

Reexamining the Proletarian Fictional Autobiography: Class, Gender and Aesthetics in Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*

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Abstract

It is accepted truth that proletarian literature is marked by a tension, or even contradiction, emanating from the social conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This article explores these contradictions within the proletarian autobiographical novel form, focusing on Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*. Smedley challenges predominately masculine discourse in working-class literature, boldly placing female desire at the center of her political project. Smedley intimately ties her understanding of class with her gender identity, something that was at loggerheads with contemporary leftist male critics who championed her working-class sensibility but resisted the gendered implications of her work. Our article pushes against a solely nationalistic viewpoint that many critics have embraced. To better understand the genre, we place Smedley's novel in conversation with Swedish working-class writer Moa Martinson's 1936 autobiographical novel *Mor gifter sig* [My Mother Gets Married]. By doing so, we analyze the nationalistic context of Smedley's book, underlining how being 'poised between bourgeois and revolutionary discursive traditions' is something historical and place-based, and arguing that this is key to understanding the category of proletarian fictional autobiography.

Keywords: proletarian autobiographical novel; working-class literature; Agnes Smedley; Moa Martinson; *Daughter of Earth*; international literature

According to Barbara Foley (2005: 284), 'American proletarian fictional autobiographies,' which comprise one of the most important proletarian novel subgenres, 'constitute a hybrid form, poised between bourgeois and revolutionary discursive traditions.' On the one hand, she argues, they draw upon bourgeois literary models, such as the Bildungsroman or novel

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of education. On the other hand, their progressive politics differ from bourgeois literature. One example of this is that proletarian literature, according to Foley, tries to 'speak for a collective,' rather than individuals. This idea that proletarian literature is marked by a tension, or even contradiction, emanating from the social conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie has become an established truth in U.S. literary scholarship. Recent essays by Lawrence Hanley (2017) and Christopher Hager (2017) in Nicholas Cole's and Paul Lauter's (eds. 2017) *A History of American Working-Class Literature* are illustrative of this acknowledgement.

One of Foley's archetypical examples of an American proletarian fictional autobiography is Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*, first published in the U.S. in 1929 and considered by Paula Rabinowitz as the 'first truly proletarian novel' (1991: 28). Our aim in this article is not to disagree with these assessments but to explore the nuances of the proletarian autobiographical novel genre through a reanalysis of *Daughter of Earth*, revealing more specifically the tensions embedded within the genre itself. Smedley's novel is filled with contradictions as she negotiates the terrain between bourgeois and revolutionary traditions, including her desire to speak *for* the working class while being distant from it, her yearning for education while embracing emotions (and perhaps even proletarian primitivity) over reason, as well as her longing for a collective universal truth while falsifying the facts of her own life experiences. These contradictions, we argue, can be best understood if we examine them in the overall way Smedley challenges predominately masculine discourse in working-class literature, boldly placing female desire at the center of her political project. Smedley intimately ties her understanding of class with her lived gender identity, something that was at loggerheads with contemporary leftist male critics who championed her working-class sensibility but resisted the gendered implications of her work.

By reexamining these contradictions in *Daughter of Earth*, we wish to bring more into focus the proletarian autobiographical novel hybrid form, adding to Foley's groundbreaking work that still has much resonance today. We do, however, also wish to push the conversation away from a solely nationalistic viewpoint that many critics have embraced. Foley places *Daughter of Earth* in the genre of the *American* proletarian fictional autobiography. However, she does not analyze the American (or, rather U.S.) specificity implied by this formulation. Thereby, she risks

reproducing a tendency within U.S. scholarship that consists of treating the particular (the *American*) as if it were universal (the *proletarian*) (see Nilsson in press). In her novel, Smedley does the same as she champions a globalized working class without accounting for the specific racial and national divisions among them. To better understand the genre, therefore, we place Smedley's novel in comparison with a 1936 proletarian autobiographical novel from another context, Swedish working-class writer Moa Martinson's *Mor gifter sig* [*My Mother Gets Married*] (translated in English by Margaret S. Lacy in 1988). By doing so, we analyze the nationalistic context of Smedley's book, underlining how being 'poised between bourgeois and revolutionary discursive traditions' is something historical and place-based, and arguing that this is key to understanding the category of proletarian fictional autobiography.

Daughter of Earth was first published at the beginning of a new epoch in U.S. society—from the ashes of the Great Depression grew a society of great want. For Michael Gold, the editor of the *New Masses*—a Marxist magazine with close ties to the American Communist Party—this soil was ripe for a burgeoning type of writer and a new literary expression. In his (in)famous 1929 essay 'Go Left Young Writers' Gold urged, 'Do not be passive. Write. Your life in mine, mill and farm is of deathless significance to the history of the world.' Gold imagined 'wild youth' with dirt under their fingernails writing 'in jets of exasperated feeling' sowing the seeds for a new crop of 'red' writers with few political theories but whose lives were lived close to the bone (Gold 1929: 3). These writers would care not for aesthetic flourish or experimental prose; they did not even have time to 'polish' their work (Gold famously stated, 'technique makes cowards of us all'). Writing from their authentic experiences, though, they would collectively reshape literature. As is obvious from his phrasing, Gold gendered this emerging new writer in distinctly masculine attributes (Armengol 2014: 62-63). Surprisingly, though, he also found a proletarian champion in Agnes Smedley (1892-1950), praising the writer and her book. Other accolades followed with *New Republic* focusing on the rendering of Smedley's life experiences as 'so authentic, so intense' (Lovett 1929: 203) and Walt Carmon, another editor of the *New Masses*, categorizing Smedley as a 'proletarian to the marrow,' and a 'fellow worker who is one of us' (1929: 17).

Maria Lauret rightly points out that Gold and his contemporaries saw Smedley as a fellow worker *despite* her gender (1994: 14-16). The 'us' for

Carmon, Gold and others was distinctly masculine, and Smedley was championed because of the way she highlighted her working-class sensibilities in her novels, her newspaper reporting, and her stories of fellow revolutionaries. Smedley, though, writes specifically as a ‘daughter,’ and her proletarian autobiographical novel distinctly concerns being a revolutionary female within a patriarchal capitalist society. Coming of age during the Colorado labor wars that would explode during the Ludlow Massacre, Smedley explicitly declares that Marie, the central character of *Daughter of Earth* and based on Smedley’s life, is a young woman with generational connection to the land. Smedley’s overt idealizing of both nature and her working-class background within the pages of her book is epitomized on the cover of a popular paperback version of the novel. On the cover image, a woman in the forefront towers over the company town that is mere background. The perspective makes the woman, with clenched fist and a whip in the other hand, as part of the sky, her billowing skirt visually connected to the seemingly blowing wind of change. The cover art and the repeated earthy references in Smedley’s prose package the novel as a distinctly proletarian novel—a novel about workers with connections to nature, ready to fight.

