

Coles, Nicholas and Paul Lauter, eds.
**(2017) *A History of American Working-Class Literature*, Cambridge University Press,
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Review by John Lennon and Magnus Nilsson

A History of American Working-Class Literature contains 24 strong and thought-provoking essays relating to a wide range of subjects within working-class literature. Together they give a rich and multi-faceted picture of this literature's history, from the seventeenth-century authors of transportation narratives writing 'toward' a working-class literary tradition (p. 10) to contemporary authors writing about 'post-Fordist, global forms of flexible accumulation and exploitation' (p. 377). It's a wonderful introduction to the field that raises numerous important questions regarding the phenomenon of working-class literature.

What does the term 'working-class' actually mean, though, in the title of this collection? As anyone working in this field understands, *working-class* is a bloated term easily manipulated by academics (and politicians) to mean a variety of things. Nicholas Coles and Paul Lauter, who are important voices in U.S. working-class literary studies, attempt to define this term at the start of their introduction. They make a theoretically stringent argument about class, stating, among other things, that "'working class" is not usefully understood strictly as a category of identity,' but 'has more to do with structural conditions of work, property, and ownership than with pigmentation, bodily configuration, assumptions about gender, nationality, and ethnic identification, or even with the deadly realities, historical and current, of racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry' (p. 2). This is an important point to be made so that class is not reduced to a junior partner in a triumvirate with race and gender.

When examining the whole of the collection, however, the concept of class—and especially that of the working class—is rather vague. 'How are the lives of the 99 percent different from those of the 1 percent?' the editors ask when discussing the 'experience of class in the United States' (p. 1). The responses by the contributors are varied. John Ernest, for example, argues that slaves constitute 'a working class' at the same time as he claims that 'the labor performed by enslaved African Americans, while certainly dominated by hard physical labor, actually included a broad range of occupations, some of which might be described as artisan or middle-class work' (p. 42). Another contributor, Peter Riley, argues that Walt Whitman belonged to the 'precariat' (p. 81). These ideas are certainly innovative but problematic as starting points for the history of American working-class literature.

Coles and Lauter also argue that this collection presents 'a history of the cultural work that most directly engages class as a lived phenomenon' (p. 1), and that working-class literature is primarily interesting as a *representation* of working-class *experience*: 'How is the historical experience of class represented in literature and in the other creative forms in our lives?' they ask (p. 1). This is also a view expressed in a number of the essays. Michelle Tokarczyk, for example, argues that what make the works of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur speak to readers are their 'representations of working-class people's lived experience' (p. 262). This

focus on literature as primarily a representation whereby readers can peer into the words and find authentic working-class experiences has been a common thread in working-class scholarship in the United States. While insightful, one result of this focus on literature as an 'expression of experiences' is that literature's many productive dimensions are often obscured.

There are many dissident voices in this collection, however, that present alternatives to examining literature as primarily a representation; they open up new avenues of discussion in exciting ways. Alicia Williamson discusses domestic socialist fiction as a 'site of contestation' and 'a venue' in which alternatives to the existing social order 'are being imagined' (p. 152). She also offers a definition of 'working-class literature' as a form of something created by and for workers in order to 'challenge existing wrongs and create new futures together' (p. 161). Another strong example: Mark Noonan argues that 'working-class books and periodicals . . . aim to win over readers to an ideological point of view,' and that 'behind working-class publications are assemblages of like-minded individuals determined to produce new ways of thinking or a new society altogether' (p. 178). These chapters and others are interested in examining working-class literature as *literature*.

The best example of this willingness to challenge the focus on expressions of experience is an article by Michael Collins. He identifies 'two competing tendencies in American working-class life writing' (p. 199). The first one he calls 'ethnographic.' It frames 'working-class life texts as expressions of an autonomous and discrete "culture,"' and 'imposes an institutional framework on the working-class voice in order to claim forms of expression as "representative" of a historicized group life' (pp. 199-200). The second tendency Collins calls 'performative' (p. 200). It is a 'literary-critical mode that pays attention to how life writing by working-class people comments self-reflexively on the conditions of its own production' (p. 200). This focus on the productive capabilities of literature is evident when Collins argues that 'working-class life writing' should be seen 'less as an authentic expression of a "culture," an entity understood to exist objectively in the world free from the shaping influence of institutions and genres, and more as a series or cluster of literary *performances* that operate within, and against, generic expectations' (p. 207).

