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Defining Working-Class Literature(s): A Comparative Approach Between U.S. Working-Class Studies and Swedish Literary History

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we compare the phenomenon of working-class literature in Sweden and the United States. After examining how working-class literatures have evolved in both countries, we analyze how they have been conceptualized in two academic fields: contemporary U.S. working-class studies and the study of Swedish literary history. We discuss the material and historical contexts shaping these conceptualizations, critique them on theoretical grounds, and offer ways that comparative approaches help us better understand the phenomenon of working-class literature. Our main argument is that our analysis makes visible two important features of this literature. The first of these, inscribed in the very concept of the term, is that working-class literature is both a literary phenomenon and a phenomenon relating to working-class life. The second feature – a far less obvious, but not less important one – is that working-class literatures are always historically and geographically situated and, thus, assume divergent shapes in different times and locations. We argue that working-class literature as a phenomenon is, therefore, always in a process of new formations. In doing so, we move away from narrow nationalistic views of working-class literature as a defined term and, using a comparative approach, allow for new vantage points in the analysis of the relationship between class and culture.

KEYWORDS: working-class literature, working-class studies, American literature, Swedish literature

Introduction

Capitalism exists as an economic system where the movement of people, resources, and capital are unevenly experienced and translated across the globe. Fluidity (of borders, of markets, of regulations, of culture) is a key component of the "logic" of capitalism in our current period – as well as of resistance to it. Therefore, those who are interested in understanding the class dynamics of contemporary capitalism need an optics of class and class struggle that seeks understandings of non-monolithic working-class cultures that exist materially at specific locations but are acted upon by international forces. One particular way to begin to create a strand of this optics is to examine a prominent form of working-class culture, namely working-class literature. Unfortunately, however, the term itself is ambiguous and rife with theoretical conundrums, and the phenomenon to which it refers is heterogeneous.

The aim of this article is to begin to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of working-class literature through a comparison of how it has developed in two countries – Sweden and the United States – and, more importantly, how it has been conceptualized in two academic fields: contemporary U.S. working-class studies and the study of Swedish literary history. By establishing a dialogue between these places and fields, we explore differences as well as common threads of working-class literatures and the historical forces that helped create them, thereby

allowing us greater understandings of the phenomenon of working-class literature.

Our main argument is that this comparative dialogue makes visible two important features. The first of these, inscribed in the very concept of the term, is that working-class literature is both a literary phenomenon and a representation of working-class life. The second feature – a far less obvious, but not less important one – is that working-class literatures are always historically and geographically situated and, thus, assume divergent shapes in different times and locations. Thus, we approach the phenomenon of working-class literature on two levels. On the one hand, we view it as a historically and materially situated phenomenon, which takes on various shapes and is constructed in myriad ways at different historical moments and places. On the other hand, we argue that the concept of working-class literature can be used as an umbrella term for various kinds of phenomena emerging at the intersection of working-class practice (experiences of class injustice, class struggle, etc.) and literature – phenomena that bring to the fore questions of vital importance for the understanding, from historical and global perspectives, of capitalism's class dynamics. The understanding of working-class literature to which this article wants to contribute is one that incorporates both these levels.

We will first outline the conceptualizations of working-class literature within contemporary U.S. working-class studies and the study of Swedish literary history respectively, and discuss the material and historical contexts shaping them. While certainly not an exhaustive study, this summary outlines some of the major divergences between these two national literatures, exploring why working-class literature has been marginalized in the U.S. as it has become a celebrated national literature within Sweden. We then explore specific ideological factors for this divergence, namely the powerful overreach of the Cold War and its politicized chilling effect of this literature as mere radical *propaganda* within the U.S. and the aesthetic transformations of working-class literature in Sweden that allowed this literature to be aesthetically examined as *literature*. Thereafter, we offer theoretical critiques of these conceptualizations before suggesting possible comparative approaches that might help us expand and better understand the phenomenon of working-class literature. An underlying argument running throughout this essay is that although working-class literature is a phenomenon that is place and time specific threading itself through a national identity (no matter how much a nation may try to erase it), by comparatively examining the ways that working-class literature has evolved and transformed in the U.S. and Sweden respectively, we will have stronger, more robust lenses to better conceptualize the aesthetic-political dimensions of working class-literatures.

Working-Class Literature Within Contemporary U.S. Working-Class Studies

Within contemporary U.S. working-class studies, the phenomenon of working-class literature has received a fair amount of scholarly attention, and the field has had a substantial impact on how it is understood today. John F. Lavelle even argues that "working-class literature, as it is being defined today, takes its genre position from a reworking and capturing of characteristics derived from contemporary working-class studies" (Lavelle 2012:97). Nevertheless, the question of what makes a text specifically "working-class" is much debated by scholars affiliated with contemporary U.S. working-class studies, revealing ideological fault lines often expressed in essentialist assumptions and definitions of both "the working class" and "literature."

Historically, U.S. working-class literature has often been understood as a literature born from writers of the working class.[1] For many critics, the authorial background of a writer has become an essential criterion, making the aesthetic qualities

1 We have consciously used the term U.S. working-class literature instead of "American" because the nature of our project is to be dialogic with other international working-class literatures. Linguistically, "American" has imperialistic implications; we are interested in exploring national understandings of these literatures by offering and learning from comparative accounts, not by exerting one literature over another. Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy (2007:xx) explain in the introduction of their anthology *American Working-Class Literature* that they use the word "American" to refer to literature produced in the territory that now comprises the United States. Although we understand their reading, we feel as if the term "American" is a loaded term and thus use the term United States throughout the essay.

of a text secondary – categorization depends on whether or not the author speaks "authentically" from a working class position. Peter Hitchcock, in his book *Working-Class Fiction in Theory and Practice*, for example, states the common myopic view of many scholars of working-class literature who have focused almost exclusively on the writer's background: "It is better that the literature of labor be barely 'literature' than for it to be barely 'labor'" (Hitchcock 1989:7).[2] To primarily discuss the literary value or analyze the form of a particular working-class text has been seen as leaving oneself open to accusations of academic elitism and being insensitive to worker's conditions and lives.

This conceptualization of what is considered working-class literature in the United States has deep roots, some of which solidified in response to the most recognized era of this literature: 1930s proletarian fiction. In many of these championed texts, members of the working class were regularly represented as (white) masculine dispossessed workers coming to a revolutionary consciousness. These novels, as contemporary critics such as Philip Rahv and others claim, were often dogmatic in their political views, and aesthetic principles were often discounted for clear, doctrinarian expressions of content.[3] Michael Gold, one of the most celebrated representatives of this strand of proletarian writing, denounced any discussion of the "style" of working-class novels as a bourgeois conceptualization – according to him, proletarians should only have "clarity, force and truth in writing" (Rideout 1992:227). Granville Hicks, while editor for *The Masses* in the 1930s (his political thoughts continued to evolve during his life), believed in the revolutionary potential of formally straightforward writing and criticism and judged works solely for their ideological content. This "revolutionary sentimentalism" of Gold and the "mechanical Marxism" of Hicks, as James Farrell stated in his book *A Note on Literary Criticism*, were attributes of a particular dogmatic "Leftism" that allowed for no gray areas of debate (Farrell 1993: 21-23, 52). These notions would tolerate little movement of the ideological frame – or aesthetic interpretations. This rigidity led many literary critics in future generations to a disavowal of the literature; since the debates were about political content with little regard to form, these texts did not have a literary legacy to call home and were (mostly) ignored.

This dominant view of U.S. working-class literature is certainly not the only view that has been expressed. Several critics – Michel Denning, Cary Nelson and Barbara Foley being the most prominent – have rightly and expertly shown that there were many working-class authors who consciously used Modernist techniques and experimentation to forward their politics. Foley's groundbreaking *Radical Representations* methodically explores the aesthetic experimentation in literary proletarianism, dismissing the commonly held idea that these writers were Communist hacks following step-by-step propagandist formulas. Rather, through literary and historical analysis, Foley shows how the Communist-led Left "established certain parameters of the discourse in which these writers were engaged" (Foley 1993:xi), while also allowing for large spaces of experimentation and ideological interpretation within these texts.[4] Denning, in his classic exploration of the artistic Left in *The Cultural Front*, details the many guises and varied genres of writing in the twentieth century that was deeply concerned with class issues, showing how experimentation in form allowed for new ways to talk about the working class. This expansive view had a cumulative effect upon both the politics of the day as well as Modernist writing: instead of shielding themselves from Modernism, Nelson, in his reading of American poetry from 1910-1945, sees a dialectic relationship between the two stating, "Modernism, in short, is beginning to work changes on and be shaped by the poetry of the American left" (Nelson

2 Hitchcock attempts to have a wider definition of working-class literature, even stating that he does not wish to have a "monopoly of class effects to writers born within the working class" (Hitchcock 1989:106). He states throughout his treatise, however, that there is a categorical difference that is based on the class origins of the writer.

