

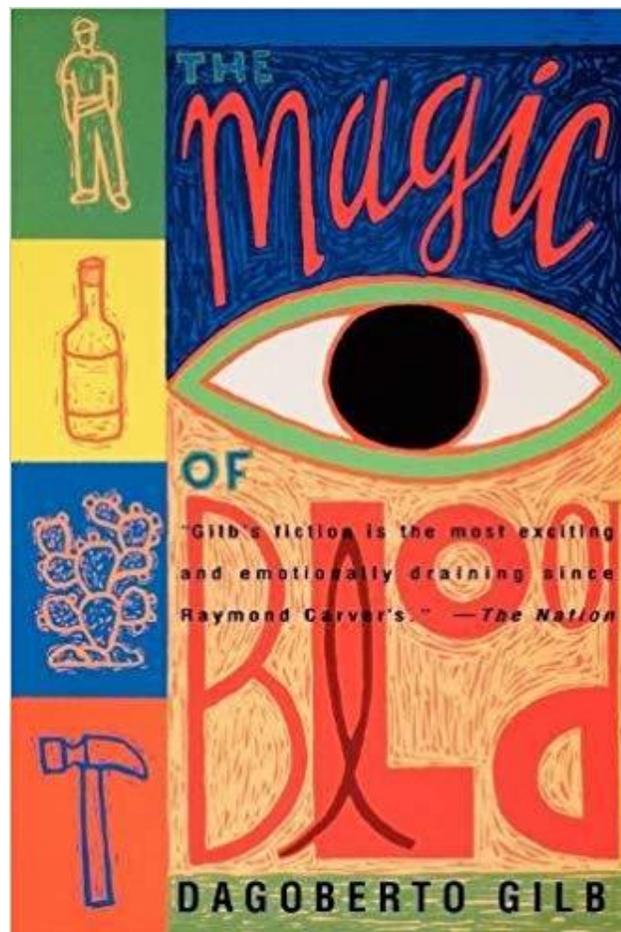
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The Magic of Blood

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by Jorge Mariscal



THE MAGIC OF BLOOD. DAGOBERTO GILB. GROVE PRESS, 1994.

***The Magic of Blood.* Dagoberto Gilb. Grove Press.**

Student expectations upon entering a course on Chicano literature are that the focus of discussions will be on issues of ethnicity and something called race. This latter category is one that most students think they understand. Given the absence in American education of any analysis based on class, students believe race (superficially understood as skin color or nationality), and perhaps gender, are the most powerful determinants of individual and group identity. University faculty who practice "cultural studies" do nothing to meliorate the situation, since, despite their repeated incantation of the race-class-gender trinity, they often have a weak understanding of class structures and little interest in what we used to call class conflict.

Dagoberto Gilb's 1993 collection of short stories, *The Magic of Blood*, forces students to consider class, gender, and ethnicity together in ways to which they are not accustomed because class and class-consciousness dominate the text. In part because Gilb himself is a professional carpenter and member of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners Local 1256 in New Mexico, he situates questions of Chicano/a identity within a rich panorama of working-class life. The ethnic context is certainly important as characters move through various Mexican-American communities in the Southwest, from East Los Angeles to El Paso and back again. In the opening story, "Look on the Bright Side," the Chicano protagonist takes his family on vacation to Baja California and upon returning to the U.S. experiences the frustration of being harassed by the Border Patrol. In "The Death Mask of Pancho Villa," competing forms of Mexican and Chicano working-class masculinity are juxtaposed in a narrative frame that is perhaps one of the most accurate and hilarious portrayals of the effects of marijuana ever written.

But it is in the descriptions of working-class people irrespective of their ethnicity that Gilb excels. A recurring term throughout the collection is "pride," which for Gilb's characters means pride of workmanship and respect for labor. Even though most of the characters rebound between part-time construction work, lay-offs, and dire economic predicaments at times carrying them to the brink of homelessness, they hold on to the belief that a job well done and respect for the labor of others are solid foundations upon which to build their identities. In the story "Al, in Phoenix," we meet Al, a mechanic who is so skilled at auto repair that the narrator is forced to overlook his rude and possibly racist behavior. And the pleasures of steady work even at minimum wage set the tone for "Getting a Job in Dell City."

Tim Libretti's assertion in the recent "Working-Class Studies" issue of *Radical Teacher* is an important one: "Chicana/o literature is already a deeply proletarian literature." What is different about Gilb's narratives is that they supplement the representations of farm-workers' lives that make up the bulk of early Mexican-American classics by introducing students to the complexities of Chicano working-class life in the great urban centers of the Southwest.



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