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Gavin Jones: American Hungers

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INTRODUCTION

The Problem of Poverty in Literary Criticism

THIS association of poverty with progress is the great enigma of our times,” wrote the social reformer Henry George toward the end of the nineteenth century, “the central fact from which spring industrial, social, and political difficulties that perplex the world, and with which statesmanship and philanthropy and education grapple in vain.” For George, the persistence of poverty in the wealthy nations of the industrialized world posed problems that were ideological as much as material—problems with the power to destroy the progressive notions underpinning “civilization” itself. If George was discussing a crisis that afflicted Western nations at large, then the paradox of want amid wealth seemed especially intense in an American context where political institutions of theoretical equality were based on “a state of most glaring social inequality.” Echoing George in the *New York Times* at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the economist Paul Krugman has described the contemporary era as a new Gilded Age in which wealth and income have shifted dramatically toward a super-rich elite, leaving the United States—despite its economic achievements—with “more poverty and lower life expectancy than any other major advanced nation.” For Krugman, as for George, the prominence of poverty in an American context poses more than just a social problem. It augurs the collapse of democracy itself as a political and social ideal.¹

The presence of poverty within the developed nations of the industrialized world has always tended to antagonize the liberal assumptions of freedom and universality that underpin a market economy. Hence the long tradition in Western social

thought of rationalizing poverty by describing the poor as inherently disordered and degraded.² In the United States, with its pronounced ideologies of social fluidity and equality of opportunity, difficult questions have surrounded the masses of people who lack the material resources for decent living, and who seem unable to rise freely on an economic scale. Doctrines of individualism have tended to downplay poverty as a problem of social structure by rooting its causes in the flawed character or in the immoral behavior of individuals. The nation's legacy of institutional racism, and the disproportionate rates of poverty among the nonwhite population, have worked to highlight cultural categories, such as race, over social categories, such as class, in explanations of economic inequality. According to Adolph Reed, Jr., in an analysis of the 2004 presidential election results, "the language of cultural divide has come to mask the class dynamics in American politics. Culture has swallowed or displaced class as an analytical category in American political debate, across the ideological spectrum." When poverty attracts the attention of legislators, as it did during the welfare reforms of the mid-1990s, its origins are consistently traced to alleged dysfunctions in family structure and lifestyle, or a refusal to conform to correct behavioral values.³ Media projections of a predominantly dark underclass have further encouraged popular perceptions that poverty emerges from factors subcultural and ethnic rather than external and economic.⁴ Despite the strong interest of sociologists in the poor, and despite periodic moments of public consciousness of the nation's neediest, the subject of poverty has remained a partial blind spot in the broader culture, unable to be seen directly or for long.⁵ The deep economic inequities exposed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 have made little lasting impact on public attitudes, recent research has shown, with poverty and inequality remaining the nation's "dirty little secret."⁶

The literary expression at the heart of my study is significant, first and foremost, because it highlights poverty as a crucial political problem, verging on a national catastrophe. Our writers may be drawn more to the polemics of poverty than to its potential solutions, yet the debate in which they engage is an essential prerequisite to social understanding and action—a making visible of a social situation that Barbara Ehrenreich describes as virtually hidden in the national culture, and largely absent from its political rhetoric.⁷ Literary analysis can also help to fill what sociologists have described as a significant "absence of a historical context in the analysis and dialogue about poverty in this country" by engaging integrally with intellectual and social history, and by offering access to groups of people who—in the words of the Depression writer Meridel Le Sueur—"leave no statistics, no record, obituary or remembrance." Literature can shed light too on a topic that has tended to resist rigorous philosophical analysis, and has remained far less parsed, in literary theory and criticism, than companion categories such as desire and consumption.⁸ (Even those Western philosophers who purport to offer a "philosophy of the poor," argues Jacques Rancière, merely reduce the poor to shells of impo-

tence, passivity, and fatigue, whose real purpose is to sanction the intellectual privilege that makes philosophy possible.)⁹ My aim is to let this literature open up the complexities and contradictions of poverty as we go along, yet some important coordinates can help us to map something like an initial theory of poverty, or at least an initial framework of ideas, that can in turn help us to locate the distinctiveness of this contentious category, and thus to understand why—despite its powers of political, historical, and philosophical illumination—poverty has been too overlooked in literary criticism.

This book is concerned with literature as an acknowledgment of poverty as a specific state of social being, defined by its *socioeconomic suffering*—a term that emerges from broader sociological and anthropological theories of “social suffering” as a cultural process.¹⁰ I choose the narrower term *socioeconomic suffering* because it gets at the peculiar dialectics of poverty as a category—its position between material and nonmaterial, objective and subjective criteria. As a condition of *socioeconomic* suffering, poverty is primarily material and economic. It rests on levels of possession and power, and is physical at its extreme, returning ultimately to the body as the site that bears the marks, the damage, of being poor. In this regard, poverty loses its urgency if it is not at least potentially absolute, if it is not defined by the lack—or by the threat of the lack—of the resources necessary for subsistence, for life itself, or for health and well-being. We can thus attempt to look at poverty objectively as a line, a threshold of human welfare. But if poverty is ultimately marked on the body, as hunger or as physical suffering, then it is always as much subjective as it is objective. “’Tis not always poverty to be poor,” remarks the narrator of Herman Melville’s sketch, “The Two Temples.”¹¹ Here poverty, as a socioeconomic level, becomes impoverishment specifically when it is experienced, by an individual or a group, as a kind of suffering. The materiality of need thus opens into the nonmaterial areas of psychology, emotion, and culture, with poverty moving away from the absolute and the objective toward the relative, the ideological, and the ethical. The suffering of poverty is sharpened by socioeconomic inequality, and is thus always pressured relatively by the context of wealth, and warped in the United States by ideological forces that work to internalize indigence as shame or blame.¹² And poverty is an ethical dilemma, more than simply a static “social condition,” because it provokes controversial questions of distributive justice—whether, for example, disadvantaged individuals are *unfairly* kept from social opportunities—which themselves return to the difficulties of defining a socioeconomic minimum and evaluating what is necessary for a level of decent living.¹³ Any definition of what it means to be poor is doubly difficult because it combines shifting economic criteria (the problem of where to draw the line, or where to stop drawing it) with much broader community judgments on what constitutes an acceptable standard of living, and who is responsible, ultimately, for those people who fall beneath it.¹⁴

