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Preface

American Working-Class Literature introduces readers to the long, and sometimes concealed, tradition of writing by and about America's working people. Gathering three hundred texts that span the centuries from colonial times to the early 2000s, this anthology presents a range of working-class literature that includes not only the industrial proletariat, but also enslaved and peonage labor, unpaid domestic work, immigrant and migrant labor, and low-paid service work. The writers are as diverse in race, gender, culture, and region as America's working class itself. Their writing represents the full range of genres: fiction, poetry, drama, memoir, reportage, oratory, manifestos, letters, oral history, song lyrics, and other mixed or hybrid forms of expression. Because the working-class cultural tradition has at times been submerged or suppressed, the anthology includes work by little-known, even anonymous, authors, alongside such writers as Frederick Douglass, Upton Sinclair, Tillie Olsen, Philip Levine, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Leslie Marmon Silko.

Designed for general readers, as well as students of American literature and history, *American Working-Class Literature* is arranged historically in seven parts, each with an introduction to the period and its literature. Individual headnotes provide biographical and historical context for reading. An introduction by the editors traces the tradition of working-class writing in the United States and discusses the uses of such literature in American culture. Additional resources include a bibliography, a timeline of working-class history, and a rich array of illustrations and documentary photographs.

This anthology of labor and literature, class and culture, emerges at a critical juncture in American history. It invites teachers and students to view literary expression through the lens of class at a time when work itself—because of deindustrialization, downsizing, globalization, and technology—is rapidly changing. While organized historically, this collection of working-class writings does not suggest in any way that the class system in America is "history." Instead, it places class differences in a long historical continuum showing how people created culture out of their economic circumstances and social relationships.

The editors have organized this material so that students can begin to explore not only a rich and often hidden literary world, but also the historical contexts for the writing. This anthology also offers an opportunity for students to see the interrelationships and inseparability of class with race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as other cultural differences and layered identities. It invites a deeper appreciation of the ideals and struggles of ordinary American people in all their diversity through their literature.

What about literature? The editors understand "literature" not as an isolated aesthetic object, but as what Raymond Williams called "writing in society," an ongoing process of writing that is practiced widely across social spaces inside and outside the academy.[1] As such, this collection of working-class literature not only expands the canonical understandings of students who are English majors, but offers all students a living connection to a legacy of American culture that may have been hidden from them.

In working with these texts, we as teachers have raised with our students such questions and topics as the following:

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- How might traditional conceptions of "literature"—how it is made, where it comes from, how it is received and used—be revised and expanded to account for this alternative tradition? How do working-class experience, identity, history, and struggle shape literary expression? What cultural work does this literature perform, in terms of what it allows us, as readers and writers, to see, understand, and produce?
- Work as a subject is at the center of much of this literature, as it is or will be at the center of much of our lives. These text allow us to ask: What is work, and what has it been in America? What are the conditions of work and the relationships of the workplace for those who do the hardest and often most physically demanding work in the society?
- Class also shapes all our lives, and consciousness of class informs all the literature that follows. If we understand class as a set of lived relationships shaped by historical forces and expressed in shared culture, we can ask: What are the connections between the work that people do and their experience of class? What does it mean to be a part of America's "working-class majority"?[2] What are the human consequences of the class system?

Responses to the questions just posed can be as multiple and varied as the 150 voices gathered here. Our aim is not to define these fluid and contested terms once and for all, but rather, to stimulate a process of dialogue and interpretation, grounded in the literature and its contexts, that will be continued by readers individually, in groups, and in classrooms. As Constance Coiner wrote, "We want readers to decipher the cultural work done by working-class texts and the ways in which readers are invited to participate in that cultural work."[3]

To initiate and frame this process, the Introduction looks further into the implications of the key terms that name the project of this book—*American*, *working class*, and *literature*—explaining as we go what has motivated us, as teachers and participants in this tradition, to gather these texts into an anthology. We then examine particular processes of "cultural formation" through which working-class literature is produced, received, and used. Finally, we describe the way in which the book itself was constructed and how it is organized so as to make this literature accessible and its contexts clear. Just as we argue that working-class literature enacts collective traditions of reading and writing, we also suggest that studying it can open a much fuller understanding of how culture is formed, sustained, and carried from one generation to another.

