Stray dogs: Interviews with working-class writers

Edited by Daniel M. Mendoza (Down & Out Books:
Lutz, Fl., 2016), 147 pages. \$6.99 (eBook)

Reviewed by John Walter Lepley

Pittsburgh, PA, USA

The media have developed an abnormal interest in working-class people amid the aftershocks of the 2016 elections. In particular, they treat deindustrialized regions of the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic as bellwethers to describe the supposed pathologies of voters who opted for Donald Trump. For example, *Politico* has made Johnstown, Pennsylvania the subject of three articles since June 2016, including one that purports to explain 'What Trump Voters Want Now' and another that includes the patronizing tagline 'Johnstown Never Believed Trump Would Help. They Still Love Him Anyway.'¹ The ostensible face of this demographic is a downwardly-mobile white male who has lost his manufacturing job, although the working class is much more diverse with regard to gender, race, and occupation. Increasingly, though, *white* is the standard adjective that modifies *working-class* in this reportage. Thus J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, also published in June 2016, is marketed as a Rosetta Stone to help readers 'understand the rage and disaffection of America's working class whites,' according to a jacket blurb by Reihan Salam of the *National Review*. The problem with most of this literature is that working-class people did not write it (Vance attended Yale Law School and is a venture capitalist in San Francisco).

'Resistance' to the Trump Presidency has manifested in several ways: massive women's marches that shook the globe, a swelling membership in the Democratic Socialists of America, and rapidly-organized demonstrations

Affiliation

1672 Norsen Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15243
Email: jwalterlepley@gmail.com

at airports in response to travel bans that the administration issued against citizens of seven predominantly-Muslim countries, just to name a few. Is the working-class part of this Resistance? The answer is yes and no – some blue collar people support Trump and others oppose him; the same goes for members of the middle and upper-classes. The real question is whether the media can eschew its middle-class biases and report working-class issues on genuine terms. *Stray Dogs: Interviews With Working-Class Writers*, edited by Daniel Mendoza, is a good starting place for anyone who wants to give that a shot and read actual working class writers. In 14 interviews (all of them conducted by Mendoza) and two panel discussions, this collection surveys the aesthetic, moral, and political sensibilities of authors who squeeze in writing between day jobs and publish with small presses. They are a joy to read.

Mendoza recognizes the problematic nature of working-class fiction in his opening synopsis, 'The Literary Merit of Working Class Fiction.' 'The content of working-class fiction does not align itself with the common assumption that many read to escape. After all, who wants to escape from one working-class life to another?' he asks. (14) One of Mendoza's interlocutors, Ron Cooper, author of the novels *Hume's Fork* and *Purple Jesus*, remarks that 'he wanted to go to college less out of a love for learning than a hope to escape.' None of the writers interviewed in *Stray Dogs* offer succinct definitions of 'working class.' For Cooper, it is 'people who often do not know how they are going to pay their bills.' (69) Michael Gill, author of the novels *Why I Lie* and *Go Love*, describes it in educational terms:

Here I was from a family where no one went to college. And I said I want to be an English major, my dad said, 'What! What the fuck is an English major?' I said well, we read literature. He turned to me and said, 'What the fuck is that?!' (47)

Gill's reminiscence is not out-of-the-ordinary. Most of the writers in this collection are from working class backgrounds and had similar experiences. An important contribution of *Stray Dogs* to the notion of 'Resistance' is that working class people find and cultivate their writing voices at community colleges and universities. Two or three generations ago the labor movement provided spaces for working class people to write but most unions have long since ceased those activities as their numbers decline. As anti-intellectualism becomes more visible and effectuated through public policy (such as reduced funding for the arts and humanities or grants for working class students), the Resistance must dispel and counter the elitist connotations that critics attach to the writing life. For instance, the editor

of *Stray Dogs*, Daniel Mendoza, originally intended to learn the craft of welding but was turned on to the Beats by a community college professor. Now an English instructor at South Texas College, he explains that 'I didn't know that occupation, a professor, was open to people like me. I thought all professors came from a certain class' (28). Despite its populist tilt, *Stray Dogs* omits any mention of the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, particularly its reliance on adjunct labor. Still, most of the interviewees feel that established literary outlets exclude working class points of view. As Jennifer Barnes, one of the founding editors of Raw Dog Screaming Press, observes, 'The ennui of the white upper middle class already been well addressed [by authors who write for major publishers]' (104).

According to its website, Down & Out Books specializes in literary and crime fiction. At first glance, *Stray Dogs* seems like a departure from those genres but it provides working class perspectives on familiar ground, instead. Many of the issues discussed in these interviews have long-informed ideas and debates about American culture, politics, and society. For example, Juan Ochoa, author of the novel *Mariguano*, comments that it is 'easier for me to write from the angle of someone experiencing occupation' because of his upbringing along the US–Mexican border (62). At the same time, some of the discussions revolve around mundane topics that many people can relate to. The novelist and short-story writer George Williams arrived at a poignant insight about Americans' uprootedness after making regular trips to visit his daughter over a period of several years. He remarks:

I was impressed by how many travelers I saw at rest stops and truck stops who looked like they'd packed up everything they owned and were heading somewhere to start over or trying to leave a personal catastrophe behind.
(50)

Stray Dogs is a commendable introduction to authors that write about people who are likely to pack up and try to begin anew. It suffers from a few defects, especially the low representation of female authors (only two of whom are interviewed). Three of the interviewees are Latino but it is not clear if any of the authors are African American. In short, the selection of writers comes close to validating the existence of a monolithic 'white working class.' The digital edition of the book, which the present author read for this review, could also use some careful editing. In spite of these limitations *Stray Dogs* would be an excellent text for courses in working class studies and literature. Working class voices must be part of the Resistance. *Stray Dogs* is a good place to start looking for them.

Note

- 1 Keith O'Brien, 'Uprising in the Rust Belt,' *Politico*, June 24, 2016; Michael Kruse, 'What Trump Voters Want Now,' *Politico*, November 18, 2016; Michael Kruse, 'Johnstown Never Believed Trump Would Help. They Still Love Him Anyway,' *Politico*, November 8, 2017.

About the Author

John W. Lepley is an independent scholar from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.