

Tracing literary careers: four case studies from the 1940 cohort of fiction debut writers in the United States

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Abstract

This article situates four literary careers in the US literary field using data from the 1940 cohort of debut writers. It uses prosopographical and bibliographical variables to illustrate how the data can be put to use. A discussion of literary trajectories makes visible the interaction between variables of social background, cultural dispositions, literary strategies, market-place restrictions, and academic fashions in determining positions in the literary field over time. Preliminary results show that regional, ethnic, and ideological branding help determine the positions these authors have come to occupy in the US literary canon. Three of the authors are women (Mildred Haun, Meridel LeSueur and Mari Tomasi) all of whom who failed to sustain a literary career, but who subsequently gained reputations as literary figures. The fourth example (James Still) suggests the importance of distinguishing between regional and national recognition in the US literary field. Haun's and Still's careers are used as examples of how literary sponsorship functions. Finally, a comparison of the fiction and non-fiction output by the sample writers and manifestations of forms of literary capital (scholarly and biographical citations and literary awards) indicates that non-fiction works help to further a writer's literary career and reputation. Although the specific character of the literary text implicitly will be a part of the discussion in the discussion of textual sociotopes, the analysis is not 'literary,' but rather focused on how conditions of production and reception can interact with notions of biography and text.

The chief glory of every people arises from its authors. — Samuel Johnson

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1. Introduction

The sample of writers used in this article is derived from a larger survey of authors who published their first longer work of fiction in the United States in 1940. This cohort makes up one of three cohorts collected for the study ‘Literary Generations and Social Authority’ which is an investigation into the literary careers of 1048 authors who published works of fiction in the United States between 1940 and the present (cf. Bolkéus Blom, 2002). Two hundred and forty-six of these individuals belong to the 1940 cohort, 321 belong to the 1955 cohort, and 481 belong to the 1970 cohort. In 1940, a total of 1060 titles of fiction were published in the United States.¹ Four of these texts were written by Mildred Haun (1968) (*The Hawk’s Done Gone*), Meridel LeSueur (1940) (*Salute to Spring*), James Still (1940a) (*River of Earth*), and Mari Tomasi (1940) (*Deep Grow the Roots*). These writers make up a sample that will be used as examples of how the available material can be used to posit hypotheses that eventually can be tested against the full data set. The overarching analyses of the 1940 cohort will focus on the bibliographical trajectories of the debut writers and how prosopographical properties intersect with the creative output of literary works over time (cf. Kaenel, 1992; Bourdieu, 1993, 1996; Ekelund, 1995, 1998; Sapiro, 1999; Griswold, 2000; Broady, 2002). The present text is a report from a work in progress and is intended to give insights into the methodological process as well as to suggest possible paths the project might take when the data survey is completed.

The article has two main points of focus. The first is to discuss the literary field in 1940 and to outline the data of the 1940 debut cohort. The second is to situate the sample writers in this context, so as to suggest the possibilities and constraints of the analyses that can be performed using the material of the entire database.

2. The sample writers

The four sample writers share a number of bibliographical aspects with the rest of the individuals making up the 1940 cohort of US debut writers. That is, they have in common data relating to the works they published during their literary careers (for example, limited publishing trajectories, being published by major to mid-level publishers, enjoying limited initial critical reception) as well as biographical aspects of education, social, geographical and professional background. At this stage of the research there is a sustainable amount of prosopographical material available for these four sample writers. This makes them useful for selective analyses regarding the socio-biographical background, but it is important to note that before we have a full set of prosopographical data it will not be possible to draw any conclusions about representativity for any individual author in relation to the entire cohort (cf. Bolkéus Blom, 2002).

¹ This figure is computed from the entries classified as ‘FIC,’ that is, ‘fiction,’ in *Publishers Weekly’s* ‘Weekly report’ of new titles published in the US. See Bolkéus Blom (2002).

The four sample writers share properties of social, economic and educational prosopographical data. Born within an 11-year time span, between 1900 and 1911 (Haun, 1911–1966, LeSueur, 1900–1996, Still, 1906–2001, Tomasi, 1910–1965), the group also shares a chronological developmental historical period in terms of social and cultural horizons of influence. Geographically, they come from rural to suburban areas. Haun and Still are both from the Appalachian area of Tennessee and Kentucky, Tomasi grew up in suburban Vermont and LeSueur traveled throughout the Midwest during her early years. None of the writers experienced urban conditions during their childhood or adolescence. Significantly, the sociotopical properties of the first entry into the literary field, respectively, reflect the biographical backgrounds of the writers. If this holds true for the entire cohort remains to be analyzed.

