

A National Labor Project: Recovering Unprecedented Numbers of Working Class Lives and Histories through Art

Ed Check
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To be working class is to be in a place of relative vulnerability—on the job, in the market, in politics and culture. (Zweig, 2000, p. 13)

Introduction

I have always worked. While in third grade in the early '60s, I helped a brother with his paper route for 25 cents per day, six days a week. I eventually bought it from him. That route wasn't a moneymaker; I could barely pay my monthly paper bill. From that time on, I remember buying my own clothes and always working—working through high school, college, summers, graduate school and then summers as an elementary art teacher. My hands and body were rarely still.

In *HANDS: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*, author Janet Zandy (2004) asks, "How much are two hands worth" (p. 7)? She and others (Jamakaya, 1998; Sherlock, 2007) document the often miserable realities of working people in the United States. Workers have been treated brutally as a class and rarely are rightly/justly compensated or appreciated for their work (Livingstone & Ploof, 2007; Zandy, 2004; Zinn, 2007; Zwieg, 2000).

Howard Zinn (2007) describes in *A Young People's History of the United States, Volume One*, the struggle between the classes in 19th century U. S. history as the "*Other Civil War*" (p. 147). I had purchased the two-volume set from Syracuse Cultural Workers curious as to how Zinn wrote history geared toward adolescents. I was not prepared for my intellectual and emotional reactions to Zinn's description and naming of class relations as the other civil war. He legitimated struggles and feelings I had experienced as a white artist educator activist, raised working class. Through his writing, he revealed/redeemed lives of relatives and neighbors. He helped legitimate and galvanize my imagination to continue an idea I have been thinking about for years--a *National Labor Project* that could recover/record the past and present lives and achievements of workers.¹

I initially based my idea of a *Workers' Center* off the *America's Black Holocaust Museum* in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. James Cameron's (the founder of the Black Holocaust Museum) idea of conceiving the lives of African Americans through a holocaust lens seemed appropriate, though few white people visited his Museum.² Cameron and Zinn's

¹ This would be a Center that archives and celebrates the lives of workers and not corporations.

² I met James Cameron in the late 90s. He gave me a personal tour of his museum. He was excited that a white professor was interested in African-American social justice issues. Keep in mind that Milwaukee, Wisconsin has been criticized as being one of the most racially polarized cities in the country.

ways of activism and perception helped me piece together a possibility for the representation of working lives.

Outside scant references to workers in art education scholarship, workers are overlooked or when referenced in scholarship, are described as problems to be solved—not people or lives worth remembering or contributing as important members of culture. As an anti-bias social justice educator and artist, I look to critical texts for fair and accurate information about workers. But I have had to look outside of the discipline. Even *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education* (Cahan & Kocur, 1996) disappoints. Another popular text in Texas is Ruby Payne's (1996) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. She cites rich, middle class and the poor and ignores working people in her text.

It has been in obscure, yet groundbreaking, texts like Joanna Kadi's (1996) *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker*, Alfred Lubrano's (2004) *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams*, Janet Zandy's (2004) *HANDS: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*, and Livingstone & Ploof's (2007) *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production* that workers are described as human beings worthy of stories being told about them. It is also curious to me that all of these writers use an auto-narrative style in their texts to describe their relationships with workers and working class issues. They either were raised working class or had developed allied relationships with workers during their lives.

It is through these sources that I found out more information about workers like myself: painter Ralph Fasanella and poet and essayist Audre Lorde; and how their art and politics were firmly rooted in their lived experiences as members of the working class.³ I had known Audre Lorde had died of cancer, but never knew her cancer was directly related to her working class life where she was exposed to X-rays.

I consider this essay an initial mapping where I reconstruct multiple ways of knowing and understanding the lived realities and plights of workers, whether they are manual workers, teachers or artists (Zandy, 2004). I use autobiography from a perspective of Standpoint Theory where I use the lives of working people as theory, method and evidence. I speak from my standpoint of my experiences as being raised white working class and my shift in salary and education to middle class.

