

The People's Writing, the People's Culture:  
Meridel Le Seuer's *Praxis* of Writing for the Working Class

By

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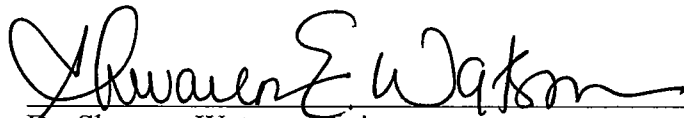
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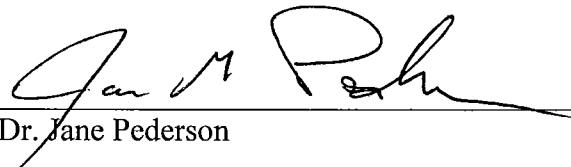
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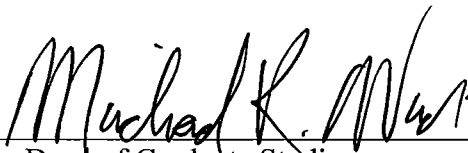


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By

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The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 2014  
Under the Supervision of Dr. Shevaun Watson

Writer and teacher Meridel Le Sueur's philosophy of writing, articulated through her textbook *Worker Writers* and other essays from the 1930s, offers a *praxis* of writing for the working class, which we need again today. Meridel Le Sueur's *praxis* of writing has more than just historical or theoretical interest. In the past decade, the United States has begun to see income and wealth disparities become the widest they have been in eighty years. Writing teachers, despite perhaps the best intentions, are often complicit in an educational system that confirms the *status quo* of an unequal, capitalist system. Le Sueur's work is a resource for challenging that system. Her writing philosophy fits into the history of critical pedagogy, sharing ideas with John Dewey and Paulo Freire of the social and democratic power of education and writing. Like Dewey and Freire, Le Sueur sees writing as a *praxis*, a fusion of theory and action. For Le Sueur, this *praxis* of writing comes from a collective identity, rooted in place, community, and history. Additionally, the workers' education movement of the 1920s and 1930s, of which Le Sueur was a part, is a useful model of alternative, community-based education. Le Sueur's critique of the higher education system of the 1930s, furthermore, reveals the harmful classed values in academic discourse that continue to exist today. Although writing teachers are not wholly responsible for the failure of the educational system to serve working-class students, teachers do have an important role in creating both institutional and community-based changes in how writing is perceived and taught. Le Sueur's *praxis* of writing can act as a guide for counterhegemonic writing instruction that bridges the divide between college and community.

 5/2/14  
Thesis Adviser (Signature) Date

For my neighbors and friends in the Phillips neighborhood of South Minneapolis,

in solidarity:

“We came into this world to give truth a little jog onward

and to help our neighbors’ rights.” —Wendell Phillips

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## Chapter One

### “The People Are a Story That Never Ends”

I just got up and looked out the window and knocked over a pitcher of water, because I can't write this story . . . You shouldn't break into a story like this, but it comes out like a burning behind my teeth.

—“Biography of My Daughter,” 1935

This begins with a familiar story. In “Biography of My Daughter,” writer Meridel Le Sueur tells the story of a young woman she knew, Rhoda. Rhoda was young and pretty, kind and hard-working. She was also working class. Rhoda worked her way through college, going to library school, but there was a depression. There weren't any jobs. Rhoda got sick; she stopped eating. She died at the state hospital, a recipient of public relief. She died of starvation.

Le Sueur went with Rhoda's mother and best friend to bring her body home from the hospital. She asked Rhoda's mother, “look, why did she want to go through college . . . What did she want?” “To be a success,” [her mother] said at last, “She wanted above everything to be a success” (99). At this, Marie, Rhoda's friend became filled with a “tenderness and fierceness . . . that would make another world.” Marie said:

“Listen, you know what she got? Four years she starved to go through that lousy place, you know what she got? This is a scream, two weeks in the library. Two weeks on the C.W.A. Hurrah! Isn't that something? Listen, after all that, two weeks as a librarian. A success! Two weeks work and a swell death.” (100)

Le Sueur wrote Rhoda's story in 1935, when the Great Depression was still seizing the American people. But Rhoda's story is being repeated today. The United States is experiencing an unyielding Great Recession. The “recovery” has been jobless, giving

little hope to the unemployed and the under-employed. Students go to college because they, like Rhoda, want to be a success. But when they graduate, there are no jobs. At the end of Rhoda's story, Le Sueur writes, "What happened to her must stop happening" (100). But it keeps happening.

Meridel Le Sueur was a Minnesotan writer, teacher, and activist who committed her life to social justice. Although Le Sueur is most known for her creative writing, her body of work from the 1930s also includes essays on writing and one textbook: *Worker Writers*. The textbook came from Le Sueur's time as a teacher in the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) workers' education program. Three essays published in 1935—"The Fetish of Being Outside," "Proletarian Literature and the Middle West," and "Formal 'Education' in Writing"—further articulate Le Sueur's writing philosophy, a *praxis* of writing, which resonates today.

Le Sueur's textbook *Worker Writers* and her writing philosophy fit into the history of critical pedagogy, sharing ideas with John Dewey and Paulo Freire of the social and democratic power of education and writing. Her work, in many ways, is a direct continuation of American Progressive, socialist, and anarchist pedagogies. But Le Sueur's work has a more urgent relevance. Her writing philosophy comes from a time, the Great Depression, which in many ways (without much hyperbole) mirrors our own. The 1930s was a brief time when, through difficult times, working-class Americans had agency and voice in American culture and politics. Some of this power came from the recognition of class identity, and the role that writing and education can play in shaping that identity. Le Sueur recognized this power of writing; she articulated a *praxis* of writing for the working class, which we need again today. Despite the continuing efforts

of social-justice-minded teachers, the relationship between of class and writing continues to be problematic.

In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) affirmed in their resolution “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (SRTOL), that students have a right “to their own patterns and varieties of language,” and that privileging certain varieties over another “amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another” (1). Although the resolution primarily came out of the efforts of the Black Caucus of CCCC’s advocacy for African-American linguistic rights, groups like the New University Conference also pushed for the resolution as a way for students to “develop a collective class identity” (Parks 152). SRTOL’s promise for lasting change was, according to Patrick Bruch and Richard Marback, somewhat weakened through “compromise and contention” (ix). SRTOL has experienced a mixed reaction within the discipline. For some, like William G. Clark, the resolution still only leads to writing instruction that supports the *status quo*. Others, like Richard Ohmann and Geneva Smitherman, have continued to view SRTOL as having lasting historical and practical influence (Bruch and Marback ix-x). Forty years later, SRTOL is still influential in composition studies, despite the struggle of writing teachers to enact the resolution in their classrooms.

Despite this resolution and the continuing efforts of writing instructor and administrators, writing classrooms continue to privilege certain types of language and writing. The related issues of race and gender have had an increasingly critical place in writing pedagogy, in part because of SRTOL. However, notwithstanding the crucial work of Ira Shor, Mike Rose, Richard Ohmann, Linda Brodkey, and others, class has largely

been left out. Writing teachers, despite perhaps the best intentions, are often complicit in an educational system which confirms the *status quo* of an unequal, capitalist system. Le Sueur's work is a resource for challenging that system. Le Sueur sees writing as a *praxis*, a fusion of theory and action. She offers a writing *praxis* that challenges the working class to reclaim their voices. For Le Sueur, this *praxis* of writing comes from a collective identity, rooted in place, community, and history. Le Sueur reveals the harmful classed values in academic discourse, reaffirms the power of the working class voice, and repositions the author in a community context. For Le Sueur, writing is one way to change the world.

As a general definition, *praxis* “conveys the dialectical nexus between the ‘theorizing,’ or thinking dimension of human beings and the ‘practicing’ or doing” (Paringer 111). The concept of *praxis* can be traced through various strains of Western thought. Starting with Aristotle and continuing with Hegel, *praxis* was a central concern of Marx and of the related movements of socialism, communism, and anarchism (Bernstein x-xi). Perhaps the most famous definition of *praxis* is from Marx's “Theses on Feuerbach”: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (318). Neala Schleuning, who connects Le Sueur's political philosophy to a communist anarchism, notes that, “Anarchists have always demanded the integration of theory and direct political action. For Le Sueur, too, involvement in radical politics was not limited to merely recording or interpreting actions around her” (103). Dewey, although not considered a radical but certainly a fellow traveler, has a distinctly Pragmatist view of *praxis*. He argues that, “The separation that has been instituted between theory and practice . . . has had the effect of distracting

attention and diverting energy from a task whose performance would yield definite results” (Dewey qtd. in Campbell 87). Although Aristotle would not consider writing to be *praxis* or doing, but rather *poesis* or making (Bernstein ix), Dewey’s more holistic philosophy, that “There is no gulf, no two spheres of existence, no ‘bifurcation’” (qtd. in Campbell 77), removes the useless distinctions between categories. Like Dewey and unlike Aristotle, Paulo Freire’s liberatory pedagogy directly connects language and writing to *praxis*:

Within the word we find two dimension, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a *praxis*. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (Freire 87)

Workers’ education, and specifically, Le Sueur’s *praxis* of writing for the working class, are bridges between Dewey’s progressive pedagogy and Freire’s more radical literacy education. But Le Sueur’s conception of writing acts as more than a bridge; it is a tool, a tool of change, of solidarity, and of love.

Meridel Le Sueur’s *praxis* of writing has more than just historical or theoretical interest. In the past decade, the United States has begun to see income and wealth disparities become the widest they have been in eighty years. Not since 1928 has the gulf between rich and poor been so vast. In 2007, the top one percent of Americans controlled thirty-five percent of the wealth in the United States, while the bottom ninety percent combined controlled only twenty-seven percent (Stone, Trisi, Sherman, and Chen 11-12). While the richest Americans continue to prosper, a recent report by the *New York Times* shows that the American middle class is no longer the most affluent middle class in the

world, and that the American poor are poorer than those in many European countries (Leonhardt and Quealy). Unemployment has remained stubbornly above five percent, and wages for those who do have jobs have been flat for the past two years (Schwartz). The share of the long-term unemployed in the unemployment rate has been at a historical high ever since the beginning of the recession in 2008 (Chokshi). Young adults are having a much more difficult time finding jobs than previous generations. The “Millennial” Generation, born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s, despite having more education than any other American generation, has an unemployment rate that is more than twice as high as the national average. When young people do find jobs, they tend to be low-wage and part-time (Reese). The 2008 global depression and the subsequent jobless “recovery” in the United States has made life much less secure for many Americans who had considered themselves comfortably middle class.

The history of the workers’ education movement and Le Sueur’s work within that movement, require an acknowledgment that America is a classed society. Although class division was perhaps a more accepted idea in the 1930s when Le Sueur was writing, class continues to be both a necessary component of America’s capitalist economy and a structural constraint that many Americans deny. Although class is more fluid and complex than I am able to explore here, J. Elspeth Stuckey has identified six indicators of class: (a) personal prestige, (b) occupation, (c) possessions, (d) interaction, (e) class consciousness, and (f) value orientation (4). The Marxian view of class is less complex, defining class solely by the relationship of the worker to the mode of production (Zweig 98-99). Stanley Aronowitz points out that the picture of the working class in the American imagination tends to be that of a blue-collar white male. “Blacks and Latinos,”

Aronowitz notes, “are viewed as unified, biological identities . . . . the narrowing of the concept limits our ability to discern class at all” (45). Much of the difficulty in discerning class in the United States comes from how class identity contradicts the mythology of America. To notice class is to notice that not everyone who works hard is able to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and achieve the American dream. The changing labor market in the United States has also made class more difficult to delineate today. Deindustrialization, globalization, the decline of labor unions, and the growth of service industries have meant that good-paying jobs, working-class or otherwise, are becoming difficult to find (Aronowitz 46). The clear-cut differences between blue-collar and white-collar jobs have blurred.

