

The Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies

# Labor Writes 2011

Work, Identity and Politics



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# **Labor Writes** 2011

## **Work, Identity and Politics**

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# Foreword

It is a privilege and an honor for me to introduce this second volume of *Labor Writes*, the annual magazine of The Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies, to its readers.

All the contributions in this anthology were written by students at the center, as part of their regular class work. They were not composed especially for this volume. That this is so speaks not only to the nature of the collection but also to the nature of its authors' education. *Labor Writes* testifies to a variety of concerns. It is neither mono-semantic nor monochromatic. It has many meanings, in many shades. So, too, does the curriculum at the Van Arsdale Center. Van Arsdale students learn that it is not enough to listen only to your friends or to those with whom you agree. It is necessary, too, to listen to your opponents and to learn from those with whom you disagree.

This also is true more generally. Labor is most powerful when it speaks for the Many, not just for the Few: when it is the unembarrassed voice of all, and not just the insistent voice of some. *Labor Writes* contains and liberates such aspiring voices. It can seem a raucous crowd, as befits a democratic movement. But the movement itself is forward, toward achieved mastery and competent command.

In the current moment, when the concerns of the Many are derided as a burden on the whole, and the concerns of the Few are shouted from the media rooftops, drowning out practically all dissenting views, it matters less what labor writes than that it writes at all. By attending closely to the texts, however, the contours of tomorrow can be seen in the lines of today. *Sí, se pueda!*

– Michael Merrill  
Dean

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# Introduction

**Rebecca Fraser, for the Editorial Committee**

Not only is this the second volume of *Labor Writes*, it also is the fifth anthology of student writing produced by the Van Arsdale Center; this year, we had an Editorial Committee – consisting of a writing coach, an couple of instructors, a staff member and a student – who were selective in choosing the writing and artwork to be published. It was a privilege to select pieces from some of our best student writers and artists – more than that, it was wonderful to have so much excellent work from which to choose. We chose pieces that speak to each other, sometimes in unison and other times not. We chose pieces that speak to our everyday experiences as students, workers, men and women, of all races. Finally, we chose pieces that contribute to a larger conversation about the role of workers in the world. We hope these pieces start discussions, evoke questions and ultimately, lead to action.



# WORK

## Number 94

### Edgardo Rivera

For three days, I slept on the sidewalk. I'd heard that Plumbers' Local 1 was going to give out applications to hire 150 people. Local 1 was going to accept the applications on the Tuesday after the Labor Day weekend. I wasn't very familiar with Queens, so I decided to check out where it was on the Saturday of that weekend. When I got there, I was surprised to find 100 people on line! People had come from all over the tri-state area. They had tents, sleeping bags, and one person even had a generator. I did not come prepared to stay, but with that many people there already, I had no choice. I was wearing a t-shirt and shorts because it was a hot day, a mistake I soon came to regret because the temperature dropped to almost 50 degrees, and I was freezing! The next day, I called my mom and asked her to bring me a change of clothes and my sleeping bag. When she arrived that Sunday afternoon with the requested provisions, she couldn't believe that the line was around two corners. I would say there were easily 500 people by then. She held my spot on line, and I went to the McDonald's across the street to change my clothes in the bathroom. Refreshed and dressed appropriately, I felt fully prepared for the next two nights. On Tuesday morning, we were given raffle-like vouchers that told us what number we were on line. I was number 114 out of 1,028.

When my turn came, I had to hand in the requested paper work which consisted of the filled out application, photocopy of my driver's license, high school transcript and a \$25 money order. I made sure all my paper work was in order and had all these items in a manila envelope. Three days of sleeping on the sidewalk just to hand in an envelope. I suppose after waiting that long, I expected more.

It was a long three months before I received any response from the plumbers' union. The response came in the form of a letter stating that I had been ranked number 94 out of all the applicants. This meant that I was accepted into the training program if I passed a drug test. That letter changed my life forever.

My first year as an apprentice was definitely difficult financially. I was a window cleaner making an average of almost \$500 a week. The problem with that job was that I did not have any benefits, so it didn't make sense for me in the long run to continue in that profession. First year apprentices only made

\$10.78 per hour for a 35 hour work week, which after taxes would come out to a little under \$300 a week. I could not survive on this meager income alone, so I did odd jobs here and there to make ends meet. All the journeymen used to tell me not to worry, things will get better. Some would even put bags of mingo (scrap copper) aside so I could sell it and make extra cash. One thing I learned early on in this union is that we are just that, a union, and colleagues really do treat each other as if we are part of a brotherhood.

My first year, I was most afraid that I would be racially discriminated against. I really thought I would be working with racist white people when I joined the union. To my surprise, most, if not all the people I met were really cool and I experienced almost no racial issues whatsoever. I also was a bit apprehensive about returning to school, but the first year was definitely the easiest for me. It was basically a review of Sequence One math. Math was my best subject in school, so it was just a matter of applying and memorizing plumbing principles to math I already know. At work, I learned in those early days that in this trade, workers respect intelligence, reliability and effort. If you were dumb, lazy and often late, chances are you would not make it. Punctuality was particularly important, as foremen decided who did what each day, and if you were late, you got the least desirable duty. As a first-year apprentice you are put on coffee order duty, not only because you are the lowest man on the totem pole, but also to see if you are competent enough to handle it. I spent most of my time handling deliveries during my first year, but I tried to make a point to study what different materials were called and what they were used for whenever I had free time.

During my second year things became more demanding at school. A week before our scheduled start date, all apprentices were called into the training center. The plumbers' union had decided that we would be the first class to attend college classes at night. Most of the students were furious because the union made attending these classes mandatory. Most people who become apprentices do so to learn a trade rather than go to college. I, on the other hand, never had the chance to go to college because I could not afford it. I viewed this new mandate as an opportunity to earn an associate degree, free of charge. The first class in college we took was writing. We wrote about something every day in that class. The second year of the training program is when they started teaching us the basics of copper and drainage. Both subjects were interesting because of how essential they are to plumbing. At work I was given small tasks of actual plumbing, nothing major. It was more like "go fix that plumbing frame," "reroute that copper line," or "set a water closet."

The training wheels came off in the third year. I was assigned to work with a partner and given my own set of tools to work with. Journeymen love to test how much you know. Let's face it, just because you learned it in class doesn't mean you know how to apply it in the field. Making the transition from the books to real life is crucial, and I tend to learn better from actually performing the task. I was constantly making mistakes, but my partners would never discourage me. Even though there is an obvious class difference between us, they refuse to show it. This is when I came to realize that even though I tend to think that class discrimination stems from income, instead it comes from a person's personality.

"How else are you going to learn if you don't try it on the field?" a journey person asked me once. "The real learning is out here and I'm going to teach you to be a Local 1 plumber." Plumbing school was teaching us about related sciences in the trade. During my third year, I started questioning myself if I really had it in me to succeed in this profession. Since the first year of my apprenticeship, the journeymen constantly warned me that as I became a fifth year apprentice/journeyman, I would become expendable. I no longer would be viewed as cheap labor, and more often than not I would be fired after receiving one or two journeymen checks.

"But why?" I asked.

I was told, "That's how it's always been, and that's the way it's going to be."

I feel that the Local does an outstanding job with the way it attempts to mold us into plumbers. However, there are certain things that I would want to change in order to make our union better. First thing I would do is make every apprentice during their apprenticeship work for a "B" shop. Alteration work is very important to our trade, as we are constantly changing the way plumbing was done. I feel like we are turning out plumbing installers rather than real plumbers who can install and replace. Secondly, I feel that every six months apprentices should change shops or if the employer deems them nonexpendable, they should change the aspect of plumbing they are doing. No apprentice should be working only with cast-iron or only with copper. This limitation of their ability to adapt is what often gets them fired. How often do you hear a guy referred to as a cast-iron or finish guy? All plumbers should be well-rounded in all phases of plumbing.

During plumbing school, an apprentice should not be put under so much pressure to pass. Teach only what is relevant to the test that will be given. Too much information can be useful, but often students study the wrong things

and are not as prepared as they could be. Although grades are important, I feel that there should be more emphasis on craftsmanship. More shop time would improve a plumber's ability in the field. Do not rely on an employer to teach the apprentice.

I also feel that an old timer should be forced to retire by the age of 65. I know that you are eligible to retire at 62, but you might need a couple of years to get credit toward a full pension, so for those I would gladly make an exception. Those who have maxed out their credits should be asked to retire. I have a problem when 65-year-old men are still working when a 35-year-old man is out of work. As an old timer, you have lived your professional life and should now make room for a younger journeyman to live his.

As a Local 1 plumber, I believe you should get rid of the dead weight; this applies to journeymen as well as apprentices. I know that we have to keep our sons or nephews working, but it should not be at the expense of a good worker. Too many people just do this for a paycheck and have forgotten to show pride in their work. I have seen good plumbers get fired while slouches who show up to work three days a week are kept on the payroll. This business is becoming much more about who you know than about what you know, and that is embarrassing for all of us.

I'm currently a fourth-year apprentice and I know that my days are numbered. I just finished my modular plumbing class where we had to build a fully functional bathroom. It was a culmination of the knowledge I have acquired in all my years. I will finish my college requirements and attain my associate degree. I no longer worry about being fired, as I have come to welcome the fact that I have learned this trade, and no one can take the knowledge that I have learned away from me.

This college experience has made me a better person. I no longer judge a book by its cover; I have become a more reflective thinker instead of just believing what I hear. I research and seek out answers for myself. I am better at expressing myself. I have improved my self worth. I am going to be one of the few plumbers who can say he has earned an associate degree paid for by my employer. If I get fired, I will be able to work for someone else. I have come to work as I do school, fully prepared and ready to give everything I have to offer. If I am fired it will be their loss.

# My Name is Hector

**Ricardo Diaz**

*Transcription of an interview with a Local 3 apprentice:*

My name is Hector and I am a third-year apprentice in Local 3 IBEW working in NYC. I am Latino of Puerto Rican descent, born and raised in the Bronx. My father is in Local 3 and has been for 25 years. I am proud of my father for the job he does every day. He makes buildings with the help of his brothers in Local 3 and the many trades out there. It's a great feeling to see something come together from nothing. Before you know it, in a week's time, it has all changed, from the walls being constructed to the electrical system being installed. That was my first experience working as a TA1. Another apprentice and I were on material delivery most of the time from the start of the job, so there was a lot of prep work. Conduit, devices, hardware, etc., were all coming in. Just as fast as it was coming into the jobsite, it was being installed. That is how fast material gets used and work gets completed.

People ask me about why I entered the Local, and if my father being a member had anything to do with it. There was no pressure coming into Local 3. I have talked to my dad about Local 3 and he has shared different stories from his jobs. Some were funny, some were sad. Others were heartfelt but, all in all, I had a sense of camaraderie with the men in Local 3. The stories 15 years ago are different from the stories today. The times are different, and so is the business we work in. Coming into Local 3 was a choice I made without input from my family or friends.

The Union has changed in many ways. Like me, a lot of minorities have had the chance to become members. Female electricians are still a minority. Years ago the numbers were really low, but time and tolerance have changed that, to a degree.

The apprenticeship of Local 3 is hard. The work is tough and you have to be alert while learning the trade. Learning is our number one priority because knowledge of electrical work makes us employable.

I have a female co-worker with us now, and she is holding her weight. She is smart and has a nice attitude, but she is small, and that will be her downfall. A lot of men in this business are big and strong, and that is something foremen notice on your first day of work. I myself take in the

heavy deliveries and work on heavy conduit installation. She on the other hand is sorting material or doing light work with a partner. My father puts it bluntly by saying when it comes to layoffs, the females are the first to go. I think that's unfair to women who have the ability to bring something vital to a contractor. A contractor is as good as is the men who lead it, and women bring a different spin to business and worker relations. I see the times with my dad, how it was when he started and how he was treated. He had to overcome a lot of mistrust and prejudice that now falls on many women. Some men point blank do not want to work with women, and claim that they are weak and lack knowledge of electrical work. They also fear being accused of sexual harassment. I believe this is one of the reasons women are not in the construction field. There is still a lot of animosity in the work area, and they must endure physical abuse. This all takes a toll, and this is why women avoid the construction trade.

My opinion on gender in the trades is that women are the same as men, and they should not be treated differently. Some women are small, but there are others who are big and strong. I work with some journeymen who are small and weak. Are they different from women in the strength department? No. Women can do the same work as men can, and they should be given the chance to work. I have talked to women in the different trades, and many are the sole providers for their families. The men who started providing for them and their kids are not around any more, so women have had to support their families alone.

I have worked with some incompetent foremen who should have their tickets revoked. Can a woman do any better? I say yes. We need not just male foremen or female foremen but competent people to lead Local 3 into a better tomorrow. It's not about men versus women. It's about the fact that we are all in a brotherhood, and we should all work together to use the strengths of everyone for the Local we are so proud to represent every day.

I have never worked with a woman journey person, but I think I would not have a problem with it. At this stage of the game, I'm looking for direction and information in electrical work. I have met some journey people who do not have a lot of knowledge in electrical work. I also have met some who know a lot and are a wealth of information for an apprentice. Working with a woman would be no different.

The credibility in the construction field has changed for the better. Long ago the construction field was a male-dominated environment and men ran it the way they pleased. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not. I'm glad

women are entering the trades because it shows how much progress has come about. Don't get me wrong: we should be years ahead, but we are not. Men are stubborn and this whole "women in the trades" thing does not sit well with many. I have to work with many who feel negatively towards female construction workers. In business, men dominated at one time. Now women run corporations, firms and businesses. They bring something that works for them and the people they are in charge over. Why would it not work in construction as well?

Local 3 has changed over the years. It was once a tightly knit organization, and the brotherhood meant something. Sadly, this is not the case anymore and worse, the jobs are scarce and everyone is looking out for himself or herself. The Local has suffered from the lack of unity it once had. A woman can be part of that brotherhood and might even help stop the downward spiral that is happening in the job market.

In summary, bringing women into the trades is a good thing because they can bring a different set of eyes and perspective that could help get us back on the right track and help their union members. I believe it is hard work, and a lot needs to be done, but with everyone's help and support it can be done.



# A World Apart

Thomas Ryan

*Transcription from an interview with a tradesman for over 20 years:*

I originally entered the trades when I was 19 years old through a family contact. It was my so-called “fall back” career, as I was going to school to be a chef. It took a little over a year for me to get accepted. I have been a foreman since I first turned “A” more than 21 years ago. My first experience with women in the trades was working alongside female laborers in the beginning of my career. My feelings were impartial because they were not my workers and I did not have to deal with them. As for my first encounter with a female tradesperson, I felt that she was a fairly decent worker.