Looking at the available data set for 1940, a preliminary analysis suggests that the sociotopical choices made by the sample writers make them stand out from the majority of debut writers. Preliminary classification of sociotopes suggests that nearly 20% (or 49 works) have a predominantly urban setting, whereas Haun, Still and Tomasi's texts are classified as 'rural.' Haun and Still both use their geographical background of Tennessee and Kentucky as defining themes in their debut works. Mari Tomasi uses not her native Vermont for her first novel, but rather her family's native Italian Piedmont region, where she spent time during her childhood. Haun, Still, and Tomasi, moreover, focus on the clashes between modernity and rural customs and traditions, and thus make the setting a central theme of their works. LeSueur's ideologically charged snapshots of the effects of the Depression on workers in the urban Midwest make topical use of the effects of economic and industrial urbanity in her collection of stories. In short, together, historical novels (also 20% of the output) and urban themes dominate the list of first works of fiction in the United States in 1940. With a full set of bibliographical and literary information on the critical and academic reception of the 1940 cohort it will be possible to test the hypothesis that sociotopical choices made by the author have effects on the canon formation processes that determine long-range success or failure in the literary field.

The four writers in this sample are not unknown quantities, but they remain in the periphery of the US literary field broadly defined. In at least two of the cases, they fall outside the demarcation line of 'the canon.' Published by established, but not major publishing houses, academically trained to some degree, and working within writerly occupations, their first prose fiction attempts were only briefly noted by the major gatekeepers of the industry, *Publishers' Weekly* and *Library Journal*, and, at best, received the distracted attention of reviewers in the press and subsequently were largely ignored by essayists and academic critics (cf. van Rees, 1983). The modes of reception, thus, and the complex processes of canonization are two areas that can be covered using the data collected for the cohorts of debut writers. Predictably, only two of these writers, LeSueur and Still, managed to maintain some form of sustained presence in the literary field (cf. Ekelund and Börjesson, 2002). Out of the four writers in the sample, three entered into the literary world by way of professional writing in other media than books. LeSueur and Tomasi worked as

journalists prior to their first appearance in book form, Still published a collection of poetry 3 years before his first novel, *River of Earth* came out in 1940. Haun, too, worked as a professional writer, but only after her first, and only, work of fiction was brought into print. In other words, these writers were engaged in other forms of professional writing prior or subsequent to the launch of their literary careers, something which they share with nearly a third of the cohort. With near-complete sets of prosopographical data it will be possible to test the hypothesis that the professionalization of the author in the US literary field also contributes to the diversification of literary production.

3. The US literary field in 1940

The Depression years of the 1930s had not severely affected the US book industry. By 1940, publishers and writers could in fact look optimistically to the future, insofar as their own trades were concerned. They had several reasons for this outlook. Not only had 1940 been chosen as the year that would mark the 500th anniversary of book printing, giving the industry ample opportunity to marketing their products, there was also an increased interest in reading among the general public, which would make prospective customers further susceptible to the marketing efforts of booksellers and publishers. Several non-fiction titles related to literature were doing well in 1940, testifying to the mounting interest in reading: there was a boom in classics stimulated by Albert Guérard's *Preface to World Literature*, the best-selling non-fiction title in 1940 was Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book*. In addition, books on current events became increasingly popular as the so-called 'phony war' in Europe escalated into what was beginning to look like a world war. A count of *Publishers' Weekly's* 'Weekly record' for 1940 bears out the optimism of the business: with a total of 11,328 titles, it was the largest number of books ever published during any year in the United States up to this date. It was an increase of nearly 6.5% over 1939. Among new books, the increase was 5.5%, adding up to 9515. There was a rise of 12% in fiction titles, which was the first such increase in 6 years (Tebbel, 1981: 7). So, a 1940 survey of debut writers gives a glimpse of a confident business. This optimism, however, was to be belied by unfolding world events. After 1940, there was a 5-year drop in the production of books in the United States (Tebbel, 1981). Generally, however, the years between 1940 and 1990 saw an unprecedented increase in the production of new books in the United States, with the 1960s as the period of most rapid expansion. The figures of the total US book output (front list, i.e. new titles) for the period can be seen in Table 1 (Greco, 1997: 21; Peters, 1992: 18).

