



US Working-Class/Poverty-Class Divides

■ **Vivyan C. Adair**

Hamilton College

ABSTRACT

In arguing for more finely nuanced and inclusive understandings of class in the USA, I write as a 'poverty-class scholar' articulating an identity, experience, marginality, and concomitant consciousness and epistemology distinct from that of working-class academics. Both in and out of academe, representations of working-class identity are juxtaposed against and, thus, reinforce the 'otherness' of poor women who are positioned as boundary markers, demarcating the unacceptable and illegal 'others' of the working class. Concomitantly, in claiming to speak for and then neglecting these differences, working-class scholarship allows for the co-optation, erasure and mis-representation of poor women and children. Ultimately, I argue that only by including theories generated 'from experience outward,' that expose and critique the differential impact of class on women's lives without claiming an uncontested authenticity, can we begin to understand the operations of class as it is lived, theorized and contested in contemporary society.

KEY WORDS

gender / poverty / poverty-class scholarship / representation / US class / working class

Until the missing story of ourselves is told, nothing besides told can suffice us/We shall go on quietly craving it/In the missing story of ourselves can be found all other missing stories. (Laura Riding Jackson, 1973: 111)

Thirtieth November 1999 dawned overcast and gray as demonstrators marched toward the long-awaited World Trade Organization's opening ceremonies at the historic Paramount Theater in Seattle, Washington. By midday, upwards of 50,000 labor union members had joined with tens of thousands of impassioned demonstrators, as Capital Hill residents cheered and a

portable CD player blared out the late Seattleite Jimi Hendrix's rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner*. As the world watched, steelworkers, machinists, service employees and tradesmen walked and protested through the streets of Seattle arm in arm. Taxi drivers went on strike for the day and Longshoremen shut down docks along the west coast of the United States in a show of unity. The 'WTO, Battle in Seattle' had begun in earnest. The next day labor leader Brian McWilliams addressed a pre-march rally in a packed stadium telling the crowd, 'There will be no business as usual today ... demonstrating to the corporate CEOs that the global economy will not run without the consent of workers everywhere ... The interests of working people transcend international boundaries' ('Demonstrators', 1999).¹

In steadfast solidarity, a very small but vocal band of welfare recipient and rights activists, made up of women of different races, ethnicities, sexualities and ages, many with children in tow, joined the protest. However, it quickly became very apparent to us that we were not necessarily viewed as 'sisters in struggle,' that indeed we were less than welcome on these streets teeming with proud and defiant workers. One group of steelworkers reading our 'Poor Women and Children Fight Back' sign, suggested in rather pornographic terms that we had no right to walk with 'real workers' since we were more suited to other 'walking occupations.' A team of telephone-line men behind them similarly insisted that we 'go back to the projects to finish watching *Oprah*.' As the angry men surrounded us, one warned me personally that I had better 'get off [my] ass and get a real job,' if I expected to earn *his* support. While I held firm, a friend and colleague was groped by a large man sporting a steelworker's hat. Although at one level the WTO protests were a remarkable show of workers' unity on the larger world stage, to many the event also highlighted the degree to which even self-defined locations on the contemporary American class landscape are sites of heated contestation.

What was at stake in this unfortunate and momentary public clash of class markings was the right of poor women to call themselves members of the working class. Ironically, in other venues US working-class academics claim and co-opt the experiences of poor women as their own, even as nascent 'poverty-class academics' attempt to articulate a distinct class identity, positionality, experience and concomitant consciousness and epistemology. These gaps are palpable and resonant, although little addressed in contemporary US class studies.

Class theorist Michael Zweig does attempt to address this lacuna in his ground-breaking *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (2000). Here he argues that the US working class is quite broad and that the poor should be considered an integral part of the working class because they do and always have worked. Zweig adds that because 'poverty happens to the working class,' and because positioning the poor as the underclass separates them and 'prohibits coalition work among all working people ... giving voice and power to the poor requires giving voice and power to the working class, bringing into focus its reality in a class-conflicted society.' His point is that 'the

ability to carry our combined grievances to the capitalist requires the power of an organized and united working class' (Zweig, 2000: 78–9).

US working-class scholars exercise Zweig's perspective, claiming to consider representation and analysis of the poor, in particular the new working poor of the welfare class. For example, although projects supported by the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University ('the first center of its kind in the United States devoted to the study of working-class life and culture') focus on industrial workers and labor history, the center purports to value interdisciplinary work that considers intersections of class with race, gender and sexuality, creating an inclusive vision of the working class that could include members of the working poor and welfare class (www.as.yosu.edu). Yet, despite these optimistic proclamations, US working-class praxis most often centers on the lives and experiences of blue-collar, white, and heterosexual industrial male workers.

