

Unbecoming Working Class? Living Across the Lines

Ed Check

Okay. To go back to "it ain't pretty." Like when I'm trying to ignore the shame or rage. Or my every once-in-awhile hatred of the rich. A hatred that made me want to shoot, string up, *demolish* a bunch of preppies in Harvard Square last year. To destroy them. For that air about them. That entitled air. That they had been born to inherit the earth. It's all there: the careless way they hold their forks, wear their clothes, snap for the waitress (who used to be me). It brought out that "I wish I had a machine gun" feeling. That urge to blow their leisured heads right off. (Vanderbosch, 1997, p. 89)

1. Introduction—My Confusion About Class

I am writing this piece as a white self-identified gay male raised working class associate professor in art who is actively reconnecting with my past/roots, trying to better understand my sense of isolation in academe and my slowly seething anger directed at many of my academic colleagues. By working class I mean 2nd and 3rd generation Polish-American, devout Catholic, white privilege, contractor father, housewife mother, large family, in and out of poverty at times, racist with no real information. By academe I mean working for six years to achieve and be granted tenure at Texas Tech University in visual studies.

I am uncomfortable in middle and upper class settings (especially academe) where I continuously monitor my body movements, and edit my language, my stories, and my white working class histories. I get angry when colleagues talk with authority about “white trash” or ways for workers and the poor to redeem themselves.

Though I addressed working class issues in my dissertation (Check, 1996), gender and sexuality played topmost in my academic work (Check, 1992; Check, 1996; Check & Lampela, 1999; Check, 2002; Check & Akins, 2003, 2004; Lampela & Check, 2003; Check, 2004; Akins, Check & Riley 2004) to date. My reading testimonies about others’ experiences being raised working class and their relationships and analyses of class and academe (Kadi, 1996; Lubrano, 2004; Penelope, 1994; Ruffo, 1997; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Vanderbosch, 1997) prompt me to not only reconsider but question many middle and upper class and queer ways of knowing that I assumed falsely as universals: “the closet,” “coming out,” “good pedagogy,” history and social justice. So, this paper is a way for me to continue my struggle with my working class roots and rethink the relationship of them to my experiences in academe, my scholarship, teaching, and art.

Using feminist autobiography and Standpoint Theory (Langlois, 1997), I examine working class issues in relation to academe, retracing my social class roots and values chronologically, concluding with questions and strategies to help me (and others) better cope with the silence and ignorance surrounding social class in academe. I continually ask myself: What does it mean for me to leave behind working class values and histories? Is it possible to be a working class person in academe? If so, how? How can I mentor for other working class students and colleagues?

This is at least a start of a conversation that voices concerns about my frustration of being raised working class now living somewhere in a middle. The more I self-label working class roots, the less comfortable

middle and upper class people are around me—possibly because they will have to admit benefiting from an unjust and stacked system? As Penelope (1994) noted years ago, class is not a discussion topic in the United States and "...the silence about it is institutionally approved of and perpetuated" (p. 17). Penelope also states that each of us may have unclear senses of our class identities, but each of us "learns our 'place' and that of others" (p. 22). Penelope names this an "institutionalized injustice" that covertly and overtly operates against working people. My shame about growing up working class and anger against such injustice is starting to make more sense to me. For me to change from an unconscious state of ignorance and denial to what was happening to me to a conscious state, a heightened awareness of how class matters (hooks, 2000) is paradigmatic and my only place to begin.

This re-examination of social class issues has many of my white middle and upper class friends and colleagues scoffing at my remembering and reclaiming, often denigrating my rethinking/reclamation of working class experiences. They assert that a Master's and Ph. D. disqualify me from being working class. My more recent coming to working class consciousness (hooks, 2000) about my past parallels Lubrano's (2004) concept of being in "limbo," being an outsider to both working and middle class. Other reactions and feelings I have, like shame, anger, rage, and grief (hooks, 2000; Kadi, 1996; Vanderbosch, 1997) against a culture that renders invisible the stories and histories of working people is also ever present in my mind. My decision to begin to talk through these issues publicly is both frightening and empowering, frightening and empowering,

The tensions of crossing class ranks, if that's what happened, is uniquely frustrating. Until I became aware of a working class email listing and other testimonies analyzing class in academe, (Kadi, 1996; Lubrano, 2004; Ryan, & Sackrey, 1984; Vanderbosch, 1997), I had no

way of making sense of frustrations, shames, and pain that I was experiencing in my everyday life.