Literature reveals how poverty is established, defined, and understood in discourse, as a psychological and cultural problem that depends fundamentally on the language used to describe it. This is why creative writers have responded so productively to poverty. The problems that poverty raises, whether ideologically, ethically, or linguistically, have fueled a network of signifying practices—a history of writing and thinking about poverty that remains central to any understanding of the history of socioeconomic inequality. We can think of poverty as a *discourse* in more Foucauldian terms: a system of thought that materially disciplines and disempowers the poor. Yet *polemics* is a better term because it more accurately captures a degree of contestation and instability in discussions of poverty. Hence poverty gains significance as a social problem that posits a relation and, frequently, a contradiction between the discursive—understood qualitatively as psychology, culture, politics, and so on—and the material: limited quantities of resources and opportunities, for example, or physiological facts of hunger and malnutrition. It is instructive in this regard to think of poverty alongside the category of *desire* because both seem to return to a fundamental “lack,” yet they are not terms that perfectly collapse into one another. Though theories of desire differ, literary critics have been particularly drawn to its essential resistance to fulfillment, which explains subjectivity as constituted in an impossible desire to return to an original oneness, and explains language itself, whose very premise is “based on the foreclosure of satisfaction.”¹⁵ Poverty may presuppose desire, yet it is a socioeconomically bounded form of desire based on the *possibility*, not the foreclosure, of satisfaction—a possibility of being materially unpoor, which helps shape the suffering of poverty in the context of greater levels of wealth, making this suffering seem so problematic and, for some at least, so unjust. For many of the writers in this study, poverty is also intertwined with questions of selfhood, being, and language, yet always in a struggle against a universal, metaphysical understanding of *lack*, and toward an understanding of *need* as a specific kind of suffering that is at once materially bounded, socially inscribed, and psychologically registered.

This dialectical relationship between the material and the discursive defines the theoretical parameters of the literary debate over poverty—its particular thematics—and engenders further dialectical relations between necessity and contingency, location and mobility, enslavement and freedom, domination and exploitation, as we shall see throughout this book. Poverty is such a polemical subject in part because any balance between its socioeconomic and its psychocultural dimensions is always on the verge of being upset, especially in an overweighting toward nonmaterial characteristics that can easily seem the cause of need. And there has been an imbalance, or a series of biases, in recent critical discourse as well—a failure, put simply, to harmonize the competing claims of “class” and “cultural identity” in a way necessary to illuminate poverty as a category or a concept. This imbalance is particularly significant, I suggest, because it tends to mirror

trends within the mainstream political discourses that the institution of academic criticism often purports to oppose.

Of course, this blindness toward poverty in literary criticism is far from total. Robert Bremner's groundbreaking study, *From the Depths* (1956), offers a history of social and creative writing on the poor, ranging from the "discovery" of poverty as a chronic condition in the 1840s to the growing substitution of environmental for individualistic explanations of poverty by literary realists and social analysts at the turn of the century. Yet Bremner's study remains a broad overview with little in-depth textual analysis. Benedict Giomo's *On the Bowery* (1989) and Keith Gandall's *The Virtues of the Vicious* (1997) offer excellent introductions to the varieties of poverty writing in the Gilded Age, and to the middle-class fascination with the alternative subculture of the poor. Both of these studies expand the thesis outlined by Bremner: that the literature of naturalism, with its predominant interest in the underprivileged and the downwardly mobile, necessarily follows the more enlightened view of the poor—as victims of their physical environment—found within turn-of-the-century social science and Progressive reform. Discussion of poverty is dotted throughout criticism of literary naturalism. Yet even Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* (2004)—one of the best recent reevaluations of the genre—depends on a formalist mode of analysis whereby the poverty of characters becomes determined by the force of narrative modes, such as "sentimentalism" or the "plot of decline," more than by an authorial engagement with poverty as a social dilemma.¹⁶ In addition to this genre-based containment of poverty, book-length studies have targeted individual authors, such as Erskine Caldwell, or specific literary archetypes, such as the southern poor white, which Sylvia Jenkins Cook traces into the literature of the 1930s.¹⁷ There has, of course, been specific attention to poverty in British literature, prompted in part by Gertrude Himmelfarb's exhaustive analyses of poverty as a dilemma within social philosophy from mid-eighteenth-century thinkers to the late Victorians.¹⁸ In a broader, North American context, Roxanne Rimstead's *Remnants of Nation* (2001) is an interesting analysis of writing about poverty by Canadian women that does much to unpack poverty as a distinctive narrative category. Yet Rimstead tends to entrench the distinction between a politically oppositional discourse in which poor subjects speak their own experience of poverty, and a "dominant discourse" that necessarily blames or erases the poor through discursive marginalization or symbolic violence.¹⁹