My own class identity reflects this complicated and changing construction of class in America. Both of my grandfathers benefited from the post-World War Two prosperity, with upper-working-class and middle-class jobs. When I was growing up, my father had a good union job, allowing my mother to stay at home. Education was highly valued in my family, so it was never questioned that I would go to college. Although I was not the first person in my family to attend college (my parents met at a technical college, though neither of them graduated), I was the first to graduate with a four-year degree. In many cultural ways, I am middle class. I have a great deal of privilege; I am white and highly educated. I had a relatively stable and secure upbringing. But in the current economy, I no longer have a stable or secure living. I graduated with my four-year degree in 2008, the year the housing-bubble burst. I have applied for part-time jobs as one of one hundred-and-twenty applicants. I currently have three part-time jobs: two are short-term, one is irregular. None offer benefits or much security. Despite my middle-class

upbringing, I have working-class jobs and live in a working-class neighborhood. My father, who had lost his union job, also lost his subsequent retail service job. He has become one of the long-term unemployed, at a time when he should be thinking about retirement. Rather than being part of a strong and stable American middle class, we have both become a part of a struggling American working class. My story is not unique. Unfortunately, this story is becoming more and more typical of Americans who had once identified as middle class, and are now finding a middle-class lifestyle out of their reach.

Economist Paul Krugman has recently defined “middle class” to mean having both security and opportunity:

By security, I mean that you have enough resources and backup that the ordinary emergencies of life won't plunge you into the abyss. By opportunity I mainly mean being able to get your children a good education and access to job prospects, not feeling that doors are shut because you just can't afford to do the right thing. (Krugman)

Krugman, who thinks about class in terms of income, rather than power as a Marxian economist would, estimated in January 2014 that a slight majority of Americans have neither security nor opportunity. Marxian economist Michael Zweig, who argues that class is about one's relationship to work and capital, estimated in 2000 that two percent of Americans were in the capitalist class, that is, those who control capital; thirty-six percent were in the middle class, professionals, supervisors, small business owners; and sixty-two percent were working class, who are, as Zweig describes, “no one's boss, who answer to the discipline and needs of their employers on the job” (99). Sociologists Earl Wysong and Robert Perrucci have proposed a new model of class in America. They

argue that there are now only two classes. Twenty percent of Americans, they assert, belong to the ruling class, and eighty percent are a part of the new working class. The middle class, or at least, a *secure* middle class, has disappeared (28-30). Whether Krugman's estimate of a slight majority, Zweig's number of sixty-two percent, or Wysong and Perucci's eighty percent are taken as accurate, it is clear that the working class has become—if it has not always been—a majority of Americans. Working-class writers, then, are the majority of writers. Writing teachers need to start taking this into account in their teaching practice. Writing and language, linked as they are to identity, provide a potent means for the working class to reclaim their place in American democracy.

The working class has experienced something of an identity crisis since the beginning of the post-World War II boom, when most Americans did experience greater security and opportunity. Fueled in part by the American myth of a classless meritocracy, and the silencing of the radical left during the McCarthy era, most Americans have continued to believe that they are middle class. The media and political leaders have contributed to what Krugman calls a “fetishization” of the middle class. To be working class has come to mean being undeserving, dependent on government handouts, an unworthy “other” of society. Historian Nelson Lichtenstein admonishes both the left and the right as participating in this destructive re-naming of class that has created, in the term “middle class,” an empty category with “no sense of agency, purpose, or politics” (13). Krugman points out that the pretense by the majority of Americans that they are middle class, “is a major reason so many of us actually aren't.” The Great Recession of 2008, followed by the Occupy Movement, has begun to give Americans a more accurate

glimpse of class structure in the United States and the inequalities inherent in the current economic and political system. Michael Zweig reminds us that, “To exercise power, you need to know who you are. You also need to know who your adversary is, the target in the conflict. When the working class disappears into the middle class, workers lose a vital piece of their identity” (74). This loss of identity has dire consequences for working-class Americans. Le Sueur offers writing as a tool, a *praxis* for both reclaiming a working-class identity and for reshaping America into a truly equal society.

Chapter Two situates Le Sueur and her philosophy of writing within a historical context. Central to her *praxis* of writing is her unique linking of place, history, and writing as working-class cultural reclamation. By nourishing the relationships of class, history, and place, within a collective identity, working class writers can access the transformative possibilities of writing.

Chapter Three offers alternatives to a higher education system that does not always serve working-class students well. Beginning with an overview of workers’ education in the United States, the focus narrows to the height of the workers’ education within the “social-unionist” labor movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Le Sueur’s role as a workers’ education teacher for the Works Progress Administration, brings further attention to the federal and state role in workers’ education.

Chapter Four centers on Le Sueur’s philosophy of writing for the working class, expressed through her textbook, *Worker Writers*, and other essays and reportage of the 1930s. This includes Le Sueur’s critique of the higher educational system and the writing that system prescribes; her dismantling of middle-class values imposed on writing; and her conception of authorship as a collaborative, community process leading to a

collective working-class identity. Le Sueur's *praxis*-oriented philosophy, much like Freire's, imbues the written word with the power to transform society.

Finally, Chapter Five implicates the higher educational system, including writing teachers, in perpetuating class inequality in the United States. Taking from Le Sueur, Freire, and the practices of service-learning and place-based pedagogy, I propose that rather for teachers to either wholly reject higher education and formal writing instruction or to compromise for the *status quo*, writing teachers need to radically re-imagine spaces of learning and writing. Writing needs to be reclaimed as a *praxis*, in an act of solidarity and love.

## Chapter Two

## “Revolution Can Spring Up from the Windy Prairie as Naturally as the Wheat”

Our past is usable today. Restless, we sense new frontiers, in vast and intricate combinations, using the democratic legacy in new extensions of old and barely realized forms. We of the north have agile practice in swift equilibrium in forever changing forms. We are agile, acrobatic, and dogged, living on the curve of movement, in the groove, on the ball. Our hope is real and honored and we move forward to great ends, in new configurations of life.

—*North Star Country*, 1945

For Meridel Le Sueur, writing can be a *praxis* for the working class by helping to grow a democratic working-class culture. This culture comes from reclaiming and telling working-class history, and building a sense of place through community. History is crucial to Le Sueur’s *praxis* of writing, for as Stanley Aronowitz points out, “We can’t know who we are unless we know where we’ve been” (55). This sense of history, combined with a sense of place and of community can be revolutionary. Anarchist Gustav Landauer argues that place and community are central to creating a new society, for “Nothing but the rebirth of all peoples out of the spirit of regional community can bring salvation” (qtd. in Buber 49). It was Le Sueur’s own rootedness in history and place, her sense of the local, that made her a voice for and with the working class.

Meridel Le Sueur, born in 1900 in Iowa, grew up in a community of activists. Le Sueur’s mother, Marian Wharton, had to kidnap her children when she left her preacher husband, for the law considered them to be property of the father. In the divorce papers, Wharton was charged with desertion and reading “dangerous literature” (Schleuning 18). Wharton and her second husband, lawyer Arthur Le Sueur, both active in the radical Midwestern politics of the early 1900s, met as teachers at Eugene Debs’ People’s College in Fort Scott, Kansas. Le Sueur grew up surrounded by socialists, anarchists, and

“Wobblies” of the International Workers of the World. As a little girl, she remembered spending hours walking and talking with anarchist Alexander Berkman. The Le Sueurs moved to St. Paul, Minnesota in the mid-1910s, where their boarding house was a center for activism. In her late teens, Le Sueur studied drama and physical culture in Chicago and New York, living for a time in Emma Goldman’s anarchist commune. Disillusioned by theater and movie industries in both New York and Hollywood, Le Sueur began writing (Hedges 3-19; Schleuning 17-25).

In the late 1920s and the 1930s, after moving back to Minnesota, Le Sueur wrote and published prolifically. Her short stories, poetry, essays, and reportage were published in magazines and journals like the *Daily Worker*, *Partisan Review*, *Scribner’s*, and *New Masses*. It was during this fertile creative period that Le Sueur chose to become a single mother. She gave birth to two daughters, fulfilling her desire to be a mother but not a wife. Around this time, Le Sueur joined the American Communist Party (CPUSA). Frequently unemployed during the Great Depression, Le Sueur worked as a creative writing teacher for the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) workers’ education service in Minneapolis and authored a creative writing textbook published by the WPA, *Worker Writers*. Le Sueur also worked on the WPA Federal Writers’ Project, where she contributed to the Minnesota WPA guidebook. Le Sueur’s increasing militancy and the growing anti-communist political environment led to her being blacklisted during the 1950s. She was hounded by the FBI, moving often, and unable to publish anything beyond a few children’s books. The feminist movement of the 1970s brought Le Sueur and her writing back to light, where she was embraced as a feminist foremother until her death in 1996 (Hedges 3-19; Schleuning 17-25). Le Sueur continues to be best known for

her writing from the 1930s, writing that was rooted in the radical political history of Minnesota, and shaped by the occasionally violent social and political environment of Minneapolis.

Minneapolis developed a strong labor movement during the decade of the Great Depression, due in large part to Minnesota's deep history of radical politics. Agrarian populism flourished during farm depressions of the late 1800s (Faue). Scandinavian and Eastern European immigrants embraced democratic socialism and the cooperative movement. Finnish, Slavic, and Italian miners on the Minnesota Iron Range, with the support of the IWW, struck against U.S. Steel. Radical third parties were common: The Socialist Party, the Non-Partisan League, the Farmer-Labor Association, and the Communist Party, all played important political roles in both local and statewide politics. (Faue 19-20; Le Sueur, *Crusaders* 11). The radical Farmer-Labor Party, which called for "a cooperative commonwealth" (Olsen 394), was a major party in Minnesota until it joined the Democratic Party in 1944 and became the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL), which still exists today.

This radical legacy contributed to the sometimes militant labor movement in Minneapolis during the 1930s. Unlike single-industry Midwestern cities like Detroit or Toledo, Minneapolis had a diverse economy that kept unemployment rates lower than the national average. However, by 1932, more than twelve percent of Minneapolis' population received city relief (Faue 58, 64). The economic, political, and social environment led to what Elizabeth Faue calls a "community-based labor movement" that preached the "gospel of unity and unionism" (18). The year 1934 saw three major American strikes: longshoremen in San Francisco, factory workers in Toledo, and

truckers in Minneapolis. The Minneapolis truckers' strike lasted throughout the summer of 1934, with sporadic violent confrontations between strikers and police that resulted in the death of two strikers and the declaration of martial law in the city (Faue 72-73). In this turbulent time, Le Sueur wrote about and taught working class Minnesotans.

Along with her work as a teacher with the WPA workers' education program and a writer with the WPA's Federal Writers' Project, in the 1930s, Le Sueur was a rising voice of the radical literary left. With writers like Jack Conroy and Nelson Algren, Le Sueur was part of an artistic movement that attempted to create a new, people's aesthetic. They experimented with voice and tone, trying to capture the lives of working America. They questioned the romantic, solitary, and middle-class idea of the author. Perhaps, above all, they rejected the notion that art is separate from politics. They saw writing as another form of protest, another tool for social change.

Although Le Sueur is seen primarily as a creative writer, her work pushed conventional genre boundaries of her time. Her creative writing made an argument. Her personal stories were shared for a public purpose. Her essays were poetic (Indeed, Communist Party critics derided her work as being *too* lyrical). Le Sueur related the Minneapolis truckers' strike by combining her eyewitness account with her passionate personal reaction in "I Was Marching." She described the humiliation and hunger of the unemployed in "Women on the Breadlines." Le Sueur's writing was always in the service of social change.

Writing and teaching during the Great Depression, and herself on public relief, Le Sueur saw and experienced the suffering of working class Americans. But in that suffering, she also saw strength. The silencing of the working class had led to an

economic system that was in ruins. The story of the American Dream had turned out to be a lie. This was the time, then, for workers to insert themselves back into the history of America. Le Sueur exhorts her students in *Worker Writers*:

We are facing hunger, want, thousands are unemployed. There is the struggle to unionize, meeting with strong and violent opposition. More and more we need words to write and express the true history of the past and to create the true history of the future. Words, the written word, is a kind of blue-print. History is a thing that you feel and sometimes you live it and often you are making it. It is YOU who make history and can write the true story of it. (*Worker Writers 2*; emphasis in orig.)