I think it’s actually easier for women to enter the trades nowadays. The fact that they will let a 55-year-old woman enter the apprenticeship is ridiculous. She will be what, 60 when she becomes a journeyman? I think the reason that there aren’t more women in the trades is because it is a rough and physical business. I, and many others in this business, feel that there are already enough women, and we don’t need any more. In these current times of low employment, many good workers are laid off and out of work because of this.

The union brotherhood means that you help each other out, and that you all work toward the same goal together as a team. I believe that women workers cannot be part of this, because women have too many rules about what they can and cannot do and are too sensitive. They bring nothing but red tape and problems to the jobsite. I don’t feel comfortable working with women because you have to watch everything you say and do. What’s acceptable around them one day is unacceptable the next because they are in a bad mood.

I do not believe that women can do the job as well as men and I believe that my point of view is the norm. Sure some women are treated differently than others in our trade, but that is based totally on the way they look. We don’t care if they are good workers. Actually, that’s not true ... it’s a plus if they can do the work.

*Transcription from an interview with a 37-year-old woman,  
a Local 3 electrician for 15 years:*

I went to college for hotel and business management. When I graduated from college there were no jobs so I applied to every city test that I could find. Local 3 was the first one to call me. I always had an interest in becoming an electrician, but I never knew when classes were being called because they were only recruiting women from certain vocational schools. I grew up in a home where my father was a steamfitter and my two uncles were electricians. I guess you can say I sort of fell into my career as an electrician when my uncle dropped off the application.

I didn't really encounter any barriers when trying to get into Local 3, due to the fact that I was a woman with a college degree. I waited just like everyone else – exactly one year. My brother applied the same time I did, and it took him almost three years to be accepted. My brother had no college credits and they were looking for people with degrees to put at the head of their class. Actually, I think being a woman helped me get in quicker. There have been numerous men and women throughout my career who have helped me in my training as an apprentice and in my career as a journeyman. There were two women who had the most profound effect on me. The reason I am a good mechanic today is because I had a good mechanic when I was an apprentice; he wanted and knew how to teach me. In my opinion, that is essential to being successful in this field.

The most difficult part of the job, which I didn't expect, was dealing with all of the politics. I originally thought, going into this trade, that if you were the best mechanic they would keep you on the job over the competition. However, guys who drove in with the foreman would solidify their place on the job, regardless of their skill. I thought it was unfair that they would avoid laying someone off because they were from the same town as the foreman or had political connections at the Local. I also have been picked to stay on a job over other journeymen who were more qualified than me. This nepotism does not favor gender or race and can happen to anyone.

The best part of being an electrician is the sense of camaraderie and family you have with so many people. You can run into someone that you haven't worked with for over 10 years and pick up where you left off the last time you saw them. This happens to me regularly when I go to a different shop or get sent to a different jobsite to do work.

Working in this industry, one does encounter some negativity from men. But I tell every female apprentice I meet that as long as she is strong-minded and confident, she will have nothing to worry about. Males do not judge us based on our race, but strictly as women altogether. I think they automatically see all women as no good, until we prove them wrong. But sometimes women prove them right. Many guys think that construction work is men's work. Everything the guys can do, the girls can do just as well, with the exception of maybe lifting heavy things. After all, it is more about brains than brawn. Everything that requires heavy lifting today can be moved by machine. Being that the construction trades are a male-dominated industry, I was a little reluctant on my first day of work. However, now I would much rather work with a male than a female. I like being the only woman on the job because sometimes women can get petty and competitive.

The reason why there aren't more women in the trades is due to the fact that a lot of women don't know about the job. They are only reaching girls in certain public and vocational schools throughout New York City. Girls who go to private schools or even schools in Long Island have no idea that women can work in this field. The women that do know about the trades are discouraged and don't think that they'll be able to do it, physically. The trade unions need to market themselves to the next generation of young women, and let them know that their presence is wanted. Right now employment is falling and I haven't worked in over nine months. In the past five years, I have only worked a total of two and a half years. Now that I just had a baby, I will probably be out for another six months. Sure I can get a job doing something different with my educational background, but I wouldn't be able to find anything I love doing as much as this. I'm in the field that I want to be in, and I am happy doing what I do. As a result of entering Local 3, my two younger brothers are now electricians as well. During my down time, my family and I have managed to build my parents a beautiful new home. There is great reward in what we do and I can only hope that other women get to experience it.

# An Electrician's Banquet

Ted Zimmerman



## ***Empire Rising: The Parallel Between a Book and a Building***

**Jaime Lopez**

Looking at the Empire State Building brings many ideas to my mind: an incredible stature, amazing design, intricate detail, King Kong and the sheer number of tourists that line up on a daily basis to see the huge steel structure that was once the tallest in the world. On the other hand, when I look at a book, all I see is a cover, a table of contents and the blurb on the back. Even though the book does not cause any excitement at first glance, it has potential to be as great as or greater than the Empire State Building. Both of these pieces of work have the ability to stand the test of time on paper, in our minds and in our hearts. I am concerned that my ideas are single-sided, missing the depth, history and understanding of what it takes to become the complete product. My thoughts are being challenged by discussions in class, and a new representation of work portrayed in *Empire Rising* by Thomas Kelly. Is our society ignoring the hard work and sacrifices that encompass the building of a skyscraper and the building of a classic book? Are workers in the arts and in other aspects of life undervalued and underappreciated? As a workforce we can learn from each other and find similarities in our everyday lives, even if we work in different fields.

Work can be defined as something that has been produced or accomplished through the effort and activity of a person or thing. Therefore, the construction of a building and the writing of a book are both a product of work. Even though the processes are different, the basic parts of a book can show many similarities to a constructed tower. For instance, we can compare the interior of an office building to the pages of a book. First, we look at the steps. They can be the same as the words of a book, every staircase creating a sentence. Each flight of stairs can escalate into the creation of an idea. Each idea can be compared to a floor or a group of floors. The floors can be traversed by an elevator found in the building, navigating the chapters by numbers that can be found in the table of contents. Every floor houses tenants full of ideas and expressions the same way characters of a novel would. A window allows the reader or the visitor to look out into the world. A person can use the window as a portal to the world on paper and also the one in his mind. Finally, there is a reason why the two are created. People create and

build because it is our nature to pass on a legacy. As intellectual beings we have the ability for our minds to design, model, test and create newer and innovative products that can prosper but also become challenged.

Production, speed and quality continue to increase with new technology, inventions and techniques. Even though our work is becoming increasingly organized and efficient the workforce is rarely acknowledged and given praise. The beauty and strength that the Empire State Building boasts is not a sufficient reflection of the hard-working people who invested their time, skill and knowledge into the production of the structure. Each person that helped construct the Empire State Building has a story. Some tell tales of joy and some great hardships. The character of Sheehan shares his story after reading a newspaper article that expected 200 workers to die at the Empire State Building: “My brother died on the job. Wind knocked him down. He fell 40 stories. Freak accident, they said. Company sent a thing of flowers to my ma” (103). Sheehan knew his brother was worth more than those flowers. The crews honor to a fallen brother when they look “off into the distance where bunches of skyscrapers stood. Each had its ghosts. The gang fell silent, a nod to Skinny Sheehan’s dead brother and to the fact that any one of them might be next” (104). Lewis Hine’s amazing photography of the construction progress shows the brave men scaling the beams and provides a true insight into the dangers of the construction of this building.

Similarly, when reading a book, I only think about the obvious things like the theme, characters, plot and the meaning of the story. The book does not prompt me to think of the countless drafts the author has composed. I have never stopped to think of how many times the book got turned away from a publisher. I often have struggles in my own writing when I try to express my emotions and thoughts. I question if the reader is going to understand the story I am trying to tell. How can I capture the essence of an important matter? Will they notice the careful arrangement of the sentences? How can I compose myself towards the end of all the hard work and come up with a conclusion that is thoughtful and inspiring? These can all become very complex questions in an author’s mind that usually go unnoticed, unless the writing is studied in a critical manner.

The idea of overlooking the basic work that surrounds us can be considered a normal occurrence in our culture. Consequently, this normalcy brings me to the thought that if we all work to create, aren’t we a society that has volunteered to play a silent role and let our work speak for us? Can the work itself collect praise and the artists or the tradesmen remain detached but stand proud? The working class is not in the headlines of the newspaper or a front

page editorial column for the great job that is being done. The only standing evidence of anything being done at all is the final creation. In reality, the people who create the work are the work. The work is built by a collection of our signatures, a collage of our styles.

In essence, the collective contributions we make to our society can have a larger impression on this world than any single person in the world. As humans, we are limited to the time we occupy on this planet and the amount of work we can accomplish alone. This is why we must invest our time and energy into productive ventures as a team. The legacy that the Empire State Building will leave behind will continue to endure through many generations. *Empire Rising* is a striking depiction of what went on behind the scenes of the construction and the story of the people who were involved. Both of these projects are timeless, in the sense that they will continue to bring powerful feelings and ideas to the people who take part in them. Even if the Empire State Building was dismantled and replaced, the time it stood in New York's famous skyline would forever be instilled in the memories of the people who had witnessed it. It would be imprinted in their minds as a piece of themselves. The ideas that we extract from *Empire Rising* will support our memories with images of the people that built it and the conditions the building was born under. Everyone in the world has been impacted by the World Trade Center. The memories of how it was built, what it stood for, and the loss of it all will remain in our lives forever. Similarly, the way its lifespan has been recorded in videos, pictures and writing will surely be equally as important.

The author, Thomas Kelly, thanks his aunt, May Delpizzo, for supplying the stories of her life for the novel. Kelly also uses facts and details from two nonfiction books, *Building the Empire State*, edited by Carol Willis, and *The Empire State Building: The Making of a Landmark*, by John Tauranac. If we study the past, as Kelly has, it could enable us to compare our lines of work and understand that our career demands are very much alike. If we can recognize each other's hardships, we can unite for mutual success. The value of our skilled community and successful accomplishments cannot be labeled at a store with a dollar value. There are people who keep formal paper work that states their ownership of completed work, but the working people of a great nation are the true owners of the nation. Furthermore, whether the person is a writer or a construction worker and their paths may not cross, these men and woman cannot be separated from their work.

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## On Reading

### Nazareth Ortiz

As a child, my reading skills were very poor due to my lack of reading and that of my loved ones. The only parent that was there for me growing up was my mom, who at the time had to work two jobs in order to provide for both of us. My aunts and uncles all worked and lived in other boroughs; the only relatives who took care of me were my grandparents who knew little English. The only help I received was at school, but that was very difficult due to overcrowded classes.

By the time I reached high school, I was thrown out of Washington Irving because I was always playing hooky and was always getting into fights. I missed out on an opportunity to take an English class during my freshman year because of my bad behavior. I started attending an alternative high school in the Bronx, but for the first two years I never had English or a writing class. It wasn't until I decided to drop out of school and take classes to obtain my GED that I took an actual English class.

As a result of dropping out of high school, I have had several problems with my reading and writing skills. When I read a book or an article, I read too quickly and cannot comprehend the material. I have to go back and reread the text in order to get a better understanding of what was in front of me. Books that are too long or that are not of interest to me are placed to the side, and I don't bother to read them any longer. The genres that do capture my attention are sport-related books or articles, mystery novels and biographies.

In order to improve my reading skills, I attempt to read in as many places as I can. I read while I'm traveling to work and school or any other place where I don't have to drive. I try to read for the entire length of the commute. When I get home from work, or during weekends, instead of hanging out I stay indoors and do my reading assignments. Most of the time, I have my iPad with me, so when I have a break or have extra time on my hands, I just open the file and read as much as I can. Even though it gets overwhelming sometimes with having to complete a book within a certain time frame, I try to keep myself on a steady pace.

The best location for me to read is certainly in my home, where it is comfortable and quiet. A good investment I've made was to buy a desk with a comfortable chair in which to do my schoolwork when I am at home.

I sometimes read while lying down, but never succeed because I just end up falling asleep. If I'm too tired or if I read too much at one time, I tend to drift away. I can definitely read anywhere, as long as I'm not distracted by loud music or by people talking too loudly.

When I read my books, I usually aim to read about two chapters a sitting. If I don't have the time, I just read one chapter but never stop in the middle of a chapter. I always like to finish my chapters so I can then move on to the next one, instead of stopping in between. When I read two chapters at a time, it helps me divide up my reading time because when I read too much I don't pay attention to what I just read. Even if the book is interesting, I still won't be able to read too much of it at once. Like they say: "Too much of anything is always bad for you."

I attempt to read books that are interesting to me so I won't get bored and put them aside. This semester I have read *Working in the Shadows* by Gabriel Thompson, *Sin City* by Frank Miller and *Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah. *Sin City* was the easiest book to read because the author gets straight to the point and the whole book was full of pictures. *Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* is an awesome book, in which the author tells the story of when he was in Africa and was forced to fight in a war as just a child.

The book I enjoyed the most was *Working in the Shadows*. I enjoyed this book because it gave me the opportunity to learn how immigrants came into the United States looking for a better life. This book told the reality of how immigrants work for very little pay doing manual work. I remember when I was a young boy working at HMV Records, Inc. for only \$4.50 an hour. I did everything from customer service, cashier and stock room to working at the ticket master counter. I know that the work I did as a young boy cannot compare to the severe work of the immigrants, but I see it as an experience that we all have to face. In my opinion, in order to succeed, one has to know how it feels to start from the bottom in order to make it to the top. I will definitely recommend this book to whoever would like to learn why it is that so many immigrants try to flee their countries in order to make a better life for their loved ones, here in the United States of America.

This semester, I certainly learned how to read multiple books at a time. With the deadlines that I had to meet and the papers I had to write, this skill is one that is very necessary. I would normally start one book and take my time with it before moving on to another. What surprises me is the number of books that we read in such a short period of time. At first, I would doubt myself saying: "I will never be able to finish this book in such a short time."

Now that I have learned and practiced different routines and strategies, I am confident and better prepared to read any type of book – fiction, nonfiction or even poetry. Even when I skim through certain parts of a book, I still have the opportunity to grasp all of what the author was trying to say. The way that my instructor showed us how to skim through a book helped me out when I needed to complete a book in a short period in order to prepare for a presentation.

One major thing that helped me improve my reading skills was reading different types of books. I would normally only read what interests me, such as articles on sports, current events and suspense novels or street books. By opening up and reading other types of books that I wouldn't have read in the past, I have a better understanding of something I may have not enjoyed as much. I am able to read a little faster and grasp the concept of what I am reading at the same time. I also have learned how to gather my thoughts together and complete an essay in a timely manner. I have noticed that my reading and writing skills have improved greatly since I have been reading more frequently and completing my assignments on time.

