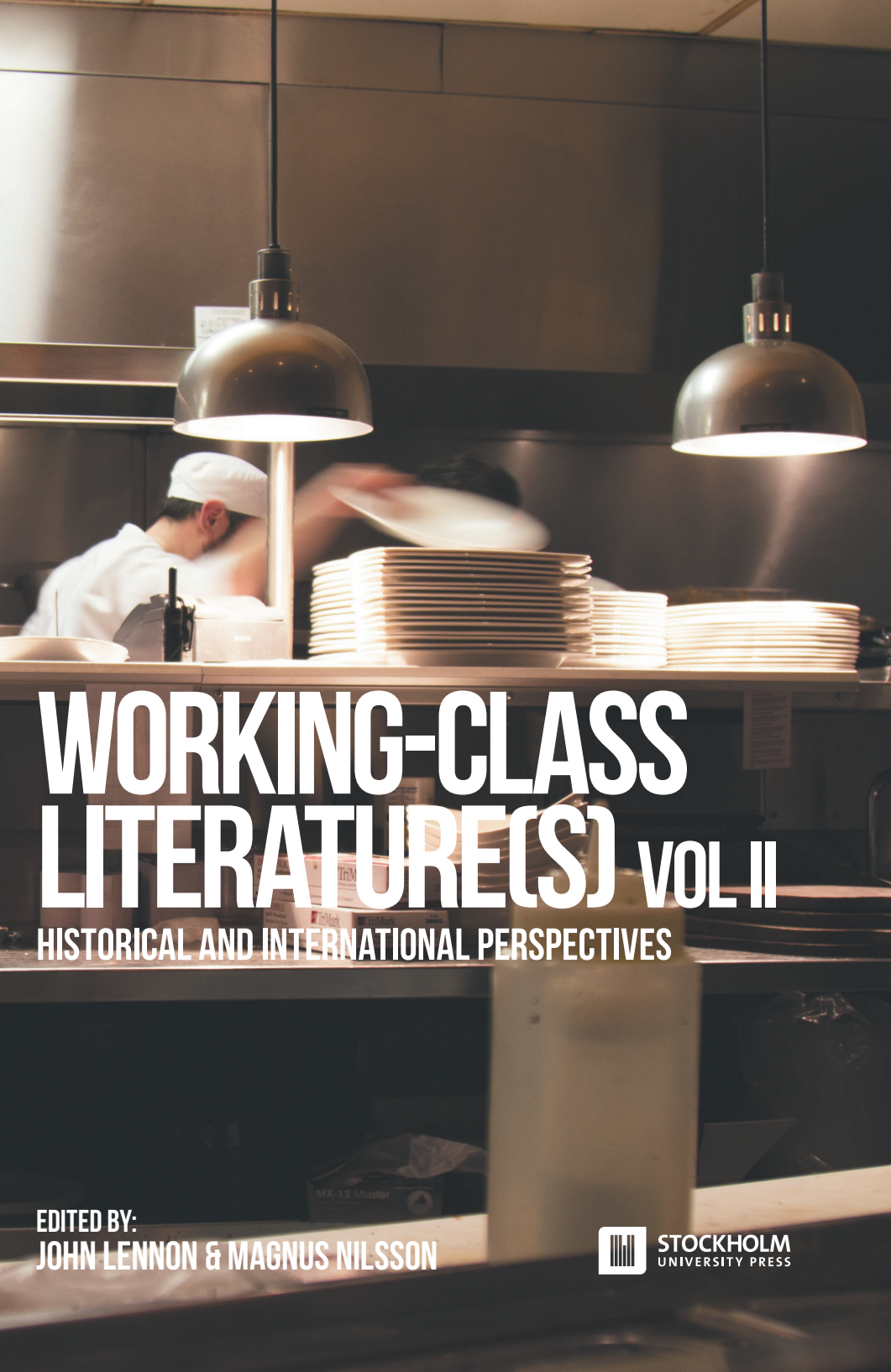

WORKING-CLASS LITERATURE(S) VOL II

HISTORICAL AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY:
JOHN LENNON & MAGNUS NILSSON

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Introduction: Evolving Perspectives on Working-Class Literature

John Lennon & Magnus Nilsson

The main impetus to publish the first volume of *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives* was simple: we were unhappy with the scholarly framing surrounding working-class literature. Excellent work was, of course, available, but much scholarship in our field was – in our view – too strictly nationalistic in outlook, too focused on the distant past, and too often theoretically outdated. As we present this second volume, we see that the scholarly framework has continued to evolve in exciting new directions.

Today, there is no lack of cutting-edge research on working-class literature and we are proud to recruit to our two edited collections junior and senior scholars who are innovatively exploring this literature. Together they will push working-class literary studies in new directions, challenging previously held beliefs about *what* working-class literature is and about *who* is writing it. They are building upon previous work but are also aware of the need to introduce new perspectives and to revise established literary histories.

Most exciting to us is that there are clear tendencies within this contemporary research to establish international connections among scholars while making salient transnational comparisons between different traditions of working-class literature and research. This reminds us of a beautiful scene early in Maxim Gorky's 1906 classic novel *Mother* [Мать] depicting Russian workers surprised to read literature about workers in other countries.

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The workers gain perspective and inspiration from these stories, allowing them to reimagine their own socio-political positioning. Likewise, we are thrilled to see our colleagues in countries throughout the world reading through these wide-angle national histories and collaborating on new international projects. We have been able to see this phenomenon at several recent working-class literature conferences.

For example, at the American Comparative Literature Association's conference in Los Angeles in 2018, scholars compared proletarian literatures from the U.S., Germany, the U.K., the Soviet Union, Sweden, China and Korea. A few weeks later, scholars discussed working-class literatures from Korea, Sweden, Germany and the U.K. during the workshop, "The Proletarian Moment: Interdisciplinary Approaches, Comparative Perspectives" at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research at the University of Bielefeld in Germany. In the summer of 2019, members of the research project "Piston, Pen & Press – Literary Cultures in the Industrial Workplace from the Factory Acts to the First World War," which studies English and Scottish working-class literatures, and thus in itself includes an international dynamic, collaborated during a conference in Tampere, Finland in cooperation with the Finnish Labor Museum. The aim of this conference – which attracted participants from the U.K., Finland, Sweden, Russia and the U.S. – was to initiate international discussions about working-class literature while building international scholarly networks. A few weeks later, The Association for Working-Class Studies – the most important academic organization for scholars of working-class literature in the U.S. – located their nineteenth annual conference to Cambridge, England, marking its first meeting outside of the U.S., with the expressed purpose, as stated on their website, to "consolidate work being carried out currently in the UK and Europe with the USA and elsewhere in the world."

In 2020, two more conferences were to be held at the Museum of Labour History in Copenhagen, Denmark. At the Nordic Labour History Conference "Labouring Lives and Political Protest Across and Beyond the Nordic Countries" – which has been postsponed due to the corona pandemic – sholars from Sweden, Finland, and Denmark should have engaged in comparative discussions, while

the conference organized by The Nordic Network for the Study of Working-Class Literature, which will take place digitally, will explore the theme of "international perspectives and connections" in Nordic working-class literatures.

Thus, the national (or even nationalistic) framework that troubled us in much previous research about working-class literature seems to be under greater scholarly pressure in recent years. The same can be said about the incorrect view of working-class literature existing only as a historical phenomenon. Deindustrialization, the rise of neoliberalism and the subsequent attacks on unionism in many countries across the world have reshaped the working class. Working-class literature has, therefore, also changed; however, it has not disappeared. Scholars are contextualizing 21st century literature as a dialogue with the past by exploring our present literature within a historical tradition. For example, in recent years, Cambridge University Press has published three edited collections about the history of U.S., British, and Irish working-class literatures, all of which follow these literatures' development into our present age (Coles and Lauter, 2017; Goodridge and Keegan, 2017; Pierse, 2018).

Thus, if we understood the first volume of *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives* as an attempt to "disrupt narrow understandings" of the concept and phenomenon of working-class literature, we view this subsequent volume more as a contribution to a broad current of new scholarship about working-class literatures. We see much momentum among scholars to think about their national working-class literatures in context of a larger international and historical phenomenon, drawing comparisons that reexamine previously held beliefs. Because of this, working-class literary studies is in a great position to grow. This expansion is especially important in our contemporary moment when neo-liberal austerity governments, which do not look favorably upon our field, are increasingly slashing university budgets.

In the introduction to the previous volume, we stressed that we had no ambition to comprehensively overview all existing working-class literature traditions. Even if the present book's publication means we have now gathered essays from more than a dozen

countries, we repeat this disclaimer. Working-class literatures exist in many parts of the world, and to produce a comprehensive account of these literatures is well beyond our ambitions. We hope, though, the work begun in these two volumes continue and that editors and publishers look to boost the voices of scholars working on working-class literatures from all over the world—especially from unrepresented nations. By spotlighting these literatures, we can have a more comprehensive understanding of bodies of previously overlooked literature.

Our goal for this collection is still a rather modest one: to give examples of different working-class literature traditions that contribute toward a more complex understanding of the global phenomenon of working-class literature(s). Taken separately, each chapter introduces a national tradition of working-class literature. Taken together, a larger more complex view of working-class literatures forms. Below, we will outline some of the important aspects of this view and the essays discussed in this collection. Our hope, though, is readers will identify other similarities and differences between these working-class literatures, adding to the ongoing scholarly debates about this phenomenon.

In her essay "Tales of Social Terror: Notes on Argentine Working-Class Literature," Anna Björk Einarsdóttir argues, in Argentina, the concept of working-class literature has not been widely used, and accounts of this literature have often been misconstrued. Because discussions of proletarian literature and committed aesthetics in Argentina have focused mainly on one writer – Elías Castelnuovo – the breadth of proletarian literature in Argentina has been obscured, and working-class literature has been reduced to a literature almost pathological in its naturalist and grotesque account of proletarian misery. By (re-) introducing and expanding the concept of working-class literature, Einarsdóttir moves beyond local terminology and critical accounts and seeks to open up a new space to examine what might count as Argentine working-class literature. This space is, in part, international, since the essay stresses the importance of seeing the local development of proletarian literature and politics in Argentina in the context of transnational developments.

In the essay "Danish Working-Class Literature Past and, Perhaps, Present," Nicklas Freisleben Lund outlines the history of Danish working-class literature from the late nineteenth century to, *perhaps*, the present. The word "perhaps" is a nod to the many critics who, pointing to a drastic decline in scholarly interest in working-class literature since the 1970s, have argued that this tradition has either ended or been actively silenced; however, according to Lund, it is mainly the *concept* of working-class literature that has disappeared from critical discourses. In his essay, Lund uncovers potential candidates for 21st century Danish working-class literature that scholars have heretofore not described as such. By doing so, Lund argues a significant point that all contemporary scholars of working-class literature should heed: the working class in the 21st century has changed; so, too, have representations of this class. As we conceptualize working-class literature from an international perspective, Lund illustrates we must also be willing to expand our conceptions of it.

Hunter Biven's essay "Revisiting German Proletarian-Revolutionary Literature" focuses primarily on one strand within the history of German working-class literature: the proletarian-revolutionary novel genre of the Weimar Republic. He offers a "revisionist" reading of this literature, focusing on the tensions between its status as a counter—or subcultural working-class practice on the one hand and, on the other hand, its ambitions to contribute to proletarian cultural hegemony in society at large. This relatively narrow focus might seem to contradict a goal in this volume to give overviews of national traditions. However, the history of German working-class literature is highly heterogenous and fragmented, which means it has been hard to view it as one unified tradition (Nilsson 2014, 64–70). By exploring the proletarian-revolutionary novel genre, Bivens creates a comparison point with other strands in German literature as well as other national literatures.

In his essay, "The Proletarian Literature Movement: Japan's First Encounter with Working-Class Literature," Mats Karlsson also focuses on proletarian literature from the interwar period. In Japan, however, this literature constitutes the core of the tradition of working-class literature, since, as Karlsson points out, the

vibrant Proletarian Cultural Movement initiative, which constituted its infrastructure, was virtually "shut down" by the authorities in the mid 1930s. Nevertheless, Karlsson demonstrates how the literature of this proletarian moment, at least in some cases, has "aged well," and has relevance in today's political, economic, and cultural situation.

In "From Red Scare to Capitalist Showcase: Working-Class Literature from Singapore," Luka Zhang Lei delineates a historical overview of working-class literature in Singapore. She does so by focusing on three writers, Chong Han (1945–), Tan Kok Seng (1939–), and MD Sharif Uddin (1978–), who represent different "production modes" within this history and engages in critical dialogues with their receptions. Zhang begins by noting there is no recognized tradition of working-class literature in Singapore, and her aim is to contribute to the construction of such a discourse. In part, this means she re-reads literature that has previously not been understood as working-class literature. For example, in her reading of Chong Han, she proposes the concept of working-class literature as an alternative to that of communist propaganda, thereby making visible new aspects of his works. Zhang also uses the concept of working-class literature to challenge hegemonic discourses about literature in Singapore founded in racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, as well as to argue against the dominant idea that workers' literature is not "real" literature. Importantly, Zang introduces – and critiques – the massive attention given to literary competitions for migrant workers in Singapore (and beyond) in recent years that she feels is part of capitalistic exploitation.

In the essay "The Hybridity of South African Working-Class Literature," Małgorzata Drwal offers an overview of this literature, focusing on its diversity in terms of, among other things, genres, forms, languages, audiences, and traditions. With the point of departure in the theoretical concept of "histoire croisée," Drwal also maps its relationships to both international and national processes, discourses, and conditions. The author also focuses on the similarities – for example expressions of pastoral nostalgia – between different kinds of working-class literature. Like all of the essays in this collection, Drwal pushes against previous

notions of what has previously been left out of South African working-class literature, expanding the frame and, thus, reimagining its tradition.

In "'A Pole of Differentiation': Pasts and Futures in Irish Working-Class Writing," Michael Pierse continues his work found in his own edited collection *The History of Irish Working-Class Writing* (2017): to explore Irish working-class literature in light of the recent reconceptualizations of Irish history that have stressed the nation's key role in the development in British imperialist capitalism, and the subsequent rediscovery of the Irish working class. His main claim is the writing that has emerged from, or represents, the Irish working class has been far more extensive and diverse than previously acknowledged in scholarship. His essay constitutes an attempt to open up and promote Irish working-class literature as an area of academic inquiry that, because of its diasporic nature, demands both national and international framing.

To a large extent, the essays in this volume confirm many of our first volume's arguments:

a) National histories are important to understand. These understandings, though, are enriched and complicated when dialogued with other national working-class literatures.
b) These dialogues between national working-class literatures must consider local conditions and specificities. Generic working-class literature definitions that attempt to narrowly fit working-class literatures from all nations together are unproductive.
c) Histories of working-class literature must do more than identify writers from the working class or literary works depicting workers and detail the *construction* of working-class literature as a tradition specifically dialoguing with political and social conflicts.

All of the articles presented in this volume clearly argue, or illustrate, the above points. However, this collection also – together with discussions at the many conferences and workshops about working-class literatures in recent years – offers new perspectives,

accents and insights we believe continue to push our field in new directions.

The starting point for many of this volume's essays is a critique of the use of the concept of working-class literature in a narrow and/or distorting way, or of the fact that literary scholars avoid the concept, denying there is even a national working-class literary tradition. In his essay, Lund argues that in Denmark the concept mainly describes an older literary tradition that is safely in the past—a nostalgia certainly present in many national literatures, including the U.S. where working-class literature is often conceptualized as consisting of only the 1930s proletarian movement. By examining Denmark's contemporary literary scene, Lund suggests literary scholars need to continue to resist standardized definitions of working-class literature and expand the way we conceptualize this literature in the present socio-political moment. In South Africa, working-class literature tends to be understood in case studies of certain authors or genres (a limiting move) without dialoguing with larger national trends. As Drwal points out, working-class literature is often subsumed within other conceptual paradigms—such as urban literature—which minimizes discussions of class. In other national literatures, the concept of class is almost completely elided. Zhang in her article on working-class literature in Singapore points to a "lack of discourse" on the subject of working-class literature as primarily issues of conceptualization and framing.

The reason for the narrowing or distorting conceptualizations of working-class literature varies among nations. Einarsdóttir explains how the right-wing terror plaguing Argentina and destroying many of the Left's cultural institutions have made possible the framing of working-class literature in naturalistic and grotesque ways. Political violence has had a lasting effect on the working class's conceptualization, and she argues the need to reexamine the literary tradition that expands this conceptualization. In Japan, Karlsson points to Japanese government authorities' destruction of the infrastructure of a vibrant working-class literary movement within the interwar period. A similar fate awaited the proletarian-revolutionary literature movement analyzed by Bivens, as well as many other working-class literary movements

in other countries (the U.S. being one with the rise of Red Scare and McCarthyism). As Lund shows, in Denmark it was not state intervention against the labor movement, but discursive struggles within literary criticism that resulted in working-class literature's disappearance from literary history. In Ireland, on the other hand, nationalism remains an important rival to class-based understandings of both society and literature. The struggles for independence from colonial rule directly affected how the working class has been conceptualized; Pierce argues that to analyze Irish working-class literature means to consider the effect of British rule on the Irish diaspora and its conception of "Irish" identity. In a similar fashion, Drwal explains in her essay that in South Africa, racism was a prime factor in limiting the concept of what constitutes working-class literature.

Regardless of these varying reasons, many of the essays in this volume aim at (re-) introducing the concept of working-class literature and/or changing its meaning. Drwal, for example, argues for imagining the concept of working-class literature not as a fixed category, but as various manifestations of thought being constructed and evolving in space and time, which invites examining circumstances that facilitate or hinder certain cultural exchanges. Zhang's analysis of Singaporean literary history leads to a shift away from categorization of what working-class literature in Singapore is now toward speculation regarding what working-class literature *could be*. She argues the role of contests promoting working-class literature undercuts the potentiality of the literature as collective ideal. Above all, she argues the poetry competitions for migrant workers organized in Singapore and other Asian countries produce "commodified working-class writings" that should be understood in terms of neoliberal experiments that "potentially hurts the working-class writing community." By reconceptualizing the concept of working-class literature, these articles make these literatures visible in new ways.

By reconceptualizing theories of literature, together these articles also suggest we need to reconceptualize class itself—an idea Lund argues clearly in his essay (although importantly, he believes a traditional concept of working-class literature is relevant today). Karlsson reasons that in Japan, older working-class literature

can be a resource for understanding class and combatting class injustice in contemporary capitalism. Zhang criticizes alternative framings of literature in Singapore, arguing that the production of literature (and who gets to produce it) is a key to understanding the historical phenomenon of a nation's working class (and, of course, its literature). What Lund, Karlsson, Zhang, and others in this volume show is that research on working-class literature raises questions about what constitutes the working class in these countries, an important question in the second decade of the 21st century.[1]

Taken together, these articles show that national literatures are not contained within their own borders. National literatures are, at their core, global literatures, not the least because of the constant settling of migrants within new national boundaries while native born citizens leave for distant shores. Pierse shows in his article on the Irish diaspora that to understand "Irish" literature one must understand the literature by Irish immigrants who fled both the famine and, later, the Troubles, and settled in countries like the United States. In Singapore, migrant workers fit uncomfortably within a national literature that often refuses to recognize them. In other words, literature does not fit neatly within a nation's borders but map on the global diasporic routes. While this was an undercurrent in our first volume, this phenomenon is made much more explicit in this volume.

Both this volume and its predecessor argue that working-class literature(s) is a global phenomenon consisting of local literatures. We are confident this constitutes a good starting point for further research, and that it resonates well with key trends in contemporary scholarship about this literature. There are, however, things that are *not* done in this collection, or in the previous volume. For example, most essays focus almost exclusively on traditional literary forms, such as novels, poems, and plays, whereas phenomena such as comics, "amateur" writing or literature published in labor-movement periodicals or in digital media are largely ignored. We think it would valuable if future research on working-class literature could adopt a more generous attitude toward the latter part of the concept and pay more attention to other media and public spheres than has hitherto been the case.

Another important movement in the field could be to theoretically develop a more robust definition of working-class literature(s). In a forthcoming article, Nilsson has taken an initial step in this direction by suggesting that the concept of working-class literature(s) could base itself on a dialectic between *historically specific working-class literatures* and *the theoretical concept of working-class literature*. This would mean empirical accounts of different working-class literatures contribute to the concept of working-class literature(s) by making visible phenomena that this concept must be able to accommodate. However, if the concept of working-class literature depends on analyses of many (actually existing) working-class literatures, then this will, in turn, affect these analyses. (It is this analysis that constitutes the *dialectical* aspect of the conceptual framework of working-class literature(s).) For example, the fact that the general concept of working-class literature is explicitly based on many such literatures makes it less likely that one example of working-class literature is solely declared genuine, and exceptionalities will instead be conceptualized as aspects of the universal. We think this heterogeneity is necessary for a variety of reasons including that a generic definition would prioritize established recognized working-class literature over the literatures of smaller, less recognized literatures, many of whom we have highlighted in our volumes. Our goal has always been dialogue, not definitions, or, perhaps, definitions though dialogue.

We look forward to the continued expansion of the field of working-class literature past its national boundaries, and we are encouraged by scholars gathering and learning at various conferences. It is our hope that scholars will continue to dialogue and build resource platforms focused not only on their research but also on their working-class literature pedagogy. The Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown University in the U.S. is a great example of compiling teaching resources together and building scholarly communities of like-minded scholars. Our vision, though, is for more integrated global pedagogical practices. Many of us teach graduate and undergraduate courses that work on dialoguing working-class literatures from a global and historical perspective—Lennon, for example, has introduced two new working-class literature courses with global perspectives at the

University of South Florida and is currently supervising graduate students on theses and dissertations on this subject. But while these courses are outward looking, they exist only in the space of the classroom and in one-on-one mentorships.

Nilsson has developed an online English-language undergraduate course which has been given for the first time in the Fall of 2020, open to students from all over the world (for EU citizens, it will even be – like all university courses in Sweden are – tuition-free). The course also involves participation from university professors from several continents. This is an improvement of student reach and an initial step toward international professorial collaboration. In the future, we hope to be able to develop this initiative further. Our goal is to have faculty from across the globe teaching together working-class literature(s) both synchronously and asynchronously. These online spaces can compile and encourage dialogue between national experts, organize large national histories, and pool in-depth analysis of particular books. Students from around the globe could collaborate on projects collaboratively, building a platform of ideas together that expand and inspire debate long after the student's graduation. Linking scholarly and pedagogical practices with a consciously built ethos of collaboration can continue to build strong foundations for our shared interests in working-class literature(s) as a continued viable subject of study. An international center of working-class literature – focusing on both research and teaching – could be formed through these collaborations as networks become solidified and projects get published.

These are, of course, future plans that we hope to be a part of as our field continues to expand in new directions. While the future looks bright, there is one thing that has not changed since the publication of the previous volume: class is still an underresearched phenomenon and an under-theorized concept. Working-class literature is, to be sure, a complex phenomenon. At the same time as it refers to literature, it also brings to the fore questions about class and class injustice in other parts of society. We stated in the previous volume that a more diverse and dynamic understanding of working-class literature could contribute to making visible many aspects of the phenomenon of class. We see presently how

literature is a powerful force when it comes to discussing class, including in the large number of recently published, internationally acclaimed memoirs and autobiographical novels. For example, Édouard Louis's novels (*Who Killed My Father?, The End of Eddy*) and Didier Eribon's (*Returning to Reims*) memoir intellectually explore the intersection of class and sexuality in France. Lyndsey Hanley (*Respectable: The Meaning of Class*) and Cash Carraway (*Skint Estate*) explore the way class is reinforced generationally for British working-class women. In the U.S., J.D. Vance's (*Hillbilly Elegy*) examines working-class generational poverty in Appalachia (and argues for individual escape) while Sarah Smarsh's memoir (*Heartland*) examines generational poverty of the working-class in Kansas (and argues for collective responses to improve the social and economic conditions of the working-class). In the Macron/Trump/Johnson era, all of these works are important documents that report on local conditions in an age where class meanings and representations are consistently under tension.

Richard Hoggart (1989, p. vii) stated in his introduction to George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, that, "Each decade we shiftily declare that we have buried class, yet each decade the coffin stays empty." Class is still certainly not dead, but, in a neo-liberal age, there are new tensions, historical phenomena, and aesthetic representations of class that merit careful examination. We hope our volume serves in a small way to keep discussions of class alive and politically relevant.

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Endnotes

1. There is currently some excellent work on national examinations of working-class literature as it relates to the new 21st economy including Sherry L. Lincoln's *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

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Tales of Social Terror: Notes on Argentine Working-Class Literature

Anna Björk Einarsdóttir

The term *working-class literature* is not widely used within Argentine literary studies, nor is it central to Latin American literary studies.[1] This essay takes up the problem of discussing working-class literature in a context marked by the absence of the term. When examining works associated with the working class and the working-class struggle in Argentina, one is more likely to encounter expressions such as "the social novel" [*la novela social*], "social literature" [*literatura social*], "proletarian literature" [*literatura proletaria*], and even the more specific designation "Boedo-literature" [*literatura boedista* or *boedismo*].[2] This essay seeks to locate the starting point for a discussion devoted to Argentine working-class literature. In short, the aim here is to treat what at first glance may appear as the most important theme associated with working-class literature in Argentina. This theme is best described by citing literary and cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo's influential reading of Argentine writer Elías Castelnuovo, whose narratives she analyzes as "scientific fictions of social terror" (1988, p. 201). As discussed in more detail below, critics have identified "social terror" as central to 1920s and 30s Argentine proletarian literature. However, this understanding of proletarian literature — and, by extension, working-class literature — poses problems. For example, authors who elsewhere would belong to the tradition of working-class literature are not considered as such within Argentine letters. The following discussion moves beyond local terminology and critical accounts, seeking to open up a new space to examine what might be categorized as Argentine working-class

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literature. Furthermore, the essay recognizes the historical context in which the conventional critical narratives were formed while demonstrating how these narratives have shaped Argentine literature and its representations of the working class.

The social terror that has been identified as a major theme of 1920s and 30s proletarian — or, "social" — literature turns out to be a prevalent mood of Argentine literature at least since Esteban Echeverrías's *El matadero* [*The Slaughter Yard*] (1871). *El matadero* is considered the first work of prose fiction within Argentine literature and is well known for the portrayal of the lower classes as a violent horde. In the story, a young gentleman is brutally attacked and sodomized by a horde of starving poor people who are depicted unfavorably as supporters of Argentina's first dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793–1877).[3] The vicious scene of butchery and gore in *El matadero* offers a pessimistic and brutal view of the lower classes. *El matadero* is quite remarkable, and, as María Teresa Gramuglio points out, if one accepts the story as the first work of prose fiction within Argentine letters, then "one would also have to admit that Argentine literature is born realist" (2002, p. 23).[4] Moreover, and adding to Gramuglio's claim, this realism is infused with a pessimism characterized by brutal violence and social terror particularly prevalent in depictions of the working poor and members of the proletariat.

As opposed to other national traditions that see the emergence of literature concerned with the working class in the 19th century, Argentine literature is remarkable as few precursors exist prior to the appearance of the militant and workerist tradition of the Boedo-group in the 1920s. This group forms an integral part of the proletarian moment of the 1920s and the 30s, initiating what should be considered the earliest expression of working-class literature in Argentina. The repression of the proletarian-centered interwar left took place earlier in Argentina than elsewhere. In 1930, president Hipólito Yrigoyen was ousted in a coup d'état by José Félix Uriburo, thus initiating "the infamous decade" [*la decada infame*]. Uriburo's dictatorship repressed communist and leftists presses while imprisoning poets and writers, thus offering an early example of the repression that the communist left of the interwar period experienced in the mid-1930s and throughout

the 40s in other national contexts. Furthermore, the recovery of the old interwar literary left, which began elsewhere with the new left of the 60s and the 70s and continued throughout the 1980s and the 90s, was interrupted in Argentina with the brutal repression of the new left. During the military dictatorship of the 1970s, leftist organizing and activism were suppressed along with artistic and literary radicalism, including attempts to recover neglected literature of the past.

While in other national contexts, this period saw the increased interest and recouping of the proletarian moment of the 1920s and the 30s, in Argentina, this time was characterized by state terror, forced imprisonment, torture, the killing of political dissidents, and exile. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this historical and political context for the fate of working-class literature within Argentine letters—especially when compared with traditions where working-class literature has been celebrated and accepted as forming a part of the national tradition. For example, in the Nordic countries, working-class literature has been recognized as a strand within the national literature and has even been canonized, in particular in Sweden (Nilsson, 2017, pp. 95–96). Furthermore, in studies on American literature, specific attention has been paid to cultural production during the depression-era with the thirties playing a prominent role in scholarship since the early 1990s initiating a recovery of proletarian literature and writings (Denning, 2010; Foley 1993; Rabinowitz 1996). In contrast, the attention to the atrocities of the military dictatorship and the complete repression and diffusion of the new left in Argentina has resulted in the devotion of Argentine literary studies to the recovery of the new left more than the old.

In Latin American literary studies, proletarian literature of the interwar period and the broader tradition of working-class literature have not been examined in a transnational context. Although the avant-garde movements have been studied in such context (Unruh, 1994; Verani, 1996), and some authors associated with the proletarian literary left have been folded into that discussion,[5] there is currently no comprehensive study tracking the proletarian literary left in Latin America, nor are there transnational studies on working-class literature. The following discussion is primarily

concerned with Argentine working-class literature and the question of how to approach the study of such literature in a context wherein the term does not possess a hegemonic place. Although this essay looks closely at a case of an isolated national literature, the aim is to contribute to the mapping of working-class literature across the region and beyond. This discussion urges for the study of the proletarian-centered literary left of the 1920s and the 30s across the region and in context of the international movement, for such literature found expressions in different corners of the world during that period.[6] In particular, this article will focus upon Argentine proletarian writer Elías Castelnuovo and his role in shaping how not only proletarian literature but also how working-class literature is defined within Argentine letters. The following discussion moves chronologically, paying particular attention to the proletarian literary left of the 1920s and the 30s and how this left and its critical legacy have shaped both Argentine literature and its criticism throughout the 20th century. A recent example of this lineage includes discussions devoted to labor and the laboring body in contemporary Argentine literature. In recent scholarship, more attention has been paid to representations of labor in literature than working-class literature devoted to the struggle against labor (Rodríguez & Laera, 2019, p. 33).

Institutionalized Tales of Social Terror

In Argentina, the late 1800s and the early 1900s saw waves of immigration from Europe. Thus, the modern Argentine nation-state was formed in a context marked by the struggle over who belonged to the nation.[7] The 1800s saw the early development of national literature in José Mármol's *Amalia* (1851) and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie* (1845) [*Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*], culminating in José Hérnandez's epic poem *Martín Fierro* (1872/79). The poem mythologized the gaucho, an early representative of a waged seasonally employed laborer on landed estates, skilled in horsemanship and cattle work. If portraying labor and the laborer is the defining feature of working-class literature, *Martín Fierro* could qualify as an early example of Argentine working-class literature. However, the poem does so in the absence of a working-class movement or before the

Argentine labor movement fully emerged.[8] As Neil Larsen points out, "Hernandéz discloses all the lineaments of proletarianization in *Martín Fierro* but evidently lacks its concept" (1995, p. 151). Classifying works such as *Martín Fierro* as working-class literature, thus, poses certain problems for the discussion. Moreover, by the early 1920s, the epic portrayal of the gaucho in *Martín Fierro* designated a unique Argentine national spirit forever out of reach of the new immigrant populations that had entered the country in the late 1800s and the early 1900s. A reading of *Martín Fierro* sees the epic poem in the context of those later readings that exploited the poem's xenophobic and anti-cosmopolitan turns (Sommer, 1989, pp. 122–123). As a result, the gaucho, and specifically his portrayal in *Martín Fierro,* came to represent the early beginnings of a literary tradition positioned against immigrant workers, who, by the 1920s, populated most, if not all, industries and service sectors of the economy, from agricultural labor, to semi-industrialized industries such as meatpacking, as well as service-work and white-collar office work in Buenos Aires.[9] In contrast to the toiling marginalized masses in agriculture, industry, and service, nationalist ideologues idealized the gaucho's free-roaming in the Argentine plains.

Against this background, the 1920s saw the emergence of two literary groups: the Florida group and the Boedo group. Each group traced its lineage back to one side forged in the early 1900s between the mythical gauchos of the past and the immigrant masses crowding cities such as Buenos Aires. The Florida group took its name after the main shopping and business street in Buenos Aires and its members held in high regard the work of Argentine intellectual and poet Leopold Lugones (1874–1938). In particular, Lugones's nationalist reading of *Martín Fierro* had a powerful impact on the writers associated with the Florida group, one of whose publications was named *Martín Fierro*. Contributors to the Florida group and the journal *Martin Fierro* were thus often referred to as 'the martinfierristas,' including well-known Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges.[10] In contrast, the Boedo group took its name after the Boedo neighborhood, the main working-class district in Buenos Aires at the time. The Boedo group was connected to the Claridad publishing house and the *Claridad* journal. Antonio Zamora, an immigrant of Spanish origin, edited the

journal and ran the publishing house, drawing the name Claridad from the French socialist Henri Barbusse's *Clarté*. The Boedo writers were of immigrant origin, mostly second-generation working-class writers whose parents had arrived in Argentina with the great wave of immigration in the late 1800s and the early 1900s. Writers associated with the group include Elías Castelnuovo, Leónidas Barletta, Álvaro Yunque, Roberto Mariani, César Tiempo, Aristóbulo Echegaray, Enrique González Tuñón, Raúl González Tuñón, Roberto Arlt, and many others. From its earliest conception, therefore, working-class literature in Argentina is intertwined with debates on immigration and immigrant culture.

The Boedo-group thus marks the beginning of a working-class literary tradition in Argentina. Not only were the writers associated with the group of working-class and immigrant backgrounds, but they also identified themselves as hailing from such backgrounds and claimed to write on behalf of the proletarian masses. The Boedo-writers saw themselves as forming a part of the working-class struggle. They also positioned themselves against the Florida-writers, who represent, in this instance, the bourgeois national literary tradition of the local elites inaccessible by the immigrant masses.[11]

International events, such as the Russian Revolution of 1917 and developments within the Soviet Union, inspired the Boedo-writers. However, in practice, they were quite isolated, seeking inspiration in writers who were not necessarily those who commanded most influence on proletarian literature elsewhere. For example, they sought inspiration in authors such as Russian realists Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, as well as in specific texts by the Russian philosopher and Marxist Georgi Plekhanov and French philosopher and poet Jean-Marie Guyau (Castelnuovo, 1935). In a more local context, the Boedo-writers also looked to realist writer Manuel Gálvez (1882–1962) and his novels about the working poor of Buenos Aires.[12] Gálvez is an important precursor in his focus on the working-class in more favorable terms than did the naturalist authors of the late 19th century, whose literature is profoundly reactionary, responding to the financial crisis of the 1880s with misogynist, racist, anti-semitic, and anti-immigrant tracks.[13] Gálvez, however, still approached the working class in

the manner of the gentleman writer who visits the slums and researches the subject matter for his books. In contrast, the Boedo writers positioned themselves as writing *from* the slums. As such, the contributions of the Boedo-writers to Argentine literature has received more negative treatment than that of the Florida-group, and critics have claimed their works to be more didactic and concerned with truth-telling than artistic creation (Montaldo, 2006, pp. 329–330). However, recent work on the 1920s and the 30s has reconsidered this assessment, and there is increased interest in the period amongst literary critics.[14]

The boundaries of the Boedo group are porous, and as Leonardo Candiano and Lucas Peralta point out, there are certain limits to understanding Boedo-literature as standing in for the tradition of militant working-class literature. Candiano and Peralta work with a narrow definition of the group, limiting the core members to only those who published novels in a particular series by Claridad. They resist the broader definition of 'boedismo' that critics worked with throughout the 20th century in tandem with terms such as *social literature* and the *social novel*. Instead, they propose to restrict the Boedo designation to a narrow body of works while recognizing the broader implications that these works have had on politically committed and militant realism in Argentine literary history (Candiano & Peralta, 2007). I am in agreement with Candiano and Peralta's resistance to using a broad definition of 'boedismo' to stand in for anything connected to a literature of the left, the social novel, proletarian literature, and even the broader tradition of working-class literature. Throughout this essay, while the Boedo-school is understood as forming a part of the proletarian moment of the 1920s and the 30s, the focus is on the militant realism that members of the Boedo group and fellow travelers practiced in their writing, and how this realism was folded into the national literary history of Argentina. Although the past two decades have seen increased interest in the cultural production of the 1920s and the 30s, there is yet to be a discussion of the precise origin of the conventional critical narrative that posits Argentine proletarian literature as unique in its use of naturalist and grotesque aesthetics. This understanding of Argentine working-class literature as pathological in its obsession with stories of

social terror, grotesque portrayals of marginal subjects, and the naturalist imaginary, continues to shape not only Argentine literary criticism, but also Argentine literature.

The best rendition of how working-class literature has been understood as pathological in its naturalist and grotesque account of proletarian misery appears in a short story by Argentine writer Oswaldo Lamborghini (1940–1985), who satirizes this aspect of Argentine working-class literature. Lamborghini was an iconic poet of the new left in Argentina, a bohemian writer associated with the avant-garde journal *Literal* (1973–77), a journal influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis and leftist politics. The third part of Lamborghini's 1973 novel or long prose poem *Sebregondi retrocede* [*Sebregondi Retrenches*] includes a short story titled "El niño proletario" [*The Proletarian Boy*] (Lamborghini, 2003). In this story, three bourgeois boys brutally rape, torture, and kill a poor working-class newspaper boy. One of the assailants narrates the story and congratulates himself for escaping the fate of being born into a proletarian household. "El niño proletario" is notorious for its detailed and lurid descriptions of the violence endured by the boy, its gore and grotesque aesthetics, and, finally, for its satirizing of Argentine proletarian literature. The narrative exaggerates the violence against the defenseless proletarian boy to such an absurd degree that the violence is almost humorous in its depiction. As an example of just how excessive the narrative is, one can cite the apologetic introduction to the English translation of the story that the editor of the journal that published the translation found necessary to include with the text: "It is a disgusting story, and I don't like it. […] So, be forewarned, and read at your own risk" (Lamborghini, 1995, p. 75).

It may indeed be difficult to understand how a short story graphically depicting the rape and torture of a proletarian boy forms a part of Argentine working-class literature. The story offers no hope for salvation nor any hint of a collective struggle, nor does it seek to document or register working-class life as anything more than a horrid suffering of cruelty at the hands of the bourgeois class. However, as the story harkens back to the critical account that posits the Argentine social novel as nothing but tales of social terror, Lamborghini's "El niño proletario" turns out to be central

to the argument developed here. Lamborghini's short story captures well the social terror critics have analyzed as the distinguishing characteristic of the literature produced by the Boedo group and, in particular, of the author who is most readily associated with the group and the broader tradition of working-class literature in Argentina. The author in question is Elías Castelnuovo (1893–1982), whose role within Argentine literary history has been quite important despite the widespread dislike for his literature amongst critics.

The account that best presents the ambivalent place of Castelnuovo in Argentine literary criticism is Beatriz Sarlo's treatment of his work in *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* [*A Peripheral Modernity: Buenos Aires 1920–1930*] (1988). Sarlo (1942–). Sarlo, who is an influential literary critic and scholar in Argentina and beyond, devotes a section to Castelnuovo's work, which she reads with amusement while analyzing his naturalist tendencies. Sarlo points out how Castelnuovo's writing is infused with "the hyper-naturalism of medical manuals," and thus "more than realist fiction, he writes 'scientific fictions' of social terror'" (1988, p. 201). Where the realist narrator would pause, according to Sarlo, Castelnuovo continues his narratives, writing detailed descriptions of suffering and gore. Sarlo's account of the social terror that permeates the literature of Castelnuovo is widely cited and serves as a pivotal moment within the reception history of not only Castelnuovo but also that of the Boedo-group (Astutti, 2002, pp. 430–438; Rodríguez Pérsico, 2013, p. 15; Saítta, 2008, pp. 109–110).

Routinely, critics have characterized Argentine proletarian literature as hyper-naturalist and grotesque with Castelnuovo serving as the best representative for this literature. While Sarlo's 1988 *Una modernidad periférica* is the source that is most often cited for this reading, a similar account is found in Juan Carlos Portantiero's 1961 study on realism in Argentine literature as well as Lamborghini's short story "El niño proletario." Thus, the same critical narrative informs Sarlo's reading and Lamborghini's "El niño proletario," which in turn demonstrates how institutionalized this understanding of Argentine proletarian literature is. Indeed, Lamborghini cites Castelnuovo as his inspiration for the

notorious "El niño proletario," acknowledging how the story was inspired by the Boedo literature and in particular by Castelnuovo's *Vidas Proletarias: Escenas de la lucha obrera* [*Proletarian Lives: Scenes from the Working-Class Struggle*] from 1934 (Rubione, 1980). However, as Adriana Rodríguez Pérsico points out, other works by Castelnuovo better match "El niño proletario" (2013, pp. 70–71). In fact, *Vidas Proletarias* is one of the few works by Castelnuovo that evade the social terror that otherwise characterizes his work. This complicates the account offered by Lamborghini and suggests the source for his inspiration for "El niño proletario" is not necessarily Castelnuovo's work, as much as it is a particular interpretation of his oeuvre. Compared to Lamborghini and even the earlier short story by Echeverría, Castelnuovo emerges as almost tepid in his social terror.

The extreme pessimism of many of Castelnuevo's stories produced during his Boedo phase is puzzling for anyone looking for classic proletarian tales inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917. Instead of strikes and red flags, the reader confronts dead bodies, a fetus left to die a slow death in a blood puddle, orphans and children left alone and miserable in the world, and so on. As in Lamborghini's story, where the raped, tortured and lifeless body of the proletarian boy is left behind on a garbage heap, the early narratives of Castelnuovo offer nothing but pathological suffering and no hope for individual salvation, let alone hope for the collective struggle of the working class. Lamborghini's citation of Castelnuovo as an inspiration for "El niño proletario" indicates how persistent this view of Castelnuovo is and how infused with this author the discussion of proletarian and working-class literature in Argentina is. And yet, it is worthwhile revisiting this characterization of Castelnuovo's literary oeuvre as well as how his work has been made to designate the broader tendencies of the Boedo-group, especially since this reductive understanding of Boedo has come to generally stand in for the "social novel." In other words, what should be understood as a contribution to proletarian literature and, by extension, working-class literature, has come to represent the two in its entirety. Before any meaningful examination of working-class literature in Argentina is to take place, it is necessary to reconsider this account. On the one hand,

it is necessary to reconsider the account that posits Castelnuovo only as a writer of social terror and pathological suffering, while, on the other hand, it is crucial to resist portraying Castelnuovo as the most important representative for committed literature within Argentine letters.

Elías Castelnuovo, the Proletarian Poet

Elías Castelnuovo (1893–1982) is not only known for his life-long commitment to the left but also his ability to adapt to political changes. Castelnuovo may be said to bridge the old communist left of the 1930s and the new left of the 1960s since his political development includes his early formation as an anarchist in the 1910s, the turn to communism in the early 1930s, his sympathy for Peronism in the mid-1940s as well as liberation theology and third worldism of the new left in the 1960s and 70s (Eipper, 1995, pp. 14–15; Tarcus, 2007, pp. 127–128). He is best known for his work from the 1920s and 30s and is often referred to as "the Argentine Gorky" (Barcos, 2003, p. 9; Eipper, 1995, p. 11; Portantiero, 1961, p. 120; Tarcus, 2007, p. 127). This designation stems from his call for writers to contribute to the development of proletarian literature in Argentina. For example, in 1934, he lamented the fact that proletarian literature had not surfaced in Argentina, claiming the genre to be underdeveloped compared to other nations.

Castelnuovo is, without doubt, the most important voice in calling for the writing of proletarian literature in 1920s and 30s Argentina. During these years in Argentina, as elsewhere, the plans for this movement were quite ambitious. The Union of Proletarian writers called on writers and workers to write proletarian literature on the pages of *Actualidad*, a communist cultural journal that Castelnuovo edited between 1932–36, and the first and only issue of *Ahora!*, a cultural journal published in Santa Fe, included an announcement asking for the support of at least 300 workers as well as submissions for the journal ("La unión de escritores proletarios," 1932, p. 46; "Resoluciones," 1932, p. 2).

At the center of proletarianism in Argentine literature, we find Castelnuovo. Not only was he the editor of *Actualidad*, but he also founded, along with the better-known Argentine novelist

Roberto Arlt (1900 – 1942), the Union of Proletarian Writers in 1932. In its first announcement, the union declared its intent to participate in the class struggle, to combat imperialism, and to defend socialism in the Soviet Union ("De la unión de escritores proletarios," 1932, pp. 45–46; "Unión de escritores proletarios," 1932, pp. 45–46). Around this time, Castelnuovo had published the first of two travel narratives based on his trip to the Soviet Union in 1931. By the time of his visit, Castelnuovo was already an established author who, in 1924, had won a literary prize for his first short story collection, *Tinieblas* [*Darkness*] (1923). During the period between 1923–1931 and before traveling to the USSR, Castelnuovo published collections of short stories fitting Sarlo's description of them as tales of social terror. After his return from the Soviet Union in 1931, however, Castelnuovo begins to carve out a new intellectual position for himself, creating a distance between his early anarchist affiliation and his newly adopted communism (Saítta, 2008, p. 103). The early narratives are characterized by the social terror that Sarlo identifies in Castelnuovo's work and, as Adriana Astutti points out, in these stories: "The poor are always in a marginalized position, held captive by their circumstances," and thus are never portrayed as agents of "resistance" (2002, pp. 437–438). Back in Argentina, he publicly embraces communism and describes his transformation in a series of short articles in *Bandera Roja*, a journal published by the Argentine Communist Party (Saítta, 2008, pp. 99–107). Furthermore, the literature he writes in the 30s sees the introduction of workers and political agitators. The marginalized outcasts and the lumpen-proletarians of his early works are now accompanied by workers and communists engaged in a collective struggle.

Indeed, critics have noted the changes in Castelnuovo's politics and persona after his return from the Soviet Union. And yet, this has not altered the assessment of his literature as failing to move beyond the anarchist naturalism of his early works. Nor has it revised the equivalency describing his literature and that of the Boedo-school, or, for that matter, the characterization of Castelnuovo/Boedo as encompassing little more than tales of social terror. Finally, this assessment is still the prevailing paradigm within which politically committed working-class literature

is discussed and is the yardstick used to measure and categorize other writers and works. For example, in the recent revival of the Boedo writer Roberto Mariani (1893–1946), critics have found it challenging to connect the realism of *Cuentos de la oficina* [*Stories from the Office*] (1925), with the characterization of the Boedo literature as naturalist tales of social terror. Mariani's *Cuentos de la oficina* includes a ballad in which the office is personified as an all-embracing live-giving mother, who speaks to the office-worker reminding him of her role – the office's – in sustaining his life. The ballad is followed by sketches depicting the work of different employees within a large British department store and closes with a short play in which children of different classes play a game demonstrating how an upper-class child cannot understand the social experiences of poor children. The game is an allegory treating the divide between the Florida and the Boedo groups. As a whole, the work resembles the collective narratives that the proletarian literary left of the interwar period developed in other national contexts.[15] Each sketch, poem, or play, can stand on its own. Collectively, though, they build a picture of proletarianized — indeed precarious — white-collar labor. In *Cuentos de la oficina*, Mariani makes explicit the connection between white-collar office workers and the unemployed Buenos Aires' lumpen proletariat. This focus on proletarianized employees and the salaried masses is not unique amongst writers in Buenos Aires at the time, nor when considered in relation to the international dimensions of the proletarian centered left.[16]

Mariani's realism does not engage with the social terror that characterizes Castelnuovo's early work. Instead, the reader is confronted with tense sketches portraying the psychological and physical exploitation of labor within the office as well as that of the unemployed office worker. The office appears as a monstrous entity demanding long hours and sacrifice of its workers while preventing any form of unionizing or collective struggles. Or, as the office seductively proclaims in her motherly ode to the free subject roaming the streets of Buenos Aires: "No one dies from working eight hours a day […] I only require eight hours from you. And I pay you; I clothe you; I feed you. You don't have to thank me! This is how I am" (Mariani, 2008, p. 130).[17] Although

Mariani was a Boedo writer who actively rallied in his writing against the Florida group (Mariani, 1921, pp. x–xi, 1924), recent criticism of his work has seen him "salvaged" from the proletarian centered literary left (or Boedo). His recuperation hinges on pitting his work against that of Boedo writers such as Leónidas Barletta and Castelnuovo, who have come to represent a more dogmatic realist tradition.