In my 13th year in Lubbock, Texas, I have been privileged to meet artists creating art on working class themes/issues. All of the artists cited in this essay are struggling through life. They have all incurred huge college or credit debt as they negotiate through middle class academic environs. I situate their work throughout my essay, trying to thematically match their work with a specific section of this essay. It's a clumsy write in many ways. I am still configuring ways of organizing artists and knowledge I have accumulated to this point on this topic.

National Labor Project: Heading/Healing Home

As I headed back home to Manitowoc, Wisconsin (population, 32,000) from Lubbock, Texas during the Christmas holiday in 2006, I had one thing on my mind—to begin a dialogue with my four brothers and my sister about an idea I had about establishing a

³ See Janet Zandy (2004).



St. Mary's and my old neighborhood

physical entity that could house a *Workers' Center* in our hometown that would document and celebrate the lives of working people: people like our parents and relatives who lived rich and ethical working class lives (Kadi, 1996; Zandy, 2004). Initially, I envisioned the Center as a physical space, a simple storefront, that could house art, archives, artifacts, a reading room, coffee shop, organizing rooms, and galleries for local histories.

I designed my stay to accommodate four dinners and/or late night chats talking about the Center with brothers and their wives. I also spent my days visiting elderly relatives, some in nursing homes, as a sign or respect to their lives and contributions, but also to inquire about their lives.

On a previous visit to my hometown in 2004, I took photos of worker homes, places my aunts and uncles had lived. As I drove around in a rental car documenting my past, I realized for the first time in my life, how "working class" this city, one of America's aluminum capitals, was.



Uncle Arnie's House, Butcher/Custodian



Uncle Newphrey's, Carpenter



Uncle John's, Shipyards Worker



Former Portland Cement/Industrial Wasteland



Former Mirro Main Plant sold for \$200.00. Over 1,000,000 Sq. Feet

I was a visitor/voyeur in my own hometown. I drove around and documented industrial wastelands within the city limits. Former aluminum factories (on multiple sites), cement companies, shipyards, foundries were eerily quiet, ghosted testimonies to a rich working past. The former Mirro main factory in the center of the city sporting over 1,000,000 square feet had been empty for years and had been recently sold for \$200.00. My hometown had the second highest unemployment rate in Wisconsin. Even churches were closing and consolidating. Former ways of doing economics and religion created ghosted neighborhoods.⁴ My heart sank as I drove around. My hometown was just another one of those dying factory towns.

Contrast this with my recollections of rich working traditions I remembered growing up in Manitowoc. The visual sites/sights of Manitowoc Cranes throughout the city, especially in the shipyards, were evidence of a once healthy economy. There were many social traditions as well: for example, the Manitowoc/Sheboygan working class winter holiday custom of “treeing.” From after Midnight Mass through January 6th, we visited neighbors’, friends’, and relatives’ houses for the purpose of viewing their Christmas tree. Relatives or neighbors showed Christmas presents neatly positioned beneath their Christmas trees. We drank and ate light to heavy snacks consisting of herring, cookies, cold cuts, summer sausages, sweet and dill pickles, ham sandwiches, chips, dips, homemade cookies, chocolates and other candies (Brachs and Russell Stover were premium). Bernstein’s, a local chocolate shop, was a special favorite. I recalled as a child waiting politely on pins and needles at an uncle’s house without kids, listening to adult conversation (we were to be seen and not heard), knowing that our next stop would be an uncle that had children our age and plenty of new toys. I also fondly remember our kid’s Christmas tree in our basement with 22 lights (sets of 15 and 7) and some homemade paper decorations. As kids, we sang around those trees. There was magic, community and memory in these and other rituals. To this very day, the scent of evergreen and gas (our tree was stored in our garage until set-up indoors) puts me back to my youth.

Socially, my family was a haven for cousins as we grew up in the 1960s. Arriving one at a time and staying for one or more weeks, some of my cousins sought safety and food at our house--respite from their hellish home lives. I learned lessons of hospitality and community-building from my parents. My dad’s small carpentry shop became a community center for retired workers in the community who visited his shop on Saturday mornings. These old men helped sweep the floor, repair things, tend to the garden, or just visit. I never missed an opportunity to stop by “the shop” on Saturdays

⁴ See Janet Zandy’s (2004) theorizing ghosted work and sites.

when I was visiting. I grew up around painters, welders, butchers, custodians, electricians, store clerks, carpenters, and factory workers.

