

Review

Who Says? Working-Class Rhetoric, Class Consciousness, and Community

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Little did I know how fascinating a group of workers pouring concrete could be. Yet Dale Cyphert's rhetorical analysis of the practice makes it so. Really. Her interpretation of the "dance of decision-making" that workers perform as they shovel, pour and level reveals a cultural logic of cooperation that stands in sharp contrast to middle-class assumptions about individualism, instruction, and order. On this worksite knowledge is collective and problem-solving is shared; tacit rhythms rather than explicit dictates govern action. Roles are assumed but quickly improvised as the situation demands. No one teaches the new kid what to do, yet all grow aggravated at how he waits for instruction. No one says more than a few words; in fact, verbal communication signals that something has gone wrong with the preferred rhetorical dynamic. Clearly we are far from the overtly persuasive, language-driven, individualistic features of traditional rhetoric.

This is but one of fifteen essays gathered in *Who Says? Working-Class Rhetoric, Class Consciousness, and Community*, two of which adopt a similarly anthropological approach to a specific workplace culture (of long-haul truckers, of migrant workers). Several others take a different

tack, critiquing pop culture representations of working-class people. The most pleasant surprise among those is Kathleen LeBesco's sharp, energetic analysis of fatness and working-class rhetoric. She explains how the bodies and behaviors of Rosanne Barr and Anna Nicole Smith trigger a nexus of cultural anxieties about gender, class, sexuality, assertiveness and consumption.

Five of the essays reach back into labor history, and most of those have a documentary feel. Such is the case with James V. Catano's telling reflection on how the heritage tourism in a former Pennsylvania steelworking town, which mixes memorializing the old mill with economic development, folds together a variety of (often conflicting) civic, personal, political, and economic discourses. Anne F. Mattina reaches back earlier into the twentieth century to examine how gender, ethnicity and ethnicity shape (and limit) the rhetoric and agency of activist women in the 1909 garment strike in New York City, the 1912 millworker strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and the 1913 silk worker strike in Patterson, New Jersey. In a similarly strong piece, Melissa J. Fiesta analyzes the commonplaces of Jane Addams' settlement house rhetoric.

Studies of specific jobs and historical moments are leavened by pieces that offer more general treatments of working-class rhetoric. Most notable among those is Kristin Lucas's argument that the tropes of "providing and protecting" govern the "occupational narrative" of working-class identity.

Not all of the essays are entirely successful. The collection features two on collective memory as it relates to steelworkers. The first (by Catano) is so much more eloquent than the other that we have to question why both were included. The essay on migrant farmworkers is an earnest but ultimately-thin thematic analysis of oral histories published by another scholar. And I just couldn't get any traction on the chapter that weighs different approaches to workplace risk communication.

About half the contributors to this volume come from departments of Communication, the other half from departments of English. Readers will find plenty on rhetoric but little on writing. One exception is Steve Martin's analysis of a series of comic books published by the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the 1930s and 1940s, but even there we see texts published by union leaders for workers rather than written by workers. Perhaps the absence of writing is to be expected, given that the book does not promise to address journalism, schooling, or literature; moreover, the lifeblood of everyday working-class culture is talk and action. Still, I wondered, shouldn't writing *by* workers also merit consideration by rhetoricians?

While several kinds of media are ably represented in this collection—everyday talk, oral history, formal oratory, music, museums, comics, television—treatment of at least one important medium is absent: photography. Consider, for example, how our perceptions of the working classes have been shaped by Lewis Hine and Walker Evans, whose haunting black-and-white shots of child labor and high-rise steelwork and rural poverty cannot help but come to mind when we think of laborers in the twentieth century. Such photos not only inhabit our collective memory; they also fueled national campaigns for labor reform.

Pointing out such omissions might not be entirely fair. After all, no single collection can cover a field that aims to examine language, persuasion, and class consciousness among the working classes, not to mention how the broader culture perceives and represents them. And coverage isn't really the main point here anyway because this book presents itself as a kind of manifesto or invitation for what could be. It makes the implicit case for an emerging field or, perhaps more accurately, an interdisciplinary space where rhetorical criticism, history, communications and anthropology can meet to focus on the language of labor. In that sense it seems to be making a bid parallel to the one women's studies made a generation ago and that disability studies has

made more recently. I'm not confident that working-class studies will gather the same momentum as women's studies, but that has yet to be seen.

Julie Lindquist closes the book with a meta-treatment of the methods and purposes of doing empirical research on working-class people and places. This serves as a bookend to DeGenaro's introduction, in that both pieces deal with meta-matters of why and how we should take working-class studies seriously. DeGenaro's introduction opens with a ritual move of canon critique, taking Aristotle (and by extension the whole Western rhetorical tradition) to task for being elitist and therefore in need of correction by voices long tamped down (as the uppity "Who Says?" of the book's title suggests). He then casts working-class rhetorics as the next logical step toward inclusiveness, following on the heels of how scholars forty years ago introduced "the new rhetoric" and more recently have given "alternative rhetorics" their due.

Lindquist reflects on the methods and ethics of ethnography. The chapter title promises a conclusion, yet we don't find her looking backward to the essays in the collection; instead she looks forward, affirming that an anthropological approach to studying working-class rhetoric is complicated but worth undertaking. The most gratifying part of Lindquist's piece for me came when she anticipated a question that had been on my mind from about mid-way through the book: How is analyzing working-class rhetoric different from doing basic Marxist critique? Her take is that the "ethnography of working-class rhetoric can help mediate between projects of Marxist anthropology, which assumes structural determinants of linguistic practices, and postmodern anthropology, which questions scientific validity and assumes contradictions" (277). I also wondered how such scholarship would distinguish itself in the crowded fields of anthropology and labor history, which Lindquist likewise addresses by noting that "rhetoric emphasizes what is strategic and hortatory—agentive, purposeful discourse, language that people use to explain themselves to themselves

and the world. To study working-class rhetoric is to position oneself as listener of a group's articulated theory of itself, and to project this theory back into the field of social relations" (279).

Readers interested more in ethnography than rhetorical criticism could bypass this collection and go straight to monographs such as Lindquist's own *A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working Class Bar*, Ralph Cintron's *Angels' Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and the Rhetorics of the Everyday*, or Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. But those looking for a sampling of how working-class studies can be drawn into the orbit of our scholarship can delight in the variety of topics taken up.