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CLASS & WOMEN'S WRITING

SARAH DIAMOND

WE NEED POETRY THAT REFLECTS THE quality of our people, working, loving, fighting, groping for clarity. We need satire — fierce, scorching, aimed at the abuses which are destroying our culture and which threaten life itself.

—Dorothy Livesay, *New Frontier*, 1936-37

THERE IS A VALUE IN CLASS ANALYSIS, IN general, when applied to women's experience. It allows us to comprehend our oppression not as timeless, not as biologically or psychologically fixed and determined, requiring endless individual adjustments, but instead as an historically specific and changing result of economic and social structures. These are, in shorthand form: the patriarchal family system and its various forms through class society and unequal economic class relations determined by divisions between those who own the means to produce wealth and those who are the producers (for the most part, that's us).

Class analysis has specific value for both the criticism and production of all cultural forms, including women's writing. It forces a dynamic, historically based perspective; a clear vantage point from which we can affirm the ability to change reality as we know it, to shape it. There is a potential role for culture within that process.

Art and ideas expressed as art represent particular forms of consciousness. What is consciousness but

an individual's expression of their relationship to reality, produced by membership in social grouping which is in turn created by existing systems? Marx states, "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.", by the real living individuals themselves as they are in actual life. Within a shared reality people have individual lives. The value of consciousness is the way that it bridges individual perception and expression of experience, making it a social phenomena. It is the linkages and the similarities which are of interest, not the exceptional story.

In a class society, consciousness is determined not only by membership in a group but by the relative power of social groups and their ability to enforce their consciousness of society onto others, by covert and overt means. When a certain group holds social and economic power its ideas also dominate through its ability to control ideological systems and organize the goals of a society: it often makes promises it cannot keep. Culture plays a key role: it helps people to understand, place, rationalize their experience in the world.

The contribution of class analysis to cultural criticism is in showing the ways that cultural concepts are perpetuated and made legitimate. Criticism can also uncover and comprehend the conflicts, the ways that people within oppressed groups internalize social values while at the same time, or at a

“Writing can be subversive in form and content without specific reference to class struggle.”

later point, they may resist them. For example, a critique based on working class women's experience of family and workplace set against existing concepts and idealizations of childrearing, secretarial work, shopping, sexuality, can bring a recognition of conflict — a recognition of existing constraints and the ability to overturn these limits. Thus criticism can show that rebellion against control is not only a response to conditioning, but also the possibility of a union of many rebellious acts and ideas into a culture of resistance. It shows the role of culture within movements of resistance. It shows that, in the process of transforming society, the need to move beyond the existing terrain of culture is based on an understanding of where concrete power lies and of the ability of culture to be capitalized and coopted.

Cultural criticism within a class framework is not a fruitless or intellectual exercise. It's hard to create new visions without political momentum, but when mass movements emerge we need the tools to understand the ways that our lives are controlled. We need to be able to act quickly, to make ideas into reality. For women this means a knowledge of the gap between the stated and the felt.

The Context of Writing

The value of class analysis to women's writing lies not only in exposing the absence of working class women as writers, although it is certainly necessary to recognize this and argue for affirmative action for women denied access to expression. It is also of value in recognizing class bias in both women's and men's writing and to understand the mechanisms by which this functions — how power and meaning are expressed in class terms. A piece of writing can show the ways in which women from one class view women from another; how women within the same class see each other; where women's experience bridges class division; and the ways in which class difference is passed on and enforced by women. For example, even within feminist literature, working class women are often seen as 'other'. The artist/writer is an historical person. Class analysis leads us to question the specific nature of a text: who is the writer, where is she located in class terms, how does she fit into a view of women's writing of a time period or geographical area; what is the value of her writing as such? We need to know where writing is located as commodity: who could be published, how

was writing circulated and to whom? These questions allow us to locate a work. Rather than negating work by, for example, the lesbian Bloomsbury writers of the early 20th century, these questions can give a context to their creative efforts.

Art has no autonomous reality outside of social production. It is a product of human labour which is socially organized, albeit often individually produced, and our perceptions of art work are also socially located. We need to examine critical standards, expressed in attitudes toward language and form. These are based on ideas of who 'artists' are at a given time and on ideas about the function of culture (release, escape, psychological resolution, transcendence, etc.). Critical standards relate directly to the ability of working class women to get published and their impact on readers' interest in consuming certain types of literature.

