter paint and a row of police lights. He understood that it was not only his decorative cars that distinguished him. 'I'm the only Hispanic guy out there,' he told me. 'When I first started, there was another guy with a Hispanic last name, but he looked white. Does it bother me? No.' Javier had moved to Northwest Arkansas from California where he had first migrated from Mexico (illicitly he implied) following a migration trend that has transformed the ethnic landscape of the region. I interviewed him at his job at a high-end professional body shop, where he ironically restores commuter cars to industry specifications. He explained the continuous economy of derby car production: 'You take parts that you use on the other cars and save them up. You know, it's not like you're goin' to be throwin' everything away because more money that way, you know.' Another Northwest Arkansas driver, Kyle, described his process of building as 'well, mine's homemade…just poor boy here in the yard, at work all day, come home and tinker a little bit.' A professional diesel mechanic, he also emphasized the fluid value of his Lincoln Continental's materiality: 'I got that car in the back, scrap metal around here has gone down quite a bit. It's only at seventy-five [dollars] a ton. Right now, I'd probably only get two hundred bucks out of it, so I'm just sittin' on it.' Though they understood that an important part of the spectacle inside the arena is putting on a show of stylized aggression, all of the drivers I interviewed connected their participation with transformative flows contiguous with their working-class livelihoods. They were making something rather than destroying it.

To account more fully for its cultural meanings and their uses, repertoires must be investigated not only horizontally through time but also vertically through what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls 'genealogical' meaningfulness. 'History,' he writes, 'leads you outward, to link patterns of changes to increasingly larger universes of interaction.' This approach led Wolfe to ancient Roman violence. 'Genealogy,' Appadurai continues, 'leads you inward, toward cultural dispositions and styles that might be stubbornly embedded both in local institutions and in the history of the local habitus' (p. 74). This last term is important to my understanding of how local

cultural practices produce local meanings. Appadurai borrows it from Pierre Bourdieu (1980), who explains 'habitus' as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (p. 53). In other words, when Eugene, a White County driver, describes himself as 'I've always been sorta blue collar,' and when Dale, a Northwest Arkansas fan claims, 'I'm above white trash,' they are calling on 'structured structures' of class identity with 'durable' or historical associations. However, Eugene and Dale's use of the terms are 'transposable' and are not associated with any particular 'ends.' 'Blue collar' and 'white trash' relate them to others in their experience rather than to others in history. Important to Appadurai's use of 'habitus,' their transpositions work at the level of local semiotics, in living language.

Classed identities are insecure, tied as they are to global vagaries in capital movements. The vague term 'middle class' seems to mean the portion of the working class (the producers of surplus value) that retains sufficient surplus value to invest in consumption behavior unattainable by the precariat, economist Guy Standing's neologism to describe the late-capitalist position of a class of workers that 'must rely largely on money wages, without non-wage benefits, such as pensions, paid holidays, retrenchment benefits, and medical coverage' (2014, p. 10). Many of the drivers and fans I interviewed, especially in Searcy, fit Standing's description, as they are itinerant workers who must seek their own temporary contracts. The aesthetics of the White County derby were less refined than the derbies in Springdale because there is less fixed capital in White County. The Springdale derbies are presented in Parsons Stadium, a permanent arena of grandstands for up to 9000 spectators. Originally built for the annual Rodeo of the Ozarks, the arena now makes most of its money from two annual demolition derbies. My consultant, Dale, jokingly bragged that we had exclusive accommodation in the 'luxury seating,' a section of shaded stadium seats with backs instead of the backless planks of the grandstand bleachers. Dale also took me into the 'pit' area where drivers were busy with the final preparation of their cars. In Springdale, the pit was accessible with only a $5 additional entrance fee. In White County, where the arena had only one meager stand of bleachers along the fence that surrounded the arena, access to the pit area required an additional $25 fee (no discounts for academic researchers, alas). Most of the audience, whose attendance was part of the White County Fair attractions, sat on a small berm near the bleachers, or lingered standing near the two chain-link gates. Without the fixed capital of a permanent stadium, the White County derby seemed more temporary and ad hoc, consistent with the precarity of the capital flows negotiated by the drivers for their livelihoods. In fact, one White County driver handed me a battered and soiled business card that listed a variety of skills offered for sale, including, 'Fabrication; Welding; Automotive Repair; Gas & Diesel; ATV & Small Engine Repair.' I visited another driver, 'the sorta blue collar' Eugene, at his home and shop in rural White County where the yard was littered with the detritus of years of derby cars built and demolished. As we drank iced tea from a cooler in the shop where he both built his derby cars and sold his labor for piecemeal remuneration, he told me, 'You just do anything you can to make a livin'.' I never heard this kind of precarity articulated by anyone in Northwest Arkansas.

All workers seem to exist along an axis between precarity and security, and the local fixtures of capital, flowing along designated and rational lines, largely determine positions. Along with the more obvious salariat, some portion of the working class has some 'middle-class' financial power

to save for retirement, to send kids to college, to buy single-family homes, to buy expensive gun collections. One's relationship with the precariat, though, is more a matter of ambiguous degree than strict formal category. Good factory jobs—or service industry jobs in Northwest Arkansas and gas extraction jobs in White County—can leave a region and emerge in another that draws populations across figurative and literal borderlands. This mobility of capital and labor is a prominent feature of studies of working-class geographies. Linkon and Russo's study of the effects of capital and labor mobility on collective memory and the meaning of work in Youngstown, Ohio, begins with a look at the traces of historical struggle on the landscape of the Mahoning Valley. The movement of capital from Youngstown, or as they rightly call it, the 'capital strike,' changed the meaning of work in the community and 'exacerbated a process of urban decline that had begun in the 1950s' when white workers could afford to move from the working-class neighborhoods near the steel mills (2002, p.236). The landscapes of Northwest Arkansas and White County have likewise been marked by the comings and goings of capital and labor. Javier, the driver I introduced above, was born in Mexico, moved to California and later followed relatives to Northwest Arkansas, where the Tyson food processing jobs, though grueling and low-paying, are at least predictable. So long as consumers crave their frozen chicken tenders, Tyson's slaughter conveyors run day and night. The sense of precarity seems less urgent when capital is flowing in the form of steady hourly wages. When I commented to Dale, my Northwest Arkansas fan consultant, that I missed fishing but lacked an Arkansas fishing license, he invited me to join him at a private rural pond stocked with catfish. As we reeled in captive whiskered blues, Dale described his Belgian factory employers with approbation but worried that the new American manager was 'more about the bottom line.' In his comments can be heard the fearful knowledge that 'the bottom line' might move the factory. The defining distinction between the two areas of Arkansas that I explore seems to be the relative pressure of precarity. Concepts of class belonging depend on local access to well-paying, stable, and seemingly long-term jobs. Demolition derby means something different depending on this ambiguity, as the different groups negotiate definitions of 'micro-classes' that they perceive above or below their own positions. The two regions of Arkansas where I engaged demolition derby drivers and fans illustrate this difference. The Northwest Arkansas landscape is marked by fluid capital flows and fixation while White County, where the Searcy derby is held, is marked by capital extraction and flight.

Northwest Arkansas versus White County, Arkansas

The Census Bureau refers to Northwest Arkansas as the 'Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers, AR-MO Metropolitan Statistical Area.' The three nominated towns are strung from south to north along a new stretch of Interstate 49, which the website of the Interstate 49 National Coalition (2002) claims will connect Canada with the Ports of Louisiana and further 'to Central/South America and points beyond through the expanding Panama Canal.' Organized by business and policy advocates in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri, this Coalition plans to take this 'comprehensive transportation grid that will enhance the movement of food, goods, energy, and people to and from anywhere in mid-America and the rest of the world' right through Northwest Arkansas. The geography of mobility, in other words, is planned and intentional. Included in the Statistical Area is also Bentonville, just north of Rogers, and the home of the largest corporation on earth, Walmart. In many ways, the modest intersection of Sam Walton Boulevard and Southwest 8th street in Bentonville is the epicenter of global capitalism, as the headquarters of the largest private employer draws the managers of global vendors and record capital into the region, a boom evidenced by the

improved regional airport, the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, and the Range Rovers and Ferraris parked around the Bentonville square.

Walmart is the most famous of the indigenous Fortune 500 corporations with sprawling campuses in Northwest Arkansas. Down the highway in Lowell, south of Rogers, J. B. Hunt, which started out as a company trading in old rice hulls, is the nation's largest trucking company. Hardly a company of mere eighteen-wheeled haulers, after deregulation in the 1980s, J.B. Hunt innovated the vertical integration of logistics and distribution across global intermodal transportation systems. By the 1990s, its dominance drew other trucking companies, both local and national, to the area until 'northwest Arkansas had evolved into a major carrier hub' with 'six of the one hundred largest trucking companies maintain[ing] headquarters in the region, a greater number than found in any other state' (Johnson, 2000, p. 196). This convergence attracted not only drivers but also mechanics to Northwest Arkansas, a working-class population with the necessary skills and access to tools for demolition derby participation. Kyle, who was saving his Lincoln Continental derby car in his backyard until scrap metal prices rose, explained, 'I work on trucks all day—heavy duty trucks. I'm a diesel mechanic, I work on Mack trucks.' I interviewed Kyle on two separate occasions in his yard in a neighborhood on the eastern edge of Springdale, the older part of town where light manufacturing and service industries sprawl across former pastures. Hispanic/Latino and Marshallese communities are concentrated in East Springdale. Parsons Stadium is there as well. Under a shade tree, Kyle described the modifications he made to his '71 Lincoln that he'd bought for $400 from a local woman's backyard: 'I took the rear-end out and welded my spider gears together for posi-traction.[2] I bought the actual—this is a Ford nine inch rear-end, three-quarter like you'd have in a three-quarter ton truck, I don't know why it's in this car but it is. I bought the spool on-line; it's called a spool.' Knowledge of the gear structure of a drive-train differential is professional knowledge for Kyle generally. He is paid a wage for applying such knowledge every day. Though he was using professional skills, he still described his derby car as 'home-made.'

A few miles south of J.B. Hunt's verdant campus on Interstate 49 (which includes a jogging path for managerial employees), a newly developed exit leads to the international headquarters of Tyson Foods in Springdale, arguably the most 'working-class' of the four Northwest Arkansas cities.[3] Tyson's innovations in chicken processing involve contracting growers to raise Tyson chicks with Tyson chicken feed to be returned on Tyson trucks to Tyson processing plants and delivered to commercial markets wrapped in Tyson packaging. The independent farmers growing the chickens are paid a set contract price independent of the market price of their produce. In other words, sharecropping. With scientific farming techniques pioneered by the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville—a combination of feed additives, hormonal treatments, and accelerated brooding in artificial environments—Tyson can produce more and more chickens with fewer and fewer growers. Its processing automation has changed the ethnic make-up of the local labor environment and the developed geography of the area in important cultural ways. It brought both Javier (from Mexico via California) and Kyle (from Ohio) to Northwest Arkansas. 'Tyson,' Kyle said, 'that's my bread and butter right there.'

[2] As any fan of the film 'My Cousin Vinny' knows, posi-traction describes a drivetrain that distributes the power of the engine to both rear axles.
[3] And my hometown.

By the 1970s, Tyson had replaced the apple orchards, bean fields, and grape vineyards of the early twentieth century with two-football-field-long chicken houses with twenty-four hour grow lights. As Tyson learned to get more chickens from fewer growers and the first generation of Walmart and J.B. Hunt millionaires needed tax-safe investments, the fields have been converted to housing developments and vertical retail complexes along the interstate. Pinnacle Hills golf course hosts an annual LPGA tournament. When I was visiting for a demolition derby and decided to get a haircut, the stylist talked about how friendly Harrison Ford was when he attended the new Bentonville Film Festival, an event co-founded by actress Gena Davis to focus on women in film. Alice Walton, daughter of Mr. Sam (as Sam Walton is still called by locals, though sometimes ironically), hired Moshe Safdie to build Crystal Bridges Museum, the digs for her collection of American art, which now attracts international tourists. Also cited for its collection of modern American art is the 21c Hotel near the Bentonville Square. The hotel made *Conde Nast*'s Top Ten Hotels in the South in 2015. In 2012, *Travel and Leisure* magazine called Bentonville, Arkansas, a 'Top *International* Destination' (my incredulous emphasis). In other words, the influx of capital has utterly transformed Northwest Arkansas in the past twenty years.

In Springdale, where I attended three of the demolition derbies in my research, the changes have been just as dramatic but geared less toward the *Conde Nast*-set. What was once Gene's Donut Shop on Thompson Avenue is now a panaderia with Telemundo broadcasting Liga MX matches. Next to the old 'Y-Liquor' (named for its location within a three-way intersection of U.S. Highways 71 and 412), where generations of workers from the George's poultry feed mill across the street stopped for an after-shift six-pack, the Mi Tienda Supermarket sells freshly-made tortillas, queso cotija, and produce such as tomatillos and nopales. Emma Street, the original commercial main street that leads to Parsons Stadium where the demolition derby is held, is lined with store-front windows in Spanish. According to Johnson (2000), 'the arrival of Hispanic migrants changed the northwest corner [of Arkansas] and brought it even closer to the American experience. Between 1990 and 1997, the 127 percent Latino increase in Arkansas was the highest in the nation' (p. 200). This population change has continued into the first couple of decades of the twenty-first century. According to the Pew Research Center's study of Hispanic Trends, in 1990, the Latino population in Washington County was 1,526. By 2000, it was 12,932, and by 2011, 32,827. In twenty years, the Latino population in Washington County went from 1% of the total population to 16% (Pew, 2016). Nowhere is that population change more visible than in Springdale.

In a 2001 article, *U.S. News and World Report* called 'the state's bustling northwest shoulder…a 21st-century boomtown, a monument to the postindustrial service economy, and surprisingly, the nation's sixth-fastest growing metropolitan area' (Glasser, p. 16). This boom has continued, protected from recessions by flush capital, and importantly, the overwhelming confidence that Walmart, J.B. Hunt, and Tyson Foods are invincible. The stable employment that these service corporations provide is important to the ideas of demolition derby in the minds of the local participants. In short, the labor environment provides sufficient leisure time and access to materials for demolition derby to be merely affective performance, a 'good time' for performers and audience members. In Northwest Arkansas, I interviewed a family of demolition derby drivers who had been featured in a national airline's in-flight magazine and subsequently solicited by eight different reality television production companies. They are famous locally. Ralph, the patriarch of the family, claimed 'They [their fans] come out there and mob our cars, want pieces off the car

and autographs. I think we have fans that would follow us anywhere we went.' Contrasting his family with the White County competitors whom everyone calls 'professional,' Ralph claimed, 'If the money's all we did it for, we'd had to quit a long time ago.' The entire family laughed when Ralph remarked that he told the local derby organizer that 'we'd do this for nothing, and we would…we have…we do.' Because of the relative security of the capital flows in Northwest Arkansas, Ralph and his sons, who both have professional salariat jobs, can enjoy the affective and aesthetic aspects of demolition derby without the pressure of winning prize money.

In White County, on the other hand, the labor environment is more precarious. What drivers refer to as 'the show,' the performance aspects of the spectacle, suffers as the competition for the prize money becomes more strategic and, according to Northwest Arkansas drivers, more 'professional.' White County, where I attended the annual demolition derby and interviewed several drivers and the local organizer, is far more rural, with a population per square mile of 74.5 versus 261.2 and 215.6 for Benton and Washington Counties respectively (Census Bureau Quickfacts). East of the Ozarks, it is on the northern edge of the alluvial confluence of the Mississippi and the Gulf Coastal plains. It looks flatter and has large stands of ancient hardwood timber. U.S. Highway 67 is the only major transportation corridor that connects Searcy, the county seat and largest town, with Little Rock sixty miles to the south. The town sprawls westward from the four-lane controlled-access highway in low-density commercial and residential development, pizza places and tire shops, a Sears and a few motels. Of course, east of the highway, stands the ubiquitous Walmart girded by newer developments with national restaurant chains, nail salons, and insurance offices. Across the Little Red River lies the even more rural community of Judsonia, where I interviewed two drivers, a father and daughter. Judsonia is notable in Arkansas history, as a consultant from Northwest Arkansas told me, for a devastating tornado that destroyed every building in town in 1952. Though the town was rebuilt, all the buildings are derelict save for Hays Work Hunt Play,[4] an outdoor and work-clothing supply business on the edge of town.

Though only about two hundred miles to the east, White County seems far from the prosperity and conspicuous consumption of Northwest Arkansas. No Fortune 500 companies have elaborate headquarters here, and no world-class museums, hotels, and restaurants are being developed. According to the Arkansas Economic Development Commission, the largest employer in White County is, in fact, Walmart with its multiple stores throughout the county. In other words, as in so many rural communities throughout the United States, the surplus value of the local service-industrial labor is being drawn the two hundred miles west to Bentonville to build museums, hotels, and restaurants there. As I explained above, Eugene claimed, 'You just do anything you can to make a livin'.' We were joined in his shop by his son and three other drivers who had participated in the derby the night before. They claimed that they didn't put much thought into the decoration of their cars, though they did paint them all a consistent combination of black and yellow. 'People know us,' Eugene laughed, 'here comes the bumblebees; they gonna sting ya'.' They were much more interested in placing in the prize money. Though they vehemently denied being 'professional,' they did have several salvaged cars to build into derby cars and a practice derby arena in the field behind the shop. Eugene's family was one of the groups that the Northwest Arkansas drivers and fans complained illicitly reinforced their cars and coordinated their tactics

[4] Many in White County wore clothing with this local logo. The three verbs go along way summing up the local ethos.

within the arena. Such 'team driving' elicits disapprobation from drivers and fans[5], but it also reveals a greater emphasis on winning. 'I ain't in it to lose,' Eugene claimed more than once. This consciousness seems to affect the meanings of demolition derby and of class signification in general.

Reading Class Identities

Class identities are being critiqued within demolition derby, especially as a certain kind of contempt for authority is being performed. Drivers and fans are definitely aware that they are involved in a consummate working-class leisure activity. Ralph, the patriarch of the Northwest Arkansas family, explained their refusal to participate in the proposed reality television programing because the producers wanted to deploy regional working-class stereotypes. 'We didn't want to look like a bunch of rednecks,' he explained. 'We may be [redneck] a little or a lot depending on who you talk to, but we ain't that bad,' he continued, 'but they [the producers] wanted us to be absolute hillbillies, and it wasn't going to happen.' At the White County derby, there was less worry about appearing working class, as the announcer began the derby encouraging 'Make some noise if you're a redneck from White County' over the public address system. Though most of my consultants mentioned something about the class identities of demolition derby, not all of them read class signifiers in the same way. There was a distinct difference in whether class was read 'up' or 'down' depending on whether the driver was in Northwest Arkansas or White County. Drivers in Northwest Arkansas spoke much more of groups that they perceived being below themselves. For example, Kyle and Dale in Springdale together explained to me the difference between their use of the terms 'redneck' and 'white trash.' They claimed 'redneck' for themselves, but described other, lower individuals as 'white trash.' 'Shit's always happening to them,' was Dale's defining characteristic of 'white trash,' meaning their lives were characterized by the crises of precarity. He went on to explain the relative social positions of the two terms: 'Rednecks are kinda stayin' even or movin' up. White trash [is] either stayin' even or going down.' In the same conversation, Kyle, who used also the term 'Crazy White Boy' to describe himself, admitted to using a limb of the oak tree in front of his house to pull the engine from a car. His wife, however, 'went and bought me a cherry picker to set up in the garage. She said it was too white trash to use the tree in front.' When I asked Dale if he would accept the term 'white trash,' he smiled and replied, 'No, I'm above white trash.' Less subject to precarity, Northwest Arkansas working-class subjects distinguished themselves by nominating the classes below. They expressed no consciousness of being judged by classes nominally above them.

In White County, on the other hand, class was read 'up,' revealing a consciousness that they were being judged from above. Adjacent to the fair grounds and literally overlooking the demolition derby 'pit,' new two-story homes had recently been built, an entire development with ample lawns for what the promoter of the White County derby called 'the suit and tie people.' When I asked Eugene about these homes and the people who lived there, he called them 'preppies' and then added, 'so-called…maybe we shouldn't call them higher.' His derby partner, a propane truck driver, called them 'university people' [there is a small private university in town], and went on to say, 'they like other things, like plays or a nice meal or something.' They never talked about any one as occupying a class below their own status, which Eugene nominated as 'always been sorta blue collar.' They explained how the 'preppies' had been successful in getting the mud racing,

[5] A fan at one of the Springdale derbies wore a t-shirt that read: 'Team Driving is for Pussies.'

held in the same arena, cancelled on a technicality, but they were proud that these 'preppies' couldn't do anything about the demolition derby. A striking sensitivity to higher-class perceptions was another driver's proud explanation that the Little Red River in Judsonia had some of the best fly-fishing in the state. When I asked him if he fly-fished, he said, 'no, I cat fish, though.' Fly-fishing is the style of angling most associated with a higher class,[6] while fishing for catfish is associated with a lower class. Though it was not his term, he knew that I was one of those 'university people,' and he was telling me not about his own fishing habits but about the fishing that he assumed I would be interested in. Identifying as working class, no one in White County ever mentioned any class below their own.

The reading of class, then, is subject to local ambiguities, which seem to be related to the relative precarity of the people doing the reading. The affluence and relative stability in Northwest Arkansas allow the demolition derby drivers and fans to read class 'down.' In this judgment, they seem to be calling on meanings of independence and ingenuity, a version of meritocracy that imagines the individual as the fundamental economic agent, a concept that demolition derby may organically critique within the communitarian approach to building and maintaining the cars. 'White trash' is reserved for people without stable employment, people who turn to the illicit economy of drug production and distribution, or petty theft and the poaching of wildlife. The term is used for people whose economic insecurity is displayed in their jury-rigged housing and public car repair. They don't have garages in which to do their work or to store the detritus of their economy. This display of 'junk' seems to be the defining characteristic of 'white trash' style. When I showed the photos of Eugene's White County yard, with its array of car bodies and parts, one Northwest Arkansas fan exclaimed, 'Oh, now that's white trash.' Importantly, the drivers in White County often attended the Springdale derby, but none of the Northwest Arkansas drivers I interviewed had been to Searcy. When I asked Eugene and his friends what else they do in the area when they attend the Springdale derby, they admitted visiting 'that big mall they got up there,' but they spoke with more approbation about the bucolic camping around Beaver Lake. They also felt slighted by the Springdale officials' accusing them of being 'professionals' and of team driving. In these comments it is easy to hear hints of class status distinctions emerging. Favored by federal investment since Reconstruction, Northwest Arkansas knows that it dominates the economy of Arkansas, and that tone of superiority infuses the symbolic meanings of demolition derby.

Demolishing Capitalist Geographies

In his essay that I cite above, Don Mitchell (2005) calls for 'a robust working-class geography that understands the relationship between space, place, and power in all its historical complexity' (p. 95). Rather than constructing a working-class that is simply 'fixed' by the logic of capitalism, he searches for mobile processes in which working-class agency is involved in the shaping of a built environment and the meanings within it. The quotation from Mitchell's essay above obviously resonates with my analysis of demolition derby. The arena in which the specifically prepared cars are demolished is a site of spectacular struggle. The unfixed potential vectors of the derby arena conflict with the rational circumscription of roadway traffic in everyday life. The latter conforms to the logic of capitalism, as the rationale for Interstate 49 that bisects Northwest Arkansas explicitly reveals: 'to create a comprehensive transportation grid that will enhance the movement

[6] And with people who use the word 'angling.'

of food, goods, energy and people to and from anywhere in mid-America and the rest of the world.' The lanes of asphalt describe a logic on the landscape, making it a particular place such as Northwest Arkansas or White County. However, as Mitchell points out, the spatial logic of capitalism involves a central contradiction: 'for capital to circulate, some value must be fixed in place, thereby increasing the risk that this capital may not be realized as value' (p. 82). Attempts at such fixity can be seen in the development of the built environment in Northwest Arkansas. The flows of people and capital into Northwest Arkansas are visible in the sprawling retail spaces of Rogers and in the pastures groomed into lawns of new two-story houses around Springdale. Commenting on the visible changes in the geography, Nelson, who had grown up in Northwest Arkansas but left for the rural peace of Judsonia, claimed that Springdale and Rogers had 'outgrowed itself tremendously' and had become 'overpopulated.' Dale, the Northwest Arkansas fan, described the visible investment in the area as 'a stupid amount,' while Ralph, the patriarch of the Northwest Arkansas family of drivers simply claimed, 'this place is berserk.' They are describing capitalist spatial formations that Mitchell calls 'central to the very functioning of capitalism, not just incidental to it' (p. 83). In NWA, Walmart, J.B. Hunt, and Tyson have fixed capital into place in the form of corporate infrastructure, leisure spectacles, and stable remuneration for labor—a Clintonian neoliberal dreamscape![7]

The differences that I observed in the economies of Northwest Arkansas and White County, such as the latter's relative precarity, reveal the movement of capital through geographies of boom and bust. Appropriately, the capitalist geographies of White County are vestiges of extraction processes. Beginning in 2002, national mining companies became interested in gas deposits in the Fayetteville Shale play slanting near the surface of the Arkoma Basin in Northern Arkansas. Southwestern, a Texas-based extraction company, applied new extraction technologies, such as horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing, to its mineral claims in 2003. By 2007, companies such as Chesapeake Energy from Oklahoma City were promising to transform the geography of White County. A 2008 article in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* claims 'By all accounts, White County is the Fayetteville Shale hot spot' and that 'much of that boom is visible in Searcy, where traffic is heavy, construction is everywhere, and business is brisk' (Widner). According to a laudatory article published on the Searcy Chamber of Commerce website (2008), Aubrey McClendon, the Chesapeake founder and CEO at the time, told locals gathered at the opening of the company's regional office in Searcy, 'The people of this area are about to see an economic boom the likes of which they've never seen before.' He went on to promise, 'this will be an office that will be expanded three or four times down the road.' He handed out a $100,000 check to the president of Harding University in Searcy, to be used for 'graduates [that will] take leadership positions in the gas industry.' In addition, the Searcy campus of Arkansas State University was promised 'a training facility for vocational workers in the gas industry' complete with a 'gas well simulator.' Belinda LaForce, the mayor of Searcy at the time, echoed McClendon's optimism, saying, 'It's going to be a long-term presence' (Watkins, 2008). Three years later, Chesapeake sold all of its interests in the Fayetteville Shale to the Australian firm, BHP Billiton Petroleum, which by 2015 stopped production completely in Arkansas. In January of 2016, Southwestern, the company that discovered the gas in the Fayetteville Shale, laid off forty percent of its work force (Taylor, 2016). A look at the website of the Searcy campus of Arkansas State University reveals no vocational training for gas workers and, alas, no gas well simulator. 'The long-term

[7] President William Jefferson Clinton practiced his neoliberal policies as governor of Arkansas before taking his hillbilly show to the White House.

presence' turned out to be eight years, during which time the promises of fixing value in the geography of White County diminished as the expensive process of hydraulic fracturing undermined the fictitious values predicted by McClendon and other wildcat fracking prospectors.

Governing the flow of capital through living geographies is an ontological predicate of sovereign legitimacy. If elected representatives are not minding the flow of capital by thoughtful legislation, then private industrial concerns become the de facto government. As Mitchell points out, 'Money must move into—and out of—the hands of workers, even as it must be frozen in the built landscape of houses, churches, shopping centers, bars, restaurants, parks, and all the other things that make life, including working-class life, possible' (p. 84). In White County, that flow of money through the geography follows patterns of extraction rather than circulation, creating a geography of detritus and dereliction. The holes into the Mississippian geology are now permanent features of the capitalist geography of White County. The value extracted from them, however, is more mobile and has moved on. Like that capital, many of the people who followed the boom have left for Oklahoma and North Dakota, to newly opened mining sites. Offices built to house the service companies, including the touted headquarters of Chesapeake, are vacant, and local land prices have plummeted. As Mitchell points out, 'Under capitalism, the construction of a built environment—a city or town or neighborhood or factory—might undermine its own reason for being. In capitalism, deindustrialization and capital flight *make sense*' (p. 83, original emphasis). It makes sense because extraction, mining, is the epitome of capitalist geographies as it converts local materials into fictitious forms of capital. McClendon's promises to White County sought such transformations. 'Underdevelopment and disinvestment may make all kinds of sense to a man 'in mining,'' Mitchell explains, 'but to the miners it can mean the destruction of a livelihood and of the places in which they live' (p. 90). The Fayetteville Lateral pipeline, which was built for the mobility of energy and, therefore, value, dissects White County on its way to a distribution port in Lula, Mississippi. Like highways, that pipeline circumscribes space into a logic. The gas was pressed out of the Fayetteville Shale and siphoned to markets far away, and as the gas flowed out of White County, very rationally and predictably, the capital flowed into the fictitious coffers of McClendon, his shareholders and similar hucksters.[8]

I have already explained the physical differences between White County and Northwest Arkansas, where the capitalist geographies are dominated by the importation of value extracted from off-shore labor sources. Nelson, the White County driver, commented on the changes in the White County geography. 'When the oil field come in and hit that area,' he said, 'it grew.' However, 'when the oil field started shutting down,' it went back to what he called 'normal.' He followed his comments about the boom and bust of White County with an observation about his experience in various built environments. 'I drive trucks,' he said, 'so I deal with everything,' meaning every kind of built traffic environment. In other words, he traffics through various geographies, always circumscribed by the logic of capitalism, the rational flows of value. The precarity that resulted from the bust of gas extraction had actually changed his living. Instead of driving a dump truck locally, a job that allowed him to be more involved with his daughter Debbie's life, he had recently switched to a job that required long-haul excursions across the continent. 'You never know if you're going to have a job,' he said of driving the dump truck. He was at the Springdale derby in

[8] McClendon, of course, used some of that capital to move the Seattle Supersonics to Oklahoma City, something he promised Seattle he would never do, and some other of that capital for the Chevy Tahoe that he drove without a seatbelt full-speed into a concrete embankment a day after a federal indictment for fixing land deals.

September to see Debbie drive in one last derby before the winter because he feared he might have to leave before the derby in a county neighboring their own. When he described demolition derby as 'my stress reliever,' he reveals the pressure of the rational geographies of capitalism and the grid of highways it produces. His performance within the demolition derby arena contradicts (literally 'speaks against') that logic. Sixteen year-old Debbie, whom I interviewed with her father after her first derby, had the letters 'WFO' painted on her trunk deck. When I asked her the meaning, she sheepishly looked at her father, who smiled and explained, 'Wide F'in' Open,' the attitude of irrational motion. Even as she was learning to conform to traffic order as a new commuter, she is learning to speak against it. Many drivers describe the potentiality of vectors within the arena as anti-rational, as 'commotion' and 'craziness.' As such, the space of the derby arena is an important transgression of the geographies of capitalism and therefore a potential area of agency for working-class subjects.

Since early twentieth-century Marxian attempts at awakening a liberating class consciousness, academics have been contemplating the agency of subjects within economic superstructures. As I referenced above, Michel de Certeau questioned whether the 'ordinary man' cares much about academic theories of working-class subjectivity and agency. Following Nietzsche, he implies that the academic gaze creates as much truth as it claims to discover. Still, trying to understand cultural and psychical superstructures that emerge from and reproduce the economic and social levers of power that limit human experiences (working-class and otherwise) remains an underlying praxis of many humanities and social science disciplines. One limitation of Mitchell's essay on 'working-class geographies' is that it speaks *to* other academics about revealing the presence of working people within landscapes, to read the landscape as a space of struggle as Linkon and Russo do around Youngstown and as Mitchell himself does in his alternative geography of the California Central Valley, *The Lie of the Land*. Reading the landscape for signs of struggle helps to bring working people into the view of history, like the anonymous asparagus pickers with which Mitchell concludes his book (1996, p. 202). However, human agency functions at the level of experience in how much power one *feels* within the forces generating that experience. I'm not sure how pointing out geographies of struggle gets to the level of empowering agency.

Ben Rogaly's development of the concept of 'non-elite cosmopolitanism' might help us understand how the experience of demolition derby, as a cultural repertoire and spectacle, reveals *feelings* of power within landscapes of struggle. His focus on the oral histories of workers allows, as he puts it, 'not only an approach to labour geography that takes workers' moral geographies seriously, but one which is more aware of the changing lives and consciousness of the people involved' (2017). Highlighting examples of 'conviviality, or being at ease with difference,' Rogaly (2020) reveals how migrant stories become intertwined with the stories of locals as the various mobilities of capitalism evolve through time in Peterborough, England. My consultant Javier, the Mexican immigrant via California, was regarded among the other drivers in Northwest Arkansas with approbation because of his reputation as a skilled auto-body technician and an exemplum of pure demolition derby ambition; he was one of the good 'ol boys putting on a good show for the audience, which in Northwest Arkansas included a portion of Latinx families consistent with their now significant portion of the overall population. Javier was the first driver my consultant Dale sought out for me, perhaps because of his visibility. 'We're lookin' for a Mexican guy with a limp,' he said simply descriptively. Still marked by his alterity, Javier nonetheless intersected with other important meanings in the working-class culture of demolition

derby, material integrity and showmanship. There were still confederate battle flags galore, but their presence revealed more about local obtuseness born of white privilege than about actual racialist concepts of humanity. None of the saltires were aimed at Javier; rather, the stickers, car decorations, and actual banners were articulating a kind of carnival semiotics of 'redneck-ness.' As Rogaly concedes, examples of non-elite cosmopolitanism 'do not exist separately from racisms or histories of colonialism but rather in relation to them' (2020). The display of the battle flag of the Army of Northern Virginia (which no one called it) can be read without associations with historical and contemporary racialist ideologies because of the cultural myopia of privileged white semiosis. That semiosis, though, also includes the kind of 'conviviality' that Rogaly emphasizes as important to feelings of agency for working-class subjects, migrant and local.

The most important local meaning that Javier connected with is something I call material integrity. Just as important as its transgression against the logic of the traffic grid is demolition derby's ethos of material integrity. This ability to convert the local material world to local uses, especially through communal work processes, intersects with nearly every axis of meaning foreclosing the identities of the drivers and fans I interviewed. Demolition derby is not a spectacle of destruction but a spectacle, as its name suggests, of demolition, of radical transformation of material from one form to another. The destruction of the utility of the automobiles nevertheless retains their value as masses of metal, as *moles*. Despite the geography of detritus and dereliction left in White County in the wake of the shale extraction bust, local material integrity made organic use of that detritus. When I talked to Eugene, the White County driver, and his colleagues at the Springdale demolition derby, they explained how they built the roll-cages for their cars from drilling pipes abandoned on the platforms around White County. Their use was transgressive not only in its creativity but also in its illicitness. Leon, Eugene's friend, laughed that the acquaintance who supplied the pipes required that the identification bands be cut from each one to prevent anyone from tracing them back to him. When I visited Eugene's home and shop in rural White County, he explained that the several demolished car bodies were being reserved for their scrap metal value. As Javier explained above, all the drivers, in both regions, spoke about using the capital from scrapped cars to fund the next round of derbies. Relating this transformation to class identities, Leon had remarked that the junk in Eugene's yard might become 'Rolls Royces or something.' Likewise, the capitalist geography of extraction became the resources for Eugene's material integrity. The foreclosures of his identity as 'sorta blue collar' required the meanings created by the repurposing of the geographical traces of capitalist order. Transforming the mining pipe to roll cages, he was making local meaning out of the material of extraction, a process over which he had no immediate control.

Though he expressed exhaustion from the building and demolishing of the cars, Eugene claimed, 'we'll run again' because, as he put it, 'once it gets in your blood' demolition derby is addictive. It's 'in your blood' because it corresponds to the rheological[9] processes of the body, processes antithetical to mining. Mitchell points out the importance of the human body in the making of geographies. 'Waged bodies—working people—are a capitalist problem,' he writes, 'because they have wills, needs, desires, and biological limits and they often—willfully—stand against the needs of capital.' Capitalism extracts energy (from workers' bodies, from holes in the shale) but

[9] Borrowing the term from physics, I am applying it here metaphorically to point out the elasticity and plasticity of semiotic meanings within cultural resources. Heraclitus' aphorism, 'everything flows,' applies to materials and to meanings. Demolition derby embodies this concept of flow and continuous transformation.

rheological processes transform energy from one form to another as material moves through an environment. Such a geography is fluid and not circumscribable, like the demolition derby arena and the communal processes of building the cars for competition. Material integrity requires a sensitivity and creativity to the plasticity not only of materials themselves but also of their potential uses. Material integrity almost literally fulfills Mitchell call for 'a much fuller, even more materialist, approach to working-class geographies.' Eugene's use of the material from the geography of capitalism and his conversion of it into a geography of working-class identity reveals the agency of working people within such 'determinant' 'geographies of power.' Rather than a mere historical actor within a mythical gigantomachia of capital and labor, Eugene and the other drivers and fans are making meanings that convert space to a living place continuously. Though he receives his wage partially from itinerate logging, another process that tends toward mere extraction, demolition derby is 'in [his] blood.' He is not a mere representative of a mass; rather, through his forging of material through rheological dynamics, he is a maker wielding his agency through material integrity. He is like the subject of David Budbill's poem 'Roy McInnes' a welder described as 'Shaper, moulder, alchemist,/intermediary, priest,/his hands communicate a vision,/they create with skill and grace/an act of intercession between reality and need' (1990, p.32). Material integrity, then, reveals itself as an important mode of what Mitchell calls 'working-class geographies' and provides a semiotic space for Rogaly's 'non-elite cosmopolitanism' to emerge and for Linkon and Russo's community memories to operate.