# My Inspiration: The Brooklyn Bridge

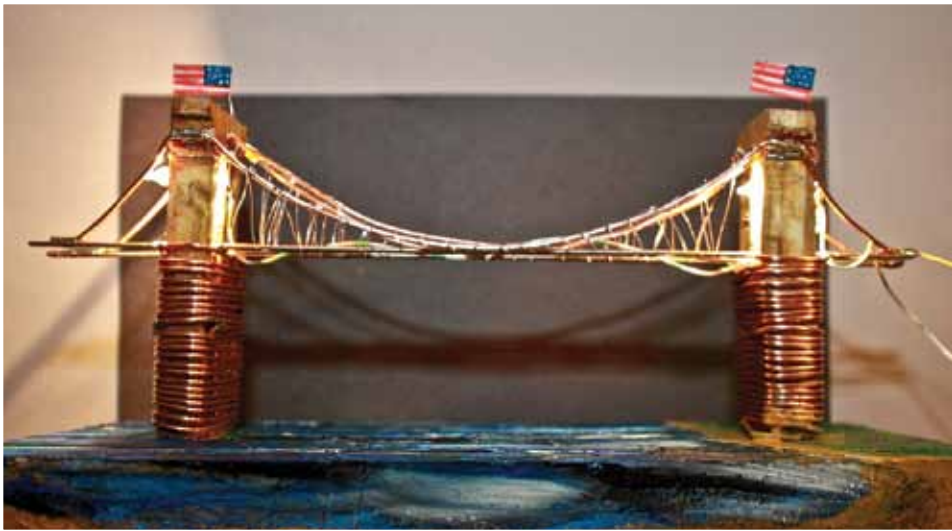
**Adam Rogowski**

There are thousands of monuments, buildings and art pieces in the City of New York that attract tourists from all over the world. The Brooklyn Bridge is one of my absolute favorites. The first time I saw it in person was approximately 10 years ago, when I decided to spend the upcoming years living in New York City. Although the bridge was not the only reason for my artistic choice, it helped me realize how architecturally diverse and beautiful New York City is. The best view of the bridge can be found from the Brooklyn Bridge Park, accessible through the Old Fulton Street in Brooklyn. On any day of the week, that area is filled with locals and tourists. Some people visit the park simply to relax and enjoy the beautiful view of the bridge. Others visit it to take pictures of the structure, often when building wedding portfolios.

Since I am fascinated with photography and have taken many pictures of the Brooklyn Bridge, it was an easy choice for the final project in my art class. Although I have never taken any photography classes, I have always enjoyed taking pictures. When I found a full-time job as an electrician after graduating from college, which significantly reduced my spare time, I didn't stop taking pictures. Last year, I decided to buy a professional camera with some extra disposable income. It takes breathtaking pictures and allowed me to capture my favorite New York City object, the Brooklyn Bridge, in its finest.

As my final project for the class, I chose to build a model of the Brooklyn Bridge. Because I work with my hands on a daily basis, I figured it would not be a very difficult task. To complete the project, I decided to use materials found exclusively at my worksite in order to incorporate my daily resources into the art piece. First, I gathered some materials, mainly copper wires and pieces of wood. Next, I sketched a drawing of my model bridge and checked proportions against the dimensions of the actual structure. Then, I prepared a platform for the bridge and installed wooden columns. Finally, I split the copper wire into smaller pieces to solder them together more easily, and started creating my copper miniature version of the bridge.

Even though it was time consuming, I am very pleased with the outcome. I think that the model came out pretty nicely, and it will definitely allow anyone viewing it to realize that electricians are not only craftsmen, but they also can create art.



# Trade as Religion

Joseph Dean

In the play *The Stonemason*, several themes present themselves, such as education, family issues and the African-American struggle. Throughout the play, Papaw instills the theme of trade as religion. Throughout history, stonemasonry has been regarded as the oldest trade; some call it God's trade. The usage of stone has been around longer than fire, and the religious aspects of the trade present themselves several times during this play.

The main ideology behind stone masonry is that working with stone is God's trade because it is the oldest trade and one cannot learn it from books. It must be passed from generation to generation – each individual is the last mason until he or she passes it down. A stonemason cannot use any unnatural procedure to cut the stone. It must only be cracked on its natural seam. At the table, Ben is reflecting on the time the vice president came to the house on Papaw's 100th birthday to ask him about laying a cornerstone at a ceremony and Papaw declined, "I ain't never laid a block of hewn stone in my life and I never will. You go against scripture you on you own. That man up there ain't goin' to help you. Ain't no need to even ask" (p. 63). Hewn stone is stone that has been cut using a tool or cutting device; it is considered unnatural by true stonemasons. Stonemasonry, as a religious trade, also relies heavily on faith. Papaw tries to instill his faith upon Ben to no avail. It seems Ben accepts the trade for the remarkable work involved, but does not share the same passion for faith as Papaw. The fact that Papaw will not lay a hewn stone is a clear example of how the theme "trade as religion" is shown in Papaw's life and faith as a stonemason.

During the play, Ben often tries to get Papaw to open up about his past days of work, and to share his wisdom on the trade. In one section, Papaw talks about the "wrath" of fools. Here Papaw is referring to his bosses: "Stone ain't so heavy as the wrath of a fool and I worked for white men and I was subjugated to that wrath many a time and I became very dissatisfied about my lot in the world" (p. 48). One of the more interesting debates from the Bible has always been about the "wrath" of God. Is God a god of vengeance? Although Papaw is referring to his work boss here, I believe there also is something to be understood regarding faith. He is trying to explain to Ben that the white men who were giving him direction were not really his boss, and that the stone is in charge. It is God who creates the stone, so therefore

He is the Boss. Perhaps Papaw believes that the “wrath” of the bosses will eventually be returned to them by God for trying to unnaturally alter the shape of the stones. Papaw believes the men do not get to pick and choose where a stone can be cut since it has natural seams, and I believe that this is partly where the “wrath of the fool” lies.

Although Papaw is the main character through whom the theme is presented, it is clear that in his death, and the moment he appears to Ben at the end of the book, this theme is truly revealed. Throughout the play, Papaw is always reading the Bible and discussing faith through the trade. Although Ben acknowledges and respects Papaw’s faith, he never actually participates in the readings himself. It is only after Papaw’s death that Ben finally accepts his faith, whether faith in God or just faith that Papaw will watch over him. In the final scene of the play, Papaw’s ghost appears to Ben. As Ben describes it, Papaw’s hands were “hands from which all those blessings had flowed. Hands I never tired to look at. Shaped in the image of God. To make the world. To make it again and again” (p. 132-133). Up until now the reader has never seen faith in Ben. Ben never expresses his own personal feelings, opinions or interests in God and it is unclear why. However, it is at this point the reader realizes that Ben has accepted faith through making Papaw into a holy figure, as God himself, with God’s hands – and it is here Ben accepts the trade as religion.

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# The Religious Trade of Stonemasonry

Steven Cullen

One theme in *The Stonemason*, by Cormac McCarthy, is the relationship between the trade of stonemasonry and religion. As one of the main themes in the play, it is portrayed throughout the story. Many of the old stonemasons were very religious people and this was portrayed through the character of Papaw. Everything that he does reflects his religious beliefs and he never compromises his faith for anything. Papaw's religious beliefs shape the type of man that he is. He has a passion for his work that is unmatched by any other character in this story and this has a great deal to do with his dedication to his faith. Papaw looks at the trade of stonemasonry not only as a job but as an extension of his faith. When somebody can relate to their work on such a deep level they are destined to be extraordinary in their field.

Papaw's beliefs are shown in Act III, Scene 1. For his 100th birthday, Papaw was asked by President Nixon to lay the cornerstone at a ceremony but he refused because he would not lay hewn stone for any reason. Ben finds the passage in the Bible which states, "And if thou make me an altar of stone thou shalt not build it of hewn stone, for if thou lift up thy tool upon it thou hast polluted it." Papaw is an old time, faith-based mason and no matter how big the honor is, he will not go against his beliefs.

Many times in the play Papaw is seen reading his Bible. He studies the Bible often and bases his life on his beliefs. In Act IV, Scene 4, a reporter is at the house interviewing Papaw and some of the family members. While talking to Ben, the reporter asks if Papaw reads often and Ben responds, "Constantly." The reporter then asks what he reads and Ben says "The King James version of the Bible." This shows that Papaw not only believes in his religion but he is very knowledgeable on the subject. He spends most of his life studying his faith and practicing his trade.

Papaw's religious faith affects most of the other characters in the play. Papaw is very respected by the members of his family. Papaw's grandson Ben has a special bond with his grandfather. Ben tries to follow in his grandfathers footsteps by trying to learn everything that he can from Papaw. He seems to be the person who holds the entire family together. This is proven toward the end of the play when Papaw dies and the family begins to fall apart. Everyone in the family reacts differently to his passing and their lives are forever



changed from that point on. Some members of the family take the news worse than others. Big Ben, Papaw's son, kills himself after he finds out the news. Papaw's death has a different impact on Ben, who actually turns to his grandfather's religion as a response to his loss.

In the final scene of the play, Ben has a vision of Papaw while visiting the cemetery. Ben says that Papaw "held out both his hands. Hands from which all those blessings had flowed. Hands I never tired to look at. Shaped in the image of God. To make the world. To make it again and again. To make it in the very maelstrom of its undoing. Then as he began to fade, I knelt in the grass and I prayed for the first time in my life." The hands of Papaw did the work of God through his work as a stonemason. In this scene, Ben has finally turned to the faith of the stonemasons through his grandfather. He prays for the first time in his life and it seems that he will now follow the same belief system that Papaw followed his entire life.

Religion plays a large role in the character's lives, especially the characters of Papaw and Ben. Cormac McCarthy captures the religious traditions of stonemasonry and portrays the impact that religion has on the stonemasons. He does an excellent job of shaping the personalities of all of the characters, and showing how Papaw's beliefs impacted the rest of the family. The reader gets good insight into the characters that McCarthy brings to life. This story shows that if people are passionate and hard working, they can have successful lives no matter what obstacles they face.

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## Freedom vs. Slavery in *The Stonemason*

Sean Rafferty

Cormac McCarthy's play *The Stonemason* has many reoccurring themes that are provocative and persuasive. The characters in the play represent a conflict of generations, genders and education. The main theme in the story is the lack of freedom. No man or woman in this play can be considered truly free; they deal with the issues that bind them in their own ways. The story is set in a black section of Louisville, Kentucky in the 1970s. This was a tumultuous time in American history with the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement and other counter culture activities. I believe that McCarthy chose this period because of the changes that were taking place across the country, especially in the black community. The Civil War freed the slaves, but they were treated as second class citizens throughout the 20th century.

Papaw is the patriarch of the Telfair family. He is a 101-year-old Freemason who has outlived his wife and all of his children except Big Ben. He is a slave to his old way of doing things. During the play, Papaw is a character who is always looming in the background, reading his Bible and drinking his coffee or tea. When he speaks during the play, he rarely talks of anything except religion or the trade. These two themes are heavily intertwined in this play. He is a man stuck in his ways and will not let anyone convince him to change, even the vice president of the United States. He knows that his way is right because the Bible tells him so. In Act III, Scene 1, Papaw says, "I ain't never laid a block of hewn stone in my life and I never will. You go against scripture you on you own. That man up there ain't goin' to help you. Aint no need to even ask." This was Papaw's response when the vice president asked him to lay the cornerstone at a bank in town. Papaw held his beliefs above personal glory in this case. It was very commendable to hold on to his principles, but he limited himself. It would have been a great victory for the black community to have one of its own to be honored by a future president. He was a slave to his beliefs and the trade.

Soldier is the youngest of the Telfair men. He is a snotty 16-year-old kid who has no respect for himself or for the trade that the family holds dear. Soldier runs away from home, and it is suggested that he might be involved with the murder of another boy. He fell prey to the scourge of the 1970s, heroin. When he comes back into the play three years after his disappearance, he has aged considerably and is hooked on the drug. In Act IV, Scene 8, Ben says, "Yes.

Black male. 19. Yes. He was 19.” He was giving the police an identification of the body when he said this. The officer on the other side of the conversation didn’t believe he was 19. Soldier was a slave to his habit.

Big Ben Telfair is the youngest son of Papaw. I think that Big Ben is a slave to his father’s image and his father’s expectations. He is a Freemason who runs his own business. He wears fancy clothes and jewelry to show how successful he is. He uses this false armor in order to hide his true self from the world, but especially his father. He owes money to the bank and has maxed out his lines of credit. He also owes his son over \$11,000. The only reason that he keeps going is his father.

Mary Weaver, Big Ben’s mistress, indicates that Big Ben wasn’t worried about his debts as much as he was about his father. After Papaw dies, Big Ben kills himself, and in Act V, Scene 2, Mary Weaver says, “I think maybe when his daddy died that give him leave to go on and do what he done.” Big Ben wanted to show his father that he was a successful businessman and that he could take the family to bigger places. After he realized that he had failed and his family was still living in an old shack, he was just waiting for his father to depart so he could free himself.

Ben Telfair is the glue that ties all of the characters in the play together. He idolizes his grandfather. He supports his father and his nephew in order to keep his family together. In Act V, Scene 3, Ben says, “We cannot save ourselves unless we save all ourselves. I had this dream but did not heed it. And so I lost my way.” Ben is under enormous pressure to make money. He is putting his wife through college; he has one daughter, a child on the way, and a home to build in his spare time. With all of this on his back he tries to travel down the right path. Soldier becomes the catalyst for his dream being shattered. After he finds missing Soldier, he sends him bribe money to stay away from the family. This money is spent on drugs and other illicit activities alluded to in their dialog. The last time he sees him, Ben struggles with whether or not to tell his sister that he found Soldier. He decides not to tell Carlotta, and it turns out to be the last time that anyone sees the boy. After Soldier’s death, Ben comes clean to his sister who will not forgive him. Ben tried to save his family by keeping Soldier away, but only succeeded in splitting it up.

The Telfair clan all had secrets and imperfections that kept them from being truly free. McCarthy shows us that a house cannot be built on an unsound foundation. In Act I, Scene 1, Ben says, “The keystone that locks the arch is pressed in place by the thumb of God.” Ben tried to be the keystone for

his family but fell under the pressure of God's thumb, not because he was not strong enough but because we cannot free ourselves unless we free all ourselves.