For Le Sueur, writing and history are active and interrelated. There is an almost cyclical relationship between history, writing, and action, with writing functioning as the action connecting the past and the future. But what is most significant in this interrelationship is the centrality of the personal. History and action find their pivot in “YOU,” the personal experience. Only the makers of history, which for Le Sueur, are the working class, can write the “true history,” and by so doing, change the future.

Le Sueur’s call for workers to write their personal histories might initially seem to have much in common with the kind of self-absorption that expressivist writing can often be critiqued as encouraging. However, as Jane Greer argues, Le Sueur did not urge her students to “‘find a voice,’ through which they could articulate an authentic, originary self.” Rather Le Sueur asked her students to find the wider “connections between their experiences and the discursive structures available to them for expressing those experiences” (Greer, “Refiguring” 613). Bringing personal histories into public discourse

was a common move of radical and left-leaning writers and artists during the Great Depression.

Like many leftist writers of the 1930s, Le Sueur was an advocate of the genre of reportage. A combination of creative non-fiction and journalism, reportage of the 1930s was written by a participant observer who “bared his feelings and attitudes to influence the reader’s own” (Stott 178-9). Reportage uses the personal experience and emotions of the observer to make the event more relatable. By making the political personal, the writer of reportage shows that “the fact he is describing is no corpse; it is alive, it has its place on earth” (North 120-1). When Le Sueur encourages writing about the self (and indeed, most of her own writing is highly autobiographical), she is encouraging it for a very public purpose. But the opportunity to express one’s self authentically, as a member of a marginalized group, does more than just facilitate self-expression. This authentic self-expression, for Le Sueur, is a catalyst for the formation of what she calls “the people’s” culture. But this culture is formed at the intersections of community, history, and place. In this intersection, the communal identity is more important than the individual identity.

Le Sueur’s identity as a Midwesterner, and a Midwestern *writer*, was formed through the connections between her own experiences with Midwestern revolt against Eastern capitalistic monopolies, and the land which contained those experiences. Rather than reflecting a shallow patriotic or provincial pride, Le Sueur translated nation and region into “personalized terms of place and community” (Mickenberg 34). Her regionalism escapes entrapment by nostalgia through her insistence of the interconnectedness between people and land. This is especially apparent in Le Sueur’s

book-length folk history of Minnesota and Wisconsin, *North Star Country*. Tradition becomes roots, which “are not just a physical place, but the people who love the land, or change the land, or even those who exploit the land” (Schleuning 63). In Le Sueur’s 1930 personal essay, “Corn Village,” a lyrical reflection of her relationship to the Midwestern landscape, she asks, “What does an American think about the land, what dreams come from the sight of it, what painful dreaming?” (12) For Le Sueur, the land is “a wound inflicted on the deep heart” (“Corn Village” 25). This wound requires “staying with you, trying to be in love with you, bent upon understanding you, bringing you to life. For your life is my life and your death is mine also” (“Corn Village” 26). People and place have an almost psychic connection, a deep entanglement far beyond the everyday connection to the land that a farmer or a miner might be imagined to experience. But this connection is more than just a poetic abstraction; it carries with it the potential to create a revolutionary culture.

Like many radical writers of the 1930s, Le Sueur was attempting to articulate a new way of writing that valued working-class culture over bourgeois culture. William Dow argues that she does this by basing “her language on a moving, living communal spirit. In this way she rejects what she considers to be the fetishized individualism of the middle class” (137-8). Le Sueur’s own writing contains a continual rejection of the American myth of the individual. This idea of establishing identity through community is central to Le Sueur’s conception of a regionally inflected working-class culture of action. As radical writers were attempting to formulate a “proletarian literature,” Le Sueur “developed the idea of ‘people’s culture’” (Shulman 42). But because she saw this culture as deriving from a communal experience, Le Sueur looked to the local. Addressing the

1935 Community American Writers' Congress in New York City, she exhorted her fellow writer and critics:

There is only one class that has begun to produce a Midwestern culture, and that is the growing yeast of the revolutionary working class arising on the Mesaba range, the wheat belt, the coal fields of Illinois, the blown and ravaged land of the Dakotas, the flour mills, the granaries. In these places the first unity of action, and of communal expression, is being made between the farmer and the industrial worker on the militant front of struggle. ("Proletarian" 136)

Le Sueur places her hopes for change with the people, not as individuals, but as communities rooted in specific locations and experiences. Robert Shulman sees in Le Sueur, "an underlying faith that, however flawed, the people and the land contain the possibilities of an America growing from precisely delineated energies and history" (42). Le Sueur's *praxis* of writing reflects both this faith in the collective power of working class people to remake American culture, and the necessity that this culture is intensely local.

Although Le Sueur is primarily identified as a feminist writer and secondarily as a Communist writer, her commitment to regionalism is a neglected but essential part of her *praxis* of writing. At its most fundamental level, regionalism is simply an acknowledgement of "the fact that culture varies over space" (Steiner 3). The regionalism of the first half of the twentieth century is usually associated today with conservative, reactionary tendencies of tradition and nostalgia. But the 1930s also saw the appearance

of a radical, leftist regionalism. Strongly associated with the anti-Fascist Popular Front alliance of radicals, progressives, and liberals, radical regionalists looked to folk and worker history and local political movements to rearticulate the possibility of American democracy within a particular landscape (Steiner 3-8; Mickenberg 27-30). For Le Sueur, this landscape was the Midwest.

Le Sueur created what Julia Mickenberg calls a “myth of place,” as a way “to inspire others to reclaim their place and their history and to recognize that *their* American way was being rejected” (Mickenberg 38). Le Sueur argued that in the Midwest, because of its unique interweaving of radical movements within particular places, “Revolution can spring up from the windy prairie as naturally as the wheat” (“Proletarian” 206). This Midwestern revolutionary culture, Le Sueur insists,

is something that has been bred in our bones for two generations, that has cut the jawbone a little sharper. This is the slow beginning of a culture, the slow and wonderful accumulation of an experience that has hitherto been unspoken, that has been a gigantic movement of labor, the swingdown of the pick, the ax that has made no sound but is now being heard. (“Proletarian,” 205)

The accumulation of experience within a space, when nurtured, folds the experience of the individual into that of the community. The experiences of the individual and of the community become one. This melding of self and community is crucial to Le Sueur’s *praxis* of writing.

Shared experience and shared suffering “binds people together,” as Landauer explains, in “common spirit, ” (qtd. in Buber 49). Le Sueur saw the beginnings of this in

her working-class, Midwestern culture. Midwesterners “of the petty bourgeoisie and the working class, have been dissenters, individual madmen, anarchists against the machine; but now the Middle Western mind is finding a place, sensing a new and vigorous interrelation between himself and others” (“Proletarian” 206). Le Sueur’s concept of the interrelation between self, community, place, and history is an antecedent of the ideas of critical pedagogy, and more specifically, of a critical pedagogy of place.

Pedagogy of place expands on Freire’s assertion that:

Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world.

(81)

Always considering people as a part of their context, and not in opposition to it, does more than just acknowledge a more complicated reality. By recognizing these interrelationships, the idea of self shifts to encompass a more collective identity. It is through a pedagogy of place that addresses “the specificities of the experiences, problems, languages, and histories” that students, writers, and communities can develop a “collective identity and possible transformation” (McLaren and Giroux 163). By nourishing the relationships of class, history, and place, within a collective identity, working class writers can access the transformative possibilities of writing.

The transformative possibilities of writing, for Le Sueur, are not simply personal transformations. Personal stories and working-class history have a social, public purpose.

Le Sueur offers a writing *praxis* that challenges the working class to reclaim their voices, or rather, to reclaim their *voice*. Le Sueur urged her working-class students to write, because “We need writers to write these things so they will be known, become the written and common experience” (*Worker Writers 2*). The working-class experience is becoming more common in the United States. Writing needs to be a *praxis* so that experience and struggle can be heard. Teachers need to create spaces where this kind of writing can be practiced.

## Chapter Three

### “Our Universities Seem Medieval”

A professor from the university got up to talk. He was a pale man with a tall head and what he was saying was very sad . . . . Educated people, she thought, have poor generative power sometimes; they don't believe in anything. No good for tomorrow's seeding. No good to look to them; so she stopped listening to the professor. She didn't hear a word he said.

—“Salute to Spring,” 1940

Meridel Le Sueur, like many others involved in the labor movement, did not find in the traditional educational system a site for class struggle. She wrote, “Our universities seem medieval compared to science, transportation, and the bathroom” (“Formal” 209). It was not that she was anti-intellectual. Rather, she saw that one purpose of higher education was to preserve the *status quo*. The universities, she argued, “protect a dying economic order by making out that is it ‘normal’ or ‘human nature’ and therefore the university is the chief enemy of that mode of consciousness which has always been most valuable to man” (“Formal” 208). The place for consciousness-raising education, then, was outside of these traditional educational spaces.

Although university attendance by working-class students in the United States was small until the G.I. Bill after World War Two and the rise of open admissions in the 1960s, there is a long American tradition of alternative educational spaces and practices for the working class (Aronowitz 65-67). While working-class students may have had only a small presence on traditional university campuses, they had opportunities for non-traditional learning outside of universities. From the 1920s until the end of World War Two, the socialist, communist, anarchist, and labor movements sponsored workers' education in schools that were basically alternative universities for the working class

(Aronowitz 39-40). Workers' education was seen as an essential part of the labor movement.

Meridel Le Sueur's involvement in the workers' education movement is the legacy of Progressive and radical American traditions of education. Le Sueur's mother, Marian Wharton, wrote her own English textbook when she was the English teacher at Eugene Debs' socialist People's College in the mid 1910s. This free correspondence school headquartered in Fort Scott, Kansas, had as its mission to equip workers "with the power, mental and moral, economic, political and otherwise to conquer their exploiters . . . and take possession of the earth and the fullness there of in the name of the people" (Debs qtd. in Greer, "No Smiling" 252). The school had an enrollment of 4,000 students in its second year (Greer, "No Smiling" 253). But workers' education was not only popular. It was also radical. Workers' education was an attempt to teach workers about social, economic, and political issues to enable them to make positive change for the working-class.

Workers' education in the 1920s and 1930s had three broad influences: Progressive educators, like John Dewey; the American labor movement; and the radical popular educational practices of socialists and anarchists. While these influences had somewhat different political goals, they had a shared vision as to the purpose of education. Education should, according to this vision, develop civic and engaged citizens, and model a democratic society. It was this democratic vision that made workers' education different from other types of education for working-class students.

It is important to make the distinction clear between workers' education and adult education. Although they may share many elements (literacy education, general adult

courses, vocational training), workers' education, as it was defined at its height between the end of WWI and the beginning of WWII, was "inherently political" (Altenbaugh 25). Rather than merely teaching workers' basic skills or just how to be good union members, workers' education prepared workers for class struggle with the aim of reshaping society. Susan Stone Wong describes this philosophy as "social unionism," which "tied the building of a union to the creation of a new and better social order" (43). Workers' education in the United States, however, began in the nineteenth century with less intention of social change, but rather as an attempt by workers to understand the economic and social implications of the Industrial Revolution (Kornbluh 9).

Early examples of workers' education saw social inequality as closely tied to educational inequalities. A workingmen's group formed in Philadelphia in 1829 decided as soon as 1830 that "in obtaining an equal system of education, we will rid ourselves of every existing evil" (qtd. in Stubblefield and Keane 99). Early labor organizations made education a central activity of their membership. The Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, one of the most powerful labor organizations in the United States in the 1870s and 1880s, was envisioned by its leadership as primarily an educational group, with the goal of rousing working people through lectures at local assemblies (159-60). However, later labor unions did not have the same focus on education. As the American Federation of Labor (AFL) gained dominance in the labor movement in the late 1880s, the workers' education movement diminished.