Demolition derby is not an innocent spectacle; it is involved in the making of living meanings. What gives the spectacle a kind of organic integrity is that it is not—in fact, willfully and militantly not—a top-down entertainment. It has always been, and will continue to be, a spectacle generated by non-professional competitors using salvaged and repurposed consumer material. It will always be a rheological process, consistent with the material experience of working-class people themselves, in which material is neither created nor destroyed but simply transformed from one purpose to another, from scrap metal to 'Rolls Royces or something.' Instead of imagining an ideal working-class subjectivity, I have tried to reveal what working-class people themselves are saying through the spectacle of demolition derby. The spectacle and all of its processes are organic symbolic representations, and in that way, they are communicative discourses. They are communicating Raymond Williams' definition of 'culture:' 'common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a man's whole committed personal and social experience' (p. 15). The demolition derby driver speaks of that experience in exhaust and twisted metal. Just as the arena is a place of mobility and contestation, meanings resist stability and nomological values. If the highways and traffic laws reproduce a mythical epistemic apodeictic, the demolition derby arena responds with an equally mythic problematic. What demolition derby seems to say about the definitions of working-class subjectivities can best be summed up by drivers Kyle's and Debbie's own words: 'It's home-made, man' and 'Wide f'in' open.'

Author Bio

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Laughing all the Way to the Closed Factory: The Deindustrialization Comedy

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Abstract

This article explores the comedic treatment of deindustrialization in three films: *Gung Ho* (US, 1986), *De frigjorte* (Denmark, 1993), and *The Full Monty* (UK, 1997). Examining the films' different ways of portraying deindustrialization, the article discusses how symptomatic it is that these films offered their audiences a form of comedic silver lining in an era when deindustrialization was still felt acutely as a crisis. *Gung Ho*'s comedic take on the 1980s deindustrialization crisis invokes hopeful discourses of reindustrialization, *De frigjorte* explores a crisis of masculinity after its protagonist is laid off after two decades' employment at a local factory, and *The Full Monty* offers a story of men overcoming deindustrialization in a communal way. Reading these films in relation to each other, the article argues that these films offered viewers faced with the realities of deindustrialization a moment of comedic distance to economic hardship.

Keywords

Deindustrialization, unemployment, film, economic recession, crisis, industrial work, comedy

Literary scholar Sherry Lee Linkon argues (2018, 10) that fictional narratives about the long-term consequences of industrial closures started to emerge in the U.S. around the year 2000. Exploring what Linkon calls *the half-life of deindustrialization*, these narratives do not present deindustrialization as an acute crisis but more as a state of affairs where the long-term ramifications of industrial closures loom large in specific communities. Philipp Meyer's novel *American Rust*, for instance, portrays how some young men 'struggle to redefine working-class masculinity and adulthood in the absence of industrial labor' (Linkon 2018, 17). One needs only read as far as the second paragraph of the novel to see how Meyer emphasizes the effects of deindustrialization on this fictional Pennsylvania community. Having only just introduced its young protagonist, Isaac English, and his situation, the novel outlines how the now closed steel mill 'had been like a small city, but […] now stood like an ancient ruin, its buildings grown over with bittersweet vine' (Meyer 2010, 3). Such deindustrialization narratives portray situations in which the factory closings of the 1970-80s continue remain 'an active and significant part of the present' (Linkon 2018, 2).

Since the publication of economists Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison's *The Deindustrialization of America* (1982), many sociologists and historians have contributed to our understanding of the historical and political realities of deindustrialization (e.g. High 2003, Koistinen 2013, Sugrue 2014, Neumann 2016). Linkon covers a cultural approach to this topic, focusing especially on literary works. Her work thus responds to a call for research that she articulated alongside sociologists Tim Strangleman and James Rhodes in 2013. They argued (2013, 11) that 'while scholars from varied fields have examined the economic, social, and political causes and effects of deindustrialization, we would argue that a cultural approach to understanding deindustrialization … is also valuable.' Though Linkon's strong literary focus does also encompass a few screen narratives that touch on deindustrialization (e.g. Curtis

Hanson's film *8 Mile* (76-80) and David Simon's TV series *The Wire* (2002-2008) (49-53)), it seems pertinent to pay more attention to some of the, albeit relatively few, screen narratives that broach the topic of deindustrialization.

This article zooms in on three films (one American, one Danish, and one British) that all explore deindustrialization in different ways but which all embrace a comedic angle to this topic, namely Ron Howard's *Gung Ho* (1986), Erik Clausen's *De frigjorte* (1993), Peter Cattaneo's *The Full Monty* (1997). This article thus aims to supplement Linkon's work in several ways. By analyzing three films from different national contexts I aim to expand how we discuss deindustrialization narratives: in a different form (film), in a slightly earlier era (the 1980s-1990s), and in geographic terms (I include British and Danish texts). Linkon remarks that most of the narratives she studies 'focuses not on those who were displaced when plants closed but on those who are still living with the effects of those closings' (9), which is different from the films under scrutiny here. These films center on the men (women don't figure prominently in these films) that themselves were laid off because of deindustrialization.[1] However, given the fact that I examine these films' take on deindustrialization, I want to explore in greater detail what deindustrialization is before I proceed to my analyses of these three films.

Deindustrialization

Historian Steven High defines deindustrialization as situations when a region experiences a relative decline in industrial employment. This happens, for instance, when factories and steel mills close, causing major challenges for many regions, cities and states (High 2003, 8-9). This process was spurred by interlinked causes, especially automation, capital flight, and disinvestment (Winant 2021, 16). Foreign competition on home markets also played a role as political scientist Dale Hathaway points out (1993, 30) in the case of the competition that the American steel industry faced. All put together, this economic transformation amounted, in Hathaway's evaluation (1993, 2), to a transformation of the economies that rival in importance the 1930-1940s, which saw 'the collapse and reconstitution of U.S. capitalism.' For thousands of workers, this meant the 'loss of good jobs and the social benefits they provided' (Linkon 2018, 164), but for many communities it also came with a legacy of toxic waste, depopulation, 'long-term unemployment, mental and physical health problems, rising rates of addiction and suicide, distrust of institutions, and political resentment' (Linkon 2018, 6).

Historians Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott note that this downturn in industrial employment meant acute crisis for the men and women (and their families) who relied on that work, but they emphasize (2003, 4) that 'What millions of working men and women might have experienced as solid, dependable, decently waged work really only lasted for a brief moment in the history of capitalism.' Deindustrialization is often associated with the 1970s-80s in the United States, but Linkon emphasizes (2018, 22) that one should see this phenomenon as a more long-term process that has forced industrial workers to reinvent themselves and their communities (22). Indeed, David Koistinen's work in *Confronting Decline* (2013) shows how the deindustrialization of the New England textile industry in the interwar period foreshadowed some of the developments that happened in the auto and steel industries in the 1970-80s.

[1] This gendering seems somewhat typical given how film scholar Sarah Attfield notes that 'heavy industry in the west has been traditionally male-dominated' (6), which is very much the case in the three films under scrutiny here.

Historian Tracy Neumann (2016, 5) notes that in the 1950s 'the Great Lakes manufacturing belt had seemed impervious to rust', but by the 1984 the Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale talked of a 'vast Rust Belt with tragic unemployment and broken dreams all through the great industrial Midwest.' As time passed, the moniker of the Rust Belt meant that deindustrialization, according to Steven High (2003, 192), became strongly associated with that specific region. Indeed, Linkon notes that the Rust Belt is the setting of most deindustrialization narratives (Linkon 2018, 13), which for instance is seen in the several documentaries that center on Rust Belt deindustrialization: Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* (1989), Heidi Ewing & Rachel Grady's *Detropia* (2012), and Steven Bognar & Julia Reichert's *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (2009) and *American Factory* (2019). Neumann, however, talks of a 'North Atlantic Rust Belt' to emphasize how certain regions in Europe have faced similar challenges to those in the American Midwest:

The Rust Belt may have been discursively situated in North America, but by the 1980s Western Europe's steel and coal country, from Lille and to the Ruhr to Sheffield and Glasgow, was corroding as well. (Neuman 2016, 5)

Neumann's emphasis on seeing deindustrialization in a transatlantic fashion motivates how we can read together *Gung Ho*, *De frigjorte*, and *The Full Monty* as part of and as responses to this wide-ranging socio-economic transformation. I focus on two films that don't look at the long-term effects but which rather portray deindustrialization as an acute crisis (*Gung Ho* and *De frigjorte*). Only *The Full Monty* arguably is about the half-life of deindustrialization in the sense that the factory closings in Sheffield are presented – through archival footage – as a matter of historical record when the film's narrative starts. But this film is still about men who were laid of when the factories closed, not the children of displaced workers like in, say, Philipp Meyer's *American Rust*. Today, these three films stand as pop-cultural remnants of an era when western societies were coming to terms with the downturn in industrial work and what this meant for the many people, families, cities, and communities who had relied on that work.

The Hope of Reindustrialization: *Gung Ho* (1986)

Ron Howard's comedy *Gung Ho* centers on the cultural encounter between a Japanese leadership at a newly-acquired factory and its American employees. In an effort to save jobs in his community, the American factory worker Hunt Stevenson (Michael Keaton) travels to Japan to get the Assan Motors Corporation to take over a recently closed factory in Pennsylvania. Having the Japanese investors take over the car factory on the condition that they can run it in accordance with Japanese managerial principles, Howard's film sets up a cultural encounter that forms the narrative engine of the film. Deindustrialization, however, is the central social-historical context and theme of the film (Jensen 2020, 32).

Screen writer Edwin Blum conceived the film's underlying premise after watching a story on *60 Minutes* about Nissan opening a plant in Smyrna, Tennessee (Canby 1986), but given the fact that American car manufacturers would not let Howard film *Gung Ho* in their assembly plants, the production team chose to shoot the film's factory scenes in Buenos Aires (Gray 123-25).

The son of actors Rance and Jean Howard, director Ron Howard did not come from a working-class background similar to the milieu he portrays in *Gung Ho*. But the setting nonetheless seemed familiar to him given how he, in the words of biographer Beverly Gray, grew up in Burbank, 'a blue-collar American town … where the livelihood of many family friends was bound up with the shifting fortunes of Lockheed Aircraft' (Gray 124).

Howard got his directorial debut in 1977 and earned a name for himself behind the camera with box office success in the early 1980s with *Night Shift* (1982), *Splash* (1984), and *Cocoon* (1985). So by the time Howard directed *Gung Ho* audience surveys had found that 'his name in the credits bring audiences into theatres' (Gray 123). The film did not turn out a success, earning a meager $36 million dollars in U.S. box office and several critics were not impressed. Film critic Robert Ebert almost disdained the film, pointing to a lack of attention to detail and how it chose to feature fistfights instead of 'dramatic development' and *New York Times*' Vincent Canby found the film's 'satire [to cut] like a wet sponge' (Canby 1986; Gray 125).

The film shows the Assan Motors Corporation to get Hunt to convince his co-workers to adhere to the new Japanese rules, but when that doesn't work Hunt strikes a deal with management, stipulating that if the workers are able to produce 15,000 cars in a single month the workers will get raises and management will hire more of the currently unemployed factory workers in the city. This plotline embraces a meritocratic fantasy in the sense that if the American workers just work hard enough they will get to keep their jobs and be able to provide for themselves and their families, i.e. a belief in a world order where a good work ethic is enough to keep industrial work in America. Given how the U.S. had lost 30 million jobs from plant closings in a single decade (Bluestone and Harrison 1982), it makes sense that a comedic take on this development would provide a sense of uplift or optimism for its viewers.

The deal that Hunt strikes with the company stipulates that anything less than 15,000 cars does not count. Hunt, however, lies about this aspect to his colleagues, which sets up him being exposed. Hunt, admitting to his lie, then delivers the central monologue of film in which he ponders the situation of Hadleyville, Pennsylvania and America more broadly:

The truth? You don't want the truth. You know what you want to hear? You want to hear that Americans do things better than anybody else. They're kicking our butts and that ain't luck. That's the truth. There's your truth. Sure, the great old Ameri-can do-or-die spirit. Yeah, it's alive. But they've got it! Well, I'll tell you something. We'd better get it back. We better get it back damn fast. Instead, we're strutting around telling ourselves how great we are, patting each other on the back. (*Gung Ho*)

Gung Ho articulates the perceived cultural effects of deindustrialization in a discourse of national identity. Framing deindustrialization in relation to Japanese competition and emphasizing how this affects American national identity and self-perception, Hunt stresses issues of attitude and mentality and takes issue with the lie his compatriots tell each other when they talk about 'how great [they] are.' Hunt's framing of deindustrialization is a cultural one that completely elides socioeconomic causes. *Gung Ho*'s take on deindustrialization is certainly not about class conflict within the U.S., which, arguably, was the way that Michael Moore would portray the issue in his deindustrialization film *Roger & Me* three years later. Moore's urban portrait of Flint, Michigan is narratively structured around Moore's attempts to interview General Motors CEO Roger Smith in order to confront him about the social ramifications of GM's downsizing in Flint in the 1980s. Moore's way of portraying both Flint's elite and some of its most marginalized citizens emphasizes class conflict in a way that *Gung Ho* completely shies away from.

Linkon argues that the long-term effects of deindustrialization include depopulation, long-term unemployment, physical and mental issues, political resentment, a distrust of institutions, and societal uncertainties that become internalized (6). Those issues, however, are nowhere near

what *Gung Ho* centers on. Ron Howard's take on deindustrialization zooms in on a perceived challenge to an American sense of self, articulated through Hunt's remark about 'the great old American do-or-die spirit' (Jensen 2020, 32-34).

The film ends with a struggle for the workers to construct the very last of the 15,000 cars, but the last ones are hardly finished in time for their deadline. Howard's way of ending this narrative seems forced. The Japanese executive acknowledges the workers' accomplishment and actually holds up his end of the bargain even though the workers did not deliver all of the cars on time. This unrealistic ending shows the workers to be completely at the mercy of the Japanese management. The power relations are fully in favor of management (Jensen 2020, 82). Literary scholar Peter Clare notes that:

the fact remains that the workers will have to keep up such an inordinate monthly production of cars from here on out (certainly putting in the same overtime and without management's help on the line), something it is clear they will not be able to do, even with their supposed reinvigorated work ethic. Moreover, although they now have wages equaling those they had under the union, they still lack a contract and collective voice. (69)

It is completely in line with *Gung Ho*'s participation in the comedy genre that the film ends on a high note. But this light-hearted conclusion to this narrative seems artificially tacked on. Management concedes to the workers in an unrealistic way. The workers have tacitly committed to performing at an almost superhuman level if they are to keep their jobs and that, too, seems to be no cause for celebration. And with the union being a thing of the past, the workers no longer will have a collected voice going forward. By focalizing its narrative through Hunt, *Gung Ho* seems sympathetic to his perspective, but, as Clare accurately argues, 'this messiah's gospel of work ethic is a ruse of sorts, pitched at the worker who will bear the brunt of this transitional state of the auto industry and global economy' (Clarke 2014, 71). *Gung Ho*'s perspective is Hunt's perspective; one that elides the socio-economic causes of deindustrialization and places the 'blame' on the on workers themselves. It believes in reindustrialization but glosses over the economic and human costs this process would entail in terms of worsened working conditions and changed power relations in the industrial economy. Seven years later, the socialist filmmaker Erik Clausen offered his comedic take on deindustrialization, but he made no promise of reindustrialization.

The Frail Man of Deindustrialization: *De frigjorte* (1993)

Directed by Erik Clausen, one of Denmark's most prolific social-realist filmmakers, *De frigjorte* explores a crisis of masculinity after its protagonist, machinist Viggo Hansen (also Erik Clausen), is laid off after working for 25 years at a local factory in Copenhagen. The film's opening scenes center on Viggo's concerns about the white envelopes (pink slips) that managers are handing out. Viggo and his co-workers, however, assure each other that 'They'll need someone to tend to our machines.'[2] This use of the possessive pronoun 'our' reveals the degree to which these machinists identify with their place of work. This identification coupled with the film's foregrounding of Viggo's concerns about being fired suggest the grave ramifications deindustrialization will have for these workers. At the heart of Clausen's film is an ambition to bring the experiences of industrial workers to the big screen.

[2] I translated all of the Danish quotes into English myself.

The two strongest through-lines in Clausen's oeuvre are arguably his political commitment and his employment of humor. 'I am a socialist,' Clausen said when *De frigjorte* was released before adding that 'but I don't want to brag about it!' (Clausen in Grue 1993b). Clausen's tongue-in-cheek way of discussing his political stance reveals an openness to aligning himself with a specific ideology as well as showing an irreverent take on political manifestations. Politics and comedy are closely intertwined in Clausen's work.

Frequently invoking his working-class background when discussing his work, Clausen articulates an important part of his politics in his choice of who to focalize his narratives through. Clausen explained in a video for the union 3F's Youtube channel that he has always sought to eschew an otherwise strong tendency to portray working-class as comic figures and that he instead 'turned the working class into the main character' (Clausen 2017), showing Clausen's emphasis on class and class-consciousness.

De frigjorte performed well in Denmark, both critically and commercially. The Danish Film Critics Association awarded the film its annual 'Bodil' for best film and the Danish Film Academy gave Anne Marie Helger a 'Robert' in recognition of her performance as that year's best supporting actress for her portrayal of Karen. In 1993, the Norwegian film award 'the Amanda' experimented with doing a Nordic award instead of 'just' focusing on Norwegian film. In that year, *De frigjorte* won for best screenplay (*VG* 1993). And in that same year, the coalition of Danish unions (The Confederation of Professionals in Denmark) gave Clausen an award, primarily for his work on *De frigjorte* (*Politiken* 1994). The film was the best-selling film in the second quarter of 1993 in Denmark (*Politiken* 1993) and the sixth-best grossing film in that year overall (Iversen 1994), trailing behind American blockbusters such as *Jurassic Park* and *Bodyguard*.

The end credits of *De frigjorte* tell us that the film would not have been made without financial support from the Danish General Workers' Union, which traditionally organized unskilled workers. This union's decision to help fund Clausen's film was surely informed by a wish to give voice to many of its members' experiences and frustrations in early-1990s Denmark that saw soaring unemployment rates. Indeed, the Danish daily *B.T.* noted (Hauch 1993) that the film's focus on unemployment made it topical: 'A highly current topic which almost 350,000 Danes plus families are feeling.' This level of unemployment roughly corresponds to an employment rate of 12 percent of the total work force at that point in time.

When the management lays off Viggo and all of his coworkers at the start of the film, the workers are informed that they're all 'set free to do other work', which is such a convoluted euphemism that one minor character, Iversen (Leif Sylvester), does not even realize that he has just been fired. Management is moving part of the production to Portugal. This line echoes the film's Danish title *De frigjorte* which roughly translates to the 'The Freed Ones.'[3] Ironically, the factory workers do not feel free to do other work and the audience in the early 1990s would know just how bad unemployment was at that point in time. This talk of being 'set free' is a satirical attack on managerial discourse (why not just say they're all fired?), but it also poses the serious question of what these workers are going to do with all of their new 'freedom' and spare time? They had already found their vocation, but now they will have to find a new place in the world.

[3] The official title of *De frigjorte* is *Fish Out of Water*.

However, it is not just the experience of being fired and being out of work that causes Viggo concerns. At one point, Viggo is having lunch with his family in a communal courtyard and an elderly neighbor joins them. He enthusiastically tells Viggo and family of his work life experiences, but Viggo's thoughts, which are continuously communicated through voiceover narration, center around how this man probably will never find employment in his line of work again.

Though Viggo's line of thought explicitly is about his man's prospects, Viggo is rehashing these thoughts as a traumatic response to his nascent realization that his fate and prospects may well parallel that of this old man. And given the fact that the first time Viggo had talked to this man is down on a bench while his man is having a beer, Viggo is dreading the direction that he is headed in. Will he end up joining the lonesome alcoholics sitting on the benches? Viggo's work and sense of self are intimately interwoven.

Being laid off starts Viggo's crisis and he both becomes increasingly estranged from his wife Oda (Helle Ryslinge) and has an affair with a woman, Karen (Anne Marie Helger), whom he meets at a bar. This thematic point is also emphasized by the film's opening credits. As mentioned, the first scene introduces Viggo's fear of losing his job and it is after this scene that we see the opening credits which show pictures that seem to be from the 1950s-1960s. Not from work but from youth life and family life. These stills suggest a life story for Viggo that the film's narrative does not develop. The thematic point of this montage is that these old photographs are not just about work, but also about the working-class life and the experiences that that work made possible. The implication is that when that work is disappearing, this situation is not just a crisis for Viggo's work-life identity but a crisis of identity as a human being.

Political scientist Dale Hathaway once pondered (1993, 3) why the crisis brought about by deindustrialization in the 1970-1980s was not met with massive opposition like in earlier crises: 'The experience of the 1890s and the 1930s strongly suggests that those who are damaged by dramatic economic transformation normally attempt, in some form we might broadly call political, to protect themselves from further damage.' This fits well with *De frigjorte*, which does not portray any political elements in terms of activism or protest. The film is about the human consequences of this development, and is thus only implicitly a political response to deindustrialization in the sense that it gives voice and screen time to those affected by this development.

Viggo's daughter, Lone (Gitte Rugaard), explicitly asks Viggo why people aren't protesting the widespread joblessness, to which her father laments that 'People take it as a personal defeat. And no one wants to put their defeats on display.' Viggo's reply speaks to the reasons for why deindustrialization was not met with popular protest, but his allusion to an experience of 'personal defeat' bears witness to the heavy weight of individualization in this situation.

Sociologist Rasmus Willig argues (2013) that contemporary societies are shaped by what he calls 'a U-turn in critique.' Due to the increasing levels of individualization in contemporary societies, many people point the finger at themselves instead of taking issue with problems in society. If something is wrong in people's lives, it is their own fault and not the product of, say, industrial production being relocated to a facility in Portugal, which is completely out of the hands of any single worker. *De frigjorte* presents this lack of public protests against massive lay-offs and deindustrialization as being symptomatic of an over-individualized society, which the film also emphasizes by having Viggo go through his crisis alone.

Viggo's affair with Karen ends with her rejecting him and Viggo being beaten up by her new lover. Viggo is hospitalized at a psychiatric facility but ends up rekindling with his family. This tragic-but-ultimately-uplifting storyline emphasizes the severe ramifications of deindustrialization on the men of the working class in the early 1990s. The ending of *Gung Ho* suggested a hope for reindustrialization, which maybe gave a glimmer of hope for a very challenged working class in the mid-1980s. *De frigjorte* offers no such hope. Historian Steven High (2021) notes that political resistance to deindustrialization has, at most, been able to postpone factory closings, but it has not been able to actually prevent it. In this perspective, *Gung Ho* seems to have been very optimistic about reindustrialization. I should add, however, that it absolutely is very understandable why somebody wanted to offer audiences a glimmer of optimism during the height of the deindustrialization crisis.

Instead of offering a promise of promise of deindustrialization, *De frigjorte* zooms in on a personal crisis that is brought about by deindustrialization. The film ultimately is about how working-class men (and women) can emotionally handle this societal transformation. Clausen's film does not suggest that Viggo will find work in his field again but it does suggest that he is able to reconnect with his family. The positive ending is possible because Viggo ultimately did not squander everything he did have. He ends up in a situation where it is up to him to rekindle with his wife and his children. The film emphasizes that there is an emotional fallout in the wake of deindustrialization that each man must go through on his own. As a contrast to his focus on the individual, Peter Cattaneo's deindustrialization film shows industrial unemployment to be handled by a group of workers.

From Blue Collar to No Collar at All: *The Full Monty* (1997)

In *The Full Monty*, a group of unemployed steelworkers form a striptease group in order to earn some money in a deindustrialized Sheffield. Media scholars Estella Tincknell and Deborah Chambers argue (2002, 146) that the film addresses a 1990s 'crisis in masculinity' brought about 'the decline of traditional male manual work' as is seen in how the protagonist Gaz (Robert Carlyle) is not able to retain custody rights due to his inability to pay child support. Learning that the working-men's club will host a Chippendales show and seeing his best friend's wife, Jean (Lesley Sharpe), urinating while standing up in a men's restroom, Gaz gloomily concludes that 'A few years more, and men won't exist ... We're obsolete. Dinosaurs. Yesterday's news.' Media scholar Chantal D'Arcy notes that this opening represents 'women's complete appropriation of all the traditional attributes of masculinity' (132). In a similar vein, Dave (Mark Addy) cannot perform sexually, Lomper (Steve Huison) is suicidal, and Gerald (Tom Wilkinson) has not told his wife that he has been unemployed for six months. None of these men exists in the world in a way they like and embrace. They are all lacking something.

The film was a huge but surprising success. For a brief moment the film was the highest-grossing film in UK ever, and a 2017 audience survey in the UK showed that *The Full Monty* was the Brits' first runner up in as their all-time favorite British film, trailing only behind *The Italian Job* (1969) (O'Callaghan 2017). Despite a modest production budget of only 3.5 million dollars, the film ended up bringing in more than 250 million dollars (Kelley 2023). The film was nominated for four Academy Awards, winning for best music and losing to *Titanic* and *Good Will Hunting* for best picture, best director, and best non-adapted screenplay. 26 years after its release, the film is even being accompanied by a follow-up television series sequel, which is soon to be released (Kelley 2023). It is a surprise success by all accounts.

The film opens with footage culled from a 1970s promotional film titled 'Sheffield – City on the Move' about the then-prosperous city of Sheffield that focuses on how the city's state is intimately tied to the steel industry: 'Thanks to steel,' the narrator tells us, 'Sheffield really is a city on the move.' This clip contextualizes the film's portrayal of 1990s Sheffield in the absence of industrial work. The ironic thing here is that the factory, though closed, still offers the men an illegal rehearsal space for this striptease performance. Their attempt to escape the confines of unemployment means going back to the source of their unemployment; the closed factory. This choice of setting is metaphorical for the film's portrayal of the transition from industrial production (in the secondary sector) to entertainment work (in the tertiary sector).
The Full Monty's portrayal of how deindustrialization causes problems for the men in society thus clearly parallels *De frigjorte*'s story about Viggo. Gaz cannot afford to take his son, Nathan (Wim Snape), to see a soccer match, indicating how his unemployment bars him from being the father he wants to be. However, when he, at the end of the film, does not want to go out on stage to perform with the others it is Nathan that urges Gaz to take the stage. Though he is experiencing a crisis he commits to his ambitions when he sees that that is what his son wants him to do. He may not be a steady provider like he and his friends once were, but he is still able to be a good man in the sense of being a good father. Indeed, Tincknell and Chambers (2002, 149) point out how *The Full Monty* shows 'fatherhood [to be] the place in which the value of masculinity is reasserted.'

Gaz's friend Dave has another problem. His self-image and sense of self is completely shattered to the point that he is unable to perform sexually with his wife Jean. However, when Dave admits that he and his friends have been rehearsing for their striptease show Jean consoles him. D'Arcy notes (2005, 130) that it is Jean's 'love [that] restores his confidence.' It is her devotion to Dave that makes him able to perform in the striptease show and, we might infer, makes him able to perform sexually later on. Gaz thus gets the final push he needs from his son and Dave gets his final push from his wife, which shows how the six men in the group not only rely on support from each other. They also depend on their families. This emphasis on the use of community is a quite the contrast to how *De frigjorte* shows Viggo to go through his crisis alone.

The film's climax is the final strip show where the men go all the way, which demonstrates the film's positive resolution of its plot. Chantal D'Arcy, however, points out the ambiguity of this ending:

Hence, for all its upbeat ending – with wives, girlfriends and female acquaintances shrieking out their support and approval – *The Full Monty* offers no evidence of a solution to the protagonists' unemployment and poverty. The only thing that the film's narrative does resolve is the problem of the male characters' loss of self-esteem. (132-133)

D'Arcy's point is that though the film probably leaves many viewers with smiles on their faces, the underlying problem of postindustrial unemployment is not solved. There is an existential crisis that is solved in each man in the group, but their economic woes do not come to an end with the few hundred pounds they each will make from this performance. In that way, the film's comedic closing disregards, for a moment, the dire outlook of deindustrialization in order to give viewers an uplifting take on a deindustrializing Great Britain.

Laughing all the Way to the Closed Factory

Film scholars Frank Krutnik and Stephen Neale note that the fact that a film is funny is not enough to label it a comedy. They argue that a 'comedy is not just 'light' and 'amusing', it is marked also by a 'happy ending' and by its concern with the representation of 'everyday life' (11). *Gung Ho*, *De frigjorte*, and *The Full Monty* fit this description. They all (at least aim to) induce laughs, they all end on a high note, and they focus on the everyday lives of the industrial working class. In other words, their appeal (to laughs), their narrative structure, and their choice of principal characters run parallel to each other.

This is an interesting creative choice given how dire the prospects were for a great many people who suffered the costs of deindustrialization, e.g. long-term unemployment and uncertainty about life prospects. The overall depressive outlook Philipp Meyer presents his readers with in *American Rust* is quite the contrast to these films. Meyer's portrayal of a deindustrialized community in 21st century Pennsylvania emphasizes a social dissolution that is intimately connected to the disappearance of industrial work where the children of deindustrialization have 'neither their fathers' jobs nor their models of masculinity' to help them enter adulthood (Linkon 2018, 62). These comedies' take on deindustrialization is less grim.

Gung Ho suggests that reindustrialization might be possible in Pennsylvania. *De frigjorte* does not subscribe to this belief but it does offer a positive ending when Viggo learns that it is up to him to reconnect with his family. Deindustrialization is the new reality in Denmark in the 1990s but Viggo chooses to leave his 'inner grump' behind and join his family in working in the communal garden. He still has agency at an existential level. *The Full Monty* shows the men to succeed in making money in a single night, which is important for their personal development. The next day, however, they are just as unemployed as ever except for Gerald.

It is telling that deindustrialization is tackled through the form of comedy in several national contexts. It seems that the laughter in these films could be interpreted as either escapist or activist. Given how none of films are invitations for activist engagement it seems more likely to understand this call for laughter in the face of deindustrialization as an offer, for a moment, to get a comedic distance to the economic crisis that was all too familiar to some of the viewers of these films.

Perhaps it is telling that one of the only American television serials to really tackle deindustrialization, David Simon's *The Wire* (2002-2008), which 'testifies to the social costs of deindustrialization' (Linkon et al 241), has also been discussed as a rather bleak show (Dreier and Atlas 2009; Jensen 2017, 131-133). It does surely seem hard to find a silver lining in depicting deindustrialization but *Gung Ho*, *De frigjorte*, and *The Full Monty* all offer their viewers a sense of uplift. The heavy consequences that deindustrialization brought about for many communities are probably too grim to make for enticing feature films, but filmmakers have nonetheless been able to give at least some voice to unemployed workers and their communities through the form of comedy.

Bruce Springsteen was gloomy about deindustrialization in his songs 'Youngstown' (Springsteen 1995), 'My Hometown', and 'Born in the U.S.A.' (Springsteen 1984). Meyer stressed the negative consequences of deindustrialization in *American Rust* and David Simon explored how deindustrialization was a central aspect of urban maladies in the 21st century American city in *The Wire*. And Michael Moore's angry approach to G.M.'s factory closings is clear in *Roger & Me*. But where Moore's humor is an activist one, the laughs induced by *The Full Monty*, *Gung Ho*, and *De frigjorte* instead offer 'an escapist breather' for people who had felt deindustrialization in their lives or in their families.

In other words, there are other approaches than the comedic one to depicting deindustrialization in popular culture, but it is nonetheless striking that some of the most prominent feature films from the era when deindustrialization was still acutely felt were comedies. Before deindustrialization entered its half-life in the 2000s, filmmakers sought to provide some silver living in the darkness of the movie theater. Later works about the half-life of deindustrialization focus more on calling attention to the problematic, and perhaps less-known, long-term effects of deindustrialization, which seems to motivate the more serious/non-comedic approach to this social reality.

In a similar vein, it makes sense that Emmanuel Carrère's *Between Two Worlds* (2021) about the contemporary gig economy is dire and serious. Its purpose is to raise awareness of the problematic aspects of this socio-economic development. This is a contrast to the public awareness about deindustrialization in the 1970-1990s which affected thousands of working-class families. In 1982, Bluestone and Harrison noted (1982, 4) that, at that point in time in the U.S., 'every newscast seemed to contain a story about a plant shutting down, another thousand jobs disappearing from a community, or the frustrations of workers unable to find full-time jobs utilizing their skills and providing enough income to support their families'. In that situation, filmmakers didn't need to raise awareness to deindustrialization. They would know that their audience was in the know about factory closings when they entered the movie theater.

Gung Ho suggested that reindustrialization was a possibility in the mid-1980s but downplayed the worsened working conditions that development would entail. *De frigjorte* offered no such hope, but was satisfied with giving a pop-cultural voice to those affected by deindustrialization in the early 1990s. It emphasized the social and existential repercussions of deindustrialization but also suggests that those affected by unemployment can get through their crises. *The Full Monty* aligned with this perspective, but, unlike *De frigjorte*'s focus on a single protagonist, stressed that male camaraderie and help from the men's wives and children could help them through the existential and social costs of deindustrialization. This comedic approach brought the story of deindustrialization to the big screen and gave viewers an hour-and-a-half of escapist humor about a social reality, which many working-class viewers knew all too well when these films were released.

Author Bio

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Problems and possibilities for Swedish working-class literature in a neoliberal age

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Abstract

In recent decades, inequality has increased in Sweden. The increasing gaps are connected with policies that are often called neoliberal. How does working-class literature relate to these social problems and what literary possibilities does it open up? In this article I discuss these questions based on some literary examples from Swedish contemporary working-class literature. These literary examples have attracted much attention. My perspective is that I see working-class literature as literature with a distinct use value and a literature that has specific functions in the working-class literature context (Felski, 2008).

Kristian Lundberg, Johan Jönson and Jenny Wrangborg all give personal accounts from workplaces. Such can be valuable. The problem with Lundberg and Jönson is that they tend to be introverted and egocentric. Especially Lundberg lacks the class perspective. Perhaps Lundberg's *Yarden* (The Yard, 2009) should be described as confessional literature rather than working-class literature. With Susanna Alakoski the working-class is hidden behind the concept of poverty. The working-class as actor is absent. The labor movement as well. Instead, it is the middle class who appear as actor. Through the role of jester, Jönson makes class society visible. The role of jester could be seen as a specific rhetorical strategy and a literary device to create a distancing effect, or Verfremdungseffekt. Wrangborg connects to the legacy of early working-class literature with struggle poems. From within the workplace she describes work situations and experiences of class.

Emil Boss takes a close look at language and concepts in a postpolitical age when old concepts have changed meaning. It is a crucial task for working-class literature to explain, interpret and examine old concepts that have changed meaning in a new political era, when the labor movement has lost contact with previous ideals and social democratic governments pursue rightwing politics, thus making it difficult to distinguish between left and right.

Keywords

Working-class literature, use of literature, Swedish literature, Sweden, neoliberalism

In recent decades, inequality has increased in Sweden. In fact, class gaps have grown faster than in any other OECD country (Ahrne et al., 2021). One could speak of a silent revolution as this social change also took place during a number of social democratic governments.

The increasing gaps are connected with policies that are often called neoliberal. Neoliberalism, as geographer David Harvey defines it, is a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (2007, p. 2). To date, few other countries have progressed as far and as quickly with privatization as Sweden, according to sociologist Liv Sunnercrantz (2021, p. 188).

At the same time as this problematic social development, working-class literature has received a boost. According to Rasmus Landström (2020), Swedish working-class literature has never before been as broad and vibrant as it is today.

