Table of Contents

<u>Editorial</u>

Sarah Attfield and Liz Giuffre

<u>Articles</u>

“Workers without Borders:” Envisioning Sociality in Xiao Hai’s Poems
Xin Yang

Responding to the Rhythms of Labor: Lola Ridge’s Work Songs in *The Ghetto and Other Poems*
Michelle B. Gaffey

“The Tale is Soon Told”: Working-Class Storytelling in Sylvia Pankhurst’s “Thrift” and May Westoby’s “The Injustice of the King”
Carrie Timlin

Girls’ Class and Character in Contemporary YA Fiction
Lisa Paolucci

Working-class Academics: Challenging Deficit Narratives Through Cultural Wealth.
Teresa Crew

<u>Personal Essay</u>

“A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County” – From Family History to Community Museum Exhibit
Ericka Wills

<u>Book Reviews</u>

Chung, N. (2023) *A Living Remedy.* Harper Collins.
Review by Renny Christopher

Waldman, A. (2024) *Help Wanted*. Norton.
Review by RS Deeren

Shih E. (2023) *Manufacturing Freedom: Sex Work, Anti-Trafficking Rehab, and the Racial Wages of Rescue*. University of California Press.
Review by Christopher R. Martin

Kwon, H. (2024) *Language Brokers: Children of Immigrants Translating Inequality and Belonging for Their Families*. Stanford University Press.
Review by Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao

Osborne, M. (2024). ***Polished: College, Class, and the Burdens of Social Mobility*****. University of Chicago Press.**
Review by Lauren J. Harvey

Reilly, I.B., editor (2022) ***The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above Your Station*****. Emerald Publishing**
Review by Barbara Jensen

High S. (2022) ***Deindustrializing Montreal: Entangled Histories of Race, Residence, and Class.*** **McGill-Queen's University Press.**
Review by Jill Schennum

Amezcua, M. (2023). ***Making Mexican Chicago: From Postwar Settlement to the Age of Gentrification*****. The University of Chicago Press.**
Review by David Robles

Gildea, R. (2023) ***Backbone of the Nation: Mining Communities and the Great Strike of 1984-85*****. Yale University Press.**
Review by Jamie Owen Daniel

Volume 9 Issue 2: Editorial

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This issue of the Journal rounds off a year that has seen many people around the world suffer due to war and the impacts of climate change. For many people in the US, the year also ends with a sense of dread at what might be come in the next four years of a Trump presidency. War and the deadly effects of climate change are linked to those in power and their willingness, or not, to intervene to try and move the world towards peace and a viable future. But increasingly, this does not happen and 'leaders' are beholden to their own interests and desire for personal wealth and power over the needs of the many. As we have mentioned many times before, it is the poorest who are the first to be hurt.

People with limited economic means are not in a position to flee easily to safer places, and even if they are able to leave – they face terrible hardship on the journey to what will be a terrifyingly uncertain future. There is also the sheer injustice of being forced to leave not just your own home, but the home that may have been yours for generations culturally as well as physically. We remember that seldom do working-class people in these circumstances leave simply because they feel like a change or an adventure, but most often because their homes have been removed or destroyed through no fault of their own. There are no systems that people are trying to cheat or processes they are trying to circumvent - as most definitions of 'refugee' acknowledge - people who are *forced to leave*, often at extremely short notice and in heartbreaking circumstances.

Then there are the circumstances where people have nowhere or means to go. Watching the suffering in Gaza is unbearable, and millions of people across the world have been showing their support for ordinary Palestinians and urging their governments to do what they can to bring about a ceasefire and a withdrawal of Israeli troops. In Sydney, Palestinians and supporters have marched every Sunday since the war began, and they will not stop until there is peace. This kind of collective response, which involves many working-class Australians does provide some hope amid all the darkness. Around the world we know similar actions are taking place.

Political changes around the world this year have also seen the erosion of rights for women, LGBTI+ and other minority genders. The misogyny that informs these decisions does not protect anyone, but instead removes the ability for adults of sound mind to make their own decisions, including for the medical professionals who are now too scared to act. History tells us that laws don't prevent abortions or other forms of interventions, but instead force people underground to risk their lives unsafely and often brutally. We stand in solidarity with those who persist in opposing the erosion of these rights, understanding that healthcare for everyone is for the benefit of not just someone's sister or spouse, but also for the young men, children and others whose deserve the right the live freely.

So we try to look forward to better times for everyone who is struggling to survive, wherever they may be.

A journal such as ours offers small rays of hope through the stories of working-class experience that appear among the articles, essays and book reviews. While the stories are sometimes grim, the hope comes via the authors who are uncovering these stories and showing the value of working-class people. The authors published in this journal are committed to working-class lives and committed to exposing classed, raced and gendered inequalities, systems of oppression as well as the importance of collective action and working-class community. We are proud to be curating these narratives in our roles as editors.

This issue contains five academic articles, one personal essay and nine book reviews. We begin with four articles focused on literature, beginning with Xin Yang's "Workers without Borders:" Envisioning Sociality in Xiao Hai's Poems', which examines the work of Chinese worker poet Xiao Hai, whose poems about Chinese labourers reveal varied literary influences, from China and the west. Yang points to the labourers who occupy Hai's poetry as members of the global working class, linked to workers around the world.

Next is Michelle B. Gaffey's 'Responding to the Rhythms of Labor: Lola Ridge's Work Songs in *The Ghetto and Other Poems*' which argues that Irish-born poet Lola Ridge can be described as an 'avant-garde poet of the working class' due to the collectivist inclinations of her poetry and her movement among activist circles in the early part of the twentieth century.

This is followed by another analysis of historical literature, this time that by the British socialists and suffragettes, Slyvia Pankhurst and May Westoby. In "The Tale is Soon Told": Working-Class Storytelling in Sylvia Pankhurst's "Thrift" and May Westoby's "The Injustice of the King", Carrie Timlin presents two stories written by these women in the mid-1900s, and argues for an acknowledgment of their work which has been overshadowed by the writing of men from this period.

The final literature article moves back into the present day with an exploration of working-class representation in contemporary American young adult fiction. Lisa Paolucci describes the class cultures on display in two YA novels in her article 'Girls' Class and Character in Contemporary YA Fiction'.

Following this selection of articles on literature is Teresa Crew's 'Working-Class Academics: Challenging Deficit Narratives Through Cultural Wealth', which argues for the positive elements of a working-class background and that working-class culture and experience can be assets in the academy.

The section of papers closes with a personal essay from Ericka Wills who reports on a museum exhibit at the McLean County Museum of History in Illinois that focuses on the stories of workers in the county who were exposed to deadly asbestos during their time working for a local asbestos company, resulting in many workers dying from mesothelioma. '"A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" – From Family History to Community Museum Exhibit' outlines the human cost of unsafe work places, and shows the importance of museums in telling the stories of workers often abandoned to their fates by unscrupulous companies.

This issue also contains nine book reviews, curated by the book reviews editor Christie Launius. These reviews once again show the depth and breadth of topics about working-class lives, and the impacts of class-based discrimination and its intersections. The books reviewed include a memoir about class mobility from a Korean-American perspective, a novel about

retail workers, an investigation into ‘rescue work’ that purports to be helping victims of human trafficking, a study into the experiences of the children of immigrants in the US who are called upon by family members to translate and navigate state organisations and systems. There is also a review of a book about the ways that working-class college students manage social mobility, and one focusing on the experiences of working-class academics in the UK. The final three books reviewed contain studies of cities that are both historical and contemporary, with one looking at the deindustrialisation of Montreal, another considering the experiences of Mexicans who settled in Chicago, and the last an account of the 1984 Miners’ Strike in the UK. A great variety of books to check out!

Many thanks to all of our contributors, we always feel honoured to be able to publish your work. Thanks also to the reviewers whose expert knowledge is always appreciated. We wish all of our readers the very best wishes for 2025. We can’t predict the future, but we remain, as always, in hope of a better world for all.

"Workers without Borders:" Envisioning Sociality in Xiao Hai's Poems

Xin Yang, Macalester College

Abstract

New worker poetry has emerged as a unique literary voice in contemporary China. This paper places Chinese new workers as the global working class and focuses on the poetics of their global vision. Through a close reading of poems written by Xiao Hai (1980-), one of the prolific worker poets, I argue that the new worker poet constructs global sociality at the levels of aesthetics, social critique, and cultural proposal. Aesthetically, Xiao Hai has borrowed inspiration from classical Chinese poetry, western counter-culture icons, and contemporary avant-garde spirit in his writings on laborers' ordeals. Global sociality embodies a powerful critique of hierarchical global systems in which laborers are positioned at the bottom. It is also a cultural ideal rooted in revolutionary nostalgia and classical notions, a passionate call for connection among like-minded people, and an awareness of workers' shared identity. Raising their voices in poetry, Xiao Hai, as well as other worker poets, actively explore opportunities to make their voices heard on a broader scale.

Keywords

Chinese migrant worker poetry, global underclass, new worker poetry, Xiao Hai, global vision, sociality, borderless

> Our humble bones in China, Vietnam, Turkey, and Brazil stick out one by one, as silent as metal. After all, there are 7 billion people worldwide, and fewer than one in ten thousand have the chance to speak out and be heard. Those silent souls! What will they say when they can finally speak?[1]
>
> Chen Nianxi (2017)

The above-quoted passage is from Chen Nianxi 陈年喜(1970–), who gave a talk at New York University in 2016. Chen was a demolition laborer working at a depth of 5,000 meters underground. Years of exposure to toxic dust damaged his lungs, and he was diagnosed with pneumoconiosis. Chen has been writing poetry since the 1990s. He is one of many Chinese migrant worker poets who write from construction sites, assembly lines, and coal mines.

Chen's speech and his life experience are symbolic on two levels. First, Chen realized that Chinese migrant workers are part of a voiceless global working class. Second, Chen was connected to global literary events and working-class communities through poetry writing and sharing. He gave speeches at Harvard, Yale, and New York University. He read his poems at

[1] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

the San Francisco Labor Festival.[2] He participated in the Global Migrant Festival in Singapore and communicated with his global counterparts.

Chen's poetry tour in the U.S. was largely due to a documentary titled *The Verse of Us* 我的诗篇 (*Wo de shipian,* 2015) directed by Qin Xiaoyu and Wu Feiyue. The documentary follows migrant worker poets and their poems. Qin Xiaoyu also compiled an anthology with the same title. In his ambitious undertaking of workers' writings, he introduces worker poets as follows:

> The worker poets resemble traditional Chinese "itinerant intellectuals," leaving their homes to seek a livelihood in the cities, concealed at the bottom of society, undergoing the hardships of their trade. Unlike others in the same situation, these poets have a conscious desire to write; and unlike traditional literati or contemporary intellectuals, they frequently must make their living doing something they despise. In their writings, they tend not to be concerned with grand, abstract issues and their language is typically not highly refined; but they come from a particular and important angle, which combined with their rich personal experiences, can paint a powerful picture of lives that few readers know. (2016, pp.19-20）

Qin confirms the worker poets' literary contribution by comparing them with traditional itinerant Chinese intellectuals. Yet his comment that worker poets tend not to touch on "grand, abstract issues" does not fully address the complexity of this social group and their poetry writing. Though many worker poets do focus on very specific, tangible aspects of labor and migration, they also have a very acute cultural and political awareness of their positionality in a broader global context.

This paper reads new worker poetry as a literary voice locally rooted and globally connected. I adopt the term "new worker" 新工人 (*xin gongren*) to refer to contemporary Chinese migrant workers.[3] Through a close reading of poems written by Xiao Hai 小海 (1980-), one of the prolific worker poets, I argue that the new worker poet constructs global sociality at the levels of aesthetics, social critique, and cultural proposal. In the work poets' own words, "workers under the heaven are one family" 天下打工是一家 (tianxia dagong shi yijia), and they envision "workers without borders" 工人无国界 (gongren wu guojie).[4] The global sociality suggests a sense of borderless-ness across geographical, national, and cultural boundaries. It reflects aesthetic creativity: Xiao Hai has borrowed inspiration from classical Chinese poetry, western counter-culture icons, and contemporary avant-garde spirit in his writings on laborers' realities. It embodies a keen awareness of shared identity and a sharp critique of hierarchical global systems that place laborers at the lowest rung. It also functions as a cultural ideal: laborers, wherever they are, belong to an imagined big "family;" they have a strong aspiration for connection and a commitment to social justice.

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[2] Chen gave the presentations at the Labor Festival and the San Francisco Living Wage Coalition, an organization fighting for economic justice. The information of the labor festival can be found at www.laborfest.net. Information about Coalition can be accessed via http://www.livingwage-sf.org/who-we-are/. For details of the poetry reading events, see Laborvideo (2016).

[3] Scholars have adopted different terms to address Chinese migrant workers and their poetry. *Dagong* Poetry is one commonly used phrase. Maghiel van Crevel (2017, 2019b) uses the term "battlers poetry."

[4] "Workers under the heaven are one family" is the title of a song written by Sun Heng in 2004. It is also displayed on the gate of Workers' Home, a community center in Picun, a village located on the outskirts of Beijing. Worker-poet Wu Yan brought up the idea of "workers without borders" at the 2020 Global Migrant Festival held in Singapore.

I first situate new worker poets as the global working class on the social, political, and cultural periphery. Because of such positionality, their poetry embodies multiple tensions and negotiations between global and local, center and periphery, city and countryside, elites and subalterns, and self and other. I will then focus on poems written by Xiao Hai. In his poetic narratives, Xiao Hai actively critiques the impact of globally sustained social inequality on local laborers and enthusiastically envisions self-empowerment through the creation of a laborers' community.

Situating Chinese new workers as global working class

Globalization comes at different institutional levels. The "high-end" globalization, or "globalization from above," refers to the circulation of global capital and products initiated by established institutions such as transnational companies. The "low-end" globalization encompasses the flow of people and goods through informal or semi-illegal channels. While multinational corporations such as Apple or Walmart make profits beyond geographic and national borders, people from developing regions, such as African traders in Guangzhou or illegal immigrants living at Chunking Mansions in Hong Kong, engage in globalization at a much lower level. [5] Though the terms, "high end" and "low end," are imbedded in institutionalized hierarchy and economic disparity, they speak to different flows of capital and labor worldwide. In reality, the two are deeply intertwined.

Chinese new workers belong to neither the "high" nor "low" end categories of globalization, though they are *locally* labeled as the "low-end population" (*diduan renkou*) and cleared away from big metropolises.[6] Rather, they are caught in between: they are at the low end of global assembly lines bought by institutionalized "high-end" globalization. They are the global working class who live on the socioeconomic margins.

The social marginality is reflected in their labeling: *nongmin gong* 农民工 (peasant worker) and *xin gongren* (new worker). The former implies migrant workers' connection to their rural origins, and the latter suggests a new belonging in industrial cities. Many migrant workers dislike the term "peasant worker" because of its undertone of second-class citizenship.[7] They want to redefine their identity by endorsing a new label, *xin gongren*, which can better address their reality: most of them have left their rural hometowns behind and make a living in cities; their jobs already have nothing to do with the rural. Wang Hui 汪辉 (2013), Lü Tu 吕途(2013), and Zhang Zhiyu 张之瑜(2019) have detailed arguments on the "newness" of workers: their identity related to global capitalism, urbanization, and industrialization, their migration from rural to urban, their sense of nonbelonging to any particular places, and their marginalized position in general. This kind of in-betweenness has been expressed in a poem written by

[5] For detailed discussions on "low-end globalization," see Gordon Mathews, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, and Carlos Alba Vega (2012) and Gordon Mathews and Yang Yang (2012).

[6] In 2017, a fire broke out in a residential building in a suburb of Beijing. The residents of the building were mostly migrant workers. This led to the municipal government's removal of migrant workers from residential areas and the city. They are "low end" in the sense that they do low-income jobs in the city. Detailed reports can only be found in overseas reports. For instance, Chu Bailiang (2017) recorded the event in a report titled "Beijing Quzhu wailai wugongzhe."

[7] Worker singer Xu Duo 许多 stated clearly his rejection of the name *nongmin gong* (Global Migrant Festival 2020a). Lü Tu 吕途 (2013), in her book *Zhongguo xingongren: mishi yu jueqi*, argues that *xin gongren* is a more accurate term as it refers to the new status of workers: some were born into the families of migrant workers who have resided in the cities for years.

worker-poet Tian Xiaoyin 田晓隐 (1985–) (2016, p.189), “I Use Nails and Screws to Fix China’s Deficiencies” 我用钉子螺丝悬疑中国短板 (Wo yong dingzi luosi xuanyi zhongguo duanban).

我不是国家工人, 也不是农民	I am not a Chinese worker, and I am not a farmer
我以一个悬疑者的身份	my status is that of a man held in suspense
在南方，一隅，某个小工厂	doing an odd job here and there in the south
拧螺丝，打钉子	tightening screws, pounding nails.

The lines, narrated in the worker-poet’s voice, specify migrant workers’ sense of rootlessness, which is also echoed in Xiao Hai’s poetic lines: “The city that I cannot stay in, and the countryside that I cannot return to” (2017, p.73). The sense of “suspense” denotes workers’ position on the socioeconomic periphery.

The socioeconomic periphery is reflected in their changing status in the public realm, namely, from being the “masters” 主人 (*zhuren*) in the socialist period to the underclass 底层 (*diceng*) in the post-socialist era. While Spivak ([1985] 2015) observed voiceless subalterns, the colonial population who are socially and politically excluded, or a lack of institutional recognition of their voices in India, the contemporary Chinese underclass has historically maintained a different relationship with the state power. In the socialist era, the state assumed a proletarian voice by enabling the “telling bitterness” practice诉苦 (*suku*). [8] Peasants and workers were mobilized to articulate their bitter stories and traumatic pasts to denounce the old regime in the grand narrative of the new nation. In the neoliberal period, the underclass narrative is further complicated by multiple players of the state, capitalistic cooperation, cultural elites, the urban middle class, and transnational intellectuals, who all try to speak on behalf of the working class.[9]

While different social players attempt to speak for migrant workers, the inevitable epistemic violence (Spivak [1985] 2015) places them as culturally marginalized others. Migrant workers have been trying to speak for themselves in their own voice. *Dagong* poetry 打工诗歌, written by migrant workers, serves as a witness to workers’ experiences of industrial alienation, ecological disaster, physical pain, economic exploitation, and gender violence (Sun 2012, 2014, 2015; Gong 2021, 2012). Acknowledging the significance of *dagong* poetry as a political intervention, Wanning Sun (2014, p. 216) points out: “(I)t is an area characterized by intense politics of cultural brokering and cultural capital,” and “most *dagong* poets seem more interested in gaining institutional acceptance than in reaching the fellow workers their poetry seeks to represent.” Sun’s sharp critique exposes the intricate relationship between the underclass and the establishment, especially that of cultural elites.

The following development of new workers’ cultural activities, nevertheless, suggests a more diversified spectrum. New workers *are* seeking institutional recognition by attending TV

[8] For a detailed discussion, see Gail Hershatter (1993) and Wanning Sun (2014).

[9] Wanning Sun (2014: 37) has observed: “The state, capital, international NGOs, and transnational cultural elites all want to speak on behalf of China’s rural migrant workers.” In the 2010s, the yearly Spring Festival Gala on CCTV included migrant workers in the program. The business-sponsored TV programs, such as “China Got Talent” (达人秀*Daren xiu*), had peasants tell their stories of their struggles and dreams. The above-mentioned Qin Xiaoyu’s documentary on migrant workers is another example.

shows or working with official institutions such as the Women's Federation. [10] Federico Picerni (2024) has argued that the social marginality of migrant workers influences their understanding and writing of the urban, and the capitalization of such marginality promotes their visibility. Nevertheless, they have also been actively developing multiple cultural forms to speak out, claim their agency, and reach out to their peers. As Chunchun Ting's (2023) puts it, they are "unlikely writers" who attempt to redefine literature and politics through both collective activity and individual endeavor. Take Picun 皮村, a village on the outskirts of Beijing, as an example. Migrant workers reside in this area located between the city and the countryside. They have created their own literary group and inaugurated a literary journal titled *New Workers' Literature* 新工人文学 (Xin gongren wenxue). They organized the New Workers Art Troupe and established the Migrant Workers' Culture and Arts Museum. They built a community center named Migrant Workers' Home. They initiated the New Workers Art Festival and New Workers Spring Festival Gala. The Museum's gate displays a message: "Without our culture, we have no history. Without our history, we have no future."[11] The message reflects workers' aspiration to narrate their own stories, in their own voice, and to construct their own subjectivity.

The aspiration is also reflected in the title of a song written by worker-poet and singer Sun Heng in 2004: "Workers under the Heaven are One Family" 天下打工是一家 (tianxia dagong shi yijia). *Tianxia* 天下, which can be translated as "all under heaven," is a loaded, fluid term. In the Chinese classics, it is a cosmological imagination of the world. It can be secular, material, mythical, or metaphysical in different intellectual traditions such as legalism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Spatially, it could refer to the central land (中原zhongyuan) as well as regions beyond the boundary of a single state. In the modern and contemporary eras, *tianxia* has acquired a geopolitical dimension. Intellectuals have turned to the classical concept for different cultural agendas. Liberals evoked the term to question narrow-minded nationalism, and leftists proposed *tianxiaism* as a different universalism to resist the Western concept of globalization.[12] New workers develop their own vision by drawing on the classical and intellectual concept of "under the heaven." This vision represents their cultural awareness and a call for connection across borders. They view new workers as belonging to one "family," united by shared experiences of labor and migration.

Building on the idea that "workers under the heaven are one family," Wu Yan, another worker-poet, introduced the notion of "workers without borders" when he attended the poetry reading at the 2020 Global Migrant Festival in Singapore (Global Migrant Festival, 2020b). The Festival was participated by migrant workers from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Burma, and more. They read their poems, performed songs, and discussed the challenges faced by migrant workers. "Workers without borders" takes on a global dimension in this context. It addresses an alternative global sociality, which is deeply connected to yet highly critical of the institutionalized neoliberal globalization. It is a cultural vision of global laborers' shared identity, community, and agency.

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[10] Some migrant workers participated in TV shows and worked with the All-China Women's Federation. For instance, Chen Nianxi participated in *Shige zhiwang* 诗歌之王 (King of Poetry), in which he teamed up with Luo Zhongxu 罗中旭, a pop singer. Fan Yusu also worked with *Zhongguo funü bao* 中国妇女报 (China Women's News).

[11] I borrowed the English translation from Maghie van Crevel, for details, see Van Crevel (2019a). The museum, however, was closed in 2023. I will discuss this at the end of the paper.

[12] For a detailed argument on the concepts of *tianxia*, see Ban Wang, ed. (2017), Feng Lan (2008) and William A Callahan (2007).

How is this global sociality imagined and constructed in new worker poetry? In what way is it connected to but critical of globalization from "above?" How does it function as a cultural ideal at the grassroots level? What does it say about the cultural or even political consciousness of new workers caught at the intersection of global production and local development? To explore the embedded politics, I will focus on Xiao Hai and his poems, with reference to other new worker poets.

Global sociality as aesthetic creativity

In 2017, the Picun literary group published a special issue on Xiao Hai's poem collection titled *Gongchang de haojiao* 工厂的嚎叫 (Howl in the Factory), a direct reference to Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." Born in Henan Province, Xiao Hai has been writing hundreds of poems while he migrated from city to city. Poetry, for him, is his personal resistance. In "A Short Poem to Resist the World" 用一首短诗去抵抗世俗 (Yong yishou duanshi qu dikang sisu [3281-282]), he wrote:

我所有的尊严都靠在温饱线卑微	all my dignity shrinks on the subsistence level
我所有的梦想都临在触碰中破碎	all my freedom drips bound in drifting
我所有的自由都淌在漂泊里捆绑	all my freedom is confined to my drifting life
当三月匆匆地流走	as March fast flows away
我只用一首短诗去抵抗世俗	I remain with nothing but a short poem to resist the world [13]

When youth, hope, love, dignity, dreams, and freedom are imprisoned in endless sweatshop labor, the poet turns to poetry writing to express his defiance.

The resistance in poetry is located in everyday reality. Xiao Hai, like most other laborer poets, focuses on the seemingly insignificant every day of laborers. Among his working-class peers, to give a few examples, Chen Nianxi writes about missing his "son," who lives thousands of miles away. Xie Xiangnan 谢湘南gives a seemingly nonchalant account of the "work accident joint investigative report." Wu Xia 巫霞narrates ironing a "sundress." Ni Wen 倪文presents a detailed account of "filling out job applications." Xiao Hai reflects on "being the son of a peasant."[14] By describing mundane daily life in poetry, new workers engage intensively in making sense of their reality. In "A Scrub Worker Living in Zhengzhou," Xiao Hai follows a scrub worker who loses his previous job due to the dismantling of formerly state-owned enterprises. Rendering the daily routine of vending watermelons in Xinjiang, selling insurance in Shenzhen, and rubbing towels in Zhengzhou in poetic form, Xiao Hai reveals the impact of institutional change on individuals.

Xiao Hai also places everyday reality on a broad scale and reflects on the past, present, and future. In "To Us in This Great Era" 致伟大时代中的我们 (Zhi weida shidai Zhong de wenmen [352]), he describes how people play with their phones, flow with daily routines, and become "industrial replicas." Such soulless existence constitutes the "great time." In

[13] The poem is translated by **Federico Picerni. For details, see Xiao Hai, "A Short Poem to Resist the World."**

[14] All the phrases in quotation marks are the titles of the workers' poems.

“Retrospection on Today Two Hundred Years Later” 两百年后看今天 (Liangbainian hou kan jintian [339]), the poet gives a long list of trivialities: rain, flood, drought, typhoon, Internet influencer, explosion, countryside, city, field, and factory. Dreams fade away in such an endless succession of days and nights: this is how people in the future will view today. In “The Silent Majority” 沉默的大多数(Chenmo de daduoshu [383]), Xiao Hai uses the imagery of ants and grass to signify the voiceless: his neighbor who dies for no reason, his co-worker who loses one arm, a divorcing woman who cries without tears, and himself. They all live in a seemingly beautiful world.

To express his resistance, Xiao Hai draws artistic inspiration from Chinese and Western poetry and pop culture. The frustration and unfulfilled yearning in his poem “Seeing Sunset Again” 又见黄昏 (you jian huanghun [62]) were triggered by Cui Jian’s rock songs. [15] “Embracing the Yangtze River, Riding Wind and Waves” 怀抱长江，乘风破浪 (huai bao Changjiang, Chengfeng polang [102]) is a tribute to Haizi. “I Have a Dream” 我有一个梦想 (Wo you yige mengxiang [110]) and “I Dream One Day” 我梦想着有一天 (Wo mengxiang zhe you yitian [111]) echo Martin Luther King’s speech. “Give True Love a Chance” 给真爱一个机会 (Gei zhenai yige jihui [155]) derives its title from John Lenon’s “Give Peace a Chance.” “Hi, Mr. Van Gogh” 嗨，梵高先生 (Hai, Fangao xiansheng [157]) is related to Bob Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man.” Xiao Hai acknowledged that Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan have given him “strength” (*liliang*) in his poetry writing (Global Migrant Festival, 2020c). The anti-establishment and counterculture temperament of these cultural icons set the passionate tone in many of Xiao Hai’s poems when he delves into the social injustice new workers cope with.

The poem titled “Freedom” 自由 (Ziyou [147-149]) bridges western counter-culture spirit and classical Chinese poetry. With its title in English, the poem follows the format and theme of “Dignity” written by Bob Dylan. In a romantic tone, the poet describes his search for freedom in the south and north, in the bustling market, at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, on top of the Himalaya, under the sun and stars, and in every corner of cities. The romantic tone of searching also echoes the classical journey in Qu Yuan’s (340 BCE–278 BCE) poem “Encountering Sorrow” 离骚 (Lisao). With rich imagery, similes, and metaphors, both poems describe persistent quests and disenchanted disillusion. In Qu Yuan’s rendering, the poet embarks on a mythical journey to heaven, earth, mountains, and rivers to seek his ideals in vain. Xiao Hai, on the other hand, gives an ironic twist: the passionate search results in the discovery of a golden credit card:

我穿过荒凉的戈壁来到一片草原	Crossing the desolate Gobi Desert, I arrived at a grassland
遇上天使和魔鬼的女儿	I came across the daughter of an angel and a devil
就坐在受到惊吓而奔跑的马头上 衣着华丽 眼神迷惘	Lavishly dressed and confused, she sat on the head of a freighted running horse
我乘着洁白的云朵如同乘着床头的墙壁	I rode on the white clouds as if riding on the wall by the head of my bed

[15] Xiao Hai acknowledged the impact of Cui Jian on this particular poem. He resonated with the repressed yearning, aspiration, and frustration expressed in Cui’s songs. For details, see Xiao Hai, *Gongchang de haojiao*, 62.

若有所思的对着咀嚼的羊群	Facing the chewing flock of sheep, I lost in thought
一无所获的领悟着	Nothing came to my mind
那不知道是谁曾说过的关于自由的话	I didn't remember who once talked about freedom
有人拿着金卡在眼前一甩	Someone threw a golden credit card in front of my eyes
说那里面都是自由	saying that is freedom

The combination of an idealistic search and what has been found creates a sense of absurdity, satirizing the monetization of a political ideal.

Xiao Hai's aesthetic creativity goes beyond the borders of genres and nations. Maghiel van Crevel (2019b) has observed that Xiao Hai's poems blur the boundaries of migrant worker poetry and avant-garde poetry; the poet combines world literature and engages with local issues. He not only turns to literary resources, but also assimilates energy from pop culture, rock music, and the civil rights movement in the U.S. Blending different resources, Xiao Hai delves into an examination of hierarchical global systems that shape workers' realities.

Global sociality embodied in the social critique

The global sociality in Xiao Hai's poetic narratives has twofold: a strong critique of systematic inequality and an enthusiastic call for world unity among the working class. While Xiao Hai identifies with the counter-culture spirit of Western cultural and civil rights figures, he is also aware that his tie with the West is mostly built on his physical labor of producing goods for transnational consumers, as his poem "Chinese Workers" clearly mentions. On the one hand, he has suspicions about the grand schemes of revolutions, be they political or industrial, as neither can really "save" laborers. On the other hand, he constantly employs revolutionary imagery and discourse to call for workers' self-empowerment and solidarity. Full of paradox, the global sociality in his poetic narratives critically exposes the reality of the contemporary working class.

Drifting in different cities to make a living, many new workers, such as Xu Lizhi 许立志, Guo Fuhai 郭福海and Li Ruo 李若, write on topics of home, homelessness, and alienation. Federico Picerni (2020, 147) argues that such poetic exploration is "the subjective representation of the social space of the city." Xiao Hai extends the problem of homelessness: he sees himself as an orphan of the world. In "Thinking of My Motherland" 就在某刻强烈地想起祖国 (Jiu zai mouke qianglie de xiangqi zuguo [354-355]), he wrote:

妈妈 请你再次告诉我哪里是东方	Mom, please tell me again where is the east
告诉我太阳是在哪边升起	where the sun rises from
我怎么总也看不到前方的道路	How come I cannot see my path ahead
我不相信是他们蒙住了我的眼	I don't believe they have blindfolded me
妈妈 我听说这里的山河是一片秀丽	Mom, I heard mountains and rivers are gorgeous here
我如此深爱着每一寸土地	I deeply love each inch of the land
可当某天我为了卑微的生存	But one day, for the sake of humble survival

却不得不丢掉倔强离你而去	I will have no choice but to abandon my stubbornness and leave you
可走到哪里都没有一个家园	However, there is no home wherever I go
就像是一个满世界流浪的孤儿	Just like an orphan, I am drifting around the world

The poet outpours his emotion of disorientation. Burdened with a humble livelihood, he fails to find any direction or home.

The sense of disorientation and homelessness derives from historically and globally preserved inequality in power, resources, and social status. In "Chinese prayers" 中国祈祷 (Zhongguo qidao [188-189]), the poet configures a hierarchical society with a sharp disparity between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless. While wealthy individuals pray for greater profits, the lower class simply hopes to meet their basic needs for survival. In "It is Alright, Motherland" 这很好, 祖国 (Zhe henhao, Zuguo [159-163]), Xiao Hai first paints a panoramic picture of disillusionment, confusion, fear, and frustration, and then points out the root of emotional unrest: workers occupy the lowest tier in global systems:

活着的惯性思维麻木着你	The sense of survival makes you numb
让你苟延残喘着曲解了生命的意义	It makes you misunderstand the meaning of life while you struggle to make ends meet
让你在奔向罗马的大道上折途返回	It makes you turn back on the path leading to Rome
而去往埃及金字塔底做一粒沙子	You instead head towards the Egyptian Pyramid to become a grain of sand at its base
一粒受法老施咒的屈辱沙子	a grain of humiliated sand cursed by the Pharaoh

Symbols of past empires' glory, Rome, the Pyramid, and Pharaoh exemplify historical establishment in various civilizations. The historically sustained oppression persists today. Migrant workers are as humble as grains of sand, insignificant and disposable.

Xiao Hai is not the only worker poet who discloses Chinese laborers' reality as part of global problems. The above-mentioned Chen Nianxi sees metals coming from his explosive work in the Empire State Building in New York City ("Empire State Building"). Sun Haitao realizes the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on him and his workmates ("Machine Documentation"). Zheng Xiaoqiong gives outcries of the global south ("Industrial Age"). Xu Lizhi packages industrial products, along with his youthful dreams, and sends them to the other shore of the ocean ("Laborer"). The global vision, in the narratives of the working class, lays bare the systematic inequality.

Facing the inequality caused by global industrialization and consumption, Xiao Hai questions revolutions, which claim to change the world and make it a better place. In "Chinese workers" (中国工人, Zhongguo gongren [43-45]), the term "revolution" carries two connotations. One refers to the social revolution, as seen in phrases such as "revolutionary comrade" and "October Revolution," and the other to the (second) Industrial Revolution. Both connect Chinese workers to the outside world, yet neither could offer them a decent standard of living. The social revolution has failed to save workers, for they continue to struggle for survival. The Industrial Revolution, on the other hand, places workers on global assembly lines and alienates them. The poet expresses his suspicion of both in the following lines:

<table>
<tr><td>我是一名中国工人
在钢筋水泥的欲望大楼里圈养着我们的廉价青春</td><td>I am a Chinese worker
Lurking inside the desire of tall mansions in steel and concrete is our captive cut-price youth</td></tr>
<tr><td>春夏秋冬的变迁不属于我们
粮食和蔬菜也不再需要我们关心
我们所能做的只是将Made in china的神秘字符疯狂流淌到四大洋 和七大洲的每条河流与街道的中心</td><td>The changes of the season are not ours
Food and vegetables don't need our attention
All we can do is let the mystery of the words Made in China
Fiercely flood every river leading to the four oceans and seven continents
And at every intersection</td></tr>
<tr><td>再用那十月革命后所带来的战利品来换取一张张年关将近时想要归家的票根</td><td>Take the spoils of the October Revolution
To exchange for much sought-after ticket stubs to return home at year's end [16]</td></tr>
</table>

"Tall mansions in steel," symbols of urbanization and industrialization, wipe out nature and confine youth. "Food and vegetables," a reference to Haizi's poetic lines, [17] epitomizes everyday living, a luxury beyond the reach of most workers, whose lives are dominated by producing industrial goods exported globally.

Trapped locally in factories, Xiao Hai looks beyond the immediate reality and questions the industrial and political institutions that sustain it. His poems outline the position of the Chinese laborers on the global machinery of production, revealing a sharp awareness of the oppression and exploitation he and his fellow workmates endure.

Global sociality as a cultural ideal

Awareness of global systematic inequality leads to an aspiration for social justice. Though Xiao Hai distrusts institutionalized revolutions, he nevertheless turns to revolutionary concepts to shape his vision of an equal society. While the poetic imagination of an ideal society embodies classical notions of harmony and unity, community building in reality is a down-to-earth practice and is deeply connected to various social groups within and across national boundaries.

In "The Long March of Chinese New Workers" 中国新工人的长征路 (Zhongguo gongren de xin changzheng lu [382]), Xiao Hai uses the poetic devices of repetition and antithesis to voice his emotions of defiance, wrath, and aspiration:

<table>
<tr><td>我们需要个毛泽东
需要他带领着我们走
走那条路 走那条路
我们不需要秦始皇 不需要兵马俑</td><td>We need Mao Zedong
We need him to lead us
Taking that road, taking that road
We do not need Emperor Qin; we do not need the Terracotta Army</td></tr>
</table>

[16] The poem is translated by Tammy Lai-Ming Ho. For details, see Xiao Hai, "Chinese workers."
[17] While Haizi (1964-1989), the avant-garde poet, wrote "From tomorrow onwards, care for grain and vegetables" in his widely-known poem "Mianchao dahai, chunnuan huakai" 面朝大海，春暖花开 (**Facing the sea, with spring blossoms**), Xiao Hai takes an opposite direction: "Food and vegetables don't need our attention".

也没那么需要一道这样的长城	We do not need the Great Wall
自己命运自己做主	We need to take charge of our own destiny
我们不要被污染了的河流	We do not need polluted rivers
不要被扭曲了的灵魂	nor distorted souls
要用劳动换来的真正幸福生活	We want hard work to lead to a truly happy life
而不是机器和偏见	not machine, not prejudice
要天下为公	We want the world to belong to all
要世界大同	We want the world with grand unity
要世界大同	We want the world with grand unity

There are different kinds of historical references to the grand narratives. The imperial imagery of Emperor Qin, the Terracotta Army, and the Great Wall symbolizes oppression and confinement. The emblematic revolutionary icons of Mao Zedong and the Long March epitomize the contemporary working class' quest for self-determination and self-empowerment. *Tianxia weigong* 天下为公 (the world belongs to all) and *Shijie tatong* 世界大同 (the world with grand unity), phrases from the Confucian classic *The Book of Rites* 礼记 (Liji, Han dynasty 202 BCE–220), signify a perfect society. Reformists in the late Qing dynasty and revolutionaries in the 1911 Revolution employed both concepts to address social ills and advocate social change. The concepts become Xiao Hai's imagination of an idealized world that treats everyone with fairness and dignity. He channels his political consciousness into romanticized revolutionary nostalgia and classical ideals.

Such ideals are nevertheless not merely abstract notions. Xiao Hai has found a local working-class community in Picun, which has shifted his attention from his anger to the working class to which he feels he belong. As Maghiel van Crevel (2023) argues, the "I and we" are connected in Xiao Hai's becoming of a poet. In "Brave the Storm to Picun" 穿过暴风骤雨到皮村去 (chuanguo baofeng zhouyu dao Picun qu,2018), Xiao Hai expresses his belief in the strength of new workers as a united group once the like-minded people come together, despite sinister obstacles:

也许闪电会把天空劈成末日	Maybe lightning will split the sky, turning it into a doomsday
也许冰雹要把大地砸成碎泥	Maybe hail will smash the earth into pieces
我还是会带着一个工人的真诚与理想	I will still carry the sincerity and ideals of a worker
穿过暴风骤雨到皮村去	braving the storm to Picun
去吧 去吧	Let's go, let's go!
穿越暴风骤雨到皮村去	Brave the storm to Picun,
那里有花和花	where flowers and flowers
草和草	grass and grass
山河与山河	mountains and rivers
云朵与云朵	clouds and clouds
自然而然的最好相遇	come together naturally and beautifully

The imagery of lightning, doomsday, hail, and storms denotes the ordeals workers endure and the challenges they overcome. The metaphors of flowers, grass, rivers, mountains, and clouds

suggest the beauty of getting together. Picun, in the poetic narrative, becomes a destination where new workers connect with one another. A sense of hope and strength arises when people build a community at the local level.