Most typical is the way that poverty enters as a subcategory, or as an occasional series of references, within studies of writing by women or by racial/ethnic minorities, and within studies of social class in literature. Stacy Morgan's *Rethinking Social Realism* (2004), for example, shows how African American writers and graphic artists confronted the psychological strain of poverty, as a disruption to radicalized working-class consciousness, alongside their more pervasive consideration of racial injustice (Morgan is one of the few literary scholars who makes *poverty* an entry in

her index).²⁰ Amy Lang's *The Syntax of Class* (2003) refers throughout to the power of poverty to determine the class positions of characters, yet the book remains mostly interested in the ways that social class, as a broader category of identity, interacts with gender and, to a lesser extent, with race. Lang's study adds to a strong critical focus on domesticity as the locus of U.S. class consciousness, which tends to emphasize how the middle class anxiously constructed itself against representations of the working classes. Within this literature on class, however, the referencing of poverty has often remained vague and has refused to coalesce into a focused and specific analysis, as we shall see. Critics have tended to discuss representations of human subjects understood to be poor without explicitly targeting or debating poverty as a distinct form of socioeconomic suffering (a point that can apply to primary texts as well). Why has an overwhelming concern with the socially marginalized emerged without a sufficient framework in which to situate an explicit discussion of material deprivation? The answers, I suggest, lie both within the characteristics of contemporary critical methodologies, and within the nature and difficulty of poverty itself as a category.

The obvious reason for the neglect of poverty lies in the notorious downgrading of class as a category of literary analysis, which reflects the silencing of working-class consciousness and the masking of class segregation in American society.²¹ In their unusually statistical analysis of the breadth of articles that have appeared in *American Quarterly* since its inception in 1949, Larry Griffin and Maria Tempenis conclude that there is a long-standing bias in American studies toward the multicultural questions of gender, race, and ethnicity at the expense of analyses of social class—an emphasis on questions of identity and representation rather than on those of social structural position. Griffin and Tempenis argue that disciplinary borders within American-studies scholarship have hampered engagement with social-science methodologies that have maintained an emphasis on socioeconomics.²² Writing in the early 1990s, John Carlos Rowe makes a similar point. Methodologies divide social theorists, who have emphasized changing class divisions since World War II, and postmodern critical theorists for whom the concept of class has become almost an embarrassment in its maintenance of rigid Marxist distinctions.²³ If the 1980s saw an explosion of interest in race and gender (ironically, Rowe's own book, *At Emerson's Tomb*, analyzes the politics of classic American literature almost solely from the perspectives of race and gender), then the 1990s saw the emergence of the nation as a category that some critics describe as threatening to displace class altogether from the front line of critical analysis.²⁴ The theoretical and critical movement now to decenter the nation itself in an effort to think "transnationally" may have originated from social theories of globalized capital, yet the greatest influence on literary scholarship has been work that stresses not global inequity but the international flow of cultural commodities and ethnic

identities.²⁵ Rimstead has even argued that postcolonial modes of criticism have tended to place perceptions of poverty *outside* the developed world.²⁶ At the very least, the theoretical unsettling of the nation as a unit of analysis can act to distract attention from the social experience of class difference, and can neutralize awareness of the state as the domain of welfare and the regulator of social resources by which economic inequities get maintained or reduced.²⁷

Rowe makes a convincing case for the inevitable clash between poststructuralist theory and traditional notions of social class. But the most powerful force sidelining class has surely been the persistent concern, among literary scholars, with the question of cultural identity, seen most recently in transnational work that looks like multiculturalism on a global scale. An overwhelming interest in oppressed subject positions has tended to evade the problem of economic inequality by centering social marginalization on the cultural identity of the marginalized.²⁸ Of course the study of cultural identity is by no means monolithic. The school of postpositivist realism, associated with scholars such as Satya Mohanty, for example, rejects overly essentialist views of identity and considers class location in its complex account of social experience. Yet class can still seem buried, at times, in a mode of analysis that stresses domination over exploitation, and that inevitably works to affirm the cultural identities of minorities by according them “epistemic privilege.”²⁹ Even modes of minority criticism that do keep class more squarely in the picture tend to emphasize the affirmative and self-emancipating power of collective class consciousness over the suffering of economic deprivation.³⁰

In his attempt to reintroduce social class into the canon debate that raged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, John Guillory argued that the reduction of political questions to the realm of the cultural explains why class is often left out of the discussion: “For while it is easy enough to conceive of a self-affirmative racial or sexual identity, it makes very little sense to posit an affirmative lower-class identity, as such an identity would have to be grounded in the experience of deprivation *per se*.”³¹ Guillory is one of a number of scholars who have attempted to understand the difference of class, as a category of analysis, and to argue forcefully for its importance. In this regard, work that bemoans the absence of class discourse in the United States becomes the discourse itself. (The concluding point of Griffin and Tempen’s analysis of *American Quarterly* is not that class has become any less important in recent years, but that class analysis has always been practiced at a constant, if rather low, level.) There has, if anything, been a resurgence of interest in class in recent years, as critics have offered to rethink class theoretically, to expand our knowledge of how middle-class writers represented inequality, and to revise the canon by establishing the aesthetic range and ideological complexity of neglected writings by left-wing intellectuals and by members of the working class. There has been strong critical interest in cross-class representation, in the depiction of work, in the proletarian novel, and in “panic fiction”—just some of the areas

in which class issues naturally feature. To explain the neglect of poverty, then, we need to analyze not only the downplaying of class within critical debates but also the ways that class typically gets included and discussed.