My perspective in this article is that I see working-class literature as literature with a distinct use value and a literature that has specific functions in the working-class literature context. For example, to strengthen solidarity and class consciousness (Felski, 2008).

How does working-class literature relate to these social problems and what literary possibilities does it open up? I want to discuss such questions here based on some literary examples from Swedish contemporary working-class literature. These literary examples have attracted much attention.

The working-class literary tradition is strong in Sweden. It had its golden age in the 1930s, in recent years it has thus had a renaissance. What characterizes this new wave is the diversity of expression: poetry and prose and even comics. The new working-class literature is also distinguished by the many female authors and the depictions of work in health care and the service sector.

There are different opinions among working-class literature researchers about contemporary working-class literature in Sweden. Magnus Nilsson believes that working-class literature has an avantgarde position in political thinking through its understanding of class and class politics. According to Nilsson (2014, p. 100), Kristian Lundberg's *Yarden* (The Yard, 2009) and Johan Jönson's *Efter arbetsschema* (According to Work Schedule, 2008) are gateposts – here Nilsson's use gateposts alludes to the famous Swedish working-class writer Ivar Lo-Johansson who called Martin Koch and Gustav Hedenvind-Eriksson gateposts for Swedish working-class literature – for a new working-class literature that seeks away from realism and is characterized by both formal and thematic renewal.

Beata Agrell (2015) points to egocentric and self-reflective tendencies in contemporary working-class literature which are not only attempts at literary renewal away from social realism, but are also an expression of the individualism and narcissism that characterize our neoliberal age. Meanwhile, Åsa Arping (2022) describes the contemporary autobiographical trend as the working-class writer entering a witness position and recounting previously silenced class experiences.

Journalist and author Kajsa Ekis Ekman (2009) believes that left-wing intellectuals often legitimize themselves by assuming the position of marginalized. In order to speak, one must be silenced, or rather present oneself as silenced using various rhetorical strategies and literary devices. But what social critical function can these testimonies have in contemporary working-class literature? Do they not primarily appear as reports on individual problems in a post-political era? Without connection to class consciousness, social outlook, social movements and collective solutions, perhaps they rather risk reinforcing the prevailing system. The story of neoliberalism is that deviations, defects in a fundamentally optimal system are corrected. Today's suffering can be justified by the fact that the system will work better in the future.

An international outlook on working-class literature research may be relevant in this context to gain further perspective. Danish working-class literature researchers are ambivalent about the question of how the class-oriented contemporary literature in Denmark is related to the working-class literary tradition. Distinctive, according to Nicklas Freisleben Lund (2020), are

depictions of those who are outside the labor market or are in a permanently unstable, insecure and vulnerable relationship to it, such as the long-term unemployed, social welfare recipients and those on sick leave (p. 71).

There are also depictions of upward class journeys, where the protagonist, with a working-class background, depicts the climb up the social ladder retrospectively (p. 73). Several of these works convey an ambiguity, notes Freisleben Lund. On the one hand, they present a positive vision that the working-class is no longer helplessly tied to its class origins. On the other hand, these particular protagonists are presented as exceptions to the rule, as the majority of working-class characters included in the story cannot follow the protagonist's upward trajectory. While the protagonist, through various circumstances, such as special personal characteristics, help from benefactors, or pure chance, is able to get out of his class, the class as such remains stuck in a degraded social existence.

Freisleben Lund (2020) further notes that much of the Danish working-class literature is characterized by descriptions of the working-class as dysfunctional and destructive with broken families, violence and abuse. Although the depictions express sympathy with the working-class and criticize the prevailing conditions, these texts differ from older classical works of working-class literature in that they do not highlight the human, social and political potential to change these conditions. The focus is on the unorganized working-class, and although the stories express sympathy and compassion, the lower classes are almost never depicted as a potentially progressive social force. The majority of contemporary class-oriented literature lacks an ideological anchoring and utopian impulse, which distinguishes it from much of the older working-class literature (Freisleben Lund, 2020, p. 74).

Working-class literature researcher Anker Gemzøe (2016) is on the same track and believes that the relationship between Danish working-class literature and the labor movement has undoubtedly been stronger and clearer in earlier periods. At the same time, he continues, the depictions of the so-called *Underdanmark* (Lower Denmark) have several genre, stylistic and attitudinal similarities with the early twentieth century (p. 124). Just like a hundred years ago, the autobiographically anchored family novel, which depicts growing up under difficult conditions at the bottom of society, is now a prevailing trend. Just as before, the focus is on childhood.

As one of his literary examples, Anker Gemzøe (2016) highlights Yahya Hassan's bestseller *Digte*, (Poems, 2013), which Gemzøe describes as a verse novel that has clear common features with, for example, Martin Andersen Nexø's (1906–1910) autobiographical account of growing up in *Pelle Erobreren* (Pelle the Conqueror). Andersen Nexø is seen by many as the pioneer of the Nordic working-class literature. The story about Pelle the Conqueror became world famous and was translated into 25 languages.

Based on the career of migrant working-class writer Md Mukul Hossine, working-class literature researcher Luka Lei Zhang (2021) sheds light on the situation of working-class writers in today's neoliberal market in Singapore. Singapore has a large group of migrant workers in many industries. Md Mukul Hossine worked in the construction sector. In 2016, his first poetry collection, *Me Migrant*, was published. It received a lot of media attention and reached a large readership. The following year, in 2017, the sequel *Braving Life* was released. Mukul participated in television shows and literary events along with politicians and writers. However, the situation quickly changed for the young poet. Mukul himself describes it as trying to express his feelings in words but being scolded and ridiculed. He also lost his job and was forced to

move back to Bangladesh. The construction manager must not have felt comfortable with the migrant worker's fame. Mukul had made too many contacts in literary circles and in the media industry and, therefore, he was fired (Lhei Zhang, 2021, p. 58).

Through this example, Lhei Zhang (2021) shows, how literature serves the function of showcasing the lives of migrant workers to the majority population. There is an overarching idea that the texts should give readers an insight into the lives of migrant workers. Lei Zhang can discern a neo-colonial pattern in the very view of migrant workers' literature. Although good intentions are expressed, it seems that the migrant workers' texts are primarily intended to fulfill the purpose of 'we' (i.e. the majority population), to teach 'us' about (and thereby distinguish 'us' from 'them', i.e. the migrant workers). These texts are produced for 'our' curiosity, 'our' knowledge and 'our' sympathy (p. 60).

The capitalist logic and neoliberal context within which the literary work emerges is made visible in the example of Md. Mukul Hossine, argues Lei Zhang (2021). The mode of production follows this pattern: first created, then consumed and finally condemned, or damned. The way in which the migrant working-class writer is given access and space in the literary field is described as 'catwalk empowerment' and Lei Zhang refers here to Malin McGlinn's definition: 'that is, empowerment that calls for visual recognition to be meaningful. The project participants, much like models on a fashion catwalk, are shown off in order to attract the gaze of others' (as cited in Lhei Zhang, 2021, p. 71).

Regarding Swedish contemporary working-class literature, Kristian Lundberg's *Yarden* has been mentioned before. Here, the narrator is the only native Swedish temporary worker among foreign-born. The narrator's tribulations interspersed with memories of a proletarian childhood, marked by social exclusion and a single mentally ill mother. These two layers can also be said to constitute two different strategies for presenting oneself as marginalized.

My thoughts go to Hayden White (2004), who reasons about how testimony relates to fact and fiction. Within the genre of testimonies, the camp descriptions from Auschwitz and the Holocaust occupy a special position, he believes. White highlights how Primo Levi's journey in to Auschwitz in his book *Se questo è un uomo* (If this is a man, 1947) resembles in form Dante's journey into hell in *The Divine Comedy* (White, 2004, p. 114).

Testimony has become an umbrella term for a number of different kinds of autobiographical narratives, many times by marginalized or oppressed groups. According to John Beverley (1989, p. 13), testimony is characterized by a strong urge to address an urgent problem related to oppression, poverty, disadvantage, captivity or struggle for survival. The narrator represents not themselves, but an entire group or an entire society – and, at the same time, speaks to the reader in the form of a clearly marked 'I' that demands attention and recognition. As Paul Ricœur (2005) point out, testimony is based on dialogue and mutual trust. For testimony to work, it must reach a recipient, an audience that receives and accepts it (p. 216).

Lundberg's (2009) testimony is a descent, if not to hell, then at least a couple of stairs down. As a temporary worker, the narrator is not even a name, just a number that has signed off clothes (p. 27). Every now and then the narrator thinks of his story as a message in a bottle that he throws into the ocean hoping that there will be someone on the other side who will pick it up and, at least for a while, feel less alone (p. 32). At the same time he emphasizes that he cannot tell everyone's story, only his own (p. 143). Thus, the testimony becomes ambiguous from a class point of view. It depicts class injustice, but above all from an individualistic perspective.

The testimony in *Yarden* portrays the class traveler's doubt as to whether he really belongs in the place he once started and to which he has now returned – the anxiety of falling back to the starting point. According to Erik Wiklund (2010) this anxiety is directed inwards. There is no hope that anyone else will understand, nor that there will be any way out together. The working poor are imprisoned by the fear and insecurity of the neoliberal system.

Lundberg's (2009) narrator describes his own surprise at how working life has changed in Sweden. The last time he worked at the port, he was in the union and was impressed by the workplace library. Now neither he nor any of the other temporary employees are in the union, and union struggle is not something they reflect on either (p. 65). There is a kind of nostalgia that pervades *Yarden*, which is interesting because the narrator accuses author colleague Fredrik Ekelund's depictions of Malmö's old stevedore workers as nostalgia estranged from the world. I think, perhaps, a Fredrik Ekelund also lived or lives in Kristian Lundberg (p. 78).

One could possibly also see Lundberg's depiction of the staffing industry as a testimony of a silent revolution. The fact that old concepts such as the Swedish model and the welfare state are still used gives an impression of continuity. In fact, these concepts have changed meaning under the neoliberal hegemony.

Susanna Alakoski's *Oktober i Fattigsverige* (October in Poor Sweden, 2012) has the character of a diary but also contains journal entries from the family's contacts with social services and psychiatry during the 1960s and 1970s. Alakoski builds authority on exclusion by bearing witness to the Swedish-Finnish family's vulnerability in the form of poverty, mental illness and alcohol and drug problems and through descriptions of how she was exposed to sexual abuse as a young person (pp. 133, 141). The testimony is also about the economic crisis of the 1990s and the increasing poverty in Sweden. From a class point of view, it can be said that the class journey motif is distinctive in this work, perhaps most clearly illustrated by the author's many trips and assignments during the month of October and by the fact that the book is partly written in a work apartment at a fashionable address in the old hometown Ystad.

The ideological function of stories about individuals' upward class journeys in our time has been discussed by Irena Molina and Lena Sohl (2013, pp. 40-41). The explanation for the interest in these stories being so great is possibly, they think, that they seem to contradict an increasingly segregated society. Stories about individuals who move up in the class hierarchy contribute to establishing the image of a relatively egalitarian Sweden, regardless of real political changes.

At the same time, it can also be said that Alakoski (2012) hides the class issue behind the concept of poverty. Although it appears that the parents had jobs, albeit poorly paid, they are reduced to paupers. The parents are therefore not workers but poor, mentally ill alcoholics. Nor do they appear as individuals, as flesh and blood people with whom the reader can identify. Rather they seem to be props to fulfill a certain purpose for the story. It is illustrative that it is through documents in the form of authority records that the family of origin appears. It is also problematic from an ethical perspective, for example when the mother's suicide attempt is reproduced through quotes from the psychiatric clinic's records, without any further context (p. 131; see also p. 16).

It is the social workers, and not the working-class, who appear as political subjects. It is not the working-class but social workers, together with psychiatrists, teachers and the police who can change the system. In connection with a talk to social workers at City Hall in Malmö, Alakoski

(2012, p. 239) writes that she dreams of a renewed social policy commitment where social managers, social workers and social researchers give a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves.

The labor movement is strikingly absent in Alakoski's historiography. The welfare society seems to be built by politicians, (unclear of which ideological affiliation) social workers and other government officials in association. The book could be described as a middle-class story. It is the middle class she addresses and it is the middle class with which the reader must identify. At the center of this middle-class story is the sociologist Barbro, who is described as a role model and mentor for the author, who herself once worked in the same profession (Alakoski, 2012, pp. 212, 251, 293).

When Alakoski (2012) occasionally refers to an older generation of Swedish working-class writers such as Jan Fridegård, Ivar Lo-Johansson, Moa Martinson, Vilhelm Moberg and Majgull Axelsson (pp. 21, 38, 56, 61, 231, 236-238, 248), it appears in the context as a kind of ceremonial working-class literary symbolism. Admittedly, Alakoski has origins in the working-class and writes about workers in the original family. At the same time, as I said, the class injustices and the working-class as a political subject are made invisible by the author's consistent use of the term 'poverty'. The testimony works in the sense that it is accepted by several critics and columnists, who in turn are inspired to testify about their own experiences of poverty and vulnerability. One critic testifies about his mother who had to take out a loan from the bank to afford to buy Christmas presents (Lundberg, 2012). Another testifies about a visit to the recycling station. As he drives off, having left the plastic Christmas tree, CDs and old toys, he sees people circling outside (Sandahl, 2012; see also, e.g. Karlsson 2012).

In *Efter arbetsschema* the poet Johan Jönson (2008) also builds authority by describing an exclusion in his depiction of low-wage poverty in care. If Lundberg's testimony is a descent into a well, perhaps Jönson's testimony could be described as a descent into a sewer. The narrator tells us that he wants to express a worker's subjectivity because 'it is something denied, something silenced' (p. 506). At the same time, there is a paraphrase or nod to Swedish working-class poetry from an older generation – Stig Sjödin's portrait poetry in *Sotfragment* (Fragments of Soot, 1949) with a collection of portraits of workmates that offers an opening towards a working collective.

The turned-up tone that characterizes Jönson's depiction of class can be connected with an ambition to break through an ideologically conditioned silence around class issues in particular, according to Magnus Nilsson (2014, p. 115). I would like to try the idea that Jönson takes on the role of the classic court jester, who with humor and impudence makes society's social boundaries and taboos visible. In this case, the role of jester could be seen as a specific rhetorical strategy and a literary device to create a distancing effect, or Verfremdungseffekt, thereby making class society visible.

Efter arbetsschema is as absurd as it is a brutal depiction of the work in care, where the old and mentally disabled are presented as the package to be fed and pooped. In one scene, the narrator is covered in feces from a patient who has received treatment for his constipation (Jönson, 2008, p. 64). In another scene, when he temporarily works as a handyman at a paving company and builds a garden wall at the home of a new rich family in Äppelviken, a suburb in Stockholm, he expresses his class hatred by wiping his herpes-infected cock on the family's, and also the children's, towels (p. 542).

Through Jönson's drastic formulations the role of the court jester also tangibly makes visible the political reorientation of the labor movement. Jönson testifies from a kind of pitch black ground zero and exposes the absurdity of class injustices. After the right wing wins the election in September 2006, he writes: 'Is it now possible for the yellow union LO to at least open its mouth?' (p. 727). When the Municipal Workers Union removes the vision of a six-hour working day from its program, he notes that 'They have never raised a finger for it in pragmatic politics, and now the idea should not be considered either' (p. 500).

Just as with Lundberg, Jönson's anxiety is above all directed inwards, towards his own self, often in self-pity. The testimony is written in despair, there seems to be no way out for the workers as a collective to be able to change their own living conditions. Possibly, however, Jönson's absurd humor, the witness position as a court jester, can work subversively from a class point of view, awakening class consciousness and making class injustices visible to the reader.

Jenny Wrangborg distinguishes herself with her poetry collection *Kallskänken* (The Kitchen, 2010) by not portraying herself as an outsider or marginalized. Instead, the author appears in the role of a trade representative who testifies to the strength of the collective (p. 77). After being denied overtime pay, the restaurant workers form a union. *Kallskänken* is a collection of struggle poem that brings to mind early Swedish working-class literature. The poems become a political tool for changing society. In the role of a trade union representative, the narrator wants to create cohesion and readiness to fight among the workers. Of course, there are also elements of the narrator's personal experiences here. However, the aim is not to express the unique, or peculiar. Instead, just as in the early working-class literature, the personal and the public are united by allowing the experiences of the poet's self to symbolize the experiences of the collective (Nilsson, 2006, p. 158). In this way, Wrangborg's poetic self is portrayed as a representative of her class and in the role of a union representative and agitator.

Just like Jönson, Wrangborg was inspired by Stig Sjödin and draws a number of portraits of her colleagues in the kitchen, such as the Dishwasher, the Coffee Maker, the Chef, the Black Eye, the Daughter and the Fryer (pp. 14, 16, 19, 23, 39, 41-42). This also includes a self-portrait, where the poem self is presented from the outside, as part of the collective. What is distinctive is precisely that the workplace is portrayed from a collective perspective; it is always 'we' and 'us', and 'I' is always included in this 'we'. The proud collective is portrayed in the light of dawn when 'the Avenue wakes up' and 'the sun pushes up behind the houses' and 'we' right in those moments, do not want to 'be anything other than cafe assistants/ we have the best job in the world' (p. 11).

Wrangborg's poems depicts the restaurant kitchen, but they also connects the working conditions on the floor with the surrounding class society. Wrangborg's poetic self directs criticism at the political reorientation of the labor movement in recent decades. 'Don't forget where we started/ don't forget where we were going/ we remember and we're tired of waiting/ soon we'll go without you' (p. 47).

As discussed above, Wrangborg's book distinguishes itself by highlighting the collective rather than the individual. In the role of trade representative and agitator, she also expresses a vision – and she dares to write the word socialism (p. 78). *Kallskänken* is thus something other than a deviation report that can be inserted into the narrative of neoliberalism.

Swedish working-class literature grew hand in hand with the labor movement and the construction of *folkhemmet* (the peoples home). In Ivar Lo-Johansson's autobiographical novel *Författaren* (The Author, 1957) there is a section that describes how the main character, a yet unredeemed author, finds inspiration during a walk at Stockholm Exhibition in 1930 for a new language to express the ¨subject' he is carrying.

> 'Utställningshallarnas blanka maskinlemmar krävde en ny poesi. Den höga stålmasten på utställningsområdet reste sig som en signal, som en ilning av lycka mot knallblå luft. Den nya tidens stil var ju avskrapningen av stilar. Dess nakna språk hette fakta. Jag översatte direkt arkitekturens språk till litteraturens. Jag gick och såg mig omkring efter den nya mänskan' (Lo-Johansson, 1957, p. 5)
>
> The shiny machines of the exhibition halls required a new poetry. The tall steel mast in the exhibition area rose like a signal, like a rush of happiness against bright blue air. The style of the new era was, after all, the scrapping of styles. Its bare language was called facts. I directly translated the language of architecture into that of literature. I went and looked around for the new man.

Ninety years later, a completely different Stockholm and Sweden is portrayed in the poem 'Ingen har berättat för mig var vi ska gå!' ('No one has told me where we are going!') by Emil Boss. Here, rather than finding a new language, it is important to first try to find a zero point, a restart, and decipher and decode a language that is associated with the history of the labor movement but that has changed meaning under the neoliberal hegemony. Boss has published several poetry collections, is active in the labor movement in the Syndicalist Movement, and works with organizing migrant workers as a trade representative and negotiator.

The poem, which is included in the Association of Working-Class Writer's twelfth anthology, *Världen vi lämnar* (The world we leave), published at the end of 2020, stands out compared to other contributions. It is not a single testimony or an individual voice from a workplace but a critical ideological reflection on the state of the working-class as a collective today which, among other things, is embodied through a May Day demonstration that seems to have gotten lost before it has even been set in motion. The poem has certain similarities with Wrangborg's 'Soon we'll go without you', and could possibly be seen as a response to or further development of the same poem.

It could also be interesting to compare Emil Boss with Stig Sjödin. They belong to different eras and operate in widely different cultural and institutional contexts. Sjödin operated during a period when literary life in the labor movement was very active, and was able to publish his poems in the trade union press. Meanwhile, Boss, in addition to his book publishing, has mainly published in Association of Working-class anthologies. Each is a sort of insider critic of the labor movement – one a social democrat, the other a syndicalist – but while Sjödin engages in polemics with a labor movement that he perceives has lost touch with old ideals, hardened, and increasingly become a kind of museum object, Boss goes a step further and tries to explain, interpret and examine old concepts that have changed meaning in a new political era.

''LO:s ledning värnar
Strejkrätten'
'Svenskt Näringsliv värnar
den svenska modellen'
Solen går aldrig ner över det

socialdemokratiska språket
och ändå:
Låter inte framtiden
alltmer gaggig?
Rentav senil?

ett minne av
en demonstration på första maj
strax innan tåget skulle
sättas i rörelse från Sergels torg
vinkade fanbäraren fram mig
panik i blicken
det röda skynket vajade
tio meter framför den långa ormen
av ansikten:
'Ingen har berättat för mig
var vi ska gå!'' (Boss, 2020, p. 292)

'The management of the Swedish
Trade Union Confederation
protects the right to strike'
'The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise
protects the Swedish model'
The sun never sets on the
social democratic language
and yet:
Doesn't the future seem
more and more muddled?
Even senile?

a memory of
a demonstration on May Day
just before the march was due
to start from Sergel's square
the standard-bearer beckoned me forward
panic in the eyes
the red curtain swayed
ten meters in front of the long snake
of faces:
'No one has told me
where we are going!'

Through the image of a disoriented May Day demonstration, Boss portrays the political confusion at a time when the social democratic government pursues right-wing politics and it difficult to distinguish between right and left. The poem can be said to make visible the post-political, not to say the post-democratic condition. With the concept of post-democracy, Colin Crouch (2011, p. 17) describes how democracy retains its external features but is emptied out in its content when the parties agree on everything except who should carry out the actual leadership. In the post-democratic society, you can still exercise your right to vote and thus force a change of government, but the public political debate is a tightly directed play. Behind

the scenes, politics is shaped in meetings between representatives of the popularly elected government and an elite that mostly represents the interests of the business world.

In his poem, Boss (2020) goes back in history – all the way to the Swedish contract-work system in agriculture depicted by, for example, the working-class writer Ivar Lo-Johansson which could be seen as part of a kind of collective working-class literary memory – to gain perspective, gain a clearer view, and try to find an ideological compass and a political strategy for the future.

‘det har aldrig hänt
–I detta land, kamrat –
att de som har makten
över ekonomin
som själva blivit mycket rika
på andras arbete
har folkets stöd
Votering är beställd
av näringslivet
och ska verkställas
i detta land, kamrat
där ingen längre strejkar
ska strejker förbjudas
för att skydda strejkrätten

klarare sikt bakåt då kanske
över någon sorts kollektiv axel?
Statarnas sista flyttlass
gick ut genom godsets grindar
ut ur en tankevärld
som ville göra dem
obildbara
hopplösa
mottagare av gåvor
de egentligen inte förtjänade
också den världen var bebodd
av livs levande människor
i huvudbyggnaden
satt godsherren och lade sten på sten
till språket’ (Boss, 2020, p. 293)

It has never happened
– In this country, comrade –
that those in power
over the economy
who themselves have become very rich
on the work of others
has the support of the people
Voting is ordered
of business
and shall be enforced
in this country, comrade

where no one goes on strike anymore
strikes should be banned
to protect the right to strike

clearer view backwards then maybe
over some sort of collective shoulder?
The agricultural contract-workers
last load of furniture
went out through the gates of the estate
out of a world of thought
who wanted to make them
unimaginable
hopeless
recipient of gifts
they didn't really deserve
that world too was inhabited
by living people
in the main building
sat the landlord and laid stone upon stone
to the language

The poem is framed by a child motif in the form of the poet's son Elis, who on his way to preschool finds a plant that his father has seen all his life along the curb but does not know its name. When they get home in the evening, they look up the name on their mobile phone and read that the plant has been here for several hundred years. The child motif adds additional layers and perspective to the poem. In her thesis, Sandra Mischliwietz (2014) shows through literary examples such as Ivar Lo Johansson's *Godnatt Jord* (Breaking Free, 1933), Moa Martinson's Mia trilogy (1936–1939), Harry Martinson's *Nässlorna blomma* (Nettle blooms, 1935) and Eyvind Johnson's *Romanen om Olof,* (The Novel about Olof, 1934–1937) how the child in Swedish working-class literature symbolizes a working-class that is exposed to injustice but also has the ability to fight it. In this way, the child also represents the position of the working-class writer – 'subordinate but vital and modern'. That the poet himself does not know the name of the plant that he has seen throughout his life could be interpreted as an image, or a metaphor, for the alienation of the working-class. With his curious questions, the son Elis breaks this alienation:

'Solstrimman korsar
raderna av platta radhustak
När vi kommer hem tittar vi i mobilen
Den nya blomman heter vintergäck
Den hade visst funnits här
i fem hundra år' (Boss, 2020, p. 294)

'The streak of sunlight crosses
the rows of flat townhouse roofs
When we get home, we look at the mobile phone
The new flower is called Winter Aconite
It had certainly been here
for five hundred years'

Conclusion

The literary examples point to both problems and possibilities. Kristian Lundberg, Johan Jönson and Jenny Wrangborg all give personal accounts from workplaces. Such can be valuable.

The problem with Lundberg and Jönson is that they tend to be introverted and egocentric. Especially Lundberg lacks the class perspective. Perhaps Lundberg's *Yarden* should be described as confessional literature rather than working-class literature. With Susanna Alakoski the working-class is hidden behind the concept of poverty. The working-class as actor is absent. The labor movement as well. Instead, it is the middle class who appear as actor.

Through the role of jester, Jönson makes class society visible. The role of jester could be seen as a specific rhetorical strategy and a literary device to create a distancing effect, or Verfremdungseffekt. Wrangborg connects to the legacy of early working-class literature with struggle poems. From within the workplace she describes work situations and experiences of class.

Emil Boss takes a close look at language and concepts in a postpolitical age when old concepts have changed meaning. It is a crucial task for working-class literature to explain, interpret and examine old concepts that have changed meaning in a new political era, when the labor movement has lost contact with previous ideals and social democratic governments pursue rightwing politics, thus making it difficult to distinguish between left and right.

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‘Typical characters under typical circumstances’: The Slum Fiction of Dorothy Hewett and Ruth Park

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Abstract

In this article I compare the representation of working people in two novels, Ruth Park’s *The Harp in the South* (1948) and Dorothy Hewett’s *Bobbin Up* (1959), as well as the ensuing critical debate about realism in their depictions of slum life in Sydney. I show that while Hewett’s work is more class-conscious and agitational, Park’s novel comes alive in deeper intersectional ways through her awareness of the interwoven structures of gender, class and race. Although Hewett’s novel culminates in a strike by women mill workers, Park reveals more of the individual strategies of survival that form part of the working-class lives she portrays. Thus, using Friedrich Engels’ critical point about ‘typical characters under typical circumstances’, I argue that while both writers try to capture the fundamental experience of working-class people, this is more successfully done in Park’s novel, both in terms of its literary realism and implicit radical politics.

Keywords

Dorothy Hewett, Ruth Park, Working Class, Socialist Realism

Introduction

In his famous letter (1888) to the English slum novelist, Margaret Harkness, Friedrich Engels offers the following critical definition of the concept of literary realism: ‘Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truth in reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances’ (Engels, 1975, p. 379). What Engels is referring to is the question of representativity: the way in which fictional characters can be viewed as both psychologically credible and sociologically recognisable. Thus, firstly, as individual portrayals that are more or less convincing. Secondly, in a broader sense, as representatives of the gender, class or race in which their lives are contextualized. This is also the way Ralph Fox frames the question in his classic study, *The Novel and the People*, where he argues that writers ‘should present man, as being at one and the same time a type and an individual, a representative of the mass and a single personality’ (Fox, 1944, p. 106). This link between literary text and context also informs Engels’s understanding of the meaning of ‘typical circumstances’ (Engels 1975, p. 379). Again, he sees an intrinsic connection between fictional characters and the social, economic, cultural and political nexus in which they are situated. However, as he also points out, there is no simple correspondence between these different levels of typicality. Referring to Harkness’s own novel, *A City Girl* (1887), he draws specific attention to her problematic depiction of the working class and the conditions in which they live:

> Now your characters are typical enough, as far as they go; but the circumstances which surround them and make them act, are not perhaps equally so. In the *City Girl* the

> working class figures as a passive mass, unable to help itself and not even showing (making) any attempt at striving to help itself. All attempts to drag it out of its torpid misery come from without, from above. (Engels, 1975, pp. 379-80)

Engels supports this critical observation by referring to the historical moment in which Harkness's novel is set, which was characterized by an upsurge of the Labour movement in Britain with strikes, demonstrations and the organisation of working-class political parties in what later historians have called 'the Great Unrest'. Despite her ambition to portray the lives of working-class people realistically, this aspect of collective struggle was absent from Harkness's novel:

> The rebellious reaction of the working class against the oppressive medium which surrounds them, their attempts – convulsive, half conscious or conscious – at recovering their status as human beings, belong to history and must therefore lay claim to a place in the domain of realism. (Engels, 1975, p. 380)

At the same time, Engels insists he is not prescribing the writing of a 'point-blank socialist novel' (Engels, 1975, p. 380) in which both characters and setting reflect the political standpoint of the author. Instead, these elements of representation should emerge organically from the whole realistic mode of the narrative. Engels recommends in fact that the 'more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better the work of art' (Engels, 1975, p. 380). Indeed, he suggests that a literary text could be so true to life, it could overcome the personal preferences of the author: 'The realism I allude to, may crop out even in spite of the author's opinions' (Engels, 1975, p. 380). The example he provides is Balzac, whose reactionary monarchist views were transcended by the art of Balzac the novelist. This is something Engels characterizes as one of the 'triumphs of realism' (Engels, 1975, p. 381), which Georg Lukacs later redefined as 'an honest and complete reflection of the real facts and connections of life over the social, political or individual prejudices of a writer' (Lukacs, 1974 p. 242).

Dorothy Hewett and Ruth Park

I want to apply Engels's criteria of realism to two iconic Australian novels written by women whose work also falls into the category of slum fiction: Ruth Park's *The Harp in the South* (1948) and Dorothy Hewett's *Bobbin Up* (1959)[1]. These books are similar in many ways. They both depict the lives of working-class people in two rundown areas of Sydney. Park situates her novel in Surry Hills, which is only a few blocks away from Redfern, the setting of Hewett's novel. Significantly, they were both written by middle-class journalists who themselves lived in these suburbs for shorter periods of time. Their main personal and political difference was, however, that Hewett was a communist and Park a liberal. Thus, while Hewett's narrative is informed by her commitment to socialist realism, Park's novel is more narrowly focused on the life of one Irish family, the Darcys. On publication, both novels were also critically debated as literary depictions – realistic or not – of the Australian working class from the 1940s and 50s.

By comparing the images of working-class people in these two novels, I want to see what critical conclusions can be drawn from their portrayal of slum life in Sydney at the time. I aim

[1] The term 'slum fiction' emerged in the late Victorian period in Britain to describe novels and stories that were set in the East End of London, an area characterized by overcrowded, dilapidated housing, poverty and squalor. This subgenre of working-class fiction was usually noted for its sensational, sometimes violent and often melodramatic plotlines, not least involving middle-class characters who go 'slumming' among the poor and destitute. See further, P. J. Keating. (1972. pp. 1-52).

to show that while Hewett's work is more class-conscious and agitational, Park's novel comes alive in deeper intersectional ways through her awareness of the interwoven structures of gender, class and race. Although Hewett's novel culminates in a strike by women mill workers, it is the result of an intervention by members of the Communist Party, raising questions about independent working-class agency. In contrast, Park reveals more of the individual strategies of survival that form part of the slum lives she describes. Thus, using Engels' critical point about 'typical characters under typical circumstances', I argue that while both writers seek to capture the specific experience of working-class people, this is more successfully achieved in Park's novel, both in terms of its literary realism and implicit radical politics.

Bobbin Up and *The Harp in the South*

The two novels in question have been republished as modern 'classics' – Hewett's by Virago Press (1985) [2] and Park's by Penguin Books (2009). Both writers have therefore a certain canonical status in contemporary Australian literature.[3] While these novels became the starting point of long and successful writing careers, the initial critical reaction was much less positive. The main point of debate revolved around the issue of literary representation and the way this expressed itself through their working-class characters. In both cases this was also indirectly connected to the status of these writers themselves: Park as a New Zealander whose image of Australian people was thought to be too vulgarised. Hewett as a communist who was criticized for not making her female workers correspond more to the radical ideal of 'proletarian' heroines. As has been noted, this was also linked to whether or not the working class in Hewett's novel has the capacity to achieve its own social and political emancipation. In Park's case, similar doubts were raised about what was claimed to be her voyeuristic depiction of demoralized slum dwellers, as Susan McKernan notes:

> Socialist realist criticism of Ruth Park's work […] noted that she was sentimentalising the national tradition and her 'kitchen-sink' novels exploited the poor rather that liberating them. [Her] novels of city misery could not belong to a socialist realist canon since they depicted a degraded and passive minority suffering poverty. (McKernan,1998, p. 22)

Hewett's participation in the Realist Writers' Group, which was formed to promote the cause of socialist realism in Australian writing, meant that her novel was also submitted to similar ideological scrutiny as to its level of realism, not least in terms of the reproduction of working-class speech:

> The Realist Writers' Groups had been established to promote [a] vision of an alternative, working-class national literature in Australia. In practice, their rigid adherence to socialist realism led their members as often as not to adopt the role of censors rather than supporters. Hewett encountered this attitude from [Communist] Party members who complained the 'working class didn't talk like that'. (McLaren, 1995, p. 38)

Park complained she was caught in an impossible political bind: 'Because I wrote about poor people I was a Communist. On the other hand because I wrote about poor people I was a

[2] Since it contains a new introduction by Hewett, all references will be to this 'classic' edition.

[3] In his comprehensive survey, *The Critical Reception of Bobbin Up*, Nathan Hollier not only documents the varying critical responses to Hewett's novel, but also its significance to the broader literary and political debate in Australia (1999).

capitalist – I wrote about them only to jeer, or, alternatively, to make money' (*Fishing* 1994, p. 149). Critics of the novels doubted if their characters represented a true image of Australian working-class people. To complicate matters, Hewett herself claimed that the workers at the Jumbuck Woollen Mills in Sydney where she worked were in actual fact even more feckless than she had depicted them in her novel:

> When *Bobbin Up* was criticized at special Communist Party meetings to discuss its strengths and weaknesses one of the principal criticisms was that it presented the Australian working class as 'lumpen proletariat' and 'anarchistic'. What the critics failed to realize was that the working class I was writing about were exactly like that, unorganized, close to illiteracy, the 'lower depths'. (viii)

More recent appraisals of the two writers have emphasized the specific gender aspects of their novels. Jill Greaves writes for instance: 'Not only are Park's characters urban dwellers, but the major protagonists are women and the stories are related from a feminine, even feminist point of view quite alien to the masculine bush ethos' (13). Kerryn Goldsworthy observes that Park's novel 'is set in or around Sydney and deals with – among other things – social injustice and the plight of the poor, especially of poor women' (120). Susan Lever argues that Hewett succeeded in going beyond the ideological constraints of her communist aesthetics: 'If *Bobbin Up* manages to resist the worst clichés of the socialist realist novel it does so through an interest in women's bodies which might place it within the Zolaesque tradition of projecting male fears and desires onto its female characters' (151). Stephen Knight also remarks on the significance of a strong female presence in Hewett's novel both at home and at work:

> [B]y locating her story among women who are self-aware and interactive workers, Hewett gives them both autonomous realities and economic power, and she focusses her whole narrative through their response to work as much as the domestic context. (Knight, 1995, p. 73)

Since many of these critical responses revolve around the issue of literary realism, I want to examine in more detail the ways in which the two novelists deal artistically with the working class. In *Bobbin Up* the theme of class struggle forms the core of the novel. Yet, despite this emphasis on militant action, the image of the working women appears surprisingly static and blurred. There is little or no tangible character development, instead, the women seem to merge into one amorphous mass, something that Ralph de Boissiere pointed out already in his early review of the book (1959). However, he also goes on to claim that Hewett's novel "is written from the revolutionary working class point of view" where she "sees life and characters in their dialectical development". De Boissiere makes a distinction between the ordinary women characters who come "too much out of one mould" and that of Nell, about whom he says: "This is the first time I have come across an "unforced, truthful, human portrait of a communist in Australian literature" (36). These somewhat conflicting critical points will be returned to in more detail in my own discussion of Hewett's novel.

