Working-Class Women’s Literature: An Introduction to Study

by Paul Lauter
Writing – and indeed thinking – about working-class literature presents a number of unique problems. To begin with, what do we mean by “working-class literature”? Literature about working-class people, literature by them, or literature addressed to them? If we use the first definition, should we include works that are ignorant of or hostile to the working-class people they write about like some turn of-the-century “industrial” novels? If we focus on writing by working people, do we include pieces that do not deal with their lives or even with their real concerns, like some “popular” songs? Should we include, say, literature by people of working-class origins, like D. H. Lawrence? To complicate the issue still further, there is the question of audience or, perhaps more accurately, of the differing functions of works with differing audiences. Florence Reece’s song “Which Side Are You On?,” for example, urges miners to stick together in the union, whereas Edwin Markham’s poem “The Man with the Hoe” calls on the “masters, lords and rulers in all lands” to right the wrongs of working people. Since both concern changing the condition of the working class, are both working-class literature? Life in the Iron Mills, the first significant portrait in American literature of the lives of the industrial workers, clearly addresses a bourgeois audience, while many drugstore novels, like those of Mickey Spillane, attract a substantial working-class readership. Which would one want to retain in a “canon” of working-class fiction? Such questions cannot be answered categorically; we need a more adequate understanding of the techniques, functions, and distinctive qualities of working-class art.

Beyond these issues, there is the question of what defines the working class. Many such definitions exclude more people, especially women, than they include. The traditional image of the American industrial worker, for example, is male, in part because of ignorance about the role of women, historical and current, in United States industry. And the traditional image is also white, reflecting the racially segregated job structure that still persists in some industries.

It seems best to use relatively loose definitions and broad categories, but we must remain sharply aware of the difficulties involved, the manifestations within the culture of efforts to overcome (or to retain) class privilege, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Here I discuss literary works by and about working people, written and oral forms, “high,” “popular,” and “mass” culture. I designate as “working-class people” those who sell their labor for wages; who create in that labor and have taken from them “surplus value,” to use Marx’s phrase; who have relatively little control over the nature or products of their work; and who are not “professionals” or “managers.” I refer to people who, to improve their lot, must either move in solidarity with their class or leave it (for example, to become managers).1 I include those who work in homes, whose labor is sold although not for pay, as surely as is that of those who work in the mills or in the streets. I also include those who work on farms and those whose labor is exerted from them by slavery and peonage. Such categories, though admittedly blurred at the edges, give us at least a reasonable place from which to start.

In dealing with working-class culture, and especially with women’s literature, we are confronted by a problem more fundamental than that of definition. It can be seen in a poem by Bertolt Brecht, “A Worker Reads History”:

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?
And Babylon, so many times destroyed,
Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima’s houses,
That city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?

In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished
Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome
Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up? Over whom

Did the Caesars triumph? Byzantium lives in song,
Were all her dwellings palaces? And even in Atlantis of the legend
The night the sea rushed in,
The drowning men still bellowed for their slaves.

Young Alexander conquered India.
He alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Was there not even a cook in his army?
Philip of Spain wept as his fleet
Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?
Frederick the Great triumphed in the Seven Years War.
Who
Triumphed with him?

Each page a victory,
At whose expense the victory ball?
Every ten years a great man,
Who paid the piper?

So many particulars.
So many questions.

Brecht’s poem vividly illustrates that the workers of the world have been hidden from history -- omitted from the chronicles, myths, sagas, and fictions that embody it. Less openly, the poem illustrates how much more hidden are
the women of the working classes, appearing here fleetingly as those who weep for the drowned sailors of Philip’s fleet, and, perhaps, as the haulers of stone and the slaves of Atlantis. The chronicles, sagas, fictions, and poems were seldom written by people who labored for their bread. Laborers did not have the leisure or, generally, the literacy to write books (though they did leave us the works of their hands, in materials like stone and wool). And if they were female, still other veils shrouded their lives and limited their creations.