In contrast, Mariani's work is recognized for its "*subjective realism*," which is also said to characterize the work of Argentine writer Roberto Arlt (Carbone & Ojeda Bär, 2008, p. 44). Arlt is an important figure within Argentine and Latin American literature, an author whose realism is routinely hailed for its portrayal of the urban landscape of Buenos Aires, the lumpenized existence of petit-bourgeois white-collar labor, its treatment of finance, and the dystopian enterprise of fascism in the 1920s and the 30s.[18] By most accounts, Arlt does not fit within a landscape characterized by the Florida and the Boedo groups. Instead, he emerges as an individualistic author who evaded all forms of categorization. He is understood to be neither of the avant-garde circles nor the socially committed literary circles around the Boedo group. For example, Rocco Carbone and Ana Ojeda Bär define the work of Arlt and Mariani as belonging somewhere in between the aesthetics of the Florida and the Boedo groups. They link their realism to immigration, claiming that this in-between-space is "a textual space whose general and binding characteristic is its *aesthetic representation of immigration*" (2008, pp. 6; 9; 15–16). This characterization hinges on pitting Arlt and Mariani's realism against that of Castelnuovo, whose work Carbone describes as dogmatic while claiming Arlt's work to be more open and rhizomatic (2007, pp. 110–111).[19]

It is beyond the scope of this discussion here to treat in detail the complicated reception history of Roberto Arlt (Drucaroff, 1998; Saítta, 2000). However, it must be noted that the recuperation of Mariani's work hinges on this history and is premised upon the similarity between the realism of Arlt's major novels and Mariani's *Cuentos de la oficina*. As Mariani's literary output does not fit within the given categories, i.e., the account that reduces politically committed literature to Boedo and then Boedo to

Castelnuovo's tales of social terror, Mariani's work must be relegated to an alternate category. As should be clear, then, Castelnuovo is still quite central in recent discussions as it is this author whose work determines other writers' classification and whether or not they belong to categories such as "committed literature," "proletarian literature," or even the broader category of "working-class literature." Thus, it is worth pursuing the precise origin of the critical narrative that reduces Argentine working-class literature to the Boedo-group alone, and more importantly, to Castelnuovo's early works. As it turns out, the analysis credited to Sarlo can be traced directly back to Elías Castelnuovo himself. For all the dislike that critics have for his work, Castelnuovo as the arbiter for whom belongs to the tradition of militant working-class literature is still quite significant within contemporary Argentine literary studies.

The short-comings of Castelnuovo's political and aesthetic model for the committed writer during his Boedo-phase, or in his early pre-USSR period, are easy to identify. If the working-class masses are nothing but suffering beasts of forces beyond their control, the revolution becomes impossible. Moreover, Castelnuovo himself identifies this element of his early works as problematic in his writing from the 1930s, a decade in which he develops his critique of this stance in various places. For example, a version of this self-critique is found in his travel narrative, *Yo ví… En Rusía!* [*I Saw … In Russia!*] (1931), where he includes a peculiar dialogue between himself and Spanish-speaking Russians who criticize his literary work (Castelnuovo, 1932, p. 58). This dialogue is semi-fictional as all of Castelnuovo's notes from the trip were confiscated by border control upon his return from USSR, resulting in him writing the travel narratives from memory. Moreover, it is highly unlikely Castelnuovo's work circulated beyond the Argentine border to the Soviet Union during this period. And yet, the dialogue serves the purpose of elaborating Castelnuovo's self-criticism that emerges in his writing after his trip to the USSR.

An even better example is found in the introduction to *Vidas Proletarias* published in 1934. In a thinly veiled self-critique, Castelnuovo puts forth an analysis of social literature in Argentina. Although Castelnuovo speaks of 'social literature' in general, his

work from the 1920s best matches his descriptions. He focuses on the limits of anarchist politics from the standpoint of his newly acquired communism, thus echoing his writing in *Bandera Roja* and the travel narratives, and presents a critique of his earlier understanding of revolutionary politics and art. He readily acknowledges how the revolution had been impossible within his earlier model for committed politics and art since:

> The working class was presented, sentimentally, as the class that suffered the most. The image of a crucified Christ, sucking vinegar and bleeding from all the nails, served ordinarily as a model. This is why writers chose to study the lumpenproletariat — traitors, beggars, prostitutes, neuropaths, assassins — and not the healthy and active proletarian masses and the peasantry. […] However, the mistake lay not in depicting suffering, but that suffering was converted into an end in itself. (Castelnuovo, 1934, pp. 11–12)

According to Castelnuovo, social literature in early 1920s Buenos Aires was characterized by "an undeniable love for the dispossessed masses" while simultaneously languishing under the morbid influence of metaphysics, pessimism, and pathology. This literature portrayed the working class as defeated without identifying the revolutionary potential of the working class or explain the material basis for their suffering (1934, pp. 7–8).

In this context, Castelnuovo's fictional work from the 1930s must be understood as his way of adopting a new set of political and aesthetic parameters for his literature that will meet the standards of his faith in the historical mission of the proletariat. However, almost as if signaling the difficulty of this move, Castelnuovo only publishes two fictional works during the 1930s. He groups together three short plays in *Vidas Proletarias* (1934) and publishes a short novella titled *Resurrección: Impresiones de una conciencia libre sobre la epopeya heroica del pueblo español* [*Resurrection: Impressions of a Free Consciousness about the Heroic Struggles of the Spanish People*] (1936–7). Critics frequently comment on the former, but *Resurrección* has not received any critical attention.[20] In *Vidas Proletarias*, the suffering of the marginal subject is replaced with the collaboration between workers, the lumpen, the abject, the unemployed, and communist agitators in a protest march and a strike. Even though both plays end with negative setbacks for the struggle, both include the "tragic optimism" common

in proletarian literature of the period (Bivens, 2015, p. 239). The tragic optimism of *Vidas Proletarias* is taken to a new level in Castelnuovo's Popular Front novella, *Resurrection* from around 1936–7, where his euphoria for the Popular Front displaces his earlier pessimism. The novel curiously inverts the usual scenario of subjects gaining class-consciousness and presents the reader with a former soldier, already class-conscious, who is confined to a wheelchair and unable to join the struggle against the fascists in Spain. Instead, all he can do is listen to radio broadcasts of the struggle. His transformation, then, involves the miraculous return of his physical health, when he, at the most pessimistic moment in the story, wakes up from a nightmare in which he foresees the victory of the fascists and the death of his comrades. He joins the revolutionary brigades, and the novel closes with him marching towards Madrid along with other fighters: "Madrid will be the tomb of fascism! […] They cannot win. They will not win! They will never win!" (Castelnuovo, 1936, p. 75).

Critics have not commented on *Resurrection,* nor does it figure in Sarlo's analysis of Castelnuovo's failure to overcome the anarcho-naturalist materialism characterized in his early works. Despite the overwhelming consensus that Castelnuovo's realism borders on naturalism, critics still use his early work as the example of committed literature in Argentina. The work Castelnuovo rejected as a model for committed communist literature is the example that critics use for committed literature, whether understood as solely that of the Boedo group or in the broader context of working-class literature. No other phrase summarizes better the reception history of Castelnuovo's work than Sarlo's account of his writing as "'scientific fictions' of social terror" (1988, p. 201). This characterization echoes earlier assessment of his work while also serving as the norm against which all other committed, social, or proletarian fiction is measured. However, in the early 1960s, Juan Carlos Portantiero discusses the social terror of Castelnuovo's literature, citing the introduction to *Vidas Proletarias* while warning against the danger of reducing the work of the Boedo group to only Castelnuovo's writing (1961, p. 128). Despite Portantiero's warning, critics continue to do so, measuring all other forms of committed literature against the Castelnuovoian earlier tales of social terror. By doing so, critics

follow Castelnuovo's own example of routinely positioning himself as being personally representative of something greater than himself. One revealing example appears in his travel narrative, *Yo ví… En Rusía!*. In this discussion, Castelnuovo relates how his flatmate urges him to pose for a painting titled "The Last Supper of the Apostles" ("La Ultima Cena de los Apóstoles"), whose theme is the worldwide revolution. The work, as Castelnuovo describes it, is a collage that besides including "the shadow of Lenin presiding over the banquet" comprises a collection of people of different ethnicities, including "the head of a Negro from Sumatra," "a Chinese from Kuangsí," "a German," "a Turk," and so on, while of course including Castelnuovo's portrait as the Latin American specimen (1932, pp. 141–142). The episode demonstrates how Castelnuovo was not afraid of taking a seat at the revolutionary table under the shadow of Lenin and among other nationals, thus embracing his role as the Latin American representative for the working-class struggle and its literature.

Castelnuovo's centrality in discussions of proletarian literature and committed aesthetics in Argentine letters obscures the breadth of proletarian literature in Argentina and elsewhere. This account overlooks how proletarian and working-class literature(s) are situated in a peculiar space between bourgeois art forms and militant modes of expression that more often than not set out to destroy that bourgeois tradition. Furthermore, although Argentine proletarian writers were quite isolated in practice, they were also under the influence of international currents and looked towards the then newly founded Soviet Union for inspiration. While it is important to recognize the isolation of Argentine anarchists, communists, and leftists during the interwar period, it is equally important to see the local development of proletarian literature and politics in the context of transnational developments. When treating Argentine proletarian literature in this context, it is crucial to understand Castelnuovo as a *member* of the movement for such literature and avoid reducing proletarian literature (or the Boedo-group) to his work alone, let alone only his early works. Nor can the broader discussion of working-class literature rely on such a reductive understanding of not only proletarian literature

but also the Boedo-school. If the task is to begin a discussion of the tradition of working-class literature in Argentina, then Castelnuovo must cease to dictate the terms of that discussion.

Finally, it is important to reconsider the social terror characterizing Argentine literature in general and understand its influence on writers such as Castelnuovo, who neither initiated this tradition nor offers the best example of its excesses. For example, one could easily trace the grotesque and vicious violence in Lamborghini's "El niño proletario" back to Echeverría's *El matadero,* thus acknowledging how both stories index moments of brutality within Argentine history. Not long after Lamborghini published "El niño proletario," the military junta took power on behalf of the local bourgeoisie. In place of the barbaric and lower-class masses of *El matadero*, three bourgeois boys rape and torture a proletarian boy. The bourgeois boys know no limits and see the proletarian masses as a body to be terrorized and destroyed. That Lamborghini misidentifies the source for "El niño proletario" as Castelnuovo's *Vidas Proletarias* reveals how the critical account of Castelnuovo and proletarian literature as tales of social terror is the main influence here. Once local categories such as Boedo and 'social novel' are contextualized with reference to broader and more transnational categories, one can begin to appreciate the breadth of Argentine proletarian realism and working-class literature, which includes, amongst many others: Castelnuovo, Arlt, and Mariani.

In the Shadow of the Social Novel

It is difficult to do away with longstanding critical narratives and their legacies, especially when Argentina's brutal history shapes such narratives. And yet, it is necessary to distance the discussion of Argentine working-class literature from the narrative molded throughout the 20th century, i.e., the critical account that reduces proletarian and working-class literature to the Boedo group, and then the Boedo group to Castelnuovo's work alone. Without such distancing, it is difficult – if not impossible – to find proletarian and working-class literature worthy of discussion within Argentine letters. Many authors whose work engages with the

working class and the political struggles associated with class-based politics would fall outside the scope of the categories based on this account. For example, Roberto Mariani and Roberto Arlt, whose work simply does not fit within the given categories, falls outside the corpus of working-class literature, even though both authors were quite concerned with labor, labor-conditions, and the laborer in their writings, and, more importantly, both saw themselves as forming a part of the working-class struggle. Another example of a writer not associated with the Boedo group whose work should be understood as forming a part of a working-class literary tradition within Argentine letters is Josefina Marpons, whose treatment of the lives of working-class women in the early decades of the 20th century in Buenos Aires is central in her novel *44 horas semanales* [*44 Hours a Week*] (1936).[21]

And yet, it is important to recognize how local and historical developments shape longstanding critical narratives and the literature they deal with. In 1934, Castelnuovo complained about proletarian literature's underdevelopment in Argentina, blaming it on the uneven development of the Argentine economy and the nation-state in the early 20th century (1934, p. 5). During this time, Argentina was surely peripheral, not only in terms of what were then the shifting centers of capital accumulation worldwide—from Britain and to the USA—but also in relation to the then newly formed Soviet Union. However, during this period, Buenos Aires was also an outpost for British-led imperialist capitalism in the Latin American region, and as such, possessed a semi-hegemonic place within the world-system of capital accumulation. Thus, Castelnuovo and the other proletarian writers of the 20s and the 30s were caught between extreme contradictions. They moved within a society that comprised of a largely immigrant working-class, many of whose members did not possess reading skills. No less important was the emerging petit-bourgeois middle classes holding white-collar office posts related to the administration of British interests in the Latin American region as well as in retail and business associated with the luxury consumption of the local elite (Bergero, 2008; Rama, 1996). This context helps explain why a majority of the writers associated with the Boedo group worked in administrative jobs and not in factory production, such as the meatpacking industry.

Thus, what often seems to be a peculiarity of Argentine proletarian and working-class literature, i.e., its focus on office workers and the lumpenproletariat as opposed to factory workers, can be explained by referencing the composition of the working class in Argentina at the time. Marcos Del Cogliano cites Portantiero's 1961 study on Argentine realism, claiming that proletarian literature in Argentina was impossible for the simple fact that the country did not have a fully formed working class (2019, p. 106). However, this condition was not particular to Argentina. For example, part of the debates surrounding the proletarian movement concerned the question of whether the movement would have to wait for the proletarian class to develop in order for the revolution to materialize. In regard to the particular case of the Argentine economy and political history, one would have to recognize how the consumerist factory worker only emerged with Peronism in the 1940s and the 50s and how this figure and the corresponding political ideology of Peronism accompanied industrial development. Peronism corresponds, roughly, with the compromise reached between labor and capital in other national contexts, with labor-unions winning some gains provided by the post-war stability of capital accumulation. However, in Argentina, the working class never assumed the semi-hegemonic place, as was the case in countries where the tradition of working-class literature became united with the official national literature, such as in the Nordic countries.

More importantly, the historical development of a repressive state apparatus with frequent coups, including the brutal repression of the new left in 1976, is a context that has to be reckoned with and helps explain the reasons why working-class literature never gained a secure place within Argentine letters. The social terror that characterizes Argentine history seeps into its literature in quite transparent ways, thus, making Argentine literature quite specific in its brutality. From *El matadero* and to "El niño proletario," through Castelnuovo's work, there is a direct line, including other works such as Rodolfo Walsh's *Operation Massacre* [*Operación masacre*] (1957). Walsh's book is an early precursor to the testimonial novel of the 1960s through the 1980s, which as Eugenio Di Stefano points out "can also be understood as a return to the proletarian literature of the 1930s, defining itself as a realist

style that seeks to document and capture reality of subalterns" (2017, p. 139). The testimonial novel, however, no longer focuses on labor or workers, as Di Stefano notes, and, one can add, no longer is this literature aligned with a working-class movement specifically. Instead, the testimonial turn, in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America, is rooted in the new leftist moment of the 1960s and the 70s. This moment in Argentina was brutally repressed in 1976, and thus the testimonial turn, or literature and literary criticism bearing witness to the atrocities of the Dirty War, was prevalent through the 1990s and into the 2000s. The field of memory studies is understandably quite large within Argentine letters and has been more concerned with unearthing the lives of those who lived through the terror of the Dirty War than with the political projects that the Dirty War put an end to (Bosteels, 2012, pp. 20–21).

With the full integration of Argentina – along with the Latin American region – into the world system of capital accumulation, contemporary Argentine literature demonstrates similar tendencies as contemporary literature elsewhere. Here we find increased attention to precarious and deteriorating labor conditions, an emphasis on part-time work, and the demolition of the protections that earlier labor-laws provided. The crisis of neoliberalism arrived early in Argentina with the 2001 crash of the stock-market that proved the utter failure of the neoliberal project to provide stability for the Argentine economy. It is always difficult to survey the present. However, as Alejandra Laera and Fermín Rodriguez point out in a special issue devoted to the laboring body within contemporary Latin American literature, one can discern a turn towards documenting (2019, p. 33). For example, in *Alta Rotación. El trabajo precario de los jóvenes* [*High Rotation: The Precarious Work of Young People*], Laura Meradi fictionalizes her own experience of working various low-paid part-time jobs in Buenos Aires. According to Martín De Mauro Rucovsky, Meradi crosses the line between journalism and fiction, producing a "hybrid genre between journalism and literature or a type of journalism with literary pretensions" (2019, p. 141).

In the Argentine working-class literature historiography, it is notable how recent works, such as Meradi's novel as well as

Laera's and Rodriguez's special issue on the laboring body, represent a return to the investigative manners of naturalist writers such as French author Émile Zola and American novelist Jack London. In short, a resurgence of naturalist aesthetics characterizes the recent turn towards new forms of labor within contemporary literary studies and literature. In a similar manner as London, who for *The People of the Abyss* (1903) went undercover to study the misery of the London poor, Meradi gathered her materials for *Alta Rotación* while working undercover in various low-paid jobs in Buenos Aires. Meanwhile, Laera and Rodriguez's approach also documents new forms of labor and exploitation in contemporary Latin American literature. This is quite different from the approach of proletarian writers who were all engaged with the political struggle of the working class and aimed to produce a new subject position whose identity could shoulder the burden of representing the revolutionary subject. This project required a new form of realism not necessarily focused on documenting labor and the lives of the laborer but emphasized the new forms of consciousness and agency required for the struggle to come. This is the project that Elías Castelnuovo engaged with after he distanced his work from the early anarchist-naturalist approach centered on documenting in lurid detail the grotesque lives of unemployed and semi-employed lumpen-proletarians in Buenos Aires of the 1910s and the 20s, or during the 1930s when he writes *Vidas Proletarias* and *Resurrección*.

The renewed interest in the working-class experience in contemporary Argentine literature and literary studies is to be celebrated. However, it is equally important to reexamine working-class and labor literature of the past and to afford this tradition the attention to detail it deserves. Although national literary history needs to be contextualized by local historical developments, it is as important to view this history in light of developments elsewhere, thus, avoiding claims positing proletarian and working-class literature as unique in its emphasis on social groups that are defined by elements other than industrial factory work. As in much of the world, industrialization was not a dominant theme in Argentine literature of the first half of the 20th century.[22] Instead, – and as elsewhere – this literature is focused on immigration, agriculture,

and the emerging petit-bourgeoisie or the salaried masses. Hence, much of the literature devoted to the working class focuses on the making of the working class and the massive social and economic transformations that were necessary for this class to emerge. To conclude, this essay does not pretend to offer a comprehensive view of Argentine working-class literature. Instead, the aim of this discussion is to open up a starting point for such a discussion to take place, a point from which working-class literature can be examined in both its national specificity and in relation to international developments. In order for such discussion to take place within Argentine literary studies, it is crucial to reconsider the conventional narrative that posits Elías Castelnuovo as the best representative for 1920s and 30s literary radicalism.

Endnotes

1. As noted by Eugenio Di Stefano in his discussion of literature in Mexico, working-class literature is not a central category within Mexican literary studies (2017, pp. 128–129). The same can be said for Latin American studies in general. For example, the Andean region of Latin America, where indigenous populations form a high percentage of the population, literature devoted to the working class is characterized by concerns for the indigenous populations. Thus, this body of works is defined as indianismo, indigenismo, and neo-indigenismo, or with terms drawn from the word indigenous. Other examples of genres particular to the Latin American region include those devoted to the violent history of the region. Since Latin American history is filled with brutal dictatorships across the region, a major body of works is devoted to dictatorships forming specific genres while the aftermath of such epochs is characterized by testimonial literature. Finally, a large body of works is devoted to the exploitation of natural resources in the region, and while this literature is concerned with the exploitation of both indigenous and immigrant labor, it is not necessarily discussed in terms of working-class literature. Rather, the attention is on the exploitation of natural resources and labor.

2. Even during the interwar period, writers associated with the communist left and the Argentine Communist Party used the term 'social literature' in tandem with proletarian literature. For example, an early study on the period by Álvaro Yunque, who was a Boedo writer,

was titled *La literatura social en la Argentina* [*Social Literature in Argentina*] (1941). However, as Candiano and Peralta point out, the term 'social novel' is difficult to define as all literature is social in one form or another (2007, p. 15). Furthermore, as Gramuglio notes, the term "proletarian literature" has been equated with social literature within Argentine letters (2002, p. 31).

3. For a discussion of *El matadero*'s role in Argentine literature, culture, and political discussion, see (Sorbille, 2016, pp. 13–19; 21–24).

4. All translations of non-English quotations are my own. Here Gramuglio cites David Viñas's canonical account of *El matadero* as initiating modern Argentine literature. See (Viñas, 1971).

5. Perhaps most notably, writers such as Brazilian novelist Patrícia Galvão, Argentine writer Roberto Arlt, Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, Peruvian poet César Vallejo, and many others, have been folded into the literary history of the avant-garde movements in Latin America.

6. Of course, plenty of excellent work exists on individual authors or particular national contexts. However, an attempt to map the proletarian literary left of the 1920s and the 30s across the Latin American region has yet to see the light of day. Comprehensive studies on proletarian literature such as Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations* (1993) and Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* (1996) (2010) have yet to be undertaken in the context of Latin American literary studies.

7. Most of the immigrants came from Spain and Italy. Between 1857–1916 about 4,7 million immigrants entered Argentina, of which 2,5 million settled permanently. Between 1889 and 1905, around 200,000 immigrants entered every year, and from 1905–1912 that number grew to 300,000. By 1914 half the population was foreign-born (Rock, 1975, pp. 10–11; 14). Italians were by far the largest group of immigrants, totaling about 45% of the overall Argentine inflow, while Spaniards comprised about a third of the overall inflow. The great majority of Spanish immigrants settled in Argentina. Between 1857–1930 over 2 million Spaniards entered the country, and over half of them settled permanently (Moya, 1998, pp. 1–10; 45–59).

8. The Argentine Socialist Party was founded in the mid-1890s and was led by Juan B. Justo. The party focused on liberal reforms

and parliamentary politics. However, more successful among the working-class immigrant population were the anarchists. The period between 1890–1910 saw increased organizing amongst the working class led by the anarchists. Between 1902 and 1910, the anarchists led massive general strikes in Buenos Aires, and when catholic church groups for workers and other such means of pacifying the public didn't work, the state turned to more direct repression. The anti-immigrant laws of the early 20th century — the Law of Residence (1902) and the Law of Social Defense (1910) — came about in response to the general strikes of the early 1900s (Rock, 1975, pp. 80–82).

9. For an excellent introduction to the socio-economic and cultural landscape of Buenos Aires in the late 19th and early 20th century, see (Bergero, 2008).

10. It is beyond the scope of this essay to dwell on this topic in detail. However, it must be mentioned that working-class writers associated with the Boedo group were quite critical of the Florida group for its idealizing of the gaucho, which they saw as poised against immigrants. For an overview of this aspect of the Florida-Boedo debates, see (Candiano & Peralta, 2007, pp. 181–190).

11. Much ink has been spilled on the debates between Florida and Boedo. In general, the view is that both groups were less experimental than their colleagues in other countries. For example, John King claims that both sides of the conflict were more conservative in Argentina than elsewhere (King, 1986, p. 28). See also (Gilman, 2006, p. 47; Montaldo, 2006, p. 328).

12. In the early 20th century, the realist novel emerges most notably with authors such as Manuel Gálvez, whose novels are often viewed as important precursors to the Boedo aesthetic. Since Gálvez's novels deal with social issues such as prostitution and crimes in the slums, workers, and poverty, some even argue that the difference between Gálvez's work and that of Boedo is more sociological than literary or ideological (Bernini, 2003). As has been noted by critics, many of the authors associated with the Boedo group adored Gálvez, for instance, Lorenzo Stanchina and Nicolás Olivari. See (Olivari & Stanchina, 1924; Sarlo, 1988, pp. 189–191; García Cedro, 2006, pp. 10–11; Astutti, 2002, pp. 425–426). A notable exception is the Argentine writer Roberto Arlt who wrote critical articles against the author (Arlt, 1932).

13. At the turn of the century, the naturalist novel dominated the literary scene. Authors such as Julían Martel and Eugenio Cambaceres responded to the unfolding financial crisis of the 1890s, which impacted the Argentine economy in significant ways, with novels such as *La Bolsa* [The Stock Exchange] (Julián Martel, 1891) and *En la sangre* [*In Blood*] (Eugenio Cambaceres, 1887). In these novels, Jews, women, and immigrants became the harbingers of destruction and were blamed for the failures of finance capital to provide sustained growth (Beckman, 2013, pp. 86; 119).

14. The best examples of this reconsideration include the work undertaken by Candiano and Peralta on the Boedo group as well as the contributions of Sylvia Saítta, who has published extensively on the period in recent years.

15. As Barbara Foley points out in her study on proletarian literature in the USA: "Of the four modes of proletarian fiction, the collective novel is the only one that is primarily the product of 1930s literary radicalism" (1993, p. 398).

16. Mariani was not alone in focusing on the newly emerging salaried masses of Buenos Aires in the 1920s and the early 30s. For instance, Argentine writer Roberto Arlt (1900–1942) focused extensively on this class in his work. Alberto Pineta (1906–1971) deals with this social class in *Miseria de quinta edición: Cuentos de la ciudad* (1928) while Josefina Marpons' *44 horas semanales* (1936) focuses on female department store workers. In an international context, the focus on office workers and the emerging petit-bourgeois salaried masses was important to interwar Marxism and committed literature. For example, the emerging middle-classes are discussed in Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and Siegfried Kracauer's *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (1930). The class also plays an important role in the literature of the period, for instance, in John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930–1936).

17. Lamentably, Mariani's work has not been translated into English. Difficult to translate in "Ballad of the office" is the tone assumed by the office, the upper-class manner of speaking to servants using the second person (you) as opposed to the more formal third person address used for formal encounters. Amongst the Boedo writes, Mariani's writing was unique in this regard as well as others

(Candiano & Peralta, 2007, pp. 230–231). For discussion on Marian's work in English, see (Leland, 1986; Jordan, 2006).

18. As a canonical author, the bibliography on Arlt is extensive. However, the most recent work on his fiction focuses on his work as an example of finance-literature or what often simply termed 'money-fiction' in Argentine literary studies. See (Laera, 2014; Bollig, 2017).

19. Carbone and Ojeda Bär cite Carbone's study on Roberto Arlt and the grotesque (Carbone, 2007). However, it must be noted that the association between the grotesque aesthetics of the Boedo group, immigration and the new middle classes in Argentina, has formed a part of Argentine literary history since David Viñas's seminal account in (Viñas, 1973).

20. John E. Eipper briefly mentions this book in his anthology of Castelnuovo's work. However, he does not include an excerpt from the novel (1995, pp. 25–26).

21. For discussion of Marpons, see (Bergero, 2008, pp. 180–182; Foster, 1986, pp. 143–149; Masiello, 1992, pp. 183–187).

22. For example, Volland points out how Chinese Proletarian and Working-Class fiction of the early 20th century was more concerned with agricultural workers and peasants than the industrial workforce (2009, p. 99).

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Towards the Light, into the Silence: Danish Working-Class Literature Past and, Perhaps, Present

Nicklas Freisleben Lund

This chapter presents an overview of Danish working-class literary history from the past to, *perhaps*, the present. Thus, the initial sections of this paper outline the established narrative of the tradition[1] from the late 19th century to the early 1980s; the closing part poses a seemingly simple, but highly cotentuous question: *Does a contemporary Danish working-class literature exist?*

In many national contexts such a question would seem superfluously polemic because the answer would be a rather self-evident *yes*. This is the case in Denmark's close neighbor Sweden, where working-class literature constitutes a dominating strand in modern Swedish literature and, furthermore, has enjoyed a veritable renaissance in the 21st century (Nilsson, 2017). The current Danish situation is markedly different. In 1985, John Chr. Jørgensen – an important contributor to the research field – mourned "the silencing" of Danish working-class literature (Jørgsensen, 1985), and declarations of the "death of working-class literature" has since been repeated several times (Gundersen, 2017, p. 6). In terms of literary studies, Jørgensen's statement has proven itself correct. Since its latest peak in the 1970s, scholarly interest in working-class literature has drastically declined. As a result, if the tradition's first century is well-documented, its trajectory over the last four decades is generally unexplored.

A similar trend characterizes the status of working-class literature within the wider literary public. In the 1970s working-class

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literature was a highly profiled phenomenon. Today, outside specialized contexts as minor left-wing medias such as *Arbejderen* and *Pio*, the use of the term *working-class literature* generally is generally limited to, for instance, reviews of re-issues of Martin Andersen Nexø's works or feature-articles on the occasion of The International Workers' Day (cf. Gundersen, 2017, p. 6). Both the term and categorization of working-class literature is largely absent from the broader coverage of contemporary fiction and poetry. In the early 1980s, Jutta Bojsen-Møller and Simon Kværndrup could portray forty self-acclaimed working class-writers (1981); in the present day, hardly any Danish author making his or her debut in recent decades has identified with the category (cf. Larsen 2009). Danish working-class literature, unlike in Sweden, has suffered from a steady decline in institutional structures that could maintain and renew the tradition, a result of lacking scholarly, critical, and literary stakeholders. Resultantly, in the contemporary Danish context, "working class literature" appears as a markedly historical term designating a tradition of the *past*.

There are developments, though, that contradict the apparent narrative of disappearance. Working-class literature cannot be reduced to an exclusively discursive phenomenon. As the following pages demonstrate, the term has been used to designate literary texts that share a range of characteristics, however difficult to pin down. I argue we can identify contemporary literary texts as examples of working-class literature even if they generally have not been percieved as such. In recent years a rising number of Danish literary texts have focused on questions concerning class, inequality, social segregation and work (e.g. Lund, 2017; Gemzøe, 2016; Turner, 2015). This trending body of work *might* be interpreted as an evidence of the continued existence of Danish working-class literature.

Even the (very) limited number of recent studies exploring the possible connection to the tradition present no univocal assessment of the current state of Danish working-class literature (Gundersen, 2017; Visti-Tang, 2016; Gemzøe, 2016; Staun, 2016). As the chapter ultimately argues, these varied interpretations are a result of a problem inherent in the research field that is by no means new: that of defining working-class literature (e.g. Lauter,

2005; Christopher & Whitson, 1999). In other words, such contemporary studies continue the definitional debate that has shaped the history of Danish working-class literature. Consequently, the initial, historical sections of the chapter will emphasize the various understandings of the term that have determined the configuration of the tradition's past before exploring different interpretations of its present state.

1870–1900: Beginnings; Workers' Songs and Horror-Realist Novels

The Danish term for working-class literature is literally "worker literature" [*arbejderlitteratur*]. Similarly, a working-class author is described as a "worker-author" [*arbejderforfatter*] and working-class poetry is "worker-poetry" [*arbejderdigtning*]. The tradition's origin is generally found in the late 19th century, the period of Denmark's industrialization. This time period also finds the rise of the modern labor movement, usually dated to 1871, the year the Social Democratic Party was founded as the Danish branch of the First International (e.g. Bomholt, 1929; Hansen, 1939; Andersen, 1982).

It would be an exaggeration to attribute a coherent cultural politics to the early labor movement (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 410). Still, the first cultural activities, institutions, and debates appeared during these decades. A popular initiative was the so-called "*arbejdersangforeninger*" [worker-choral societies]. Among their repertoire we find what is generally highlighted as the earliest examples of Danish working-class literature (Bomholt, 1929, pp. 188–200: Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 327; Andersen, 1982, pp. 251–261). In the 1870s, pamphlets containing *Socialistiske sange* [Socialist Songs] were published, followed in 1886 by publications such as the *Sangbog for socialdemokratiske arbejdere* [Songbook for Social Democratic Workers]. The workers' songbooks contained various genres of song but were centered around agitational songs such as Ulrich Peter Overby's (1819–1879) "Proletarernes vise" ["The Proletarians' Ballad"](1877). In the song, Overby thematizes the exploitation of the working class but also eulogizes its potential revolutionary force, culminating in the

closing lines with the emergence of a collective "we" prophesying a coming hour of retribution:

> We have bone to pick with you
> there'll be interest and interest rates
> to you in the street
> when we, in the midst of the turmoil,
> settle our account
> (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 352)[2]

"Proletarernes vise" fits the well-known formalist definition of working-class literature as a literature *by, about,* and *for* the working class, a conceptualization crowned—in the Danish context—by critic and social democratic politician Julius Bomholt in *Dansk digtning* [*Danish Literature*] (1930, p. 314).[3] This definition remains a recurrent point of reference in the research field, though often contested, expanded and reinterpreted (e.g. Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 326; Petersen, 1977, pp. 5–6; Harrits, 1983, p. 185; Jørgsen, 1979, pp. 18–22). Thus, most conceptualizations are situated somewhere in the intersection of these criteria; however, they are prioritizing, combining and accentuating them in various ways (cf. Gemzøe, 2016, p. 3).

"Proletarernes vise's" composer Overby spent years making his living through unskilled labor and was highly engaged in the labor movement. The song thematizes the social condition and experience of the working class, and, decisively, it was written "for" the working class. The song was performed both in workers' choral societies and at political meetings and demonstrations. But the song can also be perceived as "for" the working-class in an ideological sense, as it contains "a description of the social condition of the class, an appealing emphasis of class-solidarity, a declaration of the demands of the class and forecasts the future victory of its vision of community" (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, 327).

This characterization is found in the two-volume anthology *Arbejderkultur 1870–1924 & 1924–48* [Working-Class Culture 1870–1924 & 1924–48](1982 & 1979). Here the editors of the first volume, Ragnhild Agger and Anker Gemzøe, using Lars Furuland's somewhat flexible term, precisely give precedence to the "ideological anchorage" of working-class literature in their conceptualization of the term (Furuland, 1962, p. 14):

> [Working-class literature] is […] literature, which in various ways and varying degrees, takes part in the ongoing struggle for the constitution of the working-class as a self-conscious class aware of its own interests. Such literature is connected to the everyday-experience of the working class, to the interests, efforts and prospects of the labor movement and working class. […] [I]t seeks, as far as possible, to anticipate socialist forms of community and sociality. (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, 326)

In this context, the inclusion of "Proletarernes vise" in *Arbejderkultur*'s collection of working-class poetry and songs is self-evident. In contrast, the inclusion of a song such as "Farvergadesangen" [The Farver Street Song] (n.d.) comes forth as more questionable. The song can best be described as a drinking song. It presents a rowdy and non-judgmental, yet melancholic portrait of the working-class Copenhagen neighborhood of Farvergade associated with broken families, violence, petty crime, and, well, drinking; in other words, the stereotypical characteristics of the "Lumpen-proletariat." Despite its sympathetic tone, the song thus lacks the ideological qualities highlighted in the editors' definition.

"Farvergadesangen" does, however, fit other conceptualizations of working-class literature. It can be perceived as an expression of authentic and spontaneous working-class culture, and as such it reflects the formalist definition (though only *for* the working class in the narrow sense), as well as Ian Haywood's conceptualization that downplays "class consciousness" and emphasizes the role of "class factors" and the "material influence on a working-class text's production and reception" (Haywood, 1997, p. 3). Finally, "Farvergadesangen" can be said to live up to Magnus Nilsson's suggestion that the term *working-class literature* describes literary texts perceived as *connected* with the working class (Nilsson, 2014a, p. 24). This is precisely the case in *Arbejderkultur*: "Farvergadesangen" might not meet the ideological standards of Agger and Gemzøe's conceptualization, but it is still included in the anthology's collection of exemplary texts.

These above remarks are intended to highlight an ambiguity often present in the studies of Danish-working class literature. Scholars often present ideological-essentialist conceptualizations

of working-class literature. Their constructions of the tradition's history, however, often include text-corpora that do *not* meet the (idealized) criteria. In fact, several studies stress that working-class literature must be perceived as always already "flawed" or "impure" as it emerges within capitalist society and consequently assimilate—or is infused by—bourgeois ideology and aesthetics (e.g. Bondebjerg & Gemzøe, 1982, pp. 5–6; Andersen, 1982, pp. 238–240; Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 326). At the same time, however, these studies still tend to differentiate between a) literary texts that, despite their various limitations or "blockings," more or less fulfill the criterion and thus qualifies as "working-class literature" and b) texts that in various ways are immediately perceived as connected to the working class but are dismissed as "working-class literature."

The situation of a group of late 19th century novels and feuilletons often dismissively labelled as "rædselsrealisme" [literarily "horror realism"] is a prime example. Though there was a sizeable output of songs, poetry and, to a lesser extent, dramas and memoirs affiliated with the labor movement during this period, such was not the case of prose-fiction. Most prose representing the working class was written by authors with little or no connection to the working class of the labor movement and focused on the lamentable lives of the urban *Lumpenproletariat* (hence the patronizing nickname).

This body of works has throughout the tradition's history been met with harsh criticism. An early example is Bomholt's discussion in *Dansk digtning* denouncing the "bourgeious perspective" of the horror-realist novels (Bomholt, 1930, pp. 190–213). Several central studies of the 1970s and early 1980s take up this lead. Here, novels such as Lauritz Petersen's *Gadens roman* (1896) [*The Novel of the Street*] and early 20st century successors such as Lauritz Larsen's *Halvmennesker* (1903) [*Half-Humans*] and Christian Gjerløv's *Bundfald* 1912) [*Sediment*] are often excluded from the category of "actual" working-class literature— as formulated in *Dansk arbejderkultur* (1982)—due to their alleged inauthenticity, the absence of overt expressions of class-solidarity and, most importantly, the representation of the worker as isolated and bereft of political agency (Andersen, 1982, p. 265). Still,

the horror-realist novels are treated in depth in Andersen's study (Ibid., pp. 265–293). The same ambiguity occurs in *Arbejderkultur*, which includes excerpts from horror realism-novels, but explicitly frames these texts as counterexamples to working-class literature (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 341).

This dismissive attitude of some critics is, nonetheless, challenged by others. In *Proletarisk offentlighed* [*Proletarian Public*], Bondebjerg precisely problematizes the rejection of horror-realist novels as examples of working-class literature (1979, II, pp. 196–202). According to Bondebjerg, at least some of the horror-realism novels contain important insights into "the tension between the radical, lumpen-proletarian ideology and a petty-bourgeois individualism or religiously toned utopianism" (Ibid., 1979, II, p. 198; cf. Due 1978, I, 19–60; Petersen, 2017, pp. 303–308).

Summarily, the works of horror realism have been ascribed a wide range of positions in relation to the Danish working-class literature tradition. The variations can be ideologically motivated, but they also reflect different approaches to, and understanding of, the political function of working-class literature. At times the horror-realism corpus is dismissed for its lack of progressive qualities, at others it is positively valorized for its "reflective" insights into the muddled reality of class experience.

Finally, it is worth noting that Gemzøe, the most persistent contributor to the research field, has gradually modified his position on the horror-realism novels. Though repeating his earlier ideological critique (Gemzøe, 1977, pp. 48–99; Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 341), Gemzøe in *Dansk litteraturhistorie* [*Danish Literary History*] (1983–1985) officially includes the horror-realist novels in the tradition of Danish working-class literature (Agger et al., 1984, pp. 138–188). As he notes in a recent article, the term "working-class literature" must be considered a "broader term for many different literary trends, modes and genres" (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 114). This marks a transition from an essentialist-ideological conceptualization of working-class literature and towards an approach focusing on the tradition's literariness by designating working-class literature as an umbrella term denoting a heterogenous body of texts.

It might seem strange to allot this kind of attention to a set of texts as marginalized as the horror-realist novels. The reasoning is twofold: First, as the closing parts of the chapter argue, the enquiry into the current state of Danish working-class literature re-actualizes the debate on the horror-realist novel's relationship to the tradition. Second, the above comments also serve to emphasize the often ambiguous or dual nature of the Danish working-class literature tradition. If it does indeed have a stable, relatively undisputed core comprised of literary works univocally designated as working-class literature, this core is surrounded by a body of works whose relationship to the tradition are oscillating between inclusion and exclusion. These works, however, are also characterized by their persistent connection to the tradition, remaining a recurring element in the narratives of the history of Danish working-class literature.

1900–1920: The Breakthrough and the "Big Three"

The turn of the century saw the emergence of three authors who retrospectively have been perceived as comprising the tradition's core: Jeppe Aakjær (1866–1930), Johan Skjoldborg (1861–1936) and Martin Andersen Nexø (1869–1954); the central figures of the so-called 'folkelige gennembrud' [The popular breakthrough], a term used to describe the emergence of literary works portraying demographics other than the bourgeoisie and written by non bourgeoisie authors. Aakjær, Skoldborg, and Nexø also mark Danish working-class literature's own public breakthrough, insofar they all enjoyed critical acclaim, attracted attention from a wide readership and were able to make a living as professional writers.

The "big three" also highlight an important dividing line within the early Danish working class. The paragraphs above might have focused on the literary traces of the urban proletariat, but the Danish working class was largely comprised of a sizeable rural working class. Skjoldborg and Aakjær, both sons of sharecroppers, owe their central positions in the tradition to their portraits of the rural proletariat as well as their respective affiliations with the so-called "husmandsbevægelse" [the crofters' movement] and "tyendebevægelsen" [the servants' movement].

The subtitle of Aakjær's novel *Vredens børn* (1904) [*Children of Wrath*] precisely frames the text as "en tyendes saga" [a servant's saga]. Through the somewhat fragmented coming-of-age narrative of the boy Per, the novel exposes the degraded life of the agrarian proletariat. However, the novel also constitutes the political *bildung*-narrative of Per's ideological emancipation through his affiliation with the servants' movement. Per's organizational endeavor never manifests itself in social-political results within the novel; still *Vredens børn* is characterized by persistent visions of possible, but as of yet unfulfilled, future of social change; "[…] It will be different. Before one knows of it, there will be other times" (Aakjær, 1913, II, p. 123).

It is precisely this sort of *utopian impulse* that is often highlighted as the qualitative difference between "actual" working-class literature and the pessimistic, "petty bourgeois" prose fiction of horror realism. Thus, the term here designates the presence of, within the text, a future-oriented vision of the working class's potential to change the existing social order and to generate alternate, and better, ways of living and of organizing society.[4]

In *Dansk litteraturhistorie,* Aakjær and Skjoldborg, whose novel *Gydholm* (1902) bears several resemblances to *Vredens børn*, are precisely contrasted to the horror-realist authors because they portray the proletariat "not solely as objects for repression, but also an active societal force" (Agger et al, 1984, p. 175). In the context of *Dansk litteraturhistorie*, the quote establishes the relationship between Aakjær, Skoldborgs and the towering figure of Danish working-class literature, Martin Andersen Nexøs, whose major works *Pelle Erobreren* [*Pelle the Conqueror*] (1906–1910) and *Ditte Menneskebarn* [*Ditte, Child of Man*] (1917–1921) elevated him to international fame. The prologue of *Pelle Erobreren* precisely frames the four-volume-novel as a "book about the proletarian" […] about the working man's firm walk across the land on his interminable, half-unconscious journey towards the light" (Nexø, 2002, I, p. 9).

The works of Aakjær, Skoldborg, and, primarily, Nexø are often presented as the "classics" of Danish working-class literature (e.g. Bomholt, 1930, p. 213; Hansen, 1939, pp. 89–177; Andersen, 1982, p. 309; Gemzøe, 1977, pp. 48–49), defining the tradition that

generally had been associated with a) the realist representation of the working class, b) an ideological anchorage in the labor movement and c) a utopian impulse. These features also characterize the working-class poetry that flourished in the late 1910s and 1920s. The works of poets such as Frederik Andersen (1890–1974), Oskar Hansen (1895–1968) and Axel Engelbert Nielsen (1895–1939), despite their differences, possess realist inclinations infused with critical and agitative sentiment (Thing, 1993, pp. 95–105).

The dominating outlook has, however, marginalized other authors. For example, Jakob Hansen (1868–1909), Nexø's childhood friend, who died in poverty in 1909 leaving an eccentric literary estate often associated with themes of decadence, symbolism and impressionism (Aabenhus, 2019), has novels that contain several indignant portraits of the working class. Still, Hansen's relation to the tradition is a contested one. One reason is the heterogeneity of his *oeuvre*, another is the idiosyncrasy of his social texts, illustrated by the short-story "Lock-out" (1900). The story opens with a description of a young worker's economic distress, caused by the "lockout" of the title, but it culminates in a hallucinatory vision of a bourgeois family devouring the worker's newborn daughter. "Lockout" might share the class-perspective and indignation of the "big three," but it deviates from the realism of the popular working-class writers (Kristensen, 1974, p. 22), as well as the ideological anchorage and utopian impulse. Consequently, Hansen has both been hailed as "proletarian author" (Larsen,1943) and expelled to the contested periphery of the tradition (Andersen, 1982, p. 268; Agger et al, 1984, pp. 164–167).

Despite Aakjær, Skjoldborg, and Nexø's importance in the tradition, it is, however, important to stress the limited nature of this breakthrough. Working-class literature in a Danish context is generally considered a peripheral phenomenon. Early contributions to the research field such as Bomholt's *Dansk digtning* and Eva Hammer Hansen's *Digter og samfund* [*Writer and Society*] (1939) both address the labor movement's limited effect on and presence in Danish literature at large. Symptomatically, Bomholt presents Nexø – who succeded in establishing the "happy connection" between writings and labor movement—as a unique case in the period's Danish literature (Bomholt 1930, p. 213).

1920–1940: Consolidation

In the years prior to the First World War, the organization-rate among the Danish work force reached a staggering fifty percent. Furthermore, over the course of four decades the Social Democratic Party developed from a small, peripheral party to the majority in the Danish parliament, culminating with Thorvald Stauning becoming the party's first prime minister in 1924. This fertilized the ground for an increased focus on the cultural question. Debates –though rudimentary– over working-class literature had occurred in previous decades (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, pp. 410–429). Similarly, the first examples of historical-materialist studies of Danish literature such as Axel Schmidt's *Sociale strømninger i dansk litteratur* (1913) [*Social Trends in Danish Literature*] and Frederik Madsen's *Danmarks sociale litteratur* (1922) [*The Social Literature of Denmark*] had been published. But during the 1920's and especially the 1930s, the definitional debate reached a preliminary high.

The central contribution to the debate is Bomholt's *Arbejderkultur* [*Working-Class Culture*] (1932), in which he presents his vision of an ideal working-class literature. According to Bomholt, working-class literature must, among other things, a) be consistent with workers' lives and experiences, prioritizing content over form and composition, b) be based on the ideas and values of the working class, c) reject "gloomy realism" and "merciful sadness" in favor of "rebellion and aversion to decay and doom", and d) express optimism and emphasize the continued presence of revolutionary forces (Bomholt, 1932, pp. 160–62).

As already mentioned, Bomholt was not only a literary critic but also a social democratic politician, who was the first Danish Minster of Culture from 1961 to 1964. *Arbejderkultur* often denotes the so-called offensive phase (e.g. Bondebjerg, 1979, II, pp. 220–237) of socialist democratic cultural politics lasting from the mid-1920s to 1935. First and foremost, the 1920s and 30s saw the intensification of the labor movement's cultural and educational initiatives. At this point, the ambition for cultural access coincided with the ideal of a distinct working-class culture. Initiatives such as "Arbejdernes Oplysningforbund" (AOF) [The Workers' Educational Association] founded in 1924, aimed

at developing the societal and cultural knowledge of the working class by supporting and promoting a culture based on the experience and interests of the proletariat. A tangible manifestation of this co-existence was the establishment of the AOF Bogkreds [The AOF Book Circle], that published literature *for* the working class and sought to establish alternatives to the existing book market. The goal was to use the labor movement's existing organization to reach working-class readers.

The offensive phase of social-democratic cultural politics was, however, relatively brief. In 1934, Stauning presented the political program "Danmark for folket" [Denmark for the People], that marked an important change: The Social Democratic Party should transform itself from a "class party" to a "people's party." This trajectory is mirrored in the subsequent development of Bomholt's cultural thought. *Kulturen for Folket* [*The Culture for the People*] (1938) thus distances itself from the vision of a distinct working-class literature and instead promotes the notion of a comprehensive "people's culture" (e.g. Bomholt, 1938, p. 5). This turn is emphasized in a 1939 review, where Bomholt promotes the notion of "democratic realism," which he contrasts to the Soviet-inspired ideal of "Socialist realism." This doctrine was introduced in Danish contexts via the 1938 translation of Marxim Gorkij's speech "Soviet Literature" (1934), spurring a local and limited version of the realism debate of the 1930s (Thing, 1993, pp. 560–566); cf. Pedersen, 1982, pp. 7–10 & 82–84).

In the review, Bomholt attacks the agitational literary ideal of the "bolsheviks," which he believes is still caught in an outdated ideology of class. Bomholt maintains the importance of literature for the working class, but not in a sense of working-class literature promoting the values and interest of this specific class, but literature that investigates the relation between "man and man, between man and society", saturated by "a socially toned humanism" (Bondebjerg & Harsløf, 1979, p. 525).

It should be noted that Bomholt's review is in critical dialogue with several leftwing intellectuals. The changes in the Social Democratic Party during the 1920s and 1930s had intensified divisions within the Danish left creating a heterogenic oppositional wing critical of the alleged pragmatism and reformism of the

Social Democrats. This split also left its mark on Danish working-class literature during the 1920s and 1930s, resulting in a recurrent division between a "social democratic" and a "communist" branch of the tradition (e.g. Agger et al 1984; pp. 524–544; Bondebjerg, 1979).