In this way, *American Working-Class Literature* is designed to engage readers in working-class literature as an ongoing tradition of cultural expression. The work collected here invites students, teachers, scholars, and writers not only to discover and study this tradition, but also to contribute to it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with any project of this scope, *American Working-Class Literature* is the product not only of the labor of its editors, but also of the published and unpublished writings, oral and cultural traditions, scholarship, critical perceptions, and progressive commitments of too many people to name here. This collection does, in Walt Whitman's phrase, contain multitudes. The final outcome, honed and refined, emerges out of a process of difficult choices and necessary consultation. For detailed suggestions on the contents and design of the book, for their advice and scholarship, we especially thank our editorial advisers John Crawford, Florence Howe, Barbara Smith, Cary Nelson, and Laura Hapke. We are grateful for their knowledge and their support. Oxford University Press would also like to acknowledge the expertise of the scholars who served as outside reviewers on this project and whose counsel informed it final shape: Michael Elliott, Emory University; Gavin

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Jones, Stanford University; Barry Maxwell, Cornell University; Cary Nelson, the University of Illinois; Xiomara A Santamarina, the University of Michigan; and Gustvus Stadler, Haverford College.

Although the majority of headnotes were written by the editors, our thanks are also due to a number scholars who contributed notes on particular authors: Ken Boas, Eric Lief Davin, and Lois Williams at the University of Pittsburgh, John Crawford at West End Press, David Demarest at Carnegie Mellon University, Babak Elahi at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Richard Ellis at University of Birmingham, UK, Ted Genoways at the University of Virginia, John Marsh at the University of Illinois, Florence Howe of The Feminist Press and Larry Smith at Firelands College and Bottom Dog Press.

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Finally, anyone who has completed an anthology of any size is aware of the hard choices that must be made in the face of necessary restrictions that are imposed by a book's length and by the cost of permission to reprint copyrighted material. We regret that we have not been able to include many fine contemporary writers whose work belongs in the tradition of American working-class literature. We invite readers to consider the work of these and other writers, who are listed in the extended bibliography.

We hope this book will contribute to the restoration of a nearly lost literary legacy. We thank the writers, alive and dead, for their work.

Nicholas Coles
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 2005

Janet Zandy
Rochester, New York 2005

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Notes

1. "Writing," in *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1985), 1–7.
2. See Michael Zweig, *The Working-Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, NY: ILR/Cornell University Press, 2000).
3. Constance Coiner, "U.S. Working-Class Women's Fiction: Notes Toward an Overview," in Janet Zandy, ed., *What We Hold in Common: An Introduction to Working-Class Studies* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001), 230.

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Introduction

Class . . . [and] its relationship to works of literature: the great unexamined.
—*Tillie Olsen,* Silences

American Working-Class Literature invites readers to explore a world of writing that until recently has largely been left out of the mainstream literary canon. Workers have been singing, reciting, performing, telling stories, writing, and publishing since the beginning of the settlements that became the United States—and they are still doing so. This collection aims to represent this tradition of more than 250 years of literary witness to the ways in which working-class people have lived, labored, and given meaning to their experiences inside and outside the workplace.

Often during its history, this alternative literary tradition has been hidden or forgotten, marginalized as folklore, or actively suppressed as political propaganda. From time to time, such as during the rise of proletarian struggles in the 1930s, working-class writers found wider audiences and greater opportunities for publication, only to have their work muted or submerged when political backlash suppressed populist expression. Still, culture produced out of the experience and creativity of workers continued, albeit sometimes in fragmentary and unrecognized forms. In the context of the social changes that gathered force through the 1960s, writers, small-press publishers, editors, students, teachers, and activists challenged narrowly constructed views of literature. This anthology of working-class writings owes much to previous work of reclamation and recovery of the cultures of working people, especially those of women and writers of color.[1] But it goes further in that it foregrounds what worker-writer Tillie Olsen calls "the great unexamined": class.

As a continuing tradition of cultural expression, responsive to historical and economic pressures and changes, working-class literature is rooted for the most part outside the academy. This anthology bridges the space between the circumstances of the writing—the site of its original production and reception—and the academic location of reading and engaging with the text in its present form. To connect these worlds, to see how they intersect, and increasingly overlap in contemporary writing, it is important to understand the concepts of "literature" and "working class" in elastic, expansive ways. This anthology represents the full range of genres that writers of and about the working class have drawn upon. These genres include, but are not limited to, fiction, poetry, memoir, reportage, manifestos, letters, oral history, speeches, songs, and plays, as well as mixed forms, such as illustrated poem-cards, oral history "lifelets," and collective "autobiography." Within this range, readers will find selections by well-known American writers of the working class, such as Tillie Olsen, Jack London, and Langston Hughes, alongside work that has been more obscure, local, or ephemeral. Texts have been chosen for both their historical and literary value. This is writing that illuminates key moments, locations, and conditions in working-class life and that does so in language and in forms that are vivid, compelling, and artful. And it meets the standard that Lillian Robinson proposed for literature that is "honest": "[It] should help us learn about the way things are, in as much depth and fullness as possible and by any means necessary."[2]

