

Soil

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with Dr. Ching-In Chen

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Reflective Essay

This chapbook – like this class, like my life – has been a process of self-reflection.

Of self-reflection, of conversation, of coming *to* by coming *through* – my writing, for me, has always been a crucial way of processing my thoughts. I never feel I understand something until I can put it into words, and this includes my own mind. Writing, for me, has always been a crucial process of pinning my own thoughts, of attempting to trap their elusive motions in one place at least long enough to understand their shape, their color: to slow them down long enough to follow their trajectory, to see where they will next flit. And with such topics as we have discussed in this class – of labor, of class, of intersecting identity and its role in how we conceptualize *work* – such a process becomes even more essential.

Now, as I look back, it feels impossible to pin down the beehive of my thought, to isolate one single theme of my writing or my learning, when the class itself has consisted of so many different intersecting projects and components. When we have read and heard from so many scholars, when we have worked directly with people involved in different fields of labor (literally, in my case!), when we have attempted to overturn our conceptions of how the world can be arranged and reimagine ourselves in a different universe. I cannot isolate a single thought or a single thread from this experience so much as I can say that this class has taken me on a journey of critique, of seeking my own creative voice, and of pondering my own place in this vast interconnecting system in which we live and work. I began this class confused and I am ending it confused as well – but with a broader, deeper, more informed confusion – and I suppose that’s all I can ask for, in the end!

This chapbook details various steps in the processes of my thought throughout this class. A few of the pieces are direct responses to class assignments – “Class Path”/A meditation on

uncertainty,” for example, was born of one of my “creative experiments”; other pieces were born of in-class freewrites – but many of them are my own responses to readings or thoughts inspired by class conversations. The pieces from the chapbook are not arranged in the chronological order of writing date, but as I moved through the class, my thoughts began to take a rough shape, and so the pieces included in the chapbook follow that narrative – the story of a narrator coming to criticism through a process of self-reflection and conversation with other thinkers and other pieces of writing.

The chapbook begins with an introduction in which the narrator, the poetic *I*, promises unstaged vulnerability, honesty, and openness. I cannot say for certain if I have lived up to that promise – all writing, after all, is a process of crafting, and I cannot present an uncrafted self without the intermediary of a narrator. But this introduction is necessary to establish the fallibility of the narrator, the uncertainty of all the critique. I, along with the narrator in the chapbook, am new to this kind of critique and attempting to find my place in social commentary, particularly as a beneficiary of a white supremacist system. It is for this reason that the first non-introductory piece in the chapbook is “‘Class Path’/A meditation on uncertainty” – a poem in which the narrator explores her role as a white middle-class conventionally-educated cisgender woman raised by educators, and what that means for her ability to comment on the systems she has benefited from all her life. These questions have shadowed me throughout the class: I have benefited from a great deal of privilege throughout my life, and I have struggled with the notion of using my voice to comment on these systems that have not victimized me. Most of what I have learned throughout this class has made me feel that it isn’t my place to add commentary. Be that writing narratives of Filipino labor history, when I am white; commenting on the state of restaurant workers in a pandemic, when I have been privileged enough to work from home since

the beginning – I don't feel confident in my ability or right to critique these systems, and I want to be sure that my voice does not overshadow those who have been silenced for such a long time.

And yet, the class has been a process of conversation, of building understanding, and for me, that process is so intricately connected to writing that – whether or not I feel I deserve it – I have so much to say. I am, after all, part of this system, and that means I am affected by it regardless of what that means. But for so many of these systems, particularly the white supremacy culture that we read about early on, I have been steeped in them so long that it is exceptionally difficult even to build awareness. For that reason, many of the early pieces in the chapbook are the poetic narrator's attempt to build her awareness of her own situation and the systems that create it. Directly following the meditation on class path is a piece interrogating the nature of participating in white supremacy culture and the difficulty of shifting out of it. In this piece, white supremacy culture is framed as something it is possible to move out of, as though the shift involves actively changing location and plunging into something new and more uncertain. This is how I have always conceptualized the culture before – as though there is a moment of tangible shift into something new – and yet this very framing reveals me as someone new to this kind of critique. My lack of confidence in these topics is based on inexperience, on not feeling qualified to truly analyze each topic with an eye to all of its different complicated facets, and my critique feels too heavy-handed, too simplistic – based on metaphors that do not reach far enough.

