

# Introduction

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The idea for this collection was born out of a chance encounter over coffee in a U.S. Starbucks. Over a wide-ranging conversation, we discussed the state of working-class literature as a field, the decline of Marxism in academia, our favorite working-class authors, and the lack of good coffee shops on U.S. campuses. We both generally laid out the various trajectories of scholarly reception of working-class literature in our respective countries and realized that while there were similar trends, there were also stark differences. The conversation became a bug that, in the coming weeks, we could not squash: Why, for example, was working-class literature recognized as a central strand in national literature in Sweden while often discounted and marginalized in the U.S.? We each separately and ineffectively chased that bug to no avail. Over email conversations, we tried to find common ground between these two national understandings but even that was difficult because we weren't sure how the other defined fundamental terms. We contemplated how we define and categorize working-class literature and questioned whether a common definition could translate across the Atlantic Ocean? Researching comparative approaches on Swedish-U.S. working-class literature quickly showed a dearth of scholarship on this particular relationship but even more importantly, we found that there was very little comparative research on working-class literature across national boundaries at all. We quickly decided to co-write an essay specifically on Swedish and U.S. working-class literatures as a way to jump start this discussion.

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Working on this together allowed us to know more about each other's literary histories, as well as our own. There was value in our discussions, an opening dialogue that expanded definitions and raised larger questions about working-class literature from a global perspective. So why weren't more researchers doing this comparative work? This question was followed by the next logical one—why aren't we doing more? From that question emerged what would eventually become this edited collection. Our idea was to invite authors from a variety of nations who would write a compact history of the working-class literature of their country. If read as stand-alone chapters, each contribution gives an overview of the history and research of a particular nation's working-class literature. If read as an edited collection (which we hope you do), they contribute toward a more complex understanding of the global phenomenon of working-class literature(s).

At this particular historical moment—when the disparities between classes are growing, while conversations about class are becoming more marginalized (except for the plethora of opinion pieces assigning blame for Donald Trump's U.S. election or Great Britain's vote to leave the European Union on the rural lower classes)—a comparative analysis of working-class literature is needed. For decades, the conceptual triumvirate of *race*, *gender*, and *class* has set the agenda for much literary research. Triumvirates, however, are seldom egalitarian. Today, for example, two members of the famous second Roman triumvirate – Mark Anthony and Augustus Octavian – are much more well-known than its third member: Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. Class, it could be argued, is the Marcus Aemilius Lepidus of contemporary literary studies, as well as in academia in general. Viewed as being important, yes, but certainly, class does not garner the same attention as other phenomena. As Julian Markels (2003, p. 68) puts it in *The Marxian Imagination: Representing Class in Literature*, “class has become for so much recent scholarship the lip-service afterthought to gender and ethnicity.” In recent years, increased attention given by scholars to phenomena such as sexuality, disability, and species has pushed class even further down on the agenda. In fact, scholars interested in class are often not even invited to the academic “diversity banquet” (Russo and Linkon, 2005, p. 13).

One indication of the relative neglect of class in contemporary academia is that, whereas scholarship on literatures connected to, for instance, race and gender – such as African-American literature, feminist literature, postcolonial literatures, *écriture féminine*, etc. – has multiplied, research on working-class literature has often stagnated or diminished. As an example, the most comprehensive works about German working-class literature – such as Gerald Stieg and Bernd Witte’s, *Abriss einer Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterliteratur* (1973), or Rüdiger Safranski’s, *Studien zur Entwicklung der Arbeiterliteratur in der Bundesrepublik*, (1976) – were published more than 40 years ago.

Obviously, this neglect is a significant problem. Works published in the 1970s have long ago ceased to be comprehensive. This lack of contemporary research may also have contributed to the fact that working-class literature is often ghettoized and examined from a long-gone “glory-days” perspective. In a recent text about German working-class literature, Thomas Ernst (2011, p. 338) argues that in the 1960s, working-class authors deserved a place in German literary history, but that today, they do not.

The fact that much research on working-class literature is anchored in the past means that it is often steeped in outdated critical discourses. The theoretical foundation for Safranski’s research on this literature, for example, is a version of Marxism-Leninism that was in vogue in radical academic circles in West-Germany in the 1970s, but which has long ago both been abandoned by Safranski and lost its attraction within literary studies. Much contemporary research on working-class literature also remains theoretically backward. Unlike the multivariate and evolving theoretical framings used when examining race and gender, there has not been a significant development of analytical tools to understand class from a literary perspective. Pointedly, in U.S. working-class studies – where much of the most interesting research on U.S. working-class literature is carried out – one finds a marked hostility toward (contemporary) literary theory (Nilsson & Lennon, 2016, p. 43).

