UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

‘TO BE OF USE’:

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN’S POETRY OF WORK AND WORKERS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

JEANETTA CALHOUN MISH
Norman, Oklahoma
2009

‘TO BE OF USE’
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN’S POETRY OF WORK AND WORKERS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY

_____
Dr. Francesca Sawaya, Chair

_____
Dr. Dan Cottom

_____
Dr. R. C. Davis

_____
Dr. Jonathan Stalling

_____
Dr. Catherine E. Kelly

TABLE OF CONTENTS
'To Be of Use': American Women's Poetry of Work and Workers

ABSTRACT

'To Be of Use': Contemporary American Women's Poetry of Work and Workers
by Jeanetta Calhoun Mish

In this dissertation, I examine three genres of contemporary women's poetry of work and workers: the historical long poem, the lyric poem, and the hybrid lyric-narrative; identify the poetic devices and imagery which are designed to generate an empathetic response; explain how the poems use empathetic response to engage readers in ethical contemplation; then explore the implicit and explicit ethical demands made in the poetry. This study of the poetics of empathy and ethics in contemporary American women's poetry of work and workers is unique, on the one hand, in its grouping of writers, its emphasis on poetics, prosody, and formal structure rather than on theme, authenticity of representation, or authorial biography, and, on the other hand, in its intersection with aesthetics, and its critical appropriation of certain ideas from ethical literary criticism and from sociological, psychological, and cognitive studies of empathy. Additionally, this study's concern with ethics places it within a growing body of contemporary scholarship on literature and ethics.

The chapters of the dissertation are organized around categories of poetic genre: the long poem, the lyric poem, and the hybrid lyric narrative. In chapter two, I analyze how poems channel empathetic response toward ethical ends in historical long poems by Muriel Rukeyser, Chris Llewellyn, and Diane Gilliam Fisher. In chapter three, I analyze two modes of the ethical lyric, the family poem and the protean narrator poem, in work by Marge Piercy, Maggie Anderson, and Dorianne Laux. In chapter four, I explore how June Jordan and Lorna Dee Cervantes use a hybrid lyric-narrative form to create a dialectical poetic space within which the relationships between the individual and the world, the self and the other, the private and the public, are subject to an ethical interrogation. The conclusion opens with a short meditation on two recurring themes in women's poetry of work and workers followed by a survey of the cultural work poetry does in working-class communities. In section one of chapter five, I offer a selection of women's poetry that operates explicitly to hail other members of the working class, using empathy to create solidarity rather than to serve a class-crossing epistemological purpose. In the sec ond section of the chapter, I explore how poets put their poetries to work on behalf of working-class and underclass communities. Section three of the conclusion offers a survey of small presses and little magazines currently publishing working-class writing.

Chapter 1: Introduction—

‘To Be Of Use’: Contemporary American Women’s Poetry of Work and Workers

> I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
> who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
> who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
> who do what has to be done, again and again.
>
> — “To Be of Use” by Marge Piercy

Overview

Poets and poetry can be of use in the fight for economic and social justice. This manifesto, which I hold in common with the poets whose work is considered in this study, reflects an aesthetic sharply divergent from the mainstream of American poetry insofar as it follows the dictates of high modernism or New Criticism. However, for writers who perceive their work as existing outside traditional aesthetic boundaries, the idea that poetry can make something happen is not at all controversial or even audacious. The American proletarian and radical poets of the 1920s and -30s, American ethnic and feminist poets, and activist and political poets from many countries, notably those in Latin America and in Eastern Europe, have written and continue to write poetry intended to make a difference in the world at large. Women poets who write of work and workers, influenced by radical and proletarian traditions and by ethnic and feminist affiliations, are today continuing to write poetries that are often aesthetically designed toward the attainment of economic and social justice. In fact, Janet Zandy asserts that

one marker of working-class writing is that “Working-class texts are intended to be useful, to have agency in the world” (*Hands* 91). While engaged poetry, including politically charged occasional poetry, is enjoying a relatively newfound acceptance and critical approbation, few critics and scholars include the poetry of work and workers when defining engaged poetry, despite its often clearly polemical nature.

In this study, I examine three genres of contemporary women’s poetry of work and workers, the historical long poem, the lyric poem, and the hybrid lyric narrative; identify the poetic devices and imagery which are designed to generate an empathetic response; explain how the poem functions as a script for ethical contemplation, then explore the implicit and explicit ethical demands made in the poetry. Where the poems in the chapters two, three and four generally rely on what Susan Keen calls “ambassadorial” empathy, in the last chapter, I will explore a poetry directed specifically toward a class-conscious working-class audience. The type of empathetic appeal at work in those poems is one that Keen terms "bounded strategic empathy" (142) and that I will refer to as the empathy of solidarity. The empathy of solidarity is foregrounded in poems written by working-class poets to and for working-class audiences, published by working-class presses and journals, and presented in working class communities. In the final chapter, I also report on the various means and resources available to working-class writers who put their poetries to use in working-class communities.

American Poetry, Theory, and the Working Class

Although this analysis does not directly make use of Marxist theory, to speak of the working class and to theorize about poetry of work and workers is to bring to the fore ongoing debates about American poetry and (Marxist literary) theory. The great poetry debates, which have divided American poetry and poets since at least the early twentieth century, are formulated and described from many theoretical perspectives. To take one example, Mark Wallace identifies the "major networks of poetry production in the United States" as (1) "traditional" formalism"; (2)"confessionalism . . . associated with university MFA programs"; (3) "identity-based poetries"; (4) "speech-based poetics" such those associated with Beat poets and their followers, ethnopoetics, an New York school writing; and (5) the avant-garde (193). Wallace's terminology highlights the notion that affinities of practice in and theorizing of American poetry are conceived of along both political and stylistic lines. Moreover, in contemporary theoretical practice, "speech-based poetics" and "the avant-garde" are often equated, enough so that in 2004, Tim Peterson asked, "If a central characteristic of avant-garde poetry is that it's somehow politically oppositional, then what do we call 'political poetry' that's not 'avant-garde'?" The question so resonated with American poetry communities that it was presented to Marjorie Perloff during an interview *two years later.* Perloff reminds her interviewer that the political and the avant-garde "don't necessarily go together, and a lot of polemic political poetry is very traditional so far as form is concerned and not at all innovative" and that there is "no necessary relationship between the two" (Side). Perloff's reasoned response, while admittedly historically

correct, belies the deeper ideological division the original question exposed. That the question's frame equated the avant-garde with the political marks a theoretical division in U.S. poetry practice and theory that has its genesis in Marxist literary criticism.

The American leftist poetics debate, within which the poetry in this study may be imagined to belong, represents a fundamental split in Marxist literary theory, first made evident in the writings of George Lukács, on the side of realism, and Viktor Shklovsky, on the side of disruptive formalism.[1] The American form of these theoretical discussions on the appropriate style for writing revolutionary—or at least oppositional—poetries is exemplified in the early part of the century by the disagreements between Michael Gold, communist author of *Jews Without Money* and editor of *The New Masses* who was an unforgiving champion of realism in proletarian writing, and committed leftist writers and poets such as Muriel Rukeyser, Kenneth Patchen, and John dos Passos, who used modernist techniques in their work.[2] The contemporary version of this ongoing debate is best illustrated in the split between what became known as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school of poets (hereafter "langpo") and almost everyone else.[3] Ron Silliman, in his foundational langpo manifesto, *The New Sentence*, situates the langpo's writing practices firmly within the Shklovsky tradition, stating that the "social role of the poem places it in an important position to carry the class struggle for consciousness to the level of consciousness" and that to do so requires that poetry

---

[1] Lukács, Theory of the Novel (1920); Shklovsky, Theory of Prose (1925).

[2] See, for example, Gold's essay, "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot," first published in *The New Masses* (1936) and available online at Alan Filreis's *Poetry 88* site. Although Stein was not considered a leftist writer, the essay is similar in tone and motive to Gold's writings on proletarian and leftist modernism.

[3] Langpo is now sometimes referred to as the "post-avant," but I will use the more familiar term.

recognize "itself as the philosophy of practice in language" (17). This textual class struggle, according to Silliman, requires, "(1) recognition of the historic nature and structure of referentiality, (2) placing the issue of language, the repressed signifier, at the center of the program, and (3) placing the program into the context of conscious class struggle" (17-18).[4] The practitioners of the langpo school fault poetries of the "school of quietude" and the form of the confessional lyric as being irretrievably implicated in the use of fundamentally co-opted and co-optable language practices, a problem which renders these poetries ineffectual to intervene in hegemonic social discourse, regardless of the oppositional content of the individual poem.

Corollaries to langpo's construction of resistant language practices include the critique of the lyric "I" as a misrepresentation of the postmodern subject, a refusal of referentiality, an emphasis on the materiality of language, and the "dismissal of instrumental language as commodity fetish" (Perloff "After"). Many poets and critics outside the langpo school fault it for its opacity and its theoretical difficulty (both seen as excluding general and working-class readers) as well as its focus on the text as a site of resistance while seeming to ignore the actual lives of the oppressed and the active, embodied resistance movements arising from them. Nevertheless, the language poets and critics reinserted poetry into politics and politics into poetics, initiating a theoretical conversation about American poetry such as had not been seen since the 1930s and in doing so, reversed twenty or more years of a poetic that disingenuously protested its apolitical status. Yet, despite their recognition of working-class Objectivist poet Lorine

[4] There are several working-class women poets active in the langpo school and its branches, Dodie Bellamy, Stephanie Strickland, Harryette Mullen, and Kathy Lou Schultz, among them.

Niedecker as a foremother, language poetics does not speak of the great majority of engaged poetries written today in America, poetries that may superficially appear to reinforce hegemonic discourse with the use of referential language and the poetic "I." Nor does langpo theory take into consideration the radical act of the subaltern speaking for herself out of the supposedly undifferentiated mass of mainstream culture. As Maria Damon asserts, this speech is often reduced in postmarxist theory to Deleuze and Guattari's "maneuver in the direction of a logic of representation, their rationale for collectivity whereby a single 'gifted' poet is permitted to speak for others presumably less articulate" (*Dark End* 29). This representational logic can lead to the suppression of the subaltern voice and the assignment to some unknown entity the paternalistic power to anoint a representative. Furthermore, the langpo exaltation of radical subjectivity and the distrust of the speaking "I" does not take into account the working-class speaking "I" which is "crowded from within by other voices" (Zandy, "Complexities").

Similarly, Xiaojing Zhou argues that "the 'I' in lyric poetry can serve as a viable site for restoring individuality and subject agency" for the oppressed (4). She asserts:

> The elocutionary subject position of the "I" enables the repressed other to rearticulate its otherness by revealing an undefinable interiority and an unsettling alterity exterior to the dominant systems of thought and values. For the socially constructed abject other to assert an interiority that resists social inscriptions is to undermine both the normative categories and those which are perceived as deviant from the norm. (4)

The poetry in this study works to assert an interiority that undermines both normative and deviant stereotypes of the working class, by speaking from a position of affinity and solidarity with workers. Many of the poems in this study use the lyric "I"; it is partly the reason that this poetry has "fallen through the cracks" of literary study—it is unfashionable; it is not *avant-garde*. As Zhou rightly asserts, "The subjectivity of the silenced and marginalized other will continue to be overlooked or repressed in critical investigations of the lyric I if critical discourses continue to assume totalizing accounts of postmodern poetics in terms of a privileged, exclusive concept of the postmodern subject" (Zhou 8). To mitigate the continuing repression of marginalized voices, Damon proposes a redefinition of the American *avant-garde* to reflect the contemporary sites of vanguard writing:

> [In] the hands of deterritorialized writers, poetry, itself 'antidiscursive' in the modern situation, cannot help but produce a level of vanguard experimentation, a shock of defamiliarization, a resonant disorientation that permits new consciousness. (*Dark End* vii)

I assert that contemporary women's poems of work and workers are vanguard acts because they speak from a perspective that Americans loudly protest does not exist, and they do so to inform, transform, and sometimes radicalize their readers. In this sense one might argue that the complexly voiced working-class subject "disrupts," "destabilizes," and "defamiliarizes" the ideologically constructed "American" subject, self, citizen. Dissension and resistance, in these writings, may not always be enacted in the formal play of signification that takes place within language-centered writing, but

instead will often arise from the crowded, multiplicitious, relational "I" which consciously calls into presence "voices" that emerge, discordant (yet beautiful), to unsettle hegemonic constructions of American identity. Referencing Reginia Gagnier's work, Peter J. Greico asserts, "This ideal of a working-class collective subjectivity works in contrast to the 'sovereign subject' and 'abstract individualism' (Gagnier 39) which are dominant assumptions of middle class writing and middle class culture." Therefore, in a move similar to my argument later in the section on ethics versus politics, I wish to shift the frame. Instead of making broad, exclusionary claims about the revolutionary value of one form of poetry over the other, I suggest we start from the idea that the many poetries that work to subvert the ruling hegemony are important and deserve our critical attention. The questions to be answered are then formal and rhetorical: how is this subversion accomplished in the poem? what tactics are used? from what position does it speak? how does it bring the reader into radical consciousness or solidarity? how can poetry be made more efficacious in the struggle for justice? These are precisely the questions I ask in this study and I ask them of poetries which have often been excluded, strangely enough, from contemporary theoretical discussions of poetry's role in challenging hegemony: the poetry of work and workers and poetry written by working-class people.

Criticism, Poetry, and Working-class Studies

The current generation of scholars is intent upon bringing oppressed voices and neglected literatures into academia and is therefore interested in reevaluating (revaluing) poetry that arises from ethnic communities, previously neglected literary

movements, and political or engaged literature. This move has been led by cultural studies scholars and has found its strength, up to now, in studies of fiction and popular culture. Working-class fiction has recently benefitted from this general reevaluation and from tireless efforts by scholars to put working-class literature on the academic radar screen. Studies of poetry, for so long the poster child for high culture, have lagged behind. As Maria Damon puts it:

> Cultural studies . . . has written poetry off as a priori high cultural, ergo unrecuperable. Irony of ironies, because, far more than narrative written genres, poetry—ritually charged incantation—has been central to the cultural traditions of many subordinate peoples in the United States. ("Postliterary" 38-9)

While there is a large body of contemporaneous criticism and theory from the 1930s addressing proletarian literature in all its forms, I am speaking here of the relative lack of poetry studies from 1979 forward. Recently, this lack has been partially addressed by a flood of new work as evidenced by this study's bibliography (Damon was writing in 1997). Yet, poetry of work and workers is still not widely theorized, despite the 2006 publication of the anthology *American Working-Class Literature*. In the absence of a large body of criticism centered on contemporary working-class poetry in its ethical and political aspects, I have relied on other sources. Mary K. DeShazer's *A Poetics of Resistance: Women Writing in El Salvador, South Africa, and the United States* is a direct precursor of this study. Her concentration on contemporary poetry and her theoretical commitment to feminism and Marxism was an early influence on my work.

General studies of aesthetics and politics have also proven useful to this project, particularly Frank Lentricchia's *Criticism and Social Change* (1984), which insists on literature's (and teachers' and critics') ability to work for social justice. While not directly focused on poetry, Lentricchia's polemic is a foundational text for critics of contemporary engaged writing.[5] Terrence Des Pres's *Praises & Dispraises: Poetry and Politics, the 20th Century* (1988) was one of the earliest salvos in the battle for the respectability of engaged poetries and continues to serve as a touchstone for this and many other investigations of engaged poetics. Michael Dowdy's important study, *American Political Poetry into the 21st Century* (2007), was published just as I began writing my own and there are many parallels between the two. Dowdy offers, as I do, a *functional* analysis of poetry centered on formal and stylistic choices and their rhetorical effects; his addresses the use of voice, mine the ways in which empathy and ethics are related. He has, as I do, respect for and some affinity with Pragmatist philosophy; his carefully constructed theoretical argument has served as a rhetorical model for my own. While I was already sure of my own theoretical claims before I read his study, I gained reassurance from the existence of another recent compositional, rhetorical, examination of the ways poetry can and does speak to its readers. I do not agree with everything Dowdy asserts in *American Political Poetry into the 21st Century,* nor have I duplicated his argument, but there is no doubt that his study has informed my own.

---

[5] While the poems in this study may be thought of as "poetries of resistance," "political" poetry, and/or "polemical" poetry, I will use the term "engaged" throughout this study as a term to describe poetry of work and workers that engages with working-class life in an ethical manner.

Likewise, writings in ethnic feminist criticism and theory have been particularly useful in this investigation of the poetry of work and workers and studies of American working-class literature are essential to my analysis.[6] A spate of books in the last fifteen years has combined literary and cultural criticism of working-class literatures; many of them challenge the prevailing notion of American literature as aesthetically most pleasing when politically most bland. Janet Zandy's work as an editor and her extensive critical writing, beginning with the 1990 anthology *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings*, authorize my own investigations into women's working-class literature in ways that cannot be quantified.[7] Cary Nelson, whose pioneering publications focus on radical, leftist American poetry of the early twentieth century, concentrates primarily on the conditions of literary production and the cultural and political work that poetry performed in that era. Other scholars focusing on cultural studies and working class literatures include Nancy Berke, Michael Denning, Alan Filreis, Barbara Foley, Laura Hapke, Joseph Harrington, Paul Lauter, John Lowney, Paula Rabinowitz, and Alan Wald. The majority of these works are centered on fiction from the 1920s and 1930s, the golden ages of both Modernism and proletarian

---

[6] For example, the collection Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color edited by Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (1998), and the body of writing by bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Norma Alarcon, and Chela Sandoval.

[7] Along with Zandy, Cary Nelson, Paul Lauter, Sherry Linkon and John Russo (editors of New Working-Class Studies) are longtime leaders in working-class literary studies; all of them mentor early career scholars, generously share their networks and resources, and work toward broader acceptance of the discipline.

literature.[8] Although I have chosen to focus on aesthetics as they intersect with culture, the discourse of class which underlies this study would be impossible without the innumerable Marxist analyses that both directly and indirectly influence my work. No critic has challenged and inspired me more than Eric Schocket, whose book *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* has informed every page of this study. His rigorous scholarship and theoretical prowess serve as daunting models. While my emphasis on empathy and ethical response might be considered suspect within Schocket's theoretical realm, his lucid explication of class as a process and his warnings about the dangers of (literary) reification and class essentialism are foundational to this text.

Although there has been a recent boom in American working-class literary production and criticism, there are few extended studies of contemporary women's writing of work and workers.[9] Among these recent works is Karen Kovacik's unpublished dissertation, "'Poetry Should Ride the Bus': American Working-Class Poets and the Rhetorics of Community" (1997), which reviews the theme and principle of community in contemporary women's working-class poetry. Despite Cary Nelson's call for more critical analyses of contemporary working-class poetry and poetry of work

---

[8] Berke, Women Poets on the Left; Denning, Cultural Front; Filreis, Modernism from Right to Left; Foley, Radical Representations; Hapke, Labor's Text; Harrington, Poetry and the Public; Lauter, "Working-Class Women's Literature: An Introduction to Study" (among others), Lowney, History, Memory, and the Literary Left; Rabinowitz, Labor and Desire; and Wald, Exiles from a Future Time (one of a series of three books on leftist literature).

[9] Nicky Marsh's Democracy in U.S. Contemporary Women's Poetry includes readings of poetry by Rita Dove, June Jordan, and Harryette Mullen which touch on issues of class; similarly, in Lynn Keller's Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women, several of her poets—Sharon Doubiago, Judy Grahn, Rita Dove, and Marie Osbey—write from a working-class perspective about working-class lives. Keller's critical objective is to analyze the form of the long poem, and therefore, does not fully explore the intersection of class and poetics.

and workers, the body of criticism has not even begun to keep up with the recovery of past poetries and the production of new ones. Therefore, this study of the poetics of empathy in contemporary American women's poetry of work and workers is unique, on the one hand, in its grouping of writers, its emphasis on poetics, prosody, and formal structure rather than on theme, authenticity of representation, or authorial biography, and, on the other hand, in its intersection with aesthetics, and its critical appropriation of certain ideas in ethical literary criticism and sociological, psychological and cognitive studies of empathy. I want to make clear that I do not envision this analysis as in any way prescriptive; that is, I do not make the case that all women poets of work and workers *should* write engaged poetries, but only that many of them often do.

Methodology

In this study, I assert that contemporary American women's poetry of work and workers creates an experience of literary empathy that guides the reader toward an ethical stance. By focusing on (aesthetic and social) function, I intend to create an analysis that lies on the boundaries of poetry criticism as it exists today. I envision this study as existing at the nexus of cultural criticism, critical theory, and poetry criticism as practiced primarily by poet-critics. The kind of writing poets do when writing about poetry relies upon a different ground than the one usually established in academic, theoretical discussions of poetry. The poet writes from practice, the critic from response to that practice. This is not to say that poets are not theoretical nor that thoughtful theorists never practice poetry Indeed, many, if not most, poets have well-established theories of poetry, and some of the best contemporary critics and theorists are poets as well: Annie Finch, Charles Bernstein, Charles Altieri.[10] However, today, as Irish poet-critic David Wheatley reminds us, "there is a temptation to read the hyphen [in poet-critic] as a subtraction sign" (qtd. in Starnino). This study attempts to refigure the hyphen as an addition sign: poet-critics are cited on equal terms with academic theorists.

At the same time, the use of a theoretical approach makes this study somewhat antagonistic to working-class literary studies as currently practiced, since many leading scholars in working-class studies, like some scholars of ethnic and feminist studies, have a stated distrust of capital-T theory (except, perhaps, of Marxist theory). Roxanne

[10] A list of their predecessors would include Eliot, Coleridge, Arnold, and Pope, et al.

Rimstead suggests that this stance, informed by a healthy resistance to "Theory when it assumes its own primacy above other theories or other ways of knowing culture and marginality," forms the basis of an "anti-Theory" of working-class women's writing.[11] For instance, Rimstead describes Janet Zandy's anti-Theory as calling for

> an intertextual rather than theory-oriented cultural criticism which would allow us to bypass complexly exclusionary Theory and claim access to a cultural home through a process of recognition and retrieval, a collaborative process between reader and writer. (211)

I have attempted to respect the "collaborative process between reader and writer" in my emphasis on literary empathy and ethics, but I have chosen to resist what I view as an overreliance on thematic exploration of working-class poetry that does not also attend to questions of poetics and structure and their theoretical implications. "Theory," I argue, is not a monolithic object; some theoretical approaches are more useful for attending to contemporary working-class poetry than others.

The theoretical decision to address empathy and ethics is suggested by the structure of the poems themselves. I have repeatedly encountered the pull of empathy and a concern with ethics in the several hundreds of poems of work and workers I have read over the last five years. This is not to say that all poems of work and workers, much less all poems of the working classes, will display the aesthetics I analyze in this study. For example, in the case the protean narrator mode (chapter three), few women

---

[11] A similar suspicion is found certain ethnic feminist writings. Rimstead suggests that Rita Felski theorizes a kind of anti-Theory put to use by Janet Zandy, bell hooks, and Barbara Christian. The construction of anti-Theory is also at work in writings by Chicana feminists Tey Rebodelledo and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano.

writers of work and workers are taking advantage of its unique voicing abilities, and I suggest that it offers a voicing device that could be fruitfully put to use more often in poems of work and workers. Along with focusing upon poetics and prosody in women's poetries of work and workers, I ask what cultural information the poems carry and what cultural work they perform. The final chapter features several poets and poetry groups who use their art to perform cultural work in working-class (and often poor) communities, as a contemporary form of praxis.

This study explores poetries with an experiential ground evincing some knowledge and understanding of work and workers. However, I am not as interested at this moment, as Marxist critics and some cultural critics are, in tracing the effects of the conditions of production of these poetries or in analyzing their representations of class as a historical process.[12] My personal political stance is well to the left of center, but in this study I have chosen to focus neither on the conditions of production of the poetry nor on a critique of broader class structures, but upon empathy and its intersection with ethics as expressed through the writers' compositional choices. This is not to say that this poetry or my reading of it is "apolitical"; on the contrary, these poems make ethical demands upon their readers that can (and often should) be answered in the political realm. However, rather than focus exclusively upon *what* the poems reflect of the poets' and societies' political and ideological contexts, I want to focus primarily on *how* contemporary women poets of work and workers attempt to generate an empathetic

---

[12] See the several essays by Timothy Libretti, both books of textual recovery by Cary Nelson, Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America by Paula Rabinowitz, Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction by Laura Hapke, and Schocket. For a recent study of materialist literary representations of class as a historical process, see Julian Markels, The Marxian Imagination: Representing Class in Literature.

experience in their poems—an experience upon which they establish an affective environment conducive to making an ethical demand upon their readers.

The Working Class(es), Identity, and Representation

The terms of this study are nebulous at best, and, at worst, contentiously debatable. I have chosen to use the phrase "contemporary women's poetry of work and workers" rather than the perhaps more elegant "working-class women's poetry"; the second phrase requires that I define "working-class women." There are two primary reasons I do not wish to undertake such a definition. Describing America's socioeconomic classes has always been difficult and that is no less true today. While most people agree that there are class divisions and class identities, there is broad disagreement about how to define and describe those classes and identities. For the purposes of this study, the term "working class" should be understood as descriptive only, referring to the people whose lives are attended to in the poems at hand. When referring to "working class" in the world outside the poem, this term is meant to follow the definition offered by the Center for Working-Class Studies: "Class is not simply about how much money you make. If you earn an hourly wage and a supervisor manages what you do at work every day, if you have a high school diploma but not a college degree, if you believe in hard work and plain talk, then you're probably working class" (CWCS "What is Working-Class Studies?"). Note that this definition, written in "plain talk," includes issues of labor, economics, power structures, education, values, and culture. The CWCS also understands that class is experienced as a complex identity site, recognizing "that class is closely related to race, gender, religion, and other social

categories" (CWCS). There is no doubt the lack of specificity in the CWCS definition illustrates the difficulty of defining class in America. However, this broad definition of working class, coupled with the specific representations found in these poems of work and workers, is sufficient for this analysis.

Second, I have chosen not to define "working-class women" narrowly because I do not wish to rely upon biographical or ideological litmus tests to defend the poets whose work I consider. Satya Mohanty reminds us that "tendentious disputes over genuineness or authenticity [. . .] point to what is in many cases a practical problem: who can be trusted to represent the real interests of the group without fear of betrayal or misrepresentation?" (202). Misrepresentation has often afflicted the working class, in genres from romantic pastorals to contemporary film. Likewise, the historical specter of political betrayal and persecution haunts working-class scholars, radical political activists, and those in organized labor. In a fashion similar to that which has occurred among scholars of identity-based literatures, some critics of working-class literature, often themselves of working-class origins, have attempted to address the problem of misrepresentation by offering rolls of "authentic" working-class writers and/or inventories of aesthetic markers which they believe should be found in authentic in working-class texts; both kinds of lists generate more questions than answers.[13] In practice, the catalogues of aesthetic characteristics are more properly descriptive of certain subsets of working-class poetry than they are of working-class poetics in

[13] See Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson, "Toward a Theory of Working-class Literature." See also Tom Wayman, Inside Job: Essays on the New Work Writing and Janet Zandy's early writings. Zandy's later criticism, including the section "What Makes a Text Working Class?" from Hands (90-93), while still relying on a list-format, seems to be descriptive rather than prescriptive; it is based upon a general synthesis of the characteristics she has met with in her extensive reading in working-class writing.

general: in chapter five, I show that these aesthetic tendencies, often conflated with the idea of working-class poetic authenticity, are usually found in a two specific interrelated *types* of working-class poetry, one which Jim Daniels calls "work poetry" (114) and one which I call the poetry of solidarity. Furthermore, Eric Schocket challenges the identarian emphasis found in essays on working-class aesthetics by Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson (among others), noting that it leads to several political and theoretical problems: first that "this conception of class tends to rely on, rather than to critique, the reifications and objectifications that one finds in cultural images of poverty" (11-12); second, that an identarian conception of class is "beleaguered" by the "problem of individuals who move between and outside of established rubrics";[14] and third, that it has "political implications" because "to understand class as always antecedent to textuality is to limit the political agency of critical analysis to the (aforementioned) repetitive acts of recognition" of the assumed class motives or values in texts. Granted, rolls of authentic working-class poets are problematic for the reasons Schocket asserts, among others, not the least of which is that writers who are not connected with or recognized by scholars in the newly founded, rapidly expanding discipline of working-class studies are not likely to be included. However, solidarity poems, like those in chapter five, often ground their narrative and perspective in working-class experience, asserting a poetics which consciously and purposefully gestures toward the biographical and therefore the concern with authenticity of

[14] In a delicious piece of irony, these problematized individuals include many scholars of working-class studies, people who grew up in working-class families but moved into middle-class academia. See note 16 in chapter three for more on the subject of working-class academics.

experience evidenced by the existence of such lists cannot be completely dismissed. Moreover, access to directories of working-class writers are useful for pedagogical purposes, for establishing a working-class literary history, and for undergirding the discipline of working-class literary studies, as long as it is understood that the lists are both woefully incomplete and the result of a restrictive set of criteria. Therefore, for reasons similar to Schocket's, I generally avoid basing my analyses of the poetry of work and workers solely on biography. Although this study will analyze classed moments in these poetries, I agree with Schocket that any attempt to predefine working-class literature by insisting that "working class" adheres in the individual writer is limiting and ultimately fruitless.

Still, it is important to admit that questions of authority and representation, of who may speak for whom, are inextricably tied to attempts to define which writers—and what writings—are biographically, culturally, or politically "working class." Questions of authenticity and aesthetics are not new to the field of working-class literature. Similar debates raged in the 1920s and 1930s; workers, worker-writers, and literary critics asked: "What is proletarian literature?" and "Who is a proletarian writer?" These were vital questions for the time; writing in all its forms was an important, perhaps indispensable, tool of the radical Left. Michael Denning reminds us that American radicals of the proletarian era were involved "in a literary class war that was at once a war among the literary class and a class war in literature" (200). One of the leading soldiers in the literary wars of the 1930s was literary critic, theorist, writer, and Marxist intellectual Joseph Freeman. Although its figuration of the poet is intensely

masculinist, Freeman's introduction to the anthology *Proletarian Literature in the United States* (1935) offers a fascinating and still relevant analysis of what Satya Mohanty rightly identifies as authenticity anxiety. Freeman, like many working-class studies critics today, relies on experience to ground his definition of working-class literature; for Freeman, proletarian experience serves as subject matter, formal structure, and guarantor of authenticity. "The poet deals with experience rather than theory or action. But the social class to which the poet is attached conditions the nature and flavor of his experience" (11). Freeman's emphasis on experience does not exclude the bourgeois writer from creating proletarian texts, rather, experience is one way to engage bourgeois writers in proletarian struggle.

> War, unemployment, a widespread social economic crisis drive middle-class writers into the ranks of the proletariat. Their experience becomes contiguous to or identical with that of the working class; they see their former life and the life of everyone around them with new eyes; their grasp of experience is conditioned by the class to which they have now attached themselves; they write from the viewpoint of the revolutionary proletariat; they create what is now called proletarian literature. (13)

It is important to pause here a moment and consider some of the implications of Freeman's statement. First, Freeman's assertion that experience is constitutive of class undercuts any concept of class as an essential category.[15] He states that "experience is

---

[15] That class is not essential may seem obvious, but some theorists have tested that idea, usually to discard it. Schocket asserts that any attempt to understand class as "an ontological category" (what I call the identarian approach) will "reproduce the same error that essentialists routinely make—ascribing to people properties that derive from them but are not contained within them" (16).

an individual affair and individuals differ from age to age. Yet nothing is more obvious than the social, the class basis of fundamental differences" (10). Second, if a formerly bourgeois author can write a thoroughly proletarian text, then any claims to authority based solely upon biography are untenable. Finally, Freeman suggests that the primary aesthetic marker of a proletarian text is a proletarian viewpoint, a viewpoint not dependent upon a proletarian birthright. For Freeman, that viewpoint is not necessarily overtly polemical, but it is political and revolutionary because it views the world from a position other than that of the bourgeoisie or the ruling class. What Freeman's argument suggests is that while poetry often grounds itself in experience, the most important questions to ask of it are not those that center upon authenticity, but instead those that center upon rhetoric: "Whom has the poetry sought to empower? To which audiences does it speak? With which forms of sociohistorical and cultural discourses does it engage?" (Pérez-Torres 7). I will engage with all of these questions, to varying degrees, in each chapter of this study.

Poetry and Empathy

Women poets writing engaged poetries, including poetry of work and workers, hold the belief that their poetry can make a difference in the real world. That conviction is often dependent upon the idea that literature can create a temporary empathetic bond between poetry readers and the characters populating the poetry, a bond strong enough to lead readers to question their ethical stance regarding others. I assert that in many examples of contemporary American women's poetry of work and workers, the author consciously attempts to position the reader to experience an empathetic identification

with working-class-people and situations and then uses that assumed empathetic response as a ground from which to make ethical demands upon the reader. I assume, much as Suzanne Keen has shown in her 2007 book, *Empathy and the Novel*, that many general readers expect to have an experience of literary empathy when they read, and that they judge literature in part by its generation of what they identify as empathetic response to situations and characters.[16] The 2005 study, *Poetry in America,* commissioned by the Poetry Foundation, could be interpreted as supporting Keen's contentions since it found that 90.4% of "poetry users" (which included both middle-class and working-class readers of varied ethnic and racial identities) agreed with the statement that "Poetry helps you understand other people" (Schwartz).[17] The idea that literature generates responses in readers that are in any way predictable or analyzable is a primary tenet of reader-response theory, but despite the supposed overthrow of New Criticism by postmodern theories, "The Affective Fallacy" still holds a firm grip on the emotional throat of literary studies. However, this is not the case among general readers. Keen has clearly shown that "there is no question, however, that readers feel empathy with (and sympathy for) fictional characters and other aspects of fictional worlds" (viv).

---

[16] Keen's study includes a survey of responses to a book in Oprah's book club, and she identifies these readers as "middle-brow," a term which does not necessarily exclude the working-class reader, since Oprah's book club is promoted to both working-class and middle-class readers. For this study, the term "general" reader includes all poetry readers, middle class and working class. Whenever it is necessary to discern between the two, I will use class-specific adjectives.

[17] "The Poetry in America study used a random-digit dial (RDD) sample of telephone numbers from across the United States. Only residential landline telephone numbers were included in the sample–those belonging to businesses, institutions, and cellular telephones were out of scope. Adults who read for pleasure, that is, material not required for work or school, and who read primarily in English were eligible for the study. One respondent per household was randomly selected to participate. 10.7% of the respondents were African-American, 75.4% white, and 12.7% Other. 57.5% of respondents did not have a college degree. The largest age demographics were 45-54 (23.2%) and 35-44 (19.7%).

Some of Keen's analysis is based upon contemporary psychology and recent psychological, medical, and scientific studies in cognition, particularly those in the field of cognitive literary study. However, the most fascinating assertion Keen makes is not directly based on cognitive studies, but upon documented cultural notions: that readers expect an empathetic literary experience and they often evaluate literature ("good" book versus "boring" book) in part by its generation of what they identify as their own empathetic response to situations and characters. Keen asserts that general readers "tend not to adopt the analytical language of academic literary criticism when they defend" their reading evaluations. Instead, for a general reader, "Empathy shapes their recommendations and judgments about fiction"; they "unself-consciously judge the success of novels based on how well they could identify with characters' feelings" (ix).

On the writers' part, this cultural desire for a powerful empathetic literary experience is reflected in their poetics. As Susan Keen notes, "women writers and novelists from around the world endorse the notion of shared human emotions when they overtly call upon their readers' empathy" (viii), and the women poets whose work I discuss acknowledge that empathy is an important part of the literary experience and hope that it may also lead to actions on behalf of a just society.[18] In the contemporary women's poems of work and workers examined in this study, the experience of literary empathy serves to bring the reader into the poem's ethical drama. At the point the implied social criticism within the poem is made apparent, the poet then demands of the

[18]Some writers are on record in interviews with statements to this effect; others promote the cultural efficacy of literature, as political intervention and activism, without directly naming empathy as a useful mode.

reader, situated through the generation of empathy to be receptive, that s/he examine his or her own responses to demands for social, political, and economic justice for the American working class. According to Steven Fesmire, John Dewey conceived of the moral imagination in similar terms. Dewey proposed that "direct valuing such as empathy is complemented and expanded in deliberate, practical reflection, which requires tapping possibilities for action—especially through communication and dialogue" and that such focused deliberation on ethical matters "expands attention beyond what is immediately experienced so that the lessons of the past, embodied in habits, and as-yet-unrealized potentialities 'come home to us and have the power to stir us'" (67). Although the tie between the empathetic reading of literature and altruistic action is broadly declared by philosophers, writers, and cultural critics, it is a connection not yet absolutely proved—nor firmly disproved—by psychological and cognitive studies.[19] While I personally hope that one's empathetic reading experiences can lead to positive social action in the world, I am most interested in investigating how, during the reading experience, empathy contributes to knowledge and how this empathetic knowledge is put to use informing a reader's understanding of ethical

---

[19] See Reading Lolita by Azar Nafisi, and Cultivating Humanity and Poetic Justice by Martha Nussbaum; Wayne Booth's body of work on rhetoric and fiction also addresses "sympathy" and social justice. The psychological study of empathy has, like it literary counterpart, also experienced a recent boom. For instance, among the many clinical studies of the process of empathy completed in the last ten years is a 2004 study at the UC Irvine Medical School (Shapiro, Morrison and Baker) has shown significant increases in empathy (as measured by standard psychological testing and found that "student understanding of the patient's perspective became more detailed and complex" after the test population took an elective semester-long course in literature and medicine. This study seems to support Wayne C. Booth's career assertion that in order to effect changes in social behavior, literature must be encountered in a group that engages in evaluative, humanistic discussion of the text — in an undergraduate classroom or guided discussion group, for example. Booth calls this evaluative discussion of literature "coduction." The study is, of course, limited to a special group of readers, but one perhaps not so different from many general readers, especially since premedical majors are not usually trained literary critics.

challenges as presented in the world of the poem. In these contemporary women's poems of work and workers, the creation of an empathetic perspective is as much a part of the aesthetic choice for meaning-making as are the more traditional poetic devices and practices of metaphor, simile, imagery, and line break.

Because the term "empathy" is broadly and often indiscriminately used for several kinds of psychological engagement with the Other, I need to clarify exactly what definition of empathy is at use here. I will not offer a history or genealogy of the term; that task has been completed by Lauren Wispé's "History of the Concept of Empathy" and well summarized, with a literary accent, by Suzanne Keen. What I do wish to establish is that I prioritize the epistemological aspects of literary empathy as it is structured within the poems. This differs from Keen's study, which stresses emotional affect and its operations in fiction. For the purposes of this study, Wispé's clarification of the terms "sympathy" and "empathy" will serve as the working definition of empathy:

> Briefly, sympathy refers to the heightened awareness of another's plight as something to be alleviated. Empathy refers to the attempt of one self-aware self to understand the subjective experiences of another self. Sympathy is a way of relating. Empathy is a way of knowing. ("Distinction" 314)

Furthermore, according to Wispé, empathy is a "noncognitive social intelligence" which "depends upon the use of imaginal and mimetic capacities, and it is most often an effortful process" (318). Empathy is associated empirically with the firing of mirror

neurons in the observer's brain—a "mirror neuron" is one that is activated both when a person performs an act and when a person sees or imagines the same act performed. A simple example of the activity of mirror neurons is that many people flinch or duck when observing or imagining another person absorbing a blow or dodging a projectile.[20] Empathy is not an emotion, but instead is a process which often includes imaginative role-taking and perspective-taking. It is by definition a social, interpersonal form of cognition; there must be at least two persons, actual or literary, for the process to occur. In this study, the term "empathy" refers to the imaginative role-taking and perspective-taking scripted for the reader in the world of the poem. There is no doubt that empathy does not always work for the social good; Wispé cites the Nazi use of "howling devices" attached to their bombers during World War II as an instance when "their accurate use of empathy allowed them to predict the impact of their inventions" (319).[21] However, empathy can be put to use for the good. I maintain that these poems of work and workers are structured in a form intended to channel literary empathetic affect toward positive social understanding.

This analysis of contemporary women's poetry of work and workers concentrates on the epistemological aspect of empathy. I make the case that these poems are intentionally designed to help the reader, "one self-aware self," to imaginatively "understand the experiences" of the another, fictional self to the desired end of reducing the ideologically constructed, perceived phenomenological and ontological difference

---

[20] Mirror neuron activity is today studied with the use of medical neuroimaging devices, primarily functional MRIs (fMRI). See S. D. Preston and F. B. M. DeWaal, "Empathy: Its Ultimate and Proximate Bases." Behavioral and Brain Sciences 25 (2002), 1-72.

[21] I will explore the ethical problems associated with empathy in the upcoming section on ethics.

between socioeconomic classes. It is important to remember that empathy is not necessarily engaged in imagining the emotions of the other, but instead in imagining how one would oneself respond to an experience or situation. Keen defines "strategic empathy" as authorial "attempts[s] to direct an emotional transaction through a fictional work aimed at a particular audience, not necessarily including every reader who happens upon the text" (142). According to Keen, strategic literary empathy takes three forms:

> First, bounded strategic empathy occurs within an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling with familiar others. [. . .] Second, ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end. [. . .] Third, broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes. (142)

In this study of contemporary women's poetry of work and workers, the second two forms of strategic empathy—ambassadorial and broadcast—are at issue in chapters two, three, and four. I make the claim that the poems I analyze are engaged in generating ambassadorial empathy directed at middle-class American readers and/or broadcast empathy intended to appeal to all possible poetry audiences. Generally, poems relying upon ambassadorial and broadcast empathy are designed to direct the reader to the realization that the lives of working-class people are not alien to the American sensibility, and, conceivably, to suggest to the reader the constructed nature of class

difference and its ideological usefulness in maintaining power structures. This reduction of distance and creation of common ground, when it occurs in middle-class readers, might be understood as a temporary, literary "proletarianization" of those readers, similar to that described by Joseph Freeman. In the poems studied, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish which of Keen's two cross-class forms of empathy —"ambassadorial" or "broadcast"—are at play. Therefore, the term "empathy" in chapters two, three, and four should be understood as referring to as literary empathy which combines the functions of ambassadorial and broadcast empathy, regardless of whether or not the adjectives appear. The use of a third form, bounded strategic empathy—the empathy of solidarity—will be examined in chapter five as it appears in poems written by working-class poets and worker-writers.

In the context of this study, it is important to remember that emotional affect is secondary to the epistemological objective of empathy. No one would argue with the statement that poetry is an affective art, and, indeed, the poems examined here also appeal to the emotions, and empathy is itself based upon sensuous affective responses. Muriel Rukeyser suggests that the kind of relational, interpersonal, intellectual-emotional engagement at issue here is a "total response" to literature of a kind that poetry is uniquely able to ask of its readers: "A poem does invite, it does require . . .. A poem invites you to feel. More than that: it invites you to respond. And better than that: a poem invites a total response" (*Life of Poetry* 11). Rukeyser's theory of "total response" can be further illuminated by Charles Altieri's gloss on the difference between "emotions" and "feelings": "Feelings can occur as aspects of emotions. But

their fundamental structure is quite different. With feelings, the imagination is participatory, synthetic" ("Reading for Affect" 44). Furthermore, he describes "feelings" as an affective state "in which we are aware that we are not the source of consciousness but are in a response mode, open to an otherness that exercises influence upon us" (45). On the other hand, emotions are affects involving the construction of attitudes . . . and so situate the agent within a narrative" (*Particulars* 2). Altieri goes on to say that "feelings . . . generate some kind of action or identification" and "passions are emotions within which we project significant stakes for the identity that they make possible" (2). Altieri separates the primary imaginative and physiological actions of empathy from its secondary reflective emotions, and further divides those secondary emotions into two types. Nonetheless, his taxonomy is useful for two reasons: one, it confirms the definition of empathy at use here, and two, it suggests how the secondary aspects of empathy might be channeled through a poem to effect identification and action. Altieri's discussion of feelings and emotions also suggests a division similar to that between the epistemological and affective aspects of empathy. Like Rukeyser, Altieri emphasizes the action of feelings rather than of emotions as constitutive of literary empathy. The dividing of empathy's epistemological aspect and its affective aspect, between feelings and emotions, is somewhat arbitrary and not at all intended to suggest that empathy is not an emotive process. However, I maintain that these poems are primarily designed to help readers think through their class biases rather than simply feel for the classed Other. This hypothesis is in part confirmed by the observation that some of these poems

create a Brechtian alienation-effect, which highlights the value of intellection at the cost of emotional affect.

Poetry, Empathy and Ethics

In this study, the term "ethics" is meant to refer to practical, applied, not categorical, ethics: that is, everyday decisions about one's ethical behavior toward self, family, and society, including decisions related to the examination of personal culpability and responsibility for societal problems, questions of social and economic justice, and participation in social activism.[22] In what may seem an odd turn of affairs, the site where Marxist thinking most deeply influences this analysis is in the realm of ethics, although Marx himself described categorical philosophical ethical discourse as "obsolete verbal rubbish" and "ideological nonsense about right and other trash" (388). Ethics is often understandably suspect in radical and leftist political discourse, for several reasons. First, ethics is perceived as a passive bourgeois individualistic replacement for an active, radical collective politics; a person can be quite satisfied with the ethics they *have,* enough so that they do not feel the need to actively work within political arenas for the social justice others do *not have.* Ethics, then, is an individual state of being that frustrates the social process of politics; it is inherently conservative and reinforces the status quo. Furthermore, this individual state of being is detached from its social context: one's individual ethics do not necessarily transfer to just behavior in the social realm. Finally, it could be said that ethics at its social best will

---

[22] This definition combines several common definitions of practical, personal, and applied ethics, including those found in James Fieser's "Ethics" entry in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy and in Peter Singer's Practical Ethics (Cambridge UP, 1993).

only lead to a tolerant society, whereas radical politics can lead to a just society. For this analysis, there is another associated problem: this study might be construed, especially in the chapter on June Jordan and Lorna Dee Cervantes, as grounded in identity politics, so one might wonder if the social ethics that arises from this analysis, while not individualist, may instead be merely balkanized. These are valid concerns. However, I suggest we shift the frame from "ethics *or* politics" to ethics *and* politics." Instead of an ethics that frustrates social action, the ethics I see active in this poetry of work and workers encourages the social engagement of its readers across ethnic, gender, racial, and national boundaries.

Despite Marx's harsh criticism of philosophical ethics, Paul Blackledge insists that his writings offered an "alternative ethics" grounded in the collective struggles of workers against their exploitation. "He [Marx] argued that these struggles expose the limitations of freedom in a capitalist society while simultaneously engendering virtues of solidarity that point beyond the limits of liberal conceptions of morality" ("Marxism and Ethics"). Blackledge also leaves room for the functions of literary empathy in his interpretation of statements by Marx in the *Grundrisse*:

> He [Marx] argues against any romantic notion of a natural human solidarity, claiming that "individuals cannot gain mastery over their own social interconnections before they have created them." If "in earlier stages of development the single individual seems to have developed more fully," this was only because these individuals had not yet fully worked out their mutual "relationships."

I argue that in contemporary women's poetry of work and workers, the poet often attempts to create social interconnections between their readers and working-class people through empathetic representation. They can do this only by rejecting "philosophic criteria, grounds or foundations" for ethics that "carry the weight of rational necessity and/or universal obligation" in favor of an ethics created in "contingent, community-specific agreements people make in relation to particular norms, aims, goals, and objectives" (West 1). In these poems, the experience of literary empathy supplies the "ground" for contingent, communal ethics-building. However, some may argue that empathy cannot supply an ethical ground because it is not an ethical way of relating to the Other. Moreover, empathy has been indicted as a tool of universalist oppression and described by Terry Eagleton as a "doctrine" of "a liberal form of imperialism" (46). He claims that empathetic "imagination, or colonialism, means that what other cultures know is themselves, whereas what you know is them" (46). Richard Rorty denies that working-class people indulge in empathy, because "[economic] Security and sympathy go together," therefore, "Sentimental education only works on people who can relax enough to listen" (qtd. in Eagleton 47), a statement that is challenged by the same Eagleton who equated empathy and colonialism. He writes:

> it is a mistake to believe, like Rorty, that downtrodden societies have too little time to imagine what others might be feeling. On the contrary, there are plenty of cases in which their downtroddenness is what impels them

> to this sympathy. This has been known, among other things, as socialist internationalism. (48)

Eagleton's methodology is dialectic, so what may seem to be a contradiction in these two statements is a move toward synthesis. He goes on to say that "understanding is not a form of empathy" and also that "you do not need to leap out of your skin to know what another is feeling; indeed there are times when you need rather to burrow more deeply into it"' (49), a statement he illustrates by referencing early twentieth-century Irish anticolonialists' solidarity with Indian anticolonialists of the same period. While "understanding" may not be a form of empathy, empathy *is* a form of understanding. To "burrow more deeply into your own skin" is empathy as Wispé defines it, to imagine how you might feel in a similar situation, remaining fully aware of yourself as separate from the Other. While Eagleton does not seem willing to grant that there may be some forms of empathetic engagement experienced by the middle-class less onerous than the one he describes, his statement does support my contention in the final chapter that solidarity between workers is contingent on empathy. Likewise, as Keen maintains and I concur, "the apparent condescension of empathy can be transformed by its strategic use" by "subaltern" authors (142). In other words, ambassadorial/broadcast literary empathy can function, like the empathy of solidarity, in a non-imperialist, positive manner when solicited by poets on behalf of the working class. Nevertheless, there is a general sense that Leftist discourse and empathy are fundamentally incompatible. This may be partly due to Walter Benjamin's statement, often taken out of context, that, "Empathy with the victors thus comes to benefit the current rulers every time" (256).

Benjamin was referring specifically to historians who do not make use of the methods of historical materialism; he was not making a statement about empathy, but about its uses. My argument is that since general readers tend to empathize with literary characters, it would be wise for both writers and critics to examine how that empathy might be useful in promoting economic and social change—how, rewriting Benjamin, empathy with the workers can come to benefit the people every time.

