



M.E. LEE

“Maybe I’m not Class-Mobile; Maybe I’m Class-Queer”

Poor kids in college, and survival
under hierarchy

As a kid from a lower-class home who was privileged enough to attend university, I spent two years in women’s studies classrooms watching the same token superficial analyses of racism and classism get regurgitated over and over again. Few academics that I encountered were comfortable or even conscious enough to deal with the ways that university works as a mechanism to perpetuate class hierarchy. I was not an ideal candidate to broach the subject either — as a poor kid, I was in that classroom precisely to get myself out of the lower-class social group that I had been a part of my whole life. If I spoke up against the classist aspects of the academic industry and the values that permeate it, I knew that I would be attacking everyone in the classroom, including myself. I didn’t know if my thoughts were rational or if they were simply the product of misplaced resentment, and I didn’t know if I could even speak for a group that I was in the process of trying to escape. I lay low for a long time.

Getting educated didn’t just entail a change in my C.V. and prospective earnings; the institution and the student body were permeated by a value-set and worldview that pressured me to alter my language, my appearance, the elements of my personal background that I learned to conceal, the values that I was

expected to hold, my relationships, my alliances, my family ties, and my identity as a person. My women's studies classes were supposed to be a respite and a support, a place where I could voice my uneasiness with the institution and where I could sort out these conflicted ideas. Instead, I was met with slight-of-hand, apologist pandering, and dismissal. Wherever I tried to raise the issue, it was acknowledged briefly but the discussion quickly shifted before anything meaningful was said. Academic institutions reinforced class privilege, but academic feminism, for all its espoused anti-oppressive commitments, did not want to get into the details.

For a while, I kept my personal life a complete secret. The fact that my immediate family was on social assistance was something that was not to be talked about if I was to accomplish the

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transformation from poor to not-poor. To mark myself as different was to raise the issue that class privilege is not merely a social starting-point established at birth, but perpetuated and reconstructed at every moment of our lives. Being

in university made us complicit in the reconstruction and perpetuation of class hierarchy. The issue was not one of blame — who could blame someone for not wanting to live in poverty? But it still tasted bitter. Nobody wanted to talk about it.

At home, though, it was impossible to ignore the fact that I was going to school while my family members were on social assistance or working low-paying manual labour jobs — my education tested and transformed my relationships with my family. We talked often about what it meant for me to “move up” in terms of class, to “leave this life behind.” My mother had always pushed me to achieve as much as I could, so that I would not have to suffer the degradations that she had, living in poverty; however, as I began to put down roots in the middle-class professional world, it became clear that there was a lot of unresolved, even unacknowledged tension and anger with regard to those with class privilege. We had not constructed this “us and

them” world, but we had lived in it all of our lives, and suddenly, I was becoming a “them.”

My mother is sometimes afraid that I will become privileged and that I will internalize the classist values that paint her as a failure, a loser, a welfare bum, and a “bad mother.” She sometimes feels pain and jealousy because I have so many opportunities that she never had. She sometimes feels abandonment, because I am inhabiting realms of experience that she has always been situated on the outside of. She used to go through cycles of resentment because she feared that I would become like the many privileged young professionals in public interest fields who claim to understand the experience of being oppressed by virtue of their education and rely on the authority of their education to silence and ignore the actual experiences of oppressed people. In contrast, there were times when she wanted to cut off all contact with me because she was afraid that my ties to my family would “drag me down” and prevent me from living an easier life. Every fierce, complex, and conflicted emotion that she has felt towards me, I have also felt towards myself. We are still in the process of sorting it all out.

The personal/political exercise of self-examination and communication that my family and I are engaged in is the main site on which my feminism is practiced. I re-read Andrea Smith’s piece on white supremacy, which (among other things) talks about rethinking the concept of family as something that unites diverse members with complicated relationships to one another. This idea resonated with me at a profound level, since my relationship with my family has been the main force guiding my feminism. Growing up, my single mom struggled to keep my brother and me fed, clothed, and safe from an abusive father, and to give us the kind of foothold in the world that she herself had never had. She fought her whole life to survive, and that spirit of tooth-and-nail survivalism permeated my childhood and is the bedrock of my feminist convictions. I was raised with the understanding that in this upward battle, it is not only our bodies but our minds and identities that must endure and remain whole.