3 See Philip Rahv, "The Novelist as Partisan," Partisan Review 1 (April-May 1934):50-52. In this article, Rahv famously dismissed much of proletarian literature claiming it as merely "the literature of a party disguised as a literature of a class." Barbara Foley in *Radical Representations* (1993), however, questions this popularly held belief and methodically explores the various nuances of radical literature produced during the Great Depression.

4 This is further explored in Alan Wald's trilogy of 20th century U.S. communist literary modernism. For an in depth reading of many of these texts – with a focus on the author's biography – see *Exiles from a Future* (2001), *Trinity of Passion* (2007), and *American Night* (2012).

1989:136-137). What these three critics – and others – reveal is that the championing of the revolutionary white male worker in proletarian novels was only one particular strand of working-class literature and that Modernist literary techniques influenced (and were influenced by) writers of working-class texts, expanding and reinventing this literature.[5]

However, the perceived legacy that places a particular vision of proletarian literature as the epitome of working-class writing has certainly left a shadow over any attempts to define and examine U.S.-based working-class literature, and the view of this literature as a literature defined primarily by the identity of its authors is still prevalent in current debates. As Sonali Perera states, "too often, in literature and criticism alike, the working-class is seen and represented as masculine, metropolitan and revolutionary" (Perera 2014:80).

This focus on a fetishized working-class identity has gone hand in hand with a relative downplaying of questions about form, style and aesthetics, which can be illustrated by the following case: In 1995, under the auspices of Alan Wald, the University of Illinois Press began publishing the *Radical Novels, Reconsidered* series. Publishing texts of forgotten works from such authors as Abraham Polonsky, Grace Lumpkin, Anzia Yexierska, Alfred Maund, Alexander Saxton, among many others, the series reissued radical texts first published from the 1920s through the 1950s to help solidify and emphasize the Left's radical tradition. As Wald states, "the Left can become strengthened by understanding its own legacy in all its richness" (Wald 1998). For some critics, though, the republishing of these "lost" works, although clearly displaying the strong roots of the Left's political legacy, had little to do with emphasizing a literary tradition. Werner Sollors, reviewing, in the *Journal of American Ethnic History*, four of the inaugural books republished in 1995/1996 attacks the rationale for the whole series on aesthetic principles. Asserting that they are "B" novels without "defensible aesthetic claims," he attacks the series as a politically motivated, misguided restructuring of the U.S. canon without concerns for aesthetic principles (Sollors 1998:100). While Sollors' vitriolic remarks are testament to the missiles thrown in the canon wars of the 1990s and are clearly hyperbolic (the series was praised by others), it does speak to the way these novels were introduced and narrativized by its supporters. These texts were testament to the Left's vibrant history but there has not been a sustained effort to connect them to a *literary* tradition.

This focus on politics, rather than on aesthetics, is one of the reasons for the marginalization of working-class literature in the United States. As Jim Daniels observes about this literature in an article on working-class poetry in *New Working-Class Studies*, this is a genre that exists "on the margins" (Daniels 2005:134) of American literature, and in the very first sentence of their foreword to their anthology *American Working-Class Literature* Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy highlight that this literature constitutes a tradition that is often "concealed" (Coles and Zandy 2007:xv). If working-class literature is primarily discussed in terms of its *politics*, then it is hardly surprising that it attracts limited attention as a *literary* phenomenon.

The relative downplaying of questions about aesthetics and literariness in relation to questions about working-class experience and politics in constructions of U.S. working-class literature has also marginalized working-class literature in literary studies, where it has received only limited critical attention and, hence, remained a relatively vague phenomenon. The latter has been pointed out by, among others, Janet Zandy – one of the most prolific scholars of working-class literature within the field of contemporary working-class studies – in her anthology *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writing*, where she claims that despite "the spate of critical theories of the past twenty years, we do not yet have a critical construct that does justice to American working-class literature" (1993:10) and that we (hence?) do not even "know where the borders of working-class literature are" (1993:7–8). The same point has since been iterated by several

5 There are certainly other scholars who do focus on experimentation and minority voices within proletarian literature. Paula Rabinowitz in *Labor and Desire* (1991), explores the way modernist techniques allowed for female sensibilities and voices to enter into proletarian fiction. *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers*, 1930-1940 edited by Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz (1987) displays many of these techniques.

other scholars, for example by Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson who in their article "Toward a Theory Of Working Class Literature" argued that there is "no agreed-upon definition of working-class literature" (Christopher and Whitson 1999:71), and by Paul Lauter who in an article with the telling title "Under Construction: Working-Class Writing" underscores that "the definitional problem continues to haunt" (Lauter 2005:64). Fifteen years after first highlighting that the borders of working-class literature were unknown, Zandy admitted that, despite the increasing interest in working-class literature within the field of working-class studies, little had changed and that the definition of this phenomenon was still in the making: "Arguments about definitions of what is or isn't working-class literature … continue and are coterminous with the development of working-class studies" (Zandy 2008:46).[6]

This definition (un)making seems to go hand in hand with some resistance within contemporary U.S. working-class studies to the very idea of defining the phenomenon of working-class literature, and especially to defining it in academic theoretical terms. In *Calling Home*, for example, Zandy argues that to "try to fit this literature into the neat academic categories of genre or period is like squeezing a wilderness into a cultivated park" (Zandy 1993:9). A similar argument is put forward by Christopher and Whitson who argue that "working-class literary productions" are "too radically diverse to be encompassed by a single grand theory" and advocate the development of an eclectic theory "aligned closely to the literature by writers with origins in the working class, a theory aligned with both our intellectual orientations and our gut feelings" (Christopher and Whitson 1999:73). In her book *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*, Zandy takes this argument even further, claiming that "a priori definitional approaches" are an unsuitable starting point for the study of working-class literature, advocating for a move from "what *is*" to "what *makes* a text working class," which, she argues, would make it possible to "discern the indicators that enable a reader to recognize a working-class text and to identify strategic elements … that shape working-class writings" (Zandy 2004:85). Thus she proposes, much like Christopher and Whitson, that "we build theoretical models out of attentive observation of the texts themselves," which "may involve quieting the theoretical voice and *listening* to the voices of working-class people themselves" (Zandy 2004:85).

Zandy's plea for listening to the voices of working-class people indicates that she primarily views working-class literature as a literature produced by members of the working class that expresses working-class experience, stating clearly in *Hands* that this literature "centers the lived, material experience of working-class people" (Zandy 2004:90). This connection between working-class literature and working-class experience is emphasized in much of Zandy's writing. In *Calling Home*, for example, she claims that literature "is a powerful resource for understanding class difference" and that the "writers in this anthology *represent* the diversity of working-class experience, its contradictions and commonalities" (Zandy 1993:5), and in the article "The Making of American Working-Class Literature" she highlights that working-class writers expose "the lived experiences of working people" (Zandy 2008:45).

Christopher and Whitson also explicitly define working-class literature as a literature expressing working-class experience, as evidenced by their definition of "the literature of the working class" as "works written by working-class people about their class experience" as well as by their claim that "working class literature reproduces, in literary form, the conditions of the working class" (Christopher and Whitson 1999:71). In her introduction to the anthology *Critical Approaches to American Working-Class Literature,* Tokarczyk underlines that this is indeed the dominant view within contemporary U.S. working-class studies by arguing that, within this field, working-class literature is seen as a cultural manifestation of "working-class life" and that "critics of working-class literature often focus on unearthing working-class writers' representations of the lived experience of class" (Tokarczyk 2011:5). That she herself also subscribes to this view is evidenced by, among other things, her claim that "working-class literature is grounded in the experiences of working-class people" (Tokarczyk 2011:6).