Most class theorists maintain that 'working class' is a designation premised on distinctions that are a matter of income/assets/power/cultural distinctions and prestige (Aronowitz, 2003; Zweig, 2000). By coupling the experiences of blue-collar workers with those of poor women and their children, they juxtapose an allegedly unified experience against that of members of the middle and elite classes. In the act of claiming to speak for and then neglecting the unique experiences and expressions of lower-income women of all races who work both inside and outside of their homes, a sub-set of the 'working class' – including unwaged home workers, women on welfare, low-wage service and domestic workers and immigrant women and men engaged in non-union day labor – is co-opted, erased and rendered silent. Additionally, in the USA, as in Britain – as sociologist and class theorist Diane Reay points out – 'even contemporary research which argues for the inclusion of women in classifications of social class works exclusively with women as employees in the labour market' (1998: 259). This leads to virulent forms of misrecognition and exclusions that 'overlook the complexity inherent in the relationship between gender and social class ... the public and the private, the family and labour market' (Reay, 1998: 260).

Other theorists imagine and position the lives and perspectives of the poor as a part of the spectrum of working-class experience (Alvarez and Kolker, 2001). Indeed, class in the USA is relational, and the connections and distinctions among members of the middle, elite and working classes could be (and sometimes are) represented by a synecdoche or singular US class archetype (Mondale and Patton, 2001). A continuum of class analysis could include a range of experiences running from the profoundly and generationally impoverished to the relatively secure, propertied and 'respectable' working class, or for that matter through to the middle class and to the wealthiest, most privileged, powerful and elite in our nation. Inhabitants on this class spectrum are bound by common relationships to identity development through deeply entrenched ideologies of citizenship, nation, freedom, progress, ownership, family, sacrifice and duty. However, there are obvious dangers inherent in this methodology;

indeed this is one of the mechanisms through which our appreciation of class difference is leveled and erased in the USA.

By positioning poor women and children within larger class matrixes, the question of who speaks for, who represents and who symbolizes the identities, experiences, and perspectives of those embedded in the struggle against capital, emerges as central. In 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,' Heidi Hartman (1981) pointed out that, like the marriage of husband and wife sanctioned in English common law, Marxism acts to subsume the perspectives and material realities exposed through Feminist analysis. She claims that in this unhappy union Marxism and Feminism become one, and that one is Marxism. One could extend Hartman's metaphor to say that in class studies today we proclaim that 'the working class and the poor are one, and that one is the working class.' Like Hartmann I would suggest that 'either we need a healthier marriage or we need a divorce' (1981: 97).

The most evident differences between the working class and the poor rest on questions of income, resources, and power. In the USA today the poorest families are headed by single mothers: in 2004 women earned about 76 percent of what men earned for comparable full-time work; single mother incomes suffice as family incomes; often for every dollar a single mother earns she incurs childcare costs (in terms of money and risk) often leading to a zero sum gain; single mothers – and low-income women in general – are less able to secure lucrative college, professional, technical and trade credentials; and simply put, one income is often half (or less) that of two ('National...', 2004: 295)

The US Census Bureau indicated that over 80 percent of the single parent families in the USA were headed by single mothers, and the median annual income for these households was \$29,001 in 2003. This income is approximately 200 percent of the poverty line, precisely the artificial figure intended to demarcate the boundary between a livable and an unsustainable family wage in the USA.² (The median income for families headed by single fathers with no female present in 2003 was \$41, 711). A full one-third of single mother families had \$10,000 or less a year to live on; 3.4 percent of them lived on less than \$5,000 per year; and a single mother with two children who was able to qualify for and receive welfare, supported her family on under \$7,000 per year in cash grants and food stamps, somehow surviving on less than one-half of the official poverty threshold for a family of three in that same year. Unmarried mothers and single mothers of color are disproportionately represented among the poor, at the bottom rung (the fifth quintile) of the income ladder, while married, white men and women are over-represented in the highest quintiles of family income distribution charts (Walt et al., 2004). In the three counties surrounding Seattle – the home of the 1999 WTO class battles – in 2004 nearly 300,000 people lived in poverty although at least one of their family members worked full-time. These cashiers, janitors, maids, childcare, food service, and grounds workers made between \$6 and \$11 an hour or about \$12,000 – \$15,000 per year (Foster et al., 2005: A5). In stark contrast, the labor union workers, pipe-fitters, electricians, machinists, and longshoreman who proudly

marched in the WTO protests had individual annual incomes of \$40,120 – \$80,920 in 2004 ('National...', 2004).

