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The Broken Hermeneutics of American Poverty

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Abstract

There is a paradox at the center of twenty-first century American poverty. On the one hand, American poverty seems to have become an object of significant interest (at least to scholars and to the reading public)—as evidenced through the surge of wildly successful non-fiction books about poverty. On the other hand, American poverty, as a conceptual object in and of itself, seems to have fractured to the extent that its parameters and content are no longer clear. In response to this paradox, my dissertation examines how poverty, once a powerful means for first understanding and then mitigating social and economic inequality, has become confined to a descriptive register and is unable to ground interpretive explanations about the plight and suffering of those Americans living on the bottom socioeconomic rungs today.

Through an analysis of recent ethnographies that aim to describe and explain American poverty, I make three interconnected arguments. First, I argue that, through a rhetoric of deferral, vivid and gripping descriptions of poverty and the poor obscure socio-historical explanations of why poverty continues to exist amid so much American prosperity. This deferral is important because it reinforces the illusion that, in the absence of convincing and rigorous explanation, poverty is a one-dimensional problem. Second, I argue that a sentimental idiom and a narrative focus on emotional and psychological interiority turn poverty from a societal problem into an individual problem. While the sentimental idiom facilitates sympathy, it becomes very difficult to understand poverty in anything other than limited individualistic terms. Third, I argue that the emergence of the American affluent society in the twentieth century shifted the foundations on which poverty, inequality, and the divisions between rich and poor and between elites and non-

elites are understood. Together, these three arguments show the shape of poverty's broken hermeneutics, whose main consequence is the seamless reconciliation of the acceleration of American affluence with the intensification of American inequality.

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Introduction

On November 9th, 2016, a day after Donald Trump won the presidential election, the *New York Times* published an article titled "6 Books to Help Understand Trump's Win."[1] Four of the books came as no surprise. George Packer's *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* (2013), Thomas Frank's *Listen, Liberal: Or, Whatever Happened to the Party of the People* (2016), John B. Judis's *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (2016), and Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016) all examine the declining health of American democracy or some facet of intensifying political or ideological polarization. These books explain Trump's shocking upset by revealing how America's democracy was already ailing and by showing how the fractures between liberals and conservatives, between Democrats and Republicans, had become an impassable chasm. In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, for example, Hochschild is perplexed by mounting hostilities between Republicans and Democrats. A member of "the liberal left camp," she leaves her home in Berkeley, California, and travels to rural Louisiana in an effort to better understand the lives, experiences, and feelings of those on the right. Hochschild sets out to overcome the "empathy wall" that currently divides one side from the other and makes direct communication, let alone deep understanding and empathy,

1. "6 Books to Help Understand Trump's Win," *New York Times*, November 6, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/books/6-books-to-help-understand-trumps-win.html.

difficult.[2] In this context, the shock of Trump's victory boils down to miscalculations and misrecognitions; to the extent that the liberal political establishment failed to apprehend the depth and breadth of the country's ideological polarization. In the same vein, *The Unwinding*, *Listen Liberal*, and *The Populist Explosion* all sought to warn a shared liberal audience about the looming dangers of escalating inequalities, perceived cultural marginalization, and democratic degeneration.

The two other books in the *New York Times'* reading list suggest a different kind of explanation. Rather than foreground ideological polarization or democratic process, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016) by J.D. Vance and *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2016) by Nancy Isenberg focus on something else. At first glance, that something else is white poverty. Isenberg, a historian by training, traces four hundred years of prejudiced representations of poor white people in order to debunk the

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2. Hochschild states the following:

> An empathy wall is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances. In a period of political tumult, we grasp for quick certainties. We shoehorn new information into ways we already think. We settle for knowing our opposite numbers from outside. But is it possible, without changing our beliefs, to know others from the inside, to see reality through their eyes, to understand the links between life, feeling, and politics; that is, to cross the empathy wall? I thought it was.

Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 5.

resilient fantasy that the United States somehow represents a class-less society that gives equal voice to all its citizens.[3]

In *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance, a Yale Law School graduate, venture capitalist, and memoirist, tells the story of growing up a poor Scots-Irish hillbilly in Middletown, Ohio.[4] *White Trash* sheds light on a long history of how poor white Americans have been represented and *Hillbilly Elegy* offers a glimpse of a modern poor white American family. Neither book directly explains Trump's election. However, in concert with the other books on the list, they do suggest an indirect explanation. Namely, that the anger and resentment of white Americans on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, legitimate or not, fuels political polarization and may even exacerbate democratic deterioration. This logic would seem to be the grounds on which the *New York Times* included Vance and Isenberg alongside authors more directly concerned with political institutions, processes, and fissures.

Far from providing a coherent vision of white American poverty that might become the basis for an explanation of the entrenched divisions that shape our social and political present, both *Hillbilly Elegy* and *White Trash* defer basic questions about what constitutes poverty and who is poor. Vance accomplishes this deferral by foregrounding vivid, chaotic, and sensational descriptions of his extended family and community—transparent synecdoches, he presumes, for

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3. Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2016), 310.

4. J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper, 2016), 1–4.

the broader culture of Greater Appalachian hillbillies. Isenberg defers these questions by focusing on mostly cruel historical representations of poor white Americans. Although poor Americans have a rich history of representation that varies by place and time, Isenberg assumes that the poor make up a self-evident and ahistorical category:

> The white poor have been with us in various guises, as the names they have been given across centuries can attest: Waste people. Offscourings. Lubbers. Bogtrotters. Rascals. Rubbish. Squatters. Crackers. Clay-eaters. Tackies. Mudsills. Scalawags. Briar hoppers. Hillbillies. Low downers. White niggers. Degenerates. White trash. Rednecks. Trailer trash. Swamp people… We think of the left-behind groups as extinct, and the present as a time of advanced thought and sensibility. But today's trailer trash are merely yesterday's vagrants on wheels, an updated version of Okies in jalopies and Florida crackers in their carts. They are renamed often, but they do not disappear.[5]

For Isenberg, the labels may change but the object they denigrate does not. The white American poor have always been and will always be with us. Rather than examine what constitutes white poverty in any given conjuncture, Isenberg assumes a consistency where there is good reason to believe none exists. Are the poor white people living in the United States today in essence the same as the poor white people of the nineteenth or even eighteenth centuries? Are the problems facing the least wealthy quintile of the American population the same today as they were two hundred years ago? Or, for that matter, the problems facing the second lowest quintile? Is their only salient and defining feature their consistent relative poverty? While it is certain that some aspects of the lives of some poor white Americans alive today resemble the lives of poor white Americans from previous eras, many aspects do not. Grounded in this history of representation, Isenberg's analysis can only shed limited light on what constitutes American poverty today.

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5. Isenberg, *White Trash*, 320.

Vance and Isenberg are not the only recent highly visible authors to write about the American poor—in popular, award winning books—while deferring basic questions of poverty. Among many other recent examples, Matthew Desmond won the 2017 *Pulitzer* in general non-fiction (as well as many other awards) for his ethnography, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (2016), which examines low-income housing in and around Milwaukee. Amy Goldstein's exposé *Janesville: An American Story* (2017), which describes the half-decade following the permanent closure of Janesville, Wisconsin's car assembly plant, received the 2017 Financial Times and McKinsey Business Book of the Year Award. In 2018, the American Booksellers Association named Tara Westover's *Educated: A Memoir* (2018)—an account of growing up with survivalist parents in rural Idaho and the costs of education—book of the year. Also in 2018, Sarah Smarsh's *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke* (2018) was a *New York Times* best seller and a National Book Award finalist (the same distinctions *Strangers in Their Own Land* earned two years before). All these books treat their stories and subjects with great care and attention. All assume, in different ways, that the conditions and lives they describe are in some sense impoverished—economic strain and the language of poverty saturate each text. All promise, at least implicitly, to improve our understanding of the problem of poverty. And yet all prioritize the dramatic narratives of individual successes and failures, colorful depictions of memorable people, and the representation of sensational singular conditions over interpretive explanations about what constitutes poverty today.

The descriptions do not align with the explanations. The very force of the descriptions—especially colorful portraits and spectacular scenes of chaos, dysfunction, and despair—continually defer and obscure an explanatory account of the shape and substance of the general

state of American poverty, an avowed object of these studies. Within this recently flourishing sub-genre of acclaimed non-fiction trade books about American poverty, this textual feature can be characterized as a rhetoric of deferral; basic questions about the definition and boundaries of poverty are not only unanswered, but largely unasked. As the anger, discontentment, and resentment among poor white Americans becomes an increasingly critical part of understanding present day social ruptures, and with the intuition that twenty-first century poverty in America will continue to evade explanation, it strikes me as odd that these prominent and popular books take the concept for granted.

The original inspiration for my dissertation was the paradox of American poverty's fate in the twenty-first century: on the one hand, American poverty seems to have become an object of significant interest (at least to scholars and to the reading public)—as evidenced through the surge of wildly successful non-fiction books about poverty—but on the other hand, American poverty, as a conceptual object in and of itself, seems to have fractured to the extent that its parameters and content are no longer clear. In response to this paradox, my dissertation examines how poverty, once a powerful means for first understanding and then mitigating social and economic inequality, has become confined to a descriptive register and is unable to ground interpretive explanations about the plight and suffering of those Americans living on the bottom socioeconomic rungs today.

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because it reinforces the illusion that, in the absence of convincing and rigorous explanation, poverty is a one-dimensional problem. Second, I argue that a sentimental idiom and a narrative focus on emotional and psychological interiority turn poverty from a societal problem into an individual problem. While the sentimental idiom facilitates sympathy, it becomes very difficult to understand poverty in anything other than limited individualistic terms. Third, I argue that the emergence of the American affluent society in the twentieth century shifted the foundations on which poverty, inequality, and the divisions between rich and poor and between elites and non-elites are understood.

Studying Poverty

In the humanities and social sciences, different disciplines and fields identify and understand poverty in different ways. In some cases, the study of poverty is an enduring disciplinary concern, while in others, it is peripheral. The disciplines that address poverty most directly—economics, history, sociology, anthropology, and rhetoric—employ different approaches but claim to share a commitment to the larger social project of alleviating or eradicating poverty.[6] Each of these disciplines houses a wide literature on poverty. As a matter of

6. Literary depictions of poverty inform all these modes of analysis. Canonical examples such as Oliver Twist, Jean Valjean, Little Dorrit, the characters who populate Zora Neale Hurston's novels, the Joads, and Richard Wright's semi-autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945) all contributed to a literary imaginary of what poverty is that shapes the assumptions scholars bring to their projects. But the study of literature itself largely confines itself to the realm of discourse

necessity, I have limited my scope by focusing on those approaches that tend to appear in projects with an avowed interest in basic questions about poverty's shape and meaning. Any given approach is not the exclusive domain of the discipline with which I have associated it—sociologists often come to poverty through an anthropological lens, economists often come to it through a sociological lens, and rhetorical scholars tend to come to it through a historical lens. Since scholars see poverty in more than one way, these approaches overlap and intersect within any given analysis. Still, these five disciplines each have distinct ways of constituting American poverty as an object of analysis.

The Economic Lens

Economics might be responsible for the most recognizable method: the poverty line. The promise of the poverty line—or poverty threshold—is to offer a fast and standardized means of distinguishing the poor from the non-poor. The present-day poverty line in the United States is based on a calculation devised by Social Security Commission analyst, Mollie Orshansky, in the early 1960s.[7] To arrive at the poverty line, Orshansky's method involved calculating the basic

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and language, as Gavin Jones points out in *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature 1840-1945* (2007), it and routinely fails to engage with the social and economic issues that underpin literary representations of the poor.

7. For a brief history of the development of the poverty line, see Gordon M. Fisher, "The Development and History of the Poverty Thresholds," *Social Security Bulletin* 55, no. 4 (1992): 12. For an account of Orshansky's own fascinating investments, see Alice O'Connor, *Poverty*

costs of feeding different kinds of families and then multiplying that cost by three to cover all other expenses (housings, healthcare, clothing, etc.).[8] Any total family income that falls below three times their basic food costs would be considered poor and any total family income that falls above would not. The modern poverty threshold is simply Orshansky's original 1963 calculations, adjusted for inflation.[9]

Faced with the complexity of endless variability in individual and collective needs and wants, the poverty line is a crude tool for identifying the poor and defining poverty. In 1963 as well as 2019, life right above the poverty line closely resembled life immediately below it. Orshansky herself grasped the essential compromise that the poverty line represented:

> In many parts of the world, the overriding concern for a majority of the populace every day is still "Can I live?" For the United States as a society, it is no longer whether but how. Although by the levels of living prevailing elsewhere, some of the poor in this country might be well-to-do, no one here today would settle for mere subsistence as the just due for himself or his neighbor, and even the poorest may claim more than bread. Yet as yesterday's luxuries become tomorrow's necessities, who can define for today how much is enough? And in a society that equates economic well-being with earnings, what is the floor for those whose earning capacity is limited or absent altogether, as it is for aged persons and children?[10]

Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 182–85.

8. Mollie Orshansky, "Counting the Poor: Another Look at the Poverty Profile," *Social Security Bulletin* 28, no. 1 (1965): 3–29.

9. In Orshansky's calculation, the poverty threshold for a family of four in 1963 was around $3,100. In 2019, for a two-child, two-parent family, it was $25,926.

10. Orshansky, "Counting the Poor," 5.

Orshansky understood that when the majority of any national population stops asking "can I live" and starts asking "how can I live," the question of how much is enough becomes intractable.[11] That Orshansky harbored this skepticism while also understanding the need to count the poor, suggests that the poverty line is a permissive compromise. The blunt standard dismisses vital differences between essential needs and wants but, at the same time, transforms the poorest into a coherent group, making their suffering intelligible. The poverty line sacrifices a careful evaluation of differing needs and circumstances in favor of a practical measurement. This basic process repeats not only in other economic accounts of the scale of poverty in the United States but also, and especially, in accounts of global poverty.[12]

The Historical Lens

Historians have been responsible for some of the most reflective writing on the contingency of the concept of poverty. The two giants of historically rooted analyses of poverty remain Gertrude Himmelfarb, whose influential 1984 book *The Idea of Poverty* and its sequel *Poverty and Compassion* (1992) describe changing conceptions of English poverty from the

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11. Here, Orshansky is identifying the problem of understanding poverty within the context of an affluent society. I examine this problem in detail in Chapter 2.

12. The economic lens is especially prevalent in Development Economics where absolute measures of extreme poverty abound. See Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Growing the World's Wealth in an Age of Extremes* (2005) and Abhijit V. Banerjee, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (2012).

early years of industrialization to the end of the Victorian era, and E. P. Thompson, whose book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) traces the formation of working class consciousness among English artisans and laborers at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Of the two authors, Himmelfarb is the more explicitly focused on poverty as a conceptual object but neither author defers questions of what constitutes poverty; both explore the problematic in detail. While these works speak to American poverty in interesting ways, they are carefully and deeply committed to their historical specificity. And the extent to which their analyses and conclusions might be reasonably applied to the shape and problem of twenty-first century poverty in America is an open question.

Less rigidly situated historians have also approached the study of poverty with a great deal of care and sophistication.[13] In her incisive and excellent *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History* (2001), Alice O'Connor shows how public policy that was intended to alleviate or eradicate poverty came to dismiss political economy and capitalism in favor of "knowledge about the characteristics and behavior

13. Another central historian of modern poverty is Michael Katz. In two books, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (1986) and *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (1989), Katz historicizes the loaded distinction between deserving and undeserving poor. In both cases, Katz understands poverty as primarily an administrative category, his interest lies in the political and ideological nature of the deserving-undeserving distinction more than in the contingent contours of what it means to be poor.

and, especially in recent years, the welfare status of the poor."[14] O'Connor implicates liberal social science in the neoliberalization of this "poverty knowledge" and ultimately argues that, bearing in mind its always ideological nature, we must reconstruct how we think about poverty with a focus on structures and institutions, not on individual causes and cures. Nearly two decades old, O'Connor's critique still resonates. If anything, the explanatory pendulum has swung even further toward understanding poverty as rooted in individual behavior, character, and choice. She calls for a rejuvenated class analysis through which the collective exploitation of the poor and working classes can again become legible. While I remain deeply sympathetic to O'Connor's ideological position, her commitment to exposing the history and present of poverty knowledge's rotten core also, perhaps necessarily, assumes a degree of homogeneity among the misrepresented poor that may no longer exist. This presumed homogeneity in the face of vastly different expressions of inequality may, in fact, be one of the reasons that neoliberalism's individualizing grip on poverty discourse has become so secure.

The Sociological Lens

Since the turn of the twentieth century, sociologists have sought to identify and understand poverty through a balance of historical, statistical, and observational data. From at least the end of the nineteenth century, sociological accounts of the poor promised a new degree of comprehensiveness built on broad surveys and representative examples. While not exclusively

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14. Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in the Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

concerned with poverty, W.E.B. DuBois's *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) aimed to decipher the "peculiar social problems affecting the Negro people" in Philadelphia.[15] To this end, he conducted an intensive house-by-house canvas of the Seventh Ward, home to nine thousand of the city's forty thousand "Negroes,"[16] and then verified his findings against more general observations taken in other parts of the city. When discussing the poorest of his subjects, DuBois grounded his account in statistical data and used historical context and individual examples as explanations. Based on his surveys and available records, DuBois estimated that nine percent of his research subjects in the Seventh Ward were "very poor"—that is, required some measure of public assistance to survive. To explain this poverty, he turns first to socio-historical context. "Emancipation and pauperism," he writes, "must ever go hand in hand; when a group of persons have been for generations prohibited from self-support, and self-initiative in any line, there is bound to be a large number of them who, when thrown upon their own resources, will be found incapable of competing in the race of life."[17] In other words, the poverty he sees in the Seventh

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15. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (New York: Shocken Books, 1967), 5.

16. Sensitive to the politics behind categorizing a diverse group under an easy label, DuBois writes: "I shall throughout this study use the term 'Negro,' to designate all persons of Negro descent, although the appellation is to some extent illogical. I shall, moreover, capitalize the word, because I believe that eight million Americans are entitled to a capital letter" (DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 1).

17. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 269.

Ward, at least in so far as it differs from rates of white poverty, is the understandable result of centuries of slavery. While DuBois invokes this history as part of his explanation of poverty in the Seventh Ward, he does not dwell on it.

The second way DuBois explained the poverty he saw was through observation. After citing the rate of poverty among his research subjects in the Seventh Ward (nine percent), he summarizes what he takes to be the causes:

> From as careful a consideration of these cases as the necessarily meagre information of records and visitors permit, it seems fair to say that Negro poverty in the Seventh Ward was, in these cases, caused as follows:
>
> By sickness and misfortune .....40 per cent.
> By lack of steady employment .....30 "
> By laziness, improvidence and intemperate drink ....20 "
> By crime .....10 "[18]

The evidence for some of these conclusions comes from the self-reported data DuBois collected in his surveys.[19] None of the surveys, however, included direct questions about laziness or improvidence. To arrive at those suppositions, DuBois combined survey data with his own observations. In the text, he provides a glimpse of these observations through terse, descriptive summaries of twenty-five of the poor families he surveyed. Despite their brevity, most of the summaries defy simple categorization. For example: "No. 17.—Ivy street. A family of four; husband was a stevedore, but is sick with asthma, and wife out of work; decent but improvident."

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18. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 275.

19. Particularly from "Family Schedule, 1" and "Individual Schedule, 2." See "Appendix A," in DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 400–10.

DuBois assumes that his summaries translate directly into his conclusions about the causes underlying poverty in the Seventh Award. But, under closer scrutiny, the causal chain comes undone in two ways. First, the family on Ivy Street could be poor for any number of reasons—sickness and misfortune, lack of steady employment, improvidence, or something else entirely. In the distance between summary and conclusion, between statistical certainty and explanation, poverty's complexity disappears. Second, the causes DuBois draws out of his surveys and observations are cut off from more historical and systemic explanations of poverty. The history of slavery might affect the causes of poverty in the Seventh Ward, but DuBois does not follow his analysis past his first set of conclusions. The end result is that, beyond their relationship with his statistical evidence, the causes of poverty that DuBois lists are unsatisfying. Is chronic employment the result of discriminatory hiring or the state of the economy? Are the laziness, improvidence, and intemperance he observes among his research subjects different or more frequent than in the larger population? If so, why? And, to what extent are their illnesses and injuries a consequence of the limited living and working conditions available to the very poor?

I am not posing the above questions in an attempt to undermine DuBois's analysis or to suggest that *The Philadelphia Negro* is anything other than a monumental scholarly achievement—all the more remarkable in the context of the seemingly impossible circumstances in which it was researched and written—but to foreground a tendency in how sociologists identify and understand the poor. Namely, by assuming a quantitative certainty and then explaining it with different kinds of qualitative evidence—historical and observational, in the case of DuBois, but also, frequently, ethnographic. DuBois, and many of the sociologists who

came after, defer the analytical problems of poverty's divergent causes and conditions by accepting a simplified category of the poor and then remaining within that frame even when their evidence reveals its basic limitations. From *The Philadelphia Negro*, through different incarnations of the Chicago School of Sociology,[20] and into more recent examples, this process of selective translation is legible across sociological accounts of the American poor in the twenty-first century.[21]

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20. The researchers belonging to the first Chicago School are considered pioneers of urban sociology for their in-depth analyses of different facets of life in Chicago. Though by no means its only interest, poverty and the poor constitute a major theme in many Chicago School texts. Two examples, from opposite ends of the first Chicago School's heyday, that grapple with the problem of working within a predetermined categorical understanding of their objects are Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* (1923), a chronicle of the lives of the homeless itinerant workers who pass through Chicago, and, in the twilight of the first Chicago School, William Foote Whyte's *Streetcorner Society* (1943), in which he pioneered participant observation to study the social lives of a community of poor white working class Bostonians. In different ways and to varying degrees, both works depend on a top-down analysis where the complexities and contradictions that emerge in the observational, ethnographic, and historical data remain largely under-analyzed.