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Like the term "*literature*," "*working class*" is also defined inclusively here. This is much more than a "blue-collar" collection. Collars—blue, white, pink, brown, or missing entirely—can be misleading signifiers. To categorize this writing as "labor literature," that is, work associated mainly with organized labor movements, is too narrow as well. Although the industrial workplace is well represented, along with the literature of labor struggles, the writers collected here also represent preindustrial workers and those whose labor was appropriated through enslavement, peonage, or indentured servitude.[3] Also included is writing by those who perform unpaid work at home and those who work in the burgeoning service economy with little control over the compensation, conditions, or products of their labor. Defined broadly, in terms of the relative lack of economic and political power, "the great majority of Americans form the working-class," according to economist Michael Zweig. "They are skilled and unskilled, in manufacturing and services, men and women of all races, nationalities, and religions."[4]

Working-class identity is, of course, much more than a matter of one's economic position; it is also a lived experience, a set of relationships, expectations, legacies, and entitlements (or the lack of them). Literature illuminates those experiences and relationships, revealing how class as a shaping force is inseparable from other markers of identity: gender, sexuality, race, region, and ethnicity. The writing included here is therefore as multiethnic and multiracial as the working class itself, and it fully demonstrates how women's work is also "classed" labor.[5] "Working-class" is—of necessity and circumstance—not a single discreet identity, but an uneasy and unstable amalgam of multiple identities. These identities may be hybrid and fluid, but class of birth, the lives and economic circumstances of one's parents, cannot be separated out.[6]

Working-class literature opens to readers the intricate interior world of class experience and sets it in the context of U.S. history as it is lived by the majority of ordinary Americans. As a framework for reading, consider the implications of the key terms:

AMERICAN / WORKING-CLASS / LITERATURE

American

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed.
—*Langston Hughes*

First, a word about the meanings of *American*. Although some of the literature collected here predates 1776, it was all produced or published in the territory that now comprises the United States. However, the concept of national identity is complicated by the fact that many of these early writers did not have access to the rights of citizenship, since some were slaves, indentured servants, illegal immigrants, disenfranchised women, and propertyless men. Cohesive assumptions about national identity are rightly troubled by careful readings of the historical and biographical contexts of these writers. That said, however, this book belongs in the category of "American literature," rather than North American (although its themes of work and class can be read as international, even global). Canadian writing has reluctantly been excluded, as has writing from south of the border, although the thriving Mexican American tradition is well represented.

The working-class literature collected here can be read as constituting an alternative and evolving national narrative, one that consciously begins with the perspective and circumstances of the least powerful and confronts the many paradoxes and contradictions between professed American beliefs and revealed actions. Indeed, many of the writers who were champions of the poor and working class also saw themselves as patriots, drawing

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on Enlightenment ideals of liberty and justice to urge America to be true to itself. Seen as a body of work, working-class literature documents the rift between America's inclusive promise and its exclusionary (for some) historical reality without losing sight of repair and redemption.

One of the foundations of dominant American ideology is that the United States is an essentially classless society. *Class* and *rank* are terms commonly associated with European histories of monarchy and feudalism, and the rigid social stratification that went with them. America, in contrast, is often viewed in "exceptionalist" terms as a land of possibility and mobility for all. Work hard and you will succeed. While it is true that America has produced some rags-to-riches success stories, and that it remains to this day a country where immigrants seek refuge and economic opportunity, the larger historical picture is more complicated and less sanguine. The workers (slave, free, indentured, sojourners, immigrants, male, female, black, brown, and white) who labored to build the country rarely owned or controlled the products of their labor. Those who were not of the elite propertied class had to struggle for their rights within a capitalistic system that offered opportunity for some, but also exploited, suppressed, and limited the freedom of many others. This literature represents and documents the conflict within this system, and, as such, it can be considered a literature of resistance, endurance, and struggle. "All men are created equal" in theory, but not in fact if you were enslaved or propertyless, female or nonwhite. In the words of Langston Hughes's poem "Let America Be America Again":

> O, let my land be a land where Liberty
> Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
> But opportunity is real, and life is free,
> Equality is in the air we breathe.
> (There's never been equality for me,
> Nor freedom in this homeland of the free.) (See page 372)

Hughes is referring, of course, to the historical fact that the United States was founded not only on a set of inspiring ideals and principles, but also on a set of economic and political imperatives. These entailed the violent expropriation of land from the native inhabitants and the forced importation of masses of Africans who were wrenched from their homeland to provide both the resources and the labor power for what would become the most powerful capitalist nation on earth. American history has been shaped by class conflict all along, even in those rare periods that were not marked by slave revolts, labor strikes, race riots, mass demonstrations, or overt political repression.