Two representatives of the 'working class' in Seattle were recently highlighted in a series of articles in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* entitled 'The Other View from the Top: Hard work, Hard Times.' Narciza Pineda is a single mother and a janitor who 'scrubs and polishes the floors and toilets at [the Space Needle] Seattle's most visible symbol of progress' for \$10.75 per hour. Taking home about \$15,000 per year, Pineda and her three children barely survive, living in a 'dented white trailer beyond the safety net of a nearby driving range and a block from the city's household hazardous materials waste dump.' The rented trailer her family lives in has one bed for four people and the bathroom is missing its door. Pineda regularly runs out of food for her children, is habitually ill, and drives an unreliable and broken down car so that she can work all night leaving her children alone and unprotected (Smith, 2005: A1). Although Pineda works full time she and her children are poor and share distinct experiences and understandings of poverty with others who constitute a common consciousness and a class.³

Another article in the series highlights the plight of a solid member of the working class, Rob Anderson, a white 'family man' who lost a job as an electrician at age 47. Prior to his lay off in 2000, Anderson, who had worked at Totem Electric in Tacoma, Washington, was making \$60,000 per year. Although impoverished during the layoff, Anderson had accrued almost \$40,000 in savings that allowed him to weather the storm and to keep his house, his car, and to attend classes related to his trade credentials. By 2005, Anderson enjoyed a salary of \$68,000 as a union electrician with a contracting firm. He and his wife have a family wage that should approach \$100,000 in 2005 (Foster et al., 2005: A8). In this salary range most US working-class families have some health care, savings and insurance. They own their own homes, eat regular meals and pay their electric and heating bills. Many take occasional vacations, send at least some of their children to college, and will have a modest income in retirement (Schochet and Rangaragjan, 2004). It is difficult to imagine the utility of a 'working-class' demarcation that covers such a wide range of incomes and benefits, much less one that attempts to locate a broad spectrum of experiences including both Anderson who lives well above the poverty level and Pineda and others who are barely able – and some who are unable – to even subsist.

I hasten to point out that for many class theorists, economic conditions and their immediate implications constitute just one – sometimes misleading – aspect of social class distinction. Reay points out in 'Rethinking Social Class: Qualitative Perspectives on Class and Gender,' that class is more than income, that it is rather 'a complicated mixture of the material, the discursive, psychological predispositions and sociological dispositions' that are 'played out in interaction with others in social fields' (1998: 259, 265). Further, and crucially, she argues that a singular focus 'based on male labour market participation ... overlooks the complexity inherent in the relationships between gender and

social class' and results in an 'over simplification of what class constitutes' (1998: 260).

Indeed, an enormous and irresolvable income disparity represents only the most superficial distinction between the poor and the working classes in the USA; it is rather the lived, bodily, psychological and social manifestations of such disparity that are most compelling. Mary Federman reflected in *Monthly Labor Review* that whereas 77.6 percent of working families own a home as few as 24.63 percent of poor single parent headed families in the USA do so (1996: 34). Similarly, poor American families are far less likely to have health insurance, a phone, or a car. They are significantly more likely to experience eviction, discontinuation of gas or electric service, lack of food, infant mortality, violent crime, domestic abuse, and crowded and/or unsafe living conditions (Edin and Lein, 1997). In this sense, the economics of class are tied to its material and psychological manifestations for poor women. Material class distinctions become imprimaturs, producing, marking, mutilating and fixing the bodies of poor women and their being and value in the world, in ways that distinguish them from the working, middle and elite classes in the USA.

Reading poverty through Foucault's theories of bodily inscription, in 'Branded with Infamy: Inscriptions of Poverty and Class in the United States' I examined the means by which, unlike members of 'higher classes':

Poor women and children of all races in the United States today are multiply marked with signs of both discipline and punishment that cannot be erased or effaced. They are systematically produced through both twentieth-century forces of socialization and discipline and eighteenth-century exhibitions of public mutilation. In addition to coming into being as disciplined and docile bodies, poor single mothers and their children are physically inscribed, punished, and displayed as dangerous and pathological other ... These are more than metaphoric and self-patrolling marks of discipline. Rather, on myriad levels poor women and their children, like the 'deviants' publicly punished in Foucault's scenes of torture, are marked, mutilated, and made to bear and transmit signs in a public spectacle that brands the victim with infamy. (Adair, 2002: 454)

My own life provides further evidence of these very specific and not so 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennett and Cobb, 1972).⁴ I was raised by a poor, single, white mother who struggled to keep her four children sheltered, clothed and fed. As a result, poverty was written onto and into our being as children at the level of private and public thought and body.