The social democratic working-class literature is most often associated with authors such as Nils Nilsson (1897–1980) and Caja Rude (1884–1949), whose works depict the contemporary working class, focusing especially on the organized proletariat of the urban industries (e.g. Bondebjerg). Among the working-class writers affiliated with the communist branch are the later Nexø, Harald Herdal (1900–1978), and Hans Kirk (1898–1962). However, many of the period's communist authors (several of whom were intellectuals without personal backgrounds in the working class) are seldomly categorized as working-class authors, but instead grouped under headings such as "committed" or "intellectual" writers and often associated with the loose term *kulturradikalisme* [cultural radicalism], designating a multifaceted left-wing cultural movement of the interwar years.

The communist authors most often identified as working-class writers were autodidact writers and/or those most directly thematically and aesthetically associated with the tradition established in the previous decades. This is, for instance, the case of Kirk, a central communist intellectual who did not come from a working-class background. Still, his works are often included in the Danish working-class literature tradition (e.g. Damsgård 1975; Harrits, 1983; Bondebjerg & Harsløf, 1979; Rasmussen, 2005, p. 28). The novel *Fiskerne* [*The Fishermen*] (1923) portrays the agrarian proletariat, while *Daglejerne* [*Hired Hands*] (1936) and *De nye tider* [*The New Times*] (1939) portray the societal development of a rural community during industrialization, both examining the development of class contradictions and highlighting the community's revolutionary potential. As the brief comments above suggests, Kirk can be described as a consistent innovator (in particular regarding his mastery of the collective novel) of the working-class literature of the early 20th century due to his portrayal of the Danish working class and his "committed, realist" style (Agger et al, 1984, 457).

The case of Harald Herdal is more complex. Born into a poor working-class family in Copenhagen, for many years Herdal endured a tumultuous life characterized by unemployment and poverty. These experiences were mirrored in his rather vast *oeuvre* including the experimental collective novel *Løg* [*Onion*] (1935). Set in a Copenhagen working-class slum, the fragmented narrative portrays the lives of seven working-class youths characterized by their shared experience of social fixation, sexual repression, and general sense of hopelessness.

Løg triggered a feud between Herdal and Kirk after the latter critically reviewed the novel. Kirk, among other things, attacked the inadequacy of the sexual themes, which he stated inaccurately depicted the actual "erotic experiences" of the "proletarian youth" (Kirk, 1936). However, in several responses, Herdal dismissed Kirk's own, more optimistic depictions of the working class as ideologically motivated, "naïve," and in conflict with "the reality of things" (Thing, 1993, p. 592). As several studies note, the debate around *Løg* was ultimately invested in the question of realism, with Kirk stressing the "constructive processing of the experience material, while Herdal demanded exact reproduction of the self-experienced"(Bondebjerg & Harsløf, 1979, p. 101; cf. Thing, 1993, pp. 590–594; Bondebjerg, 1979, pp. 277–280). Thus, Kirks' literary ideal prioritizes what we might call "analytical" or "ideological" insight over the background and experience of the working-class author and furthermore the presence of "optimistic revolutionary perspective" (Bondebjerg, 1979, p. 279).

Summarily, when the 1930s are described as the years of consolidation, is it due to the emergence of a persistent definitional debate that established the bounds of the term and the tradition. However, the debate simultaneously shows working class-literature as a contested tradition and a multifaceted praxis. The decade can also be viewed, however, as a consolidation of the tradition's marginalization. Only a few new working-class authors reached the wider readership. And though a rich debate over working class literature took place, this was a markedly intellectual endeavor, especially after the offensive phase of social democratic cultural politics (Thing, 1993, p. 581).

1940–1980: Towards the Last Hurrah?

Though the following decades are often described as a low point in the tradition's history (e.g. Barlyng & Bostrup, 1982, p. 9; Due, 1978, pp. 16–18), working-class literature continued to be produced; 1940s-examples include Gunner Gersov's (1915–1990) *Drømmen om regnbuen* [*The Dream of the Rainbow*] (1942), Ludvig Søndergaard's (1889–1960) *Kun en æske tændstikker* [*Merely a Box of Matches*] (1942) and Hilmer Wulf's (1908–1984) *Sådan noget sker faktisk* [*Such Things Actually Happen*] (1943).

Gersov, Søndergaard, and Wulff all continued their literary career in the following decades, as did several of the central working-class writers of the 1930s, such as Herdal and Nilsson. Additionally, working-class writers such as Ditte Cederstrand (1915–1984), Jens Jackie Jensen (1930–) and Erik A. Clausen (1930–) made their debuts in the 50s and 60s. In light of this, it could be argued that Danish working-class literature persisted, but it did not enjoy the same status it had in 1930s. This loss of status is generally explained by factors such as the general wealth increase of the 1950s and 1960s, the expansion of the Danish welfare state, and the rise of the new expansive middle-class, the so-called "mellemlag" [interlayers] of Danish society.

Against that background, the transition to the 1970s marks a caesura. The demand for the increased efficiency and new technological possibilities of automation during the late 1960s fueled labor disputes. Starting in 1973, labor issues intensified when Denmark experienced a tough economic crisis and rising unemployment. Intellectually, the late 1960s was characterized by the rise of leftist radicalism. This trajectory left its mark on Danish academia, in the form of the emerging so-called university Marxism of the 1970s and spurred a newfound interest in working-class literature amongst literary scholars.

The scholarly investment to working-class literature was not limited to the exploration of the tradition's past. Initiatives such as Litteratursociologisk Debatgruppe [Literature Sociological Debate Group], the organization Socialistisk Kulturfront [Socialist Culture-Front] and the literary journal *HUG!* attempted to form practical alliances between intellectuals and working-class writers, the aim of which was to promote literature

written by workers (Jørgensen 1979, 14). Thus, if ideological-essentialist conceptions of working-class literature, as described in the sections above, dominated the period's studies, the question of class-background remained a central factor in the debate on contemporary working-class literature. This is in spite of scholars and editors, such as Ole Hyltoft, who in the foreword to the anthology *Arbejdsliv* [*Working-Life*] (1978), simply defines working-class literature as literature "about workers" (Hyltoft, 1978, 8).

The prioritization of personal experience is also central to the initiative Ar-litt (an abbreviation of "Arbejder-litteratur;" literally "worker-literature") that was established in 1973 as an organization by and for "skrivende arbejdere" [writing workers]. The term, preferred to the more common "arbejderforfatter" [working-class author], is symptomatic for Ar-lit's insistence on their members' active relation to the working class. If a member achieved mainstream recognition, he or she had to leave the organization, which, for instance, was the case for John Nehm (1934–) due to his public breakthrough with *Man går ind ad en port* [*You Enter a Gate*] (1975) and *Ståsted ønskes* [*Standpoint Wanted*] (1976) (Barlyng & Bostrup, 1982, p. 12). Nehm is just one example of working-class literature in the period. John Chr. Jørgsensen lists more than forty titles of working-class literature published between 1970 and 1979, several of them by established commercial publishers (Jørgensen, 1979, pp. 77–78), including Grete Stenbæk Jensen's (1925–2009) *Konen og æggene* [*The Woman and the Eggs*] (1973) og Åge Hansen-Folehaven's (1913–1979) *Mens vi venter på fællesskab* [*While We're Waiting for Unity*] (1974).

Both novels can be described as realist auto-fictive accounts of the authors' experiences as unskilled workers. The texts address themes such as deteriorating working conditions, job insecurity and the alleged resignation of the established labor movement. Furthermore, both novels explore the working life's effect on the private life of the protagonists and their families, including portraying a working-class torn between traditional working-class values (political commitment, class-solidarity etc.) and desires for social mobility, consumerism, etc. The critical gender perspective of Jensen's novel should also be noted. Combining the decade's

trending feminist "kvindelitteratur" [women's literature] with its representation of class, the novel highlights the intersection of class and gender, which has also been thematized in some critical studies (e.g. Juncker, 1977; Agger, 1982).

Based on personal experiences, both novels were also representative of the dominant documentary trend in the decade's working-class literature most apparent in book-published interviews such as Dagmar Andreasen's (1910–1991) *Fabriksliv* [*Factory Life*] (1973) or the so-called "kritiske rapporter" [critical rapports] that exposed and explored various labor problems. By extension, some scholars expanded their conceptualizations of working-class literature to include various forms of factual texts (Karlsen, 1977, pp. 154–156; Bojsen-Møller & Kværndrup, 1977). Still, the dominating critical and common understanding of the term remained "texts with fiction elements" (Jørgensen 1979, p. 22).

Hansen-Folehaven's *Mens vi venter på fællesskab* and Jensen's *Konen og æggene* attracted broad attention and media coverage. Nevertheless, the main audience of the working-class literature of the 1970s was found among "education seekers, students, academics etc." (Ibid., p. 12; cf. Madsen, 1977, pp. 40–44), a demographic on the rise since the 1960s.

If working-class literature within the literary public was a profiled phenomenon, it was also a debated one, and a recurring dispute concerned the question of "literary quality" (Barlyng & Bostrup, 1982, pp. 22–23). The controversy surrounding Hansen-Folehaven's *Mens vi venter på fællesskab* is exemplary. As a worker at the Tuborg Brewery in Copenhagen, Hansen-Folehaven came in contact with members of the abovementioned Litteatursociologisk Debatgruppe who urged him to finalize the manuscript of the novel (Jørgensen 1980, p. 55). Hansen-Folehaven's professional life, however, left little time for the task. Therefore, he applied to the Statens Kunstfond [The Danish Arts Foundation] for a working grant.

The application was primarily rejected due to the lack of "documentation of Åge Hansen's artistic qualities" (Bostrup 1982, 23). This spurred a public protest by scholars and intellectuals problematizing the implicit "social bias" of the existing "highbrow 'quality criteria'" (Hertel, 1973; cf. Barlyng &

Bostrup, 1982, pp. 46–49). The protest ultimately succeeded. Following the intervention of the Social Democratic Minister of Culture, Hansen-Folehaven was granted extraordinary financial support. The episode, thus, illustrates the renewed responsiveness to working-class literature of left-wing politicians as well as of the labor movement during the decade (Jørgensen, 1979, pp. 10–11; Barlyng & Bostrup, 1982, pp. 107–124).

The debate, however, continued after the novel was published. The critic and author Hans Jørgen Nielsen's review is symptomatic. As an editor of *HUG!*, Nielsen was among the intellectual allies of working-class literature. Still, he emphasizes the novel's "massive lack of literary qualities" though simultaneously stressing the importance of its attempt to "present material from the entire life context of the working-class" (Nielsen, 1974).

Nielsen's review reflects a general cleavage in the book's reception. Critiques prioritizing the "content" of the book was generally positive, while critiques focusing on "formal" literary qualities (with regards to language, composition and so forth) were notably more dismissive (Bostrup, 1982, pp. 45–67).[5] Thus, as Nielsen states in his review, a principal question raised by *Mens vi venter på fællesskab* is whether working-class literature should be assessed and judged on the same criteria as "literature" as such (Nielsen, 1974).

A similar question stood at the center of the 1979-debate spurred by the authors Per Larsen (1939–) and Bent Vinn Nielsen (1954–), both of whom had been, occasionally considered "working-class authors". However, in the essay "Om en tendens som kaldes arbejderlitteratur" ["About a Trend Called Working-Class Literature"] (1979) they distance themselves from the label. Though stressing the importance of "literature with working class outset and point of view," the essay attacks the alleged discriminatory implications inherent to the term when used by "pseudo-solidarizing MA's and their students," fetishizing the supposed authenticity of working-class authors (Larsen & Nielsen, 1979). According to Larsen and Nielsen, the widespread intellectual support is saturated by a patronizing attitude neglecting "craftsmanship and simple respect for the profession" (Larsen & Nielsen, 1979), that ultimately counteracts the possibility of an

aesthetically ambitious and adequate working-class literature. In an earlier commentary, Nielsen had precisely characterized the contemporary wave of realist working-class literature as "completely ignoring several decades of literary and artistic development" and, consequently, unfit to "depict the condition of the [contemporary, NFL] working class"(Nielsen, 1978).

Though autodidacts writers with working-class backgrounds themselves, Larsen's and Nielsen's own writing do differ markedly from novels such as Jensen's and Hansen-Folehaven's. Their respective debut novels *Krapyl* [*Rabble*] (1977) and *Arbejdssky* [*Work Shy*] (1978) represent the life and experience of working-class characters. The novels, however, are highly experimental and form-conscious texts, characterized by, among other things, sophisticated narratological techniques and meta-poetical reflections embracing modernist qualities such as ambiguity and ambivalence (e.g. Jørgensen, 1980, pp. 66–75; Handesten et al., 2007, pp. 328–332). Symptomatically, while some critics identified, for instance, *Arbejdssky* as working-class literature, the majority did not (Selsing, 1984, pp. 25–26).

Larsen and Nielsen's essay was subsequently met with critical responses from working-class authors and intellectual supporters, several of whom—echoing the debate surrounding Hansen-Folehaven—problematized the exclusionary implications inherent in the notion of literary craftsmanship (Barlyng & Bostrup, 1982, pp. 100–105). This debate highlights two oppositional positions within the 1970s working-class literary sphere: one insisting on the working-class's right to document its experience and conditions in its own terms, and one insisting on the importance of aesthetic awareness and ability (Jørgensen, 1980, p. 75).

If the 1970s reintroduced working-class literature as an important literary phenomenon and tradition, the decade also exposed it as a contested field. As Jørgensen notes, it would be misleading to univocally depict the development of decade's working-class literature. Instead, Jørgsensen visualizes it as a circular figure, the center of which consists of the "writing workers" and realists, while the "avantgarde" authors such as Larsen and Nielen are situated at its periphery (Ibid., p. 58).

Jørgensen's circle-image is intended as a synchronous representation. However, it is also suitable for placing the decade chronologically in the overall history of Danish working-class literature. As in previous decades, the main strand of the tradition is still perceived in the 1970s as comprised of realist and ideologically committed texts most often written by authors with a personal background in the working-class. And, as like the previous eras of working-class literature, this core is surrounded by a diverse body of texts perceived as belonging to or at least connected with the Danish tradition of working-class literature.

And the Rest is Silence?

In 1977, John Chr. Jørgensen described the repopularization of working-class literature as an "encouraging fact" (32). Only eight years later, he presented a defeatist assessment of the tradition portraying a situation where "all the talk about working-class literature has been silenced" (Jørgensen, 1985). According to Jørgensen, one factor in the silences was declining interest among Danish media and publishers. This, however, according to Jørgensen is merely a reflection of the fundamental explanation: declining support among intellectuals, the main readership of the working-class literature in the previous decade.

Jørgensen's explanatory model addresses a crucial and highly complex question in the study of Danish working-class literature: Why has the tradition–with the the exception of some notable titles[6]–generally failed to reach a popular audience? This has been a reoccurring question thoughout the history of the research field and several explanations have been suggested, including the dominant preference of readers for "entertainment-literature," not least among the working class (e.g. Hansen, 1939, pp. 19–22 & 40), and the dominance of bourgeois asthetics and literary stakeholders in the literary public (Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 325) which is reflected in the marginalization of working-class literature in academic and educational institutions prior to the 1970s (Ibid., p. 17; cf. Jørgensen, 1979, pp. 12–16). Generally, the overall peripheral position of Danish working-class literature has been linked to its emergence – and subsequent existence – within

an already well-established national literary tradition characterized by longwithstanding norms and institutional structures (e.g. Agger & Gemzøe, 1982, p. 325; Hansen, 1939, pp. 19–22). Thus, the peaks of the 1930s and 1970s have relied on the temporary formations of powerful "counter-publics" that made their way during these periods into, and affected, the national literary tradition. However, working-class literature was never constituted as a main strand of the national literature.

With return to Jørgensen's commentary, his diagnosis of "the betrayal of the intellectuals" appears somewhat hyperbolic (Jørgensen, 1985). Still, it is fair to say that the breakthrough of working-class literature and the revival of its tradition during the 1970s exposed its reliance on the support of a wide range of stakeholders in the literary public. And, as stated in this chapter's introduction, this support has indeed declined drastically ever since, perhaps the most significant symptom being the general disappearance of Danish working-class literature as a subject of research and study. Consequently, no major and comprehensive revisions of the narrative of the tradition established by the studies of the 1970s and early 1980s exist.

The sections above have attempted to highlight the various conflicts and gaps inherent in the body of research. Due to its ambition of outlining the established narrative of the history of Danish Working Class, the chapter, though, is still based largely on sources emerging within a rather narrow historical horizon. It can consequently be accused of reproducing several inherent biases, including: a) an excessive focus on politics and ideology; b) a traditional national perspective, downplaying various transnational connections; c) a narrow definition of 'literature' that excludes, for instance, oral literature, low-brow literature and non-published amateur writing; and not least d) a focus on literary works primary authored by, as it often goes, white males. These, by no means comprehensive comments, outline tasks for future research, which would remodel, expand, and challenge the narrative outlined in the previous sections.

The disappearance of the research field also means that the tradition's history after the early 1980s has been left effectively unexplored. The effect is apparent in, for instance, *Dansk litteraturs*

historie I–V [*The History of Danish Literature*] (2006–2009), a more recent overview study of the history of Danish literature from 1100 to 2000. *Dansk litteraturs historie* includes the established narrative of Danish working-class literature from the late 19th century to the 1970s; it also effectively ends the tradition's history in 1980. Thus, the term is absent in the subsequent discussion of Danish literature from 1980 to 2000 (Handesten et al., 2007). Consequently, future research must also address the tradition's history over the last forty years, expanding it to entail new genres such as the graphic novel and popular cultural phenomena such as hip-hop. Such an endeavor lies beyond the scope of this chapter. However, the final section will offer a limited contribution to such endeavor as it explores the question posed in the introduction: *Does a contemporary Danish working-class literature exist?*

Contemporary literature, working-class literature

Despite the decline of working-class literature as a research field, in recent years a limited number of texts have made enquiries into its current state: A few media commentaries (e.g. Staun, 2016; Ravnsborg, 2014; Dressler-Bredsdorff, 20190), and two master theses (Gundersen, 2017; Visti-Tang, 2016) and Anker Gemzøe's article "Underdanmark i ny dansk prosa" ["Lower Denmark in New Danish Prose"] (2016). Furthermore, articles such as Gemzøe's "Den social drejning" ["The Social Turn"] (2017) and Peter Simonsen's "Forestillingen om at tingene var indrettet anderledes" ["The Notion That Things Were Arranged Differently"] (2018) both discuss contemporary author Helle Helle in the context of working-class literature and precarity. Together with a number of recent studies focusing on themes such as class and precarity, these texts can be said to outline a multifaceted list of potential candidates for a 21st century working-class literature. This body of works can be divided into three rough subcategories:

First, a limited number of titles appear as immediate successors to the tradition as they easily fit into the formalist definition of working-class literature. One example is Viggo Toften Jørgensen's *Den glade tømrer – og andre historier fra det virkelige liv* [*The Happy Carpenter – and Other Real Life Stories*] (2012). This

collection of stories, first published in a trade-union magazine, document Toften-Jørgsensen's professional life as a carpenter with an emphasis on his commitment to, and activism in, the labor movement. Similar characteristics can be attributed the concrete worker Jacob Mathiassen's *Beton* [*Concrete*] (2011), the drainage worker Keld Stenum's *Skærveknuser* [*Iron Horse*] (2011) and journalist Peter Rasmussen's *Stillads* [*Scaffold*] (2014), a contemporary heir to the documentary interview-books of the 1970s.

Second, some literary works occasionally referred to as "arbejdspladsromaner" [work-place novels] also thematize the experience of work (Turner, 2015). However, if texts such as Kristian Bang Foss's *Stormen i 99* [*The Storm in 99*] (2008) and *Døden kører Audi* [*Death Drives an Audi*] (2012), Jacob Skyggebjerg's *Vor Tids Helt* [*A Hero our Time*] (2013), Kenneth Jensen's *Tragedie plus tid* [*Tragedy Plus Time*](2015) and Lone Aburas's *Føtexsøen* [*The Føtex-Lake*] (2009) contain fictional and auto-fictional accounts of working life in low-wage industries and services, they markedly differ from the ideological anchorage of Toften-Jørgensen's and Mathiassen's books insofar that the labor movement play little, if any, role. The dominant focus is the unorganized worker, and several of the protagonists are merely temporary workers in their respective settings. This situation is characteristic for many of the authors. Several come from what might be described as working-class backgrounds and/or have experience in the depicted professions. However, they are often *also* graduates of universities or creative writing programs and are generally considered professional authors rather than "writing workers."

Third, a number of texts depict characters who are in an economical sense situated outside of the labor market or in an enduringly unstable, unsecure and vulnerable relation to it; a multifaceted demographic consisting of the long-term-unemployed, recipients of social benefits, the sick, immigrants, and others in precarious economic and social situations. This, the dominant of the three subcategories, includes (in a Danish context) highly profiled titles such as Yahya Hassan's *Yahya Hassan* (2013), Morten Pape's *Planen* [*The Plan*] (2015), and Thomas Korsgaard's *Hvis der skulle komme et menneske forbi* [*If a Human Should Pass By*] (2017). Other, examples are Kim Basse's *Det halve menneske* [*Half a Man*]

(2016), Ahmad Mahmoud's *Sort land* [*Black Country*] (2015) and Mikael Josephsen's *Neden under* [*Down Under*] (2010).

The inclusion of these works in the existing enquiries into contemporary working-class literature firstly reflects the general agreement that working-class literature cannot be reduced to literature about work but entails literary representations of the entire life-world of the working-class (e.g. Harrits, 1983; Boysen-Møller, 1985). For instance, unemployment is a reoccurring theme throughout the tradition's history. Secondly, the inclusion of such texts –in other contexts described as "underclass literature," "literature of precarity," and "migrant literature" (e.g.; Lund, 2017; Gemzøe, 2017; Schwartz et al, 2018: Löström, 2015) – expresses a general understanding that the tradition's current manifestations must reflect the historical transformations of class formations and its intersections with, for example, ethnicity.[7] Consequently, the recent studies generally align themselves with the processual understanding of class, suggested by, for instance Julias Markels, that designates class as a "hidden process of expropriation rather than a visible identity site" (Markels, 2003, p. 22). In this sense, class (and working-class literature) is not considered a question of fixed of identities and activities (working class equals white males selling manual labor for payment) but designate social-economic and political structures systematically distributing material and immaterial priviledges unevenly and unfairly. This, again, entails an understanding of class as a historical, ever-changing process; an outlook that also applies to the subjects of working-class literature.

This understanding is refleceted in the rather heterogenous body of contemporary literary works outlining a multifaceted counter-narrative to the widespread claim that the Danish welfare state has moved beyond class (cf. Lund 2017, p. 27). Furthermore, it is possible to highlight some primary characteristics:

First, several titles, including Pape, Korsgaard, Hassan and Skyggebjerg's books, correspond to a dominant genre of Scandinavian working-class literature, "the more or less autobiographical realist *Bildungsroman*" (Nilsson, 2014b, p. 100). They develop auto-fictional portraits of characters raised in economically, socially and culturally emancipated environments, with

the recurrent topoi being the urban social housing estate and the so-called "fringe-Denmark" (impoverished provincial areas).

Second, several texts depict processes of upward social mobility. This is the case of, for instance, *Planen*, *Hvis der skulle komme et menneske forbi* and *Det halve menneske* as well as novels such as Kristian Bang Foss' *Frank vender hjem* [*Frank Returns Home*] (2019) and Dennis Gade Kofod's *Nancy* (2015). All convey narratives of working-class protagonists, in the expanded definition suggested above, "climbing the social ladder" and are often narrated retrospectively, from a vantagepoint following or near the end of the protagonist's class journey. At first glance, such texts communicate a positive vision: That the working class no longer is helplessly tied to their class-origin. However, several works include a moment of ambiguity, portraying their protagonists as exceptions to the rule, as the majority of working-class characters inhabiting these texts are unable to pursue the protagonists' upward trajectory. Thus, if individual characters – due to personal skills, help from various benefactors, and sheer coincidence – are able to "escape," the class as such remains stuck in a degraded mode of social existence.

Third, this branch of contemporary fiction generally portrays the working class as fundamentally dysfunctional and destructive, associated with broken families, violence and abuse (cf. Gemzøe, 2016; Lund 2018). Though inarguably expressing sympathy with the working class and indignantly criticizing its condition these texts – crudely stated— generally run counter to the human, social, and political potential often afforded to it in studies of the "classics" of Danish working-class literature. As a result, as Gemzøe notes, a prevalent component of this contemporary body of works bears resemblance to the so-called horror realist-novels of the 1890s and early 1900s (Gemzøe, 2016, pp. 123–124). The contemporary class-oriented literature tends to focus on the "unorganized" working class and, despite expressing sympathy and compassion, it hardly ever envisions the lower-classes as a potentially progressive societal force. To quote Svend Aage Andersen's critical assessment of the horror-realist novels, in much contemporary Danish literature the working class likewise comes forth as "socially *determined*" but not "socially *determining*"

(Andersen, 1982, p. 266). Expressed with the terminology of this chapter, the majority of abovementioned works of contemporary Danish literature thus arguably lacks the ideological anchorage and utopian impulse that were favored in the ideological-essentialist conceptualizations of working-class literature highly present in the research field.

Where, then, does that leave Danish working-class literature in the 21st century? In his 2016 commentary, Rene Staun, a literary critic at the social democratic online media *Pio*, highlights titles such as *Planen*, *Yahya Hassan* and *Beton* as marking a "new wave of working-class literature." According to Staun, if we accept a broader, updated notion of the working-class, these texts fit "the common definition of working literature. Namely, literature written *by* working-class people *about* the conditions of the working class, and expressing an attitudinal standpoint [værdimæssigt ståsted] *for* the workers" (Staun, 2016).

In their master's theses Gundersen and Visti-Tang reach similarly affirmative conclusions based on their updated conceptualizations of working-class literature. Among other things, these analyses erase the class-background of the author as a criterion. Due to their similarity, I am here quoting only Gundersen's version:

> The new working-class literature dealt with, actualizes or sympathizes with the professional or social conditions of the working-class (and/or the precariat) with a class-conscious, political or socially indignant tendency, often in a realist, documentary or auto-fictional style (Gundersen, 2017, p. 43; cf. Visti-Tang, 2016, p. 35)

Gemzøe's outlook is more ambiguous. "Do [the contemporary literary representations of the lower class] then correspond to our notions of working-class literature?", he asks before answering: "Not really. Not at all if an open and committed relation to the labor movement is understood as a main criterion" (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 124).

Before elaborating on the differences between these interpretations, it is important to highlight a commonality: Staun, Visti-Tang, Gundersen, and Gemzøe all give precedence to the political dimension of working-class literature and, thus, continue the

main trend of the studies of the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, their varied outlooks on the current state of Danish working-class literature which can be explained by reference to their distinct views on the ideological or political dimension of working-class literature.

In Staun's, Visti-Tang's, and Gundersen's texts, terms such as "class consciousness," "solidarity," and "attitudinal standpoint" seem interchangeable with ideas of "sympathy," "critic," and "indignation." Gemzøe, too, acknowledges the "social commitment" of the emerging body of class-oriented contemporary literature (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 115). However, when he ultimately hesitates to identify these texts as examples of contemporary working-class literature, it is because, I would argue, his formulation of the "open and committed relation to the labor movement" implies a sterner understanding of class-consciousness and ideological qualities which I tentatively have identified with the terms "ideological anchorage" and "utopian impulse." As described in the sections above, it is precisely such characteristics that several central studies, including Gemzø's earlier contributions to the research field, employ to mark the qualitative difference between, for instance, the horror-realist novels and working-class literature. And it is this understanding, I would argue, that still resonates in Gemzøe's reserved, hesitant outlook on the current state of Danish working-class literature.

Despite the notable reservations of Gemzøe's formulation, the hesitating conclusion of the article is rather paradoxical, as Gemzøe here previously a) emphasizes that working-class literature must be considered a historically changeable phenomenon (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 113); b) approaches working-class literature, as noted in a previous section, as an umbrella-term including "many different literary trends, modes and genres" (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 114); and c) demonstrates "an astonishing continuity with regard to central trends of genre, stylistics and attitude" between the contemporary titles discussed in the article and the historical representations of the working class such as the horror-realist novels (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 124).

Gemzøe's article can be said to reflect the ambiguity inherent in the established narrative of Danish working-class literature, that,

as this chapter has argued, has favored and has been constructed around a relatively narrow core of literary works. However, a history of the Danish working-class literature that – as attempted in this chapter – includes the history of its construction exposes it as a tradition *also* in dialogue with, and attached to, a heterogenous periphery of literary works, not always and not univocally assessed as working-class literature while still persistently connected to the tradition. Perceived in this way, Danish working-class literature reveals itself to be a much more contested and multifaceted field. Or, as stated in the closing paragraph of Gemzøe's article (rather ambiguously following his hesitant assessment of the current state of Danish working-class literature):

> Now, as before, working-class literature is […] a phenomenon that seems to avoid our preconceived notions due to its characteristic diversity and historical variability, and due to its unexpected re-actualization in new directions and forms. (Gemzøe, 2016, p. 124)

If that statement is taken at face value, there are indeed reasons to insist on the continued existence of Danish working-class literature in the 21st century. And despite the outlined developments and transformations, it is indeed possible to identify continuities between the tradition's past and present. Such genealogies, however, do not smoothly follow the path of the perceived core, but span a complex braid with several central fixed points situated in the periphery of the tradition.

Consequently, the two crucial tasks facing scholars researching Danish working-class literature – the reconsideration of the tradition's past and the exploration of its trajectory in recent decades – can ultimately be considered intersecting endeavors. Both are likely to reconcieve the narrative of the tradition, not least regarding its continuities and rifts, and the perceived relationship between its center and periphery.

Endnotes

1. "Tradition" is used in the sense suggested by Magnus Nilsson (2017, p. 96). Thus, it designates a retrospective and selective construction favoring some aspects and practices while excluding, marginalizing or downplaying others.

2. All translations of non-English quotations are my own.

3. Bomholt actually defines working-class literature as "literature written *by workers and for workers*" (Bomholt, 1930, p. 314); however, his argument at large points to the representation of the working-class as a (natural) criterion (e.g. ibid., pp. 185–188).

4. The chapter's notion of the term utopian impulse draws on the theoretical framework of the research project "Utopia Without Future" currently implemented by the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen. See: https://artsandculturalstudies.ku.dk/research/utopia-without-future/.

5. The reception of *Mens vi venter på fællesskab* thus reflects the two dominating outlooks on working-class literature in the 1970s. "First, an aesthetic perspective that in general does not assign working-class literature high-literary status. The perspective is often linked to the aesthetic and literary ideals of modernism [...] and is often critical of the overt political character of much new working-class literature. Second, a left-wing ideological point of view, that generally emphasizes the importance of the creation of working-class as a counter-weight to bourgeois literature." (Stæhr, 1978, p. 65).

6. The works of Aakjkær, Skjoldborg and Nexø reached a wider audience. During the 1930s – the heyday of the AOF Book Circle, that at its highest had 6000 subsribers (Agget et al, 1984, p. 522)— Nils Nilsson and Caja Rude could be considered well-selling authors; the was the case for, for instance, Grete Stensbæk, John Nehm and Ditte Cederstrand in the 1970s as well (Jørgensen, 1980, p. 16). Furthermore, according to editor Ole Hyltoft, some short stories from the anthology *Arbejdsliv* reached a circulation of between 500.000 and 750.000 copies due to their publication in trade union magazines (Ibid., p. 16). Finally, contemporary titles such the debuts of Yahya Hassan and Morten Pape has topped the Danish bestseller-lists in recent years.

7. The heightened attention to ethnicity in contemporary class-oriented literature reflects a demographic change of Denmark within the last fifty years. Untill the 1960s Denmark was an ethnically relative homogonic society. However, from the late 1960s to the early 2000s Denmark saw a steady increase in immigration. Parts of this this demographic belong to the "the growing under-class" and consistues a "new ethnic underclass" (Olsen et al., 2014).

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Revisiting German Proletarian-Revolutionary Literature

Hunter Bivens

The proletarian-revolutionary literature of Germany's Weimar Republic has had an ambivalent literary historical reception.[1] Rüdiger Safranski and Walter Fähnders entry for "proletarian-revolutionary literature" in the influential *Hanser's Social History of German Literature* series (1995, p. 174) recognizes the significance of the movement's theoretical debates and its opening up of the proletarian milieu to the literary public sphere, but flatly dismisses the literature itself as one that "did not justify such outlays of reflection and organization." In the new left movements of the old Federal Republic, the proletarian-revolutionary culture of the Weimar Republic played a complex role as a heritage to be taken up and critiqued. However, the most influential, if not most substantial, West German account of this literature, Michael Rohrwasser's (1975, p. 10) *Saubere Mädel-Starke Genossen* [Clean Girls-Strong Comrades], sharply criticizes the corpus and describes the proletarian mass novel as hopelessly masculinist and productivist, a narrative spectacle of the "disavowal of one's own alienation." In the former GDR, on the other hand, after having been largely passed over in the 1950s, proletarian-revolutionary literature, rediscovered in the 1960s, was often described as the heroic preparatory works of a socialist national literature that would develop only later in the worker-and-peasants' state itself, still bearing the infantile disorders of ultra-leftism and proletkult (Klein, 1972).[2] This paper offers a revisionist reading of the proletarian-revolutionary literature of Germany's Weimar Republic.

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Although a large proportion of what we can consider proletarian literature in Germany consists of lyric, dramatic, and agitprop forms, this essay focuses largely on the novel. First, the novel is the genre that most clearly reflects the tensions of proletarian literature in Germany between its status as a countercultural or subcultural working-class practice on the one hand and its ambitions to proletarian cultural hegemony in society at large. Second, this essay addresses the interwar Weimar Republic time period, a focus justified by this period's unique institutional formation of proletarian-revolutionary literature. Working-class literature is not particular to the Weimar Republic, but it acquired a self-conscious voice, autonomous institutional structure, and clearly defined purpose in the late 1920s and early 1930s that is unique in the German experience. Despite the literature's continued influence in the 1960s and 1970s in both postwar German Republics, this formation would not repeat. In the GDR, proletarian literature was subsumed into a socialist national literature aligned, however uncomfortably, with the project of state socialism. In the Federal Republic, groupings of working-class writers like the Dortmund-based *Gruppe 61* (Group '61) or the *Werkkreises Literatur der Arbeitswelt* (Working Group for Literature of the Working World) were subcultural or countercultural formations, and lacked the insurrectionary claim on the public sphere that characterized the proletarian-revolutionary literature of the Weimar Republic.

I will argue the novel form itself plays a role in this contestation of the German public sphere in the Weimar Republic, precisely because of the novel's status as at once a vehicle of bourgeois high culture and its identification with the capitalist "culture industry" in the form of genre fiction and pulp novels. By appropriating this form, simultaneously the medium of high and mass cultural idioms in bourgeois society, German proletarian-revolutionary literature understood itself as struggling against bourgeois ideology on two fronts. First, in contesting the bourgeois hegemony of the public sphere, and secondly in creating a popular literary form, accessible not just to workers, but also to the middle classes, farmers, women and youth, for the propagation of a kind of vernacular socialist sensibility. In this essay, I will argue proletarian revolutionary novels broadly contain three aspects. The

first aspect is what Fredric Jameson (1992) calls an oppositional realism, the intense investment in the limits of dominant forms by "minor literatures," which undermine and adapt these dominant forms without fully moving beyond their generic logic. The second characteristic of proletarian-revolutionary literature is its depiction of proletarian modernity and of the scenes of waged and unwaged labor as aspects of capitalist society. Finally, coevality characterizes this literature, in Marike Janzen's (2018, pp. 5–6) sense of the term, where the political impetus behind a set of global literary organizations, institutions, and authors aspired not to circulate through the world literature market, but, through a global unified revolutionary struggle, transform the world.

The Rise of Proletarian Literature in Germany

Working-class culture and writing emerged in Germany in the wake of the failed 1848 bourgeois revolutions, but it was not until the first workers' parties, the General German Workers' Association founded by Ferdinand Lassalle and August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht's Social Democratic Worker's Party, formed and merged in the 1860s and 1870s, that a working-class public sphere—based on the associational culture, party structures, and press of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the trade unions of the German Empire— began to take on firm contours. The Antisocialist Laws of 1878–1890 pushed the party underground and into a proliferation of associations, from sports societies to workers' educational associations to singing groups, and much of what could be called Social Democratic literature in the nineteenth century, consisted of popular science tracts, agitational poetry, and workers' songs that animated this associational culture. At the same time, the late nineteenth century saw a proliferation of proletarian autobiographies and memoirs. At the same time, little theoretical attention addressed the question of what an autonomous working-class culture might look like, beyond the strategic adaptation of bourgeois forms to working-class audiences' aims and interests. The SPD, it might be argued, mobilized culture to political ends without providing, before or after World War One, any real basis for a socialist literary or cultural practice

(Schulz, 1993, pp. 5, 46). Indeed, the major literary debates within the party—the 1905 Schiller debate, the Naturalism debates of the 1890s, and the "Tendency Literature" debate between 1910 and 1912—revolved largely around the socialist reception of bourgeois literary positions. The SPD was generally suspicious of overtly political literature and oriented itself toward the classical German canon. Franz Mehring, the SPD's leading literary critic and member of the editorial board of the party's theoretical organ *Neue Zeit* [The New Time], partook in the generalized atmosphere of neo-Kantianism that permeated late nineteenth century German intellectual life and attempted to combine historical materialism with Kantian aesthetic theory. Wielding Kantian rigor against the "*Gefühlsästhetik*," (aesthetics of feeling) *fin de siècle* modernist currents like naturalism and expressionism, he also insisted on the sociological and class character of art as part of the superstructure. Nevertheless, Mehring was unable to reconcile these two tendencies in his thought (Trommler, 1976, pp. 163–172). Mehring indeed subordinated literature and art to the political struggle, a sentiment captured in his well-known aphorism, "the muses fall silent among weapons" (Witte, 1977, p. 11).

Nineteenth century socialist literature served two major functions: workers' education and promoting working class sociability — in other words, *Bildung* and celebration. At the same time, Sabine Hake points out that the poems, choral songs, memoirs, and workers' autobiographies of nineteenth century Social Democracy created not only an oppositional working-class public sphere within the German Empire, but also founded what she calls a "*Gefühlsszozialismus*," or emotional socialism, bonding men and women to the political signifier of "the proletariat" through a mode of sentimentality "marked by suffering, motivated by indignation, and united in the demand for recognition" (Hake, 2017, p. 68). Nevertheless, the separation of politics and literature in SPD encouraged the rise of "*Arbeiterdichtung*," or workers' poetry, consisting of a largely nonpolitical character and conventional aesthetic nature, which continued through the Weimar Republic. As Alexander Stephen has noted, "Themes like strikes, unemployment, inflation, lock-outs and demonstrations […] appear […] only at the margins." Rather, the poems of *Arbeiterdichter* like Karl Barthel, Karl Bröger, Heinrich Lersch, Alfons Petzold,

and many others treated love and nature, as well as their own biographies in the vein of the bourgeois *Bildungsroman*, and the hyper-masculine heroics of work and war (Stephan, 1977, p. 58). Many of the representative writers of this movement continued their careers with remarkable success under Hitler and the Nazis after 1933 (Ibid., pp. 62–63).

The period around the First World War saw the rise of a leftwing, antiwar tendency in Expressionism, best apparent in the poet Johannes R. Becher, the formation of Berlin Dada, involving a number of early members of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), including Georg Grosz and John Heartfield, as well as a general radical cultural fervor (Willett, 1978). Under the influence of the October Revolution and the Soviet avant-garde and confronted with economic chaos, revolutionary furor, and the White Terror of the Weimar Republic in the early 1920s, the cultural *milieux* that gravitated toward the nascent KPD and the various left radical groups that proliferated in these years were of a very different sort than either the "O Mensch"-prophets of Expressionism or the embourgified *Arbeiterdichter* in the orbit of the SPD, with their increasingly middle-class style and attitudes. Indeed, the first years of the Weimar Republic embodied what critic Axel Eggebrecht described as a "Bolshevik fashion."[3] 1919 saw the foundation of the Association for Proletarian Culture, which attempted to make connections with the Russian Proletkult movement while promoting the "Proletarian Theater," Erwin Piscator's agitprop troupe (Ibid. pp. 177–80). The journal *Die Aktion* published essays by Alexander Bogdonov (Ibid. p. 181). The Malik Verlag, founded by Wieland Herzfelde with his brother John Heartfield as its in-house designer, was set up in the same year and combined a Communist political orientation with a strong left-avant-garde publishing profile (Schulz, 1994, pp. 311–314). Throughout the early 1920s, a heterodox group of writers and artists like Grosz, Berta Lask, and Franz Jung attempted to work out what Hake describes as an aesthetic of proletarian modernism, marked by "…class-based perspective, collaborative ethos, interventionist method, multimedia aesthetic, internationalist orientation" (Hake 2017, p. 206). By 1923 or so, as the revolutionary tide in Germany and Europe ebbed, this Bolshevik fashion, too, receded in the face of New Objectivity's brisk coolness, with its claims to documentary

neutrality and functionalism (Lethen, 2002). Nevertheless, a core of socialist writers remained, including Becher (who joined the KPD in 1919 and would eventually become the first Minister of Culture of the German Democratic Republic), Herzfelde, Lask and others, joined throughout the decade by figures including Bertolt Brecht, Anna Seghers, Friedrich Wolf, and Ernst Ottwalt. The "Group 25" organized many left-leaning authors, such as Alfred Döblin, Kurt Tucholsky, and Ernst Toller, with Communists like Becher and the "racing reporter" Egon Erwin Kisch. Communist authors also organized the Working Group for Communist Writers within the *Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller* (SDS), the German writers' union. At the same time, the work of dramatists like Brecht, Friedrich Wolf, and Gustav von Wagenheim demonstrated the growing connection between writers and the revolutionary theater, as did the proliferation of agitprop groups and revolutionary workers' choirs like Maxim Vallentine's Red Megaphone, which was affiliated with the composers Hanns Eisler.[4]

At the same time, the 1920s saw a flood of writings by proletarian authors, including, pamphlets and agitational lyrics, as well as a crop of militant worker autobiographies from writers like Ludwig Turek, Max Hoelz, Oskar Maria Graf, Albert Daudistel, Adam Scharrer, and others, who no longer narrated their stories in the idiom of the Bildungsroman, as had been common for the workers' autobiographies of the previous century, but instead as exemplary tales of class-based exploitation, violence, and resistance (Safranski and Fähnders 1995, p. 194). The workers' correspondents' movement also gained an institutional structure as part of the general reorganization of the KPD press in the 1920s. The "Bolshivization" of the party in the mid-1920s lead to a focus on factory newspapers and the cultivation of worker correspondents based on the Soviet model (Lenin's "Party Organization and Party Literature" had been published in German in 1924). Many of the authors who would shape literature of the early GDR (for example Willi Bredel, Hans Marchwitza, and Eduard Claudius) began their literary careers as workers' correspondents for the KPD press, and were mentored by the Party's editors such as Becher and Kurt Kläber in the *Proletarian Feuilleton-Correspondence* (Ibid., p. 207). By 1930 there were somewhere in the neighborhood

of 15,000 worker correspondents in Germany (Ibid., p. 206). Momentum toward formalizing the cultural work of the KPD and the wider international Communist movement came as well from the Third International, which in 1927 hosted the First International Conference of Proletarian and Revolutionary Writers in Moscow, and from the XI Party Congress of the of KPD in the same year, where the building of a "red cultural front" was proclaimed as a goal of the party. Accordingly, the *Bund Proletarisch-Revolutionärer Schriftsteller* (Association of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers), or BPRS, was founded in October of 1928 as the German chapter of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers [IURW] (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 213).

The BPRS

Formed amidst the general Third Period turn to more clearly-defined communist cultural politics (Eley, 2002), the BPRS was thus part of the emergence of a distinctive and self-conscious proletarian culture in Germany, exemplified by the working-class counter public sphere organized around the KPD. The BPRS was part of a larger proletarian counter-public sphere influenced by the Communist Party, including, besides the above-mentioned KPD press and agitprop groups, the Workers' Theater Association, the Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists of Germany, The Workers' Singers' Association, the Peoples Union for Film Arts, and the Marxist Workers' Schools, as well as the Communist-aligned press empire of Willi Münzenberg, which included numerous newspapers, publishing houses, and film firms (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 210; Safranski and Fähnders, 1995, p. 212). The BPRS united the movement of revolutionary proletarian writers with radicalized left-bourgeois authors like Becher, Kisch, and Seghers in a single organization, and its journal *Linkskurve* [Left Curve] gave them a platform to distinguish their positions from the broader field of progressive literature in the Weimar Republic. With the founding of the BPRS, "proletarian revolutionary literature emancipated itself from the literature of the bourgeois left, to which it had more or less been considered an appendage," according to the account provided in the East German *History of German Literature*. "It constituted itself as an autonomous movement,

independent from the bourgeois culture business" (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 213).

Published in the first issue of *Linkskurve*, Becher's essay "Our Front" lays out the tasks confronting proletarian-revolutionary literature, stressing the need for a systematic application of Marxist thought to literature, criticism, and aesthetics and declaring, "we must take up the struggle against all forms of bourgeois literature, and even against a certain type of so-called working class writing [*Arbeiterdichtung*—HB] (Becher, 1994, p. 236)." Becher also emphasizes proletarian-revolutionary literature's representative and collaborative character, stressing that "the central character of the proletarian-revolutionary writer is precisely his modesty, the knowledge that he is nothing more than an organizer of the experiences of others," and that "thousands, uncounted hundreds of thousands, are collaborators in his work (Ibid., p. 235)." The "Draft of an Action Program" for the BPRS, published in 1928 in the KPD newspaper *Die rote Fahne* [The Red Flag] accentuates literature's class-bound role in the ideological superstructure of a society and sets the following guidelines for proletarian-revolutionary literature: 1) the "winning over, developing, and organizing" of the "hearts and minds of the working class" for the "preparation of the proletarian revolution"; 2) the winning-over, or "at least neutralizing," of the middle class and intellectuals; 3) combating bourgeois literature and its pretentions of being above politics, such that it tends to "consciously or unconsciously blur class oppositions, often flee from reality and cloak its contents in artistic forms mastered in a craft work fashion by schooled literati"; 4) to privilege content over form, understanding that "literature does not receive its revolutionary value from a revolutionizing of form, but instead the new revolutionary form can and must be an organic product of the revolutionary content;" and 5) to understand their work as "a weapon of agitation and propaganda in the class struggle."

From these guidelines, the document extrapolates five organizational tasks for the BPRS: 1) facilitating the work of proletarian-revolutionary writers by organizing them; 2) to widen the field of action of this literature and to elaborate its theoretical underpinnings on a dialectical materialist basis; 3) to pursue the struggle

against bourgeois literature practically and theoretically; 4) to promote, train, and encourage working-class youth and worker-correspondents in their literary development; and 5) to learn from and defend the USSR (Klein, 1979, pp. 138–149).

Beyond the commitment to culture as a tool of political struggle and the pledge to active counter-production as a strategy for contesting the bourgeois public sphere, both of the BPRS's constituent groups shared, according to West German critic Helga Gallas, an interest in the "breaking-up of traditional genre forms in the direction of anti-psychologizing, documentary modes of representation and the suppression of traditional principles of literary construction, like the individual protagonist, the artificial plot, individual conflicts, dramatic tension, etc" (Gallas, 1971, p. 96). Echoing the Soviet avant-garde, BPRS initially opposed the proletarian subject's collective nature to bourgeois literature's individual protagonist. Lask formulates this opposition in her essay "On the Tasks of Revolutionary Writing," denouncing the "imperialism of the individual" in bourgeois literature with its ornately crafted subjective interiority as a symptom of reification and fantasies of mastery. "A future collective society will understand," Lask writes, "how to reshape and use that of new value which an individualism driven to extremes has brought forth (Lask, 1979, p. 153)." In the meantime, Lask advocates what she describes as "mass writing and performances," arguing that "… it is necessary to strengthen mass and class feeling, it is necessary to evoke this collective experience: that of the exploited and struggling proletariat, an experience in the individual does not see herself reflected as individual, but where instead the individual experiences herself as integrated part of the class and mass." Lask does not, however, posit such "mass writing" as a generalizable technique but argues that the construction of socialism in the USSR provides a basis for the worker's individual development as social subject that the German proletariat lacks under capitalist social relations (Ibid., p. 154). In a similar vein, critic Andor Gábor framed the so-called *Geburtshilfertheorie*, in which the role of the intellectuals within the BPRS was to act as "midwives" to the rising proletarian literature. For Gábor, literature was inherently class based, serving a particular group of people whose "thoughts and

feelings it depicts, organizes, and develops Gábor, 1979, p. 171)." Gábor argued that a proletarian literature could emerge only from workers themselves, since such a literature must be "experienced from the standpoint of the proletarian-revolutionary class struggle (Ibid., p. 177)." Instead of creating such a literature themselves, intellectuals should facilitate proletarian literature through securing publication venues for, supplying theory to, and tutoring writing workers on matters of literary technique (Gallas, 1971, p. 50). Whereas Gábor called for recruiting and training workers' correspondents as a step toward building a proletarian-revolutionary literature, others took this position further, seeing proletarian-revolutionary literature as being already present in the KPD's factory newspapers and in worker correspondents' texts without the need for intellectual tutelage. It was this type of literary production that Erich Steffen declared in *Linkskurve* to be the essence of proletarian literature. Arguing that bourgeois society "has no further creative power" but only an apparatus of power and exploitation at its disposal, Steffen asserts "only the proletariat itself can create the literature that it needs," precisely because, as a class, it is oriented to modes of literary practice that contribute to overcoming the social division of labor between work and expertise (Steffen, 1972, p. 650)." Steffen declared, "we have no need to construct a proletarian literature, we have it; we only need to understand that it's necessary to look for it there where the forces of production are to be found and we must learn to see it and not to look for it or wish to shape it through bourgeois glasses (Ibid., p. 651)." Steffen's view was representative of many of the worker correspondents in the BPRS who thought, as Gallas puts it: "proletarian literature could only be created from the experience of the workplace, in constant contact with the material production process (Gallas, 1971, p. 50)." What was at stake in these discussions was the elaboration of a specifically working-class literature, emplotting the working class not as a psychologically differentiated grouping of individuals but as a collective protagonist. The aim was to consolidate the class-consciousness of this group through the organization of their experience using small, operative forms like the reportage, agitprop skit, or militant poem (Ibid., p. 82).