In community building, poetry has indeed played a crucial role in engaging new workers in dialogue with other social groups both within and outside China. Worker writers and poets formed the Picun literary group in 2014. They gathered regularly and read their works together. They invited university professors and volunteers to teach classes and lead discussions on writing. Their literary engagement has drawn attention from different regions. Fan Yusu (2020, 1-2), a well-known worker writer, wrote that they have met "friends from all over the world" and scholars of different countries.[18] The journal, *New Workers' Literature,* has made a conscious effort to include narratives of global subalterns. A special column named "New Workers Overseas" (*haiwai xin gongren*) introduces overseas laborer writers and stories of Chinese workers who migrate to other countries. Beyond the local level, worker poets also establish direct connections with global migrant workers by participating in international poetry workshops and festivals. Xiao Hai, for instance, read his poems "Chinese Workers" and "Youth on the Assembly Line" 流水线上的青春 (Liushui xianshang de qingchun) at the 2020 Global Migrant Festival in Singapore. Raising their voices in poetry, Xiao Hai and other worker poets actively explore opportunities to make their voices heard on a broader scale.

Coda

Xiao Hai, as well as many other new worker poets, writes on the realities of laborers at the low end of global capitalism. His poems display global sociality at the level of aesthetics, social critique, and cultural proposal. He has incorporated poetic inspirations and conventions from China and the West, the past and present, revolutionary and pop cultures. In his poetic narratives, he launched his rigorous critique of institutionalized global inequality. His passionate call for a classical ideal of world harmony and unity appears to be an antidote to the global systems of exploitation. The poet not only goes beyond the national, cultural, temporal, and aesthetic borders to construct his social critique and cultural proposals in his poetry, but he also connects with various social groups, workers and intellectuals alike, to make the voice of the working class heard.

Xiao Hai's encounter with the community in Picun has made him realize it is important for workers to speak out (Wu 2017). His effort has indeed been recognized in the official media. Xinhua Net, the official channel affiliated with Xinhua News Agency, has published articles on Xiao Hai's experience and writings. Nevertheless, the tension between workers and the institutional mainstream persists. In 2023, the Migrant Workers' Culture and Arts Museum located at Picun, a symbol of the new workers' community, was disbanded and demolished due to "city planning."[19] The overarching institutionalized development inevitably engulfs the communal space of new workers. Though the physical space disappeared, the museum has found a new home online: a virtual museum. [20] On the homepage of the virtual museum display the lines that used to be at the gate of the Museum: "Without our culture, we have no history.

[18] Dr. Zhang Huiyu from Peking University, for instance, often teaches there. In *New Workers' Literature*, Fan Yusu (2020, 1-2) wrote: "Because of literature, our literature group has met friends from all over the world: Japan, Singapore, Britain, America, the Netherlands, Italy, and Canada… Scholars from around the world have given positive comments to our literary works."

[19] The Xinhua report on Xiao Hai can be found in "'Dagong shiren Xiao Hai." The detailed report on the closing of the museum is covered in the Artforum news, "Dagong yishu bowuguan."

[20] The virtual museum can be accessed here: https://the-culture-and-arts-museum-of-migrant-labors.com/#1.

Without our history, we have no future." The online "reincarnation," I argue, extends the Chinese new workers' voice to another borderless scope. Access to and connection with Chinese new workers' arts, culture, and history can happen anytime and anywhere. In this sense, the global sociality acquires another dimension: the community of working class crosses the boundary of the physical and virtual, preserving the voice from below, honest, straightforward, and powerful.

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Responding to the Rhythms of Labor: Lola Ridge's Work Songs in *The Ghetto and Other Poems*

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Abstract

Although nearly forgotten by the end of the twentieth century, Irish-born poet Lola Ridge is now recognized as a highly influential, socially engaged writer and editor who was active in various Modernist and activist circles in the United States from 1907-1941. This essay discusses the lesser-known poems within the "Labor" section of her 1918 publication, *The Ghetto and Other Poems*. I suggest that these labor poems draw from and participate in the American traditions of work and sorrow songs, thereby positioning Ridge as an avant-garde poet of the working class, a kind of Modernist troubadour. I read Ridge's "The Song of Iron" alongside Kane O'Donnell's 1863 long poem, also titled "The Song of Iron," drawing intertextual connections between these poems, both of which appropriate hymn-like rhythms that gesture toward the work and sorrow song traditions. I address how Ridge's engagement with these traditions attempts to "make new" various images, metaphors, and cadences found in O'Donnell's poem, and I situate Ridge's "Labor" poems within the context of World War One, conscription, labor radicalization, and the suppression of free speech by the federal government. I offer close readings of select poems to further demonstrate her textual play with antiphony and other communal poetics and themes, all of which model on the page the collective action necessary to challenge the capitalist and imperialist aims of the modern era.

Keywords

Lola Ridge, *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, "The Song of Iron", modernism, Kane O'Donnell, work songs, spirituals, labor poetry, working-class poetry, anti-war poetry

In 1919, the anarcho-socialist Leonard D. Abbott reviewed Lola Ridge's debut book of poetry, *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, for the Ferrer Association's *Modern School*. In his review, Abbott claims that "[t]wo Lola Ridges are revealed in her book. One is the artist. The other is the radical. Sometimes the two are merged" (Abbott 1919, p. 27). He proceeds to commend her "powers of observation [as well as] her passionate sympathy with the underdog and with all the movements that make for rebellion and freedom" (p. 27). Despite Abbott's overwhelmingly positive and representative review, Ridge's work was unknown to many students of poetry through most of the twentieth century. Louise Bernikow's groundbreaking anthology from 1974, *Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1950*, suggests that Ridge's ostensible disappearance from the canons of American poetry is due to the "buried history within the buried history," where "women on the left in America have been banished from contemporary consciousness by the slow erosion of neglect" (Bernikow 1974, p. 45). Terese Svoboda elaborates that Ridge was "twice-neglected" because she was a woman and a radical (Svoboda 2016, p. 6), and Nancy Berke draws from Cary Nelson to explain how Ridge could have been forgotten for so long, noting that "the critical practices of American literary

culture during the Cold War helped create a severe cultural amnesia about the preceding generation of radical poets, of which Ridge was a prominent member" (Berke 2010, p. 28).

Sustained scholarship on Ridge does not take root until the 2000s, though Ridge's name appears in various memoirs and scholarly articles throughout the twentieth century. Kenneth Rexroth, for example, mentions Ridge in his 1961 essay, "The Influence of French Poetry on American," where he refers to her as a socialist and as part of part of a collection of individuals associated with the little magazine *Others* that ushered in "modernism in American poetry" (Rexroth 1961, p. 155). In 1987, Ridge's essay "Woman and the Creative Will" is mentioned in a footnote to Susan Stanford Friedman's "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse," and in 1998, Susan Churchill's "Making Space for 'Others': A History of a Modernist Little Magazine" mentions Ridge's assistant editorial and contributor roles at *Others*, also in several footnotes. Ridge might still be a mere footnote in the annals of American poetry studies if not for recent scholarship that has worked to situate Ridge's life and cultural productions within the social, political, and economic contexts of the early- and mid-twentieth century. A number of scholars have addressed Ridge's influence as an editor, mentor, activist, and socially engaged poet. In particular, the works of Caroline Maun, Belinda Wheeler, Daniel Tobin, Nancy Berke, Linda Kinnahan, and, more recently, Francesca Bratton and Lucy Collins have helped resurrect Ridge from relative obscurity; in 2015, Terese Svoboda published the first-ever biography on Ridge, her fiercely researched *Anything that Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge, Radical Poet*.

Many of these contributions have included astute analyses of Ridge's long poem, "The Ghetto," which was first published in April 1918 in *The New Republic* and again, significantly expanded, in *The Ghetto and Other Poems* in September that same year. "The Ghetto" offers a portrait of Jewish life on the Lower East Side, focusing on economic conditions, sexual agency, and grassroots organizing. As Nancy Berke concludes in "Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in Lola Ridge's 'The Ghetto'": "Ridge's articulation of the working-class Jewish community inside 'The Ghetto' is…always a community of women and men making themselves in the world" (Berke 1999, p. 79). Ridge's depiction of Jewish women and men was thus markedly different from common literary portrayals in the early twentieth century; she avoided perceiving and describing "Jews as victims or as subhuman, 'snarling a weird Yiddish,' as Henry James had described them, or the Jew squatting on the windowsill in Eliot's 'Gerontion,' or beneath the rats in his 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar'" (Svoboda, Radical Modernist 2018). Indeed, Ridge celebrated the ghetto as a life-giving, life-affirming force, one where Jewish women and men of the Lower East Side were agents of their own change in the world.

Still, little attention has been given to the poems within Ridge's "Labor" sequence, the third section of *The Ghetto and Other Poems*. At times, these poems offer the imagist snapshots that we see in "The Ghetto," though they are much briefer than her long poem, and the language is often elevated—hyperbolic, even—expressing Ridge's exuberance over her subject matter, as she does with the use of italics in part IX of "The Ghetto." This essay suggests that several of the poems in her "Labor" sequence, namely "The Song of Iron," "Frank Little at Calvary," "Fuel," "A Toast," and "The Legion of Iron," draw their themes and communal poetics from the traditions of American work and sorrow songs, which tended to draw from religious hymns and rhetoric. These poems thereby participate in a poetic and musical lineage that has long reminded audiences that there is power and liberative potential in collective struggle and action.

Responding to O'Donnell: Imagery, Sound, and Rhythms in "The Song[s] of Iron"

Several poems within Ridge's "Labor" sequence contain echoes of her travels along the factory belt, and her poem "The Song of Iron," appears to recontextualize a nineteenth-century long poem of the same title by [Daniel] Kane O'Donnell, which Ridge may have discovered on a trip to Pennsylvania.[1] O'Donnell was a journalist and poet from Philadelphia, PA, working at *The Press* through the 1860s as an editor, lead writer, and Civil War correspondent. In 1865, post-emancipation, O'Donnell served as assistant superintendent of education to the city of Charleston, South Carolina. There, O'Donnell and superintendent James Redpath demanded inclusive schooling, refusing to force Black children to attend segregated schools when their parents were paying taxes to finance schools for white children (McKivigan 2008, p. 105). In the late 1860s, he traveled to Cuba to "report on the progress of the revolutionary movement there" (Wilson and Fiske 1888, p. 558), and his poetry and critical works were published in various magazines, including the *New York Independent*, an abolitionist and pro-women's suffrage publication.

Appletons' Cyclopædia of American Biography writes that O'Donnell's poetry "display[s] great facility in versification and a rare talent for rendering homely subjects attractive" (Wilson and Fiske 1888, p. 558). Two of the "homely subjects" of interest to O'Donnell were mill work and slavery, both of which were explored in his long poem "The Song of Iron," which was published in his 1863 volume of poetry, *The Song of Iron, and The Song of Slaves*, as a celebration of iron work and its revolutionary power. The poem's conclusion sees the products of iron wielded by "man appeal[ing] for man" to break the chains of slavery and refers to "Freedom" as the "iron arm of God" (O'Donnell 1863, p. 23). This long poem is echoed in Ridge's own "Song of Iron," and reading the poems alongside each other highlights Ridge's modernist craft even as she embraces proletarian subjects and arguments.

Many other modernist poets, including Marianne Moore, H. D., and Amy Lowell, are known for their intertextual and allusive work, though Ridge's apparent source material stems from a significantly different tradition than that of most of her contemporaries. Ridge's intertextual work suggests that she straddled two poetic traditions—of the avant-garde and of labor—traditions that often seemed incompatible in terms of form and, at times, content. Reading Ridge's "Song of Iron" intertextually, and considering her recontextualization of O'Donnell's anti-slavery poem that celebrates the power of the American worker, helps readers understand Ridge's view of the role of a radical poet who is unapologetically on the side of working-class struggle. O'Donnell's "Song of Iron" is an anthem for iron workers who literally smash the chains of slavery within the context of the poem; Ridge's "Song of Iron" is also an anthem for iron workers, though who smash the many forces that oppress the working class in the context of the early twentieth century.

Both Ridge's and O'Donnell's "Song[s] of Iron" are labor *and* working-class poems, for they describe iron work and the tools of such labor; they also refer to their larger contexts (the

[1] After settling in New York City in 1908, Ridge's was an organizer for the Ferrer Association's Modern School where she founded and edited the first issue of its magazine, *Modern School*; here, she met and befriended Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. An anarchist herself—and prominent activist, poet, and editor—Ridge published her first book of poetry after having traveled with her partner, David Lawson, to upper New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Tennessee, and Missouri from 1914-1917 (Svoboda, 2016, p. 88). Four of these states border the Great Lakes and were thus sites for iron ore mining; in Pennsylvania and Michigan, major steel mills were operational during these years as well. Svoboda wonders in *Anything that Burns You* if Ridge and Lawson were "helping [Emma] Goldman on her tour" through these states, where Goldman delivered political and philosophical speeches (Svoboda 2016, p. 88).

American Civil War or WWI) as they generalize the experiences of American workers who, according to the poems, are key to liberation. These poems clearly share similar themes and political perspectives, but even more interesting is how Ridge simultaneously pays homage to O'Donnell's "Song of Iron" and makes his metaphors, images, and meters new. As Ridge recontextualizes O'Donnell's subject and argument, she invites readers to embrace a modernist poetics that is intimately tied to labor struggles. Ridge likewise aligns herself with past struggles for justice and echoes these struggles in her work, even as she experiments with form, revealing how art, even of the avant-garde, can have a social function and grow from more traditional poetic and musical forms.

The bulk of both poems craft exultations of labor in steel mills as they compose their "Song[s] of Iron," referring to specific parts of the blast furnaces. O'Donnell writes:

> Beneath the chimney blazing,
> The canopy so murk,
> The gnomes with zeal amazing
> Are sweating at their work.
> …
> Hark! In the blasty hollows
> The savage, suffering ore,
> Molt-white with heat infernal
> Groans from the open door (O'Donnell 1863, p. 6)

Like O'Donnell, Ridge's lines are end-stopped, encouraging a natural pause at the end of the line to absorb the images of blast furnaces. However, Ridge embraces a crisper set of images to describe the furnace. She writes:

> How golden-hot the ore is
> From the cupola spurting,
> Tossing the flaming petals
> Over the silt and furnace ash —
> …
> Out of the furnace mouth —
> Out of the giant mouth —
> The raging, turgid, mouth —
> Fall fiery blossoms (Ridge 1918, p. 50)

O'Donnell's images of a "chimney blazing" and "canopy so murk," while clear, feel familiar, and likely would have to Ridge as well. Thus, in her rendering, the "cupola [is] spurting…flaming petals." Ridge likewise maintains O'Donnell's personification of the furnace door as a mouth (O'Donnell's door is "groaning"), though for Ridge, the emphasis is on the size and expansion of the door with her repetition of words with soft "g" sounds and stressed first syllables ("giant," "raging," "turgid"). Ridge evokes sounds in the mills with her precise words and rhythms, whereas O'Donnell describes or names these sounds.

Similarly, both poets use the color and word "gold" to describe scenes of furnaces and molten iron, scenes that would have been familiar to them both given their travels. Describing the flames that spew from the furnace doors, O'Donnell writes that "Gold issues from the tomb! / Ho! for this gold of iron! / Hurrah! the wonder-glow" (O'Donnell 1863, p. 6), focusing more on the jubilant exclamations and rhyme scheme of the stanza than the imagery within the line.

Ridge's descriptions of fire in motion, however, anticipate Futurist renderings of similar images. Out of the "cupola" fly "fiery blossoms" colored "the gold of buttercups / in a field at sunset / or huskier gold of dandelions, / Warmed in sun-leavings" (Ridge 1918, p. 50). These lines focus on various hues of gold within the mill, emphasizing what is simultaneously seen and felt (such as the almost blinding warmth of a sunset) over what is being expressed emotionally, as in O'Donnell's poem ("Ho!" and "Hurrah!").

Ridge's poem likewise juxtaposes two incongruous images—fire and flowers—which ultimately challenges any association of fire with hell and death and nature with life. In Ridge's formulation, the "flaming petals" and "molten flowers" are evidence of god-like creative work (Ridge 1918, p. 50; 51), the furnaces a source of life and living for the steel mill community. O'Donnell, too, conflates heaven and hell, god and devil, in his poem, noting that the iron workers are "Angels…hard at work in hell" (O'Donnell 1863, p. 6). He also sees their work as a source of life, or perhaps resurrection: "Gold issues from the tomb!" Ridge allows her sharp, surprising images and incongruity to reveal these conflations, whereas O'Donnell relies on more familiar and religious metaphors to achieve a similar end.

"The Song[s] of Iron" do not just share similar metaphors and images of mills and furnaces, however; they likewise employ related yet varying patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables within their lines. O'Donnell's poem maintains a traditional, though rhythmic, iambic trimeter throughout his entire long poem, with hyper-metrical odd lines that end in an unstressed syllable, thus giving his poem the flow of a hymn that could be sung. Ridge's lines do not follow a consistent meter, though they still attend to the aural qualities of her poem. In the aforementioned passage, she begins, like O'Donnell, in iambic trimeter with a hyper-metrical first line: "How gólden-hót the óre is"; however, she follows with two lines in trochaic trimeter:

Fróm the cúpola spúrting,
Tóssing the fláming pétals

Doing so allows Ridge to initially echo O'Donnell's hymn-like rhythm, and then disrupt it to emphasize the motion of "spurting," "tossing," and "flaming." In Ridge's poem, sound and rhythm give rise to image.

The second set of four lines then emphasizes the "mouth" of the furnace, not only with the visual repetition of this word and the extended pause suggested by the dashes at the end of the lines, but also with her meter: a dactyl ("Out of the") is followed by a trochee ("furnace") and concludes with an accented final syllable ("mouth"):

Out of the furnace mouth —
Out of the giant mouth —
The raging, turgid, mouth —
Fall fiery blossoms (Ridge 1918, p. 50)

The final line slightly inverts the meter of the previous two with a stressed syllable, a dactyl, and a trochee, again emphasizing the incongruity of the images of fire and blossoms. O'Donnell's long poem is thus clearly present in Ridge's "Song of Iron," though Ridge's rhythms and images are unmistakably modern: she initially plays with cadences more familiar to nineteenth-century closed forms, only to disrupt them to emphasize the image.

Their keen attention to rhythm and sound, in addition to their poetic subject, points to both Ridge's and O'Donnell's participation in the tradition of American work song, a subset of labor or working-class poetry. American work songs have a long history among working-class communities, and these songs commonly adopted the meter of popular church hymns or gospels so the melodies would be familiar to workers and their families. Sometimes the lyrics of the hymns or gospels remained but were made ironic, sorrowful, or liberative when sung within a new context. Other times new lyrics were set to familiar tunes, often for satirical or humorous effect. As Richard Flacks explains in "The American Labor Song Tradition":

> Music, sung or listened to on the job, can be a great aid in relieving drudgery and sustaining mutuality. Song-making is especially characteristic of social situations in which people work and live together under conditions set by bosses and masters, doing hard labor, knowing that they can control neither the work itself nor the return from it. (Flacks 2017, p. 286)

According to Flacks, such social situations have been found among sailors, cowboys, rail workers, lumberjacks, and chain gangs, but especially within mining communities and among enslaved people of African descent (p. 286). Soldiers and laundry workers, too, have relied on the work song to coordinate their labor and break the tedium of arduous tasks. The rhythm of these songs could organize both the work and opposition to oppressive working conditions, particularly when the lyrics were modified with a pro-labor message, as in both O'Donnell's and Ridge's poems. One natural, though not guaranteed, outcome of the work song is the forging of a community, or the recognition or strengthening of an already existing community.

Perhaps the best-known compilation of work songs and work anthems is commonly referred to as the *Little Red Songbook*, first produced in 1909 by the Spokane branch of the Industrial Workers of the World. Officially titled *I.W.W. Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent*, the *Little Red Songbook* aimed to relay songs that:

> hold up flaunted wealth and threadbare morality to scorn, songs that lampoon our masters and the parasitic vermin, such as the employment-sharks and their kind, who bedevil the workers…They will be songs sowing the seeds of discontent and rebellion…to stir the workers into action. (qtd. in Fava 2016, p. 304)

The book gathered selections by Joe Hill, Ralph Chaplin, and T-Bone Slim, among others. These songs may have been keenly sung on the job to "reliev[e] drudgery and sustain…mutuality" (Flacks 2017, p. 286), but they were also sung on the picket line to coordinate and inspire a new kind of labor: organizing to demand improved working conditions.

O'Donnell's long poem, published in the middle of the American Civil War, anticipates the work song tradition of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century with its regular hymn-like structure and end rhymes, but also with its political content. Indeed, O'Donnell's poem metamorphoses into a work anthem in its final stanzas as it calls for the abolition of slavery. Initially imagining a battle between Mars (god of war) and Vulcan (god of fire and metal work), O'Donnell writes of the potential for fire and metal work to unite with war and "Crush out the monstrous treason" of slavery (O'Donnell 1863, p. 22). To O'Donnell, the Civil War was the "time of iron" (p. 21), not in terms of iron's productivity in the 1860s, but because of its potential to aid in the abolition of slavery. Referencing O'Donnell's home state of Pennsylvania, a site of iron ore mining and steel mill work in the 1860s, his speaker notes that

the “mines and forges / Are vast in craft and power”; they have the creative potential to usher in the “iron hour” of “revolution” (p. 21). He concedes that this “battle” is “dire,” however, noting that “Two hundred thousand Irons / Have gone into the fire!” (p. 21). This is the only instance of O’Donnell capitalizing “iron” in his long poem, and it does not seem to be accidental. The “Two thousand Irons” that “Have gone into the fire” refer both to weapons created for war and to the soldiers who wield these weapons to become “Iron” personified as they “Clank! clank! on chain and rivet” (p. 23). Published two years into the Civil War, it is even possible that O’Donnell is referencing the estimated number of dead soldiers at that point, drawing a connection between metal work, war, and death. These two lines call to mind the layout of mill towns, with graveyards on high ground overlooking factories. An early photograph of the steelworks in Bethlehem, PA—not far from Philadelphia—also draws a connection between labor in the mills and death (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Evans, W. 1935. *Bethlehem Graveyard and Steel Mill*. Pennsylvania. Photograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USF342- 001167-A [P&P] LOT 1329. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.36750/

Witnessing views like this in the 1860s during wartime would have extended the meaning of the large white cross, a marker of death for mill worker and soldier alike.

Toward the conclusion of O’Donnell’s poem, the speaker wonders, “Shall Slavery chain the ages / And link the time to shame?” Still, he calls on “iron armies” to literally strike against these chains:

> Down on your myriad anvils
> Let all the hammers light,
> Crush out the monstrous treason
> And shape the wrong to right.
> Clank! clank! on chain and rivet,
> Upon the limbs of thrall,
> At work are all the hammers—
> Hurrah! the shackles fall! (O’Donnell 1863, pp. 22-23)

The song of iron, for O'Donnell, is a song of "undying freedom"; the fuel for this song is comprised of metal work, metal worker, and union soldier—"man appeal[ing] for man" (O'Donnell 1863, p. 23). His work song becomes work anthem, calling northern men to "Rise" together since "blest be the struggle" for this "brand of Freedom" that makes all the "shackles fall" (p. 23).

Although Ridge's participation in the work song tradition might not be as obvious as O'Donnell's, Ridge's contemporary, Alfred Kreymborg, actually alludes to work songs in his favorable review of *The Ghetto and Other Poems* in *Poetry Magazine*. He writes that "'The Song of Iron' is an exhortation to labor swinging to the rhythm of a paean, and a warning to 'Dictators-late Lords of the Iron'…Underneath the hammering rhythm, as relentless as a machine and as primitively nude as the animal, surges the call of mate to mate" (Kreymborg 1919, p. 338). His image of "labor swinging" in "rhythm" references both the pacing and coordination of work; his suggestion that the poetic lines serve as a "warning" to bosses and "call" to fellow workers likewise categorizes this poem as an anthem meant to inspire other workers to rise and unite in collective action. Other reviews of *The Ghetto and Other Poems* also focused on the musical qualities of Ridge's poetic project. Conrad Aiken, for instance, argues that the "latent harmonies" of the poetry "are never evoked," but that, for Ridge's particular project, perhaps "she ha[d] already reached…the right pitch" (Aiken 1919, p. 84). Leonard D. Abbott discusses the "deepest note of the book": Ridge's "unfaltering loyalty to the revolutionary ideal" (Abbott 1919, p. 28). And Louis Untermeyer writes that Ridge's poems "are all sharply written in different keys, but they are intuitively harmonized. They vibrate in unison" (Untermeyer 1919, p. 7). These musical comparisons are not mere metaphor; clearly, these reviewers reflect on Ridge's work as they might a song, suggesting that the "auditory imagination," as poet Amy Lowell referred to it in the January 1917 issue of *The Dial*, is of particular importance to Ridge's work. Lowell's essay suggests that writing, and the mass reproduction of it, hindered the reading public's ability to attend to speech and sound, atrophying its potential to hear the "'beat' of poetry, its musical quality, [which] is exactly which differentiates it from prose" (Lowell 1917, p. 46). Lowell further claims that the general reading public's "auditory imagination" in the modern era "is not nearly so well developed as [its] visual" (46). *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, however, demonstrates Ridge's careful attention to both image and sound; in fact, image and sound create and build upon each other.

Responding to Sorrow: Ridge's "Song of Iron" and the Poetics of Spirituals

The aural poetics of Ridge's work and how they underscore the social themes and images of her poetic project are likewise reminiscent of spirituals, what W.E.B. Dubois called "sorrow songs" in his *Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. These songs were initially created by enslaved people of African descent during the pre-Emancipation period, and while it may seem incongruous to label such spirituals as "work songs," since slaves were not paid for their labor, the music they constructed grew out of work, out of their forced labor, and forged a community. According to Bill V. Mullen, spirituals are indeed work songs, and they "initiate a continuous thread of African-American music as the expressive genre most prototypic of the experience of African-American working-class oppression and resistance" (Mullen 2017, p. 267). These related themes of working-class oppression and resistance, as well as the forging of a community through song, are central to Ridge's "Labor" section. Too, an understanding of the heterophonic poetics of spirituals aids in our understanding of the poetics at work in Ridge's poems, particular in her use of ellipses as they appear at the end of "The Song of Iron."

Katherine Clay Bassard's 1999 *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* lucidly theorizes the construction and poetics of slave spirituals, arguing that their meanings are often highly oversimplified. Bassard sets out to complicate how we receive and understand the spirituals' poetics, first by exploring how enslaved Africans performed and thereby created community. For one, spirituals often collapsed boundaries between performer(s) and listener(s) or observer(s), as many spirituals were created by antiphony, or call and response patterns, whereby a leader called out with a line and others responded individually or together, thus creating discordant harmonies. Eileen Southern, too, has explained that the spirituals often consisted of "'overlapping call-and-response patterns'" (qtd. in Bassard 1999, p. 136), or multi-layered antiphons, which created heterophony, or musical texts in which the same melody, in this case various call and response patterns, was sung in different ways at the same time by multiple performers.

Labor movements have even been known to adopt spirituals as communal work songs to strengthen their struggle for improved working conditions, as when they modified the pronouns of the nineteenth-century spiritual "I Shall Not Be Moved," to "We Shall Not Be Moved" in the 1950s. David Spener notes that:

> It is not surprising that many labor-union songs were drawn from the repertoire of church songs, given the intense religiosity of both black and white workers in many industries, especially those who labored in the coal mines, textile mills, and cotton and tobacco plantations of the rural southern United States. (Spener 2016, p. 41)

Given Ridge's anarchist education and understanding of the essential role that community, community-building, and song play in revolutionary historical change, it is not surprising that "The Song of Iron" employs a communal poetics reminiscent of nineteenth-century spirituals and early twentieth-century work songs to both document the pernicious effects of capitalism in the early 1900s and to provide a liberative, hopeful vision for the future of a people who suffer within this economic system.

Ridge's "Song of Iron" is driven by a thundering underbeat and a severe energy. The singular speaker of Part I first notes that she is waiting for the "clangorous music" and the "blooded, implacable Word" of "Iron singing" (Ridge 1918, p. 49). The speaker's "blood leaps in [her] arteries" and her "spirit is inundated with the tumultuous passion of [the thought of the Iron's] Voice" (p. 49). In her impassioned prayer to the Iron-god, the speaker implores, "Pour through my soul / Thy molten, world-whelming song" (p. 50). Part I thus presents the speaker waiting, "Like a new Mary" (p. 50), for the conception of Iron's song so she may, in turn, birth it for the world.

This same speaker is present in Part II of "The Song of Iron," but rather than beseeching the Iron-god, she speaks to her fellow worker. At first it may seem that this speaker is actually a factory boss, as she orders the "workman" to "Charge the blast furnace… / Open the valves — / Drive the fires high…[and again to] charge the converter" (p. 50). However, she later addresses the workman as "comrade" (p. 51), and we see that amid the oppressive, quick-burning fires of the iron crucibles, there is something more than smelted iron ore bubbling. While the workers "Drive the fires high," feeding the insatiable "furnace mouth," they, too, are being nourished, since "out of these molten flowers [of iron], / Shall shape the heavy fruit" that the speaker so desperately prays for in Part I (pp. 49-51). The images of flowers and fruit throughout Part II suggest that something is being grown and nurtured within the strenuous iron work. Indeed, the speaker asks her comrade:

> Do you not see —
> Through the lucent haze
> Out of the converter rising —
> In the spirals of fire
> Smiting and blinding,
> A shadowy shape
> White as a flame of sacrifice,
> Like a lily swaying? (p. 51)

The speaker beseeches her fellow worker to fuel Iron's song to create a certain collective, "nurturing" consciousness (Ridge 1918, p. 51). She wants to remember and recall the ghostly, "shadowy shape" emblematic of all the workers who were killed in the factories and mines, sacrificed to work, represented by the funeral "lily swaying" (p. 51). Iron's song, then, does not sing of the praises of hard labor, as would O'Donnell's miners in his "Song of Iron'; instead, it sings of the memory and liberation of all who have died working in deplorable conditions. This song, like the molten iron itself, is thus one of energized hope, signaled by the floral imagery of "blossoms," "buttercups," and "dandelions" used to describe the iron ore (p. 50). But since this song penetrates even the "arteries" (p. 49), this hope literally mobilizes the workers to move deliberately in service of all past and future "flame[s] of sacrifice" (p. 51).

Part III then follows this conversation between workers, where one of them, trembling, still waits for the "mighty quickening" of what is to come (Ridge 1918, p. 52). She notes that the earth is pregnant with Iron's song and heat, like all of life awaits its violent birth. Then, in Part IV, the "implacable Word" arrives and is:

> Sung to the rhythm of prisons dismantled,
> Manacles riven and ramparts defaced…
> (Hearts death-anointed yet hearing life calling…)
> Ankle chains bursting and gallows unbraced… (p. 52)

The "chanted and thundered…articulate tongues of Iron" sing a song of freedom for all prisoners (p. 52), including the oppressed and exploited workers. This "dissonant baying" tears "converters…from their axis" and flings "the furnaces [into the] vomiting fire" (pp. 52-53). These images echo the final stanza of O'Donnell's "Song of Iron," where "Clank! clank! on chain and rivet, / Upon the limbs of thrall, / At work are all the hammers / Hurrah! the shackles fall!" (O'Donnell 1863, p. 23). However, in Ridge's poem, the speaker, now united with her fellow workers, has actually become the song of Iron and is liberating its message by demanding that the "Dictators — late Lords of the Iron, [who are] Shut in [their] council rooms" witness the destruction of the crucibles and hear the "Gnashing of steel serpents twisting and dying… / Screeching of steam-glutted cauldrons rending" (Ridge 1918, pp. 52-53), while the "Hands inexorable, [are] marring / What hands had so cunningly moulded" (53). Significantly, there is not only one pair of hands violently destroying the crucibles that have been constructed by the ideologies and men of capitalism. Instead, Part IV of Ridge's "The Song of Iron" subtly depicts a crucial shift from the singular "I" at the outset of the poem to a collective "we" at the end. As is common in nineteenth century spirituals, we see what seems to be an individual praying to her Lord in Part I meld into a collective group and together becoming the "blare of the rude molten music of Iron…" (p. 53), freeing all prisoners of their earthly toil.

The concluding stanzas of "The Song of Iron" then present what could be read as overlapping antiphons signaling the "onward progress[ion]" of Iron's song (Ridge 2018, p. 53). In the original edition printed by B. W. Huebsch in 1918, over half the lines of the sixth stanza end with ellipses:

> Gnashing of steel serpents twisting and dying…
> Screeching of steam-glutted cauldrons rending…
> Shock of leviathans prone on each other…
> Scaled flanks touching, ore entering ore…
> Steel haunches closing and grappling and swaying
> In the waltz of the mating locked mammoths of iron,
> Tasting the turbulent fury of living,
> Mad with a moment's exuberant living!
> Crash of devastating hammers despoiling…
> Hands inexorable, marring
> What hands had so cunningly moulded…(p. 53)

While Ridge certainly includes ellipses throughout *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, the frequency of them toward the end of "The Song of Iron" is visually remarkable. Indeed, three of the four final lines of the poem also end with ellipses:

> Till the ear, tortured, shrieks for cessation
> Of the raving inharmonies hatefully mingling…
> The fierce obligato the steel pipes are screaming…
> The blare of the rude molten music of Iron…(p. 53)

Most scholars agree that Ridge's ellipses throughout *The Ghetto and Other Poems* generally suggest an occasion for pause, rather than omission of thoughts or words. However, most of these poems do not include three or four sets of ellipses in consecutive lines. The departure in punctuation here signals a departure in the ellipses' function in this poem, suggesting that the action of the line is not yet finished, but is interrupted by further action, signaled, too, by the frequent use of gerund phrasing: they are "chords never final but onward progressing" (Ridge 1918, p. 53).

But these ellipses also suggest that a kind of echoing of the thunderous initial utterance of the lines takes place within the space of the ellipses, invisible to the eye, but audible nonetheless. Like a heterophonic musical score, variations of the same melody are suggested by the ellipses and interact with each other, with accompanying "voices" coming "some beats behind the [first] voice, or arriv[ing] sooner at the end of each period" (qtd. in Napier 91), creating "octaves discordantly clashing" (p. 53). On one hand, a group of iron workers create the "Screeching of steam-glutted cauldrons rending…," but before this screeching can finish its work—its line or song—another group of workers comprise a "Shock of leviathans prone on each other…" This "monstrous fusion of sound" and these "raving inharmonies" may seem to some listeners, like the "Dictators — late Lords of the Iron" (p. 53; 52), to be a form of auditory torture. However, these heterophonic disharmonies reflect and create a specific locus of resistance in which various actions (gnashings, screechings, shocks)—various tunes—build from each other to become a song, a collective of workers calling and responding, overlapping their songs and actions to torture the effects of the "Dictators." The newly shaped iron workers produce a heterophonic song that signals a collective comprised of "Majestic discordances / Greater than harmonies…" (p. 20). The progression of the text—with the shift from singular

"I" to a collective "we," in addition to the heterophony reflected in the ellipses at the end of the poem—mirrors the poetics of a spiritual, thereby employing a textually communal poetics that reflect a liberative community of workers and that emphasize communal action, in this case, the stoppage of work and even destruction of the tools of their labor.

Responding to Working-Class Radicalization and WWI

Like O'Donnell's "Song of Iron," which responds to and participates in an abolitionist call in the mid-1800s, Ridge's labor poems respond to their historical moment. While anti-slavery speech was criminalized in several southern states during the decades leading to the Civil War, O'Donnell was not at risk for imprisonment for his anti-slavery rhetoric and poetry in Pennsylvania. For Ridge, however, publishing her pro-labor, anti-war ideas was quite dangerous due to federal laws that applied to all states. In fact, when "The Ghetto" was initially published on April 13, 1918 in *The New Republic*, it contained only three parts, which focused primarily on her Imagist snapshots of life in the ghetto, with special attention to the economic and imaginative lives of Jewish women. The poem did not include its later lines that observe union organizing meetings, nor did it include lines from her poems in the "Labor" section. Perhaps Ridge was still crafting her long poem, as well as many of the other poems in the book, or perhaps Ridge was aware of the context in which she was publishing. Indeed, the upper right corner of *The New Republic* that first published "The Ghetto" includes a note from Albert S. Burleson, Postmaster General from 1913-1921:

> When you finish reading this magazine place a one-cent stamp on this notice, hand same to any postal employee and it will be placed in the hands of our soldiers and sailors at the front. No wrapping—no address—

During WWI, Burleson initiated programs to deliver reading materials to soldiers with ease. But his support for the troops, combined with his conservative, racist politics and policies led him to be a staunch enforcer of the Espionage Act of 1917, which "was used to round up not just antiwar speakers, but to control the growing labor radicalism in the country," including members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and socialists who were in the public eye (Kindig 2008). Perhaps most infamous was Burleson's suppression of left-wing print journals, which he refused to mail, asserting that the content of the publications violated the Espionage Act. Burleson's claim held up in court, which concluded that, while circulation of the press is protected under the First Amendment, the circulation through the mail system is not. In "Art and Politics, Dissent and Repression: *The Masses Magazine* Versus the Government, 1917-1918," John Sayer explains that a "dozen or so socialist publications had been banned from the mails the first week the Act was in effect. Within five months every leading socialist publication had been barred from the mails at least once, many for weeks at a time" (Sayer 1988, p. 53). Significantly, in November 1917, affiliates of *The Masses* were indicted: "Five editors, the business manager, and one contributor were charged with conspiring to cause mutiny and refusal of duty in the military and attempting to obstruct recruiting and enlistment" (Sayer 1988, p. 55). Notably, one contributor, Josephine Bell, was included in the indictment because of her poem—"A Tribute"—that celebrated Ridge's friends and comrades, anarchists and anti-war activists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. The poem reads:

> Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman
> Are in prison,
> Although the night is tremblingly beautiful

And the sound of water climbs down the rocks
And the breath of the night air moves through multitudes
    and multitudes of leaves
That love to waste themselves for the sake of the summer.
Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman
Are in prison tonight.
But they have made themselves elemental forces,
Like the water that climbs down the rocks;
Like the wind in the leaves;
Like the gentle night that holds us;
They are working on our destinies;
They are forging the love of the nations;
    * * *
Tonight they lie in prison. (qtd. in Sayer 1988, p. 57)

Ridge would have been aware of these draconian attacks on the First Amendment, as well as the tangible consequences of being charged with violating the Espionage Act. Perhaps the truncated form of "The Ghetto" in April 1918 was due to some reservations on her part about its ability to be circulated if other sections of the poem had been printed. Ridge would have also been aware of the American Federation of Labor's official support of the War, and that only the members of the Industrial Workers of the World remained outspoken in their opposition to the draft and imperial war, even if the governing board of the IWW did not take an official stand against conscription.

In fact, ten years earlier in 1908, Ridge designed the cover art for Emma Goldman's pamphlet *Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty* (Figure 2), which "depicts 'Patriotism,' a woman in armor pinioning a prostrate female 'Liberty'" (Svoboda 2018).