21. Chapter 4 is dedicated to an analysis of recent examples in the tradition of sociological analysis of the poor.

The Anthropological Lens

Where the sociological approach to understanding and identifying the poor hinges on the relationship between qualitative descriptions of the poor and the quantitative categorization of poverty, the anthropological approach starts with particular observations about individual people, families, and communities. In his influential 1973 essay, "Thick Description," Clifford Geertz defines the problem facing practitioners of social anthropology—typically ethnographers—as "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [the ethnographer] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render."[22] Since access to this complex of conceptual structures is through observing events, rituals, customs, and relationships, always encoded in signs, anthropological analysis, then, involves "sorting out the structures of signification… and determining their social ground and import."[23] The ethnographer starts with their observations and fieldnotes and then tries to make sense of the data before them by understanding any and all relevant social context. Where the study of poverty is concerned, this mode of analysis can offer complex and nuanced accounts of discrete groups of people. Anthropological analysis flourishes at the level of situated thick description, but it struggles to describe larger social bodies.

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22. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10.

23. Geertz, "Thick Description," 9.

The way that anthropological analysis arrives at more general conceptions of poverty and the poor is by extrapolating from thick descriptions based on observations and research notes. Ethnographers, however, differ on how far they are willing to extend a singular event into a typical example of a common experience or, even, a way of life representative of a broader culture. Some ethnographers mostly limit their analysis to the lives and experiences of those whom they directly observe. In this mode, poverty appears as a separate entity that affects the lives of the ethnographic subjects rather than as an object of inquiry or a self-conscious construction at the level of the text. Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (1967) and Carol B. Stack's *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (1974), foundational texts for modern anthropological ethnography and both masterful examples of participant observation, tend to approach poverty in this way, making only tentative and qualified claims about the generalizability of the dynamics they observe.

Other ethnographers extend their analysis further and imagine their observations as representative of a larger, though still tightly defined, group. Helped along by a Marxist sensibility, Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977) examines the English working class through his observations of the lives of "twelve non-academic working class lads" attending a "boys only, non-selective secondary modern school" in a predominantly working-class town in central England.[24] Willis's ethnography is beautifully written, his analysis is rigorous, and his case that his lads' actions and relationships reveal more

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24. Paul E. Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 4–6.

general features of English working class culture in the 1970s is compelling. But *Learning to Labor* still exposes a daunting challenge for conceptions of poverty and the poor rooted in ethnographic anthropological knowledge. Willis defers a definition of the working class in order to focus on "working class culture." Because the status and identity of the working class in *Learning to Labor* is seemingly never in doubt, this deferral hardly registers. Since poverty today has become a far less assured category, the capacity of this kind of anthropological analysis to extrapolate general features from particular instances may be diminishing.

The Rhetorical Lens

If anthropologists come to the concept of poverty through observations of embodied actions and relationships, rhetorical scholars come to it through texts and discourses. The rhetorical analysis of poverty usually takes one of two forms: either it examines governing and dominant discourses, often focusing on the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, or it examines the usually historical textual and discursive traces of specific poor people or communities. Rhetorical studies scholarship primarily concerned with tracking the operation of governing and dominant discourses is, in turn, typically rooted in the analysis of government policy and presidential rhetoric.

In *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination* (2002), Robert Asen gives an account of modern poverty in America as a history of constitutive, contested binaries. He discusses how public opinion in Stuart-Tudor England divided the poor into two categories,

"sturdy beggars and rogues" on one hand, and the impotent and helpless poor on the other.[25] From the progressive era through the New Deal, he describes how reformers attempted to characterize the proud unemployed man, who wanted "'work' not 'welfare,'" as a worthy recipient of state aid (with the implication that this type of figure did not belong to the class of less virtuous poor, undeserving of the same assistance).[26] Asen's history of divisions culminates in his discussion of welfare's retrenchment era in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. He shows how the history of the divisions and contradictions internal to public poverty discourse informed and influenced debates about the future of American welfare policy. For Asen, the question is not who counts as poor, but about how the constitutive tensions of an already self-evident category transform across time and space.[27]

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25. Robert Asen, *Visions of Poverty Welfare Policy and Political Imagination* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 27–28.

26. Asen, *Visions of Poverty*, 64.

27. Very much in line with Asen's treatment of the dividing line between deserving and undeserving poor, David Zarefsky, Carol Miller-Tutzauer, and Frank E. Tutzauer explain how Ronald Reagan's strategic definitions of the "truly needy" allowed the line to be drawn and redrawn, and eventually led to massive cutbacks in assistance and programing for America's poor. David Zarefsky, Carol Miller-Tutzauer, and Frank E Tutzauer, "Reagan's Safety Net for the Truly Needy: The Rhetorical Uses of Definition," *Central States Speech Journal Central States Speech Journal* 35, no. 2 (1984): 113–19. For an excellent rhetorical analysis of poverty

Rhetorical studies scholarship concerned with specific poor people and communities often corrects established misrepresentations, complicates accepted narratives, or recuperates forgotten insights. In *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (2004), Cara Finnegan offers a complex portrayal of the rural poor during the Great Depression that disrupts reductive representations by attending to the difference, agency, and humanity of the individuals and groups portrayed in the FSA's famous photographs. As a historical reparative, other rhetorical studies scholars call attention to lost historical figures or under-represented groups. Of the former, Mari Boor Tonn offers a narrative portrait of the renowned labor activist Mother Jones to demonstrate the effective compatibility of confrontation and nurturing in labor organizing. And of the latter, Matthew May describes what he calls a "hobo orator union" to show how shared performance can build powerful affinity. In general, these approaches do not aim to analyze or explain poverty in any macro sense. While they often use their objects to create interesting and generative insights, the primary insights tend to be about something other than poverty.

Archive

The central problem of this dissertation arises out of a series of straight-forward questions: What is American poverty today? Who are the poor? How do they live and work? How does the United States marginalize its poor and render them invisible and inaudible? There

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with a greater focus on presidential rhetoric, see David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (1986).

is good evidence to suggest that a considerable portion of the American population continues to live under conditions of economic duress. According to the 2016 US Census, the lowest quintile of households shared a little over 3% of total money income (the highest quintile's share was a little over 51%) and some 12.7% of the population fell below the "poverty threshold," $12,228 for an adult living alone and $24,563 for a household of four.[28] The "Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2017" found that four in ten adults would either be unable to cover an unexpected $400 expense or they could only do so by selling something or borrowing the money.[29] Over 20% of adults "are not able to pay all of their current month's bills in full" and over a quarter of adults "skipped necessary medical care in 2017 due to being unable to afford the cost."[30] What these statistics tell us is that conditions of economic duress are widespread. And yet, across the wave of recent highly acclaimed and widely read books about American poverty cited above, qualitative interpretations about the shared experience of being poor (if there is such a shared experience) are not forthcoming. This dissertation examines why this is the case.

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28. U.S. Census Bureau, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2016," September 2017, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2017/demo/income-poverty/p60-259.html.

29. Federal Reserve Board, *Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2017*, May 2018, 2, https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2018-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2017-preface.htm.

30. Federal Reserve, *Report on the Economic Well-Being*, 2.

To study this problem, I have chosen to focus on the discourse formation where I first encountered it: recent ethnographies about the poor. Following James Clifford, my understanding of ethnography here is expansive. In his introduction to *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), Clifford defines the general practice as "simply diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation."[31] In this sense, poverty ethnographies cease to be the exclusive domain of academic anthropologists and sociologists. In so far as journalists, memoirists, and activists spend time with a culture that is not their own, adopt the perspective (consciously or not) of both participant and observer, and represent the culture through discourse by describing their observations and experiences, the texts they produce are ethnographic.

Because of the balance they strike between programmatic observation and literary imagination, poverty ethnographies provide a productive platform for tracing historical changes in how poverty is conceived and understood.[32] Perhaps the most vital pre-requisite for any ethnography is the identification of a group of people—a culture—bound together by some significant characteristic, often social, racial, or ethnic. The ethnographies that make up my

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31. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.

32. This kind of analysis is distinct from an analysis of things like policy, reports, and contracts. My focus on the more literary ethnographic imagination of poverty is to complement the excellent scholarship that has focused more closely on the historical record through these other objects.

archive begin with recent texts produced when participant observation comes together with a group of people primarily defined by their poverty.

To examine the present state of American poverty's hermeneutics, I trace its twentieth-century history before turning to three more recent books: Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's *Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope* (2020), and Stephanie Land's *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive* (2019). At first glance, these books share little in terms of object, approach, geography, and ideology, but beneath these differences, their similarities become all the more striking. Each struggles to bridge the gulf between describing and explaining poverty, and in so doing, defers questions about what poverty is and who counts as poor. Each cultivates a particular kind of affect through sentimental figures and narratives. And each offers furtive glimpses of an affluent society without dwelling on its relationship to poverty. The patterns that run through these three books are the patterns that characterize poverty ethnographies more generally.

The primary limitation of framing the archive in this way is that these books disproportionately portray the poverty of racially white people.[33] One of the reasons for this discrepancy is the force with which racism asserts itself on the lives of non-white Americans. Any responsible account of poor people of color living in the United States today must begin from the understanding that racism plays a fundamental and determining role. Disentangling

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33. Desmond's *Evicted* is a notable exception. But even in this account, Desmond is more interested in questions of housing than in disentangling the causal forces of poverty and race.

racism from other causes of poverty in the lives of people of color is as impossible as it is counterproductive.

One of the consequences of this matrix is that racism provides the first and often most powerful explanation of the poverty of poor people of color. For instance, in *Evicted*, which is among the minority of modern poverty ethnographies that portray poor African American informants alongside poor white informants, Desmond describes how Crystal and Vanetta, two young African American women, struggle to find stable housing in Milwaukee.[34] Over the course of looking at some fifty apartments, Crystal and Vanetta face overt racial prejudice, the legacies of segregation and urban slums, institutionalized oppression, and the continuing effects of centuries of racialized domination.[35] For Desmond, housing insecurity is at the core of why poor people of any race struggle to escape poverty. That racism is the overwhelming obstacle between Crystal and Vanetta—as well as many of Desmond's other African American informants—and a stable home confirms the outsized role that racism plays in keeping people of color poor. In the United States, racism continues to subject disproportionate numbers of people of color to poverty and guarantee that the conditions facing them are, in many ways, more acute.

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34. Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2016), 248–52.

35. Desmond sums up the historical forces working against Crystal and Vanetta: "Over three centuries of systemic dispossession from the land created a semipermanent black rental class and an artificially high demand for inner-city apartments" (Desmond, *Evicted*, 251).

Thanks to the work of critical race scholars since well before critical race theory was an accepted mode of inquiry, the relationship between racism and poverty in the United States has been well-documented.[36] I take the fact of this relationship and an appreciation of its urgency for granted. That is, whenever and wherever racism appears as an explanation for poverty, it must be foregrounded. Because the relationship between racism and poverty has been so well detailed elsewhere, in what follows, I examine descriptions and explanations of the causes of poverty that do not directly stem from white privilege and racism.

Method

All ethnographies about American poverty share a key objective: to make specific spatially- and temporally-located groups of poor people visible and audible to the other strata—especially the dominant stratum—of society. This general and intellectual writing enterprise is what I call the "hermeneutics of poverty." Over the course of the twentieth century, these hermeneutics have broken down. Early twentieth-century ethnographies of the poor from the likes of the Chicago School of Sociology, the Anthropology Department at Columbia University, and more popular accounts from Progressive Era muckrakers like Jacob Riis share a robust

36. A comprehensive survey of the scholars and critics who have contributed to this tradition could provide the basis for another dissertation. Some of the many to address the problem directly include Elijah Anderson, W. E. B. DuBois, Mitchell Duneier, Kathryn J. Edin, Catherine Fennell, Seth Holmes, Zora Neale Hurston, John L. Jackson Jr., Alex Kotlowitz, Elliot Liebow, Carol B. Stack, Sudhir Venkatesh, and William Julius Wilson.

hermeneutic.[37] These earlier accounts offered, with relative ease, an understanding of what poverty is, who the poor are, how they live, and where they work. When they described poverty for their readers, they were describing a constitutive piece of society. Their accounts index and elaborate an understanding of poverty that is both ubiquitous and distinct. Today, however, the old answers to what poverty is and who the poor are seem outdated and yet no new answers have emerged to take their place. What poverty is and who the poor are is no longer clear to ethnographers or to their audience.

As a general methodology, my dissertation will describe how poverty and the poor are prefigured within and across twentieth century American poverty ethnographies before examining the ideological and political inclinations of different configurations. I borrow the language of prefiguration from "metahistorian" Hayden White who used the term to describe how historians use discernible figures to construe the historical field and turn it into an object open to historical study:

> Before the historian can bring to bear upon the data of the historical field the conceptual apparatus he will use to represent and explain it, he must first prefigure the field—that is to say, constitute it as an object of mental perception. This poetic act is indistinguishable from the linguistic act in which the field is made ready for interpretation as a domain of a particular kind. That is to say, before a given domain can be interpreted, it must first be construed as a ground inhabited by discernible figures. The figures, in turn, must be conceived to be classifiable as different orders, classes, genera, and species of phenomena. Moreover, they must be conceived to bear certain kinds of relationships to one

37. This muckraking tradition runs from late nineteenth and early twentieth century works such as William Thomas Stead's *If Christ Came to Chicago* (1894), Robert Hunter's *Poverty* (1904), and Lincoln Steffens's *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), all the way to Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962).

> another, the transformations of which will constitute the 'problems' to be solved by the 'explanations' provided on the levels of emplotment and argument in narrative.[38]

Ethnographies about poverty and the poor are well-suited to this mode of interpretation for two reasons. First, perhaps more than within other discursive modes, processes of prefiguration are legible within elaborate descriptions of individuals, cultures, places, and phenomena—the bread and butter of ethnographic writing. Second, ethnographies are reluctant to generalize, preferring instead to detail tightly demarcated fields. To examine processes of prefiguration, White developed a schema which involved sorting texts in terms of their *emplotment*, their *argument*, and their *ideological implications*. While these categories helped White shed light on nineteenth century historiography, they do not apply to twentieth and twenty-first ethnographies in the same way. Rather than doggedly replicating White's formula, I remain committed to the spirit of this kind of analysis in determining the relationships between and across the texts I analyze.[39]

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38. Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 30.

39. While I do not adopt whole pieces of White's framework, his use of emplotment holds the most promise for my analysis. He defines emplotment as "the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind" (White, *Metahistory*, 7). White borrows four *modes* of emplotment from the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye: Romance, Satire, Comedy, and Tragedy. These modes are of limited use in the context of poverty ethnographies but the invitation to examine how ethnographers translate

While ethnographies are self-conscious to a fault when it comes to questions of historical context or methodology (it is a rare ethnographer who does not reserve a paragraph or two in the introduction to lionize the methodological achievements of their predecessors), the conceptual context is seldom acknowledged let alone examined. However, contrary to ethnographic ideals, reductive representational claims are an inescapable consequence of all ethnographic texts. No matter how relentlessly the ethnographer prioritizes particularity, the people and places they depict imply generalizations. Their detailed descriptions invoke broader categories either through representative characteristics or against deviant ones. Rather than assess the relationship between their object of study and the general type it invokes, ethnographers deny their complicity in the creation of the latter and build a defensive perimeter around the former in order to pre-empt accusations of essentialism.[40] The odd consequence is that each ethnography approaches its object as if previous ethnographic data has little bearing. Each ethnography sets out to compose its own world from the ground-up because, we are led to believe, that is what the particularity of the object demands. But rather than end up with radically different ethnographic worlds, familiar characters, settings, and narratives span the genre without acknowledgement and unencumbered by substantive self-conscious reflection on literary prefiguration.

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field notes, interview transcripts, and ephemera into a coherent narrative has the promise of reaching otherwise inaccessible dimensions of the discourse formation.

40. This tendency is, in part, a response to the earlier problems tied up with the fantasy that ethnographic texts could provide transparent, objective accounts of other cultures.

My cultural account of poverty today will employ an analysis of how these characters, settings, and narratives develop and change over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first to build an account of how the poor and poverty are prefigured.

Chapters

The dissertation is divided into two parts. The aim of the first part—Chapters 1 and 2—is to trace the history of how the concept of poverty lost its capacity to make the lives of those living on society's bottom rungs visible to those higher up. Chapter 1, "Where the Other Half Lives," frames the modern contours of American poverty's broken hermeneutics through a comparative analysis of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890) and Barbara Ehrenreich's influential *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001). Together, these texts illustrate the dramatic shifts underlying assumptions about what poverty is that occurred over the course of the twentieth century. For Riis, New York's poor are indelibly tied to the city's tenements where many of them live and also work. Over a century later, the poor people that Ehrenreich describes live across a diffuse and widely variable array of trailers, motels, and cheap apartments. And, aside from their low-wages and the status that confers, their jobs have very little in common. The solidity and immediacy of the tenements that dominated ideas about how the poor lived and worked in Riis's time has no modern equivalent.

Chapter 2, "Relative and Physical Poverty in an Affluent Society," argues that the twentieth century emergence of what John Kenneth Galbraith called "the affluent society" transformed the problem of identifying and understanding poverty in the United States.

According to Galbraith, the dawn of the affluent society represented the first time that a large numerical majority could live in moderate comfort and without the constant threat of hunger and privation. To show how this new material reality shaped ideas about poverty, this chapter examines Oscar Lewis's controversial culture of poverty thesis. Despite the totalizing thesis Lewis proffered in his introductions and more theoretical essays, his own ethnographic descriptions in *La Vida* (published in 1966 and his last major work) reveal a deeply situated poverty, reckoning with the social and economic upheavals of the time. Instead of a trans-cultural and a-historical image of poverty, *La Vida* offers a glimpse of what poverty looks like when a measure of material relief arrives amid persistent social and economic inequality.

The second part of the dissertation turns to more contemporary ethnographic accounts of poverty and the poor to show how poverty's hermeneutics have increasingly come to rely on narrative portraits of struggling, suffering, and failing individuals. Chapter 3, "The Gospel of Economic Inequality," analyzes Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*. Vance uses his childhood in Breathitt County, Kentucky and Middletown, Ohio to illustrate what he takes to be the crisis rotting Greater Appalachian "hillbilly" culture from within: bad personal choices, over-entitlement, impudent spending, and a refusal to work. Rather than simply dismiss Vance on ideological grounds—as a bullish advocate for the virtues of individual responsibility and as a critic of social welfare—this chapter examines the contradictions between Vance's sentimental descriptions of poverty and his explanations of its causes.

Chapter 4, "Poverty and Suffering" moves to the other end of the ideological spectrum and examines how the hermeneutics of poverty operate in Kristof and WuDunn's *Tightrope*. Kristof and WuDunn take pains to avoid the rhetoric of personal responsibility and bootstrapping

that runs throughout Vance's account and argue that the suffering plaguing the United States is, primarily, the result of a neoliberal policy agenda that began in the 1970s and the effects of the opioid epidemic. Even though they offer a sociological explanation of the suffering they describe, the explanations and descriptions remain misaligned. Kristof and WuDunn suggest that upwards of half the population is under the same strain, yet the people they describe are struggling to survive against a tidal wave of obstacles that would be unrecognizable to most readers. Although the authors affirm collective, social, and political responsibility, *Tightrope* remains caught between sentimental description and socio-historical explanation.

Chapter 5, "A Maid's Long Journey Through Poverty," shows sentimental descriptions of poverty carried to their logical conclusion in Land's memoir, *Maid*. *Maid* details desperate years during Land's remarkable rise from unemployment and homelessness to a fulfilling career as a professional writer. Although poverty provides *Maid*'s setting, Land proves to be a charismatic hero, her personal struggles and triumphs exerting a gravitational force that obscures not only explanations of poverty's origins but far less dynamic images of collective poverty. While *Maid* is written far closer to the ground and stands as a powerful antidote to the nascent meritocratic idealism *Hillbilly Elegy* and, to a lesser extent, *Tightrope*, it also attests to the extent of American poverty's hermeneutic deterioration.

The conclusion, "Requiem for Poverty," synthesizes the three themes that weave through my archive: the tension between description and explanation, the dominance of the sentimental idiom, and the under-recognized context of the affluent society. Together, these three arguments show the shape of poverty's broken hermeneutics, whose main consequence is the seamless

reconciliation of the acceleration of American affluence with the intensification of American inequality.

Chapter 1

Where the Other Half Lives

Nowhere is the transformation of the hermeneutics of poverty clearer than in the dramatic shifts in our ideas about *how* the poor live. In his celebrated 1890 account of New York tenement life, *How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis sought to unmask the horrific living conditions of New York's lower classes to a national audience. He writes in support of the poor, blaming the worst of what he saw in the tenements on greedy property owners and ineffective municipal governance. As a police reporter in the tenements in the years before the publication of *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis's descriptions are attentive and range from first-person observations made while walking the streets to second-hand stories from people he had met, to more distant recollections of vague origin and authorship. In effect, *How the Other Half Lives* is a work on poverty *sensu lato*, as it effectively establishes metonymic relationships between poor individuals, scenes, and objects and a general conception of poverty—it succeeds as a compelling account to the extent that Riis's descriptions of particular people and places are also intelligible as descriptions of the entire other half. Throughout the book, the lynchpin of this two-sided description is the tenements. Put differently, the tenements are the thread running across all these descriptions; their ubiquity makes individual examples of impoverishment legible as a much larger phenomenon. In Riis's New York, they are poverty's uncontested home, not only

explaining *where* the poor live but also *how* they live, where they work, and, in a fundamental sense, who they are.[1]

How the Other Half Lives

Despite his reputation as one of investigative journalism's great innovators, Riis's writing in *How the Other Half Lives* is formulaic. Each of the book's twenty-five chapters falls into one of two categories—either the chapter is descriptive or diagnostic. As a whole, the descriptive chapters elaborate the deleterious effects of tenement poverty in New York. They focus on

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1. One of Riis's preoccupations throughout the book is explaining the differences between ethnic, racial, national, and religious groups within the tenements. For instance, the "Polish Jew" is most likely to "coop himself up in his den with the thermometer at stewing heat" (43) whereas "the great body of hard-working Irish and German immigrants … accept naturally the conditions of tenement life, because for them there is nothing else in New York" (121). Riis's generalizations on the grounds of ethnicity and race are part and parcel of the United States' long-running histories of stereotyping minorities. Critical race scholars continue to do the essential work of excavating these histories and enumerating the legacies of racial and ethnic domination. In this essay, rather than explore the shape of Riis's racism and ethno-nationalism, I focus on why, despite the considerable attention he devotes to these differences, the unity of "the other half" is never called into question. Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons; 1890; New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1957). Citations refer to the Hill and Wang edition.

discrete places (“The Down Town Back-alleys,” “The Bend”), a specific ethnic (“The Italian in New York,” “The Street Arab”) or classed type (“The Sweaters of Jewtown,” “Waifs of the City’s Slums”), or a combination of places and types (“Chinatown,” “Jewtown”). In addition, these chapters usually start with Riis offering some general reflections about the topic before launching into an anecdotal narrative illustrating either the place or the people. Conversely, the diagnostic chapters aim to explain some of the causes of what Riis sees as dire (“The Genesis of the Tenement,” “The Cheap Lodging-houses,” “Pauperism and the Tenements,” “The Reign of Rum”). But rather than explain the causes of poverty as such, these chapters offer different explanations as to why the tenements themselves have reached the degree of depravity that they have. These diagnoses assume that the distinction between rich and poor is natural and all but unbreachable. But the link between cause and effect—the interplay between the two kinds of chapters—is never fully spelled out. The result is that Riis reports harrowing conditions and then suggests causes that fall well short of explaining the circumstances he describes.