But working people were by no means silent. On the contrary, they have always produced literature. Its forms, however – including the forms of its transmission – its structural elements, and its purposes have been quite different from the dominant written forms of the last twenty-five hundred years or so. To approach working-class culture, therefore, we must lay aside many of our presuppositions about what literature is and is not. We must begin by asking in what forms, on what themes, in what circumstances, and to what ends working people spoke and sang to one another. How did they gather, examine, transmit, and renew their experiences?

First, we need a broader definition of what we can call “literature.” That working-class literature has often taken oral forms is not surprising, since many of its creators, along with their audience, did not read or write. (A theme of working-class art has been the struggle to gain access to the resources of culture and power, including literacy.) The study of working-class art must therefore include works that in the last fifty years have been generally displaced into courses called folklore and the like. Today, when literature departments are more likely than they were a decade ago to include undergraduate folklore courses, as well as women’s studies itself, we are better prepared for the interdisciplinary approach required for the study of folk culture. Similarly, since songs – for reasons I explain below – are one of the forms most widely used by working-class artists, we have to pay attention to their literary elements; many are significant creations of language. In addition, as is true in women’s studies generally, we must pay more attention to the “fragmentary” or “incremental” genres – letters, diaries, and documents derived from oral sources.

As we move toward more inclusive definitions of “literature,” certain issues that are largely submerged in the study of “high culture” become more critical. For example, it becomes necessary to distinguish between “folk” or “people’s” (“popular”) culture and what Dwight MacDonald characterized as “mass culture.” Popular culture is what people who share class, ethnicity, and/or race produce in communicating with one another, as distinguished from what is produced for consumption by the “masses.” There is, obviously, no clear-cut dividing line, and the distinction is particularly difficult for those of us brought up in the bourgeois cultural system, in which the norm is production by artists for consumption by consumers.

The distinction is only in part one of quality, although mass culture, which is often directed by the political imperative of shaping and dominating the consciousness of the masses, generally involves basically simplified ways of appealing to the lowest common denominator – as was illustrated by the sudden flourishing, a few years ago, of television shows portraying the cop as hero. It is more important here, however, to understand the functions of “popular” art and its patterns of creation. Much working-class culture originates and exists in situations that do not absolutely distinguish between the active “performer/artist” and the passive “audience”; or if that distinction is made, the artist’s “product” is offered not for its exchange value (money for the song) but for its use in the lives of the people to whom it is directed. A fine example is provided by the Kentucky mountain songs sung with great majesty at the funeral of “Jock” Yablonski and recorded in the film Harlan County, U.S.A.

This distinctive quality of popular culture becomes clearer when we consider more fully the processes of creation and the functions of working-class art. The creative process is nowhere better described and analyzed than in Lawrence Levine’s Black Culture and Black Consciousness, required reading for anyone concerned with this area. Levine has collected a number of vivid, firsthand descriptions of the creation of “sorrow songs,” mainly in post-Civil War black churches, and he has examined the common features of these descriptions. One important observation is that new songs were most often based on old ones: a look at most labor songbooks shows that working-class artists were often concerned less with creating a work that would be unique than with building variations on tunes and themes well known in their communities. In many ways, working-class art, like other elements of working-class life, is highly traditional, even “conservative”; innovative form is certainly not a primary consideration. Similarly, working-class poetry and song – and to a lesser extent tales and the like – are often built around repeated elements – refrains, formulas, and commonly accepted assumptions about characters. Language, too, is often simpler, even commonplace and less “heightened” than that of “high culture” verse. These characteristics are, of course, common to oral art, made necessary by the exigencies of memory and improvisation.
But they also reflect a certain communal quality, which Levine finds exemplified in the creation of a song—different people chime in, a melody is picked up and carried forward by a new voice, or a chorus swells it spontaneously. In such situations, the individual creator is less important than the group, or rather, if the individual creator shapes a common stock to new group purposes, she or he does so without diminishing or expropriating that common stock. The song leader in church is not asked to provide new hymns (and would be looked at with suspicion for doing so) but is asked to point or enhance a hymn that is known, perhaps to add something especially appropriate to the situation. Early jazz musicians may have been admired for a new melody, but probably more often for their ability to ring variations on melodies the listeners knew and followed. I emphasize the “folk” or communal elements of working-class art at the partial expense of work produced by self-conscious individual working-class artists because this approach helps to bring out distinctive qualities about working-class art that are not seen so easily when one focuses primarily on the production of individual artists. Yet a continuum obviously exists between works created primarily by individual imaginations and the songs, poems, and tales that are, so to speak, common property.

