Introduction

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There was a time, not so very long ago, in which the presiding American myth had it that we are all "middle class." Economic crisis and austerity politics have shredded that myth and have forced most Americans to acknowledge not only the dramatic increase of inequalities in income and wealth but also the persistent differences in political power, life chances, and culture that mark the U.S. class system. At such times, the reality of substantial class differences emerges from the shadows of ideology and challenges cherished notions of the American Dream. People ask: How did this come about? Has it always been like this? What exactly makes these differences? How are the lives of the 99 percent different from those of the 1 percent? What can we do about it? And, more to the point of this book, what are the distinctive experiences – of work, of organizing, of homes, of families and communities, and of art – that have marked the lives of working-class people in America across time? How is the historical experience of class in the United States represented in literature and in the other creative forms in our lives?

It is now possible to compose a history of the cultural work that most directly engages class as a lived phenomenon, namely working-class literature. All the same, the first question virtually everyone with whom we have talked about this book asks is: What do you mean, "working-class literature"? Are you talking about writing produced *by* working-class people? Writing *about* working-class men and women? Writing *directed at* a working-class audience? Our answer, generally regarded as unresponsive, has been "yes" to all of these questions, and the essays collected here reflect this inclusiveness. They address writers of working-class origins, texts about working-class lives, and productions directed at a working-class audience – all or any of them.

The questions of definition arise, we think, from a paradigm carried over from more familiar instances of identity-based writing. People know, or think they know, what is meant by "women's" or "African-American"

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or "Native-American" literature. Looked at more closely, of course, these familiar categories appear far more complex than at first viewing. Is *Huckleberry Finn* an African-American literary text? Is Lydia Sigourney's "Indian Names" a Native-American work? Is William Carlos Williams's "The Young Housewife" an instance of women's literature? But even assuming that we know reasonably well the content of these familiar categories, "working-class literature" is fraught with difficulties. That is because, first, "working class" is not usefully understood strictly as a category of identity. Class, though it is manifested in daily life and in culture, 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.

Relations of power and ownership change over time, of course. The historian E. P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* explains class as "an historical phenomenon . . . something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships" (9–10). One of the best – most vivid and compelling – ways to witness class happening is in what we are here calling literature: cultural production, in a wide range of forms, by and about working-class people. As the essays that follow make clear, the category "literature" when it is linked with "working-class" becomes differently capacious than that suggested by Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, or even T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland.*

The other term in our title, "American," which has in recent decades become increasingly conflicted, remains in this context reasonably comprehensible. In this book we are almost entirely speaking about works created within and largely about what are now the United States of America. This is not to fly in the face of the disposition current in American Studies to think of that phrase in transnational terms. After all, the working class in America has *always* been in various senses "transnational" as well as multicultural: African, Latin American, Chinese, Eastern European, among other origins and affiliations. Connections to Great Britain and to Africa loom large in the earlier chapters here, and links to other parts of the world echo in a number of the later essays. All the same, this is a book about a fairly traditional conception of "American" as it has been deployed in the study of "American Literature" particularly for the past 100 years. The founders of the journal *American Literature* and other early practitioners in the field during the 1920s might not altogether

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recognize our usages of "working-class" or "literature," but they would be familiar with what we mean by "American."

They would also recognize the problem of bringing to teachers, scholars, and students of literature writing with which they were unfamiliar. For American books in the early part of the twentieth century were quite marginal to the study of "serious" literature, which was largely constituted by the reading of British work. American working-class literature, as a field of study, was nowhere on the horizon in 1915 or so. But that changed, beginning with the "proletarian" decade of the 1930s. And it has continued to change with the more recent publication of collections of primary texts that have significantly widened the canon of relevant work. The *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (seventh edition, 2012), of which Paul Lauter is the general editor, restored to the canon of what is read and taught in classrooms the writings of a vast and diverse range of under-represented writers. Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy's *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology* (2007) collected the cultural expression of working men and women of all races and ethnicities, from colonial times to the present.

At the same time, working-class studies as a scholarly field has markedly advanced. An academic organization, the Working-Class Studies Association, emerged from a series of small but enthusiastic annual meetings at Youngstown State University that began in 1995. The Association now holds yearly conferences and has helped foster scholarship on working-class life and culture in other professional groups like the American Literature Association. A decade ago, Sherry Linkon (one of the authors in this book) and John Russo edited a volume called *New Working-Class Studies* that helped define the analysis of working-class experience in a variety of academic fields, from history and political science to film studies. More recently, a few other analytic volumes have widened the study of working-class literature.[1] In short, this book emerges from a changing landscape of intellectual examination of working-class literature and what it illuminates: how class actually operates and has operated historically in American culture and society, and how working people have lived with and struggled against class hierarchy and domination.

The essays in the book, while organized more or less chronologically, are not limited to laying out a predetermined sequence of events. There is a broad range of durations covered by particular chapters: at one end of this range, Joe Lockard spans a 300-year tradition of prison writing; at the other, Peter Riley looks closely at the work of a single author, the iconic poet Walt Whitman, in the 1850s. In between, other chapters address work

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produced over 100 years – Amy Brady on theatre, Kathleen Newman on film, and Bill Mullen on African-American writing, in the twentieth century, for instance – or in a single decade: the 1850s in Amy Schrager Lang's study of women's social protest novels, or the 1930s in Larry Hanley's and Michelle Tokarczyk's essays on proletarian fiction.