Our argument—that there is a relative lack of research on working-class literature in contemporary academia and that much of the existing research is dated or theoretically backward—does not mean to suggest that contemporary and innovative scholarship on

working-class literature does not exist. On the contrary, in recent years, a range of scholars has produced highly interesting works, which, for various reasons, have not received the attention they deserve. One interesting example of this is the publication of a great deal of innovative research on Japanese working-class literature by, among others, Samuel Perry (2014), Heather Bowen-Struyk (2011), and Mats Karlsson (2016). Another example is the plethora of working-class literature scholarship in the Nordic Countries that within the last couple of years has resulted in the publication of a series of edited collections of research (Jonsson et al., 2011; Jonsson et al. 2014; Agrell et al., 2016; Hamm et al., 2017).

However, like older research on working-class literature, much of this new research is characterized by a rather narrow national perspective. Although working-class literature is often internationally influenced due to factors such as translations of literature, migration, and the internationalist ideology of the labor movement, scholarship on this literature often only looks internally within national borders. In their essay about Finnish working-class literature in this volume, for example, Elsi Hyttinen and Kati Launis highlight that many of this literature's "transnational connections [...] remain underresearched." Similarly, in his article about Swedish working-class literature, Magnus Nilsson shows that its history has been written as a national narrative that obscures its international connections. This is true also for the research on other working-class literatures. Two good illustrations of this are Michelle Tokarczyk's (ed.) *Critical Approaches to American Working-Class Literature* (Routledge, 2011) and Niclas Coles and Janet Zandy's (eds.) *American Working-Class Literature* (Routledge, 2006), which, as the titles suggest, focus entirely on working-class literature in the U.S. While both works have many strong qualities, including an expansion of what can be considered "working-class literature," the lack of a global focus is a noted absence. Because of the unfortunate national compartmentalization of literary studies, there has been a general lack of comparative discussions among literary scholars examining different national working-class literatures. A further problem is that much of the scholarship on national working-class literatures – such as, working-

class literatures from Germany and the Nordic countries – is seldom published in English. Thus, research about working-class literature is often fragmented according to language barriers or myopic views of nation states.

Nevertheless, some attempts have been made to dismantle this national perspective. One example is the recent publication of an issue of the English-language *Journal of Finnish Studies* (vol. 18, no. 2) about Finnish working-class literature. Another is the argument put forward by Sonali Perera in her monograph, *No Country: Working-Class Writing in the Age of Globalization* (2014), which asserts that national borders and literatures have become less relevant for the study of working-class literature. We are excited by Perera's non-Eurocentric view of working-class literature and applaud her international perspective, which bypasses arbitrary global North-South binaries. We feel, however, that nation-states have been and, to some extent, still are important localizing forces on literature. In other words, we contend that working-class literature(s) cannot be properly understood without national comparisons. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, national border walls (both physical and ideological) are becoming larger and more imposing. Book markets and fields of literary production etc. are still often anchored nationally, or in languages without global reach, despite increasing globalization. Thus, although we praise Perera's willingness to look outside of a specific national context, we feel that it is only a start. There needs to be more robust conversations connecting literatures and time-periods from a larger number of nations around the globe.

The essays collected in this volume – all of which are original contributions, written by prominent and emerging scholars who are experts in working-class literatures of particular nations – describe and analyze such literatures from Russia/The Soviet Union, The United States, Finland, Sweden, Mexico, and Great Britain. The aim of collecting them is to respond to the problems described above.

Unlike most of the existing research on working-class literature, these essays do not confine their arguments to narrow chronological periods or particular authors. Instead, they have a wide-angle

view that follows the historical and thematic threads of particular nations' working-class literary traditions. Together, they map a substantial terrain: the history of working-class literature(s) in different parts of the world. In effect, each essay gives a thorough presentation of a particular nation's working-class literary history, while together, they give a complex – albeit far from comprehensive – picture of working-class literature(s) from a global perspective. Thus, this collection of essays highlights similarities and differences between different working-class literatures and brings to the fore how they are rooted both in international and in national contexts. Through this perspective – which is elaborated further in the afterword – the collection challenges the narrow national(istic) perspective characteristic of much research on working-class literature, while still acknowledging national specificities. In other words, the essays collected here present working-class literature as parts of *working-class literature(s)* – a totality made up of relatively autonomous but interrelated, or even overdetermined, parts that simultaneously encompass a global and a national phenomenon.