This expansion is not reflected in the number of debut writers in the three cohorts. The 1940 cohort, for example, does not reflect the downturn of the 1940s. The 1955 cohort, in turn, does not reflect the increase in the production of the total output: when vanity press titles are removed, the number of debut writers for 1955 remains at 199. There are only 10 identified vanity press debut writers in the 1940 cohort, something which suggests a shift in possible paths into the literary field between

Table 1
Total US book output 1940–1989

Decade	Total title output	% Change from previous decade
1940–1949	91,514	–7.07
1950–1959	124,675	+ 36.24
1960–1969	256,584	+ 105.80
1970–1979	402,911	+ 57.03
1980–1989	510,286	+ 26.65

1940 and 1955. However, preliminary analyses show that few debut writers who appear on vanity presses make it into conventional publishing and rarely continue to a successful literary career. It would therefore seem reasonable to treat vanity press writers separately in future analyses.

3.1. *The Federal Writers' Project*

If the emergence of vanity and subsidy publishing tend to distort the cohort material, there are also other significant factors that separate the contexts of the cohorts from each other. For example, the 1930s and 1940s represent decades of exceptional economic and political turmoil that substantially affected the book market in the United States. As a consequence, there were other indirect factors that intervened into the literary field during this period, and that merit special attention. One such aspect that came into play was the ways in which the federal and state governments came to intervene into the literary market in the 1930s. As a direct effect of the economic downturn—the Depression—a unique entry into the US literary field by a Government agency took place, and as such it requires a special comment in conjunction with the 1940 cohort.

The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was a part of the Federal Arts Program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The initiative was conceived as a relief measure for unemployed individuals within the cultural sector and initially included the creation of jobs for writers and librarians, but also for architects and photographers, and, surprisingly, for bankers and lawyers (Mangione, 1986: 147). Its major project was the production of the *American Guide* series, which involved descriptions of each of the 50 states' (and Puerto Rico's) cultural, social, geographical and economic features. The organization turned into what has been called 'one of the largest fact-gathering organizations ever assembled in the nation' and came to involve an estimated 10,000 individuals who produced a total of approximately 1200 books and pamphlets during the period 1935–1943 (Mangione, 1986: 147).

One historian of the WPA writes that '[t]he professional writers were far outnumbered by aspiring writers, some of whom were able to use the Writers' Project as a launching pad for successful literary careers' (Mangione, 1986: 149). Saul Bellow,

Studs Terkel, and Richard Wright are mentioned as examples of this path into the literary field. Although there initially were certain conflicts between the designated project work of the FWP and the literary ambitions of the individuals who were assigned to write the Guide series and other sponsored projects, the FWP eventually came to look less rigidly on the production of literary works during ‘office hours’ and even tried to promote its employees’ works by encouraging local and state outlets for fictional works. This notion of the FWP as a ‘launching pad’ is not substantiated in our material. It is noteworthy that only two writers in the 1940 cohort have a confirmed affiliation with the FWP or any of its derivatives. Thus, Meridel LeSueur and Mari Tomasi stand out from the rest of the cohort in that they at some point were employed by the FWP as writers and fact gatherers.² The cases of LeSueur and Tomasi, however, highlight two effects of the work done within the boundaries of the FWP: LeSueur was an established writer and journalist who was provided with means to continue her work. Tomasi was an obscure local journalist who eventually was able to pursue her literary objectives through the affiliation with the FWP.

In Tomasi’s case, the affiliation with the FWP had a direct impact on her future writing. Her work included the gathering of material on Vermont’s Italian stone cutter communities, which resulted in the unpublished manuscript ‘Men against granite.’ This was to become the foundation for her second, and final, novel, *Like Lesser Gods* (Tomasi, 1949), something which then established a direct link between the FWP initiative and the literary output of one of its employees.³ This connection is less apparent than it might seem, since the purpose of the FWP was not to directly support the literary production of its affiliates, but rather to redirect their writerly efforts into designated projects.

4. Prosopographical properties

4.1. *Writerly occupations*

If the FWP offered temporary professional opportunities for writers to pursue their literary careers, other forms of professional writing seem to be a common way for writers to sustain their literary writings. The return ratio for occupational data for the 1940 cohort is 41% (101 indications of occupation). Qualitatively, however, the data range between simple statements of career (‘writer,’ ‘teacher’ etc.) to full career-biographical information. Typically, the writers in the 1940 cohort are employed in professions that involve writing or teaching in some capacity, that is what can be called ‘related professional areas.’ Out of the total data set in the 1940

² One more writer, Cecile Hulse Matschat, wrote the book on the Sewanee River in the FWP-sponsored series ‘American Rivers,’ but there is no other biographical indication that links her to the project.