Many leftist thinkers promote the idea that ethics as personal praxis can be aligned with political action toward social justice. Several of these radical and leftist intellectuals are people of color: Kwame Anthony Appiah, Thomas Glave, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Chandra Mohanty, Cornel West, and Chela Sandoval.[23] Although these writers have differing arguments, they share a idea of ethics as a necessary but not sufficient component of social justice. Among the many cultural critics who are rethinking the interaction of ethical and the political is Regenia Gagnier. She gives the name "practical aesthetics" to the writing practices and reading practices at work in this study. One of its functions is to "awaken consciousness and expose ideological lies" (277). She declares that, "We who do practical aesthetics are critical: we see in the sensuous daily experience symbols of the morally good; we see in the admittedly constrained creativity and freedom of art both negative and positive possibilities for human—and not just human—life" (281). Because this analysis presents contemporary women's poetry of work and workers, the practical, liberatory aesthetic analysis is

---

[23] Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers and The Ethics of Identity; Glave, "Fire and Ink: Toward a Quest for Language, History, and a Moral Imagination" (Callaloo 26.3); bell hooks, Outlaw Culture (and many others); Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic" (Sister Outsider); C. Mohanty, Feminism Without Borders; West, The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought; and Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed.

utilized to engage with issues of economic and gender oppression, as well as those of ethnic and racial oppression. The topics addressed vary from poem to poem: in the long historical poems, the ethical conundrums presented revolve around structural issues of class, oppression, and power in capitalist societies; in the lyrics, the ethical questions tend to relate more to perceptions of classed Others. As might be expected, in the hybrid lyric-narrative poems, readers are pressed to consider how his or her personal ethical relationships to others are connected to larger, societal ethical questions.

This study's concern with ethics places it within a growing body of contemporary scholarship on literature and ethics. Recent work on literature and ethics includes the essay collections *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture and Literary Theory* (2001) and *Ethics, Literature, and Theory* (2nd ed., 2005). The two most recognized theorists in this area are Martha C. Nussbaum and Wayne C. Booth. Booth's extensive work in the field serves as a theoretical background for many of my references, including Suzanne Keen. Nussbaum's work is unsuitable for this study, primarily because of her emphasis on judgment rather than understanding. Perhaps responding to Charles Altieri's essay in the collection *Mapping the Ethical Turn,*[24] which called for explorations in ethical criticism of the lyric, several studies of ethics and poetry have recently appeared, and many of these have centered on modernist and contemporary experimental poetry.[25] While I have found those studies engaging, my approach is philosophically most closely related to Alan Shapiro's essays on ethics and

---

[24] Altieri, "Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience."

[25] The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry by Tim Woods (2002), The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry by Xiaojing Zhou (2006), and Poetic Obligation: Ethics in Experimental American Poetry after 1945 by G. Matthew Jenkins (2008)

poetry, published as *In Praise of the Impure,* and to James Phelan's narrative theories; this is undoubtedly due to the influence on this study, and those by Shapiro and Phelan, of John Dewey's theories of the imagination.[26] Phelan has recently turned from his concentration on the novel toward ethical analysis of the lyric. My analysis, while not derived from his work, is closely aligned with and makes use of the method demonstrated in his 2004 article, "Rhetorical Literary Ethics and Lyric Narrative: Robert Frost's 'Home Burial'." Phelan's method "seeks . . . to tie ethics even more tightly and systematically to matters of technique and form and . . . to be even more open to the range of ethical experiences that texts, whether narrative, lyric, or of some other kind, can offer" (628). This analysis attempts a rhetorical reading of intentionality, affect, and ethics as represented and structured in contemporary women's poetry of work and workers. My primary method will be to read for poetic devices and structures purposed toward generating empathy and to suggest how that empathy is channeled by the poem toward an ethical end.

Except for the studies noted above, most theorists of the intersection of ethics and literature rely on analyses of the novel, partly because of its historical reputation for improving (or, in some cases, ruining) the reader's character. The few demonstrated incidents of literary efficacy toward social change in America belong to the novel: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), and Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which was instrumental

---

[26] I am particularly indebted to Steven Fesmire for his extensive explication, exploration, and application of Dewey's theories as presented in his book *John Dewey and the Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics* (2003).

in the creation of a federal statute outlawing the cultural practice of female genital mutilation in America (Keen 140).[27] Granted, none of these texts are examples of unqualified success in use of literary empathy. For example, the American public's reaction to *The Jungle* illustrates one drawback to literary empathy: as Upton Sinclair famously declared, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach" (594). Sinclair's statement makes clear that the writer cannot control all facets of readers' empathetic response and that readers may instead experience what Susan Keen terms "empathetic inaccuracy," where "empathy for a fictional character need not correspond with what the author appears to set up or invite" (136). Empathetic inaccuracy can be of several kinds and causes; in *The Jungle,* readers experienced empathy with the characters and situations presented, but not to the end the author desired. Readers' revulsion at the depiction of the processes of meat production overwhelmed their empathetic engagement with the characters' living conditions as wage slaves. Likewise, a reader's empathy may be established only minimally upon the grounds created in the text and more strongly upon those the reader brings to the text. For example, a reader might empathize with a character or situation not because the writer intended that character or situation to generate empathy, but because they are of

---

[27] This statement may seem counterintuitive, but indeed, genital mutilation was federally outlawed *in America* in 1996; there was no previously existing law that sufficiently covered the practice, which had become common in American immigrant communities (performed by traditional practitioners, and in some instances, by licensed medical practitioners). The efficacy of Walker's campaign may be measured by the fact that the topic was a centerpiece of an episode of the popular television drama, *Law and Order*, entitled "Ritual," in 1997. Keen reviews criticisms of Walker's novel, including those from African antimutilation activists and those who thought her representation of Africa and Africans reductive. However, in America, the visibility of the practice and the dialogue on its legality can be traced to Walker's novel, which included an afterword making a direct plea to her readers to agitate for banning the practice, a bibliography for more information, and a promise that a portion of the novel's profits would be used for the cause (Keen 141).

the same social group, political persuasion, or religion as a character or because they have similar experiences. Writers hope—but cannot be sure—that readers will follow the text's lead and empathize with characters and situations intended.

While *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, unlike *The Jungle*, did effect the author's professed social goal, James Baldwin's view of the novel is that it, too, suffers from a failure of literary empathy. For Baldwin, the novel's empathetic failure is similar to the literary colonialism Terry Eagleton describes: readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* weep not in empathetic response to the oppression of African Americans, but upon receiving " a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all" (19). He also describes the tendency of readers to excuse society's (and their own) sins by using the literary "report from the pit" (19) to reassure them that 'As long as such books are being published . . . everything will be all right' (Baldwin 19). Moreover, Baldwin points out two specific literary failures in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* which directly limit the protest novel's ability to effect positive change through the use of empathy*:* its "rejection of life" and reduction of the human to a type of flawed version of the (white) bourgeois original. Baldwin does seem to think that it is possible for protest literature to offer something other than confirmation of its readers' biases and an exercise in false emotion, if "we"—writers, readers, society—refuse the idea that African Americans (and other oppressed peoples) are categorically "subhuman" and begin with the premise that the struggle is not to obtain humanity but to "do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it" (23). Contemporary women poets of work and workers begin, as Baldwin suggests, with the premise that all people

are fully human and I hope to show that, unlike Stowe, the poets in this study, have successfully used various poetic techniques informed by class consciousness which allows them to avoid misrepresenting and stereotyping working-class people of all races. Baldwin's other observation, that readers tend to engage empathetically with literary representations for their own emotional satisfaction rather than for the benefit of others challenges both my positive valuation of literary empathy and my claim that literary empathy can lead to positive social action. Admittedly, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is guilty of many of Baldwin's charges, yet the documented efficacy of the novel to move large numbers of people toward ethical, and political action, despite their own personal lack of experience in slavery or intimate emotional investment in an enslaved person, cannot be denied. As I have said previously in this introduction, while I cannot prove a tie between literary empathy and social action, anecdotal evidence such as that provided by the reception history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suggests it may exist.

Nevertheless, even granting that they can occur, positive actions in response to literary empathy, such as those undertaken by readers of Stowe and Walker and valued as useful in this dissertation, may be dismissed by some radical theorists as mere reformism. However, while some Leftists believe that reform is always a symptom of counterproductive reformism, many do not. For example, in the introduction to *Reform or Revolution*, Rosa Luxemburg clarifies the difference between reformism as an end goal and the praxis of agitating for reform.[28]

---

[28] Granted, Luxemburg was writing in 1900, but the League for the Fifth International currently promotes a "transitional programme" which heavily relies on Luxemburg's analysis of tactical reforms versus strategic reformism (see "Revolutionary Tactics Toward Reformism" at the League's Web sit.

> Can the Social-Democracy be against reforms? Can we contrapose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not. The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers to the Social-Democracy an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim. ("Introduction")

Luxemburg goes on to say that agitating for reforms which benefit workers should be undertaken not only for the improvement of workers' lives, but also as "the means of guiding and educating the proletariat in preparation for the task of taking over power" (Introduction). Likewise, I believe that learning about and actively engaging with issues connected to the working class can serve to "proletarianize" the middle-class in a manner similar to that which Joseph Freeman described. Furthermore, according to Luxemburg, reformism, as opposed to reform as praxis, leads us "to renounce the social transformation, the final goal of Social-Democracy and . . . make of social reforms, the means of the class struggle, its aim" ("Introduction"). The actions toward which I believe these poetries can move their readers are not the end goal of working-class activism but rather are tactics in the larger strategic struggle against capitalism. Therefore, if at times this study seems to be advocating reformism, I hope my reader will keep in mind the difference between agitating for reforms and promoting reformism; between joining a group to actively oppose mountaintop removal mining and the assumption that once mountaintop removal mining (or any other pressing issue)

has been successfully reformed that there is no need for further action against the resultant temporarily moderated capitalism. Moreover, like most union members and class activists, I believe that activism which is closely associated with or that directly affects, and sometimes saves, the lives of working-class people of all races and genders is important because their lives are worth saving. Thus, an ethical, empathetic, literary relationship with the working class is not necessarily doomed to serve reformism, but may well lead to reforms which can serve working-class people in the present and, at the same time, set the stage for the transformation of American capitalism into social democracy.

Poetry and Rhetoric

By necessity, an analysis of poetry that professes to carry on a transformative conversation with its readers involves questions of rhetoric—of how a poet goes about creating dialogue in a primarily monologic space and what rhetorical (and poetic) devices might be more or less effective for creating readers' accession to the experience of literary empathy. I am, therefore, dancing not only with the affective fallacy, but also with the intentional fallacy. It is a fact that poems are a most artful form of communication and that they are carefully crafted by their designers to affect their audience. This analysis is centered on the poets' compositional choices as they are guided by the desire to establish an empathetic understanding of the effect of class processes in working-class life. Poet-critic Jonathan Holden specifies the rhetorical questions involved in the analysis of lyric poetry as "Who is speaking to whom, through what mask, and for what ostensible purpose?" (61). He notes that the intentional fallacy

responded to a different kind of poem than the ones many Americans write today, a poem that was predicated upon the 'extinction of the personality' (xiv). In contrast, the voice of contemporary mainstream verse culture "resembles personal testimony" (xiv). Therefore, a poem's "effectiveness is going to hinge on the reader's judgment of the poem's sincerity," a judgment that depends upon a consideration of the poet's intention, because (apparent) sincerity can only be judged within the context and tone of the poem (xiv). This judgment of "apparent sincerity" is similar to the readers' evaluations of empathetic involvement in the novel as presented by Keen: contemporary general readers desire (and pay for) characters sincere enough, and situations that seem real enough, with which to empathize. The widespread desire for sincerity and empathy are clearly implicated in recent scandals over "false" memoirs[29] and a (best-selling) glut of novels that engage readers in their own social milieu ("chick lit," for instance). The popularity of Billy Collins's poetry might also be offered as an example of contemporary general readers' preference for apparent sincerity and (unchallenging for middle-class readers) empathetic engagement.

This analysis of the rather more challenging empathetic engagement demanded by contemporary women's poetry of work and workers, therefore, may appear to commit the intentional fallacy in three ways: first, this analysis honors the craft of the poem by assuming that the poet *intended* the particular combination of cognitive structure, form, and poetic devices in use; second, that the poet intends at least one objective or purpose for the poem outside of purely personal expression; and, third, that

---

[29] For instance, works by Margaret Seltzer, JT LeRoy, James Frey, and Nasdijj. See chapter three, note one for a list of titles.

the poem's composition is influenced by the author's rhetorical intention. Altieri offers an alternative to New Criticism's framing of intention, and he suggests a different way to think about intention and affect. He writes:

> Suppose that we do not have to be as eager as most response theory is to locate affect within specific psyches. Suppose that part of the power of aesthetic experience is its capacity to keep us focused on how affective energies are structured and enacted within the text, without immediately imposing specific ownership upon them. Then rather than ask subjects what they feel when they read, one can emphasize stances exploring what it might be like to identify provisionally with the resources for participating in and valuing the experiences that the poem makes articulate. Poems matter for the intentionality they construct rather than for the intentions they exhibit. Intentions project what the author might have meant. Intentionality, on the other hand, allows us to explore how a world is composed for consciousness. [. . .] Correspondingly, readers then do not produce meanings or affects, they complete meaning and affect by projecting themselves into how imaginative worlds come into being. ("Reading for Affect" 40)

While it may seem at times in this analysis that I am speaking of the author's intentions, I hope to make clear that, in a manner similar to that which Altieri describes, I am speaking instead of the intentionality made evident within the poem. I suggest that contemporary general readers of poetry, guided by the poem's compositional elements,

"complete meaning and affect" by participating in the imaginative world of the poem. However, my method diverges from Altieri's. While his method entails "the task of establishing and criticizing the kinds of satisfactions brought to the foreground by how the intentionality is constituted" (40), my method is rhetorical. Although I assert that the intentionality of the poem guides readers' responses, I do not mean to suggest that the authors' intentions completely control the meaning of the poem. Poetry always creates an excess of meaning. Likewise, the concept of empathetic inaccuracy reveals that an author's intentional design toward empathetic response is not exempt from a reader's variant completion of meaning. Nevertheless, I propose that literary critics can investigate the ways that authors attempt to create literary empathy, just as critics have for many years investigated how traditional poetic devices may or may not successfully generate emotional effects or how rhetorical structures affect audience response in texts ranging from advertisements to political speeches.

To this end, I will demonstrate how contemporary women's poetry of work and workers creates the conditions for readers to experience an empathetic response to working-class lives, which is then channeled through the poem, functioning as a script, toward an ethical consideration of the topic at hand. I mean for the term "script" to suggest the idea that the poet is sketching out, as it were, a design for intellectual and emotional performance, and like all scripts, it is only in the actors' (the readers')

performance of the script that its full potential for meaning is discovered.[30] This meaning necessarily varies from reader to reader, but there is usually a socially embedded range of interpretations. Doubtless, these poems' scripts will be read differently a hundred years from now: "Reading, as production, is always contemporary. The poem is produced in the reader's enactment of a poetic text—which, no less than the production of a dramatic text, is played out here, now, where we live" (Scully 130). Therefore, I mean for the readings of these poems to suggest how the poems are constructed to guide contemporary readers' enactments toward ethical considerations.

Principle of Selection and Outline of Study

As is the case for general studies of contemporary American women writing of work and workers, there are currently no book-length studies of the intersection of ethics and contemporary women's poetries, even though many women poets, including those who write of work and workers, are explicit in their desire to claim an ethical dimension for their writing.[31] For instance, people writing engaged literatures (and criticism) often mention the work of Carolyn Forché as a model for ethical engagement; she, in turn, was politicized during the period she spent translating the poetry of Nicaraguan political poet, Claribel Alegría. American women poets, particularly

---

[30] The choice of the term "script" reflects my own literary and scholarly background; it is also intended to supply my readers with a useful, familiar word to describe the metatextual structure I find in these poems. In psychology and psychotherapy, the term "script" is used to describe several different but related concepts and methods. My use of the term "script" may unintentionally remind readers of "Script Theory," which was developed by Silvan Tomkins to complement his theory of affect (see the Sylvan S. Tomkins Institute Web site). However, given my layperson's limited understanding, I find script theory to be an excessively reductive account of human affect and of individuals' ability to make practical and psychological changes in their lives, including the changes in thought and relationship that mark an ethical response.

[31] Nicky Marsh and Lynn Keller do engage with ethics, but their studies are not centered upon ethical concerns.

feminist poets, refer to the textual and actual political engagement of writers like Joy Harjo, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lourde. Much of my own criticism is deeply indebted to the writings of these women as well. Among the American writers whose names are associated with engaged writing are two of the women whose poetry appears in this study, Muriel Rukeyser and June Jordan. Rukeyser and Jordan represent the two exceptions to my general principle of selection: women poets who are actively writing today whose poetry evinces an engagement with the lives of working people.

Rukeyser's first career was as a radical leftist poet and journalist (though never a party member).[32] She published in the *Daily Worker* and *The Partisan Review*, and was active in political causes from the Scottsboro Case to the Spanish Civil War to the investigation of the Hawk's Nest Incident, about which she wrote the poem analyzed in this study, *The Book of the Dead*. Although she never quit writing, Rukeyser slipped into relative obscurity in the Fifties and early Sixties, perhaps in part due to her early activism. Her "second career" was as a feminist poet and Vietnam war protester. It was as a feminist poet that I (and many other contemporary writers and critics) first met with Rukeyser, in the foundational feminist literary anthology *No More Masks!* (1993 ed.), the title of which is a line from a Rukeyser poem.[33] It is through Rukeyser that I discovered the large body of proletarian poetry written in the 1930s; following that thread, I found an entire corpus of working-class literature I had discovered neither in my voracious personal reading nor in my college courses. These reasons alone would

---

[32] The FBI file on Rukeyser cites evidence (membership rolls) that show she was a member of a John Reed Club and of the League of American Writers. They had no evidence of membership in the CPUSA, yet Rukeyser's file was active from 1936 until 1973.

[33] *No More Masks!* was edited by Florence Howe.

be enough for me to honor her work and her life by including her in this analysis. In addition, her poem, *The Book of the Dead*, is commented upon, answered, questioned, and alluded to by many working-class writers and scholars, making it an *ur*-text for women's poetry of work and workers the way *Moby Dick* is for certain other strains of American literature. Placing her poem alongside two more contemporary historical long poems of work and workers allows me to consider how the poetics of ethical memory has evolved over time. Finally, Rukeyser's theory that poetry invites a "total response" from its readers informs and enriches the broad conceptualization of "empathy" at use in this study.

As for my second exception, the temptation is to say, "But she should still be writing!" June Jordan was only sixty-five years old at the time of her death from breast cancer in 2002. Her last book of political essays, *Some of Us Did Not Die,* was in press when she passed away. Jordan wrote prolifically throughout her life in many genres: poetry, essay, journalism, children's books, autobiography, opera libretti, plays, and song lyrics (for Sweet Honey in the Rock). She was also an indefatigable activist, putting her writing, her voice, and her presence to use for many causes, all of which were fueled by her absolute conviction of the right of every human being to live with dignity. June Jordan became my literary philosophical mentor after finding her work in *No More Masks!* Because she believed in taking her message to places thought least likely to be ready for it, I had the opportunity to hear her speak at the University of Texas—Permian Basin (in Odessa, TX, George W. Bush's first Texas home, just twenty

miles from Midland).[34] Desperate to improve economic circumstances for myself and my young son, I had come to the university, a first-time student, as a thirty-eight-year-old single welfare mother living with my six-year-old-son in a HUD apartment where drug-dealing was openly conducted and shootings, both domestic and drive-by, were not uncommon. I still have the copy of *I Was Looking At The Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky* that she inscribed for me that night, February 1, 2001. I did not know she was suffering from cancer; I only knew that I hung on every powerful, polemic, often witty word, and basked in her enveloping smile. I promised myself that night that I would one day testify to what her writing meant to a poor, white Southern girl who was the first woman in her family to finish high school, much less go to college. Her death did not release me from that promise. Additionally, as in the case of Rukeyser's poetry, Jordan's poetry is appropriate and useful to my study. It is an example of the contemporary hybrid lyric-narrative form also put to use by Lorna Dee Cervantes for similar purposes, so therefore, my fourth chapter is entitled "'I'm From the 21st Century': Third World/Wave Ethical Media Poetics and Empathetic Class Consciousness in Poems by June Jordan and Lorna Dee Cervantes."

Along with the poetry of Rukeyser and Jordan, I examine the work of six other accomplished contemporary women poets of work and workers: Diane Gilliam Fisher, Chris Llewellyn, Marge Piercy, Maggie Anderson, Dorianne Laux, and Lorna Dee Cervantes. Except for the prolific Piercy, whose first poetry collection was published in

---

[34] I must also give enormous credit for my love of political, contemporary women's poetry to poet and scholar Megan Simpson, author of Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing (SUNY Press, 2000), who taught the undergraduate Contemporary American Women Poets class I took at UTPB in spring 2000; No More Masks! was the course text.

1968 and whose work, like that of Rukeyser and Jordan, serves to establish a (rather short-term) historical arc to this study, these poets all published their first poetry collections in 1979 or later. The year 1979 marks the beginning of a reemergence of working-class writing in the United States. The first post-proletarian anthology consciously constructed to present working-class writing was published in 1979: *The Waterfront Writers: The Literature of Work* written and edited by Waterfront Writers and Artists, a collective of San Francisco longshoremen and published by Harper & Row. As one might suspect, this anthology did not include any women writers. According to Jim Daniels's working-class literature chronology, the next working-class anthology published was *Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life* (1990), edited by Peter Oresick and Nicholas Coles. *Working Classics* includes poems by several women, among them four of this study's poets: Anderson, Cervantes, Jordan, and Llewellyn.[35] The eight poets whose work is included in chapters two, three, and four of this study are currently writing and publishing poetry; many of them also teach writing at various universities. Their poetry is commonly acknowledged in the working-class studies community as displaying a marked affinity with working-class concerns. The are also generally well-known. I chose these writers in part because I wanted to discuss poetry that my readers could easily find and explore for themselves, hopefully passing on the gift my teachers gave me. I also wanted to acknowledge existing thematic criticism of these women's poetries and to extend that criticism beyond considerations of theme. I understand this analysis to have a pedagogical purpose; it is my hope that issues of

[35] Working Classics is still in print and available from the University of Illinois Press.

economic class make their way into academic discussions of literature in the same way that discussions of race, gender, and ethnicity have. It is undoubtedly due to the work of critics and theorists that women's studies programs and ethnic studies programs exist today, and the formation of the Working-Class Studies Association is a positive development toward creating a cultural dialogue about America's least conceptually perceivable subject.

The chapters of this study are organized around categories of poetic genre: the long poem, the lyric poem, and the hybrid lyric-narrative. In chapter two, "The Contemporary Long Poem as Working-Class Counterhistory," I analyze three historical long poems of work and workers, specifically *The Book of the Dead* by Muriel Rukeyser, *Fragments from the Fire* by Chris Llewellyn, and *Kettle Bottom* by Diane Gilliam Fisher, revealing how the poem channels empathetic response to involve readers in the creation of an ethical counterhistory. In chapter three, I analyze two modes of the lyric poem, the family poem and the protean narrator poem. The first mode is thematic, the second stylistic, but both modes are used in poems by all three poets, "Landed Fish" and "The morning half-life blues" (Piercy); "Sonnet for Her Labor" and "Closed Mill" (Anderson), and "Small Gods" and "Oh, the Water" (Laux). While the family poem may be the most commonly used mode in working-class writing, I make the case that poems which make use of the protean narrator may be more effective for transforming readers' relationships to class processes. In chapter four, I explore how June Jordan, in "From Sea to Shining Sea" and Lorna Dee Cervantes, in "Bananas," put to use a hybrid lyric-narrative form to create a dialectical poetic space

within which the relationships between individual and the world, the self and the other, the private and the public, are subject to ethical interrogation.

I stated at the beginning of this introduction that poetry can be of use in the fight for economic and social justice. One way that happens is that many working-class critics and writers return to their communities (if indeed they left them in the first place) to share their education and their creativity.[36] The final chapter, which celebrates working-class cultural work in working-class communities, will serve as concrete evidence that poetry can be a passionate form of praxis. After a short concluding meditation on motifs and threads in women's poetries of work and workers that revealed themselves during the writing of this dissertation, the chapter will depart from the close analysis of individual poems and turn instead to a survey of the cultural work poetry does in working-class communities. In section two of chapter five, entitled "Solidarity Poetics, or, Preaching to the Choir," I offer a selection of women's poetry that operates explicitly to hail other members of the working class, using empathy to create solidarity rather than to serve a class-crossing epistemological purpose. In section three of the final chapter, "Takin' It to the Streets & Community Centers & Union Halls & Jails: Working-Class Poets in Working-Class Venues," I explore how poets with working-class affiliations put their poetries to work on behalf of working-class and underclass communities, often by teaching poetry writing as a form of critical pedagogy. These sites of cultural work include those in which working-class poetries

---

[36] One of those communities is the Working-Class Studies Association, which functions like a large (often contentious but always supportive) family for those who have made their way to academia. It keeps its associates firmly grounded in working-class realities, since it welcomes as full members anyone who has an interest in working-class studies: labor organizers, union members, workers, academics.

are produced by workers, as happens, for instance, in union worker-writer programs. The final section of chapter five, "Working at Getting the Word Out," offers a survey of small presses and little magazines currently publishing working-class writing, including those that make use of digital publishing and the internet.

It is tempting at this closing moment to appropriate W. H. Auden's "Poetry makes nothing happen" through witty revision or polemical dismissal, as do many other critics of engaged literatures. However, a wise senior scholar reminds me that Auden's statement, found in an elegy for activist and political poet William Butler Yeats, is in a *poem,* not a manifesto, written by a gay man who was himself politically inclined in his early years.[37] The poem alludes to Yeats's fears that his writing had directly sent people to their deaths or incited uncontrolled violence. Auden returned from his activities for the defeated Popular Front in the Spanish Civil War to a society that limited his options for a fulfilling life because of his sexual preference. There are many ways to read "Poetry makes nothing happen," in the context of the poem and of the lives of Yeats and Auden. Instead of a statement about what poetry can and cannot do, perhaps we could read it as a *cri de coeur*—as a bitter response to a painful crisis of poetic faith, written by one poet for another, both of whom once hoped poetry *could* make something *good* happen. Auden goes on to tell us what poetry does: "it survives, A way of happening, a mouth" (II.9). Women poets of work and workers make ethical use of the "mouth" of poetry. While it may not directly make things happen, it is put to use to speak of lives of

[37] I extend to Dan Cottom my gratitude for his gentle upbraiding regarding my original ill-tempered treatment of Auden and his famous phrase; I am also indebted to him for his intellectual and moral support during the writing of this dissertation.

common people, “From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs, / Raw towns that we believe and die in” (Auden II.8-9). If we can agree with Kevin Stein that “Dialogue between poet and reader on ethical matters becomes itself an ethical act” (151), then these poems of work and workers represent an ethical act on the part of the poets, an act that has consequences in the world. Literature can be an important means of ethical expression and deliberation. Literature cannot and should not supplant face-to-face engagements with our “Others,” but it can and should supplement and enrich those engagements. And that is the demand this dissertation desires to make of its readers: to think of this poetry not as divorced from the world, but embedded in it and responding to it in ways that can make a difference in the lives of working people.

Chapter 2:

The Contemporary Long Poem as Working-Class Counterhistory

Historically based poetry is often used to amplify the voices of the working classes. Consider, for example, the extensive body of contemporary and contemporaneous poems centered on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.[1] Furthermore, the long poem offers a form particularly well suited for poets who wish to represent communities, because it allows for the inclusion of a broad range of voices. As practiced by poets using human and documentary materials from working-class communities such as testimony, family history, news reports, and interviews, the historical long poem combines the compositional advantages of both genres. In doing so, the historical long poem becomes a vehicle that can incorporate facts, opinions, individual and communal stories, and historical documents and aesthetically combine these materials to create working-class counterhistories.[2] At the same time, the working-class historical long poem situates the individual workers' experience within a communal, class-conscious matrix. This grounding in the communal is an aesthetically apt mode of representation of the working class and the emphasis on the communal often reflects a philosophical and political stance the poet embraces.

---

[1] See the recent American Working-Class Literature for several examples of Triangle Fire writing; the editors have set aside a special section on the tragedy that includes poems by Morris Rosenfield, Mary Fell, Carol Tarlen, and Safiya Henderson-Holmes, in addition to selections from Lllewellyn's Fragments from the Fire. Ruth Daigon has also written a book-length poem on the subject: Payday at the Triangle (Small Poetry Press Select Poets Series, 2001). For another example of the importance of the Triangle Fire to the American working-class imaginary, see the Cornell ILR School's powerful online exhibit, The Triangle Factory Fire. The exhibit includes contemporaneous documentation of the fire and responses to it. It also includs a list of contemporary fiction and poetry written about the fire.

[2] Where John Lowney and some others use the term "countermemory" for the the kind of aesthetic products at issue here, I will use "counterhistory" to emphasize that these poems are social, public documents rather than individual, private remembrances.

The three historical long poems at issue in this chapter, *The Book of the Dead by Muriel Rukeyser* (1938), *Fragments from the Fire* by Chris Llewellyn (1987), and *Kettle Bottom* (2004) by Diane Gillian Fisher, present three different moments in working-class history from three different social and historical perspectives and they all rely, to various degrees, on the dramatic monologue to foreground the voices of working-class people. *The Book of the Dead* was written shortly after the Hawk's Nest incident which it treats. It "is based on the poet's personal investigation of the survivors, the site, and the documents relating to an event which occurred in a valley in West Virginia in the early thirties" (Kertesz 98), when miners working under Union Carbide control were knowingly exposed to silicon dust. Rukeyser's poem includes the voices of afflicted miners and their families and testimony and documents from subsequent congressional hearings on the matter.[3] The second poem examined in this chapter, Chris Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911*, is based on a sweatshop fire that took the lives of one hundred forty-six workers, of which twenty-three were men and one hundred twenty-three were women, many of them teenagers. Llewellyn, who identifies herself as a "labor poet," bases her poem on published histories of the tragedy and upon archival materials including newspaper reports and interviews; the author includes a source bibliography at the end of the text. The events of Diane Gilliam Fisher's *Kettle Bottom* are closely related in time, region, and industry to those of *The Book of the Dead*; *Kettle Bottom* is set in

3 For more information on the incident, see The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Accident by Martin Cherniak (New Haven: Yale UP 1986).

Mingo County, West Virginia, during the mine wars of 1920-21.[4] While Fisher is obviously familiar with the history she treats, as evidenced by the "Author's Note" which summarizes the historical events of the mine wars, the source materials of this poem are not only documentary and archival, but are also cultural and communal: family and community stories about the events and their repercussions expressed through the poet's creative role-taking.

The long poem, historical and otherwise, has recently received more attention from poets and from critics than in any literary period since modernism. However, according to Lynn Keller, author of *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*, "the scale and significance of this recent phenomenon have been obscured because critics have not adequately acknowledged the diversity of practices and practitioners in the contemporary long poem" (1). By "practices," Keller refers to the formal construction of the long poem and by "practitioners," she means the poets, particularly women poets and poets of color. Prior to Susan Stanford Friedman's two articles, published in 1990 and 1994, criticism of the long poem "not only favors modernist over more recent poems but also attends almost exclusively to works by white men" (Keller 2). Keller's *Forms of Expansion* intervenes in critical discourse on behalf of women poets and promotes a broader, more inclusive definition of "long poem" which she describes as "works that approximate book-length" and that evince the "long poem's most distinguishing characteristic" of "generic interplay" (2). Her "partial list of the formal varieties" that may "legitimately be defined as long poems"

---

4 John Sayles's 1987 film, Matewan also treats the mine wars from workers' perspectives.

includes “Narrative poems, verse novels, sonnet sequences, irregular lyric medleys or cycles, collage long poems, meditative sequences, extended dramatic monologues, prose long poems, serial poems, heroic epics” (3). Moreover, while Keller states that she wants “to sustain a sense of multiple genres interacting in the long poem,” she finds that “particular genres come to the fore in particular long poems,” and therefore, she structures her study around three of the genres she finds most likely to predominate: epic, lyric sequences, and the “radically experimental” (12). These long poems by Rukeyser, Llewellyn, and Fisher both confirm and complicate Keller’s schema: while all three of Keller’s predominant genres are identifable in Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* they are not all are clearly present in Llewellyn’s *Fragments from the Fire*. In Rukeyser’s long poem, none of the genres can been said to predominate; in Llewellyn’s case, the poems in dramatic monologue make up around half of the book’s total. In *Kettle Bottom,* Fisher’s series of dramatic monologues, the epic-mythic urge is present but is subsumed into the dramatic rather than operating generically; therefore, the dramatic predominates by its absorption of the other genres rather than by its relationship to them.

While the long poem’s generic flexibility recommends it to contemporary writers, it may be that the form’s recent revival is also a response to widely perceived parallels between current economic and social conditions and those of the proletarian era—particularly the Great Depression—when the long poem was very much in vogue. As Keller suggests, the long poem is particularly well suited to “generate poetries consonant with the needs and challenges of our era, capable of engaging seriously with

its central ethical, linguistic, and social dilemmas" (306). The recent explosion in the genre of the long poem also may be driven by a desire to collect and reflect critically and ethically on the provenance of information circulating in our complex society and to uncover and disseminate historical and cultural information previously suppressed. Similarly, Susan Stanford Friedman surmises that poets writing about or from within marginalized communities—women, ethnic minorities, and, I maintain, the working class—turn to the long poem because of its narrative axis, which facilitates the need to establish an "authoritative voice and position of the storyteller" capable of countering "hegemonic historical discourses" which have silenced and misrepresented subaltern voices (21). For women poets like Rukeyser, Llewellyn, and Fisher who write of work and workers, the long poem offers a poetic genre well-suited to the project of creating ethical, critical counterhistories that make use of the collective, revolutionary memories of working-class people. Friedman's emphasis on storytelling, combined with Keller's generic criticism, offers a constructive approach toward long poems of the working class that undertake a critical retelling of history. Of the myriad possible formal varieties of the long poem, three will be examined in this study: the collage long poem (Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*), the mixed-genre lyric sequence (Chris Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire*), and the dramatic monologue sequence (Diane Gilliam Fisher's *Kettle Bottom*). Fisher is not alone in turning to the dramatic monologue for its unique voicing attributes and its ability to personalize social criticism; Rukeyser and Llewellyn make extensive use of the genre as well. While Fisher relies exclusively on the dramatic monologue, Rukeyser and Llewellyn use the

form to differing degrees. The use of dramatic monologue correlates with the poets' ethical goals of amplifying the voices of working-class people and engaging the reader in the world of the poem.

The dramatic monologue has a long critical history which considers how the mask of persona affects readers' reception of the poem. In *The Poetry of Experience*, Robert Langbaum states that "Sympathy adapts the dramatic monologue for making the 'impossible' case and for dealing with the forbidden region of the emotions, because we must suspend moral judgment, we must sympathize in order to read the poem" (93).[5] Furthermore, according to Glennis Byron, the dramatic monologue is commonly composed along one of two lines, that of the historical and that of the social. The "historical line of development focuses primarily on questions of epistemology," that is, it functions "to interrogate history and the historical subject" (5). The social or polemical line concentrates on "representations and interpretations of the self in context [that] primarily serve the function of social critique" which she calls the "social or polemical axis" (Byron 5). These characteristics of the dramatic monologue, the ability to combine an appeal to "sympathy" (to empathy) with social-polemical and historical critiques, make it readily adaptable to class-conscious poetics. In these poems by Rukeyser, Llewellyn, and Fisher, Langbaum's "moral judgment" suspension occurs in the "historical" axis of the dramatic monologues (and, due to their prominence in all three poets' works, in the poems as a whole). Rather, it is more accurate to say that

---

5 Much of Langbaum's critical work in The Poetry of Experience is, in my opinion, irrecuperable for a critic writing on issues of class and gender, since his book is classist, sexist, and racist; this one insight, however, is worth bringing forward. Its use should in no way be construed to indicate my endorsement of his entire project.

readers temporarily *bracket* their received historical knowledge while participating in the world of the poem. Consequently, readers are encouraged to compare the empathetic understanding offered in the literary experience with received historical knowledge and to examine the epistemology of hegemonic historical narratives and negative stereotypes of working-class people. The use of the dramatic monologue in its "social-polemical" axis allows for the empathetic knowledge produced during the reading to reanimate ethical judgment of historical events at the same time its representation of the self in social context reveals that corporate interests depend for profits upon the oppression of human beings and the alienation of their labor. Although Byron asserts that women across the ages and contemporary writers of both sexes write more commonly in the social-polemical mode than in the historical, her separation of the the two modes is troublesome, suggesting that the historical and the social are opposites rather than complements. In the three poems analyzed in this chapter, the dramatic monologue is not an either/or proposition. The poems Rukeyser, Llewellyn and Fisher make use of the dramatic monologue's dual axes to reveal the interpenetration of the individual, the social and the historical, interrogating both history and the historical subject and mounting a polemic against class oppression by presenting the working-class self in context.

Because they make use of both historical and polemical functions of the dramatic monologue, these historical long poems by Rukeyser, Llewellyn, and Fisher prove it a form well-suited for interrogating class oppression. According to Cary Nelson, the dramatic monologue has a working-class history. He has identified the

"workers correspondence" poems of the 1930s as a type of dramatic monologue, that, once published, "become representative cultural texts, examples of cultural texts that have at once the conditional authenticity of confession and the generality of types" (*Repression and Recovery* 107). For the poet who wishes to represent class, the form's ability to present an individual voice as representative as the whole is vital. The dramatic monologue's speech-like qualities, its potential duality in terms of the epistemological and representational, courting both historical specificity and representative generality, make it perfectly suited for the combined historical and social functions of *The Book of the Dead, Fragments from the Fire,* and *Kettle Bottom.*

Whether or not they make use of the dramatic monologue and regardless of the period in which they are written, historical poems of working-class communities generally attempt to redress societal imbalances.[6] They are often structured as an unmasking of the realities of working-class life; they are concerned with "lifting the veil, seeing the men and women behind the curtain working to produce every single thing we purchase" (Daniels 126). Eric Schocket similarly claims that American labor writers have "used their acts of unveiling to testify to the presence of class beneath exceptionalist [sic] promise of classlessness" (4) This is particularly true of the long poems at issue here, all of which treat a specific historical period and center on a

---

[6] While its very existence might seem counterintuitive, the woman-authored working-class long poem has not gone unmentioned in studies of the form. Lynn Keller's *Forms of Expansion* examines the work of, "two working-class writers," Sharon Doubiago and Judy Grahn. At the same time, Keller does not mention any poet associated with the working class, other than Muriel Rukeyser, who worked in the long form before the 1960s. Keller also highlights working-class themes in poems by Rita Dove (*Thomas and Beulah*) and Beverly Dahlen (*A Reading*). Donna Allego's 1997 dissertation, "The Construction and Role of Community in Political Long Poems by Twentieth-Century American Women Poets," examines long poems displaying a working-class consciousness, written by Lola Ridge (1918), Genevieve Taggard (1936), Joy Davidman (1938), Muriel Rukeyser (1938), and Margaret Walker (1942).

specific historical event. However, as Eric Schocket warns, "whatever the intention, the objectification of class in person, period, or identity" tends to obscure the fact that, "class is not what we find on the other side of the veil" but rather that, "Class is what structures the veil itself" (7). Schocket's criticism sets up several challenging questions for this study: Is it possible for a poet to reveal both the lives of classed individuals and the process of class in society? How can poets writing "from their own necessarily limited and partial perspectives" (Keller 8) "give voice to historical forces transcending any single consciousness or moment" (Bernstein 272)? There is also an epistemological challenge for those writing about class consciousness and those writing about the lived working-class experience: not all poetry readers have experienced or will recognize class oppression. How can poets figure working-class people truthfully, yet neither disparage nor romanticize them? How do poets invite empathy and reasoned response rather than sympathy and, perhaps, passive pity? How might poets implicate their readers in American class processes while, at the same time, suggest to them the ethical and political imperative of addressing the problems class causes?

In working-class historical long poems such as the three examined in this chapter, history and memory, the political and the personal, are juxtaposed in a manner that asks the reader to make ethical judgments about the human condition as experienced by working-class people and conditioned by American capitalist society. Tim Woods writes, "Poetry is one mechanism for effecting this ethical relation with the past" because it "function(s) as a way of combatting the anesthesia of consciousness induced by hegemonic history" (54). This ethical relation with the past is closely related

to what Michael André Bernstein identifies as the communal project of modern verse epic, the "tale of the tribe":

> Far from being absolutely autonomous and divorced from daily reality, the "tale of the tribe" is intentionally directed towards that reality, and is expressly fashioned to enable readers to search the text for values which they can apply in the communal world. (9)

Bernstein's description of the modern verse epic captures the thrust of the historical long poems of this chapter and his emphasis on the communal world is especially apt for poems of work and workers. The historical long poem allows for a wide range of formal choices within which the poet may, on the one hand, create an experience of literary empathy, while, on the other, negotiate a treacherous territory marked with a history of exploitation, objectification, and dismissal. The three poets in this chapter, Muriel Rukeyser, Chris Llewellyn, and Diane Gilliam Fisher, battle the anesthesia of America's historical consciousness, utilizing the dramatic monologue in long poems that serve as counterhistories of working-class communities and which encourage the reader, made receptive by literary empathy, to reevaluate the ethical conditions of labor in America. Their historical long poems criticize and rewrite the hegemonic historical narrative of America in order to highlight the costs of capitalism born by workers. In order to do so, these poems make extensive use of the subjective perspective inherent in the dramatic monologue to counter hegemonic, accepted, "objective," accounts of America history. However, in conjunction with other formal techniques, the poets' use of dramatic monologue in the long poem creates quite different effects. In the case of

Rukeyser, her reliance on the documentary mode and a generally unfamiliar framing myth combined with a modernist, fragmented style leads to an uneven poetic effect in terms of creating an empathetic counterhistory legible to a contemporary readership. Llewellyn's pastiche poem is more accessible in terms of language, style, and framing myth, and while it creates an experience of literary empathy, its reliance on a modified documentary form largely tends to situate the reader more as an observer than an active participant in remaking history. Diane Gilliam Fisher's kitchen-table poetics, which places the reader in intimate contact with the community represented, extends the dramatic monologue's effect of presence, creating a communal counterhistory capable of empathetically engaging its reader in a transformative literary experience.

Muriel Rukeyser was conscious of the dangers and responsibilities of representing oppressed communities when she began her work on *The Book of the Dead*, which was included in her second poetry collection, *U. S. 1*.[7] Her response was to structure her poem as a collage epic, framed with a mythical text, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. *The Book of the Dead*, much like its Egyptian counterpart, is structured as a journey which takes the reader on a tour of the facts, variously presented, of how the people of the area came to suffer in the manner they did. In short, the poem operates as an ethically critical epistemological inquiry. Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* has been the subject of extensive critical scrutiny, including a book-length study published by Tim Dayton in 2003. As Dayton (and others) have pointed out, *The Book of the Dead* is a self-consciously modernist poem: it combines lyric, epic, and dramatic genres; it

[7] Because the original collection in which the poem was published, *U.S. 1*, is a rare book, citations in this study refer to the poem as published in The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser.

makes use of, among other sources, documents, an x-ray report, reportage, dialect, blues form, dramatic monologues, and a stock report. As a journalist in Spain during that country's Civil War, Rukeyser was certainly not naive enough to believe completely in the idea that information directly precipitates radical social action, but *The Book of the Dead* testifies to the fact that she still felt that a poem documenting social injustice could have some effect—through its affect—in the broader society on the enactment of laws and regulations, and on the general public's understanding of the unethical treatment of workers. To that end, the intentionality of Rukeyser's work directs the reader's gaze toward the reality of corporate murder in West Virginia, and asks readers to question the values that we, as a society, promote. Like other leftist modernists, Rukeyser "is complexly engaged with the formation of countermemory that critiques hegemonic constructions" of the past (Lowney 7). Rukeyser transforms social memory into a public counterhistory which both memorializes the workers' deaths and activates the critical social potential released by the industrial murders at Gauley Bridge.

While Rukeyser's mode of composition can be (and has been, by Dayton), constructively compared to Brecht's mechanisms for creating an alienation effect, *The Book of the Dead* may be best understood as one of the many examples of the 1930s social documentary, as defined and explored by William Stott in his foundational text, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America.*[8] Stott writes:

---

[8]Stott's book is not about documentary film, which is what we often think of today as "documentary." He analyzes the "documentary genre" which found expression across a broad range of artistic fields and media: "film, photograph, writing, broadcast, or art," and in "writing," which includes poetry, fiction (especially proletarian fiction), and reportage (which might be considered the grandparent of today's "creative nonfiction").

> Social documentary deals with facts that are alterable. It has an intellectual dimension to make clear what the facts are, why they came about, and how they can be changed for the better. Its more important dimension, however, is usually the emotional: feeling the fact may move the audience to wish to change it. (26)

The social documentary was one of the primary modes of artistic expression during the 1930s, one which found its most powerful expression in writing (reportage and exposé), photography (for example, the work of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and other WPA photographers) and cinema (the films of Pare Lorentz). The social documentary of the Thirties is consciously ethical, didactic, and instrumental; it "encourages social improvement. [. . .] Its mildest goal is the 'public education' Walter Lippmann sought" (Stott 21). Those working in the genre sought to guide inquiry into social ills, to shape attitudes toward the less fortunate, to suggest alternatives to current social policy, and to "promote social action" by "influenc[ing] its audience's intellect and feelings" (26). In writing *The Book of the Dead,* Rukeyser planned to extend the scope of social documentary: in a note included with the poem in its original volume, *U. S. 1*, sh writes that, "Gauley Bridge is inland, but it was created by theories, systems, and workmen from many coastal sections—factors which are, in the end, not regional or national. Local images have one kind of reality. *U. S. 1* will, I hope, have that kind and another too. Poetry can extend the document" (146). In its simplest interpretation, Rukeyser is suggesting that poetry has an epic reach that documents and national histories cannot; it is an implicit criticism of the overreliance on documents alone to tell

human stories. In order to fully represent the human condition, documents must be contextualized and vitalized through imaginative effort. Additionally, Rukeyser seems to have a postmodern grasp of the role of information and discourse, constructing her poem as an ethical intervention in the discourses that created Gauley Bridge while at the same time promoting poetry as the form most suited to such an intervention. The statement is also an answer foreshadowing Adorno's famous question about writing lyric poetry after Auschwitz: this kind of poem *must* be written in response to human violence, greed, and tragedy, because it is uniquely qualified to engage with the large and complex ethical questions of modern society. This correlates with Rukeyser's theory of "total response" to poetry:

> A poem does invite, it does require. What does it invite? A poem invites you to feel. More than that: it invites you to respond. And better than that, a poem invites a total response. This response is total, but it is reached through the emotions. A fine poem will seize your imagination intellectually—that is, when you reach it, you will read it intellectually too—but the way is through emotion, through what we call feeling. (*Life of Poetry* 11)

Furthermore, according to Rukeyser, poetry is capable of this relationship with its readers because it is, like the social, a "system of relations" and that the human search for meaning is actually the search for the "reality of the relationships" between all things. While Rukeyser's theory is not fully fleshed out and her functional analogy—because both life and poetry are complex systems of relations, they operate equivalently

— could be considered as lacking logically defensible correspondence, it does come close to adequately theorizing the means by which poetry creates an excess of meaning and affect. It also serves as a statement of Rukeyser's relational poetic as displayed in *The Book of the Dead.* As a specific example of poetry as a social document, Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* provides a script for readers' "total response," an emotional and intellectual understanding of the system of relations which led to the ethical, and political problems made culturally visible in the Hawk's Nest Incident.

The poem begins with the section entitled, "The Road": "These are roads to take when you think of your country" (73). Stott calls this the "direct method" of "Thirties documentary" which "constantly addresses 'you,' the 'you' who is we the audience, and exhorts, wheedles, begs us to identify, pity, participate" (28). But Rukeyser makes clear at the end of the section that this trip will not be as simple as "identify, pity, participate" might suggest: "Here is your road, tying / -you to its meanings" (74). This move is one of several which catalyzed observations by John Lowney and Jonathan Kahana that *The Book of the Dead* is not only a documentary, but is also a critical revision of rhetorical conventions found in the series of tourism guidebooks produced by the Federal Writers Project and directed toward a middle-class readership.[9] Beginning with the statement "here is your road" and continuing throughout the poem, the speaker "disrupts any bourgeois notions of objectivity associated with tour guides by insisting that we reflect on our own positions as readers" (Lowney 51). The poetic voice warns the reader that she cannot easily overlay her own meanings onto the land, the people, and the events,

9 One should remember that the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* is also a travel guide.

but that the reader will also be bound to the meanings inhering in them. It is clearly a journey fraught with epistemological trials, and in the next section, entitled "West Virginia," these trials are immediately evident. The accepted narrative of settlement is challenged by the presence of "the Indian Perecute, / and an unnamed indentured servant" who, along with the usual named, white, male, middle-class and upper-class explorers "left a record to our heritage" (74). The explorers and settlers did not discover a vast, uninhabited area, but instead, "Found Indian fields, standing low cornstalks left, / learned three Mohetons planted them; found-land / farmland, the planted home, discovered!" (74). The poem ushers readers into a narrative of agricultural labor that serves to prefigure the miners' labor. It reveals that the American continent was always already marked by the labor of human beings, and that the original inhabitants were not alienated from the products of their labor like the unnamed indentured servant or the dying miners. Rukeyser's pointedly ironic "discovered!" is a metonymic commentary on discourses of discovery and of "the promised land" that overwrote and erased the material labor and home-making of indigenous people. These lines further the criticism, made more explicit in the section "Gauley Bridge," of how writings as seemingly different as travelogues and historical narratives construct the "sentimental territory" (Kahana 62) of America which in turn supplies the ideological narrative that justifies American exploitation of labor and laborers—particularly the exploitation of peoples of color. The palimpsest of American history and the land onto which it was written reveals its obscured material traces of human labor only when one looks closely;

the poet trains us to read the counterhistory underlying conventional American narratives of settlement and class relations.

