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Thinking Class

**Sketches from a
Cultural Worker**

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Stupidity

"Deconstructed"¹

Dozens of workers move deliberately around the building site at the University of Minnesota, driving huge machines, handling dangerous equipment, carrying heavy loads. They can barely talk over the noise, but they are communicating and working together well. A wrongly-interpreted nod, a misunderstood word, a petty quarrel could mean the loss of a hand or a life. Although that's not the only reason for cooperative efforts; they're a common working-class practice.

I connect with these workers. I've lived with people like them, worked with people like them—I'm one of them. The worst jobs I've had were made bearable thanks to our jokes, camaraderie, easy flow of conversation. The familiar sweat, dirty hands, missing teeth, and lined faces reassure me. Workers.

Workers at the university. We've built every university that has ever existed, yet we're shunned and despised within academia's hallowed halls. Explicitly and implicitly, we've been taught our place—and it's not in a student's desk or the professors' lounge. We're needed to construct the university, maintain, clean, and repair it.

Oh, we're welcome here, as long as we stay where we're supposed to. We know the monster that presents itself if we dare step out of place. *Stupid. We are too stupid to study, learn, think, analyze, critique. Because working-class people are stupid.* So much energy goes into the social lie that poor people

are stupid; capitalism needs a basic rationalization to explain why things happen the way they do. So we hear, over and over, that our lousy jobs and living situations result from our lack of smarts. I internalized this lie. Rationally, I knew money and brains didn't go hand in hand. But on deep unconscious levels, I believed in my own stupidity and in the stupidity of working-class people.

I want to examine these dynamics in this essay which I titled "Stupidity 'Deconstructed'" in order to connect with construction workers *and* to express my irritation toward postmodernists who consistently use the term. This piece goes hand in hand with the writing of working-class people committed to theorizing about our experiences in universities and factories. It's past time for such a movement; *we* must create theory about our lives. No one else. If middle- and upper-middle-class people want to write about indoctrination into class privilege and unlearning it, great. But leave the rest to us.

A sordid history lurks here. Middle- and upper-middle class academics have traditionally sought out the experiences and stories of working-class/working-poor people for use in shaping theory. That is, we provide the raw material of bare facts and touching stories; they transform these rough elements into theory. Sound familiar? Gosh, it sounds like an exact replication of factory activity. Academics have approached me after I've given presentations on class, and said, "The stories about your family are so *interesting*." (*Oh, thank you so much.*) "Don't you think they'd be stronger if you let them stand on their own?" Unedited translation: give me your stories, I'll write the theory. Leave it to the experts. *It's time to forget that shit.*

yes, i'm a worthy person, i have two university degrees.

I understand the workings of universities. I paid attention when I studied at the University of Toronto and the Episcopal Divinity School in Massachusetts. I've hung out on other campuses, and heard more than enough university stories. Levels of elitism and arrogance vary with regional difference, size, prestige, and how

many misfits end up on the campus, but the core system remains: privileged people belong here.

If only I'd known this years ago! Then anger, instead of feeling crazy, alienated, and stupid, would have been uppermost. *Don't get me started. Even hearing that word makes my blood boil. Even hearing the word "smart" makes my blood boil. I want to wring your neck.*

From a young age, I loved to read and write and learn. But my future in that general motors city had been mapped out, and books didn't appear anywhere. I didn't like the map; nor did I like being surrounded by people who treated me like a handy repository for muddy boots and unmitigated rage. University offered a good solution (or so I thought). I started working paid jobs at age ten and saved every penny for the endeavor.

In Mr. Smythe's math class, the third floor of that ancient high school, sun streams through windows onto old wooden desks. Test results are read out loud—no surprises. Top marks for me, the Johnson twins, Brian Kingsley, Jonathon Woodley, Amanda Britian. Their label: brain. Mine: jock and party-er. Their parents: doctor, lawyer, psychiatrist, executive. Mine: line worker. Mr. Smythe advised the Johnson twins to apply to Waterloo or Toronto but not McMaster, and the intricacies of differences between these universities went way over my head; our guidance counselor poured over pamphlets and reference books with Brian once a week; Mr. and Mrs. Woodley and Jonathon drove to a different campus each weekend. I got wrecked every Friday and Saturday night and cruised around in cars driven by boys as stoned and drunk as me.