Debating the Proletarian-Revolutionary Novel

This turn to operative genres was at once a sometimes veiled and sometimes open critique of the novel as the privileged bourgeois literary form and an assertion of the need for prose forms more open to the discourses of science, politics, economics, and mass media (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 298). Indeed, Communist worker-correspondents were far from alone in their critique of the novel form around 1930. Bourgeois writers from Alfred Döblin to Thomas Mann spoke about the crisis of the novel (Ibid. p. 297). As critic Silvia Schlenstedt points out, the crisis of the novel is, in fact, an integral aspect of the genre itself. What distinguished the discussion in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s was its explicitly political basis, "now when the crisis of the novel is spoken of, reflection on the social and ideological crisis of the bourgeoisie, the crisis of bourgeois self-consciousness in the course of the 1920s, flows into the discussion (Schlenstedt, 1983, p. 68)." Becher himself wrote in 1929: "the novel strikes me today as a ponderous affair, weirdly clumsy in its response, I have only once in my life (*Levisite*) occupied myself, by way of experiment, with this 'infinite line.' With the intervention of Joyce, the novel, the way that we know it today, is not just put into question—it is finished … The apparatus that our novels have at their service—sociological, natural scientific, psychological—is completely archaic and useless."[5] Yet, rather than the Joycean stream of consciousness techniques, it was in reportage literature and the "*Tatsachenroman*," or novel of facts that socialist authors found prose forms that were more clearly anchored in concrete social and historical reality than the novel (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 297). In contrast to much of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which was content simply to reflect reality as a given, members of the BPRS like Kisch, Becher, Weiskopf and the theater director Erwin Piscator stressed a "documentary literature that would provide a Marxist analysis of the segments of reality depicted (Gallas, 1971, 93)." This emphasis on social analysis and political partisanship also differentiated these authors from the discourse of the Soviet Union avant-garde group LEF, which advocated "a literature without a subject, the writing down of details, the montage and assemblage of true facts (Ibid.)." If, under the conditions of Soviet socialist construction, literature could become a "factory of facts," as was advocated by figures like Sergei

Tretyakov and Boris Arvatov in the 1920s and 1930s, German proletarian-revolutionary writers were still faced with the task of ideological struggle from within bourgeois society.[6] In this sense, all factions within the BPRS understood art as a weapon (to quote the Communist dramatist and reproductive rights activist Friedrich Wolf) in the class struggle, "depicting, organizing, and advancing… the thoughts and feelings" of a particular social class for the purpose of revolutionary struggle.[7]

From mid-1930 through the fall of 1931, the *Linkskurve* debate shifted, as contributions began to mount a critique of the operative, proletarian-specific positions the journal had previously promoted. Steps toward a Hegelian-influenced theory of Marxist aesthetics and a re-orientation from class-specific rhetoric and modes of address to a mass audience appeal paralleled this shift. The BPRS's leftwing and the worker correspondents contested this turn, and many of the key texts in the ensuing debate responded to the arguments of Georg Lukács, the leading polemicist of the journal's new direction. Arriving in Berlin from Moscow in the summer of 1931, Lukács mounted a critique of leftist tendencies in the BPRS through his well-known series of articles in *Linkskurve*, which included attacks on the modernist tendencies of reportage and montage in the works of noted BPRS authors Willi Bredel and Ernst Ottwalt. It was also during this period that discussion in the BPRS shifted from a class-specific literature to a mass literature written from a revolutionary standpoint. In his 1930 *Linkskurve* article "Against Economism in Literature," N. Kraus already advocated widening proletarian literature's standpoint to address other social classes and for the production of a Marxist-inflected popular literature for the broad working masses, including the petit bourgeoisie, women, youth, peasants, and other groups that might not feel themselves sufficiently addressed in the often combative and masculinist style of BPRS writing. In calling for a mass literature, Kraus defined the proper standpoint for such literature as Marxism itself, a theory of the social totality. "The proletarian literature we need," Kraus wrote, "must reflect the entire life of human society, the life of all classes from the revolutionary proletarian standpoint" (Kraus, 1979, p. 203). Thus, criteria of the previous period, such as the author's

class origin, the address to a specifically class-conscious proletarian audience, and the treatment of proletarian themes, were no longer binding (Gallas, 1971, p. 83).

During the course of 1930, *Linkskurve* published a series of articles by Karl August Wittfogel (who would later go on to become an influential anticommunist), which, as Gallas points out, marked the first attempt in Germany to frame a specifically Marxist aesthetic (IBID., P. 111). Wittfogel took the publication of Mehring's 1929 literary historical works as occasion to articulate BPRS's theoretical views. Rather than the notion of art as "the free play of the powers of imagination," which Mehring inherited from Kant, and which Wittfogel denounced as a philosophy of art as its own purpose, Wittfogel proposed a content-based notion of art based on a reading of Hegel. For Wittfogel, it was not Spirit to which art gave objective form as it had for Hegel, but rather political and historical struggle (Ibid.). In Wittfogel's account, it is not art that ends (as it does in Hegel), but bourgeois art, as the truth content of the social moves increasingly toward the proletariat. At the same time, Wittfogel introduced a Hegelian notion of the "essence" of art, which was to disclose the "essence of appearances" through its aesthetic rather than conceptual concreteness, implying an emphasis on major forms like the classical bourgeois novel and drama as opposed to reportage.

Wittfogel's and Kraus's articles appeared as part of a general reorientation of the BPRS in the early 1930s, after the fashion of its Soviet sister organization, RAPP, toward the conventions of the traditional realist novel and its focus on individual psychological representation, breaking with previous *Linkskurve* positions on the mass hero and operative forms (Ibid., p. 64). The novel form gained importance in BPRS theoretical discourse after 1929. This was due, among other factors, to the International Conference of Revolutionary Writers, held in 1930 in the Soviet city of Kharkov and attended by several BPRS members. By this time, the discussions in RAPP were focused on the novel and the depiction of "the living person." The individual was to be portrayed in his or her development and change in the context of social contradictions (Murphy, 1991, pp. 30–31). The category of the living person, with its emphasis on psychological character development,

was combined with what the 1931 BPRS draft program referred to as "dialectical realism," a mode of representation linked to "the dialectic of objective development itself" (Klein, 1979, p. 435). This is to say the proletarian experience was theoretically subordinated to, or more positively sublated within, Marxism-Leninism as a theory of the *whole* social totality in its development, and manifested in individual, psychologically rounded characters. The draft program also emphasizes the novel form over smaller operative forms, like mass performances and reportage. Advocating "the great proletarian work of art," the program calls for texts that "capture the proletarian everyday life in its mutual interaction with the life of the other classes in such a deep, all-around fashion that in this everyday life the great driving forces of social development become visible and manifest." The program continues by asserting that proletarian-revolutionary literature poses the question of "handling all the problems of the entirety of society from the standpoint of the proletariat (Ibid., 432)." Becher programmatically summed up this re-orientation in the theoretical and practical work of the *Bund* in a *Linkskurve* article published in late 1931. The article "Our Turn," begins by citing the August 1931 Plenum of the RAPP and proceeds to summarize the Kharkov Conference, and the criticisms voiced there of the "backwardness" of proletarian-revolutionary literature to this point. Becher goes on to evoke the need for a socialist mass literature to combat the bourgeois culture industry and to call on proletarian-revolutionary authors to master Marxist theory (Becher, 1979, pp. 409–423).

This turn toward the social totality, as opposed to a literature of proletarian militancy and class struggle, returned to the debates about literary tendency in nineteenth-century Marxism, but with a crucial difference. Earlier Social Democratic critics, with Mehring being foremost among them in Germany, were skeptical of tendentious art and tended to advocate the appropriation of German classicism as a part and parcel of proletarian *Bildung*. Returning to this question of the relationship between politics and literature in the *Linkskurve*, Lukács criticized this Social Democratic position as itself undialectical. For Lukács, the very notion of tendency implies a reified opposition between tendency art on the one hand and pure *l'art pour l'art* on the other, ideologically reflecting the

capitalist division of labor in its opposition of art to morality and thus also of the individual to society. Against this alternative's false choice, which lay in either renouncing tendency and producing a pure art rendered all the more tendentious by bracketing out the social or in straightforward moralizing, Lukács proposes the term "partisanship," or *Parteilichkeit*, as an objective grasp of the social contradictions that shape both the subjective and objective sides of life and form. For a writer proceeding from the viewpoint of dialectical materialism, in other words, the question of tendency does not arise, "for in his depiction, a depiction of objective reality with its real driving forces and the real developmental tendencies, there is no space for an 'ideal,' whether moral or aesthetic" (Lukács, 1980b, p. 41). This turn from a specifically proletarian viewpoint to one of a Marxist depiction of the social totality did not necessarily imply a formal corollary, but it did, in its evocation of the social totality as the horizon of representation, imply a shift in emphasis from operative literary forms to more traditional and closed ones. Thus, Lukács's criticism of proletarian author Will Bredel's novels centers on the contradiction between what Lukács sees as their properly broad narrative framework and the residual reportage-like quality that he finds in Bredel's characters' language (Lukács, 1980, p. 24). "This abstract treatment of language," Lukács states, "necessarily leads many of Bredel's attempts to come to grips with concrete reality into absurdity and kitsch (Ibid., p. 26)." For Lukács, this is not a question of Bredel's talent or technique, but a symptom of an approach that is dialectically and creatively unable to dissolve "the rigid appearance of things" and reveal everyday life in its their process character (Ibid., pp. 26–27).

What Lukács means by this process of dialectical dissolution of rigid appearance into social processes and its relationship to narrative is more clearly articulated in his piece "Reportage or Portrayal," a criticism of the *Tatsachenroman*, *Denn sie wissen, was sie tun* (For They Know What They Do, 1932) by BPRS member and Brecht collaborator Ernst Ottwalt. Lukács makes it clear that he is taking Ottwalt's novel, an expose of the Prussian legal system, as exemplary of the reportage novel as a literary genre, represented as well by writers like Upton Sinclair, Sergei Tretyakov, and Ilya Ehrenburg (Lukács, 1980a, p. 45). The reportage

novel, Lukács writes, conceives a social product as ready-made and final," falling victim to everyday life's "fetishistic appearance of autonomy." As a result, the proletariat becomes an impotent object of capitalist modernity's differentiated systems, from the factory to the courthouse, rather than the historical agent of a class struggle through which these very forms arise (Ibid. p. 54). "Portrayal of the overall process," on the other hand, "is the precondition for a correct construction" in terms of the novel, "because only portrayal of the overall process can dissolve the fetishism of economic and social forms of capitalist society, so that these appear as what they actually are, i.e. (class) relations between people (Ibid., p. 53)." Lukács uses Tolstoy's work to give an example of portrayal, precisely because Tolstoy is able to integrate a seemingly contingent detail into the causality of the overall narrative while avoiding the arbitrariness of reportage, which focuses in on a single constellation of documentary details, mistaking empirical reality for the social and historical processes that the surface appearances of social life conceal. Such a portrayal of "the social process in its dynamic totality (Ibid., p. 58)" clearly presupposed large epic forms that can accommodate the portrayal of processes and interactions in between various social groups in their duration. For Lukács, this was the classic bourgeois novel. Ottwalt, Brecht, Lask, and others proposed different ways of solving the problem of forms that would be modern, partisan, connected to proletarian experience and capable of grasping larger social and historical processes. Brecht's notion of the epic theater addresses precisely these issues. Nevertheless, by 1932, such alternative positions were largely pushed to the margins of the debate in *Linkskurve*. By the time that the Nazis drove the BPRS underground, *Linkskurve* had already arrived at many of the positions that would later be codified as Socialist Realism: a socialist perspective, stylistic realism, and an emphasis on classical bourgeois form (Gallas, 1971, p. 64).

Revisiting the Proletarian-Revolutionary Novel

There are, though, two observations to make here. First, it is misleading to read the debates in *Linkskurve* as a guide to BPRS

authors' literary production, as the relationship between theory and practice in the BPRS was complex and contradictory. BPRS writers were not producing realist novels in the Lukácsean mold, but, in their radical decentering of bourgeois subjectivity and narrative, articulating a distinctly post-bourgeois epic form. Secondly, German proletarian-revolutionary literature remained linked to what Peter Bürger describes as the historical avant-garde, with its challenge to the institutions of bourgeois art and its claims to autonomy from politics, labor, and everyday life. Likewise, BPRS literature partakes of the historical avant-garde's predilection for techniques of fragmentation, montage, and reportage Bürger, 1984). As John Roberts has argued, the revolutionary workers' movement provides a kind of alternative genealogy for these techniques. With its genres of workers' correspondence and agitprop, they were concerned to "close down the distance between subject and object, near and far, part and whole" central to bourgeois aesthetics and all of which aspired overcoming the boundary between art, labor, and life (Robert, 2003, p. 53). One might argue, then, that it is precisely this avant-garde remainder to which Lukács objected in the works of Bredel, Ottwalt, and others. These writers, who had little interest in modernist aesthetics per se, nevertheless maintained a fidelity to the avant-garde aspiration to operativity, in the sense that Walter Benjamin famously evoked in his essay "The Author as Producer": not as a question of the political tendency of the author, "but on the basis of his place in production (Benjamin, 2005, p. 773)." The author's place in production for Benjamin does not describe a sociological fact—one doesn't have to be a lathe turner to write about striking metal workers, but a relationship to the division of labor between author and audience. For Benjamin, the revolutionary artist is one who works on "socializing the intellectual means of production," breaking down the boundaries between the literary specialist and the working class (Ibid., p. 780). This is, I would argue, the role assumed, again with varying degrees of virtuosity, by proletarian-revolutionary novelists in organizing and articulating the German working class's collective experience.

The proletarian revolutionary novels that appeared around 1930 fell into two broad groupings. The first narrated the World War I and the workers' uprisings of the postwar period

across Germany. Examples include Adam Scharrer's war novel *Vaterlandslose Gesellen* [Fellows Without a Fatherland, 1930], Ludwig Turek's *Ein Prolet erzählt* [A Proletarian tells his Story, 1930] Hans Marchwitza's *Sturm über Essen* [Storm over the Ruhr, 1930] and Karl Grünberg's *Brennende Ruhr* [Burning Ruhr, 1928], which narrate the Ruhr Uprising of 1920, and Otto Gotsche's *Märzstürme* [March Storms, 1933], a novel about the disastrous 1921 March Action of the KPD in Central Germany. The second major theme of the proletarian-revolutionary novel was the everyday struggles of the Weimar Republic—rationalization and unemployment, strikes and demonstrations, police and fascist violence, poverty, squalor, and boredom. Willi Bredel's novels about factory strikes and neighborhood self-defense fall under this group, as do a number of novels about unemployed and proletarian youth, including Rudolf Braune's *Das Mädchen auf der Orga-Privat* [The Girl on the Orga-Privat, 1930], *Junge Leute in der Stadt* [Young People in the City, 1932] and Walter Schönstedt's *Kämpfende Jugend* [Youth in Struggle, 1932]. Yet another subset of this socialist *Gegenwartsliteratur*, or literature of contemporary life, was the burgeoning proletarian-revolutionary children's literature; for example, Lisa Tetzner's *Hans Urian* and Alex Wedding's *Ede und Unku*, both published in 1931. Many of the novels of the proletarian struggles of the early 1920s can be read as attempts to "make sense of the workers' experience of sudden empowerment and unlimited possibility, flowed by crushing, devastating defeat" through a set of revisionist narrative strategies that restage postwar uprisings as "temporary political defeat and inevitable historical victory" and do so through an overdetermined salvaging of the codes of proletarian masculinity (Hake, 2017, p. 179). In other words, these novels develop and cultivate the character-type of the "hard as steel Bolshevik" as compensation for historical defeat, in a manner not dissimilar to the work of Mike Gold in the US proletarian literature of the same period. As Rohrwasser has pointed out, this character type also responded to the humiliations of industrial labor and projects out in Communist self-representation in the public sphere (Rohrwasser, 1975, 106). These characteristics carry over into proletarian *Gegenwartsliteratur* as well, though in both sets of

novels the experience of women as both wage laborers and as unwaged toilers play a key role; for example, Hans Marchwitza's *Walzwerk* [1932], Willi Bredel's *Rosenhofstrasse* [1931], and Franz Krey's *Maria und der Paragraph* [1931]. At the same time, BPRS novels presented a specifically plebeian and proletarian depiction of capitalist modernity, employing what might be termed a "subaltern modernism," or "social modernism," to borrow the phrasing of Michael Denning who wrote, "as writers abandoned established family plots and the individual *Bildungsroman* to create an experimental collective novel based on documentary and reportage (Denning, 2004, p. 67)."[8] Modernism and realism alike stretch to their limits in the face of working-class experience.

In this sense, I would argue proletarian-revolutionary literature can be understood as a variant of what Fredric Jameson, in a development of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of minor literatures, calls oppositional realism. Put briefly, oppositional realisms mark the intense investment in the limits of dominant forms by "minor literatures," which undermine and adapt these dominant forms without fully moving beyond their generic logic, which simultaneously isolates such literatures through their own specialized idioms and forms of address (Jameson, 1992, pp. 174–175). Historically, oppositional realisms mark the historical emergence of new identities and class ideologies. "The moment of realism," Jameson writes, "can be grasped…as the conquest of a kind of cultural, ideological, and narrative literacy by a new class or group (Ibid., 156)." Realism is a moment in the larger history of cultural revolution that the emergent class carries out against the ideologies of the previously dominant class, mapping out a newly forming set of social relationships. "The function of any cultural revolution will be to invent the life habits of the new social world, to de-program subjects trained in the older one (Ibid., p. 164)." Realism was the central notion underpinning both the proletarian-revolutionary novel and its surrounding critical discourse. In his "A 'Radical' Replies," a programmatic reply to a 1928 article by Willy Hass in *Die Literarische Welt*, Becher already describes proletarian-revolutionary literature as a guide through the "environment of schematic, abstract, impenetrable relationships" that constitute bourgeois society

(Becher, 1979, p. 144). At stake in proletarian-revolutionary literary development was not only a challenge to traditional bourgeois aesthetic and ideological norms, but also an attempt to remap social reality from the proletariat's point of view. The complex task that such a literature faced, then, is the one Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge sketched out in reference to the KPD more generally vis-à-vis the public sphere of the Weimar Republic: to evolve a working-class politics that can at once: 1) take control of the public sphere to prevent its occupation by the enemy; 2) construct a counterpublic sphere of the working class. These two projects—one of hegemony and one of cultural revolution—that must be enacted at one and the same time, appeal, however, to two different sets of motives and rhetoric, the first to discipline and the second to spontaneity (Negt and Kluge, 1993, p. 211). The turn from smaller operative genres directed precisely at the revolutionary segment of the working class to the proletarian-revolutionary mass novel, which incorporated many of the forms of address of operative literature while seeking to situate these forms in broader epic narrative structures, was a conscious attempt (even in the face of Lukács and other *Linkskurve* theorists) by BPRS authors to find literary answers to this double imperative.

1930 saw the launch of the Red-One-Mark-Novel series, published by the International Workers' Press. These novels were intended as a counterweight to bourgeois trivial literature, describing the everyday life of the masses through the viewpoint of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Introducing this series, Otto Biha evokes the threat of bourgeois "reactionary literary trash" that stalks the working class. Through the factory yards, waiting rooms, subways, tenements, and homeless shelters of the republic, "these mass novels of classless idylls and economic peace parade their slogans" of "personal diligence, love, fatherland, and property," making them "more dangerous than the so-called great literature of the bourgeoisie (Biha, 1994, pp. 239–40)." In order to repel this literature, the "red mass novel" will provide, Biha asserts, Marxist genre literature for the masses, "no less gripping and entertaining;" a literature that "instead of depicting personal conflicts and private passions, gives shape to the conflicts of our time and the struggle of the masses by depicting the fate of individuals

in their actual interactions inside the class struggle in society (Ibid.)." In other words, the turn to the novel was motivated less by a commitment to the Tolstoyan realism advocated after 1931 by the Becher-Lukács group at *Linkskurve* than it was through the attempt to appropriate popular forms of capitalist mass culture to a project of proletarian hegemony and socialist cognitive mapping. The proletarian novel differed from its bourgeois counterpart, FC Weiskopf pointed out, in its documentary style and through the "capturing of collective actions and collective feelings" instead of individual psychological portrayals (Weiskopft and Hirschfeld, 1979, p. 215). Likewise, proletarian novels' plots were driven more by social than individual processes (Ibid., p. 216). The third important innovation that Weiskopf saw in the proletarian novel was the "widening of the realm of language" to include Communist movement language, trade union and factory culture, and working class speech in general (Ibid.). This is not a content issue so much as it is one of form. For Weiskopf, these novels were no longer novels in a strict sense, but hybrid post-novelistic epic forms: half novel-half biography, half protocol-half novel, half reportage-half novel (Ibid, p. 215). In this sense, as Hanno Möbius argues, the Red-One-Mark-Novel grew more or less directly out of the Workers' Correspondence Movement and preserved the forms of working class communication developed in the KPD's factory and street newspapers (Möbius, 1974, p. 172). This is a form of communication largely arraigned chronologically, avoiding psychological depth, but instead interjects theoretical concepts into everyday situations, mediating between interpretation and experience and allowing workers to generalize out from their own experiences (Ibid., pp. 174–176).

At the same time, the proletarian novel is intensely saturated with descriptions and evocations of states of feeling; it is, as Sabine Hake writes, a "laboratory of political emotions" (Hake 2017, 263). In their affectively saturated descriptions of working-class daily life, these novels offer an archive of feeling for the proletarian experience of modernity, characterized by confinement, violence, precarity, and superfluity—what historian Alf Lüdtke describes as "daily combat at close quarters" (Lüdtke, 1995, p. 213). This is a working class modernity lived out, as Karl

Grünberg puts it in *Brennende Ruhr*, "between the dark coal pits, ugly living holes, hazy bars, and musty bed chambers" (Grünberg, 1959, p. 106). Rather than condemning proletarian-revolutionary literature for bracketing out "domestic spaces" and private spaces to focus on factories and mines, as Rohrwasser does for example, I think it is more productive to describe it as a literature that struggles, not always successfully, to grasp narratively the ways that proletarian experience exceeded the stereotype of the revolutionary, male, industrial worker and to portray the whole of proletarian experience, which is one of exploitation not only in production, but in reproduction in neighborhoods and homes. As the great economic rationalizations of the mid-1920s rendered the KPD largely a party of the militant unemployed (Weitz, 1997, p. 131), depictions of production itself in proletarian-revolutionary literature are often framed in terms of a civil war in the form of a direct bodily experience of the relative extraction of surplus value. "The ten thousand that stream in and out of dozens of factory gates in the mornings and evenings," writes proletarian-revolutionary author Adam Scharrer in his *Vaterlandslose Gesellen*, "are the face of war in civilian guise" (Scharrer, 1960, p. 94). Capitalist production itself figures in the context of the War as the unmediated production of "*Selbstvernichtung*," or self-annihilation (Ibid., p. 95). At the same time, these novels connect the violence of production and exploitation to that of working-class *reproduction*: the abjection and claustrophobia of the proletarian milieu, powerfully evoked in Klaus Neukrantz's *Barricades in Wedding*:

> Between the black walls and narrow yards flowed the turbid waters of the Panke. A sewer for factory waste in which the children bathed in summer… the cramped rooms contained several people apiece. A fetid air enveloped the faces of the sleepers. Stairs, passages, bedrooms, yards—all intolerably crowded together, the smell of humanity permeating walls, cracks, partitions; a compost of tenants, sub-tenants, lodgers—and children, the curse of the street! (Neukrantz, 1979, p. 16)

Such descriptions of remaindered proletarian space reinforce portrayals of working-class domesticity as constant exposure to

crisis and precarity, a labor of wearing down and survival. This experience of modernity as precarity and the exhausting labors of survival links German proletarian literature to global proletarian literature more broadly, echoing similar descriptions in the work of Tillie Olson or Takiji Kobayashi. Proletarian modernity is thus characterized not only as material crisis and deprivation, but also a crisis of meaning; it is a world in which, to quote Seghers, at any moment, "things had just gotten worse and less intelligible" (Seghers, 1935, 159, 159). In *Schlacht vor Kohle*, Marchwitza, a master of narrative abjection, describes proletarian domesticity as a "giant grave" in which his character Frau Ragnitzki "slowly suffocated" (Marchwitza, 1980, p. 77). Books like Bredel's *Das Eigentumsparagraph* or Walter Schönstedt's *Kämpfende Jugend* describe the "meaningless and empty life" of permanent unemployment, as those remaindered from capitalist production perceive themselves as "completely superfluous" (Bredel, 1961, p. 117). Proletarian-revolutionary literature thus gains its contemporary relevance both in its concern of what Nancy Fraser describes as the background conditions for exploitation, that is to say reproductive labor,[9] as well as the recognition that, as Denning puts it, "bare life, wasted life, disposable life, precarious life, superfluous life" (Denning, 2010, p. 79), are better descriptors for the longue durée of proletarian experience than is the Fordist imaginary of "normal life."[10] Even in those novels depicting heroic proletarian struggle in the factories and the streets, the experience of surplus working-class populations in the context of the economic rationalization and mass unemployment of the time—those who "drop out… of the contemporary production process… as by-products… the waste that's left over," to quote Siegfried Kracauer (1930)—is never far from the narrative's surface.

Finally, a sense of coevality characterizes this literature, in the sense developed by Marike Janzen: the political impetus behind a set of global literary organizations, institutions, and authors that aspired not to circulate through the world literature market, but to transform the world itself based on empathic notions of the world as the shared space and time of a unified revolutionary struggle (Janzen, 2018, p. 13). These novels map Germany as a proletarian social space, depicting specific sites of struggle—Berlin, the Ruhr, Central Germany, Hamburg—within the

context of a world revolutionary process (Kaufmann, 1973, 319). Indeed, the BPRS was itself part of what Denning describes as a working class and plebeian global culture that shadowed the global cultural idioms of high modernism and commodity aesthetics, a "worldwide movement of plebeian artists and writers to create a proletarian culture, a socialist realism" (Denning, 2004, 32). As Hake points out, this literature was a self-consciously articulated attempt at "developing the proletarian novel in critical dialogue with new literary experiments in the Soviet Union and as part of international networks of exchange" (Hake, 2017, p. 263). Janzen has coined the term *solidarian authorship* for this kind of literary endeavor, describing the leftist author "as collaborating participant within an international project, one supported at various times by international institutions, to build solidarity and thus to transform the world into a place where people are conscious of their interconnection and act in the collective interest" (Janzen, 2018, p. 3). Sonali Perera points out the necessarily fragmented and discontinuous character of this mode of authorship in working-class literature and of any attempt to frame an alternative genealogy of working-class literature as world literature. "Working-class internationalism," she writes, is "a necessarily incomplete totality," characterized as it is by "broken lines, interrupted narratives, and the inability to formalize meaning" (2014, p. 7). It is, however, precisely this necessarily unfinished form of the proletarian-revolutionary international project that renders it irreducibly collaborative, rooted in a precarious collective subject practicing a narrative mode of "willful deauthorization, self-criticism, altruism, effacement, anonymity, generosity, humility" that "self consciously figures an ethics of historical materialism (Ibid., p. 11)." Coevality and solidarian authorship are also a matter of conceiving the world as shared time. Janzen cites a short piece by Seghers from 1932, "Kleines Bericht aus meinem Werkstatt" [A Short Report from My Workshop], in which Seghers notes, that "… the first of May is celebrated around the world *at the same time*, but it is celebrated *differently* in each country" (Janzen, 2018, p. 1). Registering shared time and difference, I would argue, is central to understanding proletarian-revolutionary authorship, and, indeed, in his work on German proletarian-revolutionary

literature of the period, Christoph Schaub described this approach as the foundation of an international world literary practice as much as the institutional structures of German and international working class writing in this period (2019).

If the high road of this internationalism led from Berlin to Moscow for German proletarian-revolutionary literature, it would be a mistake to provincialize this corpus. These novels are intensely concerned with locality—a particular street, factory, prison, or mine but always concerned to relate these enclosed spaces to the global context of class struggle (Jameson, 2005, pp. xxx–xxxi). One thinks here of the program of international lists of publishers like Malik Verlag or Münzenberg's Universum-Bücherei für Alle [Universum—Library for Everyone]. The most explicit attempt to frame this kind of proletarian internationalism novelistically was Anna Seghers's first full-length novel, *Die Gefährten* [The Wayfarers, 1932], set in the aftermath of the revolutionary wave that followed the First World War. The novel begins with the Hungarian Soviet Republic's defeat, and follows a group of Hungarian, Italian, Bulgarian, Chinese, and Polish revolutionaries, political prisoners, and refugees dispersed across Europe over the next decade. Woven through the tales of this revolutionary diaspora are narratives of global working-class struggles, from Berlin to Moscow to China, with Warsaw, the Carpathian Mountains, and factories of northern Italy in between. *Die Gefährten* is a singular contribution to the mid-20th century attempt to create a popular and political imaginary for working-class internationalism, yet even a work of local scope, Berta Lask's 1927 "optimistic tragedy," *Leuna 1921*, about the Central German workers' uprising of that year closes with the chorus of nationally unmarked workers evoking a global-class struggle: "Strike in Germany.—Strike in England.—Strike in America.—Revolution in Java.—Revolution in China. Victory of the Peoples Army. Red Asia" (Lask, 1961, pp. 143–144). Reportage writer Egon Erwin Kisch's international reports from the US, the USSR, Australia, and across Asia contributed to the creation of a global, plebeian, and revolutionary counterpublic sphere (Kaufmann, 1973, p. 300).

The tension between this revolutionary horizon and the counterpublic sphere in which the BPRS, and the KPD itself, operated

is what gives proletarian-revolutionary novels their frisson. As the critic Helga Gallas has noted, "even the function of literature to deliver formulas and orientation symbols for a certain social camp consciousness and strengthen group consciousness could not be understood for proletarian-revolutionary literature in the sense of an expression and consolidation of one's own living situation, but rather as the abolition of the same" (Gallas, 1971, 74). Despite its revolutionary ethos and attempts at mass forms of address, German proletarian-revolutionary literature remains stuck in this contradiction between the cultivation of proletarian class-consciousness and its self-abolition. By the early 1930s, the BPRS had already come up against the limits of a revolutionary cultural practice based on proletarian identification; first, the problem of the increasing organic composition of capital, expelling workers in increasing numbers from the direct points of production, and secondly, the wide diffusion of a capitalist mass culture, both of these points compounded, of course, by over a decade of fascist terror that destroyed all autonomous working-class organizations in Germany, save scattered pockets and networks of underground resistance. Nevertheless, the collapse of this proletarian counter-public sphere was not historically inevitable, and rather than condemning proletarian revolutionary literature for not rising to the level of socialist realist or new left insights, it is perhaps more productive to examine the kinds of connections this literature was attempting to make, even if it often does it badly. For this reason, it is not enough to read this literature purely in terms of what it asserts. To echo Perera, the breaks and discontinuities reveal as much as the didacticism with which these novels are replete. It must also be read against the grain. And yet, this too is not enough; we must also read the trend of that grain historically. Both in their intentions and in their lapses, these novels are doing work.

Endnotes

1. This essay draws on the first chapter of my *Epic and Exile: Novels of the German Popular Front 1933–1945* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

2. Proletkult became a keyword in the GDR for leftist avant-garde tendencies in art and culture that had been ostensibly sublated by Socialist Realism and did not necessarily refer specifically to the Russian Proletkult movement.

3. Cited in Safranski and Fähnders, 1995. 174.

4. This account draws from Kaufmann, 1973, pp. 206–213.

5. Cited in *Geschichte der deutsche Literatur* 1973, 307. Becher had published the experimental novel *(CHCl=CH)$_3$ As (Levisite) oder Der einzig gerechte Krieg* [(CHCl=CH)$_3$ As (Lewisite) or The Only Just War], a vision of war and revolution at once utopian and visionary, in 1926.

6. See *October* 118: *Soviet Factography, a Special Issue* (Fall 2006) and *Russian Futurism through its Manifestoes 1912–1928*. 1988. Translated by Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, 189–280. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

7. Gábor 1979, 171.

8. The term "social modernism" is evoked in Denning, 1997, 122.

9. On reproductive and feminized labor, see Fraser, Nancy. 2014, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Extended Conception of Capitalism," 55–72. *New Left Review* 86.

10. See Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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The Proletarian Literature Movement: Japan's First Encounter with Working-Class Literature

Mats Karlsson

Japan of the interwar era is mostly associated, in both national and international memory, with its gradual descent into totalitarianism, or even outright fascism as some scholars would have it. The milestones of this trajectory are well-known: the introduction of the so-called Peace Preservation Law of 1925, aiming to counter any leftist leaning opposition throughout society; the outbreak of the Manchurian Incident in 1931; the plunge into total warfare with China in 1937; the dissolvement of party parliamentarism in 1940; finally culminating in the attack on Pearl Harbor and Japan's entry into World War II in 1941.

Yet it is probably less well-known that the Japan of this era initially experienced social unrest and a major challenge to the hegemony of authoritarian rule, which was implemented by various constellations of "bourgeois" reactionary political parties. The challenge was posed by a vigorous labor and peasant union movement, underpinned by socialist political parties of different gradation and left-leaning intellectual fellow travelers. This broad labor movement had an independent cultural wing— even though the banned underground Japanese Communist Party identified the cultural arena as their sole legal venue to reach out to the public and therefore strove to place it under its control— operating under the common denomination of The Proletarian Cultural Movement [Puroretaria bunka undō], which existed for about

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a decade, peaking in the late 1920s. The Cultural Movement functioned as an umbrella organization with eleven subgroups operating in various fields, ranging from film and theatre to the education of children and the teaching of Esperanto. Yet, the leadership of the Cultural Movement deemed literature to be the most influential cultural field, upon which they focused their activities. Thus, writers organized under the Japan Proletarian Writers' League [Nihon Puroretaria Sakka Dōmei] were entrusted with spearheading the movement as exemplars for other types of artists and cultural workers to emulate. Except for pure literary pursuits, writers were also tasked with projects like organizing literary circles on the factory floor and in the farming villages across Japan. While many members of the movement participated out of a genuine and self-sacrificing wish to create a more equal society and spread enlightenment to workers and other unprivileged segments, the movement's leadership and labor union activists tended to take a more utilitarian view of the cultural efforts as, first and foremost, a means to propagate their ideology and pave the way for union activism.

Even before literature became politicized in the twenties, there had been socially conscientious novels written in Japan, starting with the "imported" naturalistic school and its portrayal of the lower strata of society at the beginning of the century. The novelist Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943) is widely credited with ushering in a socio-political perspective with his 1906 novel *The Broken Commandment* [Hakai], which treats the social issue of the so-called *burakumin*, Japan's own group of outcasts.[1] Paradoxically, Japan's version of naturalism soon became side-tracked into a self-referential type of supposedly confessional novel (shishōsetsu, or 'I-novel'), based on the logic that if the faithful depiction of reality were to be the objective of literary depiction, then surely there is nothing an author can be more truthful about than himself.[2] With the spread of leftist ideology throughout the twenties in the wake of the Russian Revolution, discontent with widespread poverty and social inequality increasingly became expressed within a Marxist-Leninist framework. Meanwhile, in the field of literature, the hegemonic I-fictional type of myopic belles-lettres turned unfashionable as writers and intellectuals argued for the

need of a more socially conscientious mode of expression. What was new in the current literary approach was that emerging writers started to treat inequality and deteriorating working conditions as elements of class struggle. To various degrees, literature thus became dependent on politics. To the already convinced, the increasingly worsening economic conditions in the wake of the Great Depression corroborated Marxian theoretical projections that international capitalism had entered its period of final collapse, characterized by heightened exploitation of the toiling masses at home and imperialism abroad, the two main literary themes of Japanese proletarian fiction. Authorities, for their part, initially tolerated—although unwillingly and just barely—leftist leaning writers and artists to operate. Soon, though, they began harassing and persecuting them more severely until ultimately shutting down the whole Proletarian Cultural Movement initiative towards the middle of the thirties, on the sometimes true pretext that the various cultural groups contained Communist Party cells within them.[3]

Origins of Working-Class Literature in Japan

But how did it all begin? Let us first return to 1923, the year when The Great Kanto Earthquake struck Tokyo leaving approximately 143,000 people dead in its wake. The following excerpt is drawn from the opening of *Literary Reminiscences* [Bungakuteki kaisō], written by Hayashi Fusao (1903–1975), one of the instigators and most prominent members of the proletarian literary movement. Hayashi had enrolled at the Tokyo Imperial University in 1923, where he soon joined the New Man Society [Shinjinkai], formed by students at the university in 1918, originally as a democratic discussion forum. By 1923, though, it had turned into a Marxist study circle, including members of Japanese Communist Party cells. During the summer break of 1923 Hayashi returned to his rural hometown in Kyushu with the aim of involving local youth organizations in the budding nationwide student socialist movement. It is against this background that the following occurs:

> It seemed the comrades who had returned to other regions were steadily achieving results. In contrast, I was only doing things like

> forming useless 'cultural circles' comprising returnee students that had no effect whatsoever on workers or the youth in rural communities. While I was agonizing all on my own and feeling frustrated over letting other comrades down, the summer holidays ended. Then came September 1, the day of the Great Kanto Earthquake. All page space of the regional newspapers was occupied with preposterous headlines and articles. 'The Imperial Capital reduced to a field of burned-out ruins in an instant.' 'Mount Fuji caves in.' 'A large troop of Koreans lead by Socialists clashes with the military.' 'Street fighting in Kōtō, no prospect of subjugation say the authorities.' 'His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince missing.' What startled me was neither the annihilation of the capital of Japan nor the cave-in of Mount Fuji. It was the street fighting in Tokyo; in other words, the fact that the revolution had occurred. The comrades had taken to arms; built barricades, raised the Red Flag and were fighting the imperialists' army. Surely, it cannot be the Koreans only. All workers and oppressed masses of Tokyo must have joined the revolutionary army. It had probably brushed off the resistance of the military and the police to make an advance on the Imperial Palace. While I had been putting useless effort into a tedious enlightenment movement in a provincial town, the revolution had broken out. Had I only advanced the date for going to Tokyo slightly, I would have been in time. With a time difference of only a day or two I had become a dropout from the revolution, a class traitor. I walked about the hills aimlessly and came out onto the seashore. I pilfered a small fishing boat and rowed out to sea. I wished for a storm to occur and the boat to capsize. Revolution dropouts ought to sink into the sea and die! But no storm occurred and the moon arose in the clear sky. Crestfallen I rowed the boat back to shore. (Hayashi, 1955, pp. 6–7)

In his reminiscences, Hayashi uses this anecdote to illustrate how his communism had been built on fanaticism and illusion and that the whole proletarian literary movement initiative itself becomes inexplicable if we bracket this naïve and primitive, as he would later have it, fanaticism for revolution.[4] For devoted followers, it thus appears that the coming of the revolution was only a question of when, not if. Remember that The Russian Revolution was in fresh memory at the time and the Soviet socialist experiment had just started after their civil war. Needless to say, we are still in an era years before the first authentic reports of facets of Soviet daily life had started to trickle out. Even so, surveying the

proletarian cultural movement in retrospect, it is difficult to gauge whether genuine faith in the eventual coming of revolution was ever widespread, or whether the optimistic and assertive rhetoric should largely be assigned to the genre of Marxist true-speak.

Besides literature proper, an astonishing amount of discourse was produced and circulated during the hectic years that this literary movement was in operation, ranging from conceptual explications of dialectical materialism, commentary on and translations of the latest Bolshevik party programs, advice on how to initiate literary circles on the factory floor, to manifestos and political propaganda instruments. Throughout, the rhetoric is underpinned by the conviction that the movement is delivering cultural enlightenment to the unprivileged, tapping into a latent "thirst for knowledge" [chishiki-yoku] among the masses, to reference one of the terms circulating in the discourse. If we bracket the call for revolution, the movement can perhaps in this sense be seen as a socio-cultural project meant to raise the level of awareness of workers and peasants much in line with the aims of contemporary social-democratic movements in Europe. Even if they had had the chance to operate freely, it is, however, doubtful that the movement would have been able to radicalize the peasants and workers to the intended extent. In the first national election held under the Universal Manhood Suffrage Law, in early 1928, the two main "bourgeois and landlord" parties received around 8.5 million votes and 436 returned candidates, as compared to slightly less than half a million votes and eight returned candidates for the various leftist labor-farmer parties and social democrats, including local "proletarian" parties (Beckman and Okubo, 1969, pp. 151–52).

In general, when envisaging working-class literature, one is prone to think of literature written by and for workers. In Japan, though, it was originally the leftist student movement that provided the hotbed for literary initiatives. Beginning with the abovementioned New Man Society, groups for the study of social science had started popping up at universities and other schools around the country, organized in 1924 under a nationwide student federation [Gakusei shakaikagaku rengōkai]. Around this time the study of "social science" basically meant the study of Marxist theory, which was widely and eagerly undertaken at universities

and among intellectuals. Marxist theory was also disseminated through venues such as the influential progressive general interest journal *Reconstruction* [Kaizō], even though the ideology as such carried dangerous "red" overtones to wider society outside of the intelligentsia. Needless to say, Marxism was not the only foreign derived ideology à la mode in the Japan of that time. Kawaguchi Hiroshi (1905–1984), a central figure in the literary movement's leadership, has described how everything in student circles was in a state of flux, yet interconnected:

> The trend of the time that was overflowing among the young and energetic rebels was a yearning for radical reform in all fields of art. That trend was by no means only funnelled in a socialist direction. There was the constructivism of Murayama Tomoyoshi, the futurism of Kanbara Tai, the Dadaism of Takahashi Shinkichi […] The ensigns might have varied between the groups, but generally all of them were ambitious coteries for art reform spurred on by the self-confidence that it is our very course that make up the vanguard. Our inclination was by no means separated from this general current of the times. (Kawaguchi, 1971, p. 15)

When Kawaguchi enrolled at Tokyo Imperial University in 1925, he was first involved in a radical theatre group together with comrades from Japan's contemporary version of high school before the group was won over by New Man Society under the auspices of Hayashi, who had laid eyes on the radical group:

> We gradually became enlightened and brainwashed by Hayashi. Through reading books like *The ABC of Communism* [by Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhensky] and *The Bolshevik Party Programme* we were awakened to the truth. It felt like a truly new world suddenly opened itself up in front of our eyes. This was something we could sympathise with from the bottom of our hearts, exactly what we had been yearning for all the time. We realised that it had to be a revolutionary art not only an artistic revolution. Nothing would come from pursuing mere novelty or eccentricity; we had to rethink more fundamentally. For this purpose, it was essential to thoroughly study social science and Marxism, enough of makeshift theatre – this was our conclusion. Upon which all of us entered New Man Society one after the other. (Kawaguchi, 1971, p. 18)

It emerges from the literature that the labor movement proper looked down on fellow cultural workers for not doing the hard dirty work themselves. In fact, though, without the contributions by young, idealistic and self-sacrificing students, there would neither have been a documentation of the movement by cultural means as we know of it today, nor such a strong ideological and theoretical base for the unfolding political struggle.

In Search of "True" Worker Writers

From its inception, then, the Proletarian Literature Movement was defined by a high level of dependence on intellectuals and students, and by a dearth of writers with a working-class background. Both lenient leftists, congregating around the journal *Literary Front* [Bungei sensen], and hard-line doctrinaire Marxists, congregating around their *Battle Flag* [Senki], put the cultivating and advancing of "true" worker writers as the first item on their agendas.[5] In a comparative perspective, the issue of what amounts to a "true" worker writer mirrored similar ongoing contemporary concerns surrounding the proper custodians of proletarian literature in the Soviet Union (see Clark 2017). During this period, Kurahara Korehito (1902–1991), the chief theoretical architect behind the hard-line wing, chastized its writers for focusing on labor disputes while shunning actual depictions of labor in their texts, on the grounds that production relationships are the foundation of all human relationships according to Marxist tenets. Kurahara admonished writers who did not have firsthand experience to first learn about working life conditions before sitting down to write (Kurahara, 1931b, pp. 59–60).[6] Kurahara undoubtedly has a point here. The in medias res where one typical strand of Japanese proletarian piece of fiction begins is at a point in time when the workers have laid down their work and the labor dispute is already unfolding, as exemplified here by the opening of Toda Toyoko's (1904–1956) short story "Iron foundry" [Imono kōjō] (1930):

> Metal scrap chewed by the cutter, hammers tossed away, shovels stuck in coal heaps, lathes, moulds, chains, other raw material and machines – every position and pose tell vividly of the moment one week ago when negotiations broke down while work was in operation and when decisive action to withdraw all workers was taken. (Toda, 1930, p. 102)

The type of depiction that Kurahara envisaged to be emblematic of proletarian realism was vested in daily working life and could be characterized as a form of reportage literature: "At this moment in time our country's proletarian writers and artists must immerse themselves in every nook and corner of contemporary life and take correct objective and concrete notes of that life" (1928, p. 12). While the leadership sought high and low for literary talent, especially among factory workers in key industries, they came up with little in the end (cf. Clark, 2017, p. 2). But there were exceptions to the reliance on the "intelligentsia" writing on behalf of workers.

Iwatō Yukio (1902–1989) was once one of *Literary Front*'s representative writers, of whom editors had the highest expectations (Uranishi, 1974, p. 60). Iwatō is of special significance since he belonged to the minority of uneducated working-class writers that the movement sought to foster. His most important work, the novel *Iron* [Tetsu](1929), epitomizes common stylistic and thematic features of Japanese proletarian literature as promoted by Kurahara and others. Surveying the literary output of 1929, Kurahara even singled it out as a "signpost" of proletarian literature, together with *The Crab Cannery Ship* (discussed below). In his estimate *Iron* is the first Japanese proletarian work to portray "living" [ikita] factory workers (Kurahara, 1968, p. 10).[7]

The novel's narrative revolves around the I-protagonist Makishima, who has temporarily left Tokyo to return to his provincial hometown after a twenty-year long absence. Here, he divides his time between union activism at the local ironworks where he has taken up employment, and an increasingly chaotic family situation where his grandmother, a devoted Buddhist believer, is caring for his bedridden alcoholic father. The forming of the proletarian Worker Farmer Party [Rōdō nōmin-tō] in 1926 constitutes the historical context against which the fictional events unfold. The appearance on the political scene of this new radical alternative has occasioned the factory's labor union to endeavor to expand the hitherto economic struggle into an outright political one. The workers have been working fourteen hours a day without rest for a month to deliver an order to the Railway Ministry. Juxtaposed with the male ironworks is the

female arena of the spinning mill situated across the river, a site to where the union is striving to expand. In the opening of the novel, Makishima learns that the marriage of his older sister is breaking up and that she is returning home with her three-year old child. Her husband, a foreman at the mill, is divorcing her ostensibly for having continued a letter correspondence with her former lover, although the protagonist learns that the real reason was his own union activism. Now the remittance from the in-laws will cease, adding to the housekeeping burden of the family.

In the highly contested ideological field of Japan's 1920s, one of the main rivalries was played out between Anarcho-syndicalists and Bolsheviks (the debate was known as the Ana-Boru ronsō). In the novel, Iwatō, who himself arrived to Marxism via anarchism, situates this rivalry within the Makishima family by bringing the protagonist's delinquent, anarchist younger half-sister on to the stage. The protagonist remains in his hometown longer than planned because of his feeling of duty to guide his sister onto the correct Marxist path. The novel features a few scenes of heated debate between the two siblings where they throw invectives at each other that replicate commonly held opinions about the other side's cause, as for example in the following:

Sister: 'Cowards! You guys haven't ventured one step out of humanism! I despise you all!'
Brother: 'Is that all the lot of you have to say to us? Is it okay for a person to be satisfied with just conceptual thinking? Are you satisfied to shut yourself up in your tiny, insignificant subjectivity?'
Sister: 'Communism only works in theory, there are no people without egoism. Do you deny human egoism?'
Brother: 'People have emotions of various kinds, but if you bring individualism into the movement it's the end of the story. We have graduated from that kind of emotion long ago.'
Sister: 'Big talk. Why don't you just go on living like you want.'
Brother: 'That's what we are fighting for!' (Iwatō, 1929, p. 127)

An accident at the factory provides the opportunity for the union to escalate activities. One of the boilers explodes after a manager blocks its safety valve in order to increase the output, killing two workers and one young apprentice working under illegal

conditions without a contract. When the management contrives a means of blaming the accident on one of the union members, the union responds with a work slowdown. The petition with the workers' demands and the text of the handbills distributed by the union in the factory are supplied in the text, in a similar way to many other proletarian works.[8] The management responds by firing the union organizers and locking them out from the factory gate. In the end nothing is resolved as the union is defeated by the factory management in collusion with the police. How capitalists operate with different state organs is another favorite topic of Japanese proletarian literature.