Guillory's use of the term *lower class* is revealing in this regard as it points to a conceptual slipperiness in class analysis, whereby the terms *class* and *poverty* tend to blur into one another, as if to be poor and to be working class were one and the same thing.³² The term *poverty* has always had an uncertain position in class analysis, going back even to Marx himself, who famously described the Lumpenproletariat ("ragged poor") in images of residue and waste—a counterrevolutionary conception that later thinkers such as Frantz Fanon have sought to revise.³³ Rimstead has speculated that this negative designation of the poor in Marxist theory, which results from poverty being defined "more by consumption than by production, more by deprivation and need than by labor or political agency," helps to explain some of the differences between poverty narratives (as she characterizes them) and working-class writing, and to explain the relative neglect of poverty in class-based discourse as a whole.³⁴ The category of poverty certainly remains ambiguous in traditional Marxist thought, varying between the one-dimensional oppression and domination of the "naturally arising poor," and the revolutionary potential of the "artificially impoverished," exploited proletariat.³⁵ Poverty is always implicit, at some level, within class discourse, just as Raymond Williams describes how "the massive historical and immediate experience of class domination and subordination" has inspired Marxian analysis of the materiality of cultural production.³⁶ Yet this *implicitness* of poverty is really the problem: class analysis often fails to focus sharply on what poverty means as a social category. One of the most comprehensive studies of nineteenth-century American class discourse, Martin J. Burke's *The Conundrum of Class* (1995), for example, charts the controversies surrounding the categorization of class in the United States, but almost entirely ignores the specific discourse on poverty that had developed fully by the 1840s.³⁷ Even the boldest of recent efforts to reposition social class within critical theory, such as Rowe's essay "The Writing Class," passes over issues of economic injustice and dispossession to arrive at an analysis of the technological and philosophical implications of the new global economy of representation. Class analysis has, in this way, targeted the system of capitalist production and consumption, rather than considering the individuals and groups who have remained partly excluded from it.

This last point is true of perhaps the most prevalent concern in recent literary studies of class, the concern with middle-class identity and with the feminized domesticity through which it has often been understood. This perennial interest in the middle class, driven powerfully by scholars of nineteenth-century women's writing, has coalesced recently into studies of panic literature, particularly the writing that emerged from the economic slumps at midcentury. Analysis of panic literature tends to follow Ann Fabian's thesis that, by undermining confidence in the capital-

ist system itself, financial panics provoked conservative literary responses that sought to resolve the ideological contradictions of the market. The recent critical interest in the literature of middle-class fears of economic instability has inevitably made poverty seem less a specific, analyzable social state than a potential and somewhat vague threat (or at best a momentary slump), while the poor themselves become the negative symbols of moral degradation against which middle-class identity is defined.³⁸ Even when we turn to analyses that *have* emphasized the lower social classes rather than the middle-class lens through which they are seen—hence the rise of what John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon term the “New Working-Class Studies”—various critical trends still conspire to cloud analysis of poverty as a category.³⁹ These trends can be broadly termed the *affirmative*, the *deconstructive*, and the *composite*.

Affirmative methods of class criticism (we will return later to the deconstructive and composite methods) have tended to highlight the culture of the working class, rather than the socioeconomic situation of the poor. For example, Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents* (1987), an analysis of the nineteenth-century dime novel, follows the lead of new labor historians by stressing not class structure but class formation—the social, cultural, and linguistic ways that class relations get signified and represented.⁴⁰ The working class becomes a complex “identity,” formed in response to material conditions and socioeconomic power relations, but by no means reducible to questions of exploitation and inequality alone.⁴¹ Denning’s *The Cultural Front* (1996) is a painstaking investigation of the impact of the labor movement on the culture of the 1930s, yet again any consideration of social hardship is displaced by the aesthetic and intellectual effects of a class consciousness based broadly on the rise of an inclusive popular front. Indeed, Denning seeks explicitly to overturn the belief that the leftward turn in the 1930s emerged from the poverty of the Depression (or from the rise of fascism in Europe), rooting it instead in the combination of new union organization and a burgeoning culture industry. When Denning highlights the representation of urban social conditions, found within the era’s “Ghetto Pastorals,” he turns more to the ethnic and racial concerns of this literature than to its confrontation with poverty and lack.⁴²

Running against the complex forces that Stanley Aronowitz identifies as silencing questions of working-class identity in the United States, a dominant strain of recent criticism has sought to establish the importance of class not as a response to socioeconomic suffering but as an ideological perception and historical experience shaped positively from what George Lipsitz terms “organizational learning, social contestation, and political mobilization.”⁴³ The emphasis on class as a form of cultural identity and/or political agency can be seen clearly in recent reevaluations of the proletarian literature of the 1930s. Barbara Foley’s *Radical Representations* (1993), for example, suggests how economic deprivation penetrates the

subject matter of proletarian fiction, though her central concern is with the representation of class consciousness, in the politically affirmative sense of class as an instrument for socialist revolution—a partial reprising of earlier traditions of Marxist criticism.⁴⁴ Criticism that views literature as evidence for the history of political consciousness, moreover, tends to avoid the kind of close textual analysis necessary to understand the ambiguity, instability, and controversy of poverty as a category. Though Foley undermines overly simplistic accounts of the political dogmatism and stylistic naïveté of proletarian fiction, she explicitly refrains from “detailed readings of individual texts” in an effort to “offer omnibus analyses generalizing about the relation of generic to doctrinal politics in a broad range of novels.”⁴⁵ A number of recent books that direct attention to the nation’s overlooked history of left-wing writing (particularly from the 1930s) tend to base their reevaluations on the diversity or the technical complexity of a writer’s literary production rather than on an engagement with a single topic such as poverty—a topic that can, after all, make a writer seem reductively materialist or overly propagandistic.⁴⁶

Supplementing this concern with proletarian fiction, an interest in the category of work has also grown in recent literary criticism. Occasionally such criticism stresses the impoverishing impact of exploitative labor practices, yet this emphasis on work has often deflected direct analysis of poverty.⁴⁷ Laura Hapke’s *Labor’s Text* (2001) is by far the most exhaustive examination of representations of the worker in American literature, and it too makes occasional reference to the working poor and to the inequalities of class that, according to Hapke, get minimized by multiculturalists. Yet Hapke is primarily concerned with the cultural perception of the working class as an identity, founded on labor as a behavior, and with the political agency of the worker.⁴⁸ In terms of themes, Hapke is drawn most powerfully to the ideology of upward social mobility that she describes as haunting labor writing. Ironically, though, Hapke herself is most critical of a writer such as Upton Sinclair who represents the damage of poverty and “casts doubt on workers’ ability to climb out of the mire.” The flip side of a desire to see the working class as having intelligence and political agency is a frustration with writers who depict individuals limited by their socioeconomic environment—writers who thus themselves come to seem constrained by their middle-class condescension.⁴⁹ Hence an awareness of the negative effects of poverty can get partially obscured in criticism that valorizes working-class consciousness, or that surveys labor writing.