³ Excerpts from ‘Men against granite’ are available on-line from the American Memory site at the Library of Congress web (Tomasi, 2002), and will, according to Alfred Rosa, editor of the New England Press, come into print in the Fall of 2002 (correspondence with the author).

cohort there were 69 (or 28%) citations with definitions of primary writing occupations like ‘writer,’ ‘author,’ ‘journalist,’ ‘reporter,’ ‘editor,’ ‘script-’ or ‘screenwriter,’ and variations thereof. Twenty-nine (or 11.8%) citations indicated some form of teaching activity, ranging from high school teachers and college instructors to university Deans, occupations that can be assumed to involve some form of professional writing.

Writerly or teaching occupations are significantly over-represented in the available data set for the 1940 cohort. In this respect, these four sample writers can be said to illustrate the cohort in their professional trajectories. All four were at some point during their professional lives involved in journalistic enterprises. LeSueur, Still and Tomasi worked primarily as reporters, and Haun as editorial staffer. It is significant that the sample writers all were active as teachers at various levels at some point in their professional careers. Interestingly, three of the writers were also at some point involved in Government work that related to writing. LeSueur and Tomasi were both employed in the FWP during the 1930s, and Haun was a writer for the United States Department of Agriculture, first in Memphis, TN, and then in Washington, DC. As suggested, the FWP and its successor The Writers’ Program are unique in a US context in that they mark a decisive intervention by the federal government into what traditionally can be described as a ‘free’ profession.

4.2. *Geography*

One of the distinctive features of the present sample is that the authors are removed from the center of the commercial publishing world. New York City is the undisputed capital of the publishing industry. In the 1940 cohort, the 246 debut writers were brought to the market by 85 different publishing establishments. Of these, 63.5%, or 54 houses, were located in New York City, and a further 12.9% (11) in the Northeast region along the Boston—New York City—Philadelphia axis. 5.8% (5) of the publishers were located in the South and the same percentage in the Midwest. Ten (11.7%) of the publishers for the 1940 cohort were located in the West. Of these western publishers, 7% of the total (6) were based in Los Angeles, with environs.

Data for the 1955 cohort suggest that writers based in proximity to the publishing industry (i.e. closer to New York City) enjoy a more successful literary career, in terms of a sustained publishing trajectory (Ekelund and Börjesson, 2002). Information on the 1940 cohort is unavailable, as of yet, but it is reasonable to assume that the same holds true for this group.

If publishers’ locations are heavily concentrated to the New York area, the geographical origins of the debut writers in the 1940 cohort show more variations in the coordinates of the US literary map. Using the variable ‘Place of residence, infancy’ which suggests the individuals’ main geographical place of residence before the age of 18, the Northeast is registered with 32.1% (or 27 individuals) of the available data (the return ratio for this variable is 34.1%, or 84 cases). The South and the Midwest are the second most common regions of origin with 25% each (21 + 21). The West is

represented with 9.5% (8) and foreign countries with 8.3% (7). However, if the New York City area is separated from the Northeast region in the same way that has been done for the publishers, we find that 11.9% (10) of the authors come from the City itself. When further tested, then, the results would have to be posited against findings that indicate that cultural capital facilitates residential mobility, and to test if debut writers are more likely to either remain in or relocate to geographical areas where proximity increases the likelihood of sustaining a literary career (Petit, 1999; Ekelund and Börjesson, 2002). The argument that cultural capital facilitates the formation of social ties and represents the potential to form social networks fits in with the New York city–debut writer–literary career relation hypothesis (Petit, 1999; cf. Lamont et al., 1996 regarding structural positions, cultural boundaries and geographic location). However, if we are correct in assuming that the possession of cultural capital affects ‘the frequency of moves and distance of moves that people can and will make’ (Petit, 1999: 181), a literary debut (given the premise that such a debut is indicative of literary capital) would instead increase the likelihood of authors remaining in or near the gravity centers of the social and professional networks that New York city represents. The impact that an entry into the literary field has on residential mobility remains to be tested for the entire data set of debut writers.