We feel it is important to mention that the contributing authors have not been asked to apply any given universal definition of the phenomenon of working-class literature to their articles. Instead, they have been encouraged to apply definitions that are relevant within their respective national contexts and from their respective theoretical perspectives. In this way, the essays do not only map the histories of working-class literature(s), but also the construction of them as such. The essays also focus on a wide range of different aspects of these literatures, such as their relationships to other literary traditions, their contributions to the construction of working-class subjectivities, their connections to political struggles, etc. They are not toothless general histories; each article engages with specific questions about their nation's working-class literature.

Katrina Clark's essay examines Russian/Soviet proletarian literature from its birth towards the end of the nineteenth century until the collapse of the Soviet Union a hundred years later. Clark's focus is primarily on the dialectic tension between two understandings of the concept of "proletarian" literature: as a literature

of or by workers, or as literature of or by the workers' political vanguard, i.e. the socialist intellectual, who may or may not be of working-class origin. On the one hand, self-educated workers' writing have been promoted as true proletarian authors whose work embody valuable experiences and ideals. However, on the other hand, proletarian literature, written by intellectual party members, has been promoted as a means for inculcating workers with political enlightenment. The outcome of this dialectic has been a highly heterogeneous literary history encompassing grand documentary projects supported by the communist party such as "The History of the Factories," as well as poetry written by self-educated workers and the socialist-realist production novel.

Benjamin Balthaser's essay on U.S. working-class literature places emphasis on the way that the production of class in this country has always been intertwined with racial looking, identification, and solidarity. Specifically, he explores the evolution of black nationalism, emphasizing how this political movement is also centrally concerned with class. Using Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) as central texts, Balthaser reads widely across working-class literature in the U.S. to analyze how it produces working-class subjectivity that is centrally concerned with racial identity.

Elsi Hyttinen & Kati Launis's article on 120 years of working-class fiction in Finland mirrors many of the other literary histories presented in this volume, stressing that there is no accepted unifying definition of the term *working-class literature*. Emerging from the labor movement and labor press at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and transforming dramatically in the immediate years after the Civil War of 1918 (before being reevaluated yet again in the 1960s as the political environment in the country shifted), working-class literature in Finland has developed among the contested and fluid fault lines of class-awareness, political commitment, and aesthetic form. Chronologically mapping working-class literature onto Finish history, Hyttinen and Launis demonstrate how one significant historical moment—the Civil War—has powerful limiting effects on what is (and what is not) understood as *working-class literature*. Literary scholars, however, have reexamined accepted definitions of this

term, thereby calling into question the term itself. As Finnish literature enters a new aesthetic period of experimentation and form in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this lack of a set definition allows for a more robust debate on the framing of working-class literature.

Magnus Nilsson offers an overview of the history of Swedish working-class literature, focusing on how this literature has been conceptualized in different ways, at different times, and in different contexts, thereby challenging established understandings of it. Among other things, he demonstrates how connections to working-class literatures in other countries have been obscured. Nilsson argues that the conceptualization of working-class literature's relationship to national and bourgeois literature, as well as to the working class, has been debated for more than a century.

Eugenio Di Stefano's article looks at Mexican working-class literature over a hundred-year period, specifically exploring the 1920s-1930s, the 1960s-1980s, and the early 2000s. Comparing and contrasting different labor literatures with specific foci on proletarian and testimonio literatures, Di Stefano argues that each working-class literature subgenre relates to the various modernization projects throughout modern Mexican history. Moreover, reading the literature of the present day, he notes an aesthetic transition from proletarian and testimonio literatures. Di Stefano states that present day working-class literature argues less for some fictional 'authenticity' and instead insists on experimental aesthetic forms that create spaces to interrogate a political subjectivity. In a post-modern, neo-liberal world where everything is commodified, Di Stefano stresses a need for an aesthetic commitment to the forms of working-class literature that accentuate artistic invention rather than a fictional 'authentic' reproduction of working-class life.

Simon Lee's article on British working-class literature examines the genre's rich lineage, arguing that its primary focus is the tension between aesthetic and political objectives. Matching a substantial review of the scholarship of the genre with an examination of a range of literature from the Chartists to the Kitchen Sink authors, Lee contends that each period in British history continually reinvents what is "British working-class literature." Each era, therefore, infuses contemporary social concerns with adapted literary techniques that resist commodification and stagnation of

the term, rendering the genre fluid and thus consistently politically- and aesthetically-engaged.

By capturing a wide range of definitions and literatures, this collection wants to give a broad and rich picture of the many-faceted phenomenon of working-class literature(s), disrupt narrow understandings of the concept and phenomenon, as well as identify and discuss some of the most important theoretical and historical questions brought to the fore by the study of this literature. Thereby we want to make possible the forging of a more robust, politically useful, and theoretically elaborate understanding of working-class literature(s).

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