Detroit Factory Elegies: The Fiction of Lolita Hernandez
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Like workers anywhere, Detroit's autoworkers are caught in the paradox of work, desperately needing jobs they ultimately do not want. Needing, gaining, keeping, hating, and losing work is the stuff of Detroit literature: the blues and folk songs of the Great Depression; the novels of Harriet Arnow, Upton Sinclair, Joyce Carol Oates, and Jeffrey Eugenides; the early lyrics of Robert Hayden; and the poems and short stories of autoworkers-turned writers: Dudley Randall, Philip Levine, Jim Daniels, Lawrence Joseph, and, of course, Lolita Hernandez. In these works, the desperation from not having a job is matched only by the desperation of having one. As one worker says of his Ford Rouge plant job, "I waited five months in that goddamned parking lot across the street for this?"[1]

The health of our economic system, however, is measured, in part, by the numbers of people caught on both sides of this paradox. And so is the health of our city. In 1947, there were almost 3,300 manufacturing establishments within the city of Detroit, employing 338,000 workers. In 1992, there were just over 1,000 manufacturing establishments, employing only 62,000 workers.[2] That's less than 1/3 the number of manufacturers employing less than 1/5 the number of people over a span of 45 years. In slow-motion, this was a hurricane, as devastating to Detroit as Katrina may turn out to be to New Orleans—perhaps even more devastating. Historians like Thomas Sugrue have thoroughly analyzed the factors responsible for this perhaps unprecedented loss of factories and jobs. Creative writers, including those mentioned above, have described the strains on Detroit's laborers during this period. But no one has sought to chronicle with such lyrical intensity the story of one Detroit factory's demise as has Lolita Hernandez.

In 1927, the same year that Marygrove College opened its doors, General Motors opened the Cadillac plant on Clark Street. This plant, Hernandez tells us, eventually employed 10,000 workers in several different facilities: a foundry, an engineering facility, a plating facility, a warehouse, and a waste water treatment center. One by one, these operations closed down, moving to other plants, mostly in other states. The twelve stories in Hernandez's Autopsy of an Engine show human beings hoping to keep their jobs amid the piece-by-piece abandonment and eventual demolition of the Clark Street Plant.

This is a collection very much aware of its historical and literary roots. In one story, a rumor that Cadillac is hiring draws a group of job seekers one last time to the Clark Street factory gates even though the plant is scheduled to close down a week later. In its futility this Detroit ritual recalls the masses waiting outside the Ford Highland Park plant in 1914 after Henry Ford announced the five dollar day as well as the tragic 1932 Hunger March in which four people were killed on Miller Road outside the Rouge plant gates. It recalls, too, a well-known poem that Philip Levine read in this room four years ago, in which a job seeker waits in line outside the Highland Park plant, fully understanding that

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[1] *The Great Depression: A Job at Ford's*, PBS documentary
[2] Reynolds Farley, Sheldon Danziger, Harry J. Holzer, *Detroit Divided* (New York: Sage, 2000): Table 3.3, 67.

somewhere ahead
a man is waiting who will say, 'No,
we're not hiring today,' for any reason
he wants.[3]

Hernandez's story complicates this moment, attending not only to those outside needing work but those inside who will lose their jobs in a few short days. All are caught in work's paradox.

Caught as well are those who manage to hang on to their jobs for five years or more, whose fatigue escapes "as a constant sigh," and who, even though still young, develop the slump of factory bodies.[4] Factory time, Hernandez says, "passes like a thief. Before you know it you are someone else, unrecognizable from the person who entered the factory world. . . . Time passes like a gray thief, slinking from one moment to the next, stealing pieces of everyone."[5] Even though after a few years in the factory, "realism replace[s] optimism," the mere sight of an attractive female co-worker can still almost rekindle in a man the dream that has motivated American men in writings from Benjamin Franklin to F. Scott Fitzgerald:

> …in Manuel's case, if he had found his Rosario in good time. If he could have continued to gaze at her even from a distance, maybe he would have continued to dream himself a bigger life with a beautiful woman at his side, a lovely home. Maybe one day the Cadillac, children in college. A white picket fence surrounding his home in the suburbs. A swimming pool.[6]

Yet, those caught in the paradox settle instead for diminished dreams: a break in the inexorable movement of the line, a few moments stolen for lunch in the factory courtyard, a coupon for "day of delight" at the neighborhood beauty shop, "Kara's House of Esquisite Beauté."[7] At one time, Detroit's workers hoped for grander things, but automation, decentralization, obsolescence, and abandonment, have chastened them. While preparing for a strike, one worker admits that she doesn't know "if solidarity forever could really work in our case. The world [she says] is so different since UAW organizing drives like the Battle of the Overpass, or the Flint sit-down strikes. We …[feel] so helpless."[8] Hernandez shows the paradoxically pathetic condition of human workers: tired of their labors, transformed by "factory time," by lives spent in pits and grease, yet still dreading the inevitable pink slip.

It's the paradox of work that leads Cadillac employees to feel proud of their association with Cadillac, "the flagship of the corporation, the ultimate luxury car of the nation," and yet at the same time to feel "the pain to build [Cadillacs]: in the pits, like sardines on the motor line, frying from sparks in welding, eaten alive by chemicals in plating."[9] It's the paradox that causes these workers in 1987 to follow the last car to roll down the assembly line, to celebrate with raucous song the end of this part of their lives, knowing that this was "an attempt to make the best of what everyone realized was a bad

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[3] Philip Levine, "What Work Is," *What Work Is: Poems by Philip Levine* (New York: Knopf, 1992): 18.
[4] Hernandez 133.
[5] Hernandez 137.
[6] Hernandez 133-4.
[7] Hernandez 79.
[8] Hernandez 78.
[9] Hernandez 13.

situation."[10] It's this Detroit paradox that draws us to witness the implosion of the landmark building, to attend the last game in the historic stadium, to visit one more time the aquarium of our childhood. Detroiters have witnessed many such endings.

But not all of these endings are absolutely final. As Hernandez demonstrates, there is still the art of autopsy, the need to return, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively to diagnose what has happened, name the illness, define the condition. Like the other writers and scholars who have visited us in this series, Hernandez urges us to look back on the experience of life and work in this troubled city, to revisit through language the places of our past, and to pay attention to what we might have missed before. Study of Detroit brings its own rewards. There is always some new fact leading to a new mystery, something more to learn: perhaps it's the reason we continue in the paradox of work or the cause of our estrangement from one another, or, in the terms of Hernandez's stories, it might be the source of that mysterious water in the rock, the sap in the trunk of a tree, or the red stain discovered in the heart of a disassembled engine.

In *Autopsy of an Engine,* Hernandez has given us a dozen wonderful stories that deepen our understanding of the paradoxes of life and work in Detroit, stories that instruct and give pleasure at the same time. We are fortunate to have her with us tonight. Here is Lolita Hernandez.

*--Frank D. Rashid*

[10] Hernandez 121.