What I recall most vividly about being a child in a profoundly poor family was that we were constantly ill and hurt, and, because we could not afford medical attention, illnesses and accidents spiraled into more dangerous conditions that became both a part of who we were and 'written' proof that we were of no value in the world. Despite my mother's most valiant efforts to protect us, at an early age my siblings and I were stooped, bore scars that never healed properly, and limped with feet mangled by ill-fitting, used Salvation Army shoes. When my four-year-old sister's forehead was split open by a car door slammed in

frustration, my mother was forced to sew the angry wound together on her own, leaving a mark of our inability to afford medical attention, of our physical and metaphoric 'lack,' on her very forehead. Our dirty and tattered clothing; posture that clearly reflected guilt, shame and lack of a sense of entitlement; scars and bodily disease; and sheer hunger, marked us as Others among our more fortunate working-class neighbors and colleagues. When, throughout elementary school, we were sent to the office for mandatory and very public yearly check-ups, after privately testing the hearing and eyesight of working-class children, the school nurse sucked air through her teeth as she donned surgical gloves to check only the hair of poor children for lice.

Other students and even our working-class teachers read us as 'trailer trash,' as unworthy, laughable, and dangerous. In class we were excoriated for our inability to concentrate in school, our 'refusal' to come to class prepared with proper school supplies, and our unethical behavior when we tried to take more than our allocated share of 'free lunch.' The daughters of working-class parents in our school wore inexpensive twin-sets and matching knee socks from the Sears catalogue, lived in modest homes with mothers and with fathers who worked on their older cars on weekends, went bowling with their cousins. We were paraded in front of these working-class students shamed and humiliated in our ragged and ill-fitting hand-me-downs, our very bodies signaling our Otherness while representing and testing the limits of working-class identity and 'deservedness.'

If, as children, our disheveled and broken bodies were produced as signs of inferiority and undeservedness, as adults, our mutilated bodies are read as signs of inner pathology and indecency as we are punished and then read as proof of the need for further discipline and punishment. In the USA, the bodies of poor women and children are scarred and mutilated by state mandated material deprivation and public exhibition. Our broken bodies are positioned as spectacles, as patrolling images used to socialize and control bodies within the body politic (Adair, 2002). As Loïc Wacquant has pointed out, programs targeted toward the poor in both the USA and UK have increasingly been 'turned into instruments of surveillance and control' allowing the state to materially mark the poor as signs of pathology and 'criminalize poverty via the punitive containment of the poor' (Wacquant, 1999: 1643). As a result, poor women and children are taught to read our abject bodies as the site of our own punishment and erasure.⁵ In this excess of meaning, the space between private body and public sign is often collapsed.

I am committed to not reducing experiences of poverty to those of our markings; indeed my own community of origin resisted and was also of course a source of strength, vision, beauty and wisdom. My point is also not that members of the working class do not suffer class inscription and concomitant oppression, for I know that they do. Rather I hope to illustrate that (a) poor women and children are positioned, develop, and resist differently than do the working class on myriad levels, (b) increasingly the articulation of working-class identity is juxtaposed against and thus reinforces the 'otherness' of poor

women who are positioned as boundary markers, denoting the unacceptable and illegal 'others' of the working class, and (c) at the same time in claiming to speak for and then neglecting these differences, representations of the working class allow for the co-optation, erasure and mis-representation of poor women and children. Beverly Skeggs' (2004: 13) notion that 'we need to shift perspective, therefore from recognition and think instead about who is being made invisible and who is empathically denied in the process of recognition' seems apropos and long overdue in the case of poor women vis-a-vis articulations of working-class identity and value in the contemporary USA.⁶

Speaking of the Working Class

These material, psychological and social distinctions are intimately associated with disparate representations and (de)valuations of the poor and the working class. In the USA, poor women are imagined – and then as a result punished and disciplined – as single mothers who are marked by race, lack male authority and values, make bad choices, engage in pathological behaviors, and are a threat to our nation and indeed their own children. At the same time the working class is most often imagined as unmarked in terms of race and as consisting of families with male heads of household, who although 'rough,' work diligently and embody and enjoy independence, legal heterosexuality, autonomy, logic and order. Although not 'polished,' elite or privileged – and as a result not viewed as 'natural' academics, leaders, or intellectuals – in the service of hegemony, members of the working class are valued as the 'bedrock' of a democratic and capitalist culture.

Public descriptions and analysis of 'the great unwashed' are regularly juxtaposed against these alleged values of the working class. Lillian Rubin's best selling *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family* (1992) presents us with representations of the working class that position them as fragile and yet normative in the contemporary USA. Here, Rubin introduces us to 'decent, clean, honest and hard working families' who constitute the American working classes. Attempting to evoke pathos, Rubin reminds us that members of the working class '[play] by the rules of the game,' that they 'try hard, work hard, [marry], obey the law and [teach] their children to do the same' (1992: 14). Even though these good citizens are workers and consumers – collecting goods, homes, appliances, campers, trucks, and boats – the 'good life allude[s] them.' What Rubin expresses and laments is not hunger, homelessness, public scorn and 'otherness,' but the fact that for her 50 working-class families 'wages were increasing but not as fast as prices,' 'life was hard, bills kept coming,' 'there was little free time to enjoy prized possessions,' and thus the working class finds itself 'running – always running to keep from falling by the wayside' (1992: 14).