This insistence on the materiality of labor in the "wilderness" is echoed in the section "Gauley Bridge." Similarly to the section "The Road," "Gauley Bridge" is intent on rewriting the travelogue script that purports to explain and categorize these "exotic people," these Others, and, like the section "West Virginia," the historical script of "What has made these people and this place how they are?" This rewriting is as ideologically motivated as the discourses the poem seeks to displace. The travelogue genre presents a script that romanticizes the place and stereotypes the people. From the outset, the poem counters the reduction of people and place to an object of the outsider's gaze; the poem's tourist-photographer is reduced to an anthropomorphized camera: "Camera at the crossing sees the city" (77). This reversal of the gaze is set up in the first section, "The Road," when the readers are reminded that when they look through a viewfinder, they are "viewing on ground glass an inverted image" (74).[10] Rukeyser was an accomplished journalistic photographer and also worked in film, yet she directly questions the era's love affair with the camera. Although photographs were widely proclaimed during the time as the long-sought transparent medium, this poem insists photographs cannot possibly record the history and the private concerns of the people of the town, and that when it does record images, they are upside down and backwards from the reality of the place. The moment in "The Road" when the "photographer unpacks camera and case" (74) also sets up the format of "Gauley

[10] In more modern cameras, the inverted imaged is righted by a second lens; perhaps for readers unfamiliar with older cameras or with the science of optics, this technological advance makes this section's imagery and argument less obvious.

Bridge," which is presented as a series of "transparently" mediated and narrated images of the town where most of the workers lived.

The conceit of "Gauley Bridge" is its structure as a photographic gallery. The town is imaged as a series of snapshots as seen through a glass, darkly: the glass of the camera lens, the windows on the bus or in the diner, a beer glass. The language is uncomfortably flat. Undoubtedly this is the poet's take on the language of tour guides, which direct the reader to look, but rarely to see. For instance, the lively joy of a young boy running with his dog is figured as a distraction to the photographer tourist; the boy's movement across the lens field merely "blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street" (77). The camera relies upon a static aesthetic of *being;* movement is an undesired artifact. Moreover, because it is static, a photograph cannot possibly reveal the system of relations operating in Gauley Bridge. The poem reveals that the snapshot aesthetic has a blind spot and insists that the complexity of a life or a region can only be represented with an aesthetic of *becoming,* an aesthetic abundantly evidenced in the poem's use of tropes of continuity, continuance, cyclicality, and resurrection. This criticism of the snapshot aesthetic becomes more apparent as the poem continues. The language and imagery becomes more gritty and less romantic and the section concludes with a challenge, when the poet-guide's trenchant voice intrudes for the first time to challenge the reader-tourist, asking, "What do you want—a cliff over a city? / A foreland, sloped to the sea and overgrown with roses? / These people live here" (78). This repurposing of American's historical narrative and the travel guide genre is underscored in the final section of the poem, entitled *The Book of the Dead*, which

turns, appropriately, ouroboros-like upon itself, beginning “these roads will take you into your own country” (106). The poem’s refusal of romanticism and stereotypical representation underscores its interrogation of the truth-value of photography. At the same time, it uncovers a place incompletely or incorrectly known to its readers before, showing them a country stripped of its overlaid meanings and laid bare as stubbornly material territory “Past all your influences” and “all evasions’ wishes” (106).

Because the poem as a whole is intent upon establishing a critical and ideological distance between the poem’s narration of place and people and the travel guide’s romantic narration of place and people, it challenges preconceptions of Appalachian working-class people by poetically individualizing “the people” with the use of a series of dramatic monologues. While Tim Dayton identifies six of the book’s twenty poem-sections as “lyrical monologues” (28), one of the poems he includes, “The Face of the Dam:Vivian Jones” is more properly identified as a portrait. In addition to the several poems based on testimony to the Senate subcommittee, which are dramatic uses of speech but not monologues, there are five poems clearly identifiable as dramatic monologues. None are composed as transparent monologues; that is, they always evince the hand of the poet and do not pretend to offer the unmediated voice of the speaker. They can be thought of as dramatic monologues that “push toward lyric” in the sense that, as described by Alan Sinfield, the speaker is very closely associated with the poet, regardless of his or her historical existence (25). The monologues “George Robinson: Blues,” “Mearl Blankenship,” “Arthur Peyton.” “Juanita Tinsley,”and “Absalom” (the monologue of Emma Jones) present the voices of individuals later identified, with the

addition of "Mrs. Leek," in the poem "Praise of the Committee." They are members of the community Defense Committee, which was "established by former tunnel workers and local townspeople" to "assist the former workers in coping with, and winning compensation for, their disabilities" (Dayton 71). Because they represent the collective "committee" as individual persons, the dramatic monologues serve two functions: they allow community members to "speak for themselves" and they emphasize the importance of working class multi-ethnic and gender-inclusive collective action.

The dramatic monologue of the "leader and voice" (78) of the Defense Committee, African-American worker George Robinson, is written in a modified blues form. In it, Robinson comments on the racialization of Union Carbide's hiring practices. African Americans from outside the community were brought in to work the mines because it was thought they would be less likely to complain about work conditions and also less likely to organize, since they were not members of the local community. Obviously, the company did not expect to hire a man like George Robinson. "Mearl Blankenship" tells stories of the effects of silicosis on his life—"I wake up choking"—and of his lawsuits against the company: "the lawyers got a settlement / they didn't want to talk to me" (83). By including a monologue by Arthur Peyton, who is later identified as "the engineer" (78) on the Defense Committee, Rukeyser offers an example of the proletarianization of middle-class people which Joseph Freeman says occurs when "their experience becomes contiguous to or identical with that of the working class" (94). Like the laborers he works alongside, Peyton suffers from silicosis, and he describes how "the foreman laughed / they wet the drills when the inspectors came" and

then returned to the more dangerous method of dry drilling after the inspectors were gone.

In the monologue "Juanita Tinsley" the speaker is identified as "the lone outside member" of the Defense Committee. Dayton mentions that in an outline for a film Rukeyser hoped to make about the tragedy, she describes Juanita Tinsley as "the brightest girl in the high-school" (55), which would explain why, in her monologue, she yearns—and works—for a future in which there lives "a tall boy who was never in a tunnel" (89). John Lowney identifies Tinsley as "a middle-class resident of Gauley Bridge" and his analysis of Tinsley's monologue expands Freeman's notion of proletarianization by experience to include not only individual experience but also collective experience.

> As she recognizes that her 'place' as a middle-class resident of Gauley Bridge is not exempt from the suffering she has witnessed, she also recognizes that her "place" as a woman is not confined to the domestic sphere of "home." Her "place" in history is likewise transformed: she becomes an agent of change in both "America" and "at home" rather than the passive inheritor of a family legacy. (63-4)

In a manner similar to Tinsley's revision of traditional gender roles, in the monologue "Absalom," Emma Jones bases her authority to speak on her position as a mother and expands that authority to speak for all the men in her family—her three dead sons and suffering husband—who have been afflicted with silicosis. Rukeyser's framing myth becomes particularly important in this monologue. As Dayton observes, Mrs. Jones's

monologue is interspersed with lines "taken almost directly" from the Egyptian Book of the Dead which, in the poem, are spoken from beyond the grave by her son, Shirley (49). In this way, Mrs. Jones serves as the conduit through which the dead speak. Dayton also demonstrates that the poem is a collective monologue, based on testimony given not only by Mrs. Jones, but also by her husband Charles Jones and social worker Philippa Allen. Futhermore, "Absalom," as its title indicates, "expands the mythical framework of *The Book of the Dead* by including the story of Absalom from the Old testament, which carries the idea that "the son whose death is being lamented has been wronged, and that the son is righteous" (48). It is surely the most complex of the monologues, bringing together as it does two myths and at least five individual voices. In this poem, Emma Jones is transformed from her status as an individual to become the instantiation of the mulitplicitous working-class "I." Moreover, taken together, the five dramatic monologues perform the creation of working-class solidarity as exemplified in the Defense Committee by revealing how individual members' various motivations, positions, and identities enrich rather than diminish the collective. In a similarly accretive manner, the more allegorical sections of the poem, "The Dam," "Power," "Alloy," and "The Cornfield," reveal the "system of relations" which created the tragedy at Gauley Bridge.

Three of the four abstract sections of the poem, "The Dam," "Power," and "Alloy," may seem in their celebration of technology to justify workers' deaths and suffering in the name of power and progress. The following selection from the section,

"The Dam" is illustrative of the modernist machine aesthetic that pervades the three sections.

> Many-spanned, lighted, the crest leans under
> concrete arches and the channelled hills,
> turns in the gorge toward its release;
> kinetic and controlled, the sluice
> urging the hollow, the thunder
> the major climax
> energy
> total and open watercourse
> praising the spillway, fiery glaze,
> crackle of light, cleanest velocity
> flooding, the moulded force. (99)

Considered on its own, without the context of the greater poem, this section could be mistaken for one written by a Futurist in its celebration of technology and power and its positive imagery of the barely contained violence of dammed water. In the similarly composed section "Power," as Cary Nelson rightly points out, "the power plant, [. . .] in lines recalling Hart Crane's rhapsodies about the Brooklyn Bridge, turns out to be a

beautiful machine, even if it draws its energies from that tunnel of death" (*Repression and Recovery* 113).[11]

However, the meditative sections are the most allusive parts of the poem and rely heavily upon Rukeyser's framing myth, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead,* and Nelson's appraisal does not capture their spiritual mood. They are more than mechanistic celebrations of modern technology. In an evaluation that more accurately captures the mood and the function of the four abstract sections of *The Book of the Dead* ("The Cornfield," "The Dam," "Power," and "Alloy"), Tim Dayton refers to them as "meditations" and states that they "perform an act, essentially, of dialectical synthesis" and that, through the use of metaphor, they "take up the individual lives and perspectives of the monologues and the factual presentations of the documentary poems, subject them to interpretation, and render a verdict not only on the Gauley Tunnel Tragedy but also on that aspect of a broader human history of which it is a part" (Dayton 87). Rukeyser uses these sections in tandem with the dramatic monologues to represent the flow and force of history in the text overall as it is particularized in the class struggle of Gauley Bridge. This individual-in-social-context configuration is not only a result of the use of dramatic monologue but is also exemplary of the modern verse epic in which "the ideal relationship between history and the tale . . . is one of perfect interpenetration" (Bernstein 9). Although the terms

---

[11] This celebration of human ingenuity, design, and construction was one of the tensions inherent in modernist arts and especially in proletarian and leftist art which sought to valorize human labor. It often included, at the same time, criticisms of the economic and social plight of laborers (including workplace safety issues) and celebrations of labor as monumentalized in technological "marvels" such as dams, tall buildings, and fast trains. For example, Woody Guthrie wrote, in the same short period (in 1941, at the end of the proletarian era), "Grand Coulee Dam" and "Pastures of Plenty": the first song is a celebration of human labor and the Roosevelt administration's leadership in job creation infrastructure projects and the second is a scathing indictment of the abuse of migrant workers.

"ideal" and "perfect" may unnecessarily limit the range of aesthetic choices available to poets working in the genre, and exclude certain existing poetic practices designed to yoke history to the tale, Bernstein's assertion is, in the case of *The Book of the Dead,* a useful way to accurately describe the interplay of abstract sections with the dramatic monologues and the philosophical structure underlying the poem as a whole. As an example of the interpenetration of history into the poem, "The Dam" is particularly effective because Rukeyser's use of the power of water, both its unfettered "natural" power and its human-produced mechanical power, beautifully and elegantly represented in the poem by the mathematical equation for continuity, is a graspable metaphor for materialist history, a familiar metaphor imbued with a sublime irreducibility.

The "Dam," while it does celebrate human ingenuity, does not suggest that the deaths of workers were justifiable. The reader is informed that while the workers built the dam, literally and metaphorically, with their sacrifices, "stocks went up; / insured the base, / and limousines / wrote their own graphs upon / roadbed and lifeline" (96). The very road that brought the reader to Gauley's Bridge in the poem's initial lines, the road that promised to "tie you to its meanings" is here revealed as capitalism's scar across the lives of workers, one that marks the poem's reader as a beneficiary of capitalism and its exploitation of workers. In a manner similar to that of the fusion of mythic structure to the poetics of presence in "The Dam," the section "Alloy" melds the physical landscape to the underground landscape of the silicon mine and makes of the blast furnace a "crucible" for "a million men" who are not unlike the "perfected metal" tempered there. The language in "Alloy" is nearly allegorical: the human alloy that

survives the incident is the working-class, figured in “The Dam” as forged into “a single force to waken our eyes” a phrase referring, literally, to the electricity generated by the dam and allegorically, to the workers who “poured the concrete” and “hammered home” a “dam for monument.” (101). Similar to the the style of “Alloy” and “The Dam,” “The Cornfield,” which is literally piece of land used to bury victims of the tragedy and figuratively a symbol of death and resurrection, manages a more modest yet emotionally powerful fusing of myth and presence. It brings together “Perecute” and the other Native American original inhabitants identified with the cornfield in the first section with the dead and dying miners and ties the Egyptian myths of death and resurrection to the Christian myths and the call for justice: “Abel America, calling from under the corn /Earth, uncover my blood!” (90). It warns of a harsh harvest of judgment and retribution against exploitive capitalists, like “Mellon’s ghost, povertied at last” (94).

Furthermore, in the meditative sections as in the rest of the poem, Rukeyser’s mythological text, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, highlights the historical and repetitive nature of labor and its exploitation. Tim Dayton suggests that Rukeyser “refunctions” the Egyptian *Book of the Dead,* using it to build a “collective, transindividual level” to the poem.

> In "The Dam" the history of the working class is figured according to terms whereby Rukeyser can conclude: ‘It changes. It does not die’ (98). As with the idea of rebirth, she refunctions the notion of judgment in Egyptian religion for her different purposes in *The Book of the Dead*:

> rebirth and judgment become figurative and, ultimately, collective rather than literal and individual. (27)

This figuration of a "transindividual," historical level corresponds to Michael Bernstein's view of the use of myth in the modern verse epic, which recognizes that poetic material available in the present contains within it the germ of "all of man's previous legends and accomplishments as constitutive elements of its own consciousness" (9). For instance, "The Dam," which functions as a philosophical and structural map for the entire poem, emphasizes the fact that laborers—and the expropriation of their labor—have always been with us by reminding readers that the built environment was accomplished by human beings, not gifted by the gods. Similarly, in the section entitled "West Virginia," the presence of the "Indian Perecute" and the "unnamed indentured servant" challenges the narrative of American settlement and interrogates the many ways it continues to shape the national imaginary. The creation of the transindividual level through the use of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* allegorically "underscores the enduring significance of Gauley Bridge" and "locates the potential for rebirth neither in an idealized past nor in a spiritual vision of a redeemed present but in a revolutionary vision of the material world it represents" (Lowney 36). In this way, the Hawk's Nest Incident is unmoored from the past; it is no longer only a tragic event which cannot be undone, but is situated as a danger sign in the reader's present and a warning signal for the future. Moreover, through emphasis on human history as cyclical, the myth serves to establish the historical inevitability of the rebirth of the working class from the ashes of oppression. While a cyclical view of history may

be incompatible with Marxist theories of rupture and revolution, Rukeyser's poem fuses the tale of the working-class tribe to the tale of the American nation by offering this epic poem in which "past *exempla* and present needs find a continuous unbroken meeting ground" (Bernstein 9).[12] Rukeyser's poem defines "present needs" as including the necessity of securing the economic, social, physical, and psychological welfare of working-class people; it is a specific ethical intervention. In order to contextualize the mechanistic sections, "The Dam," "Power," and "Alloy," they must be read alongside, "The Cornfield," and within the poem's larger project of tying the historical exploitation of workers to the mythic tropes of power and resurrection. When considered in context, they not only celebrate human ingenuity, but also offer ethical meditations upon on the broader question of at what price technology is purchased and whose profit it serves.

Although it it clear that the political and ethical stance of Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* establishes the poem as literary profession of solidarity, there are two problems of representation that must be addressed when reading Rukeyser's poem as a literary object concerned with generating empathy and encouraging ethical decision-making on behalf of the working class. First, and most obvious, one must ask: To what extent does Rukeyser's 'speaking for' the people of Hawk's Nest drown out their own voices? Second, there is the ethical question of the documentary genre and its political use of representations of oppressed people. I will begin with the question of genre first.

---

[12] Tim Dayton asserts that Rukeyser's "vision of history is at its deepest levels informed by Marxism" and that any perceived conflict between her historical imagination in *The Book of the Dead* with Marxist theory results from what Eero Loone and Alex Callinicos have described as the difference between the scientific approach used in theories of history which 'do not seek to discover the meaning of historical process' and the philosophical approach which is based upon"ascribing meaning to history" and illustrating the meaning by "reference to particular events" (133).

The genre of social documentary, while it purports to educate the American citizenry about the lives of its populace through authentic representation of the lives of actual people, is an art form, and as such, offers framed and selected representations subject to dilemmas similar to those which beleaguer all representational genres. Popular Front documentary writing like Rukeyser's attempted to reorient "cultural history and criticism by changing the objects of study" and to turn public "critical debate to formal and political issues raised by documentary" (Denning 119). Artists justified the documentary genre's manipulation of human beings by its political work on their behalf. Although documentary genres sometimes suffered from "tragic superficiality," it was nonetheless "a response to [the] formal and aesthetic problem" of mobilizing the nation around a "class-based labor politics," a philosophy similar to the ethical impetus which I am claiming for the contemporary poetries in this study (Denning 125). Jonathan Kahana believes *The Book of the Dead* functions "not only as a memorial to the working-class victims but also as an argument for the political efficacy of documentary" to engage middle-class Americans in a class-based politics; that is, he argues a claim closely related to my own that poetry, using ambassadorial empathy, can effect its readers' ethical relationships with others. While Kahana notes that the semblance of authenticity was a primary concern of documentarians, he agrees with other scholars of documentary that it is undeniably a rhetorical genre: its function is to persuade. The ethical problems involved in constructing a persuasive document from the lives of the oppressed include issues of manipulation, informed consent, and the aesthetic and ideological challenges inherent in contextualizing representation so

that it tells a version of truth not harmful to those it purports to represent; "tragic superficiality" is only one of the ethical mines in the field of documentary. This is a particularly difficult minefield to negotiate in this study of the ethical use of representation. Therefore, while keeping in mind the criticisms inherent to documentary as a genre, I will cautiously bracket the evaluation of the ethical conditions of the production of *The Book of the Dead* and proceed as if the poet, Muriel Rukeyser, were conscious and respectful of ethical problems surrounding her project and that this poem represents her best effort to speak *of* the people of Gauley Bridge, and not *for* them.[13] In other words, I wish to concentrate less on the question of "Who can speak?" and more on the question of "Speaking for what?" which Rosemary Hennessy argues is the "crucial gauge of oppositional authority because it points to the vision of possibility that drives a politics of resistance" (148). This is not to say that I believe Rukeyser's final artistic product was complete and comprehensive in its construction of counterhistory—no one history can be complete in itself—or in its capacity to speak of the people. In fact, I will suggest that Diane Gilliam Fisher's poem was written in part as a corrective supplement to Rukeyser's poem.

This leaves us with the question of the ethics of speaking for the people of Gauley Bridge and the politics of that speaking. In the poem's most infamous contemporaneous review, John Wheelwright writes "The poem attacks the excrescences of capitalism, not the system's inner nature" (qtd. in Schocket 240). Eric Schocket agrees with Wheelwright that *The Book of the Dead* suffers from a common Popular

---

[13] Letters and other primary documents cited in Dayton's study suggest that Rukeyser did indeed struggle with the ethical problems of documentary.

Front malady in that the "poem offers only reformism as a solution to the horrors it so aptly presents" (240). Schocket's complaint is not that Ruykeyser has failed to create an empathetic bond that allows the poem to make ethical claims upon the reader; indeed, Schocket rightly evaluates the poem as "stunningly affective" (241), at least for experienced readers of complex poetry. Instead, he finds the poem in*effective* because it, like other Popular Front texts, operates "within a tropological realm where such unity—the committee, the people—can be presumed rather than taken as the goal of the artistic endeavor" (244). Unfortunately, Schocket bases much of his negative criticism of *The Book of the Dead* on what seems to be a textual misreading evidenced by the statement that the line "The committee is a true reflection of the will of the people," is one that "Rukeyser writes in a section on the congressional investigation, 'Praise of the Committee' (20). It is clear that Schocket interprets the poem "Praise of the Committee," as offering praise for the Senate Subcommittee rather than for the community's own Defense Committee. Therefore, for Schocket, the line "The committee is a true reflection of the will of the people" is a prime example of a poetic voice that "is always in harmony with the poem's instantiation of the *state* in the body of the committee" (emphasis mine) and of the poem's failure to "question the committee's ability to speak for the people" (240). As a consequence of this missed reading, Schocket sees only "two kinds of representation operating in *The Book of the Dead*: the poet represents 'the people' either through description or quotation, and experts represent 'the people' through their greater knowledge (social workers and doctors) or because that is what they were elected to do" (245).

However, the section "Praise of the Committee" is praise not for the Senate Subcommittee, but for the Defense Committee, which did "reflect the will of the people" because it was formed by the people of Gauley's Bridge, chaired by African-American worker George Robinson "leader and voice," and included "Mrs. Jones, three lost sons, husband sick, / Mrs. Leek, cook for the bus cafeteria," and "Blankenship, the thin friendly man, / Peyton the engineer" (80). "Juanita, absent" is the "one outsider member" (80). These are the same individuals who spoke "directly" to the reader in the dramatic monologues. Recognizing that the committee is made up of the individuals who speak in the five dramatic monologues is essential to understanding the poem's call to solidarity. The five committee members are not, in the literary sense, "described" or "quoted" in the dramatic monologues; in the context of the poem, the difference between the monologues, the portraits (descriptions), and the poems built from testimony (quotation) is significant. Neither are these individuals represented by experts nor by elected officials but rather speak as representatives of their own community. They convene in the "shoe-repair shop, / meeting around the stove beneath the one bulb hanging" (80). They meet at risk to themselves, because "Active members may be cut off relief" (81); "post-office / parcels are intercepted," and there are "spies" led by "Conley. Sheriff, hotelman" (81). Clearly, the poem does attempt to represent the workers as themselves, as a community and as individuals, distinct from any corpus instantiated by the state, both in this section and in the dramatic monologues. Not only that, but, contrary to Schocket's assertion, the poem does question the Senate Subcommittee, in the section entitled "The Bill."

The section, "The Bill," sums up the committee's findings and its call for further investigations; it then presents the committee's statement that it "Can do no more" and that the only way the victims will be vindicated is "to establish a new and greater regard for human life in industry, their suffering may not have been in vain" (106). To this last statement, the poet voice responds wryly, "The subcommittee subcommits." The section, the penultimate one in the entire poem, ends:

> Words on a monument.
>
> Capitoline thunder. It cannot be enough.
>
> The origin of storms is not in clouds,
>
> our lightening strikes when earth rises,
>
> spillways free authentic power:
>
> dead John Brown's body walking from a tunnel
>
> to break the armored and concluded mind. (106)

These lines continue the criticism of the senate subcommittee in the sarcastic phrase "capitoline thunder." They also deny that the poem is intended to serve as "words on a monument" because neither political solutions nor memorials are an appropriate response to the corporate murders of the Hawk's Nest Incident. The appropriate response, insists the poem, comes from the "authentic power" of workers and their supporters working together in "our" revolutionary response, rising up like the

abolitionists led by John Brown.[14] The final poem section, *The Book of the Dead,* follows this call to "authentic power" and violenct revolt with the oft-quoted lines, "What three things can never be done? / Forget. Keep silent. Stand alone" (107). The unity that Schocket insists is "presumed" in the poem is in its infancy, not in its maturity. It was born in the violent arm of the emancipation movement (the reference to John Brown), nurtured in the Defense Committee, and is not yet fulfilled; the phrase "can never be done" is a future, not a past, construction.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the larger concern behind both Schocket's and Wheelwright's evaluation of the poem, regardless of whether or not the two committees were mistakenly conflated. It is fair to ask how strongly readers of this poem experienced (experience) its call to ethical deliberation and action and to acknowledge the charge of advocating reformism rather than revolution. The primary complaint, from Schocket's point of view, is that the poem does not represent a "collective working-class alternative" to the officialdom that subsumes the workers into a predetermined nationalistic conception of "the people" (243). In other words, for a poem to be revolutionary it must, in some manner, imagine how the working-class might build a movement sufficient to effect a revolution. Schocket's complaint, as I have demonstrated, may be based on misreading Rukeyser's terminology for the worker's committee. The problem, then, is not that Rukeyser did failed to represent the

---

14 In The Cultural Front, Michael Denning writes, "Whereas the official Americanisms of the Depression usually invoked the figure of Lincoln, the Popular Front was more likely to invoke John Brown" (131). The note associated with this statement offers extensive support and several examples for his assertion, including "W. E. B. Du Bois's 1935 biography, Michael Gold's *Battle Hymn,* and Jacob Lawrence's series of history paintings" (note 32, page 499). John Lowney also refers to John Brown as a figure "that symbolized the radical ideal of interracial solidarity for the Popular Front" in general, and to Muriel Rukeyser, in particular; Rukeyser "published a long poem entitled *The Soul and Body of John Brown* in 1940 (Lowney 53).

working-class collective speaking for itself, but that she did not foreground it enough to be read against the background of the admittedly louder voices of the congressional committee and the emotionally intense meditative sections. This may indeed be the case, especially for contemporary readers. Alternatively, Christpher Green suggests that the poem simply does not work as well when read without the other parts of the book. Theorizing how the poem might serve as motivating force for ethical deliberation and political action, Green suggests that the arc of the book as a whole—*U. S. 1* is in three parts, with *The Book of the Dead* as the first section—carries the reader through a movement from the "retrospective (witness)," to the "contemporary (awakening)," to the "projective (participation)" and that it is in the final projective and participatory section that the "middle-class urbanites," whom Rukeyser has situated as her (contemporaneous) readers, are moved to action against the "stultifying force of capitalism" and against "acts of war being committed by fascists" (164). Green remarks that *U.S. 1* was "scripted" by Rukeyser "for interaction with a specific type of reader" who could be called upon to "arise, uncover, and aid" such situations in America and in the world at large after they are "eased into the facts of the situation by someone whose voice they can trust in a situation they can recognize" (179). The poem amplifies its ethical call by making a space for readers to engage in the creation of meaning; readers are encouraged to create their own ethical evaluation of the incident as a "total response" to the poem's intentionality. Moreover, in *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser challenges the Pragmatist Charles Peirce's conception of semiosis as "'occurring

between two subjects' or as 'a resultant of such actions between pairs'" (174).[15] Rukeyser states that "by semiosis I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant; this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs . . . a cooperation of three subjects," which she then expands to include the relationship between the poet, the poem and the reader.[16] Rukeyser's emphasis on relationship is crucial to her overall theory of "total response"; a poem is capable of inviting, even requiring total—intellectual and emotional—response in readers because it is complexly relational, like reality itself. In contrast to Rukeyser's theory and Green's analysis, Schocket's evaluation of Rukeyser's poetry seems centered on only two axes of Rukeyser's concept of semiosis, those of the sign and its "object," or signified; the interpretive actions and therefore the response of the reader are not considered. As Glennis Byron notes for the dramatic monologue in general, Rukeyser's use of the form "requires the reader's active participation in the reconstruction of the past and the production of meaning" (95). I assert that it is readers' cooperation in the world of the poem, in their imaginative processes of intellectual inquiry into the ethical conundrum of Gauley's Bridge, combined with their empathetic engagement with the poem's individual speakers, that create the ethical and political engagement Schocket thinks is missing from the poem. While the poem's highly allusive modernist style and unfamiliar mythic source text might make this poem incompletely legible to

---

[15] Christopher Green also notes Rukeyser's revision of Peirce.

16 Note that Rukeyser chooses to use the word "witness" in place of "'audience or reader or listener,'" a statement which seems to confirm the general placement of much of her poetry in the genre of "witness" or "testimonial" poetry.

contemporary readers, it has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in academia, partly because its difficulty is valued by postmodern scholars. This popularity suggests that Green and I are correct in this evaluation of Rukeyser's intended readership: it is a poem that makes use of ambassadorial empathy on behalf of the working class in an attempt to engage middle-class readers. It is perhaps because of the recognition and cultivation of the reader's ("witness's") participation in the process of signification that Rukeyser's poetry, and *The Book of the Dead* in particular, has found a new audience among contemporary literary scholars who value its openness and complexity—and who are less likely to be children of the International than children (and grandchildren) of the Popular Front.[17]

Chris Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911,* winner of the 1986 Walt Whitman Award, treats a historical event chronologically more distant to contemporaneous readers and from its author than events in *The Book of the Dead*. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire took the lives of 146 workers, 123 women and 23 men, most of whom were young Italian and Jewish immigrants. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company was a nonunion shop, and working conditions were deplorable; the high number of deaths was exacerbated by doors locked from the outside and the existence of only one inadequate fire escape which collapsed from the weight of escaping workers.[18] The fire has generated poetic response from the time of the tragedy to the present; the anthology *American Working-Class Literature*

---

[17] See Michael Denning's The Cultural Front (Verso, 1998) for an extensive investigation of the cultural processes which create many Americans as children and grandchildren of the Popular Front.

18 See "The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, March 25, 1911" in American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology (Oxford, 2006), pages 249-265.

features contemporary poetry from four women authors—Mary Fell, Carol Tarlen, Safiya Henderson-Holmes, and Chris Llewellyn—written in response to the fire, both in elegy for the victims and in protest of working conditions then and now. *Fragments from the Fire* can be situated stylistically within a group of similarly structured long poems written in the 1980s and -90s that includes works by Judy Grahn, Carolyn Forché, Brenda Marie Osbey, and Rita Dove. Llewellyn's book-length lyric sequence explores not only the historical events of the fire, but also the "ironies of historiography" (Kovacik 140). The poet struggles with questions of how to successfully represent working-class history and how the book's affective appeal might be interpreted.[19]

Fragments from the Fire contains a broad range of poetic forms—a *cento*, a collage poem, and several dramatic monologues, therefore fulfilling Keller's sense of generic hybridity as a signature feature of the long poem. The text is prefaced by a short historical note about the fire, but its functional poetic frame is mythic. Llewellyn's mythic frame is more broadly accessible in America than that of Rukeyser, referencing as it does Old Testament Jewish and New Testament Catholic religious practices. Llewellyn opens the collection with a poem invoking the Jewish ritual of *Havdallah*, the "Great Divide," marking end of the Sabbath and she prefaces each section with quotes from the Torah/Old Testament and the Christian Bible/New Testament.[20] Like Rukeyser's poem, it both gestures toward the epic and belongs to what Friedman

---

19 My reading of Fragments from the Fire is indebted throughout to Karen Kovacik's close reading of the poem in her dissertation.

20 "Havdallah" is variously spelled with one "l" rather than two; I follow Llewellyn's spelling.

describes as a "third type" of contemporary women's long poems that "refuses the binary of history and myth to construct a fusion or intermingling of the real and the sacred" (25). Llewellyn establishes this intermingling at the outset of the book. While the opening poem reaches toward the mythic dimensions of epic, it also situates the events of the poem firmly in mappable place: "Henry Street, Cherry Street, Hester Street: / the new world turns toward old Jerusalem" (3.1). Llewellyn makes extensive use of the dramatic monologue in both its historical and its polemical axes. Its dual abilities to serve both the creation of counterhistory and the assertion of classed polemic pervade the book as a whole, and these two objectives are outlined in the second poem of the collection. The second poem, entitled "March 25, 1911," places the events in a specific time, yet also evokes myth by commingling natural, religious, and human cycles in its first stanza.

> It was Spring. It was Saturday.
>
> Payday. For some it was Sabbath.
>
> Soon it will be Easter. It was
>
> approaching April, nearing Passover.
>
> It was close to closing time. (4.1-5)

Here, the poet sets the markers of workers' time, "Payday," "closing time," "Saturday," on equal footing with larger natural and religious cycles, suggesting the sacred interpenetration of the secular, the mythic mingling with the mundane in a dialectic which becomes particularized, personalized, in subsequent stanzas. The lines of the first

stanza recur, cycling in order, as the final line of each stanza, lending an incantatory mood to the entire poem. This mood suffuses the quotidian scenes with a religious tone.

Each of the seven subsequent stanzas describes moments just before the fire; the number of stanzas may be intended to represent the number of flights up to the eighth floor, where the fire started. This series of scenes is magnificently successful in capturing the kind of memory that people often relate after tragedies when they describe in great detail what they were doing or what they saw just before the incident: "The heads of trees budding / in Washington Square Park" (4.67), memories of the young women workers, the hum of machinery, the actions of laborers: "Neighbors from Cherry Street, / they piecework facing each other, / the oil pan hitting their knees" (5.36-38). Beginning with the eighth stanza, the poem turns to the kindling of the fire, "Della and Sophie up on Ninth / piece sleeves, race the needle's pace / not knowing on Eighth / paper patterns burn from the wire, fall on machines" (49-51). The remainder of the poem, stanzas nine through twenty-five (the date of the tragedy), treats the fire and its aftermath, describing the terror that left many of the workers to die trapped in the cloakroom or drove them to jump out of windows. Some of the stanzas are reported from outside the burning building. For these reports, as she does for the rest of the work, Llewellyn draws on several sources for this poem and marks passages as "documentary" in the sense that William Stott uses the term; that is, certain sections of the poem are clearly marked as referring to some factual source outside the poet's

imagination.[21] For instance: "Old Dominick / pushes his wheelbarrow, describes / 'a big puff' when windows popped" (pages 5-6, 1-2); "Reporter Bill Shepherd is writing" (6.75); "'I could see them falling,' / said Lena Goldman" (7.94-5); "The *Times* quotes Mr. Porter" (7.110). Other stanzas are lyrical imaginings of the workers, their thoughts, and their actions. One of the most poignant moments in the poem comes near the end, when two young women decide to jump out the window, preferring to die falling rather than burning. In the moments before their deaths, represented in the final two stanzas of the poem, the poet imagines the young women revising traditional prayers—specifically, as Kovacik points out, the Hail Mary, the Lord's Prayer, the twenty-third psalm, the parable of the camel threading through the eye of a needle, and a novena—to condemn "Our Bosses of the Locked / Doors of Sweetheart Contracts" (9.164-165). Furthermore, "March 25, 1911," the longest poem in the book, prefigures the modes used in the rest of the collection in its use of documents, first-person narratives, and mythic and historical re-writings.

First-person narratives, sometimes subsumed in collage forms but primarily composed as dramatic monologues, make up the majority of *Fragments from the Fire.* Of the twenty-three individual poems, twelve are dramatic monologues (one of which is epistolary in form); of the remaining poems, four are collage poems that include monologues. Many of the dramatic monologues are clearly marked as such by including

---

21 According to a note in the collection, Llewellyn draws on, among other sources, Leon Stein's The Triangle Fire (1962), which offers a narrative of the fire and a compendium of contemporaneous newspaper and magazine accounts of the event and its aftermath; Barbara Mayer Wertheimer's We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America (1972); Sonya Levien's 1913 Metropolitan Magazine article about her life as a garment worker and union organizer; and the memoir of Sophie Ruskay included in Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo's book How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America, 1880-1930 (1979).

an italicized "byline" under the title: "*Lena Goldman speaks of Sonya"* (13) *"Thomas Horton Speaks"* (52)*, "After Sonya Levien"* (48), "*Sadie Hershy*" (50). Most of the monologues are spoken by people who witnessed or survived the fire or by friends and family members; the imagined voices of the dead appear mostly as lyric. A particularly effective variation of the dramatic monologue is the "Survivor's Cento" (37). A footnote to the poem informs that "*Cento* is a Latin word for a garment made of patches" (37), but it is also "a *pastiche* poem made up of lines from the work of an author" (Turco 147). Llewellyn repurposes the *cento* by composing it from lines spoken by survivors and witnesses, and from lists of the names of the dead. In this way, the *cento* becomes the community's collective dramatic monologue. It includes lines that describe the identification of victims by their families, inviting the reader to associate cento's "patches" with the victims ruined garments: "That's my mama. Her name's Julien Rosen. / I know by her hair. I braid it every morning" (8-9); "Benny Costello said he knew his sister Della by her new shoes" (32). It includes the material remains of victims never identified: "Box one-twelve: female, black stockings, black shoes, / part of a skirt, a white petticoat, hair ribbons" (15-16). Voices of protest also speak: "Our children go to work in firetraps, come home and sleep / in firetraps. Day and night they are condemned" (22-3).[22] The lines come quickly, almost frantically; some are enjambed and line breaks throughout are taken in a manner that makes the statement feel overheard, as if the reader were present in the community. Another of the collective dramatic monologues, "Ninth Floor Reprise" (52) is bylined "*Fifty eight girls crowded*

22 Karen Kovacik identifies this line, spoken by a mourner outside the makeshift morgue, as only slightly modified from Stein's report in Triangle Fire (Kovacik 156).

into a cloakroom," but it feints more towards the lyric than Llewellyn's other dramatic monologues. It is set inside the building during the fire and oscillates between points of view. The first two lines are in the collective interior voice of the trapped girls asking "Who will come for us?" (2). It then moves to an imagistic, omniscient, narrative description of the fire "Up on Tenth," then back to a first person plural lyric, and then finally to a documentary couplet taken from Fireman Wohl's testimony.

The poet also constructs a collective monologue for the "Jury of Peers" (47) who not only found the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company "not guilty" (37), but also blamed the victims for their own demise: "They're lots less intelligent"; "most of em can't even read / or speak English—and the way / they live!"; "that kinda worker is more—well—susceptible to panic. / Emotional females can't // Keep a clear head" (22-23, 26-29). Playing on the title, the poem offers evidence that this is not a jury of the worker's "peers," but of their oppressors, who protect their own class interests by finding the owners of the Triangle company "not guilty." Moreover, the use of dramatic monologue to voice jury members' justifications situates the reader as one among the jurymen. As Ralph Rader notes, in certain dramatic monologues, "we are imaginatively conflated with the speaker, understanding him from the inside out, seeing with his eyes and speaking with his voice as if on our own behalf" (12). This conditional indictment of the reader in capitalism's crimes recurs in several poems in this study. Readers find themselves not only in the role of the jury-members who are representative of the class that oppressed the young workers and were also responsible for their deaths but also as one of the victims of the fire. This series of literary

identifications, moving as they do between complicity with sweatshop owners and empathy with the workers, requires a delicate balance on the poet's part between encouraging identification and withholding judgment. Revising Langbaum's analysis of dramatic monologues to describe *Fragments from the Fire* more accurately, "sympathy" (empathy) allows one to bracket received historical narratives of the tragedy at the same time it activates moral judgment toward the perpetrators. Readers are challenged to hold both of these imaginary identities in mind while maintaining their own historical perspective on the tragedy. The ethical axis of the poem demands readers couple their empathetic perspective-taking with an awareness of their own culturally situated perspectives. But to do so also means that the reader is forced to pronounce themselves guilty, at least temporarily and in the world of the poem. To offset the negative emotions generated by identifying with the owners, the poem also encourages readers to respond to by aligning themselves with the community and with the workers, both the heroes and the martyrs. This identification is constructed as an experience of literary solidarity; to displace one's literary complicity, it is not enough to condemn the owners but it is necessary to join in solidarity with the workers and their communities. To return to and modify Byron's dualistic schema, in *Fragments from the Fire* and in both other historical long poems in this study, the ventriloquism inherent in the dramatic monologue functions to bring the historical axes of the poems into contact with their social, polemical axes. Lewellyn uses the dramatic monologue to ethically challenge readers to consider the many ways America's history of class oppression

continues to influence how we think, speak and act regarding class issues today; to do so brings the poem and its criticism out of the past and into the present.

Another variation on the dramatic monologue is one told not by a person, but from the point of view of "*Captain Meehan's horse, Yale, [who] was the first to arrive on the scene*" (20). This poem could have been the moment of ridiculous in a book of sublime, but Llewellyn avoids silliness by creating barely slant-rhymed quatrains crowded with sensuous imagery and punctuated by first lines reminiscent of the cyclical markers of "March 25, 1911" which read serially as "At first," "Then," "Night," "Journey," and "Dawn" (20). The horse becomes the singular voice of "Nature" in this industrial city poem, one that equates the dead workers' bodies "plentiful as flies" to rows of "mares and foals" dropped by "The Sun" (20.22-5). The final image of dead bodies as children of the sun rages at the unnaturalness of industrial life and its ravaging of the young. The poem clearly sets up a dichotomy between capitalistic industrialism and nature, insisting that capitalism is fundamentally unnatural.[23] Likewise, the return to religious imagery insists it is fundamentally immoral as well. The imagery also figures the scene as a scene of resurrection: the horse cannot fathom such wasteful horror and so interprets the scene of death as one of forthcoming fecundity. However, another dramatic monologue, entitled "At Rest in Greenwood," accompanied by a photograph of a funeral march, complete with mounted police officers qualifies the promise of resurrection for the dead workers. In the poem, resurrection occurs only in the realm of ethical communal memory.

---

[23] A similar trope occurs in poems by June Jordan and Lorna Dee Cervantes which are examined in chapter four.

"At Rest in Greenwood" is the lone extended monologue by a worker after her death, a young woman named "*Jennie Franco."* In this poem the speaker calls out from her coffin during her funeral and the cemetery procession. This monologue appears to be completely imagined rather than modified from documents, but the inclusion of an italicized "byline" and historically-verifiable facts, like her age and the participation of the Sons of Italy and the Saint Angelo Society in her funeral procession, indicate that the person, Jennie Franco, is not imagined but historically actual. This representation of a voice speaking both from history and the grave emphasizes the "discursive split" inherent in dramatic monologue, wherein the reader is always aware of the doubling of voice, one portion of which is the poet's, the other that of the speaker. In this poem, and in others in the collection, Llewellyn plays upon the splitting of voice to emphasize the dual historical-polemical function of the text and its interpenetration of the historical and mythic planes. The poem is also literally the centerpiece of the book; it is the twelfth of twenty-five poems and its position and content signify a shift in the text's purpose, from emphasizing the historical function to emphasizing social and polemical functions. That is not to say that both axes, the historical and the polemical, are not at play throughout the book: they are. It is to say, however, that there seems to be a greater emphasis in the second half of the book toward social critique, toward inviting the reader to move toward the understanding that the poet is not just memorializing the past but also criticizing capitalism and its effect on workers today.

"At Rest in Greenwood" (31-32) begins with the speaker recounting her "short years" that

wrap me like a cloth

of schooldays, feast days, my first communion dress.

The cord of mornings, stitching at Triangle

up in the loft before light. (1-4)

As in the first poem of the collection, *The Great Divide,* the sacred and the mundane intermingle; schooldays and workdays and feast days are equally significant. The speaker, situated as she is between life and afterlife, narrates her own funeral and attempts to make connections between her current situation and her living remembrances. "Mama says, don't forget Our Lady / and always light a holy candle on your birthday. / Today she twists rosary beads between my ruined fingers, / plaits roses in my veil" (9-12). "I rest in the front room / next to the room where I was born" (17-8). The ironies of Jennie's life and death, already structurally identified by the parallel phrasal constructions noted above, become the vehicle for overt social criticism: "Papa says, only the best for our Jennie / A fine lady, I am lifted into my carriage" (23-24). Jennie's narration begins to loosen as her attachment to the world loosens, and as it does, the poem's language becomes more imagistic and sensuous, vaguely reminiscent of the horse's monologue. "The sky smells like lilies"; "Slower. Silence" (28-9). A palpable sense of detachment pervades these lines, but as the funeral cortege reaches the blackened ruins of the Triangle fire, the "shock of the skeleton loft / unfolds the tall wall of wailing" and, for one last moment before her final separation, Jennie becomes a part of the community again, as "Heaven cracks and tatters, blesses us with rain" (32). This final line is the only instance in the poem of the use of the first-person plural; the dead,

all the dead, have joined the living in protest of the conditions that caused the Triangle fire. The implication is that "the dead are always with us" in actions of remembrance and protest that are animated by ethical memory. In a manner similar to that in *The Book of the Dead* when Shirley Jones speaks through his mother's voice from the afterlife, the poem insists that workers' protests and historical poems reanimate the spirits of the dead in solidarity with the living. The reader has also been situated in the poem as one of those who participate in "the tall wall of wailing" through the use of the dramatic monologue: the reader is both "Jennie Franco" and, through the discursive splitting inherent in the dramatic monologue, the reader is also the poet-persona, whose participation in remembrance, mourning, and protest is made evident by the material existence of the poem.

The final section of *Fragments from the Fire* is epistemologically, poetically, and intellectually vastly dissimilar from the rest of the text and reframes the entire sequence for the reader so much so that a second reading of the the text is a markedly different experience from the first. Where Rukeyser, using modernist techniques and textual statements, weaves epistemological and representational challenges throughout *The Book of the Dead*, Llewellyn includes three poems at the end of the text that are centered on the poet's relationship to her materials, both human and documentary. The scripture epigraph that precedes this final section of lyric self-examination gives a hint of what is to follow: "Gather up the fragments that / remain, that nothing be lost.—*John 6:12*" (61). This piece of scripture establishes the poet's relationship to her project as

one of divine command. The first poem in the final section, "Stadium Sestina," follows the scripture.

The poem, "Stadium Sestina," is subtitled "*Remembering high school commencement / while researching the Triangle Fire of March 25, 1911*" (63). As its title announces, it is a sestina*,* a complex poetic form originating with 12th-century troubadours that was intended to display their wit and mastery. In contemporary writing, the sestina is often used to provide "the formal groundwork for a circular narrative, often of questionable meaning and amounting to little more than variations on a theme" (Strand and Boland 24). In addition to displaying the formal mastery this poet has achieved in her art, this sestina, rather than being of "questionable meaning," is engaged in questioning meaning. If a reader approaches this sestina aware that it is meant to display a circular narrative and underscore variations on a theme, then the poem begins to appear less a solipsistic exercise and more a social critique. The "circular narrative" on display is that of America's treatment of its immigrants, its poor, its working class. Where Rukeyser's poem, framed in a cyclic myth, seems to prophecy a radicalized working-class movement ("John Brown's body walking from a tunnel / to break the armored and concluded mind") and the death of capitalism ("Mellon's ghost, povertied at last"), Llewellyn's take on America's narrative suggests that there is little hope for change. The poet begins by reminiscing about her high school commencement, when "The poorest student—me—[. . .] reads the script: / 'Mother of Exiles from her beacon hand'" (63.1-2). The "script" the young poet reads is *The Colossus* written by (immigrant) Emma Lazarus, the poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, which, as most

readers will remember, declares “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.” Coming after a book full of poems about the mistreatment of those huddled masses, there is understandable irony and bitterness in the fact that in the mid-20th century, it is “the poorest student” reading this iconic and as yet unrealized American script. In retrospect, the invitation to America seems just another scheme cooked up by capitalism to feed its insatiable hunger for cheap labor.

The end words of the first stanza, which in a sestina are repeated throughout the six stanzas and the concluding triplet in a specified order, are “script,” “hand,” “circumstance,” “wings,” “newsprint,” and “generation.” “Script” and “newsprint” carry similar connotations ,which in this poem signal an interrogation of facts, history, and epistemology. “Wings” and “hands” are both body parts. As Janet Zandy has eloquently written in “The Epistemology of the Hand,” the latter word has particular resonance with the working class, since “homages to the human hand also mirror hierarchies of power, control, and ownership” evidenced in the division of labor in which “Some people get to use their heads; the rest *become* their hands” (*Hands* xii-xiii). Wings are what “hands,” like the Triangle shirtwaist workers, become when they die. The interrogation of the word “circumstance” takes place on several levels of meaning: “circumstance” as historical event, “circumstance” as the surrounding details of an event, “circumstance” as a euphemism for material welfare, for social class; and “circumstance” as the music and ritual of the poet’s high school graduation ceremony. As an example of the interrogation of the end-word terms “circumstance” and

"newsprint," the poet directs the reader's gaze toward the published evidence of the Triangle fire that she used to build her poem: "The *Herald, Sun, Telegraph* and *Times* set photos into newsprint, / hurried to interview witnesses, each tried to scoop the circumstance" (19-20). Earlier in the poem, newsprint is referenced in the image of ashen "clouds of newsprint" arising from the flames the fire that consumed "these martyrs [who] taught History the script" (8-10). The poet makes good use of the "obsessive quality of the sestina's repetitions" (Turco 292) in this poem to represent her obsession with—possession by—the dead and injured workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory, an obsession so complete that it has led her to re-imagine her own high school graduation through the events of the fire. "Every year the same old line ends the script" when the high school principal "pronounces 'We pass the torch to a new generation' " (22); the script is the glorification of the "progress" of capitalism's gain made possible by continuing working-class oppression.

The second poem of the last section of *Fragments from the Fire* is an imagistic poem of seven three-line stanzas written at the "Triangle Site" in 1981, seventy years after the fire. The poem imagines the scene as palimpsest with the contemporary materiality of the site overlaid with visions from the past. But it is the final poem of the collection, entitled "Sear" (68), that most powerfully captures the poet's dilemma.[24] The title comes from a newspaper quote from the time of the fire when "Frances Perkins speaks / from the street. *I felt I must sear it / not only on my mind but on my*

---

24 There is one other poem included in the collection after "Sear," but it is labeled as written by "*Yosano Akiko, 1911*." Akiko was a Japanese woman poet who wrote feminist poems of social criticism around the turn of the century. This final poem, with its assurance that "All sleeping women now will / awake and move," serves the collection as a reiteration of the performative impulse in Fragments from the Fire, as a prophecy of cultural resistance led by women, and as a recognition of the global oppression of workers.

heart forever" (68.4-7). Karen Kovacik relates that Frances Perkins was "an eyewitness to the fire who later became Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor" (171-2). Perkins, then, stands in relation to the events of the poem much as the poet does, and as the poet wishes for her readers to become: empathetically driven by the memory the Triangle Fire to take some kind of positive action on behalf of the working class. This is the epitome of ethical memory which supplies the knowledge and the philosophical attitude through which those who encounter it are positioned to make an ethical decision. Ethical memory undergirds the poet's commitment to creating counterhistory and underlies the relational poetics of total response. Following Perkins's statement, the poet reports another verbatim quote from the time of the fire: "One mother, *When will it be safe to earn our bread?*" (68.8). The poet insists that the italicized statements are "...Their words. / Yet some call that schmaltz, soap-opera- // *Sentiment, Victorian melodrama*" (8-10). Adhering to the poet's typographical practice throughout the poem, we must read "*Sentiment, Victorian melodrama*" as a quote, a response to some or all the poems in this collection, condemning the work as excessively sentimental for contemporary readers. The final stanzas of the poem are presented as "A testimony" about two young women who "tried to stay together / on the ledge" (16), but when one caught afire and fell, ". . . The other looked ahead, arms straight out, speaking and shouting *as if addressing an invisible audience"* (18-21). Again, the italics indicate that this description was taken from contemporaneous testimony or reportage. The poem continues as the young woman "gestured an embrace then // Jumped. Her name was Celia / Weintraub. She lived / on Henry Street." (21-4). The person Celia Weintraub

lived and died; she is no figure of the imagination, and she is still addressing her "invisible audience" through this poem.

