British Working-Class Literature, Higher Education and Identity Politics: Elevating Working-Class Voices in New Literary Pedagogies

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Abstract

This article interrogates the absence of working-class literature modules at the UK undergraduate level before evaluating various attempts at incorporating working-class voices and working-class literature within new and emerging literary pedagogies. It begins by outlining the current state of (predominantly British) working-class literary studies, and questions why working-class voices and working-class texts haven't been granted similar or equal footing for undergraduate academic study within the UK higher education sector. It then goes on to consider how the rise of identity politics has impacted attempts at defining, representing and accounting for working-class experiences. While acknowledging that other disciplines which have emerged from recent shifts toward identity politics (including gender studies, postcolonial studies, and queer theory) all seek, in varying degrees, to decentre the white patriarchal experience and disrupt and decolonise the status quo, this article determines that the inclusion of working-class perspectives at the same level remains confused, vague, and sometimes taboo – putting genuine working-class voices at risk of assimilation, marginalisation, and/or ostracization. The article goes on to qualitatively evaluate a number of recent pedagogical attempts at rectifying this issue, resisting demands to position class-consciousness in diametric opposition to popular models of identity politics, and making the case instead for valuable, insightful, and intersectional literary pedagogies which identify and showcase working-classness as a formative aspect of identity-making on par with other important aspects of self-identity. Consequently, it promotes the need for continued research into how British working-class literature might be defined, taught, and disseminated to a new generation of students in UK higher education, primarily to prevent working-class voices becoming (or remaining) a peripheral concern in new literary pedagogies.

Keywords

Class, identity politics, literary pedagogies, teaching, universities, working-class literature

Introduction

How do we define and teach working-class literature in higher education settings alongside models of identity politics which seemingly offer limited space or opportunity for the self-definition of the working-classes? This is a question which strikes at the heart of the ongoing pedagogical change which has been taking place in universities and across higher education institutions worldwide since the rise of the identity politics movements of the 1980-1990s, particularly in the arts and humanities sector. As modules on gender studies, postcolonialism

and queer theory (working in conjunction with various equality, diversity and inclusion schemes) continue to disseminate literature which consolidates notions of identity and self-identity as formative to the way we read, interpret and understand key texts (Sumara 1998; Bordin 2022; Altun 2023), new and emerging pedagogies and other epistemological frameworks tied to these developments are often accused of sidelining, ignoring, or confusing the importance and relevance of class (particularly the working-class) within the very same disciplines (Rizzo 2003; Binfield and Christmas, 2018; Faue 2018; McNicol and McMillan 2018; Das 2020). This marginalisation risks the subsumption of authentic working-class voices, materials and texts into alternative pedagogical, epistemological and/or research narratives that fail to comprehensively account for the working-class experiences that lie at the root of these creative endeavours. At the very least, this erasure (unintentional or otherwise, whole or in part) poses a problem for working-class students and academics, who already experience feelings of loneliness, dislocation, and inadequacy due to a number of other social, cultural, and material barriers (Reay 2001; LeCourt 2006; Reay et al., 2010; Warnock 2016; Crew 2021) – feelings which might be compounded by the absence of recognisable working-class voices in the subjects they have chosen to study or teach. More broadly, such erasure additionally risks reducing and limiting the scope, depth and nuance of the field of working-class studies itself; if authentic working-class voices are not always or truly reflected in the literature designated as representing the working-class experience (Linkon 2010; de Waal 2018), our ability to critically consider class from a variety of reflective, interpretive and even unorthodox angles becomes at least partially compromised.

Ongoing sociological, anthropological and pedagogical research in this area nevertheless suggests that this erasure and/or marginalisation of genuine working-class voices is by no means inevitable. Since the turn of the millennium the field of working-class literary studies in Britain (and abroad) has grown substantially (Linkon 2010; Lennon and Nilsson 2020; Fazio, Launius and Strangleman 2021), and attempts at addressing class-based inequalities in the classroom have been spearheaded by several teachers and academics in both the UK and the US (Mayberry 1996; Reay 2001; Rizzo 2003; Beech 2004; Beswick 2020). To overcome the risks associated with ignoring issues around class, accepting the status quo, and perceiving working-class studies as already on par with other disciplines, it is clear from many of these studies that working-class voices must be prioritised, listened to, and taken just as seriously as the voices of those who exist on similar or overlapping axis of oppression, ostracisation, and marginalisation (Finn 1999; Lindquist 2004; Reay et al., 2010). Only in the wake of such discussions might we see epistemological models of identity politics begin to seriously and comprehensively consider the inclusion of class as a formative marker of self-identity – and only following these discussions might new modules of working-class literature begin to take shape as part of the encouraging and ongoing pedagogical changes we see in universities today.

In this article, I thus consider some of the key reasons behind the continued marginalisation, contortion and/or absence of authentic working-class voices (perspectives as recognised by self-identified working-class readers) and working-class literature (i.e., any text or work of literature designated as working-class within the current field of working-class literary studies) within current UK higher education settings. I then go on to evaluate some of the more recent pedagogical attempts at overcoming this issue.

In the first section, I begin by pointing out the disparity between the extensive and bourgeoning field of British working-class literary studies, and the relative absence of working-class voices and working-class literature on UK university module reading lists at the undergraduate level. I then question whether or not such a disparity is tied to ongoing issues surrounding the

definition, representation and accountability of working-class experiences in light of the rise of identity politics. While I predominantly focus on attempts at defining and discussing British working-classness (rooted as it is in my own expertise and experience in the field), this is not to oversimply, marginalise or ignore the important similarities, differences and/or points of convergence between working-class communities from different countries and different continents, particularly between those in Britain and other western, Commonwealth, and/or colonised nations – which are, of course, worthy of considerable further research that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Questioning these definitions nevertheless aims at diagnosing some of the specific hesitancies around incorporating class within the increasingly prevalent epistemological models of identity politics utilised in British universities and across the western world today – models which frequently underpin various other teaching modules based on other formative aspects of self-identity at both an undergraduate and master's level (Mayberry 1996; Bernard 2023).

In the article's second section, I interrogate and evaluate a number of pedagogical attempts at resolving the specific issues I have identified – attempts which are currently being explored and experimented with in both the secondary and higher education sector, both in Britain and abroad. In particular, I assess the extent to which the authors and academics behind these attempts have successfully incorporated authentic working-class voices (as defined above) within their alternative pedagogical approaches to literary education, and determine whether or not this might result in a partial move toward the formulation of new modules and reading lists centred around British working-class literature at the undergraduate level.

In my concluding remarks, I go on to question the use-value of some (often frustrated) attempts at defining the British working-class and working-class literature in light of the creative, dynamic, and person-centred teaching methods being experimented with in education settings today. In particular, I resist calls from certain quarters to position working-classness in diametric opposition to models of identity politics, particularly when so many of these new and emerging literary pedagogies identify and spotlight the value of a class-inclusive intersectional approach. I consequently recognise that continued pedagogical research in this area might not only widen the scope of British working-class literary studies (in terms of materials taught and studied), but may additionally incorporate authentic experiences from the working-class student body into the field itself. Finally, I submit that such changes will undoubtedly help position working-classness as a valid academic, epistemological, and formative aspect of identity-making on par with many of the other important aspects of self-identity which we so often deliberate in the higher-education classroom today – which, in turn, will ultimately affect exactly how we categorise, read, interpret and understand both working-class and non-working-class literary texts in higher-education environments.

