

**Lennon, John and Magnus Nilsson, eds.**  
**(2017) *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives*, Stockholm University Press, Stockholm**

**Review by Lorena Gauthereau**

*Working-Class Literature(s)* brings together six essays that engage different national working-class literatures: Russia and the Soviet Union, the United States, Finland, Sweden, Mexico, and Great Britain. While this collection does not provide an exhaustive perspective of global working-class literatures (nor does it intend to), it does provide an overarching examination of a variety of national literatures labeled as ‘working-class.’ In doing so, it highlights not only the often-conflictive definitions of the genre, but also the historical context, evolution, national specificity, and international influences of and on working-class literature(s).

In the introduction, editors Lennon and Nilsson argue for the timeliness of this collection. Their research yielded few studies of working-class literature from a comparative national perspective. This collection, then, certainly provides a broad representation of working-class literature across national borders. Citing John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon (2005), the editors suggest that current trends in literary criticism, ‘such as sexuality, disability, and species has pushed class even further down on the agenda’ (13 qtd. x). Likewise, they argue that contemporary studies of working-class literature have not shown a ‘significant development of analytical tools’ and instead, rely on outdated theory that has not evolved over the past decades in the same way as other theoretical frameworks (xi). While I would grant that perhaps sexuality and gender have been at the forefront of current trends in literary criticism, class is often part of the critical conversation for women of color feminists (at the very least in the United States and Latin America) albeit tied to other markers of identity, such as race/ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. And although studies of working-class literatures consistently rely on the frameworks laid by canonical theorists such as Karl Marx and Georg Lukács, we cannot take for granted the evolution of intersectional class analysis developed by material feminists, who consider class in relation to capital, patriarchy, gender roles, sexuality, and race/ethnicity. Yet, despite my disagreement with these brief introductory remarks, this collection provides a strong survey of different national working-class literatures.

Read together, the essays provide a comparative selection of working-class literature and, in line with the editors’ goal, highlight the ways that this genre is ‘rooted both in international and national contexts’ (xiv). The contemporary critique offered by the authors in *Working-Class Literature(s)* takes into consideration significant trends in race and ethnicity studies as well as transnational studies. The six essays in this collection dialogue with the tensions surrounding the definition of ‘working-class’ literature, revealing a long list of debates that have changed over time. These debates questioned whether working-class literature should be defined as literature written by

workers, for workers, about workers, or about labor movement politics, and whether it should respond to social injustice, depict an optimistic classless society, deal with class inequality, or espouse leftist radical politics. This attention demonstrates how defining the genre is contentious across a range of national literatures and languages. Furthermore, each chapter provides ample examples of authors and texts that fit into each definition, which makes it easy for educators to pair with reading assignments and for students or researchers to examine the topics further in their own projects. As a whole, the collection meets the editors' goal to provide a comparative overview of six distinct national working-class literatures, which in turn provides insight into the ways the genre is shaped both by national and international historical variables.

Katerina Clark's 'Working Class Literature and/or Proletarian Literature: Polemics of the Russian and Soviet Literary Left' takes as a launching point, the two-fold Bolshevik meaning of 'proletarian': 1) of/by the working class or 2) of or by the Russian-cum-Soviet Communist Party (1). While much of the literature was written by workers themselves, the definition of who was considered to be proletarian shifted over time. Clark traces the trajectory of proletarian literature beginning with the literature of the pre-Revolutionary years (1890s-1917)—during which self-taught workers published their writing in union and Socialist Party newspapers (3)—and ending with the literature published after the fall of the Soviet Union when the genre focused more on workers' political enlightenment.

Benjamin Balthasar's essay, 'The Race of Class: The Role of Racial Identity Production in the Long History of U.S. Working-Class Writing,' highlights the racialization of class that has occurred in the U.S. as a consequence of colonialism and slave economy. He anchors his theory in Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, and astutely reads the genre through the history of a capitalist system deeply rooted in racialized slave labor. He argues that the genre of working-class literature in the U.S. has primarily been more of an 'exploration of the ethnic and/or racial self through the classed structure of power than they are truly novels of organized, working-class revolt' (52). This ethnic/racial identity 'exploration' is evident in the white/ethnic literary examples he mentions, but also, and perhaps more markedly, as he suggests, in writing by authors of color (54). In addition, Balthasar makes a compelling argument for reading slave narratives as working-class literature. Such a postcolonial assertion accounts for the historical totality of colonialism as well as the significance of racial slave labor in the Americas.