Despite my party-er status, despite the lack of help in selecting the "right" school, despite my total cluelessness, I applied to three universities. Only my grades appeared on transcripts; no entries for parents' work history or weekend activities. Fresh out of high school, naive but steadfast, I carried my cheap vinyl suitcase up those marble steps of Queen's University. Four months. I had cash for two years, but not enough class privilege. My throat locked, my tongue twisted, I sat in back rows with arms wrapped around chest and stomach. To say I felt like a fish out of

water hardly describes my overwhelming feelings of confusion, depression, inadequacy, and shame. People actually asked me the year my grandparents graduated! Not just my parents, my *grandparents*. I thought everyone's grandparents were poor. I knew everyone's parents weren't poor, but I assumed everyone in the previous generation experienced poverty. Now rich white girls with straight teeth asked, "When did your grandparents graduate?" Four months. I'm surprised I lasted that long.

Years later I returned to those hallowed halls. Not through any formal, reasonable plan—more because I was pissed off. Today the whole thing strikes me as a big joke. During a bitter separation, a lawyer told me I could get more money from my ex-husband if I enrolled in university. During our marriage, I worked and supported him while he earned a degree, and I deserved an equivalent education. "Sounds good," I told her. We got the money and I went back to school.

Women's studies, University of Toronto. Middle-class and upper-middle-class women. *I'm so stupid*. I sat surrounded by women years younger than me, women exuding poise and confidence as they discussed graduate school options and Karl Marx. (Marx. Oh, yeah, that guy those other rich² people I worked with at CBC Radio used to spout off about.) *What am I doing here?* I talked to janitors and I talked to Kim, the last hold-out for cigarettes in the whole department. We scrunched in corners of the smoking lounge so she could indulge and the smoke gave me a headache, but I didn't care. Better a headache than crazy. Kim anchored me. A white girl, working-class, smart as a whip, skinny and tough. We sat close together in back rows and whispered comments to each other because we couldn't say them out loud. I couldn't have made it without her.

Another bizarre turn of events dropped me in graduate school. A professor at U of T actually took an interest in me. My brain flip-flopped. "You should go on to graduate school," she told me earnestly. "You're very smart. And you have such good study habits. You would do so well." Smart? No, stupid. Graduate school? No, janitor. What is graduate school? What happens there? What's an M.A.? A Ph.D.? They must be the same things

with different names. I said nothing out loud; that would reveal my stupidity. A friend told me about a university with a master's program in feminist ethics. I didn't know any other graduate programs. I didn't know how to find them. *I can't believe I'm writing this down. Now people will know just how stupid I really am.* I didn't know jackshit.

I applied for the feminist ethics program and laid out stringent conditions to make it as unlikely as possible I would ever get there. *If the school offered me acceptance, a scholarship covering tuition, a job on campus, housing for my lover and me. Then, and only then, would I take the leap.* My divorce money had dried up, and I would never, never in a million years, take out a loan. I knew all about loans and debts. Every working-class person I grew up with laid down the law: never take out a loan for anything except a mortgage on a house. Loans are bad. Debts are bad. You'll never get rid of these horrible burdens. I'd fly to the moon before borrowing money for graduate school. *Graduate school. What is it?*

The school met my stringent conditions. Uh-oh. But once there, I found Joann and Sheri and Meck, and we laughed until we cried and cried until we laughed about academia and how stupid we felt. We didn't have Aristotle and Socrates as reference points, couldn't even spell the names. We didn't know how to use the library system. We hadn't grown up with parents and family friends waxing nostalgic about university days and cutesy pranks, thus easing our entry into this strange world.