British Working-Class Literature, Higher Education and Identity Politics

Since the rise of identity politics movements in the late 1980s to early 1990s, the field of working-class literary studies in Britain has made significant inroads; indeed, few today would suggest that the discipline is in anything other than robust health. Building upon seminal works such as Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working-Classes* (1992), Pamela Fox's *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel, 1890-1945* (1994), Ian Haywood's *Working-Class Fiction, from Chartism to Trainspotting* (1997), and several publications on working-class and socialist writings written and edited by H. Gustav

Klaus,[1] texts such as Peter Keating's *The Working-Classes in Victorian Fiction* (2016), *A History of British Working-Class Literature* (2017; eds., John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan), Roberto del Valla Alcalá's *British Working-Class Fiction: Narratives of Refusal and the Struggle Against Work* (2017), Phil O'Brien's *The Working-Class and Twenty-First Century British Fiction: Deindustrialisation, Demonisation, Resistance* (2019), and Sandie Byrne's *Poetry and Class* (2020) all seek to consolidate and collate patterns, trajectories and trends in British working-class fiction and publishing from various points in recent history, and across a variety of literary forms and formats. John Fordham's chapter 'Working Class Fiction Across the Century' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel* (2009; ed., Robert L. Casiero) attempts something similar within a more limited collection rooted in genre and national identity, while work by academics such as Keegan (*British Labouring Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837*, 2008), Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji (*Class and the Canon*, 2012), and Tim Fulford (editor of Robert Southey's republished *Lives of Labouring Class Poets,* [1831] 2023) aim to recover and recentre the tradition of Britain's pre-industrial labouring-class poets, and position them as valid and useful precursors to more recent examples of British working-class literature. Self-identified British working-class authors such as Kit de Waal (2018) have also spoken out on the urgent need for increased representation in the field, while others have focused on expanding the scope of the discipline by identifying and exploring specific and often niche subgenres, coteries and recurring themes within British working-class literature more generally. Prominent examples include Cassandra Falke's *Literature by the Working Class: English Autobiographies,1820-1848* (2013), Nicola Wilson's *Home in British Working-Class Fiction* (2016), Kirstie Blair's *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* (2019), Matthew Crowley's *Representations of Working-Class Masculinities in Post-War British Culture: The Left Behind* (2020), and Robin Harriott's *The Birmingham Group: Reading the Second City in the 1930s* (2022).

Throughout these volumes, certain writers and authors crop up time and again with notable regularity, gesturing toward a tentative tradition or collection of British working-class writing that appears to exist within our collective academic consciousness. Such writers include Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell (Haywood 1997; Keating 2016), whose Victorian social novels (or social-problem/-protest novels) deal in detail with aspects of poverty and inequality in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and whose works are frequently paired with understandings of class and class-consciousness in nineteenth-century Britain;[2] the naturalist poet John Clare (Keegan 2008; Blair and Gorji 2012; Harrison 2017); D. H. Lawrence – with particular reference to his semi-autobiographical debut novel, *Sons and Lovers* (1915) (Haywood 1997; Wilson 2016; de Waal 2018); and the "Angry Young Men" of the 1950s-1960s, such as John Osborne, or Alan Sillitoe (Williams 1979; Hitchcock 1989; Haywood 1997; Fordham 2009; Wilson 2016; del Valla Alcalá 2017; de Waal 2018; Crowley 2020). Other cited examples of British working-class literature are a mix of disparate titles which – to one degree or another – engage with facets of trade-unionism, socialism, and/or poverty and destitution: texts like *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) by Robert Tressell (actually an Irish writer often situated within the British tradition) (Fox 1994; Haywood 1997; Fordham 2009; Wilson 2016; Harriott 2022); Ellen Wilkinson's General Strike novel *Clash* (1929) (Fox 1994; Haywood 1997); Walter Greenwood's interwar tale of unemployment, *Love on the Dole* (1933) (Wilson 2016; Harriott 2022); or Irvine Welsh's Scottish addiction drama

[1] See *The Socialist Novel in Britain* (1982), *The Literature of Labour: 200 Years of Working-Class Writing* (1985), and *The Rise of Socialist Fiction* (1987).

[2] Consider recent publications such as *Charles Dickens and the Street Children of London* (2011) by Andrea Warren, *Dickens's Class Consciousness* (2016) by Pam Morris, and *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell* (2017) by Julie Nash.

Trainspotting (1993) (Haywood 1997; del Valla Alcalá 2017). For many of these researchers, working-class literature in Britain is clearly shaped by narratives of survival, resistance, endurance, and suffering, often against a backdrop of pre-industrial, industrial, or post-industrial employment opportunities.

These traditions, narratives and research trajectories, however, prove somewhat absent (or at the very least, misaligned) when it comes to the availability of working-class literary education for undergraduate students at top UK universities. In 2003, American historian Mary Rizzo acknowledged how the "social movements of the 1960s and 70s" which foreshadowed the rise of identity politics saw academic institutions across the west "increasingly" turn to the idea that "individuals lives are structured by gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexuality" – but while she identifies various "newly created departments, programs, and area[s] of study focused on" most of these categories, she concedes that "class remains surprisingly left behind" (p. 127). Twenty years later, there is little indication that the situation has substantially improved, particularly for new students in Britain: in a quantitative assessment of the undergraduate modules available (i.e., listed online) on BA English degrees at the top 25 ranked universities for the subject in 2023, only two (at Edinburgh and Liverpool John Moores) mention class or working-classness explicitly – despite a number of other available modules being directly concerned with issues around race, post/colonialism, gender, and sexuality.[3] Texts by some of the writers listed above *are* taught at undergraduate level, but they are usually categorised according to literary period, gender, nationhood, or identity more broadly – rather than in direct relation to the author's class or class-background.[4] At the same time, class-based modules which appear on other university courses (such as Northumbria's "Workers and 'Chavs': The British Working-Class", which is listed as a module option on their Sociology BSc) are rarely visible in English departments within the same institutions,[5] and universities with strong research records on class and/or research centres dedicated to the study of working-class lives fail to offer modules dedicated to the study of British working-class literature (the University of Sussex proving a notable exception).[6] While this doesn't qualify as an entirely comprehensive assessment of the state of working-class literary education on offer in the UK today, it does provide a snapshot (albeit limited and relative) into how a number of universities – including those most highly rated in

[3] See Appendix A, detailing information on universities as ranked by *The Guardian* (2023).
[4] See, as cursory examples, Dickens listed on Durham's 'The Victorian Period (ENGL0017), at https://www.ucl.ac.uk/module-catalogue/modules/the-victorian-period-ENGL0017; Gaskell on Surrey's 'Mobilities of Nation and Empire: Victorian Literature 1850-1890 (ELI3006), at https://readinglists.surrey.ac.uk/leganto/nui/lists/9091386480002346; and Sillitoe on Hertfordshire's 'Images of Contemporary Society: British Literature and the Politics of Identity', at https://www.herts.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/ba-hons-english-literature2.
[5] See 'Module SO6007 – Workers and 'Chavs': The British Working Class' at https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/study-at-northumbria/courses/sociology-bsc-ft-uusscg1?moduleslug=so6007-workers-and-chavs-the-british-working-class&alttemplate=df847541-4f68-426a-8940-4c60ff4c5262&y=2025; and details of modules for their English Literature BA (Hons) at https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/study-at-northumbria/courses/english-literature-ba-hons-uusegl1/#modules. Or see 'Module SOCI20045 – Class and Social Divisions' in the University of Bristol's School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies at https://www.bristol.ac.uk/unit-programme-catalogue/UnitDetails.jsa?ayrCode=23%2F24&unitCode=SOCI20045, but no explicitly class-based module on its course BA English (see https://www.bris.ac.uk/unit-programme-catalogue/RouteStructureCohort.jsa?byCohort=25%2F26&byCohort=Y&selectedCatalogue=PROGRAMME&orgCode=ENGL&programmeCode=1ENGL001U).
[6] The University of Bristol again proves a useful example here, as its research centres include the Centre for the Study of Poverty and Social Justice (see https://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/centres/poverty/). The University of Sussex, meanwhile, houses the Mass Observation Archive (see https://massobs.org.uk/), and includes a third-year module on its English BA (Hons) course entitled 'Q3319 – Class, Culture and Contemporary Writing' (see https://www.sussex.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/english-ba).

the subject of English – consider class alongside other important markers of identity-formation. At best, the provision for studying British working-class literature appears inadequate, poorly developed, disorganised, and somewhat ill-defined, with working-class texts often subsumed into alternative areas of study; at worst, it seems working-classness and, by extension, working-class literature, is being deliberately ignored or sidelined by higher education institutions which are otherwise embracing epistemological models of identity politics in other key areas.

