

## *Burning Beauty*

Diane Wakoski, Eileen Myles,  
Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel,  
Tracie Morris

When Lucille Clifton was at Dartmouth College to read in October 1999, I was invited to lunch with her, Grace Paley, and three other poets from the Dartmouth faculty—William Cook, Cleopatra Mathis, and Cynthia Huntington. When Cynthia mentioned that I was writing a book about poetry and social class, Lucille turned to me and said, “I’d be interested to read that book. You know, I’m not supposed to be here myself.” As a sign of the times, or maybe Dartmouth’s particular dynamics, it was a remark with resonance for everyone in that company.

The major obstacle to discussing class and poetry is the lack of vocabulary. As Senator John Edwards campaigned for the Democratic Party’s nomination for the presidency in September 2003, his wife Elizabeth mentioned proudly that “as the son of a South Carolina mill worker, her husband grew up without class consciousness.” She went on to say that he understood the “workingman’s” problems because “at his core, he is one.” Then she again cited his “lack of class consciousness as his greatest tool to overcome such problems.” The contradictions in Ms.

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Edwards's remarks illustrate a peculiar American sensitivity to the vocabulary of class. Anyone who thinks of himself as a workingman "at his core" obviously possesses class consciousness, but does he have words to describe it?

On my first day of teaching at a community college in Vermont, I wrote my phone number on the board so students could contact me outside school hours. Because I had only recently moved to the area from New York City, I was surprised to hear a low rumble of laughter, and then outright, "Isn't that a Norwich number?" We had moved to a town with a reputation for good schools—and the high property taxes to pay for them—a town most of the community college students could not afford to live in. There were students in those classes who received some form of public assistance; many attended class at the end of an eight- or twelve-hour work day. Yet in five years of teaching at that community college, never did I hear students describe themselves as anything other than middle class.

As would my parents. My mother and stepfather sold their home and moving business when his legs grew too old to lug refrigerators up and down stairs, and moved to Florida, where they worked for many years managing a condominium, before semiretiring to a one-room condo upstairs. Semiretirement, because she continued to work as a substitute manager at several places on the beach, and he occasionally mowed lawns or cleaned pools. When they retired, they thought they could survive on savings and social security, but realized quickly that they couldn't afford medical insurance. Now they are enrolled in a managed care plan, and complain endlessly about the quality of the treatment they receive. When she prepares me to meet her acquaintances, my mother, who is outgoing and inclusive by nature, approaches the subject of class directly. "You will like them," she tells me. "They're our kind of people. Nothing pretentious or stuck up." When my mother-in-law visited, my mother noted that "Barbara is so nice you'd never guess she has a Ph.D."

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Some years ago I reviewed *Emerald Ice*, selected poems by Diane Wakoski, a book that demanded to be treated in terms of its class attitudes. There was no other way to understand Wakoski's burning grudges—against Anne Sexton, against attractive women with large, light-filled kitchens, against thin homosexuals with a sense of style, and finally—though with self-conscious complexity—against beauty.

I want to tell you  
that beauty itself  
creates injustice,  
and that while everyone suffers,  
only beauty is allowed any mercy  
from the suffering.

I have said it before,  
the ones who need love most  
are the unlovable.

And how much more difficult to be ugly and sensitive and still  
to survive?

("How Do You Tell a Story?" 302)

I'm an experienced reader of poetry who has learned to appreciate the classics of our culture despite the xenophobia, misogyny, racism, and class bias that infect them. In this case, however, I found myself for the first time looking in a mirror, where the reflection reminded me not just of Savonarola, the monk who purged Florence of its vanities by large bonfires, but of myself at sixteen.

For those of us from the working class, beauty must always remain suspect. We associate it easily with well-dressed, expensively perfumed women and men sipping champagne while they chat about the threat of the great unwashed. When I was in high school, the local symphony orchestra made free tickets available to secondary-school students. I remember accepting one, then having to attend alone when at the last minute my friends pre-



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*my* histories),  
and who played Bach  
sitting decorously, neatly, on the piano bench  
like little hair brushes,  
while I grimaced and swayed and rocked on the bench  
with each cadence, until my practice room  
must have seemed like  
an exercise cell for some crippled gymnast,  
one who had to do all her exercises sitting  
in a single position.