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# The Sun

Thomas Desrosiers



*I love the site I'm on because it is wide open, and I get to see and feel the sun all day long. The sun makes me feel happy and it produces vitamin D for the body.*

# IDENTITY

## Race

### Carolina Rodriguez

I am a Latina. I swam through the Amazon and caught the killer fish with my own bare hands. I crawled through the train tracks and survived rape and slaughter so I can be a mule for the mighty drug lord, who is more powerful than our president. I almost suffocated inside the white man's trunk when he said he could take me across the border. I have no rights. The black people still fight for theirs every day, even though their president is black. White people say he is Muslim, but does religion really matter when we all chase after the same piece of bread?

I am inside these big United States. I buy my fruit from Kim who lost his family in North Korea and met and fell in love with Lirie who is from Kosovo; their children are beautiful and sing in Sunday School next to Gunther's twins who are half Japanese and half German. I take the bus home and always run into Elena, who is from Poland, and has driven the same bus for 12 years. She is happily married to Mario who is Italian and works at the Corona Bus Depot. Corona is full of blacks and Latinas. I am Latina. I am surrounded by everyone. We are all different colors. We all love our race. We race to support our family. We race toward the American dream.

# Class, Race, Gender and Stereotypes

## Samuel Banchs III

In their respective books, Barack Obama (*Dreams From My Father*), Susan Eisenberg (*We'll Call You If We Need You*), and Ted Conover (*Coyotes: A Journey Across Borders With America's Illegal Migrants*) each offer plenty of examples of how class, race and gender play an important part (positive and negative) in our society. The stereotypes each person possesses, be it because of the color of their skin, their nationality or their gender, shape and affect each person individually and how they deal with society in general.

Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* is our current president's autobiography, which explains his early childhood and the experiences he went through, being both black and white. In reading Obama's interaction with a black leader, I was shocked at how true his statement is even today: "In fact, that particular episode was only the most dramatic example of what I was hearing and seeing everyday. It was expressed when a black leader casually explained to me that he never dealt with black contractors ('A black man'll just mess it up, and I'll end up paying white folks to do it all over again'); or in another leaders' rationale for why she couldn't mobilize other people in her church ('Black folks are just lazy')" (194). I have heard these statements time and time again in my trade. I am amazed at this stereotype because although it may be true of some people, regardless of their race, I do not see how the good, responsible, reliable black workers are all unfairly placed in this category.

Hindsight is 20/20 and I find it amazing that the experiences Obama speaks about in his book are all roads that lead him to where he is today. The November 2008 elections were historic and I am proud to have participated in them; for a moment it seemed that class and race were irrelevant in the United States.

In Susan Eisenberg's *We'll Call You If We Need You: Experiences of Women Working Construction*, there seems to be a parallel to the way women and minorities are treated. At my jobs, women and blacks are called and considered "lazy and stupid." People talk about both groups behind their backs and seem unwilling to give them a chance to demonstrate their work ethic and capabilities based solely on their qualifications as *people*, never mind their race or gender. Having women and "minorities" on trade jobs is a



federal requirement that employers reluctantly agree to fulfill. In a way, this requirement serves as a stereotype. When women or minorities are seen on the job, other workers assume they are there because of this federal requirement. Workers then jump to the next conclusion: because they are protected by law, they will not work as hard as everyone else to keep their job.

In the chapter titled “Customized Treatment: Women of Color,” Eisenberg explains how women of color in the industry will be treated differently than white women. The author clearly describes the truth for women of color working construction: “Yet the observation was widespread among tradeswomen of different races, regions and crafts that a woman’s work environment, training and employment opportunities varied with her race and ethnicity.” I agree with this statement 100 percent. I also found it interesting that the white women quoted in the book also recognized this as true. As hard as women had it in a job dominated almost exclusively by men, black women had it even harder.

Bernadette Gross, the only black woman in her carpentry apprenticeship, expresses her race/gender experience perfectly: “That made me a double minority, and that’s how they treated me.” The double minority issue black women face is very obvious in this chapter; there is story after story explaining how in the same situation, a black woman would be treated differently from a white woman. In those situations, the stereotype of being a woman on top of the stereotype of being black must have been hard on the black women experiencing the racism and sexism.

One reason women in construction also may face hardship is the old-school thinking that men are the providers and women the caregivers. As a male, I would find it hard to expect the same from a woman in the business mainly because I would not want the woman to do the hard physical labor I have to do. Out of pity and chivalry, I would rather do most of the work than have a woman “help” me. I can now see how even this sense of “chivalry” is a bias. I would not want someone to have pity for me and therefore give me lighter work; I am sure a skilled professional woman also would feel the same way.

*Coyotes: A Journey Across Borders With America’s Illegal Migrants* presents an interesting perspective from Ted Conover who “walked in the shoes” of the illegal immigrants who risk their lives everyday to cross the border illegally. The term illegal immigrant has always bothered me (along with the word “minority”); it’s the idea that a person can be “illegal” that I find humorous and offensive at the same time. We never use the term for anything else crossing any border (a car, an animal, etc.) but a *human* is considered

illegal! I like that the author in his section, “A Note on Translation” also made a comment regarding the term “illegal alien:” “‘Illegal alien’ and ‘undocumented worker’ I also treat as synonyms, though I try to avoid both labels, as the former makes them sound like outlaws from another planet, and the latter is unwieldy.”

Once during a protest, I saw a poster that read “NO HUMAN IS ILLEGAL.” That statement summarizes exactly how I feel. I understand that crossing the border without the proper documentation and permission is an “illegal” or criminal act, but I do not believe this action makes the people that commit this crime any less human or alien. We do not call rapists, murderers or other criminals “illegal,” so why call a person that has risked their life for a better opportunity illegal?

I took immediate interest in Ted Conover’s book as soon as I opened it, starting with the Bible quotation: “Thou shall not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, as ye were strangers in the land of Egypt?” (Exodus 23:9) When I listen to the all-too-familiar complaints regarding “illegals,” I always think of what Native Americans thought when they were “discovered.” How is it that the people that made the great exodus from Europe to America were not considered “illegal”? I think it’s ironic and insensitive to then close the border of a country that welcomed all types and kinds of people.

I appreciate how Ted Conover sets out to tell the story of Mexicans. Conover set out to experience what Mexicans and other South Americans feel when they cross the border. It’s one thing to interview those brave enough to admit they entered the country illegally; it’s another thing to delve yourself into your research and interact with coyotes and Mexicans. Conover writes: “But because we as Americans control their destiny in so many ways, it is urgent that we know more about these people who ask little more than to wash our dishes, vacuum our cars and pick our fruit.” I never thought of Americans as controlling their destiny but I can see Conover’s point of view! Because we limit the amount and types of people that cross the border, we indeed control what type of life and future those wanting to come to the United States can have.

The immigrant issue can fall under class and race. I support immigration because it is what made the United States the country it is today: diverse and full of opportunities. I also believe that there should be a limit and that immigration should be regulated. However, immigration regulation can be

accomplished without demeaning anyone regardless of their class or race. Once we start treating humans with the respect they deserve, I think it will be easier for society to alter their preconceived prejudices and stereotypes.

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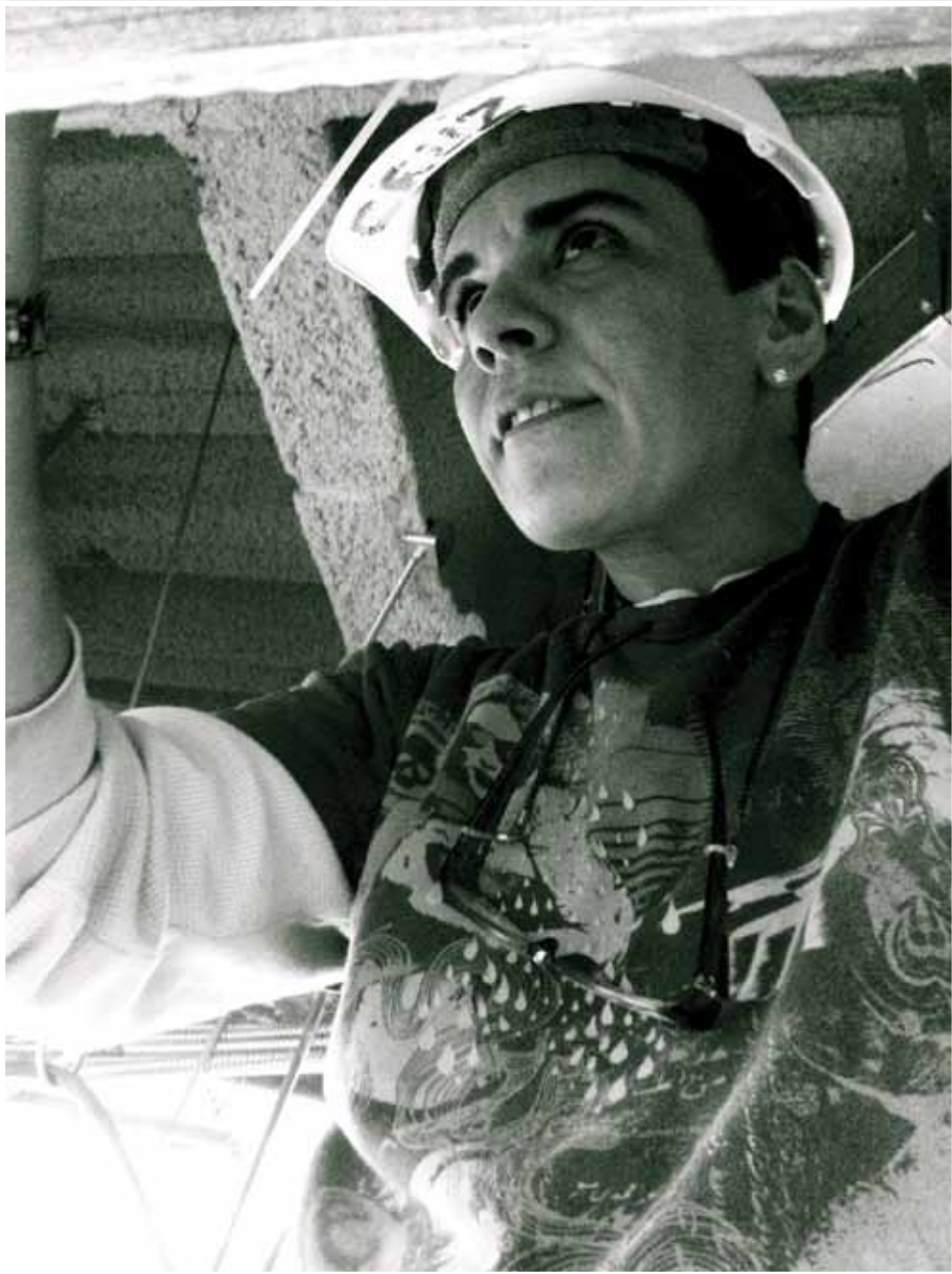
## Photo Collage

**Ariele Lino**

The following photos are inspired by those taken by various artists during the Works Progress Administration (WPA) years following the depression. Photographers like Ben Shahn, Walker Evans and Marion Post Wolcott documented the poor, overlooked workers and families in our country through one of the toughest times in our history. Working under the direction from the Farm Security Administration to illustrate the lives, working conditions, living situations and recreation habits of the poor workers throughout the Midwest, these artists captured the essence of their subjects poignantly. Their stark images capture the true flavor of the times and transport the viewer, encouraging a connection to the past.

The images presented here are of workers in our modern community. They are women who represent our own overlooked group within the construction industry. They are photographed while working or on break. They are busy getting dirty and creating – whether it is a steel structure that will frame a wall of glass or a nest of colored wires that, when connected, will provide fresh air. All require skill and can be considered art. In the process of executing the vision of another, there is the question of whether or not art is present in the process for these workers.

As I watched them work, I realized that the artistry of the work these women produce isn't necessarily only in the production of goods to be consumed by others, their art lies, also, in the dance of being one with their surroundings, like an open vessel for creating harmony between the sexes and between the trades in a way that leaves no one aware of what has just happened. I have watched all of these workers do their jobs and do them well. I have seen all of these workers make art while working. And I have seen all of these women create an unspoken art by exposing and unifying the overlooked artist/worker with the more mainstream aspects of their construction community to create a living, breathing canvas for creativity and possibility.













## Strength in Numbers

**Desiree J. Aldorando**

The night before my first job, I was filled with anxiety and anticipation about what the future had in store for me. I had completed my 3-month preapprenticeship through a program called NEW, Nontraditional Employment for Women, and had been accepted into the carpenters union shortly thereafter. The morning of my big day, I was awoken by my own unsettled sleep, and the only light illuminating the room came from the cable box, which displayed the time of 3:30 a.m. in bright red neon lights. Afraid that I would sleep through my alarm, I stood up and double-checked my tool bag. Tool belt, check, hammer, check, keyhole saw, check, knife, check, gloves, measuring tape, snipes, hard hat, goggles, chalk line, 2-foot level, plumb bob, all check. At an orientation we were given a checklist of tools that would be needed for first-year apprentices to purchase, followed by a list for second, third and fourth-year apprentices. I did not know what to expect on my first day, so I decided to purchase almost every tool from all four lists. I wanted to be prepared for everything, and not take anything for granted.

The time was 4:30 a.m. and I was out my door, tool bag in tow, heading to my first day working in construction. I arrived more quickly than I expected to the jobsite. The only other people there at 5:30 a.m. were the security guards. Looking around for awhile, I came across a shanty (temporary storage and eating area) which belonged to the carpenters. Within an hour, the sun came up and the jobsite came alive with workers from all trades, moving about and getting ready for the work day ahead. As I watched the carpenter shanty fill, I introduced myself to the foreman and told him who I was and that this was my first time on the job. With a nod of his head, he paired me up with another apprentice named Brenda.

Brenda was in her late 20s like me. She stood tall at 5'3" and seemed to weigh about 100 pounds soaking wet. She was a first year apprentice, but she had been working there for eight months. She took me under her wing and showed me the ins and outs of working as a female construction worker. My first lesson was in trimming down my tool bag. Brenda told me to have just what I needed for work, and to take the rest home because tools have a way of finding new owners.

Over the next several weeks, Brenda continued to show me how to use my tools properly and what materials were needed for the different stages of construction. I asked her if she learned what she knew through working on the jobsite. She replied that she had learned from a mechanic who was showing her as the job went along. She told me she'd replaced another woman that was working there, and that since she was turning second year in a few months, she may be laid off. She told me that no job is secure and the best way to learn our craft is by stealing with our eyes. On our jobsite there were few mechanics willing to show us how to do the work, but since we worked so closely with them, Brenda said to just observe them working.