As a rhetorical and conceptual tool, poverty fills the gap between cause and effect. It is a tacit but pervasive supplement to the causes that Riis names, reinforcing and extending the reach of his explanations of how residents of the tenements live. Not only does poverty explain poverty, but it does so convincingly. While this circular method runs across the book, it is most clearly expressed when the general context of the tenement converges with detailed, singular descriptions of the poor. Within the tenements, these convergences tend to occur either within the homes of the poor or within their places of work. In Riis’s accounts of the poor at home, poverty’s hermeneutic force manifests in three ways: first, in their ramshackle disrepair; second,

in their filth and stench; and third, in their suffocating overcrowding. Where domesticity is concerned, these three features are how the other half lives.

In one of the descriptive chapters, Riis ventures into "Blind Man's Alley" in order to photograph the living quarters of "a group of blind beggars." In the process of taking the picture, the flash sets fire to the house: "I discovered that a lot of paper and rags that hung on the wall were ablaze. There were six of us, five blind men and women who knew nothing of their danger, and myself, in an attic room with a dozen crooked, rickety stairs between us and the street, and as many households as helpless as the one whose guest I was all about us. The thought: how were they ever to be got out? made my blood run cold as I saw the flames creeping up the wall…" (25). Riis eventually manages to extinguish the fire on his own. Returning to the street, he finds a "friendly policeman" and tells him of the accident. Riis is taken aback when the policeman laughs, as if the story were a "rather good joke." Once the policeman calms himself down, he explains "'Why, don't you know… that house is the Dirty Spoon? It caught fire six times last winter, but it wouldn't burn. The dirt was so thick on the walls, it smothered the fire!'" (25).

On the surface, this passage is about a negligent landlord—the crooked, rickety stairs a sign of the landlord foregoing necessary repairs and maintenance. But the landlord's negligence only extends so far. First, paper and rags fuel the fire and then the walls' thick dirt prevent it from spreading. Paper, rags, and dirt are all features of the room, their presence a taken for granted fixture of tenement life, so much so that Riis assumes that it would not occur to his reader to question just why it is rags are hanging on walls so thick with dirt that they can suffocate a fire. Whereas poverty structures the conditions of the room for Riis, it plays an even

more determining role for the policeman who, in all likelihood, not only takes the general disrepair of the tenement for granted, but considers the regular outbreak of fires to be more or less just another of poverty's wall-dressings. It is tempting to see Riis and the policeman as foils for one another, where Riis's empathy for the poor stands in contrast to the policeman's indifference. However, that framing stops short of grasping how both the policeman and Riis understand poverty. Whether poverty confers layers of rags and dirt or layers of rags and dirt that occasionally catch fire, is only a difference of degree. Not only in *How the Other Half Lives*[2] but in the vast majority of proto-ethnographic texts that describe the homes of the poor at any length, filth and stench are fixtures.

Frequently, the filth and stench of where the poor live are explained through animal metaphors. In his description of the Bend—the "foul core of New York's slums"—Riis says: "Long years ago the cows coming home from the pasture trod a path over this hill. Echoes of tinkling bells linger there still, but they do not call up memories of green meadows and summer fields; they proclaim the homecoming of the rag-picker's cart. In the memory of man the old cow-path has never been other than a vast human pig-sty" (41). Here, the particular spatial-temporal history of the Bend dissolves into a scene that wears poverty on its sleeve. Though the characterization "vast human pig-sty" is particularly evocative, the implicit assumption is that the homes and neighborhoods of the poor are recognizable by their appearance and their smell—

2. A notable exception, according to Riis, are the homes of "the Negro." Citing a report published in the *Real Estate Record*, Riis says: "It proved agents to be practically unanimous in the endorsement of the negro as a clean, orderly, and 'profitable,' tenant" (113).

"the filth and the stench were unbearable" (54). Poverty is visceral. Walking through the tenements, Riis can smell it. In taking poverty's base physicality almost for granted he is far from alone.

In one of modern sociology's founding texts, W. E. B. DuBois recounts some of the least pleasant winter accommodations available to "the negro" in Philadelphia: "desolate pens" that "would not give comfortable winter accommodations to a cow. Although as dismal as dirt, damp and insufficient ventilation can make them, they are nearly all inhabited."[3] Fifty years later, anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston can still recognize poverty by its smell: "There is something about poverty that smells like death. Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season and rotting around the feet; impulses smothered too long in the fetid air of underground caves. The soul lives in a sickly air."[4] But the most succinct illustration of the link between poverty and smell belongs to none other than George Orwell.[5] In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell put the matter bluntly:

> Here you come to the real secret of class distinctions in the West… It is summed up in four frightful words which people nowadays are wary of uttering, but which were bandied about quite freely in my childhood. The words were: The lower classes smell. That was what we were taught–the lower classes smell. And here, obviously, you are at an impassable barrier. For no feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a physical feeling. Race-hatred, religious hatred,

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3. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 304.

4. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1st Harper Perennial Modern Classics ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 87.

5. While distinct, the histories of poverty in England and the United States share some essential elements, and, among them, the association between poverty and stench.

> differences of education, of temperament, of intellect, even differences of moral code, can be got over; but physical repulsion cannot.[6]

In this passage, Orwell captures the nexus between poverty and smell as well as the special status of knowing something by physically feeling it. On the surface, the ways that DuBois, Hurston, and Orwell link poverty and smell provide strong evidence for the immediacy of the relationship. But there is an interesting omission: what the poor *smell like* is vague. Hurston and Orwell—and, Dubois to a lesser extent—offer up signifiers empty enough to suggest that their readers would have little trouble imagining the sickly air or the smell of the lower classes. For all three of these writers, the smell of poverty is rhetorically tied to a host of other associations—penned animals, death and illness, the bottom rung of an unspoken economic order—all of which foster the poor's legibility.

Alongside filth and stench, poverty is also identifiable by its density. Riis argues that the 1890s tenements were a product of three things: (1) aristocratic housing stock built before the war of 1812, (2) New York's rapid population growth over the nineteenth century, and (3) the greed of the property-owning classes. According to Riis, New York's population grew from 100,000 in 1812 to over half a million three decades later.[7] As the population boom and the "stir and bustle of trade" that accompanied it caused the aristocracy to leave their homes along a once fashionable stretch of the East River, real-estate agents pounced at the opportunity to convert "the decorous homes of the old Knickerbockers" into subdivided housing for industrious poor,

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6. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1962), 112.

7. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 5.

desperate for accommodation (5–6). In order to maximize returns, the large rooms in the old houses were "'partitioned into *several smaller ones*, without regard to light or ventilation, the rate of rent being lower in proportion to space or height from the street'" (6, emphasis in original). It wasn't long before demand for cheap housing overwhelmed the available stock and wood rear houses were built on top of former gardens or additional floors were added to front and rear structures as demand warranted. As the nineteenth century progressed, Riis claims that New York's East Side became "the most densely populated district in all the world" (6).

The account Riis provides of the genesis of New York's tenements ties increasing density to deteriorating living conditions. Within the tenements, the main consequence of overcrowding was an increase in hazards: buildings more likely to collapse, communities more susceptible to the rapid spread of cholera, fatally poor air quality. Quarters were so oppressive that, given the choice between living in the tenements and ending one's life, it was no surprise when tenants opted for the latter: Riis writes about "…the case of a hard-working family of man and wife, young people from the old country, who took poison together in a Crosby Street tenement because they were 'tired.' There was no other explanation, and none was needed when I stood in the room in which they had lived. It was in the attic with sloping ceiling and a single window so far out on the roof that it seemed not to belong to the place at all… There were four such rooms in the attic" (9). Beyond the shock Riis elicits with this description—this anecdote is one among many of this kind—the least dramatic aspect might be the most revealing. Namely, to a large degree, it is the tenements' extreme density and overcrowding that distinguishes their residents from more affluent counterparts. On the one hand, it is the immediate individual circumstances of the hard-working man and wife on Crosby Street that pushed them to suicide. The singular

attic room, darkness and sloping ceiling alike closing in to exhaust the couple's will to live, was all the explanation that Riis needed to understand their fate. But, on the other hand, the oppressive conditions of the room are consequences of the collective poverty of the tenements in a more general sense.

Although the chaotic density that Riis describes is not embodied like emaciation and disease, it functions as a kind of material and rhetorical infrastructure that organizes and conducts poverty on to the individual and collective bodies of the tenements. As Riis describes it, the attic could be understood as a generic example of the typical living conditions of poor immigrants in New York. But this kind of analysis inevitably leads to an understanding of the poor as a collection of individuals and misses how Riis's description of the attic offers a glimpse of collective poverty. Without Riis having to specify, we know that the walls separating the room he describes from the three others in the same attic are thin and offer little in the way of privacy. Residents of the same tenement not only share the same hazards but unavoidably contribute to the collective condition. An additional floor makes the whole building less stable; the smoke from another family's cooking renders the air a little less breathable; more tenants squeezed into the same square footage make everyone a little more susceptible to infectious disease; the feeling of suicidal exhaustion, while neatly symbolized by the suffocating room, is undoubtedly part and parcel of a much larger sphere.

As with the homes of the poor, poverty's hermeneutic power is also on full display in Riis's descriptions of tenement dwellers at work. Riis's depictions of work all start from the assumption that there is such a thing as a poor job; that is, a job that, by its nature, designates anyone who holds it as poor. For Riis, the hard distinction that cordons poor jobs off from all

others is intuitive. Among others, these jobs include sweat shop laborers ("workmen" and "sweaters"), "working girls," cigar rollers, and "young toughs" (members of tenement "gangs" who make their living through petty crime). A conspicuous absence across all of Riis's accounts of the poor at work is any sense of an upward mobility sufficient to lift individuals out of poverty. Instead of narratives about the poor pulling themselves up and out of the tenements by their bootstraps, Riis describes a strict limit placed on how high his subjects can climb.[8]

The "sweaters of Jewtown" are a prime example of this limit on upward mobility. The shops Riis describes are all located in the tenements and include both "sweaters" and "workmen." A sweater—in this case, an enterprising tailor—is "simply the middleman, the sub-contractor, a workman like his fellows." Fluency in English, access to capital, intelligence, time in New York, and economic desperation all determine the hierarchy within the "sweater's shop." The sweater, who tends to speak more English than his workmen, "drums up work among the clothing houses" and then fulfills the contract by taking his pick among the recent immigrants who "come to his door in droves, clamoring for work" (89). On the one hand, the sweater is a capitalist, turning a profit off the labor of his workmen: "The workman growls, not at the hard labor, or poor pay, but over the pennies another is coining out of his sweat" (90). But on the other hand, the relationship conceived in those terms fails to capture how both sweater and workman are *both* poor jobs, the former the limit of what the latter might attain. Riis is quick to add that a workman "on the first opportunity turns sweater himself, and takes his revenge by

8. Ironically, Riis himself was a Danish immigrant who ascended from poverty to the ranks of the elite, eventually a cherished confidant of President Theodore Roosevelt.

driving an even closer bargain than his rival tyrant, thus reducing his profits" (90). Every workman-turned-sweater undersells his former employers, out of a mix of ambition and spite, and in so doing reduces the capacities of his newfound peers to prosper. While a workman might ascend to the life of a sweater, Riis never offers any sign that a sweater might in turn rise above his station. In this way, the structure of internal stratification within the sweater's shop that Riis describes affords a degree of upward mobility but only to a stringent limit.

And within the limit, the work is brutal. As with the homes of the poor their work environment is hazardous, dirty, and crowded—again, due in no small part to the fact that work and home often occupy the same space. But the work itself has at least two other discernible features: it is frantic and visibly productive. In pursuit of a first-hand glimpse of the poor at work, Riis rides the "Second Avenue Elevated Railroad" into the sweaters' district. "The road," he writes, "is like a big gangway through an endless work-room where vast multitudes are forever laboring. Morning, noon, or night, it makes no difference; the scene is always the same" (91−92). After getting off the train, Riis tours the district on foot. He visits a "knickerbocker" sweater (a shop that manufactures knickerbocker trousers) where six adults and three children are laboring: "The faces, hands, and arms to the elbows of everyone in the room are black with the color of the cloth on which they are working" (92). So focused on their sewing, "the men do not appear to be aware even of the presence of a stranger" (93). Up a floor and across the hall, a "man works on the machine for his sweater twelve hours a day, turning out three dozen 'knee-pants'" (94−95). Around the corner, Riis visits the cloak-makers. As a result of falling prices, they have had to make the most of their busiest months: "they can make as much as twelve

dollars a week, when they are employed, by taking their work home and sewing until midnight" (95).

In addition to their setting in the tenements, these jobs are poor by virtue of their pace and hours. Poor jobs are bad jobs. Seemingly void of moments of idleness or leisure, the workers' poverty comes across in how they can afford neither the time to look up and recognize Riis's presence nor the care to do something about their stained arms and faces. Not only are they working hard, as members of other classes might be working, but they are working *desperately*. And their desperation is firmly tied to how much they can produce.

None of the workers are paid an hourly wage. Instead, their compensation is entirely piecemeal. The first knickerbocker sweaters turn out 120 dozen pairs a week, "for which the manufacturer pays seventy cents a dozen," the workers receiving a share "from two to five dollars" (93). The man on the next floor, producing, according to Riis, a lower quality garment, "receives forty-two cents a dozen" (95). And a pair of cloak-makers, "working on first-class garments for a Broadway house in the four busiest weeks of the season," earned "from $7.58 to $9.60 each" (95). In all the sweaters' shops that Riis visits, every worker is directly involved in manufacturing the end-product. Grounded in the tenements, this material immediacy substantiates the conception of poverty in *How the Other Half Lives*. The question of just how many pairs of knickerbockers a worker can sew immediately determines whether—or how much—their family will eat. In this way, material production is tied to subsistence.

One of the key conditions that enables such a low return on this punishing labor is the reserve army, ready to work for little more than nothing. To Riis, this world of poor jobs is sustained by a seemingly endless mass of unemployed whose desperation leads them to accept

dangerous working conditions and "starvation wages." Riis describes a labor market flooded with immigrants, giving the advantage to the sweater who hires from "the hungry hordes of immigrants to whom no argument appeals save the cry for bread." Furthermore, Riis sees no sign that the hordes will dissipate: "…as long as the ignorant crowds continue to come and to herd in these tenements, his grip can never be shaken off. And the supply across the seas is apparently inexhaustible. Every fresh persecution of the Russian or Polish Jew on his native soil starts greater hordes hitherward to confound economical problems, and recruit the sweater's phalanx" (89–90). In other words, the renewal of the sweater's phalanx relies upon a mass—a "herd," a "horde"—of job-less and desperate immigrants.

Although it might seem odd to look to the unemployed as a means of understanding the poor at work, one of the defining characteristics of a poor job is its proximity to the hungry horde. First, proximity means that the jump from unemployment into a poor job is a short jump. While, in many instances, relevant experience would be an asset to the employer, the skills necessary for any poor job do not require expertise beyond what can be quickly learned. Second, working conditions at a poor job are consistent with the more general living conditions of the poor. Hazards and hygiene at work mirror hazards and hygiene at home—in some cases (this is true of Riis's sweaters' shops), the same tenement might serve as both home and workplace. Third, the proximity of poor jobs to a jobless mass also suggests precarity; that is, those who labor in poor jobs are perpetually in jeopardy of falling out of work and back into the horde. In this way, poverty's protagonists are neither the poor worker nor the desperately unemployed but the *tenements* within and across which poverty unfolds.

For Riis, the tenements hold the answers to questions about poverty's place and character. It seems to have never occurred to him to study the poor anywhere else. With certainty and authority, he assumes that any New Yorker would have found an explanation of poverty grounded elsewhere in the city bewildering. Riis could move back and forth between his individual examples and the general condition seamlessly—it was simply obvious to him that New York's tenements captured something essential about the nature of the lives of the other half. So it was that when Riis wrote about the tenements, he was writing about the poverty of his time. While tenements still exist in the twenty-first century, they no longer contain the totality of poverty the way they once did. To study poverty in the new millennium, then, demands a different strategy.

Nickel and Dimed

Without a twenty-first century tenement to organize her investigation—without a definitive doorway from which poverty might be systematically observed—renowned journalist Barbara Ehrenreich set out to experience low-wage labor for herself. Published in 2001, over a century after *How the Other Half Lives*, *Nickel and Dimed* is Ehrenreich's long answer to the recurrent questions of poverty's place and people. What sets *Nickel and Dimed* apart from other modern investigations of poverty and the poor is also what makes it a useful point of comparison with *How the Other Half Lives*: its ambition. Although Ehrenreich's primary object in *Nickel and Dimed* isn't poverty but low-wage work, she is still taking as her subject a much broader

economic stratum than is typical of contemporary ethnographers of the poor.[9] Confronted by the scale and ubiquity of economic duress, both Riis and Ehrenreich try to offer a representative picture. No recent ethnography matches Riis's in the effort to figure out how it is that the other half lives. Ehrenreich is among those who come closest, at least with respect to the ambition of her project.

She spends a month each in three cities: Key West, Florida; Portland, Maine; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her choices and justifications are striking. While, in a general sense, the three cities are geographically diverse, and each have a substantial share of white working poor, Ehrenreich has some difficulty explaining why she elected to go specifically where she did. A Florida resident herself, she claims to have ended up in Key West "mostly out of laziness."[10] Her reasoning behind Minneapolis is even more opaque: "Don't ask me why Minneapolis came

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9. Although she makes for a particularly good corollary to Riis because of the muckraking spirit they share, Ehrenreich is not the only exception to the trend of increasingly narrow and isolated studies of the poor. For instance, over the last twenty years, sociologist Katherine S. Newman has published a number of books arguing for wider recognition of the scope of the working poor and the problems they face, which include *No Shame in My Game*: *The Working Poor in the Inner City* (1999), *Chutes and Ladders*: *Navigating the Low Wage Labor Market* (2006), and *The Missing Class: Portraits of the Near Poor in America* (with Victor Tan Chen, 2007).

10. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 11.

to mind, maybe I just had a yearning for deciduous trees" (121). Ehrenreich's vagueness is not the result of being overwhelmed by the surfeit of possible destinations. The plight of the working poor doesn't seem to be concentrated in any city in particular. Her uncertainty is itself a sign that the relationship between poverty and place is not what it once was. Narrower categories related to poverty maintain strong ties with particular places—homelessness in Los Angeles and San Francisco comes to mind—but economic hardship itself has become relatively placeless, further evidence of the increasing difficulty of making the poor visible.

In each city, Ehrenreich's goal is to find an affordable place to live, get a job, and then last a month on whatever money she earns. As rules, she refrains from using any of her professional credentials and she commits to taking the highest paying job and the cheapest accommodation she can find. Ehrenreich allows herself the use of a car (she pays for it with a credit card, not her wages) and promises herself that she won't follow through with the investigation to either homelessness or hunger.[11]

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11. This limit points to a transformation in the conceptual role that homelessness and hunger have played in relation to poverty: neither homelessness nor hunger are the key markers of American poverty that they once were. For the most part, hunger and homelessness are not a part of the economic hardship that Ehrenreich encounters. Although she presents some of her colleagues at the Maids as undernourished, they are the exceptions, most of her coworkers being both poor and fed (albeit with foods that are, in many cases, deficient and harmful in their own right). Similarly, a small share of her coworkers live in their cars but homelessness is by no means widespread among them. Which is not to say that homelessness and poverty are unrelated.

Riis saw poverty's marks—ramshackle structures, filth and stench, and overcrowding—in the tenements. Although these marks were present in his descriptions of both the poor at work and the poor at home, in terms of sheer number of pages, his emphasis was decisively the latter. In *Nickel and Dimed*, the inverse is true: Ehrenreich offers substantial detail when it comes to place of work but glimpses of the poor at home are brief and scattered. In this regard, both Riis and Ehrenreich are unusually committed to one sphere over another. Other examples reveal a less decisive contrast: unsurprisingly, the homes of the poor figure prominently in *Evicted*, and many of the muckrakers—Upton Sinclair and Robert Hunter, in particular—were nothing if not attentive to poverty and work. Nonetheless, the diminished presence of the domestic sphere in *Nickel and Dimed* illustrates something important. To find out how the other half lives, to find poverty, all that Riis had to do was go to the tenements. By 1999 (when Ehrenreich was conducting her research), the question of *where* the other half lives had nothing resembling a definitive answer.[12]

The overwhelming trend in recent accounts of American homelessness is to explain the condition by suturing poverty together with other ostensible causes, most often drug use or mental illness. Poverty alone has become an insufficient explanation for homelessness.