6 Wald counters many of these types of criticism in his trilogy.

This focus on working-class literature as an expression or manifestation of working-class life or experience does not mean that scholars within the field of U.S. working-class studies completely ignore its *literary* dimensions. Christopher and Whitson argue that "working class literature reproduces, *in literary form*, the conditions of the working class" (1999:71, emphasis added). Tokarczyk explicitly underlines that working-class literature is "an *artistic* expression of working-class people's lives with its own *aesthetic* and themes" (Tokarczyk 2011:5), and Lauter argues that "we need always to consider the inescapable literariness of what is involved in the second term of our subject, 'working-class *writing*'" (Lauter 2005:73). Nevertheless, within contemporary U.S. working-class studies, there is clearly a reluctance to analyze, discuss, and evaluate these texts as literary objects. Coles and Zandy, for example, stress that the most important feature of the tradition of working-class literature is that it gives witness to "the ways in which working-class people have lived, labored, and given meaning to their experiences" (Coles and Zandy 2007:xix) and in "The Making of American Working-Class Literature" Zandy describes it as "a line of American literary history that emerges from the lives of workers" (Zandy 2008:42).

For critics like Christopher and Whitson, this focus on the a priori authenticity of the working class writer calls for an overhaul of the way academics analyze literature stating that "working-class literature, at base, cannot simply fit into the status quo of literary criticism" (Christopher and Whitson 1999:72). Their view, which uses an exceptionalist framing of this literature, assumes that literary studies – especially those with theoretical bases – are not able to properly analyze working-class literature. Thus, the conceptualization of working-class literature in contemporary U.S. working-class studies tends, generally, towards a view that constructs it as an expression or testimony of working-class life, experience, and politics, rather than as a literary-aesthetic phenomenon. As John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon explain in their introduction to the anthology *New Working-Class Studies* "cultural representations" such as working-class literature are viewed as "sources for understanding working-class experience" (Russo and Linkon 2005:1). Literature about and by the working class – with its own exceptional theoretical models that places it outside of other literary genres and phenomenon – is therefore read as expressions of working-class life, rather than part of a literary history. Below, we will explain why we think this limits and distorts our understanding of working-class literature. First, however, we will give an account of the history of Swedish working-class literature and its conceptualization within the study of Swedish literary history.

Working-Class Literature in the Study of Swedish Literary History

In Sweden, working-class literature has often – just like in the United States – been viewed as an expression of working-class experience or ideology, and, historically, the most important criterion for defining the phenomenon of working-class literature has been that authors born of the working class have written it. Nevertheless, in Sweden, there has been a relatively higher interest than in the U.S. in working-class literature as a *literary* phenomenon. The most important reason for this is that working-class literature is recognized as a central strand in modern Swedish literature.

Early in the twentieth century, working-class literature had a breakthrough in the site of national literature and at least since the 1930s it has, as has been pointed out by several scholars, constituted a central strand in Swedish literature. This acceptance of working-class literature both by large audiences and by critics and scholars is a very different experience than what has happened in the United States. Lars Furuland and Johan Svedjedal argue, for example, that, in Sweden, working-class literature has been a "broad literary current … , stronger and more diverse than in the other Nordic countries, England, France, Germany and Russia" (Furuland and Svedjedal 2006:25), and Rochelle Wright claims that the "dominance, in the literary profile of the 1930s and well beyond, of writers who not only came from humble backgrounds but chose to write about their class of origin is ... a unique phenomenon in world literature" (Wright 1996:334).

The importance of working-class literature in modern Swedish literature is evidenced, for example,

by the facts that several working-class writers were elected members of the Swedish Academy, or that, in 1974, two of them – Harry Martinson and Eyvind Johnson – were awarded the Nobel prize for literature in their capacity as representatives for the tradition of Swedish working-class literature (Nilsson 2014a:21–22). Besides these prestigious awards, working-class writers have also been extremely successful on the Swedish book market. After World War II, for example, many of these writers reached mass audiences, mainly through inexpensive paperback editions of their works distributed by cultural organizations affiliated with the labour movement. Many sold several hundred thousand books during the 1940s and the 1950s, and some of them even managed to sell over a million copies, in a country that, in 1950, had around 7 million inhabitants (Nilsson 2006:75–76). That these successes have given working-class literature a prominent position in modern Swedish literature is demonstrated by the fact that the volume of the standard work on Swedish literary history covering all types of national literature in the period 1920–1950 is sub-titled "Modernists and Working-Class Writers" (Lönnroth and Delblanc 1993). Still today, working-class literature – represented, for example, by such celebrated contemporary authors as Kristian Lundberg, Johan Jönson, and Susanna Alakoski – remains an important stand in Swedish literature (Nilsson 2014a:23). Given these successes in the site of literature – among critics, scholars, and readers – it is hardly surprising that it has attracted attention *as literature*.

Lars Furuland has made the most significant contribution to the academic study of Swedish working-class literature. In his seminal study of the representation of the rural proletariat in Swedish literature before 1920, he defined working-class literature as "belletristic works who thematize conditions in the working class and are written by authors who in one way or the other have been affiliated with the labor movement" (Furuland 1962:14).[7] This definition – which for a long time constituted the conceptual foundation for the study of Swedish working-class literature – emphasizes both working-class literature's thematization (but, perhaps, not *expression*) of working-class life and – through the criterion that working-class writers should be affiliated with the labour movement – its *political* dimensions. The latter aspect was also further emphasized in a later version of Furuland's definition, which stressed that working-class literature should be understood as literature "about," "by," and "for" workers, and argued that the most important criterion was its ideological "content" or "anchorage" (Furuland 1984:15).

This construction of working-class literature as a literature ideologically affiliated with the labour movement is, at least in part, a result of the fact that it first came into existence in Sweden as a literature produced, distributed and read exclusively within this movement, aiming at propagating its political ideals and contributing to the dissemination of socialist class consciousness among workers.[8] However, after its breakthrough in the site of national literature, Swedish working-class literature has undergone substantial transformations. The working-class writers who became popular outside the labour movement in the early twentieth century did not – as their predecessors in the labour movement's counter public sphere had done – write propagandistic works. Instead they turned to more conventional genres within modern literature, such as realistic prose fiction. Thereafter, Swedish working-class literature has been conditioned more by dominant *literary* practices than by labour-movement politics. Whether this is indicative of working-class writers abandoning "proletarian" ideals and adapting to hegemonic "bourgeois" aesthetics, or if they have contributed to a "democratization," or even "proletarization," of Swedish literature is a question that has been the object of scholarly dispute for a long time. In the 1970's, for example, the critic Arne Melberg claimed that the breakthrough for working-class literature in national literature was a result of it becoming "absorbed by bourgeois institutions" and integrated into "bourgeois forms of production" (Melberg 1973:85, 101). A similar argument – resembling the one put forward by Michael Gold in the U.S. – was made by the critic

7 All translations of non-English quotations are our own.

8 A good overview of this early period in the history of Swedish working-class literature is given by Brigitte Mral (1985) in her *Frühe schwedische Arbeiterdichtung*, in which she analyzes the poetry published in the Swedish labor movement's newspapers 1882–1900.

Birgitta Holm, who argued that when working-class writers entered the bourgeois institution of literature, this led to "proletarian experience" becoming subordinate to "bourgeois self-understanding" (Holm 1975:247). Others, however, have reasoned that working-class writers have affected real changes in Swedish literature including Lennart Thorsell's (1957) argument that working-class writers contributed to the democratization of Swedish literature. When awarding Martinson and Johnson the Nobel prize, Ragnar Gierow of the Swedish Academy pronounced that "the many proletarian writers or working-class poets" who, on a wide front, "broke into" Swedish literature had done so, not in order to "ravish" it, but to "to enrich it with their fortunes" (Gierow n.d.).

