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When the Middle Class Is Not Enough: The Working-Class Subaltern and the Curriculum

I write this paper a little fearfully because I'm not sure you're going to believe what I have to say, and I'm prepared to be resentful if you don't. You'll have to pardon my defensiveness. It's a self-protective thing, of course. I suppose you'll understand it if I tell you that this subject has been germinating in my head ever since I started university, but not all the people I've spoken to about it agree that it's a worthwhile issue to take up in Canadian departments of English, or that I'm the appropriate person to do it. What I'm going to talk about today is the working classes and their simultaneous presence and absence in our departments, their presence, that is, in the hallways, classrooms, and offices and their absence in the books we usually teach and in the way we often teach them.

We like to believe in Canada that we don't have a class system. We compare ourselves to England with its aristocrats and its coal miners, who are so obviously distant from one another in their ways of living, who don't even speak the same English, it seems, and we assume that we have no such distinctions here. Our coal miners, prostitutes, factory workers, secretaries, truck drivers, armed forces personnel, and working single mothers and fathers aren't that different from the middle and upper classes, we like to think, not so different that we have to consider them a separate social and cultural category, as the English at times attempt to do.

Or, if we're willing to concede that there are working classes in this country, we're not willing to believe that it's an issue that can be addressed by academics, the assumption being that once you reach university you lose your working-classness, you lose your right to your roots in that place among those people because it's not likely that you, with your university education, will lack the choices your parents lacked. Students who come from the working classes, we think, have somehow worked their way out of them.

Such assumptions apparently have their effect on Canadian writers too. In an interview published in a 1990 issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* David Adams Richards was taken to task by Kathleen Scherf for daring to write about a class in which he was not actively participating. She says to him, "You 'assert the dignity in downtrodden lives,' right? That's a quote from *Maclean's*." "Not my quote though," he insists, and her response is:

No. But you do say "I am not going to allow these people whom I knew and grew up with to be dismissed." Now, is there an element of *noblesse oblige* here? We're sitting in a rather nice house. At what point do you decide to write about the working class instead of working in it? (166)

Richards is being chastised here for appearing too well-to-do in his nice house and for making a living from his writing while at the same time choosing to write about "downtrodden" people. There's some tautology at the heart of Scherf's statements—the logic seems to go something like this: you shouldn't write about the working classes unless you are currently doing the kind of work that gets associated with those classes, and writing isn't that kind of work. The end result of such reasoning is the belief that the working classes can never ever genuinely write about themselves because the very act of writing does not belong to them. Or perhaps the people of the Canadian working classes are allowed to write, but they're not allowed to make any money from that practice. Of course, this sort of thinking effectively silences the working classes completely.

By these tactics, Scherf forces Richards into a defensive position that produces what is surely one of the most confusing justifications in the history of Canadian literary analysis. I'm going to quote Richards's replies at some length because I think that they are indicative of the general confusion that we in Canada have about the working classes. He

tells her, "I don't think I ever wrote about the working class in my life," to which she responds, "You know you're tagged with that all the time." And what follows is his attempt to explain himself and his work, and typical Canadian attitudes about the working classes:

Well of course, but you see, that's their problem. Of all the quotes they could have used in that article, that's the quote they decide to remain with, that and one about alcoholism. Shit, I know more alcoholics who are members of the legislature than I ever knew who didn't have a job. It's so bloody silly to assume that I'm writing about the working class as a class of oppressed people. Half the characters in my novels earn more than the critics that are criticizing them for being poor. It doesn't matter how much you earn but it's what you do. . . . If I were writing comedy they wouldn't call these people working class at all. I came from a middle class background. I grew up on the streets of Newcastle where there was as much middle class as there was working class. We all fought, played baseball and went home. The whole idea that I am setting out to write this great working class tract, the sort of thing that Trotsky would approve of, is absolutely trash. And it only comes from a middle class mentality . . . an *academic* middle class mentality, and it's just not true, it's absolutely not true. (166-67)

Richards asserts in this passage that he is both writing and not writing about the working classes, and his confusion on this issue is understandable given Scherf's previous indictment of him. For the reasons I mentioned above, it's not safe in this country to claim the working classes as your subject matter, especially not to the face of an academic. And yet he is obviously indebted to these classes and certainly identifies with them enough to be able to write about them, in spite of his own admittedly middle-class background. He also brings to light some myths about the working classes—that they are defined by their poverty, by their associations with alcoholism, and by their oppression. The people he writes about, he says, are not oppressed, and some of them are alcoholics and some of them are poor, but these attributes don't belong solely to the working classes in Canada.

Richards's valiant though somewhat bewildering defense of the working classes here is telling. What it points to is the refusal of academics and other Canadians to treat these classes as a culture, peoples apart from the middle and upper classes, who teach their children

different values from those evident in the dominant classes and who might respond to situations in a manner unlike their fellow and sister Canadians because of their particular value systems. If we understood the working classes as a culture or cultures, we could, for instance, argue that it isn't the prevalence of alcoholism that defines the working classes but the ways in which this problem is expressed and demarcated. Similarly, the working classes aren't the only ones who find their adolescent daughters getting pregnant (another tag of the working classes), but maybe they deal with this event by using coping strategies with which the mainstream cultures are not familiar. The possibilities for exploring these ideas in literature are enormous, and the kinds of readings that could come out of such investigations are potentially fascinating, maybe even revolutionary. But so long as we believe that the working classes in Canada don't exist at all or else are only defined by their financial status, we will not have the intellectual tools with which to formulate the questions.