Importantly, though, the woman in this artistic rendering is alone. She has the (natural) strength, will, and the weapons to rise against her oppressors. This gendered viewpoint was an issue for Carmon, who revised his ‘us’ stance. In a subsequent review, he examined the novel precisely on gendered terms, proclaiming the novel’s failures were the result of ‘the bitterness of a woman’ and thus merely melodramatic (‘Away from Harlem,’ 1930: 17). Carmon and other male revolutionaries and critics during the 1930s disavowed much of the book on this premise.

Daughter of Earth, though, had a resurgence of interest from critics and U.S. readers alike in the 1970s *because* Smedley’s autobiographical novel focused upon being a working-class revolutionary woman. The Feminist Press reissued *Daughter of Earth* in 1973, the same year the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision legalized abortion within the U.S. Marie details her two illegal abortions within the novel—one of the many connecting threads between the early 1900s of the novel and the 1970s when it was reissued. The novel has seen numerous reprintings since that time and has received continued critical attention including by Rabinowitz (1991), Foley (1993), Lauret (1994), Sondra Guttman (2000), Ruth Price (2005), Andrew C. Yerkes (2005) Christie Launius (2007), William Dow

(2009) and Jeannie Im (2013). We build upon these critics' theories—especially their gender analysis—while focusing specifically on the contradictions embedded in the genre of proletarian fictional autobiography.

Proletarian and Bourgeois Discourse in Smedley's Fictional Autobiography

It is not hard to find in *Daughter of Earth* a self-reflexive thematizing of the work's proletarian character or status. Already on the first pages, Smedley explicitly states her ambitions to speak for a collective—which, according to Foley, is one of the key features distinguishing proletarian from bourgeois literature—by stressing that she writes about 'the joys and sorrows of the lowly' (Smedley 1987: 7), and that she wants to be viewed as representing this group:

I belong to those who do not die for the sake of beauty. I belong to those who die from other causes—exhausted by poverty, victims of wealth and power, fighters in a great cause. A few of us die, desperate from the pain or disillusionment of love, but for most of us 'the earthquake but discloseth new fountains.' For we are of the earth and our struggle is the struggle of earth. (Smedley 1987: 8)

Here, Smedley connects her own biography not only to collective experiences of social subjection ('poverty, victims of wealth and power') but also to political revolt against this subjection ('fighters in a great cause'). In other words, she connects both herself and, consequently, her autobiographical novel, to the features that, according to Foley, distinguishes the proletarian fictional autobiography from the bourgeois novel: its ambition to speak for a collective and its proximity to revolutionary discourse. However, by quoting Nietzsche, Smedley also seemingly undermines her association with the masses. Even though Nietzsche has inspired many socialists—and working-class writers, such as Jack London and Maxim Gorky—he has never been well-known to workers, and his philosophy privileges the individual over the masses, ostensibly contradicting Smedley's autobiographical novel speaking for the many.²

² In Jack London's memoir of hopping trains, *The Road* (1907), the author used Nietzsche's view of Übermensch to justify his individualism against the

This push and pull between speaking for the collective and speaking for herself is apparent when Smedley writes at the novel's beginning, 'I shall gather up these fragments of my life, and make a crazy quilt of them. Or a mosaic of interesting pattern—unity in diversity. This will be an adventure' (Smedley 1987: 8). Here, she calls attention to the process of *creating* the novel—it will involve 'gathering' and 'making' instead of purely retelling. The 'adventure' is in the process of inventing, piecing together versions of her diverse experiences. The resulting product is the quilt/novel, a mosaic that only comes into focus when you step back from each individual piece and look at the whole. From the very beginning, then, Smedley is pulling back the curtain and showing how her novel is being formed, piece by piece, in the service for a collective goal. At the same time, though, this too undermines the notion that she speaks for the collective. For, if her novel is a crafted artwork, then it is she—the artist—who constructs its meaning. This desire to speak for the collective through her own story is one of the inherent contradictions within the genre, revealing the tensions between the bourgeois and radical traditions. Smedley is very clear on her views of collectivity stating, 'I believed that a truth is a truth only when it covers the generality, and not just me' (Smedley 1987: 262). In order for this 'truth' to be both for one and the many, Smedley universalizes her working-class 'truth' as that of other workers, regardless of their national and racial origins.

The 'truth' Smedley recounts might be her desire to create a truth of the collective, but it is not, in fact, one of the individual. Smedley presents herself in *Daughter of Earth* as a representative for the proletarian masses; however, her proletarian background has been called into question. It is here where the proletarian *fictional* autobiography as an aesthetic form is important to consider. Ruth Price's definitive biography on the author hints at this in her title, *The Lives of Agnes Smedley* (2005), arguing that Smedley's stated immersion in the working class was one of self-invention. The narrative Smedley weaves together in the novel about her family and her childhood has been fashioned to create an origin story of a young girl in a poor dirt-farmer family coming to class consciousness. There is truth to this: Smedley was born on February 23, 1892 in a rented two room cabin with neither electricity nor plumbing. Her life was

collectivity of the other road kids. See John Lennon, 'Can a Hobo Share a Box-Car? Jack London, the Industrial Army, and the Politics of (In)Visibility' (2007).

certainly one of hardships with an alcoholic abusive father prone to leaving the family and a mother who did not show outward affection to her child (Price 2005: 15). But it is her lived (lack of) connection to a *class* of workers and her consequential desire to universalize the U.S. proletariat as an international phenomenon that raises some important questions about Smedley and the proletarian fictional autobiography. By universalizing Marie's experiences within the novel as that of all the other workers, Smedley elides the significant differences between her and other workers.