Then, something truly amazing. A working-class professor. I studied with one of the most brilliant minds in this country, Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon, a working-class, African-American woman from the South, who pushed me and pushed me and pushed me to think critically about class. Take it apart, figure it out, analyze it, *it's just like my brother used to do when he started building stereo equipment at age ten*, pull and pull and pull, you are smart, she said, you need to write. I sat in class, sweating, tongue-tied, scared shitless, and looked at her, teaching, questioning, inspiring, her brilliance shining like a star. *She was destined to cook and clean for white people, that is, if she didn't get something worse—if she can do it, maybe I can too.*

Buildings cut from fine stone and beautiful wood. My hands ache with the remembering. The maintenance men I worked with: Tony, shy and sweet with a faint Portuguese accent; Al, tough hide covering a heart like worn flannel; Eddy, drifting from job to job, booze on his breath, twisted grin, broken front tooth. I worked with them through the summer and felt so comfortable in our little lounge, drinking coffee and smoking, smoking, always smoking—rich people have given it up but we're still puffing away.

I spent hours wrestling with voices in my head telling me "You're stupid," and listening to trusted friends telling me "You're not stupid. This system makes you feel stupid." We figured out our own analysis: the university system is intricately linked with the capitalist system. People with power at the university will do their part to reinforce and promote the capitalist explanation for class difference—smart rich people, stupid poor people—in return for continued benefits and privileges from the current structure. They don't want a motley bunch of upstart working-class urchins figuring any of this out and refusing to sit in quiet shame.

They don't want graduates of their system to end up like me: class identity and loyalties stronger than ever, angry about the others who never had a chance, who still believe they're stupid, who always will, some already in their graves. Yes, I'm angry.

constructing/deconstructing: building/hiring

For the capitalist system to continue ruthlessly grinding on (or for the capitalist system to "succeed," as you would say) those of us bred for stupid and/or dangerous work must believe we're not as smart as the people who boss us around. It's critical. Capitalism needs simple explanations about why poor people with lousy jobs take orders from men in suits. Lack of brains fits the bill. (So does the lie that rich people work harder. I'll tackle that in another essay.) Any noticeable class divisions stem from difference in intellectual capacity. Connected to this is the touting of "American ingenuity" as the doorway to upward mobility. It's as untrue as the existence of a whole class of stupid people, but if enough people believe it—even partially believe it—this idea will reinforce and strengthen capitalism. After all, if we believe brains lead to

success, we'll blame ourselves for not getting ahead. Personal failure, not systemic oppression, explains why we're going nowhere so very fast.

I grew up learning the bulk of the population in our small general motors city—that is, workers—was stupid. Dumb, brutish, boring, close to animals. Did I believe it? In some ways, I knew people in my family had brains and the bosses didn't. My extended family joked about it frequently. But just as frequently, they indicated they believed it. And at deep levels, I internalized the lie and lived with it for years. It impacted my thoughts, decisions, and actions, and surfaced resoundingly when I entered university. The smugness and certainty with which upper-middle-class people paraded their brain cells jarred me; for a time I was taken in by this, and it contrasted so sharply with my inability to speak, let alone parade, that I felt I really must be stupid. Thankfully, that didn't last long. *Who knows what will happen if we realize that we're not so stupid and you're not so smart? Maybe you'll lose privileges and status. Maybe you'll have to clean up your own messes. Maybe we'll find fulfilling work and the drudge work will be shared equally. Maybe we'll remove your feet from our necks.*

Of course, I didn't feel stupid at university only because of constructions concerning stupid workers. That coupled with an unfamiliar upper-middle-class world made me feel stupid. I didn't know any of the middle-class/upper-middle-class reference points and contexts, ranging from GRE's and LSAT's to Ph.D.'s and post-doc fellowships. I couldn't swish around with the entitlement of privileged students; I crept. I liked janitors more than professors; more to the point, I identified with janitors, not professors.

Language proved crucially important in opening a door into clarity, awareness, and class pride. It happened this way: I grew up around people who built things—houses, additions on houses, large buildings. They talked about it by saying, "I built that." This meant they planned and designed something, then picked up a hammer, nails, and saw, and began constructing.

University professors used this same phrase, often when discussing summer homes. They said authoritatively, "I built that." I knew what it meant to build something and I thought they meant

they must have built their summer home. But they didn't look like they knew anything about construction work. I felt confused. I was astounded when I stumbled across the translation. "I built this" really meant "I hired some of you to build this for me."

So. Privileged people misuse language in ways that distort meanings of commonplace, easy-to-understand words like "build." This told me something. Then I read articles focusing on class, usually written by university professors. I looked forward to these, because I needed to develop my class analysis and thought these articles would help. But again disappointment and shame resulted. I didn't understand most of what I read. Abstract and impersonal, these essays stood three times removed from concrete reality of working-class life.