(“Joyce Carol Oates Plays the Saturn Piano,” 340)

At the time I wrote the review, I was embarrassed by these class resentments. They did not indicate the poet’s self-proclaimed “sensitivity,” but were coarse and all too familiar expressions of attitudes common to the class into which she and I were born. Furthermore, they made *us* sound pathetic and deprived. Not only did my own lucky upbringing convince me that though we didn’t have money for dinner in a restaurant or nice winter coats, there were compensations and many pleasures, but my class loyalties forbade complaining to strangers. I wrote:

Class is still among the most undiscussed subjects when writing about poetry. What Wakoski says is often distasteful and, as I believe she would be first to admit, ugly. But she pronounces an unyielding, sad truth, that the ordinary claims of ego and envy can be more powerful than the beauty created by Chopin or Beethoven. All happy instances of beauty are vulnerable to the attacks of a jealous, inflexible justice. Because we recognize pain and deprivation as sources for such notions, they sometimes have the power to elicit our sympathy and complicity. It’s a bitter fruit this cactus bears, but for those of us from the lower classes, I’m afraid it’s not at all exotic.

(*American Book Review*, Sept. 1990)

Reading Wakoski’s poems ten years later, I’m less conscious of the grating resentment than the frustrated yearning for transfor-

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mation that carries throughout a body of poems written over more than thirty years. Though ostensibly the poems proclaim the injustice of beauty, they do not, finally, argue any preference for justice, only a desire to be among those unjustly blessed.

After I moved to New York City in 1974, one of my first poet friends was Eileen Myles. We attended many of the same readings, discovered in endless barroom and coffee shop conversations that we admired many of the same poets, and established early in our friendship that we shared similar class backgrounds and had both attended commuter colleges. One evening we were chatting with two young editors of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine in Jim Brodey's kitchen on the Lower East Side, while everyone else crowded into Jim's bedroom to watch the Academy Awards ceremony. The editors were bright, exciting young guys and everyone seemed to be invigorated by the company until one asked us where we had gone to college. When Eileen responded UMass-Boston, both replied that they knew it well. While at Harvard, they had spent many hours there "trying to organize the working-class kids." They laughed as they recalled their naive belief that the "working class" students would be more receptive to their organizing efforts than their Ivy League classmates. Instead, they had been confounded by what they deemed the apathy of the students, and asked Eileen if she could explain. She did: "Of course we had little time for politics. We weren't just going to school. Most of us had to work!" The subject was quickly changed and we found more amiable topics to talk about. But Eileen couldn't forgive their faux pas. After the party, she and I continued drinking until the bars closed, then moved on to an all-night coffee shop on Bleecker Street, where again and again she returned to the subject of the Harvard boys and the condescension that inevitably doomed their well-intended organizing efforts.

I was reminded of the incident again as I read Eileen's "nonfiction novel" *Cool for You*, published in 2000. This is the

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way she prefaces remarks about her grandmother's many years in a state mental hospital:

I'm grateful to the state of Massachusetts . . . for giving me a high quality low tuition public education. I would not be a writer if not for the University of Massachusetts (Boston). I think this is the place to thank the state. (143)

When Robert Lowell died, Eileen responded with this eulogy:

ON THE DEATH OF ROBERT LOWELL

O, I don't give a shit.  
He was an old white haired man  
Insensate beyond belief and  
Filled with much anxiety about his imagined  
Pain. Not that I'd know.  
I hate fucking wasps.  
The guy was a loon.  
Signed up for the Spring Semester at MacLeans  
A really lush retreat among pines and  
Hippy attendants. Ray Charles also  
Once rested there.  
So did James Taylor . . .  
The famous, as we know, are nuts.  
Take Robert Lowell.  
The old white haired coot.  
Fucking dead.

*(Fresh Young Voice, 28)*

Though I laughed when I first heard the poem read, it also made me uncomfortable. Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote that racism reveals at the least a failure of imagination. That's the way I felt about this poem by someone I regard as an imaginative poetic original—and one whom I knew at the time to be inspired by the poetry of John Ashbery and James Schuyler. But then again, Myles identifies herself as the child of “post-World War II working-class Bostonians,” and I'm not from Boston. Those

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who would suggest that poems such as this are undertheorized might want to reconsider the precision of its geographical referents. The poem may be parochial, but within a few words expresses a lot of pain and anger rising from oppressive ethnic, gender, class, and aesthetic hierarchies.

