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‘A Dream of Completion’: The Journey of American Working-Class Poetry

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

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May 2019

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Keywords: Working Class, American Poetry, Labor, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams,

Philip Levine, David Ignatow, Dorianne Laux, Kim Addonizio, Martín Espada

## ABSTRACT

‘A Dream of Completion’: The Journey of American Working-Class Poetry

by

Lacy Snapp

This survey follows the development of working-class poetry from Whitman to contemporary poets. It begins by considering how the need for working-class poetry emerged. Whitman’s “Song of Myself” sought to democratize poetry both by challenging previous poetic formal conventions and broadening the scope of included subjects. Williams also challenged formal expectations, but both were limited by their historical and socioeconomic position. To combat this, I include the twentieth-century poets Ignatow and Levine who began in the working class so they could speak truths that had not been published before. Ignatow includes the phrase “dream of completion” which encapsulates various feelings of the working class. This dream could include moments of temporary leisure, but also feeling completed by societal acceptance or understanding. Finally, I include the contemporary poets Laux, Addonizio, and Espada. They complicate the “dream of completion” narrative with issues surrounding gender and race, and do not seek to find resolution.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my family. For my mother, thank you for always supporting me and encouraging me to pursue my love of writing. For my father, thank you for passing on your passion of woodworking, it has both altered the way I relate to the world and inspired the scope of this paper.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*His suggestion to me was that hard work*

*Was the order of each day*

*When I asked again, he said it again,*

*pointing out twice*

*His Muse, if he had one, was a window*

*Filled with a brick wall, the left-hand corner*

*Of his mind, a hand lined with grease*

*And sweat: literal things*

*-- Dorianne Laux, "Mine Own Phil Levine"*

Working-class poetry in America came to be as a means of inclusion, both for those who desired to be poets and those who merely wanted to be readers. Its journey is ultimately democratic, a transformation away from a genre designed only for people with the social hierarchy to be well read, educated, have access to books, and the leisure to read them. Further, the landscapes that made up most of this original poetic content did not speak to those who were closely related with physical labor and the working class, but appealed to the pastoral tradition in which subjects transcended their historical position by developing a close spiritual relationship with nature. However, without the means to achieve that nature-driven transcendence, the elitism of poetry alienated all but those of upper classes. This is especially true considering poets such as Emerson, who advocated for only the considerations of the spirit rather than the body, which

pushed away those who related to the world especially through their bodies, like those working-class laborers, who also knew how imperfect and sometimes grotesque those vessels could be.

In “Merlin I,” Emerson acknowledges that a revolutionary and truly American vein of poetry needed to emerge, and knew that he was not the writer to do this because of how restricted he was by his historical and class position. Although he dreamed of transcendence, he could only perceive this through a privileged lyric ‘I’ that lacked extensive knowledge of the complexities revolving socioeconomic classes as well as gender and racial inequalities. In “Song of Myself,” Walt Whitman envisioned an American utopia and declared an open invitation for those of any class, race, or gender. He encouraged solidarity among nineteenth-century Americans, and did so by utilizing a poetic style revolutionary for its time that was devoid of traditional formal meter or rhyme patterns. While some did not consider that particular work to be poetry at all because of its dismissal of previous conventions, others were left inspired and built upon it with their own voices in order to further democratize the genre’s new cannon. Like Whitman, they realized that to create something truly “American,” poets and readers needed to stop expecting those English traditions to be the rubric for writing poetry. These new innovations appear in poets such as William Carlos Williams, whose Imagist poems further challenged the traditions regarding appropriate forms. Also, in order to democratize American poetry, the original pastoral landscapes had to be transformed to keep up with the ever-developing urban spaces of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The most important obstacle that needed to be overcome was the working class’ subjectification by the poem’s speaker or lyric ‘I’. Whitman’s “Song of Myself” was bold enough to include lower class subjects in order to encourage solidarity between all Americans. This was rarely seen in other nineteenth-century poetic works since the upper class was usually



writing poems for their privileged peers, also of the upper class. But Whitman's American vision attempts to know no bounds, so he includes those who are socially discriminated against such as "prostitutes" and "opium" users (Whitman, *American Poetry* 356). However, while these people are being acknowledged for the first time, Whitman's speaker writes from a privileged, lyric perspective which handicapped his overall understanding of them. This is because he does not actually know what it is like to experience those roles, nor does he try to. Rather, he imagines and uses these simplified subjects as objects for his own poetic transcendence. His approach, overall, was Emersonian since he had a very specific vision that he hoped American poetry could achieve, but ultimately his ideas spanned beyond what his mind, fixed by his class and position in history, could imagine.

Although Whitman's attempt was imperfect because ultimately he was still a product of his historical subject position, his intention was genuine and encouraged later poets to make attempts of their own. Williams pushed traditional boundaries using his concise, Imagist form, and although he, too, could not escape his elitist lyric position that subjectified the working class for personal transcendence to don the democratic 'I', his work made headway for future poets such as David Ignatow, his mentee. Ignatow and another twentieth-century poet, Philip Levine, proved through hard work and a love for language that pursuing poetry is possible. With educational opportunities expanding to include people that would have been unable to afford college before, working-class poets can study poets and forms that came before but ultimately write their own truths about their first-hand experiences that had not been previously disclosed.

This deep respect for the working class and an understanding of its inner workings can cause those working-class poetic subjects to be more than their class position—they can have their own physical and emotional complexities, their own "dreams of completion," a phrase

taken from Ignatow's poem "The Errand Boy I" (Ignatow, *David Ignatow* 35). These "dreams of completion" are one attribute that defines the working class, but its meaning is multifaceted. Simply, it can represent the dream of experiencing temporary leisure after a hard day's work, but it also means the completion that comes from working diligently and long enough that labor can be a necessity of the past so that physical and spiritual peace may be actualized. A deeper dream of completion is one of social completion in which a working-class subject experiences solidarity and support. This final aspect is an extension of Whitman's original dream when writing "Song of Myself."

Contemporary poets complicate these dreams of completion even further. Dorianne Laux, a mentee of Levine, and Kim Addonizio help establish a voice for working-class women to show the complex spirits that drive every mother, wife, sister, and daughter. They uncover buried emotional, physical, and mental trauma that stemmed from only being seen as a body without authority. In their work, they use subject matter that was considered impolite in Emerson's time—both to be seen in poetry and said by a woman. Unafraid of writing about sex, they help to redefine what appropriate poetic content can be and change perceptions of what it means to be a woman in the Twenty-first century. However, they are more than just female writers, they understand the solidarity that can be created between all members and genders of the working class, as well as mankind. Their poetry speaks truths that are accessible and pertinent any reader. The final contemporary poet of this survey, Martín Espada, complicates the working-class dream of completion to include those who have been discriminated against because of race. Race, too, is a factor that causes some to be able to attain an education over another. More importantly, Espada's poetry focuses on the social injustices that cause minorities in America to not be treated equally, and further, the emotional, mental, and physical trauma that can result. These

contemporary dreams of completion are not ones that can be resolved; instead, they rely on readers feeling uncomfortable by what they're reading and acknowledge the unresolved tension at the root of the issue.

Working-class commonalities are threaded from the modern poets Ignatow and Levine to contemporaries such as Laux, Addonizio, and Espada. Their interactions establish a genealogy of working class poetry that layer and compound ideals, trials, and desires of both the working class and the poets who represent it. Through journals and interviews, readers know that Williams studied and read Whitman; Ignatow learned from Williams; Laux was a student of Levine's. This line of succession carries on as Laux, Addonizio, and Espada teach classes of their own in the twenty-first century and encourage people to write through books such as Laux and Addonizio's *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*. In practice, the former poets use scenes of labor to articulate the deeper desires within their subjects. The latter build on the truths that the twentieth-century poets establish, which creates a narrative of solidarity. Ignatow published his poem "The Paper Cutter" in his 1948 book of poetry *David Ignatow: Selected Poems*. In it, he describes the labor of a paper cutter who works multiple jobs, explaining that "[h]e has stood all day in one spot, / pressing first the left / and then the right button" (Ignatow 31). The monotony of the occupation is apparent, during which the subject is being paid not for his mastery of a tedious skill, but for the loss of a precious commodity—time. When the subject is asked what he will do with his earnings, he answers: "I will buy a house / and then I will lie down in it / and not get up all day" (Ignatow, *David Ignatow* 31). This is the worker's dream of completion—a time when he has enough money to buy a house in which he can indefinitely rest.

Forty-five years later, Espada published "Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper" in his book *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators*. In it, the speaker describes a high school job for

which he assembled paper legal pads using “brushed red glue” and “cardboard” (49). His labor demands “[n]o gloves: fingertips required / for the perfection of paper / smoothing the exact rectangle” (49). The end of the first stanza explains that as the shift wore on into the night, his hands were damaged with tiny paper cuts from hours of working until he would bleed. Rather than just experiencing monotony like Ignatow’s speaker, Espada’s felt the violence of his tedious work. In the end of the poem, the speaker discloses:

Ten years later, in law school,  
I knew that every legal pad  
was glued with the sting of hidden cuts,  
that every open lawbook  
was a pair of hands  
upturned and burning. (Espada, *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* 49)

Espada’s speaker’s final message is one of solidarity—his awareness from being in the working class that every object requires a construction that came directly from a working-class person’s hands: either operating the machine or making it themselves. His first dream of completion is realized as the speaker transitions from the working class into a classroom of law, transcending his class position through dedication and labor, both physical and mental. The second dream of completion is one of solidarity that comes from the final five lines. Here, he is both grateful for his current station and where he comes from, acknowledging that even if others do not share his social mobility, they are still appreciated for their uncelebrated labor.

Those efforts as well as the bodies who performed them are exactly what Whitman advocated for in “Song of Myself.” He explains, “I celebrate myself, and sing myself / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Whitman,

*American Poetry* 342). While Whitman was celebrating himself, he was also celebrating everyone, no matter their social class, gender, or race. Further, he was extending his utopian invitation to all, one in which they could both see their own worth and find the voice to express it. Ultimately, that is what working-class poetry is—people who once did not feel like they had a place in the cannon both finding their own voice and telling their unique stories without subjectification. Further, it is about resisting the stereotypes that have historically been asserted about the working class. The poets from Whitman to Espada attempt to do this by disproving those prescriptions through their diverse truths, and constantly complicating the narrative of what it means to be an American with underlying dreams of completion.

For this American working-class survey, readers should note that the term “working class” is being used to encapsulate predominately urban labor settings, especially those that cause people to feel as though they are merely bodies on an assembly line. This project does not dive into the extensive complexities of the working poor, races other than Espada’s Latin American heritage, those who must travel for their occupation such as truck drivers, or workers in rural settings such as farmers or coal miners. Each of these factions of American working-class poetry would be a space for this narrative to further complicate. For now, this argument uses Whitman as the jumping-off point to explore how a working-class genealogy develops with the poets who followed, from Williams to Espada.