Figure 2. Ridge, L., Artist. 1908. ***Cover Design for Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty by Emma Goldman*. Drawing.** Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History Repository, SSC-MS-00131. https://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/yaddo/popups/pop_15cov.html

Although they did not always agree on how to organize,[2] Ridge and Goldman were comrades, especially when Ridge first arrived in New York City. Ridge would have known of Goldman's imprisonment when she was charged with violating the Selective Service Act of 1917 after encouraging young men not to register for the draft. Ridge's consistent commitment to anti-authoritarianism, steadfast celebration of libertarianism, and her relationship with and illustration for Goldman reveal how she surely felt about Goldman's incarceration and eventual deportation, as well as the Espionage and Sedition Acts. Perhaps she even read Bell's tribute to Goldman and Berkman aloud in solidarity. What we know for certain, though, is that Ridge's *The Ghetto and Other Poems* was published in the wake of a growing labor movement, conscription, global war, and the repressive Acts that were passed following the United States' entrance into WWI in 1917. And in September 1918, B. W. Huebsch, known for publishing now classic works of literature that openly address an array of controversial topics, published "The Ghetto" in its nine-part form, along with forty-two other poems, some of which previously appeared in other left-wing magazines from the time. Quite possibly, Ridge intended for her shortened version of "The Ghetto" from *The New Republic* to drum up praise and interest among poets and critics alike, enticing them to experience the full force of her revolutionary poems—including those in her "Labor" section—when the book came out later than same year.

Of these radical poems, "Frank Little at Calvary," the fourth in her "Labor" sequence, is most often discussed. This poem commemorates the lynching and immortalizes the spirit of Frank Little: anti-capitalist, anti-war activist, and member of the IWW. Little was murdered for his union organizing activities and anti-war speeches in 1917 in Butte, Montana, where copper miners were striking for improved working and safety conditions after 168 miners were killed in a horrific accident just a month earlier. Little's rhetoric, "urging miners to strike and 'fight the capitalists but not the Germans'" (Carroll 2016), reveals his understanding that WWI, which the US had just entered a few months prior, was being fought by the poor and working-class for the benefit of rich men and imperialist endeavors. Little's sentiment is echoed in Ridge's "Legion of Iron," published in the "Labor" sequence of *The Ghetto and Other Poems*. The speaker of this poem wonders what would happen if:

> …the armies halted...
> And the train mid-way on the mountain
> And idle men chaffing across the trenches...
> And the cursing and lamentation
> And the clamor for grain shut in the mills of the world?
> What if they stayed apart,
> Inscrutably smiling,
> Leaving the ground encumbered with dead wire
> And the sea to row-boats
> And the lands marooned –
> Till Time should like a paralytic sit,
> A mildewed hulk above the nations squatting? (Ridge 1918, pp. 59-60)

For Ridge and Little, work stoppages are the source of anti-war and working-class power. She imagines "armies halt[ing] and men sitting "idle…across the trenches" while trains are no

[2] In *Anything that Burns You*, Terese Svoboda notes that "Ridge wrote in her 1940 diary: 'We [Goldman and I] parted spiritually—in silence—neither speaking of that which had parted us. It was only that she could brook no independence of action in any associate—indeed she did not want associates but disciples—and I realized sadly I was no disciple'" (Svoboda 2016, p. 85).

longer roaring and while grain is "shut in the mills of the world." Without this labor, imperial wars and capitalist businesses stop, and the power is placed in the hands of the many—the workers.

Ridge's "Frank Little at Calvary," which precedes "The Legion of Iron," positions Little as a labor martyr: "He walked under the shadow of the Hill" (Ridge 1918, p. 54), a reference to the site of Jesus' crucifixion, and he "summoned" workers to lay down the tools of their labor. When the "Lords of the Hill… heard out of the silence of wheels / The answer ringing / In endless reverberations" (p. 54), they prepared for their lynching of Little. As Lucy Collins lucidly explains: "Exceptionally, in this poem, it is not the clamour of outright protest that makes the authorities fearful, but rather the silence that ensues as the men abandon their work" (Collins 2023, p. 1133). Driven by this fear, the authorities:

> …covered up their faces
> And crept upon him as he slept...
> Out of eye-holes in black cloth
> They looked upon him who had flung
> Between them and their ancient prey
> The frail barricade of his life...
> And when night – that has connived at so much –
> Was heavy with the unborn day,
> They haled him from his bed... (p. 54)

Ridge's description of black-hooded predators dragging Little "from his bed" reveals her sympathy for the organizer and disgust for his murder, further cementing her political position that strikes and organizing are clearly powerful tactics to threaten the agents of capitalism, especially if they are willing to pay off vigilantes to murder for the sake of war and profits, as they likely did with Little.

Heterophonic Call and Response in "Fuel," "A Toast," and "The Legion of Iron"

Several other of Ridge's work poems, specifically "Fuel," "A Toast," and "The Legion of Iron," challenged and continue to challenge reining imperialist and capitalist systems and ideologies. These three poems, individually and collectively, rely on communal poetics and call and response patterns to present their song of protest and liberation. "Fuel," positioned between "The Legion of Iron" and "A Toast," devotes a specific voice or perspective to each of its three stanzas, though they all respond to the same question, "Do 'common men' need art?" The poetics of "Fuel" thus enacts a type of heterophony: the poem's texture comes from three stanzas addressing the same theme, yet with variegated voices and tones. The first stanza reads:

> What of the silence of the keys
> And silvery hands? The iron sings…
> Though bows lie broken on the strings,
> The fly-wheels turn eternally…(Ridge 1918, p. 61)

The first three lines focus on abstractions and posit a philosophical question about music and art: "What of the silence of the keys / And silvery hands?" The speaker innocently wonders where the beautiful music has gone since "bows lie broken on the strings." Experience has taught the speaker, though, that the sound she now hears is the "iron sing[ing]"; thus, our speaker reveals that art is dying or is being forgotten for the sake of hard labor. The image of

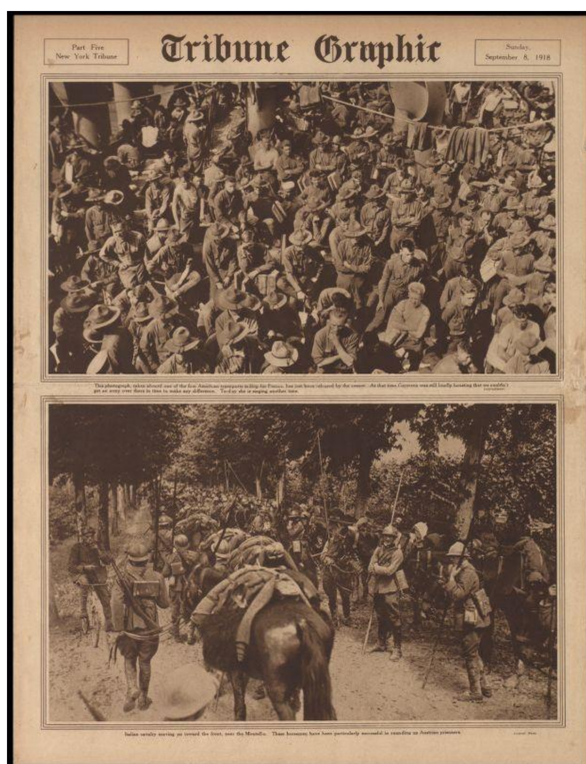
"fly-wheels turn[ing] eternally" signals that the sacrifice of art for oppressive work has been happening for ages and may continue indefinitely. The first speaker or voice of "Fuel" quietly ponders the reality that iron workers need not hear the songs of the pianos, harps, or violins; their music will be the song of iron only (importantly, this particular iron song is distinct from the one in "The Song of Iron"; note that "iron" in this poem is not capitalized, not personified, as it is in the previously discussed poem). We can detect the speaker's discomfort in the first stanza, though, through the repetition of the "s" sound throughout these lines, but particularly in the first two: "What of the silence of the keys / And silvery hands? The iron sings…" The serpentine "hiss" present at the outset both softens and troubles the first voice's ponderings, as she realizes that some form of evil resides in the hard labor forced in the factories.

The poem's second speaker or voice, which is present in the next four lines of the poem, addresses a different version of the same theme; that is, while the sense of the next few lines is the same, like a heterophonic musical score, the tone is different. Thus, this poem approximates heterophony because of the variegated, yet thematically similar, senses of each stanza. The second voice also reflects on the futility of art and dreams, though the tone feels more urgent, unlike the pensive pace of the first four lines:

> Bring fuel — drive the fires high…
> Throw all this artist-lumber in
> And foolish dreams of making things…
> (Ten million men are called to die.) (Ridge 1918, p. 61)

The speaker constructs imperatives: workers are to "Bring fuel — drive the fires high… / Throw all this artist-lumber in." The directives seem to come from someone in charge, like a factory boss bent on keeping the fire burning with no care for the workers or their dreams. In fact, this second voice delights in destroying the workers' "foolish dreams of making things," telling them to annihilate all art and beauty in service of work and, essentially, war and destruction.

These shrewd factory owners then transform into politicians who are not simply fueling a factory, but a Great War, and they parenthetically remark, perhaps behind closed doors, that the fuel must be in continual supply because "Ten million men are called to die." This line alludes to two important realities: that the steel mills supplied necessary materials for the war effort during WWI and that this war called millions of soldiers to the front lines, many of whom were killed or maimed. One important photo that alludes to the mass of men shipping out to war was actually censored for years but was printed on the cover of the *New York Tribune Graphic* in September 1918 (Figure 3), the same month and year that *The Ghetto and Other Poems* was published.



Part Five
New York Tribune

Tribune Graphic

Sunday,
September 8, 1918

Figure 3. *The New York Tribune*. Sept. 8, 1918. *Front Page of the New-York Tribune Graphic*. Newspaper Image. New York, NY. Available online: https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83030214/1918-09-08/ed-1/?sp=1&r=-0.316,0.085,1.436,0.832,0 (accessed on 27 September 2024).

The top photo depicts a crowd of American soldiers "aboard one of the first American transports sailing for France," according to the caption. The anonymous faces of the men are framed at the top of the photo by the transport ship's smokestacks—most likely made of steel. These men being hauled off to war were thus being transported by a ship and with weapons that were manufactured, at least in part, in the factories within which some of these men worked at home. These "ten million men [were] called to die" in the war, but the poem reminds readers that an entire steel industry at home helped prepare for the war, helped pave the way for the deaths of so many men with creative potential, so many men with "dreams of making things." With the same meter and rhyme scheme as the first four lines, and with the same basic theme, the urgent and somber voice of "Fuel's" second stanza dissonantly responds to the basic question, "Do 'common men' need art?" According to the politicians, the answer is "no." Together, the first two stanzas of this poem create discordant, discomfiting, and complex responses by two separate voices musing over the same question, the same "call."

The poem's final three lines yield yet another response, contributing to the poem's overall heterophony. The third voice's tone falls between the first two voices, pragmatically asking, "what dreams have these [common men] to hide from death?" The poem's third voice explains that the "common men," the workers who are also the "fuel" for war, "have no hour for books or art," as they are forever working and "sweat[ing] to keep their common breath." This third voice seems to prescribe war as a noble, glorified alternative to hard work in the factory; war, indeed is the "common man's" new art! Thus, the heterophonic poetics contribute to an overall somber tone in "Fuel." The poem's link between worker, soldier, and death echoes O'Donnell's "Song of Iron," where the speaker notes that "Two thousand Irons / Have gone into the fire," a probable conflation of worker and soldier during the Civil War.

Readers might easily mistake Ridge's song-poem of protest to be completely despairing, without a hopeful future for the "common man." However, her likely deliberate choice of the word "apart" in line nine is more than mere filler to maintain a rhyme scheme. The final four lines again read:

> As for the common men apart,
> Who sweat to keep their common breath,
> And have no hour for books or art —
> What dreams have these to hide from death! (Ridge 1918, p. 61)

Careful attention to this one small word continues to reveal Ridge's vision of communal liberation through collective struggle. She not only uses poetic "tactics," such heterophony, within this single poem; she also subtly reveals that liberation is achieved within community. The "common men" in these final lines are "apart" from each other, sweating and dreaming alone. Because of their lack of collective consciousness or action, they will indeed become fuel for work and war.

But Ridge's word "apart" in "Fuel" gestures toward the previous poem in the book, "The Legion of Iron," to posit a vision for communal action whereby workers, united in consciousness and action, actually stop the capitalist machine that drives men to war. In "The Legion of Iron," the speaker describes the laborers' silent yet present working-class consciousness. Their routine work has "planned [them] to resistance / Like steel that has cooled in the trough" and has taught them how to "conquer, withstand, overthrow" (Ridge 1918, p. 59); they know "force as a brother / And power as something to play with" (p. 59). Ridge's lines call to mind a photograph from 1906 of a group of iron workers from Pittsburgh, PA (Figure 4):

Figure 4. 1906. *Rolling Mill Crew*. Photograph. Pittsburgh, PA. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation Collection Photographs, 1864-1953, MSP 33, Library and Archives Division, Senator John Heinz History Center. MSP33.B005.F24.I02. Available online: https://historicpittsburgh.org/islandora/object/pitt%3AMSP33.B005.F24.I02 (accessed on 27 September 2024).

In the image, two rows of men pose for a camera, and because of the seated/standing positions of the workers and the contrasts between light and dark in the image, viewers' eyes are drawn first to the arms and hands in the photograph. In several sets of hands, men hold tools for their work in the rolling mill; curiously, though, these tools appear in the photo as weapons. One worker seated in the front row, for example, grins as he balances multiple tools that resemble swords, as if preparing for a duel, while the man seated next to him seems to be positioned to swing his tool in battle. While Ridge likely did not view this image (it was not published in any

newspaper or magazine), the lines of her poem suggest at least a familiarity with such imagery and her awareness that metal workers literally hold the tools in their hands to fight against their oppressive working conditions. Importantly, the men in the photograph are not working, not wielding their tools for work. This stoppage of work is key to any labor movement's struggle to improve working conditions. Both the image of the *Rolling Mill Crew* and Ridge's "The Legion of Iron" suggest that, because of their experiences in doing hard labor together, workers have gained the seeds of working-class strength and consciousness necessary to overthrow the system that oppresses them and eventually leads them to death.

In two short lines between the two longer stanzas of "The Legion of Iron," the speaker wonders: "But what if they stood aside / Who hold the earth so careless in the crook of their arms?" (Ridge 1918, p. 59). The speaker answers herself near the end of the poem and reminds her readers that their communal power lies not in passively accepting their positions in society ("holding the earth so careless"), but by actively choosing not to work—to stand "apart" from the capitalist machine. She writes: "What if they stayed *apart*, / Inscrutably smiling" (p. 60, emphasis added), like the man smiling in the front row of the *Rolling Mill Crew* photograph with his sword-like tools. Ridge's use of the word "apart" in this poem distinguishes it from "Fuel": in "Fuel," the men are standing apart from each other, which weakens their community; in "The Legion of Iron," the speaker encourages the men to collectively stand "apart" from labor and war. Should this power be exercised, we would see "the armies halted… / And the train mid-way on the mountain" (p. 59); indeed, "Time" would "like a paralytic sit" (p. 60). The workers, when organized in community, have the power to halt all work, all wars—even time—so that they and their demands are even greater than the nations that depend on their labor. Because of their collective power and consciousness and choice not to be so "careless" with their power as workers, they will no longer be alienated from each other and will instead become communion for each other, nourishing their comrades to have the strength to fight their oppression.

Yet another, perhaps more obvious reading of the "Legion of Iron" exists, one in which the subject of the poem, the "they" of first line, is not iron workers but a collective of bosses and politicians who abuse their power. These men in charge might be the ones who "hold the earth so careless" and worry about tools rusting when they "see…blood as a slip of the iron" (Ridge 1918, p. 59). In this interpretation, "stand[ing] apart" refers to the bosses and politicians backing down, removing themselves from the economic and production equation (an unlikely circumstance). The rhetorical questions that persist throughout the poem thus ask readers to imagine what the world might be like without this "legion of iron," without the orchestrators of imperial wars and oppressive work. Art—in this case Ridge's poem—provides fuel for creative thought: can readers imagine a world without bosses/generals, dangerous working conditions, and war? The rhetorical questions directly address the audience, nudging them into thought and, ideally, creative action.

Appropriately, in "A Toast," which immediately follows "Fuel," Ridge's speaker reflects on the "common men" who went off to war, as well as those who "stood aside." She "toasts," first, the men who served in World War I, though she is not honoring their patriotism or bravery. The speaker refers to these men as the "Heroes who died for evil, / Believing the evil was good" (Ridge 1918, p. 62). They have been victims of capitalism's "greed [that is] never sated, / [Which] barters the souls in [its] snares, / That were trapped in the lusts [it] created / For incense and masses and prayers" (p. 62). The poem's logic suggests that the soldiers or "fuel" for war, the "common" workers, are lured in by an "imbecile God," who perpetuates capitalist greed, "Deal[ing]" and "Trad[ing]," with what seems to be no way out (p. 62). Organized religion

then seeks to cover up this greed, since the traditional and sacrificial altars are insatiably greedy as well.

Ridge also honors a second group in “A Toast”: the revolutionaries who resisted World War I and likely those who supported the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. She refers to these revolutionaries as the “Breakers, the Bold, the Despoilers, / Who dreamed of a world over-thrown” and who “died for the millions of toilers,” such as American and Russian workers in WWI (Ridge 1918, p. 63). Ridge’s “A Toast” re-members those who were maimed or had died for lies on the Western Front, or, because of their radical politics—their standing “aside” and “apart”—had been “Outlawed” or “Branded…red-handed” (p. 63). Perhaps Ridge had Emma Goldman in mind when she crafted this poem, for Goldman was surely one of those outlaws, having been arrested for rioting, educating about birth control, and encouraging workers to resist the draft during WWI.

It is also possible that Ridge had an image in mind from the August 1916 issue of the *International Socialist Review* (Figure 5), captioned as “Just a few red girls at the Finnish picnic”:

Figure 5. Dawson, George, Photographer. Aug. 1916. *Just a Few Red Girls at the Finnish Picnic*. Digital scan of photograph. *The International Socialist Review* 17.2: p. 78. Available online: https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/isr/v17n02-aug-1916-ISR-riaz-ocr.pdf (accessed on 27 September 2024).

The photo features a group of women draped with pennants reading, “One Big Union,” the motto of the IWW. These women were “rebel girls”: members and supporters of the IWW, which organized the Mesabi Iron Range Strike of 1916, a legendary battle between workers and owners of the Oliver Mining Company in Minnesota. Ridge’s toast to the “devoted, red-handed” echoes the ISR’s description of the group of women as “red girls” who were “Bold” in support of the striking miners (Ridge 1918, p. 63), often participating in protest parades by carrying signs that “framed the strike as a struggle not over mining conditions but the wellbeing of miners’ households” (LaVigne 2016, p. 95). David LaVigne concludes in “Rebel Girls: Women in the Mesabi Iron Range Strike of 1916” that such actions “shamed strikebreakers…heartened striking miners to carry on the fight [and] increased union membership and aided fund-raising” (LaVigne 2016, p. 95). The women rebels’ actions thus extended the community of laborers who “dream[ed]…of a world over-thrown” (Ridge 1918,

p. 63). Thus, when Ridge's poem "A Toast" refers to the "Brotherhood not understood" (p. 63), she is not referring to a gender-specific "brotherhood," but rather a collective of men and women committed to revolutionary activity.

Ridge depicts these revolutionaries with a Blakean re-visioning of martyrdom, since her martyrs are not those "anointed of heaven"; instead, her martyrs are anointed by "Hell"—by the revolutionary spirit that sought to overthrow the systems that lead to the soldiers' deaths and the workers' endless toil. When "A Toast" is considered alongside "Fuel" and "The Legion of Iron," we see a dialogue in which one poem continually remakes the next, particularly with respect to the phrases "common men" and "standing apart." Much like the heterophonic lines toward the end of "The Song of Iron," these three poems are meant to interact with each other and collectively sing a song of communion and communal action in which workers are called to organize together for their own liberation.

Put in the context of local and international labor movements, a global war, and suppressive laws at home, *The Ghetto and Other Poems* can be understood as a site for Ridge to express her commitment to working-class struggle against oppression. Her "Labor" poems in particular respond to her adopted nation's call during wartime, and her response does not disappoint. A revolutionary spirit—anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist—moves through this section of poems. Nowhere is this truer than in the first two lines of her "Dedication," where she collapses the boundary between the voice of her speaker and her own voice as a poet: "I would be a torch unto your hand / A lamp unto your forehead, Labor" (Ridge 1918, p. 48). Some might argue that she overstates the importance of poetry to working class struggle when she conflates her words with a miner's torch or head lamp, but they would be wrong. Poetry in many forms, including work song, has long been integral to working-class lives and movements, and *The Ghetto and Other Poems* suggests that poetry of the avant-garde also has a place in working-class struggle and resistance. "The Song of Iron" does not "reveal…a poet who…has lost contact with the earth, with the 'common men apart'" (Tobin 2004, p. 80); rather, "The Song of Iron," in addition to other "Labor" poems, are grounded in images of working-class labor and struggle and in discussions of the "common man's" resistance and power. Her message of the importance of community and collective action is also beautifully rendered through her attention to sound and experimentation with punctuation.

Like other modernist poets, Ridge was interested in making sense of the significant changes brought on by the violence of the modern era; however, her view of historical change, which is explored throughout *The Ghetto and Other Poems* overall, knows that a clean break from traditions and their symbolic systems is both impossible and ahistorical. In the struggle for revolution, it is especially important to maintain a sense of class consciousness that builds and learns from past struggle and movements. However, Ridge knew early on that it might take time for her poetic and political vision to be appreciated and to materialize, which she makes clear in the next two lines of her "Dedication" poem. The entire first stanza reads:

> I would be a torch unto your hand,
> A lamp upon your forehead, Labor,
> In the wild darkness before the Dawn
> That I shall never see…(Ridge 1918, p. 48)

Ridge understood that she might not see the "Dawn" of a new, liberated day, but that it would be "Better" for her to have participated in the "last grand charge…Scattering a brief fire about [our] feet" than to have not struggled at all, only to become a "taper forgotten in the dawn" (p.

48). Not participating in the revolutionary struggle—through her art, editorship, or political action—would be akin to "[b]urning out the wick" (p. 48). Her anarcho-libertarianism—and her refusal to be pinned down easily—allowed her to unapologetically speak to two audiences: the avant-garde poetry circles of which she was a key player and the labor/grassroots activist circles of which she was an organizer and participant. Ridge trusted that her agitating, discordant, revelatory words and ideas would burn, even if faintly over half a century, to eventually fan the flames of discontent within working-class struggle, art, and scholarship. It is tempting to conclude that Ridge was ahead of her time with her early publications, but to do so would be inaccurate. Ridge was precisely of her time, a visionary capable of reading her historical moment and responding to it with resonant poems that invited her readers to discern how they, too, might be of service to the revolutionary ideal.

Author Bio:

Michelle B. Gaffey began her professional career as a high school and middle school English teacher, though she has been teaching composition and literature at the college level for over two decades. A multiple award-winning educator, she has co-developed various integrative learning experiences, including service-learning projects (most notably, her "Community Listening Project"); an undergraduate critical reading course (Afrofuturist Coming-of-Age Stories); and an interdisciplinary, action-learning course (Women Versus Sweatshops). Michelle was a first-generation college student, originally from northern Appalachia. Her working-class roots are at the heart of her scholarship, pedagogy, and activism. She currently lives with her family in Virginia.

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“The Tale is Soon Told”: Working-Class Storytelling in Sylvia Pankhurst’s “Thrift” and May Westoby’s “The Injustice of the King”

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Abstract

From 1880 onwards British Socialists produced a substantial body of short fiction using working-class oral literary traditions to frame their narratives. Women remain underrepresented in scholarship on this aspect of literary studies in part because much of what they wrote has been lost to history or remains hidden. Retrieving Sylvia Pankhurst’s “Thrift” (*The Woman’s Dreadnought*, June 1914) and May Westoby’s “The Injustice of the King” (*Justice*, November 1910) from the archives, and republishing them for a contemporary audience, contributes to restorative projects by scholars seeking to broaden the scope of writing on Socialist women’s creative activism by expanding the existing body of available work to include unpublished or neglected fiction, plays and poetry. These short stories, originally published in British newspapers, are examples of Pankhurst and Westoby’s ability to appeal to a socially situated readership of working men and women by simulating oral literatures, and more specifically, forms typical of the parable, fairy tale, moral tale, and working-class life writing. These stories exemplify how Socialist writers brought non-fiction and fiction into dialogue to simplify complex ideas, humanize the cold constraints of politics, draw connections between the social and the political, and pay tribute to British working-class culture and traditions.

Keywords

Sylvia Pankhurst, May Westoby, oral literature, fairy tale, working-class, Britain, short story, women’s writing, politics, socialism

> “Experience that is passed from one mouth to the next is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And of all who have written down their stories, the greatest are those whose writing differs the least from the speech of the many anonymous storytellers.”
>
> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller” (Trans. T. Lewis, 2019)

In British working-class communities passing oral literatures down through the generations was (and in some places, still is) a common cultural practice. From 1880 onwards, a substantial number of Socialist authors recognized the political affordances of this practice and adapted forms typical of the parable, fable, fairy tale, and moral tale as vehicles for ideology (Rosen, 2018, p.6). Men *and* women wrote short fiction, and yet the latter remain underrepresented in

edited collections and scholarship.[1] One possible reason is that, despite growing interest in working-class literature, and literature written for working-class readers, there is still considerable work to be done to uncover and give due consideration to stories by women.[2] Until recently, May Westoby's two-part serial "The Injustice of the King" (*Justice,* 1910)[3] and Sylvia Pankhurst's "Thrift" (*The Woman's Dreadnought,* 1914)[4] were two of those lost stories.[5] Recovering fiction by well-known historical figures like Pankhurst, and previously unrecognized writers like Westoby contributes to restorative projects by scholars like Rachel Holmes who published Pankhurst's play *Between Two Fires* in 2022. Holmes and others are doing the important work of expanding the existing body of publicly accessible fiction by Socialist woman authors, which in turn expands scholarship to include women's contribution to British Socialism, creative activism, working-class culture and readerships, and literary production in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The republication of "Thrift" and "The Injustice of the King" is timely. There is renewed interest in Pankhurst's life and politics which has been well documented, most recently in Holmes' *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel* (2020), Marion Wynne-Davies' "Sylvia Pankhurst Poetry and Politics" (2021), and Eileen Luscombe's *History and Legacy of the Suffragette Fellowship Calling all Women!* (2024). Her creative activism has received some attention in scholarship on the poetry that she wrote while serving a sentence in Holloway Prison (*Writ on Cold Slate*, 1922)[6] but her fiction is typically sidelined because of a consensus that, in Patricia Romero's words, she "was not a writer of uncommon ability and she often used an old-fashioned, nineteenth-century style which serious poets of the 1920s and 1930s had long since abandoned" (1987, 178). Pankhurst wrote the majority of her fiction and poetry in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century – a period in literary history defined by the rise of modernism, challenges to conventional narrative and poetic forms, and the advent of the literary critic. This was of no consequence to her. She was not interested in infiltrating

[1] See Michael Rosen's *Workers' Fairy Tales: Socialist Fairy Tales, Fables, and Allegories* (2018), for example.
[2] In their introduction to the first volume of *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives* (2020), editors John Lennon and Magnus Nilsson speak to a renewed global interest in working-class literature and literary culture reflected in a growing body of constantly evolving scholarship. In his chapter, "British Working-Class Writing: Paradox and Tension as Genre Motif" (2020, pp. 159-195), Simon Lee provides a comprehensive overview of important scholarship on British working-class writing, including special issues of journals like *Women's Studies Quarterly* (1995) and *Victorian Poetry* (2001). Pamela Fox has done important work on British novels by working-class women in studies like *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel 1890-1945* (1994), which includes engagement with books by Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and Ellen Wilkinson. There is very little on short fiction, and less on Socialist short fiction written by women for a working-class readership. Although Westoby and Pankhurst were middleclass writers, they were committed to the Socialist cause and wrote primarily for working men and women.
[3] See Appendix I
[4] See Appendix II
[5] To the best of my knowledge these stories have not appeared in collections of these authors' works, short story collections or in any other format since their initial publication. Permission to reproduce Sylvia Pankhurst's "Thrift" and May Westoby's "The Injustice of the King" was provided by THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive. See www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
[6] In "Sylvia Pankhurst Poetry and Politics" (*Women's Suffrage in Word, Image, Music, Stage and Screen* 2022) Marion Wynne-Davies does the important work of bringing these, and some previously unpublished poems, into dialogue with works by Jamaican poet Claude McKay. She builds on Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle's comparison between *Writ on Cold Slate* and the poetry in the 1912 Suffragette anthology *Holloway Jingles* (*A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* 2005). There are rare exceptions, including Kathryn Dodd's useful compilation of works by Pankhurst in *A Sylvia Pankhurst Reader* (1993) which provides an overview of fiction and non-fiction that traces her progression from a young, idealistic Suffragette, to a radical Socialist.

modernist circles. She wanted to make the "struggle for a better world… beautiful, aesthetically uplifting and inspiring" (Connelly, p.8).

While Pankhurst is a known name, there is very little written about Westoby outside of the occasional fleeting mention of her works for theatre (Leach, 2023, p.44), and friendship with Lizzie Glasier (Rosen, 2014). She succeeded Glasier as editor of the youth magazine *The Young Socialist*. *Roseland,* a play about the transition from capitalism to Socialism was performed by the children at North Islington Socialist Sunday School as part of their annual Christmas party in 1917 ("North Islington Socialist Sunday School," p.8). *The Young Socialist* was created, in the words of Fred Glasier, to encourage "the development of imagination in childhood by publishing folklore and fairy tales" (Rosen, 2014, n.p). The 9 December 1920 edition of *Justice* advertised Westoby's *Through the Ivory Gates*, a collection of "fairy tales produced by Socialists for the children of Socialists" (p.7). The republication of "The Injustice of the King" adds to and lengthens the current roster of fairy tales written by Socialist woman writers for working-class children and adults.

Pankhurst wrote across genres, often combining or adapting them to enhance her intended message. At first glance, and if read out of context, "Thrift" could be mistaken for non-fiction.[7] The reader becomes aware of the fictional nature of the narrative by the fairy-tale-like opening describing "two little cottages covered with a tangled mass of roses and honeysuckle, and with their little garden plots ablaze with close-growing old-fashioned flowers. In the most flowery of these two cottages lived an old woman, well over 90 years of age" (p.2). The introduction primes the reader to expect a story located within the familiar tradition of folklore and storytelling. When the story evolves into the narrator's account of various interactions with an old woman, the reader does not mistake this for a record of real events. It is a parable (containing the familiar motif of the unhappy family) that cautions against willful ignorance while paying tribute to working-class life writing (anecdotes, observations and snippets of conversations).

"Thrift" perfectly illustrates Elizabeth Wanning Harries' point that "if we continue to read only a restricted list of fairy tales, limited by common assumptions about their requisite shape and concerns, we will miss some of the most interesting and challenging examples of the genre" (2003, p.5). The same applies to "The Injustice of the King" which, if assumptions remain intact, resembles a traditional fairy tale. Reading it in context shows the ways that Westoby adapts and toys with the genre when writing for an adult readership. She complicates the cast typical of a fairy tale, a Royal and a distressed damsel, by assigning these characters multiple roles. The King is the villain, the hero, and in need of saving. The damsel appears to need rescuing but becomes the hero. The common motif of the abduction and imprisonment of a young girl is contained in a story-within-the-story. It serves two functions. First, Westoby foregrounds the idea that "The Injustice of the King" only exists because of the traditions that precede it by making the oral tradition of storytelling the catalyst for what transpires between

[7] This was a method that Pankhurst used often in her short fiction. The second instalment of "Co-Operative Housekeeping" (1920) that Kathryn Dodd published in *A Sylvia Pankhurst Reader* (1993) could easily be mistaken for an account of real events, and especially considering Pankhurst's trip to Russia to attend the Second Congress of the Communist International and her reports on co-operative living in the Soviet Union. The opening paragraphs of the first instalment, published in *The Woman's Dreadnought* on 21 August 1920, make it clear that Pankhurst was not reporting on a lived experience. The narrative centers on two fictional women in a Utopian post-Revolution society, conversing in a way reminiscent of the characters in William Morris' 1888 novel *A Dream of John Ball*.

the King and the woman who tells the tale. Second, the fairy-tale-like story that Lucilla tells is true but the King accuses her of lying – a reference to and critique of the gendered parallels between folklore and "Old wives' tales— that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it" (Carter, 1990, p.xi).

The fairy tale, parable, moral tale and fable are part of a politically charged working-class literary history dating back to the seventeenth century when the oral transmission of stories in the folk tradition was heavily discouraged. J. Paul Hunter attributes this phenomenon to Puritanism, and a distaste for the traditions of the lower classes that extended to "intellectuals and moralists of many progressive stripes" including "prophets of modernity like Hobbes, Tillotson, and Locke who did not necessarily share Puritan values" (1990, p.143). This was grounded in a "disapproval of oral tradition, distrust of a folk heritage that mixed pagan and Christian practices indiscriminately…moral objections to fictions as forms of false representation, and general suspicion of communal activities in which levity could become infectious" (p.143). In the eighteenth century, the ruling classes and moral watchdogs were faced with the increasing popularity of the novel. In the nineteenth century, education reforms accounted for a rapidly expanding reading public, and the fear of oral literatures was replaced with a fear of working-class reading habits. In the late 1880s, social anthropologist Fanny Mayne, alarmed and surprised by her findings, issued the warning that the working classes are "to a great extent, a reading people; a reading and a thinking people!" (as cited in Dalziel, 1957, p.5.).

The reading, thinking working classes often read fiction in affordable and readily available print media like William Morris' *Commonweal.* The journal published fiction and non-fiction side-by-side with "one aim – the propagation of Socialism" (William Morris, 1885, p.1). The combination of reportage and creative activism was designed to "awaken the sluggish, to strengthen the waverers, instruct the seekers after truth" (p.1). Socialist newspapers like *Justice*, Pankhurst's *Woman's Dreadnought* (later *The Workers' Dreadnought*) and her short-lived literary periodical, *Germinal,* fulfilled a similar function. They carried art, poetry, short stories and creative non-fiction alongside book reviews, news articles, extracts from works by philosophers like Karl Marx, and speeches by prominent political figures like Vladimir Lenin. For Pankhurst, art, visual and literary, was inseparable from life, and therefore inseparable from politics. Taking inspiration from *Commonweal*, she advertised *Germinal* in the 4 August 1923 edition of *The Worker's Dreadnought* as "Just the right magazine for all workers. Good stories, pictures, poetry and reviews" (p.7). She prefaced Volume I by stating that it was "intended to assist in the artistic expression of current thought, in order to bring art into contact with daily life and to use it as a means of expressing modern ideas and aspirations" (1923).

Artists and authors contributing to *Commonweal, Germinal* and *The Woman's'/Workers' Dreadnought* were not restricted by race, class, gender, genre or style. As Jonathan Rose notes in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001), working-class autodidacts struggled for centuries "to assume direction of their own intellectual lives, to become individual agents in framing an understanding of the world. They resisted ideologies imposed from above in order to discover for themselves the word of God, standards of beauty, philosophical truth, the definition of a just society" (pp.13-14). For the working classes, oral literatures were crucial for capturing and preserving a wealth of experience that class bias threatened to (or did) erase. Simulating storytellers' voices in print was a way for Socialists to signal their respect for these traditions and speak to readers in a language that they understood, with an intimacy that invited them to listen and receive the politics woven into the fabric of the narrative.

Telling Tales

Socialist newspaper serials or short stories were often strategically placed so that they spoke to the reports, editorials, transcribed speeches and letters printed around them. The first instalment of "The Injustice of the King" appeared next to a letter by Marx: "Mr. George Howell's History of the International Working Men's Association"(1878).[8] In his letter, Marx addressed "spurious literature on the International's history" written by Howell who exploited his authority as an ex-workman and member of the First Communist International General Council to support his "spurious literature on the International's history" (p.8). Marx pointed out that Howell disregarded facts and evidence and ignored eye-witness testimony to, "for purposes of his own," reshape history (p.8). The letter, originally published 32 years prior in the *Secular Chronicle* (4 August 1878), was not an account of recent events, it was a slice of history that functioned as a cautionary tale against believing slander, and the damaging effects of trying to please the upper classes. Instead of pride in his "former fellowship with a Working Men's Association, which won world fame and a place in the history of mankind," Howell approached his topic from a "lofty standpoint," pandering to the "cultured people of the Nineteenth Century" with the information "that the International was a failure" (p.8). As Marx noted, the International did not fail, it evolved.

Marx's response to the working man who betrayed his class by lying to the upper classes is reflected thematically in the first instalment of Westoby's story. The benevolent and fair young King Justus finds himself seated before a mother who is asking for help rescuing her daughter, Myra, from the "nobleman" who kidnapped her while she was picking flowers with Lucilla. The mother asks Lucilla to tell the King what happened, and "the tale is soon told" that the King was the one who took her (p.8). The King denies the accusations against him. His subjects are quick to believe him over Lucilla, betraying one of their own, who in an act of bravery and resistance tells the King and his subjects: "I spoke the truth, though I feared to do it" (p.8). The people "had always found [the King] generous and gay. These things blinded them to his look of evil now" (p.8). What they have been led to believe about the King clouds their judgement. They allow themselves to become active and willing participants in Lucilla's persecution, calling for her to be killed. The King takes a different, symbolic route. He blinds her because she saw the truth before sending her away so that she can no longer speak it. He returns Myra to her mother and secures their silence with a house and servants.

The failure to recognize the root cause of class disparity – to be blind to it, or willingly accept it – was a pervasive theme in Socialist fairy tales and other oral literatures. In 1912, in a story told to the children at the Socialist Labour Party Sunday School in Glasgow, Tom Anderson emphasized that if a lie is repeated often enough it can be mistaken for truth: "The great men you are told about by the lackeys of the master class live in big houses and have servants to attend to them, they own a great deal of wealth, and you are told stories about them and of their greatness, to cloud your brain and make you servile" ("Mary Davis; or the Fate of a Proletarian Family", *Workers' Tales,* p.230).[9] In Ethel Carnie Holdsworth's[10] "The Vendetta" (*Daily Herald* 1920), a vendetta between two families, each believing that the other is better off, leads to tragedy. The Merwyns' developmentally challenged child finds himself at the Granger's

[8] *Justice* made sure to point out that *The Secular Chronicle* was edited by Harriet Law, the only woman to sit on the First Communist International General Council.

[9] Tom Anderson's story was later printed in the periodical, *The Socialist*, for a wider audience of all ages.