But my experiences in this class have also led me to reflect on things that are very specific to my individual experience. If commenting on the system as a whole is too far for me to reach, I have learned to make commentary on the topics I *am* qualified to discuss. I have come to recognize the impact of white supremacy culture on the way I see time, for instance. Even in this

class, I have witnessed my own obsession with deadlines and productivity manifest in group projects and individual assignments – the desperation to finish projects and to do them perfectly. This is just one example of the insidious ways that white supremacy culture manifests within me, and I wrote the poem “Time/A lament” as a way of exploring that experience. This process of self-reflection led me to a further revelation about how much this culture is internalized, the places it manifests, and how leaving this culture is not as simple as a single shift. I can only hope that this kind of recognition is the first step in untangling the thread woven into the fabric of my being, recognizing the impact of these systems on my life and my thoughts. The poem is placed in the chapbook as an example of the “it” that the previous poem attempts to describe but does not quite reach – an example of seeking the concrete in these nebulous concepts I have struggled to comment on.

After class discussions and writing conferences, and after writing this poem about a more concrete example of white supremacy culture, I decided to write a response to the earlier poem to demonstrate a shifting understanding of what “white supremacy culture” really is and what it means to move out of it. This shift was also inspired in part by a class discussion about the poem “The Angels of Bread,” in which I realized that the new world order described in the poem felt like someone had driven a shovel into the soil of my world understanding and turned it over. It was not a direct reversal of the hierarchies as we see them now, but rather something new and different, and this is what visionary fiction promises: the chance to break out of internalized paradigms. This led me to the thought that the foundation of white supremacy culture is not rock, but soil – and many of the farms I have worked with over the course of this class use regenerative practices which involve tending the soil as a source of life. I decided to revisit this notion of white supremacy culture in the poem “Where to Go?/A response/Soil,” in which the

narrator reconsiders her concept of what white supremacy culture is and how it can be shifted. In the earlier poem, the narrator described the notion of shifting out of white supremacy culture as like stepping off a ledge, when really, we always are and always will be standing on ground. This poem suggests that instead what we need to change is the very earth beneath our feet – nurturing our own soil into what we want to grow there. It is in this reimagining, this concept, that my poetic narrator comes to a revelation – she notices her own place in the system, and recognizes that the place to begin with this kind of critique and commentary is with her own experience and her own life.

This revelation leads into the final poem in the chapbook, “Weeding.” This poem is written in conversation with a few lines from Mark Nowak’s “People’s History of the Poetry Workshop” (a chapter of the book *Social Poetics*) – specifically, a passage in which Nowak discusses the “weeded” stamps found on his copies of various poetry books, meaning that these books were removed from libraries. Nowak posits that this may have been done as some sort of purge of prisoners’ books from these libraries. I recognize that this suggestion is more of a rhetorical device than a true conjecture, but weeding in libraries happens to be a process with which I am intimately familiar. The system itself is extremely complex – rather than one person making a decision about what kinds of books should stay or go, most weeding is based on the use within the community, the condition of the book, the needs of the specific collection – all so many more factors than a simple purge. As someone who has physically taken part in the weeding of the collection, I had a very strong negative reaction to this insinuation and wrote the poem as a way of processing that reaction – but the process of writing the poem led me into a realization about the vastness of the interconnected systems. This poem fits in the chapbook as an example of beginning with understanding and commenting on these systems from a personal

standpoint: in this poem, the narrator speaks for herself from her own point of view as a worker, rather than attempting to negotiate complex topics or speak for someone else.