## CHAPTER 2

### WHITMAN AND WILLIAMS

#### Whitman

The emergence of Walt Whitman (1819-1892) as a poet signifies the beginning of an American poetry canon that existed not only for the privileged, but for all facets of people that made up the diversifying societal landscape. Compared to Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), who understood poetry to be that of the spirit, Whitman understood that the body, as well as the soul, is essential to the human experience. As a result, his work reimagined previous poetic conventions regarding form and content, and strove to democratize American poetry by challenging the expectation of a subjective lyric I. Through that resistance to tradition and his poetic innovation, Whitman laid the groundwork for American, working-class poetry that celebrated the human body's experiences through labor and the solidarity formed because of it. These ideals are heard repeatedly through Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* as he explored the strengths and purposes of various American identities. Although Whitman cannot be truly considered a working-class poet himself, he removed barriers which allowed future poets to experiment with form and content, revolutionizing American poetry and creating a unique canon.

The inherent differences between Emerson and Whitman can be narrowed down to the visual depictions of each man. Stills of Emerson are framed no lower than his upper torso, but usually begin just below the shoulders. This mirrors his belief that poetry should be a place of transcendence for the spirit and that the body should be disregarded. Further, it shows his compliance with the traditions of his predecessors, as does his poetic style of writing lyric verse

from his position as a privileged speaker. In contrast, Whitman's stills, such as his famous frontispiece to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, show most of his body. He did not dress formally for the occasion as Emerson did in suit and tie. Rather, he wore a brimmed hat cocked to the side with a wrinkled, open-neck shirt casually tucked into his trousers. Whitman was not afraid of appearing unsophisticated because he understood that social class does not dictate the value of a person, or poet. Compared to other 19<sup>th</sup>-century poets' etchings and photographs, Whitman was the first to integrate the presence of his body into how his society would envision him.

In "Merlin I," Emerson conveyed the need for a writer to emerge who would revolutionize American poetry and create work that is unique in form and content, unlike both those European poets who came before and Emerson himself. However, in order to do that, this poet "shall not his brain encumber / With the coil of rhythm and number" (Whitman, *American Poetry* 122). Emerson realized that most poetry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was obsessed with form and that to create an American poetic voice unlike its predecessors', someone needed to come along who would unapologetically throw conventions out the window and be unconcerned with the public opinion of what poetry should look and sound like. He wrote that "America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres" (Emerson 262). At the time, the ability to write using prescribed meters reflected the prestige of the poet. However, the mastery of these forms required someone to have the leisure and schooling to achieve such mastery. Because of this, poetry became a pastime for the privileged of both time and education, which was closely related to their position in society.

Not only was form a reflection of social class, so was content. Up until now, it was within natural landscapes that a poet found subjective transcendence. Such as in Emerson's "To Rhea,"

which states, “I have come from the spring-woods, / From the fragrant solitudes;— / Listen what the poplar-tree / And murmuring waters counselled me” (Whitman, *American Poetry* 102). Here, Emerson had the leisure time for solitude and a conference with nature. Instead of having to work the land and experience it through labor, he spoke from a privileged perspective. While he might not have physically gone out into nature in order to write these lines, he did so in spirit. However, Emerson believed that everyone should have firsthand experience with nature to better know themselves. In “The Poet,” he asks:

Who loves nature? Who does not? Is it only poets, and men of leisure and cultivation, who live with her? No; but also hunters, farmers, grooms and butchers, though they express their affection in their choice of life and not in their choice of words. The writer wonders what the coachman or the hunter values in riding, in horses and dogs. (Emerson 249)

While he validated the working men’s relationship with nature, he does not assert that they used language to express it. Whitman, through his poetry, did as Emerson suggested and “wonder[ed]” what those various personas around him were thinking and feeling. In doing so, he allowed these working people to be seen in poetry, which up until then was usually reserved for poets like Emerson to contemplate their existence and relationship with nature through the subjective lyric verse.

One obstacle that emerging American poets such as Whitman faced was trying to create poetry that was not confined to traditional poetic forms, meters, and content, which were “associated with polite rather than plebian culture” (Landry 224). He conveyed this in his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* as he explained, “For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new” (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 714), and displayed his resistance to the



old by challenging its typical poetic landscapes. His poetry focused on the unique American urban and rural realities that were beginning to shape a new national identity and included characters that before now had not been seen in poetry, such as “the opium eater” and “prostitute,” listing them right next to people of power such as “The President” (Whitman, *American Poetry* 356). Through this juxtaposition, he attempted to democratize both poetry and societal perceptions by being all-inclusive and claiming that every person and experience had value. He proved this by putting himself into the mindset of various people and placing himself in communion with them. This comes up as he considers, “The woodman that takes his axe and jug with him shall take me with him all day, / The farmboy ploughing in the field feels good at the sound of my voice, / [ . . . ] I go with fisherman and seamen, and love them” (Whitman, *American Poetry* 399-400). As he situated himself into scenarios using the different people who made up the ever-developing American society, specifically working-class bodies, he allowed those of lower classes to see themselves as subjects of poetry for the first time.

By limiting human experiences to only those of the spirit since “[t]he Universe is the externalization of the soul” (Emerson 248), Emerson neglected a pivotal aspect of quotidian existence, specifically for the working class. He denied the necessary connection between the body and the spirit. Whitman claimed that to “[l]ack one lacks both. . . . and the unseen is proved by the seen” (Whitman, *American Poetry* 344), which acknowledged that those truths of the spirit cannot be validated without understanding the truths of the body. As seen in “The Poet,” Emerson believed:

We were put into our bodies as fire is put into a pan to be carried about: but there is no accurate adjustment between the spirit and the organ, much less is the latter the germination of the former. So in regard to other forms, the intellectual men do

not believe in any essential dependence of the material world on thought and volition. . . [P]oets are contented with a civil and conformed manner of living, and to write poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience.

(Emerson 242)

Whitman could not imagine why poetry should be devoid of physical experiences since those are some of the truest that can be known. Therefore, he reasoned, “I am the poet of the body, / And I am the poet of the soul. / The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are with me, / The first I graft and increase upon myself . . . the latter I translate into a new tongue”

(Whitman, *American Poetry* 362). As a poet, he knew the body, as well as the soul, could find transcendence through language which payed tribute to the medium through which working-class Americans related with the world around them.

Whitman gave a voice to the imperfect bodies through his poetry, those people of lower classes who up until then were only regarded by their labor and societal position rather than their thoughts or feelings. He understood that “[t]he United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 711), and saw the country as a collective, not divided into parts based on those classes. By neglecting to include working class identities in poetic landscapes, poets who came before Whitman ignored the people who constituted the backbone of the nation’s society. *Leaves of Grass* both allowed them to be seen and celebrated the physical medium that allows humans to experience the world and participate in labor. Whitman admired every experience of the body, even those that were not mentioned in polite settings. For instance, he wrote, “The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer” (Whitman, *American Poetry* 366). To the upper-classes, physical imperfections were not associated with religion or pride. Whitman validated those who were previously voiceless with his poetry:

Through me many long dumb voices,  
 .....  
 Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,  
 Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs,  
 .....  
 And of the rights of them the others are down upon,  
 Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,  
 .....  
 Through me forbidden voices,  
 Voices of sexes and lusts . . . . voices veiled, and I remove the veil,  
 Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured. (Whitman, *American Poetry*  
 365-366)

He not only allowed those undesirable bodies to be seen, but asserted that their voices should be heard and liberated. Further, he assured that those vessels were also valued by the spirit when he said, “Here are the rougns and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves” (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 721). This confirmed that not only are the body and spirit to be regarded together, but that they themselves value their union.

Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman encouraged solidarity between his readers by valuing their physical experiences and asserting that those are married to the spirit’s. His voice was unlike those of poets who came before, specifically Emerson, who found transcendence through a subjective lyric which favored people of privilege, of both leisure and education, and alienated lower-class readers with the use of traditional forms and content. Whitman sought to democratize poetry for all facets of American society as he said, “Unscrew the locks from the

doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!” (Whitman, *American Poetry* 365).

This was his advocacy for the removal of previous conventions which limited who was to be included in poetry. Note, he did not suggest that doors should merely be opened, because to do so would have suggested that they could one day be closed again. Rather, he called for those barriers to have the locks removed and, finally, separated from the frames that contained them. Further, the means by which these doors were to be deconstructed appealed to the close relation between the working class and the materials associated with labor. Those of upper classes may not have been familiar with how to separate a door from its jamb. This call to action, which required physical labor and knowhow, appealed to the working class by phrasing it in a way that was tailored to their unique and valuable skillsets.

By challenging traditional poetic forms, landscapes, and conventions, Whitman started the conversation of democratizing American poetry for future working-class poets and discredited people who discriminated against others based on class, gender, or race. He wrote:

Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, / Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . . eating drinking and breeding, / No sentimentalist . . . . no stander above men and women or apart from them . . . . no more modest than immodest. [. . .] Whoever degrades another degrades me. [. . .] (Whitman, *American Poetry* 365)

Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, as Whitman put himself into the bodies and mindsets of various American identities, both powerful and unloved, he broadened the scope of poetic subjects that were considered up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With this, he set the stage for working-class poets to come, and gave their voices confidence because although Emerson did not believe that those

laboring bodies could express themselves through language, Whitman believed that such expression should be available to all.

However, while Whitman removed the door which separated those of lower societal classes from being regarded as bodies capable of poetic language, he was still privileged because of his race, gender, and access to literature. His work was revolutionary for the time and instrumental in redefining the value system by which Americans regarded one another. While he did work from a young age in the printing business, that opportunity allowed him to experience literature and writing firsthand as part of his labor, which most working-class occupations would not have done. Further, while Whitman allowed the bodies of lower classes to be subjects for the first time in poetry, his accounts romanticized one aspect of their lives without commenting on the downsides and frequent violence which riddled nineteenth-century working-class existence. His poetry did encourage solidarity between these bodies, however, and his experimentation with form and content encouraged future poets like William Carlos Williams to do the same.

### Williams

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) labored as a doctor and writer, and strove to both dedicate his life to each and allow one venture to inspire the other. The day-to-day experiences with his patients, and those he encountered on his way to them, laid the groundwork for some of his most celebrated poems. However, Williams did not use these muses because he sought monetary gain or fame through their subjection. Rather, he wrote about those such as the “poor old woman” in order to revere in her unacknowledged beauty and complexity, and make it known to the world. His passion for his patients and mankind as a whole allowed his poetry, like Whitman’s, to challenge the previous traditions regarding appropriate subjects in order to create

a new thread that was unique because of its simple, but intentional, Imagist form and dedication to Williams' hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey. However, Williams' early poetry reveals his struggle of when using concise, Modernist forms, he often only represents one side of a working-class person rather than a complex, full perspective. While part of this comes from the limitations of his form when compared to that of Romanticism, it also reflects the conditions of his elitist lyric I. His position as a poet and working man was complicated, for while he dedicated his life to being a doctor for lower classes, that occupation was one of power. As an authority on medicine to those without that knowledge, he was superior to them, and while he was saving lives, there was still a disconnect because of class.