12. In turn, what stops a book like *Evicted* from replicating Riis's forceful emphasis on the home as a locus of poverty is the uncoupling of place and person. While Desmond comes closer to answering *where* the other half lives and offers eviction as a central and formative expression of poverty, he is deeply invested in the individuality of all his subjects. Throughout the book, he is attentive to how the homes he's in reflect the character of their residents. The

In *Nickel and Dimed*, descriptions of the homes of the poor come from two main vantages: directly from Ehrenreich, as she experiences the low-income rental stock for herself, and in her accounts of what her coworkers have told her about their housing.[13] From the first vantage, Ehrenreich's view is limited to the housing she sees while looking for a place to rent for the month. In Florida, she ends up at a cottage and then moves to a trailer park. In Maine, she starts at a Motel 6 and then moves to the Blue Haven, an independently owned motel that offers cheaper weekly rates. And in Minnesota, after she spends her first few days in the apartment of an acquaintance, she moves first to the Clearview Inn—"the worst motel in the country" (150)—and then finally to the Comfort Inn. For Ehrenreich, there is a meaningful difference between the motels and inns and what she sees as more permanent housing.

Upon moving into the Blue Haven in Maine, Ehrenreich meets a "a middle-aged woman with a three-year-old granddaughter in tow" who recognizes that Ehrenreich is thrown by her surroundings and tries to comfort her: "it is always hard at the beginning, living in a motel, especially if you're used to a house, but you adjust after a while, you put it out of your mind." The woman, we find out, "has been at the Blue Haven for eleven years now" (70). That this last disclosure comes as a shock to Ehrenreich (and, I imagine, much of her audience) suggests that

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function of Desmond's descriptions of the homes he visits is to help us understand the individuality of the person living there and not to represent or explain poverty in a larger sense. Moreover, of the three hallmarks that Riis attributed to the tenements, none apply to the homes of the poor with anything resembling their former force.

13. Ehrenreich makes no mention of ever visiting a coworker at home in the text.

motels and the like are different in kind from other types of housing.[14] While Ehrenreich describes these accommodations at some length, they seem to be at least in part a product of the conditions of her investigation. Had she been in each city for a year rather than a month, she very well might have spent relatively less time in overpriced and under furnished motel rooms.

From the second vantage point—and my focus in what follows—decrepitude, filth, and overcrowding creep up sporadically but by no means unify Ehrenreich's account of the homes of low-wage workers. In contrast to the space she devotes to describing her own accommodations, there is only a scant handful of times where she relays some cursory details of the home lives of her coworkers. The longest elaboration is the result of some informal surveying she did while serving at the "Hearthside," a diner in Key West:

> Gail, a middle-aged career server, shares "a room in a well-known downtown flophouse" with "a male friend [who] has begun hitting on her, driving her nuts";
> Claude, a Haitian cook, "is desperate to get out of the two-room apartment he shares with his girlfriend and two other, unrelated people";
> "Annette, a twenty-year-old server who is six months pregnant and abandoned by her boyfriend, lives with her mother, a postal clerk";
> Marianne, a breakfast server, "and her boyfriend are paying $170 a week for a one-person trailer";
> Billy, one of cooks and likely the wealthiest among the staff, "lives in the trailer he owns, paying only the $400-a-month lot fee";
> Andy, another cook, "lives on his dry-docked boat, which… can't be more than twenty feet long";

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14. By contrast, the opposition between motel-type accommodations and other housing is nowhere near as stark in *How the Other Half Lives*. In addition to the borders that appear as fixtures in most walks of tenement homestead, Riis devotes a chapter to "The Cheap Lodging-Houses." The lodging-houses that Riis describes are relatively consistent in condition and cost with the rest of the tenements.

> "Tina, another server, and her husband are paying $60 a night for a room in the Days Inn";
> "When Marianne is tossed out of her trailer for subletting… she leaves her boyfriend and moves in with Tina and her husband";
> Joan, a forty-year old hostess who turns out to be a "militant feminist," "lives in a van parked behind a shopping center at night and showers in Tina's motel room." (25–26)

Though sparse, this list is remarkable for its diversity. The residences vary from single occupant to overcrowded, some depend on the goodwill of family or social ties, they are spread out, and the costs range from whatever Joan and Annette are paying up to a plainly unsustainable $60 a night. Given how little is revealed about these homes, finding characteristics common to all or figuring out what, if anything, makes them legible as the homes of the poor is difficult. A far cry from Riis's robust trinity of slap-dash construction, dirtiness, and overcrowding, the homes of Ehrenreich's coworkers might yet resemble one another, albeit far more faintly. Compared to Riis's tenements, all the housing arrangements that Ehrenreich lists here are, at least in some sense, isolated. The easy examples are Andy in his boat, Billy in his trailer, and Joan in her van, all living alone and apart. But isolation extends beyond solitude: the homes themselves are isolated. The cramped sociality of a shared motel room or trailer easily translates into isolation in the absence of a wider social sphere of long-term neighbors and communal space, a stark contrast to Riis's description of overcrowded, dense, collective living quarters and the kind of tenement consciousness that emerges. The most extensive collective consciousness in *Nickel and Dimed* might be what emerges in the most anonymous and sanitized housing: Tina's hotel room. Although Ehrenreich doesn't pay the arrangement much heed, Tina, her husband, Marianne, and Joan all share a stake in the same place. If the shared room leads to any sense of a shared plight, the result is beyond Ehrenreich's explicit recognition. Homes within the tenements are a part of a

structural whole whereas homes in *Nickel and Dimed* are what exists within the walls of the private sphere. This is not to say that isolation distinguishes poor homes from the homes of the more affluent, only that isolation resonates differently across the invisible homes in *Nickel and Dimed* than it did throughout Riis's New York tenements.

What might, however, hold some weight in characterizing the homes of today's poor relative to the non-poor is their precarity and impermanence. With the possible exception of Billy's trailer, none of the housing arrangements that Ehrenreich lists seems especially stable. Even over the course of the single month she spends in Key West, the homes of some of her coworkers are in flux. In addition to Marianna's move from the shared trailer to Tania's motel room, Gail leaves the flophouse and moves into her truck, and both Joan and Claude are actively pursuing different accommodations. Ehrenreich recognizes the effect of this constant relocation: "It's not hard to get my coworkers talking about their living situations, because housing, in almost every case, is the principal source of disruption in their lives, the first thing they fill you in on when they arrive for their shifts" (25).

That Ehrenreich characterizes housing as a principal disruption in a book devoted to work is evidence that the formidable interrelationship between home and poverty is still strong. However, what the homes of the poor look like today has shifted. In fact, the *look* of the homes may no longer be their distinguishing feature. Poverty's mark on each of the living arrangements Ehrenreich lists doesn't lie in the physical details of the environment as much as in the breathless pace at which poor residents move across a diffuse array of trailers, motels, spare beds (or

couches), flophouses, crowded apartments, and parking lots.[15] The emphasis isn't on any particular physical detail but on the intense strain of unstable housing. The shift from understanding poor homes in terms of their location within a tenement to understanding poor homes by the strain inflicted by unstable housing shows the new difficulty in recognizing poverty.[16]

But if Ehrenreich's account of housing illustrates a way of apprehending the homes of the poor that is discontinuous with Riis's descriptions of the tenements, in both Riis' tenements and Ehrenreich's low-wage work, the scale of poverty is massive; however, their different sense and representation of this scale show the emptying of the hermeneutics of poverty today. Whereas a sense of the scope of poverty is all over Riis's descriptions of both home and work, there are only faint echoes of poverty's massive scale in Ehrenreich's descriptions of housing—Claude's cramped apartment, or Tina's crowded motel room. And when it comes to finding and getting a job, poverty's vastness is similarly nebulous. In each of the three cities, Ehrenreich is only one of many in a sea of prospective employees navigating "wanted" ads, job applications, aptitude tests, and interviews. These jobseekers, however, never coalesce into a physical mass of any impressive size. Unlike the sweater's phalanx, hammering at the door in search of work, in

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15. While theorists of globalization have pointed out how mobility and flexibility are luxuries enjoyed by the global elite, the way Ehrenreich's colleagues move through this network of unstable housing might represent a darker side of what mobility means today.

16. Not only is psychological strain harder to see than row after row of tenement housing, precarity is not the exclusive domain of the poor.

waiting rooms, group interviews, and orientations, Ehrenreich is never physically with more than a small handful of other prospective employees. In abstract, however, she is among a massive reserve army of jobseekers.

There are still signs of the extraordinary scale of the job-seeking poor, even if Ehrenreich's account of them never amounts to their representation as an immense mass of people. Instead of converging on a tenement or a district, the reserve army in *Nickel and Dimed* is distinct from the hordes pressing against the sweater's door in search of work; it is spread out, running through the sluggish gears of the hiring machine. Because it is diffuse and in seemingly perpetual motion, seldom manifesting into a crowd, its collective form is difficult, though not impossible, to see. Beyond the surface, there are two lenses through which we can apprehend this mass of reservists.

First, there is a glimpse of this large collectivity in Ehrenreich's accounts of job seeking and low-wage hiring. In Key West, Ehrenreich grows increasingly desperate after "no one from the approximately twenty places" at which she applied responds (15). In Portland, she writes about taking (and failing) "preemployment tests" at a suburban Wal-Mart job fair. The questions on the tests are ludicrous and the "'right' answers should be obvious to anyone who has ever encountered the principle of hierarchy and subordination" (59), but that Wal-Mart is using a test to weed out those prospective employees not qualified to earn $6.50 an hour suggests that there are sufficient numbers of *un*qualified applicants to justify the measure.[17] In Minnesota, she

17. The more troubling question here might be: what are those unqualified to earn $6.50 an hour entitled to?

manages to get hired at a Wal-Mart but only after passing a physical and a drug-test. Just because Ehrenreich is never physically among legions of others hoping to be lucky enough to get hired at minimum wage (or something very close to it), does not mean that the scale of job seeking is anything other than vast.

Second, we see the faint contours of poverty's size in Ehrenreich's retelling of her orientation at Walmart. Of her first day as an associate in Minneapolis, Ehrenreich writes: "For sheer grandeur, scale, and intimidation value, I doubt if any corporate orientation exceeds that of Wal-Mart… When I arrive, dressed neatly in khakis and clean T-shirt, as befits a potential Wal-Mart 'associate,' I find there are ten new hires besides myself, mostly young and Caucasian, and a team of three, headed by Roberta, to do the 'orienting'" (143). The practiced institutional machinery that inducts new employees into the corporation is a disquieting trace of the modern-day reserve army. This machinery includes "a thick folder of paperwork"; the three defining principles of Walmart philosophy; videos on the history of Walmart, on the biography of its founder, Sam Walton, on why unions are bad, and on "associate honesty"; a reading from the "Wal-mart Associate Handbook"; and a turn at a workstation for some "Computer-Based Learning" (143–46).

While the comprehensive orientation might be read as a sign that Walmart is willing to invest in its new employees by the naïve, the tired routine of the day suggests the regularity with which workers and management get oriented. Walmart's 825,000 employees in 1998 and 1.5

million today[18] take on added significance when we start to think about the turnover that the hiring and orientation practices Ehrenreich describes imply. After the gauntlet of interviews, personality surveys, medical exams, and drug tests, each of which cull untold numbers of applicants, Ehrenreich is *one of eleven* new employees at the orientation. Notably, Ehrenreich takes the orientation in stride, finding nothing surprising about the number of new employees. Riis's sweater's phalanx conjures an impressive image of the working poor as an exploited mass. In its face, grasping the immediacy of the problem of poverty required little in the way of abstraction. While the eleven new hires attending Walmart's orientation similarly number among the working poor, the scale of poverty they imply only becomes legible through a different kind of numerical imagination.

While Ehrenreich's descriptions of low-wage hiring and orientation hint at the magnitude of the number of people working for and surviving on meagre wages, her descriptions of the work itself suggest another difference from 1890s America: unlike the manufacturing labor of the tenement sweater's shop, each of Ehrenreich's jobs is in direct service of a consumer. One of the selling points of the maid service for which Ehrenreich works in Portland is that they "'clean floors the old-fashioned way—on… hands and knees.'"[19] Sure enough, Ehrenreich finds herself in Portland's "exurbs" at a "five-bathroom spread." The house's owner, Mrs. W., has her hands full managing a cook, a nanny, and a crew of men finishing up some construction work outside.

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18. According to *Walmart.com*, the company's global workforce is over 2.2 million today. "Company Facts," Corporate, Walmart, accessed July 17, 2020, https://corporate.walmart.com/newsroom/company-facts.

19. Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, 83.

After some initial reluctance, because she had "already explained everything to the office on the phone," Mrs. W. eventually provides some direction for the maids: "move everything on all surfaces … and get underneath and be sure to do every bit of the several miles … of baseboards" (81). Once she has windexed, wiped, and buffed both sides of the banks of glass doors that line the ground floor, Ehrenreich gets assigned to the kitchen floor.

In what follows, Ehrenreich scrubs her way across the stone ("or at least stonelike") expanse—"like some fanatical penitent crawling through the stations of the cross"—while Mrs. W. stares on. Cleaning the floor in this manner isn't about some higher standard of cleanliness. According to Ehrenreich, the maid service places strict limits on water use: "We are instructed to use less than half a small bucket of lukewarm water for a kitchen and all adjacent scrubbable floors … meaning that within a few minutes we are doing nothing more than redistributing the dirt evenly around the floor" (83–84). In this scene, two things are happening. First, the relationship between the Maids and the people whose houses they clean is the book's clearest example of inequality, the moment when *Nickel and Dimed* comes closest to depicting a world of two halves.[20] The image of Ehrenreich scrubbing away while Mrs. W. stands watch is familiar—the poor have been cleaning the floors of the rich for a very long time. But here, her tenure with

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20. Interestingly, Ehrenreich reports this division without herself seeing it:

> Not all of our owners are rich. Maybe a quarter to a third of the houses look to be merely middle-class and some of these probably because they lack interim help to do the light cleaning between our visits every week or two are seriously dirty. But class is a relative thing. Once, after polishing up two houses in which the number of occupants clearly exceeded the number of bathrooms—an unmistakable sign of financial impairment, along with the presence of teddy bears in decorative roles—I asked Holly, my team leader of the day, whether the next house on our list was "wealthy." Her answer: "If we're cleaning their house, they're wealthy." (94–95)

the Maids stands out as the only job where the relationship between worker and consumer is comparable to that of lord and peasant. In every other instance, the consumers that Ehrenreich serves aren't discernible from her coworkers.

Second, cleaning in the absence of a standard of cleanliness suggests a degree of futility that can also be seen in her other jobs. At the Walmart in Minneapolis, Ehrenreich again finds herself performing somewhat futile tasks, but this time as a subordinate to the patrons of the store's women's clothing department, not the wealthy. The main job in "soft-lines" is to "keep ladies' wear 'shoppable'" which, in addition to keeping clothes folded and racks in order, mostly consists of returning the wares that customers have rejected to their proper places. In prose that Ehrenreich admits is wanting in compassion for Walmart shoppers, she writes:

> …the great thing about shopping, for most of these women, is that here *they* get to behave like brats, ignoring the brawling babies in their carts, tossing things around for someone else to pick up. And it wouldn't be any fun—would it?—unless the clothes were all reasonably orderly to begin with, which is where I come in, constantly re-creating orderliness for the customers to maliciously destroy. It's appalling, but it's in their nature: only pristine and virginal displays truly excite them. (177)

Ehrenreich's endless folding is a far cry from the frantic labor of the tenements in the sweater's district. Although Ehrenreich at Walmart and Riis at the knickerbocker workshops both describe the work as exhausting and punishing, the ends of Ehrenreich's labor are decidedly different. The sweater's workers made clothing; Ehrenreich is folding and organizing so that the customers who visit soft lines can feel a certain way. Whereas scrubbing Mrs. W.'s floor is reminiscent of a familiar social order where the poor serve the rich (though in this case, the emphasis is on performing subservience more than making things clean), Ehrenreich's folding is a sign of something new. An increasing share of the working poor no longer fall within the two sectors

dominant in Riis's time: serving the rich directly or menial labor (usually in the form of resource extraction or manufacturing). The poor used to work for industry or in direct service of the wealthy, by *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich is folding for a *consumer*. Though the pace is at times frantic, Ehrenreich's folding shares neither the material productivity nor the material desperation of a sweater's tenement workshop.

Indeed, *all* of Ehrenreich's jobs in *Nickel and Dimed* are in what might be called the "service sector": restaurant server twice over, house cleaner, "dietary aid" at a residential facility for seniors, and sales "associate" at Walmart. Working as a cleaner in Maine, Ehrenreich sees the relationship between householder and housekeeper play out in predictable ways, with a clear division separating the propertied from the help. But in every other one of her jobs, mapping socioeconomic status based solely on whether an individual is a consumer or a worker is impossible. In the restaurants, at the retirement home, and at Walmart, Ehrenreich is not serving the elite. This figure of the new, decidedly unwealthy, consumer undermines poverty's conceptual capacity to make the suffering of the poor visible by shattering the monopoly that the more affluent used to hold over immoderate consumption. Despite persistent inequality, even the poor can now feel like consumers.

Twenty-First Century American Poverty

In many ways, the massive scale and punishing character of the poverty—working or otherwise—legible in Ehrenreich's account is surprisingly consistent with conceptions of poverty from a century before. In *How the Other Half Lives*, poverty is nothing if not widespread and brutal. But in the tenements, there is neither a question of what poverty is nor who the poor are.

Under the belief that the broader public was unaware of the tenements' particular horrors, Riis's interest lies in showing the dire conditions of how the poor live and work. He confronts his readers with not only the details of the tenements but the fact of their enormity, all without ever suggesting that better governance and more moral landlords could eradicate poverty. Facing the tenements, he advocates for better living conditions since any end to poverty is all but unimaginable. In juxtaposition, *Nickel and Dimed* shows that the old understanding of poverty as a constitutive feature of society is gone. In its place, poverty appears as an aggregation of failed individuals. Speculating about the depths of poverty among the other maids in Portland, Ehrenreich asks: "How poor are they, my coworkers? The fact that anyone is working this job at all can be taken as prima facie evidence of some kind of desperation or at least history of mistakes and disappointments, but it's not for me to ask" (78). It might very well be true that desperations, mistakes, or disappointments have led each one of Ehrenreich's coworkers to the Maids, but the power of those individual narratives and personalities drowns out the telling traces of poverty's present shape; as a hermeneutic through which we might understand the suffering of the other half, poverty is broken.

What, if anything, connects the lives of the servers in Key West, the cleaners in Portland, and the associates in Minneapolis? Even unifying the places and people under the banner of economic hardship only defers the question—what then constitutes economic hardship? But, although *Nickel and Dimed* doesn't provide answers, it makes the absence of poverty's force conspicuous, a feat that subsequent books on poverty rarely undertake, let alone achieve. For their part, Desmond, Vance, and Goldstein—along with growing number of scholars and writers striving to understand poverty in qualitative terms—focus on much smaller and more

manageable groups of people, teasing out particularities and dwelling on individuals. Rather than illuminating poverty, these increasingly narrow and focused depictions of specific groups and individuals are a symptom of its broken hermeneutics.

Of the twenty-four chapters in *Evicted*, twenty-one name an individual person in the first sentence. Of the three that don't, two still name an individual within the opening paragraph. The only chapter that bucks this trend is the eighteenth, "Lobster on Food Stamps." But even there, Desmond's commitment to the individual is intact. In the chapter, Larraine, one of the more memorable trailer park residents Desmond profiles, loses her food stamp allowance after an eviction causes her to miss a phone appointment with her welfare caseworker. After a follow-up appointment and protracted negotiations with the welfare office, she eventually manages to get her benefits reinstated. "But when her food stamps kicked in, she went to the grocery store and bought two lobster tails, shrimp, king crab legs, salad, and lemon meringue pie. Bringing it all back to Beaker's trailer [her current residence], she added Cajun seasoning to the crab legs and cooked the lobster tails in lemon butter at 350 degrees. She ate everything alone, in a single sitting, washing it down with Pepsi. The meal consumed her entire monthly allocation of food stamps ($80)."[21] After this anecdote, Desmond devotes the rest of the chapter to explaining how, although Larraine's irresponsible economic choices—her lobster dinner the shining example—appear to many as a root cause, her spending is in fact a consequence of poverty and eviction. The scene is compelling and Desmond's invective against attributing poverty to spending habits is sound, if not groundbreaking. But where, amid the trailer, food stamps, and lobster, are the

21. Desmond, *Evicted*, 218.

poor? The only thing that Larraine's personality, ingratiating though it is, and her immediate circumstances tell us about poverty is how confused the concept has become.

Similarly, some of the most compelling scenes from *Nickel and Dimed* revolve around individual people that Ehrenreich meets. Like the Maids, Ehrenreich's coworkers at Walmart have, almost without exception, *fallen* into their jobs. Stan, "a twenty-something fellow with wildly misaligned teeth," had planned to put himself through school only to find that "work cut into studying too much, so he had to drop out and now…. He stares at the butt-strewed ground, perhaps seeing an eternity in appliances unfold before him."[22] Ehrenreich discovers on her first day of work that Melissa "was a waitress before this job, that her husband works in construction and her children are grown. There have been some disorganized patches in her life—an out-of-wedlock child, a problem with alcohol and drugs—but that's all over now that she has given her life to Christ" (154). Significantly, Stan and Melissa aren't exceptions but the rule: something must have gone wrong for them to have ended up working the floor at Walmart. The surface of Ehrenreich's account of the poor is of single persons and single life stories, a conjecture that, although dominant today, fails to capture the dimensions of the material conditions of larger social and economic structures. Crucially, when the register shifts away from the individual to the categorical, neither Stan's inability to juggle work and school nor Melissa's "disorganized patches" provide any insight into how and why the economy is failing to return a living wage to the working poor.

But what sets Ehrenreich's account apart is that she is not simply narrating how individuals end up at low-wage jobs. *Nickel and Dimed* is about making the suffering of the poor

22. Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, 183–84.

visible to the nonpoor: “It is common, among the nonpoor, to think of poverty as a sustainable condition—austere, perhaps, but they get by somehow, don’t they? They are ‘always with us.’ What is harder for the nonpoor to see is poverty as acute distress.” Ehrenreich urges us to see how the experiences she describes are, in fact, “not part of a sustainable lifestyle” but “by almost any standard of subsistence, emergency situations” (214). Many of the people she writes about are suffering, but to characterize these situations as invisible emergencies implies that improving the lives of the poor is contingent on recognizing the plight of the poor and then intervening on their behalf. But whether the lifestyles Ehrenreich documents are “sustainable” is a moot point since they are the result of economic inequality, not a lack of opportunity, and certainly not an absence of work ethic. What this framing misses is that the scandal of poverty is not that individuals and families have taken a misstep but that these low-wage jobs exist at all.