The overall point here is that a certain branch of class studies has itself shifted away from a consideration of socioeconomics, toward an interest in the complexities of social and cultural identity construction. Guillory’s point that class cannot be affirmed as an identity, in the same way as race and gender, is only partly true. When class arrives with a degree of political agency, it can be (and indeed has been) affirmed as a category of identity. Prominent reevaluators of class, such as Wai Chee Dimock, have thus emphasized historical evidence that working-class

women in antebellum America enjoyed income, cultural pursuits, and communal happiness not typically associated with brutalizing industrial conditions.⁵⁰ But to view class in this way, as something that transcends socioeconomic suffering, is also to imply the reverse: there are elements of exploitation and deprivation that resist a cultural perspective—what Guillory himself describes as the institutional powers that restrict access to the channels for representing social identity.⁵¹ There are undoubtedly avenues along which poverty, as a specific category, can be affirmed as a positive good. Lawrence Buell, for example, has called for critics to take seriously the long tradition of “voluntary simplicity discourse” that runs through American literature, whereby downward mobility represents moral virtue in the context of capitalist materialism. Walter Benn Michaels has identified a similar trend in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000): a desire to reclaim the poor for the Left by ontologizing poverty as a desirable identity.⁵² Yet as an enforced situation of economic disadvantage, poverty resists the affirmative pull of working-class consciousness, middle-class self-privation, or ontological theory. To interpret class as a cultural or social identity that operates beyond poverty only leaves questions of “need,” “deprivation,” and “social necessity” untheorized and excluded.

Not all analyses of the working class tend to view class as an affirmative entity. Critics such as Guillory and Rita Felski perhaps go too far in reducing working-class status to poverty, making it inevitably the realm of material deprivation and limited infrastructural resources, radically isolated from an implicitly middle-class norm.⁵³ No absolute relation links low income to illiteracy, for example, while environmental barriers are always potentially surmountable and unstable. Alongside the recent trend that characterizes class as a positive formation, a powerful countertrend has sought to deconstruct overly rigid assumptions of class consciousness. Ironically, though, this poststructuralist reevaluation of class has only again reinforced the displacement of poverty as a category of social discourse.

Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore’s edited collection, *Rethinking Class* (1994), remains an influential attempt to work against the subordination of class within literary studies. Most of the essays in *Rethinking Class* are concerned with the complexities of middle-class identity construction, just as the collection as a whole strives to understand class as a relational structure not necessarily tied to a privileged view of working-class experience and agency. *Rethinking Class* is directed against an orthodox Marxist account of class as the determinant of historical change. Far from a primary force, class thus becomes, at times, a “second-degree register,” an “epiphenomenon,” virtually an abstract social relation lacking “causal ground.” When class is targeted centrally, it becomes valued as “a theoretical enterprise” rather than “an empirical description of social groups.” This rejection of “class essentialism” has yielded a version of class not as a stable material fact but as a polymorphous, unstable, and contradictory cultural arena.⁵⁴

Recent considerations of the difference between class and categories such as race and gender have repeatedly argued that class does not share in the anti-essentialist project of race and gender studies—the move to reveal the socially constructed nature of allegedly natural or biological features.⁵⁵ Class only makes sense as a social relation, these arguments run, and thus does not require demystification but instead necessitates an understanding of its hierarchical and dynamic structure. Ironically, though, such efforts to establish the social uniqueness of class tend to re-essentialize race and gender as epistemologically different “experiential realities” (Foley), as forces that “often mark identity inescapably” (Felski). And arguments for the *contingency* of class as a social relation (Lang) stress its capacity to be transcended (again making race and gender seem insurmountable absolutes), thus sanctioning the normalcy of mobility as a way to think about how class operates.⁵⁶

Class analysis, then, has been drawn in recent years to the relational and contingent aspects of class as a category. Panic fiction generates criticism in part because it highlights the instability and unpredictability of the market. The recent interest in cross-class contact is another example of a critical approach that harbors a poststructuralist view of class as mobility and change. Michael Trask’s *Cruising Modernism* (2003), for example, employs queer theory to argue that American modernist literature is rooted in the irregular sexual desire that the upper classes felt toward lower-class transients. Rather than simply being overlooked, poverty gets explicitly displaced by the historical thesis that, in the early twentieth century, fundamental class relations broke down into a pleasure economy based on desire and surplus wealth, as a consumer culture of choice supposedly replaced a pain economy rooted in subsistence. Contingency outstrips necessity, distinct classes become fluid groups, and the very categories that might cohere into a definition of poverty—irregularity, casual labor, insecurity, for example—become linked instead to the risky pleasures of working-class consumerism and erotic sexuality.⁵⁷