2. Theories and Allies—Class Distinctions

The following section is my attempt at a theory section. I'm looking for theory to develop a framework to connect these difficult topics. I want to forewarn you the reader that though my allies are clear to me, my theories are at best jagged and awkward.

Entitlement (As Seen From the Outside)

In *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker*, Joanna Kadi (1996) writes about growing up working class, lesbian, Arab-American (Lebanese), poet and artist. She explores the lifelong tensions she experiences associated with growing up working class and Arab and pursuing professional degrees. She delineates a stupid/smart dichotomy, taught early as a kid that working class kids were not as bright as their middle class peers in schools. Suggesting that a stupid/smart dichotomy is the hallmark of academe she states:

University degrees constitute a symbol, a marker, so the world understands the bearer comes from the middle/upper class. Degrees separate this group from lowly, unprivileged, stupid workers. (p. 52)

Kadi (1996) challenges some myths about class: not all rich people are smart; no matter what initials follow your name, you are still working class; and that she didn't "acquire privilege, entitlement and arrogance after slogging it out in the academy" (p. 53). Privilege, entitlement and arrogance serve as the defining characteristics of the middle class for me. Coupled with Freire's (1970) concept of "false

generosity," that gifts given come with strings attached, I grieve when I think that the middle and upper classes are much more interested in maintaining the status quo than social change or justice. Bowles and Gintis (1976) demonstrated this about education. The power to name and maintain; for example, Kadi questions a common-held notion (held by many middle and upper class colleagues) that class identity changes if one component of class changes. Kadi disagrees with middle class people who view a good salary and a university degree as middle class:

...I believe class identity comes from many places: education, values, culture, income, dwelling, lifestyle, manners, friends, ancestry, language, expectations, desires, sense of entitlement, religion, neighborhood, amount of privacy. If one of these, such as education, shifts dramatically, class identity doesn't change...When a person with class privilege takes on the task of defining and articulating class location of someone from a lower class, it's arrogant and offensive. (p. 53)

This is important for me, because many friends and colleagues suggest that because I am an academic, I am no longer working class (and many more of them would not want to identify with working class people). If I am not working class, can I be working class identified? What about my roots and personal social histories and the values and life strategies I was raised with? So I have to ask, Why the erasure? Why can I be totally discounted if I identify as working class?

So, I've been scrambling to put to words as to why my roots should count. I often take the side of working people in academic discussions about unions, agency, and dignity. For me, the importance of working class and working poor lives cannot be underestimated, nor diminished—especially in terms of queer liberation in the United States. It was the workers and street people who started gay liberation—not the middle or upper classes. Both Gomez (1995) and Kadi (1996) remind

us that it was Black and Puerto Rican drag queens, dykes (white butches and femmes) and street people that fought back in June of 1969 at the Stonewall Inn. Jamakaya's (1988) twenty-seven oral histories of working women in Wisconsin labor unions throughout the twentieth century reminds me how workers must continue to fight for benefits many middle and upper class persons take for granted: just compensation, safe work environments, and health and pension benefits.

In *Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams*, Alfred Lubrano (2004) writes about growing up working class and attending college, and now as a journalist how he "straddles" two social worlds. He refers to his experiences as a type of "limbo," where he doesn't belong to either class. Lubrano interviewed over one hundred white collar professionals who have similar working class backgrounds and found like frustrations and alienations. Lubrano notes that gaining an understanding of social class aids "straddlers" (his term) in understanding their frustrations, angers, and fears. He reports that these professionals stated how the class chasms and pain never go away. Judith Herman's (1992) analysis of violence, from domestic abuse to political terror—labeled trauma and recovery, aptly applies to the war zones of social class in our culture, especially as I have experienced them. And Jane Vanderbosch's (1997) analysis of working class anger and shame helps me better understand what it means to be shut out of entitlement. So I have to ask myself; am I perceiving middle class arrogance from my perspective alone? Is it the reality for middle class persons? How they experience it or feel about it? I don't know.

Passing?