Chapter 2

Relative and Physical Poverty in an Affluent Society

Poverty's conceptual transformation from a material fact in Jacob Riis's tenements to something far less certain among Barbara Ehrenreich's diffuse working poor one hundred years later is in many ways incremental. But while this erosion of poverty's hermeneutic force is generally gradual, a crucial shift occurs in the middle of the twentieth century. The conception of poverty legible in the tenements outlasts the Progressive Era and survives the Depression but, amidst the prosperity that follows the Second World War, it crosses a threshold and takes a new form.

The broader context for this transformation is the subject of liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith's 1958 monograph, *The Affluent Society*. In the book, Galbraith argues that Western Europe and North America had recently undergone a monumental change, transforming from societies in which wealth was concentrated among a handful of elites and the rest of the population—the vast majority—lived in desperate poverty, their lives consumed by hunger, sickness, and cold, to societies in which "the ordinary individual" enjoyed ready access to "foods, entertainment, personal transportation, and plumbing."[1] This shift laid the foundation for what Galbraith called "the affluent society." While this new order brought relative prosperity to many, Galbraith saw a danger in one of its most potent expressions: a deepening obsession with

1. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 2nd revised ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 2.

production. In his view, like a rising tide lifting all boats, the rapid expansion of industrial capitalism was responsible for generating the unprecedented wealth that pulled the masses out of privation. The problem was that, despite these changes, mid-century economists and policymakers remained stuck in the old paradigm of "production," using a vocabulary and framework that no longer made sense: "The notion that ours, inevitably, is a world of deep poverty in which production is of supreme urgency is an old one. So is the corresponding behavior. The discovery that production is no longer of such urgency—that it is something of which we are reasonably assured and which, paradoxically, is most threatened by our failure to see it in proper perspective—involves a major wrench in our attitudes. What was sound economic behavior before cannot be sound economic behavior now."[2] With the dawn of the affluent society, Galbraith believed further increases in production and the subsequent blind generation of new wealth were quickly losing their capacity to benefit anyone other than the economic elite.

Galbraith's descriptive analysis of the social and economic order that emerged in mid-century America signals crucial changes for the section of society—the numerical majority—that had, up until a short time before, been understood as unproblematically poor. But while Galbraith deftly identifies the seismic socio-economic shifts of the postwar period, he is less attuned to how the affluent society affected poverty beyond numerical decline. In contradistinction to Galbraith's macro-economic approach, my aim in this chapter is to offer a detailed account of how the concept of American poverty gets reconfigured amidst an affluent

2. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 252.

society in the middle of the twentieth century. To this end, this chapter focuses on Galbraith's methodological opposite, famous anthropologist and influential poverty scholar, Oscar Lewis.

The Culture of Poverty

Both Galbraith and Lewis were deeply interested in the study of modern society and its inequities. But where the former's interests lay in charting structural change through society-level social and economic trends, the latter approached the problem through culture. Lewis examined his object from the ground, observing how individual people, families, and communities behaved within their milieu.

Betraying a misplaced faith in culture's capacity to determine social and economic conditions, the center of Lewis's research was his insistence that poverty produces a distinctive culture. The overly general and universalist tenor of what he would eventually call his culture of poverty thesis has tarnished what is otherwise a staggering and vibrant contribution to the study of poverty in the twentieth century. The central idea of the thesis is straightforward: across time and space, conditions of economic duress often lead to the same distinct way of life.[3] This thesis, while coherent in its most abstract terms, quickly becomes difficult to pin down in its application. Lewis believed that the culture of poverty "transcends regional, rural-urban and national differences and shows remarkable similarities in family structure, interpersonal

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3. In *La Vida*, Lewis lists six conditions that he believes are especially likely to produce a culture of poverty: capitalism, unemployment, low wages, no social safety net, bilateral kinship, and a widespread society-wide faith in meritocracy.

relations, time-orientation, value systems and spending patterns."[4] At the same time, he allowed that conditions of poverty don't always result in a culture of poverty: "There are degrees of poverty and many kinds of poor people. The culture of poverty refers to *one way of life* shared by poor people in given historical and social contexts."[5]

In Lewis's major works on "slum life" in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and New York, what exactly constitutes the culture of poverty isn't clear. Lewis gives seventy-odd traits that he claims make up the culture of poverty, but it is difficult to tell which are essential and which are not. Because of the large number of traits, and because none are indispensable, it is easy to imagine two cultures of poverty which each have many of the traits Lewis proposes while sharing few traits with each other. Nonetheless, despite his zealous generalizations and theoretical imprecisions, Lewis's most ambitious work, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty* (1965), still captures poverty amid the transition that Galbraith described in *The Affluent Society*.[6]

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4. Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1965), xliii.

5. Lewis, *La Vida*, xlviii (emphasis added).

6. In terms of where he conducted the bulk of his ethnographic research—among Canada's Indigenous peoples, in rural and urban Mexico, and in the slums of San Juan, Puerto Rico—Lewis is a peripheral figure within the twentieth century hermeneutics of *American* poverty. However, in terms of training, methodology, and audience, he is central. Over the

Historically and conceptually, Lewis and his culture of poverty thesis stand between the forceful poverty of Jacob Riis's tenements and the hyper-specific accounts of poverty in present-day ethnographies of the poor. In this capacity, *La Vida* is a transitional text, signaling the end of one formulation of poverty and anticipating the next. To elaborate this crucial shift, my analysis of Lewis and the culture of poverty has three parts.

First, I examine the culture of poverty thesis in the context of the critical responses it has elicited to show that critics have tended to reduce the thesis to its political consequences and, in so doing, have neglected the far more complex (and interesting) ethnographic description that is its underpinning. The aim of this section is to unseat Lewis's culture of poverty thesis from its status as a deeply flawed political treatise and suggest that it might be more productively understood as a symptom of poverty's place in an affluent society.

Second, through a close reading of the sections of *La Vida* that take place in New York, I examine the increasing difficulty of understanding poverty through its physical dimension. Here, I foreground Lewis's ethnographic descriptions to show how older conceptions of poverty are losing their capacity to reflect the lives of the poor.

Third and finally, I return to Galbraith to pose the question of where poverty turns without its older physical presumption. While the legacy of the culture of poverty thesis has been to dismiss Lewis as an irresponsibly reductive thinker, I aim to show that the contradictions and

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following chapters, the extent to which ethnographers writing about poverty today are still reacting to Lewis will become clear.

cracks in his ethnographic descriptions illustrate the emergence of an impasse within how we understand poverty that remains not only unresolved but largely uninterrogated.

Much has been made of Lewis's fast and loose use of culture as a frame for understanding poverty and the lives of the poor. Critiques levied since the culture of poverty's earliest formulations almost always criticize the same two things.[7] First, they take issue with the political ramifications of the culture of poverty thesis: they accuse Lewis of dismissing poverty's structural underpinnings and tracing poverty's causes back to poor people's social, psychological, and cultural failings. Second, these critiques point out the fact that Lewis's culture of poverty thesis isn't borne out in the ethnographic data he presents: the culture of poverty is a sweeping claim, not at all well-served by Lewis's intensely focused family studies, which dwell on particularities, extremes, and exceptions. Neither criticism is wrong. Lewis's broad cultural brush painted a picture in which the poor were too easily blamed for economic conditions over which they had essentially no control. Moreover, the distance between Lewis's cultural theorizing and his atomic accounts of singular figures—family, community, or individual—guaranteed the failure of any universalist theory. Together, these critiques have buried Lewis's work. When it is discussed, Lewis is seen as little more than an overly ambitious and insufficiently analytical anomaly, with little to offer poverty scholarship in the twenty-first

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7. For two contemporaneous examples, see Charles Valentine's *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* (1968), especially Chapter 3, "The International 'Culture of Poverty,' with Implications for Social Science and Social Policy," and Eleanor Burke Leacock's introduction to the edited collection *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (1971).

century. But to dismiss the entirety of Lewis's output on these grounds alone is far too hasty. For better or for worse, both strands of critique are themselves blinkered by their focus on the culture of poverty thesis.

In Lewis's formulation, the culture of poverty is composed of seventy-odd traits. This plethora has been the source of some scholarly confusion. In his encyclopedia entry on "The Culture of Poverty," Philippe Bourgois writes: "The notion of a culture of poverty, consequently, should not be treated as a full-blown theory. As presented by Lewis, it was merely a bundle of some 70 traits which he did not link to a particular processual or dynamic logic. In fact, he never even listed all 70 of the traits that he claimed existed."[8] In this dismissal, Bourgois is wrong on two counts. First, Lewis did list the seventy traits, albeit unsystematically. After introducing the eponymous idea, "The Culture of Poverty" became somewhat of a default title for Lewis. It comes after the colon in both *Five Families* (1959) and *La Vida*; it is the name of a section in *La Vida*'s introduction; it heads at least two different essays—one published in a 1963 issue of *Trans-action* and the other in a 1966 issue of the *Scientific American*; and it is the title of a number of book chapters.[9] Ideas, sentences, paragraphs, and sections repeat across all of these works—the book chapters are essentially modified collections of previously published

8. Philippe Bourgois, "Culture of Poverty," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Neil Smelser and Paul Baltes (Oxford: Pergamon, 2001), 11904–07.

9. "Culture of Poverty" book chapters can be found in *Explosive Forces in Latin America* (1964), *A Study of Slum Culture* (1968), and *On Understanding Poverty* (1969).

material.[10] The confusion Bourgois exemplifies arises with the introduction to *La Vida*, which refers the reader to a previously published essay in which Lewis claims to list the "seventy

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10. There are a number of places for critics like Bourgois to get lost. First, of the many pieces of writing that Lewis titled "The Culture of Poverty," only one—the *Explosive Forces* chapter—contains close to seventy traits. Second, the definitive list of traits appears, not in a major journal, nor in one of his monographs, but in an obscure chapter in an edited collection that is about Latin America before it is about poverty. Third, Lewis doesn't present the traits in any systematic way. Instead, he lists them haphazardly in different parts of the essay, sometimes under a heading—social and psychological characteristics or economic traits—but other times not. This lack of organization makes the traits difficult to recognize let alone count. For instance, by way of introducing extended sections taken directly from *The Children of Sanchez* in the *Explosive Forces* chapter, Lewis suggests that "a few of the many traits of the culture of poverty can be illustrated by some excerpts" (Lewis, *Explosive Forces*, 159). What follows is uninterrupted first-person narration in the voices of his ethnographic subjects. Lewis provides neither context nor comment. It is up to the reader to decipher which traits are being illustrated at any given moment and to decide whether they represent a previously mentioned trait or something else. Lastly, the traits themselves lack internal coherence. Rather than a carefully curated and balanced list, the traits are a jumble of redundancy, overlap, and ambiguity. This is likely because Lewis's understanding of the culture of poverty crystalized across and in between his publications rather than within one. Even in the *Explosive Forces* chapter, Lewis doesn't mention the seventy-trait structure; he only refers to the chapter in retrospect as containing the

interrelated social, economic, and psychological traits" that make up the culture of poverty.[11] The citation for the traits refers to a chapter—"The Culture of Poverty"—in an edited volume from 1964 called *Explosive Forces in Latin America*. Lewis's *Explosive Forces* essay, in turn, purports to "draw extensively" from material published in one of his Mexico ethnographies, *The Children of Sanchez* (1961). In truth, the *Explosive Forces* chapter combines paragraphs and sections from *The Children of Sanchez* as well as paragraphs and sections that would appear virtually verbatim in the introduction to *La Vida* the following year. The sections from *The Children of Sanchez* include what Lewis would later refer to as "approximately fifty traits"[12] of the culture of poverty. The paragraphs that would become a part of *La Vida* add another fifteen or so, bringing Lewis within range of seventy.[13]

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definitive list. The framework comes into view only in hindsight. Though this chaotic approach doesn't do Lewis any favors when it comes to his critics, in broad strokes, the aggregated traits nonetheless show how poverty is conceived within his work. Oscar Lewis, "Culture of Poverty," in *Explosive Forces in Latin America*, ed. John J. TePaske and Sydney Nettleton Fisher (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964), 149–73.

11. Lewis, *La Vida*, xliv.

12. Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *Trans-action* 1, no. 17–19 (1963): 17.

13. The reason that I am not committing to exact numbers is because the traits overlap. At one point, Lewis claims "that within the culture of poverty, envy and cynicism are powerful drives" (Lewis, *Pedro Martinez*, 163) but elsewhere lists "a cynicism which extends even to the church" as one of the culture of poverty's characteristic "critical attitude(s) toward some of the

The second way that Bourgois's dismissal falls short stems more from a lack of generosity than from an error in fact. The culture of poverty thesis, as it appears in Lewis's introductions and essays, might lead one to believe, as it did Bourgois, that it is a thin concept, no deeper than seventy mostly superficial traits. But while it might be the case for the culture of poverty thesis itself, the complexity of Lewis's ethnographies tells a different story. The intricacies that one finds in his expositions of people and places get smoothed into a too tidy analysis in his culture of poverty thesis. Simply put, the thesis does not do justice to the vibrancy of Lewis's ethnographic descriptions. Critics, however, have focused on the thesis, leaving the ethnographic descriptions that constitute the bulk of Lewis's output relatively untouched. Rather than an essentializing and totalizing account of poverty, when examined in light of Lewis's ethnographic descriptions, the culture of poverty thesis appears as Lewis's flawed attempt to theorize his own ethnographic data. Foregrounding the ethnographic accounts allows for the culture of poverty thesis to emerge as a symptom of a conceptual instability that was creeping into widely held ideas about who the poor were and how they lived. In sum, as the older traces of poverty, so forceful in the tenements, started losing their capacity to denote poverty, the culture of poverty thesis shifts the focus away from poverty's physical traces and toward what Lewis took to be its social and psychological dimensions.

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values and institutions of the dominant classes" (Lewis, *Pedro Martinez*, 154). Lewis does not offer any discernible logic to determine what counts as a distinct trait, which traits are traits in their own right, and which name categories that include sub-traits. Oscar Lewis*, Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family* (New York: Random House, 1964).

From this perspective, the seventy-odd traits Lewis proposes disclose a mix of the new conceptual instability of poverty and remnants of its former material certainty. Generally, these traits are of one of two types: either they are about the immediate material and demographic conditions of poverty and day to day survival, or about poverty's social and psychological consequences. Omitting the most obvious redundancies, the first set of traits consists of:

> "unemployment and underemployment"
> "low wages"
> "the absence of savings"
> "child labor"
> "a miscellany of unskilled occupations"
> "a chronic shortage of cash"
> "spontaneous informal credit devices (*tandas*)"
> "the pawning of personal goods"
> "the use of second-hand clothing and furniture"
> "the absence of food reserves in the home"
> "the pattern of frequent buying of small quantities of food many times a day as the need arises"
> "living in crowded quarters" and "a lack of privacy."

Again, omitting glaring redundancies, the remaining forty-three traits make up the second set:

> "gregariousness"
> "a high incidence of alcoholism"
> "frequent resort to violence in the settlement of quarrels"
> "frequent use of physical violence in the training of children"
> "wife beating"
> "early initiation into sex"
> "free unions or consensual marriages"
> "a relatively high incidence of the abandonment of mothers and children"
> "a trend toward mother-centered families"
> "a much greater knowledge of maternal relatives"
> "the predominance of the nuclear family"
> "a strong predisposition to authoritarianism"
> "a great emphasis upon family solidarity—an ideal only rarely achieved"
> "a strong present-time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and plan for the future"

"a sense of resignation and fatalism based upon the realities of their difficult life situation"
"a belief in male superiority which reaches its crystallization in *machismo* or the cult of masculinity"
"a corresponding martyr complex among women"
"a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts"
"hatred of the police"
"mistrust of government and those in high position"
"a cynicism which extends even to the church"
"a counter quality"
"a residual quality in that its members are attempting to utilize and integrate into a workable way of life the remnants of beliefs and customs of diverse origins"
Feelings "of marginality"
Feelings "of helplessness"
Feelings "of dependency"
Feelings "of not belonging"
They are "convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs"
Feelings "of powerlessness"
"a widespread feeling of inferiority"
Feelings "of personal unworthiness"
"very little sense of history"
"a marginal people who know only their own troubles, their own local conditions, their own neighborhood, their own way of life"
"Usually, they do not have the knowledge, the vision, or the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and those of their counterparts elsewhere in the world"
"They are not class conscious"
"they are very sensitive indeed to status distinctions"
"although the lives of the poor may be difficult, they are by no means dull"
"within the culture of poverty, envy and cynicism are powerful drives"
"a provincial and locally oriented culture"
Critical of priests, "they rarely go to confession or mass and rely upon prayer to the images of saints in their own homes and upon pilgrimages to popular shrines."
Unable to afford doctors and suspicious of hospitals, "they rely upon herbs or other home remedies and upon local curers and "'midwives'"
"its members are only partially integrated into national institutions"

> Its members are "a marginal people even when they live in the heart of a great city."[14]

The second set of traits is part and parcel of what elicited such a strong response from Lewis's critics. Today, they likely appear even more embarrassingly arbitrary, essentialist, and reductive than they would have following the initial publications of the culture of poverty thesis. Virtually none of the traits in the second set have endured as convincing markers of poverty, cultural or otherwise. Not only is the extent of their prevalence among the poor suspect, their existence within other economic strata is undeniable. While Lewis hedges and claims only that these traits are *more* likely to be found within the culture of poverty than elsewhere, he provides neither qualitative nor quantitative evidence to that effect. The traits in the first set are a different story. The first three—unemployment and underemployment, low wages, and the absence of savings—stand apart in that they all amount to or express a lack of wealth whereas the rest speculate about the potential consequences of that lack. The first set remains squarely in the physical dimension, understanding poverty in familiar terms where economic duress manifests in simply not having enough. The problem with the first set in the context of the affluent society is that, by the 1960s in New York, what not having enough meant was no longer simple. The second set, by contrast, is rife with subjective conjecture. Reading the two sets against each other suggests that the second might be a response to the progressive failure of the first; that once the physical dimension of poverty became less assured, Lewis sought certainty in the social and psychological traits of the culture of poverty.

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14. Oscar Lewis, *Explosive Forces*, 152–64. All of the listed traits are scattered across the cited range.

Among the many blurry formulations in and around Lewis's culture of poverty thesis is his distinction between poverty and the culture of poverty. While he is quick to point out that they are not in fact one and the same, Lewis never precisely defines where poverty ends and the culture of poverty begins. In the introduction to *La Vida*, Lewis says that the culture of poverty "is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society."[15] He goes on to qualify: "The culture of poverty, however, is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. Once it comes into existence it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children" (xlv). These passages characterize the culture of poverty as an adaptation and reaction to a set of objective conditions about the poor's marginal position within a class-stratified society. This understanding reflects the second set of traits but leaves little room for the first—low wages and under or unemployment are not cultural reactions on the part of the poor. Later in the introduction, perhaps realizing his omission, Lewis seems to suggest a more inclusive, if characteristically opaque, formulation: "The culture of poverty refers to one way of life shared by poor people in given historical and social contexts. *The economic traits which I have listed for the culture of poverty are necessary but not sufficient to define the phenomena I have in mind*" (xlviii, emphasis added). Unlike the earlier two examples where the culture of poverty is exclusively a reaction, this framing suggests that a constitutive part of the culture of

15. Lewis, *La Vida*, xliv.

poverty—the economic traits, or, the first set—is poverty itself.[16] In this more inclusive sense, Lewis's explorations of the culture of poverty are, then, necessarily not only about the phenomena he has in mind—the social and psychological markers that comprise the culture of poverty—but also about poverty itself.

That the second set of traits functions as a supplement to the first suggests that the first set alone is no longer equal to the task of defining poverty. In the *Explosive Forces* chapter, Lewis writes:

> poverty in modern nations is not only a state of economic deprivation, of disorganization, or of the absence of something; it is also something positive in the sense that it has a structure, a rationale, and defense mechanisms without which the poor could hardly carry on. In short, it is a way of life, remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines. The culture of poverty has its own modalities and distinctive social and psychological consequences for its members. It is a dynamic factor which affects participation in the larger national culture and becomes a subculture of its own.[17]

This passage reflects the division between the two sets of traits. Economic deprivation, disorganization, and the absence of *something* corresponds to the first set (and is as close as Lewis comes to offering a definition of poverty as distinct from the culture of poverty) and the something positive corresponds to the second set. His distinction between poverty and the culture

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16. Lewis never conclusively distinguishes between the social, economic, and psychological traits. The first set above is my categorization of what I take to be the economic traits and the second set a combination of the social and psychological traits. The economic traits stand out because they all clearly express a lack of wealth whereas the social and psychological traits are more difficult to disentangle.

17. Lewis, *Explosive Forces*, 150.

of poverty is tautological since both are reflected in the traits. The second set is a response to a crisis in meaning of the first. *Under*employment and *low* wages are both relative concepts, their legibility dependent on context. Lewis takes each for granted, devoting his analytic energy instead to conceiving and elaborating social and psychological characteristics. This priority is also reflected in the distribution of the traits: very little focus on the economic basis of what it means to be poor; the vast majority describe feelings, dispositions, and pathologies. While the problem of poverty's substance and meaning were in flux, the fate of the culture of poverty thesis was sealed by the short-sightedness of the second set of traits.

