

Class interests and cultural divides

An interview with poet Christopher Kempf, author of *What Though the Field Be Lost*

Erik Schreiber
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The WSWS recently reviewed What Though the Field Be Lost, the latest book of poetry by Christopher Kempf. In this collection, Kempf explores the ways in which the Civil War has shaped contemporary America and particularly its working class. He later agreed to an interview to discuss his book and his thoughts about historical and political issues. The interview has been edited for publication.

The WSWS welcomes this exchange. In our view, the fundamental problem in the current climate is not simply “extremism” or lack of civility, nor do we see “ambivalence” as the solution, although artistic thoughtfulness and complexity are certainly in short supply.

The demonization and sanctimony to which Kempf refers reflect factional warfare within the ruling class, which hides the most fundamental issues facing working people. What is most urgently needed at present? In our view, a political perspective that can unite and direct the working class against the source of the crisis, the capitalist system.

Erik Schreiber: Your book is unusual and refreshing for its interest in history. What are your feelings about the present cultural and political atmosphere in the US?

Christopher Kempf: At the heart of this book is ambivalence. We live in a culture that might benefit a little from ambivalence and from pursuing political tactics other than demonization or sanctimonious rejection. I’m interested in how we talk productively about those issues that divide us, rather than perpetuating what seems to me a cycle of viciousness that does not lead to anything productive.

On both sides of the political divide, there is a tendency toward subjectivity, toward a kind of individualism. A kind of sanctimony that doesn’t grasp how animosity is redeployed and used by, for lack of a better term, money, by power. This divisiveness in our culture is preventing more substantive change.

ES: Your first book of poetry, *Late in the Empire of Men*, discusses your childhood and your family’s move to California, as well as America’s Westward Expansion. Tell us about the circumstances of your youth and how they might have influenced your work.

CK: I grew up in rural Ohio, and we were working class. My father worked at an auto parts factory. Ohio is a big high school football state. A lot of first books from poets are about childhood and about looking back on one’s life and trying to understand who one is. And so, I’m doing that in the book, but I also wanted to understand how high school football works as an expression of larger political and economic forces.

It’s one of the great sports in this country, but it’s a rite, it’s a ritual. You can see it from the opening national anthem, the militarism, the way we use phrases like “in the trenches” to talk about football. This expresses something deeply rooted in our culture. I wanted to think through how the United States perpetuates itself, or perpetuates an idea of itself, through certain aesthetic and rhetorical experiences like high school football.

ES: Have you read the poem by James Wright, *Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio*, about high school football?

CK: In college, my poetry professor held up that poem, and it was a moment that changed my life. Suddenly I saw that poetry could be about high school football and could be about working-class concerns. It’s like a mathematical, social equation that Wright exposes in that poem. It’s brilliant! There’s a depth to that poem that’s belied by its easy surface.

ES: *What Though the Field Be Lost* examines contemporary America and particularly its working class, through the prism of the Civil War. Few, if any, contemporary poets attempt to understand the relationship of history to contemporary conditions. What made you start thinking about the relationship between history and contemporary America?

CK: My first book is historical as well, and it looks back to ancient Rome as a corollary for an empire that falls. I was a history minor in college, and so I like to think allegorically or analogically about how the past bears on the present. I’m struck sometimes by how unaware many aspects of contemporary culture are about history. For example, the way that certain movements in the present are repeating the more sectarian policies of the 1960s and 1970s: a period of cultural nationalism. This is a very similar moment politically. It’s a very similar moment in poetry. That kind of narrowing of the scope to small-bore personal [issues]—we’ve seen this before.

To get back to your question about history, it’s a cliché to say that we can learn a great deal from the past about how our age is not special, how our age is the manifestation of certain transhistorical forces working through us. What I try to do in the maximalist kind of work that my poetry is doing is to set things side by side and let past and present abrade or strike sparks against one another. Poetry doesn’t teach by didacticism or by telling something. It teaches by those juxtapositions and by making readers think about parallels or incongruities or echoes through history. Bringing history into a poem is part of the rhetorical many-sidedness that, to me, a poem should contain.

I was in Gettysburg for a couple years, and just living in that space where the history is so present and at a moment when Confederate monument protests were happening, a lot of police shootings were happening. The particular history of the Civil War was and remains incredibly pertinent, including the way pundits say we’re headed toward another civil war. I wanted to look back toward that war to think about where we are now.

I wanted to use [English poet John] Milton because Milton obviously was living through his own civil war. Satan is invoked throughout the American Civil War as a figure for secession. Both North and South think about him as an analogue for the Confederacy. It was a pleasure to read through all these letters, newspaper accounts, court trials, and to see Satan brought up again and again. And it’s Milton’s Satan, it’s not the Biblical

Satan. I think it's yet another way that history constantly gets rebooted and repurposed.