In *Daughter of Earth*, Smedley refashions her childhood, discounting her nativist privileges in order to claim an international racial unity. For example, while living through the Trinidad, Colorado coal strike of 1903-04, Smedley's father sided with the coal companies against the United Mine Workers (UMW). Part of his decision to do so was that their family's precarious socio-economic privileges hinged upon Smedley's 'Americanness'—Smedley's mother's family had been living in America since the 17th century, and her father's history went back to the Cherokee nation. This lineage had social and economic benefits. Like many other native-born Americans in the mining towns, Charles (John Rodgers in the novel) did not work as a miner underground, but always above ground, achieving some social respectability and financial stability. When Agnes went into Trinidad to shop, for example, the society column of the local paper reported what dress she bought (Price 2005: 29). When the strike was crushed, Charles' loyalty was eventually rewarded with the position of sheriff deputy, putting him in charge of keeping 'order' in the labor camps and rooting out union loyalists. Importantly, Smedley does not mention any of this history in *Daughter of Earth*. In fact, she places the workers' defeat during the strike squarely at the feet of women, writing, 'Then after weeks of bitter struggle and hunger, the strike came to an end. Nagging women and crying children helped send the men back to the mines, defeated' (Smedley 1987: 118-119). Smedley places the blame of the UMW loss on 'nagging' women while staying silent on the scabs, strike breakers, and company loyalists like her father.

Unacknowledged in the text are the varied positions of the workers in the mining town; instead Smedley consistently universalizes her experiences as that of all other workers. Early on in her narrative, Marie describes her father, John, who quickly advanced from a dirt farmer to a small business owner, as owning a dozen teams of horses and employing

twenty immigrant men. Marie states the miners accepted her as one of their own, and, when recounting her childhood, places her socio-economic struggles in the same vein as the non-native workers. When John hired miners to work for him, Marie sees no difference between them and her, stating, ‘to these miners, as to us, existence meant only working, sleeping, eating what and when you could and breeding [...] resentful everybody was but [...] we obeyed those who paid our wages’ (Smedley 1987: 118). Again, the social, racial and ethnic hierarchy within the mining camp was elided for a larger collective truth on the evils of capitalism (in a life sketch for the *New Masses*, Smedley even describes herself as a ‘child worker’ in the Rockefeller mines).³ When she depicts her father ‘in short sleeves’ outbidding other contractors, Marie states that it ‘must have been his personality’ that awarded him jobs, claiming his successes ‘a mystery’ to her (Smedley 1987: 106). Smedley makes no mention of Charles’ racist beliefs, his willingness to be a strongman for the company, and the privileges resulting from his nativist positions. Instead, she portrays Marie and her family as equal among the immigrant miner laborers, discounting the privileges her ‘Americanness’ affords the family (Price 2005: 10-33).

Importantly, far from a collectivized worldview, Charles fully believed in the American dream, his individualistic streak no better epitomized than when he left his family to sell fake elixirs with a traveling salesman across the Midwest. In the novel, however, Smedley transforms her father from a man who sold snake oil to farmers to a man who left his family so he could apprentice as an ophthalmologist (Smedley 1987: 39-43). When Smedley’s desire to tell a collective truth rubbed up against the harsh realities of her individual truth, she accented certain aspects of her life, downplayed others, or simply invented a history.

Smedley’s narrative choices make sense: this is, after all, proletarian autobiographical *fiction*. We are raising these issues to work through a larger point made by Foley: that the autobiographical novel form is poised between bourgeois and revolutionary discursive traditions. And although Smedley wishes to speak for the collective, due to the nature of the form, it is her (fictionalized) individual experience that is highlighted. The novel plays with the bourgeois form of the *Bildungsroman* where we follow a poor farmer’s child, but instead of ‘making it’ by ending up as a wealthy

³ See ‘One is not Made Of Wood,’ *New Masses* 3 (no. 4), (August 1927), and Price (2005: 183-184).

woman in a traditional patriarchal household, she develops into an anti-colonialist feminist revolutionary fighting for Indian independence. The story is of a radical—and in this way she is pushing against the conventions of the Bildungsroman. In the end, though, the novel does not escape its form and speaks of an individual experience rather than a workers' collective. Many U.S. proletarian novels (*Yonnondio*, *Call it Sleep*, *Christ in Concrete*) center around a realistic story of a worker, and in doing so, that worker stands in for the class of other workers suffering the same ill effects of capitalism. *Daughter of Earth* is different. Marie leaves her family and travels on her own throughout the country in various teaching and sales jobs before getting romantically and intellectually involved with wealthy radicals and committing to the Indian Independence Movement. Unlike those other novels, Marie is not embedded in the working class but speaks for it from a position marked by distance.

Like Marie in the novel, Smedley lived on the margins of the working class. After her mother's death, she repeatedly moved around the country and world, involving herself with New York City's wealthy Village Bohemian crowd with its middle-class activists and artists, and becoming subsidized by wealthy patrons (and foreign governments) throughout her life. Always on the edge of every class and social group that she was in—working-class, intellectual, radical—Smedley's novel was a 'mosaic' that awkwardly attempted to narrativize her connections to these various groups. The resulting image is a bit blurred.

For Jeanine Im, though, the lack of cohesiveness in the novel and Smedley's outsidership (the novel was originally called *An Outsider*) is the very thing that disrupts the Bildungsroman's developmental temporality. Im states, 'the fractures of the novel are haunted by outsider agencies that are doubly displaced from the exemplary status of the masculine, rights-bearing territorially bound subject' (2013: 584). For Im, *Daughter of Earth's* gender politics and global reaches are what unsettles the traditional Bildungsroman. While true, the novel, though, also does not fit within a revolutionary discursive tradition either. *Daughter of Earth* doesn't form around a cohesive political movement—be it the U.S. proletarian movement or the international revolutionary movement. Instead, it becomes an individual story of a radical that makes passes for a larger collective working-class identity but ultimately fails because it is not, in fact, a story of the working class.