Regardless of how one views the effects working-class literature may have had on Swedish literature in general, or how one interprets working-class literature's evolution from the labour movement's counter public sphere to the site of national literature, one cannot ignore the fact that it has become recognized as an integral part of Swedish literature and that this has made necessary changes to its conceptualization. Furuland, for example is aware that his original definition of the phenomenon of working-class literature is relevant only for working-class literature from a specific historical period, and that it is necessary to modify and expand it as this literature continues to develop.[9] In his last extended project on working-class literature – the 560-page "handbook" *Svensk arbetarlitteratur* [Swedish Working-Class Literature], co-authored with Johan Svedjedal – Furuland explicitly comments on this:

> However, the author's background alone cannot determine membership in the literary strand that we aim to delineate here. It would even place an author like Martin Koch (who came from the poor petit bourgeoisie) outside of working-class literature – despite his conscious choice of motifs from the working class and his promotion of socialism. [Furuland and Svedjedal 2006:25][10]

Nilsson (2006:12) has also demonstrated that Furuland's original definition might even reject the most iconic Swedish working-class author, namely Ivar Lo-Johansson, and argued that this discrepancy is one of the fundamental reasons for Furuland's revisions of his definition.

Thus, Swedish working-class literature has changed over time. After originating as a political literature existing mainly within the labour movement, it has evolved into an important strand within national Swedish literature. This has, in turn, made necessary changes in its conceptualization and definition.[11] The most important aspect of this change has been that more emphasis has been put on its literariness.

In fact, already in Furuland's original definition it is highlighted – by way of defining it as "belletristic works" – that working-class literature is a *literary* phenomenon. In the years following Furuland's groundbreaking work, many researchers have also emphasized working-class literature's literariness. One good example of this is Conny Svensson's (1974) study on the role of symbolism and allegory in five novels by working-class writer Gustav Hedenvind-Eriksson. In the substantial contemporary research on Swedish working-class literature – which has followed the emergence in recent years of a new generation of working-class writers, and a general increase in interest among readers in working-class literature – this focus on literariness has become increasingly important.[12] Central themes in this research are, for example: analyses of narrative and rhetorical structures in

9 The definition proposed by Furuland in 1962 was made within the context of a research project on older working-class writing. The author given most attention by Furuland (1962:304) in this project is Alfred Kämpe, who he describes as a "typical proletarian writer." However, in immediate connection to this characterization, Furuland (1962:304–305) also argues that this term is not applicable to later generations of authors.

10 Martin Koch is one of the pioneers of Swedish working-class literature, and his novel *Arbetare* [Workers] from 1912 is generally considered to be a landmark in the history of this literature.

11 Scholars who have not revised their definitions have come to the conclusion that the tradition has ended. Philippe Bouquet (1990:31), for example, argues that the generation of working-class writers emerging in Sweden in the 1930s was the very last one. This narrow view of working-class literature is reminiscent of some U.S. scholars' view of working-class literature who understand proletarian fiction during the 1930s as the epitome of working-class writing.

12 A good overview of current research on Swedish working-class literature can be found in Jonsson et al. 2011 and Jonsson et al. 2014. Both of these volumes are in Swedish. Two of few recent English-language research publications on Swedish working-class literature are Nilsson 2011 and Nilsson 2014a. The latter of these contains a short historical overview of the tradition of Swedish working-class literature.

working-class literature (Vulovic 2009; Forsberg-Malm 2011), working-class writers' adaptations of different literary genres (Agrell 2014; Arping 2014; Testad 2014), the reception of working-class literature by literary critics (Johansson 2011; Johansson 2013; Johansson 2014), and working-class writers' attempts to develop literary styles adequate for the promotion of socialist class consciousness or the critique of class injustice (Agrell 2011; Öhman 2011; Nilsson 2014b; Hamm 2014).

The increased focus on its literariness within the academic study of Swedish working-class literature has not resulted in its political dimensions, or its role as a source of information about working-class life and history, being made invisible. On the contrary, questions about, for example, the representation in working-class literature of experiences of class and gender are frequently addressed (See, for example, Landgren 2014; Jonsson 2014; Rosenberg 2011; Mischliwietz 2014a; Mischliwietz 2014b, Arping 2011). These discussions, however, are often marked by a high degree of consciousness about the importance to analyze working-class literature *as literature*. Beata Agrell's (2011) analysis of the construction of a "proletarian self-understanding" in working-class literature from the early twentieth century, for example, is intertwined with analyses of both the role played by working-class writers in Swedish literary life during this time and working-class writers' appropriation of various (originally non-proletarian) literary genres. Another example is Åsa Arping's analysis of contemporary autobiographical working-class literature, which stresses the fictionalization in this literature of working-class experiences and argues that working-class writers self-consciously make visible "the bourgeois tradition of narratives about individual Bildung and development that have become almost naturalized in our culture" (Arping 2014:238).

This double focus on literariness and experience/politics is also emphasized by Nilsson. Already in the title of his book *Literature and Class: Aesthetical-Political Strategies in Modern Swedish Working-Class Literature*, he highlights that literary aesthetics and politics are intimately connected, concluding that this literature's interventions into "cultural class struggle" – its bringing to the fore of "questions about class," and its contribution to "the formulation of various forms of critique of class injustices" – have always been "mediated through the site of literature" and that they therefore have also been "interventions in aesthetic struggles within this site" (Nilsson 2014a:159).

The Ideological and Historical Context of the Study of Working-Class Literatures in the U.S and Sweden Respectively

As seen above, there has been a marked divergence in the way that working-class literatures have been recognized and conceptualized in Sweden and the United States respectively, especially after World War II. Whereas Swedish working-class literature has been recognized as a central strand in modern Swedish literature and – hence – has received a fair amount of attention from scholars of literature, in the U.S , working-class literature is, as Zandy has pointed out, "still struggling for name recognition in the academic marketplace" (Zandy 2004: 84). Below we will make a brief exploration of some of the institutional conditions responsible for these differences.

Historically, working-class literature in the United States has often been (or been viewed as being) closely affiliated with political movements on the Left (especially communist organizations).[13] This affiliation of working-class literature and left-wing or communist politics became a problem for scholars because of the long reach of the Cold War in U.S. universities. Although McCarthy's fanatical search for communists made international news in the 1950s, the fear of "Reds" in the classroom and university laboratories, ginned up by sensationalist articles in the Hearst press during the Great Depression, was articulated by many congressmen – and one of the reasons why twenty-one states had mandatory loyalty oath programs in place for all government employees by the middle of the 1930s (Schrecker 1986:68). But it was the 1940–42 Rapp-Coudert committee of the New York State legislature designed to identify the extent of communist intru-

13 Several scholars, for example, have argued that 1930s proletarian literature had close ties to the Communist Party. One example of this is Barbara Foley's claim on the very first page in *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* this literature was part of a "Communist-led cultural movement" (Foley 1993:vii). Alan Wald's trilogy (as discussed above), also explores the Left's connection to Communism.

sion in New York City public education that laid the foundation for McCarthy – and put pressure on universities to control radical professors and monitor their teaching and research. The committee was public theater intended to have radicals self-inflict their own punishment by naming names; the first public witness-informer was Bernard Grebanier, an assistant professor of English at Barnard College, who supplied thirty names of associates whom he claimed were Communist sympathizers (Kutulus 1995:203–04). The first shot across the academic bow of higher education, thus, used a professor of English as ammunition. Although the Committee did not particularly target Humanities faculty, English professors were certainly within the crosshairs of state and federal committees. As David Montgomery states, "The Cold War reshaped university structures and the content of academic disciplines, just as it penetrated the whole fabric of political and intellectual life" (Chomsky et al. 1997:xii).

