

Open Access and the Working Class

WHEN JOHN TASSONI AND I FIRST ENVISIONED *OPEN WORDS*, WE REALIZED THAT OUR interests would overlap considerably with working-class studies. "Open access," "at-risk," "first-generation," even "non-mainstream"—all of these coded terms for students at various times imply or have implied "working class" at some level. Thomas Mortenson's study of access to universities uncovers that the annual income of the family best predicts the ability or inability of any individual student to graduate. Mortenson's data reveal that students from families earning less than \$25,000 were ten to twelve times less likely to earn a degree by the age of twenty-four than students whose family earned \$75,000 or more (42-23). Working-class students are at-risk. They are outside the mainstream of standard perceptions of college. They need access to higher education. However, class is still, as Michael Parenti worded it years ago, "a dirty little secret in America" (55), and our field has traditionally hesitated to talk about it too openly.

The uneasiness associated with frank discussions of class should not shock us too much. English studies has been complicit with elitism. Literature programs historically have acted to preserve what the canon has deemed "culture." Recent attempts to add or subtract from the canon have not eliminated from the discipline a sense of aesthetic quality that can be best appreciated by those with refined tastes. Certainly writing courses, if not necessarily the scholarly discipline of composition, have promoted standard written English as the dialect of prestige, despite the field's recognition of the logical, grammatical structures of dialects spoken by marginalized groups. Many creative writing programs still guide their students toward writing for literary magazines at the expense of popular genres more likely to be read by the working class. Sharon O'Dair's discussion of the university's function of embourgeoisement and her apparent willingness to champion this cause is just one example of our field's continuing and explicit recognition of its role in protecting middle- and upper-class interests (602-04).

Yet inroads have been made. Among others works, Barney Dews and Carolyn Law's book, *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, made the field aware of the multiple class backgrounds of academics. Sherry Lee Linkon's edited collection, *Teaching Working Class*, gathered together scholars to talk both about teaching working-class students and developing curriculum that exposes the class system. Members of our editorial board also have been prominent in bringing class to the attention of compositionists.

Mike Rose's working-class memoir, *Lives on the Boundary*, opened the door for academics to talk about their own class origins and to see connections to our students' class affiliations and their performance in our classrooms. Ira Shor started the Working-Class Culture and Pedagogy special interest group of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, welcoming writing instructors to talk about the conflicts they felt as working-class academics and theorizing the role class plays in our pedagogies. Julie Lindquist studied the rhetoric of a working-class bar in *A Place to Stand*, documenting specific argumentative strategies employed by the bar's patrons. William DeGenaro analyzed the place of class in his hard look at the function of junior colleges in "Class Consciousness and the Junior College Movement: Creating a Docile Workforce." The list could go on. Suffice it to say that composition studies' connection to working-class issues is starting to emerge from the shadows, and the members of our board have contributed much scholarship in this burgeoning area.

This issue of *Open Words* focuses on the working-class element within open admission and non-traditional students. Our contributors explore four distinct manifestations of working-class consciousness in the field. Wendy Ryden directly addresses the elitism found within the aesthetics of the profession. "Bourgeois Realism or Working-Class Kitsch?: The Aesthetics of Class in Composition" critiques academia's favoring of melancholic kitsch over nostalgic kitsch. She suggests that not much difference marks the two except for middle-class values, and she indicates ways nostalgia and melancholy conflict within teachers' perceptions of student writing as much as they do within the writing itself. In "Deep Shit: A Dialogue about Rhetoric, Pedagogy, and the Working Class," my co-editor John collaborates with two of his former graduate students—Richard Lee Walts and Sara Webb-Sunderhaus—in a piece that demonstrates ways in which our working-class students' troubled lives impact our teaching. The three of them realize that in trying to deal with the particular plight of individual students, we often overlook the systemic—or, to use their vernacular, the shit—that makes our efforts at "rescuing" students suspect. Jane Falk, in pedagogically confronting the essence of social class, looks at the pragmatics of encouraging a largely working-class population to explore the topical theme of work. "Shaped by Resistance: Work as a Topical Theme for the Composition Classroom" shows Falk's persistence in finding a way for students to engage their experiences with work critically and to create conditions for success. Finally, Lynn Z. Bloom's "The Ineluctable Elitism of Essays and Why They Prevail in First-Year Composition Courses" pursues her interest in understanding composition as a middle-class enterprise. Bloom uncovers the class biases in the essay genre and suggests, especially in first-year composition courses, that this bias will not be overcome any time soon.

John and I hope that contributors to future issues of *Open Words* can further the dialogue begun here. We cannot really understand the issues surrounding open access programs

until we grasp the inherent class biases in our discipline. Open admissions and working-class studies are linked; they further intersect with the field's interests in race, disability, gender, sexuality, and region. We trust that *Open Words* can be a forum for explorations of these intersections.

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