As a physician, Williams understood the importance and value of the human body; specifically, like Whitman, he knew of its utility as it is the means through which a human relates to, and experiences, his or her surroundings. Williams also knew Whitman's poetry first hand:

In 1902, while a student at Horace Mann High School in New York City, Williams read a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. When, in the fall of that year, he entered the University of Pennsylvania, he later recalled, "I took that book with me, and I absorbed it with enthusiasm. I loved to read the poems to myself." The enthusiastic delight of his discovery was expressed in a set of notebooks in which he was writing "quick spontaneous poems" in the manner of Whitman. (Breslin 613)

This first encounter was not the only time Williams would imitate Whitman's style. His 1917 book of poetry *Al Que Quiere!* includes the poem "Danse Russe" which celebrates both Whitman and the body. It exclaims:

if I in my north room  
dance naked, grotesquely  
before my mirror  
waving my shirt round my head  
and singing softly to myself:  
“I am lonely, lonely.  
I was born to be lonely,  
I am best so!”  
If I admire arms, my face,  
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks  
against the yellow drawn shades,—

Who shall say I am not  
the happy genius of my household? (Williams 86-87)

Here, Williams does not shy away from the “grotesque” human body, but rather, delights in every part of it. His narrative, lyric style mirrors Whitman’s, but he makes it his own as he includes very specific labels for the sections of himself he is looking at. Further, he associates his body with his emotional condition, and in the poem’s final remark, questions who could have any say of what he believes to be true. While Emerson spoke as an authority regarding a human’s experience between the body and the spirit, Williams seeks to take that power back and give it to the individual. “Danse Russe” is Williams’ take on Whitman’s “Song of Myself” as he sings lyrics of admiration despite imperfection. In the final two lines, the speaker questions, “Who shall say I am not / the happy genius of my household?” Just like in “Song of Myself,” the

potential for an individual's greatness is limitless if that person can take the time to celebrate the self.

As diverse as his lyric subjects are, there are limitations to the level of understanding Williams exhibits and his considerations of the multi-facets of his subjects' lives. One way he does this is by acknowledging the bodies but not giving enough regard to the people's emotional and mental capacities. This can be seen in "The Young Laundryman." Williams writes:

Ladies, I crave your indulgence for  
My friend Wu Kee; young, agile, clear-eyed  
And clean-limbed, his muscles ripple  
Under the thin blue shirt; and his naked feet, in  
Their straw sandals, lift at the heels, shift and  
Find new postures continually.

Your husband's shirts to wash, please, for Wu Kee. (Williams 122-123)

While this poem does allow Wu Kee, the laundryman to be seen by readers, Williams does so in a one-sided way. He simplifies the working-man as just a body, and neglects to mention any further complexities of his person besides his rippling "muscles." Granted, Williams does depict the laundryman in a way that is appealing to both the reader and the wives in the poem, but in doing so he sexualizes his labor and leaves him as an object of the poem. Part of this objectification comes from Wu Kee's position in society, a vessel to gather the dirty clothes of the "[l]adies" and "husband[s]" who are wealthy enough to outsource with a laundry service. Ideally, this poem could have served as a space for an unseen working-class person to navigate into a subject position for the first time. Instead, Wu Kee is eternalized as an object, both of the



speaker and the women's gaze, and limited as a "young" and attractive body that is never allowed to disclose the complexities of his soul.

Through the position Williams often takes in regards to his working and lower-class subjects, he fixes himself as a privileged viewer, even if he does so unintentionally. Part of the separation Williams portrays between his working-class subjects and what mental and emotional complexities are at work beneath the skin could come from his occupation as a physician and therefore, his natural instinct to compartmentalize a body. Williams defines "the artist as an inconspicuous and ordinary man who, subordinating desire for personal triumph, dedicated himself to his artistic task with the impersonal intensity of the scientist" (Breslin 615). By using this scientific standpoint, he often dehumanizes the working-class people he describes. Further, by pairing those primal descriptions with adjectives that indicate a tone of morality, he both exhibits an elitist position and solidifies this perspective for his readers to also take up. In his 1917 poem from *Al Que Quiere!*, "The Strike," Williams writes:

Heavy drink where the low, sloping foreheads  
The flat skulls with the unkempt black or blond hair,  
The ugly legs of the young girls, pistons  
Too powerful for delicacy!  
The women's wrists, the men's arms red  
Used to heat and cold, to toss quartered beeves  
And barrels, and milk-cans, and crates of fruit!  
  
"Faces all knotted up like burls on oaks,  
Grasping, fox-snouted, thick-lipped,

Sagging breasts and protruding stomachs,

Rasping voices, filthy habits with the hands. (Williams 111)

Unlike with Wu Kee, the descriptions of the body he uses here are not appealing, but rather, inspire disgust in the reader. Williams does this both through depictions of specific physical characteristics as well as their actions. The poet describes “flat skulls,” “ugly legs,” “[f]aces all knotted up like burls on oaks,” “thick lipped,” and “sagging breasts.” Rather than look at those humans as wholes, he breaks them in to undesirable parts which takes away from their humanity.

Williams pairs those body parts with linking verbs that assonate in: “Grasping . . . Sagging . . . Rasping.” These are words of desperation, deformation, and discomfort—which are honest, yet unpleasant realities of the human experience. Further, they embody an element of neglect, either of body or basic human necessities; however, this element may be no fault of the subjects themselves, but rather products of the socioeconomic positions. He describes:

Why since I have failed them can it be anything

But their own brood? Can it be anything but brutality?

On that at least they’re united! That at least

Is their bean soup, their calm bread and a few luxuries! (Williams 111)

These indicate a lack of the luxuries that come with a certain income bracket. However, Williams characterizes these simplicities with adjectives like “calm,” which compared to others that he uses in the poem, feel comforting, yet demeaning. His lack of desire to discover the complexities of the strikers’ emotions, rather than just deem them on the surface as “brut[es]” speaks to his elitist lyric position as a speaker, not a product of objectification that these working-class subjects experience. Finally, Williams adds in adjectives that connect their physical condition to a degree of their morality, seen in “filthy habits with the hands.” Although

this depiction might be accurate, the way he combines the filth and degradation of their bodies to words that could be used to articulate both a level of uncleanness of body and spirit positions the poet as a subject in an elite position as he is able to make these assumptions about the people he describes.

Just as Whitman's form and subject matter came from a desire to navigate away from the Transcendentalist poetic tradition in favor of his own democratic path, Williams' elitist viewpoint is also a product of his historical place as an Imagist trying to get away from the Romantics who came before. That could be why his poems which de-romanticize the human body through stark images and honest depictions seem to present accurate representations of the working class but do so without taking the time to consider deeper emotions at play. However, early on in his life, Williams decided he wanted to position himself above those who had to struggle to survive so he could pursue his art. In his autobiography, he describes his occupational choices:

I would continue medicine, for I was determined to be a poet; only medicine, a job I enjoyed, would make it possible for me to live and write as I wanted to. . . . My furious wish was to be normal, undrunk, balanced in everything. I would marry (but not yet!), have children and still write, in fact, therefore to write. I would not court disease, live in the slums for the sake of art, give lice a holiday. I would not "die for art," but live for it, grimly! and work, work, work (like Pop), beat the game and be free (like Mom, poor soul!) to write, write as I alone should write, for the sheer drunkenness of it, I might have added. (Breslin 615)

While this passage articulates that Williams was indeed a hard-working man, it also shows his ability to make the conscious choice to pick a white-collar profession in order to pursue his

creative outlets, which most working-class people would not have had the opportunity or means to do.

In the end, it was not Williams' working-class subject matter, but rather his revolutionary free verse and concise, Imagist form that pushed away from the poetic traditions of those formal poets who came before. In this way, he was a man of the people, and like Whitman, desired to make poetry more democratic and accessible. Further, by using scenes that he witnessed on his way to work, he expanded the American cannon to include poetry that was particular to a time and place, specifically, those urban landscapes that were diversifying and growing in the mid-twentieth century. One example is "XV" from "January Morning" in *Al Que Quiere!* He writes:

All this—  
was for you, old woman.  
I wanted to write a poem  
That you would understand.  
For what good is it to me  
If you can't understand it? (Williams 103)

His final two lines pose a relevant and vital question to the democratization of American poetry—what good is a poem if it can only be read by a fraction of the population? In poems such as Emerson's "To Rhea," the romantic and pastoral sentiment is lovely, but in the end, some of the population would never actually understand the action of sitting next to a spring and listening to its message; they would have to experience it through imagination, which has limitations. In "XV," Williams allows his readers, no matter their level of intellect or socioeconomic status, to both feel immersed in the poem and experience transcendence in the

process. By doing so, he creates a solidarity among his readers that the lyric speaker in “To Rhea” could never achieve.

In many of his poems, Williams explores how each individual he encounters has a unique story to tell and specialized understanding of the world. Often, those subjects are his patients, but he also extends the narrative to those he passes on the street or meets in other facets of his life besides his occupation. In this sense, like Whitman, Williams gives a voice to a class of Americans that did not appear before now, dramatically diversifying the canon’s subject matter. However, while his impact is crucial for setting the stage for later poets, these working and lower class individuals remain subjects in his poems, and he looks at their lives from the outside with a limited view of their complexities and true personalities. But these moments that Williams captures, while brief, tell more than what has been known before now in American poetry about the humans that are on the outskirts of polite society.

Further, because Williams’ landscape is centralized within the city his profession caters to, each story he tells weaves together an ever-expanding narrative of urban life that foils the traditional pastoral poetic tradition that was once an expected staple to qualify a poem that confers with transcendent spirits. Even though Williams’ early poetry reveals his struggle with finding a balance between embracing the contemporary Imagist form while fighting his innate elitist subject position, his later poetry such as “Paterson” show his internal tension of transcending his class perspective to be more democratic, but his lifetime’s social and cultural influences make that a difficult battle. His later work show Williams’ attempt to push against his past, privileged perspective and reconsider the complexities of the working-class people who had had come to get to know and respect, such as with the poets Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Allen Ginsberg.

While Williams wrote poetry from an elitist position above his subjects, he did not take the same stance that there should be superiority among poets. Just as how in “XV” of “January Morning” he thought that the act of reading poetry should be available to all, he also took a democratic stance towards who should be allowed to write poetry and that poetry itself is something that cannot be qualified in a way that puts one poet or poem above another. David Ignatow, a poet and mentee of Williams, recalls how at a reading, Williams opened the event by reading a poem of Ignatow’s. Afterwards, as they walked down the street, Ignatow remembers in a book of memoirs, “[Williams] suddenly burst out to say—I wish I could recall his exact words—‘There is no competition among poets!’” (Ignatow, *Open Between Us* 175). For the traditional poets of Whitman’s time, it would have been incorrect to assert that there was no competition against poets. Poets compared themselves based off the prestige of education and the handle with which a poet can master the various timeless poetic forms. So even though Williams might have compared himself to his subjects in an elitist way, among writers, he encouraged solidarity and encouragement.