Current critical methodologies are finely geared to break down essences, to dissolve race, gender, nation, and class as stable absolutes, to emphasize instead that individuals are more complex and hybrid than the categories into which we want to place them. Such criticism reveals rich potential by liberating class from material certitudes and from economic determinism. But in this effort to highlight instability and uncertainty, what happens to the specificity of socioeconomic need? How do we treat the question of whether individuals may be restricted in crucial ways by their material resources, or lack access to the tools of social movement? Whether we see class as different from a category such as race because the former is less stable, or whether we view class and race as essentially similar because they are equally the performative product of unstable situations and behaviors, the contingency and indeterminacy of class is in both cases presupposed. The result is a neglect of the aspects of class that can harm individuals physically

and intellectually, frustrate them emotionally, and, most importantly, hinder in some form their social agency and political liberty.⁵⁸ In other words, any definition of poverty as a state of material necessity comes to seem pure determinism from a perspective that views the possibility of social transition as the inevitability of categorical disintegration.⁵⁹ To argue that class is at heart a temporal category of change and movement can work to nebulize the issue of poverty, dissolving it into categorical indistinctness and impermanence. There may be a crucial clash, then, between poverty as a condition of relative and unhealthy material lack and these dominant trends in literary analysis. Poverty is not something that can be affirmed in the same way as other cultural identities, including, to an extent, the identity of being working class. But then should poverty be de-essentialized, in the same way that race and gender get de-essentialized, when the concern with economic justice that underscores poverty returns to social amenities that are *essential* to a decent quality of life, whether or not the measure of poverty is absolute (based on resources judged essential to subsistence) or relative (based on what a community believes is essential for decent living, in comparison with broader levels of wealth)? Thus understood, the notion of poverty puts pressure on quantification more than deconstruction.

The clash of poverty with affirmative *and* deconstructive critical methodologies begins to account for its insignificance in critical discourse. This double clash clarifies why “[t]he issue of poverty is rarely center stage even in inquiries about class conflict in proletarian fiction and working-class writing,” as Rimstead argues in her study of poverty narratives by Canadian women, “or in new radical fields of inquiry such as feminism, postcolonialism, and multiculturalism, all of which are concerned with social justice.”⁶⁰ But there is another major reason why the topic of poverty may have been partially obscured: the emergence of a composite form of critical analysis, outlined by Griffin and Tempenis, whereby class becomes inextricably connected to multicultural concerns.⁶¹ Even Rimstead’s analysis, unusual in its direct treatment of poverty, privileges the specific realm of women’s writing about the poor, as if the subject of poverty can only become visible when combined with a nonsocioeconomic category such as gender.

Cora Kaplan has described the recent critical interest in gender, race, and ethnicity as a productive, nonreductive recontextualizing of class. There are definite ways in which this composite style of analysis has sharpened the focus on poverty. The historian Mark Pittenger’s compelling essay on Progressive Era cross-class representation, for example, demonstrates how the categories of class, race, and culture conspired in popular and academic writing to produce an ambivalent view of the poor as more vital and alive on the one hand, yet a revolting, degenerate threat to civilized order on the other.⁶² More typical, though, is the tendency for composite analyses to overwhelm the socioeconomic, and particularly the cate-

gory of socioeconomic *need*, even as they seek to raise the prominence of class. We have already seen how Trask's attempt to merge class studies and sexuality studies shifts economic relations into erotic instability and bodily desire. The scholarly interest in female domesticity, as Dimock and Gilmore have pointed out, likewise makes class present only as it is negotiated and determined by an implicitly bourgeois power of gender.⁶³ I will offer two brief examples of this broader trend: Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor and Desire* (1991), which uncovers a neglected tradition of radical writing by women in the 1930s, and Cora Kaplan's own special issue of *PMLA*, "Rereading Class" (2000).

According to Rabinowitz, a focus on the effects of hunger on the body—or rather, a focus on the virile masculine transcendence of that hunger—is central to conventional proletarian literature and criticism, helping to shape a radical class consciousness that has repressed gender as a political category. The concept of economic lack becomes explicitly male, and is thus naturally displaced from a study that prioritizes femaleness as mobilized desire and bodily plentitude. Rather than balancing gender and class as "mutually sustaining discourses," Rabinowitz discovers the difference of female writing in its argument that embodied sexuality, not economic relations, determines history.⁶⁴ She thus suppresses the concern with female bodies among male proletarians such as Michael Gold and Jack Conroy, and she downplays the way female writers, such as Meridel Le Sueur, stress the universally destructive power of poverty and hunger on the bodies and minds of both the male and the female poor.⁶⁵ Kaplan's *PMLA* issue, on the other hand, maintains diverse perspectives on class, with essays by Peter Hitchcock and Cynthia Ward offering different ways to theorize the sensate substance of class as a lived socioeconomic experience.⁶⁶ The two essays in this issue that treat mainstream works of American literature, however, return to remarkably similar and predictable arguments. Eric Schocket bases his reading of Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861) on the assumption that Davis's era was unable to account for class segmentation in terms of class itself, for it supposedly lacked an adequate language to talk about economic exploitation. Hence Davis turns to racial discourse to explain the dependency of the working class, yet she is most interested, argues Schocket, in freeing her workers from the deterministic markers of blackness by establishing the unimpeachable agency, potentiality, and privilege of pure whiteness. Jennie Kassanoff's reading of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) similarly argues for a concealed meaning in Wharton's novel that is less class based than racial. Far from a victim of her social environment, Lily Bart allegedly represents Wharton's racial ideal, an absolute, immutable, Anglo-Saxon whiteness—an essentialist answer to the cultural vulnerabilities of class and gender. Questionably taking the racial part for the whole, both of these essays displace class almost wholly into racial questions of whiteness.⁶⁷