Park provides, in my view, a much more nuanced understanding of how class, gender and race are reproduced through structures of power and oppression in ways we would today characterize as intersectional. Moreover, within these contexts, Park allows for a more contradictory and therefore dynamic narrative of working-class life. I will turn first to Hewett's novel in order to examine its qualities as a work which ostensibly dramatizes the socialist realist trope of nascent class struggle.

Bobbin Up and Socialist Realism

In their alternative city history, *Radical Sydney*, Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill devote a chapter to 'Dorothy Hewett and the Redfern Reds'. Here they trace the radical traditions of this working-class suburb and of the activities of the Communist Party at the time when Hewett was part of the local South Sydney Section. They also refer to the friction between the local branch and the Central Office of the Party who considered the Redfern members, including Hewett, to be too undisciplined and easy-going. When Hewett got a job at a local textile factory and tried to mobilize the women workers in support of the demand for equal pay, the communist dominated trade union bureaucracy opposed this as an unnecessary political distraction. Hewett's novel can therefore be seen as writing back at those who were dismissive of her both as a communist and a woman:[4]

> Before she was sacked for being eight months pregnant, Hewett worked in the Alexandria Spinning Mills. What she learnt there about gender and politics became the basis for her great working-class novel. At the annual meeting of the Textile Workers' Union she had demanded equal pay for women workers but the male leadership ignored her. Knowing she would be sacked if the boss knew she was a Communist, she organised the other members of the Redfern branch to distribute an illegal bulletin at the factory gates. It opened with her then partner's words: 'There's a name for a man who lives off women'. The title of the bulletin, 'Bobbin Up', became the title of her novel. (Irving & Cahill, 2010, pp. 269-70)

Hewett was well aware of the fact that she was considered an outsider in the factory, both politically and personally. She saw her decision to become a mill worker as 'the kind of vague Utopian gesture that middle-class girls, trying to expiate their guilt, indulged in to 'proletarianize' themselves' (*Introduction* 1985, p. x). As part of her social disguise, she tried to bridge the differences between herself and the other women workers by adopting a lower-class persona, in particular through the way she spoke: 'Because of my Western Australian private school accent they all thought at first I was a Pommy anyway. I learnt to roughen my accent, and to be slower and more laborious in filling in my sick pay form. "You're very handy with the pen there love" they said suspiciously' (*Introduction,* 1985, p. xi). This aspect of literary slumming on Hewett's part is revealing, especially when one compares her dismissive characterization of the real inhabitants of Redfern with her fictional account of the factory women:

> Redfern was always the bottom of the heap. Foregathered there were the old, the halt, the maimed, the drunks, the mad, the unemployables, the substandard, the failures of society. The odd seemingly 'respectable' families were few and far between. (*Introduction,* 1985, p. xiii)

Hewett was clearly an untypical working woman living in typical slum surroundings, an experience that was short-lived and skewered by the feelings of political bad faith she had in her own investigatory role, something she described as 'sincere dishonesty' (*Introduction,* 1985, p. xv). At the same time, she maintained there was a genuine element of pioneering realism in her novel that gave a voice to women rarely heard before in Australian literature:

[4] In an interview she gave with Nicole Moore on July 12 July 1998, Hewett spoke in terms of "my middle-class anarchism" at this time. (1999).

> The portraits of the mill girls are 'real'. They are living, breathing Australian working-class women who speak with a living tongue, and the mill itself as a metaphor for their lives grows larger than life and realer than real throughout the pages. Up to this time, and maybe ever since, there was little working-class literature in Australia. The lives of such women remained a mystery. They could not write themselves, and they had no spokesperson to translate them into literature. (*Introduction*, 1985, p. xv).

Bobbin Up is a collective novel whose episodic narrative zooms in and out of the lives of a group of ordinary women, all of whom work in the woollen mills in Redfern: Shirl, Beth, Dawnie, Beryl, Lil, Maisie, Jessie, Patty, Gwennie, Julie, Jeanie and Nell. Nell is the only member of the Communist Party, although it is in defiance of the Party that she begins to agitate among the female factory workers. The most significant thing about these women is that they are either married or hoping to become so. Romance and matrimony are clearly their main preoccupation. These are the post-Second World War years in Australia where an emergent consumerist lifestyle was very much oriented towards domestic homemaking.[5] There is however something of a clash of gender expectations between the young men of the area, who are mainly looking for a good time, and the young women who are trying to save themselves for their wedding night. Some of the girls fall foul of these conflicting pressures, one of whom is Shirl, now a single mother desperate to find a husband. The overall impression is however that while Hewett despises their romantic daydreams, she is not particularly interested in the women as individual victims of them. It is difficult to actually distinguish between the characters depicted in the novel. They all think, feel and talk very much along similar escapist lines. Only Nell stands out as an independent woman, whose husband is at home after being blacklisted from work as an agitator. She is also involved in a personal fight with the Communist Party, which is the single most important point of psychological tension in the story.

Communist Party officials criticized Hewett's novel for portraying the 'Australian working class as a "lumpen proletariat"', to which she replied: 'What the critics failed to realize was that the working class I was writing about were exactly like that, unorganized, close to illiteracy, the "lower depths"' (*Introduction*, 1985. p. xiii). This reduction of the women to a stereotype is one of the most significant narrative weaknesses of the novel. The only indication of change occurs when Nell calls a strike after negotiations with the management about redundancies come to a halt. However, the novel ends on a fatalistic note of stasis: 'Lil spread a bag on a butter box for the pregnant Beth. "'Rest your legs luv," she said. "It's likely to be a long wait"' (*Bobbin*, 1985, p. 204).

The experience of the strike is nevertheless the key to the novel and demands more critical attention. Not only to the significance of the action, but also to the leading role played by Nell. It brings to a head the conflict between Nell and the Communist Party about having lost touch with the working class of Redfern. In particular, Nell reacts to the abstract political jargon used by Party members, who she describes as 'armchair Marxists' (*Bobbin*, 1985, p. 117). In protest, she and her husband start producing a factory bulletin, 'Bobbin Up', written in a simpler way the women can relate to:

> "Y'see these girls aren't used to politics, they understand they're bein' pushed around by the boss, and tomorrer they'll all be windy about doin' their jobs. We all understand

[5] For a more theoretically informed discussion of this postwar cultural transformation, see Dougal McNeill, "Bobbin Up as a Social Reproduction Novel" (2020).

> that feelin'. We're all workers. But it's no good givin' them great hunks of straight politics. They'd use it for lavatory paper". (*Bobbin*, 1985, pp. 128-9)

What becomes quickly clear, however, is that the workers cannot reach any higher level of class awareness without some sort of active communist guidance. Even though Nell's bulletin is meant to be a political catalyst in this context, the prospect of the women mobilising for more than just their jobs remains limited:

> To struggle … that was all they could achieve, and to struggle meant to suffer and perhaps never to see your reward in a bigger pay packet on Friday. To struggle towards socialism, when all human progress would bring human security. To her it was logical and the mainspring behind the whole of life, but how to explain this to a mob of women who didn't believe in socialism anyway? (*Bobbin*, 1985, pp. 121-2)

Nell's dilemma is how to make the connection between herself as a communist and women workers who have no traditions of organized struggle. There is an unresolved contradiction in the novel between the fight against the sackings and for Nell's more lofty vision of international socialism. The necessary leap from one ideological level to another is never really addressed. Nell remains entrenched in a utopian 'no-man's land of leftist dreams', as she herself describes it (*Bobbin*, 1985, p. 121). Moreover, there seems to be a complete lack of correspondence between Nell's characterization of the women as a conservative 'mob' and their potential role as part of a working-class vanguard. Thus, despite her ambition to write a socialist realist novel, Hewett ends up with a radical heroine who has no real political confidence in the workers she hopes to lead.

Although the conflict is still undecided by the end of the novel, the very existence of women on strike seems at least a partial victory. Perhaps the most telling example of their burgeoning consciousness is the decision by Shirl to stay on strike in the factory with her fellow workers instead of going to meet her fiancé at the registry office. It is a potentially devastating personal decision for her to make as a single mother who has finally found a man who will marry her. She chooses nevertheless to stay and miss her wedding. This most symbolic act of class solidarity in the novel appears, however, to spring from nowhere. Nor is there any real reason for Shirl not to take an hour or so off and get married since the strike action itself has lapsed into a waiting game. There is no logical explanation for Shirl having to make such a dramatic sacrifice. Her decision remains therefore both psychologically unconvincing and artistically contrived:

> She had a mental picture of Jack, broad-shouldered in his best navy suit, shoes shined, hair slicked up, waiting for her to show, waiting for the bride that never came. She felt bloody savage. She couldn't desert her mates but … ah! well it was all the lucka the game and she'd never had any luck. (*Bobbin*, 1985, p. 197)

In her introduction to the novel, Hewett indicates she was in fact moving away from the Communist Party at the time of her working at the factory.[6] Even more significantly, she admits that the strike by women workers did not in fact take place: 'There was never any talk of strike when I worked at the mill. The period of strikes in the Textile Industry was over, and the Communist Party was a dirty word' (*Introduction*, 1985, p. xi). This lack of actual personal experience of being part of a strike is perhaps one of the reasons why the final section of the

[6] Hewett's subsequent political and aesthetic trajectory is traced by Fiona Morrison in "Leaving the party: Dorothy Hewett, literary politics and the long 1960s" (2012).

novel comes across as programmatic rather than narratively organic. There is never any indication of what thoughts and feelings the women have about getting involved in a strike for the first time. Instead, the whole event seems a piece of political wishful thinking, existing only in the pages of the novel. As Hewett later confirmed, the writing of the book was primarily the result of her own literary romance with Communism:

> Looking back on the 36-year-old Communist who wrote *Bobbin Up* I am embarrassed at her proselytizing, stubborn blindness, this Antipodean Alice in Wonderland who had a protracted love affair with an idealized working class. (*Introduction*, 1985, p. xv)

This naïve projection of a militant working class finds its most utopian expression in the recurring image of the Soviet Sputnik satellite that crosses the sky at night in Australia. It becomes a metaphor of the struggle of the workers of the world, boosting their belief in a future proletarian revolution. Its reappearance inspires some of the most lyrical passages in the novel, each reflecting the political urgency of its idealized socialist message:

> Millions turned in breathless wonder to watch its lonely flight, millions of hearts in the streets of the world beat a little faster, but none faster than the heart of Tom Maguire, Sydney wharf labourer, his thick, calloused hands gripping the back fence that hung over the Erskineville railway line […] And with his finger went a host of fingers, white, black, brown and yellow, stubby fingers with grease under the nails. "*There she goes*." It was a song pouring like a ladle of boiling steel from the throats of the world's toilers. (Hewett, 1985, pp. 98-9)

The Harp in the South

When it was first published after winning a literary competition sponsored by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1946, Ruth Park's novel, *The Harp in the South*, met with an outcry of criticism as to the unrealistic depiction of characters and setting. Park was accused of denigrating Australians by portraying them as incompetent slum dwellers which the novel both sensationalized and sentimentalized. Readers and critics were shocked by the conditions she described and wondered if, as a middle-class New Zealander, she had any real understanding of the lives of hard-working Australians. In her autobiography, Park recalled the overwhelmingly negative response to her novel. She was for instance dismayed by the comparison between herself and the Australian crime writer, Jon Cleary, whose debut novel, *You Can't See 'Round Corners* (1947), portrayed a group of petty criminals in Sydney's slum suburbs.

> How did I differ from Jon? In two ways only, I was a woman and I was not an Australian. In an age when the words *should not* and *ought not*, with or without justification, were profusely applied to women, I had stepped over the invisible boundary line. Similarly, though Jon Cleary […] was an Australian, an insider, and thus allowed to do so. I was a New Zealander, a foreigner, and could not be permitted to do the same. My novel had to be either misrepresentation or derogatory criticism. (*Fishing*, 1994, p. 159)

Jill Greaves also remarks on the high literary hopes surrounding the novel's first newspaper serialization and the ultimate sense of disappointment about her apparent failure to capture the authentic experience of post-war Australia:

> 'Perhaps some critics had expected that the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s competition would finally produce the Great Australian Novel that would establish Australian literature firmly within the canon of English literature; if so, a novel about slums, fecklessness and apathy might not have been what they had in mind' (Quoted in Greaves, 1998, p. 12).

The debate quickly became political when the novel was condemned as an example of reductive socialist realism. David Carter wrote in this context of what he saw as Park's limited literary awareness: '[T]he term 'social realism' has overlapped with 'socialist realism'. But while the latter is derived from an explicit theory, the former is rather the result of a *lack* of theory' (Carter, 1998, p. 23). In reply, Park insisted that she was not a campaigning writer, even though her novel did speed up the process of slum clearing in Redfern (Carter, 1998, p. 23).

Park's narrative is without doubt about the urban working class, focussing on a family where the father, Hughie, and eldest daughter, Roie, both have factory jobs. Their mother, Mumma, stays at home keeping everyone fed, washed and clothed, while also looking after their Grandma, their youngest daughter, Dolour, their son Thady, as well as numerous lodgers. The overall impression is of a large, hectic yet self-contained community of ordinary people who, although not having much money, are certainly not impoverished or helpless. The biggest threat to their financial security is the alcoholism of the father, even though this never seems to prevent him from being employed. Throughout the novel, it is the women who nevertheless function as the main focalizers in what is primarily a narrative of class and gender confinement.[7]

In contrast to the cramped, vermin infested conditions within doors, the street outside represents a level of freedom but also of danger, especially for children. Park depicts the precarity of existence as an endemic part of working-class life. Early on in the narrative, a little boy is knocked under the wheels of a brewery truck, killing him. The point is repeated when Thady just disappears while playing out in the street. He is never found. This absence of her son haunts the mother throughout the story, a loss that is later revisited when Roie suffers a miscarriage.

The ever-present sense of social vulnerability is offset however by occasional bursts of collective carnivalesque revelry and revolt. One such event is the annual street bonfire on New Year's Eve where the rule of law is temporarily contested. When police and firemen try to dowse the communal bonfire with water, the defiance of the slum dwellers rekindles some of the rebellious traditions of their Irish origins.

> The policeman, struggling at the centre of the crowd, was a man besieged. Half a dozen old women battered him around the waist, and the taller members of the crowd clunked him with anything handy. […]. Grandma […] was making a great to-do about getting a suitable potato. She […] had her arm raised to throw it, murmuring: "Great splaw-footed spalpeen." And "I'll send it clean through his brisket," when the horrified Mumma seized it from her hand. Grandma was bereaved, for she came from a long line of wild boys and girls who had specialized in potting King's Men from behind hedges, in the insurrections. (*Harp*, 1977, p. 93)

[7] In her discussion of the aspects of Catholicism, eugenics and abortion in *The Harp in the South* and *Poor Man's Orange*, Caitlin Still provides an illuminating critical insight into the image of the 'good mother' in these novels. See further, *The Drover's Wife Speaks: A Literary and Cultural History of Maternal Citizenship in Australia 1890 -2020*. (2020).

On an individual level, Park provides a range of finely drawn characters that populate the slum shanties. It is in the detail of their lives that these figures emerge as distinct and psychologically credible portrayals. One notable example is Delie Stock, an elderly woman who runs a chain of bars and brothels in the area. She is a minor character in the story, yet one who personifies the mixture of rugged individualism and altruism that is typical of the area. Not surprisingly, she is viewed by the Church as having a destructive impact on the community. Thus, when she offers to pay for a children's Christmas picnic, her donation is refused by the priest as tainted money. Delie's angry reaction reveals a sharp self-awareness of the patriarchal norms that circumscribe the lives of working-class women:

> "You don't know what it's like being a woman. Everyone's got it in for you, even God. Even God […] What chance does any woman get around here? […]. I'm as good a woman as anyone else, and what's more," bawled Delie Stock … that money wasn't earned the way you think. I won it in a lottery, and if you want to know which one, just stick yer beak in the newspaper and read me name amongst the prize-winners". (*Harp*, 1977, p. 51)

Later, when Roie is violently assaulted and loses her baby, Delie gives her father a handful of cash to help pay for her recovery as an expression of female solidarity. In what might have become a moment of Dickensian sentiment, this spontaneous street encounter captures perfectly the awkward bonds of mutual support among the slum dwellers:

> "Here, you see that kid gets all she needs, Hugh Darcy, and if you're hard up, come around here and get some more" […]
> "Yere!" protested Hughie feebly. "What's this? Cripes, I can't do it."
> "Go on, go on," croaked Delie Stock. She was so overcome by her own generosity that she almost cried. She was a character, if ever there was one, she reflected, her the worst woman in the Hills, and giving this old goon a handout when he needed it most. (*Harp*, 1977, p. 135)

Roie becomes the key character in this context, whose troubled search for love unmasks the subjection of women to constricting gender norms. As Shulamith Firestone observes: '[L]ove, perhaps even more than child-bearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today'. (Firestone, 1970, p. 113). In Roie's case, these two spheres collide when her life is transformed by the grim reality of an unwanted pregnancy. After being seduced and abandoned by her first boyfriend, her tragic predicament explodes the romantic myths of marriage and motherhood on which her future hopes have been built. Jill Greaves writes that 'the constraint imposed on the poorly-educated slum-dweller by inarticulateness is made apparent through Roie' (Greaves, 1998, p. 29). This comment about 'inarticulateness' is somewhat surprising, however, since it reproduces a social and literary prejudice about the limited sensibilities of working-class people. It ignores the profound turmoil of Roie's feelings when she tries to make sense of her physical and moral transgression. There is also a revealing contrast in the way the two novels deal with similar issues. Most certainly, young women make calamitous personal choices in Hewett's novel. However, while Hewett leaves her female characters still stuck within their romantic illusions, Park explores the profound anguish of a working-class woman whose whole life has begun to unravel.

When Roie's fears of pregnancy prove to be true, Park shows her complete abandonment in having to choose between the perils of a backstreet abortion or the stigma of becoming an unmarried mother in Surry Hills. Park's novel is certainly of its time in this respect. The issue

of illegal abortion would have been an extremely sensitive one to write about in the 1940s. According to Nicole Moore, the question was nevertheless addressed by several pioneering female novelists like Ruth Park. Despite this, Australian women still had to wait until well into the 20th century to gain the right to decide over their own bodies.[8] In one of the most powerful and disturbing scenes in the novel, Park describes Roie's feelings of absolute horror as she waits her turn to see the male, backstreet abortionist:

> There was a low mutter of a man's deep voice; the sound of metal clinking on china; and a horrible gagged scream which diminished into gurgling moans […] The whole atmosphere of that dirty old slum house was instinct with mystery and evil. It seemed to gloat, and hold to itself all the murders that had been committed within its walls. The smell of blood was there, and the miasma of cowardice and stealth and cruelty. (*Harp*, 1986, pp. 122-3)

This is political in a very personal way. At this point Roie comes to represents the experience of all women whose bodies are objects to be desired, disciplined and punished. Running back out into the street, Roie's traumatic exposure continues when she narrowly escapes being raped by a gang of sailors. There is a powerful sense of feminist rage at this point in the novel, not least through Roie's internalization of the guilt for what has occurred:

> Until now she had felt no real moral wrong in what she had done or what she had contemplated, but now, as though she had walked into a great shadow, the world was different. It wasn't that she had been going to have a baby that made her sink down to the lowest depths of grief and shame but the knowledge that she would have murdered it, if it had not been for her own cowardice. (*Harp*, 1986, pp. 128-9)

The final phase in this intersectional continuum of gender, class and racial tensions in the novel is the way Roi's family react towards her falling in love with a Black man. It is another radical aspect of Park's novel in choosing not to shy away from the issue of working-class racism. Thus, there is an unexpected complication in the character of the mother, previously the most sympathetic and caring member of the family, who suddenly vents her racist concerns about the colour of Roie's fiancé, Charlie. Since both Roie and her father would have worked with Aboriginal people at the factory, their attitude to Charlie is shown to be very different from that of the mother. This confrontation ends in what is an almost surreal mixture of racial prejudice, class solidarity and shameful family history. It is a short, heated exchange, one that nevertheless captures the uneven combination of tolerance and bigotry among the slum dwellers that is typical of Park's eye for psychological detail in the novel.

> "I'll be losing her," wept Mumma. "She'll go away and I'll never see her anymore" […] Hughie sat up and glared at her, and Mumma tentatively moved away, for he looked as though he were going to thump her. "Now, none of that talk," he said decisively. "If

[8] Moore writes: "Working class knowledges of abortion as a useful and accessible method of separating sex and reproduction seem to surface rarely, often only in radical and utopic cultural texts; they are repressed erstwhile in a sphere labelled private, rather than everyday, and in bodies passively unconscious and inevitably maternal. Essentially an admixture of melodrama, romance and social realism, abortion plots in women's realism are rarely 'realistic', and pursue their ideological work at odds with another 'everyday' knowledge of abortion circulating in private discourse, even as they pretend to revelation, to the brave and unguarded flaunting of abortion taboos" (1996). See also, Patricia Grimshaw (1988).

> Roie's picked her man, then she's picked him, black, white or brindle, and we can talk with a hangman in the family."
> "The hangman's in your family," bristled Mumma. "Never was a Killer to make a living by other people's necks."
> "Be that as it may," said Hughie firmly […] The boy's good and solid, and I'll have nothing said against him." (*Harp*, 1986, p. 197)

Concluding remarks

Friedrich Engels's comments concerning the realistic depiction of the working class in literature have informed this critical comparison between the slum novels of Dorothy Hewett and Ruth Park. My conclusion is that taken as a whole, Park's novel stands out as a more nuanced intersectional portrayal of working-class life.[9] Hewett's attempt to fit her female characters into the ideological trope of the socialist realist novel ends up imposing a problematic political agenda on the fictional narrative that ultimately undermines its artistic integrity. Park, in contrast, confronts the experience of people struggling within overlapping structures of gender, class and race. The drama of Park's narrative springs from a deeper understanding of the strategies of survival that are forced on working-class women in an everyday context of social and economic disempowerment. In the end, it is this closer attention to the complex reality of both characters and conditions that makes Park's novel still feel vibrantly authentic and politically compelling.

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[9] Ruth Park wrote not only a sequel to her novel, entitled *Poor Man's Orange* (1949), but also a prequel, *Missus* (1985), both of which were critically acclaimed. All three novels were subsequently republished together as a trilogy, *The Harp in the South Novels*, by Penguin Books, (1987).

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Dropping Voices: Southern Black Agrarian Revolt in Charles Chesnutt's Fiction

James O'Donoghue

Abstract

This essay places Charles Chesnutt's work at the intersection of race and class in order to address the still debated question of Chesnutt's relation to the black working-class and reinterpret his now canonical fiction as deeply entwined with the political and economic life of the black agrarian masses of the US South. I argue that the conjure tales' centrality to turn-of-the-century American literature is in its full-throated representation of the economic demands of the black agrarian masses. Furthermore, when Chesnutt 'dropped' Julius as his 'mouthpiece' his writing ultimately left behind the masses and began to speak in the accents of metropolitan self-making. I address a range of Chesnutt's works to demonstrate the key developments in how Chesnutt imagined racial uplift and how the black agrarian masses were to be employed in razing American apartheid. This essay then gives evidence to show Chesnutt's growing skepticism of large dispersed political movements of the masses like Black Populism in favor of the concentrated exemplars of outstanding individuals.

Keywords

Charles Chesnutt, Black Populism, self-made, African-American literature, working-class studies, free-labor ideology, conjure tales, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), 'The Partners' (1901)

In 1900, Charles Chesnutt imagined that a future 'amalgamation' of the races in the US would mean 'There would be no inferior race to domineer over; there would be no superior race to oppress those who differed from them in racial externals. The inevitable social struggle, which in one form or another, seems to be one of the conditions of progress, would proceed along other lines than those of race.'[1] Resolving racial strife, Chesnutt makes clear, does not mean the end to civic struggle. Other social cleavages, 'inevitable' he calls them, will condition the US for 'progress.' But does Chesnutt mean future social inequalities will continue to provoke the interminable but progressive fight for greater social equality? Or does he define 'progress' Republican free-labor advocates would, as the present justification for rather than the future opposition to the greater prosperity of certain individuals against the common masses?

To borrow Chesnutt's phrasing, this essay proceeds along a line other than race to foreground a class struggle that, rather than waiting until the color line resolved itself through 'mixture,' actively

[1] Charles Chesnutt, 'The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time,' in *Charles W. Chesnutt Essays and Speeches*, eds. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz III, and Jesse S. Crisler (Redwood City, CA: Stanford U. P., 1999), 125.

shaped Chesnutt's political and artistic intervention of the nadir.[2] The following essay agrees with recent economic criticism that Chesnutt's fiction illustrates the double-bind of Southern race-hate and Northern money-love facing African Americans in the South.[3] Truly, Chesnutt's work brilliantly satirizes the Northern middle class's tales of innocence in regards to US racial apartheid. But recent economic criticism wrongly exaggerates Chesnutt's sharp tales about US apartheid into attacks on the systemic causes of economic inequality.[4] Even while they pressure certain facets of Republican free-labor ideology, Chesnutt's narratives of the nadir stop short, just as his future America stops short, of imagining economic equality as inseparable from racial equality. They imagined the exact opposite in fact. Powerful critiques by Kenneth Warren, Walter Benn Michaels, and Andreá Williams reveal Chesnutt sought class division and discrimination between rich and poor grounded in 'standards of thought and feeling' to replace the color line.[5] Scholars, though, have yet to fully examine Chesnutt's writing in relation to the particular form of Black working-class politics that restructured Black political life in the South during Chesnutt's publishing career. By doing so, I wish to show the literary means by which Chesnutt first responded to and then eventually elided a viable political and economic alternative to his own Republican free-labor ideology.[6] Of particular concern for my reading is Chesnutt's use of metropolitan self-making to ignore the most articulate and mobilized revolt of the Black agrarian masses in the post-Reconstruction era: Black Populism.

Black agrarian revolts, like the Leflore County boycott of 1889, the regional Cotton Picker's Strike of 1891 spearheaded by the Colored Farmers' Alliance, and the national fusion politics of the People's Party, constellate what historian Omar Ali calls Black Populism: 'the largest movement of African Americans in the United States until the modern civil rights movement.'[7] Nonetheless, readings of postbellum African American literature have yet to fully address the historical argument that 'the most effective means to struggle against discriminatory practices, disfranchisement and racism, all of which affected prosperous black Southerners as well as the poor—was Populism.'[8] Critics have preferred instead to summarize the efforts by Southern Blacks to own land and stay in the agrarian South as the work of one person, Booker T. Washington, and to reflexively label the landscapes of the South as carceral rather than as something workers wanted.[9]

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[2] Ibid.; The term nadir is often used to describe the turn of the century as the worst period for American Americans and is meant to articulate living against lynching, political oppression, the theft of livelihoods, and mob violence after the promise of Reconstruction had faded.

[3] See John Mac Kilgore, 'Cakewalk of Capital in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*,' *American Literature* 84, no. 1 (2012): 61–87; and Francesca Sawaya, *The Difficult Art of Giving: Patronage, Philanthropy, and the American Literary Market* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

[4] Kilgore, 'Cakewalk of Capital.'

[5] Charles Chesnutt, 'Social Discrimination,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 424, and a key quote for Williams's, *Dividing Lines*, 132–133.

[6] Arlene A. Elder claims Chesnutt's writing from the conjure tales to his last published novel codifies a move 'away from the common Black experience' toward a 'gradual identification with the liberal, white middle-class.' *The 'Hindered Hand': Cultural Implications of Early African-American Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 148. My argument traces a similar arc, but I do not hold that Chesnutt's writing identified as white.

[7] Omar Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South, 1886–1900* (Oxford, MS: U. P. of Mississippi, 2010), 10.

[8] Judith Stein, 'Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others': The Political Economy of Racism in the United States,' *Science & Society* 38, no. 4 (1974/1975): 445.

[9] See Houston Baker, *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/re-reading Booker T* (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 2001).

Turning to the primary means of long endurance and open revolt by the agrarian Black masses frames Chesnutt's engagement with rural folk characters and dialect as the necessary adoption of the political and economic demands of political allies. Too long has critical attention been paid to Chesnutt's use of dialect as a 'bridge,' to use Eric Sunquist's term, between elite and folk cultures.[10] To view Black rural subjectivity as simply a difference in language evades the irreconcilable economic and political differences between rural and urban, poor and secure, which were negotiated within African American literature at this time.[11] The most important evidence of Chesnutt's relationship to a Black folk is not in his use of dialect, but in his inscription of the Black masses' proprietary desire for land in the South. The social investment in property was in fact one of most radical actions available to rural African Americans at the time, as W. E. B. Du Bois recognizes when he labels the Freedmen's Bureau and its efforts to regulate agrarian labor conditions as the 'dictatorship of labor' that 'succeeded only at the expense of a taxation on land and property which amounted to confiscation.'[12] Rereading Chesnutt's works with this legible Black rural polis in mind articulates both a moment in which an economic justice movement necessarily attacked the mechanisms of racial hegemony and how a middle-class author wrote class difference into that moment.

The conjure tales' Julius stands as the closest representative Chesnutt would produce of the agrarian agitation that historians now refer to as Black Populism. Julius aside, Chesnutt only briefly refers either to the Colored Farmers' Alliance or the People's Party. In his 1892 address 'Why I am a Republican' Chesnutt conflates the newly formed Populist Party with the Democratic Party saying, '[The Democrats] boast of being the people's party, the party of the poor, and what have they done to lighten the burden of poverty which it seems must needs fall on some of us?'[13] The wording claiming poverty to be inevitable for some may illuminate how Chesnutt defines progress for his 'future American.' But more importantly, the calculated conflation betrays a pressing need on Chesnutt's part to negotiate a troubling alternative to his own vision of progress and Republican free labor ideology. This politically motivated erasure of Populism is writ large in his later novels. *The Colonel's Dream*, set at the same time as the rise of the Colored Farmers' Alliance of the early 1890s and written to directly address agrarian peonage, ignores the workers' movement in favor of a protagonist who gets his money in a Wall Street buyout. *The Marrow of Tradition* likewise only briefly notes the Populists of Wilmington's fusion government and narrates the dilemmas and tragedies of Dr. William Miller instead. In effect, Chesnutt's fiction removes the agrarian masses from their place in the conflicts of history.

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[10] See ibid.; and Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard U. P., 1993), 7, 301.

[11] Similarly, Elizabeth Hewitt argues that Chesnutt's role as author and Julius's use of stories to work for himself rather than wages 'suggests an analogy.' Hewitt's reading, correctly emphasizing that Chesnutt's writing sought materialist ends, deflects Chesnutt's representations of an economic class other than his own as the prerogative of an author. In my view, not to interrogate the intraracial class dynamics of an author and those he writes about implies that the effort to 'accumulate capital' by one middle-class, urban author is coextensive with the efforts to own by the poor, rural Black millions. 'Charles Chesnutt's Capitalist Conjurings,' *ELH* 76, no. 4 (2009): 933, 941.

[12] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: an Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 622. Eric Foner tempers Du Bois's praise for the Freedmen's Bureau adding that the Bureau viewed much of its relief effort as temporary and went to great pains to avoid becoming an agency of poor relief. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 152.

[13] Charles Chesnutt, 'Why I am a Republican,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 97.

As early as 1889, Chesnutt thought he would 'drop' his 'used up' Julius. After Julius, when Black working-class characters appear in Chesnutt's fiction, they almost invariably act as the foils to a Black professional-class character, as in Chesnutt's short story 'The Partners' (1901).[14] And he went further. He created a hierarchical relation within the intraracial class bond with mobility—both economic and spatial—as the privilege of the Black professional, and violence—victim of and returner of—as the privilege of the Black worker. Chesnutt drops a revolutionary voice for the Black masses of the South with the dropping of what Julius spoke to. The spectacular violence in the subsequent novels *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), while still a mark of Black agrarians' indelible presence in the discourse of the color line, is but a shadow of the recognition of the politicized Black agrarian masses in the conjure tales. Chesnutt's decision to drop Julius may have been motivated by an uneasiness in allying the voice of Blackness with the voice of rural folk.[15] But more than simply a symptom of class anxiety, his portrayal of agrarian working-class *violence* as the dead end of cross-class bonds summarizes agrarian *revolt* as a dead end of history, and thus is a calculated dismissal of the political agency of the masses.

I. Taking Their Place: The Desire for Property in Chesnutt's Conjure Tales

'[N]either fish[,] flesh, nor fowl' writes a deeply frustrated Chesnutt in regards to his middling position, both racial and economic, in the South:

> Too 'stuck-up' for the colored folks, and, of course, not recognized by the whites. Now these things I would escape from, in some degree, if I lived in the North. The Colored people would be more intelligent, and the white people less prejudiced; so that if I did not reach *terra firma,* I would at least be in sight of land on either side.[16]

Chesnutt's personal revolt—what he notably characterizes as a reckoning with animalia given the many instances of circular and deadly metamorphoses in the conjure tales—readily conforms to what Melvin Dixon reads as African American literature's creative means to assuage the geographic anxiety resulting from diaspora. The landscape—which Dixon catalogs as the wilderness, the underground, and the mountaintop—becomes the medium through which one might 'ride out' from bondage to find 'self-understanding' and, thus, a sense of 'rootedness.'[17] Chesnutt's conjure stories, as told by Julius, warn that the strong desire to remain—for instance in the characters Sandy and Ben—only allows enslavers to reach deeper, farther, and more firmly into their victim's lives. The parasitic link between land and person precludes any hope to remain in the South and not be owned. The grapevines speak the enslaver's conjure in 'Goophered'; the distant swamp in 'Po' Sandy' comes within the enslaver's reach; the creek dissolves everything outside of the enslaver's recognition in 'Lonesome Ben.' Enslaver and land become metonymic for each other in the enslaved's environmental ontology.[18] Here then is a figurative landscape that

[14] Charles Chesnutt, 'Albion W. Tourgée, 26 Sept. 1889,' in *'To Be an Author': Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889–1905*, eds. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Robert C. Leitz, III (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1997), 44.
[15] Williams, *Dividing Lines*, 133.
[16] Charles Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*. ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 1993), 157–158.
[17] Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 3, 32.
[18] In an ecocritical reading of *The Conjure Tales*, Jeffrey Myers suggests that Chesnutt portrays Black agrarians as having a 'symbio[tic]' relationship to the land they work that the white owners lack. 'Other Nature: Resistance to

represents the antithesis of Dixon's identity formation: an environment that saps one's sense of self and compels the reluctant agrarian masses of the South to 'ride out.'

Yet, despite his tale's admonition not to delay flight, Julius does not leave. He instead attempts to overcome his own personal taxonomic insecurity (is he free or is he slave) by telling stories about the land, by claiming the land beneath his feet as *terra firma*. I suggest the tension between a Southern setting which compels flight and a narrator who doggedly remains derives from the nadir's necessary political bond between the different classes and the different geographies of Black America. Chesnutt, personally and politically, preferred Northern, urban forms of uplift, yet at this time, the vast majority of Black America was rural and Southern. Given this social and economic landscape and Chesnutt's resolve to write for racial justice, he must, to paraphrase Warren, work through class.[19] In other words, class difference and the opportunity to attenuate that difference for a moment for the sake of countering programs of white supremacy, informs the thematic structure of the conjure tales.

In the conjure tales, Julius, a freedman of North Carolina, attends John and Annie, big money people from Ohio, in their ventures either to spend or make money. He invariably finds the opportunity to tell a story to acquire something he wants, usually property big and small. In this regard, Julius and John rehearse the economic contest of the vast majority of African American laborers in the South. Through Julius's daily economic revolt we can see a representative of the Black agrarian politics which shaped the post-Reconstruction South.[20]

A solitary story among Chesnutt's conjure tales depicts unsanctioned mobility without the return of planter terror. Julius's 'A Deep Sleeper' relates the tale of Skundus who 'git res'less' and disappears when the woman he hopes to marry is sent to work at a neighboring plantation for several weeks.[21] She eventually returns as does Skundus, claiming to have been asleep. Skundus's reappearance just before the harvest when his labor is most valuable rehearses a potent form of protest that moves within Southern landscapes rather than without. Julius relates to his employers that his young relative Tom is a grandson of Skundus and susceptible to the same 'deep sleep' that Skundus claimed kept him from work. As John's household economy employs Julius, Tom, and 'other members of [Julius's] family,' the tale hints at these employees' ability to leave and pressure that economy at multiple nodes and under a more systematic strategy than just Julius's artifice. John's own words in the opening to 'A Deep Sleeper' properly measure the potential scale of Julius's stratagem. 'They were,' John says of poor whites, 'like Julius himself, the product of a *system* which they had not created and which they did not know enough to resist.'[22] Its significance is made more evident when we consider that 'A Deep Sleeper' was published only a year after the

Ecological Hegemony in Charles W. Chesnutt's 'The Conjure Woman,'' *African American Review* 37, no. 1 (2003): 6. But more often than not, as Paul Outka claims, Chesnutt uses symbiosis between slaves and the natural world to illustrate slavery's ability to reify humans into beasts, and not to applaud an environmentalist ethos. *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 106.