[10] Activist, factory worker, and author Carnie Holdsworth enjoyed a successful writing career from 1907 through to the mid-1930s, producing poetry, novels and short stories, including four volumes of fairy tales. Carnie Holdsworth is one of only a few women widely celebrated for her contribution to working-class fiction.

home where Agnes Granger, spotting an opportunity for revenge, tries to think up a way to kill him. While she plots, the boy takes in the condition of her "hovel" and observes: "You – are poor – like us" (p.10). She manages to lure him to the "rotten-runged bridge that went near the water-wheel" but recalls his words, realizes the futility of the vendetta, and drowns in her efforts to save him. At the end of the story, Carnie Holdsworth draws attention to the idea that the misplaced blame that fueled the vendetta kept the families ignorant of the true origins of their poverty. The Grangers and the Merwyns walk away from Agnes' grave "to toil again – to the end, as Agnes had toiled. They had no hatred towards those who exploited them all generation after generation. They did not know" (p.10).

Pankhurst's "Thrift" concludes with a similar message to the one that Carnie Holdsworth left with her readers. The old woman routinely expresses her gratitude to the Lord whose estate has been maintained by her family, generation after generation. Only her father had earned a wage for managing one of the farms, while his wife and daughters earned nothing for taking care of the lambs and chickens. Her husband had been employed on the estate since he was a boy, eventually becoming principal gamekeeper. Together the old woman and her husband had "managed a large farm for the Lord with numbers of men and women under them" for which her "husband was never paid more than a pound a week, and she nothing at all" (p.2). Her son took over from her husband, who fell ill but continued to work until he died. After her husband's death, the agent wanted to evict the old woman, but she appealed to the Lord who let her stay. When the narrator points out that it's the least he could do after "years of unpaid work," the old woman smiles and replies: "Lord doesn't understand all that I have done for him" (p.2). At the close of "Thrift", after the son's wife dies leaving behind a debt, the old woman and her son "blamed not the Lord for whom they had done so much in return for so little, but that poor dead woman who had gone on working until the day she died" (p.2). In both Pankhurst and Carnie Holdsworth's stories the families fail to recognize that the events culminating in death and tragedy only come about because of an unequal society in which the rich profit from the labor of the poor. Both stories also hint at conflict within working-class communities and the ways that status and respectability distract from the realities of class disparity.

The title of Pankhurst's story is fraught with meaning. At its origins, thrift, from the Middle English 'thryfte' referred to a condition of prosperity. But, as Alison Hulme points out in *A Brief History of Thrift* (2019), from as early as the fourteenth century "the meaning of thrift (as thriving) was distorted and used as part of various economic and theological discourses. It came to be understood as an economic and cultural practice based on frugality and frequently linked to respectability" (p.3). Hulme illustrates the significance of the evolution of the term in nineteenth century discourse with the example of British pastor William Blackley who,

described the change in the meaning of thrift from thriving and good fortune, to careful spending and providence, as a shift from an emphasis on the human condition, to the human character or 'habit'. The choice of such words as character and habit was typical of an increasingly individualistic morality of the era that was quick to judge society's subjects, far less the mechanisms of state and society itself (p.3).

In "Thrift", Pankhurst addressed the moral judgement that Hulme describes by referencing two areas of concern that would have been familiar to an audience of working-class women readers: household thrift, and funerals. The contentment and the fantasy (fairy tale) that the old woman constructs for herself with its kind Lord and idyllic setting are disrupted by the debt that her son George's wife has accumulated. When George dismissed his impoverished oldest daughter,

saying that "she had chosen her own lot, and that nothing was to be given to her […] her mother had gone on helping her in secret whenever she could" (p.2). When she could no longer afford to provide for her daughter while running her own household, she took out a loan. According to Nicola Verdon, "an important premise attached to women's domestic management…was that her expertise and proficiency could promote careful household economy and thrift" ("The Modern Countrywoman", p.91). The old woman's criticism of her daughter-in-law is partly that she failed to conform to the domestic role expected of her:

"She hadn't been doing right for a long time," said the old woman. "I'd watched her and I knew she wasn't going straight. People like us can't afford to go putting beef steak on for dinner for a lot of hungry men as she did, instead of making it into a pudding so as it'd go further. She got that she hadn't the strength to take trouble as she should and when she knew she was going, she let things slide (p.2).

The daughter chose "her lot" and her failures as a wife and mother are, according to her father, grounds for punishment. By refusing to let her daughter and grandchildren starve the mother failed as a wife by not exercising careful economy and thrift in her own home. George tells the old woman, "She hasn't been the good wife I thought her…I didn't think she'd have done it" (p.2).

Pankhurst complicates the idea of household thrift by introducing another loan into the story. George has to "pay off the money" for the funeral implying that it was borrowed (p.2). In contrast to the loan that the mother takes to support her daughter, the old woman and George see the funeral loan as a necessary expense that will maintain the social standing of the family. In the chapter "Thrift" in Maud Pember Reeves' *Round About a Pound a Week* (1913) she noted that without burial insurance the working classes ran "the risk of burial by the parish" or being forced into "borrowing the sum necessary to pay the funeral expenses, or of undergoing the disgrace of a pauper funeral" (p.67). The pauper's funeral was considered "wanting in dignity and in respect to their dead," amounting to a "political and social degradation of a perfectly respectable family" (p.68). The cost of the funeral factors into the moral judgement that the old woman and George pass on the mother. For them, the pauperization that they avoided by giving her a proper burial is cancelled out by the financial burden that they are left with and the disgrace of her failure as a wife. They blame the mother, instead of the social and economic inequalities that contributed to her daughter's destitution, forced her to borrow money, led to her death and left the old woman and her husband in debt.

Pankhurst takes the moral of her story to its conclusion by drawing her readers' attention to what inspired her to write "Thrift":

That never ending painful contriving to make ends meet on little wages with so many mouths to feed weighs down the hearts of poor working mothers and warps the whole current of their lives…Last week three cases of mothers' suicide were reported in the newspapers. One woman's husband had given way to drink. The husbands of the other two were out of employment. It was only just possible for these women to make ends meet when their husband's small weekly wages were coming in regularly. They could not face the future with an added load of debt that they might never be able to pay off (p.2).

There were an astounding number of suicides, mostly by working-class women, in the week that Pankhurst refers to.[11] A report that comes close to one of the incidents that may have informed Pankhurst's story is the death of Eliza Alice Seddon, a mother who drowned herself in the Rochdale Canal in Newton Heath on 6 June 1914. *The Manchester Evening News* reported that her husband, John William Seddon, was unemployed, and hadn't been living with his wife for a few weeks prior to her death ("Woman's Suicide: Strange Affair in Newton Heath," p.4). Pankhurst makes the connection between fiction and non-fiction to alert her readers to the reality underlying the fairy tale about a kind Lord, a dutiful son, and a wicked daughter-in-law that the old woman tells herself. The mother in "Thrift" was not being irresponsible or cruel. She was trying to spare her daughter from the same fate as women like Alice.

The Woman Problem

Like Pankhurst, Westoby was a proponent of women's rights. The first instalment of "The Injustice of the King", printed side-by-side with Marx's letter, is about storytelling and speaking truth to power. The second instalment (12 August 1910) was printed on a page with the headline "Our Women's Circle" (p.5). The story was flanked by Margaretta Hicks' tips for retaining interest in the Women's Socialist Circles, ideas for topics to be discussed at meetings and a list of freely available essays on everything from taxes and rent to health regulations (p.5). Just before Westoby's story, readers were invited to take in Dora B. Montefiore's attack on Ramsay MacDonald's statement about women at the Independent Labour Party (ILP) Conference on the Minority Report. In part two of "The Injustice of the King", the King falls ill and realizes that he can only be saved by confessing to his people. He admits to the Chief Councillor: "I stole the child Myra for a sudden whim that took me as I saw her in the woods. I left her housed without the city, and by the morrow had well-nigh forgotten her until Lucilla accused me, and I – oh! brute beast that I am – fearing to lose the popularity I had won – for so mean a reason – lied" (p.5). After Lucilla has returned to the castle and forgiven him, he falls back into brutish ways and makes "love" to her seemingly without her consent, "Frighten[ing] her terribly" (p.5). He convinces himself that he has always loved her, and asks her to marry him, becoming angry when she refuses: "Lucilla found a dozen reasons against her queenship. He would hear of none" (p.5). The King is both villain and savior. He kidnaps Myra on "a whim", forgets about her, and then 'rescues' her from where he imprisoned her. He 'rescues' Lucilla from the destitution that he caused by blinding and banishing her. He is a ruler who professes to care for his people but also kidnaps women, forgets about them, lies, and then punishes the witness to his crimes.

[11] To name a few, Jane Elizabeth Powell, wife of a railway employee, and a mother who had displayed signs of deep depression after the birth of her child, took her life while loudly singing hymns on 15 June 1914 ("Suicide While Singing," p.2). Edith Maud Camp, a domestic servant, hanged herself on 5 June 1914 after her fiancé broke off their engagement ("Broken Engagement: Girl Found Hanging Near Halesworth," p.7). Martha Bagwell shot herself at her husband's shooting gallery on 6 June 1914 ("Shot Through the Head: Wakefield Woman Suicide at Shooting Gallery," p.5). Maude Emmeline King, who worked at a Butcher's shop, was found drowned after leaving the house holding a letter. According to *The Reading Standard*, she was "very distressed about a family matter" (p.11). On 5 June 1914, Suffragette Joan Lavender Guthrie overdosed on barbiturate veronal ("Suffragette's Suicide: Painful London Case," p.6). Guthrie had developed a dependency on the drug after taking it to ease the pain caused by the forced feedings she was subjected to while incarcerated in Holloway Prison in 1912 for involvement in one of the WSPU's direct action campaigns. In a letter left for her mother she mentioned that she had been taking the drug every night (p.6). The courts and the media used Guthrie's death to vilify the Suffragettes and Socialism by making it appear that her activities with the former, and interest in the latter, had made her unstable.

The relationship between the King and Lucilla complicates the plot of a typical fairy tale. Lucilla's refusal to marry him is both a refusal of the role of hero that he wants to play and of the role that she is expected to play as a submissive damsel in distress. This narrative pairs well with Montefiore's response to MacDonald who, in her words, "was good enough to state from the chair that "women were the problem of the hour" ("The Family as the Unit of Society," *Justice,* p.5).[12] Montefiore was resisting the idea – an idea that MacDonald supported – that the traditional family unit is the economic foundation of society:

With all deference to Mr. MacDonald's perturbations, we Socialists look upon poverty, and not women, as the problem of the hour, and that problem of poverty can only be solved by the social and economic revolution about which Mr. MacDonald is so tired of hearing. The woman who is working as an economic unit of society will benefit by that revolution equally with the man; and together they will solve the various human problems as they arise; for "the worker, having made everything, he can destroy everything, and he can remake everything." (p.5).

Her main argument was that women were treated as creatures apart. She and other women (evident in the Women's Circles advertised by Hicks) were focused on "the *human* problems of the day that if we were looked upon more as human beings and less as creatures of sex by some of these gentlemen with the reformer's concept, we, as human beings, might perhaps be able to solve our own problems more cleanly and concisely than could any brainy statesman or fussy reformer" (p.5). At the end of "The Injustice of the King" Lucilla agrees to be Queen, but only after her sight is returned and the people have called for her crowning. Westoby emphasizes that without Lucilla's guidance, and "knowledge of all sorts and conditions of men and women…many a [law] that might have worked evil was refused the King's sanction" (p.5). The implication is that before she became Queen, laws like this had been passed due to the King's ignorance of the real conditions of his people, and his people, blinded by his benevolence, had mistaken them for justice. To borrow from Montefiore, Lucilla can solve problems more cleanly and concisely than anyone in the ruling class. It is only through an equal partnership between a man and a woman, a noble and someone from the lower classes that society is reformed in a way that benefits the Kingdom. Notably, Lucilla is never described as a wife or mother, only as a Queen.

1910, when "The Injustice of the King" was written and published next to Marx's letter and Montefiore's challenge to the ILP, was a critical year in the fight for gender equality in Britain. In 1905, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), tired of being sidelined and ignored, adopted a policy of direct action. Ethel Mannin (another underrecognized Socialist author who wrote short fiction) provided a brief overview of what that entailed in her book *Women and the Revolution* (1938):

members of parliament were lobbied, ministers' houses picketed, pavements and walls chalked with the battle-cry "Votes for Women" and "No Taxation with Representation"; mass meetings and processions were organised all over the country, leaflets and handbills and suffragist papers distributed and sold; the full machinery of militant propaganda was in action, and accelerated as time went on (p.75).

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[12] MacDonald was at the helm in the 1920s and 1930s when the Labour Party replaced the Liberal Party as the primary opposition to the Conservative Party. He was a firm proponent of the traditional family structure.

The WSPU was founded in 1903 by Emmeline, Christabel and Sylvia Pankhurst who determined that the women in the ILP needed their own organization if their voices were to be heard. In 1910, the policy of direct action turned from disruption to destruction when 300 women, including Pankhurst, protested outside Parliament. 18 November 1910 became known as Black Friday after the women were met with extreme State violence and police brutality ("Suffragette Raid: Women Brought up at Bow Street," 1911, p.1). The ILP was a Socialist organization, but as Montefiore's letter makes clear, it was flawed when it came to representing the interests of women, and especially working-class women. After 1910, the WSPU began to move away from Socialist ideals entirely, and by 1914, when Pankhurst wrote "Thrift" it was no longer engaging in radical action. As Britain entered the First World War, Pankhurst was expelled from the WSPU for refusing to break ties with Socialist politics and the Labour movement. She questioned the Feminism that her mother and sisters championed, which was limited to efforts to abolish inequality between upper-middleclass and middleclass men and women.

Pankhurst saw the struggle for gender equality as inseparable from the struggle to emancipate the working classes and liberate the colonies. Pankhurst, Montefiore and Westoby agreed on the basic idea proposed at the end of "The Injustice of the King" that people across class lines should work together towards a common goal: a Socialist society in which "*human beings,*" regardless of race, class and gender lived side-by-side as equals. Pankhurst, taking steps to achieve this goal, founded the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) in one of the poorest areas in London, set up a base of operations for *The Woman's Dreadnought*, and invited men to join her organization. She then set to work creating spaces in Bromley and elsewhere where meals could be purchased for a penny (or provided free of charge in cases of destitution). The building served as a "pure milk depot and babies' clinic," with plans to open "a crèche where young children of women at work may remain during the day" ("Cheap Meals for East End Poor," p.4). In addition, Pankhurst campaigned for a state-funded minimum wage for housewives in response to what she saw as the "gross underpayment of women's labour" ("A Minimum Wage for Women," p.2). "Thrift" was written in response to the plight of working-class women who performed unwaged labour. The pressure to make ends meet often came at the cost of their health, the stability of the family unit, or in the case of Alice Seddon, their lives.

Fictional literary illustrations or interpretations of political ideas in print media bridged the gap between doctrine and the people who received it. Children's stories typically relayed a simple, clearly spelt out political idea. There is no ambiguity in the message of Keir Hardie's 1893 fairy tale "The History of a Giant: Being a Study in Politics for Very Young Boys": "High over the Tent of Labour a gallant standard is floating proudly in the breeze, and on it are emblazoned in letters of gold the words – "INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY," and under that flag will be found those who love Humanity more than material greatness" (*Labour Leader,* p.3). Tales published in newspapers and journals directed at an adult readership worked differently. Pankhurst and Westoby's stories are examples of how fact and fiction were brought into dialogue to simplify complex ideas, humanize the cold constraints of politics, draw connections between the social and the political, and pay tribute to British working-class culture and oral traditions. While fiction by Socialist woman authors like Pankhurst and Westoby stays hidden in archives or is dismissed because it appears old-fashioned or unsophisticated, studies on

British creative activism, working-class concerns, politics and literary history will remain incomplete.[13]

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Appendix I

The Injustice of the King: A Story[14]

May Westoby

Part one: *Justice*, 5 November 1910

In the great hall of judgement, the young King Justus was growing weary. It was exceedingly hot, and the appeals for justice had been very many.

Already noon was far past, and the Court grown restless. As one case was disposed of, and the offenders in it led away to prison, the King turned top his chief councillor, an old man" "I am so hungry I could eat an ox," he laughed. "After this next appeal we will dismiss the people."
"Some of them have come far, sire, to claim justice of him who is accounted the most just of living princes."

Justus blushed like a girl.

"We will not send them away. See that those who must wait are well cared for and comfortably lodged until tomorrow. Ah! what is this?

Two women had approached the throne, one old, one young. The elder, who was a widow, stretched her hands in supplication towards the King. Kneeling, she raised her eyes, red-rimmed and dimmed with much weeping, beseechingly, while she spoke brokenly.

"Justice, most just King! Give me back my fatherless daughter – my only child. Yesterday she was stolen away by some great lord."
Her grief choking her, she ceased speaking to gain control of herself. Justus bade her rise, saying kindly:
"Take comfort, dame. Assure yourself that if it be within out power your daughter shall soon be in your arms. But we must know more of the story. How came this robbery about?"

The widow, calmer now, turned to her companion. "Lucilla, speak! Thou was with the child." Then to the King: "I besought this maiden to accompany me because all I know she has told me."

The King's eyes dwelt with admiration on Lucilla. She was a tall girl of slight build, having the delicate beauty of her face framed in chestnut curls. Either for fear or shyness, she had kept her eyes on the ground, but, at the King's command to speak, she raised them, and looked at him. He wondered at her. She spoke collectedly, yet in her low, clear tones an odd sense of unwillingness surprised her hearers.

"Sire," she began, bowing low, as custom demanded, "the tale is soon told. Yesterday I went with Myra to the woods to gather flowers. We went each a different way to see which should have her basket soonest filled. We were to call to each other when this was done. I was

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fortunate, so that my basket soon overflowed, but I forgot to call Myra because horses' hoofs on the road drew my attention. I watched the coming rider unseen, and could not look away. I know not why." (Here Lucilla flushed scarlet, but paled again quickly, and went on.) "So it is that his face and form, his attire, and even the caparisoning of his horse, are fixed in my memory. He rode past, but drew rein a little further on, and, leaning from his saddle, looked smiling into the wood. Then I lost sight of him, for, still silent, I took a few steps in the direction I thought Myra might be, and the trees hid him from me. Just as I remembered I had not called, I heard Myra's voice distinctly. She cried for help again and again. I ran towards the sound, when a turn in the path again showed me that road. The horse was galloping away, but I could see Myra's golden hair and blue gown where she was held in the rider's arms, and I heard her cries grow fainter until all were out of sight."

Lucilla stopped, and once more looked on the ground. As for Justus, he had ceased to look on her long before, and throughout her narrative had fidgeted with a chain he wore about his neck. Now he fixed a curious gaze on her.

"You say you would know this man if you saw him?" he asked deliberately.
"Yes, sire."
"Describe him."
Lucilla turned paler, if that could be. Everyone saw her tremble.

"Sire," she said, so low scarce any could hear her, "it was thyself."
The Chief Councillor looked at Justus and was surprised to see anger furrow his brow, and a cruel curve new to it creep about his mouth. He rose, and towered above the trembling Lucilla.

His voice was harsh.
"Speak again, and beware how though liest."
In the dead hush succeeding his command, the slightest whisper would have sounded loud.
"I spoke the truth, though I feared to do it," Lucilla breathed, and fell forward, so that her hair lay all about the King's feet.

He did not look down, did not seem to know that she had fallen, but stood motionless for the moment that passed ere several of his nobles started forward to her aid. Then he waved them back, but said nothing still. His figure was tall and erect, his presence commanding for one so young, and his people thought him like a god. They had always found him just, generous, and gay. These things blinded them to his look of evil now. He spoke suddenly. Folk breathed more freely.

"Before you all was the accusation, before all shall be judgement. Judge, oh my people! Between the maiden and your King. She names me thief of women."
The crowded hall swayed to one impulse. "Let her die," was thundered.
Justus lifted a hand for silence. His brow had cleared a little.

"Nay," he declared; "that were too hard a fate. But her eyes which led her into temptation shall do so no more."
He turned for the second time to his Chief Councillor.
"My lord duke, be pleased to see to this matter. Let the girl be blinded" – he hesitated, then added – "with as little pain as possible."

As they raised Lucilla to carry her away, her hair dragged on the buckle of his shoe. Bending, he disentangled it with a slight shiver. His people thought him magnanimous, but the Chief Councillor, for the first time in his life, failed to understand him and was thereby troubled.
The mother of the stolen maid would have pleaded for Lucilla, but it was not allowed.
"Go in peace, Dame," said Justus. "Thy daughter shall be found. If any man hath harmed her, he shall be punished. Let it be told in writing what manner of maid she is."

With this Justus went from the hall of judgement, followed by his suite, leaving a people fed full of excitement, but hungry for more satisfying food. Proclamation was made at once for Myra's restoration, unhurt to her mother. Next day Justus, having found her family of good name, but poor, added that a dowry should accompany her. He himself gave her mother a house and servants far from her former dwelling, so that, as Myra did not know of Lucilla's sin and punishment, her mother being forbidden by the King to tell her, she continued to love her friend as of old.

Meanwhile the Chief Councillor went about his sad work with but little stomach for it.
"Either Justus is guilty, or he is sadly changed, and that suddenly. His old self – innocent – would have laughed at the girl, and made a friend of her," he mused.

Yet what was done to Lucilla the great Minister did himself, only employing a physician to apply healing unguents. Then he sent Lucilla to her stepfather, under careful escort. He bade her good-bye in enigmas.
"Go, Lucilla," he said, "but pray unceasingly that this trouble be lifted from thee."
The poor maid would have promised him anything for his kindly handling of her.
"Oh! My Lord," she said brokenly, "I am thankful my last sight was of thy sorrowful face. I could never have borne anger and contempt."

In a month – no less indeed – the scandal died down – to be forgotted unless renewal brought remembrance. Only the Chief Councillor watched the King. That Justus was out of sorts became evident to all. He did his work, it is true, with even greater zeal than before, but woe be to whoever lagged behind him. Yet, up to this time he had been an indulgent master. He sought pleasures, too, that he has heretofore despised, and was more restless than the very waves of the sea.

(*To be continued.*)

The Injustice of the King: A Story[15]

Part two: *Justice*, 12 November 1910

(*Continued from last week.*)

Once or twice nobles old enough to be his father, or, in one instance at least, his grandfather, hinted at marriage. He was blankly unaware of them. One morning he fiercely cursed a sightless man begging alms in the town, then gave him what made the man bless him in the jargon beggars use.

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"Remorse," reflected the Chief Councillor, "eats at a noble heart," and "a cowardly act is a canker in the mind of a brave man."

At last Justus could bear it no longer. The people's shouted praise of his justice sickened him. He took a fever which had been gone in a few days save for his disturbed mind. As it was he grew really ill/ He sent for his Chief Councillor, and everyone else away.

"My physicians cannot heal me," he complained.
"Do you know your Majesty's disease?"
"No my lord duke, they treat my body while it is my mind that is sick."
The chief Councillor, who had loved the King from the time when he was a tiny child, put a cool hand on his hot forehead.
"My son," he said tenderly, "if thou canst, tell me thy trouble."

Justus went silent. His friend waited. At last the King raised himself in bed, and words tumbled out of his mouth.
"I have been a liar and a coward. I am so despicable I fear to think of it, and can scarcely tell even you. Yet I must tell the whole world."
"And if *I* know?"
"Dost thou?" he breathed, his fever-bright eyes fixed on his companion. "Dost thou know that I stole the child Myra for a sudden whim that took me as I saw her in the woods. I left her housed without the city, and by the morrow had well-nigh forgotten her until Lucilla accused me, and I – oh! brute beast that I am – fearing to lose the popularity I had won – for so mean a reason – lied."

He stopped for breath, and wrung his hands. "I cannot right the wrong," he cried, "but what I can I will. All shall know me for what I am." He sank back on the pillows muttering, "Liar – coward."

"My son," said the Chief Councillor again, "thou sayest rightly, but these things are for the future when thou shalt leave this bed. For they present peace let me advise thee to ask the maiden's forgiveness."
"That I shall never win, Forgiveness! The saints in heaven would not forgive so foul a wrong. No, no! I will do as I have said."
"Give me leave to send for Lucilla, sire."

The fevered brain of Justus took hold upon the idea that his recovery rested with the wronged girls. If she forgave him, he would live, if not he must die.

"At once," he said, after a long interval he did not know had occurred. "At once." Then he sighed deeply, and muttered to himself. "But she will not, she cannot, forgive."

Messengers were dispatched for Lucilla. She was to come at once, to stay for nothing. One messenger returned with tidings that her stepfather had turned her away from his house, and had her left to do what she could in the nearest town across the river, where none knew her. He went on to say that his companions had gone further, seeking her. This sent Justus into delirium. He raved about eyes that were the lights of the world; he cursed himself for quenching them.

When Lucilla came he was sensible again. She was brought in just as she was – a beggar woman. Such had been the orders – to wait for nothing. Her feet were bare – clothes soiled and ragged. Her cheeks were sunken, and the bright curls dulled. The black discs over her eyes gave her a terribly death-like appearance.

"Child, child!" cried the Chief Councillor, who had not expected things to be so bad, and, taking her hand, he led her to a chair. Lucilla knew his voice.
"You, my lord duke! Ah! You, at least, will tell me what the King desires of me. Is it to kill me?" (Her voice was weary.) "He should have done that at first."
"Hush, my child! The King is ill."
"Ill, my lord duke? Does he think the sight of me will restore him to health?"
Lucilla's tone was bitter now, so that the Chief Councillor began to fear her mood. The King saw the embodiment of death in her.
"Lucilla," the Duke said gently, taking her hand again, "the King is *very* ill. He wishes to know if you can forgive him!"

There was silence. Justus held his beath and shut his eyes. He did not see the panting of Lucilla's wasted breasts. She spoke as if ashamed of herself.

"I have forgiven him long ago," she whispered.
"Bring her to me," Justus cried, choking back a sob, "bring her to me, and leave us alone."
The Chief Councillor did as he was desired. The startled girl, who had not known the King was present, suffered herself to be led to his bedside. What a torrent of repentance was poured into her ears no one knows but herself. At length, as his voice grew weaker and weaker, Lucilla loosed her hands from his grasp, and stood up to call for help.

"You must never leave me again, Lucilla," was heard as the door opened. As soon as the King could speak again, Lucilla was given over to the Chief Councillor. Justus begged that the Duchess would mother her. "You must never come to me without her," he concluded. The doctors ruled that the King's wishes must be met.

When Justus saw Lucilla again, the black disks no longer disfigured her eyelids. Only tiny gold stitches showed her inability to open her eyes. Justus thought her saint-like in the white robes they had dressed her in. he saw her with lover's eyes; he had loved her all the time, he told himself. He now mended rapidly, and began to ask the earliest date when he might make a public address. His physicians told him in three weeks if no relapse intervened. He cut the period down to fourteen days, and insisted on having it proclaimed so.

Lucilla, quite unconscious it was for her sake, begged him to defer it. He remained obstinate. He saw Lucilla alone three times before his public confession. The first time he made love to her, and frightened her terribly. The second time he asked her to be his wife. She refused point-blank. The third time he heaped reproaches on his own head, and accused her of being unforgiving after all. "Thou hast not forgiven, Lucilla. Thou canst never love me. These are my deserts."

Poor Lucilla, driven in a corner, made haste to soothe him.
"Sire," she said, with cheeks aflame and locked hands, "I have loved thee ever since I saw thee ride by in the sunshine. That is why I was so sure."
He caught her, kissed her, would not be denied.
"My queen, my queen," he cried.

Lucilla found a dozen reasons against her queenship. He would hear of none.
At last she said: “The Queen must be an able woman. Wouldst thou give the nation one who can but just distinguish day from night?”
He knelt down and looked at her eyelids as though he could pierce them.
“Canst thou indeed tell light from dark?” he asked hoarsely. “Then, Lucilla, thou art not quite blind.”
It was fortunate that the Chief Councillor returned at this moment. Justus was behaving like a madman. He dragged the Duke on to a balcony that ran one side of the room. When the latter understood, he said quietly:
“Yes, perhaps we might have the stitches taken out. Maybe the work was ill done. My heart was not in it.”

Justus let the words pass. He wanted a doctor. The Chief Councillor thought that the room should be darkened. When this was done, and the stitches out, the King dismissed the physician instantly, so that Lucilla’s eyes fell first on her last sight. Her tone was absolutely expressionless.

“When last I saw your face, my lord duke, it was sorrowful – now you smile.”
Then, as before her blindness, she fainted away. Justus also was quite calm, dazed with joy and relief. When Lucilla was restored to her senses, “I claim my queen,” he said directly.
“No! Oh, no!” cried Lucilla, rosy red as she had been deathly pale. Her thoughts then centred themselves on her benefactor, and , rising, she threw her arms about his neck, and kissed him, thanking him in broken phrases.

“My eyes – my eyes,” she repeated again and again. He said nothing, only smiled at her.
“Take me to the Duchess,” she cried at last. “I must thank her for having such a husband.”
The men both laughed, but the elder saw wisdom in the words.
“Yes, yes,” he assented. “Or we shall have you in a fever next.”

He led her away to sit in a darkened room until her eyes were strong enough to bear the full light. Justus was on thorns, for he wished her to hear his confession. She would never have let him have his way had she known. Her face blanched as he began the tale to a quickly spellbound audience. As he went on, sparing himself no whit, she wept for love and pity. She would have stopped him had not the Duchess forcibly prevented her, whispering the while:
“It is better so. It is better so. They will love him the more.”

In the silence that followed his last words, Justus led Lucilla forward. Her marvellous eyes were still wet with tears. Justus never doubted the result, or he would not have asked: “Will you take Lucilla for your Queen?”
Nothing could have pleased the people better. They shouted themselves hoarse to show their pleasure. The Court was thunderstruck at this master move. Lucilla would have resisted, but none heard her.

“Crown her – crown her,” was shouted on all sides, and the King, placing Lucilla on his throne, held his crown lightly above her head.

He was really delighted with the uproar, and thanked his people graciously before leaving them. Some of the nobles opposed the match. Justus was deaf. The Chief Councillor blamed himself more than the King, but forbore interreference.

But neither Justus, nor his nobles, nor any of his people ever regretted his choice. Lucilla was so loving, and so lovely, and had such a gentle dignity, that she forbade contempt to small minds, and held aloof no great ones. Then, too, through her misfortunes, she had some knowledge of all sorts and conditions of men and women. Many a law for good was passed; many a one that might have worked evil was refused the King's sanction, through that knowledge.

Even at this time, when all the days are gone that have come between then and now, the people may be heard to say:
"This good came to us through the love of Lucilla, Saint and Queen," or "Justus, most just of earthly princes, gave us this law."

Appendix II

Thrift[16]

Sylvia E. Pankhurst

The Woman's Dreadnought, 20 June 1914

It was in a wide park and the path led through wonderful old oaks and chestnuts and broad open spaces, where there were flocks of sheep and deer.

Where the ground dipped into a hollow where two little cottages covered with a tangled mass of roses and honeysuckle, and with their little garden plots ablaze with close-growing old-fashioned flowers. In the most flowery of these two cottages lived an old woman, well over 90 years of age. Her clothes were always of plain black stuff and her dresses, copied one from another, were always made with the skirt full, the bodice very straight and plain, and the sleeves without a cuff, as country women wore them when she was young.

Her father worked on his estate all his life, managing one of the nearby farms for the Lord who owns the park. Her mother worked too, and she and all her sisters, milking and caring for the lambs and poultry but only her father was paid a wage. Her husband had also been employed here from a boy and in time had become the principal game-keeper. For years, in addition, he and she had managed a large farm for the Lord with numbers of men and women under them. All this time her husband was never paid more than a pound a week, and she nothing at all. Yet she, like her mother before her, had washing and cooking and cleaning to attend to for the work people, and milking, and dairying, and poultry keeping beside. The children from the great house always found a welcome in her kitchen, and had come to her regularly on baking day for home-made cakes.

"That work at the farm was a bit too much for us, it turned us into old people: for, of course, he had always the game to think of beside, and had most of the farm to see to, the last years

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when he began to get ill." Very often she said this to me, but always added: "I've worked hard for the Lord and now he does a lot for me."

After her husband died the agent had at once told her that she must leave the cottage, and only a personal appeal to the Lord had won her the right to stay. Then the Lord had said that she might live rent free in the cottage and have as much skim milk from the farm as she could drink. "It's little enough to give you, after all your years of unpaid work!" I used to say to her, but she would smile and answer: "Lord doesn't understand all that I have done for him."

She was still wonderfully quick and active, when I first knew her, in spite of her ninety old years, and could climb nimbly over the five barred gates and stiles. She lived alone in the cottage and did all her own housework and, as who could wonder, she lived largely on the Lord's skim milk, which she always kept warming in a jug on the hob. Until quite recently she had made her own dresses, and still was always busy with darning or mending, or patchwork quilts.

She was able even to do a little mending and cooking for her son, who lived next door and who worked for the Lord, as his father had done, and had a big family of sons. His wife had just died and one of his daughters, who was engaged to be married in a week's time, came home to stay a few days with her father and brothers, and on her wedding morning finished cleaning down the house, and was pumping water from the well and whitening the doorstep within an hour of the wedding.

"People ask me if I am not lonely and whether I am not afraid to live by myself, " the old woman said to me. "Of course I am not lonely. I should be very wicked if I were. Haven't I got my dear son living next door to me? It's true he and the boys are out all day, but look at the beautiful flowers and the birds I have got all around me. Listen to that dear little thing singing away there now. Why should I be afraid indeed? Nobody wants to harm me. God can look after me just the same wherever I am, and I am sure I shan't die until he wants me to."

So she would talk on, rambling as solitary people do, who are glad to have found someone to listen well, and always she spoke kindly and seemed sweet tempered and generous to all.

Sometimes she mentioned her son's wife, who had just died pf phthisis, with the gentle sorrow and regret for a friend and companion who was gone. But one morning she seemed strangely agitated and for a time seemed hardly able to speak. Then she began to talk of the dead woman. Her son had just discovered that his wife had died owing £5 to the tradespeople.

"She hadn't been doing right for a long time," said the old woman. "I'd watched her and I knew she wasn't going straight. People like us can't afford to go putting beef steak on for dinner for a lot of hungry men as she did, instead of making it into a pudding so as it'd go further. She got that she hadn't the strength to take trouble as she should and when she knew she was going, she let things slide. But she should have had more thought for those who'd be left when she was gone. Many a time I've seen her stop and lean with her hand on the table and gasp for breath, and I've asked her 'can't you get on with your work?' 'Oh I'll manage', she'd say and then I've seen her go out and cough."

The old woman spoke with bitterness as though her daughter in law's physical weakness had been a shameful fault. We used to take the bread in for each other", she went on "and more than once the man has asked me when she was going to pay." I never said anything, but I knew

things weren't going right. And I know where some of that money's gone to, and I've told my son." Then she explained that her son's eldest daughter was married to a man who was chronically out of work and had three little children. She had been always coming round to ask the mother for food and money. Her father said that she had chosen her own lot, and that nothing was to be given to her, but her mother had gone on helping her in secret whenever she could.

For this reason, and because of her own growing weakness and lessened ability to cope with the cares of housekeeping, the debt so crushingly large to these poor people, gradually accumulated. "I don't know how George'll ever manage to pay off the money," the piteous old voice went on. "It's been a hard struggle to pay for the funeral as it is. He only found out last night that she owed anything."

"She hasn't been the good wife I thought her, mother," he said, "I didn't think she'd have done it."

And so they shook their heads together and wondered however that money was to be paid; and in their trouble they bitterly blamed not the Lord for whom they had done so much in return for so little, but that poor dead woman who had gone on working until the day she died. How tragic, that after 30 years of sacrifice and labour for them, she should be thought to have lost all right to the affection and gratitude of her family because of this paltry debt.

That never ending painful contriving to make ends meet on little wages with so many mouths to feed weighs down the hearts of poor working mothers, and warps the whole current of their lives. Where every penny must be closely counted, an accident, an illness, or misfortune, means getting into debt and borrowing from pawnbrokers and moneylenders who charge outrageously high interest to the poor.

Last week three cases of mothers' suicide were reported in the newspapers. One woman's husband had given way to drink. The husbands of the other two were out of employment. It was only just possible for these women to make ends meet when their husband's small weekly wages were coming in regularly. They could not face the future with an added load of debt that they might never be able to pay off.

Girls' Class and Character in Contemporary YA Fiction

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Abstract

Two contemporary works of young adult fiction that appeared on the New York City 365 Book List are examined in this paper as examples of the socioeconomic diversity that the creators of the list intended to include. Nic Stone's *Jackpot* (2019*)* and Ibi Zoboi's *Pride* (2018) both depict female high schoolers—Rico and Zuri—who grapple with their own identity-building as they demonstrate awareness of their socioeconomic situations, both of working-class backgrounds, and how their personal contexts contribute to the future opportunities available to them. Ultimately, even as the novels are propelled forward with romantic relationships with male teens of higher socioeconomic statuses, with greater access to power and privilege, both protagonists ultimately develop agency in their lives and powerfully negotiate their futures, especially through their understandings and analyses of class and its connection to their identities and relationships.

Keywords

Contemporary young adult fiction, working-class studies, socioeconomic diversity, teenagers and class, gender and class, culturally responsive-sustaining education

Introduction

"My mother's fear of unpayable medical bills is stronger than her fear of death," declares seventeen-year-old Rico, the protagonist of Nic Stones' *Jackpot* (2019) (p.90). The challenge, to put it lightly, of handling unexpected and enormous medical bills is just one aspect of the young adult novel that may have led to its placement on the New York City Department of Education's 365 Book List in 2020, when the list was last updated (Knudson, 2020). The initiative, originally created in 2015 (State News Service, 2015), was intended to regularly release book lists by grade level with the goal of increasing independent reading for pleasure among students in kindergarten to grade 12–the 365 indicating, of course, reading every day, all year. Importantly, as Knudson (2020) indicates, the book lists were intentionally designed to bolster culturally responsive-sustaining education, as they provide representations of diverse ethnicities, races, genders, religions, and socio-economic statuses. Young adult literature has been widely perceived as a helpful avenue for "introducing students to social justice issues," including "discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, class, and age" and "unpack[ing] the complexities" in all of these cases (Stover, et al., 2017, p. 176; Williams & Blasingame, 2017, p. 239; Boyd & Darragh, 2019). The New York State Education Department's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework (2019) defines the goals of culturally responsive-sustaining education as the following: "create student-centered learning environments that affirm cultural

identities; foster positive academic outcomes; develop students' abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; empower students as agents of social change" (pp. 6-7). Curious about the representations of socio-economic status included on the list and how the selected novels could succeed at empowering students as agents of social change—perhaps its most ambitious goal—I reviewed the titles on currently posted NYC 365 Book List, which has remained the same since 2020, and selected two novels that highlighted class in their blurbs and that had been widely reviewed. This paper will examine "how class works" in Nic Stone's *Jackpot* and Ibi Zoboi's *Pride* in the lives of the two seventeen-year-old female protagonists (Fazio et al, p. 4). Specifically, as both novels involve a romantic relationship with a wealthy male teenager, this paper grapples with the question of the extent to which Zuri, an Afro-Latino American from Bushwick Brooklyn, and Rico, who describes herself as white, Latina, and Black, from the state of Georgia, can be read as having become empowered by the end of each novel, even as they are depicted as becoming emotionally and sometimes physically connected to these wealthy young men who play powerful roles in the novels.