In light of the changing understandings of class as a sociological and anthropological label (particularly as a label indicative of someone's unique identity) that have occurred over the past thirty to forty years (in conjunction with the rise of identity politics), I propose three primary reasons for this disparity. Firstly, I suggest that identity politics has increased and compounded the difficulties in providing a *stable and/or hermetic* definition of class and working-classness that sits neatly alongside definitions of other markers of identity or self-identity formation, despite the proliferation of research and multiplicity of definitions on offer around the term; this prevents working-class literature from being widely or seamlessly adopted into the undergraduate academic curriculum under a single, homogenous banner, such as in the way other identity-based modules are categorised (e.g., women's writing, or postcolonial literature). Secondly, I submit that concerns, debates and arguments around representation and "authentic lived experience" – which are often crucial to dominant readings and understandings of feminist, queer and postcolonial literary texts (Ryan 2008; Cover and Prosser 2024) – are not as easily and readily applicable to literary texts otherwise designated as working-class. This is related to questions of definition, but also takes into account the apparent permeability and porousness of class-based identity in the twenty-first century, as individuals appear increasingly able to both move between the classes, or redefine their class position within the system at various points in their lives (Roberts 2001; Savage 2015). Similarly, others claim to be impacted by working-class origins long after they might be labelled by others as financially secure or successful (or indeed, as middle-class) (LeCourt and Napoleone 2011; Crew 2020). Finally, I contend that students who have grown-up and been raised and educated in a society dominated by arguments and debates around identity politics are often concerned with the notion of accountability – a natural corollary to prior concerns around identity and authentic representation. In the academic classroom, this translates as questioning which individuals have the right to tell which stories (Mahala and Swilky 1996; Mayberry 1996), which not only puts seemingly established or self-proclaimed working-class authors under the spotlight, but also the very teachers and educators who impart and disseminate ideas borne out of these working-class texts (Mayberry 1996). Naturally, such debates might engender degrees of discomfort, despair or even disillusion among lecturers and/or seminar tutors who might not perceive identity and self-identity in exactly the same way (or with the same import) as their students – thus preventing the inclusion and/or proliferation of British working-class literature into the curriculum by hesitant educators who cannot authentically claim a working-class background or genuine working-class upbringing. Additionally, this conclusion suggests a dearth of working-class academics more generally within schools of literature in higher-education environments, who might otherwise take up the mantle of spearheading working-class programmes of literary study.

To frame these arguments within the appropriate social, cultural and historical contexts, it is worth pointing out the significant impact identity politics has had on late-twentieth and twenty-first century systems of higher education. Eric Hobsbawm notes how the term and its wider usage came about as a "consequence of the extraordinarily rapid and profound upheavals and transformations of human society in the third quarter of [the twentieth] century" in the western hemisphere, including (but not limited to) the Civil Rights movement, the Stonewall Riots and

second-wave feminism (1996, p. 40). As a result, the rising interest in identity politics saw a concurrent reshaping of epistemological frameworks in education which created the space and opportunity for the establishment of new, interdisciplinary academic fields and movements associated with its corresponding upheavals (Rizzo 2003). These include women's studies programmes, first developed in the 1960s-70s and pioneered by academics such as Juliet Mitchell and Simone de Beauvoir (and led more recently by researchers such as Elaine Showalter and Patricia Hill Collins), which often critiqued pervasive cultural perspectives on gender, feminism and the patriarchy; postcolonial criticism, which has been heavily influenced and informed by the ideas of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha; gender studies and queer theory, spearheaded by academics such as Judith Butler, Alan Sinfield, and Michael Warner in the 1980s-90s; and the more recent, often student-led movements of the twenty-first century which prioritise non-white and non-western artists, writers, and thinkers as part of efforts to "decolonise the curriculum" across colleges and university campuses worldwide (Afekafe et al., 2018; McConlogue 2020). But while these disciplines (particularly the first three) have been neatly incorporated into undergraduate teaching structures, opportunities for interrogating class and working-class literature remain awkwardly left behind.

Since the early 2000s, it is the overarching and ongoing difficulty of defining class – and defining the working-class, in particular – which has been repeatedly identified by academics and researchers (in both the UK and across the Atlantic) as a major barrier to meaningful pedagogical change. For Julie Lindquist, for example, the omission of working-class culture in the classroom can be attributed to the collectively accepted social assumption that class is "marked neither as an identifiable category, like gender, nor as a unified set of historical practices" (2004, pp. 89-92). In a 2000 article on reclaiming lower-middle class shame, Rita Felski poses the issue as a visual problem: "What, [she asks], is the ontological status of class as a marker of personhood? How stable or indeterminate is it? As a signifier, class seems to differ from race and gender, which often mark identity inescapably" (p. 38). In the same article, she insists that "most writers agree that the traditional Marxist view of class as a polarised struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat is of little use in the contemporary Western context" (p. 34). English and film studies professor Peter Hitchcock concurs with these arguments, suggesting that "the difficulty of working-class representation begins with the fundamental abstractedness of class. There is [now] no way to understand critically the extraction of value from the working class under the sign of capital" (2000, p. 23).

More recently, other scholars continue to detail how class and working-classness remain contested and nebulous terms, both within and outside of academia. Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, for example, describe "social class" as "one of the most widely discussed, and disputed, concepts in social science", and consider the debate "fundamentally unresolvable" (2017, p. 2). They nevertheless go on to centre "occupation, and to a lesser extent, education, as key measures of where people are positioned in the class structure" (p. 3), and insist that "Britain remains a class-divided society" (p. 8). For US scholar Colby King, however, "no single way of defining the working class captures the range of circumstances that are meant to be communicated in the various observations and experiences in which the category is referred to", and he acknowledges how, as late as 2019, "the working class is increasingly acknowledged as a demographically and circumstantially diverse group" (2019, p. 116). Jess Pilgrim-Brown agrees, believing that "conceptualising what it means to have a working-class identity in the UK today is complicated, complex, and consistently under debate", partly as a result of the "blurring of the lines between socio-economic status and class identity" in early twenty-first century society (2023, pp. 51-2).

For educators such as Lindquist, Felski and Hitchcock, the rise of identity politics clearly occasioned new opportunities for defining self-identity and identity-formation, especially in relation to race, gender and sexuality. But because the working-class cannot define itself in the same way, and aren't recognised as a single, homogenous group with a shared and mutually accepted notion of class-specific oppression, these authors imply that the working-classes have ultimately failed to capitalise on the opportunities afforded by the rising interest in identity politics compared to other marginalised groups – consequently pushing working-classness toward the borders of legitimate academic study. Almost twenty years later, Evans and Tilley, King and Pilgrim-Brown recognise a similar lack of stability around conceptions of class, as well as the confusion and frustration which might arise from the multiplicity of definitions available to both academics and the reading public. Again, this indicates that working-classness lacks a definitive marker or essentialist definition that might help to establish firmer and more easily recognisable pedagogical parameters for its study at undergraduate level.

Efforts at defining British working-class literature by leading literary scholars also betray the vacillating, precarious and sometimes obfuscating foundations upon which the discipline is based, and might also go some way to explaining its continued absence in the undergraduate classroom. Raymond Williams first attempted the task by relying on a Marxist interpretation of class in his influential essay "British Working-Class Literature after 1945" (1979), principally by drawing out the specific "distinctions between working life and working-class life" (p. 128). According to Williams, "the majority of working-class novels and plays in Britian [had at the time] been written by people who were born and grew up in working-class families, and who at one stage or another, often relatively early, were moved on to an educational system which took them away […] from working-class jobs but not working-class life and family connections" (p. 133). This inevitably resulted in a proliferation of working-class novels and plays in which the focus is "working-class family life" but not "the central experience of the class which is work" (p. 133). For Williams, working-class texts are thus frequently framed as "regional" stories which exclude both real work and inter-class conflict, and which instead focus on the enjoyable exploits of quasi-heroic protagonists – "the young working-class who were very easy to celebrate" (p. 140), but who don't really encapsulate the ongoing hardships faced by real-life working-class communities in Britain.

