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Cutting Class in the Multicultural Literature Classroom

Vivyan C. Adair and Sandra L. Dahlberg

In the American arena of postmodern literary studies, "race, class, and gender" have become a mantra of sorts, allegedly framing theoretical considerations of subjectivity, identification, and resistance as they are reflected in literary representation. In their seminal "Conversation about Race and Class," Mary Childers and bell hooks (1990: 78) remind us that "when we talk about race, class and gender in representation, we really struggle for a new language." It is this new language that we struggle to help our own students find and use in the multicultural literature classroom. And yet all too often in talking about race, class, and gender, considerations of class are often cut and are, as a result, "absent" from the classroom. As hooks points out, at times the categories of gender and race "work to erase class and other differences among us." As a result, as Childers responds, students "of different classes are suppressed in the tale of identity and development" (79).

As instructors at urban institutions with substantial working-class and poverty-class enrollments, as former poverty-class students ourselves, and as educators committed to fostering complex analyses of literary texts, we recognized the urgent need to create a forum for the recognition and interrogation of representations of class identities in our American literature classes. With this goal in mind, we designed and successfully implemented a curriculum that allowed us to (1) expose our students to literary texts that represent poor and working class characters as complex reading and acting subjects; (2) juxtapose those readings against representations that present the poor as static, one-dimensional, and superficial characters and tropes; and (3) challenge

students to think about the ways class impacts their own reading, writing, and thinking, indeed the ways in which class directs their own subjectivities.

We found that the first two parts of our task were not very difficult to accomplish. We asked our students first to consider static representations of the lives of the poor in traditional American texts, such as Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre*, Eudora Welty's *Optimist's Daughter*, and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle*. In addition to assisting our students in recognizing the reductive and dichotomous frames in these canonical works, we set those works against more complex representations, such as those found in Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*, Harriette Arnow's *Mountain Path* and *The Doll Maker*, and Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*. These authors have each asserted their own positions as impoverished, but literate, subjects in their writings, and critical readings of their texts allow our students to recognize the complexity of the lives and representations of the poor. More recent works, such as Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, Rudolfo Anaya's *Alburquerque*, Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*, and Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, similarly present complex and cogent representations of the poor while avoiding the impulse to frame class mobility as a narrative of moral progress.

The second half of our task—providing safe and vibrant spaces in which to talk about class and its representation—was not so easy for our students. And this has been the most revealing aspect of our research into teaching class in literature courses. In class discussions, poor students made it clear they were used to feeling "shut out." For example, one poor student commented she had never felt that her perspectives on representations of poverty were "valid or even worthy of consideration," adding that "the subject of class wasn't an authentic topic of discussion; this was *after all* college!" Other students believed talking about class was not "academic enough" or "rigorous." The pervasive strand in these findings was that devaluing representations of poverty similarly devalued—and erased—poor students in our classrooms.

The students, most of whom identified themselves as middle-class, also revealed they did not understand what class was or how it operated in contemporary American society. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that even those students whose demographics indicated they were clearly of the poverty class clung to the notion they had become middle-class by virtue of their college attendance. These students often expressed frustration at being challenged to think about representations they intimately recognized but had hoped to leave behind. Other students lamented that they had no theoretical language with which to critique class, noting their sense that Marxism—as the

only tool most of them had been exposed to—was inadequate for addressing issues central to poor Americans today. Yet several also noted with irony that "because we think Marxism doesn't fit, we also mistakenly think that we don't have class in America," but that it did exist "back there and back then."

The good news, overall, is that when students were presented with multiple representations and methodologies for reading literary inscriptions of the poor, and when they were challenged to talk about class identification and representation, complex, passionate, and intriguing discussions ensued. Our students enthusiastically critiqued the erasure of class in American literature outside of the self-reliant model of upward mobility. Eventually, many students felt safe enough to articulate their relation to textual representations of poverty and working-class identity. Equally important, this teaching experience raised as many questions as it answered, so it inspired us to further critique our own strategies and analyses. For example, we began to question how a standard pedagogy can be created to more effectively teach class issues. We also came to evaluate the ways in which our own class identifications, including the pressures we face to pass as middle-class, impact our teaching, classroom authority, and pedagogical practices.

In short, this experience made us aware of our responsibilities as teachers to find ways to bring class to the forefront for our students' sakes. We now realize that by failing to do so, we limit our students' understanding of and engagement with the complexity of American literature. This failure ultimately denies the promise and potential of a truly multicultural classroom.