Class and Character Development in *Jackpot* (Nic Stone, 2019)

Jackpot is a YA novel that "explores how class, status, and money—or lack thereof—have the ability to limit or expand life opportunities [and] the choices we make," or believe that we are permitted to make (Harris, 2019, p. 100). In *Jackpot*, Rico is a senior in high school who works at the Gas n' Go as a cashier and shelf stocker, a place where she expects to work full-time after high school graduation in order to contribute to her household income, which includes her mother and younger brother Jax. Stone focuses on Rico's family's lack of resources throughout the novel, and how aware Rico is of the situation—how it continues to affect her thinking and behaviors. For example, when she sells lottery tickets to a Mercedes-Benz-driving man paying with big bills who calls her a "cute girl," she notes to herself that "this guy doesn't *need* two hundred and twelve million more dollars" (p. 1). She learns to put on an act, "chirp[ing]" in response when he announces that he will place a few dollars in the Salvation Army bucket outside the store. But when an elderly woman enters the store wearing a Christmas tree sweater that actually lights up, Rico's demeanor changes. She happily sells tickets to the customer, noting that she is the sort of individual who should win the lottery, though she hopes that she doesn't have to reveal her "(nonexistent) college plans" to her when the customer shares her granddaughter's college news (p. 4). The customer coincidentally includes three numbers from Rico's birthday in one of her lottery ticket purchases, which Rico notes with surprise, and is later astonished as a lottery ticket including those three numbers wins the millions of dollars. The remainder of the novel is based on Rico's quest to discover the holder of the winning ticket as the person is not coming forward.

Rico herself has not played the lotto, and this decision not to is largely embedded in her view of her mother's actions. She shares: "Mama's been obsessed with the idea of winning for as long as I can remember… cling[ing] to this impossible hope while our finances literally crumbled around her" (p. 5). Rico's mother is a housekeeper at the Hilton, working over 70 hours per week. She has moved her children to an area that is more expensive than she can afford, but that has better schools. Rico notes that "being poor in comparison with everyone around you sucks. Especially when you're just a kid" (p. 11). And referring to her 7-year-old brother, she states "We won't even talk about the fact that he's brown where most of the (rich) kids around him are white" (p. 11). Rico demonstrates the "economic anxiety" that Marcela Valdes describes in her NPR piece about

young adult novels, writing that these "economic anxieties keeping adults awake at night—income inequality, food insecurity, downward mobility, winner-takes-all competition—have also invaded the literature of their children" (p. 5). Noting that novels like *Little Women* had already been depicting financial insecurity, the "economic distress" of today's teens had "turned much darker" (p. 5). During the shift when Rico sells the aforementioned tickets, she also sees Alexander, or Zan, Macklin, enter the Gas n' Go. He is an heir to the company that invented toilet paper, extremely wealthy, and only attends public school because he was kicked out of his private school due to hacking a computer. She avoids him, having her manager sell the ticket to him as she runs to the restroom. On the way home, his presence continues to irk her in combination with all that she already has on her mind about her family's "financial precariousness": "Now I'm crying. It's like no matter how hard Mama and me work or how much we do, it always feels like we're drowning. And now I've got images of the richest kid in school superimposing memories of our shelter days and smashing up against the helplessness and desperation constantly simmering beneath the surface of my *chill.* It's bub-bub-bubbling up, pouring out, and stinging my windburned face from walking home in the cold" (*Kirkus*, 2019; Stone, p. 12). "I hate to admit it considering how low I try to keep my expectations, but the encounter with the cute granny planted quite the 'what if?' in the rocky soil of my heart. Which ain't good: when you live as tenuously as my family does, there's nothing worse than having even the slightest glimmer of hope dashed against the ugly boulders of life" (p. 13).

Rico's description of herself as either cut off or enclosed, and rugged on the surface, not welcoming, are all ways that she attempts to protect herself, to cope with what she sees as harsh truths and unchangeable circumstances. Furthermore, she states:

> …facets of my life that often plague my brain in the darkness: the fact that we're always a few hours of pay away from not making rent; that Mama treats me more like a partner and co-parent than a kid; that my seventeen-year-old life consists entirely of school, work, and sleep; that I have no friends…[now] this world of possibility has opened up, and now I constantly find myself…curious. Which feels dangerous. There are few things worse for a poor kid than working up the courage to hope and then having that hope pulverized down to subatomic particles beneath the weight of (another) disappointment (pp. 25-26).

Rico's desire to locate the winner of the lottery ticket leads her to begin breaking down the walls around her, but this is not a very comfortable experience for her. She reaches out to Zan Macklin, her wealthy classmate whom she finds extremely attractive, and asks him to hack into the Gas n' Go's security system so that she can see what sort of cab the elderly lady arrived in. This leads to a series of adventures during which Rico and Zan try to find more information, getting closer and closer to the truth. Their relationship, which becomes increasingly intimate, involves Zan driving Rico around in his expensive car, getting her paid time off from work, and even free medical care from his doctor relative who saves her brother's life after he develops an illness. Throughout, Rico's internal monologue often reflects her thoughts in this particular instance: "What would he say if he knew my skirt was held together by a safety pin or that I use the laces in these shoes for a different pair as well?" and she feels "a stab in the gut" when she realizes she cannot provide her cell phone number in return as hers is only an emergency phone (p. 42). While Rico's list of what she would do if she herself could win that sort of money includes having a home, car, and health insurance, she imagines that Zan could not possibly understand what it's like to not have

what one needs to survive, to be "constantly on the brink" (p. 47). The details above present a case of clear "power dynamics" with which Rico is uncomfortable (Khuri, 2019, p. 59).

Literary history presents numerous well-known stories centered on a "passive, suffering, female dependent on a male to rescue her"—with the male character being "'clever, resourceful, and brave'" (Brown, p. 2). Initially, *Jackpot* seems to follow this trend, as Zan carries out research that results in another lead on their search, and has Rico hop into his fancy car so that he can whisk her away to solve the mystery. Indeed, literature contains many models of a "spunky, sassy, independent heroine [who] turns into the good wife who subordinates her wishes, indeed her very self, to the desires and needs of others"—a prolific "'boys do; girls are'" theme, according to Mary Kay Ritchie's 1971 study of books for young people (p. 5). But as Brown and St. Clair note, more contemporary young adult fiction typically depicts "female protagonists whose sense of independence and assurance contrasts sharply with that of their predecessors" (p. 22). Allen and Green-Barteet (2023) also characterize contemporary "empowered literary girls" as "girls who persist and resist" (p. 620). "Autonomous thought" and "autonomous action" are typically at the heart of YA fiction, and *Jackpot* is no exception (p. 26). Brown and St. Clair note that "fiction about empowered girls must find ways to subvert that [traditional] ending" of marriage or another subordinate role in a relationship, and that "empowerment often occurs only after some overt act of rejection or rebellion against the status quo" (p. 27). I argue here that Stone's novel succeeds in doing so, even with the initial apparent domination of the wealthy Zan Macklin, and does so *through* the presentation of Rico as learning to set the terms that eventually allow her to acknowledge her own desires and to act on them.

Although Rico emphasizes again and again in the narrative that she is thoroughly annoyed by Zan's wealth, privilege, and what she perceives as his lack of understanding of others, she begins to realize that she is also very attracted to him. When he hugs her and lifts her off her feet, she feels "legitimately hot all over and *so* not okay with it" (p. 55). In another scene at work, as she struts away from him, he pulls her back by her apron string. Stone is writing for a YA audience, which has long had romance used in marketing to their interest, from as far back as the 1940s when what is widely considered to be the first work of fiction published for a teenaged audience, Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), emerged, though the inclusion of sexual topics specifically does not appear until the late sixties, and through the decades that followed until today (Cart, 2016, p. 18; Kaplan & Olan, p. 14). But Rico's beginning acknowledgement of sexual attraction for Zan can also be interpreted as an element of empowered thought, as she begins to allow herself to have what can be perceived as completely selfish desires—desires that she rarely permits herself to have. The physical connection developing between Rico and Zan is also accompanied by their coming to understand the similarities between them—neither feels that what they personally want for their futures has ever mattered to those around them. They share experiences of facing prejudice in various situations as multiracial individuals—"intersectional issues" that contribute to each of their feelings of having limited choices, but for very different reasons (*Publishers' Weekly,* 2019, p 70).

Brown and St. Clair point out that in fiction for young people, female "empowerment often occurs only after some overt act of rejection or rebellion against the status quo" (p. 28). During their adventures to locate the holder of the winning ticket, Rico stops and thinks to herself: "I hate how entitled he seems to feel to the information [about where I was]. How entitled he seems to feel to

everything. To *me.* He didn't ask if he could pick me up from work. He didn't ask me to get in his car. And he hasn't actually asked me to tell him why I really canceled. Not in a full sentence. With the word *please* tossed in there somewhere." Rico challenges him: "You're really used to getting what you want, huh?...You don't really ask for things…you…demand them…The only reason I'm sitting next to you right now is because you basically willed it so by creating an expectation I didn't feel comfortable defying. Which I have a hunch is kind of a pattern for you" (p. 106). After an argument in which Rico shows Zan how he cuts her off when she is speaking, and Zan ultimately offers his assistance as her mother is sick, they come to an agreement about how to treat one another and allow their friendship to continue with more awareness and understanding. It is only after this incident that both begin to be more honest about their feelings for one another: Zan realizes that she has brought him to life, made him feel "freer," and that he is "living for it…at this point" while Rico admits to herself that "he is nice to be around most of the time" (p. 111; 119). When Rico finally "steps forward and spreads [her] arms" for an embrace, she is literally and figuratively opening herself up to a relationship that she has actively molded to be grounded in respect and understanding. "Through…persistence and resistance," Rico exemplifies the girl characters that Green-Barteet and Allen describe as ultimately "com[ing] to understand themselves, their desires, and the worlds in which they live" (p. 622). "I'm allowed to want this," Rico declares to herself.

Toward the end of the novel, Rico's economic challenges feel insurmountable:

> No cash to do anything.
> No cash.
> Rent.
> Electricity.
> Water.
> Food.
> Gas and maintenance for the truck.
> Spinal tap.
> Antibiotics.
> Extended hospital stay.
> Down, down, down. Sinking down, down, down.
> It's too much. I can't do it. I can't do anything about any of this.
> It's hopeless. I'm trapped. There's no getting out (p. 291).

But this time, rather than continue to lose her breath, she has someone to talk to, and she allows herself to cry in Zan's embrace. Rather than interpret this as needing a more privileged male to save her, Stone's narrative has set readers up to see Rico's ability to express her emotions about the situation as a strength. Previously, she would have kept everything inside, not even believing that she was entitled to discuss her feelings. Again, pushing at the Cinderella story, Rico's mother and friends collaborate to surprise her with a prom dress and she is able to go as Zan's date, providing the type of "support" that Hill and Darragh emphasize the importance of in their analysis of young adult literature focusing on "socioeconomically challenged" youth (2016, p. 44). The novel includes vignettes from the point of view of inanimate objects which act "as a Greek Chorus," as Jessica Coates' review indicates (p. 58), and the prom dress itself states the following:

> "I'm the murky blurple of a dark night and bedazzled all over with tiny Swarovski crystals. So with the low lights and the dark walls and the little strings of light twinkling as they dangle from the ceiling, Rico feels like she's twirling within a night sky" (p. 309).

This sense of freedom—representing her "agency and independence" is far from where we first met Rico (Silva & Savitz, p. 327).

Ultimately, it turns out that Zan has had the winning ticket the whole time. When he had finally realized it, he didn't want his adventure with Rico to end, so he kept it to himself. This new knowledge destroys his relationship with Rico, as it highlights for her the great gulf that will always exist between them. He tries to give her the winning ticket, but she refuses it. Ultimately, in what admittedly feels a bit bizarre, Zan cashes in the ticket and then sets up an anonymous trust fund for Rico with half of the winnings that is distributed over a period of time and is also organized for a college tuition payment and a savings plan for her brother. They reconcile at the end of the novel, but only as friends, and both have decided to pursue their dreams in ways that they previously thought they couldn't, attending colleges that will take them in different directions geographically. Both have improved their lives, exemplifying what Boon focuses on in reviewing *Jackpot*—that "we can strive to be better, regardless of bank balances"—as a result of their relationship (Boon, 2019, p. 248). The novel doesn't end in a romance, just a friendly hug and good wishes, with Rico declaring, "I'm gonna go to Space Camp," her childhood dream (p. 339).

Jackpot maintains the expected high-interest style of contemporary YA fiction in a way that allows teenagers to either see themselves reflected, or learn about others' lives, especially through the intersecting lenses of class, race, and gender, which is one goal of exposing young people to fiction, as Rudine Sims Bishop points to in her oft-cited description of children's books as "windows, mirrors, and doors" (1990, ix). *Jackpot* can therefore motivate young people to understand the need for change—building their "critical literacy," and to believe in the agency of young people to be part of that change (Hill & Darragh, 2017, p. 86).

Class and Character Development in *Pride* (Ibi Zoboi, 2018)

Pride's Zuri is a seventeen-year-old who finds herself in the middle of a rapidly-gentrifying Bushwick, Brooklyn (previously "working-class" with mainly residents of color) in a YA novel subtitled *A* Pride and Prejudice *Remix* (2018) (Anderson, 2021, p.483). Based on Jane Austen's original novel, Zoboi's work "offers a fresh perspective on racial identity, gentrification, and class disparity…exploring how these contemporary issues intersect with the timeless themes of love and prejudice" (Myer, 2024, p. 8). The narrative begins with Zuri's reflection on her neighborhood:

> "when rich people move into the hood, where it's a little bit broken and a little bit forgotten, the first thing they want to do is clean it up. But it's not just the junky stuff they'll get rid of. People can be thrown away, too…What those rich people don't always know is that broken and forgotten neighborhoods were first built out of love" (p.1).

She demonstrates awareness of "the difference between how outsiders see them and their communities and their own identities," as Anderson notes in her analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations (2021).

Like Rico, she is acutely aware of her family's financial situation prior to meeting the very well-off Darius Darcy, one of the teenagers who moves into a renovated mansion across the street. The Darcys are part of this "unwelcome gentrification" and "erosion" of her community, and being a Black family rather than the white family that they had expected, their "arrival highlights class tensions" in the Black community as well (Anderson, p. 483). At the beginning of the novel, Darius is already playing the savior, pulling Zuri out of the way just in time so that she avoids being hit by a speeding bicycle. Unlike Rico, Zuri has plans for her future. She is actively learning about Howard University, the college she most desires to attend. She describes her plans as: "[I'll] live on campus in my own dorm room where I can stretch out my arms and legs and not to have a hit a little sister in the head while doing so. After I graduate, I'll get a job and my own apartment here too. None of those scenarios involved a boyfriend or a husband" (p. 18). The spaces in the novel are figurative representations of her own feelings about her life. Although she persists in her feelings of love for her Bushwick life, she also admits that she sometimes feels penned in. this is why the roof is their "happy place, way above it all…[we] unlock it and escape out onto the clouds…If Madrina's basement is where the tamboras, los espiritus, and old ancestral memories live, then the roof is where wind chimes, dreams, and possibilities float with the stars, where Janae and I Share our secrets and plan to travel all over the world, Haiti and the Dominican Republic being our first stop" (p. 23).

When we meet Zuri, she is actively focusing her "creative attention" on constructing her essay for her Howard University application: "my neighborhood is made of love, but it's money and buildings and food and jobs that keep it alive--and even I have to admit that the new people moving in, with their extra money and dreams, can sometimes make things better. We'll have to figure out a way to make both sides of Bushwick work," she notes, and then begins her essay by referring to "fair housing, opportunities, and access to resources" (Anderson, 2021, p. 483; Zoboi, p. 33). But poetry is where Zuri really focuses her writing, and the novel contains her poems throughout: "I force myself to write, and like always, broken words spill out. A rough, jagged poem, like the steps of this stoop, like the sidewalk in front of this building. Like everything around me right now" (p. 47).

Like Rico's feelings about Zan, Zuri may "reluctant[ly" find Darius attractive but she expresses her annoyance and dislike of him multiple times (Anderson, 2021, p. 483). When she visits the mansion looking for her sister Janae who is dating Darius' older brother, she cannot believe how much empty space there is—Darius has his own apartment within the house just like Zan did in *Jackpot*—and critically questions their lack of "stuff," to which Darius replies that they have what they need, and that it's wonderful to be able to sit in an empty room and just think sometimes. Zuri is completely unfamiliar with this, as her home is packed with "stuff" and family living close to one another. She later acknowledges that "the basement [of her landlord, Madrina] is where I dive deep into my own thoughts and dreams with Madrina and her claims of comunicado con los antepasados. To Madrina…the basement is home to Ochun, the orisha of love and all things beautiful. For them, this is a place of magic, love, and miracles" (p. 56).

Zuri and her sister, two of the five Benitez sisters, visit Maria Hernandez Park with Darius and his brother Ainsley, where a musical performance is taking place. Calling it an "art and music festival

for white people," where even before the music begins she notes that a white woman "starts dancing for no reason at all" and "do[esn't] even know who Maria Hernandez was" (p. 64). Hernandez had been murdered for trying to stop drug dealers from selling drugs in the park in 1989. Even as Zuri expresses frustration, saying "there is nothing Maria or Ez about this park anymore," she does notice that she is "tired of standing," and sits down on a blanket in the grass. This isn't how she grew up though, relaxing outdoors in a park such as this. "We sat on benches," she states, "and kept our eyes wide open in case anything went down" (p. 64). There is an emphasis here on the stiffness and tightness of one's body – not enough space at home to stretch out, not enough safety in social situations where one could lounge on a blanket. But Zuri is starting to realize that she needs a bit more space in which to grow. This is the conflict of the novel, the arena in which Zuri will develop into the empowered female protagonist that we expect in contemporary YA fiction.

The tension between Zuri and Darius continues to play out, as Zuri keeps challenging him for not being right for the neighborhood, demanding to know why he doesn't come to the park just to play ball sometimes, and criticizing the way he acts around other guys from the neighborhood in the corner store. He throws it back to her, noting that she doesn't seem to get out of her neighborhood much. In truth, Zuri hasn't left her neighborhood much. Her critical view is deeper, though, than just feeling that he is not "street" enough for the neighborhood. She tells him: "Just so you know, in this hood, you're just like everybody else. The cops and these white people will take one good look at you and think you're from Hope Gardens Projects no matter how many tight khaki shorts or grandpa shoes you wear" (p. 67). Darius is insulted and feels that he cannot get close to Zuri as she continually criticizes him and shuts down the conversation. But even though Zuri hasn't left her neighborhood much, she appears to feel secure enough to eventually do so, thinking: "I feel like I can fly around the world and back if I want to, because this is what will always be here waiting for me: my parents' love; my loud sisters; my crowded and cluttered apartment; and the lingering scent of home-cooked meals" (p. 78). Almost as if she is doing so to spurn Darius, or to make him jealous, Zuri begins dating Warren, a Bushwick guy who checks all of her boxes in terms of his street behaviors and viewpoints, and who received a scholarship to the same private school that Darius attends, and who used to be his friend. But Zuri "can't help it," as she states, to smile when she sees Darius looking out the window. Through a plot adapted from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* Zoboi "explore[s] racialised, gendered, and cultural identity," the intersection of which provides the arena for Zuri's continued identity formation throughout the novel (Anderson, 2021, p. 482).

Their interactions become warmer, and immediately after we see Zuri changing her mind about Darius, she visits Madrina's basement where a spiritual dance is taking place. Putting on the flowy white skirt that Madrina provides:

> "I…move about like a wave. And my swirling and flowing skirt and dancing body, I form a river. The drumming ebbs and flows, comes to a crescendo before stopping completely; then I am stagnant water again. Like all those tears I hold in and never let flow…Something brand-new stirs inside and all around me, as if I've been turned inside out. I immediately know that this was more than just a dance, and maybe Madrina was right all along. Maybe there is something real in these spirits…quietly slip up to the roof. My lungs are still reaching for the night air as the orishas embrace me." (p. 125-126).

A metaphor for Zuri's inner desire to be fluid, to stretch, to be able to navigate change, the basement inspires her to ascend to the roof, as Zuri "transforms" through the dance (McQueen, 2024, p. 260).

A turning point is when Zuri visits Howard University for an Open House, and notes how different she feels in an environment that is "clean and airy. No clutter" (p. 141). Being here expands my whole world much farther than I could've ever imagined…there's enough wide-open space for me to feel like I can actually chase my dreams here, and I'll be able to reach them too…I have an overwhelming sense that I belong here" (p. 141-143). Motivated, she attends a poetry reading in the area and reads her poem titled "Girls in the Hood," which receives enthusiastic applause and helps her to realize that her "words have earned [her] respect," and that "this place can be an extension of [her] block too, like home" (p. 154). This achievement of "active creation" and its "sharing" is one way that Zuri (McQueen, p. 256). Only after she has finished, she notices that Darius Darcy was sitting in the audience, having come to DC to drop off his sister at Howard University. This is when Zuri embarks on an adventure of her own that is reminiscent of Rico's, though it is only a trip home. Originally planning to take the bus, Zuri accepts a ride from Darius, not realizing they will have a detour at his grandmother's mansion. Zuri, like Rico, has her own rebellion of sorts which ultimately changes the course of the narrative over dinner, when she is spoken to with direct disdain by Darius's grandmother who realizes that she does not come from money. After refusing to have her worth diminished, and storming out, and being apologized to by Darius, they have a heart-to-heart of sorts in which they agree not to stereotype one another's family's as wholly based on their income. At this point, Zuri is able to "sit back in [her] seat" and "let her guard down a bit," while Darius drives back up to New York City, which, combined with the day as a whole, feels "familiar, but different," and "makes [her] feel brand new" (p. 180; p. 184).

When they stop to share a meal together, she's "able to sit back and take in the wide blue-orange sky and warm summer air. There are no tall buildings around or sirens or loud music and voices" (p. 187). Like Zan's view of Rico, Zuri is viewed as "unique" by Darius and they share their affection for one another.

Later in the novel, when Madrina is ill, she tells Zuri during a visit: "You have all these walls around you that it's like your heart is locked up in some room" (p. 209). This is clearly what Zuri must overcome in order to feel that she is living with self-actualization, with choices.

As Zuri permits herself to like Darius, despite her original annoyance over his wealth, and to see his other qualities, that he is a multidimensional person just as she is, they begin dating. She feels differently, her "insides…melting into sweet, gooey, sticky honey"—a feeling of physical desire that she does not act on in the moment (p. 253). But she is no longer the hardened young woman with walls up. Sitting on the roof of his house, Zuri thinks: the sky here seems wider. And maybe there are more stars from this view. And maybe the moon shines brighter. Maybe everything is better from the roof of the Darcy house" (p. 255). But what is actually happening is that Zuri sees the world differently from a place in which she allows herself to have desires, to be more flexible in her thinking, to assert herself, to write, to create. Acknowledging the complexity of having a boyfriend who is part of the gentrifying population coming in to Bushwick, (though different in that his family is African-American) but still caring for him as an individual person is a growth

area for Zuri. She is able to talk about this more directly with Darius now: "Do you see that rent is going up all over the place and people are not getting paid more? Schools are shitty because teachers think we're a lost cause. I'm trying to get into college, but I need financial aid and scholarships 'cause I have three more sisters who want to go to college too, and my parents have always been broke. That's why I had a wall up with you. You were moving into my hood from what seemed like a whole different world" (p 257). Zuri demonstrates her "wisdom" and emotional intelligence here (Silva and Savitz, p. 328).

Unexpectedly, Madrina dies and her nephew decides to sell the house; it will be knocked down, and Zuri's family has to move. They choose Canarsie, a totally different neighborhood, and Zuri has to contend with the fact that Darius' family will get to stay in *her* Bushwick while she has to move. Her father, Papi, whom we meet earlier in the novel reading Howard Zinn on the couch, tells her that Bushwick will come with them, and not to let [her] pride get in the way of [her] heart" (p. 269). This helps Zuri and she is able to conclude that home is where her family and loved ones are; the people she cares about, thus helping her to resolve the many differing statements she has made about space throughout the novel. She remembers a past conversation with Madrina, in which she says: "Rivers flow. A body of water that remains stagnant is just a cesspool…it's time to move, flow, grow. That is the nature of rivers. That is the nature of love!" (p. 281). This is the lesson that Zuri ultimately learns—that home, that love, the things that matter, are strongest when they are fluid. And this fluidity gives Zuri space to stretch as well…so that she can be comfortable in her own skin and grow in the directions in which she wants to grow, "becoming an individual and transforming the self" (Cart, p. 31). This empowerment comes not in spite of her family's socioeconomic status in a neighborhood undergoing gentrification but because of everything that she is and has experienced, and how it has led her to interact with new people. While Darius occasionally plays the savior role, it is Zuri who takes initiative in her own life and sets the criteria, the standards, and the boundaries, illustrating her "new maturity" (Silva & Savitz, 2019, p. 324). This differentiates this narrative from traditional stories about young women, changing the meaning of her acceptance of Darius' later behaviors, as he "gently turns her around to face him, wiping her tears with his thumbs…" (p. 283). Zoboi intentionally "foreground[s] love…to allow the…novel to reach young adult readers," according to McQueen (2024, p. 255). However, the romance aspect of the novel is integrated into the focus on Zuri's growth and development into a character with agency. Indeed, not so different from *Jackpot*'s ending, *Pride*'s ending does show Zuri and Darius together, but there is "room for uncertainty," and the mood is light and "playful," thus taking the focus away from the romantic aspect of the novel and instead more directly emphasizing Zuri's individual growth (McQueen, p. 261).

Conclusion

The endings of both *Jackpot* and *Pride* present Rico and Zuri as developed, robust characters who negotiate their understandings of class with their newly developing relationships and decisions about their futures and emerge more empowered and insightful, with fuller self-awareness and fluidity. As novels identified by the nation's largest public school system as highlighting areas of diversity, these particular selections do more than depict young people in various economic situations. Rather, they are examples of how class can function in literature as a major characteristic of protagonists' lives that they work through and with in order to gain agency as they "search for identity" so that they can develop into the individuals they want to be; this is not in

spite of, but because of, their living in a world with particular class circumstances (Boyd & Darragh, p. 2). In addition, they can be used to help students understand the "systemic factors that impact socioeconomic status" and how "social class affects people" (Boyd & Darragh, p. 126).

Both novels shed light on the complexities involved in literary analysis that focuses on issues of class. Specifically, the intersections of class, race, and gender are the sites for the character development that occurs in both novels. And even when identifying the young male love interests as being of a higher socioeconomic status, the race and ethnicity of each complicates assumptions of economic privilege in a white-dominated society, with Zan being biracial with a Hispanic background and Darius being African-American.

In *Jackpot* and *Pride*, class is not simply a lens, but is the major material of the work, even as it intersects with other major identity categories as stated above. These novels should continue to appear on book lists for young people due to their potential to assist with building critical capacities in young people, even as they offer the high interest love storylines that so much of YA fiction contains due to its marketability, with love, relationships, and identity- building often at the heart of typical adolescent development (Boyd & Darragh, 2019). Across disciplinary lines, it can also be "used to look at class issues throughout the ages and with attention to policy and national economics" (Hill & Darragh, 2016, p. 46).

Analysis of *Jackpot* and *Pride* indicates that readers can indeed go along for the romantic and action-packed ride of YA fiction while still drawing powerful conclusions about young peoples' abilities to negotiate the terms of their relationships, to critically analyze their communities, and to make concrete plans for their own place in their "communit[ies]" (Hill & Darragh, p. 88; Bean & Moni, 2003). This literature also validates feelings that young people may have about the relationship between their own class and how it affects their relationships with others and the opportunities they have available to them. In summary, class *works* in these novels in powerful ways.

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Working-class Academics: Challenging Deficit Narratives Through Cultural Wealth.

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Abstract

When navigating higher education (HE), working-class academics (WCAs) encounter persistent socioeconomic, cultural, and personal barriers throughout their academic careers. This study, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu and Tara Yosso, sought to illuminate the cultural wealth of WCAs. Employing a mixed-methods approach over a five-year period, the research engaged with 244 WCAs from various institutions across the United Kingdom (UK). The findings challenged the dominant deficit narratives surrounding WCAs, revealing that WCAs actively cultivate and leverage a rich array of cultural assets, encompassing examples of aspirational, navigational, linguistic, familial, social, and resistant capital. Two overarching themes emerged from the data: the profound impact of shared lived experiences in empowering marginalised students, and the crucial role of WCAs as change agents. The study demonstrates how WCAs employ their backgrounds as pedagogical assets while advocating for structural reforms. These findings suggest institutions should formally recognise working-class cultural wealth through revised hiring criteria, targeted support programmes, and inclusive decision-making frameworks. This research advances understanding of how marginalised groups can transform rather than simply adapt to institutional cultures.

Keywords

Working-class academics, cultural wealth, capital, Pierre Bourdieu, Tara Yosso

Overview

Historically, academia has been an elite domain, where class-privileged scholars benefit from unearned advantages that ease their entry and progression within the ivory tower. By contrast, working-class academics (WCAs)—representing just 8.3% to 23% of academics[1] and typically emerging from manual or low-paid backgrounds (Wakeling, 2023; Crew, 2024b)—face substantial economic, social, and cultural barriers in these spaces. A working-class identity develops through multiple intersecting factors— access to resources, cultural practices, social mobility, and community bonds (King, 2019) — revealing complex sociocultural dynamics (Savage et al., 2013). UK studies by Pilgrim-Brown (2023) revealed how cultural practices and financial precarity shape working-class experiences in academia, while Crew's (2024b) research used Bourdieusian concepts of "habitus" and "capital" to analyse these class-based experiences.

[1] depending on the sample size

Drawing on similar Bourdieusian insights, foundational research from the US has documented parallel challenges. Classic texts such as “Strangers in Paradise” by Ryan and Sackrey (1984) and “This Fine Place So Far From Home” by Dews & Law (1995), have illuminated the myriad struggles and challenges faced by WCAs when it comes to “fitting in” and finding a sense of belonging within the often alien and exclusionary world of academia. Lubrano’s evocative book "Limbo" (2005), also from the US, delves deeper into the complex experience of navigating and straddling "two worlds" - the working-class milieu of one’s origins and the middle- and upper-class environment of higher education (HE). In her US-based study, Hurst (2010) examines the psychological and emotional costs working-class achievers face while pursuing academic success., while Haney’s (2015) research on Canadian academia demonstrates how WCAs must expend additional labour bridging cultural gaps and managing microaggressions. Roscigno et al’s., 2023 extensive study of US sociology faculty revealed how structural constraints and institutional hierarchies continue to disadvantage WCAs in their career, perpetuating barriers in elite academic spaces despite individual merit and achievement.

Contemporary scholarship from the UK has further expanded this field in several ways. Ricketts and Morris (2021) found that WCAs from the UK often feel like a "fish out of water" in academia, struggling with feelings of unbelonging and alienation within the exclusionary culture of HE. Wilson et al’s., (2021) research, demonstrates how WCAs inhabit an uneasy space between their origins and academia, continually negotiating their authenticity and belonging, while striving to maintain connections to their working-class roots. This tension is vividly illustrated in "The Lives of Working-class Academics", where Burnell Reilly (2022) presents a collection of autoethnographies written by WCAs from the UK. These academics shared how they navigated their way through an industry steeped in elitism, often facing prejudice and discrimination. Rowell and Morris’s (2023) UK based research demonstrates how time becomes a structuring force for early career academics, who constantly work "against the clock" (p.40) while trying to "stay afloat" (ibid) on precarious teaching-focused contracts. While Walkerdine (2021) captures a common experience among UK WCAs, noting that "fear, shame, imposterhood and feeling that at any moment I would be found out, cannot be overstated" (p.62). Alongside this, Crew (2024b) noted how a lack of financial safety nets meant it is difficult for WCAs to manage academic precarity. These academics also reported experiences of hostility in academia which manifested as microaggressions based on accent, humour, clothing, and stereotypes. While this literature documents the institutional barriers faced by WCAs, this article moves beyond deficit perspectives to demonstrate how WCAs” distinctive knowledge and experiences both enrich academia and offer strategic tools for institutional navigation. This shift in perspective draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical Foundations: Pierre Bourdieu and Tara Yosso

This study integrates Bourdieu’s theory of capital with Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model to examine how WCAs navigate and transform HE. While Bourdieu”s framework illuminates how class-based inequalities are reproduced, Yosso’s model reveals how marginalised groups convert challenges into assets. Together, these complementary perspectives provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding both the structural barriers WCAs face and their transformative responses.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, and capital provide the initial framing. Field represents academia as a competitive arena (Bourdieu 1984) governed by distinct “rules of the game” (Lareau et al. 2016: 281), positioning agents in hierarchical relationships based on their

habitus and capital. Habitus—shaped by social biography and life experiences—generates "durable, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 53) that influence perceptions of opportunities, including assumptions about what is "not for the likes of them" (Burnell Reilly 2015: 103). Capital encompasses various resources: economic (material resources enabling academic activities), social (networks and mentoring opportunities), and cultural (valued assets like education and behavioural norms) (Bourdieu, 1986). These forms of capital, while crucial for academic success, are conceptualised through an elite middle-class lens (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). Such theoretical frameworks, including those of Schwartz (1971) and Bernstein (1977), problematically presents assimilation into privileged academic culture as the only path to advancement (Solórzano and Yosso 2002: 31).

To transcend these limitations and capture how marginalised groups transform barriers into assets, a more transformative framework emerges through Yosso's (2005) CCW model. This framework, grounded in Critical Race Theory, illuminates how unacknowledged capabilities enable institutional navigation. While dominant hierarchies determine "legitimate" knowledge (Diamini et al., 2018), CCW recognises diverse forms of cultural wealth: aspirational (sustaining hopes despite barriers), navigational (manoeuvring through institutions), linguistic (contextual language abilities), familial/social (intergenerational knowledge and community networks), resistant (challenging oppressive systems) (Yosso, 2005), and perspective capital (understanding diverse worldviews) (Jackson-Cole, 2019). This asset-based framework reveals how marginalised groups actively deploy cultural resources for success and empowerment.

Aspirational capital captures how disadvantaged groups maintain educational ambitions despite facing systemic obstacles. This form of capital manifests as a powerful force for transformation. For instance, Basit (2012) demonstrated how aspirational capital drives improved life chances among young minority ethnic British citizens. Similarly, a US study of engineering undergraduates by Dika et al., 2018 found that their stores of aspirational capital positively impacted upon their enrolment, self-efficacy, and persistence, highlighting the need for educational institutions to foster this capital for student success.

Navigational capital encompasses the strategic approaches that marginalised groups develop to excel within often-hostile institutional environments. Tolbert Smith's (2016) research with UK Black male engineers revealed how they deliberately exceeded performance expectations to counter racial stereotypes, transforming institutional barriers into motivation for excellence. Straubhaar's (2024) study of Mexican high school students found they developed sophisticated learned behaviours centered on "getting by," characterised by performative displays of "paying attention" and embodying the "good student" role. These manifestations of docility generated substantial navigational capital that enabled their progression with strong grades and teacher support.

Linguistic capital encompasses disadvantaged groups" communicative skills, such as humour and language proficiency. While Bourdieu views linguistic capital as a social asset, often associated with middle-class linguistic dominance (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021), Yosso emphasises the role of language in bonding marginalised communities. Bourdieu's framework examines language privileges from a top-down perspective, whereas Yosso's asset-based approach highlights how marginalised groups leverage this linguistic capital for social mobility. For example, Kallis and Yarwood's (2021) study of Greek-Cypriot migrants in the UK illustrates linguistic capital in action, showing that while earlier generations view heritage language as essential for preserving ethnic and cultural values, later generations increasingly convert it into economic capital.

Familial/Social capital encompass intergenerational cultural knowledge and community histories, which, together with social networks, provides both economic and social resources. The strength of family support shapes access to opportunities, as networks offer jobs, mentors and connections for education and employment. As theorised by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000), social capital resides in reciprocal ties and trust. Expanding on this and Bourdieu's work in this area, Yosso (2005) explains how familial and social capital extends beyond individual connections to include intergenerational support that empowers communities by drawing on cultural heritage, transforming shared wisdom into valuable navigational resources. Wright, Maylor, and Becker's (2016) research found that excluded Black male students maintained strong bonds with their families (familial capital) and with Black community organisations, churches, and schools (social capital). These connections proved invaluable, as they often helped these men develop aspirational and resistant capital, both crucial for achieving educational and personal success.

Resistance capital refers to the skills and strategies marginalised groups employ to challenge and resist oppressive systems and discrimination. This is evident in the narratives of the Black male students in the aforementioned UK study by Wright, Maylor & Becker (2016) who utilised "turnaround narratives" to actively resist institutional labels of failure, transforming negative experiences into motivation for achievement. Alongside this, Revelo and Baber (2018) illustrated resistance capital in Latina/o engineering students who formed support networks that helped them persist while maintaining their cultural identity and empowering future generations. Similarly, low-income, first-generation students of colour in a study by Covarrubias Laiduc and Valle (2022) demonstrated resistance capital by urging faculty to challenge their assumptions about students" resources and abilities, proactively promote campus resources, and enhance cultural awareness to create a more inclusive environment.

In addition to Yosso's examples of community wealth is perspective capital, which refers to the ability to understand situations from diverse worldviews. Research by Jackson-Cole (2019) and Hurst (2010) demonstrated how marginalised students" outsider perspectives enrich academia. For instance, in Jackson-Cole (2019), one student leveraged perspective capital to explain vaccination reluctance in Roma communities, connecting historical persecution to inherent distrust of authorities. Her nuanced awareness of Roma communities traumatic pasts and current challenges demonstrates the transformative power of inclusive worldviews. Similarly, Hurst's (2010) respondents sought out courses on diverse perspectives and courageously contributed their own experiences. Perspective capital highlights marginalised vantage points as being invaluable knowledge assets.

While Yosso's CCW model originally focused on ethnicity, it has also proven relevant to understanding how the working-class actively leverage cultural resources. For instance, Bettencourt's (2021) US study demonstrated how career and technical education (CTE) students used aspirational capital to pursue educational goals despite limited resources and academic stereotyping. Hope & Quinlan's (2021) UK study of mature working-class students revealed how they used their CCW particularly through familial support, aspirational mindsets, and social networks, to challenge traditional deficit perspectives of working-class learners. The research showed how their local connections and family resources became assets rather than barriers to HE success. Finally, O'Shea's (2016) UK study examined how first-in-family (FiF) university students, traditionally viewed through a deficit lens, demonstrated aspirational, resistant, and familial capital. The FiF students navigated HE by drawing upon both aspirational drive and family support, with partners sharing domestic duties and children

providing motivation. Mature students drew on life and work experiences to manage academic demands while fostering new learning conversations within families.

Researching Working-class Academics

Research Rationale and Objectives.

The rationale for this study is that despite there being detailed studies of widening participation among disadvantaged cohorts (See Tham, Raciti and Dale, 2023 for a recent systematic literature review), aspects of the upward mobility of academics are still insufficiently explored (Luczaj, 2023). This research study, conducted over the course of five years, had three research objectives: 1. to illuminate the lived experiences of WCAs (discussed in Crew, 2020, 2021, 2022; 2024a, 2024b), and 2. to explore the impact of intersectionality on the realities of WCAs'. (Crew 2024b). This article will focus on the third objective: to gain insights into the cultural wealth, or assets prevalent among WCAs.