As an artist, I tried to capture some essence of white working class joy and struggle in the pieces *Domestic Saints* (2002) and *Sun Dress* (2002). In *Domestic Saints*, I honored with glitter sainthood to working class women in my life. Powerful and wise, they raised families and participated in local and church organizations. These women were matriarchs in their families, kitchens, basements and laundry rooms, in their sewing circles, raising children, and working outside their homes. *Domestic Saints* reveals the joys of friendship and community, in all places a kitchen. In *Sun Dress* or *In Honor of Working Class Women*, I used traditional fabric materials that would wear, tear, fade and disappear just like the lives of millions of working class women who remain nameless, invisible or forgotten. Physical and emotional struggle were never far from their lives.⁵



Sun Dress or *In Honor of Working Class Women*, 2002, 72" tall, mixed media installation



Domestic Saints, 2002, 5" X 7," collage

Unprecedented Numbers and Possibilities

Michael Zweig (2000) argues that approximately 62% of the American workforce self-identifies as working class. In spite of this dramatically high percentage of the population, Zweig suggests that politics, popular culture and the media represent a nation of mostly middle class persons--their needs and values. This disproportionate middle class wash is evident everywhere—in Hollywood movies, in art classrooms, in

⁵ Sundresses, like in the image, were popular in the Midwest in the 60s and 70s with working class women in my life.

libraries and museums and especially academe. I recall political candidates in the 2008 national election addressing the struggles and hardships of the middle classes, as opposed to working-poor and working class groups that were truly struggling. Zinn (2007) reminds workers that “...both parties represented the classes that held most of the power in the country” (p. 147) and continue to do so today. If the United States had proportional political systems, there might be labor parties in this country. Oftentimes, labor unions and workers organizing are linked to mobs and mischief by the popular press. In schools, labor histories are often ignored or maligned. In September of 2009, when I asked an Introduction to Visual Studies class what Labor Day was, only one out of sixteen students knew. Most of the students thought it was a holiday to not work and shop.⁶



Charlie, 2006, 11" X 14," Silver Print

Post, Texas artist Jane Lindsay is attracted to working people as subjects for documentary photography. Jane comes from farming and ranching people. Jane is attracted to oppressed groups, people who get “shit on.”

Of her *Regular Series*, Jane comments, “These are just interesting working class people.” In *Charlie* (from part of a series titled *The Regulars*) Jane documents the social aspect of the complex lives of Texas Hill Country workers taking in a drink at a local bar. Jane enjoys the aspect of really getting to know people and their issues before respectfully asking

them if they would like to be a part of a current project. Social justice and social change are important goals for her. Her *McCarty Project*, photo documenting the lives of families of inmates living on death row (many unjustly incarcerated) and a series interviewing and photo documenting war veterans and their experiences with Veteran Administration hospitals and clinics are a few more examples of her social justice work.

Privilege, Entitlements, and Arrogance and a Justified Anger

Many middle class people don't understand the value of working class (read as entitlement and privilege) histories. These histories are not their lived realities. For example, a white middle class colleague once remarked how poor she was. Her husband is an independent environmental filmmaker and she was supporting them. I reminded her she owned rental property, had a great salary and was likely cash poor, but was not poor. I respect the attempts of allies who speak, not from their experiences of being raised working class, but offer their intellect and action to help raise an awareness of

⁶ Ironic that many working people, if connected to tourist or hospitality work, end up working on that day.

working class conditions and inequity (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2001). But these are few and far between.

Recently (on December, 12, 2009), I had lunch with a colleague and her daughter, both who are middle class. Sonia, the daughter, lives a privileged life where her father (a surgeon) has paid for her undergraduate and graduate educations. Her mother pays for gas and shops with her daughter (Sonia is 28 years old). It is not uncommon for her parents to send Sonia air tickets to fly home or visit relatives in Mexico or Canada. Sonia has traveled all over the world. In five days she will visit Africa with her father for two weeks. Within her middle class environs, Sonia has accomplished a Fulbright year of study in Africa and has applied for and received numerous grants. I am not sure whether or not Sonia recognizes her entitlement and privilege. I listen carefully to her stories and comments about others. Sonia has never had to worry about health coverage or money, ever.