Universities were therefore on the radar of Cold War committees designed to protect the United States from radical intrusions and cooption. Just as importantly, though, during this time, universities were concurrently becoming central "weapons" in the Cold War effort. Federal monies poured into universities – and while much went to the hard sciences that were designing actual weapons – the federal government also supported many programs in the humanities, including "area studies, language, graduate fellowships, and building construction" (Levin 2013:11). According to Richard Ohmann, in his thoughtful personal reflection on English departments' complicity during the Cold War, "Literary studies were an integral, if minor part, of the military-industrial-government-university complex, and claimed a residual share of the spoils" (Chomsky et al. 1997:80). The result was that English departments, who benefited from the federal monies both in direct and indirect ways, "struck an ambivalent posture of disengagement from and antagonism toward the postwar project of untrammeled capitalist development and U.S. dominance in the world. Politics – including focus on class inequalities – were isolated from literary criticism within most English literature classes (Chomsky et al. 1997:77, 85).[14]

English departments did not just become ambivalent to politics because they were benefiting financially, they also did so for self-protection. The Rapp-Coudert committee's actions prophesized what would soon become a televised hunt for "Reds" in government positions – including universities. Truman's Executive Order 9835 that barred anyone "sympathetic" to Communists, fascists or other totalitarians from holding any government positions was the legal foundation for the McCarthy hearings. While again, these hearings mostly focused on university professors of the sciences, English university professors, including Saul Maloff, Tom McGrath, Harry Slochower, Margaret Schlaunch and F.O. Mattiessen, were victims of McCarthy witch hunts (Schrecker 1986:259, 285-86, 294, 305). The actual number of English professors who lost jobs or whose careers were derailed are impossible to discover – within the veiled world of academia, hiring and firing decisions are translucent at best – but most importantly, the Cold War created an atmosphere of fear where any mention of class politics outside the purview of hegemonic national discourse could lead to unofficial academic banishment. McCarthyism, as Ellen Schrecker contends, was a bloodless repression that was "nonviolent and consensual" where government agencies identified or insinuated potential threats and university employers, in self-serving ideological lockstep, would fire them or not renew contracts (Schrecker 1986:9).

The reverberations of the Cold War had a lasting effect that survived the explosiveness of the national protest movements on campuses in the 1960s. The New Left, which was always a minority movement even on the most radical of campuses (Levin 2013:13), was no match for the administrative waves of educational "reform" crashing on university institutions. New Criticism, a practice that rejected a text's social history and safely negotiated politically unsavory questions by ignoring them, reigned

14 Interestingly, the skills taught within these courses were sometimes used in support of nationalistic narratives: for example, in 1955, the U.S. government published a manual entitled, "How to spot a Communist" that emphasized literary critical skills to help protect the security of the nation. See http://www.openculture.com/2013/07/how_to_spot_a_communist.html.

supreme in many English departments. In the post 1970s, "practical education" continued to be favoured on campuses across the U.S. and knowledge acquisition that was "technical, adaptable and perhaps, most important, responsive to market pressures," was lauded with financial and systematic security over fields promoting abstract critical thinking skills (Newfield 2008:8). The Cold War's focus in the 1950s on university education as a key to protecting the national security of the U.S. morphed in the last thirty years of the millennium as a tool to help create particular types of knowledge in a postindustrial society. As funding for public education was slashed repeatedly in the new millennium, and universities chased after private funding and governmental grants both of whom embraced neoliberalism's market-focused policies, humanities in general, and English departments specifically, have seen dwindling financial and academic opportunities. Unlike in Sweden where working-class literature became part of a national literature and therefore a legitimate object of study at literature departments, in the U.S., this literature – when taught at all – stayed in the margins.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, multiculturalism became a crucial and polarizing discussion in U.S. academia and, as a result, area studies raised in stature and importance on campuses throughout the United States. Issues of race, gender and sexuality became independent areas of inquiry within their own institutional departments. Class, when mentioned at all, was often seen as a placeholder for white, industrial males (Perera 2014:80). This practice of interchanging "class" with "whiteness," is a process that David Roediger (1999) shows in *The Wages of Whiteness* had origins dating from at least the 19th century. As Roediger's analysis of the antebellum labour movement shows, labour organizations and movements saw slavery as a denial of freedom. At the same time, though, they also framed slavery as a degradation of individuals within slavery – slaves and former slaves were unfit for work and embodying republican values. So although labour literature made frequent comparisons between labourers and slaves ("wage slaves" was a popular rallying cry), white workers distanced themselves from the black population and their perceived weaknesses (46). According to this logic, slavery degraded beyond hope non-whites; capitalism oppressed white workers but with opportunity, they could take their proper economic and social place within society. As Schocket (2006) states, "for American writers who saw racial formation and class formation arise at the same period, race and class have never been fully separable. Blackness is used to give evidence of class difference, which then instigates a search for what lies beneath. Inevitably, what lies beneath is a whiteness that can be claimed as common property in a nation economically divided" (64).[15] For Schocket and Roediger, the literature of labour of the nineteenth century celebrates a whiteness that casts a long shadow into the twentieth century. Working-class literature in the late twentieth century, therefore, often became narrowly conceived to represent the working class as an often romanticized, nostalgic triumph of white, industrial male literature.

This narrowing of the narrative frame, as John Lavelle states, left "any study of the working class in a very precarious state" (Lavelle 2012:56). Walter Benn Michaels' polemic, *The Trouble with Diversity*, states that identity politics have become a central issue for left-leaning academics and diversity "has become virtually a sacred concept in American life" (Michaels 2007:12). But while differences are celebrated, class structure and inequality – which is inherently about oppression and power hierarchies – is seen as out-of-focus within the narrative glare of individual rights based discourse. For Michaels, diversity "is at best a distraction and at worst an essentially reactionary position" (2007:16); when exploring working-class literature in the U.S., class analysis becomes a corollary within area studies' programs that focus on identity politics, not as a driving force when theoretically examining texts.[16]

Tillie Olsen, in the epigraph of *Yonnondio*, references the Whitman poem of the same title in order to emphasize the vanishing of a whole class of poor, working class people: "unlimn'ed they disappear." As

15 The interweaving of race and class is a significant issue when exploring working-class literature within the U.S. See Shocket (2006) 34-65; Roediger (1999), Foley (1993) 170-213; Denning (1997) 323-361.

16 For a Marxist critique of identity politics, see Nilsson 2008.

Laura Hapke's *Labor's Text* (2001) shows, however, there is no shortage of working-class literature in the U.S. to discuss – the lines have been written and continue to be. The current infrastructures and policies within universities combined with the privatization of public universities, unfortunately, makes clear that in the new millennium, higher education is now judged "less by its overall contribution to all forms of development – personal, cultural, social, and economic – than by its ability to deliver new technologies and a plug-in work force to regional businesses" (Newfield 2008:10). Humanities departments and courses are being systematically destabilized and English departments are primarily used as "service" to the rest of the university – the consistent attacks on the tenure system in many states within the United States and the adjunctification of its professoriate show a determined, institutional and systematic devaluing of the profession within university life. In this neoliberal atmosphere, as many departments try to justify their worth in economic and "job-ready" terms, courses centering upon working-class issues are not a high priority.

In Sweden too, the state implemented measures to protect itself against communism during the Cold War. However, whereas U.S. McCarthyism took the form of a public witch-hunt, Swedish state-sponsored anti-communism consisted mainly of covert operations aiming at registering, rather than exposing, communists. Interestingly, the anti-communist efforts in Sweden were to a large extent a cooperation between the state and the social-democratic party, which held power in Sweden during most of the Cold War.

During and after World War II, the Swedish military and the secret police registered 40,000 and 60,000 communists respectively (Kanger and Gummesson 1990:54, 59). Parallel to this, employer organizations (probably) also registered communists, as did the American embassy in Stockholm (Kanger and Gummesson 1990:53, 57, 61).

After the war, the social-democratic party built up an organization, Sapo, which clandestinely registered communists in workplaces (Kanger and Gummesson 1990:24–25). In the late 1950s the party also managed to set up a secret organization within the Swedish military, which, in close collaboration with Sapo, registered some 20,000 communists (Kanger and Gummesson 1990:85-95). This organization – the existence of which was revealed in the early 1970s, but about which little is yet known – is generally referred to as IB, even though that name was not adopted until 1965 (Kanger and Gummesson 1990:96).

The main objective of registering Swedish communists was to help the social democrats to control the trade unions. In addition to this, the registers would make possible the internment of communists in case of a war against the Soviet Union (Kanger and Gummesson 1990:174). Significantly, for our purposes here, there are, however, no indications that literary scholars – regardless of their interest in working-class literature – were targeted by either the social-democratic or the military organizations hunting for communists in Sweden.