The fear of 'falling' into the alleged chaos of poverty looms large for these white, married and working-class families. Rubin adds:

[As a nation] we knew plenty about the poor families, the dependent families, the delinquent families who made the headlines, who crowd the welfare roles, who tap public resources. But we knew almost nothing of the 40 million American workers ... employed in blue-collar jobs, most of them steady workers living in stable families, most of them asking for nothing and getting nothing from the government programs. (1992: 18)

These 'ordinary, fiercely independent and decent working class Americans' are similarly heralded in an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, that focuses on the 'hard work, no-nonsense attitudes, honesty, integrity, and a commitment to spouse, children, church and community' of the working class in the USA today (McDougal, 2003: L23). In a backhanded sort of way, even class historian Stanley Aronowitz recognizes that 'by invoking the phrase "working families," the labor movement ... places itself on the side of one of the icons of conservative culture, the nuclear family, with all of its religious, homophobic, and exclusionary connotations' (Aronowitz, 2003: 20).

In pointed contrast, in public rhetoric, poor single mothers are portrayed as 'lazy due to years of government programming ... illogical ... out of control' and 'crazed trying to meet [their] own selfish needs' (MacDonald, 2002a). These narratives representing poor women as dangerous parasites who have somehow violated the mandates of capitalism and heterosexism, invariably compare 'unmarried mothers, misfits and spongers who are idle' to 'legitimate and moral members of the working class who follow the rules, sacrifice and work' (MacDonald, 2002b) and contrast 'never married mothers who stay at home watching Jerry Springer' (Gilder, 1995: B6) to those 'decent, married families [sic] who work hard everyday' (Teixeira, 2005).⁷ Outside of and against the circumscribed value and normalization of the working class, poor single mothers are constructed as what Giorgio Agamben calls 'homo sacer,' people with no value, the 'enemy within' (quoted in Skeggs, 2004: 178).

As a result, policies that connect poor mothers to the public sphere of the workplace are construed as narratives of rehabilitation that transform dangerous – sexualized and racialized – poor women's bodies into those of the relatively unmarked working class, safely neutralized under the covertures of work and marriage. For example, Heather MacDonald analyzes 'work first' programs that 'only [begin] with the moral reconstruction of the inner city' and culminate with a 'restructuring [of] the lives of those women who are poor.' This is a movement, she reminds us, from 'moral weakness, irresponsibility and illegitimacy' to 'the hard work and straightforward worker mentality of mainstream American society' (MacDonald, 2002b).

In this logic, it is work and marriage that redeem working-class women and a rupture of patriarchal control, both inside and outside of the home that marks and condemns poor, unmarried mothers. To fail to recognize these differences in and through which the poor and working class are diametrically imagined, constructed, represented and materially and bodily maintained, even in the service of working-class solidarity and important coalition work, is to erase the experience and perspective, and as Zweig himself notes, the dignity

and authority of the poor (2000: 39). Poor women and children struggle to wrest the same human dignity and articulate sense of self from the narrative of the working class, as do members of the working class from those who would seek to incorporate them into universalizing models of middle-class identity.

Poverty Class in Academe

Many women born into poverty in the USA become mothers who are poor. Those of us who somehow no longer experience the hardships of economic poverty identify our community and culture as emerging from the experience of poverty and remain grounded in that identity as surely as members of the working class or middle class maintain their own class identities and allegiances despite economic fluctuations. Poor women who have somehow – against all odds – made it to the academy and gone on to become scholars, are trebly distanced from working class, middle class, and elite scholars and scholarship. We view higher education and its structure, culture, and policies from the vantage point of poverty.

Our scholarship is shaped by our vision of poverty as it is read through our own experiences, perspectives and subsequent understandings of the processes of identity development as class intersects with gender, race, sexuality, disability and a range of salient identity markers. Our perceptions of the world, our notions of family and community, our frameworks, indeed our very epistemologies and methodologies come out of these experiences, connect us to each other, and are reinforced, shaped, and patrolled by our difference in the world. As such, I argue, we represent a class. We are members of the poverty class and in the academy some of us are beginning to work with our allies to struggle and engage with and through the development of poverty-class scholarship.

Both under and against the mantle of working-class pedagogy, methodology, theory and praxis, poverty-class scholars attempt to illuminate and theorize the specific mechanisms and processes through which the experiences, identities, perspectives and consciousness of individuals who were poor as children and/or as parents are articulated and maintained. By striving to theorize class from experience outward, poverty-class scholars articulate particular standpoints that are fluid and contested, and that move both within and against the category of the working class, as well as the larger rubric of class in the USA. Examining class as it is developed, lived and resisted in, through, and with our very bodies, we argue that although poor single mothers and their children share similarities and opportunities for solidarity with the working class, at a very fundamental level, the differences between us are literally ‘written on the body.’