Daughter of Earth, at least indirectly, thematizes Smedley's alienation from the working class when she writes, 'I saw my father, and perhaps my brothers, in all that was dumb and helpless before existence, all that was denied humanity, all that was defeated' (Smedley 1987: 262). This representation of the working-class people in her family as dumb, and, therefore, positioned outside humanity—drawing on Aristotle's idea in *Politics* that slaves do not engage in speech properly and that this makes them animal-like—certainly establishes a distance between them and Smedley, the author. Furthermore, it destabilizes Foley's notion of the proletarian fictional autobiography. How, one wonders, can literature 'speak' for a collective that is not only 'dumb,' but—because it is dumb—hardly even human? Doesn't the very act of writing—which is indeed something else than being a dumb brute—alienate the proletarian writer from the proletariat, thus rendering the notion of proletarian literature self-contradictory? This passage about the dumb workers functions as a good illustration of Jacques Rancière's theories on political conflict, based on Aristotle's argument about slaves being positioned outside the realm of speech. Rancière's (controversial) argument in *Proletarian Nights* is that workers who become writers thereby liberate themselves from 'the unbearable role of the worker-as-such' (Rancière 1988: 50). Smedley's attempt to liberate herself can be seen in her relationship to her education—an often essential aspect in a traditional Bildungsroman. And as a writer, she does remove herself from the working class as she travels the world as a novelist, revolutionist and journalist. At the same time, though, she rejects (formal) education, claiming a working-class sensibility that is based on her emotional responses to lived experiences. Here again lies a complication within the genre that Foley articulates.

There are numerous examples in *Daughter of Earth* of Marie associating herself with those workers described as 'dumb and helpless before existence.' In fact, the novel consistently uncovers this tension between workers who exist on emotion or instinct (to use the terminology that Gold championed when discussing the proletarian writer) and those who are the intellectuals speaking for the working class. Smedley most certainly places the protagonist among the former. In the novel, Marie describes herself as having an emotional, rather than intellectual, attitude towards the world, and connects this to her working-class background:

To rise to be a Socialist leader—such was the goal of many. Among them were rich and noted men and women who lectured on poverty, injustice and the suppression of

the masses. [...] As always their brilliance stupefied me. I wondered if I should ever be so learned as they—if I could ever discuss with such authority the difference between left and right wings. It would perhaps never be; for I was but a worker, while they had time to study theory. It was not that they were less sincere than I—they belonged to another world.

I felt deeply, reacted violently and thought little. (Smedley 1987: 260)

Here, different classes are described as having contrary attitudes. The description of the protagonists' envy of the socialist intellectuals' 'brilliance' is ironic. In fact, the passage quoted above continues with a demonstration of the superiority of Smedley's emotions over a professor's intellectual and academic brilliance:

It was easy to defeat me in an argument. I recall one such instance. It was in one of the university lectures. The professor was blonde and immaculately clad. He was also an adviser to a great international rubber concern with heavy interests in South America. He told us of the gathering of rubber in the Amazon Basin. We learned how difficult it was—and we learned also that such things as the eight-hour day would be impossible in such an industry! If such a thing were done, the price of rubber would increase so much in our country that few of us could afford even to buy a rain coat! Then he spoke of the Negroes who worked in the terrible heat along the Amazon—that they did not object to a working day from dawn to darkness. Without thinking I arose to my feet and protested:

'I don't believe you. [...]' (Smedley 1987: 261–262)

In the passage above, intellect and research stand against passion and feelings. And, the latter is favored. Alienation from the (bourgeois) world of learning (and culture) is not a problem—it is an asset. The proletarian cuts through the nonsense and arrives at the truth. Thus, there is nothing problematic about proletarian literature. On the contrary, such literature would be superior, at least if realism is seen as a valuable feature of literature.

Smedley reinforces this idea of alienation from bourgeois learning with Marie's revelation of the 'real' man behind her pen-pal Robert Hampton. In his letters to her, Hampton represented for Marie an escape from her poverty. By sending her books on literature, botany and history he becomes a mentor, one that is both safe romantically (he exists in words and therefore is not a threat sexually) but points to a potentially different life than the one around her. In fact, Marie states that Hampton's 'letters were the most important things in my life; they were written in a handwriting that was perfect' (Smedley 1987: 130). The perfection was that Hampton exists only in the body of a letter, his beautiful penmanship

embodying the world of education which Marie equates with freedom. According to Christie Launus, Marie desires this type of man, but more importantly, she wants to be like him, which is a ‘powerful combination’ (Launus 2007: 128). When Marie meets Hampton in the flesh, however, she discovers that he is conservative in political and gendered values, a weak pathetic man whose ideas constrict, not liberate. Rejecting Hampton, she also rejects the bourgeois education he represents; her romance with his words conjured up possibilities within herself unrealized in the man who only represented endings. Hampton’s knowledge offered an escape from the working class to a desperate sixteen-year-old (fitting within the bourgeois novel of education). As she matured in her revolutionary idealism, however, her passion and feelings triumphed over a formal education, connecting herself to revolutionary organizations like the IWW and the Indian freedom movement.

When Marie marries Knut Hansen, she attempts to connect her romanticized view of the life of the mind within the confines of a physical marriage. She attempts to form an egalitarian, sexless, intellectual companionship that radically rejects traditional marriage limitations. When sex is introduced (painfully, awkwardly), resulting in pregnancies, she has abortions and divorces her husband. Overall, therefore, her relationship to education is one of rejection. She rejects her professor’s world of education (‘I don’t believe you’) by universalizing the truths between the plight of black workers in South America rubber industries and the U.S. working-class; she rejects Hampton’s education because of his individual desire to use knowledge only for self-advancement and simplistic pleasure, and she rejects Hansen’s bohemian knowledge because of the physical ‘dooties’ (Smedley 1987: 111) within marriage that she has passionately rejected since she was a young girl.

Marie, therefore, has a complicated gender-based relationship to education that neither fits within the confines of a traditional marriage nor one that has revolutionary possibilities. Her fear and revulsion of marriage as a sexist institution originated from the practical emotion-based education she received when she was young and witnessing her father abuse her mother (which the mother, in turn, turned upon Marie). As a young girl—although still beset by suitors in an environment where there were few marriageable women—Marie writes, ‘But I was wiser than most girls about me. My intellect, rough and unshod as it was, was wiser than my emotions. All girls married, and I did not know how I would escape,

but escape I was determined to do' (Smedley 1987: 123). Here is a key moment: as a young girl, she has an intellect that was 'unshod'—the term itself conjuring up images of a symbiotic relationship to nature—combining knowledge about the world ('all girls married') with an intensity of feeling that cannot be contained ('determined,' 'escape'). She believes at this point that this intellect contradicts her emotions ('wiser than my emotions') but as she enters the bourgeois world of learning (as seen in the examples above) she rejects the cold, calculating world of knowledge, instead living acutely within her emotions, with Marie proclaiming later, 'I felt deeply, reacted violently and thought little' (Smedley 1987: 260). In this way, Smedley argues for an intellect that brings us back to Gold's understanding of the proletarian author writing in 'jets of feeling.' But she rejects Gold's masculinist gendering of the writer and instead uses the form of the proletarian autobiographical novel to bring feminist concerns to the forefront of the discussion.