The AFL was somewhat apolitical, calling for fair wages and workdays, but not calling for a change in the social order. Referred to as "pure and simple" unionism (Wong 43), this conservatism was reflected in the AFL's educational policy. Workers learned

vocation skills and how to run union meetings or issue complaints to management. They were not expected to change society (Curoe 102-6). In addition, Samuel Gompers, the AFL's president for nearly forty years, was well known as being anti-intellectual (Hansome 51-2). As a result of Gompers and the AFL's resistance, workers' education developed outside of organized labor unions until the resurgence of the workers' education movement in the 1920s (Stubblefield and Keene 161).

American workers' education at the end of the 1890s and the early 1900s found inspiration in Scandinavian folk schools and English labor colleges, such as Charles A. Beard's Ruskin College in Oxford (Altenbaugh 24; Stubblefield and Keene 161). Early labor colleges at Oxford and London in the early 1900s had a "highly political educational activity, stressing working-class unity and solidarity in action enlightened by a solid grounding in the social sciences" (Altenbaugh 25). The first, and one of the longest-lived, American labor college was Work People's College, in Duluth, Minnesota. Started in 1903 as an immigrant "folk" high school with the aim of preserving Finnish language and culture, it soon became a residential labor college serving the Finnish mining community of the northern Minnesota Mesabi Iron Range. Although Work People's College was influenced by both the Finnish Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Work People's College and other residential labor colleges were formally independent of both public institutions and trade unions. This allowed for more radical goals and innovative pedagogies (Altenbaugh 60-70). These schools were influenced by the idea of "integral education," where intellectual and manual training were seen as equally important (Suissa 103). Although each school differed, there was an intentional inclusion of both theoretical courses, with texts by such

writers as Darwin and Marx, and practical or “tools” courses which worked on organizing and oratorical skills (Altenbaugh 92-93). Influenced by Progressive educators, the colleges experimented by getting rid of grades and tests, and creating more democratic discussion-based classrooms (129-30).

The Progressive Era brought liberals and socialists together in workers’ education with shared visions of the individual and social power of both democratic workplaces and schools (Kornbluh 20). Working- and middle-class educators both saw the necessity for education that challenged traditional schools, “arguing that the formal educational system reflected and perpetuated bourgeois society” (Altenbaugh 20). Alexander Fichlander, director of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union’s (ILGWU) Worker’s University, said in 1921, that workers

feel that they are frequently deceived and are furnished with interpretations of life which are intended to keep them *docile* and *submissive*. They feel that the truth will be told to them only by those of their own choosing, whose outlook on life is their outlook on life, whose sympathies are their sympathies, whose interests are their interests. (qtd. in Altenbaugh 20)

Workers’ education began to develop its own pedagogy, synthesizing liberal and radical ideas of democratic education. Workers educators were especially influenced by John Dewey’s seminal 1916 text, *Democracy and Education*, which argued that the democratic process in education would bring about a truly democratic society. Kornbluh identifies four guiding principles of workers’ education that came out of the Progressive Era: “(1) involving participants in developing curricula based on their own needs and interests; (2)

opposing the isolation of schooling from the real world; (3) building learning experiences around real-life situations; and (4) viewing the education process as a means of social change” (13-14). But despite the progressives’ and socialists’ many shared educational goals, they differed as to how that social change might finally be attained. The socialists’ “vision of an anti-capitalist society was more thoroughly wedded to strategies that called for collective action” (18). Despite perhaps the best of intentions, liberal educational reformers could sometimes be guilty of perpetuating undemocratic education. Mark Starr, educational director of the ILGWU from 1935 until 1960, argued that early attempts at workers’ education were too often made “by social-minded intellectuals *for* workers rather than *by* workers” (89). In the 1930s, the ILGWU was instrumental in developing workers’ education that brought worker-created educational ideals into practice.

The ILGWU became known in the 1930s for its “social unionism,” in contrast to the AFL and Gompers’ “pure and simple” unionism. The motto of the ILGWU’s workers’ education program was “Knowledge is Power” (Wong 43). Juliet Stuart Poyntz, one of the founders of the ILGWU’s workers’ education program, asserted that in workers’ education, “The worker must become more truly and deeply a *person*, not only for the sake of his individual happiness and fulfillment but also for the sake of cooperative accomplishment” (qtd. in Wong 47). In 1941, Starr identified what he saw as three distinct parts of workers’ education since 1933. First, he “sees workers’ education playing an important creative role in replacing rugged individualism by some form of democratic collectivism.” Secondly, it includes “a wide variety of social, recreational, and cultural activities.” Finally, workers’ education uses both “tool” courses, which “increase the practical efficiency of union services in the industrial and political field,”

and “background” courses for “studying the labor movement and society as a whole” (Starr 90-91). Workers’ education of the 1930s attempted to balance the practical, intellectual, and recreational needs of the working class while struggling for a more just social order. According to J.B.S. Hardman, the educational director of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, workers’ education “must be able to blend, in daily activity, ‘theory’ with practice, the small and the big things alike in the battle for labor and civilization” (22). During the Great Depression, the New Deal’s workers’ education programs were, for a short time, on the front lines of that battle.

The New Deal, that array of government programs pushed through by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration beginning in 1933, had no set goal beyond getting the United States out of the economic depression of 1929-1932. Yet with just this one goal, the New Deal changed how Americans view the federal government. Programs like the social security system, minimum wage laws, public housing, and farm subsidies are still in force today (Zinn xv). The work relief programs, like the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Public Works Administration (PWA), were perhaps the most visible of the New Deal programs. The Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) of 1933 provided grants to states for both general relief and work relief. The goal of work relief was to provide jobs for unemployed Americans in the areas in which they were trained. Soon it became clear that the FERA was insufficient to meet the employment needs necessary to stabilize the economy. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created in 1935 to more broadly administer work relief. By 1937, programs previously funded by the FERA were gradually ended or subsumed by the WPA (United States 5-10). One program that began

under the FERA and continued in a different form under the WPA was the Emergency Education Program (EEP).

The goal of the EEP, which began in October 1933, was “to employ as teachers of classes in adult education and certain other subjects persons qualified to teach who were unqualified and in need of relief” (United States 59). The EEP provided various types of instruction: literacy, vocational training, vocational rehabilitation, parent education, general adult education, nursery schools, and workers’ education. By March 1937, the EEP was liquidated as similar programs were put in place under the WPA (59-63). These educational programs of the EEP and the WPA are especially significant because they represent the first federal involvement in education.

The New Deal educational programs were structured as federally funded relief programs, providing funding to hire teachers or repair public schools. Technically, they did not interfere with educational content or the power of local and state educational entities (Fass 41). But the programs did reflect the New Deal philosophy that education was closely tied to social welfare and employment opportunities. Indeed, from the beginning of the New Deal, Harry Hopkins, the supervisor of the FERA and the WPA, saw education as vital to the federal relief programs (Kornbluh 27). The educational services attempted to fill in the gaps that poor and working-class Americans often fell through. Paula Fass argues that while the New Deal educational programs lacked a clear policy, they did offer an “implicit criticism” of traditional academic structures, and brought about “an awareness of how poverty often underlay inequalities in educational attainment” (47). Perhaps because the New Deal educational programs lacked specific goals, Fass suggests, the programs were open to improvisation and innovation. Each

program was separately administered, “unencumbered by a bureaucracy that would have enforced regularity, would have required the approval of the southern congressional bloc, and most likely would have been dominated by a generally conservative profession” (61). Instead, both the adult and workers’ education programs of the New Deal were flexible and responsive to student needs.

The adult education programs were wildly popular, due in part to the availability of classes and diversity of subjects (Kornbluh 31). An article published in 1937 notes that as of 1936, the federal adult education programs had enrolled 1,324,144 students. This was 183,358 *more* students than all American colleges and universities for a comparable period (“Extent and Nature” 134). In fact, at the height of the New Deal programs, a quarter of all Americans were involved in federally-funded adult education (Kornbluh 31). As the WPA adult educational programs expanded, the teachers realized there was a gap in the curriculum. A 1938 article reported that “The WPA teachers are now preparing a series of readers for use in such classes which differ radically from the instructional material commonly used” (“Adult Education” 693). Instead of teaching adult literacy with children’s primers, the new WPA readers “take subjects of normal adult interest, such as health, safety, occupation, family life and government, and present them in simple, assimilable form” (693). The workers’ education program was especially distinctive because of the flexibility of the teachers, class spaces, and curriculum.

The purpose of the workers’ education program was to provide instruction to “industrial and rural workers who wish to study their own problems in their larger setting and to use this wider understanding for the solution of their problems in relations to the organized labor movement in their own communities” (“Extent and Nature” 135).

Although the workers' education program included literacy and general adult education courses, these classes were taught using issues that related to workers. Federal director of workers' education, Hilda Smith, was also in charge of teacher training for the WPA educational programs. Because of her interest in pedagogy, the workers' education program created the first wide-ranging teacher-training program for instructors of working-class adults (Kornbluh 44). Smith's educational philosophy was an extension of the ideals of earlier progressive educators. She saw the classroom as "a microcosm of the larger society, a democracy writ small" (63). In her training materials and department memoranda, Smith advocated for discussion-based classrooms, worker-student created curricula, and most importantly, that workers' education should be separate from adult education (48). Smith had to constantly defend the workers' education program from spending cuts and the uncertainty of the value of a separate program. She argued that workers' education required a distinctly different approach because of the unique issues and educational histories of workers (50). Because many workers were resistant to traditional education, workers' education was centered in the union community, rather than in the school community.

In a contemporary article, Smith set the scene of workers' education in a hot room crowded with young men and women in overalls and cotton dresses. Smith described a group of workers eager to learn, but requesting a teacher who doesn't use "fifty-dollar words," who speaks "in our own language" (9). While the worker-students had a variety of occupations, from blue-collar factory jobs, white-collar clerk or retail jobs, and agricultural jobs, most had only an eighth-grade education (Kornbluh 58). The classes took place wherever was most convenient for the worker-students: union headquarters,

YWCA's, churches, schools, or other community buildings. Smith quoted a worker, who explained he wanted to learn "what was happening, why it is happening, and what we can do about it" (9). Class times were flexible to meet the needs of the workers. Taxicab drivers might have late-night classes after they got off work. Third-shift workers might meet at 5 a.m. before going home to breakfast (Kornbluh 49). Classes were organized by non-governmental groups, such as unions, Ys, and settlement houses. The sponsoring organization paid for supplies and the space; the federal government only paid for the teachers (58).

The smallest of the programs under the EEP, workers' education funding only accounted for one percent of the budget (Kornbluh 43). The program was also contentious, fighting for funding and legitimacy throughout all nine years of its existence. Detractors saw workers' education as left-wing and potentially anti-American. The workers' education program continued in large part because of the support of Eleanor Roosevelt and the labor movement, and the passion of Smith (43). Bad publicity and FBI investigations during the Red Scare of the late 1930s seriously challenged the program. In 1939, the workers' education program was renamed the Workers' Service Program and was completely overhauled. Instead of encouraging critical thinking on social issues in democratic classrooms, classes carried less potential of becoming political. For example, a recreation activity would become "posture improvement when workers develop poor posture at their jobs" (108). Due to cuts to the WPA and continuing political pressure, the program officially ended at the national level on May 2, 1941 (106-13). Despite the short life of the project, Kornbluh argues that the project was still effective. Local workers' education branches often led to the establishment of labor education services at public

universities and it is likely that the education received at workers' education schools contributed to the strength of the labor movement in the late 1930s and early 1940s (123-6). The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, where Meridel Le Sueur lived and taught, had two WPA labor schools, and a strong, activist labor environment.

The Twin Cities boasted of two labor schools under the WPA's workers' education program: the St. Paul Cooperative Labor College and the Minneapolis Labor School. Located in downtown Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Labor School was established in 1936, and according to a school pamphlet, was recognized as "one of the outstanding labor schools in the country" (Minneapolis Union Education Center, *Workers*'). As described in a September 21, 1938, school press release, the school was run by the Workers' Education Council, organized by the Education Committee of the Central Labor Union of Minneapolis. Union and labor organizations would send representatives to an annual Workers' Education conference, which would select the Workers' Education Council. The council met three times a year to plan the class schedule, create school policy, and raise funds. Students were recruited by unions and labor organizations, which paid three dollars per student to cover the cost of rent, utilities, and supplies. The role of the WPA was in "furnishing talented teachers" (*Minneapolis Labor School*).