Schocket and Kassanoff illustrate the degree to which class studies has come

to share in the efforts of whiteness studies to decenter an “unraced” white norm.⁶⁸ Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz’s edited volume, *White Trash* (1997), may contain essays that stress how whites also suffer from poverty, thus bringing to the fore class lines that cut across racial identities. Yet the book’s introduction clearly reveals the controlling motive of the project: to show how whites (or at least, poor whites) can be considered a racial minority too, and thus be included in a racially based multiculturalism. The isolation of “white trash” as an analytic category has privileged racial associations over the socioeconomic dynamics of class marginalization. Studies of the working classes can similarly verge on giving race an enabling priority in its capacity to generate class sensibility. Eric Lott’s brilliant *Love and Theft* (1993), for example, argues that the racial transgressions of blackface minstrelsy “made possible the formation of a self-consciously white working class,” with race actively signifying a class-conscious public sphere. Just as gender can overwhelm class and entirely displace poverty in a feminist analysis such as Rabinowitz’s *Labor and Desire*, so too does class consciousness become a function of racial ideology rather than of economic forces in Lott’s work. Downplayed in Lott’s account of the making of the American working class are the “pressures from below” identified by the labor historian Jonathan Glickstein—the pressures of increasing relative poverty, and of the perceived threat to socioeconomic well-being posed by “various groups of low-status ‘others.’”⁶⁹ If the affirmative strain within class studies has emphasized political agency instead of the trauma of poverty, and if the deconstructive theory of class has stressed uncertainty instead of the concrete limitations of need, then the composite kind of class analysis returns us full circle to the forces that have always acted to unsettle socioeconomic awareness of the lower classes—the forces that work to emphasize, above all else, the cultural categories of race and gender.

There is a powerful need for a specific and complex analysis of poverty within the discussion of social class in studies of American literature. Yet the neglect of poverty as a critical keyword cannot be laid entirely at the doorstep of recent critical trends. This categorical blind spot may have deeper causes that lie in the very effort to view “the poor” as an analyzable social group that remains partially distinct from the working class. The problem here is not that poverty has been refused the special attention it needs, even within discourses of class, but that it has already been subject to a wealth of cultural analysis that, ironically, has placed it culturally off limits. I refer here to the “culture of poverty” thesis that developed with the emergence of poverty as a political issue in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962) stressed poverty as “a way of life,” a type of personality, a “fatal, futile universe, an America within America with a twisted spirit.” In his contemporaneous studies of Mexican and Puerto Rican communities, Oscar Lewis argued that the chronically poor develop a unique subculture,

beyond regional, racial, and national distinctions, a way of life that inspires a system of values and behavioral patterns—some positive but many pathological in kind—passed on from generation to generation. Similar beliefs have a long history in American social and political thought, returning to nineteenth-century theories of chronic, character-based “pauperism” and to the moral distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor.⁷⁰ Such ideas gained theoretical definition among mid-twentieth-century leftists and liberals who attempted to grapple with the elusive nonmaterial results of economic situations, and to expose poverty as a crisis in need of urgent political action.⁷¹ Recent scholars have emphasized how Lewis’s ideas were clearly within a Marxist tradition that traced the origins of the culture of poverty to the mode of capitalist production, especially its power to destroy traditional community structures.⁷² Whatever the merits of Lewis’s original thesis, it has clearly been co-opted by other agendas, with a cultural concept that Lewis applied to a minority of the poor—and, indeed, de-emphasized in a U.S. context—being applied much more broadly.⁷³ Crucial to Lewis’s thesis was the belief that the culture of poverty can gain an *autonomy* from its economic causes, and thus become much more difficult to cure than material need itself.

To say that the poor possess a self-perpetuating culture is to imply that poverty is not fundamentally a product of economic and political forces, thus making the poor seem morally culpable for their financial status. As Michael Katz suggests, cultural explanations of poverty place moral blame on the poor by emphasizing their passivity and disorganization, effectively rationalizing schemes to limit welfare and other forms of economic redistribution.⁷⁴ Ironically, the very category that seems to resist arguments that it can be deconstructed as a mere attitude or socially constructed belief also reveals the ease with which it can register such invidious forces of identity imposition, particularly when cultural patterns are seen not as a response to but as an active cause of socioeconomic situations.⁷⁵ There is thus a marked difference between a cultural approach to poverty and a cultural approach to race and ethnicity. Criticism has been directed recently at the idealistic treatment of culture in a certain type of multiculturalist thought—culture as an autonomous and collective domain abstracted from its socioeconomic contexts.⁷⁶ If the debate concerns the socioeconomic specifically, then the recourse to culture becomes more questionable still, more of an obvious distraction from the social and political roots of domination and exploitation. And if the cultural context becomes problematic in this way then we are left with a void, at least from the perspective of literary criticism that has become so culturally concerned.

Sociological theories of poverty may be missing, to some extent, from literary studies. Yet social theory is also haunted by the cultural determinism it developed not so long ago, one that continues to taint poverty as a category because this determinism has stayed alive in legislative debates and in popular ideologies. How do we isolate poverty while resisting the pitfalls of that isolation, namely a rigid

definition of “the poor” as a class in themselves, and a treatment of poverty as something like an ethnic affiliation with a transhistorical integrity that is tangled in alleged cultural and psychological pathology? (The idea of an “underclass” is similarly controversial in suggesting the unreachability and permanence of the poor, who are made to appear outside of politics and social structure altogether.)⁷⁷ Defining the poor as a powerless mass in which individual agency has collapsed tends to cement a class hegemony that—unlike similar impositions of gender or racial identity—allows little room for a countering affirmation by the victimized group itself. To paraphrase Katz, dangers emerge from any reduction of the poor to islands of despair and isolation, unable to surmount environmental forces and disconnected from the working class as a whole.⁷⁸