While the first half of *Daughter of Earth* retells the individual movement of a poor young woman trying to negotiate the world of education (and keeping control of her own body by rejecting subservience to a husband), the second half of the novel changes and details her involvement with members of the Indian Independence Movement. Marie's gendered and classed interrelationship between rational intellect and passionate emotions are again central to the narrative, underscoring Marie's quest for a collective, universal truth. The Indian anti-colonialist movement's leaders were distinctly male and from the middle and upper classes and, as Marie bluntly states, 'The attitude of most upper-class Indians toward women, sex, and the working class' was sexist, classist and makes up a 'bitter truth' (Smedley 1987: 356). Within the movement, she faced both political opposition and physical abuse because of her gender. One way in which Marie deals with this sexism is by universalizing the struggle of the Indian freedom movement as the plight of all workers, allowing for an emotional connection rather than a purely intellectual one. For example, Marie replies to her U.S. friends who pointed out the conservative views of these revolutionary Indians regarding 'the working class as congenitally inferior' that the '[t]he Americans were just as primitive' and that she has 'no country' (Smedley 1987: 355-356). By connecting the sexism of the Left in the U.S. with the sexism of the Indian anti-imperialists, she makes the claim for a borderless working-class identity.

These universal claims, however, are ahistorical and blind to the conditions within the particular nations. For example, when Sardarji Ranjit Singh (her mentor and teacher in Indian revolutionary history) theorizes that the nationalist independence movement is a fight against Western hegemony, Marie argues that ‘race has nothing to do with it. It is nothing but a new world order being born. That order is neither eastern or western’ (Smedley 1987: 281). Jeannie Im understands this particular moment in the text in which Smedley forms ‘the conception of earth as the ground for the new world order that embraces the struggles of both the American working classes and Indian colonial subjects. This analogy is made possible by what Rodgers calls a “great a beautiful” idea, an idea that can inspire “personal love” as well as one that can supply thematic coherence to a book entitled *Daughter of Earth*’ (2013: 582). Importantly, Marie universalizes a foreign nationalist movement by way of emotion, seeing a political idea as ‘beautiful’ and of ‘love,’ eliding the embedded historical and racial conditions and ignoring any differences between her and others (much as she did when she universalized her family’s situation with the immigrant miners as mentioned above). Even though Sardarji Singh states otherwise, Marie’s emotional response creates a universal truth that is part of her larger truth formed throughout the novel, ‘a truth’ that ‘covers the generality, not just me’ (Smedley 1987: 262). The way Smedley frames her life’s narrative through proletarian autobiographical fiction allows her to write ‘of a human life’ (Smedley 1987: 7) by attempting to speak for an imagined larger collective.

But even here there are layers of contradictions. Smedley does not fully subscribe to Gold’s romantic notion of the primitive proletarian as superior to the cultured and intellectual members of the bourgeoisie—in fact, she once stated that she did not understand the optimism that a writer like Gorky expressed in his celebration of the masses (Price 2005: 134). On the contrary, she explicitly renounces this romanticism by criticizing ‘those interesting and charming intellectuals who idealize the workers, from afar, believing that within the working class lies buried some magic force and knowledge which, at the critical moment, will manifest itself in the form of social revolution and transform the face of the world’ (Smedley 1987: 240). Here, she pushes against believing in the instinctual working-class revolutionary magic. Smedley reinvented her background in the novel to connect her roots to her (later) ideological positions, placing her story within well-trod narratives of the Bildungsroman. But her novel

does not realistically portray the working class. Smedley's life and the one that she describes in *Daughter of Earth* do not depict the mines, the fields, or the mammoth factories present in the classic proletarian novels of the 1930s, nor does it describe working-class neighborhoods and tenements as in Gold's *Jews Without Money* or Anzia Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements*. Instead, Marie is a bohemian wanderer entrenched in middle-class intellectual movements, who focuses on subjects like the working class, allowing Smedley to elide the differences between U.S. workers and the international proletariat. Smedley's aesthetic choices universalize the plight of all workers and the form of the genre allows her to do so.

However, even if Smedley, at times, seems to embrace the idea that proletarian literature could (or should) express a naïve working-class worldview, it is obvious that her writing alienates her from the proletariat, or, rather, that it is necessary for her to escape the proletariat if she wants to write. Smedley resists Gold's proletarian writer straight home from the factory who needs to 'writ[e] in jets' with its masculine sexual connotations, instead showing the financial and sexual liberation needed to be a writer—be it a working-class writer or any other kind. The idea of writing a book about her life came to Smedley when she was in therapy. While living in Germany, she was in a physically and emotionally abusive relationship with Virendranath Chattopadhyayato [Chatto], an Indian revolutionary. She had spent time in a sanatorium in Western Germany, and while under hypnosis therapy, her analyst suggested that she write about her life. Severely depressed, she received money from her friend and patron and once again returned to therapy under the direction of Elizabeth Naef, a former student of Freud's in Vienna. From her experiences here, Smedley began writing poetry and sketches of her life (which she published in the *New Masses*) and was determined to become a writer. For Smedley, there was need to have a distance from labor in order to write. For example, she refused to do 'servants work' around the house, arguing that she needed space and time to write. With the financial backing of Margaret Sanger, Smedley headed to her friend (and writer) Karin Michaelis's house on the Danish coast where the two spent their mornings gardening. Describing herself as a 'daughter of earth' by emphasizing her Missouri agrarian lifestyle, she wrote the book while pleasantly gardening in Denmark, and receiving financial support from three wealthy female friends (Price 2005: 125-140). Her writing life, therefore, was very different from the one Gold routinely championed in his editorial work for

the *New Masses*. And, if for Rancière, writing takes you away from the working class, for Smedley it is the other way around: leaving the proletariat is necessary if you want to become a writer.