## CHAPTER 3

### IGNATOW AND LEVINE

#### Ignatow

David Ignatow (1914-1997) deeply identifies with the working class, which can be seen through its complex representation in his poetry and his personal experience both coming from a working-class family and holding laborious jobs from a young age. His father owned a butcher shop in Brooklyn, New York, and Ignatow recalls that he opened the establishment after he “had been blackballed from the bookbinding industry for leading a strike against the owner of the shop” (Ignatow, *The One in the Many* 7). His father held a good position as the foreman, but because he was a “Social Democrat from the old days in Kiev,” he fought for the rights of the his coworkers since he found “himself in sympathy with [their] pains and tribulations” (Ignatow, *The One in the Many* 7,8). The compassion for the working class that Ignatow inherited from his father would both shape him as a person and a poet, as would his first job at seven years old running errands for his father’s butcher shop.

Even though Ignatow gained an early understanding of the working world’s harsh realities, he had a passion for school and determined at an early age, “I was cut out for a special life, that of a writer, different from everyone else among my friends in school and at play in the neighborhood” (Ignatow, *The One in the Many* 13). His dedication to this dream and deep reverence for the hard work he and his family labored to get there comes through in the way he approaches his working-class subjects in his poems. Further, it can be seen in how he achieves transcendence and solidarity with his readers by threading acts of labor and earned leisure in a democratic, easy-to-read way that does not take advantage of his subjects but rather adequately

represents them and, finally, gives them a proper voice. Like Williams, as Ignatow learned about poetry he, too, became dissatisfied with the Romantic poetic tradition, as well as aspects of the Modernist, and realized that “to live and to survive in this environment [he] had to discover the language that corresponded to what he was undergoing. Finding it would at least be a beginning toward a truth with which [he] could then live, ugly as it was going to be” (Ignatow, *The One in the Many* 90).

Ignatow’s complex understanding of his working-class subjects in relation to that of Williams can be seen in the comparison of “The Young Laundryman” and Ignatow’s “The Errand Boy I.” In the poem, Ignatow expresses:

To get quicker through the day  
and to bring on night as a blessing,  
to lie down in a sleep that is a dream  
of completion, he takes up his package  
from the floor—he has been ordered  
to do so, heavy as it is, his knees weakening  
as he walks, one would never know  
by his long stride—and carries it  
to the other end of the room. (Ignatow, *Against the Evidence* 42)

Like with “The Young Laundryman,” Ignatow’s poem describes the labor of an errand boy whose job is to serve others. However, while Williams’ poem looks at the laundry man, Wu Kee, only on a sexualized surface and physical level, Ignatow considers what the errand boy both desires and experiences. He acknowledges that the subject in the poem must do what “he has been ordered to do,” through acts of labor that are strenuous on his body. However, the subject



does not let on about the struggles he experiences to those around him. Instead, he does his duty in order to “get quicker through the day.” Ignatow’s insight into underlying complexities is best seen when he reveals that the subject works hard in order to “bring on night as a blessing, / to lie down in a sleep that is a dream / of completion” (*Against the Evidence* 42). While the reader knows that Wu Kee works, but not why, the errand boy’s act of working is because he dreams of being finished with work as to experience uninterrupted leisure.

Ignatow sought to not only write in a form that was accessible both to himself and his readers, but also include subjects and subject matter that honestly depicted the true human experience. In a 1953 journal entry, he wrote:

These slow and measured styles of our academic poets and their imitators indicate to me their utter detachment from living. They are not fit to be read by men and women whose lives are mixed up in needs and requirements, who must struggle with every thought, emotion and action for mastery, who must maintain this same struggle with the outside world—all simply to sustain themselves as individuals in their own right. The verse of the academic poet does not reflect even the life of the academic world. There too power struggles exist but one would not know it from their writings. (Ignatow, *The Notebooks of David Ignatow* 59).

His democratic perspective carries over into the way he approaches the subjects of the poems. While Williams’ poems had their flaws when it came to accurately representing the true working-class experience, Ignatow’s poems both look at those imperfect aspects at face value as well as attempts to understand their root causes. This might stem from his deep understanding of the working class as “men and women whose lives are mixed up with needs and requirements . . . simply to sustain themselves as individuals in their own right” (Ignatow, *The Notebooks of*

*David Ignatow* 59). In his memoirs, Ignatow recalls a memory from his childhood in which he was “‘put back,’ having failed in all subjects and with a notice that [he] had lice in [his] hair” (Ignatow, *The One in the Many* 8). Ignatow said that his father, angry at the news, “‘raised his hand to strike me. I was sure that my father, if he had not been so exhausted, the chicken feathers still clinging to his wrists and his hands smeared with blood, would have understood” that Ignatow’s poor grades were a direct result of having to help at his father’s butcher shop every day in order to help his family make ends meet (Ignatow, *The One in the Many* 9).

In Williams’ poem “The Poor” from *Sour Grapes*, he writes:

By constantly tormenting them  
with reminders of the lice in  
their children’s hair, the  
School Physician first  
brought their hatred down on him.  
But by this familiarity  
they grew used to him, and so,  
at last,  
took him for their friend and advisor. (Williams 159)

Here, readers see the speaker’s elitist position as he is superior both in knowledge and cleanliness above his poor subjects. Titling the poem as “The Poor” is one indicator of privilege as Williams does not try to label his subjects as anything more than their class position. Further, Williams does not take the time to reflect on the fact that the patients might have lice because they have unavoidable circumstances that cause them to be dirty, such as Ignatow’s family’s meat business, not because they refuse to take care of themselves.

If Williams would have been looking at Ignatow's almost-violent memory, he might have only seen the face-value factors: a father about to hit his son out of anger, covered in blood and feathers. Because of Ignatow's personal relationship with the working class, his poetry can strip those simple stereotypes away and look at the people beneath their class position: humans who do what they have to in order to get by, but are more than what can be surveyed in a single moment. This appears in his poem "East Side West." Ignatow writes:

The stairs squeak like mice caught outside  
their holes. I notice the stained brown door  
of my neighbor, perhaps the one whose mailbox  
I have envied, packed full like a suckling pig.  
The door sounds with life behind it,  
the door seems to speak: a mother shrieks  
at her youngest daughter, snaps at her next  
oldest child, grumbles to herself  
of the work, curses the whole bunch around her.  
"Kids, kids!" She needs help, lonely for help.  
A mother, I recall, of four, her hair  
braided around her hawk features. Trailed  
by these four ducklings, she lugs shopping bags  
in both hands up five flights. The good husband  
every night at six races up the stairs  
and his rat-tat on the door demands entrance  
into his rightful troubles. The door closes

behind him and begins to sound with a new tune:

money, the bosses, the working conditions,

the other workers. Stinks, all stinks.

He is lonely for help.

[ . . . ] (Ignatow, *Against the Evidence* 19-20)

While someone unfamiliar with the complexities of the working-class home life might have only focused on the sounds of fighting and complaining, Ignatow understands the many layers of tension and labor this family experiences. Even though it is not noted that the mother has to report to a job, she has to endure the double labor of watching the children and taking care of the home. As Ignatow describes, these “four ducklings” don’t make this task easy since the speaker notes that the mother “needs help, lonely for help.” The father, too, is “lonely for help” as he has to withstand unpleasant external factors at his work such as “the bosses, the working conditions, / the other workers” in order to make money to support his family. Like Williams’ description of the working class in “The Strike,” Ignatow provides brief physical descriptions of the mother, seen in “her hawk features.” Considering the many factors she has to manage, the use of “hawk” makes her sounds fierce, but all-together strong. Ignatow instead focuses on the stresses that cause the family’s tension rather than trying to dehumanize them for their imperfections.

This repeated phrase, “lonely for help,” indicates Ignatow’s understanding of the subjects’ spiritual desires, which ultimately represent an absence in their lives. Like the subject’s “dream of completion” in “The Young Laundryman,” the subjects in “East Side West” also dream of being emotionally complete and supported. “Lonely for help” could be two different kinds of help. The first is the most obvious, help with the immediate tasks at hand: raising the children, dealing with the boss at work, putting food on the table. The second kind of help stems

from a desire to feel complete, not-lonely—solidarity of the spirit in which others can understand society’s toll on the soul. Here, Ignatow reveals his true grasp on the working-class experience. Yes, they have this “dream of completion” in which the work day is finished and leisure can begin. But more importantly, the “dream of completion” consists of a physical and spiritual wholeness in every aspect of one’s mind and life—an ideal Whitman strove for in “Song of Myself.”

Ignatow describes the toll of the mundane working-class experience in “For One Moment.” He writes:

You take the dollar  
and hand it to the fellow beside you  
who turns and gives it to the next one  
down the line. The world being round,  
you stand waiting, smoking and lifting  
a cup of coffee to your lips, talking  
of seasonal weather and hinting  
at problems. The dollar returns,  
the coffee spills to the ground  
in your hurry. You have the money  
in one hand, a cup in the other,  
a cigarette in your mouth,  
and for one moment have forgotten  
what it is you have to do,  
your hair grey, your legs weakened

from long standing. (Ignatow, *Against the Evidence* 59-60)

Ignatow describes what many in the working-class experience, a combination of labor and longing for the moment when that labor can turn into completion and leisure, which may never arrive. This also appears in “The Errand Boy I” when the subject works efficiently as to be able to have that “dream of completion.” However, in “For One Moment,” Ignatow extends the lyric I to strive for solidarity. Each working man stands in a line, waiting for enough time to pass so that they can receive monetary compensation. The poet includes common actions that indicate the fleeting moments of leisure the laborers can indulge in: smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, and conversing about the weather and personal problems. The end of the poem is a reminder that earning that money does not come without a physical cost as the workers find their “hair grey . . . legs weakened / from long standing.” The subjects in the poem and readers alike experience transcending solidarity because of the honest reality that this instance is inevitable for every working man and woman—that in the process of laboring to pursue completion, the subjects’ bodies are worn down, as well as experience a loss of time and youth, which is something that a price should not be put on.

Looking past the physical, Ignatow also understands the subject’s desire to experience that “dream of completion,” as seen in the “one moment [in which you] have forgotten / what it is you have to do.” That moment represents the subject’s transcendence past the body’s present labor—the dream of experiencing what’s beyond one’s class position to know the spiritual completion one can feel when that “lonel[iness]” is addressed and resolved. Williams used his poetry as a means to find personal transcendence as a privileged, lyric seer. His subjects never moved past their position, and never became complete or multifaceted. This could be because, as Williams expressed in his autobiography, his “furious wish was to be normal, undrunk, balanced

in everything” (Breslin 615). Williams desired control and so categorized his working-class subjects into terms that he dictated, rather than moving past that which he couldn’t easily understand. In contrast, Ignatow’s poetry allows his subjects to experience transcendence as they are known for more than their bodies or class. Because he wrote as a true, working-class man, he can understand their physical and spiritual discontent because, personally, he shares them.