The charge of sentimentality leveled against *Fragments from the Fire* should be considered, since it could be construed as both confirming and undermining my assertion that the experience of literary empathy is one possible route to ethical action. While sentimentalism, at some periods in American literary history, was a label likely to condemn a poets' work to "minority" status, it may be one that Llewellyn and other women poets of work and workers should consider embracing rather than denying, since, according to Joanne Dobson, the term describes a literature much like those at issue here.

> Sentimentalism envisions the self-in-relation; family (not necessarily in the conventional biological sense), intimacy, community, and social responsibility are its primary relational modes. This valorization of affectional connection and commitment is the generative core of sentimental experience. (267)

There is nothing intrinsic to this description that Llewellyn and other polemical poets of work and workers should want to deny. Indeed, Rukeyser's concept of total response is contingent upon an understanding of the "self-in-relation." Consequently, it is analytically more useful to consider *Fragments from the Fire* not as sentimental literature but as a text more closely related to "sensational modernism," which is found in socially critical works by proletarian-era working-class writers Tillie Olsen, Pietro di Donato, and Nathanael West. Sensational modernism uses "images of working-class

bodies to “challenge the sense of moral authority and cultural control that sentimentalism, naturalism, documentary photography, and high modernism typically grant the middle and upper classes” (3)—it is a “shock” aesthetic (Entin 3). Joseph Entin suggests that this aesthetic, widely practiced in the 1930s by leftist writers, was intentionally designed to disturb the middle-class viewer in order to “call into question the frameworks through which social and material inequities are conventionally viewed, and, quite often, made palatable, even perversely pleasurable, to contemplate” (264); that is, to combat the emotional self-satisfaction encouraged by sentimentalism. Entin believes that the use of sensational modernism was at least partially successful in challenging judgmental and moralistic representations of the poor and working-class during the 1930s. Similarly, *Fragments from the Fire* is effective as counterhistory, recovering as it does the effects of the fire on history from from a working-class perspective. It is quite clear the *Fragments from the Fire* is rhetorically designed to take sides, to generate both compassion toward and outrage on behalf of the Triangle workers while simultaneously refusing to encourage the perverse vicarious pleasures of literary sentimentalism. The poem enacts literary justice and reminds contemporary readers that material goods are often times the product of unjust corporate practices that directly oppress and endanger working people. Additionally, judging by the numerous critical and poetic references, it has been spectacularly effective in generating solidarity among working-class writers and critics. Chris Llewellyn, the poet, makes herself the sounding board that amplifies the voices of the victims of the Triangle Fire across time and space. Through her poetry, particularly in its use of the dramatic monologue,

Llewellyn creates an experience of the fire that cannot be dismissed in the minds and hearts of her readers. In *Fragments from the Fire,* literary empathy serves as the basis for an ethical reevaluation of the conditions of labor for those who made—and make—the clothes on our backs.

Like Muriel Rukeyser and Chris Llewellyn, Diane Gilliam Fisher delves into the past to make an ethical criticism of capitalism that is still relevant today. In a manner similar to the first two poets, in her book-length poem, *Kettle Bottom,* Fisher takes as her material the economic, personal, private, and inner lives of working-class people as conditioned by and responding to their labor. While all three poets, Rukeyser, Llewellyn, and Fisher, apparently agree that revealing working-class realities is an important goal, their poetic personas assume differing perspectives in relation to their subjects and to their readers. Rukeyser's poetic photojournalist effaces her presence through the convention of objective observation (with the exception of a rare, omniscient, ironic comment); in Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire,* the poet's perspective is, to varying degrees, a guiding presence throughout. In *Kettle Bottom,* Diane Gilliam Fisher disappears by taking on the voices of a working class community through a series of dramatic monologues. The poem's exclusive use of the dramatic monologue demonstrates a kinship with the workers correspondence poems of the 1930s and the domestic sonnet sequence as exemplified by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Moreover, the decision to rely exclusively on the dramatic monologue may be influenced by family history: Fisher's family "was part of the Appalachian outmigration from Mingo County, West Virginia and Johnson County, Kentucky" (*Kettle Bottom* 88).

Indeed, the poem ushers the reader through an experience much like that of "marrying-in" to a close-knit community in which the members have generations of shared history, customs, and coded language. Fisher, like Llewellyn, provides her readers some historical guidance with a short opening "Author's Note" that consists of an informational essay about the West Virginia Mine Wars of 1920-21, and an ending "Notes" section that defines the most outsider-resistant terms and cultural references. The section titles indicate that the poem takes place in three periods, presumably during the years 1920 and 1921: "Summer-Fall," "Winter-Summer," and between those two, another, cryptically named "Raven Light." However, the remembrance and narration of events within these time periods is, like human memory, not strictly chronological.

In *Kettle Bottom,* there is no ethnographic observer pointing the way, nor documentary guideposts to reference, nor the conceit of a camera eye to frame the view. There is not even a central personage or guiding persona to tag along with; after the "Author's Note," the reader is plunged into a 1920s West Virginia mining community through the voices of its inhabitants. The poem has a "kitchen-table" perspective; that is, the individual poem sections are composed in a way that places the reader at kitchen tables, in the mines, and in the schoolhouse with the speakers of the poems. It is a profoundly democratic perspective; the poet seems to love and respect each member of the community equally, and no one voice's narrative is complete in and of itself. For instance, one thread in the poem revolving around the death of a young immigrant-Italian miner named Nico is presented through the monologues of his father ("L'Inglese" and "Ash Wednesday"), his mother, and his brother, David, and also

through monologues from other members of the community: one entitled "Shelva Jean Tells the Sheriff What She Saw," and one by Violet, the wife of Isom, whose estranged brother, Jake, is probably involved in murdering Nico. While films, novels, and poems, like Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead,* have used multiple narrators and fragmented texts to tell a story, *Kettle Bottom* resists easy comparison. By placing the reader at kitchen-table perspective, by intertwining and cross-referencing the monologues in a way that mimics the processes of community living, by offering only minimal framing and interpretation, by making the reader, as community member, an active participant in collective meaning-making, Fisher creates a text that invites the reader into experiencing communal epistemology and structures of feeling.[25] Empathy—imaginative role-taking and affective response—is the epistemological vehicle necessary for the journey into the world of *Kettle Bottom.*

The critical genre requires that parts of the poem *Kettle Bottom* be presented for examination and while I will adhere to those requirements, it must be stated that analyzing a single monologue or a group of lines from this text is fraught with as many dangers and difficulties as analyzing Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La*

---

[25] While this term is sometimes interpreted as equivalent to "ideology," I understand Raymond Williams's formulation as describing something different than and sometimes oppositional to ideology, especially insofar as "ideology" carries connotations of false consciousness. Williams writes that "The point of the deliberately contradictory phrase. . . is that it was a structure in the sense that you could perceive it operating in one work after another which weren't otherwise connected-people weren't learning it from each other; yet it was one of feeling much more than of thought-a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones, for which the best evidence was often the actual conventions of literary or dramatic writing (Williams, *Politics and Letters* 159). It is in this sense, of emotional patterns of lived experience as expressed through literary conventions, that I use the term. Moreover, Andrew Miller states that in *Marxism and Literature,* "Williams had been very clear that structure of feeling designated something other than ideology, if by ideology we mean, as most Marxists did, a relatively formalised belief system, where the belief system of the dominant class becomes the dominant ideology" and that Williams also put the term "in opposition to the more explicitly Marxist concepts of 'world-view and 'ideology'," as a concept which could "include a strong sense of the experiential specifically excluded from most conceptions of ideology" (73).

Grande Jatte by concentrating on only one of the portraits or on the brush-points in a one-inch-square section of the canvas. And *Kettle Bottom* is a complex canvas. Fisher's epigraph to the text, a quote from Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead,* both acknowledges the two women's poetic and political kinship and declares the focus of *Kettle Bottom:*

> What do you want—a cliff over a city?
>
> A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses?
>
> These people live here.

Fisher's poetics live with the people. I have identified, by name, description, or title, more than fifty individuals who either speak or are spoken of in the poem. Of those, more than half "speak" either in their own monologues or through indirect quotation. Most of them are miners and their families (identifiably "white" with mostly Scots-Irish surnames, black, and immigrant Italian). In addition, the voices and perspectives of children are a central element. Besides the miners and their families, *Kettle Bottom* includes a curious reporter (by indirect quotation), a mine owner, his wife, and a big-city schoolteacher stationed at a mining camp school, among others.

The opening monologue, entitled "Explosion at Winco No. 9," is spoken by Maude Stanley, who relates how she identifies the body of her husband, Ted, after the titular explosion. However, the reader does not know the identity of the speaker until the last line of the poem. It opens, instead, with the unnamed speaker narrating, in dialect-inflected language, an experience the reader eventually learns is one she holds in common with other women in the community:

Delsey Salyer knowed Tom Junior by his toes,

which his steel-toed boots had kept the fire off of.

Betsy Rose seen a piece of Willy's ear, the little

notched part where a hound had bit him

when he was a young'un, playing at eating its food. (7)

A similar scene was represented by Lllewellyn in "Survivor's Cento" when family members of Triangle fire victims described how they identified their loved ones' bodies. The inhabitants of industrial working-class communities hold this particularized knowledge in common with each other, a kind of knowledge that is not widely possessed in first-world countries today.[26] The tone is almost matter-of-fact; it evokes the flatness heard in the voices of people in shock. Yet, even while in shock, the speaker does not conceive of herself as an individual stricken by a personal tragedy. She faces the same devastation as the other women in the community and in a similar manner; she is different from the other women only in the details of how she identifies her husband.

They brung out bodies,

you couldn't tell. I seen a piece of my old blue dress

on one of them bodies, blacked with smoke,

but I could tell it was my patch, up under the arm. (7)

---

[26] People in war-torn areas are familiar with this experience, and it became a narrative common to all Americans after 9/11, when similar stories were told through the mass media. One wonders if 9/11 had something to do with Fisher's decision to write this book—her community has known this kind of terror and sorrow for generations, and it was, quite literally, a daily or at least monthly experience deeply interwoven in the life of the people. Recent mine disasters demonstrate that some people still go to work every day with the knowledge that their workplaces are made as dangerous by their owners' greed and by lack of safety enforcement by the government as the World Trade Center was made by terrorists.

In the section of the poem prior to Maude's narration of identifying her husband, she tells the story of how he came to have a patch made from her "old blue dress." In just a few short lines, she identifies her husband by name, and tells how he "didn't want floweredy goods / on his shirt," giving the reader some idea of his personality and of the force of hers. She tells him "It's just under your arm, Ted, it ain't going to show," and her persuasive power with her husband becomes apparent when the patch serves as her only clue to identify his body. In the last line of the poem, the reader learns not only the speaker's name, but also, devastatingly, her age: "When the man writing in the big black book / come around asking about identifying marks, / I said, *blue dress*. I told him, *Maude Stanley*, *23*." By the end of the poem, readers have "gotten to know" Maude and Ted as acquaintances, and the bare fact of Maude's age comes like a blow to the chest. The intake of breath that naturally occurs after the end of a line, at the end of a poem, is doubled by the sharp inhalation that accompanies a shocking revelation. Extrapolating back from the final line, the reader may ponder the fact that Ted, too, must have been young, that their marriage was in its early years, and that the mine explosion destroyed lives in their prime.

Furthermore, Fisher is particularly adept at encouraging empathetic responses to situations, which is a more difficult approach than one depending solely upon empathy generated by character identification. For instance, a reader pondering of Maude's age is been positioned to ask a series of questions about the community, such as, "How old are the Salyers? and the Roses?" And how will the women (and maybe children) of the dead miners manage their lives after the death of their breadwinner? As Maude says, "It

is true that it is the men that goes in, but it is us that carries the mine inside" and "Us that picks up the pieces" (7). Where Ruykeyser's modernist poetics values fragmentation as a critical mode of representation, Llewellyn's and Fisher's communal poetics quilt together the charred remnants of working-class history. In *Fragments from the Fire* and *Kettle Bottom*, personal identity is given little meaning apart from collective identity. Fisher creates an oscillation between the individual and the communal throughout *Kettle Bottom* to emphasize the inseparability of the individual history, experience, and knowledge from the communal; that inseparability is *represented* in "Explosion at Winco No. 9," and it is *performed* in the interrelationship of each individual poem to the book as a whole. C. D. J. Pearsall identifies this performative moment as belonging to the genre of dramatic monologue, citing its "rhetorical efficiency" to "dramatize, as well as to cause, performative effects" (79). Pearsall is speaking of the performative effects in a single monologue; that performative effect is multiplied in this series of monologues. Additionally, the recurring trope of fragmentation, of pieces and patches, points to the nature of individual subjectivity within a communal matrix. The dead miners can only be identified by someone else; their subjective identity is not established upon an essential, individual ground, but is contingent upon and made visible through community and relational processes. As Peter Greico explains, "The 'I' [in working-class poetry] is only a moment that 'takes over' in a chain of ever altering yet ever similar circumstances, funded by what came before and invested in what will follow." The performative nature of the dramatic monologue serves to interpellate the reader as one of the community members who can identify the

individual community members and piece together their stories only insofar as they participate in the community drama as presented in the world of the poem. The identification of the dead is metonymic of the structure of entire book and of the manner in which an individual's narrative can only be completed through communal storytelling. *Kettle Bottom* possesses a communal imagination, whereby the ontological and epistemological processes which interpolate an individual as a member of a community are represented; at the same time, it serves to reveal the people's history that underlies hegemonic history. It presents a grassroots counterhistory where social knowledge and personal knowledge are inextricable from one another—it is rhizomatic in its structure. The book as a whole is also a stunningly effective representation of a community's structures of feeling, of how such structures are created, maintained, reproduced, and modified in the interaction between members of the community until they become ubiquitous.

One of the structures of feeling represented in *Kettle Bottom* could be described as a "discourse of death." Death, violent death, in the mine is one of the axes around which the book, the community, and individuals' lives revolve. The slow death of a miner trapped inside the mountain is literally the centerpiece of the book. Where Rukeyser's central reference point is a mythological book of the dead that promises resurrection if the deceased acts appropriately, Fisher's central reference point is an experiential book of the dead that promises nothing and in which the speaker acts inappropriately yet very humanly, running the wrong direction at the moment of the mine collapse. This central section of the poem which I previously referred to as a

"period," is a monologue spoken by Nathan Hartsell, a twenty-year-old miner who has been sealed in by a roof collapse. Centered, as it is, between two seasonal periods of time, this section entitled "Raven Light" asks to be read as occurring in the space-time continuum bounded by the mine's labyrinthine interior of pitch-black darkness and the five-day expected survival time for a miner trapped without food or water. Nathan Hartsell has become unmoored from the time and rhythms governing his community; he is experiencing and reporting to the reader from the world of the dead. This space-time continuum appears in *The Book of the Dead'*s meditative sections and is similar to Llewellyn's conceptual trope of the rent in time precipitated by tragedy, and figured as psychologically and spiritually analogous to the "Great Divide" between sacred and secular time; it is also structurally analogous to Jennie Franco's situation in the poem "At Rest in Greenwood."[27] Unlike Rukeyser's and Llewellyn's contextualizing of the human within the mythological, however, Fisher's other-world traveler challenges the mythological with the human, sometimes directly.

The title of the section, "Raven Light," refers in part to the raven which Noah first sent out from the Ark, a story Nathan says he'd "never have knowed" except that it was the "First Bible story I ever read on my own" (50); "Brother Pentecost spoke only of the dove" (50). Throughout the section, Nathan questions and challenges the gospel

---

[27] As an Oklahoman, it is impossible not to think of the bombing of the Murrah building in the same terms, especially since architects Hans and Torrey Butzer's design for the memorial has materialized the metaphor with huge, monolithic "Gates of Time" marked with the time one minute before the bomb went off—9:01 a.m.—on one side, symbolizing "the innocence of the city before the attack," and the other with 9:03 a.m., one minute after the explosion, symbolizing "the moment we were changed forever." Since the gates frame the entire memorial, the instant the bomb went off, 9:02 a.m. is forever frozen between "before" and "after." This rending of time by tragedy, signified in language as "before" and "after," is also evident in people's discussions of 9/11. (Information on the gates' symbolism is taken from the Oklahoma City National Memorial Website.

of light with his own understanding of the need for a gospel of darkness—a gospel of "raven light" that fits the lives of his people. He remembers his father returning from the mine covered in coal dust: "He put me in mind of a raven, those times, / and he was beautiful to my eyes." Nathan relates how even though the children scrubbed their father hard in the washtub, he always had "them coon eyes, like he was always looking out from the dark" (48). By this point in *Kettle Bottom,* the reader understands that the entire community is always "looking out from the dark," holding its collective breath, saying its prayers, and practicing its customs against the inevitable next time the emergency siren blows. Given the discourse of death in his culture, it is no surprise that Nathan identifies himself alternately as the raven and as God's son. He muses, "I ain't afraid in my head—there's a part of me / that's like a kite cut loose, like Noah's raven / that knows it ain't going back" (48). He raves, "God the Father, who gave his only begotten son, / Goddamn, what a hell / of a thing to do" (48). He sobs,

> Twenty years old and crying into my shirt.
>
> I'm glad Gertie can't see me.
>
> But when he seen God was really gonna make him die, even *Jesus* cried and tried to change his mind. (52-53)

In the last stanza of the section, the poet convincingly conveys the eerie detachment of impending death. Nathan imagines the surviving miners struggling "Out of the dark of the drift mouth" holding each other up "in twos and threes" and "dragging / brothers and fathers between them" (54). Ultimately, Nathan comes to terms with his own death and identifies himself with the raven, with "the dark":

I am part

of the dark the lights bob through in little clusters,

wavery constellations that fade into ordinary

men in the daylight. I am far under

the roots of the old chestnut, hid

in the raven light, where the rock

of ages has cleft. (54)

Much like Rukeyser's Shirley Jones and Llewellyn's Jennie Franco, Nathan has literally, or, rather, metaphysically, become dispersed within his community; he has merged with the spirit and the history of his community. The reader experiences his passing both as the loss of an individual and as another in an interminable series of losses to the community, an experience heightened by Nathan's description of the surviving men leaving the collapsed mine in twos and threes, with fathers and brothers.

The first poem of the final section of the book is a journal entry written by Catherine Terry, the company schoolteacher. She tells us first of the dead: 'Robert Davis's father and two brothers / are dead and Nathan Stokes is missing' (56). Then she describes the living: when Mrs. Davis hears of the loss of her husband and two sons, the teacher writes that "even the air around her seemed bruised," a comment that ties together physical and the metaphysical—the coal dust belching out of the mine stains the air while Nathan Stokes's dissolution into the darkness is still lingering. Miss Terry also describes Gertie Stokes, who, upon learning her husband Nathan was trapped in the mine, "did not speak, only turned the bucket / upside-down—the miner's way to signal

strike" (56). At this point the reader knows what the rest of the community does not yet know, that Gertie had packed Nathan's lunch bucket upside down, an act that Nathan worried would come to haunt Gertie as causing bad luck. Indeed, much later in the book, some other community members learn that Gertie had not meant to signal strike, but only to turn out the bad luck. The specific individual reason for the action does not matter, however, because the community's decision to strike is based on much more than one widow's response to shock. This is one of the many moments in the book where the poet affords the reader an "insider's view" that is less like a fictional narrator's limited omniscience and more like the experience of communal information-gathering. Communities piece together their knowledge from the information shared by individuals, but the communal knowledge and the actions based upon that knowledge are greater than the sum of the individuals' contributions. "In bearing witness to history, people are able to place themselves within a communal context defined by their community; their very lives speak to shared suffering and to a shared cultural ethos" (T. Woods, "Memory" 164). The emotional information shared within the community is valued as much as factual information: the facts are that miners have again died from unsafe conditions in the mine and the emotional impact of a young widow turning her husband's lunch bucket over serves as the catalyst for a strike.

In this action of turning the bucket, the power of symbolism to encapsulate communal epistemology and animate structures of feeling is made apparent. In this symbolic action, the community's history is instantiated; the present tragedy fuses with the community's historical experiences and therefore Gertie's "gesture / caught, swept

through the crowd, and so / it was decided. The men were going out" (56). This decision might and often does, seem inexplicable and strictly emotional to outsiders, especially to those who do not live in enveloping communities with strong cultural traditions and a sense of shared history. However instantaneous the decision to strike (or to perform other spontaneous communal actions) might seem, it is actually a historically, spiritually, and intellectually reasoned response to continual oppression, most recently epitomized by the mine collapse. A process of information-gathering and contextualizing has been going on in the community for some time; the strike is the product of those processes which the poem allows the reader to experience as if "firsthand." Fisher's poem, rather than explaining how such things happen, creates a place for the reader to experience it, thereby bringing the reader into empathetic identification with the individuals and the community found there and activating a participatory "total response" to the situation in ways that neither Rukeyser's nor Llewellyn's overall observationist perspective can. Like a drama, the effect of the book is one of presence, since a drama is never in the past but always in the perpetual present of enactment. In *Kettle Bottom*, Fisher sets the stage for the reader to participate in an empathetic drama, sustaining what is usually a momentary experience of literary empathy.

In their documentary long poems, *The Book of the Dead*, *Fragments from the Fire* and *Kettle Bottom*, Rukeyser, Llewellyn and Fisher work within and against the generic traditions of the long poem and the dramatic monologue to create powerful working-class counterhistories. However, particularly in literary work that treats the

lives and history of underrepresented groups, the problem of respectful and accurate representation is always at issue. Rukeyser attempts to avoid "speaking for" the people by framing the source documents to "speak for themselves" and offering dramatic monologues as representative of the voices of the people. Llewellyn establishes a documentary and mythic ground upon which her character's dramatic monologues may be understood as both actual and imaginative, thereby gesturing to the historical authenticity of her sources while making use of poetry's imaginative power to move the reader. Of these three poems, one might be tempted to argue that Fisher's is, at the same time, both the most and least problematic in terms of representation. Her use of the dramatic monologue formally erases the author's presence, and she could be presumed to have committed the sin of appropriating the voice of the subaltern, yet of the three poets, Fisher has what might be argued is a stronger cultural claim to the materials, and her decision to use the dramatic monologue exclusively might be attributed to her allegiance to the community represented. Moreover, Fisher's exclusive use of the dramatic monologue in poeticized vernacular language establishes *Kettle Bottom* as a corrective supplement to Rukeyser's counterhistory. Likewise, Fisher's use of a quote from *The Book of the Dead*, "these people live here," not only acknowledges Rukeyser's efforts—poetic and political—but also implies a criticism of the poem, that it did not sufficiently attend to the voices of the people but instead used those voices for the poet's own ends, no matter how honorable those ends may have been. Certainly, such a criticism is not out of line with general criticism of the documentary genre nor with specific criticism of 1930s documentary in its manipulation of the poor and

commodification of the misery of poverty. Regardless of its intended meaning, Fisher's use of the quote underscores the importance of recognizing the dangers and limitations of declaring any one perspective as constitutive of "the truth" or of any one history as objective, even as a larger common truth of the history of working-class oppression and resistance is established. The epigraph also suggests that Fisher—and probably Llewellyn—is not only rewriting historical narratives but also acknowledging, challenging, and rewriting American working-class literary history. Often, the first response to a project involving women's poetry of work and workers is "You must be writing about Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*," as if there were no other women writers of work and workers in American literary history, alternately, the response contains the assumption is that the project covers the proletarian writers of the 1930s, as if that were the only American literary period in which poetry of work and workers flourished. Fisher and Llewellyn expand the working-class literary tradition while, at the same time, they challenge a narratives of working-class literary history that begin and end with Rukeyser or with the proletarian era, narratives which occlude a more complex but commonly overlooked history of working class writing.

It appears that in the three poems analyzed in this chapter, *Kettle Bottom* by Diane Gilliam Fisher, *Fragments from the Fire* by Chris Llewellyn and *The Book of the Dead* by Muriel Rukeyser—that the use of the dramatic monologue influences the overall effect and perspective of the poems in proportion to its prominence. While Rukeyser's poem still operates as a powerful artistic rendering, the use of a more populist mythology and the more extensive reliance on dramatic monologue by the two

contemporary poets should be recognized as representing a poetic choice appropriate for contemporary readers. Despite recent trends in some poetry communities toward opacity and difficulty, the use of dramatic monologue by Fisher and Llewellyn offer contemporary readers a poetry that seems less aesthetically complex and perhaps less intimidating.[28] As Glennis Byron asserts,

> Social and cultural critique, many now believe, requires a democratically accessible form, and the dramatic monologue would therefore appear a far more useful tool for social critique than such experimental forms as, say, language-centered poetry, which risks being understood by only a limited 'elite.' (132)

Byron also comments that the dramatic monologue is broadly familiar to today's society in the guise of popular lyric, citing songs by both Bruce Springsteen and Steve Earle as examples (Byron 132). Like the working-class stories told by Springsteen and Earle, Diane Gilliam Fisher's *Kettle Bottom* displays a deceptively simple style that deflects poetry anxiety in potential readers with its intimate tone. Additionally, its emphasis on voice is well-suited to a society experiencing the renewed oral poetics of performance and slam poetry.

Furthermore, all three poets offer "a systemic vision of social life, a perspective that connects the circulation of knowledges in local situations to the broader social relations in which they are embedded" (Hennessy 144-45) and therefore may be

---

[28]Affrilachian poet doris davenport also deploys a dramatic monologue series to voice a working-class community in her 2005 collection, Madness Like Morning Glories. For more on doris davenport, see James A. Miller, "Coming Home to Affrilachia: The Poems of doris davenport," Her Words: Diverse Voices in Contemporary Appalachian Women's Poetry (U of Tennessee P, 2002).

evaluated as responding respectfully to the questions of "Who can speak?" and "For what kind of world?" (Hennessy 148). Because the creation of an ethically effective counterhistory necessarily entails revising received hegemonic history, the work must go beyond generating mere "truthiness"; it must appeal not only to the emotions but must also challenge circulating cultural, and historical knowledge. In order to effect this revision, the three poets structure a rhetorical stance (Phelan) and model an ethical perspective (Ostriker) for their readers. I maintain that all three poets have established an *ethos* sufficient to convince the reader of the truth-value of their respective poetic worlds, and in doing so, have created an environment in which a general reader will choose to submit to the appeal of empathy and to respond, at least intellectually, to the ethical demands present in the texts. Especially when it makes use of dramatic monologue, the historical long poem successfully creates a literary experience that foregrounds its reliance on historical actualities and its status as representation while at the same time inviting a the willful suspension of disbelief that Coleridge called "poetic faith."

Like the multiple genres of social documentary, these three poems' *purpose* in suspending disbelief is not only an aesthetic one, but a didactic and social one; the poets aim to create empathy for the working class and to direct ethical judgment—and hopefully, political and social action—against the enemies of the working class. As Jim Daniels puts it, "These documentary poems are political acts of salvage and recovery in hopes that the past may not be repeated" (130-31). The impetus toward action I claim for these poetries can be expressed in many ways; it probably most often takes place

when the emotional and historical knowledge gained by the reader through these works is activated by the recognition of similar problems in today's communities. Denise Levertov has said that "Poetry can indirectly have an effect on the course of events by awakening pity, terror, compassion and the conscience of leaders; and by strengthening the morale of persons working for a common cause" (174). The empathetic impact of these poems is the turned lunch bucket. It is the catalyst that can persuade a reader to be moved by empathy beyond understanding to action. Muriel Rukeyser, Chris Llewellyn, and Diane Gilliam Fisher engage ethical memory in the task of creating poetic counterhistories capable of serving not only those who are represented, but also the broader American public. Whether or not poetry has a revolutionary role to play in the remaking of American society is yet to be seen.

Chapter 3:

Class and the Ethical Lyric

One of the underlying assumptions of this work of criticism is that poetry does not necessarily need to be written by a working-class person to be emotionally, ethically, and politically effective for working-class communities. Lyric poetry, more than other genres of poetry, resists this hypothesis. Because lyric is, by definition, an individual, interior song, authenticity in the form of personal experience becomes an issue. In working-class writing, as in ethnic writing, experiential knowledge exerts a pressure on the lyric similar to that which has recently caused controversy regarding its closest prose cousin, the memoir.[1] Contemporary discussions of the role of authenticity, centered on the problem of the speaking "I" and its representational politics, often formulated as who can speak as and for whom, are common in ethnic and postcolonial criticism and can be construed as extending to concerns about the authenticity of lyric poetry.

In working-class studies, the concern with authenticity in literature has sometimes been expressed as prescriptive descriptions of working-class literature that propose a limited aesthetic range for working-class poetries. In this case, authenticity refers not only to a limit on experience but also to a preferred style of representation based upon experience. For example, Tom Wayman suggests that working-class poetry

---

[1] For example, a recent scandal erupted concerning fake "memoirs" by "Margaret B. Jones," who, in her book Love and Consequences: A Memoir of Hope and Survival, claimed to be a half-blood Native American foster child who spent her teenage years growing up as a member of the Bloods gang in South Los Angeles; the author, Margaret Seltzer, is actually from a white, upper-middle-class family and was raised in affluent Sherman Oaks. Other recent fake memoir scandals have involved the writers JT LeRoy, James Frey, and Nasdijj. It is noteworthy that at the same time many of these fake memoirists assume ethnic identities (particularly Native American), almost all of them create a classed identity—poor, downtrodden, and/or working class.

should only treat the hours of work and be situated only in the workplace while Renny Christopher and Christine Whitson promote poetry that can "reproduce the boredom of sameness, of mindless repetition, of humans acting as machinery" (73).[2] Not only are these descriptions heuristically ineffective they also, no doubt without intention, effectively exclude from the category of "working-class literature" any writing that grows out of the many types of service work often performed by women (including nursing, which has its own body of literary writing), retail work at stores like Walmart (also often performed by women), work performed in the rapidly expanding industry which provides telephone- and computer-based customer service centers, and construction and agricultural work performed by ethnic minorities.[3] The representation of domestic labor, paid and unpaid, is also under erasure. Moreover, the meditative or reflective lyric may not display these characteristics; therefore, these restrictive aesthetic formulations could be construed as excluding the lyric from the category of working-class literature. Nevertheless, for poets writing of working people, the lyric's signature self-reflective and meditative nature does not necessarily indicate an escape out of ethical and political engagement.

Another possible objection to including lyric poetry as a poetry of working-class communities is that it has traditionally formulated as antithetical to the communal. Lyric poetry, it is said, is the private poetry of the individual, not the public poetry of the

---

[2] See Tom Wayman, Inside Job: Essays on the New Work Writing (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1983.

[3] As I stated in the introduction, while these descriptions are insufficient for describing the broad range of working-class poetry, they quite clearly describe a subtype of writing that Jim Daniels calls "work poetry" (114) to distinguish it from the broader field of "working-class poetry." These aesthetic markers are also commonly found in poetry of solidarity which makes use of what Keen calls "bounded strategic empathy." The poetry of solidarity is considered in the Conclusion to this study.

community. Furthermore, as Susan Wolfson writes, the lyric has historically been written in collusion "with class-interested strategies of smoothing over historical conflict and contradictions with claims of natural and innate organization" (191-2). Yet, many writers of working-class backgrounds choose the lyric as one, if not the primary mode of composition.[4] The lyric's traditionally anti-public aesthetic intersects in America with the idea that poetry should not be political or socially engaged. As a consequence, American poets, male and female, who wish to produce engaged writing in lyric form often look for guidance to the rich tradition of engaged writing found in other parts of the world, particularly Eastern Europe and Latin America, where both poets and poems participate in the political and social milieu.[5] In a similar turn, I will reference recent critical writing on a European poet to consider one way the lyric can serve ethical ends.

Clare Cavanagh's writings on ethics and the lyric in the work of Polish poet Adam Zagajewski suggest that the lyric offers its own form of resistance:

> For the mature writer, poetry best serves its ethical and social functions precisely when it is at its most "lyrical," when it is firmly grounded, in other words, in the particular experience of the individual poet who sets the lyric's evanescent, stubbornly personal epiphanies against all would-be suprahistorical truths and final solutions. (13)

While working-class people in America have not been subjected to dehumanization by totalitarian regimes, as has Cavanagh's exemplary poet, they are depersonalized by both

---

[4] See the list of authors and titles at the end of this chapter.

[5] See the Introduction for a more in-depth discussion of this topic.

the Left and the Right, a depersonalization that is often signaled by their synechdochal representation as "hands," their rhetorical construction as "the masses" and their social and political evocations and subsequent dismissals as "the immigrant vote," "NASCAR Dads," "rednecks" "trailer trash," and worse.[6] As Barbara Ehrenreich has observed,

> While ideas about gender and even race have moved, however haltingly, in the direction of greater tolerance and inclusivity, ideas about class remain mired in prejudice and mythology. Enlightened people who might flinch at a racial slur have no trouble listing the character defects of an ill-defined 'underclass,' defects which routinely include ignorance, promiscuity, and sloth. There is, if anything, even less [than previously] inhibition about caricaturing the white or "ethnic" working class: Its tastes are "tacky"; its habits unhealthful; and its views are hopelessly bigoted and parochial. (7)

As a counter to these stereotypical views of the working class, a poet's lyrical insistence on the humanity and individuality of working-class people can be a powerful weapon, since lyric poetry has an audience in the middle-and-upper classes where social contact with working-class people is rare and often constrained by boss-worker power differentials. To effect this literary social contact, lyric poems of work and workers often present compressed stories of working-class life; they belong to a category of lyric best described as "narrative-inflected." Some poems of working life do move toward

---

[6] While sweatshops have escaped regulation in the United States during the past several years, they are not, as are some sweatshops in other countries, systematically promoted by the government. However, according to a website authored by Webster University applied experimental psychology professor Linda M. Woolf, "The Department of Labor indicates that 50% of garment factories in the U.S. violate two or more basic labor laws, establishing them as sweatshops" (Women and Sweatshops 1).

the classic lyric mode, musing upon the human condition and extending the lyrical moment deep into the poet's psyche, but even these poems usually flare up from story and they rarely remain obscured in private language or imagery for long. Instead, they reach out toward the reader in an effort to construct an imagined and possible class-conscious human community.

This chapter focuses on six poems written by three poets of two different generations hailing from three different regional cultures, who, while writing within what would typically be called a lyric genre, reach out toward the reader and attempt to create an empathetically re-imagined human community. I have chosen works by these three poets, Marge Piercy, Maggie Anderson, and Dorianne Laux partly because while they are among the writers most often cited as affiliated with the working class, their poetry has received little sustained attention in terms of their working-class poetics. Not only are all three recognized as poets of the working class, but their similar styles and strong feminist orientations make their poems intellectually appealing for comparison and contrast. Furthermore, despite differences in age and regional culture, they all three write poetry in two particular lyric modes, one which I will call the family poem and one which uses a technique known as the protean narrator. The family poem is commonly found in the writings of many poets who declare their working-class origins, including those by Piercy, Anderson, and Laux. It is designed to generate empathy and stimulate ethical considerations of the economic and social situations of working-class people and to provide a platform to speak honestly about the injuries of class, subtly and without reifying class identity. However, the family poem does not usually move past

the "injuries of class" to empathetically bring the reader into politically-viable solidarity with the working class. A second technique of composition used by the three poets examined here, is that which Dennis Schofield calls the "protean narrator." I assert that the lyric poem voiced by a protean narrator is capable of effectively engaging a willing reader in an empathetic relationship geared toward enhancing the reader's knowledge of the damage that class causes and encouraging ethical self-interrogation of the reader's complicity in class structures. Furthermore, it positions the reader, at least textually, in solidarity with working-class people. Additionally, poems written in the reciprocal voice of the protean narrator by Piercy, Anderson, and Laux operate within a utopian/ dystopian frame which reflects the desire to bring social critique into the lyric. Piercy both relies on and challenges the traditional boundaries of lyric poetry through the use of the protean narrator. In addition, perhaps buoyed by her experiences in the social movements of the Sixties, she evokes a utopian vision of a communal future. By contrast, both Anderson and Laux are of the generation that came of age during the Reagan Revolution, which was marked by the co-optation of the "voice of the common people," union-breaking, and economic tyranny that set the stage for continuing neoconservative devaluation of labor. Subsequently, they are more skeptical than Piercy of an easily achieved utopian communal future and therefore their protean narrator poems do not imagine a worker's paradise like Piercy's. Rather, both poets engage in a materialist resistance to the widespread magical thinking of America's political and economic elites. While Anderson's understandably dystopic perspective makes for powerfully stinging critiques of consumer society, Laux's protean narrator refuses both

Anderson's dystopianism and Piercy's utopianism. Instead, her poetry reveals that both imaginary worlds are instantiated in the current, material, spiritual, and emotional existence of working-class people today. All three poets' protean-narrator poems confirm James Phelan's insistence that the "central concept" of the "ethical dimension of the [poem as] rhetorical communication" is "*position,* a concept that combines *being placed in* and *acting from an ethical location*" (632). These poems use empathetic appeals to place the lyrical audience in an ethical position *vis-à-vis* workers and their families and to suggest the possibility of acting ethically from that location, while at the same time disproving the claim that the lyric necessarily excludes the historical by the material nature of their examination of the personal. Using the two modes of the family poem and the protean narrator, the poetic practice of Piercy, Anderson, and Laux situates the reader in an empathetic relationship to working-class people in order both to generate an interrogation of the dominant representations of class and class history and to demand a response from the reader that includes, at the least, a rethinking of America's ethical relationship to its workers. I will first explore the mode of the family poem as written by each poet, beginning with Marge Piercy.

Although there are few critical considerations of her poetry, Marge Piercy may be the most widely known of the poets considered here, primarily through her fiction writing.[7] She grew up working-class, was a scholarship student at the University of Michigan, and was very active in 1960s political movements. She is recognized in the working-class studies community as a poet concerned with working-class issues and the

[7]The majority of critical work on Piercy addresses her fiction.

poem I used for an epigraph, “To Be of Use,” is commonly cited as evidence of her allegiance to working-class communities.[8] Piercy herself has said that her writing is intended to “be of use” in a manner centered on human particulars:

> I am always hoping that people will understand something about those we define as the “other,” whoever we are in this society, and be willing to enter their experiences and to understand something about what it is like for a woman who is homeless instead of just missing her. To be able to understand what kind of damage class does in this society. You want people to be willing to enter the experience of characters whose problems are [more] difficult than their own so they can achieve empathy. Or whose problems are very similar to their own so they can find themselves validated. That's what I wanted to do. To validate people and to create empathy. (“A Class Act” 15)

Piercy specifically identifies “the kind of damage class does in this society” as a social problem she feels is important to explore in her work, and she has done so throughout her career. Her writing, both poetry and fiction, reveals that she is conscious of the problems of representation addressed in the last chapter and that she attempts to represent classed persons without objectifying or reducing them to victims. Most importantly, for this study, her first response regarding the philosophy underlying her writing is that she desires to create empathy by helping readers to “understand something about those we define as the ‘other.’” This is precisely what I assert that most

[8] I use this term “allegiance” with conscious reference to William Stafford’s poem “Allegiances,” which declares that it is “time for all of us common ones / to locate ourselves by the real things / we live by” (The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems of William Stafford, edited by Robert Bly, 30.)

women poets writing of working-class communities are consciously and compositionally attempting: to create empathy for working-class people as one of the tactics of their poetry directed toward the strategy of creating politically engaged solidarity with working-class people.

In "Landed Fish," (14-15), a poem originally published in her first collection, *Breaking Camp* 1968), Piercy examines the "kind of damage class does" in her own family.[9] Like most family poems, it also serves to "validate" the often painful experiences of working-class people. The poem is a bitterly honest elegy for her "Uncle Danny," who is "dead of a heart attack, / mid thirties, pretzel thin / just out of the pen for passing bad checks" (1-5). The initial response to a character just out of prison for writing bad checks may not be one of empathy or sympathy but the poem's structure postpones judgment and encourages understanding with storytelling: the poet-speaker relates a story about her uncle, set "late in the Depression" when the speaker was four years old (9). The story is not truly a memory belonging to the speaker, but instead one told by her mother "In family" and meant "to show even at four I was cunning" (14). The speaker's mother relates how the speaker charms her uncle while sitting on his lap, by declaring him "beautiful" (16) because "he has green eyes like my pussycat," when, in truth, the cat has yellow eyes. Uncle Danny buys the child-speaker a "green ice on a stick" from the "Good Humor man," a rare treat "in the long Depression / with cornmeal and potatoes and beans in the house to eat" (21-22). In the third stanza, the speaker admits she was "lying" about Uncle Danny's eyes, yet says it was "not for gain"

---

[9] All references to specific poems by Piercy are taken from her 1982 collection Circles on The Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy, (Knopf, 1982).

and instead insists that she was essentially being truthful because "he is beautiful on the steps laughing / with money in the pockets of his desperate George Raft pants. / His eyes flicker like leaves / his laugh breaks in his throat to pieces of sun" (31-34).[10] The speaker protests her mother's framing of her uncle's beauty as a falsehood and of the child's manipulation as merely mercenary; as Jean Cocteau professed, "The poet is a liar who always speaks the truth." Piercy insists the truth or lie is not in the event or in the words, but in the human dimension of the story. Capitalism measures a human being's worth by the profitability of their alienated labor; the poet replies that focusing on Uncle Danny's beauty is not to tell a lie for gain, but to re-value him as a human being.

In the third stanza, the speaker returns to the controlling metaphor of the poem: "I am tangling my hands in his fiberglass hair. / The hook is that it pleases him" (29). "The hook" refers back to the poem's title, "Landed Fish," a descriptive for Uncle Danny that can be understood in at least two ways: he is the child-speaker's "landed fish," and he is a "fish out of water" in the society in which he was born, a person who "made it as he could / and the world narrowed on him" (4-5) until he died and was "salted away in the dry expensive California dirt / under a big neon sign shaped like a boomerang / that coaxes Last Chance Stop Here Last Chance" (46-49). Even after death, Uncle Danny's neon marker seduces passersby with promises that the capitalist system makes but never keeps to its less fortunate citizens. Piercy's criticism of capitalism is unrelenting—Uncle Danny's downfall begins with his refusal to join the

---

[10] Referring to the actor George Raft, who grew up on the streets in Hell's Kitchen and went on to portray gangsters in Hollywood. His most famous role was as Guido Rinaldo in the original Scarface (1932).

military-industrial complex: “Three years and he will be drafted and refuse to fight. / He will rot in stockade. He will swing an ax on his foot” (35-6). His downfall ends, literally, under the seductive sign of desperate consumerism. Uncle Danny’s last chance did not pan out. The “hook” that set Uncle Danny was, in the final instance, not the adoring fingers of his charming niece, but the belief in the American dream, in “his own luck” (37). His almost naive belief in luck has been nurtured by the American dream discourse, so much so that it damages him; he does not realize or will not accept that “luck” rarely comes to those who do not have connections or money. Uncle Danny cannot admit that George Raft’s good fortune is the exception and not the rule.

Moreover, along with offering an empathetic portrait of an alienated worker, “Landed Fish” simultaneously presents the speaker’s bittersweet entry into class consciousness. Her mother’s family story is told to show that the speaker is “cunning” and that that cunning is related to the seductions of capitalism and the desires of the working class for ownership of the fruits of their labor, symbolized here by the green ice. The adult speaker, having come into class consciousness, frames her manipulation of Uncle Danny as a naive reenactment of Uncle Danny’s relationship with capitalism. The thematic pairing of her manipulation of Uncle Danny and capitalism’s seduction of Uncle Danny is strongly associated. The speaker also comes to recognize the gendered effects of capitalism, when she admits that she is “still climbing into men’s laps / and telling them how beautiful they are” (38-39). The speaker’s confession is complicated, since she has previously protested that such actions are a kind of truth-telling which, at least when she was a child, was one “not for gain,” yet there was a reward forthcoming

from her manipulation of Uncle Danny, and, one might presume, from her manipulation of men as an adult woman. In the poem "Landed Fish," using complex series of interrelated images, Piercy deftly and empathetically represents how capitalism's class structures interpenetrate all our relationships: among family, between men and women, between children and adults, and even with ourselves.

Like Marge Piercy, the poet Maggie Anderson writes poetry that argues for an understanding of people whose lives are marked by their labor and by their relationship to consumer capitalism. Like Piercy, she is both insider and outsider; her parents came from Appalachian coal-mining families, attended college on scholarships, and became schoolteachers. However, Anderson, unlike Piercy, has returned to the region of her family origins, teaching poetry in public schools in Pennsylvania before settling at Kent State University. Anderson's poetry evinces the moral and intellectual struggle her class-crossing has catalyzed. In the family poem "Sonnet for Her Labor" (55), Anderson calculates the damage that class does in her own family and, at the same time, she honors her aunt's domestic labor.[11] She sets the scene in "my Aunt Nita's kitchen immaculate and dark" (1), then enumerates her aunt's labors:

> She clattered
>
> pots on countertops wiped clean of coal dust,
>
> fixed three meals a day, fried meat, mixed batter
>
> for buckwheat cakes, hauled water, in what seemed lust
>
> for labor . . . (5-9)

[11] All references to specific poems by Anderson are taken from her 2000 collection, Windfall: New and Selected Poems. (U of Pittsburgh P, 2000.) Both "Sonnet for Her Labor" and "Closed Mill" were originally published in *A Space Filled With Moving,* 1992.

What may not be identifiable from this short excerpt is that the poem is composed in the epitome of the personal lyric genre, as a rhymed Shakespearian sonnet consisting of three quatrains and a couplet, with a *volta,* or turn, at the ninth line. While, as Marilyn Hacker reports, "some feminist critics" have suggested that the sonnet is the "*ne plus ultra* of poetic form enacting the negation of the female subject" (299), Anderson's use of the sonnet suggests that critical arguments about whether a particular poetic form or genre is political are not engaging the important question of how it is put to use. As Mark Wallace asserts, "it seems clear that what one does with a form is the key ethical component of writing and not the form as it exists as a possibility, whatever historical use has been made of the form" (196). Anderson uses the sonnet to enact the recognition of the female subject while simultaneously refuting traditional judgments that domestic labor is unworthy of high poetry. In this sense, it belongs to a line of "domestic" sonnets that are best exemplified in American poetry by the cycle "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. According to Strand and Boland's *The Making of a Poem,* the sonnet can "suggest narrative progress through its sequence structure, while, in single units, it is capable of the essential lyric qualities of being musical, brief, and memorable" (58). The sonnet form, then, is capable of embodying the tension between narrative and lyric found in working-class poems. Moreover, "Sonnet for Her Labor" embodies the "particular tension between the necessity of human expression and desire for beauty and the economic conditions and circumstances of work" that Janet Zandy proposes is the fundamental tension in "worker writing" (*Hands* 73). The poem reveals

how the conditions of domestic labor make unrecognizable the aesthetic desires which are often materialized in that labor.

"Sonnet for Her Labor" appears to be composed in a Hopkinsesque "sprung" pentameter, incorporating five stressed syllables per line with a varying number of unstressed syllables. If the poem indeed scans to the meter invented by Gerard Manley Hopkins, then it, too, carries its own burden of meaning in the poem. In the "Author's Preface" to his *Poems,* Hopkins states that, "Sprung Rhythm is the most natural of things. For it is the rhythm of common speech and of written prose, when rhythm is perceived in them" (para. 9). The poet has perceived the rhythm of Aunt Nita's life and has chosen a poetic rhythm closely associated with "common" speech and "common" lives. Using a controlled and rhythmic form, the poet crafts a literary-labor-intensive song that mimics the claustrophobia of her aunt's rhythmic, repetitive life. The poem's argument, established in the first two quatrains, sets Aunt Nita's drive for cleanliness against the darkness and shadows that surround her. The paired quatrains enact a struggle against the darkness, yet it is not the expected "darkness" of dying but of living. By associating "lust" with "labor," rather than with love, the poet works against the sonnet's traditional function. Moreover, the line break between "lust" and "labor" reveals an ideological fault line, since the phrase "lust for labor" is historically associated with the justification of onerous labor practices. The reasoning was that since workers, barely more human than draft animals, are driven by a lust for labor (conveniently sanctified by the church, enforced by the wage slavery, and motivated by fear of unemployment), overworking them was the appropriate prescription for

exorcising their animal natures.[12] However, the poet refuses to reduce Aunt Nita's selfhood to her function as a laborer; she only "seems" to have a "lust for labor"—the end rhyme suggests it may be for fighting the "coal dust," a metaphor which simultaneously references, and suggests as equivalent, the struggle of workers for the ownership of their labor and the universal human struggle against death. The noisy activity of the quatrains counterpoints the shadowed vitality of Aunt Nita: she is constantly moving, her day is defined in a series of verb-object clauses: she "clattered pots," "fixed. . .meals," "mixed batter," "fried meat," "hauled water." In the end, the poem leaves open what desires—for cleanliness, for order, for love—actually fuel Aunt Nita's determined productivity; Anderson, like Piercy, refuses to assume she can completely know Aunt Nita's inner life. At the moment Aunt Nita stops moving, the poem turns: "One March evening, after cleaning, / she lay down to rest and died" (9-10). Aunt Nita's labor is the engine for her life, her family's lives, *and* for the poem.