A lot can be learned just by studying how one gets the job done. It's similar to dancing: everyone moves in unison to the unheard sounds. A few months later, Brenda was laid off. She had been right about how certain companies only use first-year female apprentices to meet a quota. Over the next several years, Brenda and I kept in contact, calling each other up to check about available work. Several months ago, I reached out to Brenda to check to see if she was working and if her job was hiring. What she told me took me by surprise.

Brenda began to tell me about how she was working on a jobsite as a journey woman (mechanic) in lower Manhattan. She was the only female mechanic with about two to three female apprentices; the rest of the crew was about 60 mechanics and apprentices, all male. She was enjoying her new job and taking time during breaks and lunch time to show the apprentices, both male and female, some of the work she was doing. Brenda calls it "paying it forward," teaching apprentices something rather than just sending them for material or stuffing insulation. Brenda asked me if I remembered a mechanic from our first job together named Chris. I told her I wasn't sure.

She described Chris as a tall Irish-American with a medium build and a shaved head, and a reddish-gold mustache in his late 30s. I asked her if she was joking because she described most of the men we worked with. She told me Chris was the mechanic who was teaching her on our first job together and after remembering him she told me that he was on her current job. She told me that they had been spending a lot of time together on the jobsite and off the job as well. Working construction is an uncommon place to find romance, but that is not the case for Brenda and Chris. I was surprised: although Brenda and I have known each other for several years, we've rarely spoken about our lives outside of the job.

She told me that some of the male mechanics were making sly comments about her and Chris spending time together during work hours, and how Chris would eat his lunch with her instead of spending it with the other male workers as he usually did. Brenda said it got to a point where some male workers would go up to her and make vicious and disturbing comments, and that she felt unsafe to work around certain individuals. She reported the treatment and behavior to her foreman who seemed to not care about how his men were behaving. When her foreman failed to take any action, she went to the superintendent and reported that she was being sexually harassed. The male workers were not brought up on charges as Brenda would have liked. They were just transferred to another jobsite, which seems to be the way certain companies deal with problems. Brenda says this is a big reason why many females quit the apprenticeship program. Intimidation and harassment on some jobsites is an awful truth, and the penalties are not stern enough to deter male employees. Women should not be made to feel “less than,” and one way to change this would be to have stiffer consequences for improper behavior.

Needless to say, Chris was not happy about the situation and though some men were transferred, others stood and continued to tease him about his relationship with Brenda. Chris told me that he knows Brenda is a strong, independent, beautiful Latin woman who didn't take trash from anyone and that is what he loves about her. Chris also knows that this field has its positives and negatives when it comes to women construction workers.

He recalled teaching Brenda when she was a first-year apprentice and the desire she had to learn her trade, and how most male workers feel that construction should only be for the boys. Chris has been a carpenter for almost 20 years, picking up the family tradition as his father did before him. However, he is the exception. His father and grandfather feel like most when they say that construction should stay an all-male field. Chris has worked alongside women construction workers from the beginning of his career. He recalls only seeing one or two on the jobsites and remembers how differently they were treated from the male workers. Chris says he rarely worked with the female workers because they were given the less desirable jobs such as insulation and distributing materials.

Once Chris turned mechanic, he knew he would pass his teachings down to any apprentice that was assigned to him, even female workers. He says that as time went on, more and more women started working the trades, and on any given job there were about three to seven female construction workers. Chris would request to work with the female workers, knowing that they

would not be given a chance to work with their tools otherwise. Women carpenters are more meticulous with their work, Chris says, and they bring a different feel to the work. On occasion the other male workers would make fun of Chris for having to work with females, which didn't bother him until it affected his work. Several female workers he was partnered with couldn't take the harsh language or distasteful treatment and would either quit or be laid off says Chris.

Chris knows what it takes to be a construction worker and feels that women bring a lot more than people give credit for. Not wanting more problems, Chris spoke to several of the male workers who continue to have difficulty adjusting to female workers. This became problematic when several male workers began to ask distasteful questions about his and Brenda's personal lives. Politeness flew out the window along with any regard to the job; a fight broke out between Chris and another male worker and both were fired for their actions.

Trying to protect herself, Brenda put a target on her back. After Chris was fired she said that working at the jobsite became too uncomfortable and she asked to be laid off, which is hard due to the large number of workers on the out-of-work list. "It is the right decision for me," Brenda said. This is one of the ugly truths that female workers might face while working in a predominantly male field. This unfortunate situation has brought Brenda and Chris closer; they moved in together and married over the holidays and are expecting their first child in mid-July, the first for both.

Chris's father has gotten to know Brenda over the past several months and is not only accepting of their marriage but Brenda as a carpenter. He is already working on building them a baby's crib from cherry oak wood. Brenda's experiences have taught her that you can't expect to change everyone; just a few can make a difference. Problems such as this one could be avoided if there were more female construction workers out in the field, Brenda feels. There is strength in numbers and right now our numbers are not strong enough. Times are changing, and so will the workforce. Brenda is not working due to her pregnancy but is looking forward to being a mother first and a construction worker second. Chris, with the help of his father, is working in Queens and also is taking classes at the District Council of Carpenters School to become a shop steward with his local. He is happy that his wife and soon-to-be baby are doing well and is looking forward to becoming a dad. No matter if it is a boy or a girl, this child will have a tool belt waiting for him or her. It's a new family tradition, says Chris.

Brenda's experience, unfortunately, is all too familiar when it comes to the trades. The difference here is that she stood up for herself and let the harassment be known. Too often the abuse goes unreported and the only victims are the women themselves. I agree with Brenda when she says that there is strength in numbers. The number of ladies joining the trades now is not as high as we would like, yet these few will continue to make a distinction in a field that is dominated by men. I feel it is not only up to the women of the trades to make an impact, but also the unions themselves that need to adjust to the changing times. Women have been working construction for over 40 years, and they will continue to be pioneers for many years to come.

## Wire Pulling

Edward Monaco

One often-misunderstood job as an electrician that I have discovered throughout my work is pulling heavy wire through conduit. When viewed by an outsider, boss or even another electrician, this particular job looks like grunt work. It is often called “bull” work, which appears to require only brute physical strength. There is definitely more to it than meets the eye.

Of course with all of our jobs, preparation is always a key factor. You have to make sure you have all the proper materials, tools and supplies you will need. The amount of wire to be pulled is measured out by the foreman. This is done by fishing a metal fish tape through the conduit. The metal is a flat piece of metal that for large conduit is  $\frac{1}{4}$ " to  $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide. This fish tape is usually wound up inside a self-contained plastic casing. The tape is pushed through the conduit to the end of the conduit run. Then, a Tru-Tape is tied onto the end of the fish tape. The end of the fish tape is fashioned into a hook. Making a hook is one of the first things an apprentice learns how to do, and he carries this skill with him throughout his career. You must bend this thin flat piece of rigid steel into a hook without breaking it. This takes practice. If you have the means to a fire on the job, you would heat the metal to temper the steel. This is an old method but makes bending the tape easier and creates a better hook. This is a method passed down by old timers. You can't just bend it with sheer force. You have to take your time with it. The tape needs to be coaxed, and patience is a must. You have to give it full concentration or else the tape snaps. Once you have mastered this, the process is done in one complete motion and without hesitation you have created the perfect hook. It's functional and even looks like a piece of art.

Once you have tied your Tru-Tape on the hook the fish tape is then pulled from the other end of the conduit. The Tru-Tape has numbers on it that indicate footage. The number on the tape at the end of the conduit run is then subtracted by the number at the beginning of the run, giving the required wire footage needed for the conduit run. Knowing the math is easy and a must but an experienced electrician not only knows to add for the wire connections, but a little extra. That little extra can mean having a wire pull go from being a success to turning into a disaster. Sometimes in shipment, the outside of

the wire on the reel can be damaged. If there is damaged wire with exposed copper then that section of wire must be cut off. It takes the experience and planning of an always-thinking electrician to know the difference.

Once all the preparation is in place, the next step is the most important: getting together the right group of electricians for the actual wire pull.

Again, some nonelectricians and even electricians see this particular job as a brute physical task, so some think you just need a bunch of strong backs, but it's so much more. Communication plays a really big role here for a few reasons. The electrician at the beginning of the conduit needs to be in constant communication with the electrician at the other end. First, and always first, is safety. Since the wire gets heavier as it's being pulled, thousands of pounds of force are at work. One slip or hasty move can seriously injure the guys at either end of the pull. The other reasons are, of course, to ensure a smooth, efficient, wire pull.

The actual pulling of the wire is assisted with a machine that is bolted to the floor or affixed to the conduit through which the actual wire is being pulled. This set up also is crucial for safety, efficiency and ease of operation. There also is "the making of a nose." This is where the electrician joins the wires together in order to fasten them to a rope that has been pulled through the conduit. Each electrician has their own particular style of doing this; even though the noses might look slightly different, they all follow a certain rule of strength and durability that will hold up during the entire pull.

Like I said, this process requires a certain amount of strength, but the most important factor is a certain mindset that the entire crew must have. Though some see this as a job that needs to be done quickly, with a little patience, wire pulling becomes a group effort done in a collective way that is safe and gratifying in the end.

When you and your partner are feeding the wire, you fall into a rhythm, as if you are dancers moving together as one, instinctively knowing each other's movement and capacity to hold and balance the wire against your bodies. There also is a keen sense of hearing that you develop. There is always one electrician who communicates by walkie-talkie with the crew that is pulling the wire. The crew feeding the wire can hear through the walkie-talkie when the pulling machine is straining. This high whining sound indicates that the wire is being pulled under too much stress. Even before the pulling crew radios the feeding crew that the machine is under stress, the feeding crew already knows this from the high whining sound they hear.



Along with the pullers and feeders, there is another part of this job that stands alone. This is a one person job. He is like the field goal kicker on a football team. He is known as the soaper. He's the guy who applies a lubricant to the wires as they are being fed into the conduit. The lubricant creates a slippery condition that relieves the friction on the wires being pulled through the conduit. This is a messy job, but a good soaper knows how to set up, use the product efficiently and effectively, and yes, neatly! This is a job that many don't like, but it is a crucial step in the entire process. This also can be a dangerous job. Most soaping jobs are applied with your hands in contact with the wire. The wire is constantly moving in the pipe. You must concentrate and be focused on the wire moving in the pipe. Not only are you to make sure the wire moves in the pipe in a smooth conformed fashion, but you must use caution as to not allow your hands to get caught on the wires and into the pipe. The results could cost you a loss of fingers or even more. An experienced electrician knows and feels the movements of the pull; you get into a zone as you soap. It's like a meditation – but you don't zone out.

Although the soaper is “lone kicker,” he still part of this team that is functioning as one unit. He is part of the collective effort in “getting the pull in,” and in the end he also shares the satisfaction.

The last and one of the most crucial steps of the wire pull is the process of chocking the wires. The final moment after all the wire is in place and ceases to move is when the electrician, known here as the “chocker,” secures the wires in the conduit run. Conduit runs can span multiple floors of a building. In order to keep the wires from dropping, a chock must be put in place at certain pulling points. These points are at accessible metal boxes that are in relation to the size of the conduit that is already in place. The wires that pass through these boxes get chocked at these points. The chock is a specially made piece of wood that is round and has groves to accommodate the wires. These grooves are coated with a sand-like material that creates friction to keep the wires from slipping. The chocker hammers the chocks in place to keep the wire from falling through the conduit. Without chocks, gravity takes over and the whole pull winds up in a dangerous disaster.

And then it happens; time becomes suspended. The chocker gets word from the wire pulling gang by walkie-talkie and springs into action with cat-like reflexes, wrestling slippery wires to fit the chock around wires that don't always cooperate, while at the same time positioning the chock into the conduit. Using a precise amount of force, the chocker hammers the chock into place, being careful not to split it. Sometimes he has a partner to assist him during this fast-paced operation, someone who matches his speed every

step of the way. The whole process is a blur. Then the rest of the team begins to let up and can hear, echoing through the pipe, when the chocker strikes his hammer for the last time, that all movement stops out of a final necessity. The wire pull is complete. The whole process is over as fast as it all started.

Yes, the job does get physical but with a group of thinking electricians, the job is made so much easier. The satisfaction of working together and the camaraderie it creates is a great feeling. To pull wire intelligently and efficiently is not just about time and numbers, but an instinct and mindset that is more than just muscles and an experience and connection with your fellow electricians that cannot be measured.

## The IBEW Logo

Luis DeLeon



November 28,  
1891

The original logo adopted in November 1891 by the 10 founding members at the first convention of the National Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (NBEW) in St. Louis, Missouri.

Before the days of strict copyright laws and trademarks, today's IBEW logo is not what it once was more than 100 years ago. Initially "borrowed" from a wire and cable company known as the American Electrical Works back in the 1800s, the blue logo to the left was personalized by the 10 founding fathers of the IBEW to create a symbol for the NBEW (National Brotherhood of Electrical Workers). It was finalized on Nov. 28, 1891. The symbolism behind the intricacies of the finished design are not quite known, but in 1999, when the logo was redesigned to prepare for the turn of the century, the quantity of lightning bolts were changed. Originally 22, the number of lightning bolts were changed down to 10 to represent the 10 original founders of the union.



In 1999

The newly redesigned official seal, now featuring 10 electric bolts, symbolizes the energy with which the IBEW moves forward into the 21st century and a new millennium, while looking back to honor and celebrate the 10 founders and their vision of the future for the union.

I've attempted to recreate the central figure of the modern IBEW symbol through a variety of on-the-job materials such as kindorf, EMT, nuts and bolts. The reason I chose this specific form is because, to be quite honest, I could not find any other on-the-job material that could convey the true shape of a lightning bolt the way kindorf has. My depiction of the IBEW logo here has a few meanings to me. One, it symbolizes the stronghold that the IBEW has gained in the field of electrical work over the past century. Two, it is a tribute to the 10 founding members of the IBEW and the hard work they put into helping us gain that market share. And lastly, it is a sign of the unification that comes from being a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

I built this project not just for me, but for all IBEW members to help us always remember where we come from. We are the successors of a long line of proud electricians. Men and women who respected their trade and never took it for granted. Being in a union meant something very important to them and to us. It means that we have rights. This is what I believe the founding fathers of the IBEW intended when they first customized our logo back in 1891. To represent the importance that everyone, everyone, has the right to make a good living, to be protected in their jobs, and, most importantly, to have the right to unionize.