As a part of life, individuals work in pursuit of moments of completion which may never come. However, Ignatow does not allow this injustice to alienate him from the world around him and his fellow man. Instead, he explains, “[m]y heart goes out to all men. I am comforted by my identity with them, eating and dying. I feel I have gained much in having them to live with through my life. I feel I am natural. I feel I am like a leaf, a blade of grass. I feel I belong and shall endure beyond my death” (Ignatow, *The Notebooks of David Ignatow* 223). This solidarity is like that of Whitman’s in “Song of Myself” as he understands that he is powerful as an individual but also part of something greater. It allows him to transcend his class-created subject position to see the community that can form between working men that once might have felt alone because of a skewed societal system.

#### Levine

Philip Levine’s (1928-2015) poetry adds to the working-class narrative that Ignatow established, but his tone is often less optimistic and highlights the honest sadness the world of labor can contain. In “The Everlasting Sunday,” he shows his understanding of the monotony of labor and the tolls it can take on one’s body and spirit. He begins with:

Waiting for it

in line to punch out

or punch in.  
Bowed my head  
.....  
talked with men  
who couldn't talk, marked  
my bread with the black  
print of my thumb  
and ate it. (Levine, *Not This Pig* 22)

Like Ignatow's "For One Moment," Levine's poem describes a speaker who goes through the motions in order to sustain himself, and tries to combat his boredom by conversing with coworkers who don't really reciprocate. In the final line of the poem, after a long day of work and a walk home, the speaker questions, "When was I young?" (Levine, *Not This Pig* 23). This question articulates one that most in the working class realize because even though they are paid for their labor, it often isn't enough to cover the loss of time and youth.

Levine encapsulates what it means to be a poet for the working man. While his published works alternate between natural and urban worlds, his earliest interactions with verse stemmed from a connection between spiritual expressions and the woods near his house. He remembers from 1941 that he would sneak out into the night, go to his favorite tree near his house in Detroit, "lean back and survey the night sky. There was no industry in this part of the city, and so the stars were visible . . . [o]ne night I began to speak both to and of them" (Levine, *The Bread of Time* 80). This oratorical act allowed Levine to experiment with language in privacy as well as practice the art of observation, which is crucial for poetry. He remembers that "in sentence after sentence I'd go on to list all that was being born within and outside me, though in the dense night



I could hardly discern where I ended and the rest of the world began” (Levine, *The Bread of Time* 80). While Emerson would approve of poetry being a product of nature and spirit in harmony, Levine’s was not limited to that which was experienced by only his soul. When he was fourteen, he began working in auto factories which meant that like Ignatow, he had first-hand experience with the working class from a young age. That hard, dangerous work shaped his identity, and therefore the writings that followed tried to articulate those experiences.

Levine, just like most emerging poets in the twentieth century, experimented with those established, traditional poetic forms on his way to finding his distinct voice. Williams’ “Spring and All” was crucial for this personal discovery because after Levine read it, he “knew [his] future was somehow through this poet” (Levine, *The Bread of Time* 54). His previous “models had been Crane, Eliot, Auden, Yeats, Hardy, and Dylan Thomas” (Levine, *The Bread of Time* 54). After encountering “Spring and All,” Levine began to publish some of his own work. Specifically, one of his early publications appeared in a 1954 issue of *Poetry*, in which Williams’ poem “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” was also printed. He recalls:

My own poem on that occasion was formal, rhymed pentameter, and, while the diction and syntax struggled to echo speech, beside the magnificent ease of the Williams I sounded stuffy and far more rational and reserved than I actually am. I was stuck by the fact that in some strange way Williams sounded more like me than I did . . . (Levine, *The Bread of Time* 55)

Levine’s poetry benefited from his knowledge of form and meter, and later decision to not let those prescriptions inhibit his voice and content. When he became a teacher, Levine used “Spring and All” in order to “make the poets understand why it was the most important poem I ever read and how it turned me away from my English masters toward the effort to create a

poetry original and audacious enough to be American” (Levine, *The Bread of Time* 57). His following poetry books would do just that, and further, integrate content that represented his working-class roots.

In *What Work Is*, the title poem describes subjects waiting in line for the chance to work. However, more than that, it discloses the reasons why the subjects work as hard as they do—the other avenues they pursue to make them feel complete. Levine writes:

[your brother is] home trying to  
sleep off a miserable night shift  
at Cadillac so he can get up  
before noon to study his German.  
Works eight hours a night so he can sing  
Wagner, the opera you hate the most,  
the worst music ever invented. (Levine, *What Work Is* 18)

The narrative Levine includes humanizes the subjects in the poem and makes their desires accessible to the reader. It describes that, like Levine, they work in order to chase what makes them feel whole and like something more than a working-class laborer. Here, the subjects are more than just bodies that are worn down over time. They are diligent because they want more, a trait that Levine, and many of his readers, can relate to. The beginning of the poem, like Ignatow’s “For One Moment,” describes the monotonous waiting game that comes with trying to get work. He writes, “We stand in the rain in a long line / waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work. / [ . . . ] This is about waiting, / shifting from one foot to another” (Levine, *What Work Is* 18). Not only do the poem’s subjects undergo labor as to find completion, but they also must do

nothing but wait in order to find work, which takes another precious commodity from the men, their time.

While Williams' "The Young Laundryman" only looks at the subject, Wu Kee, from everyone's perspective but his own, Levine's "Fear and Fame" discloses the behind-the-scenes of a working-class man's daily routine. The speaker shows the process once he gets home from work:

Then to disrobe down to my work pants and shirt,  
my black street shoes and white cotton socks,  
to reassume my nickname, strap on my Bulova,  
screw back my wedding ring, and with tap water  
gargle away the bitterness as best I could. (Levine, *What Work Is* 3)

Levine's description shows the simplicities of the actions as well as their complexities. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker had to don his uniform for labor, specifically his "wide rubber hip boots, / gauntlets to the elbow, a plastic helmet / like a knight's but with a little glass window / that kept steaming over, and a respirator / to save [his] smoke-stained lungs" (Levine, *What Work Is* 3). Once he returns home, the speaker must remove that clothing meant for his own protection at his dangerous occupation as well as try to scrub away the day's labor as a whole. Step by step, the speaker gets closer to feeling like a human again through actions like screwing on his wedding ring and putting on his watch. But he also has to "reassume" parts of his personality like his nickname, and attempt to wash away "the bitterness" of his day the best he can. At the end of the poem, the speaker acknowledges his feelings of incompleteness as he gets ready to return to his job again, admitting he is "stiffened / by the knowledge that to descend and rise up / from the other world merely once in eight hours is half / what it takes to be known

among men and women” (Levine, *What Work Is* 4). While the subject in “What Work Is” can both work as well as pursue other avenues that make him feel whole, the speaker in “Fear and Fame” realizes that eight hours a day is not enough time to cultivate every aspect of a human life. His dreams of completion cannot be actualized, no matter how hard he works.

Levine’s poetry speaks to the dismal realities of the working-class existence, truths that infiltrate and taint those idealized dreams of completion. In “A Dozen Dawn Songs, Plus One,” Levine writes:

8 a.m. and we punch out  
and leave the place to our betters,  
the day-shift jokers who think  
they’re in for fun. It’s still Monday  
2,000 miles and fifty years  
later and at my back I always  
hear Chevy Gear & Axle  
grinding the night-shift workers  
into antiquity. (Levine, *The Last Shift* 47)

The speaker acknowledges the physical and mental toll that his occupation takes. First, it affects his ability to find joy in a situation, as seen in those “day-shift jokers” who come into work with optimism, accompanied by the sun. Further, even though the speaker acknowledges that he is presently “2,000 miles and fifty years” away from the experience, he still hears the sounds associated with his job at “Chevy Gear & Axle,” and has mental trauma because of that work. Eventually, those memories causes the speaker to feel as though his spirit he is “grind[ed] . . . into antiquity” just as the metal for the cars is, which solidifies his eternal place in the working-

class factory world. Levine acknowledges the tragedy of the speaker's incompleteness in an honest, but heartbreaking way. In comparison, Ignatow often finds a way to stay idealistic within his poems, while Levine illuminates the unfairness and downfalls of the working-class without any indication that is aware of solutions to those problems.

Ultimately, Levine chose to write about the working class and its truths because of his deep feeling of reverence for those associated. Unlike his poetic predecessors who could only relate from a privileged lyric, outside perspective, Levine understood both the physical and spiritual sacrifices involved and that the working class could never be defined by anything other than multifaceted. Working class people did not labor every day just because they're told to, or because they could do nothing greater. Instead, these people dream of something greater that was not handed to them in silver wrapping. This knowledge allowed Levine to write poetry that encouraged solidarity among those who understood his speaker's and subject's experiences, joined together both by similar acts of labor and dreams of completion, and allowed for those in his poems to transcend their class position in order to be both more than a body and more than a spirit. Levine writes:

When I closed my eyes and looked back into the past, I did not see the blazing color of the forges of nightmare or the torn faces of the workers. I didn't hear the deafening ring of metal on metal, or catch under everything the sweet stink of decay. . . . Instead I was myself in the company of men and women of enormous sensitivity, delicacy, consideration. I saw us touching each other emotionally and physically, hands upon shoulders, across backs, faces pressed to faces. We spoke to each other out of the deepest centers of our need, and we listened. In those

terrible places designed to rob us of our bodies and our spirits, we sustained each other. (Levine, *The Bread of Time* 89)

Although Levine ended up getting out of his original work in auto factories to earn a higher education, he still saw the value of writing about his working-class experiences. In his “autobiography,” he acknowledges that those places designated for labor were not pleasant, but rather, were “designed to rob us of our bodies and our spirits” (Levine, *The Bread of Time* 89). However, as long as the workers lifted each other up and “sustained each other,” those industries were not successful. And while many who dreamed of completion may never fully achieve that, so long as the “loneliness” that Ignatow describes was not all-encompassing, and that real human connections could be made despite subjective lyrics like Williams’ “The Strike” which depicted the working class as “brutes” without reason.