Like Wakoski, Myles is fiercely individualistic in her career ambitions, but her career has been rooted in a series of strong communal identities, however serial or overlapping. Former director of the St. Mark's Poetry Project, known for its Lower East Side bohemian camaraderie, Myles gained a wider reputation as the outspoken lesbian author of *Sappho's Boat* (titled, according to Myles, to assure that a Village gay bookstore would carry it), became an improvisational and entrepreneurial stand-up artist on the downtown performance scene, and an emphatic presence in the Provincetown summer arts community.

When she published her first book with Black Sparrow Press, I heard several people remark that she would be promoted as a "female Charles Bukowski." Black Sparrow was long Bukowski's publisher, so the remark surely owed much to that, but the comparison was also fraught with class comparisons. Bukowski's depictions of life on the margins and his notorious contempt for bourgeois values deserve their own essay, but they are crude and sentimental when compared to Myles's tonic imagination. Her essay "The End of New England" presents reflections on class (and specifically, New England working class) that are far more sophisticated, sympathetic, and nimble than Bukowski's heavy hands could muster. And though Myles may resemble Bukowski in her pugnacious anger, delight in shock, deft satire, and self-abasing Bohemian parodies, the aesthetic demands of her poems are far more exacting. In her talk "The Lesbian Poet," she said:

[I]t was poetry or the poetics of it that I was needing to address and I've hardly been anywhere other and I want to honor the place that I stand. . . . I came out here as a poet and a dyke maybe

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all in one reading. . . . A lesbian is just an idea. An aesthetic one perhaps. Hugh Kenner explains that Sappho is the standard for each poetic age. . . . [I]t may not be true, but I buy it. (*School of Fish*, 123–25)

Myles's loyalties and sense of community differ drastically from Bukowski's individualist pathos. Though you can still hear working-class Boston in her voice, you also hear a poet sophisticated by her wide reading. The combination results in evasive and elliptical aesthetic and emotional strategies that quicken her poems and help them escape narrow definition.

Two of the toughest, but also most generous voices of the working class during the last half-century, have belonged to Lucille Clifton and Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel. Clifton and McDaniel differ from many of the poets mentioned in this book in that they have maintained a strong sense of working-class community. Clifton's class concerns are most notable in her early books of poems and in her crystalline memoir of the family to which she has retained strong ties. Being African American and coming of age during the midcentury crusade for civil rights, Clifton was blessed with a defining communal sense of her "people," a sense of belonging that has slipped away from many working-class Americans during the second half of the century.

Though Wilma McDaniel, now past eighty, has been writing poems since childhood, her first book wasn't published until 1973, when she was fifty-five years old. She received a modest flourish of attention and honors only lately. In reply to a request for an autobiographical note for Janet Zandy's anthology *Liberating Memory: Our Work and Our Working-Class Consciousness*, McDaniel replied:

It is strange that quite a bit is written about my poetry, read in schools, but so *little* is being *published* outside of small presses such as Hanging Loose in Brooklyn, or the feminist *Broomstick*

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in San Francisco. I feel almost certain that you will receive few entries from cotton-picking poets, two-room school academics, but let 'er rip. I'm coughing up postage. (210)

As Clifton's poems gain power and scope from her identification with a larger community, so the interest in McDaniel owes something to the community that she represents. McDaniel was a teenager when her Okie family fled the Dust Bowl during the depression and journeyed to California to do farmwork. She has continued to return to those years again and again in her poems, as if everything since has been slightly anticlimactic and disappointing. One feels she misses those days of her youth, perhaps the last time in anyone's memory that the working class was represented in American popular culture as a class—before the leveling explosion of television, before the McCarthy era intimidated union leaders and branded the articulation of class politics as unpatriotic. Isn't that why recent academic studies by Cary Nelson, Constance Coiner, Alan Wald, and others into working-class culture are so weighted toward the decade of the 1930s, when there was some sort of Popular Front and even Hollywood nodded toward class in *The Grapes of Wrath*?