Sometimes, when handled by middle class academics, research objectifies workers (Ehrenreich, 2001;⁷ Payne, 1996) and renders workers as aimless and ignorant when in fact workers are intelligent but have little access to capital or equality. A few years back at a Chicago NAEA conference, a middle class friend/colleague suggested to me that if single middle class female academics started to have children, we could raise the gene pool in this country.

Working class realities are rarely talked about in art education. The discipline assumes that most people are middle class or at the very least are trying to be. In art history, for example, Western Eurocentric middle class art is not only the theory/norm but also the method. Some academic colleagues are surprised to find out they have working class roots. At a 2004 National Women's Studies Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I had an attendee ask me: "How do I know if I am working class?"

Self-identifying as gay in the mid-1980's, I went into debt purchasing Ralph Lauren shirts, usually on sale, in order to pass as educated and middle class--only to find out later that powerful class differences prevented me from dating middle class men due to chasms in our ethics, values, histories, and material conditions (Kadi, 1996). I couldn't pass for middle class on my teacher's salary. I knew that it took money that I didn't have to afford books, travel, drinks, and graduate education. I worked my way through college, for all three of my degrees. One result of my trying to pass and join the middle was that I assumed a huge credit debt. It has only been recently that I have become credit card debt-free for the first time in my life. Much of my success is because of my realization that the acquisition of things is not the best way for me to live my life. Consider my friend Hans Turley, who grew up white and middle class in Parkersburg, West Virginia, and whose parents owned the downtown hotel. His question was not whether he would go to college, but where—and even that was predetermined. When I met Hans in 1996 in Lubbock, Texas, where we both embarked on our first assistant professor tenure-track jobs, I was amazed at his positive self-esteem. He had an entitled air about himself. He regaled us with stories of journeys and his positions on all sorts of topics. Hans typified the entitled, arrogant, and privileged station of the middle. I, on the other hand, was reserved and cautious. When I started college, I started out at a local

⁷ Ehrenreich's work seems to satisfy middle class persons as a valid important text that educates many middle class people and others, while many working class folks are much less impressed with this work.

two-year college in my hometown to save money and then transferred to a larger four-year institution. I worked my ass off to pay for college and attend classes. And I couldn't do it on my own. I had to secure college loans. I was puzzled how friends could do three to six-month internships in New York City or Washington, D. C., for no pay (i. e. privilege and access to money).

Many working class college students experience unprecedented struggle as they endure through university educations. I encounter many working students who can barely keep up in course work and part-time or full-time jobs. Many are not eligible for enough financial aid to help them focus solely on school work. One architecture student commented that when he only did school work, his grades were high but he had no money and often went to bed hungry. I hear this over and over as an undergraduate advisor, young people with no resources trying to struggle through school, blaming themselves for not being able to do it all. Many are tired and drop out. Not because they are not smart, but because they can not compete fairly and endure the constant absence of money in their lives. From not affording simple art supplies, to tuition, unforeseen fees, parking tickets, food, and rent. Many of these students are not prepared for the lifetimes of incredible debt they will accrue.

Lubbock, Texas-based artist and graphic designer Roberta White tackles issues of entitlement and privilege in her art. Raised white and working class on a farm in Plains, Texas, Roberta incurred a high college debt pursuing advanced art degrees and struggles with an underpaid art job. She worked as a free-lance window designer for Bergdorf's in New York City for a time. She returned to Lubbock in 2000, to care for her dying mother and found a graphic design position that paid slightly above minimum wage.

Roberta's focus in her art is size--she notes that "everybody hates fat people." We are all brainwashed into thinking all fat people are unhealthy and that they are doing something to make themselves fat. Eating too much, not exercising enough. (Personal communication, October 4, 2009) Roberta says that people need health at every size. Roberta notices this attitude at work in many of her white middle class successful designer colleagues. "Even though they are size 2s and 4s, they are all dieting."