After confusion and shame, another door opened. If they misused a simple word like build, how could I trust them? If their articles used weird words like "proletariat" and showed they didn't know the first thing about us, maybe they weren't quite so smart. *Maybe we weren't quite so stupid.*

My hunch solidified after examining academic attraction to and use of postmodern theory and language. This horrible mix of distorted language and casual appropriation of our ideas allowed me once and for all to dismiss the ideology about stupid workers. As far as I can tell, postmodern theoreticians say nothing new, but their inaccessible language makes it appear as though they do. For example, they're fascinated with the notion that multiple realities exist in society, and they've written and theorized extensively about this.

Puh-lease. Everybody in my neighborhood, including the mechanics who had to sniff carbon monoxide in tiny, enclosed garages all day long, grasped that idea with no problem. We lived it. We had our reality, the bosses had theirs, and we understood them both. Theorists like W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about double consciousness—whereby African Americans understand their reality and white people's—at the turn of this century. But I've never seen postmodernists attribute these ideas to the people of color and/or working-class people who've lived and understood them for centuries. Instead, postmodernists steal these ideas and dress them

up in language so inaccessible only a tiny, elite group can discuss them.

We need to ask, and begin answering, hard, practical questions. Who defines smart and stupid, and why? Who misuses language, and for whose benefit? Who writes theory, and why? Who goes to university, and why? Who does the academy serve? Can universities be transformed into places where everyone is welcomed and respected?

In this country, the first institutions of higher learning were trade or agricultural schools and theological centers, with liberal arts colleges and medical schools following. Around the turn of this century, with the establishment of standardization and class-biased guidelines, universities took on the task of serving middle- and upper-class white men. That group enjoyed peace and quiet for several decades, until the rest of us began banging on the door. Grudgingly, after years and years of hard work, little chinks appeared in those thick, stone doors. *The doors we built, with our hands. The doors we couldn't walk through.* The misfits demanded entrance: Africans, Asians, Natives, Arabs, Latinos, women, queers, even welfare mothers. Even the sons and daughters of factory workers and miners and janitors. What's a rich white man to do? The stress must be unbelievable. Poor guys.

Capitalism exists as a human construct, not a natural or innate system. We've been steeped in lies about its inevitability, and it seems to take on its own life as its institutions reinforce each other and the system. But it is a human construct, carefully set up to keep a small number of people stretched out comfortably along the backs of the rest of us. Remember: human constructs can be destroyed.

rich equals smart, poor equals stupid

I think of the university and a swift hot anger rushes from the pit of my stomach, sweeps through my throat, bursts out of my mouth. Stone buildings beautifully carved, wooden rooms beautifully balanced. Underpaid exploited workers. Our hands next to the hands of a professor "deconstructing" ideas with strings of six-syllable words. *Stupid.* Underpaid exploited workers keeping these buildings clean. *Stupid.* I think of myself and working-class

friends sitting in back rows, saying nothing, sweating, fearful that one word from these stubborn, hurt mouths will betray us, will expose our selves/our class.

Many mechanisms have been created in this rigidly defined, class-structured society to keep poor people in our place. Our place. We crouch over and the rest of you keep your feet on our necks. You sit complacently, feet resting comfortably—"Could you move just a little bit to the left?"—crossing ankles, smiling in our direction—"Very nice." One such mechanism is the constant, cross-racial image of the worker as stupid. Growing up, I attached "stupid" to workers and "smart" to executives. This didn't happen because of a weird personal quirk. It resulted from force-fed images and words of TV shows, newspapers, magazines, and movies. Any TV show with working-class characters, first "The Honeymooners" and "I Love Lucy," then "All In the Family," covertly and overtly highlighted the stupidity of bus drivers, factory workers, and plumbers. Movies, books, and comics followed suit. At school, middle-class kids called us stupid; we hurled back "stuck up," but never "stupid." Working-class/working-poor kids failed and dropped out, but not middle-class kids. Our town newspaper consistently portrayed general motors executives as calm, rational types, while union members appeared unthinking, wild, and chaotic.

