

To my White Working-Class Sisters

Debby D'Amico

1971

This article was written by Debby D'Amico and was reprinted from *Up From Under* (the August-September 1970 issue), a magazine by, for and about women.

We are the invisible women, the faceless women, the nameless women...the female half of the silent majority, the female half of the ugly Americans, the smallest part of the "little people." No one photographs us, no one writes about us, no one puts us on TV. No one says we are beautiful, no one says we are important, very few like to recognize that we are here.

We are the poor and working-class white women of America, and we are cruelly and systematically ignored. All of our lives we have been told, sometimes subtly, sometimes not so subtly, that we are not worth very much. This message has been put across to me, a white working-class woman, all my life.

I think the time has come to speak out against these insults, and so I have decided to write about parts of my life and my ideas. I am doing this for all my sisters who have been made to feel that they are not worth writing about, and for all those people who have to be convinced of poor white existence, those same people who told us that because we are all white our lives are the same as those of the middle and upper class.

When I was in the second grade, we were given a sample aptitude test to accustom us to the test-taking rut that would ultimately determine whether we would be programmed toward college or a dead-end job. After we had answered several multiple-choice questions, the teacher had us check our answers against the "right" ones. One of the questions pictured a man in a tuxedo, a man in a suit, and a man in overalls. The question read: "Which man is going to work?" The "correct" answer was: the man in the suit. I can still feel the shame that came with the realization that what went on in my home was marked "incorrect."

I responded the way oppressed people often respond—by secretly hating myself and my family. I remember constantly begging my father to put on a suit—my father who worked an average of 65 to 80 hours a week driving trucks, checking out groceries in a supermarket, and doing any of the other deadening jobs which came his way.

My mother didn't escape my judgments either. The unreal Dick, Jane, and Sally world our school books presented as the "right" way of life, reinforced by TV and middle-class schoolmates' homes, made me viciously attack her grammar whenever she spoke and ask her questions like: "How come you never wear dresses or get your hair done?" The world of my home gave me concrete answers. At the time my mother had three kids in diapers and another on the way. Hardly a life style that called for a well-dressed mannequin. But the middle-class world of America was bigger than my home and I was overcome by its judgments.

As I went on through school, I continued to be taught about an America that had little to do with me. The picture of American life drawn in history books was almost always of a comfortable one, with exceptions like wars and the Depression (hardships which the middle-class participated in and thus wanted to talk about).

Working-class sisters, wake up! Black people were not the only ones left out of history books. George Washington is no relative of yours; neither is Henry Ford, or Nixon and Agnew. While George Washington was relaxing at his Mount Vernon estate, your ancestors may have been among the two-thirds majority of white settlers who

served as indentured servants for Master George and others like him. They may have been servants who were kidnapped from the slums of England and Ireland and brought here in chains to be sold to the highest bidder. Your grandmother might have been one of the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” who came to America and wound up in a tenement where free air never blew, and was made to feel alien and ashamed of the Old World culture infinitely more alive and colorful than the drab, Puritan, “Mr. Clean” ways of America. While Mr. Pullman was amassing his fortune, our people were fighting and dying for the rights of working men and women, our people were being shot and beaten for what they believed. I was not taught this in school but learned it later on my own.

During my high school years I entered the great rat race of women who were dedicated to snagging any and all men considered desirable. I was again led by middle-class values, and so I rejected the knit-shirted, “greasy-haired,” dark-skinned Italians I grew up with and made a mad dash for the Brylcreem man. All the while, of course, feeling I could never get him, because I wasn’t the girl in the Brylcreem commercial.

I read all the middle-class fashion and glamour magazines and tried to look like people who were able to look that way because of a life style that included a closet full of clothes I couldn’t afford and a leisurely existence that allowed them to look cool and unruffled all the time. And there I was working in a luncheonette so shabby I never mentioned it to anyone for a lousy six dollars a Saturday, that I immediately spent in vain efforts to make myself “acceptable” looking. During the day I gossiped condescendingly about the way people dressed, playing at being the glorious magazine girl, and at night I skulked off to the phone company to be bitten by cord lice and told all night that I was either very slow or innately stupid.

What all this has done to us is create a deep, deep sense of unworthiness, a sense so deep it dooms us.

Why has this happened to us? It has happened because we believed in the American dream, in the dream that anyone can be anything if they only try, work hard, and if they don’t make it it’s only because something about them is rotten. Since we don’t have much to begin with, we’re made to feel we don’t deserve much. And we believe it—even though the truth of our lives tells us that we have worked, and damned hard, but we still didn’t have the kinds of lives we read about and saw on TV. And America has kept us out of magazines and off TV because our faces and voices are full of this.

We have hated black people, but we have hated ourselves more. By believing black people are inferior, we have kept the truth about ourselves from each other—that the people who have the power and money in America never intend to raise our incomes or those of black people, not because we aren’t worthy, but because it would cut into their profits to do so.

We believed black people were so inferior that they weren’t supposed to make it—but we never did and we blame ourselves. As white people who haven’t made it, we are the living proof of the American lie and we hate ourselves for it.

We must start learning that other people have been victims of this middle-class culture aping the rich. Black and Puerto Rican, Mexican and Indian, Chinese and Japanese people have had their true history concealed and their faces scorned by TV and magazines. We must see that those who share the hardships we share are not the white middle and upper classes, but the black and brown people who work at our sides.

As white working-class and poor people we must begin to be proud of ourselves, our histories, and each other. We must unite and support ourselves as a people. Once we respect ourselves, we will find it necessary to struggle with a society and with jobs which tell us we are worthless. In that struggle we will learn that the anger of black and brown people which we have feared for so long has the same direction as our anger, that their enemies are our enemies, and their fight our fight.

What can we do about all this? As poor and working-class women, we can start asking what is wrong with America and stop asking what is wrong with ourselves. In a culture where women are often judged by beauty alone, the standard of beauty does not fit us. We, as ourselves, as we go to work or wash dishes, we, in our daily lives, are never called beautiful. Black women have told themselves that they are beautiful in their natural lives, and we need to do the same for ourselves.

We must begin to see ourselves as beautiful in our ability to work, to endure, in our plain honest lives, and we must stop aspiring to a false-eyelash existence that is not and never has been for us. We are not the women in Vogue, Glamour, or As the World Turns, nor should we want to be. We are the women who have dealt all our lives with the truths and tragedies of real life, because we never had the option of the armchair-beautiful people

existence. We are the people who have no maids or therapists to dump our troubles on. We know what it is to work hard and we are not guilty of wearing silks while others wear rags. We should never admire the women in Vogue, because there is something undeniably ugly about women who wear minks while others cannot afford shoes—and no amount of \$20-an-ounce make-up can hide that brand of ugliness.

fifth Estate

Debby D'Amico
To my White Working-Class Sisters
1971

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/126-march-4-17-1971/to-my-white-working-class-sisters>
Fifth Estate #126, March 4-17, 1971

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)