La Vida

La Vida does not read like a contemporary ethnography.[18] In the book there is a hard and fast separation between any explicit theorizing or reflecting and the substance of the ethnographic account. All the former is contained within a sprawling introduction. The ensuing

18. Even among Lewis's own body of work, *La Vida* stands out for its depth. While earlier works—*Five Families*, *The Children of Sanchez*, *Pedro Martínez*—employ a methodology similar to that of *La Vida*, they are far more limited. According to Lewis, "the most important methodological innovation in [*La Vida*] … is the much broader canvas of the family portrait, the intensification of the technique whereby individuals and incidents are seen from multiple points of view, and the combination of multiple biographies with observed typical days" (Lewis, *La Vida*, xxv). *La Vida* represents the culmination of methods Lewis had honed in earlier works and applies them on a larger scale.

chapters—totaling well over 600 pages—are a systematic depiction of five members of the Ríos family, Fernanda (or Nanda), the matriarch, and four of her children—Soledad, Felícita, Simplicio, and Cruz—in Puerto Rico and New York. The "Introduction" is written in Lewis's voice—in the first person—and includes musings on Lewis's more general anthropological project, a section on methodology, a brief introduction to the Ríos family and La Esmerelda (the San Juan slum where they live), and a more theoretical sketch of the culture of poverty.

The rest of the book is divided into five sections, each one centered around a different member of the Ríos family. Each section, in turn, follows the same formula. The first chapter of each is written in the third person and follows Rosa Gonzáles—a pseudonym for Lewis's research assistant—as she spends a day (or two) with the section's main subject. A section's ensuing chapters are mostly written in the voice of the main subject, with occasional chapters in the voice of someone of intimate proximity—usually a spouse or a close relative—interspersed among them. For the most part, the chapters written in the voices of the informants enumerate the social and psychological traits of the culture of poverty.[19]

In every case, the result is a winding, repetitive, melodramatic narrative that sketches out personal history, pauses at major life and family events, and pays exhaustive attention to close relationships. A considerable part of the narrative involves one family member evaluating the

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19. Because of the inscrutability of the book's methodology, it is impossible to know the extent of Lewis's role in drawing out this emphasis (I suspect that in conducting the interviews, in transcribing and translating them, and in writing the book, Lewis's questions, decisions, and choices were motivated more by his desire to confirm his thesis than to disprove it).

decisions, character, and morals of another. Another widespread refrain involves descriptions of mistreatment at the hands of either individuals or, less often, institutions. Lewis likely saw these narratives, judgments, and grievances as strong evidence in support of his thesis. But if they confirm the social and psychological traits of the culture of poverty, they do so only as singular anecdotes, revealing nothing of poverty's broader shape or the "structure" Lewis claims it has.[20]

Although much of the text might be considered opportunistic evidence in service of the framework Lewis lays out in the introduction—social and psychological traits in particular—*La Vida* tells us something else about poverty. In his dogmatic presentation of anecdotal evidence in support of the idea that the *culture of poverty* "transcends regional, rural-urban and national differences,"[21] Lewis misses what his research is saying about poverty itself: it's undergoing a significant transformation.

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20. In his reading of *La Vida*'s introduction, one of Lewis's earliest and best critics, Charles Valentine, points out the contradictions in how Lewis presented the Ríos family: "Thus in the space of four or five pages we have the characters of *La Vida* presented, in turn, as (1) typical of the culture of the poor, (2) following a lifestyle of unknown frequency and distribution, (3) deeply affected by a specialized occupational pattern [sex work] confined to one third of the community, (4) characterized by an extreme deviance unique in their chronicler's experience, and (5) spanning the gap between the upper and lower classes both in wealth and in family patterns." Charles Valentine, *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 54.

21. Lewis, *La Vida*, xliii.

Perhaps because it is where Lewis's agenda is at its most descriptive, traces of the material consequences of economic duress are most concentrated in the opening chapter of each section, where Lewis narrates Rosa's day or two with each Ríos. The narrative voice in these chapters is bizarre. The narration resembles that of a third-person novel, except here the text purports to be non-fiction, the protagonist is a research assistant, and the narrator, we assume, is her supervisor. The fieldwork that provided the basis for these chapters is a mystery. The omniscient writing suggests that Lewis was present, though he is never accounted for in the narrative. Rosa, in contrast, is an active participant, interacting with the Ríos family and engaging in dialogue. Sometimes the kinds of descriptions that we would expect from an ethnographer come as declarations about what Rosa is observing but more often occur as statements of fact from the narrator. It is unclear whether the typical day that Lewis narrates was a discrete day or an amalgamation of events observed over a longer period. Lewis's commitment to the culture of poverty remains prevalent throughout, but it also coexists with a descriptive necessity: these chapters set the stage, grounding the drama of the first-person narratives in a physical place and narrative context. In the Fernanda, Felícita, and Cruz sections, the Rosa chapters take place in La Esmeralda; in the Soledad and Simplicio sections, the Rosa chapters are in the Bronx. With an eye toward my more general focus on the hermeneutics of American poverty and bracketing the fraught particularity of Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States, the analysis that follows is about Soledad and Simplicio in New York. The parts of *La Vida* that take place in New York show us that understanding American poverty in terms of its conventional physicality is quickly becoming untenable.

If Riis's account of New York tenements at the turn of the century—in both its descriptions and assumptions—signaled the force of the hermeneutics of poverty at the time, Lewis's descriptions of Soledad and Simplicio's New York apartments suggest something far less assured. The apartments are a mix of familiar markers of poverty's physical presence—crowding, infestation, little privacy—with, if not affluence, some evidence of poverty's absence. According to Lewis, Soledad and her three daughters lived in a "narrow, ground-floor railroad apartment [which] consisted of a small living room in the front, a kitchen and bathroom, in the rear, and two windowless bedrooms between" (127). For their part, Simplicio, his partner Flora, and their nephew Gabi lived in "a third-floor furnished apartment which consisted of one room, a tiny kitchen, and a hall toilet shared with two other families" (413). In both cases, poverty is legible in the lack of privacy and short supply of living space. But Soledad's kitchen begins to reveal a more complex picture:

> Although the kitchen was clean and cheerful-looking, she [Rosa] saw several cockroaches crawling on the walls and over the sink. On one side of the crowded room were a china cabinet, a large four-burner gas stove, and a table and chairs. On the outer wall a combination sink and washtub was partially blocked by the refrigerator, making the washtub inaccessible. Soledad often washed clothes in the bathtub. The kitchen walls had just been painted a bright green. They were decorated with religious calendars, plastic flowers, a fancy match holder, a plaster plaque of brightly colored fruit, and a new set of aluminum pans. Fresh red and white curtains hung at the window. The linoleum, although worn, was scrubbed clean. (127)

In some ways, the kitchen too bears conclusive signs of poverty: cockroaches crawling on the walls and sink, worn linoleum, and a space cramped to the degree that the washtub is inaccessible. But at the same time, it is clean and cheerful-looking, recently painted, and freshly draped. Moreover, it seems to be well appointed: gas stove, sink, refrigerator, new aluminum pans, and even a china cabinet. Since, for Lewis, the kitchen's poverty is determined by

Soledad's membership within the culture of poverty, he misses the odd juxtaposition of cleanliness and infestation as well as the striking image of modern appliances so crowded together that they become useless. Without the distraction of the culture of poverty, the image of a clean, furnished kitchen, complete with a china cabinet and new cookware, crawling with cockroaches and crowded to the point of dysfunction, is much more difficult to figure out.

The combination of physical signs of poverty with material evidence of its absence is perhaps even more pronounced in Simplicio and Flora's kitchen. By Lewis's account, it is smaller, more crowded, home to cockroaches as well as mice but also includes the same appliances as Soledad's, in addition to a "wringer-type washing machine," a set of "good dishes," and Simplicio's prized, six-dollar model train (421). Perhaps the most difficult feature of the kitchen to reconcile with older versions of poverty is the family's pantry. After Rosa joins Simplicio, Flora, and Gabi grocery shopping, Lewis narrates putting the food away:

Flora put the perishable food into the refrigerator. It already was half full of food, milk, juices, some meat, vegetables, cheese and eggs…. The staples were stored in a food-storage cabinet which stood beside the refrigerator. The cabinet contained a jar of salad dressing, dried peas, spaghetti, farina, a large can of Ajax cleansing powder, toilet paper, disinfectant, shoe polish, milk of magnesia, potatoes, cans of Campbell's soups, cans of tuna fish, cinnamon, and popcorn for Gabi…. On top of [the other] cabinet stood a small spice cabinet and several canisters decorated with decals of apples and pears. The latter held rice, sugar, coffee, beans and powdered milk (421).

Poverty is not obviously legible in this inventory—if anything, the stores seem more middle-class. Re-stocking the refrigerator, Flora is *supplementing* a supply of not yet depleted

perishables. The mix of fresh foods and dry goods, of staples and pleasures, suggests that the household is not only adequately nourished but that their meals afford a degree of enjoyment. Far from revealing any conspicuous absences, the pantry makes allowances for the individual tastes of the household. Simplicio and Flora's well-stocked kitchen undermines one of Lewis's economic traits of the culture of poverty—"the absence of food reserves in the home"—as it calls into question the relationship between hunger and poverty more generally. But beyond this disentanglement, it also signals the shift in how American poverty is understood in the first place. While there is no doubt whatsoever that many poor people, before and since, have gone hungry, by *La Vida*, poverty and hunger are no longer synonymous.

The plentiful inventory of Simplicio and Flora's kitchen suggests that chronic hunger was not a source of anxiety while they were in New York.[22] At one level, this might be true. Simplicio makes no mention of ever being hungry in New York and, aside from the week of her arrival in the United States when she was staying with a relative, Flora seems to have always had enough to eat. Nonetheless, Flora, in particular, is constantly preoccupied with ensuring that the family is able to make ends meet, one dimension of which, of course, is affording groceries.

This preoccupation comes out in her interactions with Simplicio who is regularly jockeying for comic books, records, and candy. Flora is the thrift to Simplicio's frivolity. On a day that Rosa was with them that included both grocery shopping and a trip to Coney Island,

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22. In contrast to New York, hunger figures much more prominently in the Ríoses lives in La Esmerelda. There, each family member describes extended periods where ensuring they had enough to eat was a constant struggle.

their dynamic is on full display. On their way to the grocery store Flora asks Simplicio to stop at a drugstore and buy a roll of film so that she can take a picture of Gabi to send to relatives in Puerto Rico. Once inside, Simplicio catches sight of a small boat sitting atop "a counter loaded with toys." Seeing the acquisitive glint in his eye, Flora gets worried: "'don't set your heart on that…. Remember, we're short of money and we haven't paid rent yet.'" Carrying on from the drugstore, Flora suggests that they start doing their shopping at the A and P, a chain grocery store, because the prices are lower, to which Simplicio responds: "'No. We'll shop at the Spanish store. The A and P is too far and I don't want to carry the stuff all the way home'" (435). Once at the Spanish store, we discover that Simplicio's preference might have more to do with the owner's willingness to sell him beer on credit than with location. Errands done and Coney Island-bound, Simplicio tries to coax money from Flora at almost every turn. Over the course of the outing, he tries to convince Flora to buy him comic books, candy, a parachute ride, a toy bow and arrow, and tickets to the movies. A worn-down Flora relents to some of the requests but fends off others by reminding Simplicio of their debts. On the train, Flora goes on the offensive, preempting Simplicio's next solicitation: "'we haven't been back to Delancey Street to make any more payments on the radio we have there. If we keep on this way, we'll lose it.'" Simplicio's response is characteristic: "'Then we lose it. There's nothing we can do about it…. You should have seen the record player they wanted to sell me yesterday for fifty dollars. It was worth at least three hundred'" (437).

On the surface, Simplicio and Flora stand in for two different stereotypes of the poor: Flora is responsible and rational while Simplicio is short-sighted and reckless. Below the surface, their exchanges suggest a shift in poverty. His housing and nourishment accounted for, Simplicio

is an avid consumer of the present while Flora, in contrast, is prudent. Crucially, Flora's prudence is not only about securing housing and avoiding hunger; her purview of what is necessary includes rent and groceries, to be sure, but also life insurance, household appliances, film for the camera, and an outing to Coney Island. In this light, Simplicio and Flora are less foils for one another than evidence of poverty's transformation from material absence to a measure of presence. Neither of their immediate horizons is dominated by the pursuit of either their next meal or immediate shelter. Flora's long-term planning and Simplicio's short-term spending are both the result of an economic capacity that's above and beyond simply surviving. The question then becomes, in what sense are they still poor.

Without the old physical markers to ground an understanding of what poverty is and who the poor are, we need to look elsewhere. Lewis was convinced that he found the answer in the culture of poverty. But, for the many reasons enumerated above, his traits are neither a feasible nor a satisfying answer. Nonetheless, *La Vida* offers other possibilities. One is to take the transition from poverty-as-absence in stride and begin to read poverty into the kinds, qualities, and characteristics of things present.[23]

This shift immediately makes discerning poverty much more complicated. Before, a poor home would have simply not possessed a washing machine. Although Lewis doesn't dwell on the machine, he tells us that Simplicio bought the machine for Flora when they were living in Pennsylvania (421) and that it was among the few possessions the couple brought with them

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23. Recall Soledad's bright green kitchen walls, decorated with "religious calendars, plastic flowers, a fancy match holder, [and] a plaster plaque of brightly colored fruit" (127).

when they relocated to New York (506). While wringer-type washing machines were still commonplace in the 1950s, sales of automatic washing machines, promising modern convenience and less labor, were on the rise. Qualitative differences between the kinds of goods that belong to the poor and the kind that belong to the more affluent have existed for a very long time. But the transformation that *La Vida* captures is one of degree: the poor are no longer so easily discerned by their material possessions.

In isolation, the wringer-type washing machine doesn't connote poverty, but neither does it confer affluence. However, in the context of the Simplicio and Flora's apartment, the machine takes on new meaning. Whereas a hallmark of poverty in Riis's tenements was the high density of residents, Simplicio and Flora's apartment suggests another kind of density. Lewis writes that the main room of the apartment "was about fifteen square feet but seemed smaller because it was crowded with furniture." Sure enough, the room holds a "mahogany-colored double bed"; "an orange curtain, fastened to a sprinkler pipe on the ceiling" to afford some privacy to the couple when they have a visitor staying with them; a steam radiator; "a pair of mahogany tables"; "a television set"; a "metal record stand"; and "another small table on which lay a red toy duck" (414).

In this light, the washing machine is part and parcel of a particular setting in which poverty obtains across a collection of things by virtue of how they appear together: crowded into insufficient space. This dynamic reoccurs throughout Lewis's descriptions of the New York apartments and can be seen in Flora's collection of "cheap decorative objects" that she kept on "crocheted doilies on every available surface" (414) just as easily as in Soledad's bedroom, where her bed obstructs the bottom two drawers of her dresser and, in the absence of a closet,

clothes are hung on a suspended bar behind a short plastic curtain (132–33). Whereas poverty saturated the tenements, apparent in isolated signs as well as in aggregated impressions, in *La Vida*'s New York, it seems almost superficial.

Relative and Physical Poverty

The ethnographic description in *La Vida* demonstrates the extent to which poverty is no longer simply a question of material absence. But neither the material cheapness of multiplying possessions nor the crowded clutter that results have the unifying force of poverty's former calling cards: hunger and privation. Moreover, the scenes Lewis describes suggest that identifying the parameters of this new kind of poverty promises to be considerably more complicated than what has come before. Rather than attempt to make sense of how poverty's material dimension is changing in the context of the affluent society, Lewis jumps to questionable social and psychological explanations.

Galbraith, for his part, registers a change in poverty as well, albeit in very different terms. At the margins of his extended discussion of production and its role in the affluent society, Galbraith sees poverty's persistence as an aberration. In Galbraith's eyes, what has allowed poverty to go from a constitutive cross-section of society to a special case is not any alteration within poverty's physical dimension, but a massive numerical reduction in the number of people living in hunger and privation. That he falls into the trap he criticizes—of relying on an old paradigm when addressing a new sociohistorical reality—escapes him. Bracketing the numerical transformation, the physical understanding of poverty that Galbraith deploys throughout *The*

Affluent Society is much closer to Riis's tenements than to the cluttered apartments Lewis describes.

Although his understanding of poverty is firmly rooted in its physical dimension, at a theoretical level, Galbraith entertains three different ways of identifying poverty across the change from the old order to the affluent society. First, he identifies poverty in terms of its scale: with the coming of the affluent society, poverty went from the plight of the vast majority to a special case affecting a small minority.[24] In the previous order, poverty was simply how people lived, recognizable as the common if unremarkable default existence. In the affluent society, Galbraith is certain that whatever poverty has become, it is no longer a phenomenon of the masses but "the fate of a voiceless minority" who find themselves at "the very base of the income pyramid."[25] Second, Galbraith identifies poverty in terms of its material dimension.

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24. To make this point, Galbraith cites neoclassical economist Alfred Marshall's descriptions of the pervasiveness and desperation of American poverty at the end of the nineteenth century: "The privation of which Marshall spoke was, a half century ago, the common lot at least of all who worked without special skill. As a general affliction it was ended by increased output which, however imperfectly it may have been distributed, nevertheless accrued in substantial amount to those who worked for a living. The result was to reduce poverty from the problem of a majority to that of a minority. It ceased to be a general case and became a special case. It is this which has put the problem of poverty into its peculiar modern form" (Galbraith, *Affluent Society*, 286).

25. Galbraith, *Affluent Society*, 93.

Where Lewis's ethnographic description reveals all kinds of complexities within material poverty, for Galbraith, poverty's physical manifestation is absolute. The physical signs of poverty remain the same across time and place—in the old order as well as the new, physical poverty means hunger and privation. In this sense, Galbraith wouldn't consider either Ríos household poor. Third, Galbraith identifies poverty in relative terms; that is, poverty reduced to its social context, deriving its particular meaning in opposition to affluence in any given place, time, or relationship. In the old order, these three dimensions shared a stable balance: the poor constituted a vast majority (numerical), living in hunger and deprivation (physical), beneath a powerful and wealthy elite (relative). Tracking the change between the old order and the affluent society, Galbraith treats each of these dimensions differently. The numerical dimension is the harbinger of change while the physical dimension remains an immutable benchmark. In older times, poverty was legible just as easily by its scope as by its physical facts. In the affluent society, poverty's scope shrinks while its physical dimension persists such that the poverty of old endures but only among a much smaller contingent. In other words, physical poverty ceases to be the unremarkable plight of the masses.

Within industrial capitalism's twentieth-century expansion and acceleration, the change in the relationship between the numerical and physical dimensions makes intuitive sense. This framing, however, fails to account for the shifts in poverty's relative dimension. In the old order, poverty's relative dimension was equivalent to its physical dimension. As we saw with Riis's tenements, the homes and jobs of the poor were marked by material deprivation as well as in opposition to their affluent counterparts. The logical evolution of the relative dimension might have been for it to remain sutured to physical poverty so that, as the object of physical poverty

shrunk from majority to small minority, so would have the object of relative poverty. But this isn't what happened. Instead, the relationship between the physical and relative dimensions of poverty disintegrates. Rather than follow physical poverty into the bottom of the numerical pyramid, the relative dimension moves in the opposite direction, becoming a discursive tool for understanding economic relations that are no longer overdetermined by poverty (of course, among those for whom hunger and privation remain a fact of everyday life, the relative and physical remain in sync; poverty on both fronts). The rotten end of economic inequality, which in the old order was as good as a surrogate for poverty, is no longer the exclusive domain of the poor.

The divergence of the physical and relative dimensions is readily apparent in how Galbraith discusses poverty in *The Affluent Society*. Rather than grapple with the shifting relationship between the physical and relative dimensions, Galbraith treats them as distinct phenomena. On the first page of the book, he distinguishes between "the elegant torture of the spirit which comes from contemplating another man's more spacious possessions" and "the unedifying mortification of the flesh—from hunger, sickness, and cold."[26] The primacy of the physical dimension is as clear here as it is in the remainder of the book. Galbraith juxtaposes the urgency of starvation and privation against frivolous material envy: "Who can say for sure that the deprivation which afflicts him with hunger is more painful than the deprivation which afflicts him with envy of his neighbor's new car?"[27] Whereas physical poverty is an economic problem,

26. Galbraith, *Affluent Society*, 1–2.

27. Galbraith, *Affluent Society*, 146.

relative poverty is rooted in the greed and vanity of individuals. Throughout the rest of the book, Galbraith fails to treat the relative dimension with any real seriousness, relying instead on the physical features of poverty long established in the old order.[28] Galbraith is right that the affluent society brought changes for poverty but his insistence that the numerical dimension is poverty's only consequential variable ignores how the numerical, physical, and relative dimensions are not only interdependent but malleable.

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28. In a chapter near the end of the book titled "The New Position of Poverty," Galbraith attempts an awkward synthesis of poverty's physical and relative dimensions. After again revisiting the desperation of nineteenth century poverty, he writes:

> For poverty does survive. In part, it is a physical matter; those afflicted have such limited and insufficient food, such poor clothing, such crowded, cold and dirty shelter that life is painful as well as comparatively brief. But just as it is far too tempting to say that, in matters of living standards, everything is relative, so it is wrong to rest everything on absolutes. People are poverty-stricken when their income, even if adequate for survival, falls radically behind that of the community. Then they cannot have what the larger community regards as the minimum necessary for decency; and they cannot wholly escape, therefore, the judgment of the larger community that they are indecent. They are degraded for, in the literal sense, they live outside the grades or categories which the community regards as acceptable. (Galbraith, *Affluent Society*, 286)

Galbraith seems to be suggesting that understanding poverty in the affluent society requires balancing absolute physical traits with relative socio-economic standing. Although he highlights the synthesis between physical and relative dimensions in the above passage, just how this synthesis is supposed to be accomplished remains unsaid and unexplored.