When his elder sister drowns herself in the river, Makishima's grandmother blames him for having sacrificed his family in favor of the union. Meanwhile, his younger sister remains adamant in her anti-Communism. She accuses her brother and his comrades of being mere puppets and urges them to blow up the factory in a suicide attack in order to achieve some sort of tangible result. In an interior monologue Makishima admits to being tempted by his sister's words:

> Blowing up… an all-out fight that makes you forget yourself, like dying in a drunken stupor. A nihilistic illusion – I couldn't say that I was totally free from that yearning. Deep inside I felt the bitter temptation flash by […] The union, the Party… I had to stay alive to carry out all the work that needed to be done. Soon a time will come when a mass of tens of millions of hearts moulded in fury will rise up. Then I will die, if my body is called upon. I take pride in being a puppet of my Party and union. (Iwatō, 1929, p. 172)

Yet the narrative ends in a cheerful spirit as the union regroups for the next stage of the strife. The battle has been lost but the activists are still fighting the war.

Iwatō Yukio was, however, a rather exceptional character in the movement's line-up of writers. In a roundtable discussion in 1971 among veteran activists of the Kanagawa branch of the Writers' League (situated close to Tokyo), it emerged that they had held unfulfilled hopes of at least producing one prominent writer in the area, around whom local activities could be centred. There was a consensus among the discussants that writers simply did not emerge from the factory literary circles that were organized;

that while workers did have interesting stories to tell, when asked to put them on paper, these stories came out flat and dull. Another significant point that emerged in the roundtable was the high risk involved in joining a circle. Even unaware factory girls with no "red" track record whatsoever were promptly fired for simply having approached a literary circle (Kodera, 1971, p. 95–98). Not surprisingly, scabs and factory spies are stock characters in many of the works produced, reflecting the extreme measures that were increasingly implemented throughout society against any red tendencies. Interestingly, it is a forgone conclusion in the above discussion that it was more rewarding to read the lenient *Literary Front* than the more doctrinaire *Battle Flag*, even though the latter wielded more political clout.

In the end the movement's quest of nurturing writers of a working-class background remained an unsolved issue. The kinds of novels that were promoted as examples for proletarian writers to emulate were, for example, Alexander Fadeyev's *The Rout* [Razgrom] (1927), which Kurahara lauded for its depiction of the characters' social and class appearances and their roles in history (Kurahara, 1966, p. 296), and especially Fedor Gladkov's *Cement* [Tsement] (1925), one of the two main and most popular exemplars of Soviet socialist realism (cf. Clark, 2017, p. 11). In retrospect, it appears somewhat optimisic that uneducated workers would be able to first digest Marxist concepts (for a time writers were admonished to adhere to the method of dialectical materialism) and then integrate them organically into literary pieces. Furthermore, writing against the system, the Japanese writers had no positive historical moment, as they saw it, or ongoing socialist experiment to work with, as their Soviet counterparts had. Still, given that most writers were confined to working under great duress, it is perhaps even surprising that so much of good literary writing was produced. If we boil down the common points of critique leveled against the works produced, we might perhaps conclude that many writers were more adept at *telling* than *showing*, to borrow a famous dichotomy. Yet, although the plots might at times appear crude and tendentious— and therefore begging for a different readerly stance to that of belles lettres in general— we must not forget that the works discussed here belong to a genre of literature with a specific purpose.

Female Writers

The Proletarian Cultural Movement was undeniably a heavily male oriented endeavor, to the extent of even spawning a contemporary debate about exploited female cultural workers providing sexual favors to their male counterparts. With an anachronistic Japanese term, then, female activists were to some extent treated as *comfort women* [ianfu] by their male comrades. However, spurred on by international communism's focus on female emancipation in general and on the Japanese women issue directed from Moscow in particular, its leadership strove aggressively to mobilize and involve female intellectuals as well as cultural workers in the movement. One frequently quoted international document in various Japanese leftist publications was the resolutions of the Fifth Congress of the Profintern [Red International of Labour Unions] held in Moscow in August 1930. In a chapter of the resolutions specifically devoted to the Japanese case, "Tasks of the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement in Japan," we find the women issue highlighted:

> Particular attention must be given by the revolutionary T.U. [trade union] movement of Japan to the organising of the women and the young workers, whose exploitation in the mills and the factories of the country has attained appalling dimensions. The percentage of women in Japanese industry is higher than anywhere else, and any refusal to organize women is tantamount in the Japanese circumstances to serving the bourgeoisie. (Red International of Labour Unions, 1931, p. 147)

It appears Japan attracted special attention from the international communist movement due to the high rate of inclusion of women in the industrial workforce. In a discussion of the women's journal *Women's Arts* [Nyonin geijutsu] published from 1928 to 1932, the literary historian Ogata Akiko has commented on the promise that the Soviet social experiment held forth to some women in Japan. She argues that the left turn that the journal took— by early 1930 anarchists writing for the journal had been ousted by more doctrinaire Marxists and the radicalization from here on became conspicuous including introductions to facets of Soviet life— had its own logical causes and was not a mere result of intellectual trends:

> Women who were not allowed to breathe freely anywhere other than within the household – no matter how dark and oppressing the household was and regardless of the fact that in the final analysis not even that household could become a refuge – unhesitatingly chose revolution, Marxism, and the road to Soviet Russia. For *Women's Arts*, which aspired to women's solidarity and independence, leftist radicalization was brought about by inevitable intrinsic demands that went beyond riding the waves of the times or being swept away by them. (Ogata, 1993 [1980], p. 96)

One such female writer who chose revolution was Hirabayashi Eiko (1902–2001). A Writers' League member, Hirabayashi is representative of a type of socially conscientious individual without an academic background whom the movement attracted. Born in the Nagano prefecture, Hirabayashi had to abandon hopes of continuing her education at a girls' higher school when her family was financially ruined. She set out for Osaka alone at the age of sixteen in search of work and education. Eventually, Hirabayashi joined the Writers' League operating in Tokyo after job hopping and a sojourn at the writer Mushanokōji Saneatsu's (1885–1976) utopian project the New Village [Atarashiki mura] in Kyushu. After the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923, Hirabayashi returned temporarily to Nagano where she worked as the only female newspaper reporter in the whole prefecture. This is how she remembers her own original attraction to the proletarian cause:

> I didn't understand much of the theoretical stuff, but at the time I felt a kind of empathy towards the proletarian movement. For a while I wrote only that type of work. I wanted to turn the daily life and sentiment of the proletariat into novels. In the vein of Chekhov, you see. The times being what they were, I thought earnestly of the coming of a world easier for women, workers and other members of the lower classes to live in. Therefore, I wanted to express that wish in the form of literature. The contradictions of the world were just too great, you see. A society where women could live more on their own was absolutely necessary. I was young and, if nothing else, I was full of that sense of justice. (Quoted in Okada, 2001, pp. 149–150)

In Hirabayashi's oeuvre, female enlightenment and emancipation become leitmotifs. In her short story "The Origin" (Hottan, 1931)

she locates the setting in the proletarian heartland of the factory. Tetsuko, the heroine, belongs to the irregularly employed and poorly paid underclass female clerk squad in the accounts department. She gradually resolves to take a political stance against the company's discriminatory employment policies. Tetsuko had left the countryside with the aim of taking the primary school teachers' examination, mirroring the author's own experiences, but finds merely staying alive day by day in the city a more urgent task: "Armed like a tank, reality crushed her dreams" (Hirabayashi, 1931a, p. 114). The gist of the storyline is Tetsuko's growing impatience with her fellow clerks' lethargy in face of the excess rationalization expected to come in the wake of the Depression. In contrast to the inactivity displayed by this ambivalent social class, the defiance stirring among the company's workers fills her with inspiration. The unrest that has erupted over the injury of a fellow worker is escalating and at the end of the story Tetsuko joins their demonstration:

> The misfortune of one human being thus mobilizes five hundred mates. It is a heroic march of a class that has awakened to its own power. It is the appearance of the pent-up rage of workers too long suppressed by unjust authority suddenly coming to a boil. The powerful passion for the future that pierced straight through their core moved Tetsuko violently. (Hirabayashi, 1931a, p. 123)

In "Model Factory" [Mohan kōjō] (1931), situated in the weaving mills— a favorite location for proletarian works detailing the hardships of female workers— of Kyoto's Nishijin district, Hirabayashi yet again treats the deteriorating working conditions and shrinking wages, facilitated by increasing unemployment after the closing down of smaller mills. The story begins *in medias res* when the weavers rush to the bath after a hard day's work. The text grants access to exclusively female territory rarely encountered in male dominated proletarian literature, particularly in the opening bathhouse scene:

> The pushing and shoving of naked bodies trembling with cold had begun in front of the mirror hung on the bathroom wall. The girls' bodies, tortured by excessive labour, a simple diet, and unnatural working postures during the precious growth period, were all of

> an asymmetric, ugly shape. In proportion with the torsos, the legs were thick and short. (Hirabayashi, 1931b, p. 109)

The owner has proclaimed his factory a model factory and inspection groups come through endlessly. None of the observers, however, are interested in the weavers or their working conditions, except for one Tokyo city council member who utters his surprise at finding so few Kyoto beauties among the women, while recalling the soft skin of the geisha in the district of Gion where he is staying. To this the narrator impatiently comments that visitors seemingly did not even understand the simple fact that most of the factory girls were not locals, but poor migrant farm girls from the provinces.

In "Model Factory" the second-floor dormitory above the factory constitutes an exclusive female space where female homosocial bonding takes place. The character Omitsu plays the role of leader with the power to arouse enthusiasm in her fellow workers. Despite her powers though, she fails to muster in them enough courage to confront the factory owner with their demands, including the removal of the exhausting weekly Friday night character-building lecture delivered by a Buddhist priest from a nearby temple. Focusing on concepts such as duty and spirit of self-sacrifice, the priest praises a slavish morality that supports loyal service to the employer.

The instigator of change turns out to be a man, Shin-san, who is in charge of heating the bath. Omitsu and her companion Suzue first call on him to ask him to use more coal to keep the fire burning longer. The two of them keep visiting him and under his guidance they start to see things differently. Shin-san criticizes Suzue's religious beliefs and gradually the way she sees the world is turned upside down as a working-class pride begins to germinate. Although Omitsu possesses an intense craving for knowledge, her understanding has so far been disjointed. Shin-san's instruction, however, lends focus and direction to it. Back at the dormitory, the two girls spread the newly gained knowledge among their fellow workers. This enables the women to make sense of their daily discontent. The realization of the need for unity and solidarity starts forming among them.

Shin-san indicates that a golden opportunity to create the planned labor union has arisen as the branch manager of a bank, which is lending money to the company, is planning an inspection visit. On the morning of the visit, the women lay down their work in unison and present the owner with a petition. With his back to the wall, the owner is left with no other choice than to accept all the demands: to allow no layoffs due to production cuts; to furnish the dormitory with a charcoal brazier; to keep the coal burning throughout the bathing time; to disallow inspection groups to cause unreasonable trouble to the factory girls; to abolish the character-building lecture; and to allow union affiliation. The short story ends on an optimistic note: "Since that day Shin-san disappeared from sight. But he is sure to always return on important occasions. And the seeds that were sown will undoubtedly keep growing" (Hirabayashi, 1931b, p. 119). As the reader has suspected, it turns out that Shin-san had been an agitator— a stock character of proletarian fiction— assigned to the factory by the illegal revolutionary labor union movement to funnel discontent into acts of disobedience. In general, Hirabayashi's prose has a fresh appeal with its swift, graphic portrayal that appears directly influenced by filmic representation, the most fashionable medium at the time. As such, her oeuvre contravenes the reputation of Japanese proletarian literature as trite and stereotypical. The degenerate variant invariably hammers in political dogma in a much more unsophisticated way.[9]

One of Hirabayashi's female colleagues in the Writers' League was the writer activist Matsuda Tokiko (1905–2004). In her "Another Battlefront" ["Aru sensen"] (1932), we get another powerful first-hand report delivered directly from the factory floor. The story is set in the vulcanization division, among the suffocating chemical gas fumes, in a factory redirected to produce war material, a consequence of Japan's increased expansionism following the invasion of Manchuria. As pointed out by Norma Field in the preface to her translation of the short story: "The conditions of work, however, exploitative to begin with, were exacerbated by constant speedups, which in turn intensified the impact of environmental hazards. Given these circumstances, the challenge for the proletarian movement was to secure workers'

rights *and* oppose imperialist war" (Bowen-Struyk and Field (eds.), 2016, p. 266). This challenge is an often-featured motif in the sense that many Japanese proletarian works detail the worsening economic conditions on the home front, along with the ramifications of expansionism on the Asian continent.

The story opens on a day when flyers have been distributed, the words of which are sampled through the stream of consciousness of Sadayo, the protagonist: "*Now that we're at war, orders come pouring into your factory. You're told to work overtime, to be more efficient as you work with poison gas, but you're not provided with any of the gas masks you yourselves produce*" (Bowen-Struyk and Field (eds.), 2016, p. 268). The plot revolves around the factory management's scheme to break the workers' solidarity by having scabs plant the initiative of "voluntary" donations to the Friendship Association; deductions from salaries would be sent to soldiers in Manchuria and Mongolia. Union organizers, however, outsmart the management through collecting donations for a different purpose: for the support of two dismissed workers in dire straits. In the denouement, the reader is swept along by the surge of workers toward the accounting section on payday. In the bustling throng we are permitted to listen in on the multiple voices of the workers even as we, as readers, are about to lose our foothold while being buffeted around by them. Here, also, the prose is rendered in a filmic mode that gives a strong impression of here and now.

Relevance of Working-Class Literature in Today's Japan

Publications associated with the Proletarian Cultural Movement peaked at a joint monthly circulation of 160,000, while around over a thousand cultural circles in all parts of Japan were achieved for a time, indicating the potential for a drastic expansion of activities (Mizuno, 1968, p. 543; Ikeda, 1971, pp. 45–46). In the face of an increasingly severe crackdown on leftist activity and police roundups of Communist Party members and cultural workers, however, in 1934 the Writers' League announced its own dismantlement. Undoubtedly, the movement was crushed by reactionary authorities, busy with fostering universal support for

imperial expansionism on the continent in the citizenry, and who, therefore, decided that they could no longer afford dissent on the home front. Retrospectively, though, most literary historians tend to agree that the movement would have self-imploded anyway, due to internal shortcomings and constant in-fighting. As I have argued elsewhere (2011, p. 58), the movement sealed its own fate by aligning itself with the official ideology imposed in the Soviet Union and by estranging lenient leftist fellow travelers, whom they actually sought to embrace, depicting them as "social fascists" in line with the policy of Comintern after 1928. In this respect, Tatsuo Arima's judgement on the movement's sectarian traits appears appropriate: "Preoccupied with the necessity for theoretical impeccability as a prerequisite for conscious proletarian artists, they steadily isolated themselves from the common strata of Japanese society." Arima asserts, "The Marxist intellectuals were in the difficult predicament of facing a hostile government on the one hand and, on the other, of addressing their ideas to the people, to whom purely Marxist symbols meant little" (Arima, 1969, p. 179). In retrospect, therefore, it appears incontrovertible that the movement possessed a far greater emancipatory potential as a grassroots cultural enlightenment movement than as harbingers of a revolution that few wanted in the first place, and authorities would never have let happen.

For a long time, the proletarian works of fiction were left to slumber on the shelves of libraries across Japan, seldomly discussed outside of the university seminar rooms. But then, seemingly out of the blue in 2008, Kobayashi Takiji's (1903–1933) seminal novel *The Crab Cannery Ship* [Kani kōsen] (1929) suddenly became a bestseller with 500,000 copies sold instead of the usual 5,000 copies per year. It's success has spawned manga versions and a remake of the film version. The boom overlapped in time with the reemergence of widespread poverty in Japan and the emergence of the so-called *working poor*. This new coinage, which became a buzz word in media for a while, sought to encapsulate a new social phenomenon in the wake of the undermining of labor regulations aimed to protect the rights of employees. The new social class of vulnerable irregular employees on temp contracts [hi-seishain], making up the newly coined *precariat* on the rise in Japan ever since, obviously found inspiration in this classic novel

that portrays the struggle of the *proletariat*, the corresponding social class of its time.

The Crab Cannery Ship, the flagship of proletarian novels in Japan, is a fictionalized account of an actual case of brutal treatment of fishermen and factory workers onboard a floating cannery operating in the Sea of Okhotsk that occurred in 1926. Kobayashi had set himself a seven-point agenda concerning the novel's intent, most importantly the portrayal of a group of workers as a collective protagonist and the ruling out of the depiction of individual personality or psychology. The novel aligns itself with the common proletarian theme of gradual coming to awareness of class-consciousness, which relates to another of Kobayashi's points on the agenda, to show how capitalism inexorably causes workers to spontaneously organize:

> Fishermen who till now had known only servile submission, quite unexpectedly felt a tremendous force thrusting them forward. At first they were bewildered. Gradually they realized that *their own power*, whose presence they had not suspected, was manifesting itself [...] Once they understood it, a wonderful spirit of rebellion filled their hearts. The very hardships of the agonizing work that had been wrung from them turned into a splendid foundation for their defiance. Now the manager and his ilk could go to hell! They were elated. This new feeling suddenly enabled them to see their wormlike lives vividly, as though illuminated by a flashlight's beam. (Cipris, 2013, p. 79)

This novel of working-class realism has aged well, making it worthy of a revival. Despite some tendentious commentary on the plot on behalf of the narrator as illustrated in the above quotation and despite the sometimes-implausible story elements, like the overly idyllic portrayal of the Russian family that the shipwrecked fishermen encounter after being washed up on the Kamchatka shore, the main thrust of the novel still holds. It is the powerful and vivid description of life and work onboard the cannery ship that make the novel stand out.

But the novel is not only interesting as a case history of extreme exploitation of the workers onboard the ship. The fisherman and young factory hands are enticed by the opportunity to earn a few yen in the seasonal floating crab industry only to be beaten body

and soul by the system. They are poor tenant farmers' sons from Hokkaido and the northeast region of Japan, or workers enlisted via a Tokyo agency. In this context the association with today's *haken rōdōsha*, or dispatched temp workers, making up an increasingly larger proportion of Japan's workforce, spontaneously comes to mind. With Japan opening up its labor market to unskilled foreign migrant workers through new legislation implemented in 2019 to battle a severe labor shortage, one can only surmize that *The Crab Cannery Ship* will gain a renewed relevance going ahead. Although Kobayashi's and other proletarian writers' brand of unionism relates to a totally different sociopolitical milieu, and although perhaps no one believes in revolution any longer, their ardent appeal to solidarity has still to reach its best before date.

Endnotes

1. Although not racially different from other Japanese, the *burakumin* (the official word used to refer to this group is hi-sabetsumin, or "those discriminated against") had been confined to play the role of "Untermensch" through their historical connection with occupations associated with death, like tanners, that were considered impure according to Shinto religion and therefore shunned.

2. The pronoun "him" is used in this case as literature was an overwhelmingly male preoccupation at the time.

3. The activist writer Kobayashi Takiji (1903–1933) who was tortured to death by the police after arrest, for instance, joined the Japanese Communist Party in 1931. For an inside view of activism within the movement, see his *Life of a Party Member* [Tōseikatsusha] (1932) in Cipris, 2013, pp. 221–293.

4. It should be noted that Hayashi is today largely remembered as a turncoat, the first writer to deal the movement a serious blow from an insider position when he announced his defection in 1932, on the ground, as he put it, that he had been torn between the poles of politics and literature: he had come to realize that he had been deprecating literature in the name of politics while simultaneously belittling himself as a writer (cf. Hayashi, 1932).

5. These journals were intended as the most easily accessable, popular outlets within the movement. While focusing on creative writing,

both of them carried all kinds of leftist discourse, although especially the doctrinaire faction of the movement also published specialized journals devoted to more theoretical explication.

6. Here Kurahara writes under the penname Tanimoto Kiyoshi.

7. Kurahara is obviously referencing contemporary Soviet discourse here. Cf. 'The efforts to carry out the cultural plans designed to alter the face of the country were to be directed toward molding the public mind and shaping a perfect socialist man with appropriate psychology, emotions, and behavior. It was only logical that proletarian literature should serve as an agent of the cultural revolution. It was to carry out its mission by engaging in a "deepened psychological analysis" of fictional characters and in presenting them as real "living people,"complex and contradictory individuals. These propositions were incorporated in the collective programmatic declarations of the VAPP (later RAPP) [the dominant proletarian literary grouping, which turned into a mass movement with branches and affiliated organizations throughout the Soviet Union] leadership, which served as literary dictates and provided a foundation for further theoretical work (Ermolaev, 1963, p. 61).

8. Many Japanese proletarian works of fiction actually read like do-it-yourself manuals of labor conflicts, often with petitions to the enterprise management and handbills to be smuggled in to the factory floor highlighted graphically on the page, framed against the body of the text, almost as if to facilitate cutting them out for actual use. A typical novel that does this is Kaji Wataru's (1903–1982) serialized novel *Mobilization Line* [Dōin-sen] (1929–1930). See, for instance: Kaji, 1929, pp. 62–63.

9. For contemporary commentary on this matter, see for instance: Hirabayashi Taiko, "On the Tendency of Proletarian Works to Become Formulaic," in Bowen-Struyk and Field (eds.), 2016, pp. 180–183; Kurahara, 1931, p. 17). For an unfavorable overview of Japanese proletarian literature that reiterates common points of criticism against the genre, see Keene, 1998, pp. 594–628.

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From Red Scare to Capitalist Showcase: Working-Class Literature from Singapore[1]

Luka Zhang Lei

As a Ph.D. student in literature studies in Singapore, people often ask me about my focus of study. When I tell them that I research working-class literature in Singapore and other Asian countries, their very first reaction is always a perplexed look followed by a rapid fire of questions: "Who are the working class in Singapore? Do you mean workers can write literature?" Colleagues even dismiss my topic, stating, "Your project is so political, it sounds like a sociological investigation rather than literary studies. We don't do that here in Singapore."

These reactions, I believe, are conditioned by a significant lack of discourse on working-class literature in Singapore. The main aim of this essay, therefore, is to begin constructing such a discourse. I will do this by analyzing from a historical perspective three working-class writers from Singapore – Chong Han (1945–), Tan Kok Seng (1939–), and MD Sharif Uddin (1978–).[2] By analyzing these very different writers, I will delineate a rudimentary historical overview of working-class literature in Singapore, stressing the different possibilities and limits under various "production modes." In line with John Lennon and Magnus Nilsson's arguement in their first edited collection *Working-Class Literature(s)*, I will not offer a decisive resolution of what constitutes Singaporean working-class literature, but rather, I will explore this literature through the lens of "what it could be" (Lennon & Nilsson, 2017, p. 203). My essay can offer new perspectives to Singaporean literature studies including contributing to the study of "history

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from below." In addition, my essay also contributes to the ongoing scholarly endeavours, of which this edited collection is an example, to map working-class literature from many countries and epochs from an international and comparative perspective.

In my first section, I analyze the works of Chong Han, a "far-leftist" worker-writer who has been primarily considered a propagandist under the influence of the Cultural Revolution in China. I argue that this conception is not comprehensive, and instead I examine his works through a working-class literature perspective, opening new ways to understand his writing. In the second section, I discuss Tan Kok Seng and his works, which have been largely overlooked in Singapore literature studies, specifically examining why he has not been given much attention after his initial success in the 1970s. The last section offers a critique of a recent cultural phenomenon in Singapore's literary scene, the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition. I argue that this form of producing commodified working-class writings—although complicated by working-class writers like MD Sharif Uddin—should be understood as a neoliberal experiment that potentially hurts the working-class writing community.

In each of the three cases I reflect on particular historical, social-political, and aesthetic features that make visible the predicaments of working-class writers and various problems in the academic discourse on working-class literature at different stages in Singaporean history. Chong Han's literature and its (non-) reception makes visible the revolutionary struggles of the political left in Singapore and large parts of South East Asia that were eventually suppressed and defeated by right-wing nationalist movements. Tan Kok Seng highlights Singaporean colonial history: the manifold hierarchical relationships between the colonizers and the colonized, the efforts of decolonization, and the attempts to establish a post-colonial identity. And MD Sharif's work brings to the fore how the contemporary hyper-capitalist liberal free market economy where everything is commodified has made working-class literature in a lucrative competition. I hope this essay arouses additional perspectives and debates on working-class literature and, in a broader sense, working-class studies in Singapore, and beyond.

The "Authentic" Working-Class Writer: Chong Han

In their comparative study on working-class literature in Sweden and the U.S., Lennon and Nilsson describe this literature's marginalization in the U.S after the Cold War as a result of anti-communist fervor both at an institutional and individual level (Lennon & Nilsson, 2016, p. 48). A similar phenomenon can also be seen in Singapore, where the denunciation of Communist ideology has led to the rejection of working-class literature as a category of literary studies.

Worries about Communism have haunted Singapore since its colonization,[3] continued after its independence in 1965, and settled firmly in the national imagination after the establishment of a right-wing regime promoting a nation of "socialism without Communism" under the leadership of Premier Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party [PAP].

As Hagen Koo states in *Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation:*

> the state elites in South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore are exceptionally powerful and autonomous of other societal groups. They possess extensive apparatuses of social control…The state elites in these countries have identified economic growth as the main basis for the legitimacy of the regime and have regarded autonomous labor organizations as inimical to economic development and political stability. (Koo, 2001, p. 7)

Concerning Singapore and the PAP, this observation is confirmed by Jastus M. Kroef who has analyzed the history of Communism in Singapore and Malaysia (Kroef, 1967). In Singapore, the government routinely opposes Communists, instead promoting an ideology of multiculturalism[4] which was adopted constitutionally when the state was founded (Huat, 2003, p. 75). Discourses about the working class disrupt the national narrative of achievements and prosperity.[5] They have the potential to trigger social and political conflicts that risk destabilizing distinctions between cultures by showing that class conflicts run through ethnic and racial groups and that people of different cultures and places may have common class interests. Hence, it is not surprising that discourses on working-class literature are suppressed and mostly absent in Singapore.

There is, however, a small body of research published in Chinese by scholars who are interested in working-class writing in Singapore. This scholarship focuses on left-inclined writers in Singapore in the 1960s and 1970s, suggesting that leftist literature has been minimized in more recent decades. I argue, however, that these studies tend to marginalize working-class literature as a literary category. For instance, in *Malayan Chinese Left Literature: Under the Influence of Chinese Revolutionary Literature, 1926–1976* (2009), Cheah See Kian examines literary works produced by worker-writers and leftist writers in Singapore with close affiliations to the political actions and policies of the leftist parties. He describes these works as being of the "Chinese cultural revolution literary type." Consequently, a working-class writer like Chong Han is regarded as being "far-radical," and his works are said to be "only" propagandistic. Choo Cheng Fatt's book *Red Tide: The Cultural Revolution's Impact on Left Literature in Singapore* has a chapter on worker's fiction, in which the influence from Maoism and the use of "political" language in novels is emphasized. Both Cheah and Choo see all workers' writings as manifestation of the rethoric of the Cultural Revolution and downplay its literary qualities. This is a reductive view, especially concerning Chong Han's works. By introducing the concept of working-class literature, I will highlight the significance of his work as *literature*, thereby opening up new perspectives on this era of Singaporean literature.

Chong Han（崇汉) is the nom de plume of Zou Xiqiu who was born in 1945 into a family of farmers in Pulau Tekong, an outlying island of Singapore. He graduated from Dunman Government Chinese Middle School, where he developed a strong interest in literature and writing. After his father died when he was still a child, he started working as a laborer. He published his first book, an essay collection titled *Unyielding Spirit*, in 1972. It was just the beginning. Over five decades, Chong Han has published almost 20 books – ranging from essay collections, poetry collections, short stories to novels – all in Chinese. During this whole period, he worked in factories, on farms, in the shipping industry and as a bus driver. Grounded in his rich life experience, his texts are almost all associated with the lives of working-class people in Singapore, both the local Singaporean working-class and migrant

workers from Malaysia and Thailand. His works have, however, gained very little attention, and Chong Han is not a critically examined writer. Interestingly, the publication of his works are mostly self-sponsored with some publications financed through personal loans.

Chong Han's writing displays changes over time, both in its ethos and its style. His production can be divided into three stages regarding content and form. In his first stage from 1972 to 1981, a radical class consciousness informs his works. The texts report the hardships and the sufferings of working-class people in Singapore, stressing exploitation and oppression by capitalists, arguing for a fairer future for the working class. Another feature during this period is his condemnation and satirizing of powerful and wealthy people's evilness and hypocrisy. In the afterword to *Unyielding Soul*, for example, Chong Han (1972, p. 41) determinedly states that he "can no longer hold back" his "passion to pick up the pen and declare war on this hideous society."[6]

This ethos runs through all his writings during this period. His first novel, *On the Glittering Road* (1974), depicts workers' lives in the Singaporean Jurong industrial area from the perspective of the protagonist Di Yuan, who was born into a poor family and started working in a plywood factory after graduating from high school. While there, he witnesses harsh and oppressive working conditions. Not only does the factory owner exploit Di Yuan – supervisors and coworkers also bully him. In spite of this, he is enlightened by some of his coworkers, among them Ya Juan, who actively organizes a cultural class for the workers and stresses the importance of working-class unity:

> We are workers, as sisters and brothers, suffering from the same fate—exploited and oppressed by bigwigs and capitalists, who gained something for nothing, restrain us by all kinds of factory rules. If we want to take a leave, or see a doctor, the supervisors always embarrass us on purpose" (Chong Han, 1974, p. 33).

The novel ends with most workers being dismissed from the factory because of their resistance against the wage contract. Ya Juan, one of the workers' leaders, is deported to her home country, Malaysia, and another leading figure is arrested. During his

farewell conversation with Ya Juan, Di Juan expresses his new ethos: "I am willing to contribute my strength to the lofty calling of the people" (Chong, 1974, p. 103).

Choo Cheng Fatt, a literary critic who has analyzed Chong Han's works, has stated that the plot and characterization in his novels are "formulaic and stereotyped." He argues that, as a result of his echoing the propagandist ideology of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, "the characters Chong Han created are dry and boring," and that "it is very common to see that in the workers' novels of this period, the writer attempts to stress typically heroic characters" (Choo, 2004, p. 66). The observation that Chong Han's books display "a strong note of the cultural revolution" is not without merits. Specific words and phrases used by Chong Han in his novels stem from the discourse of the Chinese cultural revolution; for example, he uses the term "cow ghost and snake spirt" (牛鬼蛇神) referring to the "evil" bourgeoisie. However, Fatt neglects that in many ways *On the Glittering Road* is a working-class Bildungsroman. I dispute the claim that Chong Han's characters are "dry and boring," since this seems to mean little more than that they are workers.

Throughout his work during this period, Chong Han continues to accentuate his characters as workers. In his novel *In the Wind and Rain*, which was published in 1975, he presents the story of Yali, who is a working-class widower struggling with hardship at her job and her life as a mother of two children. He explains in the afterword of the novel that he attempts to give a picture of a bleak and miserable life while presenting a bright future that can be attained through workers' struggles. He also highlights the negative and dismissive attitudes of mainstream Singaporean writers and literary critics towards his works but remains adamantly defiant and determined to express the plight of the working-class in his writings:

> A "complaining" piece of work "without thoughts and content" like this one, may indeed be dazzling for some so-called progressive and conscientious "poets" and "literati". It should have been thrown to "the place where it is supposed to be". Perhaps, I am ignorant and naïve. However, I was able to "get it out" there as I was able to with *On the Glittering Road*.

> Let "those people" shout loudly "boycott it! boycott it"! (Chong Han, 1975, p. 158)

Chong Han's books from this period – *Drums on the Equator*《赤道鼓声》(1972), *On the Glittering Road*《金光道上》(1974), and *In the Wind and Rain*《在风雨中》(1975) – marked a revolutionary moment in the history of working-class literature in Singapore. By taking on the bourgeois literary establishment, Chong Han sees himself as partaking in class struggle.

In the second stage of his writings, between 1981 and 1997, Chong Han's works are less radical, and less associated with politics and class. Interestingly, in an interview published by the local newspaper *Zaobao Weekly* in 2003, the interviewer made the following comment: "It seems that you have written until 1981 and then stopped writing." Chong Han answered: "I didn't stop, I still keep on writing, but I have nowhere to publish my works."[7] With such concerns in his mind, Chong Han's writings steered towards a wider range of topics, extending to migrant workers in Singapore in the short story collections *The Rough Road* (1990)《崎岖路》and *Dreams in the Foreign Land* (1990)《异乡梦》as well as in *Yearning for Pulau Tekong Love* (1992)《恋念德光岛》a novel set in the island Pulau Tekong, that tells of its inhabitants before it was turned into a military training area for the Singaporean army.

It is not hard to see that Chong Han's works, both his fiction and his non-fiction, are inspired by his own life experiences. The novel *Years of Wheelspin*《轮转岁月》(1990) tells of his five years as a bus driver and contains no overt political posturing. Rather, it portrays the meagre lives of bus drivers, their dealings with difficult passengers, and the burden of harsh company administrators. As the novel closes, the bus driver protangonist sees a "blue sky with white clouds" in his life after having undergone difficulties and hardships, signaling a bright future for himself and other fellow workers. In this novel, Chong Han is still captivated by the life of the poor and the working-class people often neglected in literary works.

From 1998 until today, Chong Han's writing has transformed again, both in content and form. He has started to publish micro-story collections, most of which are morally educational and religiously homiletic. At the end of the stories, he often conveys a

moral, encouraging people to do good instead of committing sins in their life. Significantly, they do not have any strong connctions with specific working-class contexts. Chong Han has distributed a dozen of self-published micro-story collections to his friends, local libraries, and temples.

When I spoke with Wu Zhong (伍仲), a Singaporean Chinese writer and a friend of Chong Han, in the Singapore Chinese Literature Library which holds all of Chong Han's books, he frankly dismissed his friend's latest works, stating that his current writings have become moral education, destroying the small critical attention he received as a working-class writer. Yet, for Chong Han himself, it is a new turn in his writing career. In his book *Let Nature Take its Course* 《万事随缘》(1999), he said: "This short story collection . . . is the brand-new starting point of my writing. It is a new beginning" (Chong Han, 1999, p. 1). His works of this period are less revolutionary and militant, yet he maintains that he has evolved rather than contradicted his earlier approach. Chong Han's works cannot be examined in detail here, nor can other contemporary left-leaning authors in Singapore such as Yuan Dian (原甸) and Huai Ying (怀鹰), who both had a considerable impact on Chong Han's writings. Still, this brief account will hopefully bring more attention to Chong Han's works and struggles, while beginning to illustrate the complexity of understanding Singaporean working-class literature.

An Alternative Kind of Working-Class Literature: Tan Kok Seng

While Chong Han and his works are viewed in the shadow of the "dark" history of Communism in Singapore, Tan Kok Seng and his works are something like a ghost haunting the history of colonial Singapore, not the least as a result of the nature of the "production mode" of his works.

Tan Kok Seng was born in 1939 to a farmer family in Singapore belonging to the Teochew ethic group. His books *Son of Singapore*, *Man of Malaysia*, *Eye on the World, Three Sisters of Sz,* and the Chinese edition of *Son of Singapore*, *Xinjiapo Zai* 《新加坡仔》 were published respectively in 1972, 1974, 1975, 1979, and 1985.[8]

The first three books are a trilogy of autobiographies, based on his life experiences, and *Three Sisters of Sz* is a novel set in Penang, Malaysia.

Son of Singapore was widely and well received after its publication in 1972, and "reviewers were quick to praise it . . . he was celebrated as one of the country's Men of the Year by the *New Nation* newspaper" (Bosco 2013: iv). By 1981, 25,000 copies of the book were sold in English (Tan, 1985, p. 3).[9] However, the book fell out of favor and today, Tan's work is mostly ignored by literary critics and readers in Singapore. I propose four reasons for this erasure.

First, there is the peculiar aspect that his books are co-produced. As stated in the introduction to a re-printed edition in 2013 and 2016 by the Singaporean publisher Epigram Books: "Tan's books had been all written first in Mandarin and afterwards 'rendered into English' in a collaborative effort with his former employer, Austin Coates, for whom Tan worked as a driver in Hong Kong." Because of this arrangement, some readers view Tan Kok Seng's books as mere byproducts, commissioned by a bourgeois British "employer," and do not consider him an individual writer in his own right.

I have no intention of defending Austin Coates, who does indeed have a problematic colonial background.[10] However, the relationship between Coates and Tan cannot be reduced to that of an employer to his employee, or, of a Western colonizer to an Asian coolie. Even if it's true that Tan's works are more or less influenced by Austin Coates, Tan Kok Seng himself claims the main authorship of his works and characterizes Coates' role as that of a supporter, declaring that "when I narrated my memoirs to my boss Austin Coates, he was very impressed, insisting that they were too interesting to be read only by my children. He urged me to publish in English" (Tan, 1999, p. 5).

Secondly, Tan's works has tended to fall between the chairs in a literary life marked by divisions between cultures and languages. Given that his works were "rendered into English" from Chinese, they could be considered as "not really English" by those studying English literature and "not really Chinese" by those studying Chinese literature. Scholarly literature on Tan's works is scarce,

and those who write about his texts are unsure of how to categorize them. For example, Ruth Morse argues that since they have been translated, it is difficult for her to even categorize them (Morse, 1993, p. 62). On the Chinese language side, in the *Curriculum Vitae of Singapore Contemporary Chinese Writers from 1965 to 2015*, Tan Kok Seng's name does not appear at all. In another Chinese language resource, the *Introduction to the Development of Modern World Literature* (世界现代文学发展概论), he is introduced under the category of "Modern Singaporean Literature" and then subsumed under the "English Novel" along with Goh Poh Seng's works (Xiao, 2007, p. 20). Viewing his texts as working-class literature could thus give visibility to works that don't fit well within literary discoursens centered on, for example, language or ethnicity.

Thridly – and more importantly – unlike Singaporean "professional" writers of his period, such as Goh Poh Seng and Wong May, who are popular in English-writing circles, Tan had not received a higher education or studied overseas like other "professionals," and he has therefore always been identified as a laborer. In a Singaporean context, this has meant that he has been regarded as some sort of literary "amateur." This is a result of historical ideological conditions. The hegemonic ideological understanding of Singaporean literature included the idea that "real" writers were educated, and that, consequently, working-class writers should be placed outside of, or on the margins of, proper literature. *Son of Singapore* has been read as the autobiography of a coolie, and "even today, on the National Book Development Council's database of Singapore writers, he is described as a 'writer and laborer'" (Bosco, 2013, p. iv). This highlighting of the fact that he is not a "full-time" writer stops his reception as a serious literary figure in Singapore.

Lastly, Tan Kok Seng seems to have silenced himself for financial reasons: "Sadly in some ways, but typical of his natural pragmatism, Kok Seng declared in 1985 that he would write no more, since his primary concern was to make his own living and see his son and daughter through a proper education" (Sharp, 2013, pp. xii–xiii). However, Tan Kok Seng did not necessarily view this as an exodus from literature because he did not regard himself as

a professional writer: "I only obtained primary school education, the use of the words in my work cannot compare to experienced literary people" (Tan, 1985, p. 1)[11]. Thus, he seems to have internalized the bourgeois idea of workers as not belonging to the realm of "proper" literature. Introducing the concept of working-class literarure in a Singaporean context might help combat this classist understanding.

Here, we may ask, what makes a working-class writer after all? Can we read Tan Kok Seng as a working-class writer and his works as working-class literature? And if so, why? To answer these questions, we have to explore the connections – and the significance thereof – between authors' backgrounds and life experiences and their writings. Some argue that it is only a member of the working class who can produce working-class literature. Yet, some scholars, such as Lennon and Nilsson, find this benchmark worrisome: "For many critics, the authorial background of a writer has become an essential criterion, making the aesthetic qualities of a text secondary–categorization depends on whether or not the author speaks 'authentically' from a working-class position" (Lennon & Nilsson, 2016, pp. 40–41). Tan Kok Seng's literary works, however, display that an emphasis on a writer's working-class background might disturb certain ideological stereotypes about literature and its limits. Thus, *in this context*, a definition of working-class literature emphasizing the authors' working-class backgrounds can be very valuable. That such a definition contradicts the self-understanding of a writer such as Tan Kok Seng, who does not view himself as a "real" writer, only underscores how complex this term is as a categorization.

Also when it comes to literary content, the concept of working-class literature might contradict Tan Kok Seng's self-understanding, at the same time as it makes visible important aspects of his works. In his recent writings, he displays more "family consciousness" than class consciousness. In the preface to *Son of Singapore*, he specifies: "Autobiographies are not often written by Asians. It is somehow difficult for an Asian to expose himself and his inner workings in public. However, I hope my children and my readers will learn from my books the value of hard work" (Tan, 1999, p. 5). And through the dedication of the

Son of Singapore "To my children," he once more explicitly refers to his children as the addressees of his book.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that his works belong to a "people's history," and to the history of the working class in Singapore. His book details his difficult life as a coolie which he became at age fifteen simply for financial need. As a coolie, he had to cope with the exploitation by a harsh Singaporean-Chinese boss who treated him dreadfully and frequently shouted at him: "I've never seen such a stupid idiot as you;" or, "I've never seen such a stupid boy as you" (Tan, 2013, p. 62). These descriptions vividly and personally present a demanding and cruel life.

Man of Malaysia, Tan Kok Seng's second autobiography, first published in 1974, documents his life after he moved from Singapore. In the book, he represents himself as always ready to reinvent himself in different social circumstances. As Sharp describes him, "Here is a person who can float serenely through lives of the wealthy and privileged, quite unlike his own as a famer turned coolie turned chauffeur turned soap salesman turned vegetable seller and poultry dealer" (Sharp, 2013, p. v). All the while, Tan Kok Seng appears too busy to reflect deeply upon political and historical events. His writing shows little historical consciousness. In fact, even the historic decolonialization of Malayasia goes unnoticed by the young Tan Kok Seng. He writes: "Unbeknownst to me, in 1963, Malaya had expanded into the Federation of Malaysia, with the inclusion of three former British Crown Colonies" (Tan, 2013b, p. 157). Only later in *Man of Malaysia* does the birth of Singapore as an independent country become significant and Tan Kok Seng's recognition and conception of Singapore has seemingly drastically changed. After having watched Lee Kuan Yew's speech on the television news on 9 August 1965, Tan Kok Seng confidently expresses his emotions: "Our nation was born. We ourselves were only one drop of its blood. Yet I shall never forget that evening" (Tan, 2013b).

Ilsa Sharp believes that Tan Kok Seng "has no angels, no hidden meanings, indeed little subtlety. He is what he is: a naïf" (Sharp, 2013, p. v). In my view, however, Tan Kok Seng is not so much "a naïf", but, unlike Chong Han who is heavily equipped with class consciousness and is a self-recognized working-class writer, Tan

Kok Seng sees his everyday struggles and working experiences from a distinctly personal rather than political perspective.

The linguistic richness in Tan Kok Seng's depiction of everyday life reflects the multicultural and multilingual spheres in the history of Singapore. It presents a linguistic hybridity and diversity embedded in his only seemingly "simple" depictions of daily life. In its complexity, it differs from the "particular kind of multiculturalism" which is often narrowed down in the "'Singapore story' told through National Education in schools and in commonsense narratives in the media" (Holden, 2008, p. 351). In Tan Kok Seng's life writing, we can perceive that "the constant interweaving of languages and linguistic levels contribute to erosion of some of the compartmentalization of multiracialism: governing strategy is subverted by the realities of tactical, everyday practice in individual lives" (Holden, 2012, p. 26). Tan Kok Seng writes "people's history" by recovering subjective experiences and by reconstructing the "small details of everyday life" (Samuel, 1981, p. xviii). It may be different from the political writing of Chong Han but to explore working-class literature in Singapore, scholars must explore writers like Tan Kok Seng.

Working-Class Literature and Neoliberal Capitalism: MD Sharif Uddin

Whereas the above writers have been marginalized in Singapore, working-class writing has recently become part of an important and highly visible cultural phenomenon in the country's contemporary literary scene. Since 2014, the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition, initially organized by Shivaji Das and his team, has been held annually.[12] Through this competition, many literary works by laborers (mainly migrant workers) have been published. Generally speaking, two types of literary works have thus emerged: a) multi-lingual poetry collections by a number of different migrant workers such as *Songs from a Distance* and b) literary works written by individual writers, such as *Stranger to Myself* by Bangladeshi worker MD Sharif Uddin.

Although positive attention to working-class literature is welcome, I take issue with the fact that it occurs within the capitalist

logic of the cultural industry. The organizer of the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition, Shivaji Das, emphasizes that "winners and participants from the event have been showcased in platforms such as the Singapore Writer's Festival, TEDx, poetry slams with local poets, video documentaries, and dance recitals at the Esplanade, Singapore." Given this statement, it seems that the leading motive of the competition is "showcasing" the workers. From my point of view, this reveals a capitalist paradox: When workers' literature, and their critique of exploitation, is promoted in this way, the workers, and their literary works, are once more exploited, this time by a capitalist literature industry.

I find it especially worrisome that working-class literature is presented though the form of a competition. If the aim, as the editor of *Songs from a Distance* stated, is to give "a voice to the workers," why is there a need to pit writing workers against each other? In which sense does this competition differ from traditional ways of producing and maintaining power and prestige? Most importantly, when examining the overall framework for presenting these workers' voices, I have found that the competition promotes itself by emphasizing the workers' identities without addressing specific class-related issues.

This highlighting of identity (and, implicitly, of identity politics) underscores an important debate within working-class literature studies. Identity politics has a very strong position globally (Di Stefano, 2017, p. 139). In Singapore today, The Migrant Worker Poetry Competition is conducted in such a way that the language of "class" is missing. Rather, the competition connects closely to a neoliberal discourse of self-success and achievements by celebrating and promoting a few "selected" migrant workers and their works.

Given the "foreign" nature of the migrant workers, the competition primarily calls for Singaporeans to become aware of and emphathize with "foreign" labor. Vanessa Lim, the editor of *Songs from a Distance*, has stated that literature can act as a medium to draw back the curtain from many workspaces: "These poems offer readers a glimpse into the thoughts, hopes, and dreams of Singapore's invisible workforce" (Lim, 2017). Indeed, the "invisibility" of labor vitally inspired the competition, which aimed at

"giving voice to a community that needs to be heard" (Yeo, 2017). However, while the intention may be laudatory, it is contradicted by the very form of the competition. William Davies (2014) has noted this phenomena in a different context:

> Rhetoric and theories of competition and competitiveness have been central to neoliberal critique and technical evaluations from 1930 onwards. To argue in favor of competition and competitiveness is necessarily to argue in favor of inequality, given that the competitive activity is defined partly by the fact that it pursues an unequal outcome.

Davies' keen observation indicates a crucial point: Competition is central to the neoliberal discourse, and aligns itself with inequality. More specifically, the paradox within competitions lies in the form itself, inasmuch as "an organized competition involves contestants being formally equal at the outset and empirically unequal at the conclusion" (Davies, 2014).

Moreover, the structure of a competition also serves to justify the capitalist market and its power. In this sense, we may argue that the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition seemingly discovers and promotes workers' writing competence and talent, yet the organized competition itself as a form can be regarded as homogenizing "workers voices" to a certain standard set by the practices and rules of the competition.

Tobias Werron shows in "Why Do We Believe in Competition?" that "the modern competitions are based on social processes that mediate between the performance of the competitors and the appreciation of the audience. It thus draws attention to rarely considered prerequisites of the production and distribution of 'audience goods' such as attention, legitimacy, and prestige" (Werron, 2015, p. 193). In the light of these observations, we may better understand why Shivaji Das favored competition and passionately endorsed this format: "The contest has received widespread recognition in both international and Singaporean media such as the *BBC* and *The Straits Times*. *TODAY*, a local newspaper, chose the contest as one of the top 10 art events in Singapore in 2014" (Das, 2017). Perhaps, for Das, the significance of the contest is largely measured by the distribution of "audience goods." In this

case, the competition is centrally about the event's ranking and social media coverage. How, though, does this event impact actual migrant workers? Imagine a migrant worker in Singapore who is truly interested in reading books and hoping to acquire a copy of *Songs from A Distance*. Could he or she possibly afford to buy it, as the book costs $25 and the average daily wage is only around $18 to $30?[13]

Not surprisingly, I found that *Songs from A Distance* also has a well-designed website where people can make orders and payments online. The question and answer section of the website provides the answer to "where does my money go?" for potential consumers. It explains, "All proceeds will go towards supporting migrant worker causes, such as the work undertaken by Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and future iterations of the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition. The production costs for *Songs from A Distance* have been generously sponsored by Potato Productions." At first glance, consumers may think that their money for the book will directly benefit the workers. As a matter of fact, however, to an unspecified extent, the money supports the organizers and the production of future competitions. Moreover, the costs of the book "has been generously sponsored by Potato Productions," a group of Singapore-based enterprises who deal with technology innovations and digital mobility. The company labels and markets itself with the slogan "be creative, do good, have fun." By sponsoring *Songs from a Distance*, the company can thereby build up its own marketable philanthropic brand identity.