In order to write, Smedley needed a room of her own, to use Virginia Woolf's term. Or, to use imagery from a very different social and political sphere than that of Woolf's Bloomsbury, she needed liberation from the double oppression of working-class women. She relied on her three wealthy friends for financial and emotional support. Heavily influenced by therapy (paid by her benefactors), she plunged into her unconscious. Using the form of proletarian autobiographical fiction, therefore, allowed Smedley intellectual and political space to join her revolutionary politics with a personal history that she was still in the process of understanding. Foley states that there is a tension between bourgeois and revolutionary impulses of the novel form—and Smedley lived within these tensions. Living in Germany and being influenced by the writers of the Bolshevik revolution, by the time that she was writing *Daughter of Earth*, she was aware of the international proletcult literary movements as well as expressionist and montage techniques. Her politics were influenced by Russia and the anti-colonialism movements; her literary knowledge heavily influenced by far-reaching Modernist aesthetics. She was personally under Freudian-influenced therapy and this, as many critics have stated, emerged throughout her novel (for example, the numerous dream sequences in the third part of the novel). As stated above, Smedley lived on the edges of many social groups, and the form of the novel allows her to express multiple vantage points—however conflicting they may be.

Gold stated, 'Within this living world of proletarian literature, there are many living forms' and as Foley rightly explains, 'It is dogmatic to seize upon any single literary form and erect it into a pattern for all proletarian literature' (Foley 2005: 59). Indeed, as James Murphy points out, the organs most closely identified with the Communist Party—the *New Masses* and especially the *Daily Worker*—were quite hospitable to literary innovations of various kinds (Foley 2005: 60). Smedley was writing this novel while she was secretly being paid by the German government for her work in the Indian freedom movement (only hinted at in her novel) and under investigation by the U.S. federal government for sedition. She was obviously hiding a lot—even from her closest friends and lovers—and a memoir revealing all would not have helped her with her clandestine political work nor her serious legal situation. She was also

not interested in a memoir because Smedley was aiming for a larger collective truth. As Gold and Foley contend, there is no single set of rules forming 'proletarian literature'—and Smedley was creating a distinct form within the larger genre.

Specifically, this autobiographical novel that played with the bourgeois and revolutionary traditions allowed Smedley to push against the Literary Left's masculine impulses. As Foley, Denning, Rabinowitz, Coiner, Mullen and others have stated, the U.S. Left theoretically was egalitarian and non-sexist, believing in a just society for all. In practice, though, sexism was both overt and covert with women routinely erased in public discourse and abused within the private realm. *Daughter of Earth* rips off the veneer of the U.S. Left's egalitarian movement and focuses specifically on being a woman within a capitalistic hierarchy that places a wife below that of a worker. The book clearly indicates that Marie's and her lovers' radical politics do not protect her from the sexism and physical violence she faces within these relationships. Playing with the bourgeois form of the autobiographical novel—connected to bourgeois patriarchal family structures—allows for Smedley to resist both the form as well as the Left's sexist politics.

Daughter of Earth argues that a central conflict of working-class life is this patriarchal family structure of marriage and children. Smedley passionately resists the nuclear family by illustrating the power imbalances of these relationships. She rejects marriage and children out of hand when Marie coldly states of her sister 'Annie' [Nellie in real life] who dies in childbirth that 'Such women follow their husbands to the grave untroubled by ideas or principles' (Smedley 1987: 98). Instead, she argues,

In my hatred of marriage, I thought that I would rather be a prostitute than a married woman. I could then protect, feed, and respect myself and maintain some right over my body. Prostitutes did not have children, I contemplated; men did not dare beat them; they did not have to obey. The respectability of married women seemed to rest in their acceptance of servitude and inferiority. Men don't like free intelligent women.
(Smedley 1987: 189)

Here Marie praises her Aunt Helen who through prostitution was able to make her own money and thus, unlike her mother, able to stand up to her father ('you ain't got nothing to say to me [...] I'm making my own money now' (Smedley 1987: 78). In these two passages, marriage is related to an unbalanced exchange of basic living needs met for bodily subservience. Within the form of an autobiographical novel, Smedley attacks the

existence of marriage as inherently unequal for women and rages against it. The novel, therefore, veers between the various traditions, obviously bending the traditional ‘novel of education’ to fit her purposes. But she also modifies the literary revolutionary tradition by pushing against didactic male-centered missives that embrace specific political organizations, messages and nuclear family structures. Smedley not only calls capitalism into question but the systematic patriarchal institutions that allow for capitalism to secure its death grip.

A Swedish Literary Proletarian Daughter

Although Marie argues vociferously against marriage as patriarchal oppression, *Daughter of Earth* offers no alternative. One of the collective truths that Smedley produces by making her individual story a group one is that even in political left couplings outside of patriarchal marriage—like the one Marie has with Chatto and Knut Hansen—women are still subject to subservience and physical violence.⁴ Without alternatives, Smedley’s novel exemplifies the tension between the radical and bourgeois traditions but offers no other path besides swinging widely from one to the other. But there are options if we compare proletarian autobiographical fictions from across national boundaries. In *Daughter of Earth*, Smedley attempted to erase her Americanness, claiming a global working-class identity that knew no country. It proved impossible to do; it also blinded her to her nativist privileges. By placing her novel in context with a comparable non-U.S. proletarian autobiographical novel, we can begin to see more possibilities of the form—especially if the comparison is from a nation where proletarian fiction is celebrated, rather than stifled (Nilsson & Lennon 2016).⁵

Moa Martinson (1890-1964) is the most prominent female author in the generation of proletarian writers that became a dominant force in

⁴ There are many examples in the novel of this gender oppression with the primary one being Marie’s rape by a party member whose assault marks her as sexually promiscuous, resulting in her partner Chatto being forced into political subservience.

⁵ In our collected edited volume *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives* (2017), we argue for the need for scholars to place national working-class literature into conversations with other national working-class literature to better fully understand both the former and the latter.