ES: The attitude toward the American working class that is expressed in your recent book is ambivalent. There are moments of respect and appreciation alongside moments of ridicule or bemusement. In an interview with the *Adroit Journal*, you said that right-wing demagogues “have managed to channel rural America’s economic disenfranchisement into a conservative politics characterized by xenophobia, militarism and rebarbative economic policies.” Why don’t we find such direct statements in the book?

CK: That’s a good question, and I think you’re right to identify both the empathy for the working class and ridicule. That’s part of the ambivalence that the book wants to cultivate. That statement in that *Adroit* interview is something that I believe very much; I think it explains much of American history from the ’80s on. We don’t see that statement in a book of poetry because, to me, that’s not how poetry is most politically efficacious. A poem doesn’t teach us what to think, it teaches us how to think more self-consciously, more critically about the ways language is used.

What I try to do in the poems is model an internal formal tension where one aspect of the poem is counterweighted by another aspect. Something early is contradicted or balanced by something late. Encountering that kind of balanced, dialectical structure, that’s kind of cognitive training toward a plasticity of thinking, toward a flexibility of thinking that trains readers to negotiate other kinds of text. To understand, to read more carefully and understand how language is used against them and every day against the American working class. To me, poetry is a kind of linguistic training in how to think about language. It’s not a narrow “This is the proper reading of what has happened historically in American politics.”

ES: Poetry, by its very nature, forces the reader to read more carefully and think about what is being presented, but do you think that excludes making a statement or coming down on one side or the other?

CK: No, I don’t think it necessarily excludes that. If I were to insert into a poem the kind of statement that I made in the *Adroit* interview, I would also want to contextualize it. That statement issues from who I am and the kind of work that I do. A statement like that is, even in the language that it uses, off-putting to vast segments of the American population. I’m trying to resist positivist claims about American politics in favor of showing certain aspects of American culture and letting readers exercise their minds and arrive at their own conclusions.

This book does make arguments. It makes the argument, for example, that the South was wrong and abhorrent. But it also contextualizes that statement and balances it with empathy for Confederate monuments, empathy for the common soldier on both sides who showed a great deal of bravery to stand up and fight under those circumstances. I want a subtler, more nuanced and balanced formal structure.

There are moments in the book that are direct, even in the second poem, “Remembrance Day,” which mentions a lynching in Texas and says, “Isn’t this our country?” To me, that’s a direct statement, but it’s embedded within a system of imagery, within a system of other discursive statements. It’s a rhetorical question. It’s not a claim.

ES: Talking about specific poems, the title poem mentions William Blake’s description of John Milton as “a true Poet and of the Devil’s party.” It goes on, “Could we still—satisfied, so, / in our righteousness—admire that?” Can you elaborate on who “we” are and what kind of “righteousness” you had in mind?

CK: “We” is a term that’s very much put in jeopardy over the course of the book. It’s a book that asks, in many ways, “What does it mean to claim a ‘we’ or to want to claim a ‘we?’ Who is visible and invisible in that ‘we?’” The “we” across this book is multifarious. It’s protean. It’s sometimes, narrowly, my wife and I. It’s sometimes the United States. It’s sometimes humanity—and there’s, I recognize, a kind of

aggrandizement in claiming that “we.” In this particular instance, that “we” is contemporary culture. It’s the regnant social and cultural attitudes as I understand them.

What I’m trying to get at there is Milton’s ability to push against cemented religious and cultural shibboleths, to empathize with Satan. The kind of plasticity of thinking and of ethics that that takes. I see a capaciousness in Milton’s thought that I find sometimes lacking in contemporary culture. I think there is a kind of narrow righteousness that shuts down more productive dialectical, dialogical conversation.

ES: Who do you think is promoting this kind of judgmental thinking?

CK: There are particular interests who benefit from a restriction of imagination. The narrow sniping within the working class, which is split along many lines, prevents a real set of common interests from uniting the working class. There are all kinds of forces that benefit from that, whether that’s the party system, the tech industry that commodifies and reduces dialogue to 280 characters or a culture industry that restlessly co-opts anything and turns it into a product.

By pitting two segments of the working class against each other, you forestall unity. Virtually every corporation has much to gain from promoting narrow, sectarian strife. This is a moment when grad students, who are precarious labor, who are working adjunct jobs, who are very much underpaid, could be powerfully united with what we have come to call Trump voters. There are class interests that unite them, despite the cultural divide between them. Yet we can virtually not imagine that in this country.

ES: What are you working on now?

CK: I just finished a scholarly book that was based on my dissertation. It’s a history of the writing workshop. It’s coming out from Johns Hopkins University Press next year. It asks why we call it a creative writing “workshop.” Why do universities continue to peddle a notion of writing as craft labor? The book thinks about how the university destroys manual labor and then re-tools it as a metaphor to think about its own professional, managerial work. It argues that the writing workshop is a key force in the rise to power of the university and of white-collar neoliberalism.

I’m working on a collection of essays now called *Local Color*. It wants to think about the local as a site of resistance, but also look at the ways in which it’s enmeshed in broader financial networks or insidious cultural networks.



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