This study comprised two phases of video-conference interviews (n=89, n=74), with interviews lasting between 40-120 minutes. While qualitative interviews have faced criticism regarding their lack of objectivity and potential for bias (Kvale, 2007), they remain valuable tools for understanding how individuals make meaning of their social experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To mitigate potential researcher bias, a third phase included a survey, which was completed by 90 respondents. This project recruited WCA respondents from diverse UK institutions, roles, disciplines, genders, ethnic backgrounds, and dis/abilities to build a multidimensional, collective picture of WCAs. Prior to participation, all respondents were provided informed consent and were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. The project received ethical approval from Bangor University's Ethics Board[2].

Recruitment and Sample

Respondents were recruited via social media (Twitter/X) and academic conferences using self-definition as the key criteria, requiring participants to identify as a WCA and to have been a current or recent (within the last 6 months) academic. This captured nuanced, fluid class identifications (Savage et al, 2013). Despite the difficulties with this sampling strategy[3] the sample included professors, lecturers and senior lecturers, early career researchers, and PhD students from 34 subject disciplines within HE and from across all types of institutions within the UK. Approximately two-thirds were female, 20% had a disability, and 10% were ethnic minorities. Over three-quarters reported parents who were in manual occupations while just 10% had a degree-educated parent, indicating stark educational discontinuity. The following outlines the key themes found in over 1600 pages of interview and survey data.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and survey responses were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. The analysis specifically looked for examples of cultural wealth aligned with Yosso's framework while remaining open to emergent themes.

[2] Reference Number: BLSS14

[3] This recruitment strategy may have excluded WCAs who don't use Twitter or can't attend conferences due to financial constraints, disability, or precarious employment, potentially limiting representation of more marginalised voices.

Defining a WCA

Although 10% of respondents struggled to label themselves as a WCA due to their current academic positions, the majority (90%) confirmed a persistent working-class identification rooted in their upbringing, values and experiences. Analysis revealed WCA status encompasses cultural background, financial challenges, subjective class awareness, evolving habitus negotiations, and disparities across forms of capital, though experiences did vary. As one academic notes:

> *"elements from my life experience – upbringing, education, family, geography, hobbies & interests, accent, clothing – and the classed nature of those experiences have a fundamental impact on my integration as a member of "the academy"."* [Sadie[4], an Assistant Professor in Law at a post-1992[5] institution]

This quotation and others that were similar emphasised how broader cultural dimensions, belonging and fit shape WCA identities alongside concrete class markers.

While some WCAs had moved beyond financial hardship, many still face precarity, especially early career researchers: "*The principal problem is precarity*" remarked Mia, a PhD Student in Administration at a traditional institution[6]. Alongside this, most WCAs mentioned that securing research funding could be particularly challenging, especially those working at post-1992 institutions due to competition and limited institutional support, further destabilising job security. For Kayden, an Assistant Lecturer in Sociology at a post-1992 institution, WCA status meant "*striv[ing] to connect their identity and experiences to give back to their community*" through teaching and research - a commitment to increasing access and representation which echoed across many narratives.

As WCAs enter and adjust within academia, three equally common habitus adaptations emerged – cleft, abandoned and chameleon. Those with abandoned habitus often felt pressured to "pass" by altering mannerisms and suppressing outsider traits, though they would often feel inauthentic. A chameleon habitus (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013) enabled code-switching between worlds to retain working-class identities while acquiring the necessary capital to navigate academia. A cleft habitus reflected profound alienation between backgrounds, visible in strained personal relationships. As Bethany, a PhD Student in English and Art History at a traditional institution, describes: "*two bubbles*" exist where university and home feel disconnected. This duality creates tensions between individual advancement and community connection, as the WCA pathway enabled mobility while potentially straining social and cultural bonds.

The analysis of capital distribution revealed persistent disparities that appeared to systematically disadvantage WCAs, particularly in accessing research funding opportunities. As Dominic, a Senior Lecturer in Education at a post-1992 institution, observed: "*everyone knows that the vast majority of research funding goes to the chosen few institutions…the rest of us are left trying to be put forward by our institution for the scraps.*" - a pattern that perpetuates systemic inequalities across the sector. Frank, a Lecturer in Geography at a Russell

[4] All names are pseudonyms.
[5] Post-1992 institutions (former polytechnics that gained university status after 1992)
[6] Traditional institutions (pre-1992 universities)

Group institution[7], talked of how his exposure to cultural events like attending plays without cost (due to his father's work as an usher) enriched his cultural capital, however, like other respondents he recognised that his cultural capital was still not as substantial as that of his colleagues from elite backgrounds who had been able to cultivate such capital from a young age. Respondents also reported having smaller academic networks compared to their middle-class peers, which they felt disadvantaged them in accessing opportunities. For example, Paige, a Lecturer in Health Sciences at a traditional institution faced challenges navigating academia without guidance from family members with academic experience, while Eddie, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution noted he lacked the "insider networks" that could help him understand the unwritten norms of academia.

Working-class Academic Cultural Capital

Studies of WCAs typically paint a stark picture of their uphill battle - navigating financial precarity, confronting class-based microaggressions, and struggling to understand the unspoken rules of an elite environment. These challenges, though real, overshadow the diverse cultural assets WCAs bring to academia. They arrive equipped with a distinct toolkit, forged from their lived experiences, and brimming with what Patricia Hill Collins (2019) eloquently termed "counterstories." Close reading of the interview and survey transcripts revealed that WCA experiences aligned with and mapped onto Yosso's CCW framework, illustrating how their cultural resources enriched the academic environment.

Aspirational Capital

WCA respondents exemplified aspirational capital by pursuing academic careers, despite challenges. As Lucas, a Senior Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution, noted, "*the mere presence of people like us demonstrates resilience.*" Respondents persevered through financial anxieties and precarity, channelling their resilience into an unyielding commitment to academic success. Although some considered leaving academia due to financial pressures, they remained driven by a purpose to uplift underserved communities, a dedication rooted in their early hardships. By achieving success amidst barriers, these WCAs embodied aspirational capital that empowers their communities. Bev, a Sociology PhD student at a post-1992 institution, expanded on how her early struggles strengthened her resolve: "*I think if I didn't have that as part of my character, because of my upbringing, I would have quit by now.*" In facing and overcoming these challenges, WCAs not only demonstrate resilience but actively reshape academic spaces to be more inclusive for future generations.

Respondents" aspirational capital was evident in their commitment to positive change in academia and beyond. Becky, an Oxbridge PhD student in English, initiated community art projects to preserve her neighbourhood's cultural heritage. Yvonne, a Health and Social Care Lecturer at a Russell Group institution, found inspiration in mentors with similar backgrounds: "*Seeing professors from backgrounds like mine showed me I could do it too. They paved the way.*" Driven by a commitment to "pay it forward," WCAs like Yvonne aim to challenge the "deficit discourse" about the working class and inspire marginalised students through visible representation. As Ellie, a Lecturer in Health Sciences, emphasised, relatable role models counter stereotypes, and as Darren, a PhD student in Gaming, explained, "*I want to inspire people from all backgrounds to show them what is possible.*" Through mentoring, these WCAs'

[7] The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK research-intensive universities, often considered Britain's most prestigious higher education institutions.

aspirational capital not only supported the next generation but also had the potential to drive systemic change, helping marginalised students pursue HE despite societal barriers.

Navigational Capital.

Drawing on navigational capital, respondents assisted students in deciphering the hidden rules of academia. For instance, Craig, a Lecturer in Mental Health, utilised his personal experiences to clarify academic expectations for students. Respondents also mentioned offering hands-on writing and research mentorship, while other respondents were explicit about the need to develop networking skills. This "paying forward" of hard-earned knowledge exemplified navigational capital. Additionally, respondents aimed to empower students and early career researchers through innovative initiatives such as writing retreats, cross-year mentorships, and peer mentoring. Nonetheless, some respondents encountered resistance; for example, Eddie, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at a traditional institution, stated:

> "*I've worked hard on providing these resources for my students, all students...and all my institution can do is call it handholding*."

This loaded term implied biases regarding the legitimacy of support based on student demographics. Despite this, many persisted, with Alan, a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at an elite institution, describing it as a "*moral obligation."*

Precarious staff found it particularly challenging to access navigational capital. Flynn, a Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution, remarked, "*I faced significantly reduced access to professional networks*." Talia, a Research Assistant in Nursing at another traditional institution, concurred: "*I don't have the same level of academic support, including mentorship and professional development opportunities*." This uneven access to navigational capital often exacerbates the challenges faced by WCAs. Nevertheless, most WCA respondents remained committed mentors and empowered their students despite facing institutional hurdles. By drawing on their own experiences with inequality, these WCAs leveraged their navigational capital to advocate for policy changes aimed at addressing systemic barriers affecting WCAs and other marginalised academics. Collectively, these findings illustrate how WCAs harness the potential of navigational capital for grassroots empowerment, providing both individual guidance as mentors and broader recommendations on how to challenge inequitable institutional cultures.

Linguistic Capital

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital illuminates why regional accents are often viewed as "undesirable" in academia. Yosso's notion of linguistic capital further elaborates on this, emphasising that the communication skills nurtured within one"s community can differ from HE"s dominant linguistic norms yet remain powerful in their own right. Some respondents experienced stigma for their regional accents; however, this linguistic identity also cultivated a shared sense of community with students. As Dominic explained, "*Students often express appreciation for my Geordie accent, as it helps them feel more relaxed and comfortable.*" Similarly, Yvonne, a Lecturer in Health and Social Care at a Russell Group university, remarked, "*My local, regional accent is a reminder to students that academics are not just posh people,*" emphasising the importance of authenticity and approachability. By resisting "posh" stereotypes, regional accents made these WCAs more relatable, helping to humanise academia

for their students from marginalised backgrounds who often did not identify with the dominant academic culture.

Respondents demonstrated both linguistic and navigational capital through their openness about adapting communication styles across different settings. For instance, Alan, a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at an elite institution, described his approach:

> *"I tell students to use the language that fits where you are... I explain how I shift between home dialect with family and academic speak at university. Both have value. It helps students know that academics code-switch too."*

Alan highlighted the skill of seamlessly navigating academic and social registers, which often allows WCAs to connect effectively with diverse audiences. By sharing these "hidden rules," WCAs empower students to understand the demands of academic discourse. Dominic, a Senior Lecturer in Education at a post-1992 institution, noted, "*I let students know that the game is tough, but it can be done—with luck and hard work."* This transparency often helps students to grasp and manage the expectations of HE, equipping them with the essential tools to succeed both in academia and beyond.

Familial/social capital

Analysis revealed that the interlinked forms of familial and social capital, proved indispensable for my respondents who had disabilities. As Tina, a Lecturer in Secondary and Post-Compulsory Education at a post-1992 institution shared, "*My parents happily read my work aloud when my vision worsens. They're my rock"* - family assistance enabled resilience. Campus groups like Afro-Caribbean societies also provided community and validation when WCA respondents struggled with adversity. Additionally, online networks offered solidarity, with Brandon, a teaching assistant in Health Studies at a post-1992 institution emphasising, "*I couldn't navigate ableist campuses without* [them*]."* Examples of familial capital included WCAs drawing upon their lived experiences to conduct research illuminating issues like poverty and discrimination. They also engaged in outreach projects in community centres that shared academic skills with potential students. Furthermore, social capital facilitated building student support networks, as WCAs discussed how they often mentored those from similar backgrounds, empowering them to overcome shared academic challenges through peer solidarity. Moreover, their community ties helped to connect academia with grassroots organisations, enabling impactful collaborations. These WCAs drew on diverse forms of capital from their support networks - including family, online forums, and community ties - which provided stability and resources to overcome academic barriers.

Resistance Capital

My WCA respondents demonstrated resistance capital through a working-class pedagogy that challenged dominant narratives and recognised class-based experiences as valuable "funds of knowledge" (Crew, 2020; 2024b). Their teaching approach often deliberately highlighted systemic inequalities while using their backgrounds to empower marginalised students. WCA teaching also utilised counter-hegemonic methods, as Alan noted "*projects applying theory to real world scenarios*" which often fostered students" intellectual resistance by empowering their critical analysis of unjust social structures. Beyond critical research and teaching, resistance capital manifested through direct inclusion of lived experiences. For instance, Brandon described using the history of (his) disability to expose and combat ableism by making

the "*invisible visible*". Some WCAs directly challenged imposter syndrome narratives that often perpetuated barriers, as Flynn, a Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution asserted "*I refuse to buy into the idea that I don't deserve to be here*." Collectively, these practices reframe marginalised backgrounds as assets, enriching academia.

Perspectives on resistance tactics like the University and College Union (UCU) strikes[8] varied. Some participated to address pay inequalities, while others had reservations, noting that there were "*more effective ways to bring lasting change"*[9]. For instance, a few respondents even proposed leveraging collective power over their research outputs, arguing "*if you want change, stop giving them our intellectual capital*[10]." Though opinions on specific resistance tactics were mixed; by mobilising their cultural wealth through critical scholarship, counter narratives, and ground-up empowerment, my respondents collectively demonstrated the profound change making potential embodied within the resistance capital possessed by WCAs.

Perspective Capital

My respondents showed perspective capital through their ability to understand marginalised experiences. As Amy, a Teaching Fellow in English at a Russell Group institution explained, "*having come from a disadvantaged background, I see injustices and inequities that others don't*." And Mila, a Lecturer in the School of Education and Communities at a traditional institution echoed, "*We bring understanding, we bring humour, we bring authentic news, we bring sadness sometimes*." These excerpts show how these WCAs often provided a deeper awareness of societal issues, a sensitivity to injustices, and a unique empathy - assets often overlooked in academia. Moreover, they often applied this capital towards progress, with Sal, a Lecturer in Social Studies at a traditional institution noting "*insights into the reforms needed in higher education*" and Jamie, a Lecturer in History at a traditional institution arguing "*our ability to understand varied perspectives, built from navigating different worlds, can solve problems and reduce conflicts when applied collectively."* As Theo, a Politics Research Fellow[11] summarised, "*Because our journeys have often been a lot less traditional we see institutions that are rooted in tradition...where everything is old fashioned. We can come in with our different perspectives and we can...change, modernise, awaken these institutions and be a force for good*." This change making potential of inclusive worldviews compels institutions to recognise marginalised assets.

Discussion

This study has illustrated that a cohort of WCAs contribute to academia with their CCW. In addition to this, two prominent themes emerged across the findings: empowerment through shared experiences, and WCAs as change makers.

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[8] From 2018 to 2023, UK university staff, represented by the University and College Union (UCU), were engaged in an industrial dispute with their employers, represented by Universities UK (UUK) and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), over proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension plan and issues of pay equality, workload, casualisation, and pay levels. While the UCU successfully resolved the USS dispute in March 2023, returning to 2017 terms, they were unsuccessful in addressing the "Four Fights" as a November 2023 ballot to extend action failed to meet the required turnout. (house of Commons Library, 2024)

[9] This respondent preferred to give no identifying details

[10] This respondent preferred to give no identifying details

[11] This respondent did not wish to give details of their institution.

Empowerment through Shared Experiences

A major theme that emerged from the research findings was how these WCAs leveraged their backgrounds and shared lived experiences to empower their students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Respondents recounted their own educational challenges and offered resources to unveil the "hidden curriculum" — the tacit knowledge and skills influenced by privileged backgrounds (Jackson, 1968) that often poses hurdles for first-generation, minority, or marginalised students. Through sharing what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) term as the "rules of the game" that guide expected behaviours and interactions within the academic realm (Giazitzoglu and Muzio, 2021), these WCAs actively equipped students with tools for success through multiple forms of cultural capital. Their linguistic capital, demonstrated through regional accents, helped create more relatable academic spaces, with Dominic noting how his accent fostered student comfort and engagement. Similarly, Yvonne's local accent challenged traditional academic stereotypes and elitist assumptions about who belongs in academia. Through navigational capital, respondents like Craig utilised personal experiences to clarify academic expectations, while others developed comprehensive approaches to writing and research mentorship. Some WCAs initiated innovative programmes like writing retreats and cross-year mentorships, channelling their personal journeys into tangible strategies for student development and success.

The foundation of this guidance lies in a shared humanity and commitment to "paying it forward" (Walker & Yip, 2018). As respondents openly shared experiences of navigating academic precarity and imposter syndrome, they demonstrated what Rumsby (2022) identifies as the power of empathetic approaches in sparking ambition among working-class students. Alan exemplified this through his approach to code-switching, emphasising the importance of linguistic flexibility in academic success. However, this support sometimes faced institutional resistance. As Eddie noted, his comprehensive student support initiatives were often dismissively labelled as "handholding" revealing how support initiatives can often be undermined by deep-seated classist biases within academia. Despite such challenges, many of these WCA respondents persisted in their commitment to student support, with Alan describing it as a "*moral obligation*" and arguing that WCAs have a unique responsibility to make academia more accessible and inclusive for marginalised students.

Beyond individual mentorship, WCAs acted as cultural navigators, fostering the caring relationships and inspirational support that Eller, Lev, and Feurer (2014) identify as essential to effective mentoring. This was particularly evident in how respondents often leveraged their familial and social capital to support students with disabilities. Tina's experience highlighted the crucial role of family support in enabling academic success despite her visual impairment, demonstrating how family assistance often enabled resilience and academic progression. Additionally, respondent reported how campus groups and online networks provided crucial community support structures, with Brandon emphasising their transformative potential for disabled students navigating academic environments.

WCAs as Change Agents

This study also demonstrated that this cohort of WCAs often served as change agents within educational institutions - defined by Fullan (2011) as individuals who possess the ability to effectively transform organisational operations. Drawing on their perspective capital, respondents consistently identified inequities invisible to others, with Amy and Mila highlighting how their backgrounds enabled them to recognise systemic barriers and bring

authentic perspectives to academia. This can position~~s~~ WCAs as what Sandhu (2017) terms "experts by experience,", whereby offering valuable firsthand insights into social issues and potential reforms. WCAs often demonstrated resistance capital through a distinctly working-class pedagogy that challenged dominant narratives and recognised class-based experiences as valuable funds of knowledge (Crew, 2020; 2024b). This manifested through various approaches, from Alan's application of theory to real-world scenarios to Brandon's efforts to expose institutional ableism. Their approaches to resistance varied, particularly regarding union activities like UCU strikes, with some participating in traditional industrial action while others proposed alternative forms of collective action such as leveraging control over intellectual capital.

This cohort of WCAs often combined resistant capital (critiquing institutional practices) with navigational capital (implementing practical reforms) to effect institutional transformation through their commitment to "paying forward" hard-earned knowledge and advocating for policy changes. As Theo summarised, their non-traditional journeys positioned them to modernise traditional institutions, echoing Hills Collins's (2019) emphasis on the transformative potential of marginalised voices. Their strategies encompassed implementing inclusive pedagogy, undertaking applied research addressing real-world issues, and directly advocating for policy reforms. While study participants demonstrated success in introducing inclusive pedagogical techniques within individual classrooms, expanding this impact across entire institutions remains rare. Through this work, these WCAs actively contributed to aligning institutional frameworks with principles of equity and fairness, benefiting the entire educational community through both individual advocacy and structural change.

Study Limitations and Future Directions.

This study has several limitations. The Twitter ("X") based recruitment may have excluded WCAs who don't use social media or discuss class identity openly. The UK-focused sample also limits broader geographical generalisability.

Future research should examine WCAs" cultural wealth across different disciplines as well as social and geographical contexts, assess long-term mentorship impacts, and explore international comparisons. Institutions need to formally recognise WCAs" cultural wealth through mentoring programmes, revised promotion criteria, and funded initiatives that value working-class perspectives in pursuit of educational equity.

Conclusion

This study advances scholarship on WCAs in three significant ways. First, by applying Yosso's CCW framework to 244 UK academics" experiences, it moves beyond deficit narratives to theorise how working-class backgrounds generate distinct forms of cultural capital within elite spaces. Second, it reveals specific mechanisms through which WCAs transform their class experiences into pedagogical and leadership assets, showing their unique capacity for institutional change. Third, it documents how WCAs' combination of lived experience and commitment to social justice enables them to both support disadvantaged students and challenge systemic inequities. Rather than viewing WCAs as outsiders lacking cultural capital, this research demonstrates their role as transformative agents who actively enrich academia.

These insights can offer concrete recommendations for institutional change. Moving forward, universities must reform hiring and promotion practices to recognise working-class cultural

wealth, establish targeted financial and professional development support, and create formal channels for WCA perspectives in decision-making processes. This implementation will require robust accountability mechanisms, including regular data collection and progress reporting. Moreover, institutions must also actively cultivate environments where working-class cultural wealth is no longer ignored or merely acknowledged but valued as being essential to academic excellence. By centering WCA perspectives and contributions, institutions can move beyond producing symbolic diversity initiatives toward meaningful structural transformation that benefits not only working-class people, but the entire academic community.

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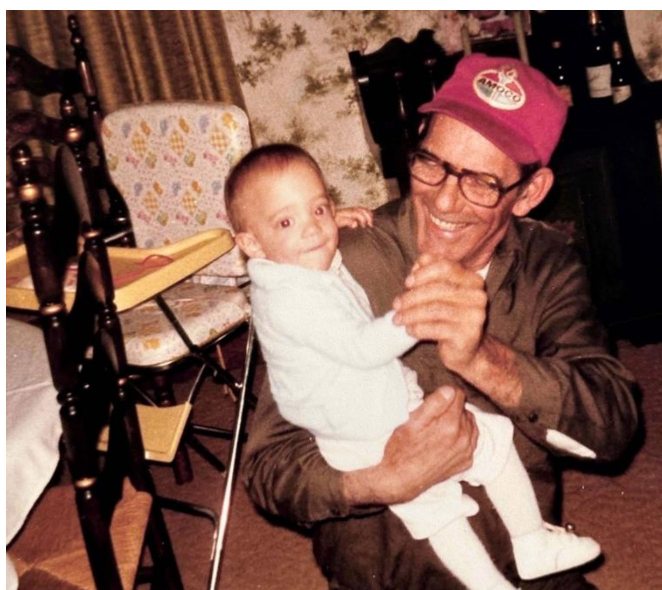
"A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" – From Family History to Community Museum Exhibit

Ericka Wills, University of Wisconsin

I want to give special thanks to the McLean County Museum of History, Laborers' International Union (LiUNA) Midwest Region, and curators Mike Matejka and Susan Hartzold for creating and supporting this important exhibit through worker/union/community/museum collaboration. I am grateful to everyone who shared their time and wealth of knowledge. There is a special place in my family's hearts for this exhibit, for everyone who made it a reality, and for each person whose life has been changed by a company's deadly deceit.

My earliest childhood memories are of my tall, smiling grandfather–in whose muscular arms I loved to curl up–rapidly becoming more frail and pained when I crawled onto his lap. I was proud of my grandfather, Willard Tipsord: a caring family man, a foster father, and an active member of Carpenters Local 63 in McLean County, Illinois. As a preschooler, I would point out buildings around town that he had helped construct. These places would later mark the passage of time in my early life, from the Eastland Mall, where I would meet friends as a teenager, to the Student Center at Illinois State University, where I would complete my graduate degrees.

Until Grandpa Tipsord became sick, I didn't know that in the 1950s, as a newlywed with a young child at home, he had worked at United Asbestos & Rubber Company (UNARCO) in Bloomington, Illinois, before earning his Carpenters union card. He was barely 20 years old when he started at UNARCO. 20 years later, in his late 40s, Grandpa was diagnosed with mesothelioma, an asbestos-related cancer, and doctors told our family that he had six months to live. Yet he lived until May 1, 1989, which also happens to be International Workers' Day. He was 57 years old when he died from cancer caused by asbestos fibers that had lodged deep in his lungs three decades earlier.

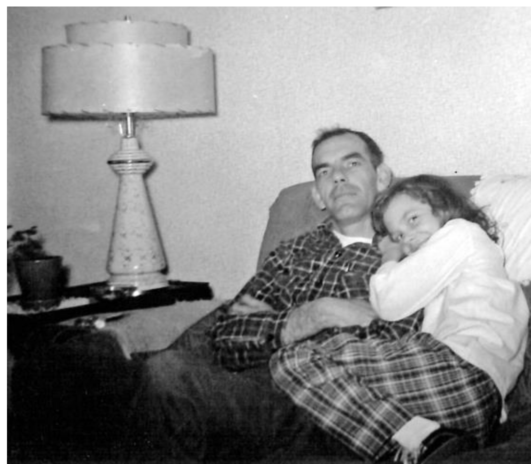


Ericka Wills and her Grandfather Willard Tipsord.

I was six years old when Grandpa died, and I couldn't have imagined at the time how the circumstances surrounding his death would eventually change the trajectory of my life. I did not know or understand how, for decades, UNARCO had suppressed studies that scientifically proved the dangers of asbestos or how, as a cost-cutting measure, the company had knowingly "phased out" workers showing early signs of asbestos-related illness to create plausible

deniability surrounding their eventual deaths. I didn't know how the company had moved production to Bloomington from Cicero, near Chicago, after workers in Cicero started getting sick, or how UNARCO left Bloomington just as quickly after workers in Bloomington also fell ill. As a confused and grieving young child, I understood only that a "bad company" had made Grandpa sick.

Today, I am an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin School for Workers, the oldest university-based labor education program in the U.S. We proudly carry forward the slogan "Education for Workplace Democracy," and build upon the legacy of men and women, like Grandpa, who gave their lives as part of the struggle for safe workplaces, a collective voice on the job, and the dignity of labor. Since I got my start as a labor educator in my early 20s, I have taught thousands of workers through their unions across the U.S., Mexico, and Canada – ranging from miners to flight attendants and teachers to steelworkers. Using a Community-Engaged Scholarship approach emphasizing collaboration with workers, families, labor organizations, and allies, I have helped workers self-organize in my neighborhood, facilitated transnational multi-union contract campaigns, and participated at every level in between. But even with my engagement in workers' struggles, I knew relatively little about UNARCO, the company where Grandpa worked as a young man. Nor did I know the consequences that management and doctors' choices to suppress data about the dangers of asbestos had on other families and the legacy that personal and corporate deceit had on shaping my home town.



Cheryl Tipsord Wills and her father Willard Tipsord.

I told myself that someday I would learn more about that part of my family history and the rippling effect decisions made at UNARCO had on workers, families, and communities. Yet it was too painful and frightening for me to reopen those only partially-healed wounds. It wasn't until September 2024, at the opening of the McLean County Museum of History's exhibit "A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County," that I realized I am part of an entire community which was just now recognizing and engaging with this history and its contemporary legacy.

Julia Rose explains, "[D]ifficult histories in museum emotions and incite visitors' resistances to engaging in learning about a painful history…For history workers, the tasks of assembling representations and crafting interpretations for difficult histories are both personal and political" (Rose 2016, 33). Recognizing this, I chose to write my own subjectivity into this article, highlighting the way that meaning-making occurs in museum exhibits at the intersection of personal, public, past, and present. My personal responses and memories are interwoven through what follows, as this article briefly situates the exhibit in a context of presenting difficult public labor histories, provides an overview of the exhibit with an emphasis on workers' oral histories, and finally offers sample community responses from young union apprentices who experienced "A Deadly Deception." While each of these sections focuses on this particular exhibit on McLean County history, as exhibit curator Mike Matejka explains, sharing the story of UNARCO "illustrates a national tragedy on a local scale," as it is "a universal story of people being sacrificed, forced to endure toxic conditions and environmental hazards all in the pursuit of profit" (Matejka 2024a). Following this realization, I am offering "A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" as

a model for local history exhibits to broaden the focus of inquiry on industrial tragedies beyond the human suffering and death (and there certainly is that) to encompass the agency, resilience, and remembrance of workers, families, and the community. In this way, the exhibit is about creating knowledge of the past to move forward by recognizing how companies have put profit before people, how this continues today, and how we can collectively create awareness and change.

Public Memory, Labor History, Truth-Telling and "A Deadly Deception"

"In the second decade of the twenty-first century, public historians have called for more public histories of labor. They ground their argument in the specificity of the moment," explain Robert Forrant and Mary Anne Trasciatti in their introduction to *Where Are the Workers?: Labor's Stories at Museums and Historic Sites*. "We see in the present moment an urgent need to tell the stories of working people and working-class organizations and movements, but we also know that class struggle is a defining feature of capitalist societies and the time for active engagement with labor history in the U.S. is always *now*" (Forrant and Trasciatti 2022, 2). "A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" seizes the momentum of the current moment, when public support for unions is at historically high levels (Brenan 2024), and the majority of Americans say unions have a positive impact on the country (Pew 2024).

This exhibit encompasses over a decade of diligent planning, listening, research, fundraising, design, and installation that involved collaboration between curators, former UNARCO workers, families, unions, community members, and others. Reflecting aspects of Commemorative Museum Pedagogy that Julia Rose develops in *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historical Sites*, the museum and curators took a holistic approach "to develop and construct ethical historical representations" that presented those with asbestos-related industrial illnesses not as one-dimensional "victims" but rather multidimensional people with "experiences, expertise, and agency" (Rose 2016, 153; 4). As such, the exhibit eschews presenting a "neutral" history in favor of what Rose describes as museums' emerging role as "social agents that can take on social responsibilities that go beyond collecting and preserving materials. They have the ability to positively influence and affect society" (Rose 2016, 36).

Participants who experience the exhibit should recognize that the museum and curators addressed a certain level of risk in the hallways of the exhibit, including the possibility that the exhibit would upset or offend audiences (Rose 2016, 36). As the article, "Reaching into the Community to Interpret Labor History: A Museum-Labor-University Collaboration" details, "For museums in communities that may lack a well-known or celebrated labor past, public and labor historians face even more difficulties as they try to develop projects that document and present the history of workers and their popular protests" (Mercier, Tissot, and Richardson 2023, 74). Such challenges and risks are particularly evident in creating an asbestos exhibit that fuses the past and the present around the theme of "industrial homicide": an evocative and accurate phrase that designates when the action or inaction of an employer or those with decision-making power at a company results in the death of workers. Speaking at the opening of "A Deadly Deception," Judy Emig, the executive director of the McLean County Museum of History, left no doubt about the museum's commitment to share such bold social messages, clarifying, "The mission of the museum is to preserve, educate, and collaborate in sharing diverse stories of our community, and we are committed to investigating the whole of history. We are committed to truth-telling." (Emig 2024).

Four generations of women in my family toured the "A Deadly Deception" – my Grandma Tipsord (Willard's widow); my mother, Cheryl Tipsord Wills (Willard's daughter); my daughter, Willow; and me. As my mother shared memories of her father and his description of working conditions with my daughter, a statement made by museum board president Carolyn Yockey at the exhibit opening echoed in my mind: "There are times we think about our history as 'oh the nice parts about grandma and grandpa or what the great grandparents did.'" "This exhibit that opens today isn't as pretty and fun to read about. It is sad. It's alarming. I used the word horrifying earlier today. But it is part of our history and something we need to know and share." (Yockey 2024). Touring or learning from the exhibit may mean sorting through messily intertwined facts, emotions, memories, and current events in an active meaning-making process.

Cheryl Tipsord Wills explaining the exhibit and family memories to her granddaughter, Willow.

The Exhibit[1]

Upon entering the exhibit, participants encounter a sign displaying its name –"A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County"– followed by a subheading that sets the stage for viewers. The sign reads, "The story of asbestos, and how the proprietors of a local manufacturing company kept a lethal secret in order to maximize profits." The exhibit is arranged in a spiral formation, taking participants from the entrance walls lined with general information around the perimeter and then inward, with increasing specificity about the asbestos company's deadly impact on workers, families, Bloomington and the surrounding communities.

Along the entry walls, exhibit participants learn about asbestos mining and its ubiquitous uses in the mid-twentieth century. They learn about the United Asbestos & Rubber Company (UNARCO), which moved into a factory in Bloomington in 1951. The building had once been a railroad shop, but when steam locomotives were replaced by diesel, it had closed. Bloomington had lost several hundred jobs in the railroad industry, so when UNARCO opened its doors, the community celebrated the 160-250 new jobs that the company promised.

As the visitor moves inward, the tone of the exhibit shifts. Visitors turn the corner to a second wall with the large, bold heading, "What Bloomington Workers Didn't Know Would Hurt Them." The following panels offer historical data, photos, workers' narratives, and scientific studies that detail how, beginning in the 1930s, the asbestos industry funded and then actively suppressed the results of studies demonstrating the dangers of asbestos. "Leaders at UNARCO and other asbestos manufacturing companies were withholding the results of their health studies from their workers, as well as the public," reads a description next to excerpts from a

[1] Unless otherwise cited, quotations in this section come from the exhibit "A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" at the McLean County History Museum. Supporting documentation can be found in Matejka 2024b and Schlenker 2024.

1948 study by the asbestos industry-funded Industrial Hygiene Foundation. As Egilman, Bird, and Lee argue, “Asbestos product companies would like the public to believe that there was a legitimate scientific debate surrounding the asbestos–cancer link during the twentieth century that delayed adequate regulation…[T]here was no such legitimate debate” (Egilman, Bird, and Lee 2014, 115). Instead, corporate, medical, and insurance interests who were “members of the Industrial Hygiene Foundation (IHF), acted in concert to manipulate dust disease science and avoid legal liability for the injuries their products caused to workers, consumers, and their family members” (Egilman, Bird, and Lee 2014, 116).

By the time UNARCO moved to Bloomington, it was already well aware of the industrial disease caused by asbestos. The company had shut down its plant in Cicero, Illinois, after paying thousands of dollars in workers’ compensation claims and, in search of a new, healthy workforce, relocated to Bloomington. “Worker Complaints About the Dust at UNARCO Landed on Deaf Ears,” reads a panel at the end of the second wall. Next to photos of workers handling raw asbestos with no protective gear are images of union grievance forms with workers’ complaints about asbestos dust. A quote from union president Richard Babb explains that when the union would take workers’ grievances to management, “They wouldn’t listen to us that dust was dangerous to our health. They told us dust was in no way affecting our health.”

Before turning to continue down the third outer wall, participants can choose to sit for a minute at the corner and listen to workers’ oral histories narrated through a loudspeaker. Excerpts of workers’ and family members’ accounts are integrated throughout the exhibit as well as being accessible in the audio nook. Firsthand accounts transition the visitor from an exhibit about an asbestos company to one about workers, their families, those who advocated on their behalf, and the larger community. Writing about asbestos-related archives at the University of Strathclyde, Arthur McIvor asserts that an such an oral history “approach democratizes knowledge, accepting that eye-witness accounts are valuable and valid; that we can learn from those who directly experienced the past” (McIvor 2024, 11).

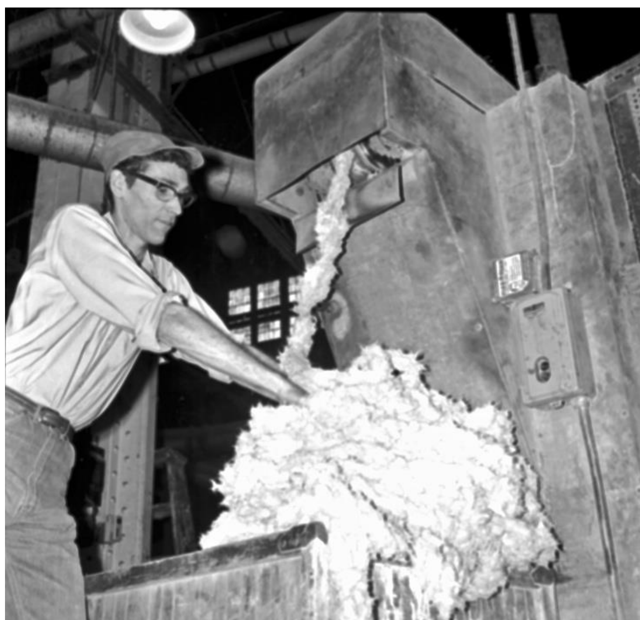
Jim Sumer working an asbestos loom at UNARCO’s Bloomington, IL facility. Photo courtesy of McLean County History Museum, Pantagraph Achieves

He continues, “These oral histories of asbestos victims and advocates…provide us with privileged insights, giving us the capability of standing on the shoulders of those who directly witnessed or experienced industrial work and its myriad hazards and risks; seeing things through their eyes; their world” (McIvor 2024, 11). Increasingly, the exhibit draws the participant into the world of the workers and their families through the voices, photos, and first-hand experiences that continue to unfold throughout the rest of the exhibit.

While listening to workers’ own words describing the conditions of the asbestos factory and the agony of suffering from asbestosis, participants can see photographs from inside the factory: workers without protective equipment shoveling raw asbestos fibers, piled like mounds of fluffy, white cotton. Two types of face coverings sit in a display case labeled, “Workers Were Supplied With Inadequate Dust Masks.” One mask, which was only occasionally made

available to factory workers, is similar to today's disposable paper masks. Another mask, a more sophisticated Bureau of Mines-approved metal and rubber respirator, was purchased by UNARCO for its lab technicians but not made available to factory workers. The display underscores which workers UNARCO considered disposable, much like a single-use mask.

These masks make me think back to Grandpa describing how he would tie a handkerchief around his nose and mouth to keep from choking on the fibers in the air. Grandpa was evidently one of the disposable workers. As my mom, Cheryl Tipsord Wills, described on a radio interview for the exhibit opening, "'Management came out and made them take the hankies off their faces. They would not let them wear hankies to protect themselves'" (Schlenker 2024).



William Mau, who died of asbestos related illness, filling asbestos weaving machine at UNARCO. Photo courtesy of McLean County History Museum Pantagraph Achieves

Continuing down the third outer wall, side by side panels read, "UNARCO Ignored Warnings to Improve Conditions in Their Factories" and "Negligent Practices Placed Workers in Harm's Way." With photographs and first-hand accounts of factory conditions, participants learn that "[r]ather than replace the old machines from the Cicero plant, UNARCO moved them to Bloomington. The old ventilation systems used at UNARCO to remove asbestos dust from the air were grossly inadequate." Although UNARCO was aware of both the scientific evidence of asbestos-related cancer and the asbestos-related illnesses it had documented at the Cicero facility, the company chose to use the same machinery in a different poorly-ventilated location where, according to employee Chuck Hammond, "[u]sually there was [asbestos] dust anywhere from an inch to three inches deep on it [the floor]." Remembering the conditions in the shop, Otto J. Kessinger described, "At the end of the plant where I worked, you could look up … it looked like it was snowing with asbestos fiber." Hammond and Kessinger's accounts provide a human context in which to understand how the decisions by UNARCO's management – such as where to relocate the plant, who to provide with adequate masks, and when to suppress scientific evidence – had material consequences. Through such asbestos oral histories, as McIvor recognizes, "We get beyond the cold documentary records and statistics of ill-health to more complex and multi-layered stories" of workers and communities (McIvor 2024, 12).

At the corner of third and fourth walls, the story moves from the workers to their families and community. "Asbestos Dust was so Thick Inside UNARCO and so Poorly Contained That the Air and Land Outside the Plant was Also Contaminated with Asbestos," reads a bold heading on the last panel of the third wall. Photos and text illustrate that community members were exposed to asbestos, although they never set foot in the plant. Mark Britton, who lived in the neighborhood by the plant and played in a nearby park as a young child, died of asbestosis at only 39 years old. He is one of those who died of an asbestos-related illness simply because of his proximity to the plant.