Much working-class art is created and experienced in group situations—not in the privacy of a study, but in the church, the hall, 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 transcendent, nor does it often function in such ways. Understanding this transitoriness is especially important in searching for working-class women’s art. Many of the finest men’s songs come from the prison chain gang or the work camp, and many women’s work songs have come from the communal experience of the church—but also from the loneliness of the solitary room often portrayed in the blues. More women’s work songs have been located and recorded in recent years and doubtless as we come to understand more about female subcultures, we will discover more about songs and stories exchanged in the markets, mills, quilting rooms, and nurseries.

Understanding the instrumental character of working-class art is also important to perceiving the aesthetic theory that informs it, a theory unfamiliar to most of us. Martha Vicinus has discussed the functions of working-class art in The Industrial Muse (the only full-length study in English of working-class [British] literature and, with Levine’s book, required reading for anyone interested in this area). In a paper on the poetry of the Colorado miners, Dan Tannacito has addressed the same subject. Tannacito suggests that “the real value of the miners’ poetry was the immediate use made of it by its local audience of miners and sympathizers” (p. 1). The writers’ objectives in writing were inseparable from these goals toward which the lives of the workers directed them. Vicinus points out that working-class artists, themselves persuaded of the power of literature to “influence people’s behavior,” aimed to “persuade readers to adopt particular beliefs.” Some artists recommended middle-class values and the culture of their “better.” Others, believing that social and political change was impossible, reassured readers of the worth of their own culture’s values, providing at least entertainment and consolation in a fixed and largely oppressive world. More—certainly most of the poets discussed by Tannacito—aimed to produce change in the status quo. They wrote, Vicinus says, “to arouse and focus social tension in order to channel it toward specific political actions.” By “clarifying” economic, social, and political relations between working people and those who held power, these artists helped to “shape individual and class consciousness” and to “imbue a sense of class solidarity that encouraged working people to fight for social and political equality” (Vicinus, pp. 1-3). Tannacito shows how miner poets accomplished such goals: poems of “praise,” for example “commemorating the heroic deeds of model individuals or important past struggles from which the community of workers takes its lessons.” Other poems aimed to inspire workers to struggle in particular ways at specific moments. In general, the miner poets and “their allies produced poems for themselves about the realities they shared—oppression by bosses, common work, the militia, scabs, and a heritage of struggle (Tannacito, pp. 2, 3).

The fundamental points here are that “artists” and “audiences” shared a reality, a similar set of experiences and outlooks on the world. They saw artistic production within the context of that shared experience, the world here and now. Art was not a means of lifting people outside the world in which they lived, or a means of producing “catharsis” and thus achieving “stasis” (if art ever does produce whatever these are). Rather, it was a means of making working people conscious of their world and actions within it, of extending their experiences of that world, indeed of enlarging the world they could experience. Thus, even as sophisticated and artful an example of working-class fiction as Tillie Olsen’s Tell Me a Riddle is directed to the problem of inspiring a new generation with the values, hopes and images that directed the actions of an earlier generation and that lie buried under forty years of daily struggle. Theories about the effects of art remain highly problematic, to be sure; I mention them here not to dispute them but to suggest that Aristotelian and other traditional notions will not be helpful in approaching working-class literature. Looking for the timeless and transcendent, for contemplation as an end, for metaphysical complexity of language, and for pastel ironies of tone can only obscure or demean the objectives and excellence of working-class art.