## Review of *Dreams from My Father* by Barack Obama

Kevon Kirton

In Barack Obama's biography *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* he describes his different life experiences while living in Hawaii and Indonesia, which eventually led to college life in Los Angeles, and a brief period in New York which jumpstarted his career in Chicago. Throughout his travels, Obama was faced with racial difficulties, as well as his own personal problems that drove him to overcome certain circumstances. At times, he reports, it seemed as if it didn't matter what he did or accomplished, as it was never enough, like a child who tries to make his parents proud but is never able to. As a young black man, he had to contend with social expectations that black men experience in America, and so he learned to come to terms with racial inheritance.

However, his childhood life helped prepare him for dealing with the world he lived in due to the fact that he was raised by two white grandparents in Hawaii. They raised him with love and respect which showed him another side of race relations that most black people at that time never saw, so he didn't experience as much hatred between whites and blacks as a youth. While his mother was white and his father was black, an uncommon situation in the rest of America, in Hawaii no one seemed to care, so he was not socially outcast as a child.

He was brought up in a loving environment that showed that black and white people can get along and live together, and when his mother married an Indonesian man and they moved to Indonesia, he experienced a completely different world in terms of everyday living. It was during this experience that he learned that race is not the only factor in making life hard, but that everywhere that there is wealth, there also is poverty.

Since his parents had high expectations of Obama – his father was an ambitious Harvard graduate – he was naturally expected to do something similar with his life. Always a smart kid, as an adult he made his way through the ups and downs as best he could, always trying to be the man that everyone knew he could be. By the time he moved to Chicago, he had a vision for himself. He wanted to help others who could not help themselves have a better life, or at least a better environment to raise their kids.

While working in Chicago's Altgeld Gardens housing project, he met a lot of challenges trying to help the tenants get better living conditions and better schools. He discovered that no matter how big the accomplishments, he was never satisfied with his success. This was something his father also had trouble dealing with in himself; based on family expectations, Obama's father was always busy planning his next move and never felt satisfied. During his time in Chicago, Obama came to terms with the realization that even though he did not know his father at all, he inherited from his father the eagerness to always do better no matter how big the success.

It was not easy for Obama to deal with the fact that his father was not around, yet he was the biggest influence in his life. Unanswered questions and high expectations left him with a certain unfilled hole in his life. He wanted to know who he was, where he came from, how he overcame his hurdles in life, and what he wanted from a father. This way of thinking led Obama to travel to Kenya to see his paternal side of the family; there he met aunts, sisters, brothers and other relatives. He found some answers there, as well as more questions; however, during the trip he realized that no matter how many answers he received, the information would not add up to the lack of response that his late father could have provided.

He did come to one understanding from his trip to Kenya – that his father had ambitions for Obama that exceeded even his own expectations of himself. His father was a man who wanted the best for himself and his family and pushed them the way his parents pushed him. It was during these revelations about his father's character, that Obama accepted the notion that he would not be able to live up to his deceased father's expectations of him because he would not be able to communicate with him. In the end, he realized that while he did not know his father, he inherited his drive to keep on succeeding and to go above and beyond without settling.

In conclusion, I do not think this is a story about race because Obama himself never really had a race problem; it is a story about inheritance. Obama inherited the love that his grandparents gave him that enabled him to view the world as one, not racially separate in black and white. From his father he inherited ambition and determination to keep on achieving his goals. These two main lessons that he learned in his life have made him a strong-minded person who always takes on a challenge with the intention to overcome any obstacles that come with it.

# The Complexities of Class, Race and Gender: A Firsthand Account

Thomas Almodovar

The influence of class, race and gender on society is at the very core of all things, whether they be political, social or personal. Class, race and gender affect everyone, on every level, in every aspect of daily life. I know firsthand that these issues influence the way people see each other and the way they view the world as a whole. Using my own story as the basis of an argument, I intend to answer the question of how class, race and gender matter.

My background gives me an interesting perspective to talk about these issues. Being from a mixed-race family and growing up somewhere between low and middle class, I knew from an early age how class and race can rear their ugly faces and help to shape the life of a young person.

Early on in my development, I had to deal with my own identity; like Obama, I struggled to find the place where I belonged. My parents didn't offer much help with this problem. It may have been through negligence, but I prefer to think that they did not understand how being of a mixed background would affect me. At home, I would experience the love and affection that a young person needed; it was when I would be around my extended family that I would feel out of place. My father was born in Puerto Rico and my mother was born here in the city, her parents German and Scottish. When my dad would bring me by his parents, I didn't feel like I was a part of that family, even though we shared the same family name. They lived in Bushwick, an area of Brooklyn which at the time was predominantly Puerto Rican, with abandoned buildings, graffiti on every available brick and evidence of drugs. When we were at my grandparents' apartment, they would speak in Spanish, and I would just sit there and listen, feeling out of place, wishing we'd go home already.

Even though I grew up no more than two or three miles from the doorstep of my grandparents' apartment in Brooklyn, it felt like we were worlds apart. Ridgewood was the next neighborhood over, separated by the Brooklyn/Queens border, an imaginary line that seemed to have some magical power. It separated two neighborhoods, two boroughs and two zip codes. What was so mysterious was how this imaginary line separated two races, two classes, and in doing so, two families.

Ridgewood was a working-class neighborhood, mostly white, and there wasn't much crime. There was a sense of community, and I had no problem fitting in at school. Most of my mom's family also lived in Ridgewood and we got to see them more often than my dad's family. It was easier for me to identify with my mother's family. I wonder what my father thought about us growing up without really getting to embrace his heritage. My brothers and I were being raised in a white neighborhood, surrounded by our white relatives. He didn't even try to teach us to speak Spanish. He said he didn't have time to teach us the language and that it was hard because my mother didn't speak Spanish. My mother says that he was lazy and didn't make the effort. I'm open to the possibility that he didn't want us to learn Spanish. Maybe he thought that he was saving us from racism and discrimination that he faced when he was young. Although he was born in Puerto Rico, he came to New York when he was about 10 years old. It was the '60s and Bushwick was a predominantly Italian neighborhood then. They were the only Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood. He's told me stories about being chased with bats and all of the name calling; it couldn't have been easy and there's no way for me to understand exactly what it was like.

I think of class, race and gender as the "X" factors of personal development. You can't deny the importance of family and how one is raised with certain values and morals. With that being said, there is a constant pressure from the outside, from society, so it doesn't matter who you truly are, it doesn't matter what your values are or where your moral compass is pointed. Society tells us who we are supposed to be based on the color of our skin, the language that we speak, where we live, the amount of money that our families have, or whether you are a man or woman, straight or gay. What makes it so hard to avoid and reject these pressures is that they are so subtle; at times you don't even know that they are there. This makes it difficult for young people to separate the things that should matter from the superficial.

So why are class, race and gender so important to us? I haven't even touched on gender, yet the complexities of this topic have proven to be many. It is quite easy to blame society for telling us that we belong to certain groups and therefore we cannot be anything other than stereotypes. But isn't society made up of people, people like you and me? So if society is telling us anything, it is telling us that it is natural for people to categorize themselves and others into groups. There is something instinctual and primitive in our behavior as human beings to belong to a group or a clan.



If it is natural for people to identify with groups, why is it such a problem? Groups fight each other for dominance, for power, and it leads to resentment and hate. It causes confusion; in my own case, I was confused about who I was and where I belonged. I was well aware of where we stood as far as class goes – we had it better than some and worse than others. My confusion was in the race or ethnicity area, what group did I belong to? White or Hispanic – it had to be one or the other, it couldn't be both. Who was in both? Was there a group for both? There couldn't be many of them, I thought. And so my confusion went on and I tried not to think about it. It seems so silly now, but this was my reality.

Somewhere along the line in my adult life, I've come to terms with who I am. I have been on the receiving end of racial slurs and class discrimination; no one is ever immune to it. Yeah, my skin is a little darker than some others and I have an unusual last name, I guess that's enough to be "different," and at this point in my life, I'm okay with that. When I was young I thought of myself as being white and would acknowledge being Hispanic only when asked. I'm not sure, but maybe I thought it was easier that way, I didn't want to live where my grandparents lived, with the boarded up windows, graffiti-laced walls and drug addicts on the streets looking like zombies. I didn't want to be associated with that; I resented it. I didn't know any better. I've had regrets and have learned to live with them; I wish I had a better and more understanding relationship with my grandparents and I wish I could speak the language. Puerto Rico is a beautiful place with a beautiful culture and heritage. There are definitely things that I missed.

When I was 19, I decided that I was going to become a merchant marine, just like my father was. I was out of school and still trying to find my way. Where did I belong? I figured I would get to travel, make some money and stay out of the kind of trouble kids my age were getting into. Over the next four years, I did a lot of traveling, made some money and, for the most part, stayed out of trouble.

Something else happened during this time – I was awakened. I got to see the world, both rich and poor, and what I saw had an immeasurable impact on the person that I am today. I saw Third World poverty in India and Indonesia and saw how humble people were with the little that they had. I sat in bars in Germany and Spain and heard people's thoughts on politics, mostly American politics. I've been to places with big cities – Japan, the Arab Emirates and Singapore. I've been to the islands, such as Puerto Rico and Aruba. I have worked with people from all across the country. This experience opened my eyes and gave me a new perspective on life and how to judge people. I realized

that class and race were some of the worst ways to look at people. I've seen generosity, dignity and pride in places where I had not expected it. In the poorest places, where the people are so different, it became apparent that we are all the same.

It would be easy for me to say that there are two types of people in this world, good and bad, and that class, race and gender do not decide who is who. And there I go again, trying to categorize people into groups. People are individuals no matter what, and therefore they should be treated as individuals. In discussing these issues, I have come to the realization of how important it is for people to judge one another as individuals, and that stereotyping people is a cop out for those who are not willing to understand the complexities and true variety of people. If I could only go back in time with the insight that I have now, I would better know my grandparents and would not have been confused about my identity. No, I won't be stepping into any time machine in this life, but I look forward to sharing my insight with my son, so that he can grow without confusion about who he is or where he belongs.

## **From Work to Evening: Made from Gaffer's Tape**

**Nicole Degirolamo**



# POLITICS

# Women in the Construction Industry

Timothy Caldwell

Why are there so few women in the construction industry? This is a question that I have pondered since I was inducted into the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 3.

Let me start by giving you a little background on myself; I am a black man in my early 40s who is a second-year apprentice for the electrical union. I am currently working at the Department of Environmental Protection water treatment plant. I will start by telling you that I always wanted to be an electrical engineer. I attended an electrical trade high school and went to college to become an electrical engineer. Even with my education and my experience in the electrical field it still took over 10 years for me to be accepted into the union. I persevered only because becoming a Local 3 electrical engineer was what I strived to be. The reason I wanted to be in Local 3 is the prestige and the respect that is given to Local 3 electricians. I love being able to use my hands and tools to create something from nothing. I take pride in being a part of a project that I can stand back from and say I helped build that.

This has not been an easy journey for me as a black man in this union; there are a lot of hurdles to jump. This brotherhood, as it is called, is a tightly woven community that does not take lightly to minorities and really frowns on having women working for the union. This is not every male union worker's opinion, but it seems to be the norm.

For my first job as an apprentice, I was sent to a deck job in the middle of winter. The first couple of days were simple – take in deliveries and get familiar with equipment. That next week, they had me pulling 750 cables on the 31st floor in 18 degree weather with a group of “A” journeymen. That morning, I was told that I would be working with a black journeyman and she would be instructing me in what to do. So I went to my assigned area and the foreman walked in with this little woman who I shall call Mrs. P.

Mrs. P. could not have been taller than 5'2” and weighed no more than 124 pounds. When he introduced us I knew from the smile on the foreman's face that he put us together because he wanted us to fail.

First thing he said to her is, “Can you pull 750s for this run?”

Mrs. P. did not say a word. She put down her tool bag, walked over to the roll of 750, pulled off three feet, and made up the nose (the head of the wire to be pulled). She then proceeded to pull off another 10 feet all by herself.

Mrs. P. turned to the foreman and said, “Where do you want it?”

The foreman was shocked and was totally miffed that she was able to do this by herself. He left us saying that he expected us to get at least three runs done by the end of the day. This was news to me since I had never heard the foreman tell any of the other men who were pulling cable how many runs he was expecting. When he left I asked Mrs. P. if it was normal for a foreman to expect so much from an “A” journeyman with one apprentice.

Mrs. P. looked up at me and asked, “How long have you been in the union?”

I told her two weeks.

She said, “Never forget that you are a black in a union dominated by good old boys and their cronies who really do not want you here. The fact that I am a woman aggravates the problem even more. That is why you and I must always give 110 percent.”

That day we pulled all three runs, broke down the jacks and stored the reels, which, I have to say, was more work than I had ever done as an apprentice. The foreman came to check up on our progress and was surprised to find that all the runs were pulled. He did not say anything to her like, “Good job Mrs. P.” He just walked away like it did not matter.

As we were leaving the jobsite, she told me, “The job we did today usually requires four men two days to complete. It was given to me because I am a woman and the foreman wanted me to fail so that he would have an excuse to lay me off. In my 15-year career as an ‘A’ journeywoman in this union, I have dealt with a lot of men in this business that have gone out of their way to make it hard for women and minorities. They have this antiquated idea that construction work is a job that only white men are capable of doing, minorities aren’t smart enough to do the work, and women should stay home and take care of the house. These are the men who harass, belittle and sabotage your work just to make you look unskilled. They are threatened by the thought that as a woman I may know more than they do or that I took a job away from one of their friends. This is why there are so few women in the construction trades. It takes a woman who has the tenacity, willpower and a passion for the trade to stand up to the ridicule, scrutiny and hurdles that she

has to face in the construction trades. It takes a woman who has the tenacity, willpower and a passion for the trade to stand up to the ridicule, scrutiny and hurdles that she has to face in the construction trades. That is why you always give 110 percent, not for the foreman, but for your own satisfaction and the pride of knowing that whether I am a man or a woman, my work says I am a professional 'A' journey person for Local 3."

I worked for Mrs. P. as her apprentice for six months and took a lot of razzing from the guys about working under a woman. I did not care; Mrs. P. was the best journey person I ever worked with. She taught me more in those six months than any man. I am glad that I got the privilege to be her apprentice; it was a great experience.

# The Abolition and Civil Rights Movements

## Jonathan Geschwinder

African-Americans in the United States have been one of the most harshly treated ethnic groups in the short history of this country. Large numbers were bought as slaves and treated as property before the Revolutionary War. During the 19th century, those who were enslaved were not considered people, and for those who were free, their rights were severely limited. After emancipation, black people were able to attain more rights under the federal system of government, only to watch them be undermined by Jim Crow laws in the south and segregation throughout the country after Reconstruction. Throughout this time many individuals and groups, both black and white, worked hard to bring about equality for black people in the United States. However, it would be nearly 100 years after the end of the Civil War, and radical actions taken by activists during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, to end second-class citizenship for the black people of this nation.

