

Notes

8. “It’s not too late to take the Sanitation test”

1. What, exactly, is “the working class” anyway? For that matter, what are classes? According to Paul W. Kingston in *The Classless Society*, classes don’t exist in the United States. He contends that groups of people having a common economic experience and who hold similar social positions don’t significantly share distinct, life-defining experiences, like family life, marriages, and raising children. Even “morality” is classless because Americans are remarkably divided in their responses to divorce, pornography, or swearing, regardless of their income (145). Meanwhile, Americans from very different income groups might have the same cultural tastes in music or clothes. In *The Working-Class Majority*, Michael Zweig agrees with Kingston about the unimportance of income and lifestyle in assessing whether class exists in America. However, Zweig sharply departs from Kingston’s interpretation of these two ideas because he believes that the nation is profoundly class-oriented. “Class is determined not by income and lifestyle,” he maintains, “but by the relative standing in power relations at work and in the larger society” (41). Taking a decidedly more Marxist approach to the topic, he states, “Class is first and foremost a product of power asserted in the production process” (12). David Harvey’s vigorous analysis of Marx’s work in *The Limits to Capital* carries this idea one step further by combining “production and distribution in the context of class relations” (42). These twin forces, he believes, determine the amount of temporal and spatial control one has over one’s life, and that power, or the lack thereof, drives class relations. Viewing social relations in this way illustrates the existence of class in the United States. In my varied work experiences, for instance, the amount of power or control I had over time and space established my class. Whether as a grocery clerk, typesetter, apple picker,

landscaper, adjunct professor, warehouse operator, junior staff writer, or handyman, I had virtually no authority over where I had to be and when I had to be there. And in those jobs I always felt like a member of the working class. But now, as an assistant professor of English, other than my office hours and class schedule (which still can be fudged), I have near-total control over where I have to be and when I have to be there. I also feel the most middle class I have ever felt in my life. So, yes, even gangsters can be working class because their bosses maintain control over their whereabouts. The “organization,” after all, operates as a highly transparent hierarchy of the division of labor.

2. Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey, eds., *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class*. 1984. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1996, p. 187.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

4. C. L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law, eds., *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995, pp. 37–38.

5. Michelle Tokarczyk and Elizabeth Fey, eds., *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, p. 72.

6. Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: The Dial Press, 2004, p. 137.

10. Re-Gifted

1. In the beginning of the film *Working Girl* the main character, Tess, played by Melanie Griffith, informs her friend she can't attend her own surprise birthday party because she has her speech class to go to that night. In another scene, Tess is listening to a recording of her boss trying to imitate her diction and inflection. Her boss, played by Sigourney Weaver, is a Wellesley graduate who's temporarily occupying her parents' Upper East Side brownstone after relocating from Boston to New York. Tess knows that if she wants to move up in the world she needs to drop her working-class speech markers and adopt the language of the ruling class. I didn't drop mine so consciously. For one thing, when I was at Johnson & Wales I was surrounded by plenty of New Englanders and no one ever said anything about my “New York accent.” I certainly didn't think of dropping it then and adopting a very heavy New England accent, which they had, and which was undoubtedly a New England working-class accent. BU was different. There were students from all over the country and everyone sounded the same, including many foreign students from Saudi Arabia and Brazil who spoke impeccable English. The requirements of their (upper) social class had wiped out regionalism—from as far away as the Sahara. I simply noticed that the students there and in class spoke a certain way. If I wanted to participate in class (which I did a lot of) “comfortably,” and fit in generally, I needed to sound more like them and less like the people back home.

2. Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Bantam Books, 1983, p. 62.
3. John Edgar Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers: A Memoir*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2005, pp. 26–27.
4. Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey, eds., *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class*. 1984. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1996, p. 115.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
6. Renny Christopher, “A Carpenter’s Daughter.” In *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, ed. C. L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995, p. 140.
7. Irvin Peckham, “Complicity in Class Codes: The Exclusionary Function of Education.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, p. 274.
8. Linda Brodkey, “Writing on the Bias.” *College English* 56.5 (1994), p. 535.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 533.
10. Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*, p. 49.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
12. Karen Fitts and Alan W. France, “Production Values and Composition Instruction: Keeping the Hearth, Keeping the Faith.” In *Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers*, ed. Alan Shephard, John McMillan, and Gary Tate. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1998, p. 49.
13. Donna Langston, “Who Am I Now? The Politics of Class Identity.” In *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory*, ed. Michelle M. Tokarczyk and Elizabeth A. Fay. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, p. 64.
14. Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America’s Educationally Unprepared*. New York: Penguin, 1990, p. 23.
15. Terry Eagleton, *The Gatekeeper*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001, p. 52.
16. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*. 1957. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, pp. 226–27.
17. Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*, pp. 62–63.
18. Victor Villanueva Jr., *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993, pp. 6–8.
19. Keith Gilyard, *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991, p. 33.
20. Brodkey, “Writing on the Bias,” p. 532.
21. Janet Zandy, “Introduction.” In *Calling Home: Working-Class Women’s Writing, An Anthology*, ed. Janet Zandy. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990, p. 13.
22. Robert Brown, “Robert Brown.” In Ryan and Sackrey, *Strangers in Paradise*, p. 133.
23. Bob Cole, “Bob Cole.” In Ryan and Sackrey, *Strangers in Paradise*, p. 49.
24. Fitts and France, “Production Values and Composition Instruction,” p. 48.

25. Patricia A. Sullivan, “Passing: A Family Dissemblance.” In Shephard, McMillan, and Tate, *Coming to Class*, p. 237.

26. Suzanne Sowinska, “Yer Own Motha Wouldna Reckanized Ya: Surviving and Apprenticeship in the ‘Knowledge Factory.’” In Tokarczyk and Fay, *Working-Class Women in the Academy*, pp. 150–51.

27. Langston, “Who Am I Now?,” pp. 61–62.

28. bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 25–26.

29. Pat Belanoff, “Language: Closings and Openings.” In Tokarczyk and Fay, *Working-Class Women in the Academy*, p. 255.

30. Gilyard, *Voices of the Self*, p. 45.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–29.

32. Perhaps the following warrants more than a sidebar: I’ve long believed that when “gifted” working-class kids are pulled out of the working-class it benefits the child, *and* the class he or she will soon inhabit, but not the working class. In fact, it may even be detrimental to it. For one thing, it maintains middle- and upper-class hegemony. The “favored” sons and daughters of the working class are now part of the ruling class. The “cream” of one class is absorbed into the others. In addition, yanking these “special” kids out of their environment, especially to become academics, removes them from participating intellectually in working-class life. Potentially powerful voices are relocated to other classes. Sure, many return “home” now and then to work for political and social justice that often affects the working class, but it often happens from the margins, not from the inside. That can be a further class hindrance. Many in the working class consider them outsiders, as no longer “one of their own.” Added to that impression is an attempt by the economic elite to call intellectuals, especially humanities professors, the “liberal elite” who are out of touch with the average working man and woman. As we’ve seen in the narratives, some of those “liberal elite” are from the working class. Such labeling is generally unfair; however, based on the “true confessions” in working-class academic narratives, there’s some truth in it. Several narrators acknowledge that they longed to get out of the working class because Joe Sixpack was a boorish ignoramus. As a result, many members of the working class look upon such insufferable smugness as further evidence that being bookish is contemptible and strangely shallow. Intellectualism turns ordinary people into extraordinary snobs. In turn, members of the working class become more entrenched in rejecting the rewards of intellectual activities and the advantages of reading, especially among males. In turn, bookish members of the working class grow up in this hostile environment, sensing and frequently experiencing this animosity, including being treated suspiciously for not being authentic members of their own class. They’re considered “weirdos” for the passion they have for those “strange tools.” This causes and perpetuates the discomfort of growing up bookish in the working class, making “escape” compelling, if not inevitable. Taking gifted students out

of the working class therefore establishes a pattern: The bookish are unwelcome, feel unwelcome, and want to escape; their need to escape and their actions to do so create inevitable ill-will among other members of the working class. Once gone, their new “elite” status brands them as arrogant traitors, furthering the impression that books are not only strange but hostile tools to the overall integrity of working-class life. The upper classes gain from skimming the cream off the top of the lower class, as does the one being skimmed. The loser in the equation is therefore the working class because the very idea of advanced literacy becomes a wedge rather than a uniting force for greater *class* power. Books provide access to mostly *personal* mobility and power. It’s as if books are the weaponry in the class struggle—within the working class!