Passing is a strategy used by many people to assimilate or infiltrate other groups—for example gay and bisexual people passing for straight. I tried to pass for straight and middle class when I started to think about self-identifying as gay—what others would describe as "coming

out of the closet" (circa early 1980s). In this instance, I was trying to protect myself psychically and physically. The type of class passing that Jane Vanderbosch (1997) describes is another version even deeper felt, a passing that eventually nullified and/or vilified her working class past. She talks about passing, as a reality of growing up working class with formal education, getting her farther from who she was: "I pass. First for smart. Then educated. And then middle-class" (p. 86). "I have been trained by twenty-six years of education to speak middle-class, think middle-class, make love middle-class. In other words, to pass" (p. 89). Eventually, it hurt too much for me to hear my friends put down workers, unions, and my reality of being raised working class. My own attempts to purchase my way to another social class reality brought only more debt and dissatisfaction. My refusal to pass for me and to accept the reality of my working class roots was revolutionary and at the same time disquieting. So, let me next explain how I got the values I have. The values that impact my living, teaching, activism, and making art.

3. My Working Class—Growing Up

What Did I Leave Behind?

I can still feel the excitements in my mother's kitchen (circa early 1960s) and my dad's carpentry shop in Manitowoc, WI. The kitchen was the hub of our house. My mother was always baking, cooking and/or cleaning. She baked homemade bread on Tuesdays and Fridays. (We took a loaf of bread to the Felician (Polish) Sister's convent of our parish every Friday.) My mother also made chocolate and crumb cakes from scratch, peanut squares, pies (apple, rhubarb, and raspberry), chocolate chip cookies, homemade donuts, bakkas, and apple coffee cake. Mulligan stew, chicken dinners on Sundays, roasts,

dumplings, fish fries on Fridays, canned mushrooms, pickles...the list is endless.

My family socialized in the kitchen especially when company stopped by. My dad's shop was where many old and long retired white working class men would gather on Saturday mornings. There, they would talk about their lives, local politics, and they made things. They would sweep the floors, cut wood, build, stain, and finish furniture, and work on assorted other small projects (fix windows, pile scrap wood, etc.). Saturdays were great days to visit the shop. My dad had time to talk on Saturdays. He sometimes looked more relaxed in comparison with the rest of the week. (But he always had time for us no matter when.) And I had time to listen, watch and smell: listen to the men's stories, watch old men socialize, and smell the woods, glues, paints, and other smells of the shop. Oral traditions were time honored in the shop. On cold nights when my dad had to fire-up the old shop wood furnace, I would tag along and build things out of wood like cranes, small buildings, and cities, while my dad stoked the furnace in the basement. This was my initial inspiration for making wood collages.

I was raised with four brothers and one sister. My uncles were welders, painters, electricians, carpenters, and farmers. My aunts worked as cooks, custodians, cashiers, and in factories. My dad had fourteen brothers and sisters, my mom ten. We were raised Polish Catholic. My mom had an eighth grade education. She grew up during the Great Depression and though wanting to go on to high school because she was bright and loved learning, had to forgo high school and work at the "Goods" (Mirro Aluminum Company, Manitowoc, WI) to help bring in money to support her mother and siblings at home. My dad grew up on a farm and received a sixth grade education. I was the first in my family to go to college.

Not only was there no college education fund for me, but also I had no expectation of receiving one. I attended my first year of college at a local two-year center in Manitowoc and worked nights, weekends and summers to pay for my tuition. The idea was to save money before transferring to a larger state university. I was able to find a \$6.05 paying job at a large Manitowoc bakery (circa 1975) driving a 3/4-semi truck from the bakery to a warehouse two blocks away. I worked for five summers at this job before I quit. When I transferred to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, I found other jobs (main desk clerk at a dorm, bouncer at a local club, and part-time gigs at factories) during the school year to pay for food and housing. My parents paid part of my tuition and room and board during my first year away at school. I took out my first loan in my senior year of school.

The only expectation expressed by my family was that I get a good paying job. And like many first generation working class kids going to college, I became a teacher. Other working class friends studied to be nurses and accountants.

4. My Working Class—Walking Away?

Trying to Pass as Middle Class?

I was an elementary art teacher for ten years in a small rural school district (1980-1989). I taught 780 kids, at three schools, with no art rooms. I became active in my teacher's union, often holding an office. I got a Master's degree at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee part-time over a four-year period (1983-1987) incurring more college debt. I always remember getting some summer job to help pay the bills.