Though I have admired McDaniel's poems since I first began to read them, I suspect that the recent academic interest in her work owes much to this nostalgia for a time when working-class identity led to political solidarity. McDaniel has responded to this recognition with modesty, grace, and bemusement. Her recent poems frequently nestle mentions of her academic appearances among more typical tales of her farmworker neighbors and family. She has never moved away from the community that is so dear and vital to her, and her portraits of her friends, neighbors, and family are sympathetic, but never in soft focus. Nor has her perspective changed significantly during the last half-century. Her poems still imply the virtues of radical redistributive politics within an encompassing framework of Christian devotion. It's a

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representation of working-class beliefs with economic implications always ignored by political conservatives, and social implications that often discomfort liberal professionals.

BIBLE STORIES

Buster's favorite Bible story:  
how Peter caught a fish  
with money in its mouth  
when Jesus told him to pay  
the Roman taxes

Buster didn't see how fish  
could swallow coins that big  
Mama told him nothing was  
too hard for the Lord

Uncle Prez joked  
He wished the Lord  
would send *us* a school of fish  
with silver dollars  
in their mouths  
Mama was very quiet  
I could tell she didn't like  
his remark  
the way she looked at him  
and closed the Bible

*(The Last Dust Storm, 12)*

Though her class loyalties have remained constant, McDaniel's passion for reading has inevitably broadened her sensibilities. She continues to find something especially amusing about academics, and her vigilant ear misses nothing.

TWO HELENS

As our school principal escorted him out to the bleachers for the big game, I overheard the visiting professor say he taught Greek at Berkeley.

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The professor didn't look much like a sports enthusiast. He was scrawny, with a bread dough personality. But I have to say he had a quick eye for the girls.

About that time our number one cheerleader Helen Boles led her pom-pom girls out on the field. She was a raven-haired beauty, easily the most gorgeous girl at LHS.

The principal said "Here comes Helen, our own homecoming queen." The doughy professor straightened up and said with real conviction, "Helen of Troy never looked this good."

The principal was pleased and said modestly, "Helen of Troy might have launched a thousand ships, but she couldn't have inspired the *Gauchos* the way our Helen has." (*Borrowed Coats*, 80)

Class is but one of the many intersecting circles that locate us in the Boolean algebra of society. As E. P. Thompson wrote in his preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*:

If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men [*sic*] over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition. (11)

McDaniel's poems testify unflinchingly to the lasting class disparities in American society, even as she refuses to reconcile herself to them as an inevitable feature of American life. But her poems also remind me that the distance between the rural and urban can be as bracing as the distance between social classes.

Though poets such as Wilma McDaniel who earn acclaim late in life inspire those of us who labor long and in relative anonymity, there's no substitute for early success. While the octogenarian McDaniel continues to write poems about life in the San Joaquin

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Valley of California, Tracie Morris gained attention as a “hip-hop” performance poet competing in slams at the Nuyorican Café and other New York venues. Morris is a bright, attractive young woman from Brooklyn whose stylish wordplay owes more to Dr. Seuss than to Dr. Johnson. The slam phenomenon has its own demands. In accord with the tastes of the young, hip audience that frequents them, Morris’s most popular poems are overtly sexual in subject, raw in expression, and not overcomplicated or delicate in treatment. (When I asked one former slam winner the secret of her own success, she joked, “A very low cut neckline.”) Though Morris’s poems also have a strong political inflection, works such as “Ten Men” are characterized primarily by a crowd-pleasing braggadocio reminiscent of Mayakovsky. In even her earliest poems, as in her well-known “Project Princess,” there is also a pronounced sense of social class.

Teeny feet rock  
Layered double socks

Popping side piping,  
Many colored loose lace-ups

Racing toe keeps up  
With fancy free gear

Slick slide just pressed  
Recently weaved hair

Jeans oversized belie her  
hips, back thighs

That have made guys sigh  
for milleni-year.

Topped by an attractive jacket:  
her suit’s not for flacking flunkies

Junkies or punk homies  
on the stroll.

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Her hands mobile thrones  
Of today's urban goddess

Clinking rings link up dragon fingers  
No need to be modest!

One or two gap teeth coolin'  
Sport gold initials

Doubt you get to her name  
Check from the side, please chill

Color woman variation  
Reworks the French twist

W/ crinkle-cut platinum frosted bangs  
From a spray can's mist

Never dissed she insists: "No you  
Can't touch this." And, if pissed

Bedecked fist stops boys  
Who feel they must persist.

She's the one, give her some  
Under fire, smoking gun

Of which raps are spun  
Songs are sung

The bells are rung, rocked  
Pistols cocked, unwanted

Advances blocked, well-stacked  
She's jock. It's all about you

It's all about you, girl. It's all  
About you and living in your world

You go on  
Don't ya dare stop.