The next step, after developing a theory for an area of art, is to assemble examples and compile bibliographies. This work has begun to some extent for working-class literature in general, but rather little has been done with working-class women’s literature. Appendix A lists the bibliographies I have come upon that will be helpful to anyone working in this area. But a word of warning is necessary: searching for examples of women’s art in most of these bibliographies, like searching in collections, will be frustrating and slow. For example, the massive bibliography of German working-class songs assembled by a collective under the leadership of Inge Lammel lists perhaps a dozen songs by women in over two thousand
 entries. David Madden's *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1968), while it contains interesting background analyses, includes no woman writer as a subject, or, for that matter, as an author. The important collection *Folklore from the Working Folk of America* (ed. Tristram P. Coffin and Hennig Cohen [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1973]) focuses on men and presents women primarily as witches, running with wolves, and the like. Even collections from socialist nations provide little help; *Para un mundo amasado por los trabajadores*, selected by Roberto Retamar (La Habana: Editorial de Arte y Literatura, 1973) contains only works by and about men. The compilation of inclusive, annotated bibliographies is thus a priority, as is the writing of descriptive articles. A significant number of works deserve to be reprinted, but there are many, even by individual working-class women writers of the recent past, for which we must first locate copies.

Republication and fresh consideration of a small number of working-class American women fiction writers from the 1920s and 1930s (as well as from more recent times) are, in fact, under way. Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker* generally remains in print, and other works by Arnow are becoming available. Arno Press has republished two of Josephine Herbst's novels in the expensive series edited by Elizabeth Hardwick, and Elinor Langer's critical biography of Herbst will be out in 1983, as will a Feminist Press edition of one of her novels. Zora Neale Hurston, none of whose major works was available until quite recently, is the subject of a fine biography by Robert Hemenway (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978); and her best novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, has also been reprinted (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978), as has her folklore classic, *Mules and Men* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978). A Zora Neale Hurston reader, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*, is available from the Feminist Press (Old Westbury, N.Y., 1979). Edith Summers Kelley's *Myself When I Am Laughing* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1968), while it contains interesting background analyses, includes no woman writer as a subject, or, for that matter, as an author. The important collection *Folklore from the Working Folk of America* (ed. Tristram P. Coffin and Hennig Cohen [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1973]) focuses on men and presents women primarily as witches, running with wolves, and the like. Even collections from socialist nations provide little help; *Para un mundo amasado por los trabajadores*, selected by Roberto Retamar (La Habana: Editorial de Arte y Literatura, 1973) contains only works by and about men. The compilation of inclusive, annotated bibliographies is thus a priority, as is the writing of descriptive articles. A significant number of works deserve to be reprinted, but there are many, even by individual working-class women writers of the recent past, for which we must first locate copies.