Swedish literature in the 1930s (other important members of this generation are Ivar Lo-Johansson, Jan Fridegård, Rudolf Värnlund, and the two Nobel Prize winners Harry Martinson and Eyvind Johnson), and, therefore, one of the most prominent Swedish authors of all times. In her foreword to the 2012 edition of Martinson's novel *Mor gifter sig* (1936, published in English as *My Mother Gets Married* in 1988), Ebba Witt-Brattström, the leading Martinson-scholar in Sweden, summarizes the book's importance in the following way: '*My Mother Gets Married* is one of the most widely read Swedish books from the twentieth century. For many years it was the most borrowed book from public libraries, and it made its author known as Moa to all Swedish people' (2012: i).⁶

Martinson's debut novel *Kvinnor och äppelträd sig* (1933, published in English as *Women and Apple Trees* in 1987) was already placed by both readers and critics in the working-class literature tradition, and after its publication, Martinson adopted a thoroughly proletarian literary identity. Thus, it was no surprise that it was she who delivered the Swedish delegation's speech at the first All Union Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow in 1934. And it is also no surprise that her portrait appears in the center of the cover to Lars Furuland's and Johan Svedjedal's (2006) massive handbook *Svensk arbetarlitteratur* [*Swedish Working-Class Literature*].

In 1943, Martinson stated in an essay, that her goal was to depict '[f]attigfolkets ännu inte helt kartlagda väldiga domäner' [poor people's vast, not yet explored, domains], and that this was why her heroines and heroes 'står på jorden' [stand on the earth] (Martinson 1943: 125). That this could be a reference to Smedley's novel, which was translated into Swedish in 1931 as *Bara en kvinna* (literally: Only a Woman), is indicated in a letter written the following year to her publisher. There, Martinson claimed that reading *Daughter of Earth* had produced in her feelings of 'systerskap' [sisterhood] with Smedley (Witt-Brattström 1988: 212). And sisters in literature she did need, for Martinson was one of very few women among the working-class writers in Swedish literature in the 1930s. In another letter to her publisher, she emphasized that she conceived of *My Mother Gets Married* as a complement to the many proletarian 'boys'

⁶ All translation of Swedish-language quotations into English have been made by Magnus Nilsson.

biographies,' that had recently been published by male working-class writers (Witt-Brattström 2012: iv).

In a 1932 anthology presenting Swedish working-class writers, Maj Hirdman—the only female contributor—tried to explain the relative absence of women from Swedish working-class literature at the time, by pointing out that women in the working class are subjected to double exploitation, both as workers and as women, making it almost impossible for them to find the time and energy necessary to create literature (Hirdman 1932: 87–88). This theory is supported by Martinson, who, like many other female working-class writers in Sweden, was published fairly late in her life; she was the oldest member of the generation of working-class writers to which she belonged. For example, her husband, Harry Martinson, the working-class writer who would later win the Nobel prize, was fourteen years younger.

Like in the U.S., Swedish critics have constructed proletarian or working-class literature as a predominantly male phenomenon, and this has often resulted in the misconstruing or devaluation of Martinson's works. Witt-Brattström (1988: 9) has even argued that 'In Swedish literary history, Moa Martinson occupies a unique position as an object for projections of surprisingly vigorous prejudices about female writing.' Furthermore, the (limited) attention Martinson receives outside of Sweden seems to emphasize her gender politics over class. For example, it is telling that the English translations of her novels were published by the Feminist Press, which highlights their relevance from a gender perspective, but not necessarily that Martinson was a proletarian writer.

A comparison with Martinson can help us understand the proletarian fictional autobiography in a slightly different way. That Martinson viewed Smedley as a sister in literature is not very surprising. There are several similarities between them and between *Daughter of Earth* and *My Mother Gets Married*. However, a comparison between the two authors and their works reveals differences pertaining to social, political and cultural contexts, ultimately offering new avenues to view the hybridity of the proletarian autobiographical novel.

Like Smedley, Moa Martinson self-reflexively thematizes a proletarian author identity. In the foreword to the 1955 edition of *My Mother Gets Married*, she stresses, much like Smedley does in *Daughter of Earth*, that the story of herself and her mother is also a story of a whole class: 'Det avsnitt av min mors och mitt liv som visas upp här i boken är

inget säreget. Det var gemensamt för hundra tusentals mödrar och barn i landet' (Martinson 2012: 5) [The part of my mother's and my life that is described in this book is not singular. It was common for hundreds of thousands of mothers and children in our land (Martinson 1988: vi)], thereby emphasizing that the characters are what Georg Lukács (1983) would call *typical*, that is individualized versions of a class position. Thus, like Smedley, Martinson tries to connect the novel's individual story to a whole class.

However, while Smedley's status as a proletarian literary spokesperson can be problematized in many ways (as seen above), Martinson's claims to speak for this class have been widely recognized. And, although Martinson initially objected to being viewed as a proletarian writer, she soon readily accepted being placed in this category. Presently, she occupies a central place in the tradition of Swedish working-class literature. Her embracing the identity of proletarian or working-class writer is hardly surprising. In the 1930s, working-class writers achieved dominance in Swedish literature, and thereafter, working-class literature has been consecrated as a central strand in national literature in way that has no parallels in capitalist nations (Wright 1996: 334; Therborn 1985: 585; Nilsson 2014: 9). Thus, unlike in many other countries, being a working-class writer did not result in marginalization (or persecution). In the U.S., the situation has been very different. There, proletarian literature has mostly been a relatively marginal phenomenon (Foley 2005: viii; Tokarczyk 2011: 4; Nilsson and Lennon 2016: 39-40). Perhaps this is the reason that Smedley mentions Gorky in *Daughter of Earth* (258). By establishing connections to an internationally well-known and respected writer who did indeed associate himself with the working class, Smedley perhaps attempts to legitimize her own proletarian-literary project.

According to the most common and conventional criterion, namely having a working-class background, Martinson does indeed qualify as a working-class author. Lars Furuland, the main academic authority on Swedish working-class literature, has explained that even if there are some discrepancies (mainly relating to dates and chronology) between Martinson's life and the story told in *My Mother Gets Married*, it is, in general, recognized as a truthful retelling, much of which can be verified (Furuland and Svedejdal 2006: 200–201). That such verification is not *always* possible is, at least in part, a result of the fact that poor working-

class people's lives were not always properly documented when Martinson was growing up.