Roberta applied to do post-graduate work in 2006 and focused on issues of size and women's health issues. "Women hate their bodies. We are enculturated to do so," states Roberta. She notes that people are perceived as a lower class and unhealthy if they are fat. She has noticed that people who have the best attitudes about their bodies that she has met personally are Black working class women. "They have other things to worry about, like paying bills." Many diverse Black women of all different sizes in Lubbock reflect this positive body image sentiment.

Roberta comments that present-day fashion models look like skeletons. She's appalled at what constitutes healthy female bodies. Part of this was reflected in a November 2006 performance at a Genderland Exhibition in Lubbock. Roberta challenged her audiences to rethink weight. She performed as a nurse using a Marilyn Wann (1998) Yay! scale that she had purchased online. A Yay! scale came in various plush colors and instead of numbers registers compliments: Attractive, handsome, cute, pretty, etc. During her performance, Roberta weighed in over 100 persons, many of which initially ran from

her with her scale. Dressed as an alternative nurse, she wrote their compliments on a nametag with size-positive websites and gave a piece of candy (a red hot) as medicine.



Genderland Performance,
2006

Leaving Working Class?

I have had the opportunity to experience the great American dream or nightmare—my socio-economically moving from working class to middle class. Leaving working class is leaving home. It is more of a nightmare as I constantly struggle throughout my conversion; resistance is futile. The middle doesn't allow for my working class values and ethics. There is lots of capital in the middle. The contrasts in histories, values and ethics could not be starker.

So, to be successful is to leave working class. My mother's friends at her wake warned me in 1996 that "I shouldn't feel I am too smart to talk to them" and "to remember to come back and visit." Lubrano (2004) articulately describes/defines a straddler as a worker moving from working to the middle class and the problems of having to leave home and working class. Middle class persons will never know this feeling. They grow up in middle and will probably die in the middle, unaware of the social and cultural struggles of being a worker.

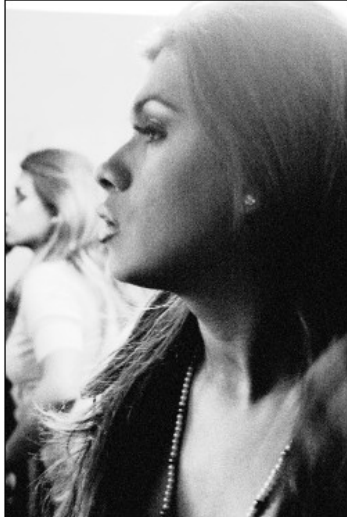
I have great difficulty accepting middle class rules and values. Middle class people seem so unaware of so much to me—especially working people. There is extreme pressure for me to jettison my working ways of knowing and being and conform to the histories, knowledges and practices of the middle.

In 2007, I was invited to a lowrider club annual dinner in Lubbock. A Ph. D. student, with middle class roots, had joined the club as part of his research of lowrider bikes. He had built a bike to show and had connected with local lowriders. When I was introduced as Kyle's professor to the club members, I felt awkward. I policed all of my actions and words. Though everyone was kind, I felt out of place. Kyle had little problem adjusting.

Born and raised in West Texas, Lubbock, Texas artist Katy Ballard investigates working class drag queens who live and prosper in what she describes as conservative and homophobic West Texas. Katy understands the pull of home and what it means to call a place home. She knows that West Texas is home to many working class gays and lesbians who have chosen to stay in their hometowns. They do not leave for Dallas or Austin or San Antonio. Many of these performers are not closeted in their lives or at work and have blended their identities of worker and performer. Thomas/Lady Adonna has been participating in drag shows for many years. He is a hair stylist. Thomas is an example of a local drag person, born and raised in West Texas, who likes it here and is very close to his family.



Lady Adonna, 8"X10",
Digital Print, 2007



Lady Devon was born in East LA and moved to Lubbock as a child. She is a manager at a local food court. Though harassed at work, her family supports her in her drag work. She is a mother to a few local drag performers. She started in Ballet Folklorico as a young boy. She goes to work as a female (and at times ambiguous, slightly more female than male).