4.3. Education

In 1940, 4.6% of the total US population over the age of 25 had completed 4 or more years of college education. For the white, non-Hispanic population, this figure was 4.9%. The figures for high school completion or more was 24.5 and 26.1 respectively (US Bureau of the Census, 2002). Out of the 246 debut novelists in the 1940 cohort, there are 55 confirmed high school degrees (22.3%), which is lower than the national average, but our numbers could be somewhat misleading here since indication of a high school degree might not be considered significant in the biographical submissions that authors volunteer to biographical sources. Further supporting this assumption, there are 58 confirmed indications of a post-secondary education (i.e. 23.5% of the total cohort, and notably a slightly higher number than the confirmed high school degrees) and 26 confirmed instances of a college degree (10.5%). The proportion of college-educated individuals in the 1940 cohort is thus more than twice as high as the national average, which, as expected, suggests a correspondence between having participated in forms of higher education and engaging in literary activities that result in a successful launching of a literary career (cf. e.g. Ekelund, 1995: 54–56). The return ratio of confirmed educational background is less than satisfying in this instance, since there are only five authors with confirmation of *no* college background in the whole cohort. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the number of high school and college degrees is higher than the actual figures. Out of the 58 confirmed instances of place of first institution of higher education, no less than 11 belong to the prestigious so-called Ivy League schools of the Northeastern seaboard, which would suggest that there is a differentiation within the correspondences between higher education and literary activity, with regards to geo-

graphical location of the institution of higher education.⁴ With further data available it will be possible to compare the geographical distributions of institutions of higher education and publisher, thus indicating how centers of gravity within higher education relate to centers of gravity within the publishing industry. One reasonable hypothesis is that there is a correlation between higher education and a successful literary debut ('successful' here meaning the appearance on the literary market), but there are possible sub-analyses to be made from this premise concerning changes over time. For example, does the expansion of higher education in the US change the importance of education in the make-up of debut cohorts, and, if so, how does such a change manifest itself in the literary choices the authors make concerning topic, theme, and narrative strategies?

5. Literary sponsorship

In relation to educational background and its importance for the launching of a literary career, we can consider the role that 'sponsorship' plays in this process. Conventionally, one would regard the post-debut sponsorship crucial in determining long-term literary success or failure, but in studying Mildred Haun's case we hypothesize that pre-debut academic sponsorship can help launch a literary career but that it might not help sustain it. There seem to be other factors, such as proximity to the center of publishing (i.e. New York city), type of academic sponsorship, position of sponsor etc, that play important roles in the making or breaking of a literary career.

Mildred Haun's entry into the literary field is directly linked to her academic education. Not only is Haun an early example of a writer whose training in creative writing resulted in a published work of fiction, but her case also highlights the importance of academic literary sponsorship. A student from the rural parts of Tennessee, Haun attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville between 1931 and 1935 (Gower, 1968: ix–xxv). There, she attended classes in creative writing for the Southern Agrarian poet and critic John Crowe Ransom. After graduating, Haun continued to work on an MA thesis consisting of folkloristic material gathered from her home county in the Smoky Mountains. Ransom enthusiastically supported this initiative, and subsequently encouraged Haun to turn it into a book. With the further support of Donald Davidson, Ransom's fellow poet at Vanderbilt, Haun secured a writing fellowship at the University of Iowa, where she could turn her 440-page manuscript of 'Cooke County Ballads and Songs' into what would become *The Hawk's Done Gone*, her first and only published book-length piece of work.

⁴ There are three cases of Columbia University, Dartmouth College, and Harvard University respectively, and one instance each of Princeton University and Yale University in the 1940 cohort. Out of the remaining 47 confirmed instances of places of first institution of higher education, a further ten are located in the Northeasternmost states of the US. They include Albany Academy, the Art Students League in New York, City College of New York, Hunter College (New York), New York University, Vassar College (two cases), Wellesley College (Boston), West Point, and Trinity College in Burlington, Vermont.

