

# SPRING 2021 BOOK NOTES

***Routledge International Handbook of Working-Class Studies* (Routledge), edited by Michele Fazio, Christie Launius, and Tim Strangleman.**

This 522-page collection of essays provides an overview of Working-Class Studies, which the publisher describes as an “interdisciplinary field that emerged in the 1990s in the context of deindustrialization, the rise of the service economy, and economic and cultural globalization.” The book is divided into sections on Methods and Principles, Class and Education, Work and Community, Working-Class Cultures, Representations, and Activism and Collective Action. It “brings together scholars, teachers, activists, and organizers across three continents to focus on the study of working-class peoples, cultures, and politics in all their complexity.” The editors describe the field, and this volume, as providing “a strong, generous interdisciplinary focus on working-class life and culture and a desire to combine the insights of academics, activists, journalists, artists, photographers, and writers of all kinds in the exploration of the lived experience of class.”

***A Pandemic Nurse’s Diary* (Hardball Press), Nurse T., with Timothy Sheard**

Nurse T. worked in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of a New York City hospital through the March and April 2020 crisis when hospitals there were overrun with COVID patients and ICUs became what she describes as “a war zone.” With assistance from retired nurse, author, and Hardball Press publisher Tim Sheard, Nurse T. has made a book out of her daily diary. From January when nurses feared a pandemic was coming through the worse days of the crisis, Nurse T. conveys in 12-hour shifts the day-to-day suffering of the poor, largely immigrant patients who flooded into hospitals long starved for funds to maintain infrastructure or provide personal protective equipment. One reviewer calls the diary a “poignant and poetic” paean to all the hospital staff who “walked up the marble stairs all through the crisis and gave their best, whatever the personal cost, whatever the outcome.”

***Workers’ Inquiry and Global Class Struggle: Strategies, Tactics, Objectives* (Pluto Press), Robert Ovetz, editor**

Workers’ inquiry is a process that involves workers and researchers working together to analyze the workers’ working conditions, the technical composition of capital in their economic sector, and how to “recompose their own power to devise new tactics, strategies, organizational forms and objectives.” This collection of articles explores how this approach has worked out in a wide variety of workplaces in a mélange of countries – including call centers, trucking, cleaning, logistics, mining, auto factories, teachers, and adjunct professors in China, Mexico, the US, South Africa, Turkey, Argentina, Italy, India, and the UK. The publisher promises the book reveals “new forms of struggle [that] are no longer limited to single sectors of the economy or contained by state borders, but are circulating internationally and disrupting the global capitalist system as they do.”

***Our Sixties: An Activist’s History* (U. of Rochester Press), Paul Lauter**

Working-Class Studies pioneer Paul Lauter remembers the long 1960s and its impact on American politics and society up to the present in a book the publisher describes as “social history as well as personal chronicle.” Lauter was part of almost every movement of those times from 1964 Mississippi freedom schools and the Students for a Democratic Society to anti-war and anti-draft organizing to the New University Conference and the founding of The Feminist Press and much else. Noam Chomsky calls it a “gripping portrayal of a dramatic era from the unique perspective of a keen observer, astute analyst, and direct participant in all its complex stages. In the author’s words, ‘a book about the transformation of minds, my own and many others,’ and of the country, with rich lessons for those taking up the struggle today.”

***Fake Italian: An 83% True Autobiography with Pseudonyms and Some Tall Tales* (Bordighera Press), Marc DiPaolo**

The subtitle here describes this unique combination of memoir and fiction by Working-Class Studies Association Treasurer Marc DiPaolo, even if the percentage may itself be fictional. The main character, Damien Cavaleri, is “an adolescent without a tribe,” dubbed a fake Italian by his fellow Staten Islanders who bully him for being artistic. Damien also finds it difficult to make friends and date girls outside the Italian community while his mother worries that he may lack commitment to his heritage. Only after a tragic accident spurs Damien on a journey of self-discovery that leads him to Italy does he “learn, once and for all, who he really is.”

***Italian Love Cake* (Bordighera Press), Gail Reitano**

Gail Reitano's novel is the story of Marie Genovese and her efforts to save the failing store she's inherited from her mother. In surviving financial peril and seeking to overcome the patriarchal culture that confines her, Marie draws on the history and strength of her female forebearers. From the publisher: "With the realist detail of Sinclair Lewis and the modern, feminist sensibility of Elena Ferrante, *Italian Love Cake* is the account of a woman thwarted in her self-expression and autonomy. Gail Reitano sets the story in a deeply patriarchal culture, but boundaries between masculine power and feminine exaltation are blurred and frequently crossed. In this Depression-era portrait of a first-generation Italian-American woman, Marie Genovese asserts her own mind, and her sexuality, on the way to achieving her economic dreams."