Oh, you're exaggerating. You've gone too far. Stupid merely refers to someone not terribly intelligent. You've attached all these cultural, class-based meanings. You're way out on a limb. Chill out. People are gonna think you're nuts.

I look up "stupid" in the dictionary and find: 1. slow of mind, obtuse, brutish; 2. dulled in feeling or sensation, torpid; 3. marked by or resulting from dullness, senseless; 4. lacking interest or point, vexatious, exasperating.³ I look up stupid in the dictionary and feel: 1. recognition; 2. affirmation of what I have felt my whole life and what I am saying in this essay; 3. fury; 4. disgust.

This dictionary definition fits precisely with what I learned in my bones before I could talk. A very particular set of cultural baggage goes along with stupid. Not a mere description of how well someone thinks, stupid has become a cultural concept with a particular code and set of signifiers that describe working-class

people as the middle and upper classes perceive and construct us. It doesn't truthfully describe working-class people; rather, it speaks clearly to the particular understanding rich people created and maintain with a vengeance.

Brutish, dull, senseless. *I grew up believing we're thick-skinned, slow-witted, impervious to pain, boring.* The dominant culture drove this point home relentlessly. Someone called me sensitive and I couldn't grasp her meaning. *Working-class people can't be sensitive.* Rich people construct us as stupid and brainwash us Day One to make us believe it. We read their newspapers, watch their TV shows, take in their movies, and work jobs that reinforce what we see and hear. A vicious cycle.

What's the reality? I do know working-class people who fit the stereotype. Of course, their brains have been fried from decades of drudge work. Like Howie, my partner on the assembly line. Slow, barely able to get a complete sentence out of his mouth, unable to believe I learned his job in two hours. Vacant look, hollow eyes. Couldn't read. *You try working on an assembly line, at the same station, for thirty-eight years. How interesting will you be? How much will you know about world affairs? How creative will you feel?*

It's painful to acknowledge the fact that some of our brains have been fried. Not stupid from birth, as rich people insist, but fried from decades of the most boring, idiotic, repetitive work imaginable. I've done it. I fought every minute to keep my mind away from the hovering void. The boredom, lethargy, apathy, and meaninglessness surrounding that factory, surrounding every factory, constitutes a horrible and violating reality of daily life.

Stupid. They marked my family as stupid, and this confused me. I didn't think we were, but had no tools for arguing against such an intense social construct. I grew more confused and internalized the belief in my own stupidity, as all around me, my family proceeded with their lives and used their brains. My aunt went from grade school education to neighborhood CPA; she knew all the deductions, could add numbers ridiculously quickly, and did everyone's taxes for free. My grandfather, literate in three languages, poor, steered new Lebanese immigrants through the

morass of landlords, bosses, lawyers. My father and uncles, with their tenth-grade educations, filled out daily crossword puzzles with pens and painstakingly planned, calculated, measured, added rooms on small houses, with wiring, plumbing, support beams, ceilings, floor tiles, never a sixteenth of an inch out. I once helped a friend build a porch, holding boards in place as she hammered, blinking in disbelief because half-inch gaps appeared. My mother and aunts balanced budgets, paying bills with nonexistent funds, borrowing some from here, begging some from there, adding and subtracting large numbers in their heads.

Class socialization begins early. Material possessions, home environment, and neighborhood provide information about our present situation and our future. Family members' sense of/lack of entitlement and expectation provides more. Social constructions of class, put out by institutions such as media and school, are a third factor. Whether family members resist or unquestioningly take in these social constructions impacts class socialization.

For a continuous supply of expendable workers, capitalism must offer ideas and experiences that reinforce each other. If people who look, act, talk, and live like you are constantly portrayed as working particular jobs because they're too stupid to get anything better, chances are you'll believe the lie when you end up in the same factory.

Ideas help reinforce and explain different class locations. Capitalism relies on various institutions, such as the university, to pass on relevant knowledge about the system. Universities need to replicate and reinforce central ideologies. Such as poor people stupid, rich people smart—a perfect example of the kind of polarized thinking that has hindered and weakened Western thought for centuries. These categorizations feed into an either/or mentality and ignore complications and complexities. They also shore up oppressive systems of racism, sexism, and classism because of the positive meaning attached to one half of the equation and the negative meaning attached to the other—male/female, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual, virgin/whore, thinking/feeling. I always include rich/poor and smart/stupid in this list of important categories; lately I've

begun to perceive the ways they map on to each other to become richsmart/poorstupid.