[19] Kenneth W. Warren, *What was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 2011), 109.

[20] Sixty-five percent of African Americans in the rural South from 1880 to 1900 were wage laborers; an additional 27 percent sharecropped on white-owned land, meaning the vast majority of Black agrarians were directly dependent upon white landowners. Ali, *Lion's Mouth*, 18.

[21] Charles W. Chesnutt, 'A Deep Sleeper,' *Two Tales* 5, no. 53 (March 11, 1893): 5, *The Charles W. Chesnutt Archive*.

[22] Ibid., 2, emphasis added.

formation of the Populist Party, a national agrarian party that formed partly from Colored Farmers' Alliance members efforts and garnered some significant support from Black agrarian laborers despite the racism of their white counterparts.[23]

Undoubtedly, Julius's tale resists John's authority as it gives Tom the time needed to procure the watermelon that John had ordered Julius harvest for his table. As Julius tells his employers the story of Skundus's flight to the swamp and his family's direct relation to that deep sleeper, he voices his and his family's awareness of the system they live and work in and a mobile labor force's role in systemic resistance. For landless Black agrarians the ability to leave and seek the best pay for their labor provided what was often one of the only means of protest, but its potency as a threat to local apartheid economies was unmistakable. The 'Redeemed' state governments quickly enacted policies to contain the contingency of a mobile and free labor force. Black populists responded in kind. As in the person of Reverend George W. Lowe of Arkansas, who organized Black populist resistance as part of the Colored Wheels, an agrarian economic movement, and wrote letters of support for people wanting to emigrate to Liberia, Black populists leveraged their mobility within the labor market for fairer wages as they pressured apartheid policies for the opportunity to remain and own land.[24] Julius employs the same pressure in the conjure tales.

Readers questioning whether Chesnutt exploits Black agrarian culture or whether he astutely helps that culture survive must come to see Julius's use of language as entangled in the primary concern of Black agrarians: property. In other words, Julius's argument with John inscribes the Black agrarians' contest against dispossession and alienation from the land. Julius's means of protest—'ifs,' 'woulds,' and 'coulds'—punctuate the conjure tales, moving the reader's conception of landed property away from assumptions of white male prerogative. Julius says to John and Annie when they first meet him in 'The Goophered Grapevine' (1887), ''Well, suh, you is a stranger ter me, en I is a stranger ter you, en we is bofe strangers ter one anudder, but 'f I 'uz in yo' place, I wouldn' buy dis vimya'd.''[25] In 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt' (1899), John asks for advice regarding clearing a patch of land by the swamp and Julius replies, 'I ain' denyin' you could cl'ar up dat trac' er lan' fer a hund'ed er a couple er hund'ed dollahs, —ef you wants ter cl'ar it up. But ef dat 'uz my trac' er lan', I wouldn' 'sturb it, no, suh, I wouldn'; sho's you bawn, I wouldn.''[26] Julius follows the conditional possessive imaginings with knowledgeable assertions about the tract of land that he could have only learned as a field hand.[27] While Julius acknowledges John's ownership, the conditional phrasing invites an imaginative displacement of John, one that broaches the possibility that freedwomen and men could be in John's 'place.'

[23] See Ali, *Lion's Mouth*.
[24] Lowe echos Skundus's 'restlessness': ''There is a great restlessness among [my people] on accoun [sic] of discriminating laws that are being made.''; quoted in Ali, *Lion's Mouth*, 32.
[25] Charles Chesnutt, *The Conjure Stories: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, eds. Robert B. Stepto, Jennifer Rae Greeson (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 6. Representations of Black Southern dialect were used by white authors of this time to cement the image of Black Americans as ignorant and only suited to servitude. Studies of Chesnutt's writing have long debated Chesnutt's use of dialect, but most hold that Chesnutt's use of dialect counters such racist writing. See, for instance, Sunquist, *To Wake the Nations*; Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
[26] Chesnutt, *The Conjure Stories*, 81.
[27] Ibid.

Chesnutt would later claim, 'the wind-up of each story reveals the old man's ulterior purpose, which, as a general thing, is accomplished.'[28] Julius's purpose and John and Annie's acquiescence have been read as moments of failed understanding, rather than as a rural laborer 'accomplish[ing]' what he wants. According to Sarah Wagner-McCoy, 'John misunderstands Julius's stories as elaborate cons for ham, a schoolhouse, or a new suit of clothes. . . . Material equivalency fails to acknowledge the mythological proportions of what has been lost.'[29] Similarly, Glenda Carpio casts the reading of Julius as telling tales to 'receive limited financial gain' as coming from the 'limited perspective' of Julius's white listeners, John and Annie.[30] The pittances certainly, at times, demonstrate John's limitations. But they still frame, as Chesnutt argues, the 'wind-up' of the conjure stories, and we should appreciate the contest for material equivalency as the recurrent contest for economic justice in the South between those who own the land and those who work the land. Rather than attempting to get paid to only satisfy a pressing hunger or need, Julius seeks the 'ulterior purpose' of material gain to interrogate the imagined future of the South.[31] Julius's conjure stories can be called strategic to the extent that they enable him to remain, make a living, and fight for his own future purpose. Like Julius, Black Populists organized because they realized that their ability to remain, make a living, and plan a future in the South would only be secured through a more strategic political power.

Locating moments of material redistribution then begins to acknowledge an economic politics within the conjure stories that arises from the Black agrarian masses in the South rather than from an urban elite. Chesnutt grasped the economic strategies and motivations of rural workers and put them into his conjure stories. Whether Chesnutt believed those workers could be successful is another question.

That Julius never gains the ground he works suspends him on the threshold of migration or an even more dangerous response. Even as 'if I was in your place' within 'The Goophered Grapevine' and 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt' disrupts a capitalist's rhetorical control of space, those stories end with Julius absent and John controlling the narration. Julius's absence insinuates a historical finality to the contest for space in the South not repeated in other tales. Julius ends his bloody revenge tale, 'The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt,' with 'w'at I be'n tellin' you is de reason I doan lack ter see dat neck er woods cl'ared up. Co'se it b'longs ter you, en a man kin do ez he choose' wid 'is own.'[32] 'I cleared up the land in question,' John perfunctorily relates.[33] He finds no haunt, as the conjure tale threatens, but a tree full of honey. Julius's tale of death and ghosts (fabricated to protect a honey 'monopoly' John tellingly believes) attempts a haunting form of proprietorship. Yet when Julius's words directly touch on the ownership of land, he is effectively silenced. Julius's absence sends a message. John knows the driving desire and telos of the stories is for Julius to take John's place,

[28] Charles Chesnutt, 'Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem,' in *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels and Essays*, ed. Werner Sollers (New York: Library of America, 2002), 906.
[29] Sarah Wagner-McCoy, 'Virgilian Chesnutt: Eclogues of Slavery and Georgics of Reconstruction in the Conjure Tales,' *ELH* 80, no. 1 (2013): 214–215.
[30] Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford U. P., 2008), 48.
[31] Christine A. Wooley's persuasive argument that Chesnutt hoped for sympathy to translate into the redistribution of property, demonstrates that the 'desired state of feeling' necessarily means a sensitivity to labor and the proper recompense for that labor. 'The Necessary Fictions of Charles Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream*,' *The Mississippi Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2012): 189.
[32] Chesnutt, *Conjure Stories*, 89.
[33] Ibid., 89.

and that is something which John will never permit no matter the soft-hearted appeals of Annie. Consequently, even as Julius proves his right to the land he knows so well, his *terra firma*, his determination to stay under the surveillance of Northern sympathy and New South economics, Chesnutt's tale argues, keeps all of the plantation South's porous boundaries between remaining and being owned open.

2. Class Bonds, the Division of Character, and Economic Inequality in 'The Partners'

A young Chesnutt once dreamed of what economic uplift for the Black agrarian masses would look like: 'The security of property encourages the acquisition of real estate, and as the colored people constitute the majority of the laboring class in the South, not only in the more menial employments, but in the mechanical trades, it is from them that the influential 'middle class' will be largely recruited in the future.'[34] Only one particular work of Chesnutt's, 'The Partners,' explores this evolution of the freedwomen and men from agrarian laborers to middle-class freeholders and traces the multiple lines of influence and alliance that structure the class politics at work in Chesnutt's late novels. 'The Partners' captures how Chesnutt naturalizes class differences within the complex intraracial alliances necessary to upend US apartheid. Here, as in his last published novels, Chesnutt replaces Julius with two characters meant to shoulder different class positions. The overlooked short story raises important questions about Chesnutt's beliefs about the potential of the agrarian working class to act in its own interests and its relationship to a Black middle class. Chesnutt's above journal entry anticipates a future America where an 'influential' (read powerful) middle class forms itself by the discerning 'recruit[ment]' of select individuals. 'The Partners' is the story of this middle class selection supplanting a strange and potentially revolutionary form of economic equality.

The 'partners,' William Cain and Rufus Green, meet in a Union army camp and agree to bond themselves to one another, going so far as to create a type of marriage certificate. The men, writes Chesnutt, are partners 'at whatever their hands find to do,' and 'What they makes shall belong to one as much as the other, and they shall stand by each other in sickness and in health, in good luck and in bad, till death shall us part, and the Lord have mercy on our souls. Amen.'[35] This remarkable pledge to economic equality clashes with the story's formulations of difference in ability, character, and prospective worth. Here, as in another story about a marriage bond, 'The Wife of His Youth,' Chesnutt portrays the class tensions that surface when alliances are made between social unequals. William's 'relative superiority manifest[s] itself' in whatever the partners do, and their division of labor notably places Rufus mixing with his 'hoe,' and William applying the whitewash.[36] Outside the bonds of the pact, Rufus would 'lead the life of obscurity,' but inside the bond, the men 'ate together, slept together, and had a common purse.'[37]

The communistic bond is both challenged and enforced by the 'advice and oversight' of a Northern philanthropist. With this unnamed do-gooder's capital, William and Rufus gain 'a piece of the soil which . . . is the common heritage of mankind' and become 'freeholders and farmers upon

[34] Chesnutt, *Journal*, 107–108.
[35] Charles Chesnutt, 'The Partners,' in *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt*, ed. Sylvia Lyons Render (Washington D. C.: Howard U. P., 1974), 254.
[36] Ibid., 254.
[37] Ibid., 259, 254.

adjoining tracts of land.'[38] This philanthropy, however, comes with ideological presumptions related to free-labor and laissez-faire individualism. When the philanthropist learns of their partnership, he explains that such a relationship is:

> incompatible with the development of self-reliance and strength of character, and that their best interests would be promoted by their learning each to fight his own battle. A thoughtful student of history might have suggested to the philanthropist that the power of highly developed races lies mainly in their ability to combine for the better accomplishment of a common purpose. The good man meant well, however, and his method was admirably adapted to separate the wheat from the chaff.[39]

Tempering the separation of 'wheat [read William] from chaff [read Rufus]' is the otherwise foolhardy philanthropist 'waiving for the moment his theory of self-reliance—of which indeed his whole generous scheme was a contradiction' and ensuring that at least two men become solvent farmers.[40]

Though bonded, the partners are not equal. The men still partly undergo what George W. Cable calls an 'energetic process of selection, and as much as some go down, others go up.'[41] The partners' social contract based on the accord of race attenuates the 'process of selection,' but it does not deny the innate inequality of character. Those inequalities of character distract the reader from the subtle development of economic difference and power. Thus, the course of events proves the pact—as much as it was intended to prevent difference—to be a dead letter. With William's 'advice' regarding crops; his 'superior knowledge' of livestock; his 'trustworthy intuitions' concerning the weather; his 'instinct of a wise farmer' to plant rice; his selling surplus sweet potatoes, which 'always kept well,' 'at a nominal price' to Rufus, whose sweet potatoes 'had not been properly put up'; and his ability to hire laborers, with all these, the profits and subsequent luxuries slowly accrete to William's favor.[42] Jealousy finally creates a rift between the friends. Complicating the feud between the freedmen is a descendent of the planters, who, working as a surveyor, capitalizes on an error in Rufus's deed of sale, and while securing the cooperation of a descendent of the philanthropist (an allusion to reconciliation between North and South after the Compromise of 1877), attempts to eject Rufus from his land.[43]

Critically, William's 'relative superiority' remains constant from the characters' 'hand to mouth' subsistence to their propertied excess.[44] The philanthropist's charity, far from distorting the partner's bond, only brings into greater relief the natural differences between the two men that had been there from the start. After the partners seem to receive an equal footing, we can then only understand economic inequality as reflecting differences of inherent worth and character. Echoing again the greater 'sacrifice' on the part of Mr. Ryder (Sam Taylor) in 'The Wife of His Youth,'

[38] Ibid., 254–255.
[39] Ibid., 254.
[40] Ibid., 254–255.
[41] George W. Cable quoted in W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The Housing of the Negro: VI. The Southern City Negro of the Better Class,' *The Southern Workman* 31, no. 2 (February 1902): 65.
[42] Chesnutt, 'The Partners,' 255–257.
[43] Ibid., 258.
[44] Ibid., 254.

'The Partners' concludes with William taking up Rufus's case at his own expense, a man true to his class-marriage bond.[45]

Economic justice, in the story's conclusion, is at the discretion of the 'better classes.'[46] The apparent justness of William's action obscures the fact that the bond is a dead-letter, and the act enshrines the bond's antithesis: the inevitability and benefits of economic difference. His moral and fiscal indebtedness enmeshes Rufus in a bond he can no longer refuse; subjugated by the goodness of his 'partner,' Rufus can only feel power through association. While the influence of Northern speculation and philanthropy seems to interrupt the communal bond of Black America, 'The Partners' internalizes and *justifies* the definite emergence of class difference under that bond's contract. Thus, a middle class process of uplift pretends to be what was there from the very beginning, and the historical moment and the political potential of the statement 'What they makes shall belong to one as much as the other' are forgotten.[47]

3. Self-Making across the Section Line in *The Colonel's Dream*

The social and economic inequalities in Chesnutt's fiction between uplifted Black working class and the uplifting Black professional class become legible along the section line of the nineteenth-century US in the later novel *The Colonel's Dream*. *The Colonel's Dream* takes the process of class differentiation so evident in 'The Partners' and spatializes it. Flight—individual not communal and urban not rural—ends the novel and is how the middle class separates itself from the working class. Chesnutt's last portrayal of the moneyed North's incursions into the recalcitrant South follows Wall Street investor Henry French as he travels back to his old home in the South. Vestiges of his former life when he was known as Colonel French reappear, and his nostalgic visit turns into a concerted effort to stay and impel Clarendon into modernity. French reclaims the abandoned cotton mill, hoping that it will one day ameliorate the deathly practices of the neighboring mill (employing white workers) and the convict-labor farm (driving Black workers) both owned by the once lowly but now wealthy Bill Fetters. French partially realizes late that racial justice must underlie his economic revivalism but fails in all.

The story of a well-intentioned capitalist meeting the morass of Southern white supremacy and, consequently, failing to modernize the region echoes Albion Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* (1879). In that novel, the South's cultural, racial, and economic stagnation results from self-inflicted

[45] Seeing the bond the professional class fashions with the working-class as 'sacrificial' is Chesnutt's own idea. The central text for Eric Sundquist's analysis of Chesnutt's abridgment of class difference within the Black community is the short story 'The Wife of my Youth.' Andreá Williams's analysis of that story notes a 1907 letter Chesnutt wrote to Celia Parker Wooley, who was adapting the story for the stage and had made changes. Chesnutt raised this objection: 'My own idea of dramatizing the story would not have taken the action back to the days of slavery, but would have begun with some preliminary development concerning the relations between Mr. Ryder and Mrs. Dixon, emphasizing the difference between Mr. Ryder and his old wife, and thereby of course enhancing the sacrifice which he made for a principle' Chesnutt, 'Celia Parker Wooley, 11 July 1907,' in *An Exemplary Citizen: Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1906–1932*, eds. Robert C. Leitz, and Joseph R. McElrath, (Redwood City, CA: Stanford U. P., 2002), 28, quoted in Williams, *Dividing Lines*, 150n6.

[46] The 'better class' and 'dangerous class' were weighted class-conscious terms used within nineteenth-century social discourse, including by African American writers to discuss Black class structure.

[47] Chesnutt, 'The Partners,' 254.

wounds.[48] *The Colonel's Dream*, in contrast, answers that Northern industrialism always already feeds the South's systems of racial oppression. The collapse of the sectional division between North and South in the novel's critique resonates with a collapse between antebellum and postbellum to argue that peonage, what Chesnutt calls elsewhere a 'new slavery,' is a sin of national scope and obvious heritage.[49]

Still, if Chesnutt's 'intimate historical compressions,' to borrow Don James McLaughlin's phrase, productively resurrect slavery in the South to damn peonage, they also pay little heed to the intervening political and economic actions of Black agrarians.[50] What came after Reconstruction on a significant scale was not just the isolated rise of a few special individuals capable of self-making under the rigors of free-labor Republican ideology, nor merely the fitful interventions of Northern moneyed-men in a handful of institutions but the continued organization among Black communities for economic justice when and where they stood.

The 'avowed purpose novel' takes place in the 1890s—the apex of Black Populism—and was written 'to expose peonage and the convict lease system'—a central issue for Black Populist activism.[51] Chesnutt rehearses, instead, the same political moment prior to the ascendancy of Black Populism as *The Fool*'s *Errand*, and ultimately the same free-labor Republican ideology. Like Comfort Servosse before him, French keeps his power, money, and standing after the failure to impel Clarendon into free-labor modernity and to outlaw the convict-lease system. The final chapter, though it reads like an epitaph, paradoxically revivifies, in part, this capitalist's project, for 'was not his, after all, the only way?'[52] Referring to the good ends of racial reform the Colonel belatedly adopts—the end to peonage and the convict lease system; the adoption of 'new thought,' 'just laws,' 'orderly administration'; and the spread of education—the passage also delimits the 'way' to those ends as being through men like French.[53] No hint of an agrarian political and

[48] Francesca Sawaya's analysis of Chesnutt's belief in the radical potential of 'true friendship' as a counter to corporate philanthropy hints at how Chesnutt's social criticism may be enmeshed in and inseparable from his ideas about social discrimination. Sawaya paraphrasing Ivy Schweitzer, historicizes '[t]rue friendship' as an 'elite model of friendship' which 'depends on notions of similitude to figure equality,' but 'nonelites effectively appropriated this model of friendship for politically empowering purposes.' Sawaya, *The Difficult Art of Giving*, 142. The model of 'true friendship' may very well be politically empowering for some. But one does not have to try hard to see the parity between two passages by Chesnutt, the first cited by Sawaya as evidence of Chesnutt's radical use of true friendship: 'for every man at all times equality with those who are no wiser or better than he; fraternity for only with this can equality or true friendship exist.' Charles Chesnutt, 'The Negro's Franchise,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 161–168, quoted in Sawaya, *The Difficult Art of Giving*, 142; and the second, the pivotal passage which Andreá Williams uses to disclose Chesnutt's class politics: 'inspiring friendships, the mental and spiritual stimulus which comes from meeting others of kindred standards of thought and feeling.' Chesnutt, 'Social Discrimination,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 424, quoted in Williams, *Dividing Lines*, 132–133. The discrimination embedded in phrases like 'kindred standards of thought and feeling' or 'those who are no wiser or better' is 'class by another name' according to Williams (133). Briefly then, 'true friendship' requires social equality rather than creates social equality.

[49] Charles Chesnutt, 'Peonage, or the New Slavery,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 206.

[50] Don James McLaughlin, 'Inventing Queer: Portals, Hauntings, and Other Fantastic Tricks in the Collected Folklore of Joel Chandler Harris and Charles Chesnutt,' *American Literature* 89, no. 1 (2017): 3.

[51] Helen M. Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 211.

[52] Charles Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream.* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1905), 293.

[53] *The Colonel's Dream*, 293–294; Gregory Laski maintains that the novel concludes in a 'politically productive' pessimistic mode and notes that Christine A. Wooley 'mutes Chesnutt's irony' by embracing the ending as optimistic. *Untimely Democracy: The Politics of Progress After Slavery* (New York: Oxford U. P., 2018), 152, 152n51. Setting aside the debate about Chesnutt's optimism or pessimism, while Colonel French is obviously an

economic movement moves the reader's thought into ways other than French's.[54] The novel's survey of the 'heavy-footed Negro or listless 'po' white man,' 'plowing with gaunt mules or stunted steers' paints the South as the everlasting region of poor farming people rather than as a region harboring the potential for agrarian revolt.[55] The 'heavy-footed' and 'listless' working poor do not move, and their politics cannot emerge. Power and the historical record rest in Colonel French.

To the extent that *The Colonel's Dream* obscures the real and historical power of Black agrarians, it suffers in comparison with the other novel about Wall Street's entanglement in the New South, Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), which concludes with a self-sustaining African American rural commune. Thus, through the novel's compression of history, Chesnutt channels power and freedom into the centralizing efforts of metropolitan self-making. It is precisely this solitary escape which *The Quest* revises in favor of a Black Populist-inspired rural community determined and organized to remain.

Already in 1878, Chesnutt had chosen metropolitan self-creation as his own personal narrative: 'I will go to the Metropolis, or some other large city, and like Franklin[,] Greely and many others, there will I stick.'[56] In 1880, pencil in hand, a youthful Chesnutt listened to Frederick Douglass's address in support of James Garfield's presidential bid. He listened and phonographically transcribed, in Pitman's shorthand, Douglass's speech, which included allusions to the 'self-made man' campaign biography crafted by none other than Horatio Alger.[57] Chesnutt noted the speech in a lecture given two years later to a literary society of his pupils at Fayetteville's State Colored Normal School. 'Self-Made Men' (1882) applauds the handful of 'individuals whose mental ability and energy distinguish them from the common herd.'[58] This self-making, laissez-faire individualism, so evident in his Republican politics and his self-reflections, finally impresses itself into Chesnutt's textual denouement of the race problem.

Withering though its critique may be of Northern capitalism's sin in the South, the novel employs the regional divisions of opportunity and freedom that kindle the desire for flight. This sectionalism shapes class difference because the South remains the region most associated with Black agrarianism as well as the Black working-class. The residual sectionalism stages a problematic allocation of movement and violence between the novel's working and professional class representatives. Amidst the white flight which concludes the novel, only a single African American escapes the South—and that only after his expulsion from the tightly knit rural community. The teacher, Henry Taylor, who had hoped to establish an industrial school in Clarendon, works as a Pullman porter when he meets French.[59] His secretive alliance with French to turn in convict-labor escapee Bud Johnson was exposed. Shunned by the African American community, and his school

object of irony in Chesnutt's novel, what Chesnutt describes as French's 'way' was what Chesnutt advocated for as the 'way' of a more just democracy in essays such as 'Peonage, or the New Slavery.'

[54] This is not to ignore Sawaya's compelling analysis of French's limitations, but Sawaya too reads the end as an evocation of the proper methods of reform. *The Difficult Art of Giving*, 158.

[55] Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 216.

[56] Chesnutt, *Journals*, 106.

[57] See *Raleigh Signal*, 7 October 1880, 2; and *Essays and Speeches*, 40n15.

[58] Charles Chesnutt, 'Self-Made Men,' *Essays and Speeches*, 34.

[59] Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 292–293.

aborted with the retreat of Northern capital, Taylor travels north 'to find somthin' better.'[60] After the lucky encounter, French ensures Taylor a position in New York 'where his education would give him an opportunity for advancement,' thereby affirming the potential of flight and self-making for the middling class.[61]

The Black rural masses pattern of movement from the late 1870s to 1890 was not, as one might expect, in the same direction or with the same purpose as Taylor's. Black agrarian laborers moved but moved within the rural South, what August Meier details as a migration to some form of land tenancy or even land ownership.[62] Indeed, 'the migration activity,' during the period of *The Colonel's Dream*, 'was correlated with the agricultural unrest associated with the rise of the Farmers' Alliance.'[63] For Meier, 'The principal, if not the entire, impetus for migration came from among the lower classes,' and that movement was 'chiefly southwestern' rather than toward Northern urban areas as would be the hallmark of the Great Migration.[64] Chesnutt, by contrast, considered migration 'en masse,' as in the colonization schemes or the Exoduster movement, to be impractical, favoring instead a gradual, solitary 'dispersion,' notably to the North.[65] Distinct from that of the rural masses, his preference argues for historically identifiable middle-class assumptions about how to make it in the US.

In *The Colonel's Dream*, laborer Bud Johnson's flirtation with escape ends when he returns to Clarendon and ambushes his former overseers. Johnson's circular movement is just one of Chesnutt's several portrayals of a laborer's movement as a closed loop. Lonesome Ben, Po' Sandy, and the ironically named Pilgrim Gainey of 'Appreciation' all either defer escape too long or return to sites of degradation because of an inability to 'appreciate' or fully perceive freedom. At times, they even go so far as to express a desire for 'masters.'[66] Their inability to enact linear flight reifies their social class and thus forever delays their transition to the freedom and mobility of bourgeois individualism. But more than that, the violence of the 'dangerous class' actually enables the middle class alliance across the color line. Like the boundary between North and South that demarcates bourgeois self-making from the circulating morass of Southern race hatred, the agrarian class forms a medium through which the middle-class 'ride out.' As Taylor tells French 'I found that my race was an enemy to me. So I got out, suh, and I came No'th.'[67] The 'herd,' to use Chesnutt's term, is an object of repulsion.[68] Uplift becomes selective. Flight becomes solitary. Chesnutt undermines the line between North and South to inculpate Northern capital in Southern white terrorism only to separate the Black professional class from the Black working class and their respective methods of power and revolt along that same line. Thus, the novel charts the path of

[60] Ibid., 293.
[61] Ibid., 293. William L. Andrews notes that 'in Chesnutt's earliest plan for *The Marrow of Tradition*, [the escape motif] required Miller's departure for the North,' pointing to both an underlying connection between the novels but also a significant shift. *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State U. P., 1980), 188.
[62] August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 62.
[63] Ibid., 62.
[64] Ibid., 61.
[65] Charles Chesnutt, 'A Multitude of Counselors,' in *Essays and Speeches*, 82.
[66] Charles Chesnutt, 'Appreciation,' in *Short Fiction* 65; Chesnutt, *Conjure Stories*, 17, 57.
[67] Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*, 292.
[68] Chesnutt, 'Self-Made Men,' 34.

self-making individualism as possessing a futurity that Black working-class mobilization will never have and thereby impresses a sectional boundary on working-class anger.

4. The Dangerous Class: Misreading Power in the Black Populist South

Bound by race, William Miller and Josh Green in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Henry Taylor and Bud Johnson in *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), and then Paul Marchand and the unnamed men who attack Trois Pigeons plantation in *Paul Marchand, F. M. C.* (1921) model the separations defined by class difference. The 'dangerous class' seeks racial vengeance not economic redress, while the 'better class' takes one step more toward becoming the 'future American.' Perhaps, rather than symbolizing the low and the high options for countering racial oppression, Johnson and Taylor and Miller and Green rehearse what John Mac Kilgore potently reads as 'the impossible choice' between 'resistance and assimilationist politics' under capitalism.[69] For Kilgore, 'it is not the burden of African American individuals to unilaterally decide on a course of action in the face of intransigent white domination. Only the displacement of racialized cakewalk capital, where the burden falls, could alleviate the antagonism.'[70] We may infer that reading *The Marrow of Tradition* for Chesnutt's representations of class could lead nowhere because Chesnutt has structured his fiction to present intraracial class divisions as one more consequence of racial capitalism.

To address Kilgore's 'false choice,' I turn to *The Marrow of Tradition*, which has become central to discussions of Chesnutt's class politics and which works harder than any other piece of writing by Chesnutt to ignore Black Populism. The choice between Miller and Green may very well be one that points to the impossibility of Black action without systemic revolution, but that is precisely what was at stake in the fusion governments formed through Black agrarian politics. *The Marrow of Tradition*'s sidelining of Black Populism can only be seen by acknowledging that the sociopolitical movement that the white cabal seeks to dismantle—and that Miller and, in an important way, Green seem apart from—is Black agrarian populism.

Chesnutt's home state of North Carolina staged one of the most 'stunning' victories of the People's Party in 1894 and 1896 through 'fusion' with the Republican party.[71] Historian Omar Ali writes: 'North Carolina's fusion constituency, comprising the poorest elements of the population, black and white, with a hodgepodge of business and industrial allies . . . had effectively overthrown the state's Democratic government.'[72] The civil government in Wilmington represented the culmination of decades of activism on the part of professional and working-class African Americans in the South with an important emphasis on Black agrarian labor needs: the abolishment of the convict-lease system, voting reforms so that the masses could use their vote to fight for their economic interests, and a fair wage for agrarian laborers. In other words, Wilmington's fusion government was part of the last potent form of Black agrarian rebellion in response to the collapse of Reconstruction.

[69] John Mac Kilgore, 'Cakewalk of Capital in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*,' *American Literature* 84, no. 1 (2012): 82.
[70] Ibid., 82–83.
[71] Ali, *Lion's Mouth*, 139.
[72] Ibid., 140.

The political and economic demands of Black Populism translate in *The Marrow of Tradition* as the explosive counteraction of armed resistance to the white supremacists' bloody 1898 coup. The representative man of the masses, Josh Green, whom we meet 'covered thickly with dust,' leads a band of Black militia against the rioting whites and finds vengeance in driving a knife into the heart of a former Ku Kluxer, 'Captain' George McBane.[73] Their fatal conflict and the subsequent détente between the representatives of the 'better class'—Miller and Major Carteret—has often been read as the central point upon which Chesnutt splits the crucial question of class in the politics of racial justice and uplift in the novel. I offer a different reading of just how Chesnutt forges bourgeois idealism within his novel of Southern race violence and Black resistance. Instead of reading Green as the sole bearer of working-class ideals, I look outside him and his antagonism with William Miller for the politics of the masses.

In a crucial, much-discussed scene, Miller is forced from a first-class railcar into the segregated section of the train.[74] There, a party of vagrant farm laborers, 'noisy, loquacious, happy, dirty, and malodorous' soon drives him to the platform.[75] He muses:

> For the sake of the democratic ideal, which meant so much to his race, he might have endured the affliction. He could easily imagine that people of refinement, with the power in their hands, might be tempted to strain the democratic ideal in order to avoid such contact; but personally, and apart from the mere matter of racial sympathy, these people were just as offensive to him as to the whites in the other end of the train.[76]

Miller misreads who at that historical moment had 'the power in their hands,' who, in fact, were shaping the political movement he lives and works in. It is precisely those transient Black laborers on the train, uncouth and lowly, with nothing on their mind save labor and desire who rewrote for a time the paths to power in the South. Those same laborers whom Miller muses drive others to 'strain' the ideals of democracy were demonstrating the power of protected democracy to shift economic and social power. It is their movement's collapse which costs Miller so much in the end. Chesnutt too hedged away from viewing the agrarian masses of the South as a more important political voice of late nineteenth-century politics. That hedge clearly appears in Chesnutt's powerful essay 'A Multitude of Counselors' (1891)—published in the watershed year the Colored Farmers' Alliance led the Cotton Pickers' Strike—which details the options available to African Americans to seek redress and the final securing of their rights. Scholars have frequently used the essay to analyze Chesnutt's (and Miller's) admiration of Green.[77] Chesnutt memorializes those patriotic individuals who mete blow for blow: 'When the Southern Negro reaches that high conception of liberty that would make him rather die than submit to the lash, when he will meet force with force, there will be an end of Southern outrages.'[78] What goes unnoticed though is the skepticism of populist economic combination. Chesnutt invokes the 1889 massacre of Mississippi

[73] Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), 58.
[74] For readings of this scene as exemplifying Chesnutt's troubling class politics see Walter Benn Michaels, 'Plots against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism,' *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 292; and Warren, *What was African American Literature?*, 108.
[75] Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 60.
[76] Ibid., 61.
[77] See William L. Andrews, *The Literary Career*, 198; Matthew Wilson, *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Jackson, MS: U. P. of Mississippi, 2004), 114.
[78] Chesnutt, 'A Multitude of Counselors,' 82.

Farmers' Alliance members as demonstrating the futility of a large race-organization fighting for economic freedom in the face of state-sanctioned white violence.[79] Thus, Chesnutt signals his preference for the capacity for violence within the agrarian masses rather than their representative economic counterpublics.

He further states:

> it is not strange that young colored people should leave the South. Their departure will better their own condition, and, after all, the progress of any race is dependent on the advancement of individuals. One Vanderbilt, one Stewart, one Depew, one Edison, one leader in any department of human endeavor, would do more to enlarge the opportunities of colored people than double the same aggregate of wealth, or talent, or labor, scattered among a hundred or a thousand of them.[80]

The fulcrum by which Chesnutt's fiction becomes symptomatic of bourgeois ideology is this economic ideal of metropolitan self-making. The dispensation of political and economic power should condense, according to Chesnutt, into individual action, though that action may have community-minded aims, rather than disperse across the community in the form of action '*en masse*.'[81] Vengeance, like wealth, to better effect racial justice, Chesnutt claims, should be 'aggregated' rather than 'scattered.'

Green's last effort to protect the 'little group of public institutions' used by the African American community, while also revenging himself against McBane, expresses without resolving the narrator's two dictums: 'To die in defense of the right was heroic. To kill another for revenge was pitifully human and weak.'[82] In driving his knife into one of the cabal's chief organizers, Green cannot thus be separated from the retribution of a more personal outrage, even if he is signifying the Black community's resistance. Admittedly, this portrayal of working-class violence can be seen as an acknowledgement in itself of the Black agrarian masses' importance within US race politics. But, at best, the distillation of Black agrarian class politics into the form of violent resistance admirably commits to answer any wrong; at worst, it assumes the form of a blood vengeance and becomes a straw man to the larger organizations and larger objects of Black agrarian revolt.

'In every instance Julius had an axe to grind,' writes Chesnutt in 1931, remembering his famed conjure tale orator.[83] Julius envisioned a greater chance of economic freedom and personal empowerment through grinding his ax daily against those who claimed '[t]here is plenty of room for us all.'[84] Though Chesnutt alludes to an underlying strain of violence between Julius and his employers, Julius voices not only a passionate resentment but also a definitive strategy of economic reparations and movement within seemingly carceral landscapes. Chesnutt's later work

[79] Ibid., 81.
[80] Ibid., 82.
[81] Ibid., 82, emphasis in original.
[82] Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 114.
[83] Chesnutt, 'Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem,' 906.
[84] Chesnutt, *Conjure Stories*, 5.

becomes more susceptible to what Williams sees as his 'assent to class distinctions.'[85] By his fiction, Chesnutt ably demolished capitalism's Redemption fabula. He preferred to do so through the performances of solitary self-making rather than class solidarity; instead of power exercised collectively by the laboring poor, his fiction prefers the forms of power exercised by those middle-class leaders who *sacrifice* in some way by their alliance with the laboring poor. From the nadir to a future raceless America, Chesnutt's writing refuses to countenance Black Populism's temporality: its past, its presence, and its potential. Absent the possibility of freedom arising in any place by ensuring the conditions of livelihood, cultural forms of escape under Chesnutt's pen become the imaginative futures of the self-made fortunates. Flight for its own sake then becomes symptomatic of inequality's continuance into a future America, rather than its redress. This study of the class politics that Chesnutt's fiction dramatizes and the mode of middle-class individualism it serves is meant to illustrate the necessity and the primacy to attend to themes of economic justice in our readings. If we ignore the injustice of rich and poor in approaching the question of what 'future American' we imagine and the work we do to identify liberating or carceral narratives, then a politically engaged literary criticism will remain inconsistent when tested or encouraged by the different lines of color and class.

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[85] Williams, *Dividing Lines*, 133.