Apart from the form of the competition, there is another layer of a contradictory dynamic within the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition which identifies it as existing within a consumer-capitalist framework. The organizers and some editors of the migrant workers' poetry collections play the pivotal in-between role between the writers and consumers, or, so to speak, between production and consumption. In a way, they need to constantly be involved with creating the "value" and importance of the new commodities, justifying consumers reading and buying these books. Through the efforts of such cultural intermediaries the writings of migrant workers is legitimized within the capitalist

market and for a capitalist readership. Pierre Bourdieu effectively describes this process, "see[ing] the new cultural intermediaries as germane to the 'ethical retooling' of consumer capitalism and its promotion of a 'morality of pleasure as duty'" (Nixon & Gay, 2002, p. 497).

The working-class literature generated by the cmpetitions is a symbolic sign that carries the moral message of the petite bourgeoisie and the dominant class: it is crucial to showcase the migrant workers in various platforms as a sign of "concern" and "sympathy" for the working-class and other less privileged people. By giving prizes to some selected ones, the organizers, the editors, and even the judges, role-play as filter and "taste-maker" in this industry. Henceforth, it is the cultural intermediaries who outline and structure the possibilities for this new type of "working-class literature" in the age of consumer capitalism while simultaneously regulating and profiting from the worker's writings from production to consumption.

Working-class literature that is not dependent on capitalist institutions may be able to withstand cultural hierarchy and capitalist legitimation. According to Bourdieu, "the only area of working-class practices in which style in itself achieves stylization is that of language, with argot…for example, the intention of deriding and desacralizing the 'values' of the dominant morality and aesthetic" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 395). It is to be feared that the capitalist version of migrant workers' literature cannot achieve this "stylization" when every piece of such writing has to be first selected through a competition system and then filtered by the cultural intermediaries. Further, the goodwill and tolerance of the cultural intermediaries bring to the fore Jean Baudrillard's remark on "functional tolerance," which indicates that in our society today, for something to be produced and consumed, "our relating simply falls under the sway of industrial production and fashion…those who were once mortal enemies are now on speaking terms, that the most fiercely opposed ideologies 'enter into dialogues'" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 190). It is not likely that a working-class literature that fights against capitalism in order to change the workers' living conditions will succeed within a competition regulated by capitalist entities.

Of all the works produced by these competitions, *Stranger to Myself* has received the most critical attention. It was published in Singapore by local publisher Landmark Books in 2017 and subtitled *The Diary of a Bangladeshi in Singapore*. The book contains prose and poems written between 2008 and 2016 and translated into English from Bengali, recording MD Sharif's life as a migrant worker in Singapore. In the forward to his book, the well-established Singaporean poet and literary critic Gwee Li Sui writes: "How Goh Eck Kheng, the publisher of Landmark Books, and I discovered Sharif is a story in itself. I was compiling short works for a literary anthology on Singapore's modern history, which was published as *Written Country* in 2016…Goh and I looked for a suitable voice among previous top entries in the fledgling Migrant Worker Poetry Competition" (Gwee, 2017, p. 11). Gwee's statement, in my view, echoes what I have mentioned above: a rather typical and somewhat prejudiced literary critic's perspective of working-class literature. On the one hand, the editors indeed acknowledged the importance of migrant workers' voices and writing for Singapore's modern history by including Sharif in the book. On the other hand, though, what the editors desired was simply "a suitable voice." Most importantly, they were looking for someone among "previous top entries in the fledging Migrant Worker Poetry Competition." Seemingly, to include a migrant workers' voice to literature of Singapore's history, a "suitability" is rightly required.

Angus Whitehead wonders, in his reflections on Bengali worker-poets in Singapore: "As may have been the case with Md Mukul Hossine in *Me Migrant*, are poets edited and translated for local consumption in Singapore's preconceived image of migrant workers, and their more complex, ambitious, controversial works not deemed suitable, or saleable for publication in Singapore? (Whitehead, 2017). In Sharif's case, there is a similar contradiction. Unlike Tan Kok Seng who dedicated his books to his children and saw them rather as a personal record for the family, Sharif's writings are "respectfully dedicated to the memory of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, founder of modern Singapore," and he points out, "After about a decade here, I, like other migrant workers, have many stories and recollections to share with you" (Sharif, 2017, p. 13). Unlike Tan Kok Seng's works, Sharif's text is confidently addressing its potential readers.

The book mainly covers three motifs: his daily experience as a worker in construction sites, his bitter life experiences in Singapore, and his longings and nostalgia towards home and family. True, to read *Stranger to Myself* is to read a book of pain and struggles. While perusing the poignantly hurtful stories and poems, we may conjure up Sharif's statement in the preface: "This diary contains the collected fragments of my experiences. It is not my intention to write anything against my homeland or this country. No hurt feelings, please" (Sharif, 2017, p. 13). From my perspective, this declaration is more or less related to the tremendous impact of "publication" on Sharif as a migrant worker-writer in Singapore. In a way, the preface is inconsistent with the work's narrative. My observation speaks to what Whitehead expressed in his study:

> Perhaps these poets have consciously or unconsciously adopted a politic strategy (that perhaps we all adopt in this place, this climate infected with something vaguely akin to fear) by editing and policing themselves, writing poetry here in which anything concerning the more controversial, morally reprehensible aspects of their treatment as exploited migrant labor without which uber-capitalist Singapore would not be where it is today, are shied away from, not confidently engaged with in detail? (Whitehead, 2017)

Sharif's writings from 2008 to 2016 is full of descriptions of and anger toward exploitation and mistreatment of workers. For instance, in the essay "The Tears of Workers," written in 2010, he cries out: "Why are we still ashamed of reminding the company of our rights? Why do laws speak hesitantly about us laborers? Why do workers still suffer despite the massive progress of civilization? Where is the so-called humanity" (Sharif, 2017, p. 48)? In many of the other essays, Sharif calls into question the inhospitable conditions migrant workers face on a daily basis.

Sharif discloses the physical and psychological predicaments of migrant workers. The food he has to eat is scarce and going bad: "We eat 10 to 12 hours after it is cooked and the food smells rotten in the hot weather." There is no guarantee for workers' safety: "He (the company owner) just thinks about productivity. He doesn't think seriously about the safety of the workers." There is a shared hopelessness with the coworkers: "The two workers with me were sad and I saw them crying silently. What is helplessness? I have seen the perfect definition" (Sharif, 2017, p. 65). The

pain he suffers, indeed, serves as the most predominant theme of the Sharif's writings.

Apart from descriptive documents on everyday struggles and life experiences, Sharif's book also contains poems about a variety of topics, ranging from personal reflections and family issues to public events. In many of his poems, we can trace a very strong sense of being a "migrant." In "A Worker's Journey," he ends with these lines:

At times I belong to this country
At times to that
I run, I have to run

We may say that the time he actually feels as if he is belonging to "this country" is the time when he is a worker, owned by the company as labor. Thus, he struggles to "run" and to be a real human. In line with the title of the book, *Stranger to Myself*, Sharif's writing poignantly displays a process of worker "alienation" in Marxist terms, particularly regarding the relation between his dehumanized subjectivity and class relations.

Nevertheless, MD Sharif Uddin is just one of the "representative" migrant worker writers from Singapore. "Selected" through a migrant workers writing competition, Sharif displays the possibility of migrant workers publishing literary work in the age of rampant globalized capitalism. His descriptions of migrant workers' suffering in Singapore is poignant, stressing issues of the terrible working-condition and injustices. Yet, the "production mode" of his book greatly re-shaped his narrative. Published under these material conditions, it is, of course, better for him to have "no hurt feelings" given that he is situated in such a vulnerable position. Although he writes of the workers as a collective, academics and media fervently celebrate him as self-made individual migrant worker writer, placing this text securely within a petite-bourgeoise literary site.

A Concluding Remark

By discussing the three working-class writers above, I have delineated a historical overview of working-class literature from Singapore, stressing above all the sucession of various "production

modes." Each writer manifests a different facet of Singaporean history. Chong Han's works remind us of the struggles and the pain working-class people suffered for the newborn nation. They express his hope for equality and justice and his compassion for miserable yet industrious people in Singapore and beyond. The (non-) reception of his works reveals several issues within academic discourse, including the lack of critical attention to working-class literature, the disdainful and biased attitude towards "communism"-related topics, and the vast chasm between literatures of different languages in Singapore.

Tan Kok Seng's autobiographies recount the rich experiences of a laborer and in many ways represent a "people's history" of Singapore. Unlike Chong Han, Tan Kok Seng is not equipped with political consciousness. He does not claim to speak for anyone else but wished to tell his personal story to his children and his wife. His success in the 1970s reveals a certain government ideology. Tan's story fits into the larger narrative of the "Singapore story": starting from a poor family background, then working hard, having a family, and eventually becoming a proud "Son of Singapore". Meanwhile, the future silencing of Tan Kok Seng reveals how the site of literature in Singapore is dominated by classist bourgeois ideals: A writer who is a worker is always regarded as "too simple" and his works as having "too little aesthetic value."

In MD Sharif Uddin's writings, he offers his painful and brutal experiences as a migrant worker in Singapore. Although – or because – he is not a "real" Singaporean, the production and promotion of his work raises several issues about Singapore, and about the fate of migrant workers from Asia in an age of extreme capitalist exploitation and inequality. Sharif's work was produced through competition and translation. This mode of production helped him become published as a worker-writer while simultaneously constraining him.

In this essay, I only focus on writers who have a working-class background. More concretely, they are all laborers who have toiled hard (too hard in my view). However, this is not to suggest that working-class literature ought to be confined in this way. I hope that this essay invites more discussion and scholarship on working-class literature from Singapore and Asia. Apart from

these three male workers, I believe that there is also the "herstory" of female workers' writings, and the working-class writings from other ethnicities and languages still tend to remain unexamined. It is just a beginning; there is still a long and winding way to go. However, I do hope that I have been able to demonstrate that the concept of working-class literature does have the potential to disrupt established discourses about literature in Singapore – and beyond – and thus to widen our understanding of it.

Endnotes

1. I am grateful to Prof. Kevin Riordan for his advice. I also wish to thank Prof. Magnus Nilsson and Prof. John Lennon for their valuable comments and kind support.

2. Literature in Singapore is written in the country's four official languages, namely, Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil. My study, however, examines only works published in English and Chinese. I hope to include more working-class writers writing in other languages in my future research.

3. Singapore came under direct British control as a colony in 1858. During the Second World war, Singapore was occupied by Japan from 1942–1945. Singapore gained independence from the British Empire in 1963 and became a fully sovereign state in 1965.

4. Of the residential population in Singapore, 75 per cent are ethnic Chinese, 17 per cent ethnic Malays, 7 per cent ethnic Indians and a small category of 'Others' (Huat 2003: 62).

5. In 2017, Singaporean scholar Teo Yeo Yen published her remarkable book *This is What Inequality Looks Like*. She decribes the the dominant nationalist narrative of a "Singapore Story" as follows: "This is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves: Singapore became in a matter of a few decades a shining Global City. We were poor and now we are rich. We had no natural resources and now we can eat whatever we want, buy whatever we want, right in our own city. We were uneducated and now our children score among the highest in the world on standardized tests. We are safe, we are clean, we are amazing. We are amazing. We are amazing" (Teo 2019: 43).

6. All translations from Chinese are my own.

7. The original interview can be found in the appendix of the book *Hong Cao, xinhua zuoyi wenxue de wenge cao* by Choo Cheng Fatt. (*Red Tide: The Cultural Revolution's Impact on Left Literature in Singapore*).

8. Tan Kok Seng published his books in English in the "Writing in Asia Series" by Heinemann Educational Books (1966 to 1996). In total, there are 114 books in this series with a wide range of topics and diverse writers. The initiation of this series was "credited with contributing prominently to creative writing and the creation of a shared regional identity amongst English-language writers of Southeast Asia".

9. My translation. As Roth Morse has observed: "And this is a remarkably successful book—though I would like to have more than the figure 20,000 copies, since a book as congenial to government policy may have had help along the way from pricing and distributing" (Morse 1993: 64).

10. During the Second World War, Austin Coates served in the Royal Air Force intelligence service in South East Asian countries, and after the war, he moved to Hong Kong in 1949 as an assistant colonial secretary and magistrate for the Hong Kong government. Afterwards, he also worked respectively in Singapore and Malaysia. In 1962, Coates decided to devote his life to professional writing. He is an author of many books including fictional works such as *City of Broken Promises* (1967) and *The Road* (1959) and historical books such as *A Macao Narrative* (1978) and *Macao and the British, 1637–1842* (1988). He also published *Rizal: Philippine Nationalist and Martyr* in 1968.

11. My translation from the Chinese.

12. On Shivaji Das personal website, he introduces himself: "Writer, traveller, and photographer; Shivaji Das is the author of 'Off the Beaten Track: Collecting Stories of Unheard Lives,' Yoda Press (under publication), 'Journeys with the caterpillar: Travelling through the islands of Flores and Sumba, Indonesia,' and 'Sacred Love: Erotic art in the temples of Nepal,' Mandala Publications/ Adarsh Books. Shivaji is the conceptualizer and lead organizer for the acclaimed Migrant and Refugee Poetry Contests in Singapore and Malaysia and for the Global Migrant Festival". See: https://www.shivajidas.com.

13. In *Stranger to Myself*, MD Sharif Uddin states, "The lowest price of lunch packs in the canteen is not less than $4. To a lowly worker like me who earns $18 per day, $4 seems like $400" (p. 61).

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The Hybridity of South African Working-Class Literature

Małgorzata Drwal

South Africa is a melting pot of various ethnicities, both of European and non-European origin. As Van der Walt (2007) in his discussion on the South African working class before the 1940s observes, transnational processes and circulation of ideas have always played a crucial role in shaping working-class movements, whereas South Africa's racial divisions have formed clearer divides than state borders. Therefore, the origin of working class in Southern Africa needs to be located within British imperialism and globalization in the late nineteenth century (Van der Walt, 2007, pp. 223–225). Until the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), Great Britain was successively consolidating areas of Southern Africa under its rule. The industrial revolution of the 1880s in South Africa, following the discoveries of diamonds and gold, was, after all, part of the British imperial economy. Furthermore, the history of the South African working class also encompasses a phase of African peoples' migrations, and, at any given moment, its trajectory crosses with Afrikaner nationalism. From its conception, the Union of South Africa, established in 1910 as a self-governing British dominion embracing the former Boer republics, the Cape Colony and Natal, was a structure marked by deep cracks: dividing not only whites from non-whites, but also the Boer/Afrikaner white settler community from the other white people — the British. The working class was evolving amongst these two forces of European origin which were most often competing but also sometimes collaborating.

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From the beginning, therefore, the South African working class was by no means a homogeneous formation. Mines of the Rand attracted unskilled workers from the north of Africa: mainly male African migrant workers from South West Africa, Rhodesia, Nyasaland, and Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique). Most of white workers, in turn, were skilled or semi-skilled. A majority of these white workers were migrants commonly referred to as "Europeans," regardless of their actual place of birth. They were mostly British, but also a significant number came from Australia and New Zealand, continental Europe, and the United States (Van der Walt, 2007, p. 226). A separate group of white workers consisted of the Afrikaners, who were usually unskilled people from rural areas, so-called "poor whites" (in Afrikaans called *armblankes*) who were driven by poverty – a consequence of the Second Anglo-Boer War, the Depression of 1929–1932, and the drought of 1932–1933 – to relocate to cities where living conditions were often not much better. These poor whites were a particularly numerous group in the 1920s and 1930s. By the 1940s, it is estimated about ninety per cent of white underground miners were Afrikaners (Van der Walt, 2007, p. 226). Employment prospects in the city also lured white women who found jobs in the secondary industry, mainly clothing plants. The labor market was more favorable to white women than to white men who had to compete with cheaper Black workers. The social and economic situation of whites in South Africa, however, was improving throughout the 1930s and the 1940s. The victory of the National Party in 1948, marking the official beginning of apartheid, brought the most significant change. White peoples' privileged status was legally sanctioned and most of them left the mining industry for better paid paying jobs. Consequently, the categories of "Blacks" and "working class" began to be used interchangeably.

Arriving at a definition of South African working-class literature is a multifaceted problem, not only due to the vagueness of the terms *working class* and *literature*, but also due to the complexity of South African population's structure and its dynamics over time. The question of "what makes a given text a working-class text" challenges many researchers, regardless of the local context they are examining.[1] The criteria include the working-class background

of the author, the working-class experience reflected in a text, a text's popularity with a working-class public, or a text's programmatic working-class message, among others. In this last case, working-class literature is sometimes equalled with proletarian literature within the parameters of the 1920s and 1930s Soviet Proletkult[2] where the overall aim of a text is to help the reader realize their place in a class struggle. Furthermore, defining "literature" poses the question whether to approach only fictional, creative writings or to include press addressed to the working-class reader; theoretical studies on working class; non-fiction, e.g. biographies of working-class activists; and – specifically for Africa – oral forms such as poetry and choir chants by Black workers; and forms corresponding with varying levels of the target audience's literacy. In this chapter, therefore, I will refer to all the above-mentioned criteria when justifying the place of a given work within the body of South African working-class literature.

There is no comprehensive and systematic study on South African working-class literature as a separate literary phenomenon with its own dynamics. Recent literary histories acknowledge working-class creativity as part of South African literary traditions in English, Afrikaans, and other African languages. However, they usually offer cursory mentions or, at best, a brief introduction rather than any in-depth discussions of motifs, let alone of exchanges between various language traditions.[3] A more comprehensive study would require a comparative approach transcending not only the boundaries of languages, but also of variously understood ethnicities (Afrikaner, British, Zulu, European, African, etc.), and skin colors (white vs. Black, or more accurately white vs. non-white). At the same time, it needs to be stressed that the history and the role of the South African working class has been given a substantial amount of attention from the political and sociological points of view. In addition, because the concept of class has always been related to race in South Africa, and throughout history the overwhelming majority of workers were Black, there exists extensive research on Black trade unionism.[4] White trade unions were active in a shorter period, from the beginning of the 20th century until about the advent of apartheid and as a topic of study did receive some attention mostly in the 1980s and 1990s.[5]

The concept of working-class literature, in turn, tends to be used only when referring to particular case studies. Certain authors are presented as working-class authors[6] or selected genres and cultural activities are studied as representative of working-class,[7] such as Garment Workers Union literature, or workers' drama in Afrikaans. Instead, the concept of "urban literature" – sometimes, but not necessarily, describing the working-class experience — has been extensively explored. Van Coller's (2008) discussion on representations of Afrikaner rural population's confrontation with the city in Afrikaans literature, and Van Niekerk's (2011) overview of texts thematizing urbanization in Afrikaans, English, and Zulu, are two examples.

To avoid traps of essentialist definitions of what South African working-class literature is, in this contribution I therefore suggest a more inclusive approach encompassing a diversity of forms, languages, and traditions. I propose to conceive of South African working-class literature as a hybrid form, since, as Peter Burke (2009) observes, hybridity includes various processes, ranging from translation to a creative adjustment of a European convention to non-European contexts, which is not a simple imitation of a Western genre (2009, p. 18). Hybrid texts are characterized by heteroglossia, to use Bakhtin's concept; there are various voices speaking within every hybrid text. Consequently, these texts are spaces of contact and exchange, which result in a subversive counter-discourse of protest literature. Yet, such discourse feeds on the culture it contests by reflecting and creatively reworking its features, adding disparate elements stemming from other traditions and ideologies. As a result, working-class literature is built upon available local forms, including South African traditions, popular genres and tropes while simultaneously incorporating foreign discourses, forms, and literary devices.

Considering its hybrid form at the intersection of discourses and genres, and its documentary character (recording the working-class experience), I approach South African working-class literature as *histoire croisée*.[8] This literature is an effect of rapid development and change of industrialisation and ensuing modernizing transformation of rural, traditional communities into urban ones. The *histoire croisée* approach is process-oriented and allows us

to view working-class literature not as a fixed category, but as various manifestations of thought being constructed and evolving in space and time. As such, it invites looking at circumstances which facilitate or hinder certain kinds of cultural exchange. The crossing metaphor guides the researcher to investigate not only the points where the lines cross, but also to trace modifications of original forms. Moreover, Werner and Zimmermann (2006) suggest juxtaposing various scales: micro and macro. Therefore, a picture of working-class literature as part of national and transnational movements can be illuminated by case studies – the personal histories it recorded, the incidental encounters between writers, activists, and workers. In this essay, the organizing crossing metaphor of the *histoire croisée* refers to intersections of race, class, gender, but also to crossing of local traditions, national mythologies, transnational ideologies.

Demonstrating their hybrid nature, this contribution explores diverse forms of white and non-white working-class literature: starting from texts by white socialist theoreticians and middle-class novelists with socialist leanings to trade unionists creating drama, poetry, and songs. An overview that it offers encompasses the period from the beginning of the 20th century until the abolishment of apartheid in 1994. The forms and themes present in working-class texts written after the shift in power, the first democratic elections, and the beginning of a Black majority rule in South Africa, lie outside the scope of this essay. It needs to be underlined that this overview is by no means exhaustive but is an attempt to accentuate the most noticeable trends and features of texts about, by, or for workers of South Africa.

Class and Race at the Beginning of the 20th Century

The deepest rift within the South African population has always been along racial lines. It was skin color that had long already shaped the identification of South African citizens, while the awareness of class was a fairly new concept emerging as the industrialization and urbanization of the country was progressing in the late 19th century. It was also when intellectuals from Great Britain, who brought a racialized social Darwinism onto South African

soil, undertook the first attempts at theorizing the South African working class. Within the parameters of their social Darwinian approach, they variously applied the term "race" to describe a skin color, ethnicity or even nationality, whereas with the concept of working class they referred to the whole Black population of South Africa.[9]

This thinking can be found for example in the writings of Olive Schreiner (1855–1920), "a British intellectual who lived only a few years in Britain, [and] a rural South African who called Britain 'home'" (Krebs, 1999, p. 141). Schreiner was the first South African-born author writing in English to become famous in Great Britain. She was a progressive activist and political commentator, influential in transnational networks of socially engaged intellectuals.[10] Including her in an overview of working-class authors is debatable, though. Her background and the audience she addressed were middle-class whites and her writings did not delve into the working-class experience. Her writings, however, offer a valid point of departure because in theoretical and fictional texts alike she approached the issues of labor and the intertwining concepts of class, race, and gender – the concepts which, as she believed, cannot be discussed separately. For example, in *Woman and Labour* (1911), where she theorizes the relationship between labor and gender, she focuses on the position of white middle-class women, but also elaborates on the differences between the origin and goals of male and female labor movements (Schreiner, 1911, pp. 122–126). Schreiner's approach to race and class issues can be observed in her other writings. As a vociferous critic of aggressive imperialism, capitalism, and the exploitation of the Black population by the whites in South Africa – both by the British and the Boers — Schreiner gave her protest a literary form in *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897). In this allegorical story, she condemned the cruelty of Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company towards the Ndebele and Shona on the territory which later became Rhodesia. It was in the later theoretical writings, in particular in the political pamphlet *Closer Union* (1909), that she most directly elucidated how the concepts of class and race are interrelated. Schreiner referred to the British and the Boers as two white races of South Africa, whereas the Black race was the

country's working class. In this piece, almost prophetically, she warned against the depravation of Black population in the name of white man's material gain:

> If, blinded by the gain of the moment, we see nothing in our dark man but a vast engine of labour; if to us he is not man, but only a tool […] if, uninstructed in the highest forms of labour, without the rights of citizenship, his own social organisation broken up, without our having aided him to participate in our own; […], we reduce this vast mass to the condition of a great seething, ignorant proletariat – then I would rather draw a veil over the future of this land. (Schreiner, 1909, p. 50)

Black Working-Class Experience: Jim Goes to Joburg

Schreiner, voicing her protest against social inequalities and sympathy for the non-white population, was writing from an outsider perspective and so were other white socially oriented writers publishing in the first decades of the 20th century. They tended to idealize the pastoral South Africa (Chapman, 2003, p. 142) and focus on the detrimental impact that the urbanised space had on the innocent rural Bantus. Utilizing the plot pattern often referred to as "Jim goes to Joburg," they attempted to depict the transformation of the protagonist in an industrial environment where instead of tribal bonds, he is defined by economic position. Such texts, written in English by both white and Black authors, meet criteria of working-class literature, because their aim is to reflect working-class experience and their authors, acting as observers and commentators, become historians of the people, documenting social change.

The "Jim goes to Joburg" theme presents a Black protagonist's journey from the rural space, standing for the South Africa of the past with its harmony and values defined by the tribal social organisation, [11] to the modern urban space, marked by industrialization and exploitation. In these new circumstances the protagonist, exposed to the vices of the city—money, liquor, gambling, prostitutes, and violence— loses his naiveté and learns how to survive. The stories accentuate the meaninglessness of the main character's life, often pointlessly terminated by a death in a random fight. As

Gray (1985) observes in his overview of the works representing this theme, the idealization of the rural past, "this Edenic nostalgia for a lost paradise merely underscores the inadequacies of the alternative" (1985, p. 69), the emptiness, despair and gloom of the city.

Leaven. A Black and White Story (written in 1897, published in 1908) by Douglas Blackburn can be listed as chronologically the first manifestation of this theme. The novel depicts the story of Bulalie, a Zulu, who as a worker is painfully confronted with the city but cannot return to an idealized rural past. Blackburn, who came to South Africa from England in 1892, as "an underpaid journalist with socialist leanings" (Chapman, 2003, p. 138), attracted by the gold rush in the Rand, was first writing satirical texts in which he attacked the corruption brought about by industrialization. Next to incisive criticism of South African colonial society as marked by a "negative coherence of greed and exploitation" (Shum, 1994, p. 97), he expressed a nostalgia for a mythical South Africa, where both the Bantu and the Boers formed classless and harmonious societies. Chapman (2003) describes Bulalie as the first "credible Black figure" (2003, p. 141) in English fiction in South Africa. Contrary to previous representations created by white authors where Black characters were flat, often comic figures, Bulalie is not a simpleton, but a character first wronged by whites who learns how to survive in the Rand, using the system to his advantage. The novel is an accusation levelled at the white government for turning the Rand mines into a just another form of British colonial exploitation. It offers an evocative portrayal of the urban environment in the "proletarian phase of colonisation" (Chapman, 2003, p. 142) and a close examination of the relationship between class and crime (Gray, 1985, p. 66).

Blackburn's theoretical writings, however, poignantly demonstrate the limitations and inconsistencies of a white socialist writer's perspective on the South African class stratification at the beginning of the 20th century. When elaborating on the idealized rural past of the Bantus, he advocated "Kaffir socialism"[12] claiming that tribal society is "essentially socialistic" and therefore the "natives" should live in their "locations" (native reserves) where they would be safe from the degenerating influence of white

"civilisation" with its concept of private property. According to this logic, even if Black people stayed unskilled and illiterate, they would remain unspoiled and would not develop evil qualities. Blackburn deemed this thinking (dangerously reminiscent of apartheid policy) not as segregationist but as an expression of the pastoral ideal (Chapman, 2003, p. 142). In this way, he presented the emerging Black working class as a by-product of white man's capitalism and his views echoed, in fact, the old noble savage myth with its patronizing colonial attitude towards non-whites.

Another two texts by white authors telling the "Jim goes to Joburg" story are W.C. Scully's *Daniel Vananda: The Story of a Human Being* (1923) and *Ula Masondo* (1927), a novella by William Plomer (first published in the collection *I Speak of Africa*). These works also offer a bleak picture of the emerging Black working class. In the first work, the author depicts the degradation of human nature due to its "essential infirmity" (Scully, 1923, p. vii) which results from racial inequality. The main character Vananda, who in the city changes his name to Daniel, walks the path of degeneration – both morally and physically (he contracts a wasting lung disease) – as a mine worker, striving to survive in a hostile environment. *Ula Masondo* explores exploited and abused Black workers desiring the trappings of white "civilisation." In an attempt to offer a more intimate picture of an exploited Bantu, Plomer presents a nostalgia for the lost rural past as expressed in the main character's internal monologue.

The "Jim goes to Joburg" plot pattern was also explored by Black authors (although these writers were not from the working-class), who painted the working-class experience in harsh conditions. A clear example is *An African Tragedy* (1931) by Zulu author Rolfes Robert Reginald Dhlomo (1901–1971) a mission-educated journalist and writer, representative of the elitist "New African" of the 1930s and 1940s. The author's hybrid identity determined his treatment of the theme: African, familiar with local, tribal tradition, yet distanced from them due to his Christian education and assimilated Calvinist norms. Writing in English, he chose to become a mediator between the world of his people and whites. *An African Tragedy* is a moralistic novella which presents a story of Robert Zulu, a village teacher who, in

need of wedding money (*lobola*) to be paid to the family of his intended wife, sets for Johannesburg where he is confronted with the vices of the city. The author is an external observer, critical of the alcohol-drenched township culture with its marabi (a popular African jazz style at that time), which he sees as "the erosion of tradition and Christian values and norms" (Gaylard, 2005, p. 54). The story gives a good insight into segregated Johannesburg with its curfew, illiterate and corrupt Black policemen, and city gangs. The most vivid is, however, the picture of both spiritual and bodily degradation of the protagonist in the city: he contracts syphilis, and on his return to the village is punished by the community members, "God-fearing parishioners who do not accept his city ways" (Gray, 1985, p. 70).

R. R. R. Dhlomo's short stories, which he published in the weekly journal *Sjambok* between August 1929 and February 1931, convey a less didactic and much more sympathetic social message. He focuses on the helplessness of Black workers within capitalist power structures. For example, the stories "Fateful Orders" or "The Death of Masaba" offer a sharp criticism of the corrupt ruthless system of the mines, where mine workers' lives are expendable. Garland (2005) observes that these writings were "an early form of protest writing in English" (2005, p. 56), even though Dhlomo, whose outlook was shaped by his mission education, was distrustful of political agitation.

Another example of protest writing is *Mine Boy* (1946) by Peter Abrahams (1919–2017). This realist novel is particularly worth mentioning because it offers a more constructive and positive approach to the working-class identity formation process, even though the confrontation with the city that it presents is a painful experience. The protagonist Xuma, on his arrival in Johannesburg, is faced with the violence of urban life in a Malay Camp in the impoverished suburb of Vrededorp and ends up as a miner, part of a larger dehumanized mass, working underground in life threatening conditions. The breakthrough comes when his fellow mine workers eventually decide to take the initiative and fight for a better destiny. What particularly needs to be emphasized is that these are Black and white workers who unite for the first time for a common goal of opposing exploitation. The novel

closes with Xuma, together with his friend, Irish foreman Paddy O'Shea, significantly nicknamed The Red One, organizing a strike in response to the death of their fellow workers in a mining accident. In this way, the text carries a straightforwardly formulated working-class message: class-conscious workers should no longer be passive victims but actively shape their lot engaging in a class struggle in which they join their efforts regardless of race. That is why Abrahams earned the name of "South Africa's First Proletarian Writer," as Michael Wade (1972) described him, even though he did not belong to the working class. Abrahams, a declared Marxist until early 1940s (Masilela, 2004, p. 35), was an intellectual, Pan-Africanist and cosmopolitan in views. Influenced by the American Harlem Renaissance writers and familiar with W. E. B. Dubois's and Richard Wright's oeuvre (Jones, 2012, p. 205), he was a renowned figure of New Black Modernity in South Africa and beyond. His work, including *Mine Boy*, can be viewed as positive response to change, a central premise of modernity.

The change, thematized in the plot of all "Jim goes to Joburg" texts, is triggered by the new economic situation which leads to the social, political, and cultural transformations in Black communities. The protagonist's migration to the city is mirrored by his inner journey leading to his new, modern identity. While in previously discussed texts the character's new identity was a combination of an urban Bantu and a worker, in Abrahams's exploration of the theme, Xuma becomes a class-conscious worker aware of how race and class are interrelated. Furthermore, he is instructed not only in socialism but also in humanism when The Red One suggests that he should think of himself first of all as a man, then recognize his class, and that his skin color is secondary. The interracial strike initiative makes Xuma realize what The Red One meant —his individual life matters: "Xuma smiled. Now he understood. (…) One can be a person – first. A man first and then a Black man or a white man" (Abrahams, 1946, p. 182).

Critical Realism and Socialist Realism

Another take on "proletarian humanism"[13] can be found in the work of Alex La Guma (1924–1985). Creating protagonists who

are supposed to be typical of their class and environment, he consciously and expressly took the role of the "historian of the people" (Lukacs, 1963, p. 19). In a realistic and naturalistic fashion this author documented the life in working-class settlements in Cape Town, work floor relations, protest, and an awakening working-class awareness of Blacks and people of mixed origin who in the apartheid terminology were referred to as "coloreds"[14]. La Guma's novels created throughout the 1960s and 1970s demonstrate a development in his approach: from "the exposition of the social contradictions of racial capitalism" (Mkhize, 2010, p. 915) towards a representation of characters actively fighting for a better future, reminiscent of those in Abrahams's *Mine Boy*. Mkhize (1998, p. 122) describes such figures as positive heroes that can be found in Soviet socialist realist literature and emphasizes the role of the author as an educator in class-consciousness. In terms of style, as Nkosi (1975) observes, La Guma's writing "owes much to Zola and the masculine rigour of Hemingway" (1975, p. 112), pointing in this way to an affinity with European naturalist and American realist traditions. These "borrowed" ingredients, such as a socialist realist plot and message, and the naturalism and realism in narrative style, applied to local South African material add up to a hybrid character of this working-class literature.

As the son of Jimmy La Guma, one of the leading Black trade unionists of the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU), Alex La Guma was raised in a home with socialist traditions. His work shows inspirations with classics: with the realism of Jack London and socialist realism of Maxim Gorky (Mkhize, 1998, p. 76). Starting as a journalist interviewing the non-white communities of Cape Town, La Guma turned to realistic prose in which he hoped to truthfully portray the lives of the poor and the working-class and "at the same time to indicate the developing sense of revolt which was fermenting all the time within the communities" ("To Literary Gazette", p. 38). *A Walk in the Night* (1967), a story of Michael Adonis, a person of color who is unfairly dismissed from his job at sheet-metal factory by a racist foreman, belongs to the critical realist tradition, where the focus lies on the poignant portrayal of the underprivileged, with "distinct Dostoevskian undertones" (Nkosi, 1975, p. 222). The novella describes dehumanizing socio-economic conditions of District Six: drinking, crime, gangs, and the helplessness of people who are victims of the

circumstances. Chronicling details, it offers a vivid picture reminiscent of European naturalist tradition:

> And in the dampness deadly life formed in decay and bacteria and mould, and in the heat and airlessness the rot appeared, too, so that things which once where whole and new withered or putrefied and the smells of their decay and putrefaction pervaded the tenements of the poor. (La Guma *A Walk in the Night*, 1967, p. 34)

Evocative realistic descriptions of extreme poverty can be found also in *And a Threefold Cord* (1964). La Guma provides the reader with a minute description with the pondokkies in the Cape Flats slums on a rainy day: "it could hardly be called a street (…) a maze of cracks between the jigsaw pieces of settlement, a writhing battlefield of mud and strangling entanglements of wet and rusty barbed wire, sagging sheets of tin (…)" (p. 21). This novel, *The Stone Country* (1967), and *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1972) have certain qualities of socialist realism and are La Guma's "project of forging a South African working class (proletarian) literature" (Mkhize, 1998, p. 37). The characters are therefore not just representatives of the working class but also political activists striving for solidarity among the poor to oppose racial capitalism and win in a better future (compare Lukacs, 1963, p. 96). In *The Stone Country* the protagonist is sent to prison for distributing leaflets; in *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1972) such characters as Beukes or Tekwane are depicted as self-conscious, heroic working-class fighters, "positive heroes" and "political role models" (Mkhize, 2010, p. 920). Beukes sacrifices his family life to take up underground resistance actions against oppressors. Tekwane undergoes a transformation according to the socialist realist novel master plot (compare Clark, 2000, p. 23). From a naïve country boy whose father died in a mine, Tekwane grows to political consciousness and becomes a working-class activist who eventually sacrifices his life and dies during a cruel interrogation by security.

White Urban Experience in Afrikaans Prose and Drama: Class Stratification vs. National Unity

Nostalgia for the idyllic rural past – which characterizes "Jim goes to Joburg" novels – is visible also in Afrikaans literature in which the encroachment of industrialization and urbanization threatens

the freshly solidified Afrikaner national identity. This identity located its origins in the 19th century Voortrekkers, i.e. pioneers trekking northwards of the Cape Colony in a conquest of lands outside of British authority where they could live as independent farmers. The prototypical Afrikaner – or the Boer (a Dutch word meaning a farmer) was defined by the countryside where he ruled over his farm, his family, bywoners (tenants), and non-white laborers (Van Coller, 2008, p. 29). The growing population of poor whites was a result of impoverishment of the countryside and urbanization following the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). Subsequent crises caused by the economic depression of 1929–1933 and drought of 1933 kept fueling the process of migration to the cities. Johannesburg's suburbia of Vrededorp, Fordsburg and Brixton were typical locations where poor Afrikaners settled (Van Jaarsveld, 1982, p. 179). Having no formal training in trade and industry, they competed on the labor market with Black workers, an experience many considered humiliating: "Loss of the farm was traumatic for most Afrikaners because it meant the loss of a means of production (…) it meant alienation: the fact that the independent person is forced to become a wage labourer" (Van Wyk, 1990, p. 17). Therefore, the emergence of Afrikaans working-class literature needs to be placed at the crossing of two trajectories defining two new Afrikaner identities: the first one was Afrikaner as a national identification, the second — the Afrikaner as a working-class member. A number of literary texts thematize the tension between these two competing identities: the national one rooted in the race or rather in ethnicity, which places the Afrikaner against the British (in a colonial fashion denying any political rights to non-whites); while the other one appeals to the ideal of the cross-racial worker identity.

As Van Coller (2008) observes, the Afrikaner attitude towards the city has always been sceptical, or at best ambivalent. Johannesburg has become the epitome of a treacherous place, the "Judasburg" – as it is referred to in the Vincent Pienaar novel *Jo'burg, die blues en 'n Ford Thunderbird* [Johannesburg, the Blues and a Ford Thunderbird]. The urban space was anglicized and governed by foreign values and practices, at odds with "Afrikaner's sense of nationhood and deep adherence to a conservative Biblical theology" (Van Coller, 2008, p. 27). The key genre

addressing the pastoral identity of the Afrikaner is the *plaasroman* (farm novel) where the farm is a mythical space, providing human existence with meaning, "an idyllic sanctuary, a feudal realm structured hierarchically on class and race, a mythical sphere in which heroic figures combat destiny and evil" (Van Coller, 2008, p. 32). This genre, thriving until the 1950s provided a powerful narrative for Afrikaner nationalism, picturing the Afrikaner as rooted in the African soil and therefore the rightful owner of the land.

Van Coller (2008) in his overview of Afrikaans realistic prose addressing the poor whites problem (*die armblanke-vraagstuk*) does not use the attribute "working class" but rather "urban" and "city," stressing the contrast between the idealized farm and the negative industrialized space. Nevertheless, this literature thematizing spacial change is, in fact, concerned with the economic change affecting the social position of whites in an increasingly class-stratified society. First, in the 1920s, the peri-urban novel (Van Coller, 2008, p. 35) represented by Jochem van Bruggen's *Ampie* trilogy (1924–1928), depicted suburban space of "white decay," and subsequently, throughout the late 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the city novel portrayed protagonists who were invariably confronted with alcoholism, violence, abuse, and loose sexual behavior, which reminds the painful confrontations of Black protagonists in "Jim goes to Joburg" novels. Both traditions utilize the same central device of contrast between the city with destructive effects of modernisation: the idea of rural Bantus living harmonious lives in pre-industrial tribal Africa corresponds with the topos of an idealised rural past of the Afrikaner on his farm. For example, J. Lub's *Eenvoudige Mense* [Simple People] (1930) and C. M. van den Heever's *Groei* [Growth/Grow] (1933) thematize the degeneration of the Afrikaners living in slums – this degeneration being also moral, like in R.R.R. Dhlomo's didactic *An African Tragedy* where the city had a destructive impact on Black population's values and family bonds. This emphasis on the moral downfall of characters is, in both cases, due to the important role of Calvinist religion on authors' outlook. Other instances of the Afrikaans city novel showed Afrikaners as working class: Imker Hoogenhout presented in *Op die delwerye* [In the mines] (1925)

a picture of poor mineworkers and Willem van der Berg in his novels *Reisigers na nerens* [Travellers to Nowhere] (1946) and *Tema en variasies* [Theme and variations] (1947) dealt with workers' rights, strikes, and racial relations, showing a critical attitude to the emerging class of Afrikaner industrialists, a "gang of fat cats" (*Tema en variasies,* 1947, p. 71).

Similarly to "Jim goes to Joburg" texts, the above-mentioned literature depicted the working class from an outsider perspective of a middle-class intellectual. In the 1930s, no other perspective dominated Afrikaans drama about the poor whites' predicament. Plays focused on the dangers of city life, such as evil consequences of alcohol abuse (*Drankwet* [Liquor Act], 1933 by E. A. Venter) or threats to young girls' moral standards (*Die Stad Sodom* [The City of Sodom], 1931 by F. W. Boonzaier). These plays, which addressed the question of decent behavior while depicting an economic situation, need to be interpreted within the nationalist political framework: the city is not only anglicized but also threatens the Afrikaners' racial purity.

The economic stratification of the white South African population formed a concern for the nationalist agenda proscribing the unified Afrikaner identity (Van Wyk, 1990, pp. 9–10). Adopted in 1931, the Statute of Westminster ended the Union of South Africa's dependency on Great Britain as a dominion, which provided Afrikaners with an impulse to reinforce their national identity as unique and opposed to both British and other non-European people in South Africa, such as Blacks and Asians. Even though Afrikaner nationalism was rapidly gaining support in the 1930s, industrialisation and the resultant category of class as a new identification endangered the ethnicity based divisions. This threat is addressed in *Hantie kom huis-toe* [Hantie come home] (1933) by P. W. S. Schumann, which presents a friendly relationship between the poor white Jan and the Indian shop owner, in this way signalling that poor whites may eventually overcome racial prejudice by developing personal friendships across ethnic lines. Therefore, the dramas have a propaganda character, with characters unambiguously distancing themselves from a class cross-racial outlook: Jan openly states: "I do not believe in classes for white people" (Schumann, 1933, p. 56) and other character, Aunt Grieta,

declares: "I won't allow my child to do kaffir work" (Schumann, 1933, p. 29). Another example is *Die Skeidsmuur* [The Dividing Wall] (1938) by A. J. Hanekom emphasizing the importance of keeping the division between jobs for whites and non-whites. The play conveys a warning against the situation in which a white domestic servant loses the old awareness of their place in social hierarchy and – as the play suggests – self-respect.

Garment Workers' Union and Grassroots Proletarian Afrikaans Literature

Afrikaans working-class literature created by authors who were working class themselves was pushed to the margins of the Afrikaans literary canon (see Willemse, 1999, p. 9). N. P. Van Wyk Louw, a playwright and scholar, who wrote about the challenges of Afrikaans drama in the late 1930s did not encourage poor whites to create their own literature. Instead, he proposed that the petit-bourgeois writer should emulate the poor white's subjectivity (Van Wyk Louw, 1939). Afrikaner critics dismissed writings which expressed actual popular sentiments of the working class most of all because this literature's socialist character involved a subversive inter-racial message.

The literature of the Garment Workers' Union (GWU) activists created from the 1930s until about 1945 addressed the issues of class and nationality from an insider perspective, at the same time presenting a new model of urban femininity. Also, this is an Afrikaans literature which for the first time adopts the working-class/proletarian qualification and presents the Afrikaner as a class-conscious worker. The GWU literature comprises texts written by female working-class authors for a working-class public, a literature which creates a proletarian identity which is supposed to cross racial divides.

The Garment Workers' Union (Afrikaans: Klerewerkersunie) was the first professionally organized trade union consisting of predominantly Afrikaner women, recruiting from the ranks of poor whites. At the arrival in a city, it often turned out that women were better equipped to find jobs in the competitive urban market than men who were as unskilled and unprepared for the

urban environment as Black migrants. Even though white women employed in manufacturing industry, mostly clothing and food sector, fared better than men, their situation was far from satisfactory. Due to lack of work regulations they were working long hours and received low wages.

The creation of trade unions was a response to this situation. The GWU was established in 1930 on the initiative of the Lithuanian-Jewish immigrant Emil Solomon (Solly) Sachs (1900–1976) who also provided the union with its ideological foundation. An admirer of Marx and Stalin, familiar with the history and organization of British trade unions, Sachs was also impressed by Soviet socialism (Verwey, 1995, p. 221). Under his leadership the union became a militant organization, fighting for the interests of semi-skilled and unskilled women workers. By 1938, female activists occupied all important positions in the GWU (Vincent, 2000, p. 63). Among the leading organizers were Anna Scheepers, Johanna and Hester Cornelius – working-class women, who conducted the union's mission to teach the newly emerging white proletariat of South Africa how to speak and fight for "bread and butter, for a happier life and brighter future" ("Our Policy", *Garment Worker* vol. 1, no. 1, Oct. 1936). Just as important, they attempted to create a spirit of unity among the working masses.

The union's educational mission involved cultural events and the creation of instructive literature. From 1936, the trade union began to regularly issue its official periodical, the bilingual *Klerewerker/Garment Worker*. The periodical consisted of twelve through fourteen pages in English and the same number in Afrikaans running back to back. Its primary role was to inform readers about the current activities of the union, but it also published contributions on the history of trade unionism in South Africa and beyond, and literary texts, such as short stories, poems, and songs. Both language sections advertised cultural activities for the union's members, but literary texts appeared much more often in the Afrikaans section, since Afrikaans was the language of the working class, while English was associated with the clothing manufacturers (Brink, 1989, p. 108). Also serialized Afrikaans translations of socialist classics appeared in the periodical, such as Upton Sinclair's novel *They Call Me Carpenter*

in Hester Cornelius's translation (*Hulle noem my timmerman* was appearing in the issues from May/June 1941 until May/June 1946). Translated socialist literature provided Afrikaner workers with a broader picture of the working-class culture as an international phenomenon.

The *Garment Worker* (*GW*) magazine target readership were workers from clothing factories. Most of Afrikaner workers, originating from rural regions, were conservative in their views, knew little of socialism and generally perceived it as a foreign ideology. In a changed economic situation, they did not want to shed their national identity or break links with the founding myth of the Great Trek and the pioneer self-image. To overcome reservations of the workers as regards to socialist thought, the *GW* authors had to rely on familiar cultural motifs which they combined with depictions of urban experience that the reader could relate to in an attempt to convey a socialist message: calling workers and poor farmers to a joint struggle against capitalists.

Realistic short stories published in the periodical documented Afrikaner workers' experiences. For example, "Die baksteen" ["The Brick"] by Ida Muller describes an anonymous starving city newcomer roaming the streets in futile search of work. He is confronted with the indifference of those living in the urban environment. Next to depictions of recognizable experience within a realistic convention, some stories are overtly didactic. "Rype ondervinding" ["Mature Experience"] opens with a convincing description of the stuffy atmosphere of a factory hall and the monotonous sound of sewing machines, a mood which corresponds with the feeling of loneliness of the main character, the exemplary Anna Cloete, a country girl freshly arrived in the city. Depressed by the urban environment, she dreams of her family farm in the Bushveld which she recalls as an idealized mythical space. This nostalgia for a lost past is a feature which *Garment Worker* literature shares with both English "Jim goes to Joburg" texts and with Afrikaans peri-urban and city novel. But the story's most important episode is Anna's encounter with trade unionists who explain to her why she should join the union. The instructive proletarian message is communicated in an even more direct and unambiguous way than in La Guma's novels.

Since the magazine's readership were mostly women workers, the texts reflected and shaped a new urban female identity. In a socialist realist fashion, the characters presented in texts were political role models. This didacticism was also communicated in poems, such as "Die Plig van die Vrou" ["The Duty of the Woman"] by Maggie Meyer published in the March/April 1941 issue of the periodical. The piece is probably the most emblematic work presenting a new woman worker's identity as an evolution of the traditional role. The Afrikaner woman had always had an important duty towards her people: both as the fearless pioneer traversing vast spaces, supporting her husband, and as an industrial worker on strike, opposing exploiting capitalists:

> The duty of the woman on earth is huge
> Her love stronger than death
> Together with her husband she struggles.[15]
> [Die vrou se plig op aard is groot,
> Haar liefde sterker as die dood.
> Saam met haar man die stryd te stry.] (p. 3)

The poem contains some of the recognizable Afrikaner topoi: references to the Voortrekker narrative in which women are modest and unselfish and always a steadfast supportive of their husbands. They sacrifice themselves for their family and their new country, the concepts which are interchangeable:

> Over Drakensberg and plains,
> Through cold nights, hale and rain,
> She has done that for our country,
> And she does not look for fame for it.
> [Oor Drakensberg en vlakte heen,
> Deur koue nagte, hael en reen,
> Dit het sy vir ons land gedoen,
> En sonder om daarmee te roem.]