I went to gay clubs in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the early 1980s (pre-AIDS awareness). I noticed many clean-cut and well-groomed white men sporting shirts with monogrammed horses near the front pocket. I had no idea what Ralph Lauren Polo shirts were and much more importantly what they represented (status, fashion, integrity). Not only was I trying to pass for straight when not at clubs, I was also trying to pass for middle class when at clubs. I charged higher-end clothes on department store credit cards, borrowed money to purchase a used BMW in good condition, and tried to change my manners, look, and talk to pass for middle class. I wanted to pass so I could find a handsome boy friend/husband—which I never did find.

I somehow knew that to be successful and handsome also meant access to sex, love and dates. And I needed to be like them, the middle class gay white guys if I wanted to date them. Gay male white pornography demonstrated this clearly. I learned about sex and sexuality in bars, in beds and from pornography. Middle class gay white guys wanted fantasies of working men to “get off” on, but resorted to their own kind for dating.

I eventually found that “passing” for middle class was something that was too costly for me—money-wise and emotionally. I did not have the money to vacation, buy clothes, and eat out as my middle class white gay peers did. I did not have the stories or experiences to date middle and upper class men to hold their attention for more than a few dates. I had to work year round.

My sense of social justice emerged in my middle 20s (circa mid 1980s) in gay bars watching white middle class closeted and out gay men put down drag queens (some who were my friends). I noticed I now had even less in common with the men I wanted to date. I also noticed how colleagues at school frequently put down working poor and working class elementary kids and their families. I remember having a conversation with a fifth grader, Marc Smith, whose two

brothers and sister had different dads. Many teachers looked down on his mom (many referred to her as the town slut) and siblings. Marc was bright and a nice kid and so were his brothers and sister. I remember telling him that he had seven more years of bias and abuse to endure in the local schools, but that he was bright and a good kid and the bias from this community would eventually end and he could go on to other things, go on to other places. Now I wonder if my advice was misleading or just wrong?

When I left teaching to pursue a Ph. D. in 1989, I concentrated on feminist and queer issues and activism (Check, 1992; Check, 1996). This was the primary lens I used for understanding my identities, art, research and teaching. As I volunteered at a gay social agency, I noticed social and political chasms between gay men and lesbians over issues such as dating, sex, relationships, community, misogyny, class, violence, and AIDS, to name a few. Feminism and its critique of gender power relations inspired me to combine academics and activism. My dissertation, "My Self-Education as a Gay Artist" (Check, 1996), explored issues of gender, sexuality and social class as war zones (Herman, 1992; Wojnarowicz, 1991). Theoretically and academically I focused more on sexuality issues than class issues. Other than from friends in the university Socialist group, class was rarely mentioned as an art or education issue. My socialist friends said life was all about class. Not persuaded wholly and knowing class had a lot to do with life, I replied that it was mostly about gender and sexuality. This is insightful for me now given the class shame and terror I experienced.

Class shame influenced my dating middle and upper class gay men during this period (1989-1996). Dating and desire now had conscious class implications. I often realized I didn't have anything in common with middle and upper class gay men in terms of culture. I often battled shame attacks—Why wasn't I more successful? Why didn't I have more access to capital and power? Why didn't I have a better

house? Trips to Europe? There was always pressure to hang at cool spaces, spaces that were usually expensive. I added more debt.

It was during this time that Jane Vanderbosch became a class ally for me. She grew up white working class in Queens. She chose not to work in academe. Initially, I didn't understand why Jane, who graduated with a Ph. D. in Education and Women's Studies from a Big Ten university, opted not to teach in academe. After negative social class experiences during a postdoctoral fellowship in Women's Studies, she settled for temporary menial jobs, though later served as a Director of a non-profit agency while continuing her work as a poet and essayist. It was during this time that Jane mentored me while I wrote my dissertation. Jane edited my dissertation and really "chaired" my dissertation. (By that I mean Jane was not a member of my official committee but without her advice and support, I would not have graduated.) Jane (1997) often spoke and wrote about her class shame and anger. She often felt ashamed of not faring better, given her education, eventually going on disability before dying of cancer. We had many late night talks about queers, activisms, art, teaching, and growing up working class.