Classes were held Monday through Thursday, primarily in the evening, with late-morning classes being added as the school grew. Friday night forums brought in speakers on a variety of topics. The school's 1936 annual report divided class subjects into two categories. "Social Studies" classes included labor history and problems, economics, cooperatives, and current events. English, literature, journalism, art, and public speaking

were among the classes that fit into the “Expression” category (Minneapolis Labor School 2). Although classes varied from year-to-year, labor law and history, parliamentary law, public speaking, current events, and English were consistently offered in available course schedules from 1936, 1938, 1939, and 1940 (Minneapolis Labor School, *Annual Report 2* and *For Immediate Release*; Minneapolis Union Education Center, *Second Term* and *Workers’ Education*). Besides academic activities, the school alumni club sponsored social events. This included a “snow train” to St. Cloud, MN for winter recreation, a spring party (which was called the Minneapolis labor movement’s “social event of the year”), and many presentations of worker-student performed plays (Minneapolis Union Education Center, *Workers’ Education*). Overlaying the academic and social activities of the school was an educational philosophy that reflected the democratic and socially transformative values of the social unionism workers’ education movement. In informational materials, the Minneapolis Labor School adopted the ILGWU’s motto, “Knowledge is Power . . . . That is why Workers’ Education is the right arm of the labor movement. That is why Workers’ Education will aid in the building of a strong and progressive democracy” (*Workers’ Education*). However, in 1939, the Minneapolis Labor School began to encounter the same challenges and changes that workers’ education programs across America faced.

In mid-1939, as the Minneapolis Labor School moved to a new building, the WPA workers’ education program nearly disappeared. Letters from Alan Bruce, State Supervisor of the WPA workers’ education program, to Hilda Smith reveal a turbulent year that involved the violent WPA strike in Minneapolis, the resultant FBI investigations and Grand Jury indictments of WPA employees, and questions as to the continued

existence of the program (Letters to Hilda Smith, July-Oct 1939). The nationwide WPA strike in the summer of 1939 was the result of severe cutbacks in Federal relief. By July 6, most Minneapolis WPA projects were closed due to striking workers. On July 13, Minneapolis police open-fired on strikers, killing one striker and seriously injuring seventeen. Although WPA workers soon went back to work, they faced layoffs of half of the relief workers and for some, summonses before a Federal Grand Jury (Faue 156-61). Along with the legal troubles some workers' education teachers faced, the entire WPA workers' education program was perilously close to being shut down by Congress.

The aftermath of the WPA strike, combined with continued attacks on New Deal programs by the anti-Communist Congressman Martin Dies and his Special House Committee on Un-American Activities, brought left-leaning programs like the workers' education program under scrutiny (Fried 47-49). After two years of budget cuts and congressional investigation, the WPA Workers' Service Program was dismantled in 1941, signaling a change in workers' education in the United States. With the onset of World War II, labor issues took second place to national defense (Kornbluh 123). During the 1920s and 1930s, workers' education was seen as "the soul of the union movement" (Wong 39). In the 1940s, workers' education turned into labor education, which no longer had the goal of changing the social order.

At the beginning of the 21st century, as union membership has declined, labor education has largely been limited to union-organizing training within the bureaucracies of the largest unions and the labor extension services of a select few public universities. Workers' education has become almost nonexistent and seemingly immaterial. But

current events suggest that workers' education, of the "social union" type, might once again be relevant.

Recent anti-worker and anti-union movements, like the dismantling of public-sector unions in Wisconsin and the spread of so-called "right-to-work" legislation, coupled with stubborn unemployment and growing income inequality, have stressed the working class. The skyrocketing cost of college tuition and the ballooning of student loan debt mean that traditional education is becoming less accessible to students unable to take on debt, but more desirable in the job market. Students are told they must, as Aronowitz states, "Go to college or die" (10). The credentials acquired through higher education have often become more important than the acquisition of knowledge. Rather than proving knowledge, completing a degree program proves "the willingness of the student to submit to the controls that have been imposed by the chronic shortage of good-paying jobs" (12). Education has become schooling, Aronowitz argues, where schools "teach conformity to the social, cultural, and occupational hierarchy" (19). This is a far cry from the motto of workers' education, that "knowledge is power."

The history of workers' education, reveals that the educational structures that exist today have never been the only choices. But the aim of workers' education between the World Wars was very different from what has frequently become the aim of higher education today. The question today is whether education should be about training and credentialing, or learning and knowledge. If the answer is the latter, then educators need to learn, as Aronowitz puts it, how to "foster the possibility of educational systems that can help people develop a sense of history, a sense of structure, and a sense of how they themselves can begin to re-create the world. You may think this idea is utopian, and

guess what—it is” (57). It is up to teachers to create spaces where working-class students can “begin to re-create the world.”

## Chapter Four

### “The Word is a Tool”

Capitalism is a world of ruins, really, junk piles of machines, men, women, bowls of dust, floods, erosions, masks to cover rapacity and in this sling and wound the people carry their young, in the shades of their grief, in the thin shadow of their hunger, hope and crops in their hands, in the dark of the machine, only they have the future in their hands.

Only they.

—“The Dark of the Time,” 1956

We are in a particular moment in American history where we need to start questioning what we teach. In the past decades, many composition instructors have ignored social class, but the growing gap between rich and poor in this country has made class difference and inequality something that writing teachers can no longer ignore. In James Thomas Zebroski’s useful conceptualization of social class as discourse, he saw the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the lack of response by the federal government, as a “break in the discourse” of social class. Americans were “shocked by the inept response to the disaster, as well as by the many images of largely poor, largely African American people stranded, waiting for that help” (522). There was a brief moment when there was a space in the discourse to talk about class. I believe there is an even larger space today. The Great Recession of 2008, the Occupy Movement, and the increasing disparity between rich and poor have created an opportunity for a new conversation about class, and more specifically, for writing teachers to have a conversation about class and writing.

Starting her teaching and writing during the Great Depression, Meridel Le Sueur never stopped having a conversation about writing and class. Although Le Sueur was primarily a creative writer, her philosophy informs all types of writing. While her

textbook, *Worker Writers*, was conceived for a creative writing class within the WPA's workers' education program, it articulates a larger philosophy about the nature of writing, language, and society. Three essays published in 1935, "The Fetish of Being Outside," "Proletarian Literature and the Middle West," and "Formal 'Education' in Writing," further illuminate Le Sueur's belief that reclaiming working-class writing is central in the struggle for social change. But more than just using writing to gain a sense of identity and voice, Le Sueur works on dismantling middle-class values imposed on writing, by society as a whole, and by most specifically and problematically, by writing instructors. Le Sueur reveals the false binary created by classed discourse. Le Sueur attempts to make whole an academic discourse that has been split by the objective and the subjective, as well as by the individual and community. From this fusion, she articulates a philosophy of writing that can be used to recreate the United States as a more just and more equal society.

Le Sueur was a creative writer, but her ideas about writing can be used across genres and discourses. Le Sueur had little patience for academic writing, as the quotes around "education" in the title of her essay "Formal 'Education' in Writing" suggest. Le Sueur's own body of work reflects a fluidity of style and genre. Her work that could be classified as more academic or formal—"Formal 'Education' in Writing," "The Fetish of Being Outside," and "Proletarian Literature and the Middle West"—display none of the objective authorial distance that typifies academic writing. Le Sueur's creative works resist categorization, usually containing simultaneous elements of reportage, personal essay, oral history, creative non-fiction, and lyric prose poem. Although *Worker Writers* is ostensibly a creative writing textbook, the genres of writing she mentions, and the appended student work, encompass a diversity of genres with a single, civic purpose. In

*Worker Writers*, Le Sueur makes clear that, “We are not concerned with what is called ‘style’” (6). Instead, the work of these writers is to “make a Union meeting vivid, or describe and report the strike, or what happened on the Mesabi Range at the funeral of a young mother who died needlessly in childbirth” (6). The student work included at the end of *Worker Writers* primarily consists of personal narrative, but also includes a week of strike reports, an oral history, nature writing, and what could be considered a “thick description” of a small town (*Worker Writers* 38-70). Rather than conforming to either the belletristic notions of writing for aesthetic or expressive purposes, or the focus, in composition, on argumentative, analytical, and civic writing, Le Sueur proposes what could be seen today as a combination of creative writing and composition. “Writing,” to Le Sueur, means the making of texts. But these texts always have a public, political purpose. Writing is, for Le Sueur, a *praxis*.

Like both the American anarchist and Pragmatic traditions, which flourished during Le Sueur’s childhood and young adulthood, Le Sueur insists on *praxis*, on an integration of thought and action. As William Dow notes, “For Le Sueur, the act of the mind seeks always a correlative in an act of the body” (145). Action and movement are vital to Le Sueur’s writing. She explains that, “There is no dissociation between art and action. You have to find the artistic expression from the *deed*, from the *action*” (qtd. in Schleuning 128). For Le Sueur, *praxis* is a necessary element to being a writer.

Le Sueur’s work in many ways serves as an American precursor to the radical literacy pedagogy of Freire. Le Sueur, like Freire, conceived of writing as transformative, as a *praxis* for the oppressed. However, Le Sueur, as a self-identified communist, and a member of the American Communist Party (CPUSA) until her death in 1996, pays

explicit attention to class. While Freire's revolutionary pedagogy can be critiqued as being taken out of context in the American, middle-class setting of higher education (Peckham 91), Le Sueur's work comes from middle-America, and working-class middle-America, at that. Most importantly, whereas Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is really working on creating a pedagogy of literacy, Le Sueur is directly addressing writing. Le Sueur's critique of the higher educational system is also a critique of the writing that system values.

Le Sueur matters today because, although social class has always been a central component of American society, growing class inequality requires more urgent action. Literacy practices like writing have incredible power in shaping American society. Indeed, J. Elspeth Stuckey, in her passionate critique, *The Violence of Literacy*, argues that "Literacy is, if nothing else, the condition of postindustrialism. A worker's possibilities are contained by his ability to negotiate subjects of capital. In contemporary capitalism in the United States, then, literacy and class are fused" (19). In a society where literacy is a requirement, how people negotiate reading and writing in their everyday lives says much about their success in the American economy. As American society is classed, so too is the language, and by extension, the writing, of these different classes. All teachers of writing need to give attention to the relationship between class and writing. Writing studies, and especially composition and rhetoric, are deeply involved in this relationship.

The extensive explanation of the Conference on College Composition and Communication's 1974 resolution, "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (SRTOL) describes how, because of historical factors, "certain dialects may be endowed with more

prestige than others . . . . These designations of prestige are not inherent in the dialect itself, but are *externally imposed*, and the prestige of a dialect shifts as the power relationships of the speakers shift” (5). Their brief explanation shows how social mobility created a “rising middle class,” who “demanded books of rules telling them how to act in ways that would not betray their background and would solidly establish them in their newly acquired social group” (11). Despite this understanding of the historical, social, and economic forces that have shaped perceptions of language and dialect in the United States, class continues to be given much less attention than other marginalized groups in writing studies.

It is important to acknowledge that there has been important work done in writing studies around class. Ira Shor and his work with critical pedagogy have been especially instrumental in bringing class into the classroom conversation. In his influential text, *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose challenges the American education system to better serve working-class students. Janet Zandy’s efforts in reclaiming working-class voices, have made working-class narratives and histories more visible. Class has become more common as a subject of discussion. But what has been missing in the discussion is how the writing itself and class interacts, especially writing in higher education. Literacy is taught to have unquestionable value, especially in attempting upward social mobility or “bettering” yourself. The requirement of writing classes like first-year composition give further credence to the idea that mastering what we term “academic” or “professional” discourse is a necessity for success (Zebroski 514-5). These expectations of what “good” writing looks like are imbued with classed values. There is little critical attention given to

the middle-class values imbedded in middle-class writing, perhaps in part because working-class English has largely been ignored.