While a few books by other working-class women fiction writers of the 1920s and 1930s (e.g., Tess Slesinger and Myra Page) are in print here and there little has been done on most. Such writers include Sarah Henry Atherton, Sanora Bobb, Catherine Brody, Olive Tilford Dargan (Fielding Burke), Lallah S. Davidson, Josephine Johnson, Margerie Latimer, Josephine Lawrence, Grace Lumpkin, Grace McDonald, Ruth Mc Kenney, Page and Slesinger, Anna Louise Strong, Gladys Taber, Mary Heaton Vorse, Clara Weatherwax, Leane Zugsmit; these women were most prominent during the period in which left-wing literature flourished in the United States. Less is known about the women writers of a generation or two earlier who were concerned with the lives of working people, although they themselves seldom had working-class origins. In listing these I cite only a typical book or two for each: Estelle Baker (*The Rose Door*, 1912), Zoe Beckley (*A Chance to Live*, 1918), Helen Campbell (*Miss Melinda's Opportunity*, 1886), Florence Converse (*Children of Light*, 1912), Grace MacGowan Cooke (*The Grapple*, 1905), Amanda Douglas (*Hope Mills*, 1880), Mary Hallock Foote (*Coeur d'Alene*, 1894), Susan Glaspel (*The Visioning*, 1911—Glaspel continued to write fiction and drama well into the
1930s and was a significant figure in the Masses and Liberatar as well as in the Provincetown Playhouse groups), Josephine Conger Kaneko (A Little Sister of the Poor, 1909), Myra Kelly (Little Aliens, 1910; Little Citizens, 1904), Alice Robbins (Uncle Tom’s Tenement, 1886), Katherine M. Root (The Stranger at the Hearth, 1916), Vida Scudder (A Listener in Babel, 1903; more of a socialist discussion book than a novel, but fascinating nonetheless); Charlotte Teller (The Cage, 1907), and Marie Van Vorst (Amanda of the Mill, 1905). Among the interesting books that male authors have written about working-class women – apart from those by Dreiser, Crane, and Sinclair – are Arthur Bullard’s Comrade Yetta (1913) and Reginald Wright Kauffman’s The House of Bondage (1910). Not all these books are important works of fiction by any means, nor indeed are all sympathetic to working people, but they do cast light on the lives of workers in the early 1900s and on attitudes toward the working class. Given our inclusive definition of working-class literature, these books need to be reassessed.

Two earlier writers of considerable interest, Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, have recently received attention in articles and dissertations. But only Davis’ Life in the Iron Mills (1861; rpt. Feminist, 1972), which has an important afterward by Tillie Olsen, and Phelps Ward’s Story of Avis (1879; rpt. New York: Arno, 1977), concerned with a woman artist not of the working-class, are readily available. Phelps’s fascinating industrial novel, The Silent Partner, remains largely unknown, though it is, as Rideout suggests (App. A), the first American work of fiction after Life in the Iron Mills to treat a factory woman’s life sympathetically and realistically. The Silent Partner is of great historical interest because it antedates most theoreticians in suggesting the importance of cross-class organizing of women; indeed, it implies that working women are organized less by the labor movement as such than by other women. Davis and Phelps are not to be sure, women of the working class, but they are, as women, distinctively sensitive to working-class lives.

A rich and largely unexplored source of short working-class fiction is provided by the many labor, radical, and immigrant magazines and newspapers, particularly those of the decades immediately before and after the turn of the century. Most such periodicals that were published in English in the United States are listed in Black and Goldwater (see App. A). But there is also much in non-English-language journals and newspapers. Norma Fain Pratt has examined the work of Yiddish women writers (e.g., Celia Drapkin, Anna Margolin, Kadya Molodovski, Ester Schumatcher, Rachel Holtman, Malcha Lee, Sara Barkin, and Aida Glazer) in periodicals like Zukunft, Freiheit, and Frei arbeter shtime (Norma Fain Pratt, Culture and Politics: Yiddish Women Writers, 1900-1940, Jewish Studies Association Convention, Boston, 1978). Similar work could be done for other immigrant groups and with working-class publications from centers like Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis. (Tannacito provides a useful model, although he deals almost entirely with men.) The working-class world has, after all, never been restricted to “our fathers,” however much foremothers have been ignored and submerged.

As one might expect, socialist countries, along with Finland and Sweden, have made more efforts to collect working-class fiction, songs, and poetry than have other countries, although women are not especially well represented in the anthologies I have located. For British working-class fiction, I know of no study equivalent to Martha Vicinus’, which concentrates on ballads, broadsides, music-hall songs, and working-class poetry. But it is likely that in Britain, as in the United States, most such work is issued by feminist and radical journals and publishing houses and has simply not yet found its way into libraries here.