Yet, despite all the evidence *La Vida* brings to bear upon the malleability of the physical dimension, it retains a faith in the same relative division that structures *How the Other Half Lives*. Soledad, for her part, understands the relationship between rich and poor as antagonistic. She remains, however, willing to accept her lot out of either resignation or a deeply held belief that the rich are repugnant:

> Some of us are born poor and some rich. I am poor, but when I come across somebody who's been luckier than I it doesn't bother me, because that was his destiny. But just because you're poor, the rich think you aren't worth anything and despise you. Suppose I live near a rich woman and suppose her little girls want to play with mine. That rich woman would come and shoo off my children because she doesn't want hers to be friends with mine. Who the hell does she think she is? It's not right, because we're all children of God and each life is a world of its own. That's God's divine truth. But when have you seen a rich person get together with a poor one? When? That only happens in fairy tales where a princess marries a shepherd.[29]

For Soledad, rich and poor are segregated to the degree that mixing is relegated to the realm of fantasy. Not only are the categories of rich and poor resilient, their undoing is nearly unimaginable. But the interesting turn in this passage is that what Soledad resents isn't the inequality between rich and poor but the rich themselves: "I hate the rich…. The rich want to be even richer, and instead of helping the poor, they would like to see us lower still" (148). In Soledad's eyes, the problem isn't one of distribution but of character. Compared to their entitlement and malicious condescension, the economic status of the rich seems almost coincidental. In this formulation, wealth inequality fades and character confirms the fundamental differences between rich and poor. If Lewis was intent on enumerating the psychological and sociological features of the culture of poverty, Soledad comes to understand her own poverty in

29. Lewis, *La Vida*, 148.

opposition to the psychology and society of the rich. Simplicio, in turn, takes a slightly different tack.

For Simplicio, poor and rich remain foils but, rather than understanding the poor against the malfeasance of the rich, he finds virtue in bearable poverty and sees balance in the codependency of poor and rich: "Sometimes I get to thinking and I say, 'Hell, it's a good thing I wasn't born rich.' I wouldn't have enjoyed it. Because those people have everything, they have nothing to do with their time. Hey, I'm proud to be poor! We poor people may gossip about each other, but we're good-hearted. And after all, the rich depend on the poor and the poor on the rich. We're all flesh and blood, and when we die, we're all stuck in a hole" (446). Simplicio's rich don't share the malevolence of Soledad's, though they are deprived of the satisfaction that comes from having to fill one's time with work. If their fault is having everything, Simplicio doesn't seem to resent the inequality as much as pity the toll idleness takes. The rich's foil, his poor are industrious and good-hearted. But, as with Soledad's, Simplicio's idea of inequality seems more grounded in generalized psychological attributes he supposes of the rich or the poor than in actual political or economic terms. Even if not antagonistic poles, the rich and the poor that Simplicio sketches occupy absolute positions in relation to one another, the idea of traversing from one side of the division to another unthinkable. Despite increasingly complex and opaque economic stratification, Soledad, Simplicio, and, by extension, Lewis operate under the assumption that the poor and the rich are permanent features of society.

In their black-and-white conviction, Soledad, Simplicio, and Lewis are not alone. But even as Galbraith's shortcoming is the consequence of a different approach to the question of poverty—his fixation on the durability of poverty's physical features—he also fails to recognize

the economic stratification of the affluent society in anything but the most rudimentary terms: either one is poor or one is not. And if one is not poor, then one is affluent. If the ethnographic descriptions in *La Vida* hint at a more complex view of who the poor are, Galbraith's poor are strictly so by the measures of old. The problem with these terms, especially in Galbraith's case, is that they close poverty off from anything but the most desperate physical examples, excluding even the likes of Soledad and Simplicio. Treating poverty as a threshold determined by static physical criteria ignores the range of living conditions that, while mostly free from chronic hunger and extreme deprivation, remain a far cry from anything resembling affluence. For Galbraith, that non-trivial economic duress can exist in the absence of hunger and amid relatively secure shelter does not seem an idea worth entertaining.

The seemingly straightforward solution to this shortcoming would be to amend Galbraith's depiction of poverty and affluence by introducing a new socio-economic category below the modestly affluent but above the desperately poor. That way, the pernicious desperate poverty of old—of unrelenting hunger and material deprivation—can retain its urgency without less acute economic hardship getting lost in the affluent fray. But this kind of solution has two crucial weaknesses. First, it assumes a coherence within the new category that there is no reason to believe exists. Hunger and extreme privation are powerful categorical unifiers, making virtually all who endure them legible as poor. As we will see in the following chapters, once they are no longer a daily threat, economic hardship takes many forms—debilitating debt, psychological strain, proximity to an array of environmental hazards, systemic neglect and abuse, excruciating working conditions, and malnutrition, to name a few. Second, it accepts the premise that poverty is primarily the domain of the desperately poor. While there is no doubt that

greater need demands greater urgency, relegating poverty to the very lowest economic tiers denies the prevalence of economic hardship and sustains the illusion that poverty can be dismissed as an aberration to an otherwise functioning society rather than confronted as a widespread constitutive failing.

Chapter 3

The Gospel of Personal Responsibility

In Chapter 1, I framed the hermeneutic problem facing twenty-first century poverty and, in Chapter 2, I examined the foundational economic and social shifts that inaugurated it. In these final three chapters I will examine how a rhetoric of deferral in more recent books about the present-day American poor works to suture together the gap between descriptions and explanations of poverty. This chapter turns to *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance, and the individual and cultural failures that he believes have produced white working-class poverty throughout Greater Appalachia.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the affluent society that John Kenneth Galbraith heralded decades earlier had firmly taken root. Desperate physical poverty—the poverty of hunger and privation—had not been eradicated, but as fewer and fewer people found themselves in this group, extreme poverty in America was cemented as the plight of a very small minority. The separation between relative and physical poverty that was legible in *La Vida*—and that Galbraith failed to take seriously—had continued to expand so that the needs and wants of the poor were no longer uniform, but highly variable. The unequal distribution of wealth within the affluent society had created a new kind of poverty, one that was not wholly reducible to privation and hunger but that was still marked by economic duress.

Published in 2016, Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* was quickly heralded as one of the keys to understanding Donald Trump's success in the presidential election.[1] With two stints atop the *New York Times* bestsellers list, the book's appeal, no doubt buoyed by the advantageous circumstances and timing of its release, lies in Vance's engaging prose, his depictions of charismatic and sympathetic friends and family, the chaos of his childhood in Middletown, Ohio, and Jackson, in Breathitt County, Kentucky, and his sensational climb up the socioeconomic ladder, which at its higher rungs produced a degree from Yale Law School as well as the bestselling memoir in question.

In the book, his unlikely triumphs unfold against the backdrop of Greater Appalachian Scots-Irish working-class hillbilly poverty; Vance explains the problems facing his community through a comparison with his own remarkable success. He opens *Hillbilly Elegy* with the claim that he has not accomplished anything extraordinary: "I wrote this book because I've achieved something quite ordinary, which doesn't happen to most kids like me"; "I have a nice job, a happy marriage, a comfortable home, and two lively dogs."[2] He is being modest. After four years with the United States Marine Corps, including a tour of duty in Iraq, Vance returned home and completed an undergraduate degree at Ohio State University in "*one year and eleven months*," graduating with a "double major, summa cum laude" (187). From there, he joined the ranks of

1. "6 Books to Help Understand Trump's Win."

2. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 1.

the elite, enrolling in and then graduating from Yale Law School.[3] Vance's refrain throughout is that his success is the ordinary result of his own hard work and the loving support he received from caring and reliable family members—primarily Mamaw (his maternal grandmother), Papaw (his maternal grandfather), and Lindsay (his sister).

Vance uses virtues and life circumstances that allowed him to succeed to highlight just how damaging the laziness, irresponsibility, envy, indolence, hopelessness, and helplessness he observes among some of his friends, family, and acquaintances can be. Throughout *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance describes the vast array of problems he sees in Middletown and Jackson. He sees individuals struggling with addiction, families plagued by instability, communities in sharp decline, and a culture in crisis. Vance explains each of these problems in the same way, subsuming them in his unifying argument: all of the problems in Middletown and Jackson are the result of a dysfunctional culture and its dysfunctional individual members. Vance even suggests that one of the reasons Middletown and cities like it throughout Greater Appalachia are struggling is because residents trace their problems back to somewhere outside of themselves—

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3. In addition, as of January 2020, Vance had raised 93 million dollars for his own venture capital fund, *Narya*. Connie Loizos, "'Hillbilly Elegy' Author J.D. Vance Has Raised $93 Million for His Own Midwestern Venture Fund," *TechCrunch*, January 9, 2020, https://techcrunch.com/2020/01/09/hillbilly-elegy-author-j-d-vance-has-raised-93-million-for-his-own-midwestern-venture-fund/.

"a cultural movement" to "blame problems on society or the government."[4] In the words of Vance's beloved Mamaw, the solution to all these problems is obvious: "'Never be like these fucking losers who think the deck is stacked against them'" (36).

In this chapter, I argue that Vance collapses his descriptions of individual dysfunction, family dysfunction, community dysfunction, and cultural dysfunction into the same explanations, rooted in failures of cultural and personal responsibility. Because of the unity between his descriptions and explanations, other kinds of explanations to the problems he describes fall by the wayside. With individual choices and behavior at the root of the dysfunctions Vance describes, poverty, too, has no other explanation.

Individuals

Hillbilly Elegy's subtitle, *A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, is misleading. While a family or hillbilly culture might indeed be in crisis, Vance describes an array of problems, each of which can be blamed on the individual. Even though Vance bemoans a tide change in hillbilly cultural mores, his conception of culture is unusually rooted in the decisions

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4. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy,* 194. Vance makes the connection between perceived accountability and cultural/individual dysfunction explicit: "We talk about the value of hard work but tell ourselves that the reason we're not working is some perceived unfairness: Obama shut down the coal mines, or all the jobs went to the Chinese. These are the lies we tell ourselves to solve the cognitive dissonance—the broken connection between the world we see and the values we preach" (147).

and dispositions of individuals. In his analysis, culture is not homogenous. At different times and in different ways, his descriptions of hillbilly culture are built around juxtaposing hillbilly vices against hillbilly virtues: his old-fashioned, hard-working grandparents against his lazy, non-working neighbors. If hillbilly culture includes these two poles, it is up to the individual to navigate them responsibly. Thus, whenever Vance explicitly indicts hillbilly culture, he implicitly indicts individuals—their choices, morals, and dispositions.

The most prominent problem that Vance describes at the level of the individual is addiction. Drinking and drug-use are part of the scenery in Jackson as well as Middletown. Vance notices the growing epidemic of drug abuse taking hold of both places but doesn't ultimately waver in his belief that drug use is just another bad choice that hillbillies make, akin to deciding to not show up to work or to maxing out a credit card. Regardless, excessive drinking figures prominently within family lore and the presence of drug use (often opioids) has become mundane: "The streetlight revealed the silhouette of a man sitting halfway in his truck—the door open, his feet dangling to the side—with the unmistakable form of a hypodermic needle sticking from his arm. I should have been shocked, but this was Middletown, after all" (235).

This ubiquity provides the context for Vance's descriptions of addiction within his own family. The two cases that he addresses most directly reflect the ongoing split he sees between good and bad hillbilly culture. On the virtuous side, Vance recounts how Papaw struggled with alcoholism only to overcome it. By the time Vance and his sister are growing up in Middletown, Papaw represents one of the few stable forces in their lives, his drinking nothing more than a bad memory. On the other side, there is no escape for Vance's mom, Bev, whom he describes as struggling with addiction since his childhood and unable to break the habit. By force of will,

Papaw was eventually able to stop drinking. As a result, his final years were relatively stable and comfortable. He became not only a responsible grandparent to Vance and Lindsay but also picked up the parenting slack when Bev was unavailable. At least up to the time that *Hillbilly Elegy* was published, Bev enjoyed no such relief.[5]

Toward the end of the book, Vance describes leaving the comfort of his home in Cincinnati in the middle of the night and driving an hour to Middletown to save Bev from a night on the streets after she had been kicked out by her fifth husband. The whole scene gives Vance cause to reflect on the distance between the worlds he and his mom inhabit. He writes: "I was a recent graduate of Yale Law School, a former editor of the prestigious *Yale Law Journal*, and a member of the bar in good standing. … I had a nice job, a recently purchased home, a loving relationship and a happy life in a city I loved" (236). Not one for subtlety, he concludes: "I was upwardly mobile. I had made it. I had achieved the American Dream" (237). From here, Vance pivots: "the world I left always finds a way to reel me back in. … Mom had begun using again. She'd stolen some family heirlooms from her fifth husband to buy drugs (prescription opiates, I

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5. While Vance entertains the possibility that Bev's drug addiction might not be entirely her fault, he concludes that her recovery depended on her trying hard enough to get better:

> Drug addiction was a disease, and just as I wouldn't judge a cancer patient for a tumor, so I shouldn't judge a narcotics addict for her behavior. At thirteen, I found this patently absurd, and Mom and I often argued over whether her newfound wisdom was scientific truth or an excuse for people whose decisions destroyed a family. Oddly enough, it's probably both: Research does reveal a genetic disposition to substance abuse, but those who believe their addiction is a disease show less of an inclination to resist it. Mom was telling herself the truth, but the truth was not setting her free.
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> I didn't believe in any of the slogans or sentiments, but I did believe she was trying. (116)

think), and he'd kicked her out of the house in response. They were divorcing and she had nowhere to go" (237).

What is most striking about the comparison is how Vance casts his own meteoric upward mobility as a kind of guaranteed result of responsible living, available to anyone who is willing to show up to work and avoid drugs. By comparing his own prosperity with Bev's ongoing struggle with addiction, Vance highlights how his own ordinary but responsible behavior has rewarded him while Bev's irresponsible behavior continues to haunt her. The person to person comparison foregrounds differences in character and avoids complicated questions that might account for Bev's illness in other ways. Asserting the virtues of personal responsibility is familiar rhetoric, but the invocation of the American Dream and meritocracy are not just one-dimensional ideological gambits. In the world of the unconscious man in the parking lot with a needle in his arm, and of the chaos of Bev's personal life, the only explanations that Vance sees are irresponsible choices and a lack of self-control—individual shortcomings, inherited or learned.

Although the straightforward story that Vance tells about addiction rooted in individual choice forecloses the possibility of explaining it in any other terms, there are cracks in his descriptions. For instance, Papaw held a well-paying job throughout his life, regardless of whether he was drinking while Bev only works sporadically. On the one hand, this difference could again reflect a difference in personal responsibility: Papaw manages to provide for his family despite his drinking while Bev does not do the same for hers. But, on the other hand, it points to different sets of social and economic conditions. Instead of choice, the difference could suggest that Papaw's job was a product of a relatively stable industrial economy that offered

large parts of the working-class employment security and a living wage whereas Bev's job prospects are subject to the volatilities and accelerations of a post-industrial economy. It could also suggest that Papaw and Bev's different capacities to work might reflect important differences between alcohol and opioid addiction, at the biological as well as social levels. Or, it could suggest that the demands of a working single mother are different from the demands of a married father.

Families

Whereas the problems Vance sees taking hold of individuals manifest in addiction and other apparent lapses in self-control, the primary problems he describes in his family are chaos and instability. One of the most chaotic and unstable periods in Vance's childhood came when Bev decided that living within shouting distance of Mamaw's house was too close, and that life would be better with some more distance. Along with her third husband, Bob, she moved the family to Preble County, "a sparsely populated part of Ohio farm country approximately thirty-five miles from Middletown" (69). Nine years old at the time of the move, Vance remembers the tension at the new home: "You never knew when the wrong word would turn a quiet dinner into a terrible fight, or when a minor childhood transgression would send a plate or book flying across the room. It was like we were living among land mines—one wrong step, and *kaboom*" (72). As Vance depicts them, the problems in Preble County stemmed from Bev and Bob's deteriorating relationship and violent fights and were exacerbated by the increased distance to the refuge of Mamaw's house.

Reflecting on what sparked Bev and Bob's fights, Vance writes: "Often the subject was money, though it made little sense for a rural Ohio family *with a combined income of over a hundred thousand dollars* to struggle with money. But fight they did, because they bought things they didn't need—new cars, new trucks, a swimming pool" (70–71, emphasis added). Based on Vance's age, the family's stint in Preble County would have come in the mid-1990s. In 1995, annual household income at the eightieth percentile was $65,124 and, at the ninety-fifth, was $113,000.[6] The point Vance is trying to make here, as elsewhere, is "that social class in America isn't just about money"[7]; that wealth and economic inequality are less important than cultural mores and the capacity of individuals to take responsibility for their lives and families.

Vance's description of the time that the family spends in Preble County is among the most chaotic periods he recounts. That it is also very likely the period of his childhood where their household income is highest suggests that wealth has little bearing on the crises that are at *Hillbilly Elegy*'s core. The family's problems boil down to comportment and choice. What makes the period so terrible is Bev and Bob's deteriorating relationship, irresponsible spending, and the decision to move further away from Mamaw and Papaw, not economic duress, or anything else. Rather than mitigate the chaos and instability, the increased spending power seems

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6. U.S. Census Bureau, "Income Limits for Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent: 1967 to 2018," Historical Income Tables: Households, table H-1: All Races, accessed July 17, 2020, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-households.html.

7. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 62.

to do little more than introduce a new degree of unnecessary acquisition and provide ammunition for Bev and Bob's fights.

By trivializing the role wealth (or its absence) plays in causing family chaos and instability, Vance reinforces the responsibility of the individual, but he also obscures the meaning of poverty. Looking back on his childhood, poverty is a central part of the identity Vance claims for himself.[8] From Jackson, where "'hill people' and 'poor people' usually meant the same thing" (18), to Middletown, where Vance remembers Mamaw railing against any poor person who steals from another—"'It's hard enough as it is. We sure as hell don't need to make it harder on each other'" (15)—Vance never suggests that his childhood was anything other than poor. In this light, the family's household income in Preble County—an elite income—calls into question the extent to which Vance sees poverty as anything other than a matter of culture or individual choice. While Vance is convinced that social class in America is not *just* about money, his conception of poverty might have nothing to do with money.

After the period in Preble County, Vance and Lindsay return to Middletown, one block closer to Mamaw than they had been before. Due to circumstances beyond their control, Vance, then in seventh grade, and Lindsay, recently graduated from high school, end up living in the

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8. Throughout the book, Vance understands himself and his family as poor, including on the first page: "You see, I grew up poor, in the Rust Belt, in an Ohio steel town that has been hemorrhaging jobs and hope for as long as I can remember" (1–2).

house alone.[9] Vance remembers how he and his sister got by: "Sometimes Matt [Bev's boyfriend at the time] or Tammy [one of Bev's longtime friends] brought us food, but we largely fended for ourselves: Hamburger Helper, TV dinners, Pop-Tarts, and breakfast cereal. I'm not sure who paid the bills (probably Mamaw)" (113–14). Where Bev and Bob's fighting poisoned the family in Preble County, their absence back in Middletown leads to relative stability: "No matter how much we loved Mom," Vance writes, "our lives were easier with one less person to care for" (114).

As much as family was the source of the chaos in Preble County, it proved a stabilizing force back in Middletown. With Bev and Bob gone, responsible and caring adults—Mamaw and, to a lesser extent, Matt and Tammy—provide Vance and Lindsay with some security. This is a common role for Mamaw who routinely rescues and shelters Vance from his chaotic surroundings. When Vance and Lindsay were living alone, it was Mamaw who kept a constant eye on them and made sure that the bills were paid and the pantry was stocked. The way that Mamaw quietly assumes responsibility for her grandchildren stands in stark contrast to Bev's frenzied negligence, the juxtaposition of the two providing further confirmation that the causes and solutions to the problems facing the family lie in how individuals respond.

Vance's description of Bev's parenting follows the same pattern of prioritizing individual dysfunction and eliding other explanations: "Mom tried, in her own way: When she was

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9. Given Bev's ongoing struggle with addiction and her mental health, which led to a suicide attempt (74) as well as Papaw's unexpected recent death (102), Mamaw decided that it would be best to have Vance and Lindsay as close as possible to her.

working, she'd always give me money on paydays, almost certainly more than she could afford. For reasons I never quite understood, Mom equated money with affection. Perhaps she felt that I would never appreciate that she loved me unless she offered me a wad of spending money. But I never cared about the money, I just wanted her to be healthy" (136). The first sentence suggests that poverty remains an economic category in three ways. First, "*when she was working*" calls to mind the constant threats of joblessness and unstable employment. Second, the timing of the gift—*always on paydays*—invokes a temporality familiar to anyone forced to stretch too small a paycheck across too wide a margin. And third, that Bev gives "*more than she could afford*" suggests the close proximity of her financial limits. Alone, these clauses paint a picture of poverty based on signs of economic duress. But in the context of the rest of the passage, poverty's economic duress gets overwhelmed by Bev's shortcomings. Equating money with affection, misunderstanding what her son needs to feel loved, and neglecting her own health confer more meaning about the depths of her poverty than do the realities of her finances. In this light, giving more than she can afford becomes a reflection of poor judgment more than evidence of limited resources. The wad of cash itself is neither a sign of wealth nor a perversion of economic duress but a manifestation of Bev's deficiencies.

With Bev's parenting, as with the tumult in Preble County, ongoing crises and hardship revolve around individual failings more than economic duress or any other cause. Vance seems perfectly willing to minimize if not fully abandon wealth and income as markers of class and poverty. It is not just that cultural deficiencies and personal irresponsibility cause economic duress, but that economic duress itself has become unintelligible. With the diminished importance of specifically economic duress, poverty loses its capacity to identify and explain

economic stratification. While individuals of meagre means will no doubt continue to exist, in each and every case, poverty is no more than the almost trivial consequence of a critical cultural/individual problem.

Communities

The individual's addictions and deficiencies in self-control as well as the family's chaos, and instability repeat in Vance's descriptions of his hillbilly communities in Jackson and Middletown. But in his characterizations of the residents in each place, signs of desperate poverty reminiscent of Riis's tenements begin to play a bigger role. The inaugural site of desperate poverty in *Hillbilly Elegy* is not Middletown, where the bulk of the narrative unfolds, but Jackson, Vance's ancestral and sentimental home. Vance describes Jackson as "a small town of about six thousand in the heart of southeastern Kentucky's coal country"; the town's residents "live in the mountains surrounding Kentucky Highway 15, in trailer parks, in government-subsidized housing, in small farmhouses, and in mountain homesteads" (11). Shortly after the Second World War, facing a career of punishing mining, and possibly spurred on by an unexpected pregnancy, Vance's grandparents—Bonnie (Mamaw) and James Lee (Papaw)—left Jackson for Middletown and the promise of well-paying jobs in industrial manufacturing.[10]

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10. Vance recalls that Papaw saw the move to Middletown as a choice between a life in the mines and something better: "As Papaw once told me, the sole option for many of his friends was to work 'in the mines'—mining coal not far from Jackson. Those who stayed in Jackson spent their lives on the edge of poverty, if not submerged in it" (25–26).