Rather than “rob[bing] us of our bodies and spirits,” through sharing their experiences, working-class poets are able to find commonalities and “sustain each other” with the use of language (Levine, *The Bread of Time* 89). Similar to Ignatow and his mentor, Williams, Levine was a mentor to the contemporary poet Dorianne Laux. Her 2011 book of poetry, *The Book of Men*, is both dedicated to Levine and includes a poem specifically for him, entitled “Mine Own Phil Levine.” She describes:

There was no arrogance about him

No vanity, only the strong backs

Of his words pressed against

The tonnage of a page

His suggestion to me was that hard work

Was the order of each day  
When I asked again, he said it again,  
pointing out twice

His Muse, if he had one, was a window  
Filled with a brick wall, the left-hand corner  
Of his mind, and hand lined with grease  
And sweat: literal things [ . . . ] (Laux, *The Book of Men* 43)

Even within the academic sphere dedicated to the practice of reading, writing, and sharing ideas, rather than the traditional working-class world that primarily centers around physical labor, Levine advocated for the diligence of “hard work [ . . . ] each day.” In the poem, Laux marries together Levine’s use of language as well as strength, seen in the lines: “the strong backs / Of his words.” Rather than needing a natural scene as Emerson would have to inspire the spirit, Levine’s use of poetry can stem from the muse of a brick wall, as well as those specific, “literal things” associated with labor such as a “hand lined with grease / And sweat.” Once Levine was able to solely pursue teaching and poetry, he did not abandon those truth derived from his experience with the working class. Because of this, future poets such as Laux also did not have to separate those complex parts of herself, but instead was able to let one inspire the other on her own journey to physical and spiritual completion.

## CHAPTER 4

### LAUX, ADDONIZIO, AND ESPADA

#### Laux

Dorianne Laux's (1952-present) emergence as a poet did not stem from the conventional, four-year college degree right of high school that is often associated with people of monetary privilege. Like Levine, she has labored in the working-class sphere in order to get to where she is now, and did not graduate with her B.A. in English until she was thirty-six years old. Before then, "[b]etween the ages of eighteen and thirty she worked as a gas station manager, sanatorium cook, maid, and donut holer. A single mother, she took occasional classes and poetry workshops at the local junior college, writing poems during shift breaks" (Laux, *What We Carry* 69). As a result, her poetry weaves together those experiences such as labor, motherhood, and relationships, without prioritizing one over the other. Further, her work does something that most previous working-class poetry cannot relate to or attempt: the complexities, and sometimes violence, that comes from being a woman. This distinct vein of working-class poetry takes those female subjects, from the "prostitutes" in Whitman, the "sagging breasts" in Williams, and the "lonely for help" mother in Ignatow, and gives them a voice for the first time. Laux does not merely imagine what a working-class mother would say or feel, she knows, and therefore writes a poetic truth that has not been disclosed before now. Therefore, while Whitman sent out an open invitation, Williams abolished the traditional poetic forms, Levine and Ignatow shared true, first-hand knowledge that had not been previously revealed—there is still a vital facet missing: that of the female perspective which poets such as Laux begins to fill.



One crucial aspect of Laux's poetry is that she does not shy away from subject matter that would have been considered impolite in Emerson's time. Like Whitman, she confronts even those ugly, but pertinent, qualities of society and human existence. In the foreword of her first book, *Awake*, Philip Levine writes that Laux "cares so much about the world we live in that she must search even the most hideous corners of it for their poetry" (Laux, *Awake* ix). This includes poems like "What My Father Told Me," which describes an inappropriate sexual relationship between a father and his daughter; while uncomfortable to read, it honestly depicts a common situation that has occurred throughout history but has scarcely appeared in modern published verse. The beginning of the poem lists the household chores the speaker is expected to do, which are then starkly followed by the sexual acts she is required to perform. Laux writes:

Always I have done what was asked.

Melmac dishes stacked on rag towels,

the slack of a vacuum cleaner cord

wound around my hand. Laundry

hung on a line.

There is always much to do and I do it.

The iron resting in its frame, hot

in the shallow pan of summer

as the basins of his hands push

aside the book I am reading.

I do as I am told, hold his penis

like the garden hose, in this bedroom,

in that bathroom, over the toilet

or my bare stomach.  
I do the chores, pull weeds out back,  
finger stink-bug husks, snail carcasses,  
pile dead grass in black bags. At night  
his feet are safe on their pads, light  
on the wall-to-wall as he takes  
the hallway to my room.  
His voice, the hiss of lawn sprinklers,  
the wet hush of sweat in his hollows,  
the mucus still damp  
in the corners of my eyes as I wake. (Laux, *Awake* 10)

The speaker's abuse is recounted through describing her efforts of labor. The speaker "holds his penis / like the garden hose," and "[h]is voice, the hiss of lawn sprinklers" (Laux, *Awake* 10). Her sense of normalcy is rooted in her routine of chores that she is expected to do. Further, her obedience is directly linked to her sense of morality, seen in the repetition and variations of "[a]lways I have done what is asked," "[t]here is always much to do and I do it," "I do as I am told," and "I do the chores." The speaker reaffirms herself using this mantra perhaps to combat her deeper feelings that the sexual interactions with her father are inappropriate, to constantly assure that those various chores are performed out of obligation and duty.

Her first set of chores appear innocent, seen in the dishes drying on a towel and the vacuum chord in her hand. However, following the account of her sexual abuse, her chores contain echoes of violence. The speaker "pull[s] weeds out back, / finger[s] stink-bug husks, snail carcasses, / pile[s] dead grass in black bags" (Laux, *Awake* 10). Everything in this list

revolves around the threshold between life and death. In the action of pulling weeds, she is destroying unwanted growth. The rest of the mentioned objects are reminders of what was once alive. The “stink-bug husks” are empty, as are the snail shells described as “carcasses.” Finally, she collects the “dead grass” and puts it into garbage bags. Laux’s speaker’s emotional trauma is mirrored by the chores she is asked to perform outside. At the end of the poem:

Summer ends. Schoolwork doesn’t suit me.

My fingers unaccustomed to the slimness  
of a pen, the delicate touch it takes  
to uncoil the mind.

History. A dateline pinned to the wall.

Beneath each president’s face, a quotation.

Pictures of buffalo and wheat fields,  
a wagon train circled for the night,  
my hand raised to ask the question,

Where did the children sleep? (Laux, *Awake* 10-11)

Laux’s speaker subtly describes her own dreams of completion within the poem. The young girl enjoys reading and learning, but following her sexual abuse, she has a hard time acclimating again to her schoolwork because her “fingers [are] unaccustomed to the slimness / of a pen.” Her dream consists of a safe place to sleep, one in which she will not be expected to perform sexual labor after hours. Poems such as “The Young Laundryman” subjectifies and sexualizes Wu Kee without disclosing his own personal desires. In contrast, Laux describes the actions of the speaker as well as her inner conflicts that stem from the sexual abuse and loss of innocence. Laux’s poem shows that she is not afraid of writing about undesirable truths that lurk within

countless women. It is not an attempt to conform to former traditions, but create new ones in which honesty is paramount rather than polite content, and prove there is no limit to what subject matter can constitute a poem.

Laux's articulation of female violence is not limited to that of childhood trauma. In "The Job," found within *What We Carry*, she describes a female worker's loss of a pinky while working at a printing press. This is an important addition to the American working-class cannon because often, when people try to picture the working class, the most immediate image is that of a male. However, women have also labored and bled in factories in order to support themselves and their families. Laux describes the subject's grotesque process of healing with: "It must have taken / months for the stump to heal, skin stretched / and stitched over bone" (Laux, *What We Carry* 22). Because of dangerous labor, the subject is now not whole, physically. However, despite this injury, "[s]he doesn't complain or blame the unguarded / machine, the noise of the factory, the job / with its long unbroken hours" (Laux, *What We Carry* 22). Instead, Laux writes that:

[s]he simply opens her damaged hand and studies  
the emptiness, the loss  
of symmetry and flesh, and tells me  
it was a small price to pay,  
that her missing finger taught her  
to take more care with her life [ . . . ] (Laux, *What We Carry* 22)

The subject's dream of being physically complete will never come to be. She cannot grow back that part of herself, and therefore must learn to interact with her world in a different way. However, the subject's inability to be whole in body means that she is more attentive and

intentional in spirit. She acknowledges her newfound desire to “pay attention / to what’s turning in the world” (Laux, *What We Carry* 22). Enforcing a change in mindset is not an easy task to accomplish, but it will have long-lasting benefits on the subject. The loss of limb now means that she will try to make up that part of her by strengthening her spiritual connection to the world—which is a dream of completion and wholeness that is more plausible to pursue. This complicates Emerson and Whitman’s original dreams, revealing a deeper, tragic truth of trauma that accompanies the realities of class and gender violence.

The working-class female survey that Laux demonstrates in her poetry is not confined to factory workers. In “Afterlife,” she explores what lies beyond death for a working-class woman, explaining that “[e]ven in heaven, when a former waitress goes out / for lunch, she can’t help it, can’t stop wiping down / the counter . . . Old habits die hard” (Laux, *The Book of Men* 51). One would think that dreams of completions are finalized when the person dies, but here the poet discloses that even in death, the waitresses cannot help but to still partake in these instinctual acts of labor. Laux describes the destruction to their bodies the subjects experienced as they’re “laid out in cheap cardboard coffins / in their lacy blue varicose veins, arches fallen / like grand cathedrals, a row of female Quasimodos: / each finely spring spine humped from a lifetime / hefting trays” (Laux, *The Book of Men* 51). The results of a lifetime of service and labor left an undeniable, lasting physical impact. Laux writes that they rest in “cardboard coffins,” which are even cheaper burial vessels than those made of the least expensive wood such as pine. This could be a remark of the amount of savings these women ended up with—it also could be a testament to the worth others put on them. Laux concludes the poem by asserting:

[ . . . ] faceless women done  
with their gossip, their earthly orders,

having poured the day's dark brew  
into the last bottomless cup, finished  
with mice in the rice bags, roaches  
in the walk-in, their eyes sealed shut, deaf  
forever to the clatter, the cook, the cries  
of the living. Grateful as nuns. Quite dead. (Laux, *The Book of Men* 51-52)

Here, the women's dreams of completion are finally defined. Although their burial conditions are not glamorous and their bodies are permanently altered from the years of work, in death, they no longer must cater to every whim and need of their customers. They pour the "last" cup of coffee, are "finished" with the gross, undesirable occurrences such as "mice" and "rats." Visually, they can be surrounded by a peaceful darkness as their eyes are "sealed shut," and finally, all of the usual auditory buzzing and orders are no longer able to be heard. Laux's poetry, like Levine's, is heartbreakingly honest about the realities of the working-class, but these help to illuminate the truths for readers, slowly changing public perceptions.

Despite Laux's poetic additions to the working-class canon that introduced the hardships of women without subjectifying them for her own gain, she foremost has a handle on human experience as a whole, regardless of gender. In "Gold" from *The Book of Men*, Laux has a three-and-a-half-page long list of items of that color. However, while most associate gold with the commodity of money, many of the listed objects are far from ideal. The first is "JCPenny's jewelry," which is not known to be the most glamorous, but rather is an affordable option (Laux, *The Book of Men* 71). Others in her list are a "candy wrapper in a gutter," "food stamps / and welfare checks," "the untended sore," "underwear / stains," "filters of generic cigarettes, brand X / bottles of beer," "government butter," "hills of sawdust and shallow pans / of brake fluid," and

“Gold Bond powder / that eats sweat from the creases” (Laux, *The Book of Men* 71-73). While previous poets might have been ashamed of this list or thought it to be unpoetic, Laux uses it to show that items of wealth and luxury do not dictate the quality of a person. Her words are honest, and invite any reader in that has a personal relation to even one of the mentioned things. Here, she revolutionizes Emerson original call for truly American poetry by putting it into a contemporary language that he would not have been able to imagine, using terms that do not translate.