More recent attempts to define the genre nevertheless reach a range of alternative conclusions that build on, work within, and conflict with Williams' observations. Matthew Crowley, for instance, draws upon Williams' own "structures of feeling" and Foucault's "discursive formations" to define class in the context of "overarching historical narratives", each of which "treats history as a series of interlocking and interrelated flows' (2020, p. 4). Here, Crowley emphasises the reliance of ideological structures such as class on aspects of cultural and material history to both underpin and inform their present existence. He then goes on to cite Bourdieu's work on habitus and Butler's ideas on performativity to define class as a "formation that actively produce[s] the objects and practices that [it] describe[s]" (2020, p. 5). He thus departs from Williams' assertion that "the *central* experience of class […] is work" (emphasis added), while nevertheless simultaneously granting that acts of work and labour might very well exist *somewhere* within this self-producing ideological structure. In contrast, Nicola Wilson builds upon Joanna Bourke's understanding of class – which consciously resists centring experiences of labour, work, and the workplace in relation to working-class lives – to buttress her own close-readings of work and the home, and goes on to define working-classness as a "subjective, embodied awareness and feeling, rather than a strictly political or economic identity" (2016, p. 2). Unlike Williams and, to a lesser extent, Crowley, Wilson thus posits emotion and interiority as a fundamental (rather than incidental) tenet of working-class writing,

and rejects the centrality of more easily identifiable, physical acts of work and manual labour that Williams sees as characterising genuine *working* fiction.

Other researchers rely on historical contexts and period-specific details to establish clear-cut boundaries for working-class literary study. In *The Literature of Labour: 200 Years of Working Class Writing* (1985), H. Gustav Klaus echoes some of Williams' arguments when he foregrounds the essential connection between labour, politics and the historical developments of the British working-classes, but he also advocates for a focus on what he labels "proletarian" culture, art and literature – even if writers and artists contributing to this culture were "not necessarily born into the working-class" (p. 12). Mike Sanders also deliberately conflates nineteenth-century Chartism with "the working-class movement" of the period in his study of Chartist poetry (2009, p. 1), while Pamela Fox saw the era of 1890-1945 as fostering "the development of an identifiable class outlook" based on the actions of both workers and more privileged members of the establishment, including "the rise of the Labour Party, trade union activism […] and the implementation of the welfare state" (1994, p. 2). Phil O'Brien, meanwhile, considers the "drastic changes to class formation in Britain brought about by the ideologies of neoliberalism" in his study of twenty-first century British fiction, including the "contradictions upon and through which neoliberal capital operates" (2020, pp. 1-2). He goes on to acknowledge "class as a discursive experience" which "shapes social, political and historical change" (p. 2), reiterating Crowley's conclusion that working-classness – and consequently, working-class literature – is simultaneously dependent upon and always interacting with previous historical conceptions and ideas about its own formation and development.

US scholar Sherry Lee Linkon determines that this variety of definitions and interpretations over what constitutes and determines modes of working-class literature is partly due to the discipline's emerging status as a recognisable field of study. While pointing to Paul Lauter's 1982 article "Working-Class Women's Literature: An Introduction to Study" as an essential springboard for working-class literary studies, she wrote in 2010 that "scholars of working-class literature are [continually] uncovering new and forgotten books and exploring the common qualities that define working-class literature as a genre" (Linkon 2010). In a later article (co-authored with John Russo), she also confesses that "in part, what we mean by class changes depending on the situation in which we are using it, but our varied answers to this question also reflect the varied interests and assumptions of members of our scholarly community" (2016, p. 5). As Phil O'Brien clearly states in his own introduction, "what is needed" in the discipline "is a variety of approaches to writing about and engaging with class as social and historical relation" (2020, p. 3). For researchers such as Linkon and O'Brien, then, the working-class literary canon remains (at least, for now) entrenched in the process of its own self-creation; its content, its interests, and its goals lack solid or widely-agreed upon boundaries, are constantly evolving, and remain open to ongoing (sometimes embattled) interpretation. Consequently, such a canon cannot yet be contained within its own unique discipline. This might partly explain the marginalisation of British working-class literature at the UK undergraduate level, where the formulation of modules for literary study is heavily reliant on traditional and recognisable modes of literary periodisation, genre, and thematic categorisation.

Alongside these recent attempts at defining class and working-class literature, the current trend for spotlighting the value of authorial lived experience – both within the field of literary studies and the publishing industry more widely – might also account for the sidelining of working-class fiction on undergraduate reading lists. Since the turn of the millennium and the rise of

identity politics, multiple critics, readers and audiences have engaged in discussions and interrogations over the extent to which authorial or "authentic lived experience" determines the social, cultural and artistic value of a given text within various public and/or academic arenas, with specific attention often paid to evidencing and/or corroborating identity-based encounters (Ryan 2008). As recent, hotly contested debates in the media over "trans-authentic casting" (Bakare 2021) and "blackfishing" (Karimi 2021) indicate, identity has been thrust to the forefront of debates on everything from artistic integrity to cultural appropriation, and artists and works of art (both new and historical) are now lent additional weight and credibility with a twenty-first century audience if the artist can claim first-hand, autobiographical experiences of the modes of marginalisation and/or oppression they claim to be representing and communicating within their work. For younger audiences in particular, identity politics has played an important role in shaping their social, personal, and even romantic interactions (Sloam and Henn 2018; Pickard 2019), and so assuming or adopting the manners or characteristics of a socially marginalised group with which one has little life experience has become increasingly frowned upon as strained, inauthentic, and offensive. Novelists such as Kathryn Stockett (*The Help,* 2009), Delia Owens (*Where the Crawdads Sing,* 2020), and Jeanine Cummins (*American Dirt,* 2018), for example, have all been recently targeted for diluting or misrepresenting minority cultures and for viewing the lives of others through a reductive touristic gaze (see Jones 2014; Miller 2019; and Olivas 2020 and Chávez 2021, pp. 90-91, respectively). While some authors have come out in defence of writing "without first-hand experience" (Kunzru et al., 2016), and while other novels – such as Rebecca F. Kuang's *Yellowface* (2023) – are already satirising the trend, this increasing propensity to value authorial experience in storytelling has also led to critical reassessments of otherwise canonical texts, such as in the deconstruction of the white-saviour narrative of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Seekford, 2016-17).

As early as 1996, Daniel Mahala and Jody Swilky explored this increasing tendency of both authors and readers to reconsider the value of personal lived experience in composition. They suggested that this "turn towards "story," "testimony," and the "personal" in professional discourse" was "a complex and many-sided phenomenon", but ostensibly viewed it as moving "towards a practice of storytelling […] which deliberately challenges the boundaries of [the] reserved space of Western culture", and which might "revive dispossessed cultures and experiences, and make possible a newly critical relationship with the dominant culture" (p. 363). As working-class writers such as Natasha Carthew or Kit de Waal contend, fictional experiences are of little literary or emotional or social value if they remain inherently inauthentic, strained, or false; plus, Carthew explains, "without these [authentic] voices, real experiences – and even dialects – will start to be lost" (Carthew 2022). Propelled by these socially admirable and culturally imperative objectives, it is easy to see how authors falling foul of such goals have faced accusations of both cultural appropriation and/or inauthenticity. Interrogating authorial experiences of class in a similar fashion, however, proves less straightforward, partly because the lack of a singular definition over what constitutes British working-classness destabilises attempts to question the legitimacy or authenticity of particular literary representations. This can be evidenced in multiple ways.

Firstly, if class is related directly and most importantly to acts of work (as claimed by Williams), then it follows that individuals will move between the classes depending on the work, occupation or employment they undertake. Once an author moves between the classes, however, surely it becomes less clear (according to the logic of identity politics) about the extent to which they might write of their experiences previously living under an alternative class structure? Despite being considered by many to be "*the* working-class novel of the early

1930s", Ben Harker points out how Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1933) has been criticised by leftist commentators "for leaving out sustained and explicit coverage of oppositional working-class collective agency, be it the General Strike of 1926, political advances for the Labour Party in the 1929 General Election, or the activities of the Communist Party and its front organisations such as the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM)" (2009, p. 56). This is despite Greenwood himself jumping between a number of temporary and insecure jobs during early adulthood before spending time on the dole himself (Hopkins 2018, pp. 196-98) – which, within new epistemological models of identity politics, more than qualifies him for writing about working-class experiences. Yet others also comment upon the author's complicated and sometimes fraught relationship with his working-class background; he was, according to fellow Labour politician Stafford Cripps, frequently "in danger of having his head turned by success" (quoted in Hopkins, p. 212). This clearly complicates the usual approach of exposing the inauthenticity of authors who represent marginalised communities they otherwise have no history, experiences or affiliation with. Within working-class studies scholarship today, Greenwood's novel thus sits somewhere awkwardly between an authentic, first-hand account of working-class life, and a somewhat condescending and detached retelling of material hardships from a later position of financial and literary success.