In my family, we are diverse individuals who occupy distinct social locations, but we are deeply invested in the survival of the whole. We are a family of hapas; our roots are Chinese, Black, Western-European and Native. I have always been able to pass

as white, and my white privilege has significantly affected the academic, social and professional circles that I have been a part of. Unlike the rest of my family, I have the safety and luxury of being racially invisible when I choose to be. I am privileged by the same racist systems that oppress my mother and my brother; at the same time, my brother is privileged by heteronormative patriarchal systems that subordinate me as a lesbian. Ignoring these dangerous dynamics is not an option — not for my family, and not for any human being who wishes to participate in the creation of an anti-oppressive movement. We need to understand these mechanisms of oppression in order to understand and love one another.

My family has been engaged in a loving, open dialogue about difference for years, and at this moment, we have never been stronger — as individuals or as a unit. But it took a lot of work and energy on all sides to keep this dialogue going and to keep our family strong. It took a lot of openness that was, more often than not, painful for everyone involved. We were lucky that our relationship was strong enough at the outset, that our ties to one another were able to survive the crush of poverty, sexual abuse, assault, drugs, mental illness, and repeated brutalizing hospitalization. We were lucky that our efforts to listen and self-examine were able to produce such positive growth. There were many, many times when I thought that our family would not survive, when I was forced to leave my home because of conflict, when I wanted to drop out of school completely, and when I felt like my identity and what I thought was my family and my home had been shattered into a million irreparable pieces.

From talking to the few-and-far-between university students from poor backgrounds that I've encountered, don't think that my experience is idiosyncratic. Poverty is not simply having no money — it is isolation, vulnerability, humiliation and mistrust. It is not being able to differentiate between employers and exploiters and abusers. It is contempt for the simplistic illusion of meritocracy — the idea that what we get is what we work for. It is knowing that your mother, with her arthritic joints and her maddening insomnia and her post-traumatic stress disordered heart, goes to work until two in the morning waiting tables for less than minimum wage, or pushes a janitor's cart and cleans the shit-filled toilets of polished professionals. It is entering a

room full of people and seeing not only individual people, but violent systems and stark divisions. It is the violence of untreated mental illness exacerbated by the fact that reality, from some vantage points, really does resemble a psychotic nightmare. It is the violence of abuse and assault which is ignored or minimized by police officers, social services, and courts of law. Poverty is conflict. And for poor kids lucky enough to have the chance to “move up,” it is the conflict between remaining oppressed or collaborating with the oppressor.

I live in a province where university tuition is extremely subsidized (I pay about \$3,000 a year for my law degree) and where need-based financial aid is mostly available. Yet I can count on one hand the number of poor kids that I have met in university. Financial barriers to education are a serious issue, and I do not wish to minimize the importance of fighting for accessible education — however, it is not enough on its own. The fight for accessible education has to be a panoramic fight against poverty — against dehumanization, ghettos, exploitation, and fear. It needs to be the fight for anti-racist collectives and radical immigration reform, and it needs to be the fight against the non-profit industrial complex wherein some organizations, under the guise of anti-oppressive activism, re-enforce the status of the privileged (for they are the educated professionals) and remain invested in the oppression of the poor and racialized (for they are the “clients” who legitimize the non-profit organization.) The fight for accessible education has to seek to change universities from institutions that reinforce oppressive hierarchies to institutions that break oppressive hierarchies down.

From my own experience, I feel that separatism in a world of oppression is not sufficient to create justice — at least, with regards to class-oppression. In fact, systems of privilege benefit from separatism because they allow the privileged to persist in their justificatory narrative without being troubled by the rage of those whose backs their privilege is built upon. The current model of “class-mobility” reinforces separatism and class-hierarchy because it posits that in order to escape oppression, one must become an oppressor — and universities do not merely mediate the boundary between professional and labourer, they teach the body of knowledge, the worldview, the values that mark a person as professional, as “belonging” to the middle- or upper-class.

Universities teach us to renounce our sense of identification with the poor; they teach this by mainly ignoring the existence of poor people, and by treating us as "other" when we do become the subject of discussion. Universities teach us not to care too much, because it will undermine our professional role. Universities teach us that we are separate from where we came from, that we are "qualified" (which suggests that our families and peers are not), that we are justified in having power over people, in speaking for the subjects of our study. Universities teach us that we are "too good" to wait tables and clean houses, with the implication that those who do those jobs are "not good enough" to deserve better.