Lady Devon, 8"X10", Digital Print, 2007

Workers in Our Midsts

Working Class students and artists don't need ways out of their culture, but visual art and scholarship that honors and records the contributions of millions of working people in the world. Many struggle economically, yet continue to create art and scholarship about working class conditions.

Lubbock, Texas working class artist Veronica Mora exemplifies attempts of social action and justice. While watching the coverage of Katrina on CNN in 2005, she wanted to do something to help. She called the Lubbock Chamber of Commerce and asked what are we doing to help? They told her to contact the American Red Cross. Veronica met almost every single New Orleans family that came to Lubbock because her assignment was to enter everyone into the Red Cross database. She assigned people to a large aircraft hanger or dorms at the former Reese Air Force Base.

One working class family was upset with accommodations because their daughter was diabetic. Veronica not only changed their accommodation, but established a friendship with them, driving them back to New Orleans that October, just so they could check to see if their home was okay. Veronica took some initial photos. Seven months later, Veronica drove back to New Orleans to visit her friends. She photo documented the aftermath of Katrina. Later in 2008, we both were in New Orleans for an NAEA conference. Veronica stayed with her working class friends and I stayed with wealthy friends. The contrast was stark and uncomfortable for both of us on many levels. Veronica's interest in photo documentary that portrays the living conditions of working people continues.



A Devastated Neighborhood
14" x 11"

Digital Print
March, 2006



The Ravaged Lower 9th Ward
14" x 11"

Digital Print
March, 2006

Conclusion

Lilia DeAnda Cabrera grew up, lives and teaches in the Valley in South Texas. Her art and teaching practices reflect her working class upbringing. Lilia's artwork and pedagogy are based on recycling and reusing materials. With few resources and under-funded as an art teacher, Lilia "dumpster-dives" to find materials for her classroom. Lilia even scrapes excess acrylic paint from students' palettes to use in her own art, mixed media pieces--meditations on recycled materials and recovery patterns. Currently, Lilia is part of an art coop that sponsors monthly art shows, local cultural events, and provides affordable studio space for community artists through the reclamation of rooms in a closed elementary school. For Lilia, art continues to be a primary outlet for her to continue examining her cultural and working class issues in her life and community while trying to help change living conditions and lives for many people in her community. Lilia and her coop serve as a model for my National Labor Project.

When I arrived in Lubbock, Texas, like many other newcomers, I was at odds with the local conservative cultural terrain. Eventually, I sought out and met local working folks not associated with the university to help me create saner and safer places for myself. Like so many working people, I struggle to get this project off the ground. I'll be happy to die with a small storefront space anywhere stating *Workers Center*.

But it's been hard working and living in middle class environs where much is taken for granted. As colleagues return from summer research or holidays, they nonchalantly ask



Te Perdiste, Haber Cuando Te Encuentro
(You've been lost, hope to find you one day),
2008 Mixed Media:
(Handmade paper cast of a woman's upper body),
18" X 22"

in elevators—what did you do this summer? That is code for where did you travel? Their question is a mere prompt for me to return the favor of asking them, so they can testify to their middle class values and research.

In August 2005, I sent a letter about this project to the Mayor of my hometown (see appendix). I also sent the same letter to Marge Miley who printed a comment about the letter in her History column of the local newspaper. One person contacted me offering some old photos about his father. I have been saving artifacts for years. Recently, a sister-in-law gave me a red Manitowoc Company jacket that an uncle had proudly worn for years. These artifacts and accompanying stories or testimonies will fill the virtual pages of the initial leg of this project.