Elsi Hyttin and Kati Lawnis' 'Writing of a Different Class? The First 120 Years of Working-Class Fiction in Finland' pinpoint the Civil War of 1918 as a major touchstone for defining the genre. After the Civil War, working-class authors were split along political divisions on the left, and not all authors wanted to be associated with politics (77). The rise of Finnish working-class literature, the authors note, occurred at the same time as a 'global upsurge of working-class literary culture,' and at the same time as the emergence of the labor movement and labor press in Finland itself (67). Like the working-class literature of pre-revolutionary Russia described in the first essay, the first literary works of the genre appeared in newspapers (69-70). Hyttin and Lawnis briefly mention the gendered dimension of Finnish working-class literature, noting that although working-class women writers appear to make up a much lower percentage than men, the authors suggest that women writers shared their works in handwritten newspapers read by young working-class people and that they hid their identities through collective nicknames (75-76). Interjecting women's issues

into literature, they claim, ‘was often difficult and the highlighting of this inequality posed a potential threat to class cohesion and unity’ (76).

Magnus Nilsson provides an overview of traditional Swedish working-class literature in his essay, ‘The Making of Swedish Working-Class Literature.’ Like the previous essays by Clark (Russia and Soviet Union) and Hyttinen and Lawunis (Finland), Nilsson provides a review of evolving definitions and an understanding of the genre in Sweden. He situates Swedish working-class literature in the historical context of the labor movement, in which the texts sought to agitate workers into political action. Swedish working-class literature changed during the early twentieth century, as it began to attract readers from outside the labor movement (98). Historical shifts in Swedish class structure ultimately changed the types of working-class literature produced in the country. Nilsson asserts that the ‘dynamic nature of the phenomenon of working-class literature’ is highlighted through analysis of ‘the heterogenous history of the construction of Swedish working-class literature’ in conjunction with comparative criticism of other national working-class literatures.

In ‘Mexican Working-Class Literature, or The Work of Literature in Mexico,’ Eugenio Di Stefano provides clear historical contextualization for thinking about working-class literature in Mexico. The genre cannot be understood outside of the class upheaval that ultimately led to and followed the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The author considers the evolution of working-class Mexican literature ‘in relation to different modernization projects’ (128) and puts three specific types of literature into conversation: 1930s post-Revolutionary proletarian literature, 1960s testimonio (or biographical/first-hand documentary text), and contemporary literature of the early 2000s (128). Di Stefano notes that while Mexican Revolutionary novels—such as Mariano Azuela’s canonical *Los de abajo* [*The Underdogs*] (1915)—attempted to convey a ‘growing disillusionment’ with the Revolution, proletarian literature (1920s-1930s) depicted an optimistic vision of constructing a classless society (131-132). The 1940s ushered in indigenous and mestizo themes (137) and the testimonio called for political justice. Unlike the proletarian literature that preceded it, the testimonio focused on ‘the subaltern as a politically-charged subject whose real, popular voice directly testifies not only to injustices, but to the radical historical changes taking place’ (141). Di Stefano asserts that contemporary trends in contemporary Mexican working-class literature ‘function as a critique of contemporary neoliberal cultural logic’ and ‘offer the opportunity to revisit working-class theory and criticism’ (151).

In the final chapter, Simon Lee focuses on the conflictive relationship between aesthetics and political objectives in ‘British Working-Class Writing: Paradox and Tension as Genre Motif,’ from Chartist fiction (a radical working-class movement) to kitchen sink realism (a type of social realism focused on the grittiness of working-class life). Lee argues that ‘the very notion of an authoritative working-class literature resists formal consummation and is therefore subject to continual renovation contingent upon cultural need’ (160). During the Victorian era, for example, aesthetics took precedence over social function, whereas during the postwar period, the depiction of working-class character underscored the reality of life during the modern welfare state. That is, British working-class literature evolved according to social concerns ‘through the use of adapted literary techniques, refusing a fixed formal aesthetic and, therefore, curtailing the potential for commodification’ (190). Lee’s essay not only provides a succinct history of British working-class

literature, but also clearly articulates the ways that contemporary societal concerns have influenced the balance between aesthetics and political goals in the genre across time.

The broad reach of *Working Class Literature(s)* makes it ideal as an introductory text for students of working-class literatures. Yet, the essays can also be read on their own. As standalone pieces, the individual chapters can serve as a complement to courses or research specific to one of the national literatures covered. For educators and students looking for an introductory text on global working-class literatures, this collection provides a clear genealogy of Russian, Soviet Union, United States, Finnish, Swedish, or British national literatures. *Working Class Literature(s)* would pair well with selected canonical texts such as Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* and *The Marx-Engels Reader*, as well as novels in the genre. The collection, however, lacks any essays that analyze working-class literatures from southern hemisphere countries. Therefore, students would benefit from an introductory course that combines *Working-Class Literature(s)* with essays on national working-class literatures from the southern hemisphere (including African countries and more Latin American countries).

### **Reviewer Bio**

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