One probable reason for this is that Swedish working-class literature was never viewed as being very closely affiliated with communism. As has already been pointed out, Swedish working-class literature has always been ideologically affiliated with the labour movement. This movement, in turn, has been dominated by social democracy, which became the dominant national political force around the year 1930 and led (with the exception of a nine-day period in 1936) every Swedish government from 1932 to 1976. In the general elections during this period, the social democrats received between 42 percent and 54 percent of the votes while also dominating the Swedish trade unions, which until quite recently has organized approximately 85 percent of Swedish workers (today some 70 percent of all employees in Sweden are unionized). In comparison to this, the communist party never was very successful. In the general elections of 1944 it received 10 percent of the votes, but in the 1950s–1970s it only secured electoral support from 3–5 percent of voters, and only occasionally and locally managed to gain influence in the unions.

Among working-class writers, support for labour-movement parties and organizations to the left of the social democracy has probably been higher than in the Swedish working class in general. Above all, many

seem to have sympathized with anarcho-syndicalism (see Furuland et al. 1999). Several well-known writers – such as Josef Kjellgren, Moa Martinson, and Kjell Johansson – have also, at least during certain periods, explicitly supported communism. However, as has been pointed out by Philippe Bouquet (1980:12, 18), Swedish working-class writers have never (at least after this literature entered the site of national literature) functioned as mouthpieces for any labour movement party or organization. This has also never been demanded by any of the labour movement parties in Sweden, including the communist party. Often these parties have also been rather sympathetic to working-class literature in general, regardless of the party sympathies of individual working-class writers. Thus, Swedish working-class literature has been associated with the labour movement in general, rather than with specific labour movement parties.

Because of this, anti-communist politics has not had as important effect on the academic study of working-class literature in Sweden as it may have had in the U.S. What probably has had effects, however, has been what we would like to call Swedish exceptionalism, namely the widespread optimistic idea that the Swedish welfare state had put an end to class antagonism (Nilsson 2014a:27).[17] As has been pointed out by several scholars, interest in working-class literature is generally higher when questions about class are considered to be important in public or literary discourse (Haywood 1997:38, Nilsson 2014a:25). Thus, the idea about Swedish exceptionalism – as well as more recent ideas and national discussions about Sweden having become a post-industrial and multicultural society, where the working class has disappeared and ethnicity has replaced class as the fundamental principle structuring social life, along with the rise of identity politics (See Nilsson 2010:54-79) – could very well result, following the U.S. model, in working-class literature attracting less attention from scholars.[18] But even if the amount of attention given to this literature has certainly varied over time – increasing "during periods characterized by economic and political crises in which the working class and the labor movement have played important roles, and questions about class, consequently, have received increased attention" (Nilsson 2014a:25), while decreasing during periods when the general interest in class has been lower – it has nevertheless always remained a legitimate object of analysis in the study of Swedish literature. This shows that the academic study of literature enjoys relative autonomy, i.e. that it is not directly determined by ideological processes in other social sites. Because of the consecration of working-class literature as a central strand in Swedish literature, scholars doing research on Swedish literary history have continued studying it even during periods when ideas such as that of Swedish exceptionalism have almost emptied the concept of class of meaning in other social sites.

Working-Class Literature and the Concepts of Class and Literature

Above we have outlined narratives of working class literatures and the historical forces that have helped shape the ways these literatures have been conceptualized in the United States and Sweden respectively.

17 Internationally, this kind of exceptionalism is often connected not to Sweden, but to the Scandinavian or Nordic countries in general. Despite certain differences between these countries, this view makes sense. In comparison with the rest of Western Europe, Scandinavia has been characterized by advanced welfare states, a high degree of economic equality, low unemployment etc. The belief that these factors had put an end to class antagonism has also existed in the other Scandinavian countries. However, it is only in Sweden that working-class literature has become recognized as a central strand in national literature. In Norway, for example, there are several "working-class writers," but these have never achieved any "positions" comparable to those held by working-class writers in Sweden, and, hence, never formed any "strong movement" comparable to the one existing in Sweden (Fyksen 2014:134). In Denmark the situation was similar. As has been pointed out by Per-Olof Mattsson (2014:70), the Danish author Martin Andersen Nexø has been viewed as a role model and a symbolic father figure for many Swedish working-class writers. However, in Denmark, no other working-class writer has managed to reach his status, and, like in Norway, no strong tradition of working-class literature has emerged. Thus, the strong tradition of working-class literature in Sweden does appear to be exceptional also in a Scandinavian context.

18 American exceptionalism, which underwrites much of U.S. national politics as well as its critical views of literature, is another reason why working-class literature is marginalized in the U.S. Eric Schocket's polemic in *Vanishing Moments* argues that labor literature – especially when it explicitly denounces the failure of the American dream – reproduces the ideological framework of American exceptionalism. Sympathetic readings and criticism of working-class texts, while it may make the reader feel apathy for individual characters, lead to individualist solutions rather that to questioning systematic ideological issues as that literature's "plot resolutions, tonality and ethical vision place it fully within exceptionalism's prescriptive ideology" (Schocket 2006:5). For Schocket, the solution from the quagmire of liberal but ultimately ineffective readings is to "shift our focus from the referent to the act of signification, from the writers to their discourse, from the content to the frame" (Schocket 2006:7).

The differing conceptualizations bring to the forefront theoretical questions concerning the concepts of class and literature, as well as the relationship between them, which we will now explore before offering specific comparative suggestions to help reframe and define the phenomenon of working-class literature.

The relatively narrow framing of working-class literature dominant in contemporary U.S. working-class studies – i.e. the view that it constitutes, primarily, an expression of working-class life – is problematic in several ways. Firstly, it reverberates of a deterministic understanding of the relationship between 'superstructual' phenomena such as literature and 'infrastructural' phenomena such as class. Secondly, by proclaiming that only working-class people can produce working-class literature (and, perhaps, that authors living working-class lives can only produce working-class literature), adherents of this view insinuate that both the working class and working-class literature are essentialist terms and that both phenomena are defined and bordered.

Regarding the working class, this view has been under debate in academia for a while. Already in the early 1960s E. P. Thompson (1961) stressed – as is made clear in the title of his most important work: *The Making of the English Working Class* – that the working class is always in the making, and in the 1970s, scholars such as Lisa Vogel questioned, from a historical position, the idea of classes being homogenous and bordered categories, stating "at no time were [workers] a monolithic mass sharing a single consciousness" (1977:72). At this present moment, when the nature and materiality of work has significantly changed for a wide spectrum of workers and "the working class" is a socially diverse cross section of the population in advanced capitalist states such as the U.S. – a point elaborated upon by Perera (2014) throughout *No Country* – these essentialist conceptions of the working-class have become objects of an increasingly radical critique. Sally Munt, arguing for a more critical cultural studies view of class, explains, for example, that, "no distinct working class [exists] to be operationalized in academic research ... only many working classes" (Munt 2000:10), reflecting the post-Marxist ideology of Chantal Mouffe who views individuals as bearing the "locus of many subject positions" (Mouffe 2000:90). This focus on individual agency moves away from traditional Marxist views of class and may lead, for some with extreme views on contemporary Capitalism, to make the claim that as a term *class* is so ambiguous that it has little meaning.

For many Marxist critics, however, viewing the multiplicities of class positions and sensibilities expands, rather than devalues, the way we think of the working class. Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, for example, argue that each individual is not embodied by one class but also "occupies a specific subset of other, nonclass positions within comparably overdetermined and contradictory nonclass social processes" (Resnick and Wolff 1989:159-60). For them, this understanding of class doesn't empty the concept of the working class of meaning but, rather, discounts the prevailing understanding among some academics that view the sensibilities of the working class as somehow inherently present within individuals and need only to be displayed. Contrary to this idealized view, Resnick and Wolff (1989) insist that class is a social process that is historically structured and overdetermined. Drawing on a Gramscian notion of hegemony, they transform the concept of class from a foundational ontological category to something more dynamic and fluid. Perera also questions the rigidity of understandings of class among literary scholars – especially in this age of periphery labour – and argues for an understanding of class – and working-class literature – as not a fixed identity or "an object of knowledge but as an aesthetic and political movement that is continuously supplemented" (Perera 2014:13).