Haun's case would suggest that the active sponsorship of established literary colleagues seems to be of lesser significance when it comes to a sustained literary career. Positive statements by prominent writers in advertisements, reviews, and, perhaps most significantly, on the back of the book, or in the so-called 'flap copy,' played the same role in 1940 as they do today. Such official network connections are supposed to arouse the interest of new readers, by associating the author with other well-established authors or critics. In the present selection, three out of the four writers received commentaries from other writers for the purpose of promotion. A public academic or professional 'sponsorship' is vital in the launching of a new writer (cf. van Rees, 1983). Not only is it a form of accessible 'reviewing' of the product, but it establishes the new author in a network of more established writers. Nelson Algren is quoted from *The New Masses* on the flap copy of *Salute to Spring* saying that Meridel LeSueur is 'on of the very few revolutionary writers who combine a powerful realism and a deep sense of beauty' (LeSueur, 1940: dust jacket). This linking with both Algren and the radical magazine draws LeSueur nearer a readership that can identify the scope and content of her work simply by way of association. As Susanne Janssen has shown, the writers who make critical interventions, whether in conventional reviews or in other forms, also can benefit from the process by accumulating social capital as they position themselves in the literary field (Janssen, 1986).

As suggested above, Mildred Haun's path into print is the most documented case of a pre-debut sponsorship. This association with literary circles would continue after her debut work was published. From 1942 to 1943, she was book review editor for the *Nashville Tennessean*. During 1944–1946, she was editorial assistant to Allen Tate at the influential literary journal *The Sewanee Review*, but then seems to have left these spheres of influence for a career as a professional writer for the Department of Agriculture. Apart from blurbs on the 1968 reprint of *The Hawk's Done Gone* stating 'A very important book' (Allen Tate) and a positive statement from Andrew Lytle, editor at the *Sewanee Review*, few indications of these important connections to the literary world remain in Haun's critical legacy.

The process leading from the Vanderbilt classroom to the editorial offices of Bobbs Merrill suggests the importance of situating Haun's entry into the literary field. No doubt, sponsors played an important role in making the opportunity available to Haun. The movement from fringe to center (or proximity to the center; Boston was still a significant publishing hub in the 1940s) suggests two significant factors. First, the process maps the existence of *regional* literary hubs. Nashville was indeed far removed from the center of the publishing world but, as Haun's way into print shows, by way of individual networks it could still serve as a junction for the aspiring writer. Secondly, and more illustratively, Haun's academic affiliation shows the significance of the carry-over from the educational field into the literary field. In fact, Haun's route from the hills of the Smoky Mountains, via Vanderbilt through the writing fellowship at the University of Iowa to the eventual publication of her debut work is foreshadowing the expansion of the academic influence into the publishing industry that would not become entirely visible until the 1970s when cadres of young writers started to graduate from creative writing classes all over the United

States. The empirical testing of this hypothesis will be possible with a cross-cohort comparison of educational backgrounds.

Haun's collection of stories did not stir up the literary establishment or the reading public in 1940. Foreshadowing the prose fiction that would appear in the 1960s, it is an experimental text with an unreliable and unidentified narrator, based on the facsimile entries of a family bible that meet the reader upon opening the book. Elements of superstition and the fantastic in *The Hawk's Done Gone* make for compelling but not easily accessible reading. The book remained out of print until 1968 when Vanderbilt University Press, recognizing its regional importance, reprinted it with an introduction and the inclusion of ten additional short stories, all but one of which were previously unpublished. The regional aspect of the collection is still possibly what makes it remain in print in 2002, but its notions of race—and especially of the so-called Melungeon-colored people—tie well into the academic agendas of the past two decades.

Unlike Haun, James Still was not a newcomer to the publishing world when his first novel *River of Earth* (Viking) was issued in January of 1940. His route into the world of publishing is typical, if somewhat unusual in that it seemed to have been fairly straightforward. When Still signed a contract for the publication of a collection of poetry, *Hounds on the Mountain*, with Viking in 1937, it was a three-book deal based on the merits of his previously printed poems in the prestigious and popular magazine *The Atlantic*. His poems were published in a limited edition of 750 copies. When *River of Earth* appeared, it was duly noted as being written by 'a Kentucky poet' in *PW's Weekly* record (Still, 1940b), despite what must have been a limited recognition of the writer as a 'poet' given the small circulation of his first published work in book form. As for the 'Kentucky' attribution, it has lingered on throughout Still's career. Biographical articles and books invariably represent Still as a hermit living in an isolated cabin in the Appalachian mountains for the last 50 years. Still has argued, however, that this largely is a public image, but one that has served to establish him as a regional literary figure (Lee, 1991: 39–41). If Haun's failure to establish a connection to the center of publishing contributed to her interrupted literary career, Still's identification with a rural and regional background has been a continuing feature of his literary reputation.