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‘They Died from Misadventure and Accident’: Learning from our Missing Ancestral Failures

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Abstract

White ethnics have fashioned a valorizing narrative of hard-working ancestors playing by the rules and ‘making it.’ This narrative distinguishes between ‘us’ and parasitic ‘them’ (today’s marginalized non-white migrants) in a highly selective fashion. What if we interrogate the universality of the Ellis Island saga? Recovering stories of forgotten people, immigrant ‘failures,’ by applying Carlo Ginzburg’s microhistory approach, reveals many victims in early 1900s America. This paper interrogates these gaps in my maternal grandpa’s family, the Albaneses of Newark. My grandpa had an older sister (born in Italy) only everyone swears there was no Maria, even though there she is in the 1910 census, 19-year-old lamp-factory worker. Then I discovered in November 1910, there was a horrible Aetna Lamp Factory fire, two blocks from their home. This fire resulted in 27 deaths, three months before the better-known Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Was this why Maria disappeared? Another sister fled an abusive husband, only to be threatened with prosecution under the Mann Act for crossing state lines for ‘immoral purposes.’ Then there was brother Ben, riding freight cars for years before ending up in an L.A. flophouse. Other invisible immigrants appear in brief newspaper notices, as of a 19-year-old striker shot in the back by Pinkertons, or runaway men whose photos called out from the ‘gallery of missing husbands.’ Revealing industrial-age microhistories of loss and trauma can (potentially) resurrect empathy toward today’s migrants or remind us of the hefty blood price capitalism exacted from workers, in 1910 no less than 2023.

Keywords

Family history, industrial fires, immigration, Progressive Era

For many white Americans, a valorizing foundational myth has been created on the shores of Ellis Island. The immigration processing station where 12 million European migrants arrived, most between 1892 and 1924, has, for many descendants of these migrants, joined Plymouth Rock as the birthplace of American liberty, as Matthew Frye Jacobson has noted (Jacobson, 2006.) For Slavic, Italian, or Jewish Americans, privileging the Ellis Island saga affords a legitimacy to such white ethnics, while simultaneously effacing brutal atrocities visited on African Americans, Indigenous nations, and other non-whites (Jacobson, 2006.) If America ‘began’ with the arrival of Litvaks, Calabrians, and Ruthenians (among many other white ethnics) fleeing poverty and persecution, with these groups’ challenges and achievements front and center, enduring racism is

moved to the margins, or dismissed as something for which white ethnics bear no culpability, since 'slavery ended so long ago,' decades before those Ellis Island ancestors arrived.

The Wall of Ancestors unveiled on Ellis Island to coincide with the 1986 hundredth anniversary of a renovated Statue of Liberty enshrined this myth. And, full disclosure, two of my paternal ancestors can be found on the ancestral immigrant wall. Certainly, there were reasons to celebrate ancestors that did not embrace the conservative implications of the Reagan administration sponsoring the 1986 Ellis Island rebranding. Not every descendant of an Ellis Island immigrant, for example, endorsed the president's slandering of Blacks and Latino/as as 'welfare cheats.' (Smith, 1992; Holland, 1993.)

Still, privileging the Ellis Island saga developed in a conservative political milieu, one that has only continued down a rightward trajectory in subsequent decades. Slavic, Jewish, and Italian forebears have somewhat ironically been deployed rhetorically on behalf of a contemporary anti-immigrant agenda. Many conservative white ethnics have fashioned a valorizing narrative of hard-working ancestors 'making it.' Assertions one's forebears arrived legally, with commitment to 'hard work' and playing by the rules is juxtaposed to denigration of '*those* people' whose supposed moral failings are called out for their own poverty. Too many wall-builders and anti-immigrant foot soldiers have sanctified the myth their ancestors arrived with notions of liberty, self-sacrifice, and almost innate American patriotism. This narrative distinguishes between 'us' and parasitic 'them' (today's marginalized non-white migrants), ironically deploying some of the same epithets of laziness, violence, or cultural incompatibility with American institutions that in the early 1900s were hurled at Slavs, Italians, and others. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, restrictionists demanded that America stop the flow of immigrants they alleged were degenerating the American racial stock. Nativists such as Lothrop Stoddard warned of the 'menace of the underman' imperiling America; the threat that he, Madison Grant, Henry Cabot Lodge, and other restrictionists warned against came from Italians, Poles, and Jews (Stoddard, 1922; Grant, 1920; Lodge, 1891.)

Invoking virtuous ancestor, however, relies on a selective fashioning of the Southeast European immigrant, a shtetl[1] of the mind that wilfully forgets less palatable aspects of an earlier era's newcomers, and the moral panic an 'invasion' of Slavs, Italians, and Jews triggered in old stock Americans. Beyond that, the standard immigrant saga is teleological – presenting a 'just so' narrative of linear progression toward inevitable achievement. This telling, too, omits the racialized barriers to the New Deal programs of the 1930s that enabled Slavic, Jewish, or Italian ascent out of the slums and into the allegedly preferable all-white suburbs, but red-lined any similar move by African Americans or Latino/as. (Roediger, 2005; Rothstein, 2018; Satter, 2010.)[2]

But neither do the Ellis Island saga sayers, the shamans of the shtetl, recall white ethnic 'failures.' What if we interrogate the universality of the Ellis Island saga? Recovering stories of forgotten people, immigrant failures, by applying Carlo Ginzburg's microhistory approach, reveals many

[1] A shtetl was a small Jewish village in the tsarist Russian empire.

[2] Redlining was the process by which African American neighborhoods and residents were deemed inherently bad risks and thus ineligible for federally insured home mortgages. African American neighborhoods were literally lined in red on government metropolitan maps, and Blacks and Latino/as were denied mortgages when they sought to purchase homes in suburbs, as they were deemed 'bad risks.' Such federal policies prevailed into the 1970s.

victims in early 1900s America (Ginzburg, 1993.) Mark Wyman reminds us, too, many migrants returned to their home countries after only relatively short stays in America, and that for nearly half of Italian and Slavic migrants, the Ellis Island saga was a 'round trip to America' (Wyman, 1993.) Such returnees invariably dropped off the American narrative in subsequent decades when descendants of the remainers narrated the immigrant tale.

Bruce Stave and John Sutherland, too, in assessing the immigrants interviewed for the 1930s Works Progress Administration, a federal agency of the Franklin Roosevelt administration providing, among other things, employment to writers and artists, note interviewees often recounted privation, hunger, and physical peril in the New World. One Polish Jewish interviewee in the 1930s referred to America as the 'land of false teeth and wooden legs,' since so many countrymen suffered physical disfigurement in industrial America (Stave and Sutherland, 1994, 49.) Only decades later would those who had survived mine cave-ins, diseases or factory fires – or more often, their descendants – recall industrial America through the fog of nostalgia. Earlier migrants, though, knew of the prevalence of industrial accidents such as the frequent fatal mine cave-ins recorded by a Slovak historian (Čulen, 1942.) For immigrants, living, or dying, in industrial America was no forger of virtue.

Such industrial accidents rapidly negated any benefits immigrants had managed to accrue through their celebrated thrift, hard work, and law-abiding ways. Nest eggs, and lives, were wiped out in a minute by such disasters. Iconic disasters may be recalled by some Americans, with the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911 in which 147 garment workers perished often cited (*New York Times*, 1911; Von Drehle, 2003.) But what is forgotten is the frequency of such accidents, that the Triangle fire was no outlier. Acknowledgment of such tragedies, too, is often framed in an otherwise valorizing narrative of what white ethnic migrants achieved despite the hazards they faced, hurdles overcome through 'hard work' and determination.

A microhistory, though, of one immigrant family might facilitate an interrogation of the universality of the triumphalist Ellis Island saga. There is no guarantee empathy for current migrants will be the end product of such a microhistory. What a colleague has aptly termed 'oppression bingo,' where the suffering (real or imagined) of one's 'in-group' negates consideration of the horrors inflicted on other marginalized groups, may win out. Still, revealing industrial-age microhistories of loss and trauma can (potentially) resurrect empathy toward today's migrants while reminding us, too, of the hefty blood price capitalism exacted from workers, in 1910 no less than 2023.[3] The bulk of this article, then, offers a microhistory of an immigrant who didn't make it and is therefore forgotten: Maria Albanese, one of the lost people of Newark, New Jersey.

If you've never heard of Maria Albanese, don't worry, you're not alone. Maria Albanese was the oldest sister of my maternal grandfather, Carmen (nicknamed Charlie.) If she really existed. Over the last few years, several distant cousins and I, great-grandkids of long-departed Italian immigrants, have been working to trace our family. Through looking at the federal censuses from 1900, 1910 and 1920, as well as records from St. Lucy's Roman Catholic Church in Newark, I've compiled the approximate birth dates of the ten children of Stefano Albanese and his two wives.

[3] Thanks to Michael Zweig for alerting me to this phrase.

My grandpa was the oldest son, born in 1898 in Long Island City, Queens. The 1900 and 1910 censuses listed, too, his sister, Maria, born in September 1891, the only child born in Italy.[4]

The only problem is no one in the family remembers her. Cousins swore there was no older sister, even though in both the 1900 and 1910 censuses she shows up. In 1900 the family was in Babylon Township, Long Island, where she's listed as nine years old, born in Italy. By 1910, the family was at 69 Hoyt Street in Newark, and she again is listed. This time Maria is recorded as a 19-year-old woman, again listed as born in Italy, recorded as a 'laborer, in lamp factory.' By the 1920 census she, as well as my grandfather, were not listed at her stepmother's house in Newark. But perhaps she had already married, I surmised. Nevertheless, this evidence on two different censuses indicated a Maria Albanese had been born in Italy in 1891 and emigrated, with her mother, in 1897, and a few cousins grudgingly allowed there must have been an older sister after all. Still, no one remembered her, and nobody knew what had become of this woman.

Any number of misfortunes might have befallen this missing sister, as so many laboring children, often the sole support of their families, never made it out of their teens. My Italian grandmother, for example, had a sister who died at 19 in Newark, only a year after both her parents died within a week of each other at 52 and 48.[5] Maria Albanese might have continued as a mystery, were it not for that notation in the census, 'lamp factory worker.' Several months after revisiting this family mystery, I came across an article on the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in *Amerikansky russky viestnik*, newspaper of a Ruthenian[6] fraternal society. The fire in which 147 garment workers had perished was scandalous national news in March 1911, so it wasn't surprising to find an account of the disaster in Ruthenian. But this article concluded by noting there had been many similar fatal fires in industrial America, and offered a list of the deadliest recent fires – including a Newark factory fire in November 1910, which had resulted in 27 fatalities (*Amerikansky russky viestnik*, 1911.)

That fire had started the morning of Saturday, November 26, 1910, at Newark's Anchor Lamp Factory on High and Orange streets. Two blocks from the Albanese home. The fire broke out when the flammable gas wicks on which a young girl was working exploded, igniting the grease-soaked floorboards of her workplace. Such accidents were so common her foreman at first ignored her cries for help. But the flames rapidly spread throughout the building, a factory that had been the scene of ten fires within the previous ten years. As would be the case four months later at Greenwich Village's Triangle Shirtwaist Company, fire doors were sealed shut, either to keep young girls from leaving for unauthorized breaks or to keep union organizers out. As the sparks from the lamp's wick ignited greasy rags and the old factory's wooden floorboards, one can only imagine the terror of the Italian and Jewish immigrant girls trapped by the flames, barricaded on the other side of the locked fire doors. For some, this November inferno was likely not their first

[4] 1920 U.S. census, Newark, New Jersey (E.D. 178, Reel 3), Matilda (widow of Stefano Albanese.) 666 N. Seventh Street; 1910 U.S. census, Newark, New Jersey, (E.D. 57, Reel 878), Stefano Albanese, head of household. 69 Hoyt Street; 1900 U.S. census, Babylon Township, New York (E.D. 735, Reel 1165), Stefano Albaney [sic], head of household; St. Lucy's Roman Catholic Church, Newark, New Jersey, baptismal records, at Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey.

[5] Holy Sepulcher Cemetery, Newark/East Orange, New Jersey, Giovanni, Maria, and Nancy Desiderio graves, Path K, Lot 5, Grave 7. Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, 101; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 84.

[6] Ruthenians are a Slavic people of eastern Slovakia and western Ukraine who worship in the Byzantine Catholic church.

experience with industrial mayhem. How many had traumatically lived through one of Newark's previous industrial fires?

As journalist Mary Alden Hopkins noted in a 1911 exposé of the Newark tragedy, the High Street building was a catastrophe waiting to happen. Erected in 1855, the building had first housed a firearms manufactory, but over the years been subdivided to accommodate various tenants. Fifty years of grease and oil soaked the rickety wooden floorboards and stairs, and the narrow wooden stairway from the fourth floor was approachable only by walking around three sides of an open elevator shaft. As noted, the narrow fire door was locked during business hours, in violation of a 1904 law (Hopkins, 1911.)[7]

The four-story building had at one time housed three companies 'that kept on hand three hundred gallons of naptha … and two gallons of gasoline.' In November 1910 only one tenant used such material, but Hopkins noted 'this one was neatly sandwiched between two inflammable ones.' A paper-box company and machinist shared the first floor. The second-floor tenant was the Newark Paper Box Company, while on the floor above, young women, maybe Maria Albanese among them, worked at the Anchor and Aetna lamp factories; on the fourth, top floor was the Wolf Muslin Undergarment Company. Paper boxes and cotton garments produced in proximity to incandescent lamps, all housed in a greasy old substandard structure. No wonder insurers rated the structure an extra-hazard and charged its owners double the normal rates. Ten fires in ten years might have required some sterner measures (Hopkins, 1911.)

On November 26, the consequences of free-wheeling capitalism and benign neglect came home with a vengeance. Sadie Hampson, one of 200 young girls working in the ratty old building early Saturday morning, was busy 'flashing filaments' at Anchor Lamp. Six days a week she placed carbon filaments in a vacuum pump, removed the air, injected gasoline vapor into the tube, and flipped an electric switch to carbonize the filament. Repeat hundreds of times a day. This time, Sadie later related to a coroner's jury, 'There was a flash of fire in my face, and I screamed.' The scream alerted her foreman, who came running. With the flames rapidly spreading, he threw a bucket of sand on the flames. When that didn't stop the fire, he told other workers to get more sand. No one called the fire department, even though a station house was right across the street. This neglect had become standard practice at Anchor, where those ten previous fires had also gone unreported. Hopkins noted 'If they called in the firemen the fire would go on the records of the Fire Department.' But 'the building already had a bad name,' and rather than run the risk of punitive city action or even higher insurance premiums the company sought to handle the disaster itself. 'When a factory has the habit of incipient fires, it is just as well not to advertise the fact,'

[7] Much of my account of the Newark fire is based on Hopkins. See, too, *Newark Evening Star*, November 26, 1910, 1, 'Find Bodies in Factory Ruins;' *New York Times*, November 28, 1910, 'The Newark Disaster;' *New York Times*, February 23, 2011, 'In Newark, Wresting a Fatal Fire from Oblivion' by Peter Applebome; Kiley Bense, 'No One Was to Blame,' https://lookingbackward.substack.com/p/newark-factory-fire-1910; 'High Street Inferno Took 27 Lives But Helped Bring Reform,' Newark Public Library, https://knowingnewark.npl.org/high-street-inferno-took-27-lives-but-helped-bring-reform/; 'We Never Forget, the Labor Martyrs Project,' https://weneverforget.org/tag/newark-factory-fire-of-1910/; Guy Sterling, Newark fire centennial, https://guysterling.wordpress.com/high-street-fatal-fire-1910-2010-centennial/; New Jersey Jewish Times, 'Centenary Events Recall Newark Fire,' https://njjewishnews.timesofisrael.com/centenary-events-recall-newark-fire/; Gordon Bond, 'Newark's 1910 High Street Factory Fire,' https://gardenstatelegacy.com (all accessed February 23, 2023.)

Hopkins sardonically noted. Whether alerting firemen to the hazard would have done any good was debatable. Fires at this particular factory and throughout the city were common – and overlooked by the Newark Fire Department and officials more interested in attracting businesses to their city than protecting Italian, Slavic, and Jewish workers who toiled in such factories (Hopkins, 1911.)

Ad hoc sand bucketing proved futile, and a girl was finally sent across the street to the firehouse. All that came was one fireman with an extinguisher, which did nothing to stop the blaze. Finally, a general alarm was called. By this point most of the workers from the lamp factories, as well as the first and second floor businesses, managed to flee the inferno. But the 116 women in the fourth-floor garment loft were not so fortunate. The forelady unlocked the door to the stairs, allowing some workers to escape, but either the door slammed shut or someone relocked it. By this point the flames were already consuming the stairs and the wooden platform to the only fire escape. Hopkins relates 'Probably from the moment those hundred and sixteen girls looked up from their work and knew they were trapped on the top floor, fifty feet from the ground, with the fire below them, they were in the grip of fright.' The wooden platform to the one inadequate fire escape that still would have left them far above High Street 'fell to the floor like paste-board.' A few girls reached the red-hot iron rungs of the fire ladder only to see it collapse under the weight of a crush of panicked girls (Hopkins, 1911, *Newark Evening Star*, 1910a.)

As would occur even more horrifically four months later at Triangle Shirtwaist, the Newark garment workers facing incineration jumped from the burning building, four stories onto High Street, and the sickening thud of women hitting the pavement was a nightmare onlookers would remember for sixty years or more. Hopkins recounted, 'One girl struck a tree, and was dead before she reached the ground. One girl broke her ankle on the steam pipe. Another came down astride the steam pipe. Another caught by her cheek on the open picket gate and hung until the picket broke. But the things that happened are too horrible to relate' (Hopkins, 1911.)

Indeed, they were. Leaping girls broke their backs, others were impaled on the spikes of an iron fence, and one girl bounced against a brick wall. As Peter Adey has noted, in Newark the deadly fence was 'intended to keep workers in and others out, just as they were in the Shirtwaist Fire' (Adey, 2022, 12.) Other leaping girls were reported 'crashing through the roof of a lower building' or crashing through the pavement (McKeon, 1911, 535; Duchez, 1911.) Such a gruesome spectacle attracted a huge crowd watching in agony the 'many windows, each window jammed with girls.' The building's engineer Lorin Paddock, managed to get to the fourth floor, and tried to get a girl, Mildred Wolters, to jump to a ladder that only reached the third floor. The girl jumped into the thick smoke, missed the ladder and fell to the ground. Paddock later learned she had died. Skimping on safety had lined the pockets of a few fat cat capitalists, but it was the garment workers who paid the price (Hopkins, 1911.)

The crowd on High Street would never forget the sight of girls plummeting to the pavement. Among the crowd was my grandfather, then-12-year-old Charlie Albanese, stunned by the disaster only two blocks from his home. If indeed his sister Maria worked in the building, he no doubt was doubly terrified. But family tragedy or no, memory of the Newark fire never left him. When I started looking into this tragedy and speculating this might be the reason for Maria's non-appearance in family memory, I shared the story with my brother. He related something I had

never heard. 'When I was very young,' he wrote, 'Grandpa Albanese told me that when he was 12 or 13, he witnessed a horrible fire at a factory where many girls burned to death. And he said he remembered that a big fat man caught two girls in his arms when they jumped from a window. …I figured it was [the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.] …Then many years later, I read about the earlier fire in Newark, and it made sense that this was the fire Grandpa told me about.'[8]

As High Street, site of the inferno, was only two blocks from the Albanese apartment, this had to have been the fire Charlie recalled more than 60 years later. And journalist Hopkins did indeed relate in *McClure's Magazine* engineer Paddock ran and caught girls who had leaped from the fourth floor before they could hit the ground; even though the girls were saved Paddock dislocated his shoulder and passed out (Hopkins, 1911.)

Sadly, 27 girls from the Wolf garment shop were not so lucky; eight died in the flames, the rest after they leaped. Other bodies, though, were not recovered as the flames caused the building to collapse; some corpses were unidentified, and other victims may have perished afterwards from injuries. The *Newark Evening Star* for days after the inferno reported human remains badly mangled and burned were recovered from the third and fourth floors of the collapsed building. The bones were so badly charred, the paper reported, it was unlikely some victims would ever be identified (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910d.) While the casualties occurred in the fourth-floor garment shop, and not in the lamp factory where the blaze began (and my great aunt may have worked), and thus I am no closer to finding out whatever happened to the sister no one remembers, the 27 victims certainly once had families who mourned them, and maybe descendants who chose to forget an aunt who died too young, an ancestor they never knew.

Even if Maria survived this fire, the trauma may have haunted her. A Slavic girl who survived told Hopkins months later she was still having nightmares about the fire. 'Something in my head turns round with me,' she said. 'I get hot in my head. If there is a sound in the night I scream. I think my bed is breaking, and such nonsense' (Hopkins, 1911.) Even the families of the martyrs likely were plagued by such nightmares. The *Newark Evening Star* noted while the factory collapsed police had all they could do to keep the crowd at bay. 'Relatives and friends of those employed in the building fought like wild animals to gain admittance, but police and firemen forced them back to fall moaning and crying on pavement and sidewalk' (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910d.) Similar scenes were reported at the morgue and city hospitals to which victims were brought, with the paper noting the cacophony of 'foreigners' crying out in various languages for news of their loved ones (Bond, *Newark Evening Star*, 1910b.) In that 'bedlam,' was my grandfather one of the 'foreigners' shoved away from the scene; did his father rush to Saint Michael's Hospital for news of his daughter?

The 27 recorded casualties were those who had been trapped in or jumped from the fourth-floor garment factory. The fire had rapidly spread upwards to the garment lofts, through the open elevator shaft, consuming the grease-soaked floors and piles of garments. As the *Daily People*, newspaper of the Socialist Labor Party, asserted, Newark was 'the latest illustration of how wantonly the members of the working class are sacrificed on the altar of capital for profit' (*Daily People*, 1910.) Even our underwear is seeped in blood.

[8] E-mail from Michael Zecker, June 12, 2022.

While it's likely that Maria Albanese – if she was employed on High Street – escaped along with most of the lamp companies' employees, the *Evening Star* noted human remains were so badly burned even on the third floor that 'there is every indication that more bodies, or the remains of bodies, rest in the hills of mortar, brick and charred beams within the blackened walls of the building.' The paper added 'Even more saddening is the practical certainty that it will be impossible to establish the identity of any bodies that may be unearthed' *Newark Evening Star*, 1910d.)

Was Maria Albanese among them? I don't know. But even if she hadn't been a victim on November 26, imagine having to go back to work next Monday in some equally hazardous sweatshop, another fire-trap every bit as bad. Day after day, year after year. Wondering when you'd be next. The sweatshops of Newark offered no guarantees, and the High Street disaster loomed over the city's workers for years to come.

Others – can we call them the lucky ones? – leaped from the flames and walked away with 'only' a broken arm, burns to the face, and those lingering nightmares that Slavic girl recounted to Hopkins. How many lives were shortened because of what they suffered that day, or a day less spectacular in its sweatshop miseries? Did some workers at Wolf or Anchor expire later from their wounds? Could that have been my great aunt's fate?

The horror of the disaster was made apparent in the magazine *The Survey*, which ran a graphic (in every sense of the word) diagram of the fire, showing women leaping from fourth-floor windows and the shabby interior of the building, where 'girls jumped over tables to reach the window.' Other girls were shown impaled on the iron fence or splayed lifeless on the sidewalk (McKeon, 1911.) The fire was international news, with a similar illustration appearing in Paris' *Le Petit Journal Supplément Illustré*. In this illustration firemen with a net vainly look skyward as women plunge to the ground, while another fireman leads a prostrate woman from the scene (*Le Petit Journal Supplément Illustré*, 1910.) Closer to home, on the very day of the fire, the *Newark Evening Star* published an illustration of a weeping factory girl throwing her hat to the ground as she jumped. 'How Many Young Girls Leaped to Their Death?' the paper asked (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910c.) Although such diagrams and illustrations were abstractions designed to elicit pity, the generic leaping girl had a name, a brother, a story. Were these effaced by families (like the Albanese clan?) too grief-stricken to remember?

In the fire's immediate aftermath, the *Newark Evening Star* provided faces and family sorrow to humanize the victims. Photographs of the dead girls were published, some smiling, others indicating serious young women, many of whom already were the sole breadwinners of poor immigrant families. Stories in the paper offered a few especially tragic vignettes. Frances Kastka was a widow supporting her mother and young children, living in Austria-Hungary with their grandmother. She had hoped to earn enough money to send for her family. Kastka, also spelled Kunseka elsewhere in the paper, had boarded with another immigrant employee of Wolf Muslin, who had also died (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910g.) Equally tragic was the story of Theresa Totarelli (or, Tortarella, or Tartaglia, as the paper variously spelled it. Even fire victims' true names were quickly effaced.) Her children, ages 10, 6 and 4, wanted to know when mama would come home, and what was in the 'big box' in their living room over which grandparents and neighbors wept. The children had already lost their father, who, although said to be 'living somewhere in Chicago,'

had abandoned the family. 'In three years she has not heard from her husband.' Theresa's body was the last to be identified. Her father, a cobbler, had brought another body back from the morgue, only to realize this was not his daughter, as this body wore earrings, and Theresa had had none. He went back to the morgue and found the correct one, his daughter, whom he identified by metal supports he had added to the soles of her shoes. A second daughter, Maria Daniano, also at first looked likely to expire, but was, the paper noted, recovering from her burns at Newark City Hospital (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910h; Hopkins, 1911.)

Three sisters, Dora, Minnie and Tillie Gottlieb, died in the fire, but seven sisters and brothers, as well as their parents, remained to mourn them. The paper noted the father walked his neighborhood in a daze, repeatedly visiting the graves. Their mother had previously been hospitalized, and the family was afraid to tell her about Millie, Dora and Tillie, the oldest of whom was only 29, fearing she would die if she heard the news (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910e, 1910j).

A hundred years later, retired *Newark Star-Ledger* reporter Guy Sterling (with whom I worked during my former journalism career), was determined the victims would not be forgotten. He led a campaign culminating in a memorial to the fatalities being placed on the factory site on the disaster's hundredth anniversary. The marker notes dozens were injured in the blaze, nameless, faceless victims. Again, I have no proof Maria was working there that November morning. But even if Maria didn't perish in this fire, or wasn't even employed at Anchor or Aetna, did some similar fate befall her? And do the descendants of the siblings of Mildred Wolters, only 16 years old, and the Gottlieb girls have phantom aunts the bulk of the family is certain never really lived? And who remembers those who were 'only' injured that day or any other day, in any of America's countless sweatshop cities? Would that memorial, to the faceless, nameless victims to the slower, no less lethal rapacity of capital, have to be several hundred miles long, longer perhaps than all the country's war memorial tolls? Who could count the names?

Sterling, though, was determined to remember Mildred Wolters, Teresina Tartaglia (as the memorial that now stands in Newark has her name), and the Gottlieb sisters. Historian Gordon Bond says Sterling tracked down the burial sites for as many victims as he could. The Gottlieb sisters' graves were in Newark's Grove Street Cemetery and Sterling 'returned on the Sunday between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in the hope that perhaps surviving family might show up.' No family did, but Sterling continued his vigil for the martyred garment workers (Sterling, 2010; *New Jersey Jewish Times*, 2010.)

By the 21st century Newark is receding into the embers of time, at least the city of thriving Jewish and Italian communities and hundreds of industrial workshops, so maybe by now no one would remember Aunt Minnie, Aunt Tillie, even if they had had long and happy lives. But as with Maria Albanese, maybe survivors remembered too much. Into their 80s or 90s, maybe no surviving Gottlieb brother or sister showed up because they *had* to forget. Forget her laughing youthful face (like Maria Rizzolo, whose haunting, happy photo was one the *Newark Evening Star* ran after she'd already burned or was crushed to death.) It had to be effaced by grieving children and brothers and sisters, if they were going to carry on. Maybe not only the fire escapees had nightmares of burning and trauma. A younger brother, 12, watching the plunging bodies, the crushed disposable factory parts splayed up and down High Street, maybe he had to forget Maria. Maybe Charlie like one of the seven other Gottlieb sisters who beat the odds in November 1910

had to pretend his sister had never existed. If he held onto her name would he crash through the sidewalk like one of those who ended up in Mullin's morgue? Never speak of her again or his heart would crumble into ashes like a rickety lamp factory sweatshop.

Journalist Hopkins wrote in the fire's aftermath city residents were confident ''something' was going to be done. The culprits were to be brought to justice' (Hopkins, 2011.) Indeed, in the days after the tragedy the *Newark Evening Star* reported officials vowed they would get to the bottom of the crime (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910d, 1910f, 1910i.) The *New York Times*, too, argued 'that the place was a fire-trap many persons must have known. The whole State of New Jersey has been stirred to indignation,' with a coroner's inquest and governor-appointed commission looking into who was responsible for the disaster. 'Obviously the stable door is now to be securely locked' (*New York Times*, 1910.)

But a few months later, the door flew wide open. As Bond notes, 'Stunningly, the coroner's jury could find no legal nail upon which to hang an indictment of anyone' (Bond, 2010.) City building code officers said all they could do was tell the owners to install a fire escape; they said they were powerless to see if this order had been followed. No one, too, was held culpable for the locked door that blocked the only exit from the fourth floor. City officials said laws passed by the Legislature meant the state Labor Department was responsible for workers' safety, not the city. The companies renting the workspaces at High Street said it was the property's owners, not they, who had to see about the building's safety. In the end, the jury glibly exonerated all concerned. In the case of Carrie Robrecht and the other girls who died in the blaze, the jury said they 'came to … death by misadventure and accident caused by a fall … and not as the result of the criminal act, either of omission or commission, on the part of any individual or individuals, whether as private citizens or public officials' (Hopkins, 1911.) In industrial America, Newark was just one of those things. Accidents happen. See you at work Monday morning, bright and early. Maybe.

That no one was held accountable must have infuriated the Albanese and Gottlieb clans, but the non-*mea culpa* astounded even middle-class professionals. Engineer Peter Joseph McKeon wrote in the magazine *The Survey*, 'Thus, private responsibility is left to run in a vicious circle and those concerned shift it about among themselves.' McKeon warned 'the Newark casualty' was also connected to 'the New York dangers,' as the metropolis contained hundreds of buildings in at least as shoddy a condition as High Street (McKeon, 1911, 537.)

Four months later, an even greater horror, the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, resulted in 147 deaths, but again, no one was held criminally liable. The *Literary Digest* commented the devastated building 'was a veritable fire-trap, tho not worse, perhaps, than hundreds of other buildings in the city.' It was noted the staid *New York Tribune* had commented regarding the 'not guilty' verdict, 'The monstrous conclusion of the law is that the slaughter was no one's fault, that it couldn't be helped, or perhaps even that, in the fine legal phrase which is big enough to cover a multitude of defects of justice, it was 'an act of God!' This conclusion is revolting to the moral sense of the community' (*Literary Digest*, 1912.)

The socialist press was even more vehement in denouncing the Newark and Triangle Shirtwaist verdicts. The Socialist Labor Party paper the *Daily People* referred to 'Newark's fire horror' as the latest example of the 'ever present and great risk of working class under capitalism' and was

sure 'This holocaust upon the altar of commercialism furnishes another lesson to the working class' (*Daily People*, 1910.) The owners of Wolf, and then Triangle Shirtwaist, had rung a few extra bucks out of a few extra bodies, writer Louis Duchez argued in the *International Socialist Review*. After the Triangle Shirtwaist disaster he noted 'Investigations since the horror have shown that there are more than 10,000 buildings in the city equally as dangerous as was the Asch building. A fire such as took place had been predicted several times since the Newark, N.J., massacre a few weeks ago. It didn't come as a great surprise. Nor will others that are sure to follow come as a surprise' (Duchez, 1911.) As we'll see, Newark suffered many other fire catastrophes in the following years. And, with no union protection and with families to feed, surviving workers at Wolf Undergarment were in a perilous position even if they were luckier than the Gottlieb girls. The *Newark Evening Star* reported Wolf offered employment to surviving Newark employees in his New York factory, which he assured them was safe. He even offered a dollar a week above their pay for car fare to Manhattan (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910k.) It was unrecorded whether any scarred survivors of High Street took Wolf up on his offer.

If he knew of Wolf's magnanimous offer, the socialist journalist Duchez, though, was likely unimpressed. In recounting the legal exoneration of Triangle Shirtwaist's owners, he incredulously asked, 'Violations of the law? Yes, enough to hang half a dozen rich exploiters and politicians. But these men won't hang.' Recounting the Greenwich Village scene where terrified girls leaped from the ninth floor and 'plunged through pavement,' Duchez snarled, 'Everything was insured but the slaves' (Duchez, 1911.) Another *International Socialist Review* article, 'God did it,' vehemently rejected the exoneration of Triangle Shirtwaist's owners by 'a New York jury composed of capitalistic cockroaches.' To the canard the fire was 'an act of God,' the writer demanded, 'Hasn't God any manhood at all? How long will He allow Himself to be made the goat for capitalist crimes?' (Russell, 1912.)

Likewise, the New York socialist paper *The Call*, spared factory owners and their enablers no venom. 'There are no guilty. There are only the dead, and the authorities will forget the case as speedily as possible,' the paper predicted. While the Triangle Shirtwaist fire has survived in working-class memory, that horrific blaze already was consigning the Newark fire to amnesia. More pointedly, *The Call* asserted,

> Capital can commit no crime when it is in pursuit of profits. Of course, it is well known that those who were killed in the Triangle disaster are only part, and a small part, of those murdered in industry during the passing year. There were only 147 incinerated and mangled. But there were thousands of others who met a similarly agonizing fate during the year of 1911. The whole capitalist system is based upon such unspeakable systematic murder, and those who defend the capitalist system defend those murders. (*Literary Digest*, 1912.)

Hopkins noted some officials also were stunned and 'told indignantly of conditions they were powerless to change.' Newark Fire Chief Asher warned, 'There'll be a worse holocaust than this one in Newark yet. I can name a hundred factories worse than this one was' (Hopkins, 1911.)

In New Jersey the High Street disaster loomed, always an unanswered warning. 'They died by accident and misadventure,' and other misadventures quickly followed. Only a week later

flammable disaster threatened the disposable people of Newark. When a fire broke out in the basement of a barber shop, the *Evening Star* reported a 'tenement panic' when frightened women sought to leap from building apartments. The paper said the blaze wasn't dangerous, but women with infants in their arms were about to leap when drop-ladder fire escapes malfunctioned. Firemen rescued them with their ladders 'and carried the crazed ones to the street.' The implication seems to have been some irrational hysteria afflicted the women, who, the paper noted, were mostly 'Hebrew, Polish, Slavish and other nationalities.' In 1910 such immigrants were often derided by middle-class nativists as irrational, and the short item on the harmless cellar fire seems to have followed suit. Of course, such women knew all too well many of their peers could quickly perish in such fires; jumping first might not have seemed all that irrational a week after the Wolf building went up in flames (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910l.)

No lasting reforms were enacted in Newark, and 'the altar of capital' that the *Daily People* decried was fed by more victims in the following years. In 1915, fire consumed the George Stencil Company, which manufactured leather for automobile seats in a highly flammable process. Two Newark firefighters were killed in this blaze, which it was later determined could have been prevented if management had installed a sprinkler system. More lethal was a 1918 fire at the American Button Works. Seven girls, a man and a boy died as the firm crowded 200 workers into the ancient building to meet a government contract. As historian Charles Cummings notes in a newspaper column preserved on a Newark Public Library website, 'Like the High Street fire, little attention had been paid to fire safety.' The National Furniture Company was likewise completely gutted in a 1920 fire (Knowing Newark.)

Newark never outgrew its infamy as a city plagued by disastrous fires. Is it worth mentioning that only a few weeks after they moved in 1970, my Albanese grandparents' old S. Eighteenth Street tenement burned to the ground, thankfully with no loss of life. Did Charlie, though, then think back to the far more infamous blaze he had witnessed as a 12-year-old boy?

Rather than directly address dangerous and oppressive sweatshop conditions, in the aftermath of High Street and Triangle, progressive writers advocated better-designed fire escapes, mandatory fire drills for factory employees and other tinkerings around the edges of industrial capitalism. Moreover, when they wrote of such measures, even well-meaning middle-class reformers often lapsed into blaming the hysterical immigrant women for their own plight, much as the *Evening Star* derided panicky Slavic and Jewish women, the 'crazed ones' who threatened to jump from a burning tenement. Adey has recently written of the way falling, or leaping, women were consistently blamed for their plight due to their irrational actions. This blame-the-victim mentality was evident when the Newark coroner's inquest cited the 'maladaptive' behavior of garment workers, but this has continued into the 21st century, when the mass deaths at Bangladesh's Rana Plaza garment factory fire in 2013 was partly attributed by commentators to the panic of teenage female workers (*New York Times*, 2013; Long, 2014.) Likewise, Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg commented after the London Grenfell Towers fire in 2017 that tenants did not use 'common sense,' implying their deaths were partly their fault (Proctor, 2019.) Adey powerfully links the enduring 'aesthetics of erasure which silences a classed, raced and gendered politics which has served to render certain subjects and bodies as not only victims, but culpable.' Indeed, following the jury's exoneration of the Triangle Shirtwaist owners, Adey notes one juror told the *New York Times*, 'I can't see that anyone was responsible … it must have been an act of God. … I think that

the girls, who undoubtedly have not as much intelligence as others might have in other walks of life, were inclined to fly into a panic.' The panicky factory girl was in need of improvement, not the fire-traps in which she worked. In our age, we have outsourced such cavalier conditions to the so-called 'Third World,' but in 1910, Newark and Greenwich Village were the Third World, where Italians and Jews were dismissed as 'gross little aliens.' Newark back then was where 'responsible citizens' blamed disposable people for their forgettable deaths (Adey, 2022.)