In the years I spent in Women's Studies, we spent hours and hours analyzing the superficial nature of dualistic thinking around men/women, white/black, and thinking/feeling, and reflected on more complicated and realistic understandings. But we never touched on the smart/stupid, rich/poor breakdown. (Of course, we were in a university classroom.) This particular ideological split goes a long way to support the dangerous, classist myth I've discussed in this essay. It's time to pay attention.

In thinking about rich smart/poor stupid, we need to analyze stupidity and intelligence. Writing this essay might play into the belief that only one kind of intelligence exists, the kind defined and revered by the ruling class in conjunction with academics, because I focus on the university, the stupid/smart dichotomy, and class oppression. That's not my intention. In the same ways I understand the category of "race" as a myth while acknowledging the reality of racism and different physical/cultural traits, I want to put "intelligence" as defined in a limited and narrow way by the ruling class into the myth category, while acknowledging a variety of mental capacities and different types of intelligence.⁴

Many different kinds of intelligence exist, and these cross class lines. Universities revere the type of intelligence that can synthesize information rapidly and understand abstract concepts. Equally valid types of intelligence enable a child to design and build a bird house, a mother to balance a budget with no money, an "uneducated" man to enthrall listeners with stories, a young woman who hasn't had music lessons to compose a piano tune, a girl to write a poem, a homeless person to comprehend the poem, a neighborhood to devise a plan to stop a company from dumping toxic waste, three young women to invent scathing responses to catcalls and whistles. These types of intelligence require creativity, humor, ability to ask questions, care, a good memory, compassion, belief in solidarity, ability to project an image of something that doesn't physically exist.

Some manual-labor jobs require intelligent, creative thinking, such as carpentry, video technology, and grounds keeping/de-

signing. Most manual-labor jobs require little thinking of any sort, and are marked by monotony and danger. Some executive jobs require intelligence and creative thinking, and most don't. (None, however, are likely to be dangerous.) On the whole, capitalism has offered little in the way of stimulating, educational, growth-enhancing work experiences.

can i really be working-class and smart?

The sarcasm in this heading is an attempt to get at underlying and often unconscious beliefs about stupidity which popped up constantly after I got my master's degree. People freaked out. Working-class people with university degrees freak out ourselves and our middle-class "brothers and sisters" (more sarcasm). We ask: "Am I still working-class?" Middle-class people inform us, delicately and sensitively: "You're not working-class anymore."

Where do these reactions come from? Let me first examine what working-class people mean when we say: *am I working-class now?* I have a university degree. A secret subtext, a critical message lurks here.

One day I figured out my translation. When I asked: "Am I working-class now that I have a university degree," I meant: "Am I working-class now that I'm smart?" Back to my theory about dualistic thinking. If the stupid/smart dichotomy is a cornerstone of the academy, and if this division rests clearly along class lines (rich people smart/poor people stupid) then conferring university degrees onto middle- and upper-class people isn't only about knowledge, courses passed, GPAs, degrees, and job security. University degrees constitute a symbol, a marker, so the world understands the bearer comes from the middle/upper-class. Degrees separate this group from lowly, unprivileged, stupid workers.

Then working-class people traverse the minefield of academia and end up with initials after our names. We get confused. Very confused, because those initials symbolize the separation between rich and poor. Rich people need these degrees to feel smart, to remind themselves they are not a lowly janitor sweeping halls, a lowly cook slopping out lousy cafeteria food. They need them, but somehow we end up with them. We get confused. Are

we announcing we're smart? But working-class people can't be smart. *If we are working-class, we can't be smart. Therefore, since we've earned a university degree, we are no longer working-class.*

Now, that's not true, for at least three reasons. First, whatever is going on subconsciously, consciously I know rich people aren't necessarily smart. Having cleaned their houses, read their garbled manuscripts, and "typed" (code word for "re-wrote") their incoherent essays, I'm well aware of this.