Although perceived as a great movement in the North during the 19th century, the abolition movement was actually relatively small, although powerful in their message. The movement comprised slaves, former slaves and even some white people who were disgusted by the institution of slavery. Slaves would oftentimes band together to seek freedom in the North and Canada. Frederick Douglass, a leader in the abolition movement, had made his first attempt to escape from slavery with four other men. He was literate, and so he was able to forge papers for all of the men who said they had permission to be traveling from their master. Escape did not come without perils, though, as Douglass describes in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, “Whenever we suggested any plan there was shrinking – the odds were fearful. Our path was beset with the greatest obstacles; and if we succeeded in gaining the end of it, our right to be free was yet questionable – we were yet liable to be returned to bondage ... With us it was a doubtful liberty at most, and almost certain death if we failed” (50-51).

Harriet Tubman was another escaped slave who helped bring hundreds to freedom through the Underground Railroad. According to James Fraser in *A History of Hope*, “By most reckonings, she was responsible for freeing more slaves than any other person in the institution’s long history” (72). Many people who were against the institution of slavery, however, did not



want to associate themselves with the abolition movement because it was seen as quite radical. It went beyond slaves seeking their own freedom through escape and secrecy. For example, William Lloyd Garrison, founder of *The Liberator* newspaper, called for the complete dismantling of the slave institution. His words spoken at meetings and through his newspaper turned many away from the movement. Nat Turner was a slave who led a revolt with other slaves killing more than 60 white men, women and children in the first 40 hours of their revolt. The revolt was put down by federal troops and Turner was caught and hanged, but the fear that it caused among white people led to the slaughter of more than 100 black slaves in an effort to suppress ideas among other slaves to revolt.

But not all revolutionaries were black slaves. John Brown, a white abolitionist, led a raid of slaves on an arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia in 1859. Their plan was to steal arms and give them to the slaves of Harper's Ferry so that they could revolt against their master. However, few showed up and Brown was quickly captured. Despite his failed attempt, news spread throughout the North, and his execution as a traitor led many to view him as a martyr. The raid on Harper's Ferry was one of the major catalysts that brought the issue of slavery to the forefront of political debate in the 19th century, eventually leading to the Civil War. And although the Civil War was not originally intended to end slavery, but to keep the Union together, Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation changed the purpose of the war, so that it would be about ending slavery in the United States.

After the Civil War ended, emancipation for former slaves took on a whole new meaning. It no longer simply meant freedom from bondage; emancipation now meant not being a second-class citizen in the United States. Former slaves and free blacks sought educational opportunities that had previously been closed off to them. According to Fraser, "Education was important to the newly free men and women for many reasons, but it was terribly important to nearly all of them" (97). The gaining of an education for the newly free was proof of their independence, and this shocked many whites, even those who believed in their freedom before emancipation, like Harriet Beecher Stowe. She reported in 1879, "They rushed not to the grogshop but to the schoolroom – they cried for the spelling book as bread, and pleaded for teachers as a necessity for life" (Fraser, 97). During the early days of Reconstruction in the South, white groups such as the American Missionary Association and the Freedmen's Bureau sent large number of men and women from the North down south to teach the newly free. However,

upon arrival, they would be surprised to learn that former slaves had already started their own schools to teach black children and adults how to read and write.

By 1866, it was reported that there were nearly 500 “native schools” set up by former slaves in the interior of the South. What literacy and education would bring for black men and women, they hoped, would be the right to vote, and with the right to vote, one could be a full member of society. Black women would not get the right to vote until all women did in 1920, but the adoption of the Civil War Amendments, or 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, would bring black Americans closer to being first-class citizens of the nation. These amendments abolished slavery in the United States, stated that all men are equal regardless of race, and gave all men, regardless of race, the right to vote. The South soon saw the election of black people to local and state government positions. Fourteen also would be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and to the Senate during the years of Reconstruction. This was all thanks in part to Republican leadership and the presence of federal troops in the South. However, when Reconstruction ended in 1877, and the federal troops were removed, it was as if progress for black Americans had taken two steps back. As Democrats began to regain control in the southern states, Jim Crow laws were enacted that were intended to get around the 14th and 15th amendments. These laws segregated schools, public transportation, public facilities and basically every aspect of society. Segregation laws were reinforced on the federal level when the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that “separate but equal” was okay in society.

Finally, after the removal of federal troops in the South, white militia groups such as the Ku Klux Klan were able to gain more power. Groups like the KKK would terrorize and even kill blacks to keep them down in society and to prevent them from voting. According to Charles M. Payne, “As late as 1960, fewer than 2 percent of Mississippi’s black adults were registered to vote” (1). It would take nearly a 100 more years to end the open terrorism and segregation that flowed through the country.

“The Civil Rights Movement really began because in small towns and farms all across the South a generation of young people, such as Anne Moody, and a few of their elders, such as E.D. Nixon and Rosa Parks, began to say they just wouldn’t take it anymore” (Fraser, 269). It was a long journey to end the second-class citizenship of black Americans, but it was the small steps taken by individuals that would bring about great changes in society. One of the first major steps toward ending segregation was in the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*. This ruling overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*

and “separate but equal,” with Chief Justice Warren stating, “We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th amendment” (Fraser, 251).

There also was the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was started by Rosa Parks refusing to get out of her seat on the bus for a white man. The boycott caused the city to lose a lot of money from people not using the bus system for transportation. Other activists and members of the NAACP, SCLC and SNCC would organize sit-ins across the country to end segregation in public facilities, the most famous of which was the first sit-in on Feb. 1, 1960, at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in North Carolina. Four black students from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College refused to get up from the white-only seating. The next day they were joined by 19 protesters, and by the third day 85 had joined them. This method of protest quickly spread throughout the South. Finally, there were the Freedom Rides organized by the Congress for Racial Equality beginning in 1961. Black and white men and women from the North would ride into southern towns on buses testing new federal immigration rules of interstate transport and would ignore the “colored” and “white” signs. However, the protests against segregation were not met without resistance. Mississippi saw terrible violence during the Civil Rights era, and Fraser points out that “in Anniston, Alabama riders on both [freedom] buses were badly beaten and the Greyhound bus was burned to a charred hull by white rioters who included at least one FBI informant” (Fraser, 276).

At a sit-in on Feb. 27, 1960, “the police allowed a mob to beat many of the demonstrators and then arrested 77 blacks and five whites” (Fraser, 270). It was the violence and further separation from society that led many southern blacks to stay away from civil rights activists. According to Payne, “Wherever they were sent, the civil rights activists found that their initial reception by local blacks was less enthusiastic. The movement was generally dismissed as ‘dat mess’ ... As one white landowner said, with completely unintended irony, to a black family as he kicked them off his land, ‘Your food, your work and your very lives depend on good-hearted white people’” (Payne, 2). Despite the fear of joining the movement, the groups and activists were able to garner enough support and power to end segregation in the United States by the 1960s.

Despite the great strides made by the abolition and civil rights movements, all is not equal in today's society. On paper, blacks and whites have equal status in society, but integration and the abolition of Jim Crow laws do not stop racism which still permeates the country. The face of welfare is that of a poor, black woman with several kids, even if that's not the reality of most welfare cases, causing people to cry for an end to government welfare programs. And although segregation is illegal, economic conditions keep blacks and whites in separate neighborhoods, causing a legal segregation of America's public schools. So even though black people don't have to give up their seat on the bus anymore, and even though they don't have to take a test to register to vote, the reality of situation for many black Americans is that even though they are not barred from all of the benefits of being a first-class citizen of the United States, they are still stuck in a second-class position.

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# The Need for Universal Health Care

**William Hayden**

It is my belief we should have a universal health care system. I have felt this way for many years, and my feelings grow stronger the more I learn of how some people are treated because of the lack of health insurance, the caps, and limitations to procedures put on insurance companies.

I grew up with health insurance that my mother bought for us since she was a single mother. My father was a New York City police detective and died when we were young. He died from a cancerous brain tumor. Since his death wasn't on the job, we were given very minimal coverage by the city. We were very fortunate to move into my grandparent's two-family home after he passed. This enabled my mother to work, and my grandparents would watch us after school until my mother came home from work.

I can remember one specific incident when my younger brother (who was 8 at the time) fell and broke his arm. It was a very bad break and required two surgeries since he needed pins and screws. I recall my mother constantly on the phone fighting with the insurance company regarding the type of care he should get versus the type of care they would cover. It varied from not doing any surgeries to a minimal surgery; they felt he would never get full use of the arm even with the surgeries. Once she won that battle with them, they continued to fight her.

They didn't want to cover the night's stay in the hospital after each surgery. That was a fight she didn't win, but luckily she was able to work out a payment plan at a reduced rate with the hospital directly. Finally, it came to rehabbing the elbow since this was where the break was and where the screws were installed and later removed. In between both surgeries, the arm remained in a cast for six months, thus requiring rehab. They would not cover this either.

My mother asked the doctors to recommend a physical therapist and explained the situation about money. She was recommended to a very nice physical therapist who agreed to help start my brother off with exercises and for my mother to continue them at home. She would bring him back to the doctor but less frequently and only to make sure the doctor felt my brother was progressing well. I am happy to say his arm is in pretty good shape, all things considered.

It is very hard to fathom that my mom was paying out of pocket for health coverage when she needed it; it wasn't there the way you would think it should be. This is just one story I reflect on when I hear the health care topic debated. It was the one that was closest to me since I saw on a daily basis how the flawed system we have here in this country needs a tremendous amount of attention.

The movie "Sicko" by Michael Moore is very educational as well as disturbing. We live in the richest country in the world with so many medical schools and pharmaceutical companies, and the laws permit the pharmaceutical companies to steal from citizens and even deny certain people medications which can make them more ill and even die in some cases. The movie also showed how we have the doctors and the facilities to treat many people who are denied medical care, sometimes even the most basic care depending on whether they have medical insurance, as well as the type of coverage they carry. I know for myself, I never thought much about what type of coverage I have and what it may or may not cover. After watching the movie, I have looked into it a little. I believe Local Union 3 provides good coverage; we are very fortunate that our Local believes this to be a very important issue every time our collective bargaining agreement is negotiated.

I am very happy President Obama has taken the health care reform issue seriously. I do hope it is only the beginning though. "Sicko" shows how well people in poorer countries are treated, which is disappointing as an American. I hope we will start to see how we are treating each other and strive to be more humane, which is all I think a universal health care system is. Maybe in the future there will be a worldwide health system and we all will be treated as humans.

# No Insurance

Marco Albino



## Does America Need National Health Care?

**Kevin Mulderrig**

The answer to the question, “Does America need national health care?” is a simple one: yes! Right now in the United States there are almost 50 million people who are not covered medically. This is a complete disgrace. Countries that most Americans would consider Third World provide free health care for their people, why can't we? America stands by idly letting insurance companies condemn people to death for the sake of huge profits. Doctors charging insane amounts of money for routine visits and drug companies' unfair pricing of medication are literally killing people every day; something has to change.

With winter coming to an end and the spring season upon us, many people are getting outside and enjoying the nice weather. Unfortunately, for those of us with seasonal allergies, spring time means two or three months of sneezing and coughing. Growing up, I never had medical insurance because it was too expensive for my mother to afford. She was a young single woman with one child, working as a waitress in New York. Needless to say going to the doctor was reserved for emergencies only.

The thought of going to the doctor for my allergies never even crossed my mind until recently. My allergies got so bad I was waking up at night unable to breath and my performance at work was being affected. I am very fortunate to be working for an excellent union and I now have medical benefits, so I went to see an allergist about my problem. The doctor said that my allergies have diminished my lung capacity and caused me to develop asthma; he prescribed two medications. Unfortunately, one of the medications he wanted me to have costs \$160 a month; the other was only \$20 plus a \$25 co-payment for a grand total of \$205 a month just to breathe.

It seems like the more a person needs a drug or medical care, the more expensive it is. It only costs drug companies a few dollars to produce medications. What gives them the right to charge whatever they want for something that can save a life? It should be a crime to deny a person medication or medical services just because they can't afford it. Maybe the only reason they can't afford it is because it is so unfairly priced. The average middle-class person doesn't earn in a week what a doctor earns in a day. This is the reason why my doctor's office is only open three days a week.



The 2007 documentary “Sicko,” directed by Michael Moore, was an inside look at how America’s insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies and America itself screw over the little guy every day. Besides the 50 million or so Americans that don’t have medical insurance, the rest of us that are insured are routinely denied medical care by our insurance companies based on technicalities or pre-existing conditions. I was appalled to find out insurance companies actually employed investigators who try to dispute policy holders claims, doing everything in their power not to pay for life-saving therapies or procedures. These companies should be held accountable for the deaths that occur because they don’t want to pay to save a life, all to make a buck.

Watching movies and reading things like this in the paper doesn’t hit home until you witness this firsthand. About 10 years ago my grandmother had surgery on a disk in her back. During the operation the surgeon found a floating cyst that turned out being malignant. My grandmother began chemotherapy and started to improve until the insurance company found out that she was a long-term smoker and was once in an alcohol abuse treatment facility 20 years earlier. She was dropped from the insurance company and couldn’t afford treatment. My grandmother died six months later.

Things like this happen every day in what is supposed to be the greatest nation in the world. The problem is insurance companies and doctors are only concerned with their bottom line. Everyone must pitch in and help for the good of society as a whole. Right now health care costs are incredibly high and ever rising. According to *USA Today*, the Kaiser Family Foundation Health Research and Educational Trust reports that the national average cost for a family medical insurance policy in 2009 was \$13,375 a year. That’s a 5 percent increase since 2008’s \$12,680 per year rate. This is an impossibly high price for most families whose jobs don’t provide insurance and many are forced to go without it.

Before working for Local 3, I worked in New York City renovating apartments for a nonunion general contractor. I worked for \$25 per hour, cash, with no benefits. My wife worked for a dentist that paid for half of her medical insurance premium. We paid the other half of her premium, which was \$180 per month. We also paid the full premium for our son, another \$360 per month. To add myself to the policy it became a family plan, and they commanded close to \$1,300 per month. I couldn’t afford to have insurance for myself. Each time I got sick, it would cost a minimum of \$200 plus the loss of pay if I couldn’t make it to work. Thank God I never needed surgery.