Beyond Basil Bernstein's study of working-class English codes in the 1970s and Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*, working-class English has been under-studied and undervalued. Despite the fact that working-class English is spoken by a large percentage of English-speakers, perhaps even a majority, Peckham points out, it "hasn't been considered an object worthy of study" (28). Even without much attention or formal study, working-class English is still identifiable as different from the language of power, middle-class or "Standard" English. Most harmfully, working-class English is seen not only as different, but also as deficient. Peckham argues that inherent—perhaps unintentionally by most teachers—in the teaching of writing, is the idea that middle-class writing is superior. "Standard" English is the language of power, not necessarily because of oppressive social conditions, but because it allows for "better" thinking (41-3). There is also the pragmatic argument to teaching "Standard" English; if it is the language of power, the way for students to access that power is to master the language. But implied in that argument is an uncertainty: perhaps it *is* the language itself that has allowed the users of it to achieve those positions of power. This notion and continuing practice of treating writing other than "Standard" English as deficient, is despite the position statement of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

SRTOL, the 1974 resolution by the most influential organization in writing and composition studies asserts that students' have the right "to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style . . . . The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable

amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another” (1).

Ideally, then, all dialects should be given equal value in writing classrooms, if teachers want to resist controlling a student’s choices of identity. Yet despite this assertion, made forty years ago, the language of prestige and power in the United States is the language that is, largely unquestioned, taught in writing classes. But even more unquestioned are the values embedded in what is privileged in writing.

SRTOL refers specifically to dialect, leading one to think the differences between working-class and middle-class ways of writing are primarily linguistic. But along with these differences, which are certainly important to recognize, are the classed values imbedded into academic discourse. Academic writing privileges certain values and virtues, values which are usual for middle-class students, but which may conflict with the existing values of working-class students. Teachers who teach about social class, might still, unintentionally, expect and enforce these middle-class values in the writing of their students. Lynn Z. Bloom, James Thomas Zebronski, and Irvin Peckham each call attention, like Le Sueur, to the ways in which writing instruction, right or wrong, favors a middle-class way of seeing the world.

Lynn Z. Bloom’s controversial article, “Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise,” is a significant contribution to reconsidering how class and writing interact in higher education. Although I disagree with the conclusions Bloom makes, she must be credited for being one of the rare voices that acknowledges the class values imbedded in writing instruction. Bloom has acknowledged the classed nature of the values that writing teachers—really all educators, K-20—encourage and privilege. Central to her argument is the assertion that “freshman composition is an unabashedly middle-class enterprise”

(655). She argues that, “Composition is taught by middle-class teachers in middle-class institutions to students who are middle class either in actuality or in aspiration—economic if not cultural” (656). While this may have been closer to the truth in 1996, when Bloom first published this article, working-class students (and for that matter, working-class teachers) are becoming more typical in higher education. Despite this increasing diversity, Bloom is unapologetic in her acceptance of not only how student should write, but what morals and values that ideal, “standard” of writing instills. Bloom weighs down the writing of first-year composition with a list of middle-class virtues and values. These values are familiar: self-reliance, responsibility, respectability, decorum, propriety, moderation, temperance, thrift, efficiency, order, cleanliness, punctuality, delayed gratification, and critical thinking (658-66). These are the values of the ideal middle-class, all-American citizen.

By contrast, Zebroski, in his call for the rhetoric and composition field to map the discourses of class both in and out of academia, points to values that working-class students might find more familiar. Zebroski cites Larry Smith’s list of five “Working Class Values”: “(1) Communication: To the Point, (2) Family: Blood Ties, (3) Community: Neighborhood, (4) Work Ethic: Work as Fabric of Life, and (5) Education: Get One” (qtd. in Zebroski 558). But as Zebroski argues, it is not the values in and of themselves that are important. Instead, we need to “locate these values in the discourse(s) of social class and . . . focus on the interactions between conflicting values in the discourses in the academy” (558-9). One of the most common and lauded values in education today, critical thinking, is one of the values that carries very particular class values

Peckham, like Bloom and Zebroski, notes that of these classed values that usually go unnoticed in writing instruction, critical thinking is one which tends to be, ironically enough, not thought about critically. Peckham argues that, as anything else in education, critical thinking is “no more class neutral than middle-class English” (50). Indeed, rather than being neutral or even positive, critical thinking in certain classed setting may actually be negative. Zebroski reminds us that many working-class jobs “*punish* workers who exercise critical thinking” (559). As Peckham traces the meaning of “critical thinking” through its historical applications, he notes that the process of critical thinking—observing, analyzing, and synthesizing—values the disinterested or objective point of view over the subjective (52). This split between objective and subjective, is, for Le Sueur, the primary marker of classed writing.

Like Bloom, Zebroski, and Peckham, Le Sueur saw what was considered neutral or “standard” writing, to be biased in ways that benefited the middle class and acted to silence the working class. In her critique of writing instruction in higher education and in her own writing textbook, Le Sueur reveals a set of binaries of classed values in writing. Le Sueur delineates two overarching pairs of classed values in writing: the objective and the subjective, and the individual and community. She identifies objectivity and the individual as middle class values, and relates subjectivity and community with the working class or proletariat. But rather than simply acknowledge the privileging of middle-class values in academic discourse, Le Sueur argues that these middle-class values are antithetical to working-class justice. The so-called standards in writing of objectivity and individuality take away the power, the *praxis* of writing for social change.

Le Sueur places writing concretely as a foundation for a new, just, democratic society. Le Sueur sees words and writing as powerful tools for change, without which, “we cannot create a new social adjustment” (*Worker Writers* 4). However, to Le Sueur, certain ways of writing have more power to create that “new social adjustment.”

Objective writing, she argues, “can never provide will or purpose and is related to the liberal form of neutrality and disinterestedness” (“Fetish” 201). The objective distance in writing also distances the writer from the fight because, “You cannot be both on the barricades and objective or removed at the same time. I suppose you can but you are likely to receive the bullets of both sides” (“Fetish” 200). Le Sueur reveals how objective and subjective writing are on either side of the class war, a divide which has a long history of influence in Western thinking.

Peckham relates the classed values of objective/subjective all the way back to Plato’s cave, where the working classes are “dominated by subjectivity” in their perception of the shadows on the wall, but the upper classes “can see things how they are (68). This perspective has dominated academic writing, where the “I,” when it is permitted, is always the “writer in possession of her reason, language, and stance” (69). Peckham points out that a typical progression in first-year writing instruction moves from the personal, to “‘graduating’ to the more impersonal, argumentative writing” (67). This progression is analogous to the upward class mobility that higher education is perceived to accomplish. The emotional, subjective working-class writer is gradually molded into the more acceptable, emotionally removed middle-class writer. That this change is not necessarily easy or even desirable for a working-class student is seldom questioned.

Zebroski points out that the way in which academic discourse constructs “the appropriate/inappropriate emotion in dealing with topics and the world” is one of the “most difficult, yet unspoken barriers of academic discourse for the student from the working class” (541). While it is important for writing teachers to acknowledge that working-class students may struggle with appropriating a discourse which has different values, Le Sueur argues that the emotional remove privileged in academic writing silences those writers who may have something to write that is deeply emotional. Change does not come from an emotionally removed place, Le Sueur explains, but requires “heat,” for “You can’t hatch anything without heat. ‘Objective,’ removed, ‘individual’ writing at this time doesn’t give birth to anything” (“Fetish” 201). The emotion comes from a greater sense of necessity. The upper classes are, as Peckham writes, “born into the condition of being *above* it all” (69). The working class lives closer to the bone. The emotional urgency comes from a drive to survive.

Emotional writing has another negative connotation: Emotions can be messy, and so emotional writing can be messy. One of Bloom’s middle-class values of first-year composition is the value of cleanliness. If “clean” writing is preferred over messy writing, so too is clean language. But Le Sueur exhorted her students that, “Language was made to be used, not be kept pure. It is the vulgarians who make it a living language. It is the vulgarities that come up from below that make it live” (Lecture notes, n.d. [1937]). The vulgarities that might come into writing from a deep emotional experience are also the elements that can give writing the power to act in the world in a meaningful way. Working-class writers need the vulgarities and the emotions, because, as Le Sueur told her students, “we’ve got to strike a blow. By that, I do not necessarily mean a blow

AT something, I simply mean intensity, the thing that makes a straight drive through, that makes you say exactly, and not approximately, what you mean” (Lecture notes, 5 Oct. 1935). Subjective, emotional writing, rather than being seen as suspect, can give the working-class writer more power.

Although it is easy to divide the classed values of academic discourse into neat categories: objective/subjective, removed/emotional, clean/messy, the point in identifying these values is not to widen the divide. Instead, Le Sueur argues that we need both. Le Sueur does not put objective and subjective writing in opposition to each other. Instead, Le Sueur’s writing of *praxis* fuses the two. In an interview in the 1970s, Le Sueur explained that, “Writing has to be about that interchange—what happens. Instead of alienating and analyzing and objectifying, it turns out that the writer and the reader and the thing that’s written about, become one” (qtd. in Schleuing 136-7). This holistic view of writing rejects the artificial split between objective and subjective, and the putting of writing into dry categories. Le Sueur argues that, “If you’re going to change the world you can’t just do it from either one—the subjective or objective. You have to have a *praxis* between them which moves into action, which changes the nature of things” (qtd. in Schleuning 150). For Le Sueur, the classed binary of objective/subjective in an obstacle for writing for change.

The second classed binary Le Sueur identifies in that of the individual and the community. Bloom associates the value of “self-reliance” with the middle class, a typical trope of American individuality (658). In contrast are the working-class values that Zebrowski cites, through Smith, of “community” and “family” (558). These values are central to writing, because of how the dominant values, of self-reliance and

individualism, have shaped notions of authorship. Le Sueur directly relates these notions to maintaining the *status quo* of capitalism.

In Le Sueur's critique of the idea of the individual author, she points to the individualistic and competitive society that the capitalist system requires. For Le Sueur, Modern education for the most part is purely an apology for the distortions of a competitive, dog-eat-dog system of life. . . . The schools have been the chief defenders of this aggressive system, supposedly creating what is called the norm but which turns out to be a normality actuated by the ulterior and the vicarious. They have set up a social image and called greed and competition "normal." ("Formal" 208)

While the myth of America often celebrates the "rugged individual" of the frontier, for Le Sueur this individualist world-view is empty. The individualists are "going a lonely way in a kind of void, all shouting to each other and unheard, all frightfully alone and solitary" ("Corn Village" 9). Le Sueur sustains her hope in the idea of community. She wonders if, in the feeling of separation, "The whole communal organism suffered perhaps. One individual is only an articulated sensitive point for the great herd suffering" ("Corn Village" 17). The separation between the individual and community is only an illusion, a symptom of a destructive bourgeois sensibility.

Le Sueur's social conception of authorship is an extension of her own rejection of the "maggoty individualism" of a capitalistic society. Le Sueur rejects this individualistic sensibility as being hostile to the idea of authorship. At the same time, she acknowledges her struggle to reconcile her belief in a more collective notion of authorship with her middle-class, albeit radical, upbringing. Le Sueur "does not care for the bourgeois

‘individual’ that I am. I never cared for it. I want to be integrated in a new and different way as an individual and this I feel can come only from a communal participation which reverses the feeling of a bourgeois writer” (“Fetish” 200). The writer, rather than being a solitary figure, is, as Jane Greer describes it, “enmeshed in a network of relationships” (“Refiguring” 609). Through this network of relationships, writers become part of “An organic group pertaining to growth of a new nucleus of society . . . You do not join such a group, you simply *belong*. You belong to that growth or you do not belong to it” (“Fetish” 199). Le Sueur’s insistence on the naturalness, the “organic” belonging of the writer to the group, emphasizes her belief in the social nature and purpose of writing.

Le Sueur’s idea of a collective identity, of belonging to an “organic group,” does not mean that the sense of the individual self disappears. Instead, the individual self is recognized as an integral part of a larger society. The denial of the social aspect of the individual, can indeed, according to Raymond Williams, be harmful to the individual:

Any version of individual autonomy which fails to recognize, or which radically displaces, the social conditions inherent in any practical individuality. . . can lead at the best to self-contradiction, at worst to hypocrisy or despair. It can become complicit with a process which rejects, deforms, or actually destroys individuals in the very name of individualism (194).