An adjacent panel with a black-and-white photo of a women putting clothes into a mid-century electric washing machine explains, “In an Environment in Which Asbestos Dust Prevailed, Workers Carried it Home on Their Clothes. Subsequently, family members were exposed.” While I had been thinking about Grandpa during the exhibit, this brief statement reminded me that my grandma, too, suffers from asbestos lung damage due, most likely, to fibers that Grandpa brought home on his work clothes that Grandma washed.

For me, experiencing the exhibit involved emotional and intellectual responses: learning and feeling. As Dickerson, Blair, and Ott point out in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, “The partiality and contestedness of public memory are virtually undeniable” (Dickerson, Blair, and Ott 2010, 17). Therefore, it must be noted that while the exhibit offers worker, family, and community member oral histories, it goes beyond public memory (and forgetting) to ground information in scientific and legal documentation. The medical evidence and asbestos-company documentation exposed during class action lawsuits, particularly in the 1980s, suggest that while individual, family, or community memories might vary, in instances of companies like UNARCO, a preponderance of evidence demonstrates the “manipulation of science and law by the asbestos product manufacturers” (Egilman, Bird, and Lee 2014, 116).

Like the change in tone around that first corner of the exhibit, the emphasis shifts again, from workers’ personal accounts to evidence of scientific data and legal documentation that UNARCO and other asbestos companies knew about the dangers of asbestos, yet willfully exposed workers, their families, and the whole community. Under the heading, spelled out in bold, capital letters, “THE DECEIT,” the next panels provide medical documentation, health records, and physicians’ accounts to illustrate how “UNARCO and other asbestos manufacturing companies regularly monitored the health of their employees, but not because they wanted to ensure they stayed healthy in a dangerous environment.” Rather, in “a callous and calculated process, UNARCO management and doctors used the X-rays to watch any asbestos disease’s progress, and then ‘eased workers out’ (laid them off) before the devastating symptoms of the disease became apparent to the worker.”

When workers began to show asbestos-related illness, UNARCO would also convince workers to sign away their right to sue in return for a cash payment through the asbestos company’s self-insurance front, Associated Safety & Claims Services, Inc. “Why would the company take an x-ray of workers every year?” asked exhibit curator Mike Matejka. “Because they knew we want to follow people so that if they reach a certain point, and we start seeing disease in their lungs, they are going to get a little visit from the personnel manager who says sign this paper for a $2,000 settlement if you agree not to sue us” (Matejka 2024a). This practice was not unique to UNARCO; rather before stricter laws in the 1960s, asbestos companies “moved to channel all legal claims into workers’ compensation or out-of-court settlements, eliminating the potential of publicly accessible trial records” (Shearer 2015, 178).

As the fourth wall of the exhibit begins to curve inward, the panels transition to the collapse of the asbestos industry’s willful deceit. “Beginning in 1964 the U.S. Department of Labor conducted industrial hygiene surveys at factories that produced asbestos products,” a panel reads. Before the establishment of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in 1971, the Department of Labor could issue citations and recommendations but there were no meaningful enforcement mechanisms to protect worker health and safety. Perhaps because of the Department of Labor’s Industrial Hygiene findings, such as a 1967 report that “UNARCO asbestos levels were well above the acceptable levels and was in violation of the

law due to non-use of respirators, dry sweeping during work hours, inadequate dust hoods, and poor housekeeping" and the growing number of asbestos-related illnesses in the Bloomington area, by the late 1960s, UNARCO was looking to get out of the asbestos industry altogether.

"In 1970 Owens-Corning purchased the Bloomington facility from UNARCO, intending to continue asbestos production," reads an adjacent panel. However, an industrial hygiene firm hired by Owens-Corning found that "'atmospheric conditions in the work environment of this plant are unbelievably bad…No consideration was given to protecting the health of the workforce…The outdated equipment and methods of handling prevent proper control under present conditions.'" After this report, Owens Corning stopped manufacturing asbestos products in its Bloomington plant and shuttered the operation in 1972.

Over the next two decades, the asbestos industry's deadly deception would increasingly come to light, in significant part due to class action lawsuits filed by workers against asbestos companies. As Shearer explains, "Worker and consumer lawsuits against asbestos manufacturers helped raise awareness of the harm from asbestos exposure, and the litigation helped uncover documents showing industry knowledge of harm and attempts to suppress the information" (Shearer 2015, 178). In legal proceedings, asbestos companies were required to produce records, studies, health data, and other documents during discovery, and management personnel were deposed under oath. A panel summarizes, "Depositions revealed a plethora of unconscionable practices by UNARCO owners and managers." This section shares that workers could not recall "receiving printed materials from management regarding the dangers of asbestos" or "seeing signs anywhere in the plant or on any bags of asbestos that warned them of the dangers of asbestos," while the vast majority of workers recalled "piles of loose asbestos on the floors, and high concentrations of asbestos particle[s] in the air." In another attempt to avoid accountability and "to protect its shareholders from asbestos liabilities, on July 29, 1982, UNARCO became the first [asbestos company] to declare Chapter 11 bankruptcy. [As part of the] reorganization, on June 2, 1989, a trust was established to pay asbestosis claims against all manufacturers."

However, the story of asbestos and companies' deadly deceit does not end there. As the exhibit participant moves towards the center of the room, asbestos issues are brought into a contemporary context. Under the unambiguous title, "Secrecy and Greed–the Continuing Story," a panel details, "This is not the first, nor will it be the last time that businesses have lied to consumers in order to grow their profits." Participants can flip through a book attached to the panel that details "Deadly Deceptions" in other contemporary U.S. industries, including military burn pits, lead in water pipes, Purdue Pharma and OxyContin, and forever chemicals like Gore-Tex, Teflon, and Scotchguard.

Next to this panel is a closing admonition to the viewer: "Today we rarely hear about the issues of asbestos, but they still exist and continue to be a very expensive problem." The assertion reflects what Egilman, Bird, and Lee recognize as historic and contemporary asbestos exposure that "translates into hundreds of thousands of additional asbestos injuries and deaths worldwide and the accompanying individual and human toll that results" (Egilman, Bird, and Lee 2014, 122). The panel details financial costs to society and families from asbestos removal in local schools, continuing medical bills, and lost earnings. What cannot be quantified is the emotional and psychological toll all of this took.

Author, Ericka Wills, viewing Grandpa Willard Tipsord's memorial book page.

Around the final corner, at the heart of the exhibit, is a memorial wall naming the over 130 known McLean County workers or family members with secondary exposure who died of asbestos-related diseases. Attached to the wall is a small table with a photobook that shares family pictures of those who died and describes them in their loved-ones' words. It contains a wedding photo of Grandma and Grandpa and a picture of Grandpa smiling widely as he held me. Each of those names is more than a worker; the names signify someone with hopes and dreams who went to work to support themselves and their families and whose life was sacrificed for corporate greed.

Participants leave the exhibit walking through a model decontamination chamber, passing through plastic flaps and by a mannequin wearing the full hazmat gear that should be used today when workers are in the presence of asbestos. This final display of personal protective equipment emphasizes the true deadly nature of the substance and stands in stark contrast to the photos and descriptions that exhibit participants previously saw of UNARCO workers handling raw asbestos fibers without any safety equipment and the columns of the names of those who died because of that exposure.

By integrating oral histories, personal photos, and contemporary connections alongside historical, legal, and scientific evidence, "A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" centers the worker, their family, and the community in the asbestos story. By reading and hearing workers' accounts, an exhibit participant can, as McIvor recognizes, view "the asbestos story through their lens and relay that to us to enable better understanding of the meanings of their working lives, work-health cultures and how they navigated identity transitions from fit, able breadwinner, to disabled, dependent, and dying" (McIvor 2024, 12). Echoing Rose's call for multidimensional representation in exhibits on difficult histories, integrating worker, family, and community voices fosters an understanding of how they were "active agents in this process, not just passive victims. They reacted to corporate irresponsibility and managerial exploitation, putting production and profit before health, by mobilizing and campaigning" (McIvor, 2024, 12).

"A Deadly Deception" provides a model for what a public history museum can achieve in place-based labor history to, as Forrant and Trasciatti articulate, "create awareness of present challenges, and support ongoing efforts to build power, expand democracy, and achieve justice for working people (Forrant and Trasciatti 2022, 14). For this to be more fully achieved, community engagement with the exhibit must be encouraged and fostered. At its best, the exhibit is not only a display of facts and perspectives contained within the walls of the museum but rather an experience that the viewer takes with them into the world, better educated on what happened in the past, the ramifications in the present, and the trends of corporate greed and labor exploitation that, unfortunately, may continue into the future without informed, concerted, organized intervention from collective workers and consumers.

Community Reactions: UA Local 99

A few weeks after the exhibit opened, a group of about thirty United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipefitting Industry (UA) Local 99 first year union apprentices visited the museum as part of their training. As I chatted with apprentices touring the exhibit, most told me they were in their late teens or early twenties – the age my grandfather was when he had worked at UNARCO. I couldn't help but wonder what resources about worker health and safety, let alone labor history, had or had not been available to my grandfather at that age, and what these young workers were taking away from their experience at the exhibit. Ultimately, to assess a public labor history project like "A Deadly Deception" requires not only considering the exhibit itself but also "responses of the learner[s] to the difficult histories" (Rose 2016, 153).

UA Local 99 apprentices at "A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" at the McLean County History Museum.

Apprentices John Kelleher and Clive Griffiths, both 19 years old, said that they didn't know much about asbestos before the exhibit and had no idea that there had been an asbestos factory in the community even though they have lived in the area their entire lives. Griffith explained, "This is my first time ever hearing about asbestos, especially reading and seeing that there was a factory here. It's worrisome because we never really know what is going on around us." For Griffith what he learned from the exhibit also extended beyond asbestos and his community. He pointed out the information about contemporary toxic exposure from burn pits and shared, "This is good to know because I am in the military. We still dig holes and burn things like this."

While "A Deadly Deception" memorializes those whose lives were impacted by asbestos-related illnesses in central Illinois, the power of this exhibit lies not only in revealing an effaced local history but also exposing a trend of company decisionmakers knowingly and willfully sacrificing workers', family members', and community residents' lives in pursuit of increased profit. Malignant corporate greed knows no historical limits, impacting workers and consumers as it evolves from, for instance, the asbestos industry to opioid pharmaceutical producers to forever chemical proliferation to military burn pits. Conceptualizing the exhibit as speaking as much to our present conditions as recording the past reflects Rose's assertion that by "commemorating and interpreting difficult histories, history organizations can contribute powerful content to the collective narrative, effectively demonstrating that difficult histories matter in the present" (Rose 2016, 340). As such, "They have the ability to positively influence and affect society. Such a claim to social agency propels museums and historical sites into a wider and more urgent educational role of advocating for social justice" (Rose 2016, 36).

For UA Local 99 apprentices, an assertion of museums' role in social justice is neither abstract nor hypothetical. Rather, information from "A Deadly Deception" about worker health and safety is applicable to the everyday lives of the young plumbers and pipefitters who are exposed

to a variety of building materials, chemicals, and toxins at their worksites. Jerry Kelleher, UA Local 99 Business Manager, who accompanied the apprentices to the exhibit, explained, "It is important for my apprentices to know the dangers that they could still be confronting when they are out in the field working on older piping or remodel jobs. You need to think about yourself and your family and how unsafe exposure is happening again with materials like Teflon."

As apprentices Kyle Sheldon and Nick Schuler neared the end of the exhibit, they stood by the list of names of community members that have died of asbestos-related illnesses. "We know now about asbestos and the dangers of it but to see the wall of names with all the people that passed away due to the conditions is really impactful" Sheldon said. "It is important to remember because it makes you look at the things you do on a daily basis and wonder: What am I handling that might be dangerous?" Schuler agreed, elaborating that not all the names on the wall were those of individuals who were exposed to asbestos in their workplace. "Learning about people who didn't even work there like people in neighborhoods by the factory and workers families getting sick from the asbestos is really eye opening," he explained.

UA Local 99 apprentices at "A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" at the McLean County History Museum.

Beyond their workplaces, the UA union members are learning to connect past labor fights with current workers' struggles in their apprenticeship labor history education class. Providing direct education on these topics through a museum exhibit offers labor history that is accessible to the union apprentices and larger community. As Forrant and Trasciatti state, "given that most people are not learning labor history in high school or college… exposure to that history in alternative settings is essential for building and supporting a viable and formidable labor movement" (Forrant and Trasciatti 2022, 12).

Taylor Hemmingson, who had worked her first job as an apprentice the week before she toured the exhibit, connected what she saw at the museum to what she had learned about labor history and her experiences in the field. "This [UNARCO story] is beat-for-beat like the same playbook by the company as with Radium Girls," Hemmingson recognized, referring to women in Ottawa, Illinois, north of Bloomington, who in the 1920s and 30s painted glow-in-the-dark wristwatch dials with radium-laced paint that the company knew was toxically radioactive. Hemmingson elaborated, "The parallels are that this is something that keeps happening. What's happening to us now? I think about the focus on making sure important research on dangers to workers isn't quashed and making sure you advocate for yourselves because the company isn't going to."

Hemmingson reflected on a narrative from the exhibit that other apprentices also recognized – the continuing story of workers and consumers being put at risk by corporate greed. Grant Weidner stated, "It's very important to tell these stories because I didn't know the timeline for

asbestos. I think a lot of people might be under the impression that these things happened to workers way in the past, in the 1800s, but stories like this help us use our critical thinking to realize that things like this are still going on and companies are still going to be willing to put people in situations that they know are dangerous." Weidner said he had been told to "just do the work" in unsafe conditions in construction before he joined the union, and he was now "so grateful to be part of the union" because, according his him, they take worker health and safety seriously.

Near the exit to the exhibit, Jerry Kelleher emphasized, "The more everybody knows, the more educated we are, the more we come together. True education makes a better community." Kelleher's statement articulates both the core goal of an exhibit like "A Deadly Deception" to educate for social justice as well as the task of a progressive labor movement that not only participates in traditional collective bargaining over wages, hours, and working conditions but also leverages power for the common good by using solidarity to create a better and more just society.

The Present and Our Future

Today we are teetering on a precipice for worker and consumer protections, as well as broader social justice movements in the United States. In 2018, the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Epic Systems v. Lewis* upheld mandatory arbitration agreements as a condition of employment, taking away workers' right to file class actions, and echoing the agreements that UNARCO's workers signed to waive their right to sue the company in exchange for a modest payout. Without those class actions in the 1980s, there would have been no depositions or testimony exposing UNARCO's deceit. The Supreme Court's reversal of the *Chevron* doctrine in 2024, which empowered agencies like OSHA and EPA to pass regulations and required courts to defer to them, slammed the door on the power of agencies to protect worker and consumer health and safety. Will the result be similar to the ineffective and unenforceable mid-20th century citations and recommendations that the Department of Labor levied against UNARCO? Even the continued existence of the heart of United States labor law, the National Labor Relations Act, which is enforced by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), has been brought into question as courts may be poised to hold that the enforcement arm of the NLRB – once taken for granted by workers – is unconstitutional.

"A Deadly Deception: The Asbestos Tragedy in McLean County" opened in September 2024 and only two months later, after the election in November of that year, projections for the future of organized labor echo struggles of the past. Forrant and Trasciatti provide a particularly apt analysis of our current era:

> Research shows that both stagnating wages and rising inequality are a direct result of declining union membership. Although the situation is dire, there is hope. The U.S. labor movement is in a moment of transition marked by historic levels of popular support and increased militancy, on the one hand, and a stream of antilabor initiatives from the Supreme Court, federal agencies, and various state governments, on the other. This combination of growing support and increased threats makes labor history more relevant than ever. (Forrant and Trasciatti 4, 2022).

Moving forward in a new historical context will increasingly mean engaging with the past, as the laws, agencies, and governmental bodies that have protected workers and consumers are eroded, reminiscent of a time before these safeguards existed. A "Deadly Deception" reminds

exhibit participants of the human lives sacrificed for corporate profit and the continuation of this trend. Effective advocacy for the future of workers' health and safety protections on national and international level may well depend on our ability to effectively convey the lessons of local labor history that surround us today.

Author Bio:

Ericka Wills, PhD, is a workers' rights advocate, labor educator, and union activist. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin School for Workers.

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Chung, N. (2023) *A Living Remedy.* Harper Collins.

Review by **Renny Christopher**

Nicole Chung's *A Living Remedy* won the Working-Class Studies Association's 2024 Tillie Olsen Award for Creative Writing[1] and was also selected as one of the NY Times Book Review's 100 Notable Books of 2023; it is well deserving of these and all the other recognitions it has received. *A Living Remedy* is simply a beautiful book, although certainly not a simple book. It is a memoir of Chung's experience of losing her adoptive parents over the span of two years. Her father died first, at 67, in part due to never having received adequate care for diabetes and kidney disease. Her mother died of cancer during the COVID lockdown. Chung's narrative takes these bald facts and weaves them into a story of love in the context of precarity, interracial adoption, upward mobility, and the broken-down nightmare that is the U.S. healthcare system. The book is moving, brutally honest, and tells an important story.

Chung was born to Korean-American parents and put up for adoption. She tells the story of the search for her birth parents in an earlier book, *All You Can Ever Know* (2018), which is also well worth reading. That book focuses more on race and family, while also touching on class, with the experience of being adopted at its center. *A Living Remedy* focuses on Chung's adoptive family, her experience of upward mobility as she goes to college, marries, joins the professional middle class, and has children of her own, with the difficult deaths of her parents at its center.

After her father's death Chung began writing the book to deal with her grief; before the book was finished her mother also died, and so it became the story of both losses, each devastating in its own way.

Interwoven through the narrative is Chung's own upward mobility story. She was born in Seattle; her adoptive parents took her to rural southern Oregon, a very white part of the country and a very economically depressed part of the country, especially in the late 20th century. Her father managed a series of pizza restaurants; her mother worked first as a respiratory therapist and later in low-level office jobs. Both had health problems. They pieced things together—work, healthcare in the absence of insurance, housing. Chung writes of the family when she was in high school, "we no longer lived *paycheck to paycheck*, as my mother had once told me, but emergency to emergency" (p. 16).

As the only Asian student in her classes at school, she grew up not knowing anyone who looked like her—not even her own family. She wanted to get out of southern Oregon, and finally figured out that college was her road out. Her family was opposed to "handouts," so she paid the fees for her own SAT exams and college applications out of what she made from her part-time job. Many years later she saw the financial aid application her mother had filled out and found that her family's income was less than the cost of her first year of college. She made it through on financial aid. A familiar story.

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[1] For a full list of WCSA award winners see here: https://workingclassassn.org/awards/

What's not as familiar in working-class narratives of upward mobility is the setting in the rural west. The more common backdrop for such stories is the industrial northeast. Chung's portrait of rural southern Oregon reminded me in some ways of my own youth in rural California (which was not nearly as white as Chung's community, but very similar in other ways). This different setting is one of the contributions Chung's narrative makes to working-class literature.

Another important contribution this book makes is in its indictment of the U.S. healthcare system and the way that lives are shortened for working-class and working-poor people because of their lack of access to adequate healthcare. After Chung graduated from college, married, and remained on the east coast and had two children, both of her parents lost their jobs just at the time that her father's diabetes begins to cause a steep decline in his health. Reluctantly, he finally applies for social security disability after two years of unemployment, only to be denied, and later denied Medicaid. By the time he finally sees a doctor at a safety-net clinic he has end-stage renal failure, and eventually dies "*a common American death*" (p. 78).

Chung wrestles with guilt and helplessness at being far away, barely getting by while in graduate school and obligated to her own children, and therefore unable to do much to help her parents – feelings familiar to many upwardly-mobile working-class kids. I've felt it, although my family's situation was never nearly as bad as Chung's family, nor were their interactions with the healthcare system as bad (although they weren't good). My dad also had diabetes. I remember being with him at an appointment with a diabetes educator who wanted to teach him to count carbs. He asked what a "carb" was, and the educator said, "carbohydrates," as if that were something everyone should know. My dad said, "I don't know a carbohydrate from a carburetor." The diabetes educator did not succeed in explaining. The medical system doesn't really know how to talk with people who aren't college graduates, let alone provide adequate treatment.

Chung writes eloquently of grief, and of the complicated grief of an adopted daughter. While she is still deep in her grief over her father's death, her mother is diagnosed with cancer. And then the pandemic locks everything down, and prevents Chung from being with her mother at the end, as she had desired to be. This book chronicles one of the many, many stories of this kind that took place in 2020 and 2021. This is another contribution this books makes—it chronicles an experience that was shared by many, and that should not be forgotten.

Chung's prose is poetic while still being straightforward, and she has included lists within the narrative that hit like gut punches. Her writing is clean without being spare, poetic without being flowery. She conveys experiences that will be unfamiliar to some readers in a way that will provoke empathy and understanding, if not identification.

Overall this is a book that has a lot to offer, and is written from a rare perspective in working-class literature: that of a Korean-American adoptee growing up in a white family in the rural west. I hope that Nicole Chung will continue to write more books, bringing her considerable talent and essential voice even further into the conversations on class, race, adoption, family, healthcare, and love. For above all, this is a book about love.

Reviewer Bio:

Renny Christopher is Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs at Washington State University Vancouver. *A Carpenter's Daughter* (Sense Publishers, 2009), addresses xyr experiences as the

first in xyr family to attend college. Before earning a doctorate, Christopher worked as a printing press operator, typesetter, carpenter and horse wrangler.

Waldman, A. (2024) *Help Wanted*. Norton.

Review by **RS Deeren**

My most recent trip to Target was meant to be a quick errand. I needed a fluorescent lightbulb and, as most in-and-out trips to Target become, I was drawn to the clearance aisles and the seasonal set-ups that appear overnight, as if Santa's helpers swept away Halloween and Thanksgiving to make room for faux wood reindeer and glittery sleighs. Of course, I know this work is done by the [typically] unseen and [usually] underpaid Target employees who scour the store before it opens, making sure every day starts fresh. I envy those pre-customer hours. As a former cook, I thrived in early morning prep-work routine, before my knife's rhythm was interrupted by a pushy diner whose well-done steak was too well-done.

This trip, however, was disorienting. Pallets filled with carboard boxes and stacks of shrink-wrapped cases of dry goods and shoes crowded each aisle. Employees not in the typical red top and khakis weaved through customers, unsheathing boxcutters as they unloaded box after box. What was most disorienting about this bustle, though, was the one-to-one recreation of a scene from Adelle Waldman's newest novel, *Help Wanted*. I wasn't questioning why this work hadn't been done before the store opened. I wasn't confused as to why these employees weren't in the standard Target outfit. In her novel, Waldman explains how this chaos is actually a planned penny-pinching scheme hatched by corporate suits to cut down on both the number of employees *and* the number of employee hours.

In the world of *Help Wanted*, Team Movement comes in every morning at 4am to unload the day's truck under the probing eye and equally inept guidance of their Executive Manager, Meredith. The team, when Meredith doesn't insert herself into their rhythm, operates smoothly. They unload the day's truck, sort merchandise, and stock shelves all before the front doors open. However, Town Square Corporate found that if Movement's hours were to start at 8, when customers arrive, stores could "bring in fewer Sales staff… reduce labor costs," and have workers untrained in customer service do not only their warehouse jobs, but the job of front-facing staff. Like most corporate needling, the plan lacked foresight beyond the bottom line and threatened the livelihoods of most part-time employees.

Help Wanted is a triumph on many fronts, but this scene hits the working-class beats for those familiar with wage labor: earnest employees looking for solid ground; petty middle managers jockeying for position on the corporate ladder; company brass making sweeping decisions from 30,000 feet.

With *Help Wanted*, Adelle Waldman gives readers what only the best working-class novels can: working people with their own voices, their own desires, their own ideas of what a good life can be. Set in the fictional big box store of Town Square, *Help Wanted* follows the members of Team Movement—the store's backroom warehouse workers—as they plot a way to rid themselves of their ineffectual manager, Meredith. A revolving cast of wage-laborers share their lives, personal desires, and employment hopes as Movement's plan takes shape. Some on Movement want Meredith fired while others believe getting her positioned to take over as the new store manager

would get her out of the warehouse while also leaving the door open for their own possible promotions. Meanwhile, outgoing Store Manager Big Will is caught between his loyalty to his employees, Town Square's cost-cutting VPs, and the growing suspicion that his early championing of Meredith might cost him his own promotion.

Set almost completely inside Town Square, Waldman uses humor to underscore the monotony and precarity of part-time work. Waldman's character work in this novel is one of its many strengths. Part-time wage-earners navigate not only the physically-demanding and monotonous tasks of unloading an entire semi-truck within an hour, but also the months-long decrease in hours, the mental and emotional toll of their home lives, and the constant drone of a boss who can't do the very labor she demands of her employees.

Boisterous Milo, Movement's sole "thrower," practices his comedy as he unloads the day's truck in orders that tell a story: pallets of food followed by packages of toilet paper. "What comes in—food—followed by what comes out." Too-cool-for-school Nicole just wants to punch in, work hard, and punch out after an early run-in with Meredith leaves her mental capacity questioned. She's determined to see Meredith fired. When it's Nicole's time to speak to the company executives, she states, "don't count your chickens. I can't wait for my interview. I'm going to sink her." Suave Diego laments a lack of hours while also positioning himself in the eyes of his female coworkers. Barely literate Ruby is the all-seeing team member who sees Town Square will only care about Town Square. Meek but practical Raymond tries to live down Meredith's accusations of his supposed drunkenness. Group Manager Little Will wants to make everyone happy, while ladder-climbing Val eyes Little Will's job. Hovering over them is Meredith, in full makeup, dressed in business casual more fitting for a saleroom floor than a warehouse. She's quick to micromanage but her inexperience causes her to bumble her way through work that the rest of Movement makes look like a dance routine. Anyone who has worked wage labor will appreciate the humor—or maybe just the familiar angst—of having to sidestep a manager who is incapable of doing the job.

Thematically, Waldman's depiction of the working class is never voyeuristic. She refuses to position Team Movement as caricatures to be gawked at by middle-class readers. These are earnest characters; even if readers don't root for all of them, they can understand their motivations. This is a hallmark of any great fiction. Additionally, Waldman writes with the care needed to not turn Team Movement into a working-class monolith. As the plan to rid themselves of Meredith evolves, breaks in Movement's ranks begin to form and ulterior motives come out. Ambitious Val points out the power vacuum any one of them could fill, stating, "If Meredith gets promoted, so does Little Will. And voilà, his job opens up. As far as who gets it, it could be anyone—any one of us." Is Val spearheading this plan for the betterment of the group, or to leapfrog her coworkers on the middle management ladder? Is Milo going to sabotage the plan simply because he feels disrespected? Is Nicole's resentment toward her boss going to alert Meredith to the plan? Waldman's skillful use of dramatic irony illuminates the nuances of these characters and shows how they are just as real as any of her readers.

Waldman, who was at one time a part-time warehouse employee much like those on Movement, has crafted a book with such humor and insight into the lives she represents and the broader social and economic forces they work under. This is perhaps the truest aspect of *Help Wanted*, that despite

their labor, their expertise, and their teamwork, Movement is still at the whim of the bottom line. As each individual finds some level of success, readers learn of looming systemic threats: store closures, reduced hours, automation. A reader not versed in the culture of the working class may find this a bitter pill, but the Nicoles, Vals, Diegos, and Milos of *Help Wanted* know what they can control: when to enjoy a second cigarette, and when to get on with the job. A brilliant sophomore novel.

Reviewer Bio:

RS Deeren's debut collection of short stories, *Enough to Lose*, is the winner of a 2024 Michigan Notable Book Award and a 2024 Midwest Book Silver Award. His research interests include contemporary fiction, US working-class studies, and rural-urban dynamics. His fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in periodicals including *The Great Lakes Review, Joyland, Midwestern Gothic*, and more. He's an assistant professor and coordinator of creative writing at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee.

Shih E. (2023) *Manufacturing Freedom: Sex Work, Anti-Trafficking Rehab, and the Racial Wages of Rescue*. University of California Press.

Review by **Christopher R. Martin**

A jewelry party at a suburban Southern California house sounds like a nice occasion. A couple dozen guests, takeout from a local Thai restaurant to eat, and original handmade pieces – pearl bracelets from $30 to $50, earrings with semiprecious stones for about $20, and necklaces for up to $75. Oftentimes the attendees end up buying a few pieces. The jewelry looks fine, and there is kind of a quid pro quo for these events – I came to your house and ate your food, so I should return the favor and buy a piece or two. Maybe I could give them as gifts to friends.

But this party isn't a gig for Avon or any number of direct-sales jewelry companies. This merchandise has a higher purpose. These are "slave-free goods," and the party attendees, assembled through their local evangelical Christian church, are visually moved by the video screened and stories of how victims rescued from sex trafficking in Bangkok are given new, meaningful lives as jewelry makers. The party makes about $2000 in two hours, which supports Cowboy Rescue, the American organization that hosts the event.

This is another case of the American practice of ethical consumption: buy some cool handmade jewelry at a house party and support the rescue and productive employment of formerly trafficked women in Thailand. Problem solved!

Not so fast, writes Elena Shih in her book, *Manufacturing Freedom: Sex Work, Anti-Trafficking Rehab, and the Racial Wages of Rescue.* The book is the winner of the Working-Class Studies Association's C.L.R. James Award. (Full disclosure: I was one of the judges, and re-reading the book for this review, I appreciate it even more.)

Shih writes from a great deal of experience. Now an assistant professor of American Studies and Ethnic Studies at Brown University, Shih tracked "slave-free jewelry" from Los Angeles, its primary site of consumption, to Beijing and Bangkok, where it is produced. Shih explains that "slave-free goods" are an "emergent niche market created by the global anti-trafficking movement in the early 2000s."

In China and Thailand's capitals, Shih embedded herself as a participant-volunteer, doing three years of fieldwork and gaining access to various parties in the movement: "government officials, the United Nations, consumers, NGO workers, activists, trafficking survivors, and sex workers." Seeing what happened inside the anti-trafficking organizations, her views began to change.

"Although I started my fieldwork optimistic about jewelry making as a form of cultural activism, as I immersed myself in the participant observation on the shop floor, workers seemed to interrogate the confusing duality between manual labor and spiritual reform," she writes. "By my third summer of research, I often raised questions with activists, but found them to be quickly shot down, or…co-opted sometimes to enact more rigid surveillance on workers."

The problem, she finds, is us – the consumers, the U.S. government and anti-trafficking vigilantes. Since around 2000, the U.S. government has taken a special interest in the topic, and Shih calls the U.S. the "self-appointed global sheriff of anti-trafficking efforts" around the world. Each year, the Department of State issues the TIP (Trafficking in Persons) Report, which ranks each nation on compliance with anti-trafficking standards. If a country gets downgraded in the report, it can be subject to sanctions by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

But this bureaucratic approach isn't enough for America's self-styled anti-traffickers. Shih devotes an entire chapter to "Vigilante Humanitarianism in Thailand," groups of fervent civilian Americans like Tim Ballard and his Operation Underground Railroad who bring their raid-and-rescue operations to developing countries with little or no state accountability. Shih reminds us of Ballard's supporters, like conservative commentator Glenn Beck, who traveled to Thailand with Ballard and his wife in 2017 and reported the journey on his radio program. (In 2023, after Shih's book was published, Ballard stepped down from the group he founded after allegations of sexual abuse, and in 2024, six women brought federal sexual assault charges against him. Ballard, the heroic figure of a Hollywood movie about his work, had pulled in $50 million annually in donations, the *New York Times* reported.)

Shih rightly finds a lot of hidden motivations and reproduced old-order colonial relations in all of this. "Profit and religious proselytization become invisible as motives when shrouded in the sentimentality of entrepreneurship and rehabilitation as pathways to 'freedom'."

Shih's careful analysis of the anti-trafficking rescue industry finds several failings. First, the anti-traffickers conflate commercial sex work, in which workers "do not consider themselves 'victims of trafficking,'" and actual sex trafficking, where people might be kidnapped and pressed into labor. Secondly, Shih explains that "cases of nonsexual-labor trafficking far exceed those of sex trafficking," yet most U.S. anti-trafficking groups "have magnetically been drawn to *sex* trafficking." Third, the "rescued" workers are put into jobs where they have little autonomy, and certainly no opportunities for labor organizing. The minimum wage jobs offered by American anti-trafficking rehabilitation organizations can require additional "repentant labor," including Bible study and church worship, and their off-work social connections are tightly surveilled. Ultimately, the vocational training "does not offer pathways to long-term social mobility or economic independence." Instead, Shih says, it "reproduces low-wage women's work by seeking to replace the sale of sex with the sale of jewelry."

In sum, the rescuers come off as the imperial power, pushing Western religion and low wages on the people they "rescue." Shih concludes that a better path for more accountability and less worker exploitation would be for the U.S. to instead support worker organizing in the Asia-Pacific region, rather than "allocating additional power to governments, corporations, and consumers." The U.S.

anti-trafficking organizations that Shih investigated reported nearly $200 million in annual revenues. That would be a good start for helping workers organize.

Shih's book is smart one. In her deep ethnographic fieldwork, she listened to the actual workers, and her message offers a profound reconsideration of the "rescue" work that on first glance seemed to have so much moral clarity.

Reviewer Bio:

Christopher R. Martin is professor of Digital Journalism in the Department of Communication and Media at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, Iowa. He is author of *No Longer Newsworthy: How the Mainstream Media Abandoned the Working Class* (Cornell University Press, 2019), winner of the 2020 C.L.R. James Award from the Working-Class Studies Association.

Kwon, H. (2024) *Language Brokers: Children of Immigrants Translating Inequality and Belonging for Their Families*. Stanford University Press.

Review by **Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao**

What does it mean to be young, working class, and a person of color in a society that marginalizes all three social categories? In *Language Brokers: Children of Immigrants Translating Inequality and Belonging for Their Families*, Hyeyoung Kwon examines how working-class Mexican and Korean American children of immigrant parents become active social agents within the realm of language. Through their bilingual skills, they function as "language brokers" on behalf of their immigrant parents (for whom English is a second language) as they navigate racially hostile, classist, monolingual institutions. In her preface, Kwon offers a poignant reflection as a point of departure: "… the anger and confusion I felt as [a] working-class daughter of immigrants left me with an intense curiosity to understand how multiple forms of inequality shape the lives of working-class children of immigrants" (ix). As a Korean American sociologist of working-class origins, Kwon provides a finely detailed examination of the internal/social lives of Mexican and Korean American language brokers as they work through the contradictions of race, class, age, and citizenship.

Language Brokers reflects upon new articulations of the "American experience." A 2024 report from the Pew Research Center highlights how the largest number of immigrants currently arrive from Asian and Latin American countries—specifically, India and Mexico in 2022 ("How the Origins of America's Immigrants Have Changed Since 1850"). Kwon's study is set in Los Angeles, California "where 49 percent of the population is Latinx and 15 percent is Asian American" (p. 23). In addition to conducting "eighty in-depth interviews with working-class Mexican and Korean American language brokers who grew up translating for their immigrant parents," Kwon interviewed twenty health care workers and engaged in "six months of ethnographic research at a police department" (p. 191-192). Through her interviews, Kwon discovered that the following two sites were the most challenging for young language brokers: health care facilities and police stations.

Kwon's interviews with working-class Mexican and Korean American youth yielded rich information that challenges mainstream anti-immigrant discourses that devalue the translation work of working-class children as a consequence of immigrant parents unable to assimilate into American culture and society (p. 6-7). Instead of depriving working-class youth of "normal" childhoods (based on white, middle-class values) and causing conflict within the family, language brokering was viewed as a site of empowerment, survival, resilience, and resistance by working-class youth. This counternarrative is conveyed through the organization of *Language Brokers,* which is divided into seven chapters and accompanied by an appendix that inventories methods of

active listening used for the project. While chapters one and seven function as the introduction and conclusion, chapters two through six provide close readings of the interviews and ethnographic research conducted.

Three key concepts are woven throughout the study: W.E.B. DuBois's double consciousness, Patricia Hill Collins's intersectionality, and bell hooks's notion of marginality as "more than a site of deprivation" (p. 17). Kwon builds upon these concepts in her close reading of the voices of young working-class language brokers. In chapter three, Kwon reveals how language brokers (by way of double consciousness) become aware of intersecting forms of oppression that are invisible to mainstream white America such as racialized nativism and lack of access to resources that are necessary for social citizenship or "full inclusion in society"—such as health care, a living wage, housing, and education (p. 11). In chapter five, working-class youth (positioned as "outsiders within" as coined by Patricia Hill Collins) use the following strategies in their translation work to challenge racist stereotypes (ranging from the "passive immigrant" to the "angry person of color") and to gain access to resources necessary for social citizenship: "passing as 'American' adults" (p. 111-119), "shielding parents from racialized nativism" (p. 120-126), and "posing as middle-class adults" (p. 126-131). Kwon also pays close attention to the ways in which working-class youth narrate their lives and the lives of their parents. The realm of culture (specifically storytelling) provides working-class youth an opportunity to construct counternarratives to dominant anti-immigrant discourses. Chapter six provides an inventory of these strategies of "inclusion work": "Americanizing parents' migration journeys" (p. 139-145), "constructing immigrant families as collective and hardworking" (p. 145-156), and "emphasizing intergenerational mobility" (p. 156-162).

While Kwon illuminates how the margins are used as site of empowerment, she also acknowledges the challenges of waging resistance from the margins. It can collude with the center. In chapter six, Kwon highlights the contradictory nature of the "inclusion work" of language brokers. It challenges anti-immigrant racism, yet it simultaneously deflects attention from "systemic and pervasive patterns of inequality" and "reinforce[s]… the moral boundary between 'good' and 'bad' immigrants" (p. 164). Language brokering itself is a contradictory site, as explored in chapter four. It is a site of empowerment and survival. At the same time, it is a site where working-class youth experience the "double bind"—the challenge of juggling responsibilities to one's parents as a language broker and to one's school as a working-class young person aspiring to attain intergenerational mobility.

Language Brokers is necessary reading. First, its focus on working-class youth from two different communities of color rearticulates Ronald Takaki's comparative multicultural approach (*A Different Mirror*, 1993). Second, it builds upon an approach to blending cultural studies and sociology within Asian American/ethnic studies which Yen Le Espiritu developed in works such as *Filipino American Lives* (1995) and *Homebound* (2003). Third, it can open a space for critical reflection. As we anticipate a new presidential administration in the United States that promises mass deportation, we will need to return to a word mentioned throughout Kwon's study: resistance.

Reading *Language Brokers* at this historical moment compels us to reflect upon the concept of resistance. Are everyday acts of survival the same as resistance? If individual acts of counternarrative storytelling and subversive performance from the margins (à la Bhabha's

mimicry) run the risk of reinforcing systems of domination due to their reliance on the "master's tools," then what kind of resistance could ultimately dismantle the "master's house" (to borrow language from Audre Lorde)? The work of Ruth Milkman reveals how young people (Millennials and Gen Z) have become politicized by involvement in various social justice movements over the years—Occupy movement, environmental justice, immigrant rights, racial justice, LGBTQ rights, reproductive rights. In our search to imagine/organize collective resistance (to engage in "transformative work") in the face of possible mass deportations and other draconian measures of Project 2025, we could creatively utilize Kwon's thoughtful method for active listening to develop solidarity with working-class youth from immigrant families involved in social movements for change—movements that offer hope as they continue to develop all around us.

Reviewer Bio:

Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao is Professor of English and Cultural Studies in the Department of History, Literature, and the Arts at Bryant University in Smithfield, Rhode Island. He is president-elect of the Working-Class Studies Association.