Without Aunt Nita's industry, the third quatrain is still and quiet: "Uncle Ed" and "Uncle Craig" are "silent" and still for "the blessing" of the meal Aunt Nita has prepared at the table she has set. The couplet reveals the depth and sorrow of the silence: "No one said a word to her. All that food / and cleanliness. No one ever told her it was good" (13-14). With its forceful final couplet, the sonnet form makes the bare

---

[12] Paul LaFargue, Marx's son-in-law, writes extensively on the ideology supporting the "murderous delusion" for the "The blind, perverse and murderous passion for work," insisting that it "transforms the liberating machine into an instrument for the enslavement of free men. Its productiveness enslaves them." It is clear even today that a worker who took up "The Right to Be Lazy" would immediately be replaced by someone willing to work more for less remuneration. Needless to say, this is one of the many reasons unions (or a revolution) are necessary to protect workers from oppressive labor practices. LaFargue also examines how the Protestant "work ethic" supplies a religious sanction for capitalism's alienation of labor. See "The Right to Be Lazy" at the Marxists' Internet Archive.

statement of ingratitude almost shocking and certainly unequivocal. The couplet also proclaims the epideictic purpose of the sonnet: the poet is breaking the silence that surrounds her aunt's labor. The metaphorical societal silence is made material in that of the uncles: the poet interjects her song for Aunt Nita's labor into both silences. For many poets, especially women poets, the act of breaking silence is, in itself, an ethical act. That the poem is designed to submerge the reader into the rhythm of Aunt Nita's life adds to its empathetic dimension; the reader's body becomes identified with Aunt Nita's labor through the devices of rhythm and rhyme. Thus, when the final couplet arrives with its blunt truth, the reader has been positioned to incorporate its hard rhythm as blows that metaphorically echo the emotional and psychological blows of a life spent in alienated and unappreciated labor. Anderson's "Sonnet for Her Labor" is a formally masterful and emotionally moving portrait of one woman's labor as representative of the experiences of many women.

In contrast to those of Piercy and Anderson, Dorianne Laux's poems of work and workers are often founded not only upon a childhood remembrance or familial experience, but also upon her own personal, adult and childhood experiences, and although I have avoided strictly biographical criticism, it important to note that Laux did not "leave" the working class until she earned her B.A. in English at the age of thirty-six. According to the short biography included in her second book of poetry, *What We Carry*, she "worked as a gas station manager, sanatorium cook, maid, and donut holer" and "wrote poems during shift breaks." Laux's first book of poems, *Awake,* was published in 1990 (69). Her experience of adult working-class life inflects her

family poems; they are just as often about Laux's own family (her daughter was nine when Laux entered Mills College) as they are about the poet's childhood in her parents' home. Laux's adult working-class experience and her formidable pragmatic aesthetic provide a challenge when comparing her family poems to those of the other two poets. Nevertheless, the final family poem under consideration is Laux's "Small Gods" (44), published in her second collection, *What We Carry* (1994).

"Small Gods" presents an adult's critical remembrance of a child's perspective on her working-class parents, a view the speaker implies is universal, or, at least, common to the other children in the neighborhood. Unlike Piercy's "Landed Fish," there is no attempt at an understandable romantic revisionism; unlike Anderson's "Sonnet for Her Labor," there is no sense of redemption. Instead, Laux's poem presents dark visions of working-class family life in which both parents are figured as gods. The speaker's father is "floating / home" like all the other fathers down the block, "in their gleaming cars filled with food / and thunder" (2-4); the mothers are "lesser gods, fragile / in their thin robes" (5-6). The children "were small, barely human, huddled half-naked like puppies on a rug bathed / in the blue TV light, trying to be good" (8-10). These first few lines establish a clear power structure: the parents have it (to varying degrees) and the children do not. The parents are gods, the children animals trying not to incur the wrath of their godlike parents—"trying to be good" (10). There is no communication between the children and the parents, only rules that are handed down from on high; there is no family interaction. In Laux's small family portrait there is no intergenerational discussion, not even the representation of the parents' ability or desire

to imagine what their children are thinking, what dreams they are dreaming. Nor can the child-speaker stretch her imagination enough to engage with her parents on a more equitable ground. "I could not imagine the immense thoughts / they carried in the heads, their hearts / pumping like heavy machinery" (15-17). Her only defense from the pain inflicted by their indifference is to suppose that "maybe this was how it had to be, their silence / a rigid religion" (18-19), an involuntary stoicism inflicted on the speaker and her siblings.

Finally, the adult speaker ties her parents' godlike silence to her own inability to empathize with the animals she cared for, asking rhetorically, "What did I know / of their terrors, their souls?" (25-26). It is improbable that a practiced reader of American poetry would miss this allusion to Robert Hayden's poignant working-class poem about a similar lack of communication, "Those Winter Sundays," in which the speaker admits to a failure to recognize the love and sacrifice in his father's seemingly mundane acts of polishing the child's shoes and starting a fire to warm the house. Hayden's poem, like Laux's, is written from the perspective of an adult looking back at his childhood; its final lines are "What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?" In Hayden's poem, the speaker has, in his adulthood, come to the understanding that his father did love him; no such comforting conclusion is arrived at by the speaker of "Small Gods." Instead, she compares her godlike parents' distance from their children, who are "barely human, huddled half naked like puppies on the rug" to her own distance from the "animals I tended through those years" (21). The speaker does not call the animals pets, nor does she indicate she considered them as

anything more than something to tend. She only "gave names and fed them. / Day after day I watched them grow" (27-8). She named them. She fed them. They grew. Her parents named her and fed her. She grew. Children, like animals, are objects denied a subject's right of response, of discourse. There is no intimation that love and sacrifice are part of this particular family's parenting logic, not even from the broader perspective of adulthood; there are no acts that have the potential to signify love. More important, there is no imaginative role-taking capable of connecting the adult / child speaker and her parents. It implies that empathy can be learned—or not learned—by example. This is an uncomfortable poem that refuses its reader an empathetic or even a sympathetic relationship with its characters; it is a poem representing the failure of empathy. In its intertextual comparison of the speaker's family to that of Hayden's speaker, Laux's poem asserts that love is an act, or rather, a series of acts through which love is performed. Love, for the speaker, is an active verb, and, in this poem there are no acts between parents and children that go beyond what even animal parents supply for their children: food and shelter. Laux's take on the working-class family is that its dynamics can sometimes preclude the kind of affective response I maintain is at work in these poems; the poem asks how we might learn to extend our empathy to Others if we have not learned empathy at home. Moreover, it is possible to read this one family as allegorizing social relationships in our classed society; if a reader makes that connection, she must acknowledge the damage to society that occurs when empathetic engagement is missing from our collective lives. Laux presents this denial of the affective dynamic as a lack, as a negatively marked space. In the same way dystopia

carries within itself the idea of utopia, the tone of longing and regret in Laux's dis-affective poem indicates a desire for empathetic response of the kind around which a transformative ethical poetics might be created. This poetics would be one capable of empathetically engaging readers in the realities of working-class life while at the same time asking them to consider the ethics of their own position within the class structures of American late capitalism toward the end of transforming their relationship to working-class people into one of solidarity.

While the working-class family poem crafted by skilled and sensitive poets like Piercy, Anderson and Laux can subtly, truthfully, and empathetically reveal the damages of class, poems that make use of the protean narrator to create a reciprocal perspectival voice are capable of empathetically engaging readers in socially-transformative ethical responses to working-class issues. While perspectival voice in poetry is not as widely theorized as it is in narrative, there are several essays concerned with its use and function. For example, T. S. Eliot identifies three voices at work in poetry: the subjective or egopoetic voice, where the poet is "talking to himself—or to nobody," a voice Eliot identifies with the lyric poem; the objective or narrative voice, identified with narrative poetry, in which the poet addresses an audience; and the dramatic voice which speaks "within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character" (4).[13] As poet-critic Charles Martin notes, "In the middle of the last century, when T. S. Eliot wrote the essay, [. . .] 'The Three Voices of Poetry,' he had in mind an older idea of voice as a poet's mode of relating (or of not relating) to an

[13] Lewis Turco maintains this schema in his classic reference work, The Book of Forms.

audience, rather than the contemporary sense of poetic voice as a means of individuation," and it is this rhetorical sense that is at issue here. According to Martin, Eliot's third, "dramatic," voice has all but disappeared in contemporary poetry, a disappearance caused by the "expansion" of the domain of Eliot's first voice, the "private" voice of the poet talking to herself.[14] He views the rhetorical turn toward what he terms the "reciprocal voice" as a corrective to the inward turn of writer-centered contemporary poetry. "Reciprocal voice" describes those contemporary lyric poetries that participate in an active (as opposed to Eliot's passive) discourse with their readers, a poetry that lies somewhere between "talking to oneself" and "talking to others." According to Martin, the poem in reciprocal voice, in opposition to the widely used contemporary egopoetic voice, has "as one of its themes the necessity" of "discourse between writer and autonomous reader" (34). It is a poetic voice he describes metaphorically as the poet sitting "on a worn-out picnic blanket, making up stories, singing songs, posing riddles that the others can take away with them" (34). The reciprocal voice is inherently social. For this study, the most important aspect of the reciprocal voice is this social aspect: the poem in reciprocal voice assumes the presence of an audience capable of responding to the poet's rhetorical assertion. The choice of an audience-directed perspectival voice, Martin's "reciprocal voice," is used by Marge Piercy in "The morning half-life blues," by Maggie Anderson in "Closed Mill," and

---

[14] This evaluation is disproved by the extensive use of dramatic monologue by women poets of work and workers and by the poet Ai's almost exclusive use of the dramatic monologue. However, I find very useful the idea that the "reciprocal" voice represents a rhetorical middle ground between the personal, private voice and the dramatic voice. Unfortunately, Martin's disapproving discussion of the "prophetic" voice verges on reactionary sexism in his reading of the poem "Rape" by Adrienne Rich; despite all these caveats, the concept of the "reciprocal" voice is serviceable and, I think, an accurate description of a certain aesthetic in contemporary poetry.

Dorianne Laux, in “Oh, the Water.” The reciprocal voice, which is closely associated with these poem’s ethical dimensions, is signaled by the use of a shifting second person pronoun which Dennis Schofield calls the “Protean narrator.”

> Put most simply, it is a mode in which it is unclear whether the "you" is a character, the narrator, a reader/narratee, or no-one in particular—or a combination of these—so that its utterances are at once familiar and deeply strange, its engaged readers at one and the same time identifying with and repudiating a seeming [sic] direct, even intimate, address.

While Schofield is defining the properties of the protean narrator in fiction, his description is consonant with the poetic narrator found in these poems. Moreover, in contemporary poems of work and workers, the second-person plural pronoun “we” is also capable of signaling the presence of a protean narrator. The pronoun “we” can signal a shifting, combinatory,“seeming direct, even intimate address” in some working-class poems for two reasons: one, as Janet Zandy asserts the working-class “I” is *a priori* plural and two, the “we” interpellated is the result of a process—the class process (“Complexities”). In other words, the pronoun “we,” while it does not always function in a manner similar to the protean “you,” it can, and does in poems by Piercy, Anderson, and Laux, serve to combine perspective and addressee in a manner which mimics the varying social positions created by class structures. Second, in poems of work and workers, the protean “we,” like the protean “you,” can also serve as a performative which establishes (literary) solidarity with the speaker/character/reader at the moment of its speaking. Furthermore, the protean narrator respectfully and reciprocally engages

what James Phelan terms the "lyrical audience," which, although it "recognize[s] that the speaker is different from us," moves "toward adopting the speaker's perspective without any irritable reaching after difference evaluation" (635). The ability to encourage the reader to adopt the speaker's perspective is particularly important in these poems where the speaker's perspective shifts position and voice within the confines of the poem. The protean narrator is an audience-directed poetic device that respects its readers' ability to piece together their own narrative from multiple perspectives; it speaks in a reciprocal voice, equally available to the perspectives of character, narrator, and reader. The protean narrator speaking in a reciprocal voice allows for a poetic perspective of empathetic partial-knowing; it brings the reader into identification with the speaker *and* with the subjects of the speaker's empathetic imagination, the working people of the poem. In poems by Marge Piercy, "The morning half-life blues," and by Maggie Anderson, "Closed Mill," the protean narrator is located within a utopian/ dystopian frame which intensifies its power of social critique. Dorianne Laux's poem, "Oh, the Water," differs from that of Piercy and Anderson in her signature refusal of romantic (utopian) and nostalgic modes. This is a difference in kind from Piercy's poem, a difference in degree from Anderson's.

Marge Piercy uses the protean narrator to encourage the creation of an empathetic response which underwrites a class-conscious ethics in the poem "The morning half-life blues." "The morning half-life blues" exemplifies Piercy's ability to use a multiply perspectival lyric voice to engender an empathetic response toward the poems' citizens. Additionally, Piercy's figuration of this poem as a blues song

immediately signals the poem's working-class origins. While the blues is certainly an African American form, it is also a pan-ethnic working-class genre, in thematic content and in audience reception. The blues has always critiqued class ideology and economic injustice (and through the voices of its female artists, classed gender relations), foregrounding lyrics that directly interrogate worker-boss interactions, the drudgery of domestic and physical labor, and the joys and sorrows of working-class life.[15] "The morning half-life blues" includes traditional blues themes; it focuses upon the daily grind and evokes workers' sense of alienation and loss of personhood. However, where blues songs usually rely on a first-person perspective or a straightforward communal "we," in Piercy's poem the perspective shifts radically from stanza to stanza.

The protean narrator in Piercy's "The morning half-life blues" shifts the reader's position relative to the poem's characters as it moves from the perspective of an observing outsider (signaled by limited omniscient narration) to a communal perspective (signaled by the use of "we") to a slippery I/thou narration signaled by the pronoun "you," and finally to a voice speaking in first person, a voice that makes an ethical promise to the poem's characters. "The morning half-life blues" is a poem of women, of "Girls" who "buck the wind in the grooves toward work" and who pass by "shop windows" that "snicker / flashing them hurrying over dresses they cannot afford: you are not pretty enough, not pretty enough" (40.1-5). The introductory first stanza reads as if it were a traditional lyric in egopoetic voice and a practiced literary reader

---

[15] Country music, the "white" version of the blues, also evinces this concern with class, particularly classic country music (before its sharp right turn). For a small sampling of essays on the blues and country music as working-class genres, see Working Man Blues: Country Music in California, by Gerald W. Haslam, Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues by Paul Oliver, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday by Angela Y. Davis.

might be justified in assuming that the poet will use the girls' apparitions in the shop windows as the catalyst for interior reflection or that their reflections will function as opaquely evocative images, like "petals on a wet black bough" (Pound). However, Piercy refuses both the "talking to herself" and the "talking to nobody" poetic modes, and moves instead to a communal "we" that identifies the poem's narrator (and, putatively, the poem's reader) with the working women, or, more powerfully, *as* one of the working women who are "Blown with yesterday's papers through the boiled coffee morning" (6). The women, including the speaker, are presented collectively: "we dream" (7), "we nestle" (9) we "lie in mounds of peony" (10). The "dream" is a communal re-imagining of a place beyond alienation, of a "stop on the subway without a name / a door in the heart of the grove of skyscrapers" (7-8), a utopia where we "need barter ourselves for nothing. / not by the hour, not by the pound, not by the skinful" (11-12). This utopia, a "party to which no one will give or sell us the key" previously has been glimpsed by working women only in debased form, when "we have all thought briefly we found it / drunk or in bed." (14-15). Drucilla Cornel writes that "the politics of difference and the difference of the feminine demand the evocation of utopian possibility" which imaginatively funds the "struggle through the dream for a new world, a new future" (173). Piercy's poem imagines not just a better working-class future, but a better, feminist, working-class future. The utopian impulse at work here in Piercy's poem is also found in her fiction. Elyce Rae Helford ties the utopian impulse both to Piercy's feminism and to her class consciousness, describing Piercy's speculative fiction novel, *He, She, and It,* as presenting "a working egalitarianism based

upon both affinity and necessity" (12), a description that could also distinguish the implied philosophical thrust of this poem. The "necessity" of Piercy's utopian dream is made evident in her criticism of society as a "party to which no one will give or sell us the key," a situation that can only be rectified by refusing, as a group, to "barter" away selfhood and human dignity. "Affinity" in this poem is represented in part by the use of the protean "we," which makes the dream briefly found "drunk or in bed" common to all working women as represented by the women described in the poem. In addition, narrative slippage turns the first-person plural phrase into a performative statement, creating in its utterance an affinity between the speaker, the working women it represents, and the reader.

After imagining this socialistic dream of common women, the poet moves back "out" to a richly imagistic description of women on their commutes to work.[16] The speaker describes "Black girls with thin legs and high necks stalking like herons, / plump girls with blue legs and green eyelids and strawberry breasts" (40.16-17). Sadly, these herons are destined for the capitalist zoo, to be "swept off to be frozen in fluorescent cubes, / the vacuum of your jobs sucks your brains dry" (40.18-20). The poet is re-imaging the common cultural conceit of women as birds, figuring the women as graceful, exotic, and powerful creatures in a manner that refutes more mundane, domestic, dismissive comparisons to chickens or hens. These images also function to recognize the women's inherent comeliness in much the same way that the child-speaker recognized Uncle Danny's. They simultaneously refute capitalism's

[16] An intentional play on "dream of a common woman," the title of a poetry collection by working-class lesbian poet Judy Grahn. Piercy quotes Grahn in the preface to Circles on the Water.

"snickering" denial of their intrinsic human beauty, which tells them "you are not pretty enough" to be anything other than wage slaves. The slide into second-person here indicates the poet's desire to identify with her characters yet acknowledge that she can only know them because she can imagine the commonalities between their lives and hers. Piercy's use of singular- and plural-second person avoids problems inherent to third-person narrative perspectives, particularly third-person omniscient, which assume complete knowledge and gesture toward an inherent assumption of narrative control, functioning as perspectival grand narratives in the same way cultural grand narratives do. Similarly, rather than signaling the presence of the protean narrator, second-person narration can indicate what Charles Martin calls the "prophetic voice," which marks a situation "seen as universal and a poet speaking for those who are presumed to be unable to speak for themselves" (34). In contrast, Piercy's generous, reciprocal intimate protean narrator is more complex and nuanced than one that speaks "for" the subaltern subject; her poetic voice never presumes complete knowledge of the women her poem describes.

The slipperiness of Piercy's speaker is especially powerful in the next four lines:

> Living is later. This is your rented death.
>
> You grasp at hard commodities and vague lusts
>
> to make up, to pay for each day
>
> which opens like a can and is empty, and then another. (40.21-24)

These lines comprise the philosophical summation of the poem's criticism of consumer capitalism, and the speaker's voice is at once that of the women in the poem and of the

speaker. The poem's reader is situated as addressee and, through empathetic identification, is also situated as the described subject of the line. In "The morning half-life blues," Piercy's protean poetic persona generously engages the lyrical audience and collapses phenomenological boundaries between the poet, the reader, and the human subjects of her work. At the same time, this move allows the poet behind the speaker to acknowledge that presuming to know all about another's life is to practice a dehumanization of the Other just as powerful and perhaps more insidious than the objectification wrought by the system she criticizes.

The poem's final stanza performs a blessing and a prayer for the future, directed toward the "Girls of the dirty morning" whose "living is a waste product of somebody's mill" (27, 28). The speaker declares, "I would fix you like buds to a city where people work / to make and do things necessary and good, / where work is real as bread and babies and trees in parks / where we would all blossom slowly and ripen to sound fruit" (29-32). The speaker's blessing uses for the first time in the poem the pronoun "I," and it is grammatically structured in the future unreal conditional. It carries a Whitmanian tone which suggests that Piercy may have composed this poem with Whitman's "A Woman Waits for Me" in mind. Whitman's poem celebrates the ability of American society to "grow fierce and athletic girls, new artists, musicians, and singers" (33-34); "daughters fit for these states" (28) who "are tann'd in the face by shining suns and blowing winds" (16); and women who "are ultimate in their own right —they are calm, clear, well- possess'd of themselves" (19). Originally, the title and first line of Whitman's poem in the 1860 manuscript was "A woman America knows (or yet

shall know)" (100).[17] "The morning half-life blues" reveals the sad outcome of Whitman's prophecy—the drudgingly empty lives of strong women who are used and used up in the capitalist machine because they are alienated from the means of production in ways that Whitman, our first great poet of the working-class, could not conceive. In a gesture similar to Whitman's valuation of labor as a socially redeeming practice, Piercy's protean narrator, appropriating the voice of America (which is simultaneously the reader's voice) offers honest work "real as bread" as the antidote to these women's alienation. However, unlike Whitman's tone of grand surety, Piercy's use of the unreal conditional imparts a tone of wishful thinking, as if even the poet is not convinced that her own work is sufficient to the task of helping to create a just, humane, and personally fulfilling society. Perhaps, though, the dream of a workers' utopia future must remain conditional to engage the reader in an empathetic response that contains the possibility of action—if all it takes is a poem to re-create the future, then the reader's empathetic involvement in the imagination and realization of a new future is unnecessary. In a manner similar to that which Cavanagh finds in the poems of Adam Zagajewski, Piercy leaves space in her poem for individual lives (of the poet, the reader, and the women portrayed) through a compassionate re-presentation of working women's lives. In this way, the poet sets the stage for readers to come to an empathetic understanding of women workers and of their own position in consumer capitalist society.

---

[17] The information about the title and first line is found in footnote to the poem included in the Norton Comprehensive Reader's Edition of Leaves of Grass which was published the year before Piercy wrote this poem.

In a manner similar to Marge Piercy's use of the protean narrator, Maggie Anderson, in the poem "Closed Mill" (60-61) engages the protean narrator to speak the harsh-unspoken of working-class lives while simultaneously creating an audience-centered ethical poetics. Anderson's "Closed Mill" underscores the poets' allegiance to the community from which she came, an allegiance not lacking a critical distance but one that comes burdened with what might be called survivor's guilt.[18] The poem begins by declaring its status as anti-lyric:

> I'm not going to tell you everything.
> like where I live and who I live with.
> There are those for whom this would be
> important, and once perhaps it was to me,
> but I've walked through too many lives
> this year, different from my own,
> for a thing like that to matter much (1-8).

The speaker's statement is composed in lines that end where one might expect a self-indulgent lyric to end: "tell you everything," "walked through too many lives." However, the poet modifies the meaning of the lines in their clausal completions on the

---

[18] This is a common existential angst among working-class academics. Karen Kovacik has summarized it well: "Yet while literary acquisition brings rewards—including sometimes the very language for conceptualizing class difference—the process of formal schooling can occasion profound disillusionment and a sense of estrangement both within the academy and from one's family of origins" (108). For a range of responses to class-crossing in academia, see the anthologies Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class edited by Ryan and Sackrey (South End Press, 1984), Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory, edited by Tokarczyk and Fay (U of Mass P, 1993); This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class, edited by Dews and Law (Temple UP, 1995); Reflections from the Wrong Side of the Tracks: Class, Identity and the Working Class Experience in Academe, edited by Muzzatti and Samarco (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); and Resilience: Queer Professors from the Working Class edited by Oldfield and Johnson (SUNY Press, 2008).

next line. The personal, lyric "I" occurs five times in the first, fourteen-line, stanza, twice in the last stanza, and only twice (once in its object form, "me") in the other three stanzas of the poem combined. The poetic speaker's initial statement functions much like Rukeyser's "these people live here," although as a poet teaching in the community, the speaker in Anderson's poem is closer to the people she writes of than is Rukeyser's speaker. Moreover, the perspective in Anderson's poem differs from that of Piercy's. In Piercy's poem of women workers, the poet erases her presence through an imaginative and grammatical collapse of boundaries; in Anderson's poem, the poet makes her presence and position known while at the same time dismissing them as "important" to the meaning of the poem. This move begs the question of what makes the poem, if the poet does not matter, if her presence and perspective are marginal to the making of the poem? The succeeding stanzas suggest it is the town (both its human inhabitants and its built environment) and its tragic dimensions that pull the poem into being, in the same way that the "huge scrap metal piles . . . pull light through the fog on the river / and take it in to rust in the rain" (20-22).

Not only is the speaker unimportant to the material existence of the town-as-poem, but the presence of a poet in this community is figured as a side effect of capitalism. The speaker notes that Andrew Carnegie "opened up some libraries" so that he might "'repay his deep debt,' / so that light might shine on Pittsburgh's poor / and on the workers in the McKeesport mill" (17-19). One must remember that Andrew Carnegie, the great philanthropist, is also Andrew Carnegie, one of the foremost union-breakers of American history, who employed his Pinkertons to harass and murder union

members. The speaker suggests that, as an educated person, she has been created by Carnegie's libraries and her job continues his professed, but suspect, desire to shine "light" on the workers and the poor. Her livelihood, working in a school where "Many of the children I taught today / were hungry" (23), is imagined by the educational state apparatus to assuage the pain of the workers from the closed McKeesport Mill and to "repay" creation of more of "Pittsburgh's poor" (18). This is a subtle turn, one similar to the more overt interrogation of the individual's complicity in the nexus of global capitalism found in poems by Lorna Dee Cervantes and June Jordan.[19] Anderson focuses specifically on the damage that chasing after corporate profit has done to the community where she is working. Not only are many of the children hungry, but "their fathers / hang out in the bar / across the street / from the locked gates / of the mill, just as if they were still / laborers with lunch pails" (25-28). The "fathers" of the poem are helpless to respond to their joblessness in any effective manner such as that which might be offered by a strong union; instead, they go to drink "as if" the bar were their workplace. One might also interpret the fathers' exodus both as ritual—they leave in the morning as they have always left—and as escape from the humiliating connotations of their presence at home during working hours. Here the poem shifts into a suppositional mode, demanding the reader place him or herself in the dislocated workers' lives. "Suppose you were one of them?" the speaker asks, who "had no place to go all day / and no earned sleep to sink down into?" (30-33). The speaker supposes that "most likely you would be there, too" (34) in the bar, and at home where "you'd

[19] See chapter four.

talk mean / to your wife who would talk mean back" (41-42). Home becomes the symbol of joblessness and ineffectualness; both husband and wife are trapped in its corrupted meanings.

The speaker slides into second-person protean narration here, but it does not encourage the same kind of empathetic identification as Piercy's. Anderson's use of the second-person remains firmly placed in the realm of the suppositional: the lyric audience is not encouraged to forget his or her difference from the people in the town, a move that appeals as much to *logos* as it does to *pathos*. The reader is instead coached both to feel and to think, to experience and to analyze, the lives of these working-class families. In some ways, this re-creates the poet's relationship to the region, as "both observer and observed, focal point and border, the subject and verb of remembrance" (High 5-6). It also exemplifies what Joyce Dyer has called Anderson's poetics of *confluence,* which places the poet in "the position of being on the margins and seeing the blur. Always the blur of things that points to the mix and magnifies uncertainty" (28). The protean narrator is well suited to a poetics of margins and of uncertainty, creating, as it does, a conditional voice that speaks from many perspectives. As the poem moves forward, its use of the second person generates an alienation effect that requires rational reflection and the spectator's (in this case, both the speaker's and the reader's) critical analysis of the economic and class processes which resulted in the closed mill. That the material existence of the closed mill is itself the most appropriate poem of the social conditions of the working class becomes apparent in the next-to-last stanza.

In the penultimate stanza, the poet uses powerful visual imagery to monumentalize the stubborn materiality of the closed mill and to memorialize the societal damage that has resulted from industrial work and the lack of it. A directed perspective also returns, since the mill is described as seen "From here" (49) which refers to the first stanza's "top of a steep hill" (12), where the speaker, "exhausted from teaching six classes of junior high school students," "sat in my car" and "stared / for a long time at the closed mill" (12-14). The visual imagery of this stanza is almost apocalyptic: "the sky, gray above the dark razed mill's red / pipe and yellow coals, silver coils of metal heaped up and abandoned" (51-53). Anderson's aptitude for enjambment is also apparent in this stanza; as in the first stanza, her line breaks frustrate a conventional reading. For instance, where one might expect a steel mill's "redness" to flare up from its smelter, here in this abandoned mill, the red is found on dilapidated rusty pipes, and the once-glowing coals are yellow, spent. The "silver coils of metal" are not forged into some great machine but rather left unformed, "heaped up" and "abandoned" (53). The stanza's images of loss of vitality and formlessness serve as objective correlatives for the loss of vitality and lack of direction suffered by the town's inhabitants. In the last three lines of the stanza, the speaker makes yet another narrative perspective change, from the implied "I" of the person in the parked car to an ambiguous we: "Probably we are not going to say / too much about it, having as we do / this beautiful reserve, like roses" (61.55-57). The pronoun "we" is startling, since it comes without precedent in the poem. It requires a pause to ask, "We, who?" Who is "not going to say / too much about it"? Certainly, in this phrase, poets are indicted for

their propensity to maintain their "reserve." The readers of the poem are also positioned as complicit in the silence.

It is probable that "reserve" is a double entendre, with one meaning residing in the constellation of related definitions that center on a kind of personal reticence valued in the middle class (referencing the observer-poet and some of the poem's readers), the other referencing the Renziehausen Park Rose Garden and Arboretum at McKeesport. Like the Carnegie Library in McKeesport (which included a gymnasium), the parks and arboretums of the Manufacturing Belt were promoted as workers' havens. Parks in particular were often marketed to prospective wealthy donors with the idea that they made available to workers a place for healthy exercise and recreation which in turn would supply healthier, stronger, more productive workers.[20] That the speaker equates having "this beautiful reserve" with "having roses" makes explicit the connection between the industrial magnates who abused workers in the past, the CEOs who have allowed American industry fall apart in a grab for wealth, and those—members of the middle-class, including poets, politicians, poetry readers, and professors—who do not say much about displaced workers and the economic corrosion that turned the Manufacturing Belt into the Rust Belt.

Additionally, for readers attuned to working-class issues, "roses" always calls to mind the phrase "bread and roses," the strike slogan of textile workers in Lawrence,

[20] Whether this was the case in practice is beyond the scope of this study; it is widely thought that philanthropic projects were actually consumed by the middle class. I am referring here only to the marketing, not the reality.

Massachusetts in 1912.[21] The Bread and Roses strike, led by women textile workers, won many important concessions from factory owners; the strikers are credited with inventing the moving picket line, so they would not be arrested for loitering. The phrase "bread and roses" is said to have been written on one of the strikers' signs: "We want bread but we want roses, too." In Piercy's blues, the speaker calls for "work real as bread"; in Anderson's "Closed Mill," the workers have the "roses,"—literally, the roses in the garden and, metaphorically, the scholarships and cultural programming at the library—but they are getting short of bread. One might indeed be tempted to expand these metaphorical roses to encompass all the emotionally empty consumer goods available; nobody says much about the working class because their lives are full of inexpensive widgets from China, manufactured by invisible workers oppressed by global capitalism and by a political ideology that promised to free them.

The final stanza protests the "not saying" by saying that the children she teaches "were hungry." Yet the speaker stops short of uttering another kind of truth: "I would not dare to say the mill won't / open up again, as the men believe" because, as she admits, "You will believe whatever you want to," especially when that belief offers hope (58-61). This protean "you" marks another change of address and perspective. It obviously refers to the "men" who believe that mill will open up again; perhaps it also refers to the "you" the reader, and, as the second-person convention allows, to the speaker. If the men believe the mill will open up again, what do the reader and the speaker believe? It is impossible to say for sure, but several readings are suggested by

---

[21] See Bruce Watson, Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream (Viking, 2005). Bread and Roses is also the not-for-profit cultural arm of New York's Health and Human Service Union, 1199/SEIU. See the epilogue for more on the project.

the poem's intentionality. If the reader in this case is positioned as a middle-class person, the question might refer back to the belief that it would be better for workers to get an education rather than return to work in the mill. Or, the reader may be asked as she was earlier in the poem to imagine what she would believe if she were a worker. If the reader is a working-class person, then the question asks the reader to consider the problems inherent in the common and often politically paralyzing longing for a return to an idealized past. Likewise, the speaker (and the readers-as-speakers), previously established as living in both working-class and middle-class worlds, may be signaling the confusion of her own beliefs and desires and her inability to offer a constructive solution which would benefit American society at large. The richest reading would understand the question as engaging with all these perspectival interrogations.

After asking her more-than-rhetorical-question, the speaker then returns to the "philanthropy" that "swept across our dying cities / like industrial smoke" (62-3).

> and we took everything
>
> it left and were grateful, for art
>
> and books, for work when we could get it. (63-65).

Here, the pronoun "we" must be understood as referring to the American working-class, since it uses the plural "cities" rather than the singular "city." The lines question the people's grateful acceptance of philanthropy and part-time work as a substitute for the physically difficult yet meaningful work the mills offered. It has shown the reader the human emptiness that the "smoke" of philanthropy has not been able to fill. It asks the reader to make a complex ethical judgment about the role of philanthropy in soothing

the guilt of the liberal middle class about the material and social conditions of the working-class and the simultaneous construction of "compulsory bourgeoisity" for the working-class which insists that higher education is a preferential and sufficient substitute for manufacturing jobs and other forms of physical labor.[22] It may be comfortable to think that educational philanthropy, in the form of scholarships that allowed people like Anderson and her parents to attend college and find work as teachers, is unquestionably "better" than steel mill work, but the poem interrogates that liberal, middle-class idea. The poet-speaker suggests that working in a steel mill is a fulfilling occupation for many people and that working conditions (safety, wages, benefits) should have been improved rather than closing the mill and relying on extrinsic social forces to somehow compensate for the loss of work. The poet-speaker is, by her own admission, a product of palliative educational philanthropy, and as she struggles to come to terms with her position relative to the displaced workers and their families and to consumer capitalism, she sets the stage for her readers to do the same.

The poem ends in a hellish yet grimly hopeful image of the "big doors" of the mill opening to

> let us back inside
> the steamy furnace that swallows us
> and spits us out like food, or heat
> that keeps us warm and quiet
> inside our little cars in the rain. (68-72)

---

[22] Playing, of course, on Adrienne Rich's term, "compulsory heterosexuality."

Who is the "we" of this stanza? It is not the "we" of "beautiful reserve." It is not (only) the speaker, who has previously spoken in the first-person singular of her drive. Neither is it limited to the reader-directed "you" of the third stanza or the "we" who gratefully accepted philanthropy in place of work. Here, the speaker's pronoun encompasses the actual reader and all possible readers; it is a "universal we," and in an ironically subversive capitulation to the historical connotations of the representative "universal," a "middle-class" we as well as a working-class "we." Mapping the final stanza's pronouns supports this reading; they are, in order: "I," "the men" (they),"you," "we," "us," "us" "us," "us." Because human labor "keeps us warm and quiet / inside our little cars in the rain," because, as Marx taught us, human labor is commodified in the use- (and exchange-) value reified in the products of labor, then everyone, the unemployed mill workers, the capitalists—all consumers, all of "us"—are warmed by the "heat" of someone's labor and everyone is complicit in the deafening silence about the conditions of that labor.

Unlike Piercy's utopian impulse toward a workers' paradise, Anderson's dystopic imagery extends into the future where a return to work is no less alienating than it was in the past. Jean Pfaelzer, writing of the utopian impulse in the 1953 film *Salt of the Earth*, a film of feminist, ethnic (Mexican-American), and working-class consciousness, theorizes the working-class penchant for utopianism (and therefore also its dystopianism) as serving to "suggest that history has a system, a 'big picture—but one which can be re-written, re-imagined. . . . History in *Salt* suggests the possibility of understanding the significance of how we live class, how we narrate it, and how we

might change it" (121).[23] History, in working-class poems narrated by a protean narrator speaking in a reciprocal voice, operates in much the same way. Maggie Anderson's poetry does not leave as much room for re-imagining working-class life as does Marge Piercy's, yet Anderson's poems still enact a demand for justice by situating the poetic speaker and the reader as complicit in an unethical silence. Both poets offer stinging critiques of consumer society and suggest that consumer capitalism is intrinsically incompatible with socially just and humanly decent democracy.

Finally, the protean narrator in Dorianne Laux's "Oh, The Water" (57-58) serves much as it does in the poems by Piercy and Anderson, to frame and direct the reader's gaze toward working-class people.[24] However, unlike the protean narrator of the other two poems, it interpellates both the poem's speaking persona and its readers as themselves members of the working class, hailing them in the first stanza as the "hero of this poem" (1).

> You are the hero of this poem
> the one who leans into the night
> and shoulders the stars, smoking
> a cigarette you've sworn is your last
> before reeling the children into bed. (1-5)

The description of the reader/subject/hero in this stanza is the initial one of a series that describes other incarnations of the working-class hero: "the first worker on the line" (6);

---

[23] Karen Kovacik has noted a similar utopian/dystopian poetics in the working-class poems of Jan Beatty and Karen Brodine.

[24] The poem's title is a line from a 1970 song by (formerly) working-class troubadour, Van Morrison, entitled "And It Stoned Me."

"the oldest daughter / of an exhausted mother, an inconsolable / father" (10-12) and "the brother / who warms his own brother's bottle, / whose arm falls asleep along the rail of his crib" (13-15). These successive images, coming one after the other in each of the first three stanzas of the poem, not only describe individual working people as representative of the class, but also disclose the reproduction of labor in the domestic realm where parents' exhaustion makes it necessary and expected for children to work at raising themselves and their siblings. Like Anderson's "Sonnet for her Labor" and Laux's "Small Gods," the poem reveals how deeply class pervades our seemingly private hours and reproduces class structures within families, and how, despite child labor laws, capitalism creates even children as laborers.

The fourth stanza opens up in a manner similar to "Closed Mill," using the first-person plural to remove the reader and the speaking persona from their rhetorical identification with the working-class heroes of the poem and place them back in a rhetorical position that mimics their sociological perspective.

> We've stood next to you in the checkout line,
> watched you flip through tabloids or stare
> at the face on the *TV Guide* as if it were the moon
> your cart full of toothpaste, shampoo,
> day-old bread, bags of gassed fruit,
> frozen pizzas on sale for $2.99. (16-21)

In a manner similar to that in poems by Piercy and Anderson, the protean narrator's "we" in this stanza is much more complex than one which simply encompasses the

speaker and the poem's reader. While the use of "we" and the position of observation initiates a movement away from the poem's characters which effectively removes the reader back out to a critical distance from the empathetic identification into which she had been positioned, the identification established in the previous stanzas still lingers. Moreover, the poem's narrator refutes the cultural mantra that the working-class is "invisible" in America, pointing out that "we" could, if we looked, see working-class people all around us. The narrator points out to the reader the signs of economic duress in the shopper's choice of goods: "day old bread" and "frozen pizzas on sale for $2.99," probably because they have reached their expiration date. Popular magazines designed to appeal to working class audiences, like *TV Guide* and entertainment tabloids, create the desire for products which fuels consumerism at the same time they valorize socioeconomic lifestyles so far removed from that of working-class shopper that they might as well be "the moon."

Laux's final perspectival move in the poem is to imagine the working-class hero not as he or she appears to the speaker or to the reader, but to his or her own family. "When you slam the trunk in the driveway, spilling the groceries, dropping your keys, / you're someone's love, their one brave hope" (25-27). This moment, with its protean "you" and its quotidian scene, serves to re-insert the reader back into an empathetic identification with the human need for communal structures and as perspectively coincident with heroic figure of the poem. However the reader must return to the position of empathy with the moment of critical distance still lingering in her mind. To trace the identities of "we" and "you" in this poem is to move through a series of

successive identifications with and distancings from the speaking persona, the working-class characters in the poem, and one's own position as reader. Since the poem begins by interpellating a working-class "you" as both the reader and the "hero of the poem," then the "you" who buys the day-old bread refers to both the worker-Other and the reader-hero. The reciprocal voice of the protean narrator invites the reader to experience a blurring of subjectivity within the poem which creates a temporary, literary bond of solidarity between the reader and the poem's working-class character. Moreover, the poem's subtle polemic challenges the reader to consider why a working-class person's life should be less satisfying, less healthy than that of a middle-class person and to consider what personal and political choices make the reader complicit in the diminishment of other's lives. In "Oh, the Water," the ethical choice idealized in the utopian/dystopian dichotomy is realized in each person's daily interactions with others; the political efficacy of the communal depends upon personal ethical praxis and conscious affiliation rather than identity.

These poems by Piercy, Anderson, and Laux successfully make use of the reciprocal voice of the protean narrator to create an active discourse with their readers which operates to illuminate the relationships between the social and the personal, in terms of the effects of class. One might think of the varying uses of the protean narrator in somewhat theatrical terms: Piercy's protean second-person seems to invite the kind of identification Aristotle associated with the theatergoer, an identification that might be problematic for a poet wanting to facilitate real social change, since, theoretically, its end is in catharsis, an emotion that substitutes for action. Anderson's poem comes

closer to a Brechtian mode: it begins with a self-effacing monologue which functions much like Brecht's famous placards. Like Brecht's theater, "Closed Mill" consciously reminds its readers that everyone is ensnared in classed discourse and class processes. Dorianne Laux's poem suggests another territory for the use of the protean narrator: the identification of common interests and experiences between an imagined middle-class reader and the poem's working-class characters which, at the same time, functions to signal a recognition that the reader might also be currently part of, or have origins in, the working class. This gesture toward a working-class audience is explicit in the poetries and projects I explore in the final chapter—poetries and projects which announce themselves as in the service of creating and maintaining a "tale of the tribe" for working-class Americans. Laux's doubling of address through the protean narrator allows for a simultaneous identification and critical distance for two (perhaps not so) different audiences. This combination of critical distance and empathetic understanding, made possible by the protean narrator, allows this poem, and others like it, to supply information through the experience of empathetic identification, which is then guided by the poem's intentionality toward an ethical response to the damage class does to individuals and to society.

As stated earlier, one of the reasons I chose the poems of Piercy, Anderson, and Laux is because all three poets write in two modes that I see recurring in poetry of

working-class communities, that of the family poem and the protean narrator.[25] The mode of the family (autobiographical) poem is more prevalent than the use of the protean narrator; or, perhaps it is merely more easily identifiable in women's poetries of the working class. The family poem is found across the range of writings by women from many ethnic and racial groups, and it seems to participate in that more familiar construct of the (Oedipal) family drama only through its conscious refusal or, at the least, complication of, conventional Freudian interpretation of gendered interactions, reflecting the influence of feminism and crosscutting class and ethnic issues. Among the many women poets of work and workers writing the family-origins poem in the lyric genre are (in chronological order): Kate Daniels (*The White Wave* 1984); Linda Hogan (*The Book of Medicines* 1993); Leonora Smith (*Spatial Relations* 2002), Jan Beatty (*Boneshaker* 2002), Linda McCarriston (*Little River* 2002[26]), Julia Stein (*Walker Woman* 2002), Diane Gilliam Fisher (*Out of Everything* 2003); Debra Nystrom (*Torn Sky* 2003); Michele D. Gibbs (*Line of Sight* 2004), Paola Corso (*Death by Renaissance* 2004); and M.L. Smoker (*Another Attempt at Rescue* 2005). Perhaps the emotional and aesthetic conflicts of a poet's relationship to her working-class origins is best represented by the title of Michelle Tokarczyk's 1989 collection, *The House I'm Running From.* The title was taken from a statement made by Jesse Jackson during a

---

[25] I am not suggesting that these are the only two recurring modes in women's poetries of the working classes. For instance, Nicky Marsh (in Democracy) has identified yet another mode in women's poetries, particularly in women's working-class poetries, that she denotes "the obscene." Jennifer Moxley's call for "invective" verse describes a similar aesthetic (Oblek 1993). Among those working-class poets writing, regularly or occasionally, in the realms of the obscene or invective lyric, Nicky Marsh includes Cheryl A. Townsend and Ruthann Robson. I would add Jan Beatty, Michele Tokarczyk, Kim Addonizio, lesbian poets Dorothy Allison, Alta, and Judy Grahn, working-class African American poets influenced by BAM aesthetics such as Michelle T. Clinton and Michele D. Gibbs, Native American poets Wendy Rose and Allison Adele Hedge Coke.

[26] This is a collected works edition. Some of the poems in the collection are dated as early as 1977.

presidential campaign which the poet has included as an epigraph: "They see me running for the White House. They don't see the house I'm running from," a statement that plays upon both meanings of "from." This acknowledgment of the difficulties and frequent ugliness of working-class life and the simultaneous desire to honor working-class lives and labors is a tension found throughout this mode of lyric. The family poem may also be understood as an establishment of poetic authority, of the right to speak honestly, sometimes brutally, of the realities of working-class life and in doing so, it serves an important documentary function. That it can do so subtly and without reifying class as an identity is evident in the family poems by Piercy, Anderson, and Laux. However, the family poem does not usually move past the representation of the effects of class nor does it overtly urge the reader toward a politically efficacious experience of empathy which can lead to solidarity with the working class. Moreover, empathetic inaccuracy can also beleaguer the family poem. For instance, a reader might not find the narrator of "Landed Fish" an ethically compelling persona or empathize with Uncle Danny's situation. Likewise, in "Sonnet for Her Labor," a reader might fully empathize with Aunt Nita yet leave the poem cognizant of its feminist message while missing or under-appreciating its class critique. Finally, the family poem's popularity may suggest that writers and readers are stuck in an aesthetic rut leading to the creation of and desire for the spectacularization of classed (or raced or gendered) injury, a situation which tends to preclude readers' engagement in an ethically transformative relationship to class processes and working-class people.[27]

---

[27] The prolifieration of fake memoirs is a symptom of this problem.

Although the protean narrator offers to poets of work and workers the possibility of representing class as a relationship and ethics as a position, it is not widely used. A few examples can be found in the working-class poems of Native American poets Roberta Hill Whiteman ("Lines for Marking Time" from *Star Quilt*) and Allison Adelle Hedge Coke ("Responses" from *Dog Road Woman*), and in those of Palestinian-American Naomi Shihab Nye ("Where the Soft Air Lives" from *Words Under the Words*). When it is deployed, the protean narrator makes visible "one of the interesting paradoxes of working-class writing" in which its speaking persona, the "working-class 'I' is never isolated, but crowded from within with other voices" (Zandy, "Complexities" 6) and therefore, like working-class autobiography, denotes a speaking position which

> is rarely isolated or romanticized individualism. Rather, its raison d'être is to recall the fragile filaments and necessary bonds of human relationships, as well as to critique those economic and societal forces that blunt or block human development. (Zandy, "Introduction" xiv)

If one agrees with Zandy, as I do, then one must admire the protean narrator's ability to represent both the crowded, socially-inflected "I" of working-class subjectivity and to model the subject who can be constructed through class-crossing solidarity. I believe it has enormous potential to be aesthetically efficacious for the purpose of creating an empathetic bond between readers and the working-class situations and characters portrayed in lyric poetry; it presents a more inclusive "us" to the reader, and blurs the line that signifies "them."

Furthermore, when transformed by a protean narrator, the lyric "I" is repurposed as a critique of ethically and politically regressive individualism by way of displacing its central, supposedly private positions with multiple shifting perspectives and positions that testify to the material contexts and conditions of "subjecthood." As an example of this repurposing, we can return to Maggie Anderson's opening lines in "Closed Mill" which make clear that the "I" of the poem is not the romantic, individual poet and that the materials conditions of other's lives inflects her subjectivity, her perspective, and her ethical stance: "I've walked through too many lives / this year, different from my own, / for a thing like that to matter much" (5-7). Additionally, class is more clearly identifiable as a process and as a relationship in poems that utilize the protean narrator's ability to represent a poetics of "becoming" because a poetics of becoming aesthetically reproduces dynamic relationships and processes. Likewise, the protean narrator's shifting positions allows the poet to avoid two recurring problems Eric Schocket has identified in writing of the working classes: the "too hasty resolution of class conflict" (7) that hobbles the revolutionary potential of much working-class writing and the "reification of class" as an objectified identity (24). Even when the poem reaches toward a utopian dream, as in "Morning half-life blues" by Marge Piercy, class conflict is neither resolved nor deferred, but intensified in the realization that it could be otherwise if we chose to remake our society. Poems using the protean narrator shift the emphasis from the family poem's representation of classed ways as presocially constitutive of identity to the representation of the ways in which class conflict and processes are deeply implicated in personal subjectivity. In Dorianne Laux's "Oh, the

Water," the children's exhaustion from caretaking and the darkness that surrounds a mother returning with her groceries are signs of class processes that impinge on the domestic and the social, that warp our everyday lives. While the family poem can offer beautifully rendered, emotional portraits of the effects of class, poems that make use of the protean narrator can successfully make use of literary empathy as a foundation for the ethical interrogation of class processes and relationships. This analysis of lyric poetry suggests how class can be successfully represented in a genre not traditionally considered sufficient for the task, and shows how lyric poetry offers one possible medium for readers to perceive the "hidden injuries of class," to experience empathetically their own relationship to class bias, and to consider how they might work toward an economically ethical society.[28]

[28] The Hidden Injuries of Class by Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb (W.W. Norton, 1993).

Chapter Four:

"I'm From the 21st Century"—

Third World/Wave Ethical Media-Poetics and Empathetic Consciousness in Poems by June Jordan and Lorna Dee Cervantes

The poems examined in this chapter stand, stylistically speaking, between genres. They are "longish," making use of the available breadth and complexity of the long poem, but are not book-length, like those by Rukeyser, Llewellyn, and Fisher; nor are they clearly identifiable as lyrics, like the poems of Piercy, Anderson, and Laux. These poems gesture, on the one hand, toward cultural traditions of storytelling found among many ethnic groups, and on the other, to contemporary poetic practice. They are not as dependent upon an established mythic ground as the poems in the first chapter, yet they make use of the lyric's concern with the personal and familial to establish a literary common ground upon which to build a contemporary multicultural *mythos*. History is present in these poems, but there is not as much emphasis on historical recovery and remembrance as there is in the historical long poems. Instead, the poems in this chapter use history almost exclusively as an index to aid in the comprehension of contemporary societal ills. June Jordan, in the poem "From Sea to Shining Sea," and Lorna Dee Cervantes, in the poem "Bananas," make extensive use of a lyric-narrative form, a hybrid poetic that is well-suited to their projects of bringing together disparate peoples in the ethical struggle for human rights and justice. Moreover, Jordan and Cervantes use a first-person speaking persona in which, unlike the confessional or private poem, the lyric "I" is not the emotional and psychological center of the work.