Writers for the progressive magazine *The Survey* argued for better fire escapes, construction of fire walls, and mandatory fire drills, and no doubt they were well-intentioned in advocating such measures. But unlike in the socialist press, *The Survey* gave little consideration to whether the sweatshop and its substandard wages and working conditions themselves needed eradication. Only better fire safety measures were offered so that the next invariable conflagration might be less lethal. Consulting engineer Peter Joseph McKeon saw the Newark fire as 'a challenge to public opinion throughout the metropolitan industrial district,' not as a wider indictment of systemic industrial conditions. Likewise, engineer H.J.F. Porter said 'the fire wall is an essential,' which perhaps it was, but he was silent on whether eradicating sweatshop conditions at large might also, to Maria Albanese, be essential (McKeon, 1910; McKeon, 1911; Porter, 1911a; Porter, 1911b.)

In articles by engineers in *The Survey*, the irrationality of the immigrant woman worker could be controlled by Progressive expertise; professionals would fix her. Nothing was said on the quotidian miseries of capitalism, only the need to mitigate large-scale, embarrassing disasters. The 'ignorance as to how to escape, impulsive efforts to get out' by factory girls caused many of the factory 'panics,' engineer Porter argued (Porter 1911a.) McKeon also related a story of excitable Italian men who had to be physically restrained by firemen to prevent mass panic (McKeon, 1910.) There was almost something intrinsic to such workers' irrationality in these accounts. When immigrant workers' 'impulse' to flight was blocked in poorly designed factories, Porter wrote, they 'become panic-stricken.' He also argued the women who jumped out of windows were the 'surplus people above the capacity of the stairways.' Southeast European immigrants were often portrayed by restrictionists circa 1910 as 'swarming' and 'invading' the country, a menace in need of strict control. Here casualties at Newark were rendered 'surplus people,' again, disposable (Porter, 1911a; 1911b; McKeon, 1910, 1911.)

Porter continued in this vein. 'The daily press recently told how fifty girls became hysterical and several fainted in a shirt factory,' he wrote, 'where a newspaper blazed up from a spark from an electric motor, and many women were trodden down in a senseless panic …' Immigrant workers, as with those fleeing Newark's burning tenements, were invariably 'hysterical,' 'senseless.' Even those who escaped a factory fire were described by Porter as 'nervously shocked.' Female workers had, Porter argued, a 'tendency to faint or stampede,' which fortunately a rationally designed fire drill could correct. He deplored the behavior of workers during another fire, one where he claimed workers 'were in no danger whatever,' but where directionless employees 'became panic stricken. Several were seriously injured and considerable property was destroyed before they could be controlled.' Control of the irrational, unruly worker before all else seems to have been Porter's goal. Indeed, he contrasts this lamentable destruction of 'considerable property' (and some worker injury, but this by the by) with another factory, where an expert's fire drills had been introduced and all employees evacuated the building within five minutes. 'This was the net result of system and order,' Porter proclaimed (Porter 1911a, 1911b.)

Such articles discussed 'the way some of the problems presented by factory fires can be met' although the solutions offered were only tinkering around the burnt edges of capitalism. Maybe end sweat shops? Of course not! Better ladders, rational fire drills for 'hysterical' Italian and Jewish girls! The plans were a 'rationalization' of the 'ordered' sweat shop, not its abolition.

It is evident McKeon and Porter were appalled by sweatshop hecatombs and were anxious to improve conditions. It is just their ethnic, gender and class assumptions blocked any large critique of capitalism. So, too, they relied on moral suasion to convince the factory owner it was 'clearly in his interest to effect a prompt escape from the building.' Porter urged employers to consider their 'moral responsibility' to lessen fire hazards in the sweat shops, something that as a bonus would prove a 'paying investment for the employer.' Further than that he could not go (Porter 1911a.)

Hitting the moral center of a factory owner may be aiming for a very tiny target. What if it's only Jewish and Italian immigrants who die? Or African migrants in a substandard Bronx apartment building in 2022? Or Bangladeshi sneaker makers in 2013? Can a factory owner or realtor be convinced it's worth his time or expense to protect them? In 1910 the outlook was grim. Especially when so many replacement parts, rational or not, were arriving daily at Ellis Island, coming to the factory gate on the very next boat. And while a fire drill at High Street would have been nice, an industrial engineer somehow in 1910 could never quite design a living wage. In 2013 in Bangladesh he still can't manage the task.

The profit mongers try to control 'irrational' us, then dispose of us, again and again. Recovering our immigrant 'disappeared,' those who didn't make it, may suggest the new proletariat and valorized immigrant ancestors have more in common than we care to acknowledge.

All these stories of gritty Newark have brought me no closer to finding my aunt. But if Maria didn't perish at Anchor or Aetna, there were other ways she could have disappeared, dropped through the cracks in the triumphalist immigrant saga. In 1915, not that far from Newark, a young Ruthenian immigrant, John Sterančak, decided along with hundreds of other employees of the Rockefeller oil-refining works in Bayonne that he had had enough. They went on strike for higher pay and safer working conditions, not least protective gear and shorter spells at their dangerous tasks. Ironically, the first Slavs had arrived in 1883 in Bayonne as strikebreakers, but by 1915 they realized what a lousy deal they'd been handed in industrial America, and sought power in a union. Since temperatures soared above 150 degrees in the oil stills Slavic workers cleaned, temperatures so high they could only stay in the stills for three or four minutes at a time, and since they only received $2.50 a day for such hazardous work, who could blame them? (Dorsey, 1976; Bukowczyk, 1984; Burke, 1941.)

Apparently, Rockefeller could. As was typical, his company deployed armed private 'detectives' to break the strike. Historian John Bukowczyk writes that 'for … four days, Bergoff's private army of so-called 'nobles' terrorized strikers by sniping at pickets and launching armed sorties into the assembled crowds. No fewer than five strikers died and several more sustained gunshot wounds before the corporate reign of terror at the hands of Bergoff's 'armed thugs' finally subsided' (Bukowczyk, 1984, 67.) Among them was the 19-year-old Ruthenian refinery worker John

Sterančak, whose confident, cocky photo was reproduced in *Amerikansky russky viestnik*. The Ruthenian paper had already decried the company thugs for shooting into a pro-strike crowd leaving a meeting at Bayonne's 'Greek Catholic Hungarian-Ruthenian church,' which 'brutal attack infuriated the people so much that, whether one was a striker or not, they all abused the thieving 'Pinkertons' [sic].' Standard Oil was condemned for recruiting these 'detectives' 'from among the lowest and most morally degenerate people' (*Amerikansky russky viestnik*, 1915a.)

All the forces of 'respectable' society were deployed against the strikers. The *Bayonne Evening Times* masthead proclaimed Bayonne 'the peninsula of industry,' so it's no surprise its 'advice to honest workingmen' was obey Rockefeller, stop striking, don't listen to outside agitators and work harder. Eighty-four hours a week cleaning oil stills at 150 degrees evidently wasn't hard enough work. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Carlo Tresca, and other Industrial Workers of the World organizers were prevented from speaking even though they had rented Mydosh's Hall for a meeting. Mydosh and his son were beaten by the 'nobles' for good measure. The *Bayonne Evening Times* flatly declared, 'No Meeting Will be Allowed Anywhere.' Hired thugs made sure of that (Flynn, 1915.)

A different take on the strike appeared in the Ruthenian-language *Amerikansky russky viestnik*. It was the murder of their countryman Sterančak that really infuriated editors. 'This paper is not in a position to describe the grief and sorrow of the father and mother of the young and already dead John,' the paper said, 'because everyone knows how they would have felt if their 19-year-old son had left this world with such an unexpected death.' But the paper went beyond personal condolences and condemned 'such a continuation of greedy capitalism':

> A man who works hard and makes millions for the capitalists, sees that he is wronged in his hard work; he sees that he is treated like a slave. He asks for a raise because he knows he deserves it, and he asks not to be enslaved by a 'foreman' or some other 'boss.' When a hard-working person sees that he cannot get by peacefully, he goes on strike and wants to claim his rights. And then what will he get? He gets a bullet to his raised head …
>
> 'That's how the well-known multi-millionaire Rockefellers carry on and do business,' the paper added, condemning their recent bloody suppression of the coal strike at Ludlow, Colorado. Of the gangster tactics of corporate strikebreaking, the paper declared, 'That should stop once and for all' (*Amerikansky russky viestnik*, 1915a, 1915b.)

But of course it didn't. In the Passaic textile strike of 1926-27, my paternal grandparents and their parents (the Slovak side) faced down tanks and teargas deployed to make sure America could be made safe for wage cuts and the speedup (Zumoff, 2021.)[9] Memorial Day Massacre. River Rouge. Harlan County. How many teen-aged uncles-to-be were cut down in such moments of corporate terror? And in Bangladesh, the families of the Rana Plaza victims – will they soon only vaguely remember a sister or aunt who burned to death so Wal-Mart could peddle cheaper goods? Can remembering, linking our industrial tragedies, our sweatshop disasters to *their* sweatshop disasters, begin to build empathy, and more important, solidarity? Is this a naïve hope?

[9] The speedup was the process by which textile manufacturers 'sped up' mechanized looms or required workers simultaneously to tend greater numbers of looms at the same time.

In Hudson County, does anyone remember John Sterančak, shot in the back, or are there descendants of the surviving Sterančak clan who swear there never was a brother John, just like my aunt Maria was never recalled? Did the Rockefellers steal more than a safe, decently paid job from the Ruthenians; was the memory of an uncle taken from them, too? At least there is a photo of John, as cheerful as those garment girls like Maria Rizzolo mourned for a few days in the *Newark Evening Star*. For those who can read Ruthenian, in *Amerikansky russky viestnik* here's proof for any Sterančak wondering, yes, Uncle John briefly was real. Shot down by the thugs in a 'strašna bitka' ('horrible battle'), but a question mark no more.

There were other ways an uncle or aunt could vanish in industrial America. As Irving Howe and Elizabeth Ewen have noted, immigrant newspapers often featured a 'gallery of missing husbands' (Howe, 1976; Ewen, 1985.) So, too, did *Amerikansky russky viestnik*. In December 1916 Katharina Leško implored anyone who had news of her husband, Vasiľ, to contact her. He had left Dobromir, Galicia, for Passaic in 1914, and since then she had had no word from him and didn't even know if he was alive. Recall even one of the Newark fire victims, Theresa Tartaglia, had been abandoned by her husband. In the same issue of the *Newark Evening Star* as accounts of the fatal fire, a story ran of Alice Carrigan, who was struggling to provide for her children after her husband abandoned his family. Alice knew he was still in the city as she subsequently saw him on a trolley, but he had run away before she could speak to him (*Amerikansky russky viestnik*, 1916; *Newark Evening Star*, 1910m.)

As Kim Moody has documented, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries working-class men were extraordinarily itinerant, making it difficult to establish sustainable unions in hard-rock mining, lumbering, and other professions (Moody, 2019.) Itinerancy was a recognized fact of working-class life, with the Newark city directory listing men such as my grandfather, Charlie Albanese, as 'in USA – inquire at 666 N. Seventh Street,' his stepmother's address. (After his father's death, Charlie roamed the country, as did his brother Ben, who rode the rails throughout much of the 1920s before resurfacing in a Los Angeles flophouse. Another brother stayed in New Jersey and did quite well, opening a bakery and food-service company, which is why he was remembered as 'Tony Cakes.') In South Philadelphia, too, itinerant immigrants retained contact with kin who kept boarding houses to which they periodically returned when work was slack in distant mines or steel mills (Zecker, 2010, 25, 74.)

Roaming and disappearance was less frequent for women, but not unheard of. On my Slovak side, 'Bad Gizella,' who was recalled as 'boy crazy,' left home in the 'Roaring Twenties,' never to be heard of again. Several decades earlier, the middle-class press was full of sensational accounts of 'white slavery' in the Jewish, Italian, and other immigrant communities (Turner, 1909; Keire, 2001.) Perhaps 'Bad Gizella' was a 'fallen woman' of a different kind than the leaping girls at Wolf and Triangle Shirtwaist.

Of course, gender oppression guaranteed women all too readily were tagged as 'fallen' if they resisted patriarchal control, as Mary Odem and Jessica Pliley note (Odem, 1995; Pliley, 2014.) Another Albanese sibling, Great Aunt Lucia (Lou) in the '20s fled an abusive husband with her daughters. The husband hired detectives (offering their services in between shooting striking Slavs, no doubt), who tracked Aunt Lou to California, where she was living with a man who would soon become her second husband. Bay Area newspapers, though, published lurid accounts of the

beautiful woman and older man who might be facing Mann Act charges for crossing state lines for immoral purposes. Fortunately, the California DA declined to prosecute, and Aunt Lou escaped her violent first husband. Other immigrant women were often not so lucky (*San Francisco Examiner*, 1929; *Oakland Tribune*, 1929.)

There were many reasons, then, that working-class immigrants could have gone missing – certainly deliberate family abandonment among them, but also industrial accident or fleeing a violent marriage. These missing husbands, sisters and aunts do not fit neatly in the grand immigrant narrative of upward mobility and progress.

And what happened to Maria Albanese? I'd like to hope there was a happy story for her, something less horrific that explains her absence in memory and photos. Perhaps she got married, moved to Chicago, rooted for the Cubs, and had a long and happy life. (Although being a Cubs fan and having a happy life don't seem to go together, and for my Brooklyn Dodgers-loving grandpa this might have been the family scandal that dared not speak its name.) Maybe that's why no one remembers her. I'd like to think she was one of the lucky ones who beat the odds in industrial Newark.

I'd still really like to find Maria Albanese. I wish I'd known this back then so I could have talked about it with Charlie Albanese, who saw that fat man catching those terrified burning girls, and maybe prayed that his sister was safe. I wish I could have asked him about it, and heard about Newark's disposable people. I think he would have understood.

Author Bio

Robert Zecker is a professor of history at Saint Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada, where he teaches courses in race, immigration, social movements and U.S. history. His research includes immigration, radicalism and the popular culture of immigrants on the left. He is the author of many articles in journals such as the *Journal of American Ethnic History*. He is the author of four books, most recently *'A Road to Peace and Freedom': The International Workers Order and the Struggle for Economic Justice and Civil Rights, 1930-1954* (Temple University Press) and has a chapter, 'Spotlight on Jim Crow': Radical Immigrant Papers Cover Race and Civil Rights,' in *Immigration and Exile: The Foreign-Language Press in the U.K. and U.S.*, forthcoming from Bloomsbury. Before entering the academic racket, Bob was an ink-stained wretch foisting journalism on an unsuspecting public in his native New Jersey.

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Invisible Laborers: A storied love letter to other working-class mothers in academia

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Abstract

This paper began from my own desire to see the words of other working-class mothers in academia, to find the proof of our existence. I use autoethnography, or scholarly personal narrative, to nest my own stories of being a working-class mother within earlier scholars' (Leeb, 2004) observations of the particular ways classism targets working-class women in academia. I also draw from Tiffe's (2014) observations of the strengths of working-class people, in our abilities to disrupt the neoliberal university's relationships to time, care, and bodies, and consider how working-class mothers in academia enact these disruptions through our presence.

Keywords

Working-class academic, social class, autoethnography, mothering, feminist

Dear readers,

In the summer of 2022, seven months after giving birth to my youngest child, I went searching for the evidence of our collective existence, for the words and stories of other working-class mothers in academia. My youngest is the ninth child I have mothered[1], but the first to come from my body. Despite the fact that I have been mothering – through kinship care, fostering, and adoption -- for more than two decades, becoming a mother by birth has led many people to see me as a 'new mother.' From all outside appearances, bringing her into the world as a 44-year-old assistant professor was one of the most middle-class things I have done. But in becoming a mother again, in a moment when both childcare (Haspel, 2022) and infant formula (Rosenberg, 2022) are in short supply in the United States, I've experienced a visceral reminder of our shared vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are inextricably linked to my class background. That is, in becoming a mother again, I am reminded that I am a working-class person in a middle-class institution that – at best – embraces the fiction that I can or should want to shed my working-class background. And that is only at its very best.

Mother has always been part of my identity in academia: as a non-traditional student and Pell-grant recipient mothering teens, as a grad student who attempted to feed her family with food

[1] Here I am echoing Garbes' (2022) construction of mothering as actions of care for others that are life-affirming and sustaining, and her rejection of the limiting heteropatriarchal ideal of mothering as a private investment in one's biological and legal children.
While mothering is deeply gendered, people of all genders can mother.

stamps, and as a contingent instructor who became a grandmother at 36. Now, from the relatively privileged perspective of a tenure-track position, mothering again elevates my awareness of my race, gender, and class – but particularly my class. I am aware of some of the ways whiteness affords me a buffer for the demanding labor of pregnancy and mothering that my BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) colleagues do not receive. I'm also aware of the increasing salience of my gender presentation, as my swelling belly drew comments in the hallways and colleagues coo over my youngest child. I can share some experiences of mothering with colleagues: we have developed a shorthand and sense of solidarity in the importance of mothering and the difficulty of balancing it with academic work. But it is the renewed resonance of my identity as a working-class mother that threatens to unmoor me: who will I speak to as a working-class mother in academia? My presence has already felt tenuous as a working-class academic. My degrees have afforded me some of the privileges of a middle-class life. Mothering again is a powerful reminder, though, that even with these degrees I am conditionally accepted in a space that was not created for me or people like me. Leeb (2004) explained:

> It is precisely the bodies of women who are the first generation to enter higher education who are of specific interest, for they pose a threat to academic/middle-class subjectivity. They are the ones who have yet to be disciplined into conforming to what is expected from an academic/middle-class subject (pp. 18-19).

Mothering again makes my body resist discipline, become unruly. Mothering reveals – for me and for others – deeply ingrained beliefs, values, and dispositions that I received in the wordless 'psychological flow from mother to child' (S. Linkon, personal communication, June 2021). Mothering again exposes me. It touches all my insecurities and underscores fears of failure, of falling from the place I fought so hard to reach.

And yet, while the evidence of our collective existence is slim and the social supports for *all* mothers in academia are lacking (Gonçalves, 2019), I believe working-class mothers have something to offer academia. Tiffe (2014) argued that working-class academics have the potential to disrupt the neoliberal university's relationships to time, care, and bodies. Mothering exists at the nexus of these three things. If we are to have a *true* reimagining of universities that persist in othering and marginalizing working-class academics (Lee, 2017) and students (Ferguson & Lareau, 2021; Langhout et al., 2009; Lehmann, 2014), the stories of working-class mothers in academia are essential.

Becoming invisible: The erasure of working-class labor and mothering in academia

Like many working-class academics, I have sought community in the collected stories of other working-class academics[2] (Dews & Law, 1995; Hurst & Nenga, 2016; Ryan & Sackrey, 1996; Tomarcyzk & Fay, 1993; Van Galen & Sablan, 2021). Their stories are a salve I apply to heal wounds that are so numerous I fear I will spend the rest of my life learning to articulate the pain. Warnock (2016) summarized themes across several of these works: alienation, classist microaggressions, impostor syndrome, 'passing' as middle-class, and for those of us who entered

[2] I'm aware that some of these collections focus on first-generation status rather than working-class identification among the authors. Because our discourse around social class is so muddled in the United States, I've included these collections too, given the significant overlap between working-class and first-generation students.

academia more recently, the burden of student debt and increasing precarity of contingent labor. She also captured the emotional weight of these writings: many of us read them through tears.

When I turn to these volumes, the mentions of mothering are limited (Bond, 2021; Díaz Martín & García, 2021), and what I do find often speaks to the erasure common among all working-class academics. Laura Harris (2002) wrote about the solidarity of welfare mothers in her graduate program, and the deliberate obfuscation of this part of her identity when she transitioned from being a student to an academic:

> My identity as a welfare queen is consistently rendered illegible in the academy…While the academy identifies me as a lesbian woman of color and is often eager to do so, it remains a troubled identifying coupled with my lived experience as a welfare recipient that frequently impacts my subjectivity in the academy's halls (p. 373)

Harris's (2002) race and gender are central to her identity as a welfare queen. These elements of her identity are *seen*, along with her sexual orientation, and even welcomed. But the erasure of her identity as a welfare queen is also a denial of her classed experiences as a welfare recipient. For those of us who are working-class, there is a stronger connection, and often lived experiences that betray the intimate associations between mothering, working-class life, and poverty. Another working-class scholar shared her experiences of sitting with her sister, who was becoming a mother, 'locked in the molded plastic chairs of Adult and Family Services' (Garrison, 2002, p. 471). Importantly, Garrison (2002) noted the distance between her experiences as a graduate student and the waiting room of the local welfare office she had come to know as 'a room mothers sit in' (p. 471).

I am grateful for these traces, for scraps of evidence that it is possible to mother and be working-class in academia. But I want more. Our erasure is a violence. In its place are the 'lying myths and easy moralities,' (Allison, 2001, p. 86) that perpetuate incomplete narratives about *all* working-class academics: the tales of social mobility, exceptionalism, of grit and resilience. The silence flattens us; it makes those of us who are here wonder if we are alone. In these pages I will write with the words of other working-class academics, including some who speak of mothering. And to the silence, I will add my stories.

Telling (y)our stories: Working-class mothering and a concept of the future

'[I] tell these stories because [I] believe they do something in the world to create a little knowledge, a little humanity, a little room to live and move in and around the constraints and heartbreaks of culture and categories, identities, and ideologies' (Adams & Jones, 2011, p. 109)

Although scholarly personal narratives are the signature method of working-class studies, the stories we tell about working-class people are often too narrow (S. Linkon, personal communication, June 2021). Working-class people are routinely constructed within the archetypes that spring from an impoverished imagination of what constitutes working-class: white people, almost always men, impacted by de-industrialization. This is particularly true in the United States, in which classism is one of the 'distortions of difference' (Lorde, 1980/2007, p. 115) which is least understood. Defining class becomes a struggle, even for those of us who learn class lessons that

linger in our bodies: the fear of hunger that sets my mind on edge several times a day, the resistance to calling in sick that arises when I wake with a raging fever, or the anxiety that grips me when my car needs an expensive repair. My students also struggle to articulate this aspect of their identities, and to them I offer hooks' (2000) use of Rita Mae Brown's words:

> Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions about life. Your experience (determined by your class) validates those assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act (pp. 3-4).

When I share these words with my students, I often invite them to think back to their experiences in high school and their dreams for their lives. Our concepts of a future are often reflected in our plans, our dreams, about life after high school.

June 1995

On a warm spring evening I joined my high school classmates one last time, walking across our football field while the younger members of the school band played 'Pomp and Circumstance' on an endless loop, guiding us to our chairs. There were ninety of us in my graduating class, and most of us had known each other from kindergarten. In eighth grade, two of my classmates became pregnant, and in each year that followed, a few more became mothers. By the time we reached graduation, nine of us were already mothers, or were pregnant and had decided to mother their children.

Graduation was the culmination of several years spent nurturing dreams of college amidst the realities of a working-class teenaged life. After taking the SATs, my mailbox filled with glossy brochures from colleges and universities across the country. I collected them in a fat stack that I tucked inside a drawer in my desk. Occasionally I would fan them out and dream about sitting in lecture halls, reading in beautiful, old libraries, or studying at a cramped desk in my dorm room. I crossed the stage at my graduation as one of the 'top ten' students, those with the highest grade point averages (GPA). I was proud to be among these classmates – all of us women – who had finally made it acceptable to be smart and female. But I was too embarrassed to reveal that I was the only one without college plans, a detail that was announced with our names, scholarships awarded, and GPAs. When the principal read my name, GPA, and listed the scholarships I'd received, and told the crowd I was planning to go to the local community college, I blushed with shame at my lie. I had not given up hope, though, that I would get there someday.

As a young person, I might have been challenged to explain my basic assumptions about life or my concept of a future. But on that soft June evening, I walked away from my education with a lesson our teachers probably never intended: to be gendered as feminine in my community was almost synonymous with motherhood. Those of us like me who did not become birth mothers by our early 20s worked in occupations approximating motherhood: as child care workers, early childhood educators, personal care workers, and nannies. College was a possibility I never let go of, but I always knew it was *just* a possibility. Motherhood, on the other hand, was something I knew to be inescapable. In a society where mothering and the work it entails are dismissed and

devalued, and particularly for working-class mothers, I learned quickly that my work and my worth were always in question.

As a result, like many working-class people, I have no access to intergenerational wealth. Stories are my cultural inheritance. Even my somewhat remarkable social mobility is not enough to guarantee I will be able to pass on much of material value to my children. My chances at amassing wealth grow slimmer with every year I pay student loans, watching the balances remain stable or – more often -- grow with compounding interest. While I hope to leave my children something of monetary value that will buffer them against the cruel indifference capitalism directs towards working-class people, stories are the only thing I can promise. I offer my words here for other working-class mothers in academia: proof of our existence, historical traces that will encourage those who follow in our footsteps. Stories can heal, can help us articulate who we are in the midst of erasure, and perhaps most importantly, provide evidence that we are not alone.

Disrupting time: A working-class mother enters academia

> An educational system constructs a timeline for 'scholastic age,' namely, the age a student is expected to be at a certain stage in an educational trajectory. Working-class students are the most likely to deviate from the scholastic age (Arner, 2014, para. 18)

As Arner (2014) goes on to explain, the timeline for scholastic age reflects a middle-class educational trajectory, with immediate enrollment in a four-year university following high school graduation and the completion of a degree without significant gaps[3] or pauses. Younger graduate students, and consequently younger applicants for academic positions, are associated with precocity, and greater intellectual potential. Working-class mothers in the United States, by virtue of living in a society with little to no social supports for mothering (i.e., paid parental leave, childcare assistance, universal health care, and/or child allowances), often enter university as non-traditional, older students. Unfortunately, older students are not always viewed with the same promise, the same assumption of potential, as students who have completed education at the 'right' pace.

September 2008

My first academic job is a work-study position my professor has fashioned into a research assistantship. Every Thursday I sit in his office, and while the sun slants low through the windows, we discuss my work for the week: reading articles, crafting literature reviews, and editing a manuscript. It is work that doesn't feel like work, and after years spent in a busy restaurant and perpetually underfunded early childhood classrooms, I am amazed one can have work like this. I start to grow comfortable in the space, to love the cool, quiet hallways, the small kitchen and fully stocked work room, the soft chair where I sit each week. One week my task is – quite unbelievably – to write about a moment of epiphany (Denzin, 1989). After a year at university, I've finally begun to believe what my professors have told me: a graduate degree is a possibility for me, a 30-year-old mother of teenagers. Like every assignment, I agonize over each word, typing it on an old

[3] An exception to this rule could be gap years. But these – at least in my experience – also seem to be solely the province of middle-class students and families.

desktop computer tucked in the corner closet of our living room, balancing the keyboard on my lap.

When I meet with my professor to discuss my writing, his reaction surprises me. The usual look of approval is replaced by bewilderment. I have written about my experiences mothering (fostering, adopting, and providing kinship[4] care to eight young people in my family) and how these experiences have led me to research questions about what happens after foster care, about aging out. As we talk, I realize it's not the style of my writing that has unsettled my professor, but the details of the story.

> *'So, you allowed this young person to stay in your home?' he asks.*
> *'Yes. I couldn't take him to the men's shelter. He was only 19.'*
> *'And he was a friend of your cousin? I'm just surprised…'*

When he shifts his glasses down on the bridge of his nose, my professor bears the slightest resemblance to my uncle, who spends his days repairing buses for public transit. I create these connections to my family almost subconsciously, as points of familiarity that might help me remain in a place that is at once both strange and inviting. Or perhaps I am the strange one, as I often find myself wondering why aspects of my life are so unexpected. I offer this:

> *'Yes, he was my cousin's best friend. And on paper, he is just my cousin. But you have to understand, my cousin spent a lot of time with my family while he was growing up…' I falter for a moment and consider the phrase that is in my heart: 'My cousin was the first person to call me mom.' But I worry it's too unfamiliar, too much to explain. Instead, I say, 'After his younger sister died, we helped my aunt care for him. So, when he said his friend needed help, I trusted him.'*

He opens his eyes wider, in the look that I've come to recognize as humility, a willingness to always admit the unknown, a quality which made me trust his teaching. 'I didn't know any students here had these types of experiences.'

When I look back on this exchange, I know it was a compliment: my lived experiences with young people in foster care, and young people who had experienced addiction and the criminal legal system were an asset to our research. Even on a commuter campus where the average student age was 30, my experiences as a working-class mother marked me as different, unexpected.

When I enrolled in university as a mother of teens, and even more so when I pursued a graduate degree and became an academic, my story was easily co-opted into the myth of the exceptional student rising above her circumstance. I was evidence of the meritocratic possibilities of higher education. The fact that I was mothering at such a 'young' age and had done so much mothering already was treated as an anomaly, rather than the reflection of cultural beliefs that prize intimate partnerships and mothering alongside (rather than after) educational and career goals. I initially leaned into the narrative of exceptionality; indeed, I trusted it as the most realistic interpretation of my circumstances. Upon reflection, I realize how this surprise at my abilities and my experiences

[4] This is a term I only learned in college. Prior to this, it was just considered caring for the young people in my family whose parents could not care for them, usually due to disability, poverty, and early death.

betrays the promise that academics may overlook in non-traditional students, particularly working-class mothers.

Now, from the semi-comfortable perspective of a tenure track position, I continue to offer these glimpses of mothering and my working-class identity as an attempt to prevent our erasure. I am here, and through holding tightly to my ancestors' patterns for mothering rather than middle-class benchmarks, I carry them into my work as an academic. For several years in the college classroom, I've offered a brief introduction on the first day of classes. I have a well-rehearsed blurb revealing some things about my identity as a working-class mother: 'I've been a kinship, foster, and adoptive parent to eight young people between the ages of 25 and 34.' This changed in November of 2020.

November 2020:

On Veteran's Day in 2020 my phone rings early in the morning. When I pick up, I'm surprised to hear my aunt's voice but her words settle into me as if I knew they were coming. There is no hesitation: she has just come from identifying my cousin's body. My brain hovers over our conversation and the rest of the details: his recent break up, how long his body lay there before anyone called for help, and the possibility of burying him in the spring, maybe on his sister's birthday, and maybe beside her grave.

Twenty years earlier, following his younger sister's death, my cousin's mother began sending him to stay with us: extended summer visits or to finish a particularly difficult term in school. My cousin was nine years younger than me, and he really was the first person who ever called me 'mom.'

My experiences as a mother appear non-traditional among largely middle-class academics. I have disrupted time through my 'early' entry into mothering roles. But my children's lives – and deaths – are also disruptive. In the first autumn of the COVID-19 pandemic, my cousin died the same way many others did, in the massive surge in lives lost to the opioid crisis (Cartus et al., 2022). As a working-class mother in academia, I have learned that too often our loved ones may come to embody, to give a face to the statistics of academics. To mother as a working-class person is to know that it is not just my timeline and concept of the future that will differ from my colleagues' sense of the future. It is also my children's futures that will likely differ dramatically. I wonder about the future my cousin imagined in his final moments, and his possible loneliness breaks my heart. Now every time I introduce myself to a new group of students, my oldest will always be 34.

Disrupted care: Working-class mothers and communal care

Working-class mothers in academia are likely to have come to motherhood earlier than our middle-class peers, but this timing is about more than a simple rejection of the middle-class timeline for mothering. It also reflects collective cultural values that drive many working-class people to engage in caretaking for our families and communities because, as Raechel Tiffe (2014) pointed out, we know that *no one else will* (emphasis in original, para. 24). I happened into motherhood after high school the same way my middle-class peers happened into college, by listening to the messages of those around me and responding to the needs in front of me.

February 2001

For the first few years I was providing kinship care, I was used to our teenaged family members calling me by my first name. I did the work of a mother, but could not take that title out of respect for the parents in our family who weren't able to do this work. My cousin was the first person to call me mother, and it began as a joke: he enjoyed the confused looks we got from people in the grocery store or the middle-aged women who staffed the front office at his high school.

'Mom' was a way he would tease me, but it was also a title I earned. [5] *I woke early in the dark mornings to cook breakfast while he packed his lunch. I drove him to the nursing home to visit his father, who had early-onset dementia. I sat beside him when he broke down crying on his sister's birthday, and listened to his stories: her favorite song, the Make-a-Wish trip to Disney World, and her final days, the hospital room quiet except for the hum of the ventilator and the nurses who tended her body as she died. In their last photo together, he lays beside her in her hospital bed, arms encircling her, his eyes staring directly into the camera. Beneath the beautiful dark fringe of lashes, her eyes had already taken on the distant, glassy look of her father, her aunt, and her grandfather, who all eventually succumbed to the same disease.*

Caring for my cousin while his mother began grieving the death of his younger sister seemed to me to be the most natural thing in the world. Prior to becoming an academic, my entire adult life was spent caring for others in some form, both paid and unpaid. I babysat and waitressed as a teen and seamlessly moved into childcare, early childhood education, and personal care work before becoming a mother several times over. I sometimes wonder where I learned to give care, and find answers in my earliest memories: watching my mother join the elder women in her family in caring for her grandmother. They cooked meals and fed her, steadied her hands while she worked on a puzzle, and witnessed the slow progression of Alzheimer's as she was increasingly confined to her bed. My memories of these times are pleasant. I learned that to grow up was to care and give care to others.

In becoming a mother again, I've been confronted with the care*less*ness directed not only towards my children but towards all children in our culture. While my lived experiences and scholarship had taught me about the crisis in caregiving in the United States, living through it with an infant during a pandemic has only amplified the barriers to working-class mothers securing the child care necessary to pursue an academic career. Like Olsen (1956), the images of my youngest child's short stint in her first child care are 'curdled into my memory' (p. 2)

March 2022

When we step into the infant classroom, we are greeted by the cries of two of the three infants sitting on the classroom rug, one with mucus stretching from his nose to his chin. The classroom teacher is doing her best, trying to orient us amidst the cries. The director who pops in briefly ignores the upstretched arms of the crying boys. During my daughter's three hours of 'trying out' care, I move as quickly as possible to get errands done, my phone buzzing with notifications. 'C.

[5] When you mother as a foster parent or adoptive parent or kinship caregiver, it's important to understand that you may need to earn the title of 'mother.' It may take years or may never happen. This is part of what makes this labor invisible.

began her nap at 10:20.' 'C. woke up at 10:40.' 'C. drank 2 oz. of her bottle.' 'C. is a happy girl!' At ten weeks old, my daughter is too young to join the sitting infants on the rug. In the accompanying photo she sits in the teacher's lap, her body arched and face twisted upwards in a grimace. When I pick her up, the director informs me that the center is going 'masks-optional' the next week, following the governor's recent announcement (VanderHart, 2022). After a weekend spent weighing the potential risks of a COVID infection and scrambling to come up with alternative care arrangements, I withdraw her on Monday.

I have thought back to this scenario again and again in the ensuing months. I wonder if I made a mistake, turning away a child care placement and plunging my family into months spent patching together childcare plans that fell through more often than they worked out. I remember my own years spent working in childcare, and the difficult work of soothing young children. When we withdrew our daughter, I told the director we were concerned about masking, and we were. But the truth was, I was not ready to surrender my child to the care of people who might behave carelessly with her.

Disruptive bodies: Working-class mothers in academia and embodied labor

> …according to Plato 'manifold and complex pleasures and desires and pains are generally found in children and women and servants, and in the freemen so-called who are of the lowest and more numerous class' …the production of the clear thinking male philosopher mind, far removed of the body, is based on the production of the female and the laboring class *as* the body, expressed in their 'manifold and complex pleasures and desires and pains' (Leeb, 2004, p. 41).

Leeb (2004) traced the academic tendency to link working-class people, and particularly women, with bodies and physical labor, and the subsequent devaluation of that labor, to the earliest Greek philosophers. The working-class mother troubles academia through her presence, by performing labor that is always already embodied. Like all mothering, the labor of working-class mothers in academia requires a giving of one's body (Garbes, 2022).