I initially felt my dissertation alienated me from my family. My primary focus on gay issues marginalized me from my working roots, often portraying my family and relatives as stereotypes when in reality they accepted and loved me. I recall my sister cried as she discussed my dissertation after reading it. "Did you not enjoy anything growing up?" she asked me. I explained how the dissertation was just a small part of my understanding my roots. But my sister's responses made me realize I was not prepared to talk about working class issues in relation to my family, my teaching and my art. I was still in a shame place in terms of class and didn't realize it. I realize this now.

5. My Working Class—Here and Now

I was astonished in 1999 when I discovered a working class academics' email list. Established by Barbara Peters in 1994, it is a venue for working-class academics to discuss issues (personal, research, classroom, social, tenure, etc.) related to being raised working class and teaching in middle class environs. I identified with the first-person testimony emails about working class academics' frustrations, fears and traumas working in academe. The emails criticized the institutionalized values of middle class academics: the entitlements, the arrogance, the confidence, the social connections, internships, individual achievements, senses of knowing, self-importance, and grandiose social histories. I related to the cultural splits posted in emails: the physical, emotional, and intellectual self-doubts and shames that are created in moving from one class to another, in this case from working class to middle class, what I and others have referred to as social class war zones (Check, 2004; Herman, 1992; Wojnarowicz, 1991), the experiences of being outsiders.

It was the emails that inspired me to read and reread first person testimonies and related working class issues (Bourdieu, 1984; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; hooks, 1995, 2000; Langlois, 1997; Lubrano, 2004; Nader, 2004; Payne, 1996; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Schlosser, 2002; Swanson, 2001; Tea, 2003; Zandy, 2001) and the relationship of class to gay issues (Kadi, 1996; Penelope, 1994; Ruffo, 1997; Wojnarowicz, 1991). These testimonies revealed to me how the working class is connected to money, power and cultural capital.

I better understand now why my friend, mentor, writer, poet, and activist Jane Vanderbosch chose not to become an academic. She said she could not compromise her gender, sexual and social class truths for the middle and upper class bias and the politics of academe.

That I dislike attending faculty parties and other social spaces where colleagues talk department business, money and politics, or talk

about their accomplishments, recent research findings, or recent trips overseas, is part of my “limbo” experience. Clothes, conference trips (often not funded by my department), eating out, and living in an isolated part of the country, contribute to my growing debt—one that I feel shame about. Paying off graduate loans and credit card debt doesn’t allow for disposable income for me to go to Europe or travel anywhere for that matter. Investments? How do I do that? In spite of this, my friend Rose (raised upper class) reminds me I am part of the professional class and there are rules to follow and to adhere to.

I purchased a smaller house (1,022 square feet) in a working class neighborhood that some of my middle and upper class acquaintances have said is not in a safe neighborhood. My neighborhood is a cross section of races, ethnicities and social classes. Evidently, the presence of any workers or poor people creates a feeling of non-safety for some of them as they openly expressed this to me (though they could not produce facts to back their fears).

Built in 1942, I was impressed with its simplicity, an original Chambers stove (in good working condition), wood floors and tall windows. I’ve kept the red counter kitchen tile intact to honor the choices made by the original owners. My house aesthetic has a definite industrial and working class feel. By that I mean I work with the original architecture and when possible, I purchase period working class accessories. I try to restore my house/recycle it as I do in my art. I furnish it with diner plates and other simple working class articles that I remember growing up with. My friend June (working class artist) says my house is a “working class repository of sentimental relics from my past” (June White, personal communication, October 10, 2004). My reclamation is consistent with working class values I was raised on—to respect the land (I xeriscape), not waste, simplicity, and getting the job done.

I often compare my simplicity to that of friend's who own larger houses, sometimes with shame, sometimes with pride. I have bouts of shame about my aesthetic choices—often made out of necessity and not by choice. I don't have the money and do not want to put myself farther into debt. How do I pay \$5,000 for a couch? It's just not in me. It's not my training. In the fall of 2004, I had my house appraised for a refinance loan. I intended to reduce some credit card debt. The appraisal was so shockingly low, that I said to my friend June, "It's official. I am white trash." In my opinion, the house was seen as less than acceptable by the biased appraiser. After a bout of self-doubt and shame, I called a local mortgage company that appraised my house closer to the city's appraisal (they appraised it 33% higher than the first appraiser) and I was able to continue with the refinancing.