If I had to pull one main thread from the class about what I have learned about work, then let us say this is it: that workers can speak best for themselves. I wrote other pieces for class – mostly not included in the chapbook – in which I attempted to make social commentary on labor fields outside of my own. For the most part, my tentativeness and uncertainty came across clearly in those poems, and it was difficult to find a main point for each one. My strongest writing produced in this class was the writing that was born directly from my own thoughts, opinions, or life situation. I have struggled to find a voice to make commentary, and perhaps the lesson in this is that – at least for now – my voice is best used to speak for myself.

I must also acknowledge that most of the work I have produced in this class has been created as a result of and in conversation with other works and other people. That is another important theme I have pulled out from my experience in this class – from my individual writing and especially from my teamwork – that all of this engagement is part of a larger conversation with multiple people, and that everyone brings their own perspective to that conversation. It is important to me to acknowledge those who have inspired me, to write in conversation with them, and to give credit where it is deserved. All of this work is a process of learning together, and that shared learning and conversation is what inspires us each to create our own work and to build on what we have learned together.

Invitation/To a seeking soul

I am so accustomed to presenting myself in pieces.

Whenever I am asked to stop, to cease the endless motion of *delay*, of *distraction*, of *talking around* – to still my whirring thoughts and present them as they are: pinned for a moment to a corkboard for inspection, understanding, connection – I begin to shiver somewhere deep within myself. Heedless of the warmth of the room, of the comfort of my position – I feel bare, suddenly: unprotected, unswaddled. There is a deeper discomfort to this presentation – the promise of presence, of connection to be found, if I can bear it, if I can bare myself to it – and I shiver like an animal writhing out of skin, like I am dropping the shields of thought I have built to protect myself, exposing my shelled/unshelled soul to be cradled or chopped to pieces, and –

And to prevent the latter, I wield the knife myself.

I have learned the flaws of those shields; I have learned the falseness of self-protection and determined to shed my shell. Bared for scrutiny, I protect myself from criticism by offering myself up for it: staged vulnerability, preemptive protection. If I identify all I have done wrong before someone else can, if I present a partial version of myself, cut down already by my own anticipation, then the touch of another blade will not come as a shock. I cannot be hurt if I have hurt myself already. I cannot be cut if I have already shaped the pieces.

But that is its own kind of falseness, parts perfectly preserved on a platter an arrangement at odds with the truth of my soul – the truth I claim to reveal.

And so I wish for us, my friend, my stranger, my shared soul in seeking – may our hearts shiver upon our meeting. May our shields fall away unneeded; may we expose the miracle of our fleshy insides to one another, uncarved. May we shed our layers of protection, uncross our arms, and reveal our vulnerable cores. May we not cut ourselves down in anticipation of the other's knives.

I wish that we may lay aside our weapons, that we may approach with open arms and trust one another not to carry hidden blades. I wish that we might embrace in easy meeting, that we might learn who we are together, in our generosity with ourselves and one another. I wish for us to see one another in our wholeness, to find a way to become more whole still together.

And so I present myself to you– unshielded, uncarved. May your heart meet with mine, and may we feel no need for defense.

“Class Path”/A meditation on uncertainty

I am the daughter of teachers.

What shaped your worldview, I am sometimes asked;
what made you who you are? I know intellectually: I am a creation
of class, race, gender, religion – that all these form
the answer, invisible foundation beneath the shape
of the self I became: white, middle-class,
nurtured on privilege and perfectionism, assumed “default”
such that I can hardly identify
their influence. I see myself
unmarked, identity born of parents’ careers, and yet
is that not itself a kind of mark?

None of this

I can ignore, but parsing it is like remembering
to look directly beneath my feet, while the answer I recognize
is above: *I am the daughter of teachers*. Education was my
religion, the creed running through my family line like blood,
answer, always, to questions of what
to be, what to do. It is not religion
that keeps me obedient, adherent to rules, arbitrary structures
of imposed morality – it is that subtler preaching, those anecdotes
from parents about students who misbehaved, who struggled, and
I didn’t want to be like them, did I?