In 1978, *River of Earth* was reissued by the University of Kentucky Press with an introduction situating the work within a regional literary context, something which seems to be typical for the regionally successful author. Like Haun (whose eventual re-issue of her only work of fiction by Vanderbilt University Press in 1968 also included a scholarly introduction), Still is an example of how the processes of consecration can emanate or be strengthened by regional academic centers. It is, however, important to distinguish between regional and national forms of recognition. As Coser et al. have noted, 85% of all university presses in the US are located outside of the New York area and thus removed from the conventional commercial center of publishing (Coser et al., 1982: 377). These academically affiliated institutions can claim stakes on the literary map as well as sponsor further interest in regional culture by rediscovering or maintaining regional literary reputations.

One hypothesis is that the regional importance of a writer has little or no impact on the national processes of literary consecration, other than temporary, and depends more on shifting interests and alliances of the institutions that maintain a position of importance as actors in the field, both nationally and regionally. The circulation of regional literary capital must hence be understood as autonomous to some degree. That Still has maintained a steady reputation is evidenced by the fact that he is one of the most comprehensively documented writers in the 1940 cohort.⁵ Even though Still is the writer in the 1940 cohort with the highest number of recorded literary awards, including a number of nationally prestigious and academic honors, most of the laurels bestowed upon him come from regionally based universities and cultural sponsors.⁶ It is interesting to note that Still's literary honors increasingly become 'regional' with the progression of time, something which suggests that there is a temporal dimension to the distribution of literary capital and that it relates to the spatial distribution. With a full set of data, the relation between regional and national literary capital, manifested in e.g. awards and academic sponsorship of the type Still has enjoyed, can be measured against investments in the forms of sociotopical choice (like regional settings etc), but also against other kinds of position-takings and positions in the form of movements across fields (Lundén et al., 2002).

6. Literary-bibliographical properties

Over time (up until 2001) the 1940 cohort produced a number of 1357 titles in all.⁷ This number includes fiction and non-fiction, and shorter works (of less than 49 pages, cf. Peters, 1992: 14) that are included in the Library of Congress catalog. This means an average of 5.5 titles per author.

⁵ Biographical information about Still can be found in *Contemporary Authors, 20th Century Authors, 20th Century Authors Supplement, Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Vol. 9) *CA Autobiography series* (Vol. 17), *Contemporary Southern Writers* (St James P, 1999), as well as citations in *Who's Who in America*, Vol. 54, *Who's Who in the South and Southwest*, Vol. 26 and the *Complete Who's Who* (1999).

⁶ His literary awards and honors include, in chronological order, the Publisher's Fellowship for the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, 1937, the MacDowell Colony fellowship, 1938, 2nd Prize in the O. Henry Memorial Volume, 1939 (for story 'Bat Flight', Southern Authors Award for 'Best novel published about the South by a Southerner' shared with Thomas Wolfe, 1940, Guggenheim Award, 1941, 1946, National Institute of Arts and Letters Award, 1947, appearance in Best American Short Stories, 1946, 1950, 1952, LittD, Berea College, 1973, U of Kentucky, 1979, LHD, Lincoln Memorial U, 1974, Weatherford Award 1978 for Appalachian writing, Marjorie Peabody Waite Award, American Academy and Institute of Arts & Letters, 1979, Milne Award for Service to the Arts, Kentucky Arts Council, 1981, Book of the Year citation. Appalachian Writers Association, 1987, Poet Laureate of Kentucky (1995–1997), U of Kentucky Library Award for Intellectual Excellence. Still is also honoured with The James Still Room at Johnson-Camden Library, Morehead State University (dedicated in 1961), and the James Still Fellowships for advanced studies for the humanities, social sciences and Appalachian studies at the University of Kentucky (from 1981).

⁷ The figure for the 1955 cohort is 1701 titles in all. The publication ratio including vanity press writers between the cohorts thus shows a slight decrease. For 1955: average 5.3 titles (1701 titles/321 writers), for 1940: average 5.4 titles (1332 titles/246 writers), cf. Ekelund and Börjesson (2002).

Table 2 lists the number of titles published by the sample authors. Column 1 includes all published titles regardless of Library of Congress classification, including shorter works and reprints. The two most prolific writers in the selection represent a wide range of published titles, from the classification PZ1–4 (which makes up the selection criteria for the inclusion in the cohort, cf. Bolkéus Blom, 2002) to poetry, historical works, and significantly, juvenile literature. Column 2 includes all titles excluding works shorter than 49 pages, and column 3 includes titles classified as ‘fiction’ (that is ‘PZ1–4’ in the Library of Congress catalog).