Working-Class

> There is not a person in this crowd in whom I do not find a part of myself.
> —*Clifford Odets*[7]

If we accept that American society is, in fact, stratified and divided by class, what does it mean to be working-class in the United States? Michael Zweig makes the distinction this way:

> For all their differences, working-class people share a common place in production, where they have relatively little control over the pace and content of their work, and aren't anybody's boss. They produce the wealth of nations, but receive from that wealth only what they can buy with the wages their employers pay them.[8]

There is an argument and a history embedded in the term "working class" that provides an essential framework for the literature presented here. It argues, first of all, that this is a class of people that works, producing the goods and services that build the economy and

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meet social needs. It is also the class that, because of its relative lack of economic and political power, is frequently out of work, as when decisions made in boardrooms result in the closing of a factory or the offshoring of a work center. Working-class life is marked by this insecurity as much as by the often-injurious effects of the job itself.

These effects, and workers' responses to them, reveal themselves in palpable ways in this literature. The writing employs a common language of the body at work, showing how workers face occupational hazards and physical risks that mark the body and the text. The physicality of the job—hard muscles, swollen legs, enlarged hands, or missing fingers—is inscribed on a worker's body, recognizable to other workers. Through its focus on physical labor, this writing presents worlds of work that are usually hidden or not deemed appropriate subjects for literary expression.[9] We see the fatigue of working in kitchens, the dangers of steel production, or the labor of birthing, but we also become more fully aware of an interior consciousness that is rarely attributed to working-class characters, as well as their deep sense of pride in the dignity of work and craft. Through often-lyrical and feisty language, these workers witness the conditions of working-class lives, the power of resistance, and the necessity of struggle—not only in a political or labor context, but also in the dailiness of providing and "making do." These voices emerge despite efforts to silence them through strikebreaking, militias, red-baiting, corporate dominance, and political unwillingness to name the class that, as Zweig makes clear, encompasses the majority of Americans.[10]

The second word in the compound term "*working class*" also carries an argument; it proposes that we live and work not only as individuals, but as members of groups and in relation to the history of our "classed" society. British historian. E. P. Thompson defines class as "an historical phenomenon . . . something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships":

> And class happens when some [people], as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other [people] whose interest are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which [people] are born—or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.[11]

And, of course, embodied in literature. Two lasting and linked common ideas in the history of working-class people, ideas that animate this writing, have been the value of solidarity and the tradition of struggle. At the level of lived history, improvement in material conditions has come largely through processes of mutual aid and shared action, celebrated in songs like Ralph Chaplin's "Solidarity Forever" and Florence Reese's "Which Side Are You On?" (presented in this volume). At the level of the writing, much of this literature necessarily moves away from the stereotyped view of the author as isolated genius. Most of these authors are also workers, and many of them are activists. Their writing challenges reverence for disconnected artistic individualism by providing another kind of model—of reciprocal understanding—and another kind of movement—a collective mobility that improves working and living conditions for many, not just the lucky few.

This, then, is literature by, about, and in the interests of the working class. Many of the more contemporary texts gathered here are by writers who come from working-class families. Some of the authors are self-identified as worker-writers (Jack Conroy, Sue Doro, and Joseph Kalar). Some are second-generation immigrants, educated in America (Pietro DiDonato, Hisaye Yamamoto, and Tomas Rivera). Some are middle-class authors writing in allegiance with workers (Upton Sinclair, Meridel LeSueur, and William Attaway). As poet Thomas McGrath puts it: "All of us live twice at the same time—once uniquely and once representatively. I am interested in those moments when my unique personal life

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intersects with something bigger."[12] Whether narrating their own stories or witnessing for others, all are telling a larger story about work and class in the United States.

Literature

> I do not write mere words. I write of human flesh and blood . . . with roots in experience and conviction.
>
> –*Agnes Smedley*[13]

An important claim of this book is that the working class is not only a class that works—that produces goods and services; it is also a class that produces culture, including literature. "Literature" is, like "working class," an unstable and contested concept. Literary culture as anthologized in texts that are intended for classroom use is frequently presented as either a timeless artifact of the past or as emerging out of the sensibilities of individual writers. As Raymond Williams explains the development of the term *literature* over the past two centuries, its meanings have gradually narrowed from a reference to the broad social practices of reading and writing to the point at which it now marks a set of works of "high imagination," which, because they were particularly well written ("literary"), were taken to be of lasting value.[14] These texts became the centerpieces of the English profession's "canon," repeatedly taught in schools and universities and regularly republished.