Although the chapters are not organized to illustrate a single overarching narrative or theory, several thematic issues remain important throughout. Foremost among these is the status of work itself. The words "work" or "labor" appear in the titles of eight of the book's twenty-four chapters. Not surprisingly, then, many of these essays examine forms and sites of labor, in mills and fields, households and prisons, noting how work plays a dominant role in shaping class experience. Paul Lauter's essay considers why people work, or are made to work – and how they often resist the work they are compelled to perform. Most of the essays here address through one lens or another how such conflicts over power and control affect the ways working people think and create.

But these essays also consider how forms of identity such as race and gender, as well as sexuality, intersect with class and modify in a variety of ways what life prospects do and do not exist for working people. Sara Appel directly addresses the phenomenon of "intersectionality," and essays by John Ernest and John Marsh take up questions raised by race-based slavery and its continuing aftermaths. Christopher Hager examines the literary production of a dominantly female workforce in antebellum industry, and Michelle Tokarczyk traces the ways women writers reshaped radical fiction during the Great Depression. Riley investigates the role Walt Whitman's sexuality plays in understanding him as a worker-poet.

Important to all these essays, of course, are the historical contexts within which working-class literature was formed: colonization, slavery, the industrial revolution, repeated economic depressions, wars hot and cold, deindustrialization, globalization, and, of course, capitalism as it has emerged and evolved in America. The writers in this book are concerned with how in such settings working people organized and competed for the goods of life, how place and time shaped desire, opportunity, and ideas about fulfillment. For example, a number of these chapters focus on how and why people migrate: across the Atlantic in Matthew Pethers's essay, from farm to factory in Hager's, and out of the Dust Bowl in Nicholas Coles's piece. These chapters explore how immigration from elsewhere or migration within the nation affects outlook, possibility, and community.

Most significantly, perhaps, these essays survey the ensemble of textual forms working-class culture has taken. A number of the chapters – by John

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Ernest, John Marsh, Richard Flacks, and Cary Nelson, for example – are concerned with the significant roles played by songs, chants, and poems in working-class literary culture. Other chapters engage the variety of stories and novels in which working-class characters play meaningful roles. Contributors to this book explore how American writers have shaped such fictions in relation to particular social and political dynamics of their time: socialist (Alicia Williamson), utopian (James Catano), proletarian (Hanley and Tokarczyk), postindustrial (Sherry Linkon), globalized (Joseph Entin). Newman's essay explores "the labor plot" in film while Brady surveys "workers' theatre" – two other media in which the events of working-class life and struggles have been tellingly represented. Michael Collins additionally analyzes how radical writer-activists have used "life-writing" as a mode of political resistance and affirmation. In short, these essays illustrate how the phrase "working-class literature" encompasses the full range of the kinds of writing available to American authors.

The chapters also attend to the variety of institutions – publishing houses, magazines, festivals, and archives – that project and share working-class culture. Such institutions, as the chapters by Jan Goggans and Mark Noonan illustrate, provided the material basis for the emergence of working-class culture and the many forms it takes. Publications from the Wobbly *Little Red Songbook* and the "Little Blue Books" to Folkways records have enabled the formation and circulation of that culture. Likewise, a number of these essays are concerned with the relationships, not always comfortable, between institutions dedicated to advancing the cause of working people – unions, political parties, publishers – and the daily lives and creative accomplishments of working-class people.

We think these essays will be helpful in opening a generally neglected area of literary and cultural study, one that is critically important in a time of extreme class inequality. Also, as was the case with women's writing half a century ago, seeing working-class literature alters the evidentiary base on which theoretical models for cultural study have been constructed. This is not to suggest that the work of charting U.S. working-class literature is now accomplished. Hardly. For example, we think new scholarship will continue to illuminate relationships between class, place, and ethnicity (e.g., in mining areas of Kentucky and the lettuce fields of California). Likewise, domestic labor, health care work, fast food service, "adjunct" teaching, and precarious jobs in the "gig" economy are likely to play larger roles in contemporary writing that engages the impact of neoliberalism; they will, therefore, be increasingly important subjects for future commentators on working-class literature. And as more and more people in

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America become, by any definition, part of the working class, it will be our responsibility – and opportunity – to study the writing by, about, and for them. Reading, in the final analysis, the work with which this book is concerned is richest at what Irving Howe first called the "bloody crossroads" where politics and literature engage. To write about working-class literature is from this perspective a necessarily political act whose goals carry writers and readers out beyond the covers of the book.

Notes

1 We have in mind Michelle Tokarczyk, ed. *Critical Approaches to American Working-Class Literature* (Routledge, 2012); Andrew Lawson, ed. *Class and the Making of American Literature: Created Unequal* (Routledge, 2014); and Sonali Perera. *No Country: Working-Class Writing in the Age of Globalization* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

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