

# Clayton, O. and McIntyre, I., eds. (2025) *The Popular Wobbly: Selected Writings of T-Bone Slim*. University of Minnesota Press.

## Review by Jennifer Forsberg

I was unfamiliar with T-Bone Slim when this volume came into my hands. That admission feels a little embarrassing as a literary scholar who has spent nearly two decades studying the rhetorical posturings of hobo raconteurs. But the unassuming tone of *The Popular Wobbly* is one of the most compelling accomplishments of editors Owen Clayton and Iain McIntyre, whose careful curation of Slim's work welcomes new readers and serves as a comprehensive compendium for existing fans.

After an insightful foreword by David Roediger, the editors' introduction explains the particulars of Slim's biography and archive. This helpful context addresses Slim's complicated bilingual and immigrant status and denotes the challenge of curating a large body of work riddled with significant gaps, omissions, and ambiguities. Presenting Slim's fragmented history, as evidenced by editorial language such as "might," "could," or "may," underscores the need for an intentional selection methodology. Further, they expose Slim's own editorial process, which often relied on fragmented pieces stitched together by an editor over days or weeks (p. xxxiii), reinforcing the recommendation that readers sample Slim's pieces incrementally or risk encountering trouble finding continuity (p. lii).

Clayton and McIntyre have selected Slim's "best" work, what they consider "the funniest, most interesting, and most profound" (p. li). With this guidance, the reader can witness the development of Slim's style, wit, and longstanding themes over a career spanning just over twenty years. The editors' organization of the volume leans into usefulness, whether for one's increased understanding of Slim's career or as an archive with teaching potential: they even cross-list 6 central topics in Slim's work, and offer a comprehensive list for further reading at the end of the volume. For activists, scholars, and artists within Working-Class Studies, the volume provides ample material to showcase the specific material conditions of the period, Slim's insightful and innovative rhetorical moves for critique and protest, and finally, a compelling collection of calls for solidarity over time. As Slim writes in "Untitled Article" (1933): "Join the I.W.W. There is no other time like NOW. Today is too late. Tomorrow is never. Yesterday never was. NOW is forever" (p. 276).

Organized chronologically, the opening section features Slim's work from 1919 to 1921, and evidences his developing style. Each piece exposes Slim's burgeoning self-confidence through experimentation, wordplay, and recurring imagery. This sampling of early work is self-aware and referential, but candidly captures growing trends of violence and oppression against working people. This opener successfully offers a snapshot of the world Slim is writing about, and allows his voice to construct a biographical map and a political survey of the time.

The six sections covering the entire 1920s show how carefully Clayton and McIntyre worked to present a well-rounded, insightful engagement with Slim's work. This includes the continued development of Slim's style, perhaps most notably in his word games in 1923's "Prepare for the Worst" (p. 71) and the delightfully humorous "The Passing Show" from 1925 exploring "Soup! Souperb soup! Souplime soup!" (p. 133). The editors do a phenomenal job letting Slim speak for himself, showcasing his interests in labor and its impact on gender, race, and age. As a columnist for the IWW, Slim's political engagement and investment in drumming up membership take on the role of historian and commentator. The editors' choices allow the reader to recognize the power of Slim's language and style to call for solidarity. For example, 1925's "Cross Word Puzzle" celebrates the ability of language to "lay out the facts, fancies and fakes before the folks," while also highlighting their limitation: "[n]othing happens without work, effort, deeds and action" (p. 134). Slim's wordplay conveys the severity of a worker's situation, stressing the pressing need for change. Satirical pieces like 1927's "Boneyard" critique the financial cost of suicide, calling for more affordable ways to kill oneself, exposing the dark, material effects of the system and conditions of the time (p. 177).

The three sections covering the 1930s feature Slim's responses to the increasing economic strain of the Depression and the growing concern with international conflict. The editors offer pieces that both show Slim's critical eye and reflect an increased desperation for improved conditions in the material everyday, as representative of the future of the nation. Moments like 1930's "On Popular Sanitation" capture an embodied intensity, offering that "A man has certain inalienable rights such as strife, tribulation, pursuit of happiness and among these we find sickness" (p. 237). The body in turmoil is common throughout Slim's work but is especially powerful here, as it speaks to systemic mistreatment and institutional mismanagement. Another embodied discussion occurs in "A Mosquito's Lunch" (1931), which argues that "homeless men" are "public benefactors, to be paid for ridding [Detroit, Michigan's] thriving community of all those winged-demons of the soft and stilly night" (p. 252). Once more, the editors successfully display Slim's humor and the reality of everyday life for the unhoused and unemployed, lambasting "a city ... so deeply concerned about the welfare of such a thirsty bunch of bloodsuckers" rather than its people (p. 254).

The editors present Slim's late work in the 1940s as driven by an interest in worker solidarity as an answer to the horrors of global war. One of the most impactful selections was Slim's 1941 piece "Warning of Cannon Fodder Shortage for War of 1960," which argues that a low birthrate at the time will result in fewer disposable bodies later. This kind of sobering truth-telling, often made palatable with humor, is what makes Slim's work most impressive. Without Clayton and McIntyre's smart editorial decisions throughout, Slim's crystalized visions of the world, still largely applicable in our contemporary time, might be altogether lost to most readers.

The volume follows Slim's own words with a selection of responses to his work. Some, like George Baker and Sam Murray, champion him in his own time, calling for increased attention to Slim's skill. One 1930 response aptly characterizes Slim's writing as having "the force of Hemingway plus the sting of Swift," situating him within literary history more generally (p. 340). Other selections, like those from Franklin Rosemount and Ville-Juhani Sutinen, offer a memorialization and reflection on legacy that complement the three-dimensional understanding of Slim that Clayton and McIntyre have carefully constructed. In doing so, the volume does great service to interested readers looking to revisit Slim or even encounter him for the first time.

**Reviewer Bio:**

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