Class analysis is thus of value for the very production of cultural material (as well as in our understanding and receiving of it). Rather than dismissing bourgeois women's writing, let us see it as class specific; rather than pushing bourgeois women to include working class women characters as a token gesture, let us construct and fight for the means by which working class women can write of their own experience.

This raises the question: "Is there a working class culture?" My perception is that there is not. There is a working class experience (or rather many working class experiences with some parallels); however, much of this experience occurs within capitalist reality and culture. There is a danger in idealizing the existing culture within working class life. This can undermine dissatisfaction with life as it is now. It can feel prescriptive and idealistic, without resonance in people's real anger and aspiration. Until the working class controls and restructures society to conform with its needs and visions there can be no working class culture, per se.

There is, on the other hand, a *culture of resistance* which is articulated against the dominant culture. It is essential to validate forms of resistance — to express what we like about what exists and has been created. It is important to address and represent the nature of working class experience within a culture of domination. We need to record and to form the places of rupture. But let's not pretend that there is somehow an autonomous culture inside capitalist-

“This raises the question: Is there a working class culture? My perception is that there is not.”

patriarchy blossoming free of its roots. There is an analogy here with notions of a feminist culture. Both the feminist movement and the conscious working class movement have created critical cultural expressions. There is a hidden history of writing by working class women, though their ability to circulate their poetry, articles, etc. has been severely limited. But these (feminist and working class cultural expressions) are also specific to a lived material reality. This means that we must understand the culture ‘industry’ and its relation to its market place: its tendency to exclude perceptions which threaten its own continuation, the places where we can push for

The Revolt of Lucy the Housemaid

Lucy this and Lucy that,
Button my dress and get my hat,
Some day I'm going to get so tired
Don't even care if I do get fired
I'm going to tell that dame:
You may live on top of the pile, There's nothing you
ain't got,
You may live in the swellest style, But sister you
ain't so hot;
Yeah, you look so high and mighty, when you sit
there sipping tea;
But everytime I look at you, Boy! I'm sure glad
I'm me;
You got money, you got clothes, Lord! You sure
can act refined,
Beats me how you put on the dog, But listen woman:
I ain't blind
All the things you think you know, Long ago I done
forgot,
To me you're just a so and so, Sister you ain't so hot,
You may look so nice and meek like a sweet forget-
me-not,
The mister works down on Walter Street, he acts like
he's the top,
But, ask me what I think of him, He's just a lollypop!
I do all the work there is, while you raise all the
Cain,
Ev'rytime I look at you, Woman, you give me a
pain;
You can yell like bloody murder, you've got me in
a spot
But, someday I'm gonna yell right back:
SISTER YOU AIN'T SO HOT!

The Fisherman, March 28, 1939

publication because of the demands of consumers; the ways that we, as women, can create our own publication networks; and what that might include.

Realism, Fantasy and History

Cultural production is essential in order to validate resistance, to develop an understanding of our experience and to raise questions. There are many forms that our writings can take. There is a valuable tradition of realism within women's writing. While much of this production was not by working class women, it was linked to working class movements and based on the documentation of working women's experience. This work has an important role in both entertaining and instructing. Examples include: Dorothy Livesay's writing; *Waste Heritage*, written in the '30s by B.C. novelist Eileen Baird; work by the *Workers' Theatre* and work by little known women published in the workers' presses.

But there are limits to realism. Pleasure and fantasy empower us as well. Writing can be subversive in form and content without specific reference to class struggle. There is an important place for the erotic and a subversive value in breaking down assumptions about women. Marge Piercy's poetry is a fine example of such work.

There is another level of women's expression which has great value. These are the word-based though 'non-literary' forms such as oral culture (stories passed down from woman to woman), lyrics to songs, nursery rhymes, etc. These are both a valuable repository of our lost history and artistic expression in themselves.