Because of Elaine Showalter and other academic feminists, we have learned to recognize women as inhabitants of a separate culture in our society. And this recognition, first proposed in the 1970s, has produced an abundance of scholarship, which has changed forever the way that we "do" literary interpretation. It has led to the recovery of hundreds of women writers—novelists, diarists, pamphlet writers, poets, playwrights, etc.—and to the consideration of specifically women's issues in literary criticism. The attention paid to gender in our discipline over the last 20 or so years and the willingness to entertain the notion that women may indeed occupy a cultural placement different from but sometimes overlapping with the masculine culture that gets to hold sway in a patriarchy have also created what I think is one of the most wide-ranging and fruitful of all the popular theoretical paradigms that we use to read and teach literature today—namely, feminist literary theory. Feminist critics as disparate as Ellen Moers, Catherine Belsey, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Julia Kristeva have questioned everything from the traditionally male literary canon to the dichotomizing of gender itself. Had they not insisted on their right to view themselves and other women as specific, special, and separate, the fruitfulness and abundance of feminist literary criticism and feminist teaching would not exist today.

It is this argument about separateness that I am mustering in relation to the Canadian working classes, and it is this right that I am demanding for myself, a white woman who grew up working class and whose most profound ties and allegiances remain there. Because of the feminists before me who didn't budge an inch and because of my own efforts and the efforts of my open-minded and sympathetic colleagues now, I don't have to betray my gender to do my job. This job does, however, require me to betray my class in the subtlest of ways. For instance, as an English professor, I'm expected to use a certain English that I didn't grow up speaking. And I must admit that I've labored to acquire that language. But after 11 years in the university system, I still have a hell of a time, especially when I talk, trying to remember where to put the "I's" and where to put the "me's" in my sentences. I also can't seem to keep the word "exacerbate" apart from "exasperate" or "prostate" from "prostrate." Needless to say, this discomfort with certain words and grammatical structure—this not having standard English there on the tip of my tongue—has produced some immensely embarrassing moments in my academic life. Moreover, I'm afraid that there will come a day when I will be able to wield this dialect with ease, and who will I be then?

The simple practice of studying that which we call "literature" can be an alienating experience for a working-class student. It is very likely in this country that we can spend four or five or even ten years in university English departments and never once see our working-classness constructed or discussed. Or if we do get to read about working-class life in novels such as Alice Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, or Earl Lovelace's *The Wine of Astonishment*, we don't get to study these moments and realities *as* working-class, as somehow different from the middle and upper-class realities on which most canonized literary works focus. Let's face it, despite the decades-long presence of Marxism in our university English departments, the curriculum continues to reproduce middle-classness as a norm, even as an ideal.

In their book *Rewriting English*, which is about Marxist literary criticism and the British working class, Janet Batsleer, Tony Davies, Rebecca O'Rourke, and Chris Weedon assert (and this was published in 1985) that

the authority of standard English still derives from its historical if unevenly articulated alliance with the national literature, or rather 'Literature', since that too becomes, in the same process, a curricular selection and organization of 'valid knowledge', with the implicit devaluation of everything that lies outside its field. (38)

If this is true in England, where there exists at least some usually floundering tradition that involves paying attention to the working classes, how much truer must it be here in Canada, where working-classness is barely acknowledged as a category. The current literary canon, as it exists in Canadian English departments, with its accompanying periodization and our incessant insistence on the "greatness" of certain texts, inevitably erases working-class writing and working-class realities or it holds them in contempt, either implicitly or explicitly. So we don't study what was, for instance, considered a classic in my childhood home, *How Green Was My Valley* by Richard Llewellyn. I suppose that this particular book isn't allowed in the canon in part because it's sentimental, a characteristic not generally associated with "greatness." But this novel dignifies the coal mining working class of Wales, makes their struggles seem of epic proportion and their sorrows the stuff of tragedy. I loved it when I was a teenager. It took my mother 10 years of verbal nudges to get me to look up from my comic books, my Fontana collections of "truly terrifying" ghost stories, and my much tattered copies of Xaviera Hollander novels and read *How Green Was My Valley*. I have never bothered to tell her that this "classic" isn't a "classic"—isn't even in the running—in this place where all we do is study literature. She would have disdain for us, I think.

University English departments in Canada are presently in the process of deciding what their role should be in the education of our population. It has been a privilege for me as a postcolonial feminist critic to participate in the movement to open up the literary canon to accommodate writers not typically studied and ideas not usually entertained. The opportunity to confront a demanding otherness—whether historically, culturally, racially, or gender-based—should not be undervalued, and I hope that it continues to be a priority in our English departments. But one person's "demanding otherness" is someone else's comforting self. I know that at Saint Mary's, where many, many of our students come from the lower middle class and the working classes, we need to learn how to

value these particular selves. And that valuing could be expressed in any number of ways—through the teaching of middle-class novels from working-class perspectives, through the recovery of working-class writing—regional, national, and international—and through the study of the "popular" culture that many of these students share, the television shows, comic books, bestselling novels and genre fiction that we too probably all watch and read, although we may be reluctant to admit that we have such tastes. At Saint Mary's some of this is already quietly under way. So I'm hopeful. I'm hopeful that we and our students might eventually decide to believe that culture is not something that we come to university English departments to acquire: it's something we already have.

WORKS CITED

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