If, on the other hand, class is a self-perpetuating and performative series of ideological practices connected to historical trajectories (as outlined by Crowley and expanded upon by O'Brien), then class is almost exclusively subconsciously performed – acted out by individuals relying on social and historical understandings of what class means to them which are, in turn, shaped by their own material and geographical circumstances. But how do we determine the in/authenticity of subconscious thought? Again, this particular conception of class makes it difficult for proponents of identity politics to deconstruct working-class experiences in the same way they might other important aspects of identity-formation, where it is easier to recognise and point out inauthenticity based on widely available and clearly discernible autobiographical data.

Finally, if class is the emotional or holistic embodiment of subjective feeling (a perception described by Bourke and utilised by Wilson), then class is individualistic and person-centred, and not necessarily reliant on external factors such as work acts, income, or material comfort. If someone *feels* working-class, they might suitably lay claim to that feeling within certain boundaries. While staking such a claim does not inhibit potential challenges from others about the appropriateness or authenticity of such feelings, this definition too muddles the usual approach in epistemological models of identity politics to directly and emphatically call out representations that appropriate or falsify marginalised experiences – for how can we rigorously (and righteously) assess the extent to which such feelings intersect with previous material conditions, community relations, family connections, and/or acts of work and labour which fall outside of conventional understandings of what constitutes working-classness? Jack Carroll nevertheless attempts such a task when he contests that "Orwell's bourgeoisie upbringing and unfamiliarity with the working class hindered his ability to portray his subjects, their living conditions, and their community in a manner that was not influenced by his own bias" (2020) – particularly in relation to *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), a text famous for its depiction of the northern working-classes. Yet others, such as Ben Clarke, insist that Orwell's "emphasis upon […] identities" was in fact "founded upon the idea that the narratives that determine such communities are, to use Althusser's phrase, identical with the "lived" experience of human existence" (2007, p. 8). Clarke goes on to credit how "Orwell's own understanding of […] class difference increased with his broader political consciousness" that

had come a long way since the earlier publication of *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) (p. 17). For Clarke, Orwell's improving ability to *feel* the reality of working-class lives justifies further writings on the British working-class experience – despite the author's otherwise middle-class background.

Within all of these parameters and definitions, it is consequently clear that assessing the authenticity of working-class lives is not as straightforward as simply recognising a physical, superficial, or apparently autobiographical disconnect between author and published work, even if the legitimacy of other supposedly working-class texts (including those by Dickens, Gaskell, and several other authors listed above with questionable working-class origins and/or suspect relationships with working-class lives) are now being brought under greater scrutiny.[7] With what makes for an authentic working-class text so up in the air, it is easy to see how educators in the undergraduate classroom have so far avoided coordinating and consolidating modules based solely and exclusively on working-class lives.

For other social historians and observers, this intrinsic or authentic value borne out of genuine life experience is often absent from discussions on class partly due to the newfound suspicions toward class structures and class practices that have increased since the rise of neoliberalism (which itself occurred alongside, and is intertwined with, the rise of identity politics). As Verity Burgmann explains, "during the 1980s the intellectual and political climate [primarily of the political left] became increasingly hostile toward the notion of class and contemptuous of the working class, with decline of class-consciousness persistently paraded as proof of the death of class itself" (2005, p. 1). By the early-1990s, such hostility in Britain emerged at the fringe of the "Kinnock agenda" of pre-New Labour, which sought to recognise that "the economy had changed out of all recognition, and with it the working-class" as well (Cronin 2004, p. 306). Instead, the Labour Party aimed to become a broad ''rainbow coalition" of the excluded and marginalised who, together with what remained of the traditional working-class, could be "mobilised around a fundamentally left-wing programme' (Cronin 2004, p. 306). For Terry Irving, this "damage caused by identity politics" resulted in a fractured and limited acknowledgement of class solidarity among the self-professed left: "Instead of exploitation in common, liberal thinkers looked for multiple oppressions. […] Instead of practising solidarity as activist intellectuals, informed by an understanding of the history of the class struggle, they retired to academia and built abstract models of intersectionality" (Irving 2017, p. 106).

As, according to Irving, "liberal thinkers" ignored or suppressed historical or materialist understandings of class in their efforts to incorporate models of authenticity and identity politics into their worldviews, it is subsequently not illogical to presume that similar notions of class or working-classness might have been equally sidelined and/or subconsciously ignored in the corresponding study of literature during the same years of the early twenty-first century. Indeed, in addition to Rizzo's earlier observations, Rita Felski has affirmed how there was "a noticeable silence about class in much contemporary cultural theory" at the turn of the new millennium (2000, p. 34), a point echoed by Evans and Tilley in their own study on the more recent political exclusion(s) of the working-classes in Britain: "By the turn of the millennium, British sociologists appeared to have turned their backs on the very idea of class" (2017, p. 2). Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble strike an even more cynical tone when they claim that although there has been an "increased prominence of the working-classes in political discourse since the

[7] For further details about Dickens and Gaskell's backgrounds and upbringings in particular, see Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (2012), and Helena Kelley, *The Life and Lies of Charles Dickens* (2023); and Deidre D'Albertis, 'The Life and Letters of E. C. Gaskell' in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell* ed. Jill Matus (2007).

Great Recession began in 2008", such discourse engages "not with the working-classes [proper], but with fantasies that simplify the people they purport to describe" (2017, pp. 2-3). While O'Brien's work on the impact of neoliberalism on British working-class fiction somewhat resists this interpretation, these authors clearly see working-classness in the twenty-first century as being either wilfully subsumed or tactfully ignored by both academics and politicians alike, partly in a cynical effort to recentre a model of identity politics disconnected from class dynamics as the *cause célèbre* of university approaches to inclusion, access, education and participation.

Identity politics thus not only complicated ideas around the authentic literary representation of the British working-classes, but reshaped or reformed historical notions of class and working-classness in a manner that had a profound impact on party politics in Britain, and whose effects rippled outwards into other realms of society – including within the education sector. As Michael Zweig contends, "the emerging field of working-class studies is" more recently "settling on definitions of class that are rooted in the power relations established in production, extending outward into politics and culture" – partly because "income and education are poor proxies for class" in the identity-obsessed twenty-first century (2017, pp. 29-30).

Zweig's reference to "power relations" leads directly onto my final (but related) consideration for why British working-class literature remains relatively absent from the undergraduate English literature classroom: that of authorial accountability. As Julie Lindquist boldly asserts, since the rise of identity politics "there is something about the act of claiming working-class experience that pisses people off" (2004, p. 187), and several writers, educators and academics situated in these new fields of study have been grappling with the urgent question of who gets to tell (and teach) what stories. In her introduction to *Teaching What You're Not: Identity Politics in Higher Education* (1996), Katharine J. Mayberry asserts how the increasing proliferation of identity-based modules appearing on academic syllabi in the 1990s put more privileged teachers under the spotlight: "In a setting where little was safe from interrogation […] it was only a matter of time before white faculty – guardians of the now thoroughly problematised trinity of knowledge, authority, and tradition – were challenged. The most provocative of these challenges revolved around the issue of identity […and] identity-based credibility […] as an entirely new precondition of professional authority" (p. 3). For students from minority, oppressed, or marginalised backgrounds, it became increasingly important that academics had some kind of first-hand experience which would qualify them to teach subjects related to these identity-based struggles. While Mayberry deliberately exposes the historical exclusion of class from these particular discussions in the 1990s, it is not unreasonable to assume that some academics would nevertheless go on to perceive their class identity in a manner not dissimilar to their gender, sexuality and racial background. Considering that recent studies put the number of self-identified working-class academics in the UK higher-education sector as low as 14% (Friedman and Laurison 2019, p. 244) or even 10% (Wakeling 2023), we can thus fairly conclude that there is a distinct *lack* of first-hand working-class experience among higher-education faculty in the UK today. Combine this with the demand to pair subject teaching with first-hand experience that Mayberry recognises as being brought about by the rise of identity politics, and it suddenly seems unsurprising that so few lecturers in English are currently pioneering, organising or even teaching modules centred around British working-class literature; ultimately, they lack the authentic working-class upbringing and/or background that students have come to expect from academics teaching on identity-based modules.