The poem is vital to the working-class cannon because while poetry used to be designed to only include those who can make sense of the meter or formal language, or identify with those pastoral moments such as consulting the river for spiritual guidance like with Emerson, Laux shows that transcendence can be found in everyday items, even those that are undesirable to some. To others, “welfare checks” are as good as gold because they mean children can be fed; “filters of generic cigarettes” perhaps signify that workers such as those in Ignatow’s “For One Moment” experienced a fleeting moment of leisure and community amidst a hard day’s work. As unromantic as the “Gold Bond powder / that eats the sweat from the creases” is, it is a catalyst for a person finding a new degree of physical comfort. This list is not just relatable to working-class men, or women, but anyone who has participated in hard work, been in pain, in need, or experienced simple joys—true Americans. Readers who identify with this list find a kinship to others who feel the same, as well as the poet.

Within “Gold,” the dream of completion is not that every desire in life will be fulfilled indefinitely. Instead, it is one of the solidarity found through appreciating all life has to offer: the positive and, sometimes, negative. The poem ends with gold describing:

[ . . . ] the edges of bargain basement books

dropped into the bin, dust rising in motes  
onto the long tables in the public library  
where the homeless come to sit in rows,  
heads fallen on their folded arms

like good school children dreaming of sleep. (Laux, *The Book of Men* 74)

The final two images represent a hope for more. While these “bargain basement books” were discarded by someone, to another they indicate an access to knowledge that would not otherwise be available. The long tables in the public library—a space in which knowledge is free to all—is also a physical refuge for those homeless people who do not have a place of their own to sleep at. While resting on a desk is not ideal, it is warmer and safer than the street. Socially, these individuals are often discriminated against for their lack of a job and a residence. However, Laux acknowledges that ultimately, they are still human, and while they nap are as innocent as “good school children dreaming of sleep” (Laux, *The Book of Men* 74). This dream of completion is one of social equality and acceptance, one in which they cannot be harassed for lacking what others have.

#### Addonizio

Kim Addonizio (1954-present), a contemporary poet and novelist, dedicated her 2000 book of poetry, *Tell Me*, to Laux. Together, they published *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* which includes essays and writing exercises. The book attempts to make the act of writing poetry more accessible to anyone who has the desire to try, an inclusion of which Whitman would approve. Addonizio's mother was a tennis champion and her father a sports writer, so her upbringing proved to be different compared to poets such as Levine



and Ignatow who were growing up in big cities right after the Great Depression. While her poetry does not exactly divulge into the dangerous worlds of factories, it does address once-taboo topics such as sex and substance abuse. These two have always been realities of both working-class people (and those who aren't), but rarely have they made their way into published poetry, especially that of a woman.

For many Americans, substance abuse is the means for combatting feelings of incompleteness and an attempt at self-transcendence by trying to escape the boredom, or pains, of the self. This is not limited to the working class, but often can be a result of areas in one's life not meeting expectations, such as a stressful job, dysfunctional relationships, or childhood trauma. In "Song of Myself," Whitman addresses that the "opium eater reclines with rigid head and just-opened lips" (Whitman, *American Poetry* 356). While an opium user's presence represents a first in American poetry, Whitman uses the character to diversify the subjects in his survey for his own transcendence and fails to take the time to consider the internal conflicts and desires of the "opium eater." Instead, like Williams' Wu Kee, the subject is only a body seen with a "rigid head and just-opened lips" (Whitman, *American Poetry* 356). Whitman's understanding is incomplete without truly knowing the complexities of this person, but this lack of knowledge can be directly linked to the limitations of his historical and social position.

Addonizio is not restricted by her time; instead, because of it she is able to complicate the simple depiction that Whitman provided. She does this by not only looking at the negatives of actions such as drinking, but also the romance and community it can entail. Her poem "Last Call" from *Tell Me* speaks to the duality of loneliness and company drinking at a bar consists of. Her poem starts by romanticizing the experience with, "It's the hour when everyone's drunk / and the bar turns marvelous, music / swirling over the red booths, / smoke rising from neglected

cigarettes [ . . . ]” (Addonizio 54). Despite the noise and busyness in the room, she describes the setting as “marvelous.” However, she uses the word “neglected,” which comes to describe both the cigarettes in the ashtray and the people in the room. She writes that while one man tries to make conversation with another:

[ . . . ] the second man nods  
and lays his head on the bar’s slick surface,  
not caring if he dies there, wanting, in fact, to die there  
among the good friends he’s just met, his cheek  
in a wet pool of spilled beer. [ . . . ] (Addonizio 54)

Like with the opium user in Whitman, “the second man[’s]” physical description is discomfoting. While Addonizio’s speaker never discloses why the subject is unhappy, she at least mentions that he is experiencing internal conflict rather than just looking at him merely as a body. The third and fourth lines included above do indicate that the man is lonely, seen in the fact that his “good friends” are ones that “he’s just met.” This subject feels incomplete, but does not express optimism about changing his condition except through death. His presence at the bar and experience with drinking is not enough to change his mind, instead it catalyzes his disconnection to the world around him.

While the “second man” subject does not find any sort of resolution in the poem, others do. During the last call, the room is full of people trying to not just combat loneliness, but also desire to be truly seen. Further, Addonizio’s speaker acknowledges that the people want to be saved, not from death, but from themselves. The poem ends with:

[ . . . ] the cabs are being summoned,  
and the gods that try to save us from ourselves

are taking us by the neck, gently,  
and dropping us into the night; it's the hour  
of the blind, and the dead, of lost loves  
who come to claim you, finally, holding open  
the swinging door, repeating over and over  
a name that must be yours. (Addonizio 54)

The “gods” try to save the subjects by getting them out of the bar, and do so “gently.” This last call, which falls on the early hours in the morning, is a time when other people are safely at home, asleep. The speaker claims that this is the “hour / of the blind,” and “dead.” Like some of those mentioned in Whitman’s “Song of Myself” these are not characters who are considered to be strong or desirable. However, the dream of completion in the poem is embedded in the desire to be claimed, to have someone to alleviate the loneliness that the “second man” experiences. This recognition is solidified by the “repet[ition]” of that “name that must be yours.” In Whitman’s poem, the subjects are identified based on their actions or profiles, but the poet does not always consider the personalities within. In Addonizio’s poem, this desire to both be seen and be truly known is actualized. The working class has historically only been regarded as bodies on an assembly line, unrecognized as anything more than a class position. The end of Addonizio’s poem articulates that although the subjects are not whole, as they experience loneliness and an incompleteness they attempt to fill with late nights accented by cigarettes and alcohol, they still have identities that extend beyond their physical and habitual signifiers.

While Addonizio’s subject matter spans past substance abuse and sex, those two topics help to further complicate this contemporary working-class survey. In Whitman’s nineteenth century, women were either mothers, wives, or whores. Sexual freedom was not extended to

women while being accompanied by respect. In the twenty-first century, the struggle for gender equality in the workplace and fighting to rewrite social normalcies are paramount. Poetry is one medium that, in nature, is a place for reimagining and expressing truths that can help to change opinions. Whitman's "Song of Myself" sought to democratize poetry to be more all-inclusive. Addonizio's poetry also does this by writing about sex like Whitman does, as an integral facet of life that is complex and should be explored, not shamed. She combines the body and the spirit, acknowledging that the experiences of one affect the other. Further, the sexual experiences she writes about are romantic, lonely, and everything in between. Her depictions are unfiltered and include profane language that would have been impolite for a woman to express during Emerson's time, but they are necessary for redefining what is acceptable for women in present day to express and publish.

Addonizio's speaker in "One-Night Stands" exhibits the incompleteness she feels which she attempts to remedy through frequent one-night stands after drinking. The male subject is plural, and she admits in the first two lines that "[t]hose men I fucked when I was drunk, / I can't even see their faces anymore" (Addonizio 85). Like Levine and Laux, she does not attempt to sugar coat her experience, and doesn't let the worry of how her readers will judge her speaker affect her approach to writing the poem. The speaker expresses a disconnection between those her past sexual encounters and her present memories. Instead, she can recall "the bars I met them in, the sweat / on a glass of beer" and the "sharp swell / of music and a voice saying *Let's get out / of here*" (Addonizio 85). The settings and conditions are similar to those she's experienced before, but the faces of the men are lost to her.

This desire for connection, with no indication that the speaker is looking for commitment, is yet another dream of completion. However, this is not one that can be found in the body of

another, but comes from better knowing the self. She confesses, “There are people we’re meant / to lose, moments that rinse off” (Addonizio 85). At the end of the poem, the speaker admits that she continues to frequent the bar and find company with strangers because she longs for the adventure and the uncertainty of it all. There’s a unique type of companionship that comes from being able to “*Let someone else pay. Ask for a cigarette / and the fire to light it, burn a few hours, / show me you love me that much*” (Addonizio 85). The liminality of the experience that only lasts a few hours shows the speaker that she is “love[d],” even if she doesn’t long to be consistently by a single person. The necessity for a woman to find a husband, settle down, and have kids is slowly fading in the twenty-first century. Instead, women have proved that satisfaction can be found in solitude, or from other fulfilling facets in their lives. Further, poems like Addonizio’s seek to establish that a commitment to a lack of commitment does not correlate with a lack of morals or character. While this is not specific to only the working class, it does pertain to the female faction of American society that has been objectified for centuries and considered to be unequal to their male counterparts, no matter the socioeconomic class.

### Espada

Just as this working-class poetry journey would not be complete without considering the inequalities experienced because of gender, discrimination based on race also needs to be addressed. Martín Espada (1957-present) was born in New York and is a Puerto Rican writer, translator, and former lawyer who has sought to help others achieve social justice both in the courtroom and through poetry. His working experience ranges from “a night desk clerk in a transient hotel, bindery worker in a printing plant, bouncer in a bar, welfare rights paralegal, and tenant lawyer” (Espada, *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* 89). In his 1990 book of poetry

*Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands*, each of his poems written in English is accompanied by its translation in Spanish. Like Whitman's "Song of Myself," Espada wants his poetry to be more democratic and inclusive to the multitudes of diverse individuals that make up America. However, this inclusion is not just for those who want to read the poems in Spanish because at the end of the collection, the poet includes a glossary of the Spanish terms he uses so that his English readers can better understand his bilingual works. But more than just being inclusive, Espada's poetry seeks to illuminate on social injustices that happen daily but do not receive an adequate amount of attention.