In light of this mainstream tradition of what counts as "literary," some readers will find linking the words "working class" and "literature" puzzling. Perhaps more than any other identity-related field of writing—gay, women's, Latino, or African American literature—working-class writing has been subject to questions about literary quality and to assumptions about the limitations of writers' abilities. This anthology challenges these assumptions as signs of class prejudice. Working-class literature—both within the historical contexts in which it was produced and as we read it today—is as lively, engaging, and "well written" as one would find in standard literature textbooks. But it is also unfamiliar and, to some, unsettling.

Readers are challenged, for example, to imagine these texts as not necessarily written in the quiet of "a room of one's own," but rather fitted in around the demands of job, family, and home life. Some of the writing here was composed in jail, on the road, or in a work camp. As Paul Lauter explains the distinctiveness of this literary culture:

> Much working-class art is created and experienced in group situations—not in the privacy of the study, but in the church . . . the work site, the meeting hall, the quilting bee, or the picket line. It is thus rooted in the experiences of a particular group of people facing particular problems at a particular time. It is not conceived as timeless and transcedent.[15]

Consequently, some of this literature stretches the boundaries of what is commonly understood as a "text." It calls on readers to imagine themselves as part of a participatory audience, as witnesses, or as fellow workers by singing along with the ballad, "hearing" the speech being delivered, or "witnessing" factory girls jumping from ninth-floor windows of a blazing factory. It calls on readers to reenter the urgency of the moment, to venture inside the circumstances out of which the text was created.

Although this is a textbook designed for use in academic settings, it is important to recognize that many of the writings, songs, and speeches come from these other labor contexts and were not originally designed for the interpretative and defining frameworks of the academy. Unlike a strictly formalist approach to literature that views a text as an isolated artifact to be admired and analyzed, working-class literature is marked by its roots in ordinary people's experiences of particular places and historical moments. And this affects how the literature is received by its audiences, now and at the time of creation. It is more

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important that the writing have agency and usefulness than that it celebrate solo achievement. Proletarian writer and magazine editor Jack Conroy puts it this way, referring to his 1933 novel *The Disinherited*: "I wanted to be a witness to the times, to show how it feels to be without work and with no prospect of any, and with the imminent fear of starvation, to move people to think about these things, and, what was more important, to do something about it."[16] Working-class literature has use-value as protest, mourning, celebration, affirmation, testimony, call to action, and transformation. At its best, it becomes a form of cultural "commons."

Among the many genres encompassed by working-class literature—poetry, short story, novels, autobiography, memoir, drama, reportage, oratory, manifestos, letters, oral history, documentary, and speeches—songs are a powerful example of this process of collective sensibility and shared use. As John Steinbeck explained in his foreword to the collection *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People*:

> The songs of the working people have always been their sharpest statement and the one statement which cannot be destroyed. You can burn books, buy newspapers, you can guard against handbills and pamphlets, but you cannot prevent singing. . . . You can learn more about people by listening to their songs than in any other way, for into the songs go all the hopes and hurts, the angers, fears, the wants and aspirations.[17]

Woody Guthrie, one of the songwriters who compiled *Hard Hitting Songs*, puts a similar point with characteristic humor: "This song is Copyrighted in U.S., under Seal of Copyright # 154085, for a period of 28 years, and anybody caught singin it without our permission, will be mighty good friends of ourn, cause we don't give a dern. Publish it. Write it. Sing it. Swing to it. Yodel it. We wrote it, that's all we wanted to do."[18]

It is important to note, too, that just as there is no single working-class identity, there is no single working-class literary aesthetic. Because the American working class is large and particularly diverse, its literature is multivocal, embracing the richness of language differences and styles of utterance. Cary Nelson makes it clear in his work on modern American poetry that the working-class and radical traditions are no less innovative in their forms and genres than are works in the "high modernist" tradition.[19] As writers on the margins gave shape to the new content and new awareness engendered by the struggles of working-class people, they rewrote conventions, crossed genre boundaries, and created new experimental forms, such as blues poetry, the proletarian portrait, and the revolutionary sonnet. Let us look more closely at the processes of cultural formation through which this literature is forged.