For some, this partial erasure or suppression of working-class modules in the curriculum has the unintended consequence of suppressing working-class voices in literature altogether – even

if such voices are often framed by middle and upper-middle class perspectives. The self-described middle-class Irish author Roddy Doyle, for instance, resists calls to speak only from his own experiences, and insists that not only is the subject of class "fun to deal with as a writer", but that investigating concerns beyond the scope of your own class is part of "people's urge to somehow […] redefine themselves" in this current age of identity politics (O'Malley 2013). While Mayberry concedes the risk that "identity is replacing expertise" within higher education settings (1996, p. 4), she too looks at opportunities for personal reflection and redefinition, proposing that academics and faculty members take advantage of the current cultural moment to examine "his or her own motives, qualifications, and goals as teachers and as scholars" (p. 5). Such instances of self-reflection have undoubtedly proliferated in the near thirty years since Mayberry's observations were first published, and they take the form of several of the new and innovative literary pedagogies that I now go on to evaluate. Having established how ongoing debates around identity politics have impacted definitions, conceptions and representations of literary working-classness and, to some extent, prevented their assimilation into newly accepted forms of undergraduate teaching in the UK, I now turn to some of the recent pedagogical attempts at overcoming this issue, and consider the extent to which class and working-classness might begin to be thought of as equally important and valid aspects of identity-formation in the future of twenty-first century literary education.

Elevating Working-Class Voices

So how might these myriad, often contradictory arguments around defining, authentically representing, and responsibly accounting for representations of the British working-class be resolved to recentre working-class experiences, and encourage the foundation of a more concrete pedagogical understanding of working-class literary studies in the undergraduate English literature classroom today? To assess this question with sufficient insight and precision, I will now interrogate and evaluate a number of more recent pedagogical attempts at responding to issues and concerns around working-class representation in the classroom. While these various attempts are drawn from both the UK and US, and from both secondary and higher education settings, I nevertheless consider exactly how they might each contribute to the formation of core modules for the study of British working-class literature within UK university settings. In doing so, I respond directly to both the notable absence of working-class modules for literary study, and the urgent need to consider class as a formative aspect of identity-formation alongside other aspects of identity – particularly within the increasingly utilised epistemological and pedagogical models of identity politics available to academics and educators today.

To overcome the complications around neatly or singularly defining class or working-classness, some literary researchers emphasise the importance of accurately delineating and applying the correct term, label, moniker and/or sub-definition of class which is always historically dependent on a variety of economic, material and social conditions. In *Teaching Labouring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (2018), Kevin Binfield and William J. Christmas concede that while "contemporary students […] tend to see the existence of a labouring class and an author's membership in it as […] a social problem that must be corrected", they determine that it is the responsibility of educators "to foster in students a disposition to replace [this] nostalgia with an active, critical reflection on the realities of [the intersections between] labour and life" (pp. 2-3). To achieve this, they invite teachers and students to "view authorship and literary creation in an earlier historical context of labour", and to "consider how labouring-class authorship diverged from leisure-class theories" that are historically specific (p. 4). In particular, they stress that even the eponymous label chosen for

their collected volume – "labouring-class" – "should not be understood as a singular term that reduces a manifold to a cleanly circumscribed entity; rather, it stands as an adjectival form of *labouring classes*, suggestive of plurality and diversity […] and more inclusive of women and authors of African descent than is suggested by other terminology" (pp. 7-8; original emphasis). Binfield and Christmas consequently opt for an intersectional approach that nevertheless underlines the significance of historical specificity; by choosing the most precise available definition to describe the working-class author being taught, historically inaccurate pitfalls are not only avoided, but additional avenues of research that intersect with other marginalised identities are broadly welcomed into the field. Considering the extent to which identity politics values recovering and recentring marginalised experiences, this might prove a useful method for introducing working-class modules and texts at the undergraduate level in universities.

In the introduction to their edited collection *New Working-Class Studies* (2018), John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon also advocate for an "emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches", but otherwise spotlight "cultural representations [of class] as sources for understanding working-class experience" (p. 1). This "cultural approach" – which alleviates the need for the acutely specific labels advocated by Binfield and Christmas – ultimately foregrounds "important models for linking the academic study of working-class history and culture with activism and education" (p. 2). As the pair go on to insist, "No discussion of working-class life and culture would be possible without the formative ideas from three social sciences: sociology, anthropology and economics" (p. 8). For Russo and Linkon, then, definitions of class and working-classness become more malleable (and more meaningful) when considered from a variety of social, cultural and academic angles, and they propose a pedagogy for study which prioritises connections between disciplines *and* between educational institutions and other class-informed structures (such as unions, or the home). To adapt and expand opportunities for learning about and understanding working-class literature at the undergraduate level, English departments across UK universities might therefore consider how working-class literary studies might be taught in conjunction with programs from other schools and departments. Tutors and academics from interdisciplinary research centres might, for example, put together modules on working-class literatures and working-class cultures and make them available on a number of different degree programs; this widens the scope, nuance and opportunities for collaboration in the teaching of (and research within) British working-class studies, while at the same time practically prioritising adequate student numbers to make the module viable. It would also align with Russo and Linkon's assertion that "New working-class studies brings together scholars, activists, and workers from a variety of perspectives, disciplines, and theoretical schools" (p. 10) to help move the discipline beyond historically constrained or otherwise culturally limiting definitions of class.

While these scholars are making concerted efforts at diversifying the field, lingering questions over "authentic lived experience" and accountability still confuse and frustrate other attempts at neatly delineating a space for British working-class literary studies at the undergraduate level. Many education researchers agree, however, that one of the most effective ways to engage with and respond to these debates around authenticity, around who gets to tell what stories, is by empowering students – particularly working-class students – to admit their own authentic experiences into the classroom and challenge existing hierarchies of learning. This includes challenging what constitutes "literature" – and by extension, British working-class literature – worthy of academic study.

Romy Clark's and Roz Invanič's *The Politics of Writing* (first published in 1997) accounts for the historical systemic exclusion of student working-class experiences in the classroom in some

detail. Drawing upon David Bartholomae's earlier 1986 essay on "academic discourses", Clark and Invanič acknowledge that certain types or styles of writing – and therefore, reading – depend "on the access people have had to literary practices and discourse types"; if students are unfamiliar with the particulars of a vocabulary or it differs from their way of talking or communicating at home, it is doubly challenging to grasp such a language in the classroom (2006, pp. 135, 15). They also concede that "inequalities in education" are "primarily class-based", and that working-class students often "hold different values and beliefs from those encoded in the discourses and genres that they encounter and are encouraged to reproduce in school" (pp. 43, 126). This is supported by researchers such as Wilkins and Burke, who found that working-class students unfamiliar with such norms have been "summoned to adjust their behaviour and [are] learning to fit with culturally implicit norms and pedagogic demands" as recently as 2015 (p. 435). Clark and Invanič's research thus displays an acute awareness of the perceived inauthenticity of the working-class experience that persists within the educational environments and limited curriculums currently on offer, and might go some way to explaining why working-class students (or even working-class academics) are more hesitant than other marginalised groups to advocate for the inclusion of British working-class literature at undergraduate level; having been taught from a young age to disregard their authentic class-based experiences in the classroom, such individuals are unlikely to confidently consider the very same experiences as worthy of academic study.