Like Mia (the protagonist in *My Mother Gets Married*), Martinson—whose real name was Helga Swartz (the pseudonym Moa was taken from a character in a novel by the Danish proletarian writer Martin Andersen Nexø)—was the illegitimate daughter of a maid. As a child, she consistently moved with her mother, and at times stayed with her grandparents or lived in foster homes. Later, she married a man that suffered from alcoholism and depression, and who eventually committed suicide. She had five children—all boys—two of whom tragically drowned at a young age. In the early 1920s, she became active in the anarcho-syndicalist labor movement, and towards the end of the decade she received an opportunity to attend a course at a women's school.

Between 1929 and 1941 she was married to Harry Martinson, and her home—a small cottage south of Stockholm—became a gathering point for working-class writers, artists, and intellectuals. Thus, her book debut in 1933 was preceded by a breaking free from the life led by most working-class people (although not necessarily from the economic hardships suffered by them) and by her becoming part of intellectual and artistic circles. However, since these circles were frequented mainly by people who had proletarian backgrounds, becoming a writer did not—as it did for Smedley—mean entering a bourgeois-dominated environment.

One example of how intellectual life in Sweden had a broader class base than many other countries is that working-class intellectuals introduced and promoted many modernist ideas. For example, some popular working-class writers in the 1930s, including Moa Martinson's husband Harry Martinson, introduced Modernist avant-garde poetry in Swedish literature. These writers also promoted psychoanalytical thought. This is not the least true regarding Moa Martinson, who in fact claims, in a letter to her publisher, that she had read Freud ten years before meeting Harry Martinson and other 1930s Swedish working-class writers (Witt-Brattström 1988: 64). It is also easy to detect psychoanalysis-influenced features in *My Mother Gets Married*. For example: Mia's mother is wonderful until she becomes pregnant. It is here she becomes monstrous to Mia both physically (the mother throws up on the road, etc) as well as to her as a guardian (when Moa gets lice and is not taken care of physically). That psychoanalysis influenced Smedley can be understood as a challenge, or even perhaps alienation, from her proletarian writer

identity, since this influence came from bourgeois intellectual circles. In Martinson's case, however, the interest in psychoanalysis was shared with many other working-class writers.

In fact, in Sweden, literature itself was not—at least not to the same extent as in many other countries, including the U.S.—considered to be a non-proletarian phenomenon in the 1930s. Even if Martinson published her novels with a prestigious publisher, her writing was not cut off from the working class. For example, in 1928-1929 a manuscript that can be read as an early version of *My Mother Gets Married* was serialized in the socialist periodical *Brand* [Fire] (Furuland and Svedjedal 2006: 200). Later her novels were distributed in very large numbers to working-class readers through the publisher *Folket i Bild*, which had close ties to the labor movement, and sold literature through commissioners in workplaces (Nilsson 2006: 76).

Martinson, like Smedley, writes about female proletarians, thereby introducing a tension between gender and class both in her work and in her identity as a writer. Similarly to *Daughter of Earth*, marriage is physically and emotionally dangerous for women. When Mia and her mother move to the country so her stepfather can work on a farm, they live next to another poor family comprising Olga, a young mother, her husband, and a baby. Mia states, 'Olga var nitton år, jag var åtta år, men båda visste vi ej annat än att [...] äktenskap var trötter, barn, nöd, fulhet, eller i bästa fall en trög slitlycka, där vanan gjorde att två buttra eller två trötande människor höll sig i par' (Martinson 2012: 179) ['Olga was nineteen and I was eight but both of us knew [...] marriage was rows, kids, trouble, meanness, or at best, a dreary toil and moil that custom had made for two sullen or quarreling people to hold together as a couple'] (1988: 171). Here Martinson calls out the idea of the 'custom' of marriage that girls understand from a young age can either kill them or force them to a life of dreary servitude.

Martinson, however, introduces an alternative to patriarchal heterosexual marriage. In *Mother Gets Married*, the mother, Olga, Mia and the young child form an egalitarian family structure that centers around taking care of each other. Children are not a problem but a focus of attention and love. Within this radical female-centered coupling, there is stability where personal growth is fostered. This is a female proletarian world positioned around friendship, from which the male proletarians are excluded, and against which they are defined as others or even as enemies.

When the men drunkenly reappear, they cause havoc and destroy the bonds between the women by forcing Mia's family to move again. But Martinson fleetingly offers a vision of proletarian egalitarianism. This description of women fighting together against the destructive forces of drinking men is a recurring motif in Martinson's novels (Furuland and Svedjedal 2006: 200). Martinson's view differs from Smedley's portrayal of female friendship, with the Swedish author highlighting female solidarity in the novel.

Conclusion

Daughter of Earth is a proletarian autobiographical novel, although this categorization does not exhaust its meaning. Acknowledging that the genre itself 'constitute[s] a hybrid form, poised between bourgeois and revolutionary discursive traditions,' in this article our goal was to make clear some aspects of this balancing act. Smedley's novel often tipped in one direction or the other: she wanted to speak for a global working class while being apart from it; she desired a ('bourgeois') education but privileged ('proletarian') emotion over reason; and she argued for a collective universal truth but played fast and loose with the facts of her own autobiography. By using the genre for her purposes, Smedley could avoid the didacticism of some strands of proletarian writing, embracing the complications of striving to become a radical female proletarian and thematizing how female experiences push against the dominant construction of this literature as a predominately male phenomenon.

Another goal of this article was to highlight the problematic ways Smedley universalizes her personal experiences as a collective truth that knows no national boundary. The comparison above of *Daughter of Earth* with Martinson's *My Mother Gets Married* has stressed that working-class writers and working-class literature always exist in specific contexts. Among other things, it has revealed that both terms in the composite concept of working-class literature (as well as working-class writer) have had very different meanings in the U.S. and Sweden respectively. Above all, it seems that in the 1930s, the borders between the working class and the realm of literature (and intellectual life in general) were more porous in Sweden than in the U.S. For example, in Sweden, working-class writers had a much stronger position in national literature than was the case in the U.S. As a consequence of this, the inherent tension in the concept of

proletarian literature described by Foley are not universal, but relative to specific historical conditions.

Even if working-class literatures are always historically and geographically situated, they are also entangled in international networks. That Moa Martinson viewed Agnes Smedley as a literary sister is a good example of this, as is the fact that both of them reacted, in different ways, to aesthetic-political ideas emanating from the Soviet Union. Thus, the scholarly engagement with working-class literature must encompass both this literature's particular manifestations and its universal dimension. Comparative analyses like the one presented in this article do, we believe, constitute a good foundation to do so.

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