CULTURAL FORMATIONS

> I feel any writer serves many aspects of culture, including language, but you also serve history, you serve the mythic structure that you're a part of, the people, the earth, and so on—and none of these are separate.
>
> —*Joy Harjo*[20]

As consumers we are accustomed to seeing a finished product. What is visible is the sleek new computer, but not the interior wiring or the human process of design and assembly. In calling attention to cultural formations, we evoke an older craft tradition involving an exposure of the various steps of production—in making a carpet, for example, the carding, cleaning, dyeing of the wool, the design, the work of loom and hand. Culture is, in Raymond Williams's words, "a noun of process," and working-class literature particularly calls for attention to the process of cultural formation.[21] So, then, in noting the differences

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in language and content between, for example, the writing of Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright or Tillie Olsen and Gloria Anzaldúa, we can also trace their shared process of cultural formation—of the carding and weaving necessary between solo voice and communal sensibility.

How working-class writers respond to historical events is one example of cultural formation. Literary antecedents are often not so much dominant canonical "fathers" as events, legacies, histories, and actions that affect working-class people. To illustrate this process, the book includes "clusters" of writing that juxtapose a historical event and the writing produced at that time with later writings by contemporary authors who express particular affinities with this past. For example, in addition to the poetry written shortly after the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in 1911, the Contents includes recent "fire poetry" that reclaims the event in labor history and imaginatively restores the subjectivities of the workers at the time. Other instances of this version of cultural formation—in which historical events and their literary traces serve as provocations for working-class writers who come after—occur in the clusters of writing on the Dust Bowl migration in the 1930s and on the legacy in song and memoir of IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) songwriter and organizer Joe Hill.

Another version of the process of cultural formation can be seen in the ways in which working-class artist have adopted and rewritten traditional forms, especially those that are validated in mainstream culture, and have articulated them to new purposes. Joe Hill was a master at this, especially in the form of parody, as when he rewrote the gospel ballad "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" as a scathing attack on sanctimonious providers of charity in "The Preacher and the Slave":

> You will eat, bye and bye
> In that glorious land in the sky
> Work and pray, live on hay
> You'll get pie in the sky when you die (that's a lie). (See p. 296)

In a more serious vein, Hill's fellow-Wobbly Ralph Chaplin set his 1915 song "Solidarity Forever"—which has since become an unofficial anthem of the American labor movement—to the tune of the Civil War marching song "John Brown's Body," bringing forward the fighting spirit of the struggle for emancipation into a celebration of the strength of union solidarity. Often, the same song will "travel" across historical and geographic contexts, with new verses being patched in to address the new occasion. For example, "Which Side Are You On?" written in the 1930s by Florence Reece, a Kentucky union activist and coal miner's wife (and itself set to the tune of a Baptist hymn), was adapted and sung by Pete Seeger in reference to a longshoremen's strike and again by British socialist folksinger Billy Bragg during a 1980s printers' strike in London.

The conscious use of intertextuality is another form of cultural formation—especially for twentieth-century writers who have had the benefit of higher education and/or wide reading. A writer may quote or cite, explicitly or implicitly, other writers in order to create an internal dialogue with other texts or statements. In John Gligun's poem "Counting Tips," for example, a well-known poem of W. B. Yeats is cited to emphasize the distance between the mother's work world and the son's college education:

> My mother came home from work,
> sat down at the kitchen table
> and counted her tips, nickel by nickel,
> quarter by quarter, dime by dime.
> I sat across from her reading Yeats.
> No moonlight graced our window
> and it wasn't Pre-Raphaelite pallor

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that bleached my mother's cheeks.
I've never been able to forget
the moment she said—
interrupting *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*—
"I told him to go to hell."
A Back Bay businessman
had held back the tip, asking,
"How much do you think you're worth?"
And she'd said, "You can go to hell."
All evening at the Winthrop Room she'd fed
stockbrokers, politicians, mafioso capos.
I was eighteen, a commuter student at BU,
riding the MTA to classes every day
and she was forty-one in her frilly cap,
pink uniform, and white dress shoes.
"He just laughed but his wife was there
and she complained and the boss fired me." (See p. 690)

In addition to the explicit ironic reference to Yeats and his romantic lyric celebrating escape from the grayness of the city, there is a piece of "silent" quoting in the line "No moonlight graced our window," which Gilgun explains as a response to line in Philip Levine's poem "You Can Have It" (see page 670). In Levine's poem, the speaker's brother comes home from work in the middle of the night and collapses into bed:

The moonlight streams in the window
and his unshaven face is whitened
like the face of the moon. He will sleep
long after noon and waken to find me gone.