Second, whatever silly initials my friends and I carry after our names, we're still working-class.⁵ We still talk the same and feel the same and work shit jobs. We don't float around thinking we're entitled to everything; we don't grab whatever we want. We don't acquire privilege, entitlement, and arrogance after slogging it out in the academy.

Third, all of this begs the question: does class location change if one factor governing class location alters? Some people say yes. For them, once working-class people make a good salary they cease being working-class. By the same standard, if working-class people earn university degrees, they leave their class of origin.

I disagree with this, since I believe class identity comes from many places: education, values, culture, income, dwelling, lifestyle, manners, friends, ancestry, language, expectations, desires, sense of entitlement, religion, neighborhood, amount of privacy.⁶ If one of these, such as education, shifts dramatically, class identity doesn't change.

Let me return to the statement of "fact" made by middle-class people: "You can't be working class. You have a university degree." I want to address this because I've heard it frequently, usually after I've asserted my working-class identity.

The remark contains arrogance that goes unnoticed by the speaker (*surprise, surprise*) but not by me (*surprise, surprise*). When a person with class privilege takes on the task of defining and articulating class location of someone from a lower class, it's arrogant and offensive.

Does this happen because working-class people claiming our identity threaten class-privileged people? In the United States, class is a taboo subject for everyone, let alone some upstart housecleaner or garbage man. Rich people need an automatic response, and seem to prefer a verbal attack that immediately silences the speaker. Discounting someone's identity usually does the trick.

This action is similar to the way white people try to shut me up when I critique racism: they question my identity as a person of color because of my light skin. Middle-class people attempt to shut me up by discrediting me, calling my identity into question, anything to stop me from claiming a working-class identity from which I might offer some criticism of their class privilege.

Implicit in middle-class people's assertion that I have indeed "moved up" is the ever popular belief that upward mobility is easily achieved and highly desirous. Neither of these is true, as far as I can tell. Some small percentage of working-class families have moved into the middle class in one or two generations, but they are the exception rather than the rule. As for upward mobility being highly desirable? Not for me. The values, ethics, simple lifestyles, and cultures of working-class people from any racial/ethnic group appeal to me more than the constrained emotional life, isolation, and gross materialism of rich people. The only aspect of class privilege I find desirable is rich people's innate belief/knowledge that options about life—from job choice to education to creative activities—really do exist. Not to mention the freedom from despair over whether the rent will be paid or whether food will appear on the table.

how do you spell "class"?

Universities have changed in the last twenty years. Critiques of the system, hard questions, cross-disciplinary dialogues, new programs and departments springing up—Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, Queer Studies. This is great, but what about class? I know the kind of rampant sexism, racism, and heterosexism progressive professors and administrators deal with as they struggle to change curricula, but it's hard to deal with the classism of

this crowd because I expect more. I'm dismayed to read the advanced theories these people offer when discussing race, gender, or sexuality, and contrast that to blank looks about the c-l-a-s-s word.⁷

I've heard progressive professors present information about social change movements, and been excited to study common people's history and struggles. But I'm angry when pertinent information about participants' class location doesn't enter the discussion. In a lecture about the 1960s' Black civil rights movement, a professor carefully delineated racial issues but somehow forgot to mention that most people putting their asses on the line were poor. Another professor discussed "gay men" and "lesbians" fighting back at the Stonewall riots. I didn't learn until later that Black and Puerto Rican drag queens and white butches and femmes really carried off the honors; none of them held executive day jobs.⁸ I want to call progressive professors on their failure to integrate class into the curriculum, on their failure to notice they are as out-to-lunch about class as the straight white men they criticize.

Hand in hand with changes to existing institutions, I propose the establishment of new institutions. I want Working Class Studies set up. I want working-class and working-poor histories, cultures, ideologies, theories, languages studied. I want the many worthy individuals who spent their lives working for social justice studied and examined. I want us teaching each other, want the labor halls and community centers filled with janitors, secretaries, housecleaners, garbage men, lineworkers, want us in charge of curriculum and reading lists and teaching. I envision us at the center; I don't want "experts" explaining our lives to us, standing behind a lectern and pontificating for two hours on proletarians.