33. Gloria D. Warren, “Another Day’s Journey.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, pp. 108–9.

34. Rosa Maria Pegueros, “Todos Vuelven.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, p. 90.

35. Dwight Lang, “The Social Construction of a Working-Class Academic.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, p. 159.

36. Mary Cappello, “Useful Knowledge.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, pp. 127–29.

37. Ryan and Sackrey, *Strangers in Paradise*, p. 103.

38. Naton Leslie, “You Were Raised Better Than That.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, p. 69.

39. Sowinska, “Yer Own Motha Wouldna Reckanized Ya,” pp. 152–56.

40. Nathan Green, “Nathan Green.” In Ryan and Sackrey, *Strangers in Paradise*, p. 57.

41. Alice Trent, “Alice Trent.” In Ryan and Sackrey, *Strangers in Paradise*, p. 223.

42. Christine Overall, “Nowhere at Home.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, p. 210.

43. Stephen Garger, “Bronx Syndrome.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, p. 44.

44. George T. Martin Jr., “In the Shadow of My Old Kentucky Home.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, p. 82.

45. Sharon O’Dair, “Class Matters.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, p. 201.

46. Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*, p. 49.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

49. Sowinska, “Yer Own Motha Wouldna Reckanized Ya,” p. 152.

50. Fitts and France. “Production Values and Composition Instruction,” p. 52.

51. O’Dair, “Class Matters,” pp. 202–3.

52. Ryan and Sackrey, *Strangers in Paradise*, p. 115.

53. Willy Russell, *Educating Rita*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2001, pp. 39–40.

54. Sowinska, “Yer Own Motha Wouldna Reckanized Ya,” p. 150.
55. Cole, p. 49.
56. Warren, “Another Day’s Journey, p. 108.
57. Gilyard, *Voices of the Self*, p. 105.
58. Laurel Johnson Black, “Stupid Rich Bastards.” In Dews and Law, *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, p. 18.
59. Brodkey, “Writing on the Bias,” p. 543.
60. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 229.
61. Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*, p. 49.
62. Gilyard, *Voices of the Self*, p. 44.
63. Charles Finder, “Charles Finder.” In Ryan and Sackrey, *Strangers in Paradise*, p. 164.
64. Gary Tate, “Halfway Back Home.” In Shephard, McMillan, and Tate, *Coming to Class*, 1998, pp. 253–54.
65. Louis Potter, “Louis Potter.” In Ryan and Sackrey, *Strangers in Paradise*, p. 186.
66. Carol Faulkner, “Truth and the Working Class in the Working Classroom.” In Shephard, McMillan, and Tate, *Coming to Class*, pp. 37–44.
67. O’Dair, “Class Matters,” pp. 206–7.
68. Faulkner, “Truth and the Working Class,” p. 44.
69. John Ernest, “One Hundred Friends and Other Class Issues.” In Shephard, McMillan, and Tate, *Coming to Class*, pp. 34–35.
70. Olivia Frey, “Stupid Clowns of the Spirit’s Motive.” In Shephard, McMillan, and Tate, *Coming to Class*, pp. 72–75.
71. Zandy, “Introduction,” p. 13.
72. Janet Zandy, “The Job, the Job: The Risk of Work and the Uses of Texts.” In Shephard, McMillan, and Tate, *Coming to Class*, pp. 295–99.
73. Tate, “Halfway Back Home,” pp. 254–59.
74. Sullivan, “Passing,” p. 239.
75. Tate, “Halfway Back Home,” pp. 255–59.
76. Sullivan, “Passing,” p. 237.
77. This kind of lunacy is carried on by the state in its teacher certification exams. Typically, prospective English teachers must answer a series of identification questions, whereby they must recognize that five lines of poetry is from Tennyson, not Wordsworth or Shakespeare or Yeats, as if that’s going to determine their effectiveness as reading and writing teachers. If anything, such tests do more harm than good by setting a bad example, demonstrating that the kind of mindless rote material they must study for to become teachers is the same mindless rote material they should be passing on to their students.
78. O’Dair, “Class Matters,” p. 207.
79. Belanoff, “Language: Closings and Openings,” p. 270.
80. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 229.
81. Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*, p. 44.

- 82. Ibid., p. 67.
- 83. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 229.
- 84. Faulkner, “Truth and the Working Class,” p. 44.
- 85. Brodkey, “Writing on the Bias,” pp. 529–31.
- 86. Tate, “Halfway Back Home,” p. 255.

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