US working-class scholars have well articulated the anomie and sense of dislocation they have experienced in the halls of higher education. Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey’s *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working-*

Class (1996) explores working-class scholars' experiences of anxiety, insecurity, and internalized contradiction. In this collection – comprised of essays by 22 white men and two white women – contributors explore their senses of anomie in academia while emphasizing their working-class values of integrity, hard work and commitments to religion, marriage, family and education. These images are set against the raced, classed, gendered and sexed specter of lower and lesser 'others.' In *Working Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory* (1993), published three years before *Strangers in Paradise*, Michelle Tokarczyk and Elizabeth Fay had explored similar themes of dislocation and alienation. Contributors to this fine collection reflected their experiences of lack of support, guilt, self-doubt, erasure and exploitation in the academy. These are working-class women who as students and scholars had clearly 'suffered a loss' as they were silenced 'by the singular voice of the academy' (Tokarczyk and Fay, 1993: 5).

Tellingly, none of the contributors to either collection described experiences of homelessness, lack of food, being left to fend for themselves while parents worked, the material costs of going without medical or dental care, or the pain and humiliation of public vilification; certainly none of these contributors themselves reflected experiences of working, caring for children and trying to keep a family intact, and fending off public assaults while earning educational degrees. The interpretation of experiences of poverty are simply absent from the texts. These omissions represent boundaries; to borrow from Reay, stories of working-class identity and resistance in these collections are 'fantasies which, in classic post-colonial terms, trap the colonized in the fantasies of the colonizer and which therefore play right into the hands of prevailing relations of power by silencing other actual or potential speaking positions' (Reay, 1998: 263). As Rita Felski acknowledges, a semiotics of 'order and respectability' marking the working class is set against (and thus dependent upon) 'sexualized images of lower-class women's bodies' (Felski, 2000: 33).

The handful of US poverty-class academics who survive and attempt to speak, certainly have similarly profound, complex, and raw feelings about the prices they paid, and continue to pay, for accessing higher education (Adair and Dahlberg, 2003). However, again at the level of the body and in terms of public representation and vilification (as both products and producers of the body), poverty-class scholars share a very different experience, perspective, methodology, epistemology, and pain. Added to the general malaise expressed by working-class scholars is the very materiality of our lives. For example, I had come to academe as a 34-year-old, undergraduate, unmarried mother who had dropped out of school. My body had been indelibly marked by poverty, I had a fragile child and too few resources, I came with medical and dental injuries and ailments that had not been properly cared for, and I moved with a posture that reflected my fear of taking up space, resources, or time. Those signs were read and reinscribed by many of my professors, colleagues and supervisors as proof of the mistakes I had made and would presumably make again. My Otherness was continuously inscribed on and read from my body. Perhaps as a result, my

work and scholarship were often framed as suspect, and my body, my child and our material needs, were read as pathological in a paradigm that pitted the allegedly chaotic body of the poor woman against an archetype of independent, autonomous, ordered scholarship and class identity.

In this model working-class students can be read as being mobile and able to 'progress.' Indeed, in the USA our entire national narrative is based on the premise of upward mobility through 'work and sacrifice.' To the degree that their presence can reinforce the myth and absolve the privileged members of the academy of guilt, working-class students are read as deserving, albeit 'unrefined.' This is not so with poverty-class students who are seen as illegitimate and as de-historicized, de-contextualized, dangerous and static 'Others' who refuse transformation.

As a result, I learned to pretend that I was a divorcée rather than an unmarried mother; that I did not have a child at home; that I was not frantic trying to sell my blood so that I could secure food and books; that I was not awake at nights worrying about the insurmountable debt I was accruing or the physical and mental stability of my child. Like most poor women I knew who tried to survive in academe, I learned to pass as a humble member of the working class. The more I passed, the more I was rewarded, and yet I was reminded on almost a daily basis that the truth of who I was, was simply unspeakable. In the process, my experiences and the perspectives and theories that grew out of them, were made obscene and invisible. I was disgraced and silenced.

These overwhelming, debilitating judgments and tropes proliferate in the academy. My own profound sense of dislocation as a poor, working, single-mother student was exacerbated in classes where I became both the subject and the object of investigation. I recall one particularly painful experience of liminality where in my class, students and teacher alike were lamenting and laughing at the inability of the poor to ever come to political consciousness. One student, the proud daughter of working-class parents as I recall, pointed out how poor single mothers were 'too busy breeding and eating Cheetos' to fight for political equity at labor rallies. As the class chuckled with amused agreement, I felt myself ripped in two. I was laughing with my new working-class colleagues about their reading of my own experience, my own people, my own body. In the bitterness of that moment I knew that I was homeless.