Mentoring Working Class Students

Class membership doesn't ensure awful art or good art. Class membership does ensure whose art, whose cultural expression, is valued and appreciated. (Kadi, 1996, p. 21)

Recently (September 27, 2004), one of our Ph. D. students died suddenly. Jo Beth defined herself as growing up white poverty/trash in a research class I taught. Being white, female, working poor, and fat made her feel out of place in academe most of the time. Jo Beth regaled us with stories and perspectives of white West Texas working poor. She often felt out of place in the Ph. D. program, but was determined to make it work for her. Like a working person, she tried to do much on her own. Three days before she died, she failed a qualifying exam that I was present at. I purposefully stayed after the exam to comfort her and offer my advising for her next, second and final attempt. We talked about social class issues that worked against her exam performance. I assured her that she was intelligent and not a failure. I

often ally with working class students in our graduate and undergraduate programs.

An undergraduate student (Tara Smith, personal communication, September 26, 2004) talked about how biased an undergraduate education course is in terms of social class views that totally ignores working people's perspectives. Tara said the education course is totally biased and skewed toward middle class ways of knowing and teaching. Her histories and values were not represented nor even mentioned in the course. "It was as if working people do not exist," she commented. She was angry and determined to speak up about the slight and question her professor in the next class.

Renee, a graduate student, often talks about her working class background and the silence surrounding class issues, and especially working people, in her graduate education classes. She is writing a thesis about networks of queer working kids, how they support each other, how she supports them, and how institutions ignore their lives and needs. We chatted about her thesis as we drove three hours to Jo Beth's funeral in Pampa, Texas. Jo Beth's service was short, replete with Elvis' version of "Amazing Grace" and The Eagles "Desperado." On our return to Lubbock, we stopped in Amarillo, Texas, where I bought Renee's dinner. I told her I wanted her to fondly remember our trip and talk about her thesis ideas, and thought food was a great way to achieve that goal. I wanted her to be excited and not afraid while writing, and sad when her writing is over. A much different way to think about writing as artful—a birthing of ideas and experiences—working class experiences.

I am finding that conflict over class issues is inevitable and messy. In the summer of 2004 at a National Women's Studies Conference in Milwaukee, WI, a young woman approached me in the exhibits halls thanking me for my comments about growing up white and working class at an earlier session that morning titled "Being Queer, Teaching

Queer: Our Silence Will Not Protect Us.” At that session, I said I offered students options of how to address me in classes—Ed or Dr. Check, based on their comfort levels. A Black lesbian academic with a poverty background lambasted me, that my male privilege and whiteness permitted such naming/addressing options (and she was right). I regret that she failed to see my efforts to rethink my current classroom practices in terms of my working class background rather than solely by my whiteness and maleness. Back in the exhibit hall, the female student further wondered if she herself had a working class background. I asked her what her parents did for livings. She said her dad worked in a factory. We then talked at length about how her parents not having money for cable (she was told there was nothing good on cable so why get it) and other money issues were directly related to her working class background.

The Black lesbian was right. I knew how to pass for straight and middle class with white male skin privilege, though I am suspecting it is even much more complex than that. Vanderbosch (1997) suggests that we are all in pain around class issues, trained to think they are different pains, hence not recognizing the need for more dialogue about class:

And as long as we believe that, as long as we act on those beliefs, dear reader, we are going to kick the shit out of one another. Or get the shit kicked out of us, And nothing will ever change. (p. 94)

The psychic and emotional pain is incredible as experienced by me and described by students. And the silence is deafening.

Revisiting My Working Class Family and Places Where I Grew Up

In June 2004 I visited my Aunt Helen for an hour while passing through my hometown, this right after the Women's Studies Conference. As we visited in her kitchen, I looked around in disbelief. The brick home that seemed so huge when I was a kid seemed so much smaller now with a definitely working class aesthetic. My visit betrayed my childhood memories. Where were the large rooms with very nice things? How now years later, Aunt Helen in her late eighties, her still beautiful flowers in her backyard—and everything so working class—how could I have missed this?

In December 2003, my sister tells me about her uneasiness shopping in a higher end gourmet shop in a local Milwaukee suburb. I rage inside at the clerk who made my sister feel so unwelcome, made my sister feel less than, that she was out of her social class. I am angry that my sister had to feel that way. I am angry we grew up working class. And yet, I am planning a trip home (October 2004) to document some factories and other industrial landscapes for an art poster series surveying the lives of working class people. Part of my vision is to document people and buildings that haven't disappeared yet. I can't deny my roots.