Poor people tend to see university as a way out for their kids, but university is also a way in to the class of people whose success is premised on the oppression of the poor. In the course of my upbringing, I was exposed to a lot of conflicted ideas surrounding university and class mobility. "Moving up" was seen as both highly desirable and worthy of derision and scorn. It was the subject of envy, resentment and outright hatred. Some of the black kids on my block got called "white" for reading books; it made sense, since the educated professionals whose houses were cleaned and whose children were reared by lower-class people of colour were mostly white. Education had a strong class and race connotation to it, and contrary to what most privileged people tend to think, going to college was not something that evoked uncomplicated positive feelings in most of the poor people I knew, myself included. For a kid to become educated meant that he or she would live an easier life that was premised on the oppression and invisibility of the very communities s/he came from. This left a foul taste in many mouths.

I have had that foul taste in my mouth for years, and I have come to the provisional conclusion that it is the taste of injustice — of being forced to choose between the indignity of remaining poor and the ethically repellant strategy of privilege-seeking. To a poor kid who has the chance to go to college or university, participating in an institution that she identifies as oppressive (either before attending or in the course of her education) might seem like the best choice with regards to her survival, but it is a conflicted survival.

University is a classist institution — not only in the sense that financial barriers render it inaccessible to most poor people

but in the sense that the culture of university imposes a homogeneous set of classist values, including dangerous delusions of meritocracy. My experience of women's studies in particular has been deeply alienating since the program claims "fighting oppression" as one of its objectives. Ideas about justice and empowerment that had been my tools of survival were present in our course materials, but they were rendered so abstract, and they were so dissociated from their real-world application that they were barely recognizable. Issues of racism and classism were identified as "problematic" and left at that. I found myself in a classroom sitting next to a blonde girl who raised her hand to complain that she didn't know how to talk to black people because she was uncomfortable with the idea that "they" might be hostile towards her. There were a couple of black women in the room, and I wish to god that I could transcribe their facial expressions because their faces said it all. Even when the oppressed person is sitting right there, the university setting permits everyone to talk about us in the third person.

Sometime during my fourth semester, I started ranting in seminars, arguing with professors after-hours, and disclosing my background to my peers. A few responded with respect and interest, but most responded with discomfort, disinterest, defensiveness, and anger. Of the former, most came from similar class backgrounds or had similar feelings of ambivalence and alienation within the university setting due to their race or cultural roots.

To talk with other people who are engaged in the same difficult task of working out the conflicts in their own narrative, I have started to imagine a new kind of interstitial identity: citizenship within no man's land. When we work together, we can go beyond the question of what university is doing to us, and we can start thinking about what we can do to the university. Academic institutions have the power to construct one group of people as "professional" or "qualified" and thus relegate everyone else to the status of "unqualified" — moreover, they are not about to lose this power anytime soon. But we can get a hold of some of that power, and we can control how it is used. We can change the internal composition of the institution by staying in school and getting more of our own people in. We can participate in the institution on our own terms rather than on theirs, and we can redefine what an educated professional looks and sounds like.

We can challenge what knowledge is seen as legitimate and what is seen as illegitimate. And most of all, we can identify the role of the university itself, and the way that it sustains class divisions, the way that it functionally excludes people based on their economic status, and the way that it alienates the few who make it through the cracks. Academic feminism belongs too much to the oppressive white educated-class culture that infuses academia as a whole, but it is the most logical place to begin asserting our presence. We need to speak up in order to make room — psychologically and intellectually — for the ones who come after us. We need to carry our roots with us, and not forget or whitewash where we come from.

Note

I've spent four years in university — first women's studies, now law school. There are still a good number of mornings that I wake up feeling like a *compradora* and I hate myself inside and out. (Because I am seen as a valuable enough prospect, my university and government collaborate to give me free psychiatric counseling, which helps — although I'd feel better if my family also had access to comparable care. But I digress.) I know that I am where I am largely due to my privilege. I did grow up far below the poverty line, I am a lesbian and a survivor of sexual abuse, and I suffer from mental illness. But I am also a Canadian citizen and a Quebec resident, meaning that I can access extremely cheap post-secondary education and extremely cheap health care, among other things. I look more-or-less white and I am cisgendered. I am highly privileged. While I believe I'm in a decent position from which to examine the relationship between class and education, I know that my ideas and my efforts to understand the systems we live are greatly enriched by other perspectives, and I invite dialogue.

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