Lawrence Henley's essay on proletarian fiction is another wonderful illustration of this view of literary performances, arguing that 'proletarian narratives recognize that their claims for representative status always compete with prior, and usually more powerful, agencies for representing and defining working-class experience and identity' (p. 244). Amy Brady's essay on workers' theatre argues that the literature produces real and significant change in a society: 'Because the desire to educate an audience about working-class concerns was antithetical to long-standing, traditional Western theatre practices, the workers' theatre . . . can be said to have changed not merely the styles and content of theatrical productions but their very cultural purpose' (p. 327). Along this line, Joseph Entin stresses literature's capacity to contribute to the production of new understandings of class, arguing how a novel like Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* 'encourages us to see China Men as members of an American working class,' but also 'insists that class is transnational, shifting, and deeply riven by cultural and social differences and divisions' (p. 381).

Other contributions also present complex definitions of class and its relationships to race and gender. One of the most interesting examples is provided by Bill V. Mullen who, in his essay about African-American working-class literature, treats African-American working-class history 'as a part of general American working-class history' and argues that this allows us to 'understand both the particularity of experiences of racial oppression and the common core of

experiences of working-class people that African Americans share' (p. 265). Another interesting example can be found in Joseph Entin's essay, in which it is argued that 'much of what we typically consider "multicultural" literature is also working-class literature, concerned not only with race and ethnicity but labor as well' (p. 378).

Coles and Lauter have done a wonderful job, therefore, of collecting and editing some truly excellent scholarship. We do, though, quibble a bit with their decision to define 'American' in the collection's title in a 'fairly traditional' way (p. 2). Why, one wonders, adopt such an approach? Yes, working-class literatures are often situated nationally. But they are almost always affected by international currents such as the aesthetic/political impulses of the international labor movement, or writers being influenced by their international colleagues. While national literatures should be examined, why limit the influences at the nation's borders? As Joseph Entin shows in his essay about contemporary working-class literature, both the working class and working-class literature are globalized phenomena; it should be examined as such.

This focus on 'American' results in general statements about working-class literature that are, in reality, very particular. For example, Christopher Hager argues—in one of the finest contributions to the collection—that 'a classic problem in the study of working-class literature' concerns whether or not there is 'an essential gentility in the realm of the literary that is alienated from or alienating to the working class' (p. 64). Hager also argues that 'for many working-class people, the written page is a less comfortable venue for politics or philosophy than it is for better-educated people' (p. 73). While this may be (or may not be) true in the United States, in other countries (for example, Sweden), literature is exalted among the working-class. This methodology of boxing working-class literature(s) into national categories has been under negotiation recently and we would have liked to see more of the authors, and this collection as a whole, consciously probing these boundaries as they follow the trajectories of international influence.

Despite these issues of framing, this is an excellent and important resource for academics working in the field as well as students who are beginning to learn about working-class literature. This collection should find a prominent position on many bookshelves. Unfortunately, due to the price of the book (\$112 hard cover / \$80 for e-book), *A History of American Working-Class Literature* will be priced out of many scholars' and students' budgets. We do hope, though, that the individual scholars will make their work available, as they are valuable contributions to the history of this vibrant literature and project new and rich avenues of scholarship.

Reviewer Bios

John Lennon is Associate Professor in English at The University of South Florida. His research is principally concerned with how marginalized individuals exert a politicized voice in collectivized actions. His monograph, *Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in Literature and Culture 1869-1956* (2014), University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, examines the hobo as a resistive working-class figure. He is currently at work on a new project examining conflict graffiti from a global perspective.

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