Although sharing the terminology of some postmodern and post-subcultural scholars in terms of "multiplicities" and "framing," this view of the working class is different from thinking of class as purely an "identity marker." For Marxist critics like Julian Markels, who explicitly draws on Resnick and Wolff, class is a "hidden process of expropriation rather than a visible identity site" (Markels 2003:22), which leads him to detaching questions about what working-class literature is from questions about authors' identities. The central focus of some working-class studies scholars finding "lost texts" and "authentic" repre-

sentations of the working class can concurrently be deterministic, grounding class in ideological identity politics – a move that Eric Schocket (2006:5-7) describes as reactionary. While certainly invaluable attempts to give voice to the forgotten, if working class literature is only viewed through this lens of "authenticity" rather than aesthetic formulations, working-class literature may become centrally concerned about subjects rather than the processes of class formation and struggle.

Part of the attempt within contemporary U.S. working-class studies to narratively frame working-class literature in terms of identity has been tactical and self-preserving, aiming, as the leaders of the field state clearly, at making possible the invitation of academics interested in class and literature to the so-called academic "diversity banquet" and make class a more visible component in the "complex mosaic of class, race, gender and ethnicity" (Russo and Linkon 2005:13). Building from a cultural and American studies model, along with a committed view of intersectionality first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) that connected power with identity and resistance in the cultural appropriation of everyday life, identity became the site for understanding power relations whereby class is not privileged "over other aspects of identity" (Russo and Linkon 2005:12). Viewed from this position, culture – and literature as one aspect of cultural representation – becomes the access point for understandings of identity.[19]

As an identity site, however, class is revealed and often fetishized in the objectified figures of the representable (or newly "discovered") disenfranchised workers. As Schocket argues in *Vanishing Moments*, "[Class] is stabilized, made available for a process of sympathetic identification that leaves the reader affected by the poverty of the scene but not cognizant of the extent to which this scene is discursively constituting the poverty it seeks to mimetically represent" (Schocket 2006:23). While the affect produced from the readings may lead to sympathetic analyses of the text, it may also disguise the social relations of capital and the process of class formations. Without theoretical models and close analysis of aesthetic forms, these sympathetic readings may focus on the individual subjects in the text, where individualistic ideals are championed. Class becomes objectified but the process of class formation remains invisible. Part of this reason for objectification is that without a clear critical lens to view these texts (or even a willingness by some to theoretically analyze these texts), "literature" becomes subordinate to "working class" and concerns over the practitioner's authenticity become paramount over the critical literary analysis that helps reveal processes of class formation.

In the study of Swedish working-class literature (within the study of Swedish literary history), the dangers of essentialism are not as grave as in contemporary U.S. working-class studies. According to Nilsson, his reception-oriented definition of Swedish working-class literature – that it constitutes a tradition "made up of literary texts, which, at different times, for different reasons, and in different sites, have been defined as working-class literature" – makes visible that it "is not constructed around some stylistic or ideological essence" (Nilsson 2014a:24). What these definitions have had in common is that they have been made when different kinds of "connections between literary texts and the working class have *played a dominant role in the text's reception*" (Nilsson 2014a:24). Sometimes the author's class background has constituted the link between the working class and working-class literature, at other times it has been a thematic focus on working-class life, or the promotion of working-class politics and socialist class consciousness. Thus, in the contemporary discourse about Swedish working-class literature, the phenomenon of the working class is not fixed, but fluid. It can be understood in terms of identity, but also in terms of class politics, class consciousness, etc.

In addition to this, the relative sensitivity in research on Swedish working-class literature to questions about its literariness, and, especially, to the fact that it achieves its political effects by literary means, makes possible a way out of the determinist conceptualization of the relationship between literature and class still underpinning much research within contemporary U.S. working-class studies.

This view has – just like the essentialist understanding of class – been debated by scholars for

19 While there are many scholars who have contested this view, for a particularly clear rebuttal, see Michaels 2007.

decades. Often it has been presented as a fundamental feature of Marxist literary criticism, and critiqued by scholars hostile to Marxist theory. One example of this is Jaques Rancière's rebuttal to Marxist understandings of working-class literature in his works from the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1960s, Rancière was a disciple of Althusser, contributing, for example, to his *Lire le Capital* (*Reading Capital*) from 1965. However, in the 1970s, Rancière broke with both his teacher – whom he subjected to severe criticism in *La Leçon d'Althusser* from 1975 – and with Marxism, and tried to develop an alternative theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between class and culture. One result of this attempt is the book *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, where he analyses (among other things) poetry written and read by workers. In the preface to the new English edition of this work from 2012, Rancière (2012:x) criticizes "the fetishist passion for lived experience" that, according to him, characterizes much (essentialist and determinist) research on labour history and literature. "A narrative," he further claims, "is not a simple relating of facts. It is a way of constructing – or of deconstructing – a world of experience." Thus, the workers' words need to be "removed from their status as evidence or symptoms of a social reality to show them as writing and thinking at work on the construction of a different social world." Even though Rancière is highly critical of (some versions of) Marxist scholarship, we do not view his insistence on not reducing working-class literature to a mere source of information about the social world as being in any way incompatible with Marxist theory. On the contrary, we see it as harmonizing with, for example, the anti-essentialist and dialectical Marxist theory developed by Resnick and Wolff (1996:175), who argue that cultural processes such as literature or theory do not reflect, but contribute to the construction of, reality.

By stressing the *productive* role played by literature for class consciousness and class identity, research on Swedish working-class literature moves away from the view of literature as a 'determined,' 'super-structural' phenomenon, instead opening up possibilities for a re-conceptualization of working-class literature as an *overdetermined* phenomenon actively engaged in the very construction of the phenomenon of class along the lines proposed by Rancière or Resnick and Wolff. For decades, for example, scholars have analyzed how working-class literature contributes to *the production* of class consciousness, as in Brigitte Mral's study of early Swedish working-class literature, where this literature is described as facilitating the "transmission of political consciousness" from the labour movement to labourers (Mral 1985:4). In contemporary research, this productive dimension of working-class literature is emphasized even more. When analyzing the novel *Yarden* [The Yard] by the contemporary Swedish working-class writer Kristian Lundberg, for example, Åsa Arping does not ask how it expresses working-class subjectivity, but how it brings to the fore questions about "what happens to working-class subjectivity and working-class identity" in the era of post-industrialism (Arping 2011:194), and Nilsson (2014a:156) argues that Lundberg self-consciously (and self-reflexively) "presents a radical attempt at rethinking the very concept of the working class in contemporary post-industrial and multicultural Sweden." This perspective is also stressed in the very latest doctoral dissertation on Swedish working-class literature, where Sandra Mischliwiez (2014a) analyzes – drawing on theorists such as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault – how this literature *contributes* to the discursive *construction* of class.

Working-Class Literatures: Comparative Approaches

The differences between the conceptualizations of the phenomenon of working-class literature in U.S. working-class studies and the study of Swedish literary history respectively are not only products of the difference between two fields of research but also of differences between different kinds of working-class literature. As we have emphasized in this article, in Sweden, working-class literature has been consecrated as an important strand within modern literature, whereas U.S. working-class literature still remains a marginalized literary phenomenon. This difference (as well as other differences which have not been explored in this article) brings to the fore a fact of great importance for the understanding of the

phenomenon of working-class literature, namely that it always exists as a historically specific phenomenon, under historically specific conditions.

Within U.S. working-class studies, scholars are often aware of the fact that they focus almost entirely on U.S. working-class literature. They also often display awareness that their discussions of this phenomenon are conditioned by specifically U.S. discourses on class (see, for example, Lauter, 2005:63). Nevertheless, they seldom try to contextualize their studies by referencing research on working-class literatures from other countries. The latter is true also for research on Swedish working-class literature, which seldom is comparative (one of few recent exceptions to this is Nilsson 2014a, which compares Swedish and West-German working-class literatures).

Above, we have established a dialogue between different traditions of research on (different kinds of) working-class literature in order to shed new light on questions about the concept of class and on how to conceptualize the relationship between the working class and working-class literature. One important thing that we have learned from this is that rather than speaking of working-class literature, we need to speak of working-class literatures. This doesn't mean that we want to abandon the concept of working-class literature – it means that we argue that our construction of this concept must be built on comparative analyses of different kinds of working-class literatures, as well as of different conceptualizations of these literatures. Only from such a perspective can the phenomenon of working-class literature(s) tell us something about how the dynamics of class antagonism is mediated in literature, and function as a catalyst for theoretical development. In the following, we will briefly make some further suggestions regarding how the study of working-class literature within both contemporary U.S. working-class studies and research on Swedish literary history could benefit from such a dialogue.