The mention of the Drakensberg is a direct refence to the figure of Susanna Smit who, as the legend has it, told British official Henry Cloete that she prefers to cross this mountain range barefoot rather than obey British administration. The poem is structured around the parallel between the 19th century struggle for freedom and current struggle for decent wages. The enemy in both cases,

though, is the same: the British, referred to as "capital," because most of the industry employing both Blacks and poor whites were British enterprises. The poem emphasizes that the most recent events of the 1932 strike are part of a longer history of resistance against oppression:

> The freedom did not last long,
> (…)
> In the factory from early till late,
> There you learn to hate capital.
> A joint decision was taken
> In 1932 they go on strike.
> [Die vryheid het nie lank geduur,
> (…)
> In die fabriek van vroeg tot laat,
> Daar leer jy kapitaal te haat.
> Saam word daar 'n besluit gemaak
> In 1932 gaan hul op staak.]

Besides poems, songs written and performed by the Garment Workers also documented working people's social history. Songs are a powerful medium used to incite the feeling of solidarity among workers, in particular when their performance accompanies particular events. GWU songs were usually written to be sung at strikes and rallies; they commented on a situation or demanded action from the public. Since authors frequently used a familiar folk melody and added lyrics conveying a political message, these songs constitute another hybrid genre of working-class literature. The idea of providing a political text to a well-known tune, however, is not unique or new, as it had already been applied in the *Little Red Songbook* of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), published in the United States for the first time in 1908. Similarly, to the I.W.W. songbook, the GWU songs were parodies, marked by wit and sarcasm, designed to poke fun at employers and politicians and to boost morale during strikes. Thanks to a well-known tune, their radical message was made accessible and familiar. The value of such song rested in its belonging to a group, its performative quality and "quotability" (Furey, 2001, p. 55) which encouraged identification with the message. The Garment Workers adapted tunes of traditional Afrikaner folk songs which they and their audience associated with a familiar rural space. For

example, the melody of "Wat maak Oom Kalie daar" ["What is Uncle Kalie Doing There"] was used to create a song to be sung at a strike at a tobacco factory in Rustenburg and appeared in the May/June 1941 issue of the periodical:

> What are the scabs doing there?
> (…) The strikers take a big stick
> And hit the scabs on the head
> O, what are the strikers doing there.
> [Wat maak die brandsiek daar?
> (…) Die stakers vat 'n grote stok
> En slaat die brandsiek oor die kop
> O, wat maak die stakers daar.] (p. 7)

Similarly, "Bobbejaan klim die berg" ["Baboon climbs the mountain"] was adapted for the union's rally on the 18th of March 1941 and published in the March/April 1941 issue of *Klerewerker* (p. 11). The lyrics refer to the current political situation and criticize the Minister of Labour Walter Madeley, and Ivan Walker, Secretary for Labour of the Union of South Africa, for unfair laws against workers. The substitution of the baboon with a politician's name produces a comic, satirical effect:

> Walter Madely climbs the mountain,
> He is our so-called friend, Walter Madeley,
> He is now the boss over the whole working class.
> Yes – Walter Madeley makes a law
> To shut our mouths.
> Farewell democracy now!
> [Walter Madely klim die berg,
> Ons vriend is hy mos kastig, Walter Madeley,
> Is nou baas oor die hele werkersklas.
> Ja – Walter Madeley maak 'n Wet,
> Om ons monde smeer hy vet.
> Vaarwel vir demokrasie nou!]

These kind of lyrics served not only instruction in militant socialism, but a "romantic treatment of class-based identity" (Furey, 2001, p. 56) contained in these songs helped workers reimagine their self-picture and replace the image of victims of an unjust system with that of agents and makers of their own future. The workers regained dignity when singing:

O! do not bow and do not sway
To slavery or fascist law
We should all unite and stand together
Such low wages are no fun.
[O! Moenie buk nie, en moenie buig nie
Vir slawerny of fasiswet
Ons moet verenig, en almal saamspan
Sulke lae lone is geen pret.] (*KW*, March/April, 1941, p. 11)

The Garment Workers' Drama

The GWU was greatly inspired by the Soviet Union. The magazine frequently published articles expressing almost uncritical fascination with this country, aiming to familiarize the South African audience with Soviet trade unionism and at the time of WWII, to manifest the GWU's support for Soviet military efforts. Throughout the 1930s, some key activists were sent on four week visits to the Soviet Union during which they, together with delegates from different countries, were shown a polished version of Soviet reality. On their return, the GW delegates published in the *Garment Worker* magazine elaborate reports where they painted idealized pictures of life in a utopian Soviet Union (e.g. reports by S. Venter or A. Scheepers in a couple of 1939 issues): modern cities, clean factories, happy workers participating in party cultural events, etc. Furthermore, inspired by what they were shown during their stays, the activists set up a cultural section which organized literature discussion club, lectures on socialism, and theatre performances by and for factory workers. The amateur theatre group Eendrag/Unity led by Hester Cornelius was a project of the creation of a truly proletarian theatre, reminiscent of Soviet agitprop brigades of "self-styled educators" (compare Mally, 2000, p. 10), which would deal with real working-class problems, offering an uprooted worker a new identification by becoming a socialist who fights for her rights and a better future (Cornelius in *KW,* May/June, 1941).

Some plays were a reaction to actual events which took place in factories and can be viewed as documents of working-class history. *The trial of the 22* (written between 1936 and 1941) is an example of this sort drama: the plot was inspired by the

hearing of Rose de Freitas and 21 workers of Black & Company in Cape Town, following illegal strikes in 1936 (Sachs, 1957, p. 234). Reflecting the language of the work floor, the play contains passages both in Afrikaans, the language of the worker, and in English, the language of the capitalist. The play is also an attempt to propagate the idea of interracial solidarity among workers:

> Why do you, a white girl, associate with these Blacks?" Sy antwoord: [She answers:]
>
> "Yes, you try this one on me. (...) These coloured workers are no worse than I am, we are all slaves, and, (shouts) we don't want to be slaves any more!"

Most dramatic texts were not published and are preserved as unsigned and undated manuscripts in the archive of the William Cullen Library, Wits University in Johannesburg. The *GW/KW* periodical published shorter dramatical texts, agitprops in Afrikaans (Coetser, 1999, p. 62). These overtly didactic pieces had a form of a dialogue between two workers: the knowledgeable activist and the other one who was sceptical of trade unionism. In *'n Staaltjie uit die lewe van twee klerewerkers* [*An Episode from the Life of Two Garment Workers*] (*KW*, Aug 1939) by Mary Myburgh and Maud Goldwyer, Mary encourages Maud to join the trade union; in "Die Plig van Fabriekverteenwordiger" ["The Duty of Factory Representative"] (*KW* May/Jun 1947) Bettie Botha explains to her colleague Sannie Smith the role of the trade union and how workers' representatives negotiate better working conditions with the factory board.

Works by the Cornelius sisters were created as proletarian drama with an unambiguous aim of awakening class consciousness in the audience. Johanna Cornelius's *Eendrag* [Unity] (undated) demonstrates the power of workers' mass actions against capitalism. The plot presents a story of Bessie, a worker who is unjustly dismissed. Yet the boss agrees to employ her again when other factory workers threaten to start a strike. *Slavin van Suid-Afrika* [*Slave-Woman of South Africa*] written jointly by the sisters (performed in 1941) presents three women workers who, after a tiring day of work, decide to voice their demands to the exploiting capitalists and demonstrate the socialist solidarity between the farmers and workers: land for poor landless farmers, higher wages

and decent housing for workers. One of the workers, Anna, in calling other workers to join a protest march refers directly to the Afrikaner Voortrekker imagery: "Come follow in the footsteps of the Voortrekkerwomen (…). Co-workers let's come and organise a march of women and children through the streets of our city and demand a better life for every man, woman and child! ["Kom ons volg die voetstappe van die Voortrekkervrou (…) Medewerkers kom ons organiseer 'n optog van vrouens en kinders deur die strate van ons stad en ons eis 'n beter lewe vir elke man, vrou en kind!"].

Die Offerande, the longest Afrikaans drama published in its entirety in *Klerewerker* in 1942 also relies on Afrikaner cultural references which it shares with the middle-class farm novel but combines them with elements of socialist realism. The play contrasts the threatening city space with the farm and offers an array of characters representative of various role models. On the one hand, there are conservative figures who fear the change: Oom Kalie Potgieter, a typical Boer attached to his farm and Tant Anne who recalls women in concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War. On the other hand, the play introduces Werda, a resolute socialist organizer and Dannie, a poor farmer's son turned factory worker and unionist.

Oom Kalie's daughter, Lettie, is the positive hero of the play and the story's plot reminds us of the Soviet socialist realist novel master plot.[16] In the beginning, she shares her parents' traditional outlook and wants to spend her whole life on the farm where she was born, declaring: "Groenvlei [the farm] belongs to us. Our family was buried here; it's here that I've seen the light for the first time, and it's here where I'm going to breathe my last breath" ["Groenvlei behoort aan ons. Ons familie lê almal hier begrawe; Hier het ek die eerste lig aanskou en hier gaan ek my laaste asem uitblaas"] (*Die Offerande*, act 1, p. 4). But then she meets Werda who guides her to political maturity as a class-conscious worker. The character of Lettie demonstrates the transition from political immaturity to political awareness and thus becomes a model for the reader to identify with. Moreover, as in a Soviet socialist realist propaganda fashion, the drama closes with an idealistic vision of a future South Africa where farmers and industrial

workers harmoniously cooperate. This vision, as Werda claims, is the reality of the Soviet Union. After her last monologue, all actors join in a song expressing Afrikaner love for their land. Interestingly, the lyrics, starting with the words: "Uit die blou van onse hemel" ["From the blue of our heaven"], were written by C.J. Langenhoven, a well-known poet and a representative of the Afrikaner cultural elite. In this way, the Garment Workers, borrowing a poem from the mainstream middle-class literature, aimed to underline their complex modern identity: their being also an Afrikaner, not only a worker.

Black Workers' Drama

Black working-class theatre in South Africa started in 1979 as a result of a cooperation between the Junction Avenue Theatre and FOSATU (Federation of South African Trade Unions). The Junction Avenue Theatre, which came into being in 1976, was as an initiative of a group of politically engaged white students from the University of Witwatersrand who aimed to create scripts reflecting social and political problems, such as racism, injustice, and exploitation. FOSATU (1979–1985) was a nationwide organisation fostering cooperation between trade unions. This class-based organization with its programmatic non-racial "workerism," was also a force opposing apartheid in the early 1980s (Byrne, Ulrich and Van der Walt, 2017, p. 255). Yet, while the ANC based their struggle on the concept of nation as a territorial multi-class formation, the perspective of FOSATU centred on the class solidarity across racial divides, and saw the unions as part of a global working-class movement with distinct interests and goals of struggle against capitalism and apartheid, differing from those of the elites of any race (Byrne, Ulrich and Van der Walt, 2017, pp. 261–262). FOSATU and the Junction Avenue organized a series of workshops for Johannesburg industrial workers, which resulted in the creation of plays critically portraying the position of Black working-class in labour relationships. These first "workshop plays," "created and performed within the perimeter of working-class leisure time- and space" (Von Kotze, 1984, p. 92), were designed to transmit a call of class solidarity in a form intelligible to worker audiences, part of which was illiterate or semi-literate Black workers.

The first outcome of the cooperation between white cultural workers and Black trade unionists was the play *Security* (1979) which depicted a man who, unable to find job, agrees to becoming a watchdog guarding a factory. The protagonist literally acts as a dog recieving a collar and a kennel and is trained by a middle-class clerk under the supervision his boss Mr Fatman. The play was performed in community halls and churches, usually on weekends, when working-class audience could attend (Von Kotze, 1984, p. 93). *Ilanga Lizophumelo Abasebenzi* [*The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers*], focused on conflict within a factory and *Dikhitsheneng* [*In the Kitchen*], showed the exploitation of domestic workers. After these performances, Astrid von Kotze and Ari Sitas of the Junction Avenue Theatre were asked by the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) in Durban to assist in the creation of a workers' play there. The product of this cooperation was *The Dunlop Play*, whose premiere took place in April 1983 at the annual meeting of the union (Orkin, 1991, p. 192). This performance was attended by about 1000 people and was well received (Von Kotze, 1984, p. 106).

As Von Kotze reports, written scripts provided only suggestions for improvisation because illiterate and semi-literate worker-actors had to rely on memory. Therefore, the play's later versions contained various modifications, suiting occasions of performance (Von Kotze, 1984, p. 107). Various degrees of literacy and the workers' knowledge of English had a big impact on the communication between the workers and the coordinators who assisted in writing the story line. The plot of *The Dunlop Play* presents a life of a worker from his entering employment at the Dunlop plant up until the present, at the same time illuminating the development of the MAWU as part of the labor movement history of South Africa. The challenges in the creation of the play lay also in the fact that the target audience, African workers, were not familiar with certain visual codes of European drama. For instance, to depict the history of the Dunlop trade union movement, the workshop coordinators resorted to the use of a "cranky" (Von Kotze, 1984, pp. 100–101), a device popular with the 1960s and 1970s agitprop groups. The device fulfilled the role of a movie screen and consisted of a roll of paper or canvas with painted images, which was placed in a large frame. Slow unwinding of the roll served

to present lapses of time in a way comprehensible to African audience.

The play recreated events workers could recognize and identify with, such as discussions about the trade unions, doubts concerning union membership. It also contained lighter notes, such as the parody of bosses and supervisors by means of miming and putting on masks, providing comic relief to the plot. Von Kotze stresses the didactic aspect of the workshops, the role which they played in community building and in the creation of working-class awareness. She cites the words of a couple of participants who claim that discussing problems, choosing episodes and designing scenes to be performed, they discovered the sense of common goal, solidarity, and agency (Von Kotze, 1984, p. 109).

Typically, and to a much greater extent than in the case of the white Garment Workers plays, Black workshop plays incorporated songs which served as an introduction and commentary to improvised speeches given by actors. Some songs, employing the call-and-response technique, invited the participation of the audience, reinforcing class solidarity. The inclusion of songs and dance-routines within the plays made drama a more accessible form to an audience not familiar with theatre, whose contact with European culture was mostly conducted through church and mission schools. Even though co-ordinators relied on European models of theatre, the plays which resulted from workshops – according to Von Kotze (1984, p. 110) – enabled workers to find their own ways to incorporate performative aspects (miming, singing, dancing) of their culture which are constituent of their oral storytelling tradition.

Working-Class Identity in Zulu Choral Music

Even though Black working-class theatre came into being quite late, other forms serving expression of Black working-class identity had emerged much earlier. Such forms were songs, some of which were later incorporated into theatrical performances. Songs, chants, traditional poetry mixing the word and music are oral forms that need to be taken into account when approaching the concept of literature in South Africa. It comes as no surprise

that these were the local forms that spontaneously came to reflect the changing identity of Black migrant workers in the industrial centres of Johannesburg and Durban. Male Zulu choral music, so-called *isicathamiya* (see Erlmann, 1987), is a truly hybrid genre, incorporating old tribal forms of consciousness, pan-African ideology, Zulu nationalism and the emerging Black working-class consciousness.

The history of the genre dates back to the late 19th century and the popularity of traveling American minstrel shows in South Africa (Erlmann, 1987, p. 5). Its most dynamic development, however, took place in the 1920s and 1930s during the most rapid industrialisation and intensified migration of Black workers to the cities. It was also when the mission-educated Reuben T. Caluza bridged the gap between American minstrels' style and the then popular ragtime (Erlmann, 1987, p. 7), and wrote songs about hardships workers suffer due to racism on the job. Throughout the 1930s, many bands, such as the Bantu Glee Singers or The Crocodiles, to name just a few, developed Caluza's style. Musically, *isicathamiya* was a product of experimentation of several generations of migrant workers and an amalgam of styles: an adaptation of traditional Zulu wedding songs, Afro-American religious hymns, and western rock and roll.

The hybridity of this genre's musical dimension corresponds with the hybridity of the new urban Black identity it served. Lyrics told stories from the perspective of young men living isolated in factory hostels and separated from families. The songs expressed rural nostalgia juxtaposed with descriptions of the evils of the city, violence and alcohol, an element common in all abovementioned literature of new urban communities, regardless of race. But at the same time the texts accentuated the pride at being an urban citizen, in this way conveying a constructive message: the urban Black person needs to embrace his new identity, because it gives him also the strength to resist oppression, both economic and racial (Erlmann, 1987, p. 4). The genres manifested the ideals of trade unionism, among others. For example, throughout the 1920s music ensembles organizing workers' leisure time, were active among workers of Dunlop in Durban, and had links with the ICU (Industrial and Commercial Workers, a trade union

established in 1919 by Clements Kadalie) until the union's disintegration in the early 1930s.

The popularity of the style did not diminish throughout the 1940s and 1950s. A good example is the song "Yethul' Isiggoko" [Take off your hat] by S. Linda's Evening Birds, which was frequently broadcast by a Durban workers' radio station between 1943 and 1948:

> What is your home name?
> Who is your father?
> Who is your chief?
> Where do you pay your tax?
> What river do you drink?
> We mourn for our country.
> (English transcription after Tracey, 1948)

This song addresses the new complex identity of the urban Black and enumerates components of his hybrid identity referring to his family left in the countryside, to his place in the tribal hierarchy, and to his being a tax-paying citizen. The line "We mourn for our country" can be read as a nostalgic call to the lost past, but also as a protest against the situation in which segregationist legislation deprived Black population of their rights – Black citizens lament the country which has been taken away from them.

Worker Praise Poetry

In the 1980s, the *isicathamiya* musical style was sometimes combined with *izibongo*, Zulu praise poetry. For example, The K-Team ensemble, consisting of the Kellogs' factory workers, performed a song in which they manifested their support for FOSATU leaders:

> Let us thank FOSATU for representing the Black nation.
> We thank you Dlami and Maseko and people who help you.
> Even if it is tough, we will grab the hot iron
> We will persevere till the end. (after Siyabona Fosatu, Shifty Records, Fosatu Worker Choirs, L4.)

Similarly to songs, the *izibongo* was an essential part of the Zulu oral literary tradition. Such working-class poets as Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo (born 1951) and Alfred Temba Qabula (1942–2002),

among others, who were also involved in the production of *The Dunlop Play* (Orkin, 1991, p. 192), turned the *izibongo* into a working-class form of expression. Michael Chapman (1999) argues that the Zulu praise poetry represents a "useable past," since its important quality is malleability: it can be adapted to various circumstances (Chapman, 1999, p. 34). Therefore, its working-class variant links the economic situation of Black workers to the history and culture of this people. Praise poems were originally devoted to mighty Zulu kings and glorified military power and warrior ethos. Their performative character created bonds among community members and gave expression to their feelings of anger, joy, or grief (Chapman, 1999, pp. 35–36). As a form of artistic expression, it "bred and nurtured" amongst "ordinary people" (Sole, 1994, p. 2) and was evolving throughout time, reflecting the history of those people. Already influenced by Christian sermons and gospel singing, in the 1980s it thematized the working-class experience, which can be seen as a following step in the hybridization which had always characterized this form.

The worker *imbongi* (poets), drawing from the old oral tradition, oscillated between "the heroic and the ordinary in an attempt to locate and articulate their identity as an exploited working-class in South Africa" (Mashige, 2006, p. 144). Initially not recognized as artists by South African elite, they offered a democratic art, preforming in trade unions' mass events, such as rallies or funerals of political activists, becoming indispensable at such occasions. It needs to be emphasized that these artists were Black class-conscious poets who performed as representatives of proletariat, addressing Black workers by means of literature accessible even to those whose literacy was very basic. Thematizing the struggle for workers' rights, they fought for the emancipation of the oppressed majority of South Africans (Mashige, 2006, p. 146).

Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo and Alfred Temba Qabula were members of the Metal and Allied Workers Union. Hailing from poor working-class backgrounds, they believed that poetry is public property and should not be reserved to the intellectual elite. Together with other working-class *imbongi* they published their poems in two collections: *Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle* (1986) and *Izinsingisi: Loud Hailer Lives, South African Poetry from Natal* (1988). Ari Sitas of the

Junction Avenue Theatre, who wrote the introduction to the latter collection, noted the syncretism of this poetry and observed that the reader can find references to "the Nguni oral tradition, the Christian Bible, the black-consciousness poetry of the 1970's, jazz poetry just as [one] can pick the rhythms and imagery of street talk" (Sitas, 1988, p. ii). Considering that praise poetry originated as an oral form, a performance which was linked to a particular event, the fact of writing praise poems down is also the hybridizing impact of a European convention.

Mashige (2006) describes the *izibongo* tradition as intricate, with its unique poetic devices, such as imagery, symbolism, satire, and parallelism (2006, p. 145). Unlike traditional praise poetry, "Praise Poem to FOSATU" by Alfred Temba Qabula was initially composed on paper in the early 1980s and delivered in Khosa/Zulu at workers' rallies. In this genuinely hybrid form, the trade union is addressed as the protector of workers in the style chieftains used to be addressed in the *izibongo* of the past. The poem contains a number of apostrophes where FOSATU is personified: it is "the moving forest of Africa," "the hen with wide wings that protects its chickens," "the lion that roared in Pretoria North." The poem connects the past with the present and the spiritual with the material, referring to the ancestors and economic situation of the workers: "Mvelinqangi and the ancestors have answered us, and sent to us FOSATU! (…). Teach us FOSATU about the past organizations before we came." (*FOSATU Worker News*, August 1984, p. 12).

Hlatshwayo's "The Black Mamba Rises" acknowledges working-class history: this poem praises the protests of Dunlop factory workers. The poem employs the animal symbolism which is typical of the *izibongo* tradition. The Black mamba is a symbol of the rise and revival of the Black workers' trade union movement against apartheid and exploitation: the movement seems dead after blows it has received but like the snake being severely hit and deemed dead, it is alive and only gathers strength to strike:

> Never again shall it move,
> Never again shall it revive,
> Never again shall it return,
> Yet it was beginning to tower with rage. (*Black Mamba*, p. 25)

The buffalo is another powerful animal to which the workers' movement is compared. This image is juxtaposed with the "tragi-comic nomenclature" (Mashige, 2006, p. 151) of apartheid: the verbal manifestation of violence which imposed on Black people random identities. This piece also records the changing lot of Black South Africans:

> You black buffalo
> black yet with tasty meat
> The buffalo that turns the
> Foreigners' language into
> Confusion.
> Today you're called a Bantu,
> Tomorrow you're called a Communist
> Sometimes you're called a Native.
> Today again you're called a Foreigner,
> Today again you're called a Terrorist,
> Sometimes you're called a Plural,
> Sometimes you're called an
> Urban PURS [Permanent Urban Residents].
> (*Black Mamba*, p. 27)

Other poems in the collections are a call to unity of workers and wish of peace as such as Hlatshwayo's "We Workers Are a Worried Lot" (*Black Mamba*, 1986, p. 32) or "Workers' Lamentation for Ancient Africa" are a protest against white men exploiting Africa, disowning the county's Black people:

> Hungry lambs
> In an Africa of shrubs
> Craving for shelter
> To protect us from assailing storms
> In an Africa
> Of caves and eroded gorges (*Black Mamba*, p. 29)

When addressing issues of class and race, the poet uses Biblical imagery: victims of exploitation, the workers are depicted as hungry innocent lambs, looking for protection. Workers' *izibongo* is essentially a hybrid form, incorporating Christian vocabulary and teachings because of its authors' exposure to and assimilation of Christianity – an ideology initially alien to them that was brought by whites.

Here, one encounters references to the romantic nostalgia for a mythical Africa. This motif is characteristic for all working-class literature discussed in this contribution – only the source of displaced people's misery is variously defined. In Afrikaans novels and plays depicting the poor whites' situation, British capitalists are, most of all, to blame. Texts describing the lot of Black workers in the "Jim goes to Joburg" convention, written from the middle-class outsider perspective – both by white and Black observers-socialists – always pointed that capitalism in South Africa cannot be separated from its racial aspect. The capitalist represents the colonial power of the white man over Africa, and this power is a destructive intrusion in the life of African communities. The Black oral poetry, created by working-class members, also levels criticism at European countries but underlines that their intrusion in Africa has destroyed not only the agrarian society but also African humanism and dignity (Mashige, 2001, p. 8). Therefore, workers' *izibongo* played an important part as an expression of a recreated dignity of the Black worker who protests against economic exploitation and racial discrimination.

Conclusion

This aim of this overview was to cast some light on the hybrid nature of the concept of South African working-class literature. Considering the multiplicity of forms this literature involves, hybridity seems to be the most prominent unifying quality allowing to capture such diverse texts under one umbrella term of "South African working-class literature." This concept includes works created in various languages, by authors of various ethnicities, from insider and outsider perspectives expressing diverse goals and, finally, having various target audiences. All those texts formed a reaction to industrialization which has dramatically transformed traditional — that is pastoral, rural – Black and white communities of South Africa into urban modern society. Therefore, the recurrent nostalgia for the lost idyllic past invariably appears in texts thematizing the painful encounter of the agrarian population with the destructive capitalism of the city. This theme can be found in English realistic prose telling the "Jim goes to Joburg"

story, in Afrikaans writings about the poor whites' issue, in the creative output of the Garment Workers, and in Black workers' praise poetry of the 1980s.

Moreover, South African working-class literature, documenting the experience of working people can be approached as *histoire croisée*. It crosses in its development the histories of labor migrations within the South of Africa, histories of British intellectuals commenting on South African economic, political and social situation, history of Afrikaner nationalism, and history of emancipation and freedom struggle against the apartheid regime. In the creation of working-class literary forms, both foreign and local discourses, traditions, and forms of artistic expression have merged. Foreign elements included for example the novel form applied to the experience and sensibility of Africans or Soviet socialist realism in La Guma's English novels and in Afrikaans drama by the Garment Workers. Also, traditional forms, such as Zulu oral praise poetry or Afrikaans folk songs were adapted to carry socialist message, and to reinforce the feeling of solidarity among workers. The working-class identity, as manifested in literature, was therefore built not in opposition to local identities but relied on the continuity with a whole range of local traditions.

Endnotes

1. Compare e.g. Nilsson and Lennon, 2016.

2. See discussion by Clarke in vol. 1, 2017.

3. Compare Willemse in Van Coller, 1999; Chapman, 2003; Attwell and Attridge, 2012.

4. For example Ulrich, 2002; Van Holdt, 2002; Buhlungu, 2006; Bendix, 2010; Bezuidehout & Buhlungu, 2011, to mention only a few publications.

5. Witz, 1988; Brink, 1989; Berger, 1992; Hyslop, 1999, and more recent studies, e.g. Lange, 2003 or Kenefick, 2010, are less numerous.

6. See Alex La Guma in discussions by Mkhize 1998, 2010.

7. See Brink,1987, Lourens, 1997, Coetser, 1999, and Vincent, 2000.

8. See Werner and Zimmerman, 2006.

9. Compare Krebs, 1997, p. 428.

10. See the discussion on Schreiner's "glocal" perspective by Stanley, Dampier and Salter, 2010.

11. See Lukacs, 1963, p. 19.

12. Nowadays, the term "kaffir" is conceived of as very offensive. At the beginning of the 20th century and before, however, it was used by whites to denote a Black person and was acceptable in press. See "The Safeguard of Kaffir Socialism" 1908, p. 448.

13. See Mkhize, 1998, p. 24.

14. The term "colored" (also spelled "coloured" in British English) in South Africa customarily refers to a person of mixed origin (European and African, Malayan, Khoisan etc.) and as such distinct from a Black person (a Bantu, i.e. a Zulu, Xhosa etc.). Due to its being the first European settlement in South Africa, Cape Town became a place of contact and a melting pot of ethnicities, and until today has the most numerous population of people described as coloreds. The formally defined and legally sanctioned distinction between Blacks and coloreds dates back to the apartheid area when South African society was divided (in many cases arbitrarily) into four categories: Whites, Blacks, Indians, and Coloreds. For more on the complexity of "coloured identities" see Mohamed Adhikari (2009), *Burdened by Race. Coloured Identities in Southern Africa*. Cape Town: Juta and Company. The term has long functioned as fairly neutral in South African academic discourse, however, recently it started to be perceived as offensive in certain contexts, while some people still voluntarily identify themselves as coloreds; see discussion in South African press, e.g.: Tom Head, "Tony Ehrenreich says 'coloured' is derogatory, should be replaced by 'camisa'". *The South African*, 20 Sept 2018 (https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/tony-ehrenreich-coloured-camisa/), or "Calls for the term 'Coloured' to be abolished", *eNCA*, 7 Oct 2018 (https://www.enca.com/news/calls-term-coloured-be-abolished).

15. All translations from Afrikaans by the author of the contribution.

16. Compare Clark, 2000. See a more extensive discussion of *Die Offerande* in Drwal 2020.

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"A Pole of Differentiation": Pasts and Futures in Irish Working-Class Writing

Michael Pierse

As Declan Kiberd has observed, the Irish working class has often been characterized by its apparent belatedness, forming much more slowly in a less industrialized setting than many of its European neighbors (2017a). This understanding of Irish class dynamics and the concept of "modernization" that subtends it routinely fails, however, to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of national and indeed regional experiences of capitalism. Modernity has many guises. As Breda Gray has written,

> Practices and institutions of modernity such as industrialisation, urbanisation and state craft have different histories, conditions of emergence and effects in different parts of the world (and even in different parts of the same country) so that instead of speaking of modernity, it may be more accurate to speak of multiple modernities […]. The question is how these different constellations of practices and relations to time might be thought in ways that do not constitute some as "belated." (2004: 21)

Understandings of "modernity" and "belatedness" are accompanied, in the Irish case, by curiously persistent denials of the country's class politics. Some in Ireland have even suggested that Irish society never had much of a class structure at all.[1] But recent, more rigorous scholarly analyses have revealed a much more complex picture. Approaches to the history of Irish industrial development and class relations that fail to properly account for its role in the expansion of imperialist and capitalist Britain risk missing the significant part the Irish played in providing labor for

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England as that country emerged, during the nineteenth century, as the primary global manufacturer of goods—earning its reputation as "The Workshop of the World." After all, as David Convery has most recently pointed out, the role of domestic Irish workers in feeding the empire, through their work in agriculture, distribution and associated industries, was significant from before the Act of Union in 1800 and continued to be so in the centuries that followed.[2] Additionally, despite longstanding romantic views of the Irish countryside in popular culture, Ireland's northeast has had a long history of intense industrialisation in shipping, engineering, rope-works, linen and other industries. As migrants, the Irish were equally vital in British and American industrial development, as navvies, laborers, nurses, servants and workers in a range of areas in the bustling trans-Atlantic economies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In British working-class life, the Irish also provided a number of political activists and proletarian leaders from the Chartist movement on, as well as some of the most memorable proletarian writing, including Patrick MacGill's *Children of the Dead End* (1914), Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) and James Hanley's *They Furys* (1935). Seán Ó Cualáin's television documentary *Lón sa Spéir* (2013) and Pavel Barter's Newstalk broadcast *The Sandhogs* (2015) have recently drawn attention to the often hazardous work carried out by twentieth-century Irish emigrants. For example, Ó Cualáin's documentary found that some of the men in one of New York's most iconic twentieth-century photographs, Charles C. Ebbets' "Lunch atop a Skyscraper" (1932), were Irish-speaking immigrants from rural county Galway. These men atop a skyscraper may not have seen a building larger than their local church before they left home, and their precariously perched figures on a beam above the rapidly developing cityscape are an evocative reminder of the shock of displacement common to many Irish emigrants. They joined millions more who, across the last two centuries, flocked east and west (and south, to Australasia, many due to penal transportation) as part of a large, mobile and often vulnerable working class. These emigrants didn't simply leave, of course, but retained relationships with Ireland that compel us, amongst other things, to consider the class structure of Irish experience in a complex, connected, international context.

Ireland, then, if "often thought of as a classless society" (Share, Tovey, and Corcoran 2007, p. 170), was very much part of the most advanced experiences of working-class life in the last two centuries. "All of Ireland until 1922 was an integral part of the United Kingdom (UK) and, as such, was therefore not a 'backward' society any more than a primarily agricultural part of England was" (Convery, 2017, p. 52). From this perspective, "Ireland had a role as part of the UK economy": "There has been some debate about how much this role was engineered, or whether it was accidental, but nonetheless, Ireland was useful to British industry as a source of food and of cheap labour" (Ibid.). Some of the Irish working class has been urban and industrial over the past two centuries and more; much of it has also comprised of rural, often insecure and temporary wage labor. Since the middle of the twentieth century, as Ireland's economy rapidly changed, labor has been increasingly in technological and services sectors, while women since the 1960s have increasingly worked outside the home. However, during the 1950s, 1980s and in the decade following the economic crash of 2007, large-scale emigration returned in waves. For these reasons, despite the temptations of seemingly straightforward comparisons, the Irish working class cannot be characterised in the same way as that class on its neighboring island. Instead, the Irish working class must be viewed in relationship with that island, colonialism, and emigration, and with regard to the particularities of class in other common destinations for Irish workers.

The Irish working class has also been integral to the politics of decolonization, some of its most recognized intellectuals and writers – James Connolly, Peadar O'Donnell, Seán O'Casey, Frank O'Connor, Brendan Behan, Bobby Sands and Gerry Adams, for example – being active in decolonizing revolutionary movements. Irish workers have been prominent in major labor movements and left-wing politics in the countries to which the millions of them flocked: in the Chartists, Bronterre O'Brien and Feargus O'Connor; in the USA, Mary "Mother Jones" Harris and, as a daughter of Irish immigrants and acutely conscious of her country's legacy of rebellion, Elizabeth Gurley-Flynn. Joan Allen notes that by "the early years of the twentieth century a significant

percentage of Irish workers in Britain came to privilege their proletarian solidarities at the local level and to regard the nascent Labour Party as best positioned to defend their day-to-day interests" (Marley, p. 35). As Ruth Dudley Edwards and Bridget Hourican (2005, p. 140) note, the Irish in Britain maintained a "long-standing antipathy to the Conservative Party" and "for class reasons, there has been a disproportionate number of Labour politicians of Irish descent, including around a third of Labour MPs in the late 1960s and, recently, two Labour prime ministers, James Callaghan and Tony Blair." Tim Pat Coogan (2000, p. 312) points to John J. Sweeney's observation that in the USA "most trade union leaders at the turn of the [twentieth] century were Irish"; Coogan proceeds to enumerate some of those various leaders "taken from a list which, if given in full, would fill this page." Much later, as conflict raged in the north of Ireland, Irish organized labor would be a key contributor to the republican struggle, raising finances for the Irish-American (Irish) republican support organization Noraid from the 1970s on (Hanley, 2004, p. 4). As this suggests, not only was the Irish working class integral to trans-Atlantic capitalism over the past century, its worker emigrants and their descendants continued to exert considerable influence on life in "The Old Country". Irish working-class experience, then, is complex and multi-faceted, and exceptionally globalized.

The tendency to underplay class in Irish life has at least something to do with the emphasis on "horizontal comradeships" (Anderson, 1991, p. 7) that emerged running up to and following Ireland's Revolutionary Period (1913–2023) and the partition of the island of Ireland, after which the foundation of two deeply problematic and conflict-ridden states followed. The Free State, later Republic of Ireland, in separating from the British Empire and founding a polity said to be based on a vision of "cherish[ing] all of the children of the nation equally" (the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 1916) had a vested interest, like all post-independence former colonies, in underplaying the extent to which it was in fact riven with class distinctions. As Aaron Kelly (2008, p. 84) argues, "Irish nationalism conceived of itself as liberating resistance to British law and power but yet, when afforded its own state and political institutions, served to reterritorialize

identity, to move from being minor to being dominant or major in its own (repressive) state." The Catholic working class north of the Irish border was subject to unionist supremacist misrule in the new Northern Ireland, while the working class south of the border was compelled to identify with the horizontal comradeship of the state at the expense of its own class interests. In the Irish Free State, there was a "long-standing nationalist desire to sub-ordinate divisive party and class concerns to the national interest" (Farrell, 2017, p. 70). In the North, unionism bound the Protestant working class to a vision of "Northern Irish," or simply British, nationalism, which had the effect of privileging Protestant above Catholic workers through pervasive discriminatory practices, thereby keeping many poorer Protestants firmly loyal to unionist elites within the statelet. The Irish "Free State," then Republic, was founded on utopian promises of fraternity and equality and on the enormous sacrifices and martyrdom of revolutionaries whose august words would come back to haunt the "free" polity that their struggle produced. Northern Ireland, as a contrived, gerrymandered, sectarian statelet, designed to maintain a planter-descended elite at the expense of an oppressed Catholic minority, germinated the seeds of injustice from which the conflict known as the "Troubles" (1969–1998) would spring.[3] In both jurisdictions, working-class writers most often set themselves against these states' troubling inequalities, though most often in a complicated and sometimes conflicted relationship with the nationalisms that subtended them. Respective hegemonies emphasized national imaginaries in which class, gender, and sectarian inequalities were troubling and inconvenient realities.

As Convery has shown, the problematic discrepancies of modernization theory – of applying a model of class and industrialization more appropriate to centers of capitalist and imperialist power than to "peripheral" countries like Ireland – combined with Ireland's postcolonial experience, have diminished the appreciation of class consciousness and narratives of working-class life. Irish working-class writers have produced some of the most stinging condemnations of power and privilege on the island, both before and after the country's achievement of partial freedom from British rule, and they have produced some of Ireland's

most internationally recognized literature. The writing that has emerged from, or represents, the Irish working class, in ballads, fiction, poetry, drama, film, life-writing, Irish-language writing and other forms – most recently, for example, rap-poetry – has been far more extensive than previously acknowledged in scholarship. Recent developments in the historiography of the Irish working class and the study of its representation and cultural production, though, are transforming the terrain of Irish studies itself, suggesting the urgency of Irish working-class studies as a serious and important academic specialism. Dermot Bolger, in his review of Cambridge University Press's recent *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* (2018), observed how its focus "restor[es] a lot of these voices and narratives to their rightful context within Ireland's literature" (Bolger, 2018). Furthermore, developments in public history, grassroots local historical initiatives and trade union and other organizational support for the curation and celebration of Irish working-class history and writing, illustrate the growing importance of this work in terms of social commitment and political development; among them, the openings of the Irish Centre for the Histories of Labour and Class at National University of Ireland Galway in 2013 and the James Connolly Centre in Belfast in 2019 suggest renewed vitality in the broader field. While it would not be possible, in such a relatively short essay, to survey in depth the many texts unearthed and explored in recent research on Irish working-class writing, the following will provide a brief introduction to this growing area of inquiry. This essay will consider some of its major themes and potential future trajectories, suggesting the extent to which this area requires an extensively international as well as national framing.

Academic Framing of Irish Working-Class Writing

Irish working-class writing sustains common themes and strategies of engagement with the politics of class in Ireland and beyond, though as I have noted elsewhere (Pierse, 2017, pp. 1–36), until recently this writing has received less scholarly attention than it merits, most particularly *as* working-class writing. The Irish working-class writer has a lot to offer, not only in terms of our

understanding of Irish society and culture but also our understanding of Britain in particular. In an essay for *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel* (2009), for example, John Fordham notices how

> It is no coincidence that the two most significant working-class literary voices of the early century were Irish – Patrick MacGill, born into the Donegal peasantry in 1890; Robert Tressell (Robert Noonan) into "middle-class" Dublin in 1869 – because it is their combination of class and diasporic consciousness that enables their texts to adopt a unique narrative position: one that observes the changing nature of labor from both within and beyond the laboring class. The formal implication for such writing is that, as distinct from classic English realism, it has no affirming tendency toward "settlement and stability," but, as Terry Eagleton suggests, is characterized by strategies of irresolution that "cut against the grain of the fiction itself." (2009: 132–133)

Fordham rightly suggests that both formal and thematic correspondences between Tressell and MacGill, the "most significant working-class literary voices of the early century," provide fascinating historical and cultural insights (ibid.). But in John Wilson Foster's collection, *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (2006), MacGill is referred to only fleetingly, Tressell not at all. Another of those Irish emigrants who joined the working class elsewhere – in his case, in South Africa and then England – Tressell's posthumous achievements are extraordinary, though few have placed him beside Irish working-class writers of his times (Sean O'Casey, James Stephens, and MacGill) as part of a specifically Irish literary trend. There are many more Irish writers who too have written about working-class experience and who have, until recently, not been thought of in terms of a tradition of worker writing. In 1984, Ruth Sherry could write that "the concept of Irish working-class writing is not a well-established one" (Sherry, 1984: 111); three decades on, even after her article identified a host of writers in this category, very few scholars were writing about Irish working-class writers. Mary McGlynn's *Narratives of Class in New Irish and Scottish Literature* (2008), my own *Writing Ireland's Working Class: Dublin after O'Casey* (2011) and Aaron Kelly's 2013 special issue of the *Irish Review* on "Cultures of Class" in Ireland are among the very few exceptions

in this regard. Ray Ryan's decision to commission *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* (2017), in which scholars discuss further some of the issues mentioned here, was partly prompted by the publisher's commissioning of volumes of scholarship on British and American working-class literature and partly also by Ryan's own knowledge of the scarcity of academic research on this subject. Extraordinarily, while monographs have appeared on prominent Irish working-class writers such as O'Casey, Frank O'Connor, Brendan Behan, Sam Thompson, Christy Brown, Stewart Parker, Roddy Doyle, and Christina Reid, studies have rarely linked them, in any depth, in terms of one of the fundamentally formative aspects of their upbringings and great preoccupations of their works: class. *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* has both partially addressed this neglect and opened up a range of possibilities for renewed exploration. Much of the following is indebted to what the scholars who contributed to that volume have achieved.

"A Land in Which No Justice to be Done to the Poor!": Early Writers

The poor in Ireland's seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries are often characterised *en masse* as "peasantry," distinct from a properly constituted "working class." But this distinction is problematic, both in terms of categorising labor within a system of agrarian capitalism and in terms of its frequent failure to acknowledge the porosity between peasant and proletarian. For example, Christopher J.V. Loughlin (2017, p. 62) asks, to what extent were the secretive agrarian combinations of eighteenth-century Ireland "a form of agricultural trade unionism"? Known as "Whiteboyism," or *na buachaillí bána*, these often violent organisations defended subsistence farmers against exploitative colonial practices, bringing together some of the poorest people in Ireland at that time. As Michael A. Gordon (2012, p. 190) argues, trade unions "had much in common with Whiteboy associations [… which] included mostly small tenants and cottiers whose rent was paid from wages they earned as labourers." This is not to conflate the two, but rather to suggest a porosity between them. As the Irish economy advanced to meet England's needs, laborers landed

or landless shared a great deal in common. In terms of literature, the rural laboring poet is particularly compelling figure in the emerging colonial capitalism of a country in which formerly elite Gaelic aesthetes were thrown down the social order. As Ireland was conquered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Irish-language poetry – which had till then provided many of its finest practitioners with an elevated status in the clan system – lost much of its prestige. Poets, or *filí*, formerly patronized by Gaelic elites, found themselves toppled from their lofty station, many of them and their children becoming laborers. One of them, Aodhagán ó Rathaille (1670–1726), would lament the upending of traditional order, through which, he opined, the poor were badly treated:

> Tír gan chomhthrom do bhochtaibh le déanamh!
> […]
> Fán smacht nahmhad is amhas is méirleach.
>
> *A land in which no justice to be done to the poor!*
> *[…]*
> *Beneath the tyranny of enemies and mercenaries and robbers.*[4]
> (Crowley, 2000, pp. 105–106)

One of the most globally recognised eighteenth-century satires on the treatment of the poor originates in the political climate Ó Rathaille described. Jonathan Swift's essay, *A Modest Proposal for preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burthen to their Parents or Country, and for making them Beneficial to the Publick* (1729), excoriated both the colonial and the class politics of those eager to lay the blame for Irish poverty on the Irish poor themselves. Swift's "proposal," a parody of the supercilious rationalisations of political economy, mockingly recommends that the poor in Ireland might reasonably be persuaded to sell their children to English elites as food. As Ireland indeed increasingly fed the English economy with physical labor and food, formal education was limited to the Protestant Church of Ireland by the Penal Laws, and children, particularly girls and Catholics, were often considered more usefully employed in labor than in schools. Few were able to write of their own experiences, and as Andrew Carpenter notes, "any assessment of the activities of these Irish working or labouring classes before 1800 is hampered by the fact that the sources of information about most of those who lived on

the lowest rungs of society are so meagre" (2017, p. 73). However, he also observes how "modern Irish working-class consciousness – its traditions, its folk-culture and its sense of its place in the world – derives, at least in part, from perceptions of what life was like for the underdog in eighteenth-century Ireland" (Ibid.).

Some of the accounts of class consciousness that survive from pre-Great Famine (1845–1849) Ireland are those of the much-abused landless laborer, or *spailpín*, described by the Devon Commissioners of 1843 as the most "wretched of the many wretched classes in Ireland" (Ó hAllmhuráin, 1999, p. 115). Some of these, like Ó Rathaille, were formerly revered *filí* (poets) from the vaunted *aos dána* (intellectual class) of Gaelic Ireland, for whom the shame of poverty was often more of a misery than its material privations; as one put it, '"ní hé an bochtanas is measa / ach an tarscaine a leanann é" ("it is not poverty that is the worst thing, but the insult that follows it" (Kiberd, 2017b, pp. 13–14).[5] Kiberd compares these "ruined bards of the lost Gaelic order" to Beckett's wise tramps in *Waiting for Godot* (1953); their "arduous and mandarin training [as poets] left them ill-equipped for a new mercantile world" (Ibid, p. 13). In one well-known poem of unknown authorship and date, though probably late-eighteenth century, "An Spailpín Fánach" ("The Wandering Labourer"), a Kerry-born *spailpín* records the humiliation of hiring fairs, where these laborers would seek employment:

> Go deo deo arís ní raghad go Caiseal
> Ag díol ná ag reic mo shláinte,
> Ná ar mhargadh na saoirse im' shuí cois balla
> Im' scaoinse ar leaththaoibh sráide –
> Bodairí na tíre ag tíocht ar a gcapaill
> Dá fhiafraí an bhfuilim hírálta.
> O! Téanam chun siúil, tá an cúrsa fada;
> Seo ar siúl an spaipín fánach.
>
> *I'll never again go to Cashel*
> *Selling and bartering my health,*
> *Nor at hiring fair sit down against a wall*
> *Nor hang about the street –*
> *The boors of the district coming on their horses*
> *Asking if I'm hired.*

O! Let's make a start, the journey is long
It's off with the wandering labourer.[6]

As Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin notes, the *spailpín* would also have his plight memorialised in the song "Caoineadh an Spailpín" ("Lament for the Spailpín"), and in other songs such as "A Spailpín, a Rúin" and "Peigín is Peadar" (2016, p. 129). Eighteenth and nineteenth-century Irish poetry of the poor is collected in Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella's *An Duanaire 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981). The sense of dispossession reflected in the collection's title indicates the class antagonisms that emerged among poets fallen on hard times. As Micheál Ó hAodha observes, "Many anecdotes relating to the Travelling poet/tradesmen such as the legendary poet/mason Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin depict the poet/craftsman engaged in verbal duels with priests, often in response to their 'flexible' working hours" (Ó hAodha, 128).

Carpenter illustrates that so much of the representation of the poor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is in the form of lampooning or vilification. The Irish poor appear as comic (ab)users of the English language in mid-to-late seventeenth century poems written for the merriment of the English in Ireland (see Carpenter, 2017, p. 83); they appear also at this time in sensationalist tales about alleged criminals facing execution (ibid., pp. 78–9). Due to the illiteracy of most of the Irish working class at this time, we have little of their self-expression in English poetry and prose. But there are some, like Drogheda bricklayer Henry Jones (1721–1770), or Kilkenny housemaid Ellen Taylor (unknown b. and d. dates; eighteenth to early nineteenth century), who rose socially with their poetry and were marvelled at by their social "betters," at least in part due to a form of primitivist fascination. As Carpenter notes, however, "there was virtually no leisure time for those who could work so that it is not surprising to find little writing that one can say was actually the work of members of the labouring class in seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Ireland" (2017, p. 74).