What is your class path? If we are trails in a forest, education is mine: clearly marked
and flat-packed with the feet
of all those gone before, scuffed with the treads
of my father’s soles. Signposts marked off levels
of school, acquisition
of grades – there were forks,
of course, and always undergrowth beside – I could turn off the path
I was reminded, but why would I, when this was
the best way forward? I could do anything
I wanted to, but why not do this?

I glanced from side to side,
at times, saw my peers
hacking through thorns, nursing bloodied wounds,
wrenching boots from sucking mud. I watched and I wondered,
strolling past on my hard-packed trail,
why they didn’t simply come to join me? I did not think
about the trials of struggling
through foliage, limping
from thorn-inflicted wounds, missing shoes. I did not think
about how far away

a trail can feel when you do not have markers
to tell you where to go.

I did not consider the foundation
of identity, the security of race
and class – the *white supremacy culture*
that built the forest I walked in, the creed
all my family preached, the very ground
beneath my feet. I did not understand
that we do not all walk in the same forest.

I did not understand that a clearly-marked trail is not the only one.

I think sometimes I still don't understand it. I've never thought
to leave my trail, to stop checking off markers – high school,
check, residential college,
check,
and what comes next? Only then did I wander
off the trail, poke tentatively
at the weeds. Experiment with
the bushwhacking, the thorns of a
service job, trying on
“downward mobility,” but always I knew
where that trail was, always I could return
to the safety of my pre-treaded path.
And always I looked back
over my shoulder as my erstwhile peers walked
ahead, not waiting for me, and I could not stop calculating
how fast I would have to run to catch up.

And eventually, as always, I reach a point where the metaphor can go no further.

Life is *not* a hiking trail, the path no clearly-marked trailhead, but a stumbling
exploration for all of us. I don't want to say that I am *different*, right or wrong, in some
fundamental way – don't want to reduce real struggle to bushwhacking, don't want to claim the
superiority of any path. Nor do I want to ignore the ease of my clear direction, the people who
walked before me, guided me.

And all these vast thickets of confusion – this tangle of thought and uncertainty – still does not
begin to question the nature of the “forest” I walk in to begin with, the generations on
generations of reproduced inequality, the generations of people I will never know but who lived
forced futures while my ancestors chose theirs freely, while they built this trail for me to walk
out of their own choices, wore it smooth with their own soles, created this world of *opportunity*
for me to stand and dither, gazing around at others on different paths, faltering at forks in the
road, writing collapsing metaphors,

and still not understanding. I don't know how to understand myself
in relation to others, not with the biblical teachings of my preacher-teacher family
still echoing in my ears. I don't know how to recognize
the ease or the hardships of my life
without discounting or magnifying
other sorrows, other joys. I stand here on my chosen path
looking at the thousands of others crisscrossing in the forest
and the next trail marker is visible in the distance
and I have never felt more lost.

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“White Supremacy Culture”/Where do we go now?

We are clinging to the edge of something.

Something rough and raw, something that shreds at our skin and our nails – but we are clinging, because we do not know how to let go.

We are poised on a brink – all of us, it feels sometimes, although there are times when I look outside my own life and start at the differences I see – on the edge of a tipping point into what could be real change – and yet we cling, because that change is a chasm and we can’t quite bear to make the drop.

We are the culmination of all that has come before. Agonizing years of slow progress and backslides, of misery and exploitation that I can’t dream of understanding, of stories that are not mine to tell. *We* not the people, but *we* the foundation, the slow-shifting mass of interlocking systems some of our ancestors dreamed up, and others’ ancestors were forced to build. We may learn better, individuals, but that shift is slow and long, and how often do I think about the ground beneath my feet if I cannot feel it move?