***Union Made* (Hardball Press), Eric Lotke.**

*Union Made* is the story of Catherine Campbell, a union organizer fighting to win representation at Pac-Shoppe, a retail chain in Richmond, Virginia. Nate is an accountant working for a company planning a hostile takeover of Pac-Shoppe. Nate finds evidence of dirty, anti-union tactics that could help the union campaign, and *Union Made* turns into a love story. As Catherine's campaign falters in the face of Pac-Shoppe's illegal hardball tactics, Nate's sympathy for the workers and fascination with Catherine grow. *Union Made* celebrates essential workers – grocery and department store workers—and according to the publisher, "explores the tactics and risks of mobilizing a diverse group of workers to stand together against a giant corporation."

***40 Patchtown* (Bottom Dog Press) Damian Dressick**

Damian Dressick's debut novel, from Bottom Dog Press' Appalachian Writing Series, focuses on the 1922 coal miner's strike in Windber, Pennsylvania. James Charlesworth, author of *The Patricide of George Bernard Hill*, writes that the novel is "deftly paced, gritty and poised, pitch perfect in its voice and historical rendering," and says it "accelerates from its opening pages with desperate energy," and follows "fatherless fourteen-year-old Chet Pistakowski as he struggles to support his mother and siblings in a setting dictated by violence, poverty, and manipulation." Charlesworth describes the novel as "lean, convincing, and clear-eyed prose," which tells the tale of "a young man torn between family and morality, desperation and desire, circumstances and escape."

***Working Class History: Everyday Acts of Resistance & Rebellion* (PM Press), Working Class History, editor**

This unusual volume goes day by day throughout the year listing acts of rebellion and resistance throughout the world and across history to illustrate how "history is not made by kings, politicians, or a few rich individuals." Its definition of the working class is not confined to blue-collar white guys, as it charts the struggles of women, young people, people of color, migrants, indigenous people, home workers, and LGBTQ, disabled and older people as well as every other part of the working class. The publisher promises: "Going day by day, this book paints a picture of how and why the world came to be as it is, how some have tried to change it, and the lengths to which the rich and powerful have gone to maintain and increase their wealth and influence"

***The New Working Class: How to Win Hearts, Minds and Votes* (Policy Press), Claire Ainsley**

Claire Ainsley is now a policy adviser to the UK Labour Party, having come from the non-profit research and advocacy sector at the Rowntree Foundation in York. Her "new working class" is peopled with service workers – especially in cleaning, catering, social care, and retailing, and mostly low paid -- alongside the traditional working class in manufacturing, transportation, and construction. This working class is more varied by occupation and more ethnically diverse, and they work in a more fragmented world, often in isolation and bound by individual contracts. But Ainsley finds a common core of values across this diverse group – based on "family, fairness, hard work and decency" – that she argues can be galvanized into political action by policies that appeal to those values, especially those that would improve the lives of all working-class families. Most of the book is about the public policies that she thinks fit that bill.

***The Poetry of Detroit Music* (Michigan State U. Press) edited by Jim Daniels and M.L. Liebler.**

Gathering an array of poems and lyrics, this collection "makes a case for Detroit being the greatest music city in the United States," according to Steve Wynn, singer, songwriter, and guitarist for The Dream Syndicate. The poets and songwriters include Eminem, June Jordan, Fred "Sonic" Smith, Rita Dove, Jack White, Robbie Robertson, Paul Simon, Nikki Giovanni, Philip Levine, Sasha Frere-Jones, Patricia Smith, Billy Bragg, Andrei Codrescu, Toi Derricotte, and Cornelius Eady. Roberta Cruger, former *Creem* magazine staff writer and editor, says it is a "stirring collection of poetry [which] captures decades of Detroit's genre-spanning music legacy, from jazz to R&B to techno. Each stanza's beats, rhythms, and grooves evoke the sounds of the city's clubs, streets, and scenes with passion and pleasure." (

***Intimate Integration: A History of the Sixties Scoop and the Colonization of Indigenous Kinship* (U. of Toronto Press), Allyson Stevenson**

The “sixties scoop” is the vernacular name for the Canadian government’s programs for taking Indigenous children from their families and communities and placing them in foster homes or putting them up for adoption by white families. Though identified with the 1960s, the programs removed an estimated 20,000 Indigenous children from their families from the 1950s into the 1980s. Allyson Stevenson, now a political science professor at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, was one of these children. She draws on her experience as well as her scholarly research to explore both the origins and consequences of what might be called attempted cultural genocide. One reviewer calls *Intimate Integration* “politically sharp, carefully researched, and intellectually generous” and says it “transforms how we see modern Canadian colonialism and the range of ways that Indigenous people have resisted and rebuilt in the face of it.”

***Work Better, Live Better: Motivation, Labor, and Management Ideology* (U. of Massachusetts Press), David Gray**

Why do Americans of every stripe value working hard and even brag about how hard, and often how long, they work? David Gray argues that it is at least in part the result of a century-long propaganda campaign initiated early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by corporate management. This so-called “motivational project” got more and more sophisticated as times changed through two world wars, the Great Depression, the Cold War, and neoliberalism. According to Gray, it became “a highly orchestrated affair as managers and their allies deployed films, posters, and other media, and drew on the ideas of industrial psychologists and advertising specialists to advance their quests for power at the expense of worker and union interests.”