Gilgun explains his process of intertextuality this way:

> I honor Philip Levine as one of the few poets in my time who's written on working-class themes. I consider his work essential and I always taught "You Can Have It" each semester because Missouri Western College is an Open Door, working-class, community college. My students needed to know that poems on work and working-class people were being written and that these poems applied to their lives as working-class people. "*This is your life and here it is in poetry*." "*Can we write like that* ?" "*Why not? Levine does*."
>
> However, there are a few things I disagree with in Levine's "You Can Have It" and my poem "Counting Tips" is my way of "getting it right," that is, specifically, it is my way of writing a working-class poem in which no moonlight shines through a window to put a poetic gloss on the gritty, dirt-under-fingernails "reality" of what work really means to a working-class person.[22]

Gilgun explains further that, although his mother did work as a waitress, the specific incident narrated in the poem—and the line "How much do you think you are worth?"—is adapted from an interview with the waitress Dolores Dante in Studs Terkel's oral history collection *Working* (see page 652). The poem is then constructed partly, in Gilgun's words, as "text on text on text," but it is also, he insists, "working-class autobiography," true to his life and his mother's and the world of work and money that both unites and separates them.

Attending to the complexity of processes of cultural formation, the call and response of workers and writers within a larger literary or historical continuum, reminds us that a national narrative of labor—told from the perspective of workers—is often under-represented or completely missing from the classroom and curriculum. This collection, then, is simultaneously old and new, looking back to a forgotten history and culture and providing a new framing for contemporary readers. It offers a critical dialogue between early and recent cultural forms, and it invites readers to continue that conversation through

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further research and study. And, as Gilgun suggests, it invites us to participate in this living cultural tradition as writers as well as readers.

FORMING THE BOOK

There has also been a process of cultural formation in the construction of this book, and although it has been a relatively deliberate and academic process, it has been a collective one, drawing on the ideas and texts and energies of many people. The two editors, with different class backgrounds but a common commitment to teaching and publishing working-class literature, have collaborated across the distance between their homes and universities for many years. They have been supported in this work by a group of editorial advisers, scholars, and publishers who have made suggestions for inclusion and responded to drafts of the designs for the book. Beyond them is the wider circle of colleagues—writers, teachers, artists, and scholars in many disciplines—who contribute to the growing field of working-class studies. And, of course, there would be no book without an interested press that is willing to commit the resources to publish a body of work that has never before been collected and made available to readers in the form of an anthology.

As a result of this collective process of formation, here is a body of work called "American working-class literature," but the fact that it is collected between the covers of a book does not make it definitive or complete. Any anthology has finite limits of size and costs, and a large number of appropriate texts have regrettably had to be left out. For each one of the more than 300 pieces included here, the editors have considered dozens of other possible selections for the book. To give readers a sense of the scope of the field and as a guide to further reading and study, a detailed bibliography lists longer works of literature for recommended reading, as well as critical commentary on this literature and on the history of work and class in America.

The editors recognize the complexity of audience for a book that does not quite fit conventional expectations of literature textbooks—a book that will be of interest to teachers and students of history and sociology as well as of literature and writing. Our readers are invited to engage in a process of "reading backward"—that is, understanding the material in its own historical time and for its own historical audience—and reading in the present and for the future, discovering writing that is of relevance to our own (classed) times. The book is designed to facilitate this reading process—a dialogue involving history as read through literature and literature as read through history.

The organization is broadly historical, rather than strictly chronological. To illuminate a continuum of literary expression, the texts are grouped around key historical and cultural developments in working-class life. They are arranged in seven parts, each containing works from a particular span of years in which life changed in major ways for working-class people, including colonial times and slavery days, the first industrial revolution, mass immigration and urbanization, the Great Depression, and the rise of the service economy. Each part is introduced by a short essay that places the literature of the period in the context of these historical developments. Additional historical framing is provided in the timeline of significant events in working-class history (See p. 903). Each selection in the book (with the exception of some early texts in Part I, many of which are anonymous) is introduced by a brief headnote, providing information about the author's life and writing, and an account of the context—historical, artistic, political—in which that text was produced.

Part VII, writing from 1980 to 2005—the most recent being Martín Espada's poem "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100" about the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center—is arranged chronologically by the author's date of birth. Our aim in Part VII, the

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book's largest, is to gather work by writers from the full range of identities that make up the contemporary American working class. These writings express not only the diverse voices of America's working people, but also their commonality across the many differences of identity and location. The literature reveals filaments of connection across differences of race, gender, ethnicity, geography, and generations, among people who share common and subordinate relationships to the owning classes.