The following columns list the number of citations in the Modern Language of America citation index (MLA) as given in March 2001 (column 4), the number of literary awards indicated in the available reference material (column 5), and finally, the number of citations in a selection of bio-bibliographical reference works (column 6).⁸

A first glance would suggest that there seems to be a correspondence between the publication trajectories, the number of citations, and the critical attention that a writer has received, with the exception of James Still, who has received an unproportionally high number of literary awards compared to the number of works published.⁹ This correspondence, however, is not so obvious if the material is examined more closely. If the non-fiction titles are removed from the publishing trajectories, the literary output is less diverse than it first seemed, something which is further underlined if we apply to the definition of a published work a minimum number of 49 pages (cf. Peters, 1992). With shorter works removed, the list of published titles would be significantly less diverse, as shown in columns one through three. Notably, Haun’s and Tomasi’s works are limited to the PZ3 classification (that is, fiction, novels). At an average of seven published prose fiction works, the present selection thus holds a slightly higher average number of titles published.

Arguably, by the present definition, the core of the literary capital that these writers are able to bring to the field consists of prose works. If all other titles

Table 2

The sample writers: published titles, critical citations, awards, biographical entries

Name	All titles	Excl. short	PZ1–4	MLA	LitAward	BioCit
Haun	1	1	1	1	0	0
LeSueur	21	16	4	36	8	2
Still	14	9	3	18	14	9
Tomasi	2	2	2	2	2	1

⁸ This selection represents both specialized author biographies (the Gale *Contemporary Authors* series, The *20th Century Writers* series, the Gale *Dictionary of Literary Biography* series, the St James’s *Contemporary Writers* series) as well as more general biographical series (*Who’s Who*, with editions, and the *Current Biography* series).

⁹ It can be noted that no fewer than nine of Still’s literary and academic honors are awarded by organizations and institutions that can be said to have little or no national significance, including awards from several state colleges and writers’ associations, something which reinforces his standing as primarily a regional writer. See also footnote 6, listing Still’s awards and grants.

(non-fiction, but also juvenile literature, drama and poetry) are removed from the bibliographical list, what at first seemed to be an uneven distribution of the number of published titles, is now a narrow gap, as indicated by column three ('PZ1–4'). There thus no longer seems to be a clear correlation between the number of published titles and the number of critical and biographical citations that these four writers have received. In other words, the critical attention afforded to each of these writers depends less on the number of literary works.

A compilation of the data results in an index that shows the yield per published title. This index illustrates how we can observe an increasing return per published title in the different categories from 'All titles' to 'PZ1–4'. Thus, in this sample it seems that the literary capital that arguably can be said to reflect the production of prose fiction works to a large degree depends on other forms of textual production, notably juvenile fiction and non-fiction (Still and LeSueur have two PZ7–8 titles each, that is 'juvenile fiction'). Although the present preliminary testing of the data does not include critical interventions by writers, the findings are in line with Janssen's theory of 'side-roads to success' (Janssen, 1986). One would assume that high-prestige genres such as poetry and drama account for a significant amount of this transferred symbolic capital, but a closer look at the output of the sample writers shows that in Still's case only three out of 14 titles are collections of poetry (although Still also has three instances of local riddles and rhymes in his bibliography) and in LeSueur's only two titles are poetry. Moreover, both authors' published poetry titles include one retrospective collection. There are no published works of drama by the sample authors.

7. Conclusion

Using data on four US debut writers from the 1940 cohort, Mildred Haun, Meridel LeSueur, James Still, and Mari Tomasi, the present article has outlined how socio-biographical, or prosopographical, data can be compared to a writer's literary career. The available data make it possible to posit hypotheses about the correspondences between social disposition and choices of literary sociotopes, about correspondences between education, occupation and publication trajectory with regards to geographical features, and about the importance of regional features in the sustaining of a literary career and definitions of different types of literary capital. Preliminary results suggest that the relation between pre-debut regional academic sponsorship of a literary career should be further tested in order to establish the relation between regional and national forms of recognition. The cases of Haun and Still especially underline the importance of distinguishing between regional and national recognition in the US literary field. Finally, an analysis of the available sample data illustrates the benefits of further comparing the relation between quantitative output, different forms of publications (i.e. forms of fiction and non-fiction) and manifestations of literary capital, here measured in scholarly and biographical citations and literary awards, and posit the hypothesis that there is an increase in literary capital that also depends on a forms of non-literary output.

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