6. Conclusion—Unbecoming Middle Class?

...the university system is intricately linked with the capitalist system. People with power at the university will do their part to reinforce and promote the capitalist explanation for class difference—smart rich people, stupid poor people—in return for continued benefits and privileges from the current structure. (Kadi, p. 44)

It is taking me a long time to come to terms with my working class roots and to begin to realize my working class roots give me a place to ground my teaching, art, writing and life, to better understand my shame, grief, pain, and yes the rage that I have toward middle and upper class privilege and entitlement. I witness to my own experiences, talking about the contradictions I live and feel. Using my voice to witness is better than the silence and shame I experienced. I can model and be a mentor for others. I am excited about further exploring my pain, pleasure, desire, shame and rage in relation to class issues and sexuality, teaching and art.

Am I working class? Working class identified? A hybrid? Am I reappropriating my own past? Is it mine to claim? All I know is that I identify as working class—it's in my marrow: my values, culture, manners, ancestry, language, and ethics. I'm an insider because I am white, but other than that I am an outsider. It's such an odd feeling to talk about, even now.

Art to Question Class



In my art, I explore working class themes birthed in my father's shop and my mother's kitchen. In "Domestic Saints" (2002) I canonize three working class women photographed in a kitchen (my mom, an aunt, and family friend). Hilda wears an apron and holds a dinner plate, my mom holds an aluminum cake pan marked with medical tape, while Aunt Sally smiles into the camera. I used gold glitter to create halos around them. Like Jamakaya (1998), I wanted to publicly showcase the lives of working women that taught, influenced and protected me. Where else would the canonization of everyday working women occur? In "Sun Dress" (2003), I created life-sized dress installations around the outside of my house honoring the lives of working women who taught me. I used materials that wear, tear, fade and disappear, just like the lives of millions of working-class women who remain nameless, invisible, and/or forgotten. Sundresses, like this one, were popular in the Midwest in the 1960s and 1970s with working women in my life. This piece gently and quietly moves in the wind, fading in the sun, tearing from the elements. It stands as a testimony to a class of women often taken for granted.



Further Implications

It is also in writing, teaching and in my community that I ask crucial questions about class. Those are areas where I can also mentor to other working class students, colleagues (and mentor to middle and upper class students and colleagues) and neighbors and community members about her/ histories, art, and other working class social phenomena.

As stated earlier, I want to talk about class in my writing and art. This paper is one example of me beginning that public discourse. Creating a poster series and postcards that can be handed out to people for free. This is another way for me to do outreach to working class allies and others. Many working class and working poor families are strapped for cash and cannot buy art.

At university and in classes, I can help create safer spaces for working class and other students who are exploring their working class roots. For example, in preparing for a spring 2005 graduate art education seminar on art and social justice, I decided to include Kadi's *Thinking Class* knowing one graduate student who will be taking the course is struggling with her working class background. It is a way I can support her and myself in class. We all need to talk about class as an issue in education. There are also many working class artists, and artists with working class backgrounds that can be utilized in classes for teaching. Judy Baca, Ralph Fasanella, Luis Jimenez, Yolanda M. López, and David Wojnarowicz are a few that come to mind.

In politics and interactions with university colleagues, I can continue to support working class students in meetings, tests, and reviews. I can also talk about class at faculty meetings and when planning School of Art activities: visiting artists, lecture series, exhibitions, etc. I can also support other working class academics who

are just beginning to realize that their working class backgrounds impact their academic lives, including their teaching, art, and research.

And finally, I can talk about class in my own greater community where I live. I recently attended a neighborhood meeting where some residents readily recognized the plight of working poor in our neighborhood and strategized ways the working poor can access public and private monies to fix up their homes. Though safety is an issue in our neighborhood, residents were not quick to blame the working class residents and the working poor for recent thefts and burglaries. Residents recognize that social class issues are complex and want to work toward equitable changes in our neighborhood, and not quick fixes that blame one socio-economic group.

Finally, I want to open this up to other working class (and other) academics/artists/activists to begin to talk and share our histories, issues and possible strategies and lessons for dialogue and continued survival.

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