Clark and Invanič nevertheless advocate for the active involvement of educational institutions in "exposing the partiality of accounts of the world", and for lending a "sense of personal power or authoritativeness" to marginalised, working-class students (pp. 227, 232). Generally, this has been a popular approach to formulating new literary pedagogies since the early-2000s. Julie Lindquist, for example, emphasises how important it is to "enable students to locate their own affectively structured experiences of class within more integrated understandings of social structures and identity formations", particularly for those from a working-class background who may have to negotiate loyalties between two different and competing developmental environments (2004, p. 188). In her 2006 paper on performing working-class identity, Donna LeCourt also voices concerns about educational approaches that have posited "working-class and academic discourses existence in a dichotomous relationship where one discourse is depicted as in almost complete opposition to the other" (p. 30) – just as Clark and Invanič described. Instead, she extols the need for a more collaborative relationship between the two – championing the right of students to challenge institutionally imposed "hierarchies" around class and identity politics (p. 44) and suggesting that "seeing class as both economically structured and culturally fluid" will help create "the potential for infinite meanings" in new classroom pedagogies (pp. 45-6). In "Redneck and Hillbilly Discourse in the Writing Classroom", American teacher Jennifer Beech additionally warns of the "capacity for seemingly well-meaning educators to perpetuate mainstream classist and racist ideologies". To resist this, she advocates for "a pedagogy that allows students from a variety of class backgrounds to make use of knowledge brought from their home communities while still making their way into academic discourse" (2004, pp. 173, 183). While some researchers, such as Diane Reay, see fundamental shifts in government policy or the national curriculum as the only method for achieving this kind of transformational change in classroom on a wider scale (2001, p. 343), these studies and attempts to reevaluate and remodel the teaching of class are nevertheless predicated on what Patrick Finn summarises as the idea of "connecting knowledge with the reality of working-class students' lives" (1999, p. xi).

To deconstruct such "hierarchies" and achieve "infinite meanings" for working-class students within higher-education settings, many universities have turned toward ostensibly pedagogical

widening participation programmes to help potential and first-year applicants decode the "academic discourses" identified by theorists such as Bartholomae, Clark and Invanič. Mary Lea and Brian Street, for example, posit that by applying an "academic literacies" perspective to extra-curricular routes into higher-education and encouraging working-class students to recognise and decode unfamiliar language, universities might increase applications from students from lower-income backgrounds. Unlike "study skills" and "academic socialization" models, they argue that an "academic literacies" model pays greater attention to structural power relationships, authority, and meaning-making "that are implicit in the use of literary practices within specific institutional settings" (2006, p. 370). Ultimately, Lea and Street found that when university leaders do incorporate different literacies into their widening participation schemes, they are more likely to elicit positive and varied responses from students about what it means to be at a literacy-based disadvantage. At the same time, researchers such as Wilkins and Burke highlight how such schemes are most effective only when they operate from a point of "*working-class empathy*" rather than "*middle-class sympathy*" (2015, p. 445; original emphasis). Teresa McConlogue's *Assessment and Feedback in Higher Education* (2020), which includes a chapter on "Developing Inclusive Curriculum and Assessment Practices", also details how adopting an empathetic approach to multiple disadvantaged backgrounds – including social background – in the grading of final submissions engenders more useful and practical feedback for working-class students (pp. 140-141).

These pedagogies consequently provide useful templates for incorporating working-class literature into the undergraduate curriculum. In the first instance, academics might begin to work alongside and in conjunction with groups of working-class students to formulate truly authentic working-class literature modules and reading lists. This collaborative approach would immediately prioritise and underscore the importance of working-class student voices within academic settings (as advocated by multiple researchers above), while simultaneously "connecting knowledge with the reality of working-class students' lives" and enabling them to deconstruct epistemological and literary hierarchies and other "academic discourses".

To achieve this kind of change, Borsheim-Black et al. advocate for reading *against* existing canonical texts to help marginalised students comprehend and critically analyse existing structures of power and control. For these researchers, "canonical texts perpetuate ideologies that are also dominant – about Whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, Christianity, and physical and mental ability" (2014, p. 123), and are therefore especially suited to being critiqued in an age of identity politics which imbues inherent value in alternative or marginalised identities. While, once again, the concept of *class* as a dominant social ideology is absent from this analysis (more specifically, the middle-class attitudes and customs found in multiple canonical texts that often prove the "norm" against which other class-based behaviours are measured against), Borsheim-Black et al. nevertheless subscribe to Paulo Freire's belief that canonical texts (inadvertently or otherwise) "support the dominant ideology" and consequently enact behaviours that reinforce existing social and economic inequalities (1985, p. 17). Borsheim-Black et al., thus recommend that students should learn how "language and texts are not neutral and always ideological", and that only by 'questioning representation and normativity' will individuals and institutions begin to "work toward [effecting some kind of] social transformation" (2014, pp. 123-4). Like Freire, they "recognise the power canonical novels hold to reaffirm cultural capital" (p. 132). Encouraging groups of undergraduate working-class students to read against canonical examples of working-class literature and collectively determine the authenticity of such texts might therefore be doubly useful: such a process guards against accusations of inauthenticity behind a literature module's creation, while simultaneously affirming and validating a variety of personal, working-class

experiences that have been traditionally or historically ignored and sidelined within academic settings.

While reading against canonical texts can prove useful for elevating working-class perspectives, other researchers propose redefining or upending the canon altogether. In an article on the "use value" of working-class writing, Sonia Perera, for instance, examines what makes this kind of writing valuable, and how it connects with "traditions of literary internationalism" (2012, p. 932). She deconstructs ideas about the "English canon" and "world literature" – marking them as elitist categories, a product of privilege and colonialism – and calls for the introduction of new working-class literatures (including "unglamorous" diary entries, letters and autobiography, and work in multiple languages) to be included in higher education environments. Deconstructing "use values" of popular or canonical texts might therefore be equally helpful for improving the academic outlook of disadvantaged or marginalised students and bringing working-class perspectives into the undergraduate literature classroom. To achieve this, students might be encouraged to bring a literary text of personal value to introductory seminars, which can range from anything to a paperback bestseller to a diary-entry of their own. In subsequent discussions, they might then be able to redefine what constitutes "literature" or "value" and begin to deconstruct the terms as critical concepts. This will enable all students to incorporate their own "value systems" into their studies, no matter their class-background – and ensure that texts with alternative viewpoints or which exist outside of the middle-class canon are treated with equal critical diligence. Such an approach fits neatly with Katie Beswick's more recent research on taking seriously "*felt* class identity" (as advocated by Bourke and Wilson), whereby she positions "*class feeling* as an important dimension of understanding how barriers to access and participation operate" (Beswick 2020, p. 267; original emphasis). While Beswick's research is centred around affective class identification in the theatre industry, its focus on the "multitude of reasons why individuals feel themselves, legitimately or otherwise, to be members of the working-class, regardless of where they are positioned by instrumental measurements" (p. 268) might clearly be applied to similar literary contexts – including within the undergraduate English classroom.

At the same time, pedagogical models of widening participation which value "empathy" rather than "sympathy" can provide similarly illuminating methods for encouraging working-class undergraduate students to value their own subjective (if sometimes uncritical) interpretations of working-class literature. Within an undergraduate literature seminar, for example, lead tutors might model acts of disclosure, before encouraging the sharing between peers of institutional, social or literary challenges faced by students from all social backgrounds. Tutors might then encourage students to identify points of similarity and convergence between their own experiences and those found in selected working-class texts. Where working-class students' own authentic lived experiences mirror or parallel with their literary counterparts consequently provides opportunities for them to not only contribute (or potentially even lead) classroom discussions, but feed directly into pedagogical models of literary interpretation facilitated by the academic tutor. This would constitute an empathetic approach which overcomes suggestions that determining the authenticity of class-based experiences is too unwieldly, indeterminate and/or complex for undergraduate students to accommodate.

Michalinos Zembylas, however, anticipates that some students might struggle to speak about personal identity and overcome this kind of "pedagogy of discomfort" – a term he coined to describe a pedagogy which might invoke feelings of shame, awkwardness, embarrassment of even pain felt by students when engaging in "social justice education" which "unsettle[s] cherished beliefs about the world" (2015, p. 164). Yet he also confirms how "in recent years"

such discussions are increasingly framed as being "pedagogically valuable" (p. 163). Zembylas sees such pedagogies as being "grounded in the assumption that discomforting feelings are important in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain social inequities", and he affirms how they create "openings for individual and social transformation" (p. 163). While potential in/sensitivities between students may arise and need to be delicately navigated, subsequent discussions can broaden students' understandings of identity-based labelling while simultaneously encouraging them to reflect upon their own methods of valuing or de-valuing literary texts. Undergraduate seminar tutors can therefore "embrace crisis as a medium to transform students' identities and worldviews" (Zembylas, p. 165), and continue to model processes of discomfort and disclosure as useful pedagogical tools for formulating alternative reading lists centred around British working-class literature and authentic working-class experiences.