Osborne, M. (2024). *Polished: College, Class, and the Burdens of Social Mobility*. University of Chicago Press.

Review by **Lauren J. Harvey**

What does it mean for colleges and universities to "level the playing field"? Does it involve institutions adapting to better support their diverse student bodies? Perhaps it means providing marginalized students with the resources to navigate and thrive in upper-middle-class academic environments? Or does it require that students themselves change their values, demeanor, and interests to assimilate into existing institutional structures? In *Polished: College, Class, and the Burdens of Social Mobility*, Melissa Osborne explores how low-income and first-generation students experience, adapt to, and respond to the unexpected challenges of social mobility at elite U.S. higher education institutions. Osborne meticulously examines how selective colleges "polish" these students by offering resources and programs designed to help them navigate the college experience. Like raw diamonds, students' perceived "blemishes" – their working-class backgrounds or lack of cultural capital – are smoothed away to help them acculturate to the upper-middle-class aesthetic of academia. While this polishing process yields positive outcomes for many marginalized students, it also creates a liminal space that students must navigate, balancing institutional expectations with the values and desires of their families and home communities. Osborne traverses this terrain and highlights ways colleges must do more to support students confronting the challenges of social mobility in the face of class marginalization.

The book comprises five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, which build on one another to explore students' experiences throughout their college career. It opens with a brief overview of how U.S. colleges and universities have attempted to support low-income and first-generation students over recent decades. In general, institutions focus on providing students with economic and cultural tools to compensate for their perceived social and material "deficits." This raises a critical question: despite these efforts, why are low-income and first-generation students still struggling disproportionately? To answer this question, Osborne conducted an ethnographic study between 2016 and 2021, involving focus groups, surveys, in-depth interviews, and participant observations with 150 first-generation and/or low-income students across 18 highly selective and selective private institutions in the U.S. These schools were grouped by region—East, South, Midwest, and West.

Chapter 1 explores the factors students consider when selecting colleges, such as financial aid and prestige, and the dissonance they experience between their decision-making strategies and the realities of attending elite institutions. Many students adopt new personas, or "suspended identities," to fit in with their peers. Suspended identities reflect the attitudes, behaviors, and values low-income and first-generation students adopt to navigate the college environment, with the expectation that they can forfeit these personas for their "true selves" when they return home.

Chapter 2 delves deeper into the experiences of first-generation and low-income students, illustrating the intersecting forms of exclusion they face within elite institutions. Osborne argues that students' ability to navigate these spaces is often shaped by their prior cultural capital, with students from elite high schools having a strategic advantage. The chapter introduces the concept of a "socially mobile habitus," a toolkit that enables students to maneuver through multiple social spheres, balancing the demands of academia with their awareness of being marginalized. One student describes this experience: "I learned how to play the game of this kind of place [elite universities] a long time ago in prep school… I can be the well-behaved scholarship student, but I can also try and make the space for people like me a little bit larger and more authentic." Students with a socially mobile habitus feel confident navigating elite spaces without fully sacrificing their authentic selves.

Chapters 3 and 4 shift focus to the college "polishing" process and the tensions that arise when students try to balance the expectations of their college and home communities. Many selective colleges offer programs designed to teach financial literacy, professional skills, and campus cultural norms to help first-generation students acculturate to the upper-middle-class values that dominate these environments. While these programs represent a positive step toward greater inclusion, they often convey the message that these students are deficient in the economic, social, and cultural capital necessary for success. Osborne critiques this process, arguing that it risks erasing students' authentic selves and reinforcing a narrow, class-based definition of success. Osborne demonstrates how mobility facilitated by colleges often results in conflict with family or friends who may not understand or accept students' new "elite" personas. For example, students who adopt suspended identities experience the most conflict when they return home, as their families may perceive them as abandoning their roots in favor of upper-middle-class ideals. Osborne frames this as a "double bind" – the pressure to conform to the values of both home and school, often leading to internal conflict and alienation.

Finally, Chapter 5 examines coping strategies students employ to manage these pressures. Some students leave school, cut ties with family, or maintain suspended identities as long-term survival strategies. Osborne critiques institutional programs for focusing primarily on skill-building while failing to address the psychological and identity-related challenges students face as they navigate their social mobility. The book concludes by urging colleges to better support students through these personal transformations, suggesting that institutions should not only provide resources for academic success but also help students navigate the complex and often painful process of social mobility.

Polished is a vital contribution to working-class scholarship, but it could have engaged more with the distinctions between class, income, and first-generation status. Class and working-class identities are mentioned several times throughout the book, but the author never fully defines what a working-class identity entails. Moreover, class is never explicitly differentiated from the terms first-generation and low-income, leading readers to assume these terms are synonymous with working-class backgrounds. The book would have benefited from a clearer discussion of class, especially given that there is no universally agreed-upon understanding of working-class status.

Additionally, Osborne sets up a distinction between first-generation and low-income students in the introduction and methodological appendix, but the book would have benefited from a more

detailed synthesis of how these students' experiences differ. For instance, Chapter 4 describes how low-income students experienced less family conflict as a result of the polishing process compared to their first-generation peers. A more comprehensive discussion of the differences between first-generation and low-income students would have helped illuminate the unique burdens first-generation students face. Race also emerges as a significant factor for many students, particularly in relation to their first-generation experiences, but the book lacks a cohesive analysis of how racial and cultural experiences may have differently shaped students' trajectories. Readers are left uncertain about whether and how these differences impacted students' academic paths.

Despite these critiques, *Polished* is an important contribution for educational practitioners and working-class scholarship, enhancing our understanding of first-generation and low-income students' experiences. The longitudinal and multi-regional scope of the study offers valuable insight into how students' experiences vary across time and geography. While much literature focuses on first-generation students at a single point in time, Osborne's work demonstrates that social mobility is a "longitudinal experiential process" that impacts students' identities, emotions, and behaviors well beyond their first year in college. Moreover, Osborne offers tangible suggestions for institutions and practitioners to better support first-generation students *throughout* their college careers, such as creating programs and resources to help students navigate the contextual changes they will encounter, implementing peer mentor programs and staff positions, creating parent cohorts, and improving utility of campus mental health services.

Perhaps most unique about this book is that it reveals how students not only framed their mobility but responded to the structural and cultural constraints of elite institutions. Multiple students emphasized the need to "buy in" to an elite education without "selling out" their working-class values. Students who did this best were those who developed a "socially mobile habitus," successfully balancing their identities with the overwhelming and intimidating cultural apparatus of higher education. This reframing is essential for those of us who study working-class culture and education as it shows how students lay claim to their identities while navigating the polishing process of higher education.

Reviewer Bio:

Lauren J. Harvey is a Ph.D. student of Sociology at Rice University. Her research centers working-class people and higher education. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* and *Inside Higher Ed*. She is currently working on a project that examines school effects on first-generation, working-class students' academic and social-psychological outcomes.

Reilly, I.B., editor (2022) *The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above Your Station*. Emerald Publishing

Review by **Barbara Jensen**

This extraordinary, multi-faceted book of essays is a welcome addition to the literature of working-class academics. It speaks fearlessly of the difficulties of traveling the fraught terrain from poor and working-class backgrounds to the relative comfort and power of life as academics. Each article deserves a review of its own, there is such richness in each one and in the book as a whole. Packed with ideas from a multitude of perspectives, this book couldn't be more well-arranged and curated by its exceptional editor, Iona Burnell Reilly.

Lives illuminates acute and invisible struggles, as well the resilience and triumphs of academics from working-class backgrounds. It is a book by academics for academics. It offers no simple solutions or static definitions. As the foreword states, working-class academics have a complexity of identity "sculpted out of the structural and material resources we have available to us… Social identities are contingent, fluid, and always in a process of emergence…". The collection illustrates a variety of identities and social positions, all of which contain a thread of working-class experience that urges working-class academics to not forget where we came from. It goes further to urge us to mine our working-class lives for knowledge and to dedicate ourselves to using this knowledge to help working-class students.

Method

This book explicitly employs, and provides considerable support for, the research method of "autoethnography," which is detailed and explained repeatedly by different authors, each with something particular to add. This approach employs personal experiences for academic knowledge. It dovetails with working-class autoethnographic academic literature in the United States, and especially in the Working-Class Studies Association with its challenge to understand class in terms of "lived experience." As Mary Capello said in 1995, this produces "a knowledge that is just as valid as any and possibly more instructive than most." As Reilly points out in the preface, quoting Byrne, "'Working-class people are, by definition, relatively uneducated, which exposes the link between class and academia, and the inherent dissonance in thinking about oneself as a working-class [person]…the academy is not just classist, it is the source of classism, and of the very concept of the working class'." In other words, for Working-Class Studies, as with Women's Studies, African-American, and Ethnic Studies, the pursuit of knowledge necessarily requires reports from the people who have experienced real lives in the area of inquiry.

Lives contains multiple approaches and this makes it all the more fascinating. From sociology to poetry, from structural analyses to tender, personal stories. All track the many challenges for working-class people in higher education, a difficult and complicated psychological navigation

through accumulation of middle- and upper-class cultural capital and life quite different from the one that feels like home. Theorists that first pioneered this terrain, Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu, are quoted and aspects of their theories of language codes, codes-switching, habitus (culture), and cultural capital are examined and expanded.

Classism and Class Struggle

"'You're new' the teacher said, 'do you like drama?'
'Not really' I said.
'Not really? alright mate, alright mate' the teacher mimicked.
Everyone laughed. My face turned beetroot red. The teacher had mimicked my cockney accent because nobody else in the school spoke like that."

Reilly recounts this incident to introduce the concept of microaggressions, quoting Bourdieu about "symbolic violence," a soft violence that includes racism, sexism and, as this book illuminates, classism.

Because this book was written in 2022, unlike the classic US texts *Strangers in Paradise* (1984) and *This Fine Place So far from Home* (1995), it describes many of the same dilemmas those books did, but also moves forward in history to detail the improvement in accessibility to higher education and the commitment of working-class academics to saving their working-class students from some of the cultural clashes and classism so common in higher education. Peter Shukie writes:

> "Competition to 'prove myself', a process so worthless that involvement in such proving grounds makes us self-loathe, shuddering with the ugly clumsiness of having to define our families, communities, histories and backgrounds for the edification of others. It makes writing this chapter difficult, a lifetime of 'chip on your shoulder' reproaches that silence any reflections of what has shaped me. There is also the sense of betrayal, of discussing what we did not have that denies the struggles of parents also living with five children in a two-bedroomed terrace…I realised, as the writing emerged, how owning my working-classness is absolutely necessary in facing the power of an academy that seeks to nullify it."

Shukie also speaks of public school for working-class kids: "I was naughty, it seemed, before I even arrived." Like me, he was a frequent recipient of violent reprimands in public school. He describes how working-class children were regularly beaten, which reminds me of my own experience in primary education. Physical violence was a regular element of being in school, as was having to stay after school for "detention." For him, as for myself and many others, that only served to prove the profound difference between us and the teachers, and to intensify our resistance to all things school-related. He describes how the children that received free school lunches went from waiting in that line to the one for "canings, admonishments, detentions and suspensions." Others have illuminated such profoundly different treatment of working-class children in the US from that of middle, upper-middle, and wealthy children. It is no surprise that that antipathy continues in higher education.

A difference in this UK book from the literature by working-class academics in the US is that there is more of an explicitly structural, and Marxist, approach, and these structural analyses are interwoven with personal stories and reflections. The emphasis is on classes as living, fighting entities rather than abstract, inert or stratified social categories. This approach is established as central by the first essay in the book by Alpesh Maisuria, "Navigating the Relational Character of Social Class for Capitalism in the Academy." Working-class academics are in a unique position to not only explain and dispel the disjuncture between working-class lives and neoliberal assumptions about human nature, of the vaunted ideology of individuality and its attendant constant competition, with real life in the working class, where mutual aid is more necessary, comfortable, and joyful, than competition, and having to "prove oneself."

Stephen Wong argues that class is a *verb* and that "the notion of class is mostly elusive, always relational, and evolving." Wong sees and uses various forms of cultural capital from both his academic and working-class cultures and believes this enriches his own life as well as the lives of his students.

Michael Pierse also emphasizes that "class is all about relationships – to wealth, to each other, to historic forces and also to representation. These relationships are far more than mere designators of social positioning; they are sometimes the origins of deeply personal traumas and life-defining wounds that go far beyond the economic per se." This perspective allows for changes in class-based cultures over time, rather than reifying or essentializing more stationary concepts of class identity.

Intersections

Class-based experiences and scholarship are interwoven with other social positions or identities. Sexism and racism are primary among them, but other identities also include disabilities and able-bodyism, ethnic identities, rural versus city life, and more. As Reilly notes, "These problematic factors are what make the lives of working-class academics all the more interesting, rich and powerful."

Carli Rowell and Hannah Walters examine the role of working-class women in higher education and find they are overloaded with a "'guilty burden' of pastoral care…work that they chose to do, yet which is seldom acknowledged, rewarded, or formalized." They describe how as women academics we are called upon to do emotional labor that men are not. Both gender and class conspire to require us to do service work that can lead to "pathologization of working-class women within academia to the detriment of career progression." M.L. White speaks of "working the hyphens," that her multiple identities lead her to embrace plurality and play the multi-faceted roles. She goes on to tell about her research with student teachers and how little the privileged students understood about poverty and disadvantage. Indeed, they reported not having "the language to talk about class."

Language use is a crucial dimension of class in higher education because language is necessary for the creation of meaning and identity, and voice is also a part of developing a sense of agency, of our ability to change the class bias of higher education. This book is an effort to find that language and share it with other working-class academics.

The entire collection echoes a resounding pride in being working class, though that identification is never simple or uncomplicated. As Kalil Akbar, a Pakistani raised in England put it, “I am working class at my core and always will be. Amidst that identity, I am also British, South Asian, Muslim and male…to ignore any one of my multiple identities would consequently negate an integral part of who I am.”

Marcia Wilson points out that there are 45 Black women professors out of approximately 23,000 full professors in the UK. She states,

> “I have been fortunate to meet interesting people from all across the globe and all walks of life. However, most of my experiences have been where I was the only Black woman in the room which has been an overwhelmingly lonely and, sometimes, hostile place.”

She also spoke of “the additional emotional labor involved in simply existing in a space that was not designed for you.”

In the US, working-class scholar David Greene developed what he called “A Matrix of Identity” wherein he explores his Jewishness, his maleness and his working-class identity as tightly interwoven. He defiantly still identifies as a working-class person, as do many of these authors, though his adult life was as an academic. Teresa Crew elaborates on this complexity: “When people ask me about being a working-class academic, I remind people that I can ‘consume’ sophisticated culture, and still be working class, ideas to the contrary just perpetuate well-worn stereotypes of working-class people.”

Some in this volume call for community-engaged teachers with an understanding of the actual life experiences of the community their school serves. While this may seem obvious to working-class academics, it is not at all clear to those from middle- and upper- class backgrounds. Since the vast majority of college teachers are not from working-class backgrounds, the challenge becomes how to make the invisible visible?

Resistance

Like *Strangers in Paradise* and *This Fine Place So Far from Home* in the US, *Lives* traces the paths of resistance of working-class academics. *Strangers* consists mainly of tenured, successful, and deeply-divided professors subject to profound cognitive dissonance and Imposter Syndrome in their new social locations. *This Fine Place* moves forward over ten years and reflects 1996 in the US, with contingent academic labor just beginning and contains articles from a wider range of academic positions and experiences than *Strangers*; it also devotes more time to diversity in working-class perspectives, as academia itself changed over time to allow more women and people of color within its membership.

For the authors in *Lives*, making changes in higher education emerges as a common mission and practice. They believe that all should have access to higher education, but also that the very content of higher education must change in a way that includes, indeed invites, those not traditionally

welcomed, let alone empowered within academia. To see the breadth of this challenge we should note that only 14% of academics in the UK were from working class backgrounds in 2017.

Crew talks about "resistance capital" as a way to counter "what is possible." Resistance is resilience for these writers, and the very act of writing about class in higher education is a form of resistance to upper- and middle-class hegemony.

Like many of these essayists, editor Iona Burnett Reilly, taught at a school designed for people like her. She reflects on her experience, that tells a very different story from those in *Strangers*:

> "For me, the effects of field–habitus clash were minimal. I attended the local university where many learners were from similar backgrounds. This university had taken full advantage of widening participation policies and strategies by encouraging large numbers from the local working-class community to participate in what the university had to offer. … I studied alongside people from my own social class who were also enjoying the benefits of widening participation."

She states that she doesn't have to pretend to be middle class but she works on "…developing and evolving. into a comfortable and confident version of myself." She has successfully developed her job role as what she calls "the neo-working class," and she has adapted her working-class life to include higher education, as both a value and a practice. Her cockney accent is less pronounced than it once was, but neither does she entirely banish it; in fact, she uses it to relate to her students, and sees it as an assertion of her own working-class identity, a kind of pride in all of who she is.

Or, as Marcia Wilson explains:

> "There are small steps that we can all take on this journey of change, and I urge courage and bravery to embrace your authentic self. It is important to stand in our truth and create opportunities to speak it. If we can engage in small changes, we are committing to leaving academia in a better state than when we found it."

Shukie urges: "By forming new narratives we continue the push away of dominating toxicity that destroys [us] and replace these with our own voices, cultures, knowledges and ways of seeing."

Carli Rowell and Hannah Walters detail a list of ways that working-class academics can support marginalized students.

Closing:

This book aims to make real changes in the world of higher education. This includes the drafting of the world's first University Code on Equal Opportunity for Working-Class Students and Academics drafted by the Alliance of Working-Class Academics. Our organization (WCSA) has endorsed this proposal, and I look forward to more collaborations between our organizations.

The action-orientation aspect of *Lives* is much stronger than previous collections, perhaps because more time has passed and the basic notion of working-class studies has grown and spread.

I close this review with a quote from the afterword from someone who has helped bridge the gap between the UK and US by being a leader in both the Working-Class Studies Association and the Alliance of Working-Class Academics: Valerie Walkerdine.

> "I was really struck by the longing contained in many of the stories. I recognise that longing – such a strong desire to be able to think and to dream. How I reveled in it and nothing and nobody could take this away from me. Just think what would happen if all the working-class children were actually supported in their dreaming -- what a revolution that would be!"

Reviewer Bio:

Barbara Jensen is a counseling and community psychologist in Minneapolis, where she has taught at Metropolitan State University. She is a founder and past president of the Working-Class Studies Association, and author of *Reading Classes: On Culture and Classism in America*.

High S. (2022) *Deindustrializing Montreal: Entangled Histories of Race, Residence, and Class.* McGill-Queen's University Press.

Review by **Jill Schennum**

Historian Steven High adds a beautifully nuanced account of Montreal to the literature on deindustrialization with his new book, *Deindustrializing Montreal.* High's expertise on deindustrialization, as evidenced in one of his prior books, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rustbelt,* is applied to this study of two working-class neighborhoods in Montreal. He understands Montreal as a revivified, thriving city but one in which postindustrial development plays itself out unevenly across lines of class, race, and residence in two communities.

High structures the book as a comparative study of Point Saint-Charles and Little Burgundy, two working-class neighborhoods in Southwest Montreal, one white and the other multiracial. The book takes the reader through waves of deindustrialization: the decline of the railroads with the growth of automobile culture; the closing of the Lachine Canal to ship traffic; and shutdowns, over decades, of the many factories along the banks of the canal. It also explores the histories of changing social policy in and around cities, exploring the impact of suburbanization, urban renewal, and gentrification on these neighborhoods.

High's histories are supported by his in-depth, long-term, ethnographic work in these two communities. Steve High lives in Point Saint-Charles, has worked extensively with students and community partners in both neighborhoods, has collected oral histories, planned public events, conducted neighborhood walk-throughs and engaged with local institutions for more than 15 years. This long-term, deeply embedded research results in incredibly rich archival materials, including oral histories, photographs, and primary documents, most of which have been collected by High and his students.

The book is a beautifully curated, multi-media representation of these two Montreal neighborhoods, from post World War II to today. The book includes photographs, maps, songs, graphic art, and visual art. Photographs, spanning a long period of time, include aerial photographs; photographs of buildings, bridges, and factories (the built environment of these communities); and many photographs of people in their communities – with their families, in their churches and clubs, at work, and in their neighborhoods. High includes images that show the "birds-eye perspective" (maps, charts, photos) of urban planners and developers but contrasts these to the many images of ordinary people living their daily lives. One chilling series of photographs documents city officials taking "expropriation" photos of homes and small businesses in preparation for urban renewal, their aim being a documentation of the perceived dirt and blight of the neighborhoods, all while ignoring the vibrant community life. High's wide-ranging access to visual materials, and his skill in archiving and presenting them are central to this book.

The extensive oral histories High and his students have collected also reveal people's own narratives of their lives, locating these neighborhoods as central places in Canada's Industrial Revolution and in the movement of people and goods in industrial Canada. The residents of Point Saint-Charles reminisce about childhood daring in riding the swing bridges as sailors from around the world threw candy to them, swimming in the polluted Lachine canal, the sounds of the neighborhood – train, ship and factory whistles, and the anticipation and excitement of the annual circus ship. These stories of industrial childhoods capture, so beautifully, what High describes as an "industrial culture of feeling". Through relating these vivid memories, High pushes back on dominant narratives that abstract work from community, representing the loss of work as natural and inevitable and communities as impoverished. These memories instead document the lively community life intertwined with work in the many factories strung along the canal.

These oral histories also reveal the complicated history of a multiracial neighborhood in the northern part of Little Burgundy. High documents the vibrancy of the neighborhood, relating kids playing in and around the railyards and the strength of Black churches, clubs, and organizations. But with Black Canadians excluded from factory work, these stories also speak of racial discrimination. High describes how one of the few jobs available to black men, as railway porters, improved through union struggle, only to be lost with the decline of passenger rail as automobile culture and the highway system expanded. The success of porters' fight for better wages and benefits led to them moving out of Little Burgundy to suburbs in the 1940s, even earlier than white factory workers, separating the Black, middle-income working class from urban neighborhoods and undermining black community institutions.

Throughout the book, High is critical of dominant narratives that muddy or downright eliminate class relations and class struggle. For example, High is concerned that urban scholars' and policy makers' framing of urban renewal as solely a racist attack on Black neighborhoods, directed by the state, erases the importance of class relations, the complexity of working-class neighborhoods, and the role of capital in these processes. This rings true for me, as in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where I do my work, urban renewal initiated by the city eliminated a multiracial, working-class neighborhood called Northampton Heights in the 1960s, allowing Bethlehem Steel to build a new basic oxygen furnace on the site, clearly demonstrating the collusion of state and capital.

High pushes scholars to link race and class in examining how interrelated processes of deindustrialization, suburbanization, urban renewal, and neighborhood decline play themselves out. High argues that Little Burgundy became "stigmatized as a racial ghetto" rather than understood as a neighborhood hard-hit by deindustrialization and suburbanization, and this stigmatization then elicited different policies, including public housing projects and over-policing, that further damaged the neighborhood. Analysis solely through the lens of race can erase the ways processes of deindustrialization impact working-class Black Canadians earlier and harder than white Canadians. This can (and did), for example, lead to scholarship and public policy discourse that created a racialized 'underclass' category and then ignored class projects that "pauperized" neighborhoods. We need more analyses that foreground these relationships, like this one and Patricia Fernandez-Kelly's nuanced ethnography of West Baltimore, *The Hero's Fight*.

High also critiques the dominant urban policy discourse of "social mixing" that emerges in the postindustrial era. This ideology redefines gentrification as progress, emphasizing the role of

socially mixed neighborhoods in alleviating the effects of poverty, thereby supporting policies that encourage gentrification. But as High points out, gentrification displaces and disenfranchises working-class Point Saint-Charles and Little Burgundy residents.

High is also critical of industrial heritage projects that provide "political and intellectual cover" for gentrifying processes. Representations of a sanitized industrial past, as so often happens with industrial heritage efforts, erase the lives of workers, the history of class struggle, and the devastating effects of factory closures and urban renewals. High gives examples of this revisionism in Parks Canada historic panels, photographs, condominium panels, and in the "industrial aesthetic" that takes priority over a more accurate representation of industrial history.

I found it interesting that High's interviewees, the residents of these communities, were reluctant to talk about the union. This is, perhaps, related to blue-collar exit to the suburbs, in many urban communities, that preceded factory closures. High argues the very success of union struggles producing better wages and benefits also led to workers moving out of Point Saint-Charles and Little Burgundy to the Montreal suburbs, thus weakening connections between community and union activism. We could also examine how suburbanization narrowed the circle of those who had access to union wages and benefits and removed the economic benefits of union wages (supporting restaurants, taverns, grocery stores) from working-class communities. The movement to the suburbs severed workers from densely structured working-class communities while simultaneously encouraging a middle-class identity through tying workers' identities to private property through home ownership.

In conclusion, this book contributes greatly to our understanding of relationships between class, residence, and race in understanding deindustrialization and the transformation of urban communities. For United States scholars, the similar yet different histories of race and class in Canada are also fascinating, including differences such as the importance of language in shaping class relations, the politics of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, and the different labor and migration histories of Black Canadians.

Steven High leaves us with important questions about urban revitalization. Who benefits from this reconstituted, postindustrial economy and city? What happens to the descendants of working-class residents of these communities? How do revitalized economies and gentrified communities make invisible the precarious service sector work that supports them? In High's words, how can we understand the "entangled histories of race, residence and class" to analyze the uneven inequalities forged in contemporary capitalism? And, given those understandings, how can we better connect contemporary workplaces and communities in current labor and activist movements?

Reviewer Bio:

Jill Schennum is professor and chair of anthropology at County College of Morris in New Jersey. She is the author of *As Goes Bethlehem: Steelworkers and the Restructuring of an Industrial Working Class* (Vanderbilt U. Press, 2023).

Amezcua, M. (2023). *Making Mexican Chicago: From Postwar Settlement to the Age of Gentrification*. The University of Chicago Press.

Review by **David Robles**

Making Mexican Chicago by Mike Amezcua narrates the ethnic Mexican experience in the Windy City as it "became a Mexican metropolis in the second half of the twentieth century." Comprised of six chapters, Amezcua focuses on the neighborhoods of Near West Side, Pilsen, Back of the Yards, and *La Villita* (Little Village). He is interested in the spatial and racial politics that stemmed from "white flight" by ethnic Europeans who grappled with the notion of either leaving or staying in their neighborhoods as ethnic Mexican immigration contributed to not only the rising population, but also the creation of Mexican spaces in white neighborhoods. He is also interested in "the complex structures of feeling" that all of those involved experienced as ethnic Mexicans, citizens and undocumented, as they transformed these spaces into their own. These structures of feeling "encompassed individual and collective ambition, equity seeking, and dreams of opportunity" (p. 7)—all which were limited by U.S. capitalism.

In Chapter One, "Crafting Capital," Amezcua argues that urban whites' dissent against the Democratic Party was not solely because of the "redistributive polices" directed towards minorities, but was also rooted in urban whites' attempts to prevent ethnic Mexicans from settling in these white spaces and stalling the inevitable. For urban whites, seeing their neighborhood become more Mexican due to immigration led to feelings of "loss and a sense of being under siege from hostile external forces" (p. 7). The chapter illustrates that such fears stemmed from their belief that their neighborhoods would "degrade," leading to the decline of property values, and according to Amezcua, creating resentments fueled by housing policies and speculative markets tied to race. New Deal-era federal housing policies and mortgage lending programs, along with federal bureaucrats and insurers, led to *redlining* and segregating neighborhoods that were diverse. This in turn would allow for the denial of either grants or mortgages. By the mid-twentieth century, Chicago experienced deindustrialization, leaving behind empty factories and ethnic Mexican community members without jobs. Amezcua notes that there were many consequences: ethnic Mexicans living in these areas had little to no political backing and representation; city administrators labeled these spaces as "blighted" and open to urban renewal efforts; renewal efforts led to gentrification; and finally, there were forced removals, the result of new immigration policies.

In Chapter Two, "Deportation and Demolition," the author illustrates how immigration policy and urban renewal were "enjoined forms of material dispossession and urban erasure" (p. 59) in the post war years. Hence, this chapter narrates the efforts ethnic Mexican communities in the Windy City made to avoid not only deportation, but also the dispossession of their homes and the community they had created. Such efforts, especially from the Mexican Near West Side

neighborhood, saw community members' attempts to empower themselves as both residents and merchants in the neighborhood. However, Amezcua explains that city officials considered ethnic Mexican residents "expendable" as well as removable due to immigration policies deeming them deportable. This chapter makes it clear that policies such as Operation Wetback and the deportation of many ethnic Mexicans had adverse effects on the community as they weakened it and made it vulnerable to the city's plans for urban renewal. Forced out of the Near West Side neighborhood by the city administration and into the Lower West Side neighborhood known for its stockyards, ethnic Whites attempted to contain ethnic Mexicans at all costs.

Chapter Three, "From the Jungle to las Yardas," concentrates on the struggle for space between the ethnic White working class and the growing ethnic Mexican population after their forced removal from the Near West Side due to immigration sweeps and the city's plans for urban renewal. Yet, to contain and restrict ethnic Mexican peoples from either leaving or moving into the stockyards, Amezcua explains that the city passed and used numerous zoning policies that not only facilitated the containment of ethnic Mexicans in the less desirable areas of the neighborhood but prevented them from renovating their dwellings. By denying ethnic Mexican residents the opportunity to repair their homes, the city contributed to the hastened pace of dilapidation and then dispossession of these properties. In simplest terms, living in the *Las Yardas* neighborhood meant "navigating an inequitable system of urban development and residential apartheid" (p. 99). Yet, ethnic Mexicans used this inequity to create political and economic power, mobilizing to become part of the Democrat machine in the city.

Chapter Four, "Making a Brown Bungalow Belt," illustrates how ethnic Mexicans and their newfound political and economic power became crucial to reviving inner-city neighborhoods after ethnic Whites evacuated the area in the 1960s. Detailing the importance of ethnic Mexicans, especially Mexican Americans, and their economic power, Amezcua explains that the city of Chicago under mayor Richard J. Daley softened previous spatial restrictions in order to bring new life to these abandoned neighborhoods. This opportunity stemmed from not only their loyalty to the Daley Democrat machine, but also "built on the accumulated social capital that had been carefully cultivated for years" as this group of ethnic Mexicans labeled themselves as "representatives of a deserving, industrious, hardworking immigrant/ethnic group" (p. 145). Through their struggle from the post war years, Daley supporters did not identify with liberal or New Left politics or ideologies. Amezcua insinuates that the political power they exerted in the 1960s was more accommodationist as they were not in favor of the welfare state, but did support business, and law and order—illustrating how Mexican Americans who were probusiness and middle class shifted to the Republican party.

Chapter Five, "Renaissance and Revolt," examines how the pursuit for political power within the ethnic Mexican community in Chicago divided Mexican Americans during the 1960s and early 1970s. Amezcua demonstrates that Mexican Americans who were attracted to the economic development of their neighborhoods associated themselves with the Republican party while Chicanos, who wanted to empower all people of ethnic Mexican decent, aligned themselves with the Democratic party. Representing the identity politics of the time, this chapter informs the reader that Chicano activists viewed Mayor Daley's development initiatives not as a "renaissance," but merely another attempt at "cultural erasure and people removal" (p. 173) since it favored middle- to upper-income individuals. Overall, this chapter illustrates the political, economic, and social

struggle between both groups and their visions of what ethnic Mexican neighborhoods should and should not be. As explained by Amezcua, "Latino" Republicans envisioned the proposed renaissance to be guided by "Latino business power," while Chicanos promoted a more community-oriented development. Still, the uncertainty of community control still presented the threat of displacement, and it would come in the form of young white affluent suburbanites and speculators.

Finally, in Chapter Six, "Flipping Colonias," Amezcua's focus is on the gentrification of the barrios, most notably, the Pilsen neighborhood from the 1970s-1990s. This chapter details the process by which neighborhoods comprised of ethnic Mexicans became gentrified via capital, connections, and coercion. According to Amezcua, John Podmajersky created a "neobohemian fortress" comprised of new settlers that he referred to as an "artist's colony." However, other private real estate developers looked towards these neighborhoods for financial gain. Taking advantage of tax benefits, public subsidies, and zoning changes, as well through other illicit means, these developers were able to obtain various buildings to "rehabilitate" the neighborhoods. Well into the 1980s, community members continued their efforts to stop speculators but were no match for the capital and connections they brought. The gentrification of the barrios in the late twentieth century by speculators and "rehabbers" allowed them to reap the rewards of the "sweat equity" ethnic Mexicans, both immigrants and Mexican Americans, built and established in the decades prior.

Overall, when one thinks about the ethnic Mexican experience in the United States in relation to immigration and immigration policies, displacement, social justice, political representation, redlining, and labor, the southwest immediately comes to mind. However, the ethnic Mexican experience of these issues is not only reserved to the southwestern states where the population of this ethnic group is higher. It also encompasses communities throughout the Plains and mid-western states, and other communities with an ethnic Mexican population. *Making Mexican Chicago* illustrates this and contributes greatly to the historiography of the ethnic Mexican experience in the United States.

Reviewer Bio:

David Robles, an Assistant Professor of History at Lamar University, is a Borderlands historian whose research focuses on Chicana/o activism and movements in South Texas. He is currently working on a book project tentatively titled *Far from Heaven: The Pharr Police Riot and Chicano and Community Organizing in a Small South Texas Bordertown.* His publications include the book chapter, "'It Was Us against Us': The Pharr Police Riot of 1971 and the People's Uprising against El Jefe Político," in the anthology *Civil Rights in Black and Brown: Histories of Resistance and Struggle in Texas* (University of Texas Press, 2021).

Gildea, R. (2023) *Backbone of the Nation: Mining Communities and the Great Strike of 1984-85*. Yale University Press.

Review by **Jamie Owen Daniel**

In 1976, Raymond Williams was asked to prepare a speech to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the General Strike of 1926. In "The Social Significance of 1926," Williams began, as he so often did, from the personal, by grounding his remarks first in the experiences and subsequent memories of his own family, and then more broadly of his South Wales community, and then of his class. He refers to his militantly pro-union father and his colleagues as "a small group of men in a very specific social situation," members of a working-class community that had "the potential of solidarity already physically present within it" because of the labor of the people who lived in it and their material interdependence. His community's active support throughout the strike and that of similarly militant communities was therefore "the self-realization of the capacity of a class, in its own sufficient social relations." And because of this, the strike was a defeat, but not a failure.

Robert Gildea's meticulously documented and compassionate book, published on the 40th anniversary of the mining strike of 1984-85, likewise commemorates an extraordinary resurgence of "the capacity of a class" in response to brutal and ruthless state power that sought to crush that capacity. Most of the dominant narratives of the strike read it as naïve and tragic, a victory for Margaret Thatcher that "broke the back" of Britain's most militant union, and with it, the capacity for resistance of a once-unified working class.

In contrast, Gildea also frames the crushing of the strike as a defeat, not a failure. He contextualizes the strike as the logical continuation, and to a great extent the culmination, of a long struggle between the miners and the British state. Coal production had been essential to the iron, steel, textile and other industries, so much so that, by 1913, over a million men, one in ten male workers, was a miner. These numbers, and the extent to which the nation and indeed the British empire depended on coal to function, resulted in the miners becoming the most muscular and best-organized constituency of the working class.

And they exercised their muscle, regularly striking for safer working conditions and a "family wage." The state increasingly exercised its muscle in response, such as when Home Secretary Winston Churchill ordered the army to brutally put down a Welsh miners' revolt in 1910. The memories of this event, as well as of subsequent strikes and confrontations with state power – including those in 1926, 1972, and 1974 – were passed down from generation to generation in the mining communities as a source of class and community pride. Raymond Williams, for example, was just 5 years old in 1926, but that strike was a "memory" that he referred to with pride throughout his life.

The British coal industry was nationalized in 1947. Thereafter, mining was increasingly mechanized, and eventually oil replaced coal as the dominant fuel source. As a result, the state

began to close coal pits, often forcing families to move from the communities in which they were rooted to those with still-open pits, or leaving workers unemployed in communities that had been built around the mine. These working-class communities were increasingly being "hollowed out," as Gildea puts it, by state indifference fed by long-term Tory antagonism toward their class-based identities.

It was thus predominantly in response to rampant pit closings that the strike was organized. Gildea relies on interviews with miners, from militant activists to those who were against what would clearly be a confrontation with the Thatcher government, to provide the background for the eventual walkouts in South Wales, England, and Scotland. As Welsh activist Sian James put it, by the time it was called, the strike "had the inevitability of a train wreck." Eventually, the majority of the lodges, but by no means all, voted to walk out. The pickets went up on March 6, 1984, and the union finally succumbed on March 3, 1985.

Gildea describes in detail the vicious attacks on the miners at Orgreave and elsewhere, when Thatcher sent out army soldiers on horseback disguised as police to beat and brutalize the unarmed strikers. Thatcher also authorized cancelling the coal allowances usually provided for local families, thus leaving them in freezing conditions in the winter months. The book is not just about the experiences of the miners themselves, but also focuses on those of their communities as they self-organized to support their striking men and to draw financial and political support from across the nation and, eventually, the world. This broad and inclusive approach allows for the rich social density of the individual chapters.

Among these are a chapter on queer activist support organizations like the London-based Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM), later represented in the film *Pride* (Matthew Warchus, 2014). Here as throughout, Gildea relies on interviews with both mining community members and queer activists who eventually collaborated on providing funding for food and other essential resources since the striking miners received only a tiny strike fund allowance, not anywhere near their working wage.

The chapter on LGSM, together with those documenting the considerable self-organization of miners' wives and other women supporting the strike, provide a thoughtful focus on the impact of the strike on gender relations in families in which "traditional" gender roles had been taken for granted. Women were the first to accept and welcome the support of queer activists; they formed women's organizations to provide soup kitchens and food parcels for impacted families. They gathered winter clothing to distribute, and solicited help from supporters throughout Britain and beyond. One now-grown woman recalled a surprise treat of chocolate sent from East Germany to help provide a somewhat normal Christmas celebration for miners' children.

The extent to which women stepped forward and took on public roles was not always met with gratitude from their striking men, who traditionally understood themselves as the proper "heads of households." Already unable to provide for their families and feeling the weight of expectations that they should be doing so, some men took it out on their wives. Some couples didn't survive the strike. Some women went on to stay active in public life, earning university degrees and even winning seats as MPs in Parliament.

Gildea's history of 1984-85, enriched by his reliance on the voices of the working-class men and women who participated in that strike and experienced its aftermath, is a model for what working-class history can be, incorporating both first-person testimony and historical contextualization and giving each equal epistemological authority. There is much for us to learn from this book about class solidarity and resilience, even in the face of defeat.

Raymond Williams, like Gildea, focused on the tension between the past and the present, and particularly that between working-class pasts and present-day narratives that negate or erase them. What remains, or should remain and be remembered, of past struggles? Are they ever really past? And how can the memory of these past struggles be brought into newer formations that understand collective working-class memory as a tool of resistance?

Gildea's book is a powerful example of such a tool of resistance as we enter a period in which such tools will again be urgently required.

Reviewer Bio:

Jamie Owen Daniel is a retired union organizer and university professor. She divides her time between Chicago and a small working-class community in central Vermont.