The explicit focus on literariness in research on Swedish working-class literature could very well contribute to a deeper understanding of the question that, according to Tokarczyk (2011:1), should be central in the study of U.S. working-class literature, namely how this literature "works," since even researchers primarily interested in working-class literature's function as expression of working-class life and experience have to take into account that these expressions take on literary forms. Perhaps, though, insights from research on Swedish working-class literature could not only contribute to a better understanding of how U.S. working-class literature "works," but also to how it *doesn't* "work." The fact that Swedish working-class literature has been recognized as a central strand in modern Swedish literature has many causes. However, one of them is without doubt the insistence among writers and critics alike on its literariness. Even though both Swedish working-class writers and critics promoting working-class literature have often distanced themselves from allegedly bourgeois forms of literature, for example, they have always aimed at "'re-functioning," rather than "rejecting" these forms (Nilsson 2014a:98–114). In other words: their commitment to the working class and to working-class politics has not resulted in them turning their back on the literary nature of their endeavours. And this, in turn, has probably contributed to making possible the recognition of Swedish working-class literature as an important *literary* phenomenon.[20] This indicates that the attempts within contemporary U.S. working-class studies to fight the marginalization of working-class literature could very well benefit from a greater emphasis on its literariness. To use examples mentioned previously: Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* has proletarian and communal sensibilities that clearly and openly pronounces its Leftist, radical politics. The author, however, also uses literary Modernist techniques to portray these sensibilities of class inequality and revolutionary desire in ways that are both subtle and imaginative. While Olsen's work could be described as "authentic" because of her working class background, dialectically placing her text within a wide-angle view of the literary tradition of Modernism helps further discus-

20 This argument can be further supported by a comparison of Swedish and West-German working-class literature. In West Germany in the 1970s, many radical critics argued that working-class literature had (or, should have) virtually nothing in common with "bourgeois" literature. Eventually, this led to a rejection – among both radical critics and working-class writers – of literature as such, which, naturally, resulted in a marginalization of working-class literature in the site of national literature (See Nilsson 2014b:64–70, 114).

sions of the meaning(s) of working class literature.[21] The same examination can be done for the texts in the *Radical Novel, Reconsidered* series. For example, Alfred Maund's complicated and powerful 1957 novel, *The Big Boxcar*, adapts the form of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and uses it in contemporaneous ways. Discussing the text as part of an adapted literary tradition while discussing aesthetic choices hand-in-hand with its political content can lead to a fuller and more complicated understanding of this text. Although literary tradition and theory can and certainly have been used as a way to devalue working-class literature, this happens only when used narrowly and poorly. By debating aesthetic principles within a literary tradition, class can be discussed as a process rather than an essentialist category. The overarching focus would not be on particular rediscovered subjects; rather, literary criticism and tradition could be used as tools to discover the processes of class.

In *The Stamp of Class*, a personal exploration of the interrelations of class and poetry, Gary Lenhart (2006) specifically examines the aesthetic choices of working-class writers, connecting their texts to a literary tradition (for example, he focuses on Whitman's (complicated) class views as the beginning of a poetic tradition in U.S. writing), arguing that working-class poetry can be judged on aesthetic foundations. Lenhart, like many of the scholars within contemporary U.S. working-class studies, does seemingly hold rigid views of who can write this type of literature; however, he complicates these views, showing that class is somewhat fluid and thus analytical examinations of the aesthetic principles, along with the content, helps reveal the process of working class sensibilities.

Another feature of the research on Swedish working-class literature that could prove to be productive for research on American working-class literature is its focus on this literature's active interventions into politics – as well as on how these interventions are mediated through literature – rather than on expressions of experience. The argument that this path should be explored has been made by dissident voices within contemporary U.S. working-class studies. Lauter, for example, has pointed out that an "emphasis on expression … makes a kind of essentialist assumption, namely, that working-class sensibility is simply *there* and needs only to be recorded," and advocated a move away from focusing on "expression" towards focusing instead on "the *creation* of working-class sensibilities in texts" (Lauter 2005:72). Schocket's (2006) underlying argument in *Vanishing Moments* (as discussed above) shares Lauter's concern while equally worrying that critics focus too readily on sympathetic readings and not on systematic understandings of class formations and inequality. Perera also argues for an examination of the aesthetic interruptions and experimental formalisms of texts rather than concentrated foci on epochal events and the authors' backgrounds advocating for a "rhetorical analysis of figural logic and the literariness of such texts must be made to supplement the logic of periodized case studies" (Perera 2014:76). Nevertheless, despite these sophisticated readings, much remains to be done.

The main benefit of research on Swedish working-class literature emerging from a dialogue with the research on working-class literature within contemporary U.S. working-class studies would be the possibility of developing a wider conceptualization of its object of study. In Sweden, the study of working-class literature focuses mainly on canonized works. (After all, one central effect of canonization is that works are deemed worthy of academic study.) This of course means that some working-class texts – namely those who enjoy a relatively low status as literature, or are not recognized as literature at all – receive less attention, and this, in turn results in a rather narrow conceptualization of the phenomenon of working-class literature. For example, the vibrant scene for amateur working-class writing centered on Föreningen Arbetarskrivare [The Association of Working-Class Writers] in Sweden has hitherto received almost no attention from scholars, and few attempts have yet been made to analyze the relationships between more traditional working-class literature and contemporary (sub- or popular-) cultural expressions such as hip hop or comics. Older forms of working-class literature – such as the

21 There are certainly critics who have done this type of reading including, Anthony Dawahare (1998), Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson (2007), and Sonali Perera (2014:82–100).

political poetry produced within the labour movement during the late nineteenth century – also attract considerably less attention from scholars of literature than the newer kinds of working-class literature that have been canonized as part of the national literary heritage. In contemporary U.S. working-class studies, on the other hand, the borders of working-class literature are rather porous. *American Working-Class Literature*, for example contains not only traditional literary works, such as poetry and prose fiction, but also examples of oral history, letters, and manifestoes – and explicitly sets out to challenge received notions of literature and literary quality (Coles and Zandy 2007:xxiii). Regardless of what one may think of this very generous definition of the phenomenon of working-class literature, it is obvious that the phenomenon needs to be continually re-negotiated, and that the focus on particular rigid understandings of literariness among researchers interested in Swedish working-class literature may constitute an obstacle to this. A dialogue with contemporary U.S. working-class studies could thus serve as a catalyst for scholars of Swedish working-class literature to develop a broader understanding of what working-class literature is, or what it could be.

Such a dialogue could also help renew the theoretical and methodological paradigm within research on Swedish working-class literature. Even if the focus on literariness in this research certainly has some merits in relation to the focus in contemporary U.S. working-class studies on working-class literature as an expression of, or source of information about, working-class life, it also results in a privileging of certain theories and methods, namely those developed in literary studies. Within the inter-disciplinary field of contemporary U.S. working-class studies, on the other hand, theoretical and methodological inspiration is drawn from a wide range of academic traditions (such as cultural studies, critical race theory etc.). Since – as we hope to have demonstrated in this article – working-class literatures are historically changing phenomena that assume different shapes when approached from different angles, any researcher interested in this phenomenon must be open to trying out new theoretical and methodological perspectives.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay, we have established a dialogue between U.S. and Swedish working-class literatures, as well as between the conceptualizations of working-class literature within contemporary U.S. working-class studies and the study of Swedish literary history respectively. Through comparative explorations of the historical and material forces that act upon each national literature, as well as on the study of it, we are arguing for a more informed and fluid understanding of the phenomenon of working-class literature. Doing so acknowledges that working-class literature is a heterogeneous phenomenon, always in a process of formation. Loosening myopic nationalist understandings of working class literatures in favour of a comparative approach will expand our understandings of them. Keeping in mind Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's statement in *Empire* that "there is no common language of struggles that could 'translate' the particular language of each" (Hardt and Negri 2000:57), what we are suggesting is not one "cosmopolitan" language that flattens out respective literatures but rather a comparative theoretical analysis that allows for new vantage points to read and understand them.

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