Yet Zembylas also insists that "experiencing discomfort should not be confused with the absence of safety" (p. 165), and that "minimizing ethical violence toward any student is important" (p. 173). Additional safeguards for working-class students are thus required to ensure that such pedagogies are primarily "challenging students to critically analyse their ideological values and beliefs that subordinate on the basis of [class]" – and not on forcing "marginalized students" to be "representative[s] of a homogenized group" or on forcing "privileged students […] to make their transformation "evident" in public" (Zembylas 2015, pp. 166, 171). Within the undergraduate English literature classroom, such safeguards might include advertising relevant content in advance of the seminar (via content warnings); laying out terms for respectful discussion in opening lectures and seminars; and introducing and discussing connected notions of intersectionality and allyship in an attempt to ensure discussions of class do not become focused on devaluing the authentic lived experiences of students with similarly marginalised or oppressed, but other, identities. By working in conjunction with the new and emerging literary pedagogies evaluated here (including those on establishing historically specific definitions of class, connecting working-class literature with working-class culture and activism, instituting empathetic models of widening participation, and integrating the authentic experiences of working-class students into classroom debates), such safeguards can function as equally positive conduits for rethinking traditional parameters of academic literary study.

Conclusion

As definitions and representations of class and working-classness continue to evolve and be debated by scholars, politicians and sociologists within both public and academic arenas, it is clear that opportunities for studying British working-class literature remain limited for new undergraduate students across the UK. While the rise of identity politics and the subsequent implementation of new modes of learning centred around self-identity and identity-formation have fundamentally reshaped how academics, researchers, tutors, and students all think about themselves, the positive and encouraging changes to the study of gender, sexuality, race and nationhood, and post/colonialism (particularly within literary contexts) are either ill-conceived, indeterminate, or altogether absent in the study of class and working-classness. As outlined above, this discrepancy seems to have emerged (in part) due to the increasingly awkward relationship between class and identity politics, which numerous researchers and social historians identify as being rooted in ongoing social conflicts centred around un/acceptable notions of individualism, neoliberalism, and in/authenticity in twenty-first century society.

Yet this article also evidences a number of new and emerging pedagogies that are currently making concerted efforts at widening access to the field of working-class studies. These alternative models of education create openings for the more detailed, specific and in some cases expansive study of working-class literary history; advocate for interdisciplinary connections that embrace lived experiences of working-classness outside of traditional academic and institutional spaces; and promote empathy between a range of different identity-based communities to encourage increased understanding, collaboration, and research in the discipline. Most pertinently, they all stress the importance of adopting an intersectional approach for both challenging existing dominant structures within education systems and establishing new and innovative approaches to the study of working-class lives. As Katie Beswick asserts, "class inequality is inherently intersectional", as it frequently becomes "entangled with injustices related to race, gender, sexuality and disability, [especially] to the extent that it is difficult to understand the lived experiences and stigmas produced by distinct identity positions" as existing separately from class (2020, p. 266). Discussions of working-class literature, working-class writing, and subjective experiences of class should therefore not preclude an engagement with other aspects of identity that – within the context of literary studies – academics and students regularly explore in pedagogical approaches to gender, sexuality, and postcolonialism.

As early as 1995, Constance Coiner attested how "working-class writing often coincides with other literary categories" (p. 250), despite its relative absence in higher-education settings and/or the undergraduate literature classroom. Considering how markers of identity shape "literary categories" today, such a claim clearly invites researchers and academics to consider class through a multitude of exacting socialised prisms which are rooted in the continued proliferation of identity politics. While Beswick herself also points to how "class discourse" so often becomes "conflated with conceptions of the white working-class and dismissed on the basis of this" (p. 267), this is a distinction and over-simplification that must be resisted; as texts by George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, and more recently Alex Wheattle, Kit de Waal, and Lemn Sissay indicate, there is no such thing as a total nor homogenous "white working-class" in a country as multicultural as Britain. While it is equally important not to amalgamate (and consequently simplify) class-based prejudice and discrimination with experiences of racism (or class-based prejudice with any other kind of identity-based discrimination), an intersectional approach to working-class literary studies nevertheless permits us to consider questions of class (and what it means to be working-class) from a variety of nuanced, alternative, and authentic perspectives – perspectives which are ultimately grounded in what so many of the pedagogies evaluated above essentially advocate for: the idea of "connecting knowledge with the reality of working-class students' lives" (Finn 1999, p. xi).

As Borsheim-Black et al., insist, teachers and academics must not only recentre authentic working-class student experiences, but do more to "locate counterstories […] written by [marginalised] writers, musicians, activists, artists, or politicians who were active" not just in the major arenas of history, but in the margins and shadows of the past as well (2014, p. 128). Going forwards, it therefore falls to academics, teachers, educators and tutors to adopt, practice and/or experiment with the new literary pedagogies being established and promoted by so many of the researchers mentioned above, particularly in an effort to procure working-class "counterstories" and "revise established histories" about what constitutes working-class literature. As even Terry Irving concedes, "class is part of the zeitgeist again" (2017, p. 105), and, in light of this cultural moment, academics should take advantage of the "renewal of intellectual energy in class studies" that is evident in wider research in the field (pp. 110-111). By adapting, contorting, and evolving our understanding of class so that we begin to see

working-classness as a more formative aspect of identity in line with other marginalised facets of identity, we might thus begin to see new working-class texts, authors and methodologies infiltrate their way into our popular academic consciousness – and only then might we begin to see the consistent and dedicated formulation, consolidation, and proliferation of undergraduate modules dedicated to the study of British working-class literatures within UK universities.

Author Bio

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Appendix A: Teaching Class in UK Universities: Undergraduate English Literature Modules Assessment

The following table provides links to BA English course pages (for Autumn 2024/25 entry) for *The Guardian's* Top 25 UK Universities of 2023 for studying English.

Modules relating to lower- and/or working-class experiences that can be found online are mostly absent, but exceptions (highlighted bold) have been identified in the table below.

A complete list of *The Guardian's* Top UK Universities for English is available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2022/sep/24/best-uk-universities-for-english-league-table.

All information accurate as of July 2024.

Rank	University	Class (Y/N)	BA English Literature Undergraduate Modules (Links)
1	St. Andrews	No	https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/subjects/english/english-ba/
2	Oxford	No	https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/courses/course-listing/english-language-and-literature
3	Durham	No	https://www.durham.ac.uk/study/courses/q300/
4	Cambridge	No	https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/courses/english
5	Warwick	No	https://warwick.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/englishlit/
6	UCL	No	https://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/undergraduate/degrees/english-ba
7	Lancaster	No	https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/english-literature-ba-hons-q300/
8	Loughborough	No	https://www.lboro.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/english/
9	Surrey	No	https://www.surrey.ac.uk/undergraduate/english-literature
10	Edge Hill	No	https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/course/english/
11	Exeter	No	https://www.exeter.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/english/english/
12	**Liverpool John Moores**	**Yes**	**https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/study/courses/undergraduates/2024/36045-english-literature-ba-hons** **Module: Working-Class Writing**
13	Hertfordshire	No	https://www.herts.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/ba-hons-english-literature2
14	Glasgow	No	https://www.gla.ac.uk/undergraduate/degrees/englishliterature/#coursedetails
15	Aberdeen	No	https://www.abdn.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/degree-programmes/577/Q300/english/
16	Hull	No	https://www.hull.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/english-ba-hons
17	Strathclyde	No	https://www.strath.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/english/
18	York	No	https://www.york.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/ba-english/
19	Gloucestershire	No	https://www.glos.ac.uk/courses/course/elt-ba-english-literature/
20	Swansea	No	https://www.swansea.ac.uk/undergraduate/courses/culture-communication/english-literature-creative-writing/ba-english-literature/

21	Birmingham	No	https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/undergraduate/courses/english/english
22	Sheffield	No	https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/undergraduate/courses/2025/english-literature-ba
23	Edinburgh Napier	No	https://www.napier.ac.uk/courses/ba-hons-english-undergraduate-fulltime
24	**Edinburgh**	**Yes**	**https://www.ed.ac.uk/literatures-languages-cultures/english-literature/undergraduate** **Module: Working-Class Representations**
25	Keele	No	https://www.keele.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/undergraduatecourses/englishliterature/