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## **REVIEW OF *LITERATURE, CLASS AND CULTURE: AN ANTHOLOGY***

Although the quality and depth of the general discussion may still often frustrate many of us, it is hard to deny that there is a broad public awareness of gender, race and ethnicity in American society. The issues concerning these categories certainly remain highly contentious, but they are nevertheless widely recognized by people across the ideological spectrum as markers of social identity and as important factors in politics. Not so with class. Within a national discourse that has steadily slipped to the right over the past thirty years, class has virtually disappeared, both as a mode of socio-economic analysis and as a category of personal identification. The distinct concerns of working class people have been all but erased from the popular public consciousness as most Americans strain to self-identify as "middle class"; and, of course, when we all think that we are middle class, the political interests of the most wealthy and powerful people in America can be made to seem the same as the single mother of two who is a cashier at Target.

In his recent book, *The Working Class Majority*, Michael Zweig joins a growing number of people who have recently sought to foster more public awareness of the stark divides that continue to separate the working class from the middle and capitalist classes in America. As Zweig passionately explains, the absence of general public recognition of class distinctions in our society has had devastating ramifications:

When society fails to acknowledge the existence and experience of working people it robs them of an articulate sense of themselves and their place in society. We know from the vibrancy of other identity movements that to silence and leave nameless a central aspect of a person's identity is to strip them of a measure of power over their lives. A full, realistic self-identity is a basic requirement for human dignity. (61)

The promotion of more understanding of class should certainly be among the primary goals of progressive educators. What I like about *Literature, Class and Culture*, a new anthology edited by Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald, is that it will help teachers to answer the call of people like Zweig for more public awareness concerning how class continues to shape consciousness and define relationships. Conceived for use in introductory literature courses and composition courses with a literature emphasis, *Literature, Class and Culture* will provide myriad openings for discussions of the complicated ways that class continues to impact and define life in America. On a more practical level, this anthology will prevent teachers who seek to make the discussion of class a significant part of their course goals from having to continue to piece together essays, poems and fiction from a vast array of sources and then figure out a way to get copies to their students.

*Literature, Class and Culture* is divided into four sections. The first, "Bread, Land, and Station: Work and Class," contains selections that explore the relationship between work as a material practice and consciousness. In Jack London's "The Apostate," for instance, a young man who supports his mother and

siblings doing piece work in a textile mill gradually grows tired and cynical. It is only when he is injured on the job and forced to take some time off to recover that he gains some perspective on his life. For the first time, he has the leisure and space to understand how work has impacted his body and his perception of himself and the world. Among the authors chosen for this section are Herman Melville, Woody Guthrie, Paula Gunn Allen and Jimmy Santiago Baca.

Section two, "Clothes Make the Woman: The Social Dimensions of Class," explores how class relates to factors other than work--such as consumerism, social institutions, family relations, and images in popular media. Lawrence Kearney's poem, "K Mart," shows how shopping habits help to form gender identity: a boy is separated from his mother, who shops in LADIES WEAR, and taught by his father to "shop like a man" in HOME FURNISHINGS. Dorothy Allison's "Mama" describes a working class mother/daughter relationship complicated by an abusive step-father. This section is the longest in the collection and includes work from writers as diverse as Louisa May Alcott and Bruce Springsteen.

The third section, "'Between the Workers and the Owners': Class Conflict," not only contains selections that describe open, violent confrontations between workers, management and police, but also the less dramatic, everyday conflicts and struggles that most working people will be able to recognize immediately. In Sue Doro's "Subject to Change," a group of factory workers endure a perfunctory meeting with evasive and powerless middle managers and worry about a new round of layoffs. Alice Wirth Gray's "He Was When He Died" imagines the obituary of an "unemployed mattress factory worker" whose life is publicly defined by what he did not do. Among the other selections in this section are an excerpt from *The Autobiography of Mother Jones*, and the lyrics to Bob Dylan's "I Ain't Going to Work on Maggie's Farm."

The final section, "Classic or Classy: Art and Class," contains various ruminations on the relationship between art and culture. It includes work by Matthew Arnold, Raymond Williams, Kate Daniels and Mao Tse-tung.

While the sections are divided by theme, the work collected within the sections is generally arranged chronologically by date of publication, and most people should find the book easy to navigate. There is also an alternative table of contents that organizes the selections by genre.

What might be the anthology's greatest weakness may also be its greatest strength. Whether by intention or not, the bulk of the collection will encourage readers to locate a distinctly "American" culture; there are certainly exceptions, but not much of the anthology will lend itself well to discussions of cultural hybridity or diaspora. This might be a problem for some teachers. However, in my experience as a teacher, many of my students have been surprised to find that class identity has historically been as integral a part of America's mythological image of itself as "individuality" and "self-reliance." What I especially like about *Literature, Class and Culture* is that the historical progression of its selections solidly illustrate this point. This collection shows that class-conscious contemporary authors, like Dorothy Allison and Francisco Jimenez, are adding to a very established--even if sometimes marginalized--conversation among American writers.

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