



2019 Working-Class Studies Association Awards for work produced in 2018

PRESS RELEASE

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Each year, the Working-Class Studies Association ([WCSA](#)) issues a number of awards to recognize the best new work in the field of working-class studies. This year, they will be awarded in September 2019 at WCSA's conference, hosted by the University of Kent, in Canterbury, United Kingdom. The review process is organized by the past-president of the WCSA, and submissions are judged by a panel of three readers for each of the categories of awards.

The results are in for the annual WCSA Awards for significant contributions to working-class studies in the year 2018; the winners are listed below, along with judges' comments. Together these works demonstrate the scope and vitality of cultural and scholarly production in working-class studies, and they serve as an inspiration to future work in the field.

C.L.R. James Award for Published Book for Academic or General Audiences

[*The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring* by Sherry Lee Linkon](#)

Judges' comments:

“Sherry Lee Linkon’s inventive and pathbreaking study constitutes a major and, really, foundational contribution to working-class studies overall and to working-class literary and cultural studies in particular. Linkon undertakes the vital, arduous, and exciting

scholarly endeavor of creating a new category or genre [writing about economic restructuring] for organizing a body of literary and cultural production and then maps its contours and gathers and identifies in great volume the works that comprise this cohesive literary corpus. Culture is a primary means through which we process material and historical experiences, so having a cohesive and named body of cultural works that enables us to process the material, psychological, and spiritual dislocations and traumas deindustrialization inflicts on working-class communities and lives is hugely significant. Linkon provides a mountain of graceful and intricate close readings of texts, in addition to elaborating class in deeply human ways and on multiple levels, exploring, for example, the meaning of work or loss of work, beyond just the economic hardship and pain. Linkon invents anew a model for working-class studies scholarship.”

“*The Half-Life of Deindustrialization* is a new and bold intervention into the scholarship on working-class literature and culture. With clarity, elegance, and a keen critical eye, Linkon delivers an interpretation of a range of intersectional texts, weaving them together to paint a picture that is both rich in its particularities and inclusive in its scope.”

“Linkon examines the often-devastating impact of deindustrialization on workers, their families, and communities in the U.S. by examining working-class literature, broadly defined, from the 1980s to 2010s. Her close reading of that literature permits her to examine the subjective experience of deindustrialization by several generations of workers, from the ‘inside out.’ Linkon succumbs to neither nostalgia/celebration nor cynicism/condemnation. Instead, her critical but empathetic analysis reveals the intelligence, courage, tenacity, and creativity of many of those who live and labor in the ‘rust belt.’”

Tillie Olsen Award for Creative Writing (two awards)

[Sacred Smokes](#) by Theodore C. Van Alst Jr.

Judges’ comments:

“*Sacred Smokes* is profane and filled with drugs and violence—in other words, an authentic representation of working-class urban life in the 1970s. That’s not all there is to the collection: the narrator’s voice is compelling and unique, maintaining throughout a story-telling approach. Many working-class readers will recognize in these stories the tension between desperate recklessness and the hunger for books and a better life. The collection’s tone-perfect survival humor helps create verisimilitude and keeps readers engaged with the collection despite its often-dark themes. Van Alst has not only written one of the few fictions about urban working-class Natives, he has revealed the deep truths of growing up working class in 1970s America.”

“The combination of authenticity, poetic musings, and gritty realism in of the author’s voice makes this book extraordinary. Theodore Van Alst’s ability to put the reader inside the head of the protagonist is remarkable. It shows the humanity and texture of life among those in the poverty/working class who actually enjoy being there, despite the many drawbacks and dangers. This book also illuminates an important, overlooked corner of working-class studies: American Indian experience in inner-city working-class neighborhoods.”

[Learning to Heal: Reflections on Nursing School in Poetry and Prose](#) edited by Jeanne Bryner and Cortney Davis

Judges' comments:

"*Learning to Heal* is the best kind of writing working class studies has to offer: actual workers telling their real-life stories with poetic, authentic, and instructional voices. I laughed, I cried, and I learned a lot as I read. An exceptional view into the inner lives of a too-often overlooked, but crucial, group of workers (mostly women, also, an often-overlooked group) that underlines the incredibly difficult and essential work of giving care to others. This book charts perilous human journeys of both nurses and their patients with grace, humor, empathy, and dignity."