Autobiographies that reflect working-class life are a rich source of information. To be sure, many autobiographies, especially those by white women, were written after the authors had moved into other class circumstances. But taken as a whole, autobiographies constitute a significant body of working-class women’s literature. I know of no comprehensive study of such works or even an adequate bibliography that includes both black and white women’s autobiographies, much less those by women from other countries or those still in manuscript. Brigane, Fine, and Williams (App. A) provide useful basic bibliographies, which include such categories as slave
narratives and immigrant autobiographies. Only a handful of prominent labor and radical organizers – “Mother” Mary Harris Jones, Emma Goldman, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn – have published autobiographies, but many others probably exist in manuscript. There are at least three collections of interesting short autobiographies of British working-class people: The Annals of Labor: Autobiographies of British Working-Class People, 1820–1920 (ed. John Burnett [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1974])


No comprehensive book about working-class women’s songs and poems exists nor is there any unified collection of them. I use the words “comprehensive” and “unified” to signify two basic requirements for work in this area. The first has to do with bringing together black and white working-class materials. Almost all writing produced by African-Americans is, by any definition, working-class literature: most of the authors have working-class origins, and their subjects and audiences are generally working-class people like themselves. Although some important collections of folk songs – notably those by socialist artists and collectors – do acknowledge that black literature is working-class literature, few secondary works in this area consider songs and poems of black and white working-class women together. The reason, in part, is that the two have different musical traditions: the black folk songs are largely “sorrow songs,” or “spirituals,” and the blues; the white songs are “country” and British-derived ballads. But separate treatment has obscured the commonalities of female experience as well as the interactions of the two traditions.

The second requirement is to integrate “folk,” or “popular,” songs with “high-culture” poetry. The two are almost invariably considered distinct. Most collections of women’s poetry (with a few exceptions, like Louise Bernikow, ed., The World Split Open [New York: Vintage, 1974]) ignore blues singers and songwriters like Aunt Molly Jackson. And while serious books on music carefully consider African-American influences on Western composers, starting with Dvorak, few books on formal poetry make even a gesture in that direction. For working-class women’s art, such a separation is particularly harmful, whether one is talking of literature or the plastic and visual arts. Women of the past, generally excluded from formal schools and training, created works of art with what one might call “nonacademic” media like quilting, embroidery, and cutouts – works of art that were also useful in their daily lives. Similarly, many women, especially those of working-class origins, were not familiar with academic traditions and academic forms in literature (e.g., the sonnet and blank verse) and used what was familiar or what came readily to hand – like songs that they learned from their grandmothers or in church, on the picket line, at quilting bees, or at other rituals of communal female experience. Such literature, which we generally designate as “song,” must be read and studied together with the more academic or high-culture forms for which we usually reserve the term “poetry.” And this union should be made not simply to show how, for example, Emily Dickinson transcends the banality of consolatory verse and tombstone poetry; rather, we need to become aware of the hierarchy of the categories themselves. Approaching works primarily in terms of their genre may provide the critic with useful, or at least convenient, lines of demarcation. But if we are interested less in literary typology and more in what literature reveals to us about the lives of women, and of working-class women in particular, then this approach is not useful. It implicitly places more value on the kinds of experiences with which “poetry” deals and the kinds of language (and the people who use it) in which it is expressed. Further, the categorization fragments what is continuous and distinctive in female experience, at least in Western societies, regardless of class – for example, labor that is undervalued or trivialized, the ever threatening union of sexuality and childbearing, the power and limits of “sisterhood,” the anger and waste in keeping one’s “place.” Further, working-class women’s literature – by dealing with such concerns as work and especially work for wages, organizing with other women, and the fear of desertion and physical violence – completes the picture of women’s lives that most bourgeois forms show only in fragments. Such female experiences, their commonalities and class-based distinctions, come into focus best when we base our work on women’s historical reality rather than on the literary distinctions created primarily by male and bourgeois critics.