I have lived my life blithely unaffected on the backs of others – but those others have not been silent. Years of fighting, of struggling, of resisting, until finally I felt the shifting beneath me and dared to look down and see –

And see how unstable the ground here has always been. And see that something has to give.

The characteristics of white supremacy culture. The ground beneath my feet, paved with exploitation, cracking with age – but what do I cling to when there is nothing else beneath me?

We must move away from a *sense of urgency* – but if others are waiting for us outside, how can we remove our own deadlines? We must move away from *perfectionism* – but changing expectations for others does not change the behavior we model, and perfectionism is so impossible to unlearn. We must move away from *worship of the written word* – but when I am so used to taking notes, how else can I be expected to remember? All these habits built into the way *I am*, the only way I know how to *be* –

We must move *from*, but how do we move *to* when we cannot see the ground we are bound to land on?

We are changing – we must be. The ground is shaking; the center cannot hold when it is built on the instability of cruelty. We are edging closer to a brink, step by slow mincing step – always too slow, but there is movement – I must believe it. The ground is shaking, we are clinging to the edge, and we know it is time to fall –

But to fall into what?

The problem with destroying a foundation: what is below you to land on?

We are trying. We are throwing things off the edge of the cliff that we must believe will cushion our landing – discussions and trust-building and language changes and training and reading, so much reading. The scholars and activists and artists, the people who have dared to share their pain and their power, their learning – they are leading us, handing us cushions to toss down: diversity initiatives, intersectionality understandings, organizations doing the work – and we are dropping them before us, praying it will all be enough that we can land on something, praying that the trust we are trying to build will create a cushion soft enough to land on – and yet still we hang here, worried it has not been enough, unable to see the end, what all these pieces are adding up to.

The cliffside is shredding our nails, slicing our skin into ribbons – but even if it hurts us, it hurts us in a familiar way. What awaits us beyond the edge? We do not know, and that fear makes it hard to drop.

But somehow we must. We cannot cling here any longer; every moment we stay on this surface is another moment of hurt. At some point we must trust in the strength of ourselves and all that we have learned and done – all that others have learned and done for us, to build the better world we await. At some point, we cannot cling any longer and we must simply link arms, trust ourselves and trust the world – and let ourselves fall.

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Time/A lament

I never met a clock I could look away from.
I don't always know
what time it is, but I wish I did
wish my blood pounded in time with the seconds, pulsing minutes
through my veins, always attuned,
always aware. *What time is it?*
Time for you to get a watch,
they say when I ask
so I can magnetize my eyes to my wrist, glance compulsively
down every minute, seconds slipped away
like shadows.

If I could keep time itself
on my wrist, in my body, captive in my ribcage,
I would. Always it is too elusive for me, racing
ahead like a nymph to spill as water through my fingertips, fading
like Eurydice when I cannot resist turning
to look back.

I don't know who instilled this in me, this need
to know the time, and in knowing hold it captive, keep it
like a prisoner, but I can make a guess –
for I am not alone in this. Do we not all know this
urgency, every clock a stopwatch – deadlines
like mile markers, life like a race
against time that I know I can never win
but how dare I stop running? *On time*
for me is early, *perfectly punctual* late, and late
unforgivable. I pack my plans
with extra minutes like padding: departure,
travel, arrival – and some extra
just in case something comes up. I leave fifteen minutes early
to my early planned departure, overestimate travel time, and arrive
half an hour too soon
and finally able to breathe.

In this remote world, where each destination is a link
in a browser window, *early*
is one minute, and I arrive two, stare at the blank
“waiting room window” and fidget
until the host can let me in. Deadlines
for projects mean the day before
if not sooner, and if I am not ready by then
I can't think, can't breathe, torn up from within

by the talons of the unfinished –
because only in the space between finishing one thing
and starting another
can I find that tiniest sliver of freedom.

I wish I could hold time captive,
but I can't help but feel it's imprisoning me instead.