These are outwardly directed poems that offer an expanded understanding of the relationship between self and community. They operate in the realm of the social, which Carolyn Forché asserts is the domain of the witness poem—of engaged poetry—"a place of resistance and struggle, where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated. It is the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice" (9). The poet is able to make claims against the political order by generating, within the world of the poem, "broadcast strategic empathy" which "calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes" (Keen 142). In the poems "From Sea to Shining Sea" by June Jordan and "Bananas" by Lorna Dee Cervantes, the reader is guided through a lyrical narrative of working-class lives and history and encouraged to create an expanded sense of identity that can serve as the basis for a more complexly imagined ethics than that available through a reliance on limited identity politics. The poems' intentionality models processes through which empathetic ways of knowing can be put to use in creating feminist, ethically responsive imagined communities capable of resisting the dehumanizing effects of capitalism while simultaneously working for justice.

Lorna Dee Cervantes is, and June Jordan was, to the moment of her death, extraordinarily committed to and active in a variety of causes, including those which affect working-class communities. Their poetry is part of a larger societal project. Both poets consciously choose to foreground the ideological usefulness of their writings, insisting that their artistic processes and products are not only an aesthetic objects but also tools used to work toward specific social goals. Both write a poetry of witness that

"combines a sense of historical and personal . . . with a performative mode"; it is "primarily contextual, dependent on its audience, and crucially future oriented" (Davidson 166). Both poets write in a contemporary genre that David Kennedy terms "media poetics" and they make use of the flexibility of the hybrid lyric-narrative form to bring together disparate elements of working-class experience.

The hybrid lyric-narrative form is commensurate with the twin goals of poetry as witness and poetry as art; its narrative thrust is inclusive and its often surprising imagery permits the creation of emotionally intense and intellectually reflective moments well-integrated into a narrative arc. Maurice Manning describes this prominent contemporary form as one that "tell[s] partial stories, following a narrative line far enough until the poet discovers a pool of lyricism in the woods and jumps in" (Manning).[1] This evocative description clearly applies to the work of Jordan and Cervantes; in these poems, the lyrical moments are often the ones dedicated to pondering an ethical response set up by the narrative. Additionally, the hybrid poem may be thought of as a response to what Patricia Wallace calls the problem of balancing the "literary and the literal," which she has traced back to Emerson's "The Poet."[2] Wallace's essay explores how "the literary," defined as "the use of poetic language and technique" and the literal, "the pressures of particular historical reality, and of the poet's

---

[1]In 2001, Manning's first book of poems, Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions, was awarded the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Award, chosen by W. S. Merwin. He is also, along with Wendell Berry, Silas House, Bobbie Ann Mason, George Ella Lyon, and Anne Shelby, among the core group of Kentucky writers who have been increasingly active in the fight against mountaintop removal mining, appearing at rallies and protests throughout the state. This e-mail interview is part of an ongoing conversation on poets and poetics between myself and Manning.

[2] While considering possible models for the American poet, Emerson admits that "we have our difficulties even with Milton and Homer. Milton is too literary, and Homer too literal and historical" (338).

need to witness what *is* [. . .] make themselves felt" in the work of Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cathy Song, and Rita Dove (3). She describes these women's poetries as "shaped by . . . a passion for language's possibilities" as well as by "material reality" and "relationships to history" (4). It is an accurate description of the hybrid lyric-narrative poems written by Cervantes and Jordan. According to Ana Douglas, the dependence on a reader's willing collapse of "the difference between the historical and the literary" is both a marker of and precondition for a poetics of witness.

> The poetics of witnessing depends upon the readers' willingness to suspend their awareness that what the witness presents as "truth" may in fact be caught somewhere in between the perceived "absolute truths" of historical accounts and the "universal truth" reflected in the literary. The "effect" of texts of witness depends precisely on this willingness of the audience to collapse the difference between the historical and the literary. (71)

The hybrid lyric-narrative form is functionally similar to Douglas's description of witness poetics. There are two meta-textual axes to the lyric-narrative form: one axis, the historical, is closely associated with the hybrid form's tendency toward narrative, the other axis, the literary, is associated with the form's ability to integrate lyricism and intense imagery into a narrative arc. However, rather than "collapsing" the boundary between the literal and the literary, the hybrid lyric-narrative plays up the tension generated in the sometimes paradoxical and often ironic relationship between the two, resulting in a poetics of witness that relies as much on empathetic intellectual

engagement as it does on emotional appeal. Because much of the meaning created in the lyric-narrative depends on the relationship between the literal and the literary, it is necessary to take both axes into account when analyzing the poetic devices, elements, and techniques at play in the hybrid structure of lyric-narrative poems. For instance, in her essay, Patricia Wallace concentrates on lineation, imagery, rhythm, and the poetic speaker's rhetorical stance; similarly, Manning points out that "two elements of poetic craft, in particular," are foundational to this hybrid mode, "imagery and lineation." Imagery, which Manning perceives as working "from inside" the poem and lineation, which works "from outside" the poem, make meaning with and against each other to create a hybrid aesthetic object that can maintain a compelling tension and a tolerance for paradox. While analyzing the poems in this chapter, I will likewise pay close attention to the "inside" and "outside" poetic elements in order to measure their effects on meaning.

A the same time the hybrid lyric-narrative structurally solves the problem of the literary and the literal, in poems by Jordan and Cervantes, its use reflects the confluence of two desires: the desire to draw on the epistemological practices and oral narrative traditions of ethnic and working-class cultures and the desire to establish a subjectivity —a personhood—through the lyric "I." The poets make good use of both the historical and literary metatextual axes of poetry which are accentuated by the form's hybrid nature: the historical axis comfortably accommodates oral narratives and critical storytelling while the literary axis allows for the creation of a complex, ethical literary experience of empathy. While establishing personhood is a project suspect in many

theoretical discourses, it is still psychologically and politically important to those whose personhood is not yet socially visible enough to discard. For example, working-class personhood, one that defines itself within and against its interdependence with family and society, is often created—and recreated—through the process of storytelling. Judy Grahn has said that "one characteristic of working-class writing is that we often pile up many events within a small amount of space rather than detailing the many implications of one or two events" (112). While the "piling up" of events is evident in many linguistic practices, rather than being limited solely to those of the working class, there is no doubt Jordan's and Cervantes's poems are narrative in this sense: that storytelling serves its own end, as a way to sort through life's events and lessons to decide what to keep, what to share, what to remake. Moreover, critical storytelling is widely considered a theoretically sound epistemological practice of women, workers, and people of color, grounding as it does an aesthetic responsive to the idea that the personal is political. In these poems by June Jordan and Lorna Dee Cervantes, critical storytelling, which partakes of the historical axis, is expressed through the narrative elements of hybrid lyric-narrative poems. These poems operate under "the implicit conviction that telling stories with an awareness of analytically elusive complexity may stimulate concepts, rhetorics, and structures for grasping more surely the tensions and simultaneity of race, class, and gender" (Childers, "Parrot" 218). Jordan's and Cervantes's poems also draw on the poets' respective cultural traditions of the blues and *signifyin'* and of *corrido* and *testimonio.* However, considering the extensive use of "torn from the headlines" references, these poems may be more accurately described, in

a term recently coined by British critic David Kennedy as belonging to the genre of "poetry as media."

In his study of contemporary British poetry, Kennedy claims that "poetry has often functioned like the media," bringing news of human rights abuses and other social problems to its audience, and that the term, "poetry as media" suggests a "wider range of activity, commentary and responsiveness that a designation such as political poetry would cover" (Kennedy 214). Certainly these poems can (and do) function as a type of "media," offering information, context, and implied modes of action for putting information to work for social justice. This aligns these poems by Jordan and Cervantes with others that serve as examples of American poetry at work in the world: the radical poetry of the 1930s, antiwar poetry, ethnic poetries, and feminist poetries. To think of these poetries as "media" also announces their rhetorical nature as "occasional" poems. Both poems in this chapter respond to a specific set of issues contemporaneous to their composition. They were written partly to "get the word out", or, to use Thomas McGrath's politically charged terminology, they are "tactical" poems, responding to "immediate events" (28) At the same time, because Jordan and Cervantes examine large and persistent social and political conditions, they also function as "strategic" poems in which "the writer trusts himself enough to write about whatever comes along, with the assumption that what he [sic] is doing will be, in the long run, useful, consciousness raising, or enriching" (McGrath 28). As strategic poems, "Bananas" and "From Sea to Shining Sea" continue to be relevant and aesthetically powerful today.

Additionally, these hybrid lyric-narrative poems by Jordan and Cervantes function as media poetry because, using extensive intertextual references, they foreground the almost overwhelming social and cultural forces within which we are compelled to negotiate our place and perform our subjectivities. In these two poems by June Jordan and Lorna Dee Cervantes, the intertextuality is rarely literary, but instead social and cultural. Janet Zandy suggests this is one of the aesthetic markers of American working-class texts, that they are often "based on actual events such as strikes or industrial accidents, or writing is composed in response to and in dialogue with other working-class expressions" (*Hands* 91).[3] The intertextuality of "Bananas" and "From Sea to Shining Sea" is, according to David Kennedy, one of the primary characteristics of "poetry as media" (215). Furthermore, Kennedy claims that the genre's marked intertextuality identifies media poetics as a type of postmodern poetics. He also asserts that poetry as media is postmodern because it shares postmodernism's distrust of subjective identity. According to Kennedy, media poetics requires an "engagement with the fraught nature of identity" because "an unavoidable corollary of such writing is a decision about identifying and exploring the self as a part of a particular community or constituency" (215). While both Jordan and Cervantes accept and even celebrate the necessity of placing the self within a communal matrix, this does not constitute, as it does for Kennedy, a complete distrust of subjective identity. Both Jordan and Cervantes suggest that reclaiming a subject understood as both embodied and constructed is necessary to the establishment of an interpersonal and communal solidarity capable of

[3] I include the descriptor "American" to underscore that many of David Kennedy's examples of "poetry as media" are of Irish and British working-class writers and writers with working-class allegiances.

resolving "negotiation and struggle" between the two polarities Kennedy sees as present in "poetry as media": one "a regional, phonocentric identity" and the other "a commodifying, national," global identity (215). In contrast to Kennedy's binary opposition of regional and national identities, the poems of Jordan and Cervantes suggest a third way, remaking the meanings of "nation" and "tribe" into a politically useful counter-hegemonic, strategic position. Therefore, while the hybrid lyric-narrative poems of Jordan and Cervantes share a concept of identity somewhat different from that expressed in Kennedy's criteria for poetry as media, they do enact a poetics within which personal identity is expanded through empathetic engagement with others to create a national/global solidarity that resists commodification and encourages ethical relationships between people.

However, despite a writer's best efforts, it is extremely difficult, some might say impossible, for her works to resist co-optation and commodification, or "complicity with the dominant." This holds true for personal ethical choices as well, since the raw materials of our lives are drawn from our families, societies, and cultures. Cornel West reminds us that "We are born into and build on circumstances, traditions, and situations not of our own choosing; yet we do make certain choices that constitute who we are and how we live in light of these fluid circumstances, traditions, and situations" (xv). West's lyric "I" would doubtlessly be a partially constructed one, consciously woven from the threads of his own sense of self and his cultural inheritances, and ethically experienced within the context of his communities, of birth and of choice. Similarly, Bonnie TuSmith points out that among ethnic writers like Jordan and Cervantes, their respective

"position regarding individualism and community stems from a combination of historical and social factors as well as personal choice" (24). TuSmith may be unnecessarily limiting her observation by suggesting that only ethnic writers negotiate their identities; certainly most people who strive toward active ethical and political engagement in the social realm struggle with the quandary of situating themselves as individuals *vis-à-vis* the community. How does one choose which parts of her cultural inheritance to keep, which parts to jettison? And how can we rebuild culture? The hybrid lyric-narrative poems of Jordan and Cervantes explore the combination of historical and social factors of contemporary life in America, and they model for their readers solutions for creating ethically responsive lives from the choices available. In the two poems, "From Sea to Shining Sea" and "Bananas" June Jordan and Lorna Dee Cervantes actively challenge readers' ethical sense of the world through the presentation of uncomfortable, brutal facts in the "historical" axis of their poems, facts that are designed to lead to the recognition that, for large numbers of people, our society is not working. The poets then offer, through metaphor and imagery, in the "literary" axis of their poems, an invitation to empathetic understanding and alternative ways to reconceptualize the world. The reconceptualization modeled by the poems is itself an ethical act; Jordan and Cervantes offer imaginative, ethically empowering examples for the reader to use in reimagining and reconstructing the relationship between community and self, made possible by an extension of the definition of individual identity to include a class-conscious recognition of interdependence with working-class people in America and across the globe.

This reimagining of the ethical dialectic between the individual and the community is influenced by socioeconomic class and ethnicity. Poets of the working-class, like ethnic poets, often emphasize this ethical relationship between the individual and the community and so therefore choose to place the individual lyric in a communal matrix. Many critics have remarked upon the communal aesthetic evident in working-class poetry.[4] Likewise, class critique is an integral part of the aesthetics of many ethnically identified writers, particularly ethnic women writers. For example, Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga charges white middle-class feminism with race and class bias: "For, if race and class suffer the woman of color as much as her sexual identity, then the Radical Feminist must extend her own 'identity' politics to include her 'identity' as oppressor as well" (128). The charge can be leveled also against class-blind ethnic criticism. To analyze ethnic working-class women's poetry without talking about class is to evade the difficult question of one's own place in class-based oppression.[5] It is difficult in America to discuss class-based oppression, because we have neither a good understanding of historical class processes in America nor an indigenous analytical vocabulary sufficient to the task. Generally speaking, Americans have traditionally resisted Marxist language and analysis. Yet the poet, as Jordan and Cervantes prove, can offer metaphors that pierce the fog around class processes, by using powerfully descriptive vocabularies that identify and criticize class oppression. The two poets use a

---

[4] See Zandy, Kovacik, Christopher and Whitson, Lauter, and Berke, among others.

[5] See the extensive body of work by third world feminists that takes first world feminists to task for their elision of cross-cutting class bias. See also the fascinating personal, theoretical, and critical discussion between Mary Childers and bell hooks on the invisibility of class and the avoidance of race in middle-class feminisms and critical theory. ("A Conversation About Race and Class." Conflicts in Feminism, 1990. 60-81.)

similar approach, setting media poetics in the form of a hybrid lyric-narrative, to critique and extend identity politics by re-situating identity as an ethically powerful, politically crucial position complexly constructed of race, ethnicity, gender, personal choice, and cross-cutting class consciousness. These two hybrid lyric-narrative poems written fifteen years apart, Jordan's "From Sea to Shining Sea" and Cervantes's "Bananas" report on the construction of an expanded, class-inflected identity as it responds to changes in late capitalism: Jordan's 1980 poem expands personal identity toward intra-national class-conscious solidarity, while Cervantes's 1995 poem goes global. Interestingly enough, both poets find their class-based riff next to the bananas and pomegranates at that site most emblematic of exchange and commerce, the food market.[6]

June Jordan began publishing poetry in 1969. The poem "From Sea to Shining Sea" was originally published in *Feminist Studies* in 1982, then republished in the 1983 black feminist anthology *Home Girls,* and was later included in Jordan's 1985 collection, *Living Room.* There are significant structural differences between the earliest and most recent versions of the poem. In the earliest, 1982 version of this poem, published in *Feminist Studies,* the voices section is marked as section "2"; the voices are neither italicized nor enclosed in quotation marks. The same section markings are evident in the poem's republication in the black feminist anthology *Home Girls* (1983), and in Jordan's 1985 collection, *Living Room*. It is only in the version found in Jordan's

---

[6] One is easily reminded of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" as a poem evincing a similar aesthetic, especially since the poem is widely interpreted as commenting upon capitalism, consumerism and greed. Moreover, the philosophical bent of the poems by Jordan and Cervantes has some elements in common with the Pre-Raphaelites' reaction against Victorian (goods) materialism in favor of a return to a more "natural" society.

2005 collected works that the parenthetical phrase "(voices from the background)" appears; in this version, the monologues are placed in italics, enclosed within quotation marks, and subsumed in section 1. Jordan may have felt a need to distance the speakers even further from the poet; perhaps she experienced audience response that indicated some confusion about who is speaking. Regardless of the reason, her feint toward the fictional axis of the monologue is less ambiguous with the inclusion of italics and quotation marks. While I believe that the poem as originally published is more interesting because the lack of markers more clearly implicates both the poet-speaker and the reader in the representation of ideological division, I will refer here to the version found in *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan* (325) because it is more readily available.

"From Sea to Shining Sea" opens with an ironic play on the phrase 'natural order' which serves as the frame for the poem as a whole. Section one begins, "Natural order is being restored" then defines "natural order" as stacked fruit, perversely described as "plastic-looking" with "its little top / a childproof cap" into a "wobbly / pyramid composed by 103 additional pomegranates / next to a sign saying 89 cents / each" (1.1-9). The reversal of the once-commonplace analogy of describing a manufactured thing in terms of a natural thing sets up the poem's interrogation of the phrase "natural" order and of contemporary society's penchant for prepackaged illusions over reality. Section two features seven distilled dramatic monologues that represent the *zeitgeist,* "spoken" by what must be understood as "representative" voices, paired snatches of conversation overheard on the street that represent certain ideologies

circulating in American society. The section is rife with sarcasm; both the caustic voice and the common voice are frequently heard throughout the body of Jordan's work. Irony, too, is at play here; however, it is not the irony of a disengagement but rather the wry, subversive irony of the truth-teller, of the observer who points out the emperor's nakedness. Equally important to the poem is the concept that ideological divisions such as those represented by the interrogation of the phrase "natural order" are often revealed in spoken English. In this section, each reported statement reveals a societal divide that has become naturalized, made to appear as the way things truly are. This section relies heavily on Jordan's theories of the ethical and political dimensions of speech which center on the terms "white English" and "Black English."[7] In Jordan's terminology, white English does not necessarily denote a "living language spoken by a certain demographic (Caucasians) alone, but the carefully scripted ideologically invested language of political pundits and policy makers" (Stalling 210). Likewise, "Black English" does not "attempt to map all varieties of English spoken by black Anglophones" but describes an "antagonistic speech" that is capable of "presencing multiplicities and their governing power relations" (Stalling 210-11). In "From Sea to Shining Sea," as in her theoretical writing, Jordan refuses the easier path of laying the blame for society's ills on the government alone or upon some abstract sense of hegemonic power; instead, by using the dramatic monologue in section two to mimic the spoken word, she insists it is the culture-creating powers of language, both our embodied language and disembodied politico-speech, that are at least partly at fault.

---

[7] See "White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation" (1972), reprinted in *Civil Wars*.

The dramatic monologues in section one of "From Sea to Shining Sea," like those in the historical long poems of chapter two, make use of the form's inherent duality to foreground historical narratives and to perform social critique. The dramatic monologue's historical quality makes it a natural fit for evoking the metatextual historical axis of the hybrid lyric-narrative. Moreover, its ability to represent speech is useful in a media poem for mimicking "sound bites." Furthermore, like the dramatic monologues of chapter two, both the historical and the polemical modes are at play, since the historical, individual voices are also representative of societal divisions. The section's voices begin with one perhaps identifiable as belonging to a black man, who speaks against 'those Black bitches' who 'got to have my job' (1.19-23); a second, probably identifiable as belonging to a black woman, replies 'it was Black men laid us wide open for the cut. / Busy telling us to go home. Sit tight' (1.24-25). The perspective of the next voice is more difficult to identify: 'Those macho bastards! They would rather blow / the whole thing up than give a little: It was vote for spite: vote white for spite!' (1.29-31). Given that the poem is marked "Copyright 1980" in *Home Girls*, the voice could belong to a female supporter of the Communist Party USA's 1980 and 1984 vice-presidential candidate, African-American radical activist Angela Davis.[8] The criticism appears to be leveled at white male members of the traditionally misogynistic

[8] Sadly, in 2008, these lines could be identified as commentary on working-class men who voted for John McCain rather than Barack Obama because of racism and against their own class interests.

and often racist CPUSA who did not support Davis's candidacies.[9] This voice, then, marks the race and gender disputes within the radical political community. Other voices testify to the many other divisions in American society: between the young, who point out that 'Old men run the government' (1.40), and the old, who says of an eighteen-year-old that the 'Only thing he wants is a girl and a stereo and hanging out . . .What / does he care about the country?' (1.45-7); between black workers and white workers, the whites filled with ideologically manufactured resentment of 'niggers' who 'were chewing into the middle of my paycheck'; between women and misogynist, homophobic men afraid of losing political power and status in the face of activism by 'Fucken feminists' who 'turned themselves into bulldagger / dykes and scared the shit out of decent / smalltown people' (1.32-34). The section ends with a reference back to the pyramid of fruit in the first stanza, "Pomegranates 89¢ each." Similar to its function in *Fragments from the Fire*, the dramatic monologue positions readers to confront divisive words as if they were their own. That is, readers are rhetorically positioned to read these lines as if they were speaking them and that action compels personal ethical evaluations of their own complicity in societal hatred and division. Although the sentiments expressed are not ethical, Jonathan Stalling suggests that Jordan would consider reproducing these speech acts in poetry as creating "antagonistic speech,"

---

[9] Although the CPUSA nominating committee voted unanimously to nominate Davis, many rank and file members and leaders were widely known to be both racist and sexist. It is unknown how many members chose to abstain or to vote for another party's presidential candidate in those years, as Jordan's speaker says, "for spite." However, in 1991, Davis and 800 other signatories presented the CPUSA with a document entitled "An Initiative to Unite and Renew the Party," which "criticized the CPUSA for elitism and racial and sexual bias" (James 9). In the CPUSA elections that followed the presentation of "The Initiative," CPUSA leaders "who signed the paper were refused placement on the official slate, consequently, none of "the signatories were reelected to office" (9). Afterwards, Davis, along with many other African-American members, left the party. See Joy James's "Introduction" to The Angela Y. Davis Reader (Wiley-Blackwell, 1998) for more information.

which is “ethical in that it attempts to foreground the conflict intrinsic to the maintenance of the (status) quo” (211). The ethical action of the poem is instantiated in the readers’ recognition of her complicity in societal divisions and her interrogation of the speech acts that bring hatred into being.

The second section of the poem returns to a close description of goods in the grocery store, one that mimics another type of media, the advertisement. On first glance, the descriptions are politically neutral. But upon a closer look, one can see that the imagery highlights the fruit’s containment, “frozen cans of orange juice,” “Pre-washed spinach,” “Onions by the bag,” “Scallions rubberbanded” (2.1,7). Because the literary axis of the poem encourages a metaphorical reading, Jordan’s imagery here, as in the first stanza, foregrounds artificial order imposed upon natural disorder, a dichotomy that serves as the organizing trope of the entire work. The poem as a whole makes the argument that an unnatural order has replaced the natural order and that this replacement has been in part effected by an Orwellian substitution in which the term “natural order” has been co-opted to mean its opposite. Section 3 interrupts for a moment, only long enough to say, “This not such a hot time for you or for me” (3.1-2), a statement which, in the speech-world of this section constitutes disruptive rhetoric and simultaneously, thematically anticipates the journalistic reports of section 5. Section 4 of the poem clarifies this idea for the reader, beginning “Natural order is being restored”(4.1); this restoration's metaphorical equivalencies include “Music will be replaced by reproduction / of the music”(4.4-5), and “Food will be replaced by information” (4.6). The use of passive sentence construction in this section mimics

politico-speak which, in its obfuscation of agency, rejects intention and avoids accepting responsibility and placing blame: the classic "mistakes have been made." By weighting politico-speak with negative connotations, the poem suggests that a complete denial of individual subjectivity leads to a complete refusal of accountability, and by extension, that the reinstatement of subjective identity, even if a contingent or provisional one, is necessary for an ethically functional society. The addressee of politico-speak is an abstract audience, not another "I," and therefore white English forecloses the possibility of dialogue, debate, and questioning in its use of mono-directional language. To put it another way, there must be an "I" capable of interacting ethically with "you," and this lack of ethical reciprocity in white English politico-power-speak renders it fundamentally unethical.

Section 5, the longest section in the poem, consists primarily of a series of apparent journalistic reports introduced by a chanted refrain beginning, "This was not a good time…": "to be gay," "to be Black," "to be old," "young," "a child," "a woman" or "married," nor to be a person "without a job," with "a job," living in "Arkansas," "Queens," "or "Grand Forks North Dakota." About halfway through the narrative of section 5, the poet reminds her readers of the poem's overarching metaphor: "This was not a good time to be a pomegranate ripening on a tree" (5.41). Each piece of reportage obviously refers to actual events, political and legislative acts, military acts, acts of social violence, racism, and sexual abuse; the speaker's ironic voice also returns. Each of the reports ends with a final dismissive line: "etcetera" or "among other things," or "and the like," or "something of the sort."

As an example of the style and content of section 5, here is the reportage introduced with "This was not a good time to be without a job" and its following section, "This was not a good time to have a job":

This was not a good time to be without a job.
Unemployment Compensation and the minimum
wage have been identified as programs
that plague the poor and the young
who really require different incentives
towards initiative/pluck and so forth.
This was not a good time to have a job.
Promising to preserve traditional
values of freedom, the new administration
intends to remove safety regulations
that interfere
with productivity potential, etcetera. (5.51-62)

One can almost *see* the aristocratic wave of the hand that surely must accompany "and so forth" and "etcetera." The real lives of real workers have no meaning in a discourse that defines unemployment compensation and minimum wage as "programs that plague the poor and the young" (5.54) and that defines safety regulations as something that can "interfere / with productivity potential" (5.61-2). Jordan's line breaks are fascinating and meaningful, ending on and therefore accentuating "minimum" and "programs," leaving the second part of the compound term "wage" and the appositive clause "that

plague" with less impact. Therefore, for a moment, the reader hears "the minimum" as a collective noun for a "program," and that "wages" are only programs, bureaucratic functions rather than earned recompense; the "poor and the young" only need "different incentives," which, following the poem's logic, will replace wages. A similar unveiling of doublespeak occurs in the next stanza, where the "promise to preserve traditional" swallows "values of freedom" and highlights "administration" and "regulations" (5.58-62). As James Scully has said of another politically engaged poem, "The line breaking proposes to trouble the sentenced surface, to realize ideologically suppressed meaning" (153). In this poem, the ideologically suppressed meaning the poet foregrounds is the naturalizing of unnatural order by those in power. Also, the redefinitions proffered serve to tell the reader more about the "speaker" than the speaker knows she/he/it has revealed; this is, of course, one of the primary markers of dramatic monologue. Although the pseudo-journalistic tone of the monologues may disguise their affinities with traditional dramatic monologues, there is no doubt the monologues in this section are intended to represent the pronouncements of hegemonic capitalist ideology, with the poet's persona interjecting ironic and critical commentary at regular intervals. In the earlier section of monologues, the voices of "the people" are busily engaged in blaming their Others for the problems they face, while all around them the voice of power reveals its plans and its schemes, including those that encourage internecine hatred among the people, the workers it desires to control.

The penultimate phrase of section 5 is a blunt recapitulation of the poem's themes: "This is not a good time to be against / the natural order" (5.108-09). Again,

the line breaks encourage the ear to hear "This is not a good time to be against" (anything the hegemonic powers suggest); however, since "the natural order" stands alone on the next line and is not semantically or aurally buried by its position, here we get both the invisible meaning-completion "anything" and the ideological insistence on "natural order." This line follows after a litany of more examples of what it is not a good time to be or do: "to be married," "to buy a house, "to rent housing," "to be a Jew," "to be a tree," "a river," to be "found with a gun" or "without one," "to be gay," "to be Black," to be a "pomegranate or an orange" (5.90-107). As it is not a good time to be against *any thing* (that is part of the "natural order"), it is also not a good time to be *any one;* "one" includes those who were the object of othering in the second section as well as those who were speaking the othering into being. For a moment, the poem gestures toward empathetic understanding based upon a common position relative to hegemonic power; it purports to inform the people that no person who is not one of "the powerful" escapes from late capitalism's life-denying grip. However, the poem will suggest, much as Chandra Mohanty has, that "assuming an enforced commonality of oppression" is not as politically effective as a "practice of solidarity" grounded in "mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests"(7). Near the end of the poem, the poet-speaker realizes that empathetic understanding of the mutuality of oppression is not the best use of empathy toward the project of instantiating ethical relations between people. The epiphany leading to this understanding begins immediately after the last iteration of "This is not a good time to be against / the natural order." Centered on the page, the sentence "-Wait a minute.-" appears; it is as if the

speaker has heard enough to finally *hear.* The phrase "Wait a minute" invites the reader to join the speaker in what is framed as a sudden realization of the obscured meanings of "natural order" and the implications of its appropriation in the service of hegemonic ideology. It also serves to turn the poem toward its hortatory end.

Until this point, the primary mode of interpretation and analysis of "From Sea to Shining Sea" has focused upon rhetoric and line breaks; section 6 of the poem, like section 2, requires attention to a third component of the hybrid lyric-narrative, that is, the image, both visual and aural. Throughout the poem, the poet-speaker reminds readers that the pomegranate is intended to be a symbol of something momentous in the poem, and the first lines of section 6 confirm the readers' expectations: "Sucked by the tongue and teeth and lips / while the teeth release the succulence / of all voluptuous disintegration" (6.1-3). There is a marked change of language between sections 5 and 6, from a flattened poetic language imitating the voice of order, control, and power, to a lyrical, musical, erotic language. Sibilance, assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme create a sensuous experience, and, insofar as a reader enunciates the words, embodies that experience; this effect is heightened by the lack of personal pronouns. Empathy is often described as "feeling with" another, of sensuously apprehending and understanding the way in which "I" might feel if embodied in a similar situation as "you." The poet-speaker encourages just such an imaginative body-swapping in these lines.

The next six lines bring a new chant into the poem, one that challenges the previous droning of "This was not a good time …"; it relies on the use of a

Whitmanesque deictic "I" that simultaneously serves to figure the speaker as the voice of nature, of "natural order," and to resituate the human being as part of that natural order.

> I am turning under the trees
>
> I am trailing into the rivers
>
> I am walking loud along the streets
>
> I am digging my nails and my heels into the land
>
> I am opening my mouth
>
> I am just about to touch the pomegranates
>
> piled up precarious (6.4-10)

These lines, with their alliteration, rhythmic lines, and physical, active images, accentuate the body-centered poetics of section 6. The open vowels of "loud," "along," "land," "opening," and "mouth" are sensuous both in their aural qualities and their fullness as experienced by the mouth's musculature. The use of the present progressive verb constructions "am turning," "am trailing," "am walking," "am digging," and "am opening" suggests the importance of action "now." It also underscores that the speaker, and by extension the reader, is engaged in the process of becoming, that identity is always a process and a relationship, an initial condition for ethics but not its consummation. The final line, with its "just about" brings the reader into a moment of action anticipating and directed toward the future. The pomegranates in their pyramid return, "piled up precarious" (6.10). The alliteration of "p's" gives these two lines the feel of a nursery rhyme; certainly there is delight in the contemplation of the speaker's

implied intention to transgress by "touching" the "precarious" pile of fruit. As might be expected, section 7 is set post-transgression; it is "now," in the moment after the restoration of "natural disorder" effected in the tumbling of the pomegranate pyramid.

An enormous rhetorical change occurs between section 5 and section 7, a change which is on the cusp of being realized in section 6. In opposition to the despairing "this is not a good time" of section 5, section 7 insists, "This is a good time / This is the best time / This is the only time to come together" (7.1-3). The sensuous transgression of section 6 has literally and figuratively transformed the "times." This continual coming together—of people, of nature—is "Fractious / Kicking / Spilling / Burly / Whirling / Raucous / Messy" and "Free"; it is "Exploding like the seeds of a natural disorder" (7.4-12). The reader may surmise that the pomegranates serve to remind human society of the unnaturalness of the kind of "natural order" represented throughout the poem; here, "The Fall" is recoded as positive. It is clear in this section that pomegranates represent chaos, particularly chaos in its oldest sense, of potential and fecundity, the "seeds" of a different kind of order, of a chaotic order based on creativity, sensuality, the "feminine" principle, the womb of the universe, the Heraclitan foundation of reality. The poem does not insist that the new disorder has any particular form, nor that it is in all things the opposite of the previous order. Rather, it is a celebration of transgressive anarchy against the current hierarchical taxonomies. One might object that there is no such entity as natural order and that the poem's substitution of someone's idea of the order of nature in the place of the negatively-coded manmade social order is at best naive, and at worst reactionary. However, the poem does not

attempt this kind of substitution, but, rather, recognizes that a human- and-humanely-designed alternative is possible through empathetic engagement with other human beings. As Nicky Marsh writes of Jordan, "In making apparent the role of the irrational, of desire, and the visceral, her poetics gesture to a political embodiment beyond . . . institutional frameworks" ("This is the Only Time" 27). The embodied understanding that empathetic connections with others make possible is necessary to an ethical society; principled economic, social, and legal justice must be founded upon a profoundly empathetic understanding of and egalitarian communication with those who are most in need. The new order would be no less "unnatural" than the previous order, but hopefully more just. Moreover, the poet's representation of a natural disorder for human beings has much in common with Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," not least because Eros was "born of Chaos" (55).

The erotic, according to Lorde, is a form of knowledge embedded in the body; it functions, in part, by "providing the power" to share sensuously with another person. It is not a universal feeling, but an embodied way of knowing. In short, the "erotic" in Lorde's terms is both a mode of self-awareness and a form of empathy; empathy requires a "self-aware self," as does Lorde's construction of the erotic. For Lorde, erotic-empathetic understanding is "the bridge" which "connects the spiritual and the political"; it makes ethical life possible because through the erotic, one's self-awareness is always relational (56). In Lorde's essay, the erotic is always associated with positive feelings, with the "sharing of joy" that "forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the

threat of their difference" (56). In contrast, empathy (and especially sympathy) are often construed, in literature and in psychology, as involving only negative affect. Perhaps, however, Lorde has identified the missing positive aspect of empathy by revealing its other name. Certainly the speaker in "From Sea to Shining Sea" puts more faith in positive empathy—the erotic—than in negative empathy; none of the monologists in the second section of the poem seem capable of empathizing with their Others, despite obvious common social positions, difficulties, oppressions, and oppressors. The ethical response scripted in "From Sea to Shining Sea" proffers positive empathy as a way out of the unnatural order; attempts at negative empathy could be said to only reinforce the social division, personal paralysis, and worker alienation seeded and cultivated by hegemonic structures and ideology. As Margret Grebowicz states, "Jordan calls for a politics in which ethics intervenes at every step" (163). Although Grebowicz is speaking specifically of Jordan's writings on childhood, throughout her body of work and as exemplified in this poem, Jordan promotes ethical intervention in every decision that involves assertions of power. When one considers how viciously workers' gatherings, even celebratory ones, have been suppressed, the many ways in which festivals have been co-opted and commodified, and the methods by which restrained, bourgeois personal manners have been inculcated in schools and other institutions, Jordan's poetic reinstatement of empathetic joy and disorder, of "fractious," "loud," erotic coming together is indeed a radical prescription toward a new social ethics. While Philip Metres finds in Jordan's later work that "despite its origins in the United States, [it] asserts and summons a community *not*

bounded by nationality that must resist imperial oppression," her concerns in "From Sea to Shining Sea" are primarily those of intra-national ethnic, racial, and class divisions (177). The poem was written before globalization became a widespread term in the American vocabulary, when the extent of international trade and finance, spurred by corporation-friendly laws and regulation revisions, was not widely known to those outside the corporate world. Therefore, the poem's interrogation of an unnatural "natural" order predicated upon race, gender, and economic divisions among working-class people is one that exists "from sea to shining sea." A mere fifteen years later, in a style similar to "From Sea to Shining Sea," Lorna Dee Cervantes's "Bananas," extends Jordan's critique of identity-based, political and ideological divisions beyond national boundaries. "Bananas" is also resembles "From Sea to Shining Sea" in its insistence on ethics as a ground for politics and its use of a hybrid lyric-narrative form which provides an experience of poetry as media.

Lorna Dee Cervantes's poetry, from her first book, *Emplumada* (1981), to her most recent, *Drive* (2006), is saturated with working-class images and narratives. Her poetry supports Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano's assertions that "the Chicana's experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and a culture which is not the dominant culture" (139). While Jordan's poetry and essays often engage with class issues, her work is usually more closely associated with the interrogation of race and gender. By contrast, Cervantes's work is often overtly engaged with class critique, and scholars of her work, many of whom identify as Chicana/os, remark on that class-consciousness. In addition to the

class critiques of her work by Chicana scholars, Marxist critic Timothy Libretti foregrounds class issues in his readings of Cervantes's first two poetry collections, *Emplumada* and *From the Cables of Genocide* (1991). He states that "Cervantes's poetry radically re-theorizes identity and identity politics through a poetic reconceptualization of the relations between identity and otherness in terms of race, class, and gender, experience and totality, and nationalism and internationalism" (207). Libretti's examples from Cervantes's work do indeed outline a movement toward "internationalism," but like Jordan's journey toward an international poetics of solidarity, the theme is not fully realized in her earlier work. The internationalism of *Emplumada* and *From the Cables of Genocide* is mostly intracontinental; that is, an internationalism crossing the United States-Mexico border and the invisible borders of race and gender within the United States. Cervantes's two early books are partial enactments of Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness; but in her latest work, recently published as the collection *Drive: The First Quartet* (2006), the poet expands her third-world feminist, empathetically imagined working-class community beyond the Americas and into "the 21st century."

Where Jordan's "From Sea to Shining Sea" focuses on the poem's present and is envisaged within national boundaries, Cervantes's poem "Bananas," expands a culturally situated sense of class solidarity, oscillating between a "personal/ethical" voice that centers on the speaker's concern for a friend, and a "historical/political" voice which imaginatively emphasizes class-based linkages between workers across time and space. Moreover, although they intertwine throughout the hybrid lyric-narrative poem,

the literary axis of is most often associated with the personal sections and the historical axis with the narrative sections. The final section of the poem attempts a dialectical synthesis of the historical and the personal, the narrative and the lyrical. "Bananas" opens with the speaker thinking of her friend Indrek, in Estonia, for whom bananas have become a symbol of want and desire because "There is not a chance / for a taste. Where rubles are scarce, dollars are harder" (I.6-7). Indrek takes his children "to look at bananas" (I.2); "He wants them to know about the presence of fruit" (3), their presence signifying an absence in their lives of something that is taken for granted in middle-class America. The family "light the few candles not reserved for the dead, / and try not to think … / of irradiated fields or the diminished catch in the fisherman's / net" (I. 9-12). The absence figured in the "diminished catch" and the presence of radiation, extends the absence/presence trope beyond the human and into the ecological. This interpenetration of the personal, the sociological, and the ecological I have elsewhere called an "eco-logic" poetics and in "Bananas," this eco-logic serves to make connections between workers across time and space and to make connections in the poem between the personal/ethical voice of parts I and III and the historical/political voice of parts II and IV.[10] I will first consider the historical axis of the poem, as expressed in parts II and IV.

Parts II and IV of "Bananas" are composed in a historical narrative voice that evokes the Latin American genre of *testimonio,* where a speaker tells of contemporary and historical events as if she were personally present; the implied presence of the

---

[10] "'The Heart's Sweatshop': Weaving Poetries of Witness in Demetria Martínez's *The Devil's Workshop*."

speaker is understood to represent the historical presence of "the people." For instance, in part II of the poem, the reader is carried back to "Colombia, 1928" where "bananas rot in the fields" (II.1) and where "The murdered Mestizos have long been cleared / and begin their new duties as fertilizer for the plantations" (II.19-20). This is a reference to the "Banana Massacre," during which workers striking against the American-owned United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands) were fired upon by the Colombian army (under pressure from the United States government), killing between five hundred and six hundred people.[11] Because the line breaks after the word "cleared," the "murdered Mestizos" are figuratively aligned in the plantation owners' discourse as trees; that is, they are no more than trees that must be cleared to extend the boundaries of the plantation. Cervantes's eco-logic asks the reader to question the idea that people are "no more than" trees and to consider that they are "no less than" trees, either. In fact, as fertilizer taken up by the trees, the men have become part of the bananas we late consume like a communion wafer. Their labor has literally become reified in the products of their labor. Moreover, the Mestizos' continued presence both memorializes their sacrifice and denies the company the power to prevent their resurrection, as individuals and as a working-class collective.

Not only do this series of images mount a polemic against capitalism's abuse of labor, it also critiques the capital-driven environmental discourse that promotes banning indigenous people from their native lands on the grounds that the presence of humans

---

[11] For more history of the Banana Massacre and American intervention in South America on behalf of fruit companies, see Marcelo Bucheli, Bananas and Business: The United Fruit Company in Colombia: 1899-2000 (2005) and Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala (1982).

would be necessarily harmful in wilderness areas, regardless of their traditional relationship with the environment. The people who live there are not consulted. According to investigative historian Mark Dowie, "green ethnic cleansing" is

> the removal of aboriginal human beings from their homeland to create a commodified wilderness is a deliberate charade, a culturally constructed neo-Edenic narrative played out for the enchantment of weary human urbanites yearning for the open frontier that their ancestors "discovered," then tamed, a place to absorb the sounds and images of virgin nature and forget for a moment the thoroughly unnatural lives they lead.

The "untamed" wilderness has become a salable product and the same capitalism that justifies the destruction of workers and trees also justifies the destruction of cultures. By placing the historical account of the conditions of bananas production after a story of hunger for bananas in a formerly Communist country, Cervantes asks her readers to consider whether national and transnational corporate interests, regardless of political persuasion, are ever compatible with the needs of human beings as workers and as consumers. The use of lineal, stanzaic, and sectional parataxis as is an essential meaning-making device in "Bananas"; guided inference is necessary to navigate the epistemological and ethical dimensions of the poem. The interconnected stories make the argument that neither distance in time nor distance in place can sever connections between workers, so long as those connections are based on material conditions of existence. The poem asks readers to consider their own complicity in unethical labor relations, human rights violations, and environmentally unsound and unsustainable

production practices. It gives readers a context for examining the repercussions of global capitalism while at the same time modeling an ethical interrogation of the role that consumer demand for certain goods plays in workers' oppression, in the destruction of the rain forest, and in the displacement of indigenous peoples, problems which arise from the desire for bananas in a country where they are never in season.

Part IV of the poem extends the poem's imaginative linking of workers in the contemporary global economy. It is set at Big Mountain on the Hopi reservation in Arizona, where "uranium / sings through the dreams of the people" (IV.51). The area's history is complicated: in short, in 1974, Congress passed a bill to "relocate" thousands of Navajo people who had lived in the area from time immemorial. The relocation was driven in part by the coal-fired power industry which wanted the area cleared for more mining (of coal and uranium) and power-plant construction. In 1980, an area was finally set aside for settling the evacuees, but the settlement area is a Federal Superfund site (with extensive uranium tailings), which was not (and still has not been) cleaned up. A 1996 bill allowed for "forcible eviction" of Navajo tribal members remaining in the area and for impoundment of their livestock and property.[12] Ironically, many Navajos (and members of other area tribes) worked in the uranium and coal mines in the area, mines which escaped most government regulation until 1990.[13] The mineworkers suffered

---

[12] See Mike Wicks's article "A Short History of Big Mountain-Black Mesa" on the American Indian Cultural Support Web site for more information, including governmental documents. The Big Mountain land grab has continuing political implications—a 2008 presidential candidate, Senator John McCain, was the sponsor of both the 1974 and the 1996 bills. The removals began before the 1996 bill was passed (as evidenced by the fact Cervantes was writing this poem as early as 1995); it was, in essence, passed as a retroactive justification for actions already under way.

[13] For a short history of Navajo mine workers in uranium mines and the health damage it caused them, see "The History of Uranium Mining and the Navajo People" by Doug Brugge and Ron Goble.

extensive health damage resulting from dangerous labor conditions in the mines then they were thrown out of their own homes by the State. The "state tractors with chains trawl the resistant / plants, gouging anew the tribal borders, uprooting / all in their path like Amazonian ants, breaking / the hearts of the widows" ("Bananas" IV.6-9). The Navajos' sheep "are carried / off by the Federal choppers waiting in the canyon / with orders and slings" (12-14) in this "Encounter rerun" the poet-speaker dates to 1992, the year of the Christopher Columbus celebrations and protests (17).[14] The "good shepherd" of Christian religious mythology has become a mechanical vulture sent by a terrible godlike government intent on separating the people from the land, which is for Native Americans a spiritual as well as a physical separation. Cervantes's overall paratactical design for the poem highlights structural similarities in the stories of indigenous banana workers in South America and indigenous uranium workers in South America. The discourse of profit that justifies acts of genocide in both cases are the same. In a manner reminiscent of Rukeyser's inclusion of Perecute and the unnamed indentured servant and of Llewellyn's interrogation of the Statute of Liberty script, the association of the destructive "good shepherd" with the narrative of "Encounter" suggests that the United States' foundational story of search for religious freedom is nothing more than a cover story for the discernible profit motive that actually drove European exploration and settlement of the Americas and which continues to drive the oppression of workers worldwide.

[14] The relocations have gone on for years, often moving the same families repeatedly, since many return to their homes in defiance of government orders.

Part III is composed self-reflexively, mimicking its position "between" communal histories with its content. It is composed as an epistolary poem, opening with an ambiguous greeting, "Dear I" (III.1). The "I" to whom the "letter" is addressed could be the speaker's friend, Indrek, but the poem itself is a series of events related in the narrative present by the poet-speaker. Therefore, the ambiguous "I" in the salutation could also be the personal pronoun of the speaker who relates the days' events to herself for clarity and understanding. It is more interesting to think of the "I" as representing both the speaker's friend Indrek and the speaker herself, a device that interweaves personal boundaries and creates an effect that closely mimics the way we (humans) experience empathy in our inner dialogues.

The opening images of section III find the poet-speaker at the "hippie / market in Boulder" on "Labor Day" where she gazes at "marigolds, some / with heads big as my Indian face" (III.3-4). For the speaker, marigolds "signify death," since marigolds are traditionally used on *Día de Los Muertos* altars. The speaker is in the market on Labor Day to shop for 'no-spray bananas;' the fruit was last referenced in the final line of part II, as an image describing "gold claws of bananas" falling like feathers from native birds of the rain forest onto the "newly spaded soil" of the "murdered mestizos" graves (21). In this series of compact images, the poet has tied together Native people, Hispanic culture, and labor, a move that recapitulates her story of the banana plantations in part II and anticipates her treatment of the Big Mountain relocations in part IV.[15]

---

[15] It is important to point out here that, since the Mexican revolution, class-conscious social criticism has been part of the celebration of *Día de Los Muertos*, particularly through the graphic art of José Guadalupe Posada, whose drawings and prints of "calaveras," or skeletons, satirize the upper class through a medium the often-illiterate campesinos understand. See "Las calaveras de José Guadalupe Posada" by Luis Cardoza y Aragón.

Also, the absence/presence trope returns: in this poem which is centered on a lack of food, the abundance of food also carries dangerous weight. The poet intricately weaves these politically charged images borrowed from the previous narrative, historical sections of the poem into the literary, personal, lyrical sections of the poem; in doing so, she ties personal experience to public politics. The ethical challenges signified by bananas cannot be ignored by the poem's speaker because she knows her history too well: she chooses to "forego / Dole and Chiquita" because she knows of the companies' banana-republic history in South America and is even privately embarrassed that her childhood pet name was "chiquita" (III.9). Her personal history again intersects with public history when she is asked by someone at the market, "Where are you from?" because she is "still brown enough" for the question (III.13). Refusing a purely personal response, the speaker answers "I'm from / the 21st Century," a reply that succinctly performs Cervantes's transnational, world-citizen, class-conscious poetics.

I use the prefix "trans-" carefully here; I do not mean Cervantes "globalizes" her poetry or her identity; globalization erases difference, culture, history. Cervantes's media poetics reveals a hybridity which goes beyond its form. It combines not only lyric and narrative genres and the literary and historical axes of poetry, but also reaches across and embraces difference, honors history and culture, yet calls for her readers to recognize and empower each other through shared concerns. The empathetic moment here, of imagining one's personal identity as a site of solidarity with the world's oppressed, with the world's workers, is a matter of human survival and human dignity. The speaker's claim to be from the 21st century also serves as a warning: in the future,

there will be more people who look like me, and, by analogy, who think like me and act like me. In an admission that makes clear the speaker's desire to embrace her Others despite irreducible differences, she is immediately regretful of her snappy reply (since it is directed to a *worker* at the market); she "feels rude for it—when all I desire / is bananas without pesticides" (III.17-18). The speaker's "desire" to buy healthy produce not implicated in the deaths of her imagined community has become very complicated indeed, as it does whenever we attempt to struggle against the globalized consumer culture in which we are living. Ironically, the poetic speaker in the market is, in a very personal and ethical way, there to resist globalization by engaging in a little of her own.

Although the speaker tells us that "all" she desires "bananas without pesticides," a more immediate purpose for the bananas is soon revealed: "I ask the produce manager how to crate and / pack bananas to Estonia" (III.22-23). The speaker is engaging in a personal, intimate form of empathetic action meant to be emblematic for the transnational empathetic relationships she envisions as the basis of an ethical politics. The action is directed toward particular people and their circumstances which are known to her; she is thinking specifically of her friend and his children: "I am thinking of children in Estonia with / no fried plátanos to eat with their fish" (IV.27-28). But the "produce manager," perhaps because she is a "manager" and not a "worker," "glares" at the speaker "suspiciously" and replies, "You can't do that. I know. / There must be some law" (III.4-5). Cervantes's line break unveils for her reader the problems inherent in creating ethics without a correspondent politics or a politics without an ethical component. This is the "hippie market," where, supposedly, the vendors conceive of

themselves as politically leftist, yet the produce manager is suspicious of what she must imagine is the speaker's radical intentions. In the matter of export law, the manager insists "I know" but in the next line, her certainty is revealed as unfounded: "There might." The produce manager, in her position as a member of the petit bourgeois, establishes her subjectivity firmly on the side of hegemonic power and cannot imagine the speaker's request as one fueled by experiencing empathy with another person. The speaker's desire to defeat globalism and poverty with an act of charity (and here we must think of *caritas*, of *agape,* not the modern diminishment of the term) is frustrated by the rules and regulations that separate nations and people. Finally, instead of trying to send bananas, the speaker, as the "folk" often do, finds a way around life-negating strictures: "I buy up organic / bananas, butter y canela. I ship banana bread." "Bread" is invested with deep significance in proletarian communities and literature, both materially and metaphorically. It is often used metonymically for the whole of workers' subsistence demands. "Bread and Roses." "Pane e Vino." Its Christian religious connotations are strong as well. The speaker who chooses to send banana bread has chosen to send not just that which is desired, but that which is fulfilling, an actual material foodstuff and a spiritual and historical lesson for Indrek's children to ingest.