I have realized that this National Labor project is unprecedented in its theme and potential. It will start out virtual before physical space is acquired. I was asked why I couldn't conceive of a worker center in Lubbock, Texas. I can, and it needs one. Although Lubbock, Texas has been my home for the last 13 years, my heart lies with my hometown. But it is evident to me that the National Labor Project will have entries from cities from across the country, including Lubbock. Workers are everywhere. It was during my chats with my brothers and their wives in 2006 that I realized how complicated even a storefront idea would be. If people started bringing in artifacts, where would they be housed? I have read many local history journals and have contacted many educators, artists, local historians and allies.⁸ I have also talked to many neighbors and relatives about the idea that virtual space is an appropriate first step. I'll close with one more story that occurred December 14th 2009 with a middle class colleague. We ate lunch at a recently reopened restaurant under different management. As we sat down at the counter, my colleague and friend said, "This place isn't as classy as it used to be." Under previous management, there was a university coffee house atmosphere with tattooed wait staff and a middle class owner. Now, all of the wait staff, management and new owners appeared to be working class. The menu had changed. As I talked to the wait staff (because my colleagues comments bothered me), I found out that not only have they changed the food but anticipate receiving a bar license soon, so they can serve alcohol. Then these working folks talked about keeping the art on the walls for sale, bringing in live music/bands and poetry readings, serving specialty meals, and ended with: "Wouldn't it be great to have drag queen bingo? I think that could draw in another clientele of people to the place." She said this with sheer joy on her face. And that is how I feel about establishing a Workers' Center—to celebrate the diversity of working lives—both contemporary and historic—sheer joy.

⁸ Jamakaya is a wonderful labor historian. *Voyageur* is a bi-annual historical review from Northeast Wisconsin, and there are so many more zines, websites, local folks.

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Appendix

August 29, 2005

The Honorable Kevin Crawford, Mayor
Manitowoc City Hall
900 Quay Street
Manitowoc, WI 54220-4543

Dear Mayor Crawford,

I am wondering if anyone has ever talked about establishing a museum or study center(s) based on the histories of working people in the Manitowoc area? The recent national exposure of the Season's Gleaming (Shimon & Lindemann, 2004) book demonstrates to me the powerful histories of working people and the interest in those histories. I took special note of a USA Today (Tuesday, November 20, 2004) newspaper article where a former employee described her difficult job making branches for the trees and how rarely such histories are published. Jamakaya's Like Our Sisters Before Us: Women of Wisconsin Labor (The Wisconsin Labor History Society, 1998) (Wisconsin Press) is one of a few examples of books that examines the lives of everyday workers. Product diversity that historically comes from Manitowoc: the aluminum industry, shipping, boat manufacture, furniture, aluminum trees, car ferry service, and breads, just to name a few, gets me to thinking of all of the stories out there yet to be told.

I recently gave a talk at my university about an art installation I constructed (circa 2002/3) honoring working class working women (see enclosure) in my life. In that talk, I showed slides of old Mirro plants, the Manitowoc Company, The "Bud" beer bottles, shipbuilding, the sub, and the now old St. Mary's Church (my hometown parish), explaining the importance of my roots on my art. My interest lies in developing a memory of workers in the area. Mirro products (a small skillet and cookie press-stamped in Manitowoc), some Red Owl seasoning containers, and other items, are exhibited above my refrigerator in testimony to my pride of hometown products. I recall years ago visiting Rudy Rotter's studio and in conversing with Dr. Rotter, finding out that one of my cousins was his receptionist for 15 years. I spent four hours with him that day. And I wonder, is anyone documenting these histories? (I am aware of the writings of Marge Miley, retired managing editor of the Herald Times Reporter, and some of the efforts of the Manitowoc County Historical Society.)

I received my Ph. D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Curriculum & Instruction in 1996 and since then have worked at Texas Tech University. In the past, I have belonged to a working class academics email list, where former working class kids (like myself) straddle our new identities as middle class academics—confronting different values and histories. It's not easy growing up working class, moving to the middle, forsaking any ties with working values and ethics. I and many other working class academics are trying to change that and preserve the values and memories of working people.

There exist numerous possibilities to raise funds for scholarship and possibly a study center or museum. Area employers and state and federal funds are available. With the demise of Catholic parishes, and other changes, I feel the need for documentation is great, so future generations will know the industry of working people who do and once populated Manitowoc. Part of the urgency is that people who can tell stories are dying. Of other importance is that these former workers house items that could be used in such an endeavor, items that they may feel has little value in today's world, but that have great historic importance. Having come from a family of carpenters,

welders, electricians, painters, janitors, etc., I know there is great potential for success in such a venture.

Any information, concerns or advice on developing a center is greatly appreciated. I am proud of my hometown and the impact it's had on the world. I want to make sure some of those working histories get told.

Sincerely,

Ed Check