Knowledge of how the category of poverty has been used and abused historically, returns us to the rationale behind the poststructuralist decentering of a determinism within class analysis. Yet if our concern lies with the significant numbers of people who have lived in conditions of relatively painful material deprivation and restricted social resources throughout U.S. history, then it remains essential to retain a definition of poverty, however complex and contentious it may be, rather than theorizing it into inconsistency and ambivalence. Substantial questions emerge if we see poverty both from a linguistic-ideological perspective and from a socially referential perspective, as a category that has always suffered from attempts to root its causes in cultural pathology and moral failure, or from attempts to dismiss it as the register of such oppressive usage. The term *poverty* may seem particularly ripe for deconstruction but we need at least to address the stakes of arguments that implicitly deprive it of shape altogether, especially if the understanding and redressing of material inequities are pressing concerns. Despite an engagement of social theory with poststructuralist ideas, the reigning sociological tendency is to treat poverty not as an unstable construct but as a quantifiable term for complex social forces, an analyzable condition defined by a network of shifting factors such as income level, unemployment, homelessness, hunger, and access to educational and health-care facilities.⁷⁹ Its significance always relative within a context of economic inequality, poverty has usefully described a dynamic, contextual, and flexible social state that people move into and out of from many positions.⁸⁰ It is a term whose definitional difficulties never outweigh the consequences of abandoning it altogether.⁸¹

There is a strong need for a critical language that can recognize the links between *and* the separation of poverty and class. According to census data, poverty affects large numbers of the working class: no inverse relation links work and want.⁸² Poverty is not inevitably associated with a single, lower-class group, however, but is cross-class in nature—a condition that can affect individuals from all walks of life.⁸³ To some extent, poverty is not the problem of a marginalized underclass but a widely experienced condition, not just for the nation’s legion of low-paid workers

but even for suburban couples who seem to embody middle-class values.⁸⁴ And there are aspects of poverty, as a category, that move it partly beyond a conventional class structure altogether. The clearest example here is the relationship between poverty and race. On the one hand, poverty is far from an exclusively non-white problem. In relative terms, African Americans and nonwhite Hispanics are much more likely than whites to become poor, and much less likely to transition out of poverty, yet in absolute terms most poor Americans are white.⁸⁵ A number of prominent sociologists have used such evidence to criticize cultural perspectives that deflect attention from the truly significant socioeconomic and political causes of want. An extreme position holds that the focus on race in particular has acted to divide and pacify the working class, thus delegitimizing poverty as a political question.⁸⁶ But mainstream considerations of social disadvantage and exclusion in the United States have always been so culturally based in part because poverty rates *do* correspond to conventional categories of cultural identity. The fact that poverty disproportionately affects African Americans, Hispanics, and—increasingly—women, shows how socioeconomic forces have gone hand in hand with structures of racism and sexism throughout American history. The critique of American exceptionalism should teach us to be wary of claims that the United States differs from comparable countries in its failure to attach poverty so explicitly to issues of an industrialized working class. But we need to appreciate, as well, the pressures that have always existed here to unhouse poverty from a purely structural class perspective, and to associate it strongly with groups who seem to be marginalized primarily on grounds of their cultural identities.⁸⁷

We have arrived at a more politicized restatement of the dialectical challenge of poverty—in this case the challenge of developing a critical language capable of recognizing both the cultural (racial, ethnic, gendered) and the socioeconomic (class) dynamics of the category. Many of the challenges of this approach stem from the difficulty of extricating poverty, as a category of literary and social discourse, from competing and traditionally overwhelming categories, such as race and class. *American Hungers* attempts to hold on to a definition of poverty, founded in material disadvantage, without slipping into the parallel, if more nebulous, discourse of personal failure, which Martha Banta describes as the imagination of frustration beyond the “facts of material achievement and tangible social position.” We strive to see the category of poverty explicitly, in its own light, and not simply as the negative state that highlights the frustrations and paradoxes of an American ideology of success.⁸⁸ The nonmaterial questions of “spiritual poverty” and “voluntary simplicity”—often associated with the middle classes—are engaged without losing sight of the privileged relation between poverty and the economically neediest. And we attempt to understand the psychological and cultural experience of socioeconomic suffering—what Ehrenreich has eloquently described as a “repetitive injury of the spirit”—without slipping into cultural causal-

ity.⁸⁹ Perhaps the greatest challenge of all is to recognize the aesthetic dimension of poverty, the complex ways that it has catalyzed the forms and content of literary expression, without merely dismissing this aesthetic as an act of internal “colonization” or as a repressive, bourgeois appropriation of the poor—a justifiable anxiety that emerged with early Marxist intellectuals and has been a persistent concern of critics on the Left.⁹⁰ Writing about the poor always has the potential for a troubling power dynamic in which states of structural inferiority and social barriers that threaten literacy are brought, ironically, into the literary sphere. Writing in the 1890s, William Dean Howells noted how the virtual institution of inequality in a nation “that means equality if it means anything” causes a crisis of literary representation whereby poverty seems unreal, or is distanced by a recourse to the picturesque that treats with callous indifference the ruin and misery of the poor.⁹¹ The writers who interest us here are not those who practiced uncritically such modes of “neutralizing the disinherited” but those who confronted head-on the tensions involved in producing discursive richness from analyses of poorness, particularly within an American cultural and political context.⁹²

We have seen some of the problems that make poverty such a difficult topic from the perspective of literary theory, the problems of affirming poverty as a cultural identity, and of breaking it down as something more than socioeconomic, something cultural and hence unstable. Opposing tendencies—to view culture affirmatively on the one hand, and to undermine apparently hegemonic social categories on the other—may have combined to hinder analysis of literature as a forum in which poverty can be investigated as a social and historical problem that demands critical definition. I hope to demonstrate how the very forces that seem to remove poverty from the realm of viable literary criticism actually brought into being a materially concerned, polemical mode of discourse with rich potential for literary study and cultural theory, and with equal relevance to the history of social thought by illuminating the contentious cultural and psychological dynamics of poverty easily overlooked in structural sociology. Poverty possesses this potential precisely because it has provoked a self-conscious struggle with the political, intellectual, and cultural problems surrounding its acceptance as an integral social condition and as a subject of literary representation. Rather than challenging poststructuralist interpretations of identity, in other words, poverty provokes epistemological and ideological dilemmas of its own.