The poor Irish were subject, then, to simultaneous and interlinking colonial and class snobberies. "One way of assuaging one's fear of an opponent is by satirising or burlesquing him to make him look ridiculous" (ibid., p. 75), and this kind of lampooning

was deployed *ad nauseam* to the Irish poor, notably in the form of the comic stage-Irish buffoon, which from the nineteenth century became "a staple of music hall entertainments and melodrama" (Maureen Waters, 1984, p. 41), and which the Irish Literary Revival later that century would set itself explicitly against.[7] Indeed, the legacies of stage Irishry, as Liz Curtis (1983) has shown, were still to be seen in English political cartooning and stereotypes that persisted into late twentieth-century British press and comedy. John Hill (1987) and Martin McLoone (2000), in relation to film, and Patrick Magee (2001), in relation to fiction, have also noted how the recent north of Ireland "Troubles" ramped up popular cultural imagery of the Irish as simian. From the earliest, depictions of the Irish poor as either laughable buffoons or dangerous brutes – or some combination of both – served both comic and political purposes. Mid-to-late seventeenth-century long poems that circulated in elite English circles in Restoration Dublin ridiculed the Irish for their apparently risible use of English (Carpenter, 2017, p. 75), reinforcing the sense of racial superiority that the colonial project required. Ireland's oral tradition, along with its language barrier, mean that we are left with few texts of the poor Irish person's reply to such slurs.

Carpenter does find a more sympathetic depiction of the Irish worker in early eighteen-century writing by Swift, such as his "A Pastoral Dialogue" (1733) and *A Dialogue in Hybernian Stile* (c. 1735). But it is telling that so much of what remains of the apparent words of the poor at this time is in relation to alleged criminality.[8] It is often in the "dying words" of apparent criminals, sentenced to death by hanging, that narratives of the eighteenth-century Irish worker appear, their "stories" fabricated by others for financial gain. As Carpenter notes, these accounts do nonetheless provide some (dubious) insights into the experiences of workers at the time, not least how easily they might fall afoul of the law. One of those he cites, Sisly Burke, was hanged at the age of twenty-six years for allegedly stealing clothes (Carpenter, 2017, pp. 78–79).[9]

We know less of what the significant population of Irish soldiers in the British army wrote during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Irish enlisted significantly in the British army,

particularly prior to the Great Famine, when they were nearly one third of the population of the United Kingdom but constituted more than 40 per cent of the military's manpower (Nelson, 2012, p. 123). This significant working class has not produced any literature I am aware of, though it appears, for example, in the recent Lance Daly film, *Black 47* (2018), in which a fictional returned Irish soldier goes on a rampage against British elites when he discovers the cataclysmic effects of the famine at home. The avenging soldier now refuses to speak English, reverting to the Irish language as a portent of the sharply nationalist turn of the following seven decades that led to partial independence in 1922. But this romanticised version of Irish soldiers serving the Empire is hardly representative.

As with much of Europe and America, from the late nineteenth-century labor politics in Ireland began to grow, and the representation of Irish workers and the poor grew apace too. Working-class characters would make their way into writings by some of Ireland's most well-known writers: Dion Boucicault, W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge and G.B. Shaw, all hailing from the middle and upper classes, would depict aspects of workers' lives. In Boucicault's drama, the experiences of class and emigration are central to the crafting of his dramatic productions, not merely in terms of theme but also audience. When his "peasant girl," Eily, "a vulgar barefooted beggar" in his melodrama *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), tries to rid herself of her dialect to improve her social position, learning that she must stop to "spake like the poor people" and must now be "getting' clane of the brogue, and learnin' to do nothing" (Boucicault, n.d. (188?), p. 8), the conflation of idleness and social mobility no doubt speaks to class consciousness in his audiences at home and abroad. When his picaresque, loveable-rogue, stage Irishman, Conn, in *The Shaughraun* (1874), observes that "a poor man that spoorts the sowl of a gentleman is called a blackguard" (Boucicault, n.d. (187?), p. 7), there is a more caustic commentary on the demonization of the poor. Eily is the daughter of a ropemaker, more clearly working class, while Conn is a vagabond and more difficult to categorise. But in both cases, Boucicault's success with, and consciousness of, his Irish-American audiences, who were likely to find affinities with the poor characters on

stage, is evident. They had no doubt experienced those class inequalities at home and now, in other ways, in the New World. Boucicault's success in Ireland, Britain and America indicates a complex relation of cultural production and class, as befits a first-world working-class with, to adopt a phrase of Luke Gibbons', a "third world memory" (1998, p. 27). Notably, after a New York performance of *The Colleen Bawn*, Boucicault would remind his audience "that Irishmen do most of the hard work in this country—I mean real, hard, manual labour" (Rohs, 94). Melodramas such as Boucicault's were also popular with Irish working-class theatregoers in London and at home.[10]

But other forms of cultural transmission were more common over the centuries in Irish working-class culture. Song was extremely important in the repertoire of a postcolonial working class with limited literacy and few educational opportunities. As John Moulden shows, a great deal of what survives of the Irish workers' popular imaginary in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is stored in ballads and broadsides, which could "express the lives of the people more fully than other kinds of record" (Moulden, 2017, p. 105). Folk song was a relatively fluid, democratic, responsive form of art, through which grievances could be aired, shared, and then adapted according to particularities of political context, time and place. In this sense, it was also a collaborative, bottom-up form—a route through which those with limited education, light and leisure could articulate thoughts and communalise experiences. As Moulden shows, many of these songs shared similarly counter-cultural sentiments, and some of those who sang them learned to read and write from folk songs that were written down (Moulden, 2017, p. 104). Given how easy they were to disseminate and hide, folk songs also made space for more seditious ideas. Moulden also emphasises the transnationality of the form, which could be modified from place to place with a central grievance or concern remaining much the same—illustrating how much the poor of different nations held in common. Folk song in Ireland enjoyed a revival in 1960s and 1970s and remains a popular current in working-class life. It was integral to the civil rights and separatist movements that emerged in the 1960s, particularly in urban working-class communities in Belfast and Derry.

Working-class writers such as Brendan Behan and Patrick Galvin were fascinated by folk ballads. Sometimes these ballads appear in other forms of literature, for example in Behan's play *The Hostage* (1958) or in Ken Harmon's play *Done Up Like a Kipper* (2002), the latter ending with an African newcomer to Ireland singing, in a somewhat twee nod to social inclusion, "Dublin in the Rare Oul Times" (p. 86). Tony Murray (2012, p. 52) notes another example: a "semi-legendary figure on the building sites of London," Irishman The Horse McGurk, who appears in Dominic Behan's 1965 ballad "Building Up and Tearing England Down," also makes an appearance in Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke's photography and novel collaboration (or "photographic novel"), *I Could Read the Sky* (1998). Folk songs are well placed to travel between places and across artistic forms. They also are the form most likely to be part of the vernacular creativity – "the doings and sayings of everyday life" (Hawkins, 2017: 12) – of the Irish working class. Brendan Behan's song "The Auld Triangle" (1954), for example, is undoubtedly more familiar to working-class people than is his play *The Quare Fellow*, in which the song was first performed.

All of these forms will bear the markers of historiographical selectivity and silencing. A very obvious example is Irish broadcaster Radio Teilifís Éireann's decision to ban ballad group The Dubliners' 'Seven Drunken Nights' in 1967, despite its achievement of a number five ranking in the British singles' charts that year. But it is important not to underestimate the extent to which worker-writers were capable of responding to inhospitable circumstances, both ideological and material. For example, Ireland's linen industry progressed rapidly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and with it a new kind of writer. Weavers in this period became associated with poetry, especially in Ulster, which was influenced by the work of Robert Burns and by changing industrial circumstances. As Frank Ferguson (2008, p. 17) explains, "numerous coinciding factors – economic, social, political and cultural – are responsible for lower-class Presbyterians, whose caste had been mocked much earlier in the century, gaining a voice as poets in the late eighteenth century." The initially home-based linen industry entailed flax spinning and linen

weaving in cottages. This rapidly developed in the north of Ireland during the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, though the industry began to move into mills from the 1820s.[11] Jane Gray considers how the poetry provides an insight into the plebeian culture of the period. This culture, before the arrival of mills, is distinguished by fairs, revelry and amusements such as card-playing, cockfighting and bullbaiting, but religious influences and industrialisation led to these pursuits falling into abeyance: "The advent of the factory was therefore accompanied by the suppression of plebeian culture" (Gray, 1996, p. 48). Gray notes how weaver poetry would reflect this transformation, rhyming weaver James Orr's poem "Ballycarry Fair" (1804) celebrating how the fair's "bargains, courtships, toasts, huzzas, / Combine in the blythe disorder, O!"; his "Address to Beer" (1809), however, paradoxically (and apparently without irony) commends beer's healthy and moderating influence in a place where whiskey is the preferred alcoholic drink: "Renown'd Reformer! Thou has freed / Frae suffrin's tragic, / Unnumber'd fools, wha turn'd their head / Wi' Whiskey's magic" (qtd. in ibid, pp. 49–51). As Ferguson shows, far from being simply derivative of the Scots vernacular poetry, as some have assumed, Ireland's rhyming weavers developed styles and themes of their own (Ferguson, 2008, pp. 16–19). Undoubtedly, the monotony of the work of spinning and weaving itself facilitated flights of imagination and impelled self-expression. Even as the weaving became increasingly intensive, the writing – noteworthy for its embrace of Ulster Scots dialect – persisted. Ferguson describes the process of "a manifesto of linguistic and class aesthetics being defined" (2017, p. 92) as these writers cultivated and shared commonalities of ideology, philosophy and form, while vying with previous forms. This Scots-Irish tradition was closely related to the industrial waxings and wanings of Ireland's traditionally most dynamic manufacturing region. As Ferguson notes of the nineteenth century Ballymena poet, David Herbison, for example, his poems would "accentuate the rage felt against the industrial processes and consumerism of mid-nineteenth century Antrim" (2017, p. 97):

> Oh had I the power the past to restore,
> The reel wad still crack, and the spinning-wheel
> snore,

Mill-yarn wad sink doun as it never had been,
Trade flourish as fair as it ever was seen;
Distress and oppression flee far frae our view,
Our hamlets rejoice and their beauties renew. (Qtd. in ibid.)

A later poet of the northern Irish left, John Hewitt, did much to help revive these rhyming weavers, who had been neglected partly due to their perceived low level of prestige. This neglect has since been significantly remedied by Ferguson's *Ulster Scots Writing: An Anthology* (2008). The sectarian character of Irish politics has also no doubt impeded the appreciation of weaver and Ulster Scots poetry which is mostly (though not exclusively) associated with northern Protestants.

Writing across Borders: Emigration and International Contexts

The shock of emigration from mainly rural Ireland (more lived in rural rather than urban Ireland until the early 1970s)[12] to global urban centers of capitalist development is crystalized in pioneering Irish poet Joseph Campbell's[13] plaintive "The Newspaper-Seller" (1911), where an Irish emigrant worker in New York bemoans his estrangement from his children and indeed from home, yet finds new affinities there too:

In a bakehouse. He was German, sir,
The boss; and Germans, mostly, mixed the dough,
And watched the fires. That's how I came to know
The Deutsch. I speak it better than I used to do
The Gaelic at home. (Gardiner, 181)

The poem speaks to a people stripped of their language and traditions, cast adrift by empire and poverty, surviving in the New World. Just as Irish trade unionist and republican-socialist rebel James Connolly learned Italian to ply his trade unionism to New York's workers in the early 1900s, Campbell's newspaper seller learns German to succeed at his trade. The gulf between the two, though – one isolated and losing his past, the other deeply connected to Ireland and its early twentieth-century politics of cultural revival – captures something of the diversity of Irish emigrant experience, of the varied experiences of survivors and agitators. And many fall into both—or neither—category.

The Irish working class abroad has a grim history of reactionary politics, but it has an extraordinary history of trade unionism and radicalism too.[14] It would be too much to present left-radicalism as characteristic of Irish working-class experience: so much of Irish emigrant mythology, particularly in America, has been of accommodation to an "American Dream" narrative of social mobility and achievement (see Lee, 2016). As Hallissy and Lutz (2017) convey, Irish working-class writers in America had very mixed responses to capitalism. In nineteenth and twentieth-century Irish-American fiction, from Mary Anne Madden-Sadlier to Colum McCann, they discover a wide range of approaches to the predicament of Ireland's uprooted new arrivals. For example, in the short stories of James William Sullivan's *Tenement Tales of New York* (1895), they note the author's sympathy with those poor Irish who fall into crime. One of them, "Slob Murphy" – a child who ends up a thieving street urchin – is depicted as a victim of social circumstance rather than a mere disruptor of the social order. Sullivan portrays the harshness and loneliness of Slob's short life and death, for example, when a friend discovers that Slob has died in an accident:

> In the upper hallway stood little Johnny McNaughtally. He said
> "How's Slob?"
> "He is dead."
> "Wot's dey a-going to do wit' his old cloze?"
> (Sullivan, n.d. [1895], p. 23)

In the story, life is precarious and there is little time for sentiment. Other writers Hallissy and Lutz explore include Finley Peter Dunne, Sarah Orne Jewett, William Kennedy, James T. Farrell, Mary Anne Madden Sadlier, Betty Smith and Maeve Brennan. In Brennan, Hallissy and Lutz find stories of female Irish emigrants' subjection to the same sexist constraints in the "New World" that they suffered in the old. Despite the tens of millions who claim Irish heritage in the USA, rarely is this diasporic literature discussed in terms of its relationship with Irish literature at home, or as integral to a broader history of Irish cultural experience. As Mary Burston (2009, p. 64) pertinently argues in her discussion of Irish-Australian women's narratives:

> The emigrant experience cannot be reduced to a physical crossing over of national boundaries or an unloading of cultural baggage when emigrants literally step on to new shores to be re-clothed in the habits of settlement. Emigration is not an eradication of identity. Notions of home remain embedded in cultural and geographic spaces as well as in memory, and in constructs of self-identity and in metaphorical and allegorical landscapes that can be traced to the memories of homeplace.

Hallissy and Lutz are the first to bring Irish-American worker writing into relation with other Irish working-class literature, providing salutary opportunities to consider how the Irish working class retained, transformed or indeed jettisoned aspects of its pre-emigration cultures and experiences, and how their experiences may have inflected Irish culture at home. Peter Kuch's recent research paves a path for parallel developments in research on Australasian-Irish working-class writing. Across a range of writers, Kuch observes a class consciousness that intersects with the outsider status of the migrant, and a concomitant "aspirational, class-conscious respect for education" and "palpable sense in which religion and inherited traditions – whether oral, historical, political, literary or folkloristic – invariably constructed the Irish as 'other'" (2017, p. 241). This recent research by Kuch, Hallissy and Lutz, is the first to interrogate such class, colonial and diasporic themes in proletarian Irish-American and Irish-Australasian emigrant writing, to my knowledge; the still relatively weak foothold of these areas in Irish studies is noteworthy.

Less understandable is the lack of attention given by scholars to Irish working-class writing in Britain. Given Britain's proximity, it is odd that emigrant and diasporic Irish-British literature rarely gets the scrutiny it deserves. Tony Murray and Liam Harte, in academic studies and anthologies, have produced some of the most noteworthy recent research. Harte describes his anthology, *The Literature of the Irish in Britain, Autobiography and Memoir 1725–2001* (2009), as being much characterized by writing of the margins and working class: "In many respects, this is a literature of outsiderness and exclusion, not only because of the writers' exilic status and the themes of struggle and alienation their work encodes, but also because of the sizeable number of plebeian

worker-writers encompassed by this tradition" (p. xv). While Murray has written about the many accounts of male Irish laborers in Britain, he also points to the importance of moving away from the general over-focus in scholarship on male-labor and "navvy" narratives—those stories of lives in occupations typically taken up by Irish emigrant males, such as in writing by Patrick MacGill, Dónall Mac Amhlaigh and Maidhc Dainín Ó Sé (some written *as Gaeilge*). As he illustrates in his recent research on Irish nurses' writing, for example, Irish women workers' experiences of racial prejudice, sexism and class snobbery, along with their attempts to gain "respectability" and dignity through their work, in an often challenging climate, provides for fascinating insights into both British and Irish class dynamics (Murray 2017). The freedom from conservative Irish sexual and religious norms that was available to Irish working-class emigrants in Britain during the twentieth century – as evident, for example, in O'Casey's *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (1949), Brendan Behan's London-produced play *The Hostage* (1958), Neil Jordan's film *The Crying Game* (1992) and Patrick McCabe's novel *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) – suggests that if emigration can be alienating, it can be liberating too. Working-class writers like O'Casey, Behan, Paul Smith, and more recently Anna Burns, all left stifling contexts in Ireland, working abroad to great success.

But to overemphasize the freedoms of emigration would be to collapse into a stereotypical romanticizing of the Irish emigrant, which authors abroad so often problematize. There are also other areas in which international experience complicates the histories of Irish working-class writing. Scholars, such as Stefanie Lehner and Mary McGlynn, have illustrated, for example, interesting commonalities and contrasts in working-class writing across both Irish and Scottish literature. Lehner's 2011 study notes the potential for what she terms an "archipelagic subaltern aesth*ethics*" which employs a "comparative postcolonial approach," arguing for "a number of important historical, socio-political and cultural affiliations" (1, 2) across the two nations. The present volume is, of course, a further important step in this direction; comparative work on Irish and international working-class writing is currently scant.

"I Fought to Raise a Daughter on these Streets": Writing Working-Class Irishwomen

Inequalities *within* the working class are, in general, less explored in academic research on working-class writing. My own recent work on portrayals of newcomers – of immigrants arriving to Ireland mainly since the post-1990s economic boom – considers a much-transformed context of class-race intersectionality in recent Irish drama and fiction (Pierse, 2020). Writers such as Bisi Adigun and Ursula Rani Sarma have attended to this question through theatre, as have writers of non-immigrant backgrounds such as Dónal O'Kelly, Jim O'Hanlon and Roddy Doyle, with varying degrees of success (see ibid.). Women's working-class writing in Ireland is receiving new attention from scholars such as Emma Penney and Heather Laird. Penny has been researching in the less-explored area of women's writer groups in working-class areas of 1980s Dublin.[15] Laird (2017) has recently written on Irish women's working-class writing since the late nineteenth century. Overall, writing by working-class women has been relatively scarce in Ireland, though, not least because so much of the burden of parenting – so often in large families – went to women, with very little time to write (see Kearns, 2004, p. xxii).

Representations of working-class women in Irish writing have been problematic in a range of ways. Male writers, such as James Stephens, Seán O'Casey, Paul Smith, James Plunkett, Peter Sheridan and Roddy Doyle have all written significantly of or "from" women's perspectives, though this is, of course, problematic. As one would expect in a culture in which the Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary has been so extensive, there is also a tendency in Irish working-class writing to represent women in the role of saintly victims of a sinister system, the "careworn but diligent mother/nurturer" being "the dominant female figure in narratives that draw on Irish working-class life" (Laird, 2017, p. 126). As Gerardine Meaney (1993, p. 230) has argued, "in Ireland, sexual identity and national identity are mutually dependent," and therefore "the images of suffering Mother Ireland and the self-sacrificing Irish mother are difficult to separate." A central concern for feminist scholars is that "both serve to obliterate the reality of women's lives. Both seek to perpetuate an image of

Woman far from the experience, expectations and ideals of contemporary women" (ibid.). Even where writers attempt to validate women's experiences, they risk collapsing back into such imagery. Dermot Bolger's poem, "Neilstown Matadors" (2008), in which twenty-first century heroines take up the fight against drug dealers and addiction in urban Dublin, might stand accused of reproducing this image of the martyred mother, yet the poem's power is in its lyrical championing of the everyday courage and tenacity of Neilstown women, which is implicitly (and positively) compared with the faux-courage of men:

> I fought to raise a daughter on these streets,
> I stood in queues and worked on checkouts,
> I searched for my child on dangerous estates,
> I stood up to debt collectors calling to my door,
> When she shivered in detox I tried to nurse her,
> […]
> In time I wrapped my grandchild into my arms
> And took the place of the person I loved most,
> I made a nest amid the belongings I possess,
> I stood up in the ring every time I was gored,
> I watched the bulls run and raised my cloak […]. (Bolger 2008)

An interesting aspect of this poem is its production as part of the Night and Day (2008) visual art and poetry project, which engaged questions of cultural capital and class spatially and graphically. "Neilstown Matadors" and other poems about working-class and immigrant experiences were erected on city streets in evocative "mural poem" posters with striking images and words, bringing Bolger's poetry to the places and people it depicted. But, despite her combative stance, Bolger's suffering mother, conjured by a male writer, is inevitably echoing that trope of the ever-suffering female embodiment of Ireland from Yeats's *Kathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) or Patrick Pearse's 'The Mother' (1906?). Bolger's "matador" defends her grandchild, however, whereas Yeats's and Pearse's women-as-Ireland are defended by their sons.

Laird has considered differences between men writing women and women writing themselves in an Irish context and will expand on this work in her contribution to the *Routledge Companion*

to Literature and Class (ed. Georgia Lee McMillan, forthcoming with Routledge). Laird notes how the degradations that women suffer through poverty became a trope in Irish working-class literature. This frequently portrayed poverty's effects on women's capacities to meet hegemonic female behavioral standards as a means of critiquing the prevailing politics of class; "immoral" or "fallen" women were a powerful symbol of the society that failed them. Such a manoeuvre entails the partial reinforcement of the hegemony even as it assails it, but the trope of the "fallen" woman, from MacGill's reluctant prostitute, Norah Ryan (*The Rat Pit*, 1915), to Doyle's teenage mother, Sharon Rabbitte (*The Snapper*, 1990), has, in diverse ways, been a mainstay of Irish representations of working-class life. Oliver St. John Gogarty's Lily, in *Blight* (1917), rejects the toils of her poorly paid work in a laundry for a job in a restaurant where she earns "seven and six a week [...] and free temptation" (1973, p. 23), hinting at illicit relations with customers and accusing capitalism of creating this moral malaise. James Plunkett's prostitute in *Strumpet City* (1969), also ironically named Lily, escapes from the horrors of the factory for a more lucrative life in sex work (see Pierse, 2011, pp. 158–9, for further commentary on this trope). In MacGill's *The Rat Pit*, Norah's progress into prostitution analogises a swift, corrupting transition from rural life in Ireland to urban life in industrial Britain. Such depictions indict inequalities in the status quo, but these women's taboo "fallen" status is never in doubt. Mirjana Rendulic's one-woman play *Broken Promise Land* (2013), however, depicts sex work much differently. If, similar to these earlier works, Rendulic's lap dancer Stefica escapes into sex work from the humdrum and low pay of "sliding, scanning, typing, bagging" (2013, p. 2) in a retail job, here the sex industry, despite its dangers, is depicted as a welcome alternative. "I was always asked 'why are you doing it?'" Rendulic recalls of her own experiences as an exotic dancer, to which she would respond, "Well, why are you a waitress?" (Keane, 2013; further commentary on this play in Pierse 2020). In other recent writers, the trope continues more straightforwardly. In Lance Daly's 2008 film *Kisses*, for example, in which two children from dysfunctional families run away from home, their brief misadventure in a

lap-dancing club symbolises the grim underside of economically booming "Celtic Tiger" Dublin.

Laird's work illustrates how often working-class writers reinforce gender norms, even as some of them attempt to dismantle them, and how often women are deployed as victims, rather than agents of change: "a common characteristic of fictional accounts of the Irish working class is that the women they feature are often presented as having little or no awareness of the structural basis of class and gender inequalities" (2017, p. 25). Yet Laird also illustrates how working-class women have used literary and fictive means to challenge their subjection to various forms of oppression. Paula Meehan's poetry has repeatedly eschewed Catholic Ireland's vision of womanhood as submissive and domesticated. One of her most harrowing poems, "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" (1991), centres on the 1984 death of a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl, Ann Lovett, who died in childbirth at the foot of a grotto to the Virgin Mary in Longford. Lovett, having hidden her pregnancy for fear of social censure, died with her baby, causing a wave of revulsion and anger about the stigma of pregnancy outside marriage in Ireland. In twentieth-century Ireland, this issue was always class-ridden, for example in how a "hierarchy of institutions" dealt with the perceived moral problem of unmarried mothers, "with mother and baby homes used for women from well off families who were pregnant for the first time and Magdalene asylums used to incarcerate poor women and women with more than one pregnancy, who were then forced to work in the associated laundries" (Gilmartin and Kennedy, 2019, p. 125). That Lovett died beside a statue of the mother of Christ added particular symbolic power to her and her baby's deaths. In Meehan's poem, she imagines this statue speaking:

> On a night like this I remember the child
> who came with fifteen summers to her name,
> and she lay down alone at my feet
> without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand
> and she pushed her secret out into the night,
> far from the town tucked up in little scandals,
> bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises,
> and though she cried out to me in extremis

I did not move,
I didn't lift a finger to help her,
I didn't intercede with heaven,
nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear. (2002, p. 637)

This silence is emblematic of a stifling Ireland in which women who defied the strictures of hegemonic morality were vilified and abandoned, particularly if they were poor. But if Meehan invokes here an iconic image of the suffering mother, it is not to reinforce the orthodoxies of its cultural potency, for the statue rejects her assigned place: "They call me Mary — Blessed, Holy, Virgin. / They fit me to a myth of a man crucified: the scourging and the falling, and the falling again, / […] They name me Mother of all this grief / though mated to no mortal man" (Ibid.). Rather, the image excoriates the hypocrisy of Irish ideals of motherhood in a society where some mothers are condemned. Laird shows how women's writing, from Fannie Gallaher's slum fiction of the late nineteenth century, to Christine Dwyer Hickey's fiction of the 2010s, has exhibited a complex range of responses to intersectional oppression. Some of those responses have entailed organizing culturally too, from the development of women's theatre groups, such as Charabanc and JustUs in the 1980s and 1990s, to the 2015 rallies of the #WakingtheFeminists movement, in which women challenged the entrenched sexism of Irish theatres. Working-class women have repeatedly sought to bring to the stage a feminist perspective that includes issues of class.[16]

An important related point here and in the study of all working-class writing, but particularly in a country where the kind of large-scale, enclave industrialization experienced in Britain and America was largely confined to one region (the northeast), is that working-class literature is never reducible to labor history—to the struggles of unions and industrialized workers. Nicola Wilson observes the continuing merit in Ken Worpole's observation of more than three decades ago in Britain that "the two major traumas that dominate working class life are, not the strike, not the factory accident, but early and unwanted pregnancy and hasty marriage, or the back-street abortion" (Wilson, 2015: 89). In Irish working-class writing that refers to or foregrounds labor politics, however, there is a range of responses to laborism and

leftism. Seán O'Casey's play *Red Roses for Me* (1942), in which a young socialist hero dies for his beliefs, is an example of a play in which the politics of the left are straightforwardly valiant in a theocratic state "in th' grip o' God" (289), but in many other works, the politics of labor fail. St John Ervine's *Mixed Marriage* (1911) depicts a Belfast in which labour agitation descends into sectarian strife, while A.P. Wilson's *The Slough* (1914) portrays a Dublin in which socialists are overzealous in their hatred of "scabs." James Hanley's Liverpool-Irish *The Furys* (1935) has a cynically self-serving labor organiser, and Sam Thompson's *Over the Bridge* (1960) caused controversy for its depiction of some labor activists as deeply sectarian in a pre-Troubles Belfast. In the Republic of Ireland, James Plunkett's 1977 short story "The Plain People" depicts a subdued trade union movement that has eschewed its revolutionary roots; tepid and technocratic labor relations dominate. Martin Lynch's *Dockers* (1981) would raise ethno-national sectarianism again, and his collaboration with Charabanc, *Lay Up Your Ends* (1983), would portray sexism in labor politics too. Dermot Bolger's novel *Night Shift* (1985) has workers plan an "accident" that attempts to seriously injure a scab. Jimmy Murphy's *Brothers of the Brush* (1995) and Owen McCafferty's *Scenes from the Big Picture* (2003) would both continue to criticise the grasping self-promotion of union activists. Yet these works all portray some of the positives of unions as well.

Something of a constant in post-Partition Irish working-class literature is the disenchantment of workers with the unfulfilled promise of Irish freedom. This is not to suggest that disenchantment was anything other than intense in years of the Irish Revival that led to the 1916 uprising that precipitated partial decolonization. From the onset of the First World War in particular, the sense of anger at the waste of working-class lives – portrayed for example in MacGill's *The Great Push* (1916), Liam O'Flaherty's *Return of the Brute* (1929), and much later in Paul Smith's *Esther's Altar* (1959) and Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974) – was feverish. But the failure to deliver on the idealist hope espoused by the Proclamation of the Irish Republic has lingered to the present. That Proclamation declared the rebels' purpose as the "happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and

of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally."[17] The deep, if quite different, inequalities that emerged on both sides of the British border in Ireland after Partition made this promise seem a haunting mockery of opposing nationalist hegemonies north and south. Writers from working-class backgrounds ever since have repeatedly drawn attention to the failures of both jurisdictions and the subsequent politics of elites descended from that revolutionary moment.

Seán O'Casey, Peadar O'Donnell, Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor and Brendan Behan, writing in the Free State, all channel the alienation of the poor. Much of this criticism takes a social realist approach, for example in Peadar O'Donnell's depictions of grinding rural poverty; the following is from his 1928 novel *Islanders*:

> Then the family went back to the three daily meals of potatoes. And when the potatoes became scarce they took to doing without any supper, except sloak and dulsk. Sheila took to vomiting when she tried to eat either of these, and the mother borrowed a tin of Indian meal from Peggy. Sheila was now being slapped at school, because she hadn't three halfpence for a new reader. Once she came home at midday crying bitterly. She had been put into a corner by herself and would be refused admission to the class until she bought the book. (2005, p. 25)

However, O'Casey for example departed from the more realist drama of his most successful plays in the 1920s (*The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926)) in order to make some of his most trenchant criticisms of Ireland's newly "free" polity. In plays from *The Silver Tassie* (1928) on, expressionist and experimental stagecraft is deployed in order to jolt audiences from their complacencies. *The Silver Tassie* depicted the horror of First World War battlefields in its bewilderingly expressionist second act, where music, chanting, exaggerated symbolism and language, and the kind of studied *gestus* from actors that we associate with Bertolt Brecht, create a kaleidoscopic condemnation of the increasingly rationalized barbarity of war. Here, the playwright suggested that the propaganda of war had made its madness so normal that only a defamiliarizing dramaturgy could explode the common sense.

The plight of working-class soldiers lured to the battlefields, and their subsequent realization that war means "Shells for us and pianos for them" (1950, p. 38), is central to the play. This desire to estrange audiences would recur two decades later in O'Casey's "*Totaltheatre*" play, *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (1949), though here the focus is on renewed emigration under self-government. As in other later plays, such as *Hall of Healing* (1952), which castigates the Irish health system, O'Casey is keen to stress in *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* the fetters of class inequalities in post-independence Ireland. At this stage, his focus has turned on the theocratic proximity of (Catholic) church and state – what O'Flaherty had termed "the dour Puritanism of the young generation, arisen since the revolution" (1998 [1928]: 81) – and its role in maintaining the status quo. *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* deploys the outlandish in its attempt to expose these realities: a local priest of a small rural town attempts to rid it of a comic masque figure, the "Cock," who personifies the pre-Christian worship of nature, but which represents the vital energy of youths who are "fleein' in their tens of thousands from this bewildered land" (O'Casey, 1950: 194). The stifling moral climate and its role in hegemonic power is assailed through a comic, surreal theatrical experience. To again assail the sclerotic moral order, Brendan Behan also would transform his naturalist tragedy, the Irish-language play *An Giall* (1957), based in working-class Dublin, into a more experimental piece, *The Hostage* (1958), for the London stage.

Surreal hauntings recur in Irish working-class theatre. North of the border, in Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987), a Protestant working-class woman haunts a home during the 1974 Ulster Workers' Council strike, seemingly signalling, as with the worker ghosts of Parker's earlier play *The Iceberg* (1975), that those excluded from "history" often need to be re-inserted through magical means. Dermot Bolger has used ghosts to represent the excluded, implying the power of the literary to disrupt the hierarchies of empiricist histories. For example, in his play *The Passion of Jerome* (1999), a poor suicide victim haunts and terrifies an affluent couple, as a spectral indictment of the class divide. Bolger's earlier novel *The Journey Home* (1990) repeatedly deploys surreal, cartoonish hyperbole to signal the extent to which an extraordinary state of political affairs in Ireland's 1980s has been normalized. In one

episode, corrupt politicians take their ailing revolutionary socialist grandfather on election canvasses but villainously "remove his false teeth so that the people mistook his tirades against the smugness of the new state for the standard pieties they expected" (p. 214). This outlandishness gestures at the obfuscation of a deeper reality: the reliance of corrupt crony capitalists on the population's allegiance to absurd lines of descent between rebels who fought for a socialist republic and their grandchildren who govern a capitalist state. It gestures as well to the dangers of realism's naturalizing drives. Roddy Doyle, though generally preferring more realist forms, would suggest something similar in his play *Brownbread* (1992), where young men, who have watched too much of the television series *Miami Vice*, decide to kidnap a bishop. And in Philip Casey's novel *The Fabulists* (1994), an unemployed couple descend into a fantasy world of tall tales that seems to make life on the dole more bearable. From James Stephens' novel *The Charwoman's Daughter* (1917) to Emmet Kirwan's recent play and then film *Dublin Oldschool* (2014 and 2018), fantasy, the bizarre and surreal are deployed by working-class writers to highlight the normalization of what ought to seem grotesque. This is not to overplay the innovations of Irish working-class writers, but to suggest instead that they are at the very least more aesthetically complex than is often assumed. This is a perceptual issue that accompanies all working-class writing, of course: the worker-writer's value is too often simplistically measured in terms of their "reflection" of reality, their writing assumed to be "realistic in the most unpremeditated and unselfconscious fashion" (Davies, 1984: 125).

To be sure, realist depictions of the lives of poor people are a larger part of Irish working-class writing, which often simply aims to make outgroups visible. As John Brannigan observes of O'Casey, for example, "a persistent theme […] is the attempt by working-class men and women […] to become visible as thinking democratic subjects" (2017, p. 294). But in the more realist too there are various forms of innovation. The experience of the immersive play *Binlids* (1997), for example, written by Brenda Murphy, Christine Poland, Danny Morrison and Jake Mac Siacais, aimed to replicate, in a performative way, the disorienting tumult

of British Internment policy, which facilitated the mass arrests and jailing without trials of mainly working-class Catholics in early 1970s Belfast. On five stages, and with actors intermingling unannounced with their audience, *Binlids* simulates the chaos of early 1970s working-class West Belfast, including through a riot scene that some observers found uncomfortably real (Rooney, 2018, p. 35).

Here, as in much northern writing of working-class experience in the past half-century – such as John Boyd's *The Flats* (1971), Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* (1983) and *Joyriders* (1986), Danny Morrison's, *West Belfast* (1989), Glenn Patterson's *The International* (1999), Marie Jones's *Somewhere Over the Balcony* (2006), Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018) and Scott McKendry's *Curfuffle* (2019) – in fiction, drama and poetry, writers continually represent the experiences of class inequality on a level often ignored by the over-focus on high politics and ethno-national tensions that writing of the "Troubles" so often entails. Poets are often keenly aware of the dynamics of class in northern Irish life, even when they come from relatively comfortable backgrounds. Adam Hanna (2018) conveys how some of the most celebrated of Irish late twentieth-century poets, such as Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, have felt very personally their remove from the working class. Others, such as John Hewitt, John Campbell, Michael Brophy and Gerald Dawe, suggest that the conflict in Northern Ireland between rich and poor is more important in understanding local political dynamics than often imagined (also Hanna, 2017). But preoccupations more generally wax and wane during this period. As Mary McGlynn observes, for example, a "substantial evolution" takes place in fictional representations of Irish working-class experience from the 1960s to the 1980s, with earlier texts exhibiting "preoccupations common to modernist and postwar texts: the centrality of clergy; social hypocrisy; the sprawling family with abusive alcoholic father and weary, loving mother; dreary squalor" (2017, p. 305). Later writers are more likely "to take these as clichés to be avoided if possible" (ibid., p. 306).

When the boom of 1993–2007 came, it transformed the Republic of Ireland, not just economically, but socially, culturally,

and perhaps most profoundly, psychologically: Ireland, for the first time, was a global economic marvel, and if the old Ireland had peddled myths about its dreamy otherworldliness, the new one would have its own collection of myths. Not least among these was the perception of embourgeoisement that affluence brought. Martin J. Power, Eoin Devereux and Amanda Haynes observe that if "class inequality has been and remains a significant element of Irish society […] the myth of a classless Ireland was perpetuated most strongly during the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom" (2013, p. 3). Eamon Jordan illustrates, however, that "rather than reinforce binaries of hegemonic and non-hegemonic, marginalised and centralised, privileged and subjugated," Celtic Tiger dramatists "demonstrate something more complicated" (2017, pp. 392, 393). Some evince a still-vibrant communality in Irish working-class communities, even if capitalist ways of thinking have taken hold through ethics of competition and efficiency, a "dog-eat-dog world […] which dominates most ways of relating" (Ibid., p. 392). Mark Phelan and George Legg note how, north of the border, the linking of reconciliation with notions of progress through economic rejuvenation has been problematic; late twentieth and early twenty-first century northern Irish plays, such as Owen McCafferty's *Scenes from the Big Picture* (2003) and Brian Campbell's *Voyage of No Return* (2004) attempted to challenge neoliberal notions that political progress for the working class is inextricably linked with economic "regeneration." In the later play, a socially mobile tourism executive sees his emergence into the lower rungs of bourgeois society, as part of a "a young, confident, upwardly mobile, aspiring-to-own-a-silver-BMW" cohort of "Taigs [Catholics] With Attitude" (Campbell, 2004, p. 13), as evidence of social progress. His collusion in neo-colonialism, however, through an American business venture in Montserrat, suggests the exploited has merely learned to become the exploiter.

Throughout this writing, as this necessarily short survey has sought to illustrate, working-class writers continually seek to dismantle the rationalization of class inequalities by colonial and decolonizing regimes alike. Sociologist Michel Peillon argued in the 1980s that Ireland's "stark class contrasts" revealed themselves "not only in differences of status but also in differences of

behaviour" (1982: 2). These differences of behavior in the working class forged, at least in his assessment of working-class urban Dublin, "a specific life-style" in which "the particularity of the working class appears from whatever aspect one studies it, and it asserts itself *as a pole of differentiation in Irish society*" (35). This "pole of differentiation" is evident, in diverse ways, throughout most Irish working-class writing.

Future Scholarly Trajectories

There are a number of areas in which future scholarship on Irish working-class literature will find hitherto underexplored writers and trends. In the nineteenth-century song "Rocky Road to Dublin," Galway poet D.K. Gavan narrates the comic-tragic tale of an Irish man from Tuam, in the impoverished west of the country, who makes his way to the Dublin and then to Liverpool, England. Along the emigrant's journey, there is self-aggrandizing comedy, as he leaves "the girls of Tuam nearly broken hearted"; melancholy, as he drinks "a pint of beer, my grief and tears to smother"; and prejudice, as he suffers the taunts, first of his compatriots in Dublin, who mock his "Connaught brogue," which "wasn't much in vogue," then of the people of Liverpool, who ridicule his native country (Huntington, 1990, p. 178). The defiant emigrant, who has just journeyed across the sea in the pigs' quarter of a ship, finds his first helpers in fellow western Irishmen, who join him in fighting the offending Liverpudlians. This quick-cadenced song, performed at impressive speed and requiring exceptional skill on the part of the singer, reminds us that for many Irish a sense of kinship and community was more easily found among the Irish abroad than it was in other parts of the island of Ireland.

As I have argued here, the Irish who fed capitalism's machinery in Australia, Britain and America across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were part of a global working class, but in many cases, as with our doughty traveler from Tuam, isolated within the countries they had arrived in and acutely aware of their othered identities. These Irish often provided support for their families at home, made way for siblings and relatives who followed them, and contributed immensely to Irish cultural production. Their experiences at the coalface of capitalism are not other to, but

integral to, the story of the Irish working class in a country where emigration forms a very significant part of the national tale, and research on the writing of that experience is undoubtedly among the most urgent for scholars of Irish working-class culture and literature.

Very little has been written about Irish-language working-class writing too, with writers like Dónall Mac Amhlaigh, Maidhc Dainín Ó Sé, Séamus Ó Grianna receiving little attention as a group writing in that language and often about emigrant experiences and poverty. Neither has enough been written about the most othered group within the Irish working class, Irish Travellers, who have been subject to a great deal of condescension and vilification, which Peter Sheridan challenged, for example, in his play, *The Liberty Suit* (1977), and Rosaleen MacDonagh has more recently explored, from a Traveller perspective, in her play *Rings* (2010). Another urgent trajectory is the investigation of class in the Irish arts infrastructure: little has been written on the quantifiably material dynamics behind Irish cultural and arts institutions and their qualitative impact, though Cultural Policy Observatory Ireland, established in 2015, has been keen to expand the research base in this regard. Sandy Fitzgerald's 2004 reader on community arts in Ireland, *An Outburst of Frankness*, considered some issues around the funding and support available to working-class writers and arts practitioners, but the overall field of Irish arts management studies has been lacking in research on this issue. Helena Sheehan's studies of Irish television drama point to the extent of the national broadcaster's role in reproducing class inequalities. But Sheehan's research on this subject is mostly more than two decades old, and has yet to be followed by such significant interrogations of class in television drama in more recent decades: what are the unthinking class biases in the hit crime drama *Love/Hate* (2010–2014), which is largely focussed on working-class communities, or in *Fair City* (1989–), Ireland's long-running and leading soap opera, which again attempts to capture contemporary urban working-class life?

The recent publication of *The Children of the Nation: An Anthology of Working People's Poetry from Contemporary Ireland* (November 2019), edited by Jenny Farrell, along with author

Paul McVeigh's forthcoming collection, *The 32: An Anthology of Irish Working-Class Voices* (scheduled for publication in 2020) suggest that the resurgence in scholarly interest in working-class Irish writing is matched by a renewed vitality and connectivity in the writing itself. McVeigh's book follows and is modelled on Kit de Waal's British collection, *Common People: An Anthology of Working-Class Writers* (2019), and inspired by his own observation that "too often, working class writers find that the hurdles they have to leap are higher and harder to cross than for writers from more affluent backgrounds" (O'Toole, 2019).

Another area in which further research is urgent is that to which the present volume turns. As Sonali Perera has recently insisted, "working-class writings from different parts of the globe share more points of connection than are acknowledged by most literary histories" (2014, p. 5). Close attention to the nuances of local and national context are indispensable to working-class writing; as I have suggested here, the particularity of Ireland's postcolonial context provides but one example of why scholarly caution about how we historicize the global working class ought to make us wary of simplistic international comparisons. However, if class is a relationship and not a "thing," as E.P. Thompson (1980 [1963], p. 10) famously declared, the emotional, cultural, psychological and social experiences that emerge from class relationships—experiences of alienation, shame, anomie, alterity, defiance, depression, collectivity, "radical openness" (hooks) and much more—provide undoubtedly rich comparative contexts. If workerist claims, such as those made by George Orwell that "poverty frees [the poor] from ordinary standards of behaviour" (1933, p. 6), risk idealising the poor, there are yet many commonalities in experiences of class that traverse national boundaries and suggest the wisdom of a more concerted networking of scholars researching the literature of the working class globally; the fine grains and knotty contradictions of particularity need not be lost in the wide sweep of these comparisons.

This point seems implicit in Jeremy Gavron's recent novel, *Felix Culpa* (2018), which draws almost two thousand lines of its text from over one hundred other books. Pinning this novel to a concrete location is a fruitless endeavor: one reviewer suggested

its landscape of mountains and jungles might point to South Africa (Cioni, 2018), but its borrowed lines from narratives located in Britain, Mexico, Tibet and a range of other climes, draw on vernaculars that suggest such speculation is redundant. *Felix Culpa* follows its protagonist, an unnamed artist-in-residence in a male-only jail, in his quest to discover how one of its inmates, a mysterious loner, died. In utilising the diverse international stories of a range of marginal, loner figures, from, for example, Cormac McCarthy's novel based on the Mexican border, *The Crossing* (1994), and Patrick MacGill's narrative of an Irish 'navvy' in Britain, *Children of the Dead End* (1914), Gavron suggests something of an uneven but powerfully evocative fellowship of the marginalized. Each line beseeches us to reveal its mystery—to seek elsewhere for its origins in another text and what that might reveal about Gavron's unfolding story. This innovation enables a multiplicity of rich interpretations, invites the reader to participate more actively in the making of meaning, and repeatedly entreats one to be open, not just to the parallels and crossovers it suggests, but to the transgression of norms and inversion of ethical hierarchies Gavron's focus on the margins—on criminals and outcasts—suggests. In a neoliberal age in which the relentlessness of what Henry Giroux terms "disimagination" (2014)—the idea that there is no alternative to the political status quo—holds sway, connecting the margins across space and time in *Felix Culpa* attests to the role of history's outsiders in unsettling complacencies and rejecting orthodoxies, and to their continuing relevance. This is by no means to suggest a reductive characterization of those margins and their local political complexities, but rather to make a more modest claim, as bell hooks has, that the margins can be, and often are, a "space for radical openness" (1990), though which alternative social visions emerge. When Gavron invokes MacGill's anti-improvement story of an Irish outcast who rejects Victorian norms, or a more sympathetic reading of the legendary criminality of another Irish diasporic outcast, Ned Kelly, in Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), and when he puts them in relation to more than a hundred other texts and a central tale that speaks to the wisdom to be found at the edges of social acceptability, this connectivity indicates how we can reach beyond

disimagination. Where we make imaginative leaps across barriers and contexts, to connect diverse experiences of the poor, we find resources for imagining beyond the "disimagination machine" (Giroux, 2015, pp. 74–76). This is what we do when we make those imaginative leaps in the study of international and transnational working-class literature.

Endnotes

1. See Convery's critical account of this, 2017, pp. 45–50.

2. See Convery, 2017.

3. The northern state would secure for British rule only six of the nine counties of historic Ulster, in order to maintain a Protestant majority there.

4. Translation by Crowley.

5. Translation by Declan Kiberd.

6. Translation by Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin (1999, p. 116).

7. The manifesto of the Irish Literary Theatre (1897), for example, pledged to "show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment." Qtd. in Lee, 1995, p. 166.

8. As Carpenter writes: "Given the social structures of the day, it is not surprising that most of those who fell foul of the law and ended up on the scaffold in early eighteenth-century Ireland were from the working class, as were most of those who came to enjoy the spectacle of a public execution. Thus though Irish was the language of the many of the onlookers, the 'Dying Words' of the malefactor, printed on half sheets and sold to the crowd before the fatal drop, were in English. Few of these texts would have been composed by the criminals; it is more likely that they were the work of hack writers or even of those who printed them. But still, they probably reflect the attitude of working people towards each other and the law" (Carpenter, 2017, p. 78). See also James Kelly, *Gallows Speeches from Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001).

9. Georges Denis Zimmermann has also illustrated how the sensationalism of public trials and executions attracted significant interest from the peddlers of broadside ballads (Zimmermann, p. 62).

10. See Christopher Fitz-Simon (2011). See also, for example, commentary on Hubert O'Grady, J.W. Whitbread and P.J. Bourke in Stephen Watt (2004), esp. pp. 27–28.

11. See Jane Gray (1996) for an account of the shifting economic, industrial and social circumstances behind this poetry.

12. See Terence Brown (2004), p. 246. From 1971, for the first time, more than half of the population of the Republic was living in urban areas.

13. I am grateful to Scott McKendry for introducing me to Campbell's work and to this poem. McKendry's research on Campbell is ground-breaking and will be published soon.

14. See B. Kelly (2018) for some discussion of this contradiction.

15. Penney recently completed a PhD on narratives about the feminist movement in Ireland through a mixed-methods analysis of working-class women's writing, publishing, testimony and community work, focalized through the work of the Kilbarrack (Dublin) women writers' group that was active during the 1980s; her project is briefly outlined here: https://www.writing.ie/resources/on-being-an-irish-working-class-writer-part-3-by-dave-lordan/.

16. See Armstrong 2015 in relation to class and #WakingtheFeminists.

17. The full proclamation is available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/bfa965-proclamation-of-independence/.

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THE AIM OF THIS COLLECTION IS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE FORGING OF A MORE ROBUST, POLITICALLY USEFUL, AND THEORETICALLY ELABORATE UNDERSTANDING OF WORKING-CLASS LITERATURE(S).

THESE ESSAYS MAP A SUBSTANTIAL TERRAIN: THE HISTORY OF WORKING-CLASS LITERATURE(S) IN ARGENTINA, DENMARK, GERMANY, JAPAN, SINGAPORE, SOUTH AFRICA AND IRELAND. TOGETHER WITH THE ESSAYS IN A PREVIOUS VOLUME – WHICH COVER RUSSIA/THE SOVIET UNION, THE USA, FINLAND, SWEDEN, THE UK, AND MEXICO – THEY GIVE A COMPLEX PICTURE OF WORKING-CLASS LITERATURE(S) FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE, WITHOUT LOSING SIGHT OF NATIONAL SPECIFICITIES.

BY CAPTURING A WIDE RANGE OF DEFINITIONS AND LITERATURES, THE TWO VOLUMES GIVE A BROAD AND RICH PICTURE OF THE MANY-FACETTED 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.

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 A WHOLE (WHICH WE HOPE YOU DO), THEY CONTRIBUTE TOWARD A MORE COMPLEX UNDERSTANDING OF THE GLOBAL PHENOMENON OF WORKING-CLASS LITERATURE(S).

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