The final, fifth section of the poem reaches toward a dialectical synthesis between lyric and narrative; between personal and historical voices; between the local and the global and, most significantly, between the ethical and the political realms. Its range is breathtaking, broad yet specific, as it draws together threads from throughout

the poem, extends them, and reveals previously unmentioned connections. It also seems to continue the "letter" begun in section III, since it closes with "Your friend, a Chicana poet." Section V opens with the speaker worrying "about the slavery of substance and / gruel" endured by her friends who are "exiles in their / homeland gathered around a fire" (V2-5). This specific concern then explodes into a general one, "*Will there be enough to eat? / Will there be enough to feed?*" (5.5-6). The italics seem to indicate that these two sentences are the words of the poor in general and of her friends in particular. This is the first dialectic synthesized and represented, that of the local and the global. It also represents a movement from the sympathetic understanding of her friend's situation to a general empathetic understanding of the working-class condition. The phrase "exiles in their / homeland" ties Indrek's family to the murdered banana workers in South America and to the displaced Navajo in Arizona; the speaker, too, is an exile "from the 21st Century." The tie between ethics and politics is made explicit; every person is also part of a historical political constituency and every historical political constituency is made up of individuals. Therefore, ethics is politics on the personal level and ideally, politics is the communal expression of ethics.

The intent of the synthesis between personal and historical voices and political and ethical realms is made clear a few lines later, when the speaker returns to the trope of food:

> Sugar cane seeks out tropics; and dictates
> a Resolution to stun the tongues of those
> who can afford to pay: imported plums, bullets,

black caviar large as peas, smoked meats

the color of Southern lynchings . . . (9-14)

In these lines, the speaker makes an explicit class critique which highlights the intertwining oppressions of class and race. Not only do culinary delicacies appear on the menu for "those / who can afford to pay" for them, but also "bullets" and "Southern lynchings." The metaphor "smoked meats / the color of Southern lynchings" is particularly stunning, since it graphically evokes the practice of setting lynching victims afire while they were being hung.[16] Moreover, with this image, Cervantes brings another oppressed group—a group whose historical relationship to modes of production is inextricably intertwined with race—into the poem's worldview. The next line emphasizes this section's movement toward an internationalist class critique: "You are out of work." The "you" is the speaker's friend, Indrek, who we learn in the next line is a "high physicist(s)" (V.15-16). Moreover, the lines expose the ironies and entanglements of the late capitalist global economy. The speaker's friend, with whom the reader has developed an empathetic relationship over the course of the poem, is revealed to be a cog in the global military-industrial machine that saw its birth in the enslavement of millions of people to maximize profit, that poisoned and exiled the Navajo miners, and that expanded its reach in the governmental and military support of the fruit companies' virtual occupation of South American countries. Indrek is also marked as the failure of communism in Russia, since as an Estonian citizen, he likely

---

[16]For an illustration of the horrifying accuracy of Cervantes's metaphor, see *Without Sanctuary* project Webpage, created by James Allen and John Littlefield, where there is an extensive archive of lynching photographs. See also the descriptions in Ralph Ellison's "A Party Down at the Square," which ends with a comment about class relations across racial divides.

worked for Russian nuclear programs and is out of work because of the end of the Cold War, which, despite its positive implications, did in fact have devastating economic repercussions for workers on both sides. The ethical question behind the revelation of Indrek's former occupation is, why have we chosen to build our economies on war, exploitation, murder, and land theft?

It is useful here to refer to Alicia Ostriker's definition of "postmodern witness poetry." She describes the "postmodern witness" poem as one that balances between the reportage of events and the inclusion of a poetic self, a "consciousness that desires, suffers, and chooses" and that acts as the "ethical or political model for the reader" (35). The poet, according to Ostriker, "is not simply a phantom manipulator of words, but a confused actual person, caught in a world of catastrophe that the poem must somehow both mirror and transcend" (35). At this moment in the poem, confusion is rampant, as much for the reader as for the speaker, and both find themselves in an ethical morass. How can we build a body of knowledge sufficient to an ethical response from the overwhelming amount of information available? Futhermore, how can we act ethically given the ironies of history? How shall we decide who is worthy of our empathy and action? How can we understand the suffering individual as part of a class, yet not refuse our empathetic response because she or he may be or have been in some way, often not by choice, complicit in the oppression of others? How will the poet model for the reader an ethical response that can negotiate the tangled web of a global economy, a time when "Stocks high / these days in survival products" (V.20-21)? Rather than provide an instant, easy answer, the poet-speaker of "Bananas" (perhaps we should

think also of the slang meaning of bananas, "craziness") plunges even deeper into the catastrophes and ethico-political choices we face as human beings on this planet in the 21st century. From the agricultural fields of California, where "500 years later tomato / size tumors bloom in the necks of the pickers" (V.21-22), to the poet's "ancestral land" where "Vandenberg shoots / nuclear payloads to Kwajalein, a Pacific atoll, where 68% of all infants are born amphibian or anemones" (24-26). In the face of the horror, the poet-speaker returns to her friend's words, "*Poetry, though / is food for the soul*" (V. 17-18). She offers to the reader, to her friend, and to herself the "poetry / of Improbability" (28), then reclaims the vocabulary of subatomic physics: "the magic in the Movement / of quarks and sunlight, the subtle basketry / of hadrons and neutrinos of color" (29-31). Cervantes's metaphor for the energy that drives our empathetic and ethical bonds to one another is the scientific equivalent of Jordan's erotic chaos. Since subatomic particles are the building blocks of matter, including all forms of Earth's planetary life, the trope communicates a vision of kinship across all boundaries,—ethnic, racial, class, gender—even transcending the borders separating life forms. We are all made of the same elemental stuff, and hierarchical divisions that privilege or value one form of life, one race, gender, or class, over another are, as Jordan's poem similarly suggests, ideologically useful only to those who would profit from them. They are dangerous to everyone, to the oppressors as well as to the oppressed. Furthermore, the philosophical shift necessary to transform ideologically driven conflict based on a false concept of alienated difference to a recognition of the kinship underlying diversity is modeled in this section of the poem. The poem insists that it is both an ethical

imperative and a survival imperative to examine one's own position in the world and to make alliances that resist transforming the biological elegance and spiritual beauty of diversity into a fearful hatred of difference that leads to alienation, devastation, and violence. By capitalizing "Movement" and setting the line break at the end of the phrase "the magic in the Movement," the poet gives it the double meaning of both an atomic motion and a solidarity "Movement." By framing the energizing core of the movement in terms of her friend's work, she redeems both him and his pursuits and places them back in the realm of useful things now made available for purposes other than the destructive ones they have been serving.

In the end, for her last statement, the poet returns to the material world, "how what you do / is what you get—bananas or worry" (V.21-32). It is not enough to worry about hungry people; one must *do* something. This seems simplistic but Cervantes is not suggesting that individual charity is enough: she is stating that action is always better than inaction. In the context of the poem, making banana bread is a small but significant act, the story of which serves as the recollection of a specific gesture of ethical individual resistance (in the narrative axis) and as a metaphor for social, political action (in the literary axis). Marta Ester Sánchez identifies this tension between "bread and roses,"—between "bananas or worry"—in many of Cervantes's poems: "Her inner utopian 'I' wants to believe that poetry can reconcile racial hostilities, but her outer social 'I' knows that battle must be fought in the historical world" (94). It is also possible that the poet is criticizing the idea that writing the witness poem, the movement poem, is enough, that textual resistance is sufficient. As do the other poets in this study,

Cervantes clearly believes that poetry can make things happen; along with them, she knows that poetry alone is not enough. This section of the poem mounts an implicit criticism of theories that lean too heavily on the idea that linguistic intervention is the same as activism, suggesting that it is absurd for poets and critics to congratulate themselves on their poetics and theories of resistance when there is still material hunger and poverty among many people of the world. This critique is extended to the reader; empathy alone is not enough, but must lead to concrete action and to an ethical politics at work building a new world in which the suffering of the many takes precedence over the profit of the few. This movement from empathy to action is ideally accompanied by a recognition of one's own place in the global economy, as oppressor and, perhaps, as oppressed.

While both June Jordan's and Lorna Dee Cervantes's hybrid lyric-narrative poems use media poetics to model an ethical social imagination, the problem of moving from ethical understanding to political action remains. Cervantes states that "what you do is what you get," but, as Eric Schocket reminds us, "There is no requisite link between epistemological realism (which claims to know a poverty previously hidden from view) and political radicalism (which takes actions against economic systems of exploitation)" (19). There is no requirement that literary empathetic experience and ethical understanding lead to a decision to *do* something about the quandary under examination; the decision might as easily be that nothing can be done or that nothing should be done. In fact, either of those two decisions is often less demanding upon the individual than is the decision to take action. Harriet Davidson, who also argues "for a

transformative power to . . . the poetry of witness," suggests that these poems' power to ethically transform their readers is located in their use of performative modes and in its orientation "toward the future as a warning, a call to action," is, at the least, "an impetus to more poems or to speech" (166). But Cervantes suggests, and Jordan would probably agree, that more poems and more speech are insufficient in themselves and may be part of the problem: when speech is considered enough, there is no need to follow up with action.

Theorist bell hooks has been pondering how to translate speech and thought into action for a long time, and she has been asking it from a standpoint that takes account of class as well as race and gender. In *Outlaw Culture,* hooks addresses the need to develop an "ethics of *practice*" (Edelstein 104); this pragmatic ethics is based in love, a love which is best described as a form of solidarity. Hooks's view of contemporary American society is that "many of us are motivated to move against domination solely when we feel our self-interest is directly threatened" (290), an evaluation that makes improbable these poets' (and my) contention that poetry can create a space for empathetic action. To counter the epidemic solipsism of American culture, hooks insists we "desperately need an ethic of love to intervene in our self-centered longing for change" (290). To join in solidarity with others is to recognize that their well being and your well being are intricately related. When people act in solidarity with others, self-love and personal concerns are transmuted into social bonds and concern; to act in the others' best interest is to act in your own. This ethic of love is a broader application of Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano's emphasis on the importance of love in the writings of

ethnic, working-class women. She states that "Chicana feminism as a political movement depends on the love of Chicanas for themselves and each other as Chicanas," and that the Chicana writer finds that the "self she seeks to define and love is not merely an individual self, but a collective one" (215). The love that both hooks and Yarbro-Bejarono describe and that Audre Lorde figures as the erotic, is the bridge from personal ethics to public politics; it is the empathetic understanding of the Other through our own self-knowledge. It urges the expansion of personal identity into social solidarity, moving the personal "I" into an ethically responsive, politically efficacious "we" capable of taking both responsibility and action. Poetry can be of use modeling the expansion of the self toward the collective; it offers "this other kind of knowledge and love, which has forever been a way of reaching complexes of emotion and relationship" (*Life of Poetry* Rukeyser 7). The generic inclusiveness of media-poetics and the flexibility of the hybrid lyric-narrative form makes possible a poetry in which a reader can ethically engage with the history and memories of other classes, people, and cultures; it is a "poetry of meeting-places, where the false barriers go down" (Rukeyser 20). Both "Bananas," by Lorna Dee Cervantes and "From Sea to Shining Sea" by June Jordan urge their readers to find a personal empathetic ethics of love and kinship that will generate a transgressive energy sufficient to power and empower a sustained engagement with the world capable of reaching across boundaries of identity to embrace the Other.

Taken together with the practice and metaphor of love, these poems by Jordan and Cervantes can serve as a generalized sketch of the processes that engaged poets—

including working-class poets—design their poetic practices to engender. Tim Woods contends that

> A nexus of history and ethics—the past and the present, memory, tradition and resistance—is increasingly manifested in contemporary poetics; and this poetry urges one to recognize that the discourse of ethics, like eruptions of the imaginary, appears in the modern discourse of rationality, as something which cannot be overlooked, ignored, or dismissed. ("Memory and Ethics" 156)

These two poets have formulated the discourse of ethics as a response to the political question, "How do we reformulate society along the lines of a concept of social justice that can motivate individuals to take positive action to make the world a just home for all?" The question's urgency is underscored by the fact that the global economy is now more than ever divided into two worlds, the producers and the consumers, and that entire countries are situated as worker-producers of objects of desire for Western appetites (C. Mohanty 156). The poetic praxis at work in June Jordan's "From Sea to Shining Sea" models within a nationalist framework the interrogation of classed, gendered, and racial divisions and a possible resistance to them; written fifteen years later during the rise of global capitalism, Lorna Dee Cervantes's "Bananas" extends the framework transnationally. Constance S. Richards asserts that "advancing a transnational feminist approach to literary practice" allows "writers and readers in the postcolonial moment" a method to "successfully negotiate difference without effacing it" (xi). The poems of Jordan and Cervantes supply their readers a model for an ethics of

identity capable of offering a subjecthood grounded in family, community, and history that is simultaneously able to empathetically extend beyond the personal, familial, and local in solidarity of thought and action with classed and raced individuals with whom they may have had no intimate contact. The poems offer a model of social engagement, of "the public," which "interrogates the limits of its discursive grounding and rejects identity as a basis for politics, while, at the same time, remaining closely focused on its social realities" (Marsh, "This is the Only Time" 24). While Jordan uses the metaphor of erotic chaos and Cervantes relies on the language of nuclear physics to figure the idea of trans-identity solidarity, both poets stress that the working people of the world have much more in common with one another than with they do with the corporate and political interests that oppress them. Cervantes's poetics, like Jordan's, "abandons the non-viable limits of group formations for nomadic shifting collectives in search of a distilled language of resistance" (Stalling 218).

Furthermore, it is clear that Jordan and Cervantes are influenced by third-world feminisms that that arose during the second-wave period. According to Mary K. DeShazer, "Patricia Hill Collins delineates several traits that characterize what she calls a black women's epistemology, drawn from feminist, womanist and Afrocentric standpoints" (10). The traits include: "an emphasis on personal accountability, the belief that concrete experience is a source of wisdom and knowledge, a commitment to dialogue as a tool for exploring differences, and an ethic of empathy" (10). These traits also describe the poems in this chapter, both Jordan's and Cervantes's. Moreover, Lorna Dee Cervantes is influenced by and, in return, influences the work of Chicana feminists.

Because they put their talents and energies to work for a "broad field" of activism, Jordan and Cervantes share with third-wave feminists a wide-ranging engagement which "includes the kinds of issues often called 'women's issues,' but that also encompasses environmentalism, anti-corporate activism, human rights issues, cultural production and the connections between these" (Heywood and Drake 17). Putting poetry to use as critical media capable of informing readers of unethical and oppressive practices and urging readers to action is essential to these two poets' feminist, radical, ethical praxis. Drucilla Cornel has said that "the politics of feminism needs its poetry for the redefinition of the goal of feminist politics" (173); the poetries of Jordan and Cervantes reinsert class consciousness into the ongoing redefinition of the goals of feminist politics. The class-based, third-world/wave feminist poetry of June Jordan and Lorna Dee Cervantes, while never erasing the question of interlocking oppressions of gender and race, asks us to reconsider and perhaps remake our complex identities and our relationships within late capitalism, toward the end of refusing an ethically, environmentally, and politically unsustainable consumerism. Cervantes and Jordan have taken up their responsibility for creating a just world by remaining always vigilant and by dedicating their lives and their poetry to the task of amplifying the voices of the oppressed in a class-conscious manner that embraces difference, yet helps us to understand what we hold in common.[17] June Jordan and Lorna Dee Cervantes would, undoubtedly, wish for their poetries to engage readers in material as well as intellectual actions. Who is to say they have not?

---

[17] What We Hold In Common: An Introduction to Working-Class Studies, edited by Janet Zandy.

Conclusion

Our Tale, of Our Tribe: Working-Class Solidarity in Poems, In Print, In Place

> *Poetry has been falsely viewed as a province for privileged folks and for the extremely gifted. [But] poetry derives from an oral tradition throughout the world. It comes from the people and needs to be given back to the people.*
>
> —*June Jordan*

When I began this study, I was sure that I would be able to theorize how empathy and ethics functioned in women's poetry of work and workers; I was sure of almost nothing besides that. There were so many strands to tie together: working-class studies, poetics, philosophy, theory, cognitive science, psychology, sociology, ethnic studies, feminism; there were very few extended studies of contemporary poetry of the work and workers to use as models. I did not know that motifs in addition to the ones I expected—the symbolism of hands, the emphasis on community, and the call for "bread and roses"—would recur, woven in patterns throughout this written tapestry, appearing as figures on the interpretive carpet. This opening section of the conclusion is partly a meditation on those figures and partly a statement toward constructing theories of working-class writing.

The first motif that announced itself was that of fragments, pieces, patches, and the symbolism of its interplay with questions of identity. Again and again, patches, pieces, and fragments are the sign of subjective identity which, in order to signify a specific individual, must be interpreted by someone else in the community. In Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, the fragments are techno-scientific: photographs, x-rays and their interpretations, the signs and symptoms of silicosis. In *Fragments from*

the Fire and *Kettle Bottom*, there are human body fragments, patches of floweredy blue cloth under a dead man's arm, a mother's braid, a son's toes. In the lyric poems of the third chapter, rusting scrap metal piles figure the lives of people in a economically devastated area; working women are partially and inaccurately reflected in a window until the poet-speaker brings them into focus. In a similar manner, the poets of chapter four attempt to piece together a fragmented society, to stitch together empathetic relationships among people whose identities are likewise contingent and incomplete in themselves. The women in this study have undertaken the enormous endeavor of creating an empathetic human community of heterogenous solidarity; poetry's ability to dwell in paradox is essential to the task.

The second motif I discovered was a philosophical one: the poems I found most compelling in their representation of class processes and their ability to appeal to cross-class, trans-identity empathetic engagement all partake of an active, relational poetics of *becoming* rather than a static, reified poetics of *being.* This poetics is most evident in the poems that make use of the protean narrator, but it is also present in the media-poetics of Jordan and Cervantes and the relational kitchen-table poetics of *Kettle Bottom.* It is also found, although in less active, symbolic form, within the mythic structures of *Fragments from the Fire* and *Book of the Dead.* Eric Schocket must have suspected that a poetics of *becoming* would be more ethically and politically useful to the working classes, since he despaired when criticizing a piece of literature he found powerful, but which effected premature closure or offered pat solutions to the problems of class. Eric passed away at the age of forty, shortly after completing his book, but

before it was published; I wish I could asssure him there is hope for class-based revolutionary literature in America and that I could thank him for being my constant companion during the last five years of research and writing.

In honor of Eric Shocket, I would like to return again to a question he confronted and one that, despite my own best efforts, resists a final answer: if class is a process and a relation, not a thing, how can we speak of working-class literature? Responses to the question of how to represent the process and products of categorical oppression have ranged from rigid demands for programmatic literary styles such as socialist realism, to the literary appropriation of one group's oppression to stand as a figure for another's (the widespread and often inappropriate use of Holocaust imagery, for instance), to the exhausted refusal of the effort required to create any kind of engaged and political representation. "In part because class status can frequently be changed and the markings of class are so much less visible than those of race and gender, and in part because of the conspiracy of silence that exists in this country about class inequity, it is very hard for individual writers to claim their own experiences of growing up poor or working-class as representative" (Childers, "Parrot" 206). It is equally hard for readers to recognize and comprehend the representation of class processes, especially if criticism of classed literatures continues to concern itself primarily with stylistic and biographical authenticity. Criticism of working-class writing will benefit from a shift to a rhetorical frame that that asks how literary ethics can be useful to liberatory politics; that is, it can benefit from asking how ethical representations of individual lives and specific communities can foster the recognition

of systemic, categorical class oppressions and catalyze radical social change. An ethical approach to working-class literature must include the attempt to uncover the traces of class processes through a theoretical analysis of the means of representation as well as its ends. We must ask how poetry achieves class critique, not just assert that it does. To ask how, how well, and with what tools working-class literature does its job would seem to be the right place to begin.

Therefore, in this final section, I ask how, how well, and with what tools—through what avenues—poetry performs cultural work within working class communities. Where the first four chapters of this study have been primarily concerned with "ambassadorial" or "strategic" poetries of work and workers which target an implied audience of general middle-class and working-class readers, in the remainder of this chapter I will test my theoretical approach on another kind of literature of work and workers: poetry whose implied audience is a specifically working-class audience which consists both of working-class readers and of some middle-class people from working-class backgrounds. The current accessibility of poetry is reflected in the 2006 Poetry Foundation *Poetry in America* study, in which 55.7% of the people the Foundation surveyed do not have a college degree but who nonetheless identify themselves as regular consumers of literature, read or listen to poetry regularly (Schwartz).[1] While "poetry has certainly seemed threatened in schools and universities," it is "alive . . . in its own world: never have there been so many poets and poetry readings, books,

[1] Since 75.6% of Americans do not have college degrees, this is a significant amount. In contrast, only 44.2% of college educated, self-identified literature consumers surveyed read poetry, and the college educated make up only 24.4% of the general population.

journals, and online sites" (Culler 210), and many of those poets, readings, books, journals, and online sites declare their working-class allegiances. The remainder of this chapter explores how poets of work and workers address their working-class audiences in print, performance, and praxis. The following section, "Solidarity Poetics," will analyze how the empathy of solidarity is created in poems directed toward a working-class audience. The subsequent two sections will depart from the close reading of poetry for signs of empathetic engagement and will instead focus on poetic praxis as it promotes empathy-as-solidarity. The first of these two sections, "Takin' to the Streets & Community Centers & Union Halls & Jails" will disclose how poetry is put to use as a form of activism, a method of critical pedagogy, and a tool for building solidarity as it creates ethically and politically powerful empathetic connections between working-class people. The final section, "Working at Getting the Word Out" will report on how the literature of solidarity finds its way to working-class people, often made widely available with the use of the Internet and low-cost digital publishing, through the efforts of committed editors, publishers, and organizations.

Solidarity Poetics, or, Preaching to the Choir

In the previous chapters, I made the case that women's poetry of work and workers generate ambassadorial empathy directed toward interclass understanding. However, at least one poem in the earlier chapters reaches specifically toward a working-class audience, or at least appeals directly to the working-class portion of its implied audience: Dorianne Laux's "Oh, the Water." If we enter this poem, and others like it, from the perspective of a working-class audience rather than that of a middle-

class audience, it looks less like an ambassadorial overture and more like a secret handshake. Laux's poem "Oh, the Water," directly interpellates the reader of the poem as a member of the working-class audience, as the "hero" of the story. It establishes an intra-group empathetic bond between the characters, the speaker, and the reader of the poem. The poem, while it clearly makes use of ambassadorial/broadcast empathy, also utilizes bounded strategic empathy, the empathy of solidarity. Bounded strategic empathy "can be called upon by the bards of the in-group; it may also prevent outsiders from joining the empathetic circle" (Keen 142). While "Oh, the Water" certainly speaks to a middle-class audience, its initial gesture toward a working-class reader may give the middle-class reader a case of "empathetic inaccuracy" which "can be accounted for by recognizing that a reader does not belong to the group invited to share bounded strategic empathy" (Keen 142). "Bounded strategic empathy"—the empathy of solidarity— assumes some commonality of experience or history and may indeed discourage outsiders from engaging empathetically. The three poems considered in this section, "The Change" by Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, "Sisters, A Paycheck Apart" by Cleo Fellers Kocol, and "Song for My Dad and a Stranger" by Amy Watkins, generally do not reach out toward a middle-class audience but instead call out to working class people through the representation of common experiences, knowledge, and kinship based on class. In solidarity poems, regardless of the authenticity of the represented world and perhaps sometimes because of it, not all readers can assume an empathetic relationship to all literary characters and situations. This is not to say that it is impossible for a reader from one class to empathize with characters and situations from

another; for example, working-class readers have been experiencing cross-class empathetic bonds for many years, at least since the birth of the novel and the rise of general literacy. Yet, poetry written to engage the empathy of solidarity neither courts nor reaches out to the middle class; its primary function is intra-class solidarity. While it is not impossible for a middle-class reader to engage empathetically with poetry of solidarity, the poems' often strongly polemical nature might prove less than inviting to readers outside the working class. Additionally, a middle-class reader may be unlikely to encounter solidarity poetry at all because its status as a resistant cultural product means it is not often found in middle-class venues. Found almost exclusively in working-class venues—journals, union halls, labor publications, community centers, web sites—solidarity poetry presents a working-class persona speaking from a working-class perspective.

Because the rhetorical stance and speaker perspective of solidarity poetry depends in large part upon an identifiably "authentic" working-class voice, it is necessary revisit the problem of aesthetic authenticity in working-class poetry. As mentioned previously, descriptive lists of working-class aesthetics include such markers as the attempt "to portray a pace of activity controlled by machinery, supervisors, or a time clock"; "to reproduce the boredom of sameness, of mindless repetition, of humans acting as machinery," and creating a style of writing that has "that dilates time and mimics the state of consciousness that an inoperative machine produces" (Christopher and Whitson 73-4). According to Janet Zandy, working-class texts written by worker writers, people "born into" and perhaps "educated out of" but who still maintain

"allegiance to" the working class, "usually include[s] the idioms, dialects, syntax, curses, blessings, and direct tones of working-class speech" (*Hands* 90). While these descriptions erroneously conflate biographical and experiential authenticity with rhetorical strategies for addressing specific audiences, it seems clear that they accurately describe what Jim Daniels calls "work poetry," which is "poetry written about a job, regardless of whether that job is blue collar, white collar, whatever" as distinguished from "working-class poetry" which has a broader thematic range (114). Furthermore, an emphasis on biography and experience is also found in poems that make use of the empathy of solidarity to call out to working-class readers from a working-class perspective. While it is important to maintain the separation between experience and rhetorical stance, there is no doubt that working-class readers are finely attuned to the veracity (or lack of it) in working-class poems. It is unlikely that poetry written by someone who has never been a member of the working class, whether by birth or through proletarianization, would pass a class-conscious, working-class reader's appraisal of authenticity. Therefore, poetry that relies upon the generation of *intra*-group empathy through many of the compositional choices enumerated by Zandy, Christopher, and Whitson can be more usefully categorized not as the only authentic type of working-class poetry, but as poetry that engages in the creation of the empathy of solidarity.[2] In fact, Zandy notes that in working-class writing, "Lines of distinction

---

[2]John Marsh, editor of *You Work Tomorrow: An Anthology of American Labor Poetry, 1929-41*, suggests this term in an unpublished paper entitled "Affect, Poetry, and the United United Auto Workers" which he presented at the conference Rethinking Labour: Labour, Affect and Material Culture (Clinton Institute, University College Dublin 2008). Marsh was kind enough to send a written copy of his presentation to me with the understanding that I would not quote from it; I will honor his request but wanted to credit him for the use of his terminology.

between writers and readers may blur; audience matters"' (*Hands* 73); this blurring of audience and author marks the empathetic affect of solidarity poetics.

Many writers who are widely known as working-class poets often engage in solidarity poetics; in addition, it may be the primary mode for poets who publish in magazines and journals directed at working-class audiences.[3] The poetry of solidarity is written in many styles, and rather than attempt to catalog generic forms, I offer instead Jim Daniels's elegant and useful tripartite rhetorical schema. Daniels proposes that work- and working-class poetry performs three rhetorical functions for both poet and reader: "To celebrate, condemn, and comprehend" (129). These functions can be found existing simultaneously or singularly in any one poem. For instance, *The Book of the Dead* condemns and attempts to comprehend the tragedy at Gauley's Bridge; *Kettle Bottom* adds to condemnation and comprehension a celebration of strength of community in the face of extreme events and the devastating external economic and social forces operating upon it. The family poems of Piercy and Anderson, "Landed Fish" and "Sonnet for Her Labor" are at once critical and celebratory; Laux's critical poem "Small Gods" condemns a certain kind of family dynamic and her "Oh, the Water" celebrates the working-class family heroine. When a poetics of empathetic solidarity is combined with condemnation of American class structures and a celebration of working-class cultures, the resulting poems can be difficult for a middle-class reader to enter. A more familiar example of this effect is the discomfort some white readers experience when reading Black Arts Movement literature. Writing that

---

[3] Journals, magazines, and websites that commonly publish working-class writing are surveyed in the next section.

generates bounded strategic empathy is at once familiar and foreign; it rages and places blame, it talks in an unfamiliar language or uses unfamiliar terms. The creation of an empathetic response in a middle-class reader is difficult to establish and even more difficult to maintain in a poem of worker solidarity. It could be said that empathetic inaccuracy or failure that occurs between a middle-class reader and a working-class poem is the premier marker of a poem that engages in solidarity poetics. The three poems considered in this section, "The Change" by Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, "Sisters, A Paycheck Apart" by Cleo Fellers Kocol, and "Song for My Dad and a Stranger" by Amy Watkins, presuppose the answer to the question "Which Side Are You On?" to be "on the side of the working class."[4]

Poems written to activate the empathy of solidarity can be found wherever working-class poetry is found: in books published by well-known poets and lesser-known poets, in journals, magazines, and online. For example, the poem "The Change," from American the Book Award-winning collection *Dog Road Woman* written by Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, celebrates, condemns, and attempts to comprehend the work and lives of Cherokees sharecropping in the tobacco fields of North Carolina. In the poem, which is composed recursively, perhaps to mimic the seasonal cycles of agriculture, the skilled manual labor of workers is celebrated by the use of active imagery and stubbornly opaque, specific terminology. The opening lines appear to promise a romantic, pastoral narrative: "Thirteen years ago, before bulk barns and / fifth wheel diesel tractors / we rode royal blue tractors" (1-2). That expectation is soon

[4] A reference to the famous union organizing song, "Which Side Are You On?" Florence Reece, who wrote the words, was the wife of a miner and union leader during the Harlan County mine wars.

frustrated; the prelapsarian moment is revealed to be "Before the year the dusters sprayed / malathion over our clustered bodies"; "Before we were poisoned and / the hospital thought we'd been burned in fires" (14-5). Paul Lauter, following Studs Terkel, contends that representations of the violence of work are a marker of the working-class literary sensibility because they "embody experiences of particular kinds of work, because they convey the qualities of that experience to an audience mainly unfamiliar with it" ("Under Construction" 67). Accordingly, Hedge Coke's imagery throughout the poem focuses on the bodies of workers who are "perspiring / while we primed bottom lugs, / those ground level leaves of tobacco," a job manually performed "before anyone had seen / automated machines that top and prime" (8-10). The workers are described as they harvest the crop, "grasping / hold below the petals / with our bare, calloused hands / and twisting downward, quick, hard" (26-28). Throughout the poem, an "us and them" rhetoric contrasts the sharecroppers' values with values that are at once those of the owners and those of middle-class America; the "we" of the poem is contrasted with "they" who "call weeds" the overgrowth of wild plants. Mechanized big business farming and "America" are set up as the Others of the speaking voice that existed before America, survived attempted genocide, and continues to resist commodification. The irony is, of course, that Native people originally gave tobacco to the colonists for use as a medicinal and ritual herb. The poem criticizes the practice of spraying malathion on the fields while workers were present, the European invasion of America, the enslavement of Africans, the assimilationist and divisive policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the speaker's ex-husband's capitulation to middle-class nonnative

America with his "fancy white girl" and the new "white Trans Am" (30, 33) he bought to please her. Hedge Coke aligns individualism and the quest for the trappings of middle-class white America with slavery, unsafe workplaces, ecological damage, bureaucracy, betrayal, and alienation; tribalism-communalism is aligned with freedom, skill, interracial worker solidarity, beauty, ecological stewardship, and the ownership of one's labor. Where its rhetorical function of comprehension is concerned, the poem is performative; that is, the poem enacts the speaker's creation of a comprehensive view of structures of class and racial oppressions in America. The poem asks its reader to empathize with, to imaginatively put her body in the place of, a manual laborer whose worldview is built upon her labor and upon her relationship with the land. Moreover, the poem's celebration of craft and the speaker's criticism of working conditions and class structures in late capitalism assume a class conscious reader. In the poetic world of "The Change," the reader is forced to choose between us and them, between worker and owner; it asks quite clearly, "which side are you on?"

While several of the poems in this study engage in solidarity poetics to a greater or lesser degree, they employ moderately polemical form compared with the strong forms on display in worker-writer poetry such as that published in working-class literary journals like the *Blue Collar Review.* Much of the poetry in *Blue Collar Review* is written by poets who are currently working in blue- and pink-collar jobs; about one-third to one-fifth of the writers in each issue are women. Although many poets published in the review are accomplished amateurs whose primary means of financial support are their day jobs, well-known professional writers such as Marge Piercy and

Jim Daniels also publish in the journal. Whether written by amateurs or professionals, most of the poems have a strong narrative drive, some of them are rhymed and metered, and all of them are unapologetically on the side of the working class. I offer, as examples of the use of solidarity poetics, two poems published recently in the *Blue Collar Review,* "Sisters, A Paycheck Apart" by Cleo Fellers Kocol, and "Song for My Dad and a Stranger" by Amy Watkins.

In "Sisters, A Paycheck Apart," by Cleo Fellers Kocol, the speaker describes her own empathetic engagement with a homeless woman and suggests that today's empathetic experience prefigures tomorrow's reality. The speaker describes two encounters with a figure presented as two incarnations of a homeless woman; once, when the speaker is on vacation, she sees the woman, who,

> Word was, during off-season, no
> jobs available, she plummeted from
> hotel magnificence. Fortyish, hard-
> muscled, clad in bra and panties, . . . (1-4)

The woman, now unemployed and homeless, "bathed ocean-side in an outside shower" (5). The signs of labor are written on the woman's "hard-muscled" body; the signs of unemployment are visible in the lack of privacy for her basic hygiene. Returning home after her "annual week's vacation," the speaker sees "a wild- / haired woman dozing on the steps // at St. Vincent's" (19-21). In a world where the speaker returns to work to "say nothing. . .about / needing a raise" because "Twice minimum // beats no job," the speaker insists that she and her homeless sisters are only "a paycheck

apart" (Kocol 10). In the context of the poem, it is clear that the speaker intends for readers to universalize the story to represent all workers and all homeless people—the poem is both specific enough to indicate actual events and allegorical enough to serve as the parable it resembles.

While the speaker in "Two Sisters, A Paycheck Apart" responds empathetically to a situation which could be her own in another time, the speaker in Amy Watkins's "Song for My Dad and a Stranger" empathizes with a stranger at a Willie Nelson concert because she recognizes his occupation by the signs of labor's violence on his body, "by his left thumbnail, black / from a misplaced hammer stroke, / and his back, brick-colored / from his neck to the white skin barely showing above the waistband / of his good jeans" (5-10). The stranger is a framing carpenter, like the speaker's father, who "came home looking beaten, / often bleeding or bruised" (19-20). As Peter Greico has said of one of Peter Oresick's poems,

> Personal memory, here, is inextricably bound to group memory. It is always a memory of others, most notably of others' busy hands—soldering wire, shovelling sand, cobbling, tailoring, washing dishes, starting an engine—almost as if the work of hands by itself is enough to set off a chain of collective memory.

The initiation of a "chain of collective memory" is found in many working class poems, and it is directly related to the empathy of solidarity. In "Song for My Dad and a Stranger," the chain of collective memory leads to an empathetic experience shared between the poem's speaker, the stranger, and the reader. The circulation of empathy in

this poem arises from the speaker's love for her father and flows from the speaker to the stranger to the reader, establishing bonds of solidarity between the speaker, the stranger, and the reader. The poem closes with the first-person plural, which invites the reader to join in a dance of solidarity with the speaker and the stranger, whom the speaker has created a kinship by calling him "Cousin" (26).

I stamp
my feet, clap my hands, the rhythm
like swinging an ax or a sledgehammer.
Willie's voice is soothing,
but we're past being comforted.
We're going to dance till we collapse
to a song like hammer on pine
like sawdust in our eyes and mouths.

Dance, for both the speaker and the stranger, is infused with the bodily rhythms of physical labor; music is saturated with the sounds and sensations of work. The speaker and the stranger are "past being comforted" by "Willie's [Nelson] voice"; they are past being comforted at all. Instead, in the speaker's empathetic imagination, they join in a rough dance that can temporarily exorcise the physical and emotional pain of a life of alienated labor only at the moment they both "collapse." In both "Sisters, A Paycheck Apart" and "Song for My Dad and a Stranger," the speaker initiates a discourse of empathy that circulates between the speaker, a character, and the reader. While this tripartite structure for the circulation of empathy is not the only form of solidarity

poetics found in poems published in the *Blue Collar Review* and in other journals, it is common, and seems to be particularly favored by women poets. In many working-class poems, the empathetic bond is signified through a ritualistic claiming of kinship: "sister" in Kocol's poem, "cousin" in Watkins's. The use of kinship terms has a long history in labor struggles and unionism; many union members today still call their fellow members "brother" or "sister" and the use of kinship terms in these poems emphasizes class-based solidarity. As Jim Daniels declares, "This poetry helps create a sense of us being in it together, against those who refuse to acknowledge the impact of our *working* lives on the *rest* of our lives" (135). The circulation of empathy in these poems both models and performs solidarity; the poems not only describe how solidarity can be created but also function as performative utterances that instantiate it.

Takin' It to the Streets & Community Centers & Union Halls & Jails: Working-class Poets in Working-class Venues

While the bulk of this study has examined how empathy works on behalf of the working-class from the page, empathetic solidarity between poets and working-class communities is often more directly actuated in community projects. For example, the poets whose work is included in this study are active in community writing projects and workshops; they also lend their poetry and public presence to a variety of causes. Dorianne Laux works with Tebot Bach, a community-based project founded by poets that facilitates "poetry reading and writing workshop series for venues impacting underserved populations, such as homeless shelters, battered women's shelters, nursing homes, senior citizen daycare centers, hospitals, AIDS hospices, and correctional facilities" ("Tebot Bach"). Maggie Anderson taught in a writer-in-the-schools program

in Pennsylvania; she and Diane Gilliam Fisher are currently involved in fight against mountaintop-removal mining, in Appalachia and elsewhere, that devastates both the natural environment and the surrounding working-class communities.[5] To list all of Lorna Dee Cervantes's poetry activism would take an entire chapter (and that's just for one month's worth!) but a recent sampling of her MySpace page includes: organizing and writing love poems on demand during a " house rescue benefit" for a high school teacher and poet to help him "and his family get into a house as soon as possible" ("LornaDice" Feb. 09); a fundraising fast on behalf of RISE; a "nonviolent immigration rights organization" (Nov. 08), and participating in the 19th Annual Heretical Consumer Research Performance in San Francisco.[6] Marge Piercy has been an activist since her college days when she participated in Vietnam-era antiwar movements; she is still active in causes from Iraq war resistance to environmental protection to women's reproductive rights. Allison Adelle Hedge Coke was named Mentor of the Year in 2001 by the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers for her work with incarcerated Native youth and a recent article entitled "Writers Giving Back: Pass the Torch," published in poetry's most esteemed professional and craft magazine, *Poets and Writers*, recognizes Hedge Coke for her work mentoring and

---

[5] Poet-critic Maurice Manning, cited in chapter four of this study, is also active in movement against mountaintop-removal mining like many, many other poets, writers, and musicians in Appalachia. The activist group Mountain Justice (in which several poets are active) protests mountaintop-removal mining with actions ranging from occupying the West Virginia governor's office to disrupting stockholders' meetings of involved companies to hunger strikes on the West Virginia state capitol steps. Public literary events include the Holler Poets' monthly poetry reading and musical performance at Al's Bar in Lexington, KY, which raises awareness of and money for the cause.

[6] It is impossible to describe this project of radical artistic praxis in a short phrase; see Heretical Consumer research blog.

teaching “Native American working-class” people (C. Wald 1); She and other Native American writers serve Native communities through the Word Craft Circle; its mentors make and maintain contact with young and early-career working-class Native writers, often teaching writing long distance to their apprentices, many of whom live in isolated, rural areas.

Although June Jordan died in 2002, the program she founded at Berkely, *Poetry for the People* is one of the most widely known poetry-in-the community projects in America. Although *Poetry for the People* (*P4P*) is housed in a university and offers university credit for the three-course sequence, it creates community across academic disciplines, between writers of all ages and stages, and, after its first three years, in off-campus community programs. Any interested student can take the UC Berkeley course, which consists of readings of poetry and on poetics from different cultural traditions combined with student writing workshops; there are no prerequisites or exclusions. According to the *P4P* website, the course attracts “students from Freshmen to graduate students in their last year at Boalt Law School, men, women, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, Arab Americans, Anglo Americans, gay, lesbian, straight, abled, disabled”—a representative sample of California citizens (“June Jordan’s”). The first few years of *P4P* galvanized the students to initiate active engagement with surrounding comunities, placing writing students from UC Berkeley into Dublin Women’s Prison, Berkeley High School, and the San Francisco’s Glide Memorial Church (a facility which supports homeless people in the Mission District). After a few years, Jordan set up a teaching practicum and a pedagogy course designed to transform

student-poets into teacher-poets. The spring student-teacher-poet (STP) course includes a requirement that the participants design, organize, and facilitate a *P4P* workshop in the community; STPs "also provide personnel for the various outreach programs and are encouraged to perform at community events and readings in the Bay Area" (*P4P)*. Additionally, Jordan and her STPs wrote *Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Handbook*; the *Handbook* includes guidelines, reading lists, and how-tos for those who would like to start a *P4P* program in communities outside the Berkeley area. Both Berkeley ("Poetry for the People on Facebook") and Baltimore still have active programs. ("Poetry for the People Baltimore").

Although her poetry is not included in this study, another California-based poet, Carol Tarlen, exemplifies radical poetic praxis for many poets currently engaged with working-class communities. Until her death in 2004, Tarlen was active in San Francisco's vibrant poetry community; her poetry was published in Janet Zandy's *Liberating Memory*, and in the journals *Working Classics* and *Pemmican.* According to Julia Stein's remembrance of Tarlen, published in *Pemmican*, although she earned a B. A. and an M.A. in English while "working full time," Tarlen remained a member of the working class, employed as a "as a secretary at the UC San Francisco medical center" ("Death of a Poet"). She held office with her union, AFSCME Local 3218 and was a poet-delegate on the San Francisco Labor Council. She was also involved in several significant social and political actions, including joining with poets Sara Menafee, David Joseph, and Jack Hirschman to illegally feed San Francisco's homeless people in association with Food Not Bombs. Everywhere she went, Carol Tarlen took

her poetry, to the homeless in San Francisco and to the union hall; she saw no need to separate poetry from life. Tarlen's legacy directly influences Stein, who continues to put her poetry to use in solidarity with workers. In one nationally publicized response to worker-poetry activism, Guess, Inc., the fashionable jeans company, "filed a libel/ slander suit against the literary reading I [Julia Stein] had organized in support of the garment workers' union UNITE that was organizing this garment manufacturer" (J. Stein, "Poets Win"). It is not often in America that corporations think poetry is dangerous, but the Guess corporation obviously did; they eventually dropped the suit eight months later because of nation-wide negative publicity generated by Stein's continued public appearances and an extensive informational campaign carried out by Common Threads, associated unions, and poets, writers, and artists who knew Stein and the project. Julia Stein continues her affiliations with unions and social movements in the Bay Area, working to generate cross-class and intra-class empathy for workers' demands and to build solidarity sufficient to support them.

Organized labor has long recognized the importance of writing, including poetry, to the creation of working-class consciousness and solidarity.[7] The Wobblies (International Workers of the World) were (and are) renowned for their promotion of both creative writing and graphic design; their Web site is a treasure trove of past and current radical workers' cultural products. Contemporary labor arts organizations that encourage poetry and poets to be of use furthering labor solidarity are the Chicago Labor and Arts Festival, LaborFest San Francisco, and the Bread and Roses Cultural

---

[7] See John Marsh's *You Work Tomorrow* for labor poetry written and published by worker-writers, union leaders, and rank-and-file members between 1929-41.

Project, which is the "not-for-profit cultural arm of Local 1199, the Health and Hospital Workers Union" ("Bread and Roses"). The Bread and Roses Cultural Project was founded in 1979 to give the union's "220,000 predominantly Latina and African-American women members" access to the arts, an access they would not otherwise enjoy. Members can take classes in fine and literary arts, and mount exhibitions and present readings of their work. A similar project is the Worker Writers Festival, sponsored by the Southeast Michigan unit of the National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981. Union members offer workshops for workers throughout the year at sites across Michigan. The festival, hosted by a different union local each year, is a public event that features performances by "workers, union and non-union, who write poetry, short stories, skits, narratives and songs" ("Worker Writers Festival").

In another union-related series of cultural projects, experimental poet and working-class labor activist Mark Nowak facilitates "poetry dialogues" between "Ford workers at the closing St. Paul Assembly plant here in Minnesota and autoworkers at downsizing Ford plants in Port Elizabeth and Pretoria, South Africa" (Nowak, "Late Late Fordist"). He has also led poetry workshops for striking University of Minnesota clerical workers unionized by the AFSCME 3800, and, in a course he taught while appointed to a visiting professorship in the MFA program at Minnesota, he required his students to lead community-based poetry dialogues:

> One student led poetry workshops between employees and management at a UPS facility and shot digital video of poetry happening in the back of UPS trucks being loaded overnight; another conducted her workshop

> with 3rd and 4th graders at a Native American after school program; one more led workshops at the Shakopee Women's Prison and another at the VA hospital with soldiers returning from Iraq; one student-facilitator became the star of Minnesota's Iron Range, leading his workshop at the Grand Rapids Public Library with former Range workers—he even got guest slots on local public radio to promote his event and write-ups in regional newspapers. ("Late Late Fordist")

Because of Nowak's radical, critical, activist pedagogy, at least two young women poets have had the experience of taking poetry to communities outside academia.[8] Nowak's most recent cultural work, entitled the *Rufaidah Poetry Dialogues*, is designed "to engage Muslim nurses and entry-level health care practitioners in a dialogue about health care, race, and working conditions through the reading, writing, and performance of poetry" (Nowak, *Rufaidah*). He is collaborating on the project with two Muslim RNs, Rahma Warsame and Nimo Abdi Nowak. Nowak plans to continue facilitating poetry dialogues for labor and working-class communities as long as he is able and he credits June Jordan for her vision and praxis as demonstrated in *Poetry For the People* and Carol Tarlen for her exemplary poetic solidarity with workers. Working-class poets consciously create ethical connections across organizational and regional boundaries, build networks between themselves and other working-class activists, and share

[8] I say, "two," because one is referred to by a third-person feminine pronoun; the other because commonly only women are allowed to teach workshops at women's prisons. The reverse situation in genders is not usually the case.

knowledge and experience with each other for the purpose of creating politically effective solidarity with working-class people.

Among the many poetry projects in the United States based in and responsive to their communities is Working-Class Kitchen, a reading series and writing group based in Lexington, Kentucky: "a chain of writers opening doors for each other, empowering new voices and sharing thoughts across so-called class and racial barriers" (Kilkelly and Zabielski). The project was organized by a working-class woman, Laverne Zabielski, who began writing poetry in the minutes she had between customers at her hair salon. Zabielski's writing was encouraged by Ann Kilkelly, who taught at a local college and who was "producing showcase events for local women artists" when Zabielski presented her work at one of those events. Then, she sat in on Kilkelly's women's studies classes and was eventually "asked to work at the Family Care Center, a facility for women, young women, often on welfare with children, trying to get their G.E.D." It was after working with those young women that Zabielski started Working-Class Kitchen "in order to create more opportunities" for working-class women writers to share their work with each other and the public. Working-Class Kitchen "presents readings by emerging writers in cafes, homes and other sites throughout the city." Zabielski's Working-Class Kitchen manifesto captures the spirit, the anger, the desire, the determination, and the initiative behind cultural work performed by many working-class writers. She begins by offering her "credentials": "I have no degree or Ph.D. I am a mother of five, a stepmother of four, a poet, writer and hair designer" (Kilkelly and Zabielski); what follows is surely the most trenchant working-class creative statement

ever written. Zabielski theorizes poetry writing and performance as a form of critical pedagogy in a manner reminiscent of Paolo Freire, defining a true education as one that allows a person to press "through the blinds of oppression" and that encourages working-class women to begin "prying through to the freedom of our voice—the I am and I want and I will." She also unveils the reality of working-class women who write poetry—first, that they *do* write it, and secondly, *how* they write it*:*

> So we write. We write at the kitchen table and at the stop lights, between appointments and at the playground and then we read it. We read it to other mothers in the park, children interrupting. We read it in the kitchen when the kids come home from school, the telephone rings and the stage is the kitchen table. (Kilkelly and Zabielski)

The pronouncement is also brutally honest about the possibility of being heard as a working-class poet. The problem is not that the subaltern does not speak, but that she is rarely heard:

> We desire to be heard and we want to read it and . . . when we're ready, when we want someone to hear it, no one is listening. 'Cause there's nowhere to read it. The academic feminist is too busy making speeches and her publisher wants polished pieces written in penta something meter or in proper English and university classes take time and money we don't have. (Kilkelly and Zabielski)

There is nothing in Zabielski's manifesto that has not been said by other working-class poets, critics, academics; it is just that she says it from a position undeniably entrenched

in working-class reality. She has not moved into the middle class through education, occupation, or income; her poetry and her manifesto are written in a vernacular English reminiscent of the ethical, antagonistic speech that June Jordan values for its ability to speak truth to power. Zabielski's desire to share what she learned about poetry and to make performance venues available to other women in her community is infused with the spirit of empathetic solidarity; the poetry and performances of other women in her community are as important as her own.