A “comprehensive” view of working-class women’s poetry in the United States thus encompasses songs and more formal verse from both black and white traditions. We specifically need to reexamine the formal, often left-wing working-class poets. The names, though not generally the work, of a few such women, like Genevieve Taggard, are familiar to scholars, but others have been quite lost – for example, Lola Ridge, Hazel Hall, and Sarah N. Cleghorn. The major sources for studying their work are back files of such left-wing periodicals as Masses, Liberator, Anvil, New Masses, and Mainstream (see, e.g., Jayne Loader’s bibliography). With the exception of May Days, edited by Taggard, anthologies of women’s poetry have not included verse called “Comrade Jesus” (Cleghorn) or “Buttonholes” (Hall). Among the poets of “song” whose writing (or, in a few cases, interpreting) needs serious consideration are “Sis” Cunningham, Aretha Franklin, Sarah Ogan Gunning, Vera Hall, Billie Holiday, Mahalia Jackson, Aunt Molly Jackson, Ma Rainey, Florence Reece, Malvina Reynolds, Jean Ritchie, Bessie Smith, and Ella May Wiggins. For some black singers of the blues and gospel music, reasonably accurate bibliographies – or, more properly, discographies – exist, and often the text of at least one version of a song is in print. It is difficult to know whether even that much attention has been given to the work of women of the labor movement in the United States, although the collection Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-
Hit People (App. C) does include works by writer-singers like Jackson and Gunning. I have not been able to locate any systematic treatment, like Alan Lomax’ book on Vera Hall, of influential artists like the late Malvina Reynolds or “Sis” Cunningham.

I have included as Appendix C a list of sources for working-class women’s poetry. This list is by no means definitive. In the first place, many songbooks are quite ephemeral, and the ones I list are those I happened on in the libraries to which I had access; different lists could probably be compiled from the holdings of libraries on the West Coast and in the South and from the personal collections of collector-activists like Mary Elizabeth Barnicle. Second, I have not included books contained in Vicinus’ extensive bibliography, many of which I could not check (since they are available only in Britain) to see if they contain women’s work. Finally, while extensive collections of working-class poetry and song have been published in Europe, particularly in the socialist countries (and some are included in App. C), these works are only erratically available in American libraries and, in some cases, the gender of writers cannot be ascertained.

In certain respects, bibliography will be the most useful resource to scholars working in this field. I have therefore included a number of appendixes as a means for sharing with readers what my own research has turned up. I have already mentioned Appendix A (a bibliography of bibliographies), and Appendix C (collections of working-class women’s poetry). Appendix B lists collections of both prose and poetry, including some that consist primarily of "documents." Appendix D shows secondary works on working-class women’s poetry and song, including a number of biographies of black women artists, a few major analyses of the blues and other expressions of black women’s art, as well as the rather rare writings concerned with white working-class songwriters. Appendix E is a very selective list of secondary works that concern or can help inform the study of working-class women’s literature. Finally, Appendix F is an even more selective list of magazines that publish, with some regularity, work of interest in this area. Wherever possible, I have examined the books to see whether they include works by or about women.

NOTES
2. See Martha Vicinus, The Industrial Muse (New York: Barnes, 1974): “What we call literature, and what we teach, is what the middle class – and not the working class – produced. Our definitions of literature and our canons of taste are class bound; we currently exclude street literature, songs, hymns, dialect and oral storytelling, but they were the most popular forms used by the working class” (p. 1).
3. Note that the study of folk literature was once clearly a part of the literature and language profession; indeed, it was a field considered “appropriate” for female scholars. Louise Pound, the first female president of the Modern Language Association (MLA), specialized in the study of songs and ballads, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, an early life member of the MLA, was an important folklore collector and political activist.
6. Dan Tannacito, “Poetry of the Colorado Miners: 1903-1905,” The Radical Teacher; 15 (1980): “But the historical reality is that workers, like the Colorado miners, wrote poetry in order to share and express their feelings about their experiences as a class. They were creators of their culture as well as creators of their society” (p. 1).
7. Zoltan Kodaly, for example, wrote an entire opera, The Spinning Room, based on songs exchanged among or sung to women working at their looms and spindles. I have come on pictures of women singing at quilting bees, but I have seen no detailed exposition of what they were singing.
8. In a useful review of this book, Catherine Gallagher discusses stylistic elements used by these and other working-class writers and the problem of an excessive concern, on the part of professionals, for the work lives of working-class people. See "Workers," University Publishing, 5 (Summer 1978), 1, 24.