Maybe I'm paranoid, but I anticipate this reaction to my idea: *You've got to be kidding.* Eyes focused on the front of the room, looking anywhere else but toward me, silence, shifting bodies, unease, a bright smile from the professor: "Thank you for that interesting suggestion. Shall we move on?" *It's happened to me before. Once I actually told a group of rich, white students I thought we should have Class Speak-Outs where only poor people could speak. No one looked at me. My words rolled*

into a hole in the middle of the floor and disappeared from the face of the earth. I know what the reaction to this will be: what on earth are you suggesting? *Study a bunch of stupid rednecks?*⁹ Chuckle, chuckle.

conclusion

At 3:00 p.m., construction workers on the University of Minnesota campus finish up. Privileged university students grumble about what an easy job these guys have and how early they're leaving. They have no idea these workers arrived at 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning. They don't know how a body feels after eight hours of physical labor. They don't care.

As for me, I just watch the workers go by and feel many things. I feel at home, because these men look so familiar, from their flannel shirts, jeans, and workboots down to lunch pails and thermoses, cigarettes, and hard hats. I feel comfortable, because I like being around them. *These are my people. And we're not stupid.* I feel angry, because I know how students and professors perceive these workers. Because I know some of these workers believe the lies about who's stupid and who's smart, who has the right to think and study here and who has the right to build and clean here.

But I am clear. *I'm working-class. I'm smart. Just like the people I grew up with.* We know how to screw the system, we know how to take care of ourselves and survive when the odds are against us. We cook tasty meals with one onion, build our own stereo speakers, cut precisely-fitting pieces of wood for porches, know how to wire our houses and sew clothes, we like to read and think and talk to each other. We make music and art and tell stories. We know how to work cooperatively and we know how to give, generously, both hands open.

I've figured out I belong in the university. Not just when they need a janitor, or a cook, or a construction worker. But when I want to go. If I choose to study there, I won't let anyone make me feel stupid; I'll remember why it's so important they try. I won't let them turn me into an assimilationist, a fraud, a middle-class-identified polite girl who's grateful for all the help these nice rich people offer. I'll stay true to my roots. I'll use my brains, and my

hands, to take this system apart. I'll use my brains, and my hands, to get your feet off my neck.

notes

1. Thanks to Jan Binder, Elizabeth Clare, Cynthia Lane, Jeff Nygaard, and Susan Raffo for their help with this piece.
2. In this essay, when I use the word "rich," I mean anyone middle-class and up. Poor means anyone working-class and down. That is the way the working-class and working-poor people I grew up with use the terms. I find these categories problematic on one hand because they miss a lot of the subtleties of class. For example, they ignore my privilege of being working-class instead of working-poor. On the other hand, I still find them powerful and appropriate categories. Middle-class people, who could choose to realize they are also being duped by rich people and decide they would be better off aligning themselves with working-class and working-poor people, continually align themselves with the rich. This is another reason to include middle-class people in the "rich" group.
3. From *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1979.
4. Thanks to Jeff Nygaard for helping me articulate this point.
5. I also know other working-class people who have earned a university degree and are no longer working-class identified. These people are intent on passing and assimilating. I'm not sure if they are really middle-class, but they are certainly middle-class identified.
6. Thanks to Dr. Katie Cannon, for articulating all of this so clearly.
7. A notable exception to the lack of discussion/curriculum around this issue are the courses I took from Dr. Katie Cannon, which consistently dealt with critical questions relating to race, class, sex, ability, and sexuality. Dr. Cannon is continuing this groundbreaking work at Temple University in Philadelphia.
8. I want to mention here the regular inclusion, in Women's Studies, of the women's campaign to get the vote. I believe it is an important struggle to study, but I've also come to believe that part of its popularity in women's studies is that the social location of those activists reflects the social location of the women teaching in those programs in a way that other struggles usually do not.
9. For the best discussion I have ever read on the offensiveness of rich people using the term "redneck," read Elliott, "Whenever I Tell You the Language We Use is a Class Issue, You Nod Your Head in Agreement—and Then You Open Your Mouth," *Out of the Class Closet: Lesbians Speak*, Julia Penelope, editor (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1994). Elliott's article first appeared in *Lesbian Ethics*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Spring 1991).