Similarly, in 'Not by Myself Alone: Upward Bound with Family and Friends,' Deborah Megivern, a poor white woman responsible for a family of three, recalls an overwhelming sense of alienation and resentment that arose in her classrooms. She remembers:

Fellow students expressed extremely negative and stereotypical views of poor people, and I was too afraid to challenge their thinking. An economics professor assigned the works of writers such as Charles Murray ... we were assigned an essay titled 'What's So Bad About Being Poor?' which romanticizes poverty. Years of hardship had left me numb and virtually unable to cry, but reading this essay caused weeks of internal wrenching and waterless tears. (2003: 128)

Megivern's 'classes on poverty were particularly challenging,' as working and middle-class students 'who had never gone hungry were essentially discussing my family, my friends, even me, as though we were all objects' (2002: 129).

Like Megivern, Tonya Mitchell, an African American student and single mother recalls, in 'If I Survive, it will be Despite Welfare Reform,' that in her community college classes 'poverty bashing was delivered as academic gospel.' She clarifies:

In one sociology class, the professor opened the discussion by telling the class ridiculous anecdotes about lazy poor women sitting at home collecting welfare checks so they could buy color television sets ... while the rest of us take care of families or work for a living. He had no proof for these allegations, no foundation on which to generalize his obscene little stories. But he did encourage the other students to join in with their own ideas of the outrageous misdeeds that the poor inflict on our country. (2002: 115)

These stories highlight the ways in which many poor women of all races continue to be publicly censored in and out of the academy. The effects of poverty bashing, however, are even more widespread and damaging. Because the bodies of poor women are positioned and read as racially and sexually pathological in law and public policy, we are increasingly prevented from entering into and surviving in institutions of higher education (Adair, 2001).⁸ Reading our bodies as aberrant and untrustworthy in the academy prevents those few of us who are able to make it to college from ever coming to voice. Finally, the pressure to redefine ourselves as working class, prevents many of us from ever finding or developing that 'measure of power over [our] lives' that Zweig refers to as 'a full realistic self-identity [as] a basic requirement for human dignity' (2000: 5).

When, as a hopeful feminist class scholar, I enrolled in courses so that I might begin to explore the complex operations of race, gender, sexuality, and class – representing with pin-point precision the systemic devaluation of my life and those of my own people – I was stunned to find that my experiences and perspectives as a poor woman were rejected as irrelevant, peripheral and unwelcome. When I was drawn to working-class literature courses in the hope of engaging in finely nuanced understandings of identity and representation, I was similarly disenfranchised. What I found were largely unmitigated and often pat, stereotypical portrayals of the alleged brutality of the lower classes and voyeuristic and obscene portraits of 'trailer trash.' But, occasionally I also found and celebrated beautiful and resonant representations of the dignity of decent, hardworking and 'legitimate' blue-collar families. Still, my life and the struggles of my people were nowhere in sight. When I excitedly enrolled in labor studies courses I was thrilled to learn about an important history of unions and activism, but in classes devoted to poverty, I was greeted with faceless calculations and 'objective assessments' of the 'despondency and rage ... the unstoppable downward spiral of deterioration ... of urban hellholes rife with

deprivation, immorality and violence where only the outcasts of society would consider living' (Wacquant, 1999: 1644). Nowhere did I encounter even a glimpse or a fragmentary sense of the deeply rooted, multifaceted and sometimes even ambiguous pain and power of my own community, of my own gendered, raced, sexed *and* classed 'human condition.'

As a graduate student and junior scholar I sought out the advice of feminist and working-class professors, seeking support and guidance in my exploration of literary and cultural representations of poor women. More often than not I was patronized and dismissed. One of my favorite professors chided me by claiming that my 'identity platform was weak' and that I had nothing 'new to offer,' since 'all students and certainly all graduate students were or have been poor at some point in their lives.' She later confided in me that when she and her husband bought their first condominium as graduate students, they suffered through eating nothing but beans for a week! One Marxist scholar insisted that I *was* working class, and that the stories I sought out were simply 'aberrations' of an otherwise proud and dignified working-class history.⁹

These experiences underscore my sense that questions of voice and authority are central to a multi-faceted and rigorous understanding of the operations of class in the USA, both in and out of the academy. A notable lack of representations of the experiences, perspectives and burgeoning theories of poor women – even embedded in the supposed safety and inclusion of working-class studies – erases many of the complexities of class as it is actually lived, while simultaneously prohibiting first-hand poverty-class analyses of the American condition, to the bane of assiduous class scholars and students.