One mentioned aspect of working-class poetry is its resistance to traditional forms that can alienate readers. In the forward of *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands*, Amiri Baraka writes, "Martín Espada is a young man who should never have to hear the dumb whittle of formalists croaking about 'form' (Though undoubtedly he has already). Which to them is something that does not *breathe* or *mean*" (Espada 15). This tension felt between prescribed conventions and the realities of the American culture comes through in the contemporary works of Laux, Addonizio, and Espada. For them, the dream of completion is not one that can be easily resolved or satisfied. Rather, this it revolves around honestly uncovering underlying tensions, revealing them in a sometimes uncomfortable, but ultimately necessary, way.

Espada's subject matter includes, but is not limited to, gang violence, migrant workers, unions, racial stereotypes, and discrimination both for adults and children. His poems speak to the physical violence that stems from racism, and further, the emotional and mental trauma that follows. In "The New Bathroom Policy at English High School" from *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands*, the speaker describes the tension present between administrators and students when those children are not culturally assimilating as some think they should. Espada writes:

The boys chatter Spanish  
in the bathroom  
while the principal  
listens from his stall

The only word he recognizes  
is his own name  
and this constipates him

So he decides  
to ban Spanish  
in the bathrooms

Now he can relax (Espada, *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* 1-11)

Like some of Williams' poetry that experiments with the lack of conventional punctuation rules, Espada's poem includes multiple statements that are separated only by stanza breaks rather than periods, commas, dashes, or colons. In the poem, the principal feels threatened by the fact that he cannot understand what the Spanish-speaking children are saying, other than the realization that they use his name and thus are talking about him. By restricting their use of their native language, the principal can "relax," proving that his decision was for his own comfort rather than to benefit their development in some way. While he is not being physically violent, his distrust in their primary mode of expression, which impedes their First Amendment rights, attempts to destroy their sense of community and could result in emotional trauma. Further, it causes them to

feel censored within a public institution that is designed to encourage growth, the pursuit of knowledge, and discovering oneself.

Another of Espada's poems continues this narrative, showing that these small acts of discrimination do not stop as a child gets older; instead, these occurrences can intensify, becoming more extreme and violent. In "Beloved Spic," set in Valley Stream, Long Island in 1973, the speaker explains the "new white neighborhood[']s]" reaction to his family's arrival (Espada, *Imagine the Angels of Bread* 32). The poem describes the speaker's new "white" neighbors' use of this derogatory racial slur, how they "laughed when it hopped / from their mouths like a secret" and "bellowed it in barrooms / when the alcohol / made them want to sing" (Espada, *Imagine the Angels of Bread* 32). Here, the tension that budded in "The New Bathroom Policy at English High School" manifests within the community, both in the suburbs and within the speaker's new school. Rather than describing one insecure principal, the prejudice has spread to include adults and children alike. The speaker physically sees the word spray-painted on his locker and "scripted in the icing on a cake" (Espada, *Imagine the Angels of Bread* 32). But then it gravitates into the intangible as it is "on the coach's lip" and "spiral[s] into the ear / of a disappointed girl who never sat beside me again" (Espada, *Imagine the Angels of Bread* 32). Finally, "spic" resonates as emotional trauma within the speaker, seen in:

[I] heard it in my head when I punched a lamp,  
mesmerized by the slash of oozing  
between my knuckles,  
and it was beloved  
until the day we staked our lawn  
with a sign that read: For Sale. (Espada, *Imagine the Angels of Bread* 32)



After the constant use of the word infiltrated most facets of his social and physical environment, it led to feelings of alienation and a desire for violence. This reaction did not harm another person, but instead was taken out on a lamp and caused the speaker to bleed. Further, this prejudice was not just felt by the speaker, but also his family, and caused them to feel unwelcome enough that they moved away. This move into a new neighborhood probably started as an optimistic experience, but ended with violence and trauma. These two complicate the reality that while poets like Whitman can advocate for democratization, not all Americans will embrace this ideal with open arms; instead, they will combat it with resistance.

Not all of Espada's poems center around emotional trauma as a result of racism. Many are inherently violent and honest about how having to move is not the biggest concern someone can have since for some, these social conflicts might result in death. This is a reality in "Federico's Ghost" as the speaker relays a story of a pilot who sprays pesticides on "whole families of fruitpickers" (Espada, *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* 2). The speaker of the poem, as well as some of the subjects, aren't positive about which elements of the account are true, such as whether or not some farmers at the labor camp were sneaking into the tomato fields at night in order to destroy crops. Others claim that the culprits are "vandal children / or communists," and some say the farmer singled out Federico, seen in:

The pilot understood.  
He circled the plane and sprayed again,  
watching a fine gauze of poison  
.....  
and aiming for Federico,  
leaving the skin beneath his shirt

wet and blistered,  
but still pumping his finger at the sky.

(Espada, *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* 19-21, 24-27)

The speaker describes this finger to be “obscene,” and the pilot to have sprayed perhaps because of “whiskey or whatever” and seeing Federico disrespect him (Espada, *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* ). Even after the man’s death, “old women in camp” swore that he was the still the source of this destruction:

laboring after sundown  
to cool the burns on his arms,  
flinging tomatoes  
at the cropduster  
that hummed like a mosquito  
lost in his ear,

and kept his soul awake. (Espada, *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* 78)

While poets such as Levine, Ignatow, and Laux can complicate working-class poetry by writing about the violence experienced in urban factories, there is another layer of found in the tales of immigrants and migrant workers. These people are often paid even less than other working-class Americans, and might have to do so without benefits or unions. Joining a union, as seen with Ignatow’s account about his father, can result in the loss of a job which prevents workers from providing for their families. Because of this, working under unfair conditions or receiving less pay is preferable to the alternative, which is a social injustice that Espada’s poetry acknowledges.

Although Federico is dead, his dream of completion is still alive since his spirit is still “awake” (Espada, *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover's Hands* 78). It is rooted in the tension

between the pilot and the undervalued workers who destroy crops to show discontent. So long as there is injustice present, his dream of completion cannot be resolved since it stems from the lack of inclusion and equality a faction of the nation experiences. For contemporary poets like Laux, Addonizio, and Espada, their dreams revolve around acknowledging those various tensions and exploring them without necessarily intending to determine a specific solution. This may be because there is no one simple answer; rather, “Art (created Being) is significant because of the *feelings* (the real life) it can convey. It is the expansiveness of our feelings that are the fuel of evolution” (Espada, *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover’s Hands* 15). While the work of Whitman and Williams hinged on experimentation, and that of Ignatow and Levine was concerned with honest depictions and awareness, these three contemporary poets use their truths to try to “fuel . . . evolution” (Espada, *Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover’s Hands* 15). No matter which social injustice or gender bias they write to combat, their poetry seeks to relate to a reader, or perhaps even sway one. The epitome of working-class poetry is to resist preconceived notions of the spirits that drive these bodies, and present various dreams of completion to prove those spirits’ complexities.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The historical occurrences between the twentieth-century poets and the twenty-first help to contextualize some of the differences of their tones and content. Following World War II, programs such as those established thanks to the G.I. Bill forever changed the demographics of who could afford an education. Before then, higher education was primarily available to those of upper classes. This optimism surrounding changing societal landscapes comes out in poets such as Levine and Ignatow. While their poems, such as Levine's "What Work Is," are honest about the physical and mental demands of labor, there is also an acknowledgement that their spirits remain resilient and determined to transcend past their class positions. This could be that while the labor was grueling, the "dream of completion" of working hard enough in order to experience rest was still within reach if one could endure long enough to see it through.

However, the tensions exposed in the poetry of Laux, Addonizio, and Espada reveal a shift from those mid-twentieth century ideals to a mindset and perspective that has hardened in response to the happenings of the late-twentieth century. One reason for this is the disappearance of most of the American working class. In Levine's time, the American dream introduced by Whitman was still alive, which promised that anyone and everyone could succeed and belong if they tried. His "Song of Myself" did not account for the possibility that practices such as neoliberalism would resurge and take American jobs away from hard-working citizens. The end of the twentieth century brought with it trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which took the hope and idealism Levine and Ignatow contained and turned those into feelings of uselessness. Their labor began to be outsourced, and has caused

industries such as American automotive giants to close shop. Some consequences of these events translate into habits such as substance abuse which seeks to combat the feelings of incompleteness caused by the country's societal and economic landscape being absent or in constant flux.

Another complication to this American dream stems from the working class' inability to seek out solidarity as they once did in the form of unions. This issue arises in Ignatow's memoir as he describes that his father lost his job because he led a union, and continues in to the work of contemporary poets such as Espada, seen in the tribulations of his described migrant workers. One threat during Ignatow's time was that if someone is associated with a union, they may be replaced by another American worker who is not in one. However, in the late-twentieth century, bosses would often assert that they could outsource the labor to Mexico in order to cut down on costs if the American workers would not comply with their terms. When faced with the option of either compromise or lose the job, most of the working class chose to stay employed even if that meant not receiving the proper earnings they were due. While Ignatow and Levine wrote poems that encouraged solidarity among readers and those of the working class, their foundation was undermined as the those jobs were outsourced thanks to NAFTA, and the products they once made, such as in the automotive industry, ultimately disappeared since in the end it is cheaper to import rather than make those products in America.

Further tensions that emerge in the poetry of Laux, Addonizio, and Espada come from the reality that although laws have changed which allow for females and people of color to have more of a stake within the American society, stereotypes and discrimination still exist. Although Whitman called for all Americans to be in harmony, some still resist this inclusion and refuse ideas such as equal pay. Over one hundred and fifty years have passed since Whitman's 1855 version of "Song of Myself" and yet many marginalized groups are still far off from being

regarded with a proper amount of respect. Also, the prescriptions such as appropriate behavior for females still influence social perceptions and do not allow for nationwide acceptance as they attempt to reimagine previous conventions. These poets must resort to utter honesty which, while it is sometimes uncomfortable, reveals tragic and necessary truths that do not attempt to make excuses. Through this execution, these contemporaries speak for those who have not had a published voice before now, and try to not just find their own transcendence, but relate to their readers to validate their experiences. While some of their poetic narratives are not limited to the workplace, they are still pursuing solidarity with readers and fellow poets alike.

As mentioned in the introduction, this project has room to expand by considering more historically marginalized races and a more in-depth and diverse study of the many facets of the American working-class landscape. It could be more complex by looking at those who are unable to join the middle-working class, such as the working poor, those who are disabled and therefore unable to work, and even those Americans who would work if they could but are unable to find jobs because of circumstances such as a criminal record or being incarcerated. Another paper could be dedicated to the rural working class, such as those in Appalachia, and how their desires, needs, and experiences are represented in poetry. For this project, the included works are limited to Emerson, Whitman, Williams, Levine, Ignatow, Laux, Addonizio, and Espada. Their intersections reveal an ever-developing conversation among this American genealogy that poets such as Emerson and Whitman might have hoped for, but never could have imagined its extensive influence.

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