Consciously sought oral history from working class women provides individual stories that can be melded together into a vision of women's lives. Oral history is important in representing women without literary tools. There are different levels to oral history. Individual testimony on its own is often inspirational as well as entertaining; when amalgamated, women's recollections transcend the individual; when coupled with analysis, women's views of their own experience can be underlined, showing the consciousness that is implicit in daily life. When pooled together, these contributions contradict history as told by (mostly) bourgeois men — a telling which is incorporated into the dominant culture's view of its own development. Oral history

allows us not only to relive and to be inspired; it shows the conflict between women, past mistakes and their repercussions, the process of change over time, and lends a perspective not always visible from inside a lived reality.

Because of the power of the written word, the recording of oral history in written form forces a respect and recognition of women's view of the past. As an interviewer and writer it is essential to understand one's difference from the speakers. When writing with the voices of working class women we must also recognize the ways that bourgeois culture traditionally caricatures working class people, defining them as "other", and when taking spoken language into written forms we must be wary of grammatical style that may overpower perceptions

of content, as well as changes in rhythm and pacing.

Lastly, as women writers we must note and consider the importance of mass culture as a reference point. Mass culture is oriented towards working class consumers. Though there is value in producing for a limited, defined community, it is also important to develop forms of accessible, critical culture.

In this piece, I've touched on some ideas regarding the importance of class analysis in approaching the task of cultural criticism specifically for those who, as feminists, are concerned about understanding and transforming the culture in which we live, as well as for those who are creating visions of alternatives and of resistance. For the feminist writer, reader and critic, class/female consciousness is invaluable.

Sara Diamond

Myrtle Bergen: Oral History Excerpts

"...because I didn't have a clue about politics. But I knew about class struggle."

YOU' SEE, WHAT OPENED MY eyes was when I had it explained to me what the role of unions is. And it was just the greatest thing that had ever happened to me in my life. I saw the light. Where I had been ashamed to take any boyfriends to the home of my mother and father because they were so poverty-stricken, I saw where they fitted into a class of people who were exploited. (She cries) When I saw the class structure of society, I knew right away. (cries)

When it was explained to me that my former friends were on the other side of the fence, they were not going to be my friends anymore. First of all, I knew this before I gave my notice to the courthouse. But all my mail came to the courthouse, where I worked and they had sealed letters with International Woodworkers of America on the bottom. I can remember one day after I had given notice and I'd told them I was going to work for the IWA and why: because I was going to get more money — thirty-five dollars a week — I can remember one of the policemen coming down the hall singing that Russian boatmen's song: "Yo ho heave ho". It didn't mean a

thing to me until afterwards when I realized what he was doing. He was red-baiting me, you know. And little did I know, because I didn't have a clue about politics. But I knew about class struggle. I had just learned about it.

OUR LITTLE HOME WAS THE union office and I was the secretary for the union and I used to do the books for the union. And so we had loggers in our house most days and when the lay-off season came, they'd be around there all the time, because it was the union office. And weekends they'd be at our place, they'd come down on the Friday night and they'd have a bottle and they'd want a place to drink it so they'd come to our place. Then we'd have somebody sleeping on our chesterfield or somewhere else and in the morning, Saturday, we'd have the union meeting and I'd have all the books done up and ready and then that night the auxiliary would put up a dance and I'd be working on that and then after the dance they'd all come over to our place again and we'd have a party. And so it got so that I got so tired of all this business,

that sometimes I'd think, "oh boy, it's Friday, I won't have to get up early tomorrow", because I used to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to get Bergie (husband) off to work, and then I'd think, "Oh no, they'll be coming in from the camps". I'd say, when Bergie would get home from the camps, "Let's hurry up and go to Victoria tonight, and stay in a hotel and they won't know where we're at." Because we got tired of it, but I used to love them too, because I heard so many good stories and they were great people. Just the greatest guys.

I cooked for them. You did everything. I can remember one night they all came over to our house for a party and little simple things wouldn't do me. I had to do something fancy, do it up, so I was cooking waffles for about 20 people. And you know, after I'd worked all day on the dance and danced all night too. And Bergie, well, nobody helped me — just Owen Brown. So after that, I figured he'd (Bergie) better help too, because to me, socialize meant equality, and it didn't mean that the women did all the work while the men sat around, you know.