The individual does not lose their sense of self to the community. Instead, the individual engages in a dialectical relationship with the community. Marx, in his *Philosophic and Economic Manuscripts of 1844*, explains how the individual is both the “*particular*

individual” and “just as much the *totality*” (45). Writing, then, engages both an individual author, and the society in which the author writes.

Because the writer is always embedded in social relationships, writing is always a social act. Stuckey reminds us that “We are, to be sure, natural individuals, but we are social before we are born, and the commerce we do with literacy is always, fundamentally, social. We are arranged by our relations to literacy, to how and why literacy is produced, and to the effects of what literacy is about” (95). For Le Sueur, working-class writers have a particular need to understand their social relationships with writing. Le Sueur equates that “maggoty individualism” with a capitalist system that has exploited the working class. In a capitalist economy, she argues, “all groups are a subtle hypocrisy since capitalism is based upon the exploiting ability of every individual against every other one” (“Fetish” 199). Working class writers can resist this system by fully engaging as social agents with a collective identity. In her lecture notes from around the time she taught for the WPA workers’ education program, Le Sueur reminds her working-class students that:

Today an individual does not stand just for himself, but acts as an apex of forces that created him. He does not participate as a unit in himself but stands for maybe years and years of development of a great many people, that have created him and thrown him up against a moment of crisis in which he acts, not for himself alone but for them all. (Lecture notes, 8 Oct. 1935)

Because the individual is created by the society, writing, then, especially in moments of crisis like the Great Depression, is enacted for that society. By revealing the classed

values of individual and society, Le Sueur is not suggesting that one should lose one's identity in the community. Instead, one's identity is, and always has been, in relation to that community.

Paying attention to the classed binary of individual/community is not to suggest that these values are universal or fixed. Rather, the point is to be aware of how these values work in academic discourse. By doing so, Zebroski argues, "we do the very thing that the discourse exists to prevent: we make it visible, we de-naturalize it, its prohibitions, its exclusions and its taboos" (535). This visibility also reveals that the relationship between writing, self, and, society is not binary or static, but complex and fluid.

One of Le Sueur's most pointed critiques of the education system is that it frequently projects a fixed reality. This is certainly relevant today, where the more recent emphasis in elementary and secondary on standardized testing and common curricula, implies that knowledge and writing can be standard. But this is not how language works. Taking from Valetin Volosinov, Williams holds that reality "occurs within an active and changing society. It is of and to this experience—the lost middle term between abstract entities, 'subject' and 'object,' . . . that language speaks" (37). It is this "middle term," what is between the binaries of subject/object, that we need to explore. Le Sueur argues, "the writer must contact a reality in flux, without fixity, and he is inimical to the static form of an image . . . . It is the worship of *that which stands for*, rather than *that which is*. A system, a thing, a substitution for life" ("Formal" 208). It is in this "reality in flux," of encountering "that which is," that makes writing a *praxis*. In order for writing to be a *praxis*, the classed binaries need to be made visible and rejected. Writing must have both the

objective and subjective, both the individual and the community. Freire adds “reflection and action” to this list. He maintains that, “if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis” (Freire 87). It is through this fusion that writing becomes a tool.

In *Worker Writers*, Le Sueur is clear that, “Language is perhaps the most social, outside the drama, of any of the forms of expression” (4). With the social power of writing, “you speak to others, influence others, tell others of what has happened to you” (*Worker Writers* 5). Le Sueur argues that, “The word, like the plough, the chisel, the needles, the spindle, is a tool” (5). She gives the power of writing back to the worker, for “Every worker must make this tool his own. He must not be afraid of this tool simply because he has not had a formal training in its use. The tool with practice, like any other tool, will turn to your hand” (5). The working class audience of Le Sueur’s textbook would certainly relate to the analogy between writing and work tools. But for Le Sueur, as for Freire later, the comparison is more than a metaphor. Freire makes a direct equivalency: “word = work = praxis” (87). Le Sueur uses “tool” because tools build things in the real world. The word is a tool that can change the world.

Addressing her working-class students during the Great Depression, Le Sueur wrote, “Today something is happening. The word as a tool is going back to the people. The best of our writers are saying that writing is no use unless it is a tool, a tool of defense as well as creation, a tool against barbarism, against hunger and want” (*Worker Writers* 6). Today, something is happening. Once again, working-class writers need writing for a tool. As writing teachers, we need to help provide our working-class students with that tool.

## Chapter Five

### “A New Nucleus of Society”

Our life seems to be marked with a curious and muffled violence over America, but this action has always been in the dark, men and women dying obscurely, poor and poverty marked lives, but now from city to city runs this violence, into the open, and colossal happenings stand bare before our eyes . . . . In these terrible happenings, you cannot be neutral now. No one can be neutral in the face of bullets.

— “I Was Marching,” 1934

When I started looking at workers’ education and Meridel Le Sueur, I wanted to find something we could use in higher education, some sort of panacea. Because what we are doing now does not work. Working-class students come to us, already with a sense of shame of their own deficiency in their linguistic identity. They know, to some extent, that their economic survival depends on their grasp of Standard Edited American English. Our students want to succeed. Besides the attainment of knowledge, they want to find good jobs to make a decent living for themselves and their families. We want our students to succeed; we try to teach them what we can so they will succeed out in the world. Except that it has not worked. Education, especially higher education, is not an equalizing force of social mobility.

Education is a gatekeeper, still sorting people by class. Aronowitz reminds us that “The structure of schooling already embodies the class system of society, and for this reason the access debate is mired in a web of misplaced concreteness. To gain entrance into schools always entails placement into that system” (18-19). Higher education, especially at four-year institutions, reproduces and reinforces class inequality, despite efforts of well-intentioned instructors. Although more students are attaining four-year degrees by age twenty-four, these gains in education come disproportionately from the

upper two quartiles of income. College attainment, like income and wealth, are becoming more disparate. In 1980, a student from the top quartile of income was five times more likely than a student from the bottom quartile, to have received a four-year degree by age twenty-four. By 2009, the inequality had increased to ten times more likely (Postsecondary 2). Students from working-class backgrounds are disproportionately more likely to attend two-year community colleges or low prestige schools, and are more likely to drop out of school. MaryBeth Walpole's extensive longitudinal study of student success based on social-economic status, shows that even with four-year degrees, these lower-class students have lower incomes and are much less likely to continue their educations in graduate school than their upper-class peers (63). Most working-class students, who often have some college credit (and debt), end up in low-paying service jobs (Aronowitz 46). There are some exceptions to this; there are students who experience upward class mobility through education. But most working-class students who attend four-year institutions are going into quite massive debt for an unfinished education, without any significant financial or social benefit. They will be in the same economic and social class they started with, except that the educational system will have taken away part of their identity when it expects them to change their language. This is why we need to stop buying into our current higher education system.

Language and writing are perhaps the most efficient mechanisms the educational system has to keep people in certain categories. First-year composition, as Anne Ruggles Gere points out, acts to sort students, for "Those who do not succeed in composition courses rarely last long in higher education" (89). This sorting mechanism is founded on what Stuckey calls an insult and a lie: "Students of nonstandard languages in the United

States do not fail because of a language failure; they fail because they live in a society that lies about language” (122). When working-class writers have difficulty in our current educational system—if they have not already been excluded from it—they will have to face the lie. All of the gatekeeping functions of education, like the standardized tests endemic to K-20 schooling and the typical first-year composition requirements, are built on this lie: If students learn to read, write, and speak in “Standard” English, they will succeed. This is the lie; we need to stop participating. This means, to some extent, that we need to stop participating in our current educational system. We need to begin to create truly open communities of learning.

While there are certainly spaces that can be made for working-class students and working-class writing in higher education, perhaps the most valuable lesson from the past, from workers’ education and the work of Meridel Le Sueur, is that we need to look outside of our traditional educational spaces. We need to radically rethink what those educational spaces should look like, who gets to participate, and how they can be integrated into the everyday lived experience of our communities. Although service-learning and place-based pedagogies have each attempted to relocate the college classroom in the community, they tend to remain too rooted in an inherently unequal educational space.

Social justice-oriented service-learning and place-based pedagogies are some more formal attempts to cross that boundary between college and community. Service-learning, in particular, has become common on college campuses, where students are often required to have a certain number of service-learning credits in order to graduate. In theory, service-learning differs from volunteerism because of its “emphasis on reflection

as well as action” (Schutz and Gere 129). Aaron Schutz and Gere’s thoughtful model of service-learning within English studies, turns on their re-conceptualization of public and private spaces of discourse and dialogue. Rather than a one-sided relationship of the student as giver of knowledge, their conception of service-learning puts the student in a more reciprocal position as a receiver of knowledge from the community (146).

Unfortunately, this model is too rarely a reality.

Despite the potential of service-learning pedagogy, far too often it merely provides the primarily middle-class students with an opportunity to feel good about their service. Students often have a personal, emotional response to their service-learning experience, a response that Bruce Herzberg, in his own critique of service-learning, finds problematic. In reflecting on his experience as a teacher of service-learning composition courses, he muses “If our students regard social problems as chiefly only personal, then they will not search beyond the personal for a systemic explanation” (309). Although Herzberg recognized that his students began to develop a deeper critical consciousness at the end of their two semester long service-learning course, I question how much this experience extended beyond the required timeframe.

Service learning still privileges the students over the community. The resources are focused on the student: the attention of the professor, the well-planned lessons, the carefully selected readings, fulfillment of credits, and the final grade. There is also, always, the explicit difference between the students and those in the community. Because college students are much more likely to be middle or upper class, there is usually a clear class distinction between the students and the people the students are serving. While the community organizations and members certainly benefit from the students, the primary

benefit is awarded to the already privileged students.

As both a service-learning student volunteer and later, the volunteer coordinator at the same community organization, in Minneapolis, I experienced first-hand this division between student and community. While the university campus was geographically near the community in which I volunteered, the lived realities were worlds apart. As a student, my service-learning, as a youth literacy tutor, certainly opened my eyes to the poverty and hopelessness that urban Native American youth experienced. I will never forget the second-grader who didn't want to do her homework because, "I'm not going to graduate from high school. Why bother?" Given the reality of Native American high-school graduation rates, statistically, she was probably right. But as a service-learning volunteer, I got to leave her reality when my tutoring shift ended. I could leave and I could forget.

When I shifted roles from volunteer to volunteer coordinator at the same program, I had also shifted locations. Very unintentionally, through my own ignorance of Minneapolis neighborhoods and the unscrupulous advertising practices of a large apartment rental company, I found I lived four blocks from the community center where I tutored. I suddenly had more than an emotional response to the struggles of the kids I was tutoring. It became more personal, certainly, but I also began to notice how easy it was for the police and the city council to ignore my neighborhood. I learned that this neighborhood has a long history of environmental contamination and exploitation, which means that the children are more likely to have asthma and exposure to high levels of lead and arsenic. I knew what it was like to feel unsafe. I could no longer leave and forget.

I also developed a very different perception of the service-learning students when

I became their volunteer coordinator. Although the program certainly needed and appreciated these volunteers, managing them: their schedules, course requirements, and day-to-day supervision, often required more time than I or the program really had to spare. And most significantly, these volunteers could leave. There was always a sense of slumming, of the novelty of this slightly dangerous neighborhood. After each volunteer shift, they could leave the neighborhood. After their semester was over, they rarely returned. The service-learning students usually came from classes with social-justice-minded professors, and syllabi filled with critical texts and reflection assignments. But despite the intentional construction of these service-learning experiences, the fact that the students could remove themselves from this space meant that it was never necessary for them to translate their personal reactions into public action. Despite the physical proximity, the distance between the university and the community was too wide.