An inclusive vision of class in the USA would allow for a careful and respectful examination of identity formations at the multiple and shifting intersections of experiences of race, gender, sexuality and class embodied nowhere more forcefully and urgently than on the body of the poor woman. Ultimately, I want to expand Skegg's pivotal challenge to class theorists, by calling for both a 'wider and deeper' and a more complex, more inclusive and even a more contradictory conceptualization and decoding of what it means to be working class in the USA. For, as she posits:

... class formation is dynamic, produced through conflict and fought out at the level of the symbolic. To ignore this is to work uncritically with categories produced through this struggle, which always exist in the interest of power ... Class (as a concept, classification and positioning) must always be a site of continual struggle and refiguring precisely because it represents the interests of particular groups. (Skeggs, 2004: 5)

By developing theories that help us to understand and critique the impact of differential access to economic, social and cultural resources on a range of women's lives, without claiming an uncontested authenticity or epistemic privilege, and by recognizing the multiplicity and contradictions of identity and community

formation, we can begin in earnest to explore rather than overlook the operations of class as it is lived, theorized and contested in contemporary society.

Notes

- 1 I thank Professor Dorothy Sue Cobble and her students at the Institute for Research on Women at Rutgers University, New Jersey, for first raising these issues with me. I have made similar, although differently framed and supported arguments in 'The Missing Story of Ourselves: Poverty Class in Academe', *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 2(3), and 'Class Absences: Cutting Class in Feminist Studies', *Feminist Studies* 31(3).
- 2 In the USA most federally funded 'poverty programs' set '200% or less of poverty level' as the requirement for enrollment and receipt of benefits (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, <http://www.statecoverage.net/schip.htm>).
- 3 I am grateful to Professor Janet Zandy (Rochester Institute of Technology, New York) for bringing these articles to my attention.
- 4 I share my interpretation of my experiences of childhood and adult poverty aware of the risk of producing what Louise Morely in 'A Class of One's Own: Women, Social Class and the Academy,' calls 'a piece of literary striptease' (1997: 114).
- 5 As I have argued in 'Branded with Infamy: Inscriptions of Poverty and Class in the United States' welfare reform programs such as 'Bride-fare', 'Tidy-fare' and 'Work-fare' are designed to socialize others by exposing and publicly punishing and marking 'misfits' whose bodies are read as proof of their refusal or inability to capitulate to capitalist, racist and heterosexist values and mores (Adair, 2002: 466).
- 6 Sandra Dahlberg concurs in 'Survival in a Not So Brave New World,' adding that: 'cultural differences and chances for opportunities are as distinct between the working class and the poverty class as those that distinguish the middle class from the upper class. While recognizing the similarities, explorations of working-class and poverty-class experience and theory must be disjoined and examined separately to challenge negatively essentialized portrayals and perceptions distinctly applied to each' (2003: 71).
- 7 In 'Classifying Practices: Representation, Capital and Recognition' Skeggs reminds us that 'class has a long history as an identity of heroism, rebellion and authenticity for working-class men, an identity which is celebrated across different sites of representation' as opposed to representations of working-class women 'whose recognition is based upon pathology and sexualized representation.' My guess is that the women Skeggs refers to are actually poor women (working and not). This is certainly the case in the USA (Skeggs, 1997: 124).
- 8 Skeggs adds that 'the ability to claim and promote an 'identity' is often based on access to sites of representation such as higher education' (1997: 123). While it has always been extremely difficult for poor single mothers to complete college degrees, recent federal welfare legislation has made it increasingly difficult, and now nearly impossible, to do so. An alarming reduction of the numbers of poor single mothers who are able to enroll, let alone complete, college programs, means that poor women are denied access to the tools of constructing and

disseminating representations of their own senses of class experience (see Adair, 2001).

- 9 Eventually, with the assistance, support and generous encouragement of Professors Sydney Kaplan, Joycelyn Moody, Gail Stygail, and George Dillon I was able to write a dissertation on this topic, which has since been published. See, Vivyan Adair, *From 'Good Ma' to 'Welfare Queen': A Genealogy of the Poor Woman in American Literature, Photography and Culture*, (2000).

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Vivyan C. Adair

Is the Elihu Root Peace Fund Associate Professor of Women's Studies and the Director of The ACCESS Project (serving welfare eligible student parents) at Hamilton College. She is the author of *From 'Good Ma' to 'Welfare Queen': A Genealogy of the Poor Woman in American Literature, Photography and Culture* (Garland Routledge, 2000) and the co-editor of *Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty and the Promise of Higher Education in America* (Temple University Press, 2003), as well as articles in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Feminist Studies*, *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas*, *Pedagogy*, *AAUW's On Campus with Women*, and *Radical Teacher*. Her research interests include feminist class theory, welfare reform and education, and women's autobiography. In 2005 Dr Adair was named the CASE Carnegie New York State Professor of the Year.

Address: The ACCESS Project at Hamilton College, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York 13323, USA.

E-mail: vadair@hamilton.edu