

Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty, and the Promise of Higher Education in America. Vivyan C. Adair and Sandra L. Dahlberg, eds. *Teaching/Learning Social Justice Series*. Lee Anne Bell, ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003. 280 pp.

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I am not a working-class academic but, rather, an upper-middle-class liberal who has worked with and on behalf of poor people; and I believe I have learned something about poverty from my experience. I find arguments that one can know only from "identity" problematic. However, if one uses personal experience as a text, holding it at a distance to analyze and incorporate it into an intellectual analysis, then "experience" does become a special qualifier. So I approached *Reclaiming Class*, a book in which all the writers are from the poverty class, with the following questions: Would the writers use their experience to reveal injustices and endorse policies that people like me do not readily see? Would they make experience matter? Because it is unlikely that the Bush administration will sit down with *Reclaiming Class*, my criterion for the assessment of "mattering" was that the book should help sympathetic readers become more powerful and informed analysts, arguers, and advocates for poor women seeking postsecondary education. Does the book accomplish this? In part yes, and in part no.

First, I want to characterize this book. *Reclaiming Class* is a collection of feminist chapters contributing to the field of working-class studies. The authors are academics from poverty and working-class roots who explicate their experiences of becoming and working as professors. They raise theoretical and empirical questions about how female university students in poverty are constructed by those with whom they interact, by a welfare system that both aids and demeans, and by profound psychological tensions--alienation, inauthenticity, anger, and, yes, gratitude and relief at having escaped poverty--that color their intellectual and personal lives.

A theme across many of the essays is the paradox formulated by immigrant, working-class, and female intellectuals over the last century that gaining an education is both a profound loss and a substantial gain. One comes to see one's home, family, and community from a distance--often as if through a bell jar. Some authors simply note this phenomenon, others mourn the loss of their community of origin, and others are angered and blame the university with its class-biased culture for stripping them of their pasts and contributing to their seeing themselves as victims, rather than as agents of their own mobility who choose to enter higher education as a route to greater security and meaningful work. Among the best treatments in the volume of this theme is Sandra Dahlberg's "Survival in a Not So Brave New World." She argues rightly that the working-class female academic must construct plural not oppositional identities, or else she becomes an "imposter . . . while the appropriated text of her upward mobility is used as an endorsement for middle-class norms" (p.81). In an example of the university as a haven, in "Not by Myself Alone," Deborah Megivern recounts with appreciation how the Upward Bound program staff persistently rescued her over a period of years as she lurched from crisis to crisis while also attempting to "pass" in an upper-middle-class private postsecondary institution. Indeed, these staff members connected Megivern to a conference of working-class academics, giving her a place to process the castigation she was receiving at home for having turned away from God.

Sadly, the authors do not argue for the contribution their knowledge of poverty might make to their institutions' intellectual inquiry. Many recount personal slights and experiences of contempt from peers and teachers when

their class identity is "outed." Thus, they fear rejection or repercussions that might hurt their career prospects. Particularly telling is Nell Sullivan's essay on academic constructions of "white trash," with its critique of a Modern Language Association session on popular culture during which the audience joined in with laughter at descriptions of poor whites' tastes and behaviors. Critiquing performativity as a means of subversion, Sullivan noted that "the performance of economic status works only in one direction." Although she is enraged by the session, Sullivan does not speak out to say what she writes in retrospect, poor people cannot "perform" affluence (p. 65, n. 6).

A number of chapters succeed mightily. They are heartbreaking encounters with hardship and they "matter." Among them, Joycelyn Moody's indictment of the media for encouraging both blacks and whites to confuse class and race. Moody draws poignantly on her own experience as a pregnant black welfare recipient and a student at a private Catholic college who is scorned by black hospital workers as a middle-class woman abusing welfare benefits intended for the poor. At least four chapters address intergenerational family violence and abuse with descriptions of growing up in abusive families, falling into abusive relationships, and then extricating through postsecondary education. "That's Why I'm on Prozac" makes recommendations about how battered and abused students can be protected from certain penalties of the welfare system under the Family Violence Option. Finally, two policy chapters treat the welfare workers who make decisions about poor women's lives. Not surprisingly, although there is a strong belief on both sides of the welfare desk that education is a hopeful route out of poverty, workers exercise great discretion in deciding which women "deserve" to have access to educational benefits.

In sum, *Reclaiming Class* casts a harsh eye on the interaction between welfare policy, university culture, and the constituency that is attempting to better their lives by using one entity to access the other. Although promoting the same exceptionalism it critiques by telling stories of those who battled the odds and succeeded, nonetheless, *Reclaiming Class* is a caution to those academics, like me, who may miss the cues that would help us become better advisors to poverty-class students; it also sets an agenda for examining further how working-class culture is constructed within the academy.

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