Place-based pedagogy, like service-learning pedagogy, is another attempt to narrow this distance between school and community. Usually guided by an environmental focus, place-based pedagogy is a variation of critical pedagogy. As with critical pedagogy, the heart of place-based education is social justice, but with an intense awareness of social and environmental context. Place-based pedagogy seeks to “revitalize the commons” and “reinhabitate” material spaces (McInerney, Smyth, and Down 6; Gruenewald 9). Although it is strongly associated with rural settings, place-based education has also been applied by cultural geographers to sites of urban struggle (Jayanandhan 105). By foregrounding place, students are asked to confront the local politics and histories that have shaped particular locations, and the people who live and work in them. In some ways, place-based pedagogy’s focus on the local is a revolt

against the educational requisite of creating a flattened standard of schooling, so students can compete in a global marketplace (Gruenewald 7). But perhaps because of this narrow vision, place-based education can have a blind spot to the lived experiences of global citizens.

Place-based education can be critiqued for failing to take into account the increasing mobility of individuals within a global economy. As Jayanandham notes, community is now likely to consist of immigrant or migrant residents, including the college students themselves (109). Living in a historically immigrant community in Minneapolis, I witness this reality of intersecting contact zones and traumas. Refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, Nepal, and Vietnam; migrant workers from Mexico and Guatemala; and relocated Dakota and Anishinabe (Ojibwe), have very different relationships to the material place from each other, and from the Euro-Americans who also live here. The tendencies of regionalism toward a more conservative and nostalgic sense of place can overemphasize Euro-centric histories and traditions of ownership and community. Because of continuing familial and cultural connections, many residents are likely to relate more strongly to communities outside of their current geographical place, especially if they either hope to someday return to their community of origin or fear deportation. The complicated nature of global identities can create a disconnect between a sense of community and a sense of place.

Students are similarly disconnected. Their usually transitory residency means they will live in a neighborhood for only four or fewer years. They have little reason to be committed to the long-term wellbeing of a community. Students living in dorms can have a school experience almost completely isolated from the surrounding community.

Commuter students might have a split experience, identifying more with their neighborhood of residence than their school community. And like service-learning education, place-based pedagogy is still framed by an unequal educational system. The grades, credit-load, and degree progress, are still part of the mechanism that awards a few, but excludes the majority. Place-based pedagogy can narrow the distance between “towns and gowns,” but is still limited by the artificial structure that our college education system has continued to perpetuate.

Despite these structural constraints, service-learning and place-based pedagogy do offer helpful frameworks for re-imagining the relationship between writing, learning, and community. Rather than using writing as a gatekeeper, writing courses could instead focus on creating “community literacy.” At the Community Literacy Center, a community/university partnership in Pittsburgh, the production of community literacy occurs wherever there are bridging discourses invented and enacted by writers trying to solve a community problem. Community literacy is intercultural and multi-vocal. It is practiced as people cross boundaries, share various perspectives, and move into action. (Peck, Flower, and Higgins 220)

Rather than prescribing discourses and genres, “community literacy,” allows for a fluid and multi-vocal language, a language that belongs to all members of the community. It is one way of reclaiming writing as a shared community good, creating a community language.

Place-based pedagogy brings the idea of the “commons” back into the center of our concept of community. Although the environmental and ecological tendency in place-

based pedagogy has meant that the commons referred to are usually natural commons like water and ecosystems, this acts to broaden definitions of place and community. Place-based pedagogy offers a more holistic view of community and urges teachers and students to question, reflect on, and ultimately, reinhabit their places (Gruenewald 6-7). The commons is based on the idea that there are shared resources that belong to everyone. The idea of the commons can be extended from natural resources to the social and cultural. Writing is one of those commons, a commons of boundless value and boundless power. Whoever controls language and writing, controls the society we live in. The marginalized in American society need to take back their textual authority, as a community good like the air, water, and earth. Learning and language are commons that have been enclosed. They need to be reclaimed. But this reclamation only works when you are acting as part of a community, not simply acting as an individual or a member of a closed group.

The realization of the distance between the privileged few in higher education and the larger community is certainly nothing new. Civic-minded academics continue to struggle with how to simultaneously engage their students and serve the people who live and work near their campuses. But the problem is not primarily with the professors, the students, or the community itself. The problem comes from the inherently unequal educational system, which attempts to commodify, standardize, and segregate students as products for a labor market. The educational system has less and less to do with actual education, what Aronowitz defines “as the collective and individual reflection on the totality of life experiences” (29), and has more to do with job training.

Although most post-secondary institutions list such things as “critical thinking”

as their values or goals or missions, the end product is really to provide the necessary credentialing for a post-industrial economy. *Students* become the products, “molded to the industrial and technological imperatives of contemporary society” (Aronowitz 16). Schools have become factories, painted over and branded to look like places of learning, of equality, and of democracy. Ivan Illich describes how the school system sustains and institutionalizes the myths of society, the myths of meritocracy and democracy. The educational system “is simultaneously the repository of society’s myth, the institutionalization of that myth’s contradictions, and the locus of the ritual which reproduces and veils the disparities between myth and reality” (Illich 37). Students have been raised on the myth, and so take part, unquestioningly in the ritual, only to be later disillusioned. Teachers are more likely to understand the reality, but still act in the ritual. If we stop believing in the myth, we should stop participating in the ritual. Illich exhorts us, “Only disenchantment with and detachment from the central social ritual and reform of that ritual can bring about radical change” (Illich 38). The disenchantment is perhaps easy; the detachment and reform are difficult.

We cannot fall into cynicism and despair, for, Freire warns us, “Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it” (91). We also cannot be content to simply write, or read, or talk about what we *would* do, if: If things were different, if we made the rules. The problem seems monolithic, and it is. But what we do, as teachers, writers, and human beings, does not need to be monolithic. Lasting change comes from the everyday chipping away of calcified practices and relationships. Do not discount the small act, for as Stuckey reminds us,

Local change is not antithetical to the possibility of sweeping, fast, clear

change. Too often, people perceive broad change only in terms of violence. They overlook the incremental, daily violence against those who are not favored by the system. Changing the way we teach . . . does not require violence. It requires necessity. (Stuckey 126-7)

If there is any time that requires necessity, it is now. The gap between the rich and poor in this country means that there is less opportunity, less democracy, and more suffering. But if we try to change the way we teach, we can find hope in the work of others who have tried.

While within a system, it is easy to forget that there are alternatives to that system. Alternative pedagogies, like workers' education and critical pedagogy, offer alternatives. They are models of what could be called a "liberatory pedagogy of hope." Despite the differences between them, each gives us the option of hope. Workers' education tells the working class that education can change society, because "knowledge is power." The revolutionary pedagogy of Paulo Freire affirms that, "to speak a true word is to transform the world" (87). Le Sueur was influenced by the social anarchists, who believe we cannot wait, that "we must create here and now the space *now* possible for the thing for which we are striving" (Buber 13). At the heart of each is a *praxis* of here and now. Our theory and practice must take place now and it must take place *here*.

Each day, we are faced with choices of how, what, and where we teach. There is the choice to leave the official system of schooling. Meridel Le Sueur made the choice to never fully participate in this system. As her friend and fellow writer Irene Paull, has said, "There was no picket line, no struggle for civil rights, for labor rights, for any right, that did not take precedence with her over any longing she may have had to retire in

peace to an ivory tower” (Schleuning 22). But this is not a viable choice for most teachers, who must after all, make a living (and enough of a living to pay back their student loans). Leaving the system also disregards what is still valuable in higher education. Despite its flaws, there is perhaps no other space that acts so well as a gathering place of ideas. There is also the choice to stay, to work within the system, in the belief that incremental change through compromise is enough. But this is not enough. The reality of the growing class and income inequality in the United States requires a more radical choice. But it is difficult to make radical choices when you are comfortable.

These two choices are, in many ways, false choices. They continue the idea that one is either in or out, that there is an imaginary wall that separates the school from the community. The privileged few get access “inside,” while the majority are stuck on the “outside.” We need to stop thinking this way. As Freire points out, “the oppressed are not ‘marginals,’ are not people living ‘outside’ society. They have always been ‘inside’—inside the structure which made them ‘beings for others’” (74). Although the students and faculty may be less likely to be working class, the college community functions only because of the labor of the working class. The janitorial staff, the groundskeepers, the food service and maintenance workers, are all necessary to the school community, and are all “inside.” There is no inside or outside; the boundary wall is imaginary. Rather than make the choice to live in or out, we need to make—everyday—small, radical choices that re-imagine these boundaries into spaces for democratic, inclusive, transformative, community learning.

Meridel Le Sueur’s *praxis* of writing for the working class offers hope that it is possible to re-imagine the ways in which teaching and writing can act for social change.

There are contemporary models that offer similar hope. The continuing work at the Community Literacy Center and the aim of creating “local publics” that develop hybrid discourses is one model which attempts to bridge the perceived boundary between college and community (Higgins, Long, and Flower 18). Another model is that of the translingual English/Spanish writing classes taught by Tamera Marko at Emerson College. These classes are composed of both traditional Emerson students and Emerson maintenance workers. The classes were formed from the desire of the maintenance workers to learn English. In this translingual space, the maintenance workers, who are usually excluded from the idea of a campus writing community, finally belong (Bartson).

While I struggle with the ways in which I can bring Le Sueur’s *praxis* into my first quarter of teaching developmental writing at a for-profit career college, I do have visions of what Le Sueur’s *praxis* might look like in my own neighborhood. In my very diverse working-class neighborhood of primarily immigrants, and ethnic and religious minorities, I am very aware of the voices that are not heard. I imagine a multilingual talking, writing, and reading circle. In this circle the women of my neighborhood could certainly share stories and language, but also potentially use this local discourse to bring about positive change for the community. This model perhaps draws the most from Le Sueur’s *praxis*, as I imagine it as being fully in an alternative educational space, created by and for the community. But the ways in which Le Sueur’s *praxis* can be applied are dependent on the particular situation. In the end, there is no concrete plan, no curricula imposed from above. Le Sueur’s *praxis* is about making small, local choices that are informed and created by an inclusive notion of community

Swedish writer Goran Palme has said that we must “dig where we stand” (qtd. in

Aronowitz 96). But this kind of locally focused action does not need to be narrow in vision. Instead, it requires a different kind of engagement with the local. It requires redefining what we mean when we think of community, by finally seeing the members of that community who have often been invisible. It requires more than feeling sympathy for those who do not experience our power and privilege. Instead, we must act in solidarity, a stance that is, necessarily uncomfortable, for “Solidarity requires one to enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary—it is a radical posture” (Freire 49). It is by acting in solidarity, reaching out, and taking risks, that community is created. Le Sueur said that a writer, a writer in solidarity, belonged to “An organic group pertaining to the growth of a new nucleus of society . . . You do not join such a group, you simply *belong*. You belong to that growth or you do not belong to it” (“Fetish,” 199). We already belong; we must choose to act. In an afterword to a collection of her short works from the 1920s and 1930s, Le Sueur explains, better than I can, the collective power of the word:

The naming of the world is not possible unless infused with love. No one can say a true word alone. When the word, in bourgeois education and philosophy, is deprived of the dimension of action, the word becomes empty, suffers alienation, sentimentality, verbalism. We are not built in alienation and silence. We must somehow find how to be committed to others, how to express that love which is an act of courage, not of fear, but of bravery and of seeing the liberation in each other, that makes us proud and human. I was trying to find that action—that love. (“Afterword,” 238)

This is what we need to remember when we are faced, everyday, with choices about how, what, and where we teach. A *praxis* of writing can only come out of solidarity and love.

I end where I began, with the story of Rhoda. Rhoda was a young woman who did everything right: She worked hard and got herself an education. She should have been a success, but her society failed her. Le Sueur did not title this story, “The Biography of *Rhoda*.” She called it “The Biography of *My Daughter*.” This is an act of solidarity and love:

Listen. Living I never thought of Rhoda as my daughter. She was not my daughter, but dead she becomes the daughter of all of us. She was not my daughter, but she might have been and my daughters may be lying dead like that . . . . This is my daughter. She is dead but this must be a reminder of her to all people. (“Biography of My Daughter”100)

Le Sueur promised that, “what happened to her must stop happening” (100). As a teacher of writing, I will try to keep that promise, because the story of Rhoda is not the story of her alone. It is the story of all of us.

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