Many people, given the chance, would settle down with a menial job and not pursue their dreams because it's safer to work a job that provides medical benefits. This is doing our country a great discredit. Think of all the things these people might create or the good they could do if they didn't have to worry about how they were going to pay for a visit to the hospital. Taxes in this country should be raised in order to fund a universal health care system. Instead of policing the world with our over-funded military, we should be taking care of our own people.

According to the *Congressional Digest*, "The United States is the only wealthy industrialized country that does not have a universal health care system, and the nation's current combination of public-private coverage is the most expensive in the world" (289). It's clear to me that the government needs to intervene and set limits on what a doctor or pharmaceutical company can charge for their services. At the same time, we need to raise taxes in order to train more doctors and fund a universal health care system for all American citizens to enjoy.

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# Wire Sculpture

James Olivo



## **A Review of *Working Class New York* by Joshua Freeman**

**Gerald Waters**

In *Working Class New York*, Joshua Freeman writes in great detail about New York City in the years after World War II. Due to the rise of organized labor, the city benefitted tremendously, gaining affordable health care and public housing, cheap and easy-to-use mass transit, and fair wages and benefits for the working class. I would say that Freeman's main argument is that in the 30 years following World War II, organized labor was very much responsible for the rise of the social democratic nature of New York City.

New York City was always unique and different from the rest of the country. For instance, after World War II, while most of the country's manufacturing was done with mass production in big factories, New York manufacturing was accomplished through specialized labor within much smaller shops. New York did not rely on the unskilled labor of mass production. In fact, nearly one-third of the city's population consisted of skilled blue-collar workers. New York had a deep sense of unionism, while towns and cities throughout the Southern and Western United States had an anti-union sentiment at the time. Also, while most cities would be described as "one-union towns," with an example being the automobile industry and United Auto Workers in Detroit, New York was filled with many different unions in both the manufacturing business and labor trades.

The title of the book says it all: New York is a working-class city. In the years after World War II, one of the reasons that this was true was most of the population of New York was the working class. New Yorkers on television were even portrayed as working-class people, on shows like "The Honeymooners." There was a strong sense of solidarity in the city, not just during strikes, but in the neighborhoods as well, as many ethnicities were clustered into the same neighborhoods. There was a sense of neighborhood attachment in those days, as people would claim to be from a certain neighborhood, not from a city, state or country.

New York was a city of newcomers and became increasingly integrated after World War II. The Brooklyn Dodgers were a great example of this, as Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier. Due to its diverse cultures, the city dealt with civil rights issues almost 20 years before the country started to pay

attention to them. I believe that the labor movement played an important factor in this as well, as the Civil Rights Movement and the labor movement went hand in hand at times. Communities came together and helped take care of one another.

Unions had a lot more political clout after World War II and basically had control over the employers. More than three million workers went on strike in 1945, only to be topped by four million workers going on strike in 1946. There were high levels of unionization at the time, and unions gained both cultural and political acceptance. Not only were there many more blue-collar workers than white-collar workers, but Mayor Wagner and Governor Rockefeller were both in power, and both were great friends of the labor movement. Organized labor solidly established its presence in New York City by the late 1940s, as political leaders were forced to accept labor as a leading institutional presence.

Unions also helped the working class to obtain health and death benefits, which was one of the main reasons that many people organized in the first place. World War II paved the way for new modes of mass medical care. Union medical centers were created for medical, financial and organizational reasons and provided care for half a million New Yorkers by 1958. Also, the unionization of hospital workers brought African-Americans, Puerto Ricans and West Indians into the labor movement.

The type of unionism that took place during this time period can be described as social unionism. People united and came together in order to make their workplace and overall surroundings a better place for everyone. One thing that unions helped out with was the housing market. Rent control laws were established and co-op housing projects were built. Roughly 120,000 people lived in a union housing project in 1970. There was a housing shortage after World War II due to a construction stoppage during the Great Depression, so many new homes and buildings were put up after the war. In my opinion, social unionism is a very important device, as it can bring together people that normally would not get to know one another. Social unionism can help put an end to discriminatory practices and still has the potential to evolve into something much greater.

Freeman has made a great argument that New York was, and remains, a working-class city. If it was not for the working class movement, I doubt that this city would be as great as it is today because the presence of organized labor gave the city its cultural greatness. Freeman showed much strength in his thesis, and I liked how he not only talked about how the labor movement

affected the city and its people but went as far as to describe the way that it reflected upon the pop culture of the time as well. It seemed as if Freeman left no stone unturned as he described this time of vibrant unionism.

It is hard for me to find any weaknesses in Freeman's argument, but the one thing I would point out is that I felt that he was a little too one-sided. I say this as a fifth generation unionist, so I definitely have a loyalty to the labor movement, but I thought maybe Freeman could have explained the other side's perspective as well. I also would have liked for him to talk a little bit more about the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, as he seemed to focus more on the United Electrical Workers, but I guess that's just splitting hairs.

Right now, we are at a turning point in history. Organized labor seems to be on the ropes, while the Wall Street crowd seems to have taken over. The white-collar workers have more political power, and it almost feels like they can do whatever they want, regardless of whether it is right or wrong for everyone else. However, social policy is not made simply by political elites; it is made by the people. I believe that if the working class comes together with the type of unity that we had just after World War II, we can definitely take that power back, and steer the labor movement back into the right direction.

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## **Review of *From Welfare State to Real Estate* by Kim Moody**

**Delfin Martinez**

The regime change that Kim Moody describes in his book, *From Welfare State to Real Estate: Regime Change in New York City, 1974 to the Present*, was a calculated plan that had as its main goal to take away the power of the nation's richest social democracy and place the interests of the elite leaders of New York City's bank and real estate industries above everything else. As a means to this end, these figures used the fiscal crisis of 1975 to set into motion their scheme to seize unprecedented influence in local politics.

In the 1960s and early part of the 1970s, New York's economy was very diverse with large parts of its citizenry employed in many areas supplying goods and services that were used throughout the city, and in many cases, exported to other parts of the country and world. This variety in the economy helped New York weather the normal cyclical changes of capitalism. New York City and the region had its very wealthy and very poor, but the disparity of what each group had, or made, was nowhere near what it is today; and the inequality was buffered by a hefty working class that called the city its home. These working-class families were politically active and made sure that the leadership of the day was responsive to their needs or were not elected when the polling booths opened again. They also benefitted from the services that were provided by the city, such as: medical care at city hospitals; free tuition at the City University of New York; and the use of the city-maintained parks for recreation. Those who could not work were provided with basic necessities of housing, nutrition, medical care and an education through high school. The very wealthy still had their enclaves in the tiniest neighborhoods in Manhattan and summer homes wherever they wanted, but paid a greater percentage of their income in taxes, that helped the entire system to function, grow and prosper.

The period before this era, from the years directly after World War II, was a golden age for the middle class, in which their spending fueled the dynamic build up of the U.S. economy. The middle class thrived, its numbers expanded, and people's living standards increased. The U.S. economy grew, and along with that growth millions of families were lifted out of poverty and into the middle class. This type of economic growth fed the myth that became the American dream, in which successive generations did better than

the previous ones. The top 1 percent gained as well – executives and bankers enjoyed the success of the American economy as much as anyone. “Their incomes grew steadily, but together with the rest of the country in a rising tide that lifted all boats, in New York and in the country as a whole. We grew together” (Parrot, 2010).

When the city could no longer support this economic growth because of the beginning effects of globalization, and the economic downturn of the nation as a whole, the business leaders saw their chance to make the city come to terms with what would ensure their continued growth, but at the expense of the jobs and lives of its middle-class constituency and the poor. New York City had turned to issuing short-term municipal bonds to fund the demands for expanded services and capital improvements instead of raising taxes in a more equitable way. As the city borrowed more and more money, the bankers who sold the bonds for the city lowered their grade on the bond market thereby making the bond issues less enticing to investors. When the city could no longer raise sufficient funds and was denied assistance by the state and federal government, they were mandated to make austere cuts to services.

The municipal government was hijacked by the Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC) and the Emergency Finance Control Board (EFCB). These two organizations continued to exist until 2008, by which time the business elite had already secured their fantasy with the election of one of their own, Michael Bloomberg, as mayor of New York City. The members of these two groups were chosen by the city point men, which went about trying to correct the city’s economic problems by furthering the austerity measures that had been threatened, but for the most part avoided, by Mayor Beame in the 1970s (Moody, 2007). These two groups had almost complete oversight over all fiscal policy in New York City. Budgets were cut, hiring for city jobs was frozen, contracts were not renewed, and city workers were furloughed and, ultimately, fired. This led to an increase in the number of people who needed to make use of the services and goods that the city provided for its poorer constituents. Still no taxes were raised on the income of the very wealthy.

At this very point, the city’s labor and municipal unions should have stepped up and cried foul, but shockingly they were scrambling to protect their membership during these very hectic times and played a less antagonistic role. They were led by Harry Van Arsdale, then the president of the Central Labor Council, who attempted to get the other big union presidents in line and worked to assist the bail out effort by committing members’ pension funds to buy the new bonds issued by MAC (Moody, 2007).



The concentration of wealth into the businessmen's hands was facilitated by mayors who owed them great favors for filling their election coffers. Since the election of the race-baiting Ed Koch through today with the understandably titled "Corporate Mayor" Mike Bloomberg, New York City chief executives have assisted the developmental bulldozer to extend its reach and placed more pressure on the city's beleaguered and divided working class. With almost no exceptions, the mayors of New York have sought the advice, and curried the friendship of, the business elite and put plans into effect which helped their concentration of wealth continue to increase.

The wealthy have set up organizations, such as the Partnership for New York (PNY), the Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY) and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) to lobby the executive and legislative branches of government for the enactment of further favorable legislation. The REBNY championed redevelopment of once blighted neighborhoods and pushed for government subsidies to build housing units. That these housing units tended to be for the higher end clientele of the business elite and displaced many working and lower income families didn't matter. With the stroke of a pen the mayors of New York City staked their bets on the development gods, and the displaced families and homeless moved into the outer boroughs where the wealthy and tourists did not have to be bothered with their presence.

This has continued to the present day. At the beginning of 2010 the PNY, through the Committee to Save New York (CSNY), began to run print, television, radio and Internet advertisements in support of New York State's newly elected Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, who wholeheartedly supports the group's "position on the budget." The governor's close friend, Dan Klores, is handling press for the business-funded committee.

These were the words of the newly elected governor, when he was asked about the advertising campaign and possible conflict of interest in dealing with the group:

"I encourage people to join that group. I encourage people today to speak up. The special interests have had the loudest voice for too long. So, I encourage participation by people. I encourage participation by other groups to make their voice heard. It can't just be a one-sided dialogue where the special interests who have financial incentives are the only ones that speak. It can't be a closed room with only one voice and the special interests dominating the conversation. The special interests that have billions of dollars at stake are spending millions of dollars in TV commercials to win the budget battle. That has to change."

Where can the working people of New York City turn if the man that was touted as having their best interests at heart is already so deeply intertwined with our political adversaries? The CSNY has already raised more than \$10 million for their war chest, and since they are not listed as a lobbying organization, they do not have to work under the concept of transparency. We can learn what the CSNY wants to advocate for and save by looking at its just-named board of directors, which includes many names from a who's who list of New York City's corporate elite issue and members of the REBNY.

These changes, along with financial deregulation and the failure to limit executive compensation, have tremendously benefitted large financial firms and corporate executives at the expense of working families in New York City. These developments have made huge differences in the policies that allowed the purchasing power of the middle class to erode so critically. The reduced power of labor unions also has made a significant difference in minimizing the political clout and economic power of these same middle- and lower-class workers.

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# The Benefit of Unions

Anthony Wake

Unions have the ability to improve workmen's morale and make them less likely to quit, while providing wealth to a nation. Employers have long resisted the formation of unions and unions have, in effect, received a reputation as corrupt and violent. Yet statistical evidence shows that the negative stereotypes associated with unions are incorrect. While many feel that the right to join a union is a right afforded to us by the Constitution of the United States, courts have determined that union activity is not a constitutionally protected right. However, some economists who subscribe to the classical theories of wages believe that the formation of unions is essential to the creation of a wealthy and prosperous nation.

Employers hate unions because they allow employees to obtain higher wages and greater benefits. Employers also are concerned that employees may rise up and gain too much power, thus, removing the powers reserved for employers. As a result of these fears, unions were once attacked as conspiracies and many workers were killed. Due to the backlash from employers, union demonstrations sometimes turned violent in the past. However, the number of striking workers that commit violent acts is miniscule and the reported cases of corruption are very small. In 2006, there were only two reported cases of misconduct by union officials. In contrast, the number of reported cases with big corporations involve millions of dollars and are far greater in number than that of union officials.

Our Constitution provides us with the right to freedom of association. However, courts have concluded that this right is only extended to the government and not to the private sector. Therefore, union formation is not a constitutionally protected right. The National Labor Relations Act protects the rights of workers to organize and form unions. However, the NLRA is often seen as a joke because the penalties for violation of the act are trivial and meaningless to most corporations. Considering that employees who belong to unions earn approximately 20 percent more than nonunion employees, permitting workers to unite could equate to millions of dollars to a large corporation. As a result, corporations typically fire any employee who attempts to form a union. The NLRA's fines generally do not amount to

more than a few thousand dollars. When compared to the amount of money permitting a union could cost a corporation, it would be stupid not to break the law and receive the fine for a few thousands of dollars.

However, according to Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, permitting workers to form unions will evidently lead to a wealthier nation. Smith explains that although the bargaining power of the employer far outweighs those of the employee (primarily due to the uneven distribution of wealth), there are other factors that determine bargaining power. Factors such as the ability of workers to form unions, the ability of employers to form unions, and the ability of governmental intervention all play an important part in determining the bargaining power of the two parties. Government intervention is by far the most important factor because the government has the final say in determining of the permissibility of unions. However, the government should weigh in favor of union formation because when workers obtain higher wages, it is good for the entire country. If workers are paid more money, they are able to spend more money in the marketplace; in effect they will feed the economy and other industries. Smith also states that high unemployment causes wages to fall and low unemployment causes wages to rise. In addition, the level of unemployment is not caused by the level of wages, but is actually caused by the level of investment. Workers can invest when they have more disposable income, i.e., money in their pocket.

To conclude, unions have the ability to not only benefit workers but benefit society as a whole. While unions may have received a bad reputation because of historical events that occurred in opposition to their formation, the bad reputation is not substantiated. Given all the potential benefits that unions have, the government should enforce the right to union formation more strictly. At the very least, regulations should be in place that provide for higher fines to violations of the NLRA. Higher fines would deter corporations from violating the act and workers will be more likely to form unions. The formation of unions will fuel the economy and create an overall better quality of life.

# Hardhat Lamp

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