Two of the primary commonalities in working-class experience, threaded throughout the book, are the value of solidarity and the necessity of struggle. This literature underscores how improvement in material conditions—whether in the neighborhoods, barrios, villages, or borders of American life or in the global structure of economic trade—has come and can come through a process of connection and shared work. This book is, in one sense, an effort to recall and recuperate the language and the vision of solidarity, expressed in the IWW slogan "an injury to one is an injury to all." This is a continuing historical struggle whose uncertainties and promises are embedded within the literature itself. Consequently, this is a collection not only of critique and exposé, but of possibility and hope. We invite readers to become better acquainted with this distinctive American literature and the compelling history it illuminates.

Notes

1. The list of the writers, scholars, and teachers who were involved in this work is as long as the process of recovery itself. It includes works listed in our bibliography by Paula Gunn Allen, Pamela Annas, Gloria Anzaldua, Constance Coiner, John Crawford, Jim Daniels, Michael Denning, Barbara Foley, Gloria T. Hall, Laura Hapke, Florence Howe, Paul Lauter, Sherry Linkon, Cherríe Moraga, Bill Mullen, Cary Nelson, Tillie Olsen, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, Larry Smith, Ronald Takaki, Alan Wald, Mary Helen Washington, Tom Wayman, and Janet Zandy.

2. Lillian Robinson, "Working/Women/Writing" in *Sex, Class, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 230.

3. Some readers may be surprised by the inclusion of slave writing in this collection, especially if their definition of *working class* follows Marx's classic account of the (industrial) proletariat. David Roediger has addressed this issue in an afterword to his classic study *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1991, 1999) which was (mis-) taken by many to argue that the American working-class was an essentially white formation: "I had long argued that slavery in the US was part of a capitalist system of social relations, that slaves were workers and that slavery must be central to any rethinking of labor's past . . . [T]he Civil War would demonstrate that slaves were not just a part of the working class but its most politicized and combative sector" (188–189).

4. Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, NY: ILR/Cornell University Press, 2000), 3.

5. In discussing "the obfuscation of class as a category of literary analysis," Constance Coiner describes its displacement in classrooms by the more identifiable markers of race, gender, and ethnicity, noting, for example, that Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) is identified "as a lesbian but not also a working-class novel . . . [and] Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) as both African American and women's writing but not a working-class novel as well" ("US Working-Class Women's Fiction," in Janet Zandy, ed., *What We Hold in Common*, [New York: Feminist Press, 2001], 233).

6. As Dorothy Allison, best known as a lesbian-feminist author, has expressed it: "But what may be the central fact of my life is that I was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, the bastard daughter of a white woman from a desperately poor family, a girl who had left the seventh grade the year before, worked as a waitress, and was just a month past fifteen when she had me. That fact, the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved, has had dominion over me." (*Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature*, Ann Arbor, MI: Firebrand Books, 1994).

7. Quoted in Harold Clurman's Introduction to Cifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1975), x.

8. Zweig, *The Working-Class Majority*, 3.

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9. See Janet Zandy, *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

10. Zweig, *The Working-Class Majority*.

11. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 9–10. We altered Thompson's generic male "men" to "people."

12. From McGrath's Foreword to the first collected edition of the poetry of Edwin Rolfe, *Permit Me Refuge* (1955), quoted in Frederick Stern, ed., *The Revolutionary Poet in the United States: The Poetry of Thomas McGrath* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988).

13. *Daughter of Earth*, (1929; New York: Feminist Press, 1987), 246.

14. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 183–188.

15. "Working-Class Women's Literature: An Introduction to Study," *Radical Teacher* 15 (December 1979), 16–26; reprinted in *Women in Print I*, ed. Joan E. Hartman and Ellen Messer-Davidow (New York: Modern Language Association, 1982), 109–125.

16. "Introduction to the 1982 Edition" of *The Disinherited* (1933; Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 28.

17. *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, compiled by Alan Lomax, introduction by Woody Guthrie, edited by Pete Seeger (1967; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 8.

18. Quoted on the web site http://eff.org/deeplinks/archives/001765.php. Ironically, the holder of copyright to many of Guthrie's best known songs, including "This Land is Your Land," refused permission to reprint his work in this anthology. However, lyrics to most of his songs are available at the website of the Woody Guthrie Foundation, which granted permission to print the songs included in Part V.

19. Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

20. From an interview with Marilyn Kallett, *Kenyon Review* 15, 3 (Summer 1993), 57–66.

21. *Marxism and Literature* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1977), 13.

22. From Email correspondence, January 30, 2004, quoted with permission.