APPENDIX A
The following works either constitute or contain bibliographies useful to the study of working-class women’s...
literature. Addresses are given for little known publishers.


Arno Press. Books by and about Women, 1977. Publisher’s catalog of several series of reprints. Arno also has a useful catalog of reprints dealing with American labor.


Black, Henry. Radical Periodicals -- Their Place in the Library. Mena, Ark.: Commonwealth Coll., 1937. A brief essay justifying inclusion of such periodicals in library collections; the list of periodicals, with brief descriptions, includes some not listed in Goldwater’s later bibliography.


Chatham Book Seller. Radical Novels: Poetry and Drama in America, no. 8; The Political Novel in America, no. 30; Black Literature, nos. 34, 40; Radical Novels, etc. in America, no. 35; Women’s Rights and Liberation, no. 43; and Socialism, Communism, Anarchism, Pacifism in the U.S., no. 44. These catalogs not only list books for sale but record items not found in major libraries.

Collector’s Exchange, comp. Frank Girard. This publication includes a list of periodicals, an index to articles, assorted notes of interest to collectors and anthologists.


Ladyslipper Music. Catalogue and Review. Extensive list of records, tapes, etc., by women singers and some writers.


McBrearty, James G. American Labor History and Comparative Labor Movements. Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1973. Has a section devoted to a list of novels, which is uneven but helpful.


Prestridge, Virginia W. The Worker in American Fiction. Champaign: Univ. of Illinois, 1954. Inst. of Labor and Industrial Relations. The most extensive bibliographical work on the subject; describes fiction that, from any point of view, has “authentic working-class problems and conditions as the central theme.”


Vicinus, Martha. The Industrial Muse. New York: Barnes 1974 The bibliography, which, like the text, is extraordinarily rich and comprehensive, may be considered definitive for the British work it covers.


APPENDIX B

The following books contain prose (some of it more documentary than imaginative) and/or poetry by working-class women.


APPENDIX C

Collections (or articles) containing at least some songs or poems by working-class women writers.


Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Song Book. New York, 1940.


Folksongs of Peggy Seeger. New York: Oak, n.d.

Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians (as Sung by Jean Ritchie). New York’ Oak, n.d.


______. Songs: Labor, Folk, War. Monteagle, Tenn.: Highlander Folk School, 1944.

Hille, Waldemar, ed. The People’s Song Book. New York: Oak, various dates.

Industrial Workers of the World. Songs of the Workers (To Fan the Flames of Discontent). Chicago: IWW, many dates and editions.

International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Dixie Union Songs. Atlanta, Ga.: ILGWU, n.d.


______. Let’s Sing. New York: ILGWU, 1934.


APPENDIX D

Secondary books and articles mainly on working-class women's songs and poetry.


Cunningham, Agnes "Sis." "Sis Cunningham: Song of Hard Times" (as told to Madelaine Belkin Rose). Ms., 2 (March 1974), 29-32.


APPENDIX E

Secondary books and articles especially helpful to the study of working-class women's literature.


Appendix F
A very selective list of magazines that regularly run material of interest in the study of working-class women’s literature.

Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies, esp. 2, no. 2 [Summer 1977], on women’s oral history.


People’s Songs. 4 vols. 1946-49

Radical Teacher esp. nos. 4, 6, 10, 15.

Sing Out! Esp. 25, nos. 1, 2, 3, 5.

West End, esp. 5, no. 1 (1978): Midwest People’s Culture Anthology.

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