My curse, my enemy, my inalterable obsession
I called it once, and laughed, and thought myself clever
for the hyperbole, as if I could laugh off
the clawed minutes raking me slowly into shreds,
the clock ticking in place of my heart.

“Where to Go”/A response/Soil

We are clinging to the edge of something.

That is what I said, how I imagined
the change I still struggle to envision. A drop, a fall, a leap of faith
from the edge, a tumble from a cliff
made of a substance I never did name.

How do we move to when we cannot see the ground we are bound to land on?

I asked, but why did I not name the ground
we stand on already?

Why did I not consider
the earth is not always unyielding rock?

I've been learning about soil lately:
the science of tending the earth itself,
black and carbon-rich, unturned to preserve
the ecosystems beneath, coaxing
the insects and microbes to return
to their beautiful devouring. I've been learning
that the plants you grow are better
for the soil they grow in. I've been learning
you make the world healthier by nurturing its roots.

The problem with destroying a foundation: what is below you to land on?

I asked, but why did I think the foundation
must be destroyed to be transformed?

Why did I think I could predict what might be found
on the other side without first looking
at my own?

This culture has writhed its way into me
like worms below soil, has rooted
beneath the surface of my soul. It is too easy
to say *things must change*; it is too easy
to stand transfixed
with uncertainty, unable to identify
the ground beneath my feet. It is too easy
to say *it all must go*, and then not
to do anything about it. Transforming the problem
into something too vast to be handled
is an excellent excuse to do nothing.

What I must do is dig my hands into the soil.

Identify the roots

of my own transformation
and nurture them
until they grow.

Weeding/From the agent of the state/An indulgence in defensiveness

The stamp itself offends me, deeming people's histories and anthologies from important prison writing workshops to be nothing but weeds...

I am the weeder.

Among the stacks, I go with garden gloves,
plucking the volumes I deem least worthy
of retention, of continued residence
upon our shelves. Who decides
which books will stay, which will be drawn
from circulation, cycle broken, removed
from view?

Maybe contemporary liberal and neoliberal state institutions view volumes like these as easily erasable, as needing to be "weeded" and "withdrawn." Criminals, after all, like to destroy the evidence.

I am the eraser of the evidence.

Not garden gloves, perhaps, but rubber
or thicker; they say latex does not conceal fingerprints –
representative of the state, I creep among the stacks like a robber
seeking the evidence of my crime, personification
of the institution.

No, that is too simple.

We like a democratic process,
we contemporary liberal and neoliberal state institutions – we weed
the books long overlooked, long untouched
by patrons – a word we are retiring,
for implicit gender, or capitalist implication? I never asked –
by library users, people who avail
themselves of our resources. For whatever reason
they did not choose that book. Overlooked
it sat, gathering years and dust
on uncracked pages, wedged pristine
on the shelf, protected by equally unused neighbors. I do not decide
but the users do, by neglect, by lack
of use – then the librarians, who know
the pulse of the field, then the head
of collections – final arbiter of decisions, and
is that paternalistic? These cycles
of each book unused – and who decides, anyway,
that it should be unused, unstudied? If we respond
to the state of the field, the use of the book, is it the users

or their teachers
or the scholars
all deciding, every day, every week, not to use
the book, until it sits
forgotten between forgotten neighbors
on the shelf, languishing
until I come through with my robber-gardener gloves
and pluck it free?

But sometimes it will be seen again.
Sometimes drawn free in an explosion of dust
a long-forgotten treasure between my fingertips
a book buried in others, in classifications and letters,
in shelves ignored for computers, for articles,
for the fast-paced knowledge of today –
we have to weed, so who decides
what we must remove?

You say the state has purged
this book, I say perhaps
the purge is more insidious than that:
a long-waged campaign in the education
you describe, the poetry workshops
erased, the authors
uplifted and those buried instead
buried like a book
on a shelf
unused for decades
and we need a deeper revitalization
to bring it forth.

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