The visibility that comes with early success brings with it opportunities and pressures. Some flinch from those opportuni-

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ties and retreat to what they know well. They go on reciting the same poem or even writing a minor variant on it for the remainder of their careers. Morris responded to her opportunities by accepting an array of challenges, replying with texts “for placement in theatrical settings” that included dance, one-woman performance, songs, poems, even lectures. Her work expanded in range and ambition, and if there was an occasional scattering of focus, the growth (from an already strong base) was startling. I first met Morris when we participated on a panel devoted to poetry and social class. Billed as the hip-hop phenom among older, more traditional poets, she was as fresh and electric as promised, but impressed also by the thoughtful, carefully articulated nature of her comments. Living outside New York for the past ten years, I have had the opportunity to catch her performances only intermittently. But each time I have seen her, I have been impressed by dazzling leaps in the maturity and sophistication of her art.

Morris distinguishes between her “page work” and her “stage stuff,” but to the reader (or audience) the distinctions are along a continuum—the paper work jazzed by the orality of performance, the performance work growing more adventurous in vocabulary and more syntactically complex. Like slightly older slam poets such as Paul Beatty and Julie Patton, Morris’s “stage stuff” was always condensed sufficiently to retain interest on the page—except for rare sound effects and repetitions that perform strongly but can be tedious to read. In fact, her terse, compressed sense of line often reminds me of Lorine Niedecker. But Morris’s magical ear now hears a greater array of muses. Without sacrificing class consciousness or political edge, she seems to daily expand resources for her imagination and voice.

even when Ali needed mo’ machismo  
he put dopes on the rope with a  
butterfly float, flippant wrist  
let loose noose’s grip

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like we girls did  
reworking the kinetics  
left-turn, right-turn  
over-hand aesthetics

feet thinking double-time  
meter reason school's  
in season, flip in, flouncing  
guild's lilies

dust clouds breezes—  
ten little drummers  
summon up old stories  
speak in tongues

(From "Las Brujitas," Morris, *Intermission*, 33)

For all her early success, Morris, like many working-class poets, might be considered a late developer. She remains a committed student of poetry who reveals the range of her studies in frequent acknowledgments of her predecessors, as in her poem "Writers are my Nepenthe." It was only in her twenties, however, as an already accomplished poet, that she was introduced to some of the texts that we assume poets such as James Merrill or John Ashbery read closely as teens. As a result of their wide reading, in their earliest poems those precocious poets already seem full-fledged. Though Morris was precocious in her own way, by the measure of her later work we can see that when she wrote the early work, she was still en route. In poems such as "Writer's Delight," what might seem self-consciously literary in others only emphasizes the expansion of her ambitions. Where most working-class poets, as Ron Padgett suggests, avoid "large claims" for fear of sounding pretentious, Morris's extensive experience reciting before a wide range of audiences has allowed her to develop the gift of

Pushing the envelope  
while moving through the crowd.

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Seventy years ago Christopher Caudwell wrote,

The poet finds his full individuation in bourgeois poetry, where chanted lyrical poetry becomes written study poetry, and the social ego of poetry is identified with the free individual. (290)

In Caudwell's determinist analysis, poetry evolved historically from chanted communal to written individual expression. A counterargument might now be made that the "chanted lyrical poetry" of poetry slams resurrects a public poetry for a post-modern culture that is increasingly oral, rather than literary. If so, does this mark a moment when individuals from any background can discover their free individuality, or the moment when the individuated consciousness gives way to unindividuated group identity?

A combination of serious poetic experimentation and populist crowd-pleasing is an ambition realized fully by only a few, though the tradition seems more insistent among African American poets, from Langston Hughes through Jayne Cortez. But every poetic revival in this country has been rooted in the promise of increased access. Anyone old enough to have witnessed the aftermath of the Beat explosion can recall dreadful saloon recitations by wannabes unconsciously parodying *Howl*. Anyone who attends contemporary slams appreciates how quickly innovation can become formalized and debased. Yet this vulgarized open platform, with its jarring lack of quality control, remains the most welcoming route to poetry for many. Refined in such fires, Tracie Morris now pushes the envelope in a dazzling range of experimental and traditional forms without ever seeming precious or unentitled.