***Winter Counts* (Ecco/Harper Collins), David Heska Wanbli Weiden.**

This novel tells the story of “Virgil Wounded Horse, the local enforcer on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. When justice is denied by the American legal system or the tribal council, Virgil is hired to deliver his own punishment, the kind that’s hard to forget. But when heroin makes its way onto the reservation and finds Virgil’s nephew, his vigilantism suddenly becomes personal.” Louise Erdrich says “*Winter Counts* is both a propulsive crime novel and a wonderfully informative book. David Heska Wanbli Weiden has written the first of what I hope is a series of books about life on Rosebud Reservation. Virgil Wounded Horse, his nephew Nathan, and Marie Short Bear are more than characters; they brim with intrigue and authentic life.”

***Poor Man’s Fortune: White Working-Class Conservatism in American Metal Mining, 1850-1950* (U. of North Carolina Press), Jarod Roll**

This book argues that the recent phenomenon of reactionary and conservative voting among working-class whites has deep roots in the beginnings of industrial society in America. Focused on a century of experience among metal miners in the Tri-State district of Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma, *Poor Man’s Fortune* argues that “American inequalities are in part the result of a white working-class conservative tradition driven by grassroots assertions of racial, gendered, and national privilege.”

***Yeoman’s Work: Poems*, (Bottom Dog Press), Garrett Stack**

In reviewing Garrett Stack’s first collection of poetry, Adam Schuitema writes: “The women and men in these poems—dirt under their nails, rust flaking off their hearts—are so fully realized they might as well be sitting next to you at the diner when you read them. Through generous empathy and a keen eye, Garrett Stack reveals the cooling embers in strangers’ souls before kindling them, so that they might once again faintly glow. The poems build to powerful resonant images and gut-punch final lines.” Lauren Shapiro says that *Yeoman’s Work* “mines the richness of life’s pitstops—weddings, funerals, trips to the Quik-Fil and Supercuts—and illuminates how closely personal narrative is tethered to place. From cowboys making coffee to doers and dreamers and taxidermists, Stack’s work is a vital cultivation of individuality and an homage to the complexity of domesticity.”

***The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (Oxford U. Press), Michael Goldfield**

Distinguished labor historian Michael Goldfield argues that what happened in the American South’s core industries in the 1930s and ‘40s has shaped all of US history up to the present. Based on studies of Southern textiles, timber, coal, and steel, Goldfield contends that the “early defeat for labor unions not only contributed to the exploitation of race and right-wing demagoguery in the South, but has also led to a decline in unionization, growing economic inequality, and an inability to confront and dismantle white supremacy throughout the US.”

***Claiming Union Widowhood: Race, Respectability, and Poverty in the Post-Emancipation South* (Duke U. Press), Brandi Clay Brimmer**

During the American Civil War black Union soldiers, like whites, were promised veterans' pensions for themselves or their families if they were killed in battle. *Claiming Union Widowhood* explores the ingenuity with which the federal government sought to deny these pensions to black mothers, wives, and widows after the war and the persistence and ingenuity these black women responded with. Labor historian Eileen Boris praises the book for advancing "how we think about the agency of newly emancipated women from after the Civil War into the late nineteenth century, in the process challenging existing interpretations about the origins of social assistance in the modern United States."

***Midnight in Vehicle City: General Motors, Flint, and the Strike That Created the Middle Class* (Beacon Press), Edward McClelland**

If there were one strike that created the so-called middle class, which there was not, the drama-packed 1937 autoworker sit-down strike against General Motors in Flint, Michigan, would definitely be a candidate for that title. Journalist and historian Edward McClelland gives us a refreshed narrative of that famous strike with all its inspiring drama: "the takeovers of GM plants; violent showdowns between picketers and the police; Michigan governor Frank Murphy's activation of the National Guard; the actions of the militaristic Women's Emergency Brigade who carried billy clubs and vowed to protect strikers from police; and tense negotiations between labor leader John L. Lewis, GM chairman Alfred P. Sloan, and labor secretary Frances Perkins."

***Three Brothers: Memories of My Family* (Grove Press), Yan Lianke, translated by Carlos Rojas.**

*Three Brothers* is a memoir of growing up during China's Cultural Revolution. The publisher says: "With lyricism and deep emotion, Yan chronicles the extraordinary lives of his father and uncles, as well as his own. Living in a remote village, Yan's parents are so poor that they can only afford to use wheat flour on New Year and festival days, while Yan dreams of fried scallion buns, and even steals from his father to buy sesame seed cakes. He yearns to leave the village however he can . . . *Three Brothers* is a personal portrait of a politically devastating period, and a celebration of the power of the family to hold together even in the harshest circumstances."