June 2022

After three and a half months back at work, I am attending my first academic conference since giving birth. My sister agrees to accompany me to provide child care while I present. She tries, but cannot get out of the extra shift she'd agreed to: the rural hospital where she works as a nurse is still overwhelmed with the fallout from COVID-19. We arrive at the conference hotel just before midnight. After puzzling over the travel crib I have never collapsed and reassembled, nursing, and settling my daughter back to bed, I lie quietly, willing sleep to come. I am startled awake sometime in the early hours of the morning, and, still half-asleep, check my daughter to ensure she is still breathing. Like my sister, she is sleeping peacefully. My body cannot seem to settle in a new place.

The next day I linger after my conference session for a conversation over coffee, encouraged by my sister, whose ease with my daughter is welcome respite. That afternoon my breasts fill with milk I cannot express, and the clogged ducts harden like knotted ropes. For the next two days my chest radiates with pain that extends out to my armpits, and holding my daughter is excruciating.

It's not surprising that the few working-class scholars who write of the activities of mothering mention breastfeeding (Bond, 2021; Díaz Martín & García, 2021), with Olsen (1956) daring to mention the physical discomfort of 'my breasts ach[ing] with swollenness' (p. 2). Traveling even a few hours from home with my daughter demanded a carefully executed plan to ensure not only that she would have a regular source of food but that my body would not betray me. I have grown to know this pain intimately in the first year of my youngest child's life. As hard as I try to enact the disembodied academic subject toiling away at the keyboard, the physical demands of feeding my youngest child make this impossible. I consider stopping breastfeeding many times, but the store shelves have been emptied or near-emptied of infant formula for months[6]. I can't stomach the thought of buying formula that someone else needs to feed their child if I can make food from my own body.

August 2022

Aside from her dark, abundant hair, my daughter's hands are the feature that people comment on most frequently. They remind me of little golden starfish, each long, delicate finger punctuated by a tiny dimple at its base. They are my hands, but they are not. These days, it seems my hands are aging faster than any other part of my body. In between the diapers and preparing bottles, the washing is wearing down skin I began to neglect as a 16-year-old waitress, plunging my hands into scalding-hot buckets of bleach water to sanitize the rags we'd use to wipe up after customers. My hands are perpetually thirsty, and recently they've begun to burn and itch from frequent washing.

These hands wiped noses and comforted embarrassed children in hushed tones when they wet their pants in the child care classroom. These hands steadied an elder with early-onset dementia, spoon-feeding, and brushing hair. When her dementia progressed, these hands helped with the most intimate tasks: shaving, cleaning up after using the bathroom, changing soiled clothing, and bathing.

It is difficult for me to untangle the relationship between care and embodied labor: working-class mothering has marked my body. My hands resemble the hands of my ancestors, something that brings with it physical pain and discomfort and also a sense of pride. These are hands marked by decades of caregiving for young and old bodies, for disabled and dying bodies. I study my daughter's hands as she learns to use them, as she studies them. My work as an academic might protect her hands from the effects of this labor, from the pains of caring for other's bodies. But I hope she will also know the desires and pleasures of the embodied labor of care work: of the brevity of our time here together on this planet, and our remarkable and inescapable interdependence.

Reclaiming body consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2002) and claiming our existence

> Academics…write about people like me, like us, as objects of study. Yet, they will never understand people like me, like us; neither would they fully accept my working-classness

[6] As I complete this manuscript in late October of 2022, there is still a shortage of infant formula in the United States.

> when I was in the role of academic. To do so would mean the object of study has become the subject, thus the status quo would be threatened…instead, what happened was either I was invisible, not seen, I didn't exist… (Tugwell, 2022, p. 44)

I began this letter as a testament to the presence of working-class mothers in academia, after searching and finding scant evidence of our existence. The very qualities that shape my mothering as a working-class person, my orientation to time and the embodied labor of caregiving, render me an ill fit for academic work (at least as it is currently imagined). I have spent many hours trying to disembody myself, to prize the efficient use of time, to offer my best imitation of the 'clear thinking male philosopher mind' (Leeb, 2004, p. 41). Mothering again reminds me why I so often fail in these attempts. In writing this letter, I am attempting a new response, a reclaiming of the embodied labor of caregiving, and the time that it takes. I am reminding myself of the existence of working-class mothering in academia, and especially, it's value. Our value, that is.

October 2022

On the days when I've grown numb at my desk, and my mind swirls with the fears of my inabilities, I remember Anzaldúa's (2002) words: 'To reclaim body consciousness tienes que moverte – go for walks, salir a conocer mundo, engage with the world' (p. 553).

After bundling my daughter in her coat and hat and snuggling her into a carrier strapped to my chest, I step onto the forested path in the park near my home. She cranes her neck upward and studies the trees, their green tops slowly thinning, revealing the clouds above. After a few minutes of walking, the rhythm of my steps lulls her to sleep. Under the trees my head begins to clear. I am surprised by the ways my cousin has emerged in the process of writing these words: his life and his death, and his recognition of my work as a mother. It's been nearly two years grieving the death of a young person that feels both unspeakable and unintelligible in middle-class academia. As I walk, I am reminded of the value of being one of the few working-class scholars in academia: for the students who need to see themselves, and for the research that needs the perspectives of working-class people, and particularly working-class mothers.

While they are difficult to find, I believe there are more – and perhaps many, many more – stories of working-class mothering in academia. Mine are by no means representative of the whole. But it's precisely because there are so many stories that are silenced – through fear, doubt, shame, and the simple fact of exhaustion -- that I have begun this telling. There are so many stories left to tell.

With love,

Miranda

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The Laughing Face of Youth

Ian C Smith

When the boss's containers packed with expensive Italian ceramic tiles leaves the docks he summons us by phone, a curt snarl. We need only be on call with our own transport, strong, and with the hides of illegal immigrants to unload at galley slave speed anointed by sweat. Undergraduates, we are scourged by this swine who performs as if gripped by a demon, his foul constant hectoring a weapon of war on workers.

Finding this job on the student noticeboard, we earn more for one irregular day's labour than most student work pays in a week. Between truckloads we three, the other two surfers, stretch languidly on neat grass beyond the boss's office, waiting, bonhomie overt, chests sun-glistened, laughter exaggerated. At the first sound of the next truck we spring to our feet without using our hands, ready like mercenaries.

The container truck driver watches, smoking while our Cerberus, bald, middle-aged, a bedlam of bellicosity in European-accented English, the only signs of intelligence his grasp of business, and the maddening insult, curses his toiling scum labouring at the double like miners edging ever deeper into a dark shaft rattling weighty boxes along a scenic railway of rollers towards the gloom of his cavernous warehouse.

Wise guys, our horizons endless, favourite books yet unread – think musk sticks rather than marijuana – unaware of time's stealth, our hectic futures, we come up with haemorrhoidal diagnoses for the boss, pain-in-the-arse quips accentuating his most repeated swearwords, vying for grinned accolades, inverting our strenuous workout into almost-pleasure to be remembered these years on, trees swimming in the wind of late afternoon, my body now in autumnal decay, that apoplectic man surely long dead from a stroke, this cry from the past, his presence, a surprise, my opinion of who called the shots back then all changed.

Author Bio

Ian C Smith writes in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria, and on Flinders Island. His work has appeared in *Antipodes*, *cordite*, *Eureka Street*, *Griffith Review*, *Journal of Working Class Studies*, *Meniscus*, *Shaping the Fractured Self* (UWAP), &, So Fi Zine. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra Press.

Liu, P. (2023) *The Specter of Materialism: Queer Theory and Marxism in the Age of the Beijing Consensus.* Duke University Press.

Review by Matt Brim

Petrus Liu's latest book, *The Specter of Materialism: Queer Theory and Marxism in the Age of the Beijing Consensus* (Duke UP, 2023), will be of interest to readers who wish to grapple with capitalism as a 'moving totality' (p. 26), an ever-changing process of accumulation and dispossession. For Liu, that analytic work requires a geographic reorientation away from the U.S. and the West. 'The Beijing Consensus' names capitalism's latest mutation and reflects China's position as the new center of global capitalism in the wake of the post-1989 social and economic upheavals and, more so, after the economic meltdown of 2008. Materialist critique, now and for the past three decades, is debilitated to the extent that it does not center East Asia and use Asian Marxism to retrain the critic's vision on the contradictions that China reveals–uniquely in this geopolitical moment–about 'capitalism as a relentless drive to subsume the labor process in the global South' (p. 24).

Liu is an Associate Professor of Chinese & Comparative Literature and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Boston University. He is also a queer theorist, and queer theory provides a key referent in *Specter's* title, for it is this academic field, in its dominant and most recognizable U.S.-based formation, that Liu argues is haunted by materialism. Materialism haunts queer theory not because the discipline clings to its early attachments to discourse and representation after the linguistic turn (think performativity) but because it has attempted its own materialist turn. Liu indicts queer theory for its broad, though not total, failure to pursue meaningful materialist critique, arguing that most of its critical efforts have been undercut by the field's U.S.-centric analysis of the interplay between capitalism and sexuality, sex, and gender. '[T]hough contemporary queer theory strives to be more materialist,' Liu argues, 'a focus on multiculturalist inclusivity keeps displacing the critique of capital and blocking materialist queer theory from forming a transformative politics' (p. 51). At his most critical, Liu conflates queer theory with liberal progressivism, multiculturalism, and a focus on 'surface inequalities' (p. 25) such as wealth disparities, and he claims it conducts 'its anticapitalist critique mostly through a moralizing language against privilege or discrimination' (p. 22). This misplaced materialism is possible because the American academy, including feminist studies and queer theory, have misinterpreted Marxism as a monocausal, 'purely' economic analytic.

Lest this appear to be a widening of the economics vs. culture rupture that supposedly resulted in 'post-Marxist' academic disciplines focused on identity politics, *Specter* even more strongly advocates for the critical correspondence and even interdependency of queer theory and Chinese Marxism. In a fascinating rendering of that relationship, Liu suggests that only together can Marxism and queer theory fulfill their independent promises of explaining materialism as the intertwined economic and social production of human subjectivity. The concept of 'queer Marxism…uncover[s] [queer theory's and Marxism's] common preoccupation with the material grounds of subject formation' (p. 58). Each theory understands the subject to be formed by a constitutive outside of 'unknowable others' (p. 63), including sexual/gender others and ever unseen laborers with whom the subject is in ethical and vulnerable relation (and here Liu relies most heavily on the evolution of Judith Butler's work). In a sentence that would perhaps be more recognizable to queer theorists than U.S.-trained Marxists, Liu writes that 'Marxism shares with queer theory the belief that human life is incessantly transformed by norms and forces outside the subject's horizons of cognition' (p. 76). More familiar to Marxists may be Liu's claim that capitalist accumulation in the new world order of the Beijing Consensus produces altered social relations, especially differential relations along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality. Capitalism demands that culture be restructured, or subsumed, to meet its bottomless need such that gender, for instance, is there not for sexuality (which was one of transgender studies' founding critiques) and not for itself (as voluntaristic and self-affirming identity would have it) but, instead, *for* capital.

With Marxism's and queer theory's critical dependency theorized in Part 1 of *Specter*, Liu turns in Part 2 to analyses of literary, cinematic, and cultural Chinese texts. Though these texts will be unfamiliar to most U.S. academics, that defamiliarization is crucial to Liu's method of reorienting queer theory not through the West, which becomes a site of parochial queer knowledge production, but through the Sinosphere and, in particular, through China. In his boldest claim, Liu refuses Western pluralism and instead uses the frame of the Beijing Consensus to argue that queer materialist analysis–and the transformations it alone can produce–can succeed only insofar as it is grounded in transnational queer Marxism. Queer Chinese Marxism, specifically, stands at the center of that geopolitical reorientation.

In chapter three, Liu examines writer Lu Xun (1881-1936) as a contested figure in the history of China's Communist Revolution. Rather than read Lu Xun's writing as exemplary of social realism (the struggle between peasants and landlords), Liu makes the case that Lu Xun's queer modernist aesthetic offers less of a representational strategy than a formal subjectless critique, 'a call to examine the historical forces that create our fragmented, reified, and gendered existence' (p. 99). Chapter four advances Liu's project of supplanting the study of 'America's Asia' (109) by using Asian Marxist cultural criticism to argue that, from East Asian perspectives, the Cold War never ended. The ongoingness of the Cold War grounds a queer materialist method that upends the Western post-Stonewall timeline of queer progress. Finally, in chapter five Liu traces competing Chinese definitions of gender in the Beijing Consensus, not only to reject them as translations of

liberal Western concepts but to demonstrate the complicated ways China mainstreams gender to give itself credibility to pursue economic development in the global South while simultaneously negotiating its post-socialist legacy.

Ultimately, the chief contribution of *The Specter of Materialism* is that it offers queer theory a model of materialist analysis that looks beyond a critique of the differences produced by capital to a critique of capitalism as an ever-evolving process that can be, potentially, transformed.

Reviewer Bio

Matt Brim is Professor of Queer Studies in the English department at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York. Brim is author of *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (2020) and coeditor of *Queer Precarities in and out of Higher Education: Challenging Institutional Structures* (2023) and *Queer Sharing in the Marketized University* (2023).

McCallum, Jamie K. (2022) *Essential: How the Pandemic Transformed the Long Fight for Worker Justice*. Basic Books.

Review by Michael Zweig

Jamie McCallum has written the first book-length overview addressing the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the U.S. labor force. Based on surveys of over 700 workers in jobs deemed 'essential' as the pandemic broke out and spread across the country, and in-depth interviews with 100 of them, McCallum takes the reader deep into the contradictory realities of those jobs. On the one hand, political leaders and the public hailed essential workers as heroes, for months hanging out of windows every evening at seven banging pots and pans. On the other hand, essential workers were subject to life-threatening, often life-ending, conditions of work with utter disregard for their safety and mental health.

In April 2020 almost one-third of U.S. workers were considered 'essential,' those whose work was necessary for public health and safety, including the orderly delivery of basic services. These jobs could not be done remotely: grocery and drugstore workers; those providing child care, building services, and trucking; letter carriers and warehouse workers, and tens of thousands in meat-processing. McCallum reports that even before the pandemic more than two-thirds of these workers were economically distressed, making less than $14.50 an hour. The majority were women and people of color.

McCallum makes several major points. First, the ill treatment of these workers arises from the capitalist system, which routinely disregards the health and safety of all workers. He provides a host of examples of pre-pandemic neo-liberal employment policies that cut staffing levels to bare minimums to boost corporate profits. When the pandemic hit, workers in health care, meat processing, and transportation could not be spared from work even when they got sick because there was no slack in the system. Trump's Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia actually sabotaged the protections OSHA might normally have provided in the crunch. He refused to issue any Covid-specific directives to protect workers in any industry, while, astonishingly, 'OSHA conducted 44 percent fewer workplace inspections from March to December 2020 compared with the same period in 2019, when there was no raging pandemic' (127).

While this vicious disregard for workers is appalling, McCallum reminds us that neo-liberal structural policies before the pandemic had already starved public health institutions, closed hundreds of hospitals in rural areas, limited medical and nursing home care in urban consolidations, and more generally gutted public services and government regulation of industry. McCallum wants us to understand that the crisis was not only a matter of the personal failings of President Trump and his officials. It was the result of the success in corporate restructuring of the economy over the past fifty years.

McCallum goes on to point out a different aspect of the story. As the pandemic intensified, essential workers rebelled in many creative ways, often uniting across occupations. The Labor Department records strikes only when they are 'major work stoppages' involving more than 1,000 workers lasting a day or more. Almost all Covid strikes were much smaller. A few -- like the walkout led by Chris Smalls at the JFK8 Amazon facility on Staten Island over basic safety demands as Covid began to spread -- caught national attention when workers there successfully organized a union in response to management's firing of Smalls and others who led the strike. Most strikes, however, remained under the radar of national consciousness. Nonetheless, thousands of labor actions by hundreds of thousands of nurses, teachers, and other essential workers evidenced a growing labor militancy. In addition, these struggles began to articulate links between economic, racial, and gender justice in the economy.

Sometimes, essential workers supported each other across occupational lines, but too often, McCallum documents, divisions arose among workers that thwarted class-wide unity. 'Differences among essential workers strained unity on the front lines. The classic sociological dividing lines of race, gender, and immigration status were in some sense less significant barriers than other pandemic-specific obstacles' (p.52). Political divisions emerged, focused on mask and later vaccine mandates. Low-wage workers who lost their jobs as sections of the economy shut down received extended unemployment compensation through the CARES Act, which became a source of resentment among those who continued to work.

McCallum documents another important finding that emerges from his study of the pandemic. Even though the designation of some workers as 'essential' seemed to separate them from the rest of the workforce, there is in fact no real separation between the wellbeing of 'essential' workers and everyone else's wellbeing. Essential workers regularly emphasized this point when they linked their strikes and public outcries over their health and safety to the broader public interest – medical workers and their patients; teachers and their students and students' families; food workers and the safety of those who eat.

McCallum focuses on what is sometimes called 'social reproduction work' to make the analytic point. This is labor that produces and sustains the very ability of all workers to work. When this work is undermined, the functioning of the entire economy is threatened. Yet, McCallum points out, despite its role as a pillar of the economy, these low-wage workers dedicated to social reproduction were sacrificed in the pandemic, another aspect of the dual treatment of essential workers as both heroes and disposable.

While much of the work of social reproduction is done outside capitalist markets in unpaid household labor, a point McCallum acknowledges, he zeroes in on the undermining of paid social reproduction. Failure to protect healthcare workers, teachers, and food production workers in the pandemic carried forward in extreme circumstances the steady erosion of these jobs already operating in the decades leading up to the pandemic. McCallum presents this as an example of how capitalism undermines its own long-term capacity to grow. For ordinary people, capitalism 'creates the conditions we need to live longer, healthier lives but keeps us from benefitting from those advances as widely and equitably as necessary' (p.175).

To deal effectively with the problems laid bare by the pandemic, McCallum calls forth the history of the New Deal. He reports that in the pandemic essential workers in unions fared much better than those in the same occupations without unions. He reminds us that unions only gained real power after serious labor unrest and economic disruption during the Great Depression led to the passage in 1935 of the National Labor Relations Act. McCallum calls for the reemergence of labor disruption now to reinvigorate a social movement that can seriously challenge the capitalist system.

McCallum acknowledges that Congress passed significant relief measures during the pandemic, including the CARES Act in 2020 and the American Rescue Plan in 2021. But the relief these laws provided was temporary. Extended unemployment payments and the rent moratorium have expired, as have increased childcare payments.

For McCallum, this shows responses to crisis 'in the most American way possible, without any lasting changes in our welfare state' (p.246). He asserts that only radical transformation of capitalism into a socialist society will meet the challenges revealed by the pandemic's effects on the working class.

One source of division in the working class that McCallum identifies is the influence of Donald Trump and his MAGA message, which has gained traction in response to the real suffering, disregard, and frustration that working people experience. McCallum makes a case that socialist organizing will be a necessary part of any movement that can address these experiences with a message and program of structural change that can improve working class life in the long term.

McCallum's writing in *Essential* is an exemplary combination of personal stories and affected voices with data and analysis. It ends in early 2022, well before the full effects of the pandemic have worked themselves out. But McCallum provides a valuable example of how continuing analysis of this period should unfold.

Reviewer Bio

Michael Zweig is *emeritus* professor of economics and founding director of the Center for Study of Working Class Life at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. His newest book, *Class, Race, and Gender: Challenging the Injuries and Divisions of Capitalism*, will be out from PM Press in October 2023.

Henry, A. (2022). *Seen, Heard, and Paid: The New Work Rules for the Marginalized*. Rodale

Review by Nathaniel Heggins Bryant

Years of experience working as a Black man in largely white (and, to be sure, white-collar) spaces inform longtime tech and productivity journalist and editor Alan Henry's first book. As the book's subtitle suggests, *Seen, Heard, and Paid* should be read as a series of specific and practical recommendations for marginalized workers who find themselves in similar situations. Henry directly addresses many facets of how white-collar work still operates on outdated racial, gendered, and class-based hierarchies that center and promote white men at the expense of their co-workers who are from underrepresented identity groups. His advice confronts many largely unspoken expectations about success on the job and he formalizes and codifies the kind of advice that has often circulated in worker whisper-networks about how to get ahead at work without becoming 'the office mom,' someone who does necessary but unglorified work to keep the office going, or without earning an unfair reputation for supposedly being selfish, or loud, or not a team player when a worker stands up for themselves. (Intersectional analyses of workplace dynamics have long documented how these reputations are nearly always gendered, classed, and racialized—often all three working in tandem at the same time.) Threading the needle of protecting one's self and achieving personal success and satisfaction without becoming further marginalized already presents a rather fraught set of challenges on its own for women, queer workers, and people of color. In addition, most marginalized workers have higher work expectations with lower ceilings of promotion, and also experience higher rates of burnout, as well as daily microaggressions, as his book adroitly demonstrates.

Henry directly addresses his book to the professionals in any given field who might be the only person of color, or woman, or queer person in the room. He does so in part because he has long detected a series of gaps when it comes to career and productivity advice. He makes his intent clear from the introduction, both about how his book should be read and what it attempts to do: 'To be productive, we need to be seen, heard, and paid fairly for our work. Affording these rights to everyone requires a new look at how work is done and a new set of real-world rules for people who are sidelined and lack privilege' (p. 4). What he does best is to collect and arrange advice, perspectives, and recommendations from other productivity writers (particularly women and writers of color) and interweaves them with his own experience, generating a book that serves as a comprehensive field guide to tackle these concerns.

Seen, Heard, and Paid offers a comprehensive list of things to consider and tasks to complete for readers so that they can protect themselves, maintain or even increase productivity on meaningful projects, highlight their accomplishments, and even extricate themselves from a job should it prove too toxic for workers. He has arranged his chapters as a set of numbered rules, with a parenthetical subtitle, each of which focuses on a different element: Rule 5, for instance, is 'Office Housework Will Never Get You Ahead (Getting the Glamour Work),' Rule 9 is 'Give Your In-Box Its Time, but No More (Being Mindful),' and the final chapter, Rule 15, is titled 'Your Job Is Not Your Friend (Knowing When to Go).' Many of the core activities in these chapters have multiple uses,

too. The most notable recommendation—to keep a work journal or personal log and paper trail of both achievements and concerns—comes up repeatedly over the course of the book. It allows a marginalized worker to point to the numerous projects and obligations a person has in real time if a manager or coworkers are skeptical of their contributions. This is handy if and when that worker needs to be able to refuse a new request. (Indeed, Henry devotes one chapter, Rule 6, 'Figure Out Your Unique Contribution,' to setting workplace boundaries, particularly in how to accept or decline work requests so that the already marginalized worker does not fall into the trap of taking on so-called office housework, important but often low-reward grunt work, the requests for which are often already racialized or gendered at the outset.) At the same time, if a worker feels aggrieved enough to lodge formal complaints or ask for a raise, this work journal serves as a paper trail and data to back these up or, if the workplace culture should prove too hostile and toxic, the journal can serve as a springboard to allow that worker to leave on her own terms and hopefully start a successful search for a new job.

To be entirely clear, this book is not necessarily about or even for traditional blue-collar or labor-intensive jobs, though Henry occasionally gestures beyond white-collar or intellectual labor. Nevertheless, I think his book does offer up quite a bit to those interested in Working-Class Studies, for self-identifying working-class academics (particularly those from marginalized communities) or formerly working-class people finding themselves in unfamiliar professional settings. The use of direct address personalizes his hard-won advice at the same time that it also validates what people inclined to read his book have probably already experienced: these behaviors are not new, they are not acceptable, and you are not alone in experiencing them. His book manages to, for the most part, make useful recommendations for succeeding at a workplace and protecting one's self while not succumbing to 'productivity porn,' Vivek Haldar's term for the constant fetishizing of productivity tips, tricks, hacks, and tools, the productivist (and usually expensive) cottage industry that winds up serving as a distraction for actually doing meaningful work. What I find to be his most compelling chapter on this topic is Rule 8, 'Don't Fall for Productivity Porn (Prioritizing Your Work),' in which he simultaneously acknowledges how his own career participates in this dynamic while also critiquing its limitations, particularly the notion that those most likely to engage in productivity porn are those who are already privileged enough to not need it.

However, the most powerful takeaway for any reader of Henry's book is a fundamental one: it is not the individual worker's responsibility to take on and fundamentally change a workplace that is racist, misogynistic, homo- or transphobic, ableist, and the like. This is a point bookending *Seen, Heard, and Paid,* and he makes it very explicit: '*It's not your job to fix a workplace's systemic discrimination issues.* Especially if you're in a toxic environment and are a victim of those issues, it's not your job' (p. 244). In many ways it might be productive to read Henry's book as advice for young professionals that is analogous to what other texts have done to demystify the university for first-generation college students. For too long marginalized workers have entered into new spaces and done poorly because they lack basic information about how to succeed, learning too late about invisible norms and the interpersonal dynamics that privilege white, straight men above everyone else. This is a refreshingly direct and honest assessment, one that is hardly unique but nevertheless needs to be articulated more forcefully and repeated loudly until the workplace dynamics do change for the better.

Reviewer Bio

Nathaniel Heggins Bryant is Assistant Professor of English at California State University, Chico. He is the author of several articles dealing with the intersection of labor studies, prison studies, and prison writing on individuals like the Soledad Brother George Jackson and Caryl Chessman. He has served as the Working-Class Studies Association secretary and is currently the vice president for his campus chapter of the California Faculty Association, the labor union representing faculty, counselors, librarians, and coaches in the CSU system.

Fogelson, Robert (2022) *Working-Class Utopias: A History of Cooperative Housing in New York City*. Princeton.

Review by Joshua B. Freeman

From the mid-1920s through the mid-1970s, some 40,000 units of non-profit cooperative housing were built in New York City, enough to accommodate a small city. The residents were people of modest means, families of factory, construction, clerical, and retail workers; teachers, social workers, and accountants; taxi and bus drivers; lower-level managers; and small business owners. Labor unions, directly or indirectly, developed most of the cooperative projects. They still provide decent affordable housing, in many cases with plenty of amenities: cooperative supermarkets, libraries, schools, community centers, auditoriums, recreation facilities, clubs of every variety, even a cocktail lounge and bowling alley. This extraordinary working-class achievement is almost completely unknown outside of New York. Even in its hometown, it is largely hidden in plain sight.

Robert M. Fogelson's *Working-Class Utopias: A History of Cooperative Housing in New York City* tells the story of these projects. This deeply researched, scholarly study is the first readily available, full-length account of New York's cooperative housing movement. Fogelson sympathetically recounts its many successes, but also is not shy about detailing its problems and failures.

The first working-class housing cooperatives in New York were organized by Finnish immigrants in the early twentieth century. Larger-scale developments came in the 1920s, under the sponsorship of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and several radical Jewish groups. Built on empty land in the Bronx, a subway ride away from Manhattan's garment district, these cooperatives gave residents escaping overcrowded, deteriorating tenements well-designed new apartments, greenery, and collective ownership. The Amalgamated also built a small project on the Lower East Side after clearing away existing slums. In cooperatives, the residents themselves control the buildings, paying a modest fee when they move in, which they get back when they leave.

The Depression and World War II brought cooperative housing construction in New York to a halt. After the war, it resumed, on a much larger scale. Its heyday, from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, is the central focus of Fogelson's account. A remarkably diverse group of unions sponsored projects to house their members (and outsiders as well), including IBEW Local 3 (which represented construction electricians); the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union; New York Typographical Union No. 6; the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butchers; and Local 1199 of the Hospital Workers Union (now part of SEIU). Reflecting a capacious view of unionism, then prevalent not just in the more left-wing CIO unions but in many AFL affiliates, too, cooperative housing provided a way for labor groups to give their members benefits outside the framework of collective bargaining, build mutualistic communities, and attack the ever-present need for more

affordable housing. The projects ranged from small efforts, like the 144-unit Sam Burt Houses in Coney Island, sponsored by the Fur, Leather, and Machine Workers Union, to the 15,300-unit Co-op City in the Bronx, which when built was the largest apartment complex in the world. Like many of the larger projects, Co-op City was sponsored by the United Housing Foundation (UHF), a coalition of unions, existing co-operative complexes, and neighborhood and philanthropic groups.

Though rightly thought of as working-class achievements, the housing cooperatives depended heavily on government support, without which most could not have been built. Starting in the mid-1920s, a host of state, local, and federal programs assisted cooperative development through tax abatements, the use of eminent domain to clear land, and below market-rate loans. The UHF ultimately became almost an extension of the New York State government. Many of its projects were suggested by state and city officials, including Co-op City and Rochdale Village (named after the English town where the cooperative movement began), a 5,860-apartment complex in Queens, completed in 1965, that became the largest African American majority cooperative in the country. Loans from public employee pension funds and a state finance authority, along with union money, made these developments possible. One reason there were so many cooperatives in New York and so few elsewhere was the exceptional backing the state government provided.

The politics of cooperative housing did not fall along the usual lines. The key UHF government ally was Robert Moses, a multi-hatted city and state official who for decades dominated New York land use, construction, and slum clearance decisions, widely hated by liberals for driving highways through residential neighborhoods and his general contempt for working people. Long-time Republican Governor Nelson Rockefeller was another strong co-op backer. For them, and for liberal Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr., union-sponsored apartments provided a vehicle for slum clearance, keeping middle-income families in the city, and taking advantage of federal housing programs, such as Title I of the Housing Act of 1949. This strange-bedfellows alliance was eased by the effective control of the UHF for most of its life by Abraham Kazan, a Clothing Workers staffer who shepherded the first union cooperatives into existence and kept at it for another four decades.

Fogelson devotes the last half of his book to Co-op City and the epic battle that broke out between the UHF and its tenants in 1970, not long after the project opened. The UHF made a habit of underestimating construction costs to ease financing, figuring it could later muddle through. But construction problems, steep, unanticipated inflation, and, according to its critics, mismanagement, made the promised carrying charges (the equivalent of rent) at Co-op City far too low to meet costs. In response, the UHF-appointed project board (control had not yet passed to the residents) kept jacking up the carrying charges until a massive revolt ensued.

For thirteen months, eighty percent of the Co-op City residents refused to pay their monthly bills, instead handing over the money to a strike steering committee, in what was probably the largest concerted housing action in U.S. history. Injunctions, threats to jail the strike leaders, and even foreclosure proceedings by the state, which could have led to evictions and the loss of the payments residents had made for co-op shares that gave them the right to live in their apartments, did not deter the protest. The state and the UHF finally cracked in 1976, after over $20 million dollars in

payments had been hidden away (over $100 million in current dollars). The UHF withdrew and the state handed over control of the project to the strike steering committee.

Fogelson provides an extremely detailed account of the legal and political maneuvering at Co-op City, but not much social analysis that might explain the extraordinary organization and tenacity of its residents. He does note that many had left rent-controlled apartments to move into Co-op City, coming with an experience of government intervention to keep housing costs down, not complicity in pushing them up. There were some professionals in the forefront of the strike but also a lot of unionists, including its main leader, Charles Rosen, a left-wing typographer at the *New York Post*. During the strike, a strong sense of community developed at the huge project, the very thing the UHF claimed to want to foster but ended up doing only by becoming a shared object of wrath.

Working-Class Utopias may get into too many weeds for casual readers. But for anyone thinking about how to address the housing crisis today, it is highly instructive. Without large-scale, ongoing government assistance, it is impossible to build and maintain affordable housing; in most of the country, workers just do not make enough money to pay for it on their own. Unions have plenty of financial assets that they conceivably could use for housing, but their political clout and institutional capacity are way down. Meanwhile, land to build on has become hard to find in cities like New York and San Francisco and costs are through the roof. But if the specific approaches workers once took toward housing may not be possible today, the lesson we can take from Fogelson's account is how much can be done when working people have a broad, audacious vision of what they and their institutions should be doing. When society failed to address the obvious need for decent places for working people to live, labor took it upon itself to solve the problem and did so with a remarkable degree of success.

Reviewer Bio

Joshua B. Freeman is emeritus professor of history at Queens College and the author of *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* and, more recently, *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World*.

Baldwin, Davarian (2021) *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities*. Bold Type Books.

Review by Gabriel Winant

Almost as long as there have been universities, there has been social conflict between town and gown. The University of Cambridge, after all, was founded in 1209 by scholars fleeing the hostile environment of Oxford, where three of their colleagues had been hanged in an act of semi-vigilantism by town officials in punishment for their role in the death of a young townswoman. From then until now, the general logic of the conflict has stayed the same, even if the particulars have varied widely. Universities have a profound historical connection to the reproduction of ruling elites, manifest most darkly in the historical discovery in the last generation of the connection many hold to slavery and the slave trade. Students and scholars are linked up to national institutions that carry their own status and prestige and may access distinct pools of economic resources. Especially at more elite institutions, they may occupy a quite different social position from their neighbors, but (except for online colleges) they must exist in physical space and interact with the social geography around them.

Still, it is not enough to say 'twas ever thus. The fact that colleges and universities enjoy different, and often superior, institutional positions to the people and organizations that share geographies with them tells us little about the complex relationships that link these unequal neighbors: relationships mediated through employment and labor markets, real estate and housing markets, policing and exclusion, schools and local taxes, hospitals and health care provision—and beneath all these, the grinding tectonic plates of race and class in America. In his new book *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities*, historian Davarian L. Baldwin examines this dynamic across numerous campuses and cities. What he finds is not pretty.

Baldwin takes in a wide range of examples of town-gown frictions. SUNY Buffalo in its eponymous city; Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh; University of Chicago and its South Side surrounds; Yale in New Haven; University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia; Columbia and Barnard in Harlem; NYU in Greenwich Village; Johns Hopkins in Baltimore; his own Trinity College in Hartford. 'By the 1970s,' Baldwin writes, 'most elite universities had become islands of wealth amid a sea of poverty. These institutions gobbled up land and envisioned themselves increasingly as the hubs of a new urban knowledge economy, in which their assets might form the basis for revitalization in these abandoned communities. Indeed, it is true that they have attracted investment to these cities, Baldwin writes, and thereby expanded their footprint. 'More and more people are part of a university's ecosystem.' Yet this ecosystem is an unequal regime, consisting of unequal labor relations, lack of access to medical services, displacement from gentrifying neighborhoods, and policing by institutional forces. As he notes of Hyde Park (where I live), 'In 2018 Black drivers made up nearly three-quarters of all the drivers stopped by university police.'

This is not, however, simply a relationship of one-sided oppression and exploitation. In city after city, the townspeople caught up with the university in one of these many capacities have organized and resisted, generating the possibility of a more democratic relationship between themselves and the institutions they abut. This too is an old tradition, and has often involved students as well: the 1968 revolt at Columbia, recall, was sparked by the plan for the university to build a gym in Morningside Park with semi-segregated access for community members. In New Haven, decades of workers' organizing on campus have spilled out into the neighborhoods in a formation called New Haven Rising: a labor-community coalition that has fought (and won significant victories) over the university's tax exemption, its failure to hire locally from working-class neighborhoods of color, and the hospital's cruel medical debt collection practices. (Full disclosure, I was active in this coalition from 2010 to 2018.) In Chicago, in addition to years of struggles against housing displacement and racist policing, a student-labor-community alliance compelled the University of Chicago Hospital to reopen its trauma center, now the only one on the South Side.

Baldwin emphasizes the increasing prominence of such struggles, exemplified best by India Walton, the former nurse and surprise winner of Buffalo's mayoral Democratic primary in 2021. Walton has a long activist history, but one key moment came in 2016 when an expanding medical school campus caused parking to overspill into her neighborhood, making it difficult for her elderly neighbors to park in front of their homes and carry out daily tasks. Walton began 'barricading open parking spots' with caution tape. Eventually, she went on to run a community land trust, participate in the 2020 George Floyd protests, and finally enter electoral politics.

Cases like these abound across the country with increasing frequency as universities themselves have become both engines of urban growth and sites of economic and racial inequality. Class and racial formation are not just studied at the university, they are happening increasingly at the university. While this is often upsetting for those of us committed to egalitarian racial and class politics to witness, as it makes us in some way complicit in the exploitation that attends this process, it also generates opportunities and obligations for us to participate. The rapid expansion of academic labor unionism and the eruption of racial justice struggles on campus, both in the last decade, represent the meeting of these obligations and opportunities.

As universities and hospitals step into the role once played by great mills and factories, Baldwin is emphatic that universities' role might be a positive one. He cites the experience of University of Winnipeg, whose expansion has been far more inclusive and egalitarian. It has created affordable housing, terminated its relationship with food service subcontractors, practiced systematic affirmative action in hiring, and taken care to incorporate indigenous culture and indigenous people into its expansion plans. This, of course, has happened in the context of a far more social-democratic society than ours. To follow Winnipeg's example, we will have to fight far harder: still, as Baldwin shows us, the university's unequal social, economic, and geographical expansion itself creates the material for such political struggles.

Reviewer Bio

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