Like Working-Class Kitchen, many other projects nationwide teach poetry writing and encourage its performance as a form of community-based critical pedagogy. Among these projects are the Community Word Project (New York), the Neighborhood Writing Alliance (Chicago), D.C. WriterCorps (Washington, DC, San Francisco, and the Bronx[9]), and New Mexico CultureNet (Albuquerque). Perhaps the most common way that poetry reaches working-class communities is through writers in the schools and communities programs like the one Maggie Anderson worked with when she wrote the poem "Closed Mill"; many of these programs are funded by state arts agencies or by writers' organizations.[10] Additionally, poetry open mics, organized or sponsored by various groups including arts organizations, local bookstores and restaurants, libraries, schools, and interested, nonspecialist citizens, take poetry to places one might never suspect: a retired insurance company worker hosts a monthly poetry reading at a local

---

[9] See the recent anthology, *Days I Moved Through Ordinary Sounds: the Teachers of WritersCorps in Poetry and Prose,* edited by working-class poet Chad Sweeney. (City Lights, 2009)

[10] Poet Ron Padgett, one of the founders of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative, the first organization dedicated to placing writers and poets in direct contact with schools and communities, is from an Oklahoma working-class family; he went to college at the University of Tulsa, like many of his generation, on the G.I. Bill.

diner in Shawnee, Oklahoma. Slam poetry events often include working-class poets as well.[11]

As a final example of poets and poetry put to use for working-class communities, I offer the Web site for the project *Women and Prison: A Site for Resistance* as a representative of the work many poets do inside prison walls. Most incarcerated people are working-class, with or without work—the so-called "poverty-" or "under-" class. A quick glance at the "Activism and Social Justice" section of the Web site reveals the breadth and depth of commitment and praxis of poets (and other artists) to those who are incarcerated. Choosing the link "Poems" from the home page, a reader finds an entire page of poems written by incarcerated women who have had the opportunity to study writing with poets working in prisons. A quarterly newsletter, *The Fire Inside*, "put together by the California Coalition for Women Prisoners" publishes letters, essays, poems, stories, and other writings "written by women inside prisons, to try and connect and break down the walls that the prison system creates between the outside world and inside the Prison Industrial Complex." The first issue of the Coalition's women's prison literary zine, *Writers' Block,* was published in April of 2009. In an article by poet Ann Folwell Stanford about her experiences teaching poetry to women at Cook County jail, she reveals that a poetics of solidarity is found among the

---

[11] For more on slam poetry and its political usefulness to working-class people, see Leslie Wheeler, Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present; Michael Dowdy, American Political Poetry in the 21st Century; and Scott Woods, "Poetry Slams: The Ultimate Democracy of Art." Susan Sommers-Willet has suggested that although slam poets and poetry are valued for their performances of "marginalized identities," their audience is primarily white and middle class. She attributes this disarticulation to several interrelated cultural phenomena in her 2005 article, "Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity." Perhaps this is more evidence of the desire for specularization of the working class as identified in chapter 3.

women writing there. She asserts that "writing that affirms a 'we' in jail is itself a radical work" because it resists both the "public rhetoric that emphasizes individualism" and the "notion" that "collectivity is antithetical to the overall system of incarceration which relies on detainees' dependence on authority (or the spectacle of authority) to maintain control." The women Stanford worked with consistently wrote poems that both reestablished their individuality in the face of dehumanizing treatment and poems that declared empathetic solidarity with other incarcerated women. Against great odds, these women imagine a collective, communal, empathetic bond; they offer a model of resistance for the rest of us.

Working at Getting the Word Out:
Small Presses, Journals, Little Magazines & Websites Publishing Working-Class Writing

As the women who prepare and distribute *The Fire Inside* and *Writers' Block* know, the desire of working-class poets to create an empathetic bond of solidarity with their readers would not be realizable if the poems did not reach their intended audience. Literary journals, magazines, and small presses are essential in the circulation of solidarity poetics. Fortunately, there are several journals and presses that regularly publish working-class poetry. Jim Daniels's history of new working-class writing, which begins in 1979, lists six presses and ten journals that exclusively or consistently published working-class writing.[12] Three of the journals Daniels names are still publishing: *Blue Collar Review*, *Pemmican,* and *The Minnesota Review. Blue Collar Review* and *The Minnesota Review* continue to offer print editions while *Pemmican*,

[12] I will concentrate on journals still in existence; see Jim Daniels's history of working-class publishing (in *New Working-Class Studies*) for information on journals that have ceased operation.

after ten years of offering a print edition and taking a two-year publishing hiatus, reinvented itself as an online-only journal in 2001. Among the journals Daniels did not include by name is *Struggle: A Magazine of Proletarian Revolutionary Literature,* which began as a print journal in 1985 and continues today in both print and online editions. Work Literary Magazine, an online journal based in Portland, Oregon was established in 2009; it is "is dedicated to celebrating the daily grind: white collar, blue collar, pink collar, sex work, food service, freelancing and more" ("Work"). Currently, *The Progressive* and *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* publish one poem each issue. Journals including *Xcp: Cross-Cultural Poetics*, *Western American Literature*, and *Ghoti* have published special issues on working-class life and writing, including poetry; *Women's Studies Quarterly* has published two special issues, "Working-Class Studies"(1995) and "Working-Class Lives and Cultures" (1998). Daniels notes that *Pig Iron* ("Labor and the Post-Industrial Age," 1990), *Seattle Review* (1994), and *North American Review* (2001) have also published special working-class issues (121-22). Journals that publish working-class writing for a primarily working-class audience and the critics and reviewers who write in solidarity with working-class writers are remarkably ecumenical in their choice of poems, in their broad acceptance of many styles of poetry, and in their promotion of working-class poets—professional, amateur, and in between. If one were forced to declare a winner in the long-running poetic battle between the valuation of form versus content, in the case of working-class solidarity poetry and its affiliated publics, content would surely take the prize, so long as "content" is understood to include both experiential and ideological content. This

does not mean that working-class solidarity poets do not strive toward technical mastery; it does mean that a technically masterful poem that works against or had nothing to say about the lives, the interests, and the political goals of the working classes will not likely be published in working-class journals. It also means that many working-class editors choose to publish poetry that might not find a home elsewhere because of the poet's amateur status, the poem's perceived simplicity of form, or its polemical content. Moreover, most working-class poetry published by these journals is "progressive," in the sense that *Blue Collar Review* editors Mary Franke and Al Markowitz intend it: politically charged poetry that speaks from a working-class perspective on behalf of the goal of economic and social justice for all.

Like the editors of *Blue Collar Review,* many small presses which publish working-class poetry show an editorial preference for progressive work which promotes empathy between and solidarity with working-class people toward the end of an economically and socially just society. The presses most often associated with working-class writing are Larry Smith's Bottom Dog Press (named after the first novel by radical proletarian writer Edward Dahlberg) and John Crawford's West End Press. West End has "published progressive, working class, and regional poetry, drama and fiction, with a concentration on women and multicultural U.S. writers" since 1974; the press has published work by Meridel LeSueur, Pablo Neruda, Sharon Doubiago, Paula Gunn Allen, Cherríe Moraga, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim. Publisher Crawford put out more books in 2008 than he has in any year since 1979, and a recent distribution partnership

with University of New Mexico Press has proven beneficial.[13] West End also sponsors People's Culture Conferences with help from longtime radical publisher, writer, and activist Fred Whitehead, poets Cherri Moraga, Margaret Randall, Patricia Clark Smith, Simon Ortiz, Levi Romero and others, where activist artists, writers, musicians, and community organizers plan strategies, share tactics, and offer support to one another. Another publishing company which supports working-class writers and activists is Bottom Dog Press, located in Huron Ohio. According to their Web site, Bottom Dog Press has "published 120 books in our 24 years," among which are poetry collections by Mary E. Weems, Jim Daniels, Paola Corso, and Jeanne Bryner. As Dr. Smith, Larry also directs the Firelands Writing Center at BGSU Firelands College in Huron, Ohio. Firelands is a cooperative of regional writers who offer free monthly writing workshops open to the public, open-mic and featured readings, and a writer's retreat. Other presses consistently publishing books by working-class writers or with working-class themes are Azul Editions (Connecticut), The Backwaters Press (Nebraska), Cleveland State University Press (Ohio), Curbstone Press (Connecticut); Holy Cow! Press (Minneapolis), Kent State University Press (Ohio), Steel Toe Books (Kentucky), Tia Chucha Press (California), University of Pittsburgh Press (Pennsylvania), and Wings Press (Texas).

---

[13] In the interest of full disclosure, I should reveal that West End Press is the publisher of my 2009 poetry collection, *Work Is Love Made Visible.* I am honored to find a literary home with Crawford and his press, and I am humbled by the artistry, brilliance, and commitment evinced by my West End family of writers. Unfortunately, shortly before this dissertation was completed, UNM Press laid off half its workers in one day and announced it was considering outsourcing its fulfillment and distribution operations while simultaneously justifying outrageously large advances to a few authors. The status of the more than thirty small and independent presses with whom UNM has a distribution agreement, like West End Press, is unclear.

In recent years, the distribution and dissemination of literatures of solidarity, including poetry, has been facilitated by the growth of the internet, the availability of cost-efficient desktop publishing programs and digital printing services. In 1999, *Pemmican* ceased its print operation and resumed in 2001 solely as an online journal. The decision to transform into an online journal was driven by cost concerns; as an online journal, it remains affordable for the people it is meant to serve. Both *Struggle* and *Pemmican* are free to anyone who has access to a computer, which is near-ubiquitous in public libraries. The Progressive Artists Roster provides an example of the way working-class cultural workers are making use of the internet as an inexpensive and widely accessible tool for building solidarity. The Roster, associated with the US Social Forum Cultural Working Group and organized by CultureWorks Collective, is a "resource that links artists with activist organizations, universities, and festivals so that progressive artists around the country can work with others to animate our aspirations" ("Culture Works"). Not only are working-class writers taking advantage of internet venues established specifically for working-class activism and writing, but they are also making appearances in other online poetry sites as well. For example, *Harriet*, the blog of the Poetry Foundation of America, recently featured writing and reviews by Mark Nowak, poet and editor of *Xcp.* Poetry by working-class poet and literature professor Kathy Lou Schultz can be found at *PennSound*, and, along with other writing by Schultz, her essay "Talking Trash, Talking Class: What's a Working Class Poetic, and Where Would I find One?" is available at *HOW2*. Additionally, all the poets in this study, except Chris Llewellyn, have a biography and/or poems at Poets.org, the Web site

of the Academy of American Poets.

Along with internet-based journals, there are also innumerable "tiny" presses and journals, made possible with desktop layout programs and digital printing. Print and internet journals, print and PDF books are cheap to produce, and electronic storefronts are now simple to operate. Open source software is free; an open source layout design program and PDF generator, Scribus, is designed to replace Adobe's InDesign, which costs six hundred dollars. Digital printing, either on home office laser printers or through short-run digital printers brings the printing cost of a one hundred fifty page book down to as little as three dollars. The use of digital publishing allows for the production of cost-effective print editions that do not require sacrificing aesthetic appeal. For example, *Blue Collar Review* always has a beautiful full color illustration—usually a painting—on its cover; the interior is black and white, and it is saddle stapled. A one year subscription to the quarterly costs only fifteen dollars for four issues; single copies are a proletarian-friendly five bucks.

Blue Cubicle Press in Plano, Texas, which publishes *Workers Write Journal* and the Overtime fiction chapbook series, is one of the new tiny presses. The *Journal* publishes fiction and poetry; the Overtime series publishes short stories set in a workplace, one story by one author in each issue. A fifteen-dollar subscription gets the working-class reader a new Overtime chapbook every three months and a copy of the most recent issue of the annual *Workers Write Journal*. The *Journal* is thematic, and past titles have included *Tales from the Cubicle, Tales from the Classroom, Tales from the Clinic,* and *Tales from the Cash Register.* Issue number five, *Tales from the Capitol,*

is inspired by the recent presidential election; the issue "will contain stories from the government worker's point of view" ("Workers Write"). Despite the press's location and the perceived conservatism of the area's working-class population, it has taken chances in its chapbook series, publishing *Overtime #4: A Pocket Guide to Male Prostitution,* a short story about a young man who decides that "surfing and sex would seem like the perfect summertime occupation*,"* ("Workers Write"). The editors added a warning of adult content to the chapbook's listing in the online store, but did not censor it or hide it from their customers. Because a tiny, digital press has a comfortable cost to price ratio and a closely targeted audience, it can afford to take occasional risks; not all of them do, of course, but Blue Cubicle does. There are likely hundreds more tiny working-class presses and journals in every corner of the nation. They find their places in a history of working-class disruption of mainstream, middle-class literary production, following a tradition that includes pamphleteering by Diggers protesting enclosure in seventeenth-century England, Emanuel Haldeman-Julius's "Little Blue Books" that sold for "as little as five cents" (Potts) in the 1920s and -30s and were "small enough to fit in a trouser pocket," and d.a. levy's "mimeograph revolution" in the 1960s ("The d.a. levy Collection"). Poetry, in the callused hands of working-class people, is more than just self-expression; it is radical praxis, critical pedagogy, disruptive rhetoric, and a call to solidarity.

REFERENCES

Allego, Donna. "The Construction and Role of Community in Political Long Poems by Twentieth-Century American Women Poets." Dissertation. Southern Illinois University, 1997. UMI Microform.

Allen, James, and John Littlefield. "Without Sanctuary." 2000. Web. 12 Dec 2008. <www.withoutsanctuary.org>.

Altieri, Charles. "Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience." Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory. Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 2001. 30-58. Print.

---. The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003. Print.

---. "Reading for Affect in the Lyric: From Modern to Contemporary." Poetry and Pedagogy : The Challenge of the Contemporary. Eds. Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 39-62. Print.

Anderson, Maggie. "Closed Mill." Windfall: New and Selected Poems. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2000. 60. Print.

---. "Sonnet for Her Labor." Windfall: New and Selected Poems. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2000. 55. Print.

Anzaldua, Gloria. La frontera/Borderlands. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999. Print.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. The Ethics of Identity. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004. Print.

---. Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006. Print.

Auden, W.H. "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." Another Time. 1940. The Academy of American Poets Website ed. New York: Random House, 1940. Web. 30 Nov 2008.

Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel." Notes from a Native Son. 1955. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984. 13-23. Print.

Beatty, Jan. Boneshaker. Pitt Poetry Series. Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 2002. Print.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Illuminations. 1939. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1969. 253-67. Print.

Berke, Nancy. Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001. Print.

Bernstein, Michael André. The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980. Print.

Blackledge, Paul. "Marxism and Ethics." International Socialism: A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Theory.120 (2008). Web. 14 Jan 2009. <www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=486&issue=120>.

Blue Collar Review. Norfolk, VA: Partisan Press, 2009. Web. <http://www.angelfire.com/va/bcr/>.

Booth, Wayne C. The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction. Berkeley: U of California P, 1989. Print.

"Bottom Dog Press." Bottom Dog Press. Web. 9 Feb 2009. <http://smithdocs.net/home>.

"Bread and Roses Cultural Project." Health and Human Service Union, New York, 1199/SIEU, 2007. Web. 9 Feb 2009.

Brugge, Doug, and Ron Goble. "The History of Uranium Mining and the Navajo People." American Journal of Public Health 92.9 (2002): 1410-19. Print.

Bucheli, Marcelo. Bananas and Business: The United Fruit Company in Columbia: 1899-2000. New York: New York UP, 2005. Print.

Butzer, Hans, and Torrey Butzer. Oklahoma City National Memorial. Public Memorial. 1997. Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation & the National Park System, Oklahoma City.

Byron, Glennis. Dramatic Monologue. New Critical Idiom. Ed. John Drakakis. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Cardoza y Aragón, Luis. "Las calaveras de José Guadalupe Posada." Artes de México 67 (2003): 36-40. Print.

Cavanagh, Clare. "Lyrical Ethics: The Poetry of Adam Zagajewski." 59.1 (2000): 1-15. Print.

Cervantes, Lorna Dee. Emplumada. Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 1981. Print.

---. From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger. Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1991. Print.

---. "Lorna Dice." Blogspot, 2005. Web. 15 Feb 2009. <http://lornadice.blogspot.com/>.

---. "Bananas." Drive: The First Quartet. San Antonio: Wings Press, 2006. 20-24. Print.

Cherniak, Martin. The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Accident. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986. Print.

Childers, Mary M. "'The Parrot or the Pit Bull': Trying to Explain Working-Class Life." Signs 28.1 (2002): 201-20. Print.

Childers, Mary M., and bell hooks. "A Conversation about Race and Class." Conflicts in Feminism. Eds. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller. New York: Routledge, 1990. 60-81. Print.

Christopher, Renny. "Special Issue on the Working-Class Literature of the West." Western American Literature 40.4 (2006): 381-474. Print.

Christopher, Renny, Lisa Marie Orr, and Linda Strom. "Working-Class Lives and Cultures." Women's Studies Quarterly: Working-Class Studies 26.1-2.1-2 (1998): 3-6. Print.

Christopher, Renny, and Carolyn Whitson. "Toward a Theory of Working Class Literature." The NEA Higher Education Thought & Action Journal.Spring (1999): 71-81. Print.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Biographica Literaria, or Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions." 1817. Rest Fenner. Google Books ed. Web. 5 May 2009 <http://books.google.com/books?id=hEJBrzMwcb4C>.

Coles, Nicholas, and Janet Zandy. American Working-Class Literature : An Anthology. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.

Cornel, Drucilla. "Feminine Writing, Metaphor, and Myth." Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries. Eds. Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002. 161-85. Print.

Cornell University ILR School, et al. "The Triangle Factory Fire." 2003. Print.

Corso, Paola. Death by Renaissance: Poems. Working Lives Series. Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press, 2004. Print.

Culler, Jonathan. "Why Lyric?" PMLA 123.1 (2008): 201-06. Print.

CultureWorks Collective, US Social Forum Cultural Working Group, and Backbone Campaign. "Progressive Artists Roster." 2008. Web. Feb 14 2009. <http://www.progressiveartistroster.org/>.

Daigon, Ruth. Payday at the Triangle. Concord, CA: Small Poetry Press Select Poets Series, 2001. Print.

Damon, Maria. The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry. American Culture. Eds. Stanley Aronowitz, Fraser. Nancy and George Lipsitz. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. Print.

---. "Postliterary Poetry, Counterperformance, and Micropoetries." Class Issues: Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and the Public Sphere. Ed. Amitava Kumar. New York: New York UP, 1997. 33-47. Print.

"The d.a. levy Collection." The Cleveland Memory Project. Ed. Bill Barrow. Cleveland State Univesity Libraries, 2009. Web. 2 Feb 09 2009. <http://www.clevelandmemory.org/levy/>.

Daniels, Jim. "Work Poetry and Working-Class Poetry: The Zip Code of the Heart." New Working-Class Studies. Eds. John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon. Ithaca: ILR Press, 2005. 113-36. Print.

Daniels, Kate. The White Wave. Pitt Poetry Series. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1984. Print.

Davidson, Harriet. "Poetry, Witness, Feminism." Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma. Eds. Ana Douglas and Thomas A. Vogler. New York: Routledge, 2003. 152-71. Print.

Davis, Angela Y. Blues Legacies and Black Feminism. New York: Vintage Books, 1999. Print.

Davis, Todd F., and Kenneth Womack, eds. Mapping the Ethical Turn:A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory. Charlottesville: UP Virginia, 2001. Print.

Dayton, Tim. Muriel Rukeyser's The Book of the Dead. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2003. Print.

Dean, Jeffrey. "Aesthetics and Ethics: The State of the Art." Aesthetics On-line (2002). Web. 15 Feb 09. <http://www.aesthetics-online.org/articles/index.php?articles_id=15>.

Denning, Michael. The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century. Haymarket Series. London: Verso, 1998. Print.

Des Pres, Terrence. Praises & Dispraises: Poetry and Politics, the 20th Century. New York: Viking, 1988. Print.

DeShazer, Mary K. A Poetics of Resistance: Women Writing in El Salvador, South Africa, and the United States. Ann Arbor, MI: U Michigan P, 1994. Print.

Dews, C. L. Barney, and Carolyn Leste Law, eds. This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class. Philadelphia, PA : Temple UP, 1995. Print.

Dobson, Joanne. "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature." American Literature 69.2 (1997): 263-88. Print.

Douglas, Ana. "The Menchú Effect." Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma. Eds. Ana Douglas and Thomas A. Vogler. New York: Routlege, 2003. 55-88. Print.

Dowdy, Michael. American Political Poetry into the 21st Century. American Literature Readings in the 21st Century. Ed. Linda Wagner-Martin. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

Dowie, Mark. "Human Nature." Guernica Magazine of Art and Politics (May 2009). Web. 1 June 2009. Excerpt from Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict Between Global Conservation and Native Peoples. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. Web. 23 May 2009.<http://www.guernicamag.com/features/1004/human_nature/>.

Dyer, Joyce. "Confluences: Fluidity in the Art and Vision of Maggie Anderson." The Iron Mountain Review XXI (2005): 27-36. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. The Idea of Culture. Blackwell Manifestos. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000. Print.

Edelstein, Marilyn. ""A Postmodernism of Resistance": bell hooks and the Theory Debates." Other Sistershoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color. Ed. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley. Champaign, IL: U of Illinois P, 1998. 86-104. Print.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class. 1989. HarperPerennial ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1990. Print.

Eliot, T.S. The Three Voices of Poetry. New York: Cambridge UP, 1954. Print.

Ellison, Ralph Waldo. "A Party Down at the Square." Flying Home and Other Stories. New York: Random House, 1998. 3-11. Print.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Poet." Selected Writings of Emerson. 1844. Ed. Brooks Atkinson. College Edition ed. New York: Modern Library, 1940. 318-41. Print.

Entin, Joseph B. Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America. Cultural Studies of the United States. Ed. Alan Trachtenberg. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007. Print.

Fesmire, Steven. John Dewey and the Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics. Bloomington, IN: Indian UP, 2003. Print.

Fieser, James. "Ethics." The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2006. Web. Feb 15 2009. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/ethics.htm>.

Filreis, Alan. Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, & Literary Radicalism. Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture. Ed. Eric Sundquist. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994. Print.

Fisher, Diane Gilliam. Out of Everything. Cleveland Poets Series. Cleveland, OH: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2003. Print.

---. Kettle Bottom. Florence, MA: Perugia Press, 2004. Print.

Foley, Barbara. Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction. 1929-1941. Post-Contemporary Interventions. Eds. Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1993. Print.

Forché, Carolyn. "Twentieth Century Poetics of Witness." American Poetry Review 22.2 (1993): 9-16. Print.

Freeman, Joseph. "Introduction." Proletarian Literature in the United States. Ed. Granville Hicks, et. al. New York: International Publishers, 1935. Modern American Poetry. Web. 15 July 2009. <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/freeman/prolit.htm>.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Craving Stories: Narrative and Lyric in Contemporary Theory and Women's Long Poems." Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory. Eds. Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller. Women and Culture Series. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994. 15-42. Print.

Gagnier, Regenia. "A Critique of Practical Aesthetics." Aesthetics and Ideology. Ed. George Levine. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1994. 264-82. Print.

George, Stephen, ed. Ethics, Literature, and Theory: An Introductory Reader. Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2005. Print.

Ghoti. "Special Labor Day Issue." 11. Web. 10 May 2009. <http://www.ghotimag.com/archives/Issue%2011/index.htm>.

Gibbs, Michele D. Line of Sight. Albuquerque: West End Press, 2005. Print.

Glave, Thomas. "Fire and Ink: Toward a Quest for Language, History, and a Moral Imagination." Callaloo 26.3 (2003): 614-21. Print.

Gold, Michael. "Gertrude Stein: Literary Idiot." The New Masses. 1936. Poetry 88. Ed. Alan Filreis. Web. 15 July 2009. <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/stein-per-gold.html>.

Grahn, Judy. The Work of a Common Woman: The Collected Poetry of Judy Grahn. 1978. Feminist Series. Trumansberg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1980. Print.

Grebowicz, Margret. "On Sex, Poetry, and the Violability of Children." Still Seeking an Attitude: Critical Reflections on the Work of June Jordan. Eds. Valerie Kinloch and Margret Grebowicz. Lanham, MD: Lexinton Books, 2004. 157-69. Print.

Green, Christopher Allen. "The Social Life of Poetry: Pluralism and Appalachia, 1937-1946." Dissertation. U of Kentucky, 2004. Web. 4 Apri 2009. <http://lib.uky.edu/ETD/ukyengl2004d00167/greendis.pdf>.

Greico, Peter J. "Swirling Voices: A Consideration of Working Class Poetic Property." Journal of American Studies of Turkey 2(2002). Web. 3 Aug 2009. <http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/~jast/Number2/Grieco.html>.

Guthrie, Woody. "Pastures of Plenty." This Land is Your Land: Asch Recordings Volume 1. New York: The Richmond Organization, 1941. Print.

---. "Grand Coulee Dam." This Land is Your Land: Asch Recordings Volume 1. New York: The Richmond Organization, 1941. Print.

Hacker, Marilyn. "Sonnet." An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art. Eds. Annie Finch and Katherine Varnes. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2002. 297-307. Print.

Hapke, Laura. Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2001. Print.

Harrington, Joseph. Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics. Middletown, CN: Wesleyan UP, 2003. Print.

Haslam, Gerald. Workin' Man Blues: Country Music in California. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999. Print.

Hayden, Robert. "Those Winter Sundays." Collected Poems of Robert Hayden. Ed. Frederick Glaysher. New York: Liveright Publishing, 1985. Poets.org. Web. 18 Jan 2009. <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19217>.

Hedge Coke, Allison Adelle. "The Change." Dog Road Woman. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997. 3-7. Print.

---. "Responses." Dog Road Woman. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997. 51-54.

Helford, Elyce Rae. "The Future of Political Community: Race, Ethnicity, and Class Privilege in Novels by Piercy, Gomez, and Misha." Utopian Studies 12.2 (2001): 124-42. Print.

Hennessy, Rosemary. "Subjects, Knowledges,. . . and All the Rest: Speaking for What?" Who Can Speak?: Authority and Critical Identity. Eds. Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1995. 137-50. Print.

Heywood, Leslie, and Jennifer Drake. "'It's All About the Benjamins': Economic Determinants of Third Wave Feminism in the United States." Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration. Eds. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 24-36. Print.

High, Ellesa Clay. "Maggie Anderson: Two Languages." Her Words: Diverse Voices in Contemporary Appalachian Women's Poetry. Ed. Felicia Mitchell. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2002. 3-9. Print.

Hogan, Linda. The Book of Medicines. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1993. Print.

Holden, Jonathan. The Rhetoric of the Contemporary Lyric. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980. Print.

hooks, bell. "Love as the Practice of Freedom." Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations. New York: Routledge, 1994. 287-98. Print.

---. Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "Author's Preface." Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ed. Robert Bridges. London: Humphrey Milford, 1918. Bartleby.com. Web. 12 Nov 2008.

Howe, Florence, ed. No More Masks!: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets. 1973. Revised ed. New York: HarperPerennial, 1993. Print.

Howe, Irving, and Kenneth Libo. How We Lived, 1880-1930: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America. New York: Richard Marek, 1979. Print.

International Workers of the World. "Culture." Web. 20 Aug 2009. <http://www.iww.org/en/culture>.

James, Joy, ed. The Angela Y. Davis Reader. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998. Print.

Jenkins, G. Matthew. Poetic Obligation: Ethics in Experimental American Poetry after 1945. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2008. Print.

Jones, Margaret B. Love and Consequences: A Memoir of Hope and Survival. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008. Print.

Jordan, June. "From Sea to Shining Sea." Feminist Studies 8.3 (1982): 535-41. Print.

---. "From Sea to Shining Sea." Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology. Ed. Barbara Smith. Latham, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983. 223-25. Print.

---. Living Room. Manhattan, NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1985. Print.

---. I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky. New York: Scribners, 1995. Print.

---. June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Handbook. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.

---. "White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation." Civil Wars. 1972. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. 59-73. Print.

---. Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays. New York: Basic Books, 2002. Print.

---. "From Sea to Shining Sea." Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan. Eds. Jan Heller Levi and Sara Miles. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2005. 325-31. Print.

"June Jordan's Poetry for the People." UC Berkeley, 2005. Web. 12 Feb 2009. <http://poetryforthepeople.org/>.

Kahana, Jonathan. Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary. Film and Culture. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. Print.

Keen, Suzanne. Empathy and the Novel. New York: Oxford UP, 2007. Print.

Keller, Lynn. Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997. Print.

Kennedy, David. The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980-1994. Bridgend, Wales: Seren, 1996. Print.

Kertesz, Louise. The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1980. Print.

Kilkelly, Ann, and Laverne Zabielski. " We're All at the Table in the Working-Class Kitchen." ROOTS Reader. Ed. Lydia Frye Burnham. Saxapahaw, NC: Alternate ROOTS/Community Arts Network, 2003. Web. 9 Feb 2009. <http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2003/10/were_all_at_the.php>.

Kocol, Cleo Fellers. "Sisters, A Paycheck Apart." Blue Collar Review 10.4 (2007): 10. Print.

Kovacik, Karen. "'Poetry Should Ride the Bus': American Working-Class Poets and the Rhetorics of Community." Dissertation. Ohio State U, 1997. Print.

Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2009. Print, web. 17 April 2009. <http://labor.dukejournals.org/>.

LaFargue, Paul. "The Right to Be Lazy." The Right to Be Lazy and Other Studies. 1907. Charles Kerr and Co., Cooperative. Marxists Internet Archive. Web. 15 April 2009. <www.marxists.org/archive/lafargue/1883/lazy/index.htm>.

Langbaum, Robert. The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition. New York: Random House, 1957. Print.

Lauter, Paul. "Working-Class Women's Literature: An Introduction to Study." Radical Teacher: A Newsjournal of Socialist Theory and Practice 15 (1979): 16-21. Print.

---. "Under Construction: Working-Class Writing." New Working-Class Studies. Eds. John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon. Ithaca: ILR Press, 2005. 63-77. Print.

Laux, Dorianne. Awake. Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, 1990. Print.

---. "Small Gods." What We Carry. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 1994. 44. Print.

---. "Oh, the Water." Smoke. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2000. 57-58. Print.

League for the Fifth International. "Revolutionary Tactics Toward Reformism." (1983). Web. 15 July 2009. <http://www.fifthinternational.org/content/revolutionary-tactics-towards-reformism>.

Lentricchia, Frank. Criticism and Social Change. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984. Print.

Levertov, Denise. "On the Edge of Darkness: What is Political Poetry?" Poetry and Politics: An Anthology of Essays. Ed. Richard Jones. New York: Morrow, 1985. 162-74. Print.

Levien, Sonya. "Veteran." Metropolitan 1913. Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy. Ed. by Leon Stein. New York: Quadrangle/New Times Book Company, 1977. 134-137. Print.

Libretti, Tim. "Rethinking Class from a Chicana Perspective: Identity and Otherness in Chicana Literature and Theory." Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color. Ed. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 200-27. Print.

---. "Sexual Outlaws and Class Struggle: Rethinking History and Class Consciousness from a Queer Perspective." College English 67.2 (2004): 154-71. Print.

Linkon, Sherry Lee, and Paula Rabinowitz, eds. New Working-Class Studies. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006. Print.

Llewellyn, Chris. Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911. New York: Viking Penguin, 1987. Print.

Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984. 53-59. Print.

Lowney, John. History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry, 1935-1968. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2006. Print.

Lukács, Georg. Theory of the Novel. 1920. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974.

Luxemburg, Rosa. "Introduction." Reform or Revolution (1986). Marxist Internet Archive. Web. 15 July 2009.<http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/>.

Manning, Maurice. ""Re: Permission to quote your syllabus." Email to the author. 3 Dec 2008.

Markels, Julian. The Marxian Imagination: Representing Class in Literature. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003. Print.

Marsh, John. You Work Tomorrow: An Anthology of American Labor Poetry, 1929-41. Class: Culture. Eds. Amy Schrager Lang and Bill V. Mullen. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2007. Print.

---. "Affect, Poetry, and the United United Auto Workers." Rethinking Labour: Labour, Affect, and Material Culture. Unpublished presentation. April 20, 2008: "Class Identity, Class Consciousness, and Militancy." 2008. University College of Dublin Clinton Institute.

Marsh, Nicky. ""This is the Only Time to Come Together": June Jordan's Publics and the Possibility of Democracy." Still Seeking an Attitude: Critical Reflections on the Work of June Jordan. Eds. Valerie Kinloch and Margret Grebowicz. Lanham, MD: Lexinton Books, 2004. 15-32. Print.

---. Democracy in Contemporary U.S. Women's Poetry. American Literature Readings in the Twenty-First Century. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

Martin, Charles. "The Three Voices of Contemporary Poetry." The New Criterion 22 April (2004). Print.

Marx, Karl. "Critique of the Gotha Program." The Marx-Engels Reader. 1875. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton, 1972. 382-98. Print.

McCarriston, Linda. Little River. Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland: Salmon Poetry, 2002. Print.

McGrath, Thomas. "The Frontiers of Language." North Dakota Quarterly 50 (1982): 28-29. Print.

Metres, Philip. "Performing 'Righteous Certainty': The Shifting Poetic Address of June Jordan's War Resistance Poetry." Still Seeking an Attitude: Critical Reflections on the Work of June Jordan. Eds. Valerie Kinloch and Margret Grebowicz. Lanham, MD: Lexinton Books, 2004. 175-88. Print.

Millay, Edna St. Vincent. "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree." Collected Sonnets. Rev. ed. New York: Harper Perennial, 1988. Print.

Miller, James A. "Coming Home to Affrilachia: The Poems of doris davenport." Her Words: Diverse Voices in Contemporary Appalachian Women's Poetry. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2002. Print.

Milner, Andrew. Re-imagining Cultural Studies: The Promise of Cultural Materialism. London: SAGE, 2002. Print.

The Minnesota Review. "Writing Working Class." 63-64 (Winter 2009). Print.

Mish, Jeanetta Calhoun. "'The Heart's Sweatshop' Weaving Poetries of Witness in Demetria Martínez's The Devil's Workshop." Mediating Chicano/a Culture. Ed. Scott Baugh. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006. 113-23. Print.

Mohanty, Chandra. Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003. Print.

Mohanty, Satya P. Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997. Print.

Moraga, CherrÌe. Loving in the War Years. Boston: South End Press, 1983. Print.

Morrison, Van. "And It Stoned Me." Moondance. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records, 1970. Print.

Moxley, Jennifer. "Invective Verse." Oblek 1993. "English 88." Alan Filreis, ed. Web. 16 July 2009. <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/home.html>.

Muzzatti, Stephen L., and C. Vincent Samarco, eds. Reflections from the Wrong Side of the Tracks: Class, Identity, and the Working Class Experience in Academe. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. Print.

Nafisi, Azar. Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books. New York: Random House, 2003. Print.

Nelson, Cary. Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945. University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. Print.

---. Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

"19th Annual Heretical Consumer Research Performance." Web. 3 Aug 2009. <http://hcr2008.wordpress.com/poetry/>.

Nowak, Mark. "Late-Late Fordist Poetics." Harriet (06/21/08). Poetry Foundation Web Site. Web. 9 Feb 09. <http://poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/06/latelatefordist_poetics.html#more>.

Nowak, Mark, Rahma Warsame, and Nimo Abdi. "Rufaidah Poetry Dialogues." 2009. Web. 9 Feb 2009. <http://web.me.com/mnowak/rpd/Welcome.html>.

Nussbaum, Martha C. Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995. Print.

---. Cultivating Humanity: A Clasical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. Print.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. "Where the Soft Air Lives." Words Under the Words: Selected Poems. Portland, OR: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1995. 144-47. Print.

Nystrom, Debra. Torn Sky. Louisville, KY: Sraabande Books, 2003. Print.

"Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum Official Website." 2006. Web. 8 Nov 2008. <http://www.oklahomacitynationalmemorial.org/>.

Oldfield, Kenneth, and Richard Gregory III Johnson. Resilience: Queer Professors from the Working Class. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008. Print.

Oliver, Paul. Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990. Print.

Oresick, Peter, and Nicholas Coles. Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990. Print.

Ostriker, Alicia. "Beyond Confession: The Poetics of Postmodern Witness." The American Poetry Review 30.2 (2001): 35-39. Print.

Pearsall, Cornelia D.J. "The Dramatic Monologue." The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry. Ed. Joseph Bristow. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.

Pérez-Torres, Rafael. Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.

"Pemmican: An Online Magazine of Poetry." Pemmican Press, 2009. Web. 15 July 2009. <http://www.pemmicanpress.com/about.html>.

Perloff, Marjorie. "After Language Poetry: Innovation and Its Discontents." Differentials: Modern and Contemporary Poetics (2004): 155-74 pp. Web. Electronic Poetry Center. 15 July 2009. <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/after_langpo.html>.

Peterson, Tim. "The Latest Avant-Garde." Mappemunde (22 April 2004). Web. 4 Feb 09. <http://mappemunde.typepad.com/mappemunde/2004/04/the_latest_avan.html#comments>.

Pfaelzer, Jean. "Salt of the Earth: Women, Class, and the Utopian Imagination." Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers 16.1 (1999): 120-31. Print.

Phelan, James. "Rhetorical Literary Ethics and Lyric Narrative: Robert Frost's 'Home Burial'." Poetics Today 25.4 (2004): 627-51. Print.

Piercy, Marge. "Marge Piercy: A Class Act " Interview by Dawn Gifford. Off Our Backs 24.6 (1994): 14-15. Print.

Piercy, Marge. "To Be of Use." Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982. 106. Print.

---. "Landed Fish." Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982. 14. Print.

---. "The Morning Half-Life Blues." Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982. 40. Print.

Pig Iron. Youngstown, OH: Pig Iron Literary & Art Works, 2009. Web. 15 July 2009. <http://dianaludwig.com/greenwood/pig.html>.

Potts, Rolf. "The Henry Ford of Literature." The Believer Sept. 2008. Web. 22 April 2009. <http://www.believermag.com/issues/200809/?read=article_potts>.

"Poetry for the People." 2009. Facebook. Web. Sept 3 2009. <http://www.hs.facebook.com/pages/Poetry-for-the-People/49089858066>.

"Poetry for the People Baltimore." 2009. MySpace. Web. Sept 6 2009. <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=136237379>.

Pound, Ezra. "In a Station of the Metro." Personae. 1926. New Directions, 1971. Rpt. at "Poets.org." The Academy of Amnerican Poets. Web. 22 March 2009. <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15421>.

Preston, S.D., and F.B.M. DeWaal. "Empathy: Its Ultimate and Proximate Bases." Behavioral and Brain Sciences 25 (2002): 1-72. Print.

The Progressive. Madison, WI: The Progressive, 1909-2009. Print.

Rabinowitz, Paula. Labor & Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1991. Print.

Rader, Ralph. "Notes on Some Structural Varieties and Variations in Dramatic "I" Poems and Their Theoretical Interpretations." Victorian Poetry 22.2 (1984): 103-20. Print.

Richards, Constance S. On the Winds and Waves of Imagination: Transnational Feminism and Literature. Wellesley Studies in Critical Theory, Literary History, and Culture. Ed. William E. Cain. New York: Garland, 2000. Print.

Rimstead, Roxanne. "Between Theories and Anti-Theories: Moving toward Marginal Women's Subjectivities." Women's Studies Quarterly XXI.1 & 2: Working-Class Studies (1995): 199-218. Print.

Rukeyser, Muriel. "Note." U.S. 1. 1938. New York: Covici Friede, 1938. 146-47. Print.

---. "The Book of the Dead." The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser. 1938. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978. 71-105. Print.

---. The Life of Poetry. 1949. Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1996. Print.

Ryan, Jake, and Charles Sackrey. Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class. 1st ed. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984. Print.

Sánchez, Marta Ester. Contemporary Chicana Poetry: A Critical Approach to an Emerging Literature. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985. Print.

Sandoval, Chela. Methodology of the Oppressed. Theory Out of Bounds. Eds. Sandra Buckley, Michael Hardt and Brian Massumi. Vol. 18. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000. Print.

Matewan. Dir. Sayles, John. Perf. Chris Cooper, James Earl Jones and Mary McDonnell. 1987. Print.

Schlesinger, Stephen E., and Stephen Kinzer. Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala. 1982. Cambridge: Harvard U Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 1999. Print.

Schocket, Eric. Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature. Class:Culture. Eds. Amy Schrager Lang and Bill V. Mullen. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006. Print.

Schofield, Dennis. "Summary." "The Second Person: A Point of View? The Function of the Second-Person Pronoun in Narrative Prose Fiction." Dissertation. Deakin University, 1998. Web. 12 Nov 2008. <http://members.westnet.com.au/emmas/2p/thesis/0a.htm>.

Schultz, Kathy Lou. "Talking Trash, Talking Class: What's a Working Class Poetic, and Where Would I find One?" How2 1.2 (1999). Web. 6 March 2008. <http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_2_1999/current/alerts/schultz.html>.

Schwartz, Lisa K., et al. Poetry in America: Review of the Findings. Chicago: Poetry Foundation & NORC U of Chicago, 2006. Web. 12 March 2009. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/PoetryinAmerican_FullReport.pdf>.

Scully, James. Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice. Willamantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 2005. Print.

Seattle Review. Seattle: University of Washington, 2009. Print.

Sennet, Richard, and Jonathan Cobb. The Hidden Injuries of Class. New York: W.W. Norton, 1993. Print.

Shapiro, Alan. In Praise of the Impure: Poetry and the Ethical Imagination. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993. Print.

Shapiro, Johanna, Elizabeth H. Morrison, and John R. Boker. "Teaching Empathy to First Year Medical Students: Evaluation of an Elective Literature and Medicine Course." Education for Health 17.1 (2004): 73-84. Print.

Shklovsky, Viktor. Theory of Prose. 1925. Urbana-Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990. Print.

Side, Jeffrey. "Marjorie Perloff Interview." Poetry Salzburg Review. 10 (Autumn 2006). Web. 22 March 2009. <http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Perloff%20interview%202.htm>.

Silliman, Ron. The New Sentence. New York: Roof, 1989. Print.

Simpson, Megan. Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing. Albany: SUNY Press, 2000. Print.

Sinclair, Upton. "What Life Means to Me." Cosmopolitan 41 (1906): 593-4. Print.

---. The Jungle. New York: Doubleday, Page, & Co., 1906. Print.

Sinfield, Alan. Dramatic Monologue. London: Methuen, 1977. Print.

Singer, Peter. Practical Ethics. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1993. Print.

Smith, Leonora. Spatial Relations. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print.

Smoker, M.L. Another Attempt at Rescue. Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose Press, 2005. Print.

Sommers-Willet, Susan. "Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity." MMLA 38.1 (2005). Print.

Stafford, William. "Allegiances." The Darkness Around Us Is Deep: Selected Poems of William Stafford. Ed. Robert Bly. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994. 30. Print.

Stalling, Jonathan. "Finding a Democratic Speech: The Intercultural Poetics and Pedagogy of June Jordan's Poetry for the People." Still Seeking an Attitude: Critical Reflections on the Work of June Jordan. Eds. Valerie Kinloch and Margret Grebowicz. Lanham, MD: Lexinton Books, 2004. 209-34. Print.

Stanford, Ann Folwell. "More Than Just Words: Women's Poetry and Resistance at Cook County Jail." Feminist Studies 30.2 (2004): 277+. Contemporary Women's Issues. Web. 17 Jan 2009.

Stanley, Sandra Kumamoto, ed. Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. Print.

Starnino, Carmine. "The Plight of the Poet-Critic." Poetry May 2008. Print.

Stein, Julia. "Poets Take on Guess, Inc.: Poets Win." electropoetics book review.5 (1998). Web. 9 Feb 2009. <http://www.altx.com/ebr/ebr5/stein.htm>.

---. Walker Woman. Albuquerque: West End Press, 2002. Print.

---. "Death of a Poet: Carol Tarlen (1943-2004)." Pemmican (2009). Web. 22 March 2009. <http://www.pemmicanpress.com/articles/carol-tarlen.html>.

Stein, Kevin. Private Poets, Worldy Acts: Public and Private History in Contemporary American Poetry. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1996. Print.

Stein, Leon. The Triangle Fire. 1962. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2001. Print.

Stott, William. Documentary Expression and Thirties America. 1973. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. Print.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly. Cleveland, OH: John P. Jewett and Company, 1852. Print.

Strand, Mark, and Eavan Boland. "The Sonnet." The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000. 366. Print.

Struggle: A Magazine of Proletarian Revolutionary Literature. Detroit, MI: Struggle, 2009. Web. 13 March 2009. <http://www.strugglemagazine.net>.

Sweeney, Chad, ed. Days I Moved Through Ordinary Sounds: the Teachers of WritersCorps in Poetry and Prose. San Francisco: City Lights, 2009. Print.

"Tebot Bach." Web. 18 Feb 2009. <http://www.tebotbach.org/>.

Tokarczyk, Michelle. The House I'm Running from. Albuquerque: West End Press, 1989. Print.

Tokarczyk, Michelle M., and Elizabeth A. Fay, eds. Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993. Print.

Turco, Lewis. The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics. Third ed. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 2000. Print.

TuSmith, Bonnie. All My Relatives: Community in Contemporary Ethnic American Literatures. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993. Print.

United States Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Muriel Rukeyser." (2000). Web. 10 Jan 2009. <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS98155>.

Wald, Alan M. Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 2002. Print.

Wald, Catherine. "Writers Giving Back: Pass the Torch." Poets & Writers. May/June 2004 (2004): 1-2 pp. 9 Feb 2009. <http://www.pw.org/content/writers_giving_back_pass_torch>.

Walker, Alice. Possessing the Secret of Joy. New York: Harcourt, 1992. Print.

Wallace, Mark. "Toward a Free Multiplicity of Form." Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s. Eds. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks. Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2001. 191-203. Print.

Wallace, Patricia. "Divided Loyalties: Literal and Literary in the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cathy Song and Rita Dove." MELUS 18.3 (1993): 3-19. Print.

Waterfront Writers and Artists, ed. The Waterfront Writers: The Literature of Work. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Print.

Watkins, Amy. "Song for My Dad and a Stranger." Blue Collar Review 10.3 (2007): 39-40. Print.

Watson, Bruce. Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream. New York: Viking, 2005. Print.

Wayman, Tom. Inside Job: Essays on the New Work Writing. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 1983. Print.

Wertheimer, Barbara M. We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America. New York: Knopf, 1977. Print.

West, Cornel. The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991. Print.

"West End Press." Web. 20 Feb 2009. <http://www.westendpress.org>.

"What is Working-Class Studies?". Center for Working-Class Studies, 2008. Web. Feb 15 2009. <http://cwcs.ysu.edu/studies/why-how>.

Wheeler, Leslie. Voicing America: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present. Ithaca, NY: Cornel UP, 2008. Print.

Whiteman, Roberta Hill. "Lines for Marking Time." Star Quilt. Duluth, MI: Holy Cow! Press, 1984. 7. Print.

Whitman, Walt. "A Woman Waits for Me." Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition. Eds. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley. The Norton Library. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968. 101-03. Print.

Wicks, Mike. "Short History of Big Mountain-Black Mesa." American Indian Cultural Support, 1998. Web. 12 Dec 2008. <http://www.aics.org/BM/bm.html>.

Williams, Raymond. Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review. London: New Left Books, 1979. Print.

Wispé, Lauren. "The Distinction Between Sympathy and Empathy: To Call Forth a Concept, A Word Is Needed." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 50.2 (1986): 314-21. Print.

---. "History of the Concept of Empathy." Empathy and Its Development. Eds. Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer. New York: Cambridge UP, 1987. 17-37. Print.

Wolfson, Susan J. "'Romantic Ideology' and the Values of Aesthetic Form." Aesthetics and Ideology. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1994. 191-2. Print.

"Women and Prison: A Site for Resistance." BeyondMedia Education, 2006. Web. Feb 9 2009. <http://www.womenandprison.org/index.html>.

Woods, Scott. "Poetry Slams: The Ultimate Democracy of Art." World Literature Today 82.1 (2008). Print.

Woods, Tim. "Memory and Ethics in Contemporary Poetry." English: The Journal of the English Association 49 Summer (2000): 155-65. Print.

---. The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002. Print.

Woolf, Linda M. "Women and Sweatshops." Women and Global Human Rights (2009). Web. 11 July 2009. <http://www.webster.edu/%7Ewoolflm/sweatshops.html>.

"Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers." Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, 2007. Web. July 15 2009. <http://www.wordcraftcircle.org/>.

"Worker Writers Festival." United Auto Workers International, 2008. Web. 25 June 2009. <http://www.uaw.org/about/where/uawmap.html>.

"Workers Write Journal." Blue Cubicle Press. Web. 10 Feb 2009. <http://www.workerswritejournal.com/index.htm>.

"Work Literary Magazine." 2009. Web. Sept 6 2009. <http://workmagazine.wordpress.com/>.

Xcp: Cross-Cultural Poetics. "Writing (Working) Class" Issue 9. Minneapolis, 2001. Print.

Yarbro-Bejarano, Yvonne. "Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective." Chicana Creativity and Criticism: New Frontiers in American Literature. Ed. María Herrera-Sobek. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1996. 213-19. Print.

Zandy, Janet. "Introduction." Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings. Ed. Janet Zandy. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990. 1-13. Print.

---, ed. Calling Home : Working-Class Women's Writings : An Anthology. New Brunswick : Rutgers University Press, 1990. Print.

---. "The Complexities and Contradictions of Working-Class Women's Writings." Radical Teacher 58 (1995). Print.

---. Liberating Memory : Our Work and Our Working-Class Consciousness. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1995. Print.

---. "Working-Class Studies." Women's Studies Quarterly: Working-Class Studies 23.1-2 (1995). Print.

---. "Introduction." What We Hold in Common : An Introduction to Working-Class Studies. Ed. Janet Zandy. New ed. New York: Feminist Press CUNY, 2001. xiii-xv. Print.

---. Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2004. Print.

Zhou, Xiaojing. The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2006. Print.