"A captivating collection of poems and personal stories, in which the work of nursing and the lives of those who undertake it are given voice. Time collapses—the stories don't follow a chronological order, but instead we see the parallels between experiences, change in a wider context, and the kind of complex class, family, gendered, and racialized relationships that a straight chronology would simplify. The quality and ambition of the poetry is of the highest standard, and the blurring of roles that comes with being both an author and nurse foregrounds the varied trajectories that working lives may take."

"The breadth of writing is outstanding—as co-editor Jeanne Brynner notes in her introduction, the age span of contributors ranges from recent graduates in their twenties to elders in their nineties. The anthology is also diverse in 'gender, race, nationality, socioeconomic opportunity, and education,' thereby sharing a range of experiences and, perhaps, changing and informing perspectives about who a nurse is and what a nurse does. At the same time, the writing is emotionally strong, creatively composed, and an important addition to the literature of 'what work is.' *Learning to Heal* should be required reading in all nursing schools."

John Russo & Sherry Linkon Award for Published Article or Essay for Academic or General Audiences

["Durban Dockers, Labor Internationalism, and Pan-Africanism"](#) by Peter Cole

Judges' comments

"A far-ranging—if pithy—examination of how black dockworkers around the world (and throughout time) have set aside their own immediate concerns to use collective action in support of other people of color, especially in Africa. Peter Cole draws on a rich body of primary and secondary sources from history and literature to contextualize recent events. He links the Durban dockers' refusal to unload arms for the Mugabe regime to

trans-Atlantic sailing during the slave period, Marcus Garvey's pan-Africanist movement, and Jamaican Claude McKay's modernist novel *Banjo*. In so doing, he also corrects recent assessments of Africa-specific labor on the docks but manages to do so in a way that is nevertheless accessible and engaging for broader audiences and that is also hopeful, as the lessons of the Durban dockers can and should be read more broadly as a template for current ways of resisting global capital and violence."

"Using historical and ethnographic data, Cole examines how dockworkers in South Africa intervened in the delivery of weapons routed to Zimbabwe. He contextualizes this with short discussions of other similar interventions to suggest that, in an age of worker disempowerment and union weakness, there are still moments when effective resistance occurs. The particular strength of the essay is the conversation it creates between workers and global capitalism. Workers are often discussed as non-agentive cogs in ever-expanding networks of neoliberal global flows, but Cole offers a case study that inverts this narrative. Cole inspires scholars to investigate other kinds of 'chokepoints'—related to transportation or otherwise—where workers have the potential to exercise agency and where unions are relevant. Since 'class' is so often locally defined, it is fascinating to have a case study that truly considers working-class workers across national and even continental boundaries."

Studs Terkel Award for Media and Journalism

[*Memorias Culturales de un Pasado Industrial / Cultural Memories of the Industrial Past*](#)
by Rubén Vega and Irene Díaz

Judges' comments

"Rubén Vega and Irene Díaz's *Memorias Culturales de un Pasado Industrial* beautifully weaves the stories of more than a dozen local artists in Asturias, Spain, to create a compelling and provocative documentary about how the history of the mining industry and labor protest has shaped the landscape, and the role of art in resurrecting these histories. The filmmakers carefully unveil what is lost in the criticism of the mining industry, building an argument around the elements of the work that are tied to local identity, and the power of art to keep it alive, namely a collective class consciousness, and a struggle that lifted living standards. In celebrating the functions of art in preserving cultural memory of industry, the film also advances its own role in tying together the experiences of disparate artists working to reaffirm a collective identity across a range of media, from dance to rap to graffiti."

"This film captures the collective memory of ruins that comprise the region's landscape, giving new meaning to its deindustrialized space. It's a living testimony of artistic

expression devoted to the memory of working-class history and culture where, in telling their own story, in their words, they resist the narrative of silence and erasure. The images of murals and other visual arts to document worker's resistance offers a 'self-reflection' that moves beyond nostalgia to reclaim past struggles and its relevance in the present. A moving film that inspires."

Constance Coiner Award for Best Dissertation

[*The New Entrepreneur: Worker Experiences in the Sharing Economy*](#) by Alexandra J. Ravenelle

Judges' comments

"Alexandra Ravenelle's topic is on the cutting edge, given the exponential rise of the so-called 'sharing economy.' She creates true grounded theory by drawing her findings out of long, in-depth interviews with TaskRabbit workers, Uber drivers, AirBnB hosts and a rent-a-chef service. Each of her findings is brought alive by human stories. While she found that many gig-economy workers, in particular those who start out with more capital and cultural capital, fell into the Success Stories and Strivers categories, the horror stories of the ultra-exploited Strugglers category are the most heart-wrenching. By including the labor history of winning protections such as workers comp, unemployment insurance, OSHA, overtime, limits on hours and breaks, etc., she makes her point that many of today's gig workers are working under 19th century conditions, reversing all that progress. *The New Entrepreneur* is a compelling read, and essential for mounting a resistance to the erosion of worker protections."

"*The New Entrepreneur: Worker Experiences in the Sharing Economy* is a timely and detailed project that reveals much about the working conditions of workers in the sharing economy. Ravenelle interviewed nearly 80 workers who were working for four sharing economy services: Airbnb, Uber, TaskRabbit and Kitchensurfing. The project highlights the ongoing casualization of work in the new economy, and reveals the ways in which work, and life more broadly, has become precarious for many. As she writes, 'In addition to the daily risk of unemployment, workers are outside the workplace social safety net of unemployment insurance, retirement and health insurance contributions and workers compensation. As a result, when they experience on-the-job injuries, sexual harassment, or find themselves in criminally questionable situations, they have no recourse or protections.'"

Jake Ryan Award for a Book about the Working-Class Academic Experience

[*Returning to Reims*](#) by Didier Eribon

Judges' comments

“Didier Eribon is a French writer and academic, previously known for his work on Foucault and queer/gay issues in France. In this autobiographical work, Eribon comes out as working class, something that he says was incomparably more difficult than coming out as gay. It is this which tells the reader so much about the significance of class for the French intellectual elite despite a radical class history in the country. By weaving together autobiographical detail about growing up in the industrial heartlands of northern France together with social commentary on class in France, Eribon has created a hugely significant work that brings working class scholarship to a French audience and moreover brings together a discussion of class and sexuality that is long overdue. For me, being able to extend the reach of WCA’s championing of working class writing beyond the English-speaking world and into Europe, is hugely important for the society as a whole.”

“In this nuanced and heartfelt book focusing on the complexities of class as a lived experience, sociologist Eribon tackles both the individual and institutional realities of the working class in France. In a book which speaks heavily to the present political moment in Europe, as well as in the United States, Eribon faithfully represents the working-class experience, while also taking careful steps not to purport to speak for the working class, often questioning the motives of those who do. From his detailed and fraught depictions of his upbringing as a gay, working-class man in France to his alienation from an educational system that seeks to reproduce social class inequalities to his intellectual coming-of-age wrestling with what it means to identify as both a Trotskyist and a gay man, this book highlights the intersections of class with other identities within varying institutional contexts. As the title suggests, so much of the book grapples with identity and the meaning of home, particularly when that home imposes insult and stigma. *Returning to Reims* questions the extent to which upward mobility makes it possible to truly return home, or indeed, to claim a home at all. A masterpiece of memoir and critical theory.”

Special thanks to those who served as judges:

Jeremy Baker, Columbus State Community College
Nathan Heggins Bryant, Chico State University
Marc DiPaolo, Southwestern Oklahoma State University
Michele Fazio, University of North Carolina at Pembroke
Liza Sapir Flood, University of Virginia
Mara Fridell, University of Manitoba
Scott Henkel, University of Wyoming
Allison L. Hurst, Oregon State University
Barbara Jensen, Community and Counseling Psychologist / Educator
Gary Jones, American International College
Colby King, University of South Carolina Upstate
Betsy Leondar-Wright, Laselle College / Class Matters
Tim Libretti, Northeastern Illinois University
Jeanetta Calhoun Mish, Poet
Asia Muhammad, Graduate Student, University of North Carolina at Pembroke

David Nettleingham, University of Kent
Lizzie Presser, ProPublica Journalist
Valerie Walkerdine, Cardiff University
Deborah Warnock, Bennington College