Though his grandparents moved away, much of Vance's extended family remained in Kentucky, providing the occasion for regular visits throughout his childhood.

In *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance characterizes Jackson as a kind of ground zero for the cultural problems he explores: "If the problems start in Jackson, it is not entirely clear where they end" (22). Jackson is one point within a vast range of circumstances Vance describes as poor. The desperate poverty of the town's poorest residents—conditions reminiscent of Riis's tenements—is at one end of a spectrum. At the other end, there is the poverty of Vance's childhood in Middletown which itself varies widely, from the $100,000 household income in Preble County to high school years spent with Mamaw where the expense of a $180.00 graphing calculator was acutely felt—"'I didn't spend every penny I had on that little computer so you could fuck around all day'" (137). Across this range, poverty's economic shape is destabilized and obscured.

The broad contours around how Vance describes poverty amid the problems facing his community are vague. In the introduction, Vance claims a number of economic identities: "I grew up poor, in the Rust Belt"; "I identify with the millions of working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent who have no college degree"; "My family, from the hills of eastern Kentucky, describe themselves as hillbillies" (1–3). While Vance touches on the different cultural implications of each identity category, he is not concerned with whether being poor, white working-class, or a hillbilly implies a different kind of economic status. Rather than as an object of analysis, Vance invokes poverty to raise the stakes of his narrative. Leaving poverty undefined while linking it to other identities brings urgency to the text without the burden of having to distinguish between economic and cultural dimensions. The pattern of invoking

poverty's urgency while obfuscating its content recurs throughout the book, in detailed descriptions as well as categorical divisions. The result is that poverty appears to be at the center of the discussion, but its specific content is at best uncertain and at worst unintelligible. This is especially true of how Vance writes about poverty in Jackson and Middletown.

For Vance, Jackson is twice poor. First, its physical poverty is almost ahistorical: Jackson has always been poor. But second, sometime in the recent past, Jackson changed. Not only is this new Jackson still impoverished, but its residents appear to be worse off than they were. In the first chapter, Vance describes visiting his second cousin, Rick, on a recent trip to Jackson:

> We talked about how things had changed. "Drugs have come in," Rick told me. "And nobody's interested in holding down a job." I hoped my beloved holler had escaped the worst, so I asked Rick's boys to take me on a walk. All around I saw the worst signs of Appalachian poverty.
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> Some of it was as heartbreaking as it was cliché: decrepit shacks rotting away, stray dogs begging for food, and old furniture strewn on the lawns. Some of it was far more troubling. While passing a small two-bedroom house, I noticed a frightened set of eyes looking at me from behind the curtains of a bedroom window. My curiosity piqued, I looked closer and counted no fewer than eight pairs of eyes, all looking at me from three windows with an unsettling combination of fear and longing. On the front porch was a thin man, no older than thirty-five, apparently the head of the household. Several ferocious, malnourished, chained-up dogs protected the furniture strewn about the barren front yard. When I asked Rick's son what the young father did for a living, he told me that the man had no job and was proud of it. But, he added, "they're mean, so we just try to avoid them." (18–19)

This is a disorienting passage for poverty. With the ominous hope that his "beloved holler had escaped the worst," the stage is set for a temporal comparison between the familiar Appalachian poverty of Vance's childhood and something new. While the rhetorical effect of what follows seems to confirm that Jackson has indeed transformed for the worse, Vance's descriptions of the poverty he sees resist that interpretation—whether the contemporary scene is familiar cliché

Appalachian poverty or evidence of some new depravity is not at all clear. The decrepit shacks, hungry dogs, and discarded furniture are heartbreaking but supposedly *less* troubling.

Apparently, "far more troubling" is the two-bedroom house: eight pairs of fearful, unsettling eyes—not the people, just the eyes—and a mean, thin man, proud to be out of work. Apart from how Vance and Rick's son characterize the man and the eyes, the physical features of the two-bedroom house are no different than the less troubling clichés, right down to "ferocious, malnourished, chained-up dogs" and "furniture strewn about the barren front yard." Rather than comparing a distinct conception of past poverty with a distinct conception of present-day poverty and analyzing the differences, Vance relies on striking details to evoke a vague sense of nostalgic past and fallen present and insists that something vital has changed.

Where Vance's account of poverty in Jackson exploits a temporal distinction, his account of Middletown's poverty is initially framed in terms of spatial difference.[11] By way of introducing Middletown's geography, Vance says that as a kid, he understood the town in terms of three distinct regions. The area by the high school, "large homes mixed comfortably with

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11. Vance's descriptions of Middletown cut two ways. First, they are narrow, contained within the slim segment of experience to which Vance can lay personal claim: he's not talking about poverty or the white working classes in general, he's talking about his family. Second, they are vague, not in the sense that they lack vividness, but in the sense that the extent to which they are supposedly representative—and representative of what—is opaque. The "we" of Vance's prose slides fluidly from his immediate family, to Middletown's white working class, to hillbillies at large or the people of Greater Appalachia.

well-kept parks and office complexes," was where the "the rich kids" lived. The area around Armco (the town's steel plant), "where even the nice homes had been converted into multi-family units," was where "the poor kids (the really poor kids)" lived. Finally, there was Vance's area, "with abandoned warehouses and factories within walking distance" (49). But, uncomfortable with the tidiness of the division, Vance questions his memory: "Looking back, I don't know if the 'really poor' areas and my block were any different, or whether these divisions were the constructs of a mind that didn't want to believe it was *really* poor" (49). The point here is not whether to pigeonhole Vance as poor, really poor, or something closer to middle-class, but that whatever distinguishes being really poor from the status above is blurry.

By the same token, the line between whatever status Vance conceived for his family and Middletown's more affluent is also far from distinct. He writes that he never thought of professional-class families—households where parents were "lawyers, engineers, or teachers"—as fundamentally different: "They still lived within walking distance of my house, sent their kids to the same high school, and generally did the same things the rest of us did. It never occurred to me that I didn't belong, even in the homes of some of my relatively wealthy friends" (203).[12] The readiness with which Vance entertains the possibility that his family was in fact *really* poor while at the same time attesting to how comfortable he was in the homes of wealthier friends suggests that poverty in Middletown was neither discrete nor obvious. Vance's mobility across

12. With the class consciousness of a bygone era, Mamaw, for her part, is happy to lump any and all professionals together as "'rich people'" and be done with it (203).

class differences relegates poverty to the periphery of his analysis and again confirms the primacy of cultural affinities over wealth disparities in *Hillbilly Elegy*.

The defining boundaries of Vance's childhood poverty are, to say the least, porous. Though he frequently characterizes his childhood and family as poor, he never describes experiencing hunger or conditions approaching privation. His account is rife with chaos, instability, and abuse, the likes to which no child should ever be subjected. But it is unclear where, beyond loose description, economic duress fits in the narrative. While Vance tries to explicate poverty in *Hillbilly Elegy* by locating it in a particular place and distinguishing the urgency of the present-day from the familiar, ostensibly less potent poverty of old, the categories he uses are undermined by his own descriptive accounts, retaining the urgency of economic duress while obscuring questions of economic difference. Once poverty is understood as a symptom stemming from root-causes that reside in cultural failure or individual deficiencies, and once its economic parameters are sufficiently blurred, distinguishing between rich and poor becomes a character assessment.

Culture

While the problems Vance describes facing individuals, families, and communities are distinct, his explanations for each come down to the irresponsible or insufficiently resourceful individual. As I noted above, Vance's conception of culture is no more than an extension of the decisions and behaviors of individuals. When he condemns hillbillies on the grounds of their dysfunctional cultural characteristics, the characteristics directly invoke the figure of an irresponsible individual. Over the span of a couple pages, he identifies the kinds of "truly

irrational behavior" (146) that are rotting hillbilly culture from within: "We spend our way into the poorhouse"; "We spend to pretend we're upper-class"; "We choose not to work when we should be looking for jobs"; "We'll get fired for tardiness, or for stealing merchandise and selling it on eBay, or for having a customer complain about the smell of alcohol on our breath"; "Our eating and exercise habits seem designed to send us to an early grave and it's working" (146–48). In this list, cultural dysfunction is indistinguishable from individual dysfunction, the irresponsible individual being the cause of both. With the distance between culture and individual collapsed, they come to serve as the foundation of explanations for family and community problems too.

Perhaps sensing the overly general and prejudiced tenor of the list, Vance is quick to qualify: "Not all of the white working class struggles" (148). In what is a familiar move for Vance, he then divides the "white working class" into two parts, the good and the bad: "I knew even as a child that there were two separate sets of mores and social pressures. My grandparents embodied one type: old-fashioned, quietly faithful, self-reliant, hardworking. My mother and, increasingly, the entire neighborhood embodied another: consumerist, isolated, angry, distrustful" (148). For Vance, those embodying old-fashioned mores and abiding quiet faithfulness and self-reliance are beyond reproach while the consumeristic and angry are unquestionably at fault. In his account, the two types are distinct in terms of things like character and work ethic but not, it seems, in terms of wealth. Despite embodying the right old-fashioned mores and abiding quiet faithfulness and self-reliance, Mamaw wore her poverty "like a badge of honor" (136). Moreover, after Vance enlists in the Marines, Mamaw is unable to afford a $300

increase in her health insurance premiums and is forced to accept money from her grandson.[13] While Vance is perfectly clear about which set of social mores—which subset of individuals—he believes is destroying hillbilly culture, even in his own descriptions, more virtuous behavior is not necessarily rewarded with either wealth or relief.

Still, working as a cashier at Dillman's, a local grocery store, during high school, Vance comes to see the two contingents of the "white working class" as not only distinct but antagonistic:

> I also learned how people gamed the welfare system. They'd buy two dozen-packs of soda with food stamps and then sell them at a discount for cash. They'd ring up their orders separately, buying food with food stamps, and beer, wine, and cigarettes with cash. They'd regularly go through the checkout line speaking on their cell phones. I could never understand why our lives felt like such a struggle while those living off of government largesse enjoyed trinkets that I only dreamed about.
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> Mamaw listened intently to my experiences at Dillman's. We began to view much of our fellow working class with mistrust. Most of us were struggling to get by, but we made do, worked hard, and hoped for a better life. But a large minority was content to live off the dole. Every two weeks, I'd get a small paycheck and notice the line where federal and state income taxes were deducted from my wages. At least as often, our drug-addict neighbor would buy T-bone steaks, which I was too poor to buy for myself but was forced by Uncle Sam to buy for someone else. (139)

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13. Vance, who was, of course eager to provide whatever assistance he could, was still struck by the desperation that would have led Mamaw to accept financial help from him: "She had never accepted anything from me—not money from my paycheck at Dillman's; not a share of my boot camp earnings. But she accepted my three hundred a month, and that's how I knew she was desperate" (166).

In Vance's eyes, he and Mamaw struggle virtuously while some of their neighbors coast by gaming the welfare system. He sees the returns on his hard work pale in comparison to what his entitled neighbors can afford on their public assistance. Vance not only resents his neighbors, he blames them. In his imagination, the reason he cannot eat what he wants or have a cell phone is because of the income tax deductions that subsidize his neighbors' steaks and phones. While it has long been true that not being able to afford what others take for granted leads to bitterness and resentment, the way that Vance ultimately traces the causes of his own relative discomfort (figured as a lower level and quality of consumption) to his neighbors' irresponsible spending and defective work ethic shows that his anger is not aimed across any class divide. Instead, poverty's causes are also its individual subjects. The architects of poverty are not only individuals, but poor and powerless individuals. The wealthy and powerful do not figure in responsibility for or solutions to poverty.

Meritocratic Logic and Affluent Society

For Vance, the nexus of individual irresponsibility and cultural dysfunction has the capacity to explain all the problems he describes in *Hillbilly Elegy*. Whether or not those explanations are compelling, they belie fundamental assumptions about the distribution of wealth and income in the United States. The personal responsibility that is so central to Vance's analysis only makes sense in the context of an economic system that consistently rewards hard work and ingenuity. Sure enough, Vance's faith in the American Dream to make good on its promises is deeply held: "Mamaw and Papaw taught me that we live in the best and greatest country on earth. This fact gave meaning to my childhood. Whenever times were tough—when I felt

overwhelmed by the drama and the tumult of my youth—I knew that better days were ahead because I lived in a country that allowed me to make the good choices that others hadn't" (190). This meritocratic logic dictates that no matter their station, deserving Americans will rise to the top and reap the rewards.

Vance sees himself as part of a tradition of this kind of well-functioning meritocracy. Mamaw and Papaw left Jackson for Middletown and were rewarded for their shrewd decisions and hard work: "My grandfather earned a wage that was almost unfathomable to friends back home; he liked his work and did it well; their children went to modern, well-funded schools; and my grandmother lived in a home that was, by Jackson standards, a mansion—two thousand square feet, four bedrooms, and modern plumbing" (40–41). Of the three children of the next generation, Lori and Jimmy (Vance's maternal aunt and uncle) both seem to attain new levels of economic prosperity and security while Bev, striving for a similar status, was ultimately undone by irresponsibility and addiction. In spite of Bev's stumbling, Vance, two generations removed from Jackson, carries his family's upward momentum to new heights.

Even though Vance is certain that hard work and responsible choices will inevitably lead to prosperity, the consensus among American economists is that meritocracy has not been distributing wealth primarily on the basis of merit for some time.[14] Vance's insistence that personal responsibility explains poverty points to a different facet of meritocracy, regardless of

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14. See Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* (2019) and Robert H. Frank, *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy* (2017).

whether it is fully functional: the distribution of wealth in any meritocracy is necessarily hierarchical. Whether that hierarchy translates to more or less monstrous levels of economic inequality depends on many things—government regulation, the state of the economy, the strength of unions, and global trade among them. Though we spend less time talking about it, meritocracy is not just about heaping riches on the most brilliant and resilient individuals, it also mandates that those in other economic strata deserve whatever prosperity they have earned, no more and no less.

If the successful deserve their wealth, by the same token, those who have failed to rise deserve their lot too. But while those with only modest fortunes can console themselves with the knowledge that they are simply unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to rise to the next level of elite wealth, those at the very bottom of the hierarchy are faced with a different kind of explanation. In no uncertain terms, they are either victims or failures. Vance reinforces this implication by relentlessly characterizing himself as ordinary, affirming that the path upward is wide open to us all, no exceptional ability necessary. Since opportunities in a meritocracy are available to all, the diligent poor need not worry, their path to prosperity is as clear as anyone else's. Those with a waning work ethic or with a propensity toward vice, however, are justifiably out of luck.

Because of meritocracy's promise to distribute wealth hierarchically, a bottom is inevitable. Meritocracies respond to poverty by guaranteeing opportunities to escape it while cementing the conditions that guarantee it. In *Hillbilly Elegy*'s conclusion, Vance introduces Brian, "a young man who reminded me of fifteen-year-old J.D. Like Mom, his mother caught a

taste for narcotics, and like me, he has a complicated relationship with his father" (253). In addition to providing full-circle narrative closure, Brian inspires the book's closing call to action:

> These problems were not created by governments or corporations or anyone else. We created them, and only we can fix them.
>
> We don't need to live like the elites of California, New York, or Washington, D.C. We don't need to work a hundred hours a week at law firms and investment banks. We don't need to socialize at cocktail parties. We do need to create a space for the J.D.s and Brians of the world to have a chance. (256)

A fundamental if implicit goal of any appeal to equality of economic opportunity is to guarantee that the ranks of the poor are made up of only those who deserve it. In other words, a general acceptance of meritocracy's norms, as well as faith in the assured triumph of exceptional individuals, cannot but cast the poor as an aberrant aggregate of failed people and cultures. In this understanding, poverty is not an economic category and the poor are not a consequential class, in any conventional sense. Instead, poverty becomes a symptom of individual and cultural failings. Vance seems to believe that the appropriate response to the crises he has just spent a book describing is for those at the bottom to take responsibility and pull their culture out of poverty by its own bootstraps. But, ultimately, this belief is at the expense of a different set of questions: What happens to the J.D.s and Brians of the world who miss or squander their chance? Is there a minimum standard of living to which we are all entitled? How much economic inequality is too much?

Chapter 4

Poverty and Suffering

The Basic Causes of American Suffering

In Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, poverty is what happens when an individual either falls off the socioeconomic ladder or refuses to start climbing in the first place. The picture is more complicated in Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's *Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope*: explanations of individual deficiency persist but are presented alongside "failures of government, of institutions and of society."[1] Where Vance was committed to a polemic of personal responsibility, Kristof and WuDunn move back and forth between societal and individual descriptions of poverty, addiction, desperation, hopelessness, and suffering. To this end, they open the book with a representative narrative about the Number 6 school bus, which Kristof rode in the 1970s when he was growing up in Yamhill, Oregon.

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1. We find evidence of both explanations of individual deficiency and macrolevel failures in passages such as the following:

> The Knapps and many of the kids on the bus—and millions of Americans across the country—made terrible, self-destructive choices about using drugs or dropping out of school. But we saw that these were compounded by terrible choices that the country made on multiple fronts. The kids on the bus who floundered weren't somehow worse than their parents or less prepared—indeed, they mostly had more education—and they didn't have weaker characters than their counterparts in other countries. American kids don't drop out of high school at higher rates than in other countries because they are less intelligent.

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Tightrope: Americans Searching for Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 9–10.

At the time, the kids on the bus were part of families enjoying "dizzying progress" after generations of socioeconomic stagnation. Eight of the children who rode the bus came from two families; the Knapps and the Greens. Dee and Gary Knapp, parents to five bus riders, had been migrant farmworkers with scarcely a primary school education between them but, thanks to Gary's "good union job laying pipe" and Dee's "steady job driving tractors on a hazelnut farm near Yamhill," "were on a trajectory to claw their way into the middle class" (4–6). Tom Green, a veteran of the Korean War with a very limited education, and Irene Green, "who had grown up in poverty without toilets or running water," provided for their three bus riders with Tom's union job as a mason and cement finisher.

Looking backward, Kristof and WuDunn write: "It was a reflection of the upward mobility of the time that an illiterate man born into poverty could learn a skill, buy a farm, earn a solid living and build a good life for his family" (30). While some of the bus riders find stability and even prosperity (Kristof among them), *Tightrope* explores the fate of those for whom the promise of that upward mobility disintegrated. At the time the book was published, of the eight Greens and Knapps who rode the Number 6 bus, only one was still alive, the other six having all died what are increasingly called deaths of despair.[2] Kristof and WuDunn describe desperate lives lived in horrific conditions, but whereas J.D. Vance traced the causes of such desperate lives back to personal and cultural irresponsibility, Kristof and WuDunn assume a more balanced

2. See Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (2020).

approach and suggest that individual and societal failings jointly cause the suffering they describe.[3]

Kristof and WuDunn aim to uncover the social foundations of the suffering that has overwhelmed the Greens, the Knapps, and so many others. Armed with this better understanding, the hope is that individuals and institutions can make more effective interventions. With the suffering described and individual and collective accountability reasonably allocated, poverty does not have an obvious place in *Tightrope*'s analysis. The poor, as such, do not have an identity of their own. Instead, Kristof and WuDunn invoke a spectrum of suffering that, while inclusive of questions of poverty and economic duress, is far more expansive.

This spectrum begins with the acute, at times fatal, suffering of the Greens and the Knapps: "an excruciating loss of jobs, dignity, lives, hopes, and children."[4] But it also extends to a more general conception of suffering, toward which Kristof and WuDunn only gesture. The most common form that this gesture takes in *Tightrope* is in knowing references to "those who are struggling" (259). The content of the struggle is open-ended and can include financial strain and job security just as easily as addiction and domestic violence.

While the Greens and the Knapps have struggled a great deal, their plight is not disconnected from the much larger problem. According to Kristof and WuDunn: "There's a brittleness to life for about 150 million Americans, with a constant risk that sickness, layoffs or a

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3. As Kristof and WuDunn put it, "personal responsibility must be part of the turnaround, but so must collective responsibility, especially for children now struggling" (Kristof and WuDunn, *Tightrope,* 12).

4. Kristof and WuDunn, *Tightrope*, 9.

car accident will cause everything to collapse" (17–18). While nearly half of the American population might not be living in poverty (however defined), that many might well be struggling—recall that forty percent of American adults would be unable to afford an unexpected $400 expense.[5] Kristof and WuDunn cite "a deeper malaise," "an epidemic of loneliness," "stress and hopelessness," and "chaotic circumstances"[6] as evidence of the nation's failings. These pains are flexible insofar as they can describe the woes of the desperately poor as easily as working class resentment and more middle-class ennui. With this emphasis on far-reaching suffering, poverty recedes as an object of analysis. Rather than mobilizing a hermeneutic of poverty—making the poor visible to other socioeconomic strata—Kristof and WuDunn leverage suffering in a distinctly affective register.

Kristof and WuDunn take great pains to explain how the Greens and the Knapps are representative of some of the most desperate struggles in the country, but, beyond affirming the ubiquity of malaise and chaos, they don't build a case explaining how this particular nexus of job loss, vulnerability, and addiction translates into a viable representation of the common struggles

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5. Federal Reserve, *Report on the Economic Well-Being*.

6. Kristof and WuDunn, *Tightrope*, 16, 39, 147, 167. Kristof and WuDunn describe this chaos in the following terms: "The common thread of the Mike Stepps, the Farlan Knapps, the Ricochet Goffs, the Rebecca Hales is that they grew up in chaotic circumstances, buffeted by drugs, alcohol, crime and other temptations and without much of a lifeline from extended family, the school or government. They were set up to make poor choices, and they indeed made poor choices, with nary a safety net to be seen" (167).

facing the majority of the bottom 150 million Americans. In stories from Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Pine Bluff, Arkansas, *Tightrope* shows that Yamhill is not unique and that the Greens and the Knapps are far from alone. Across the country, those who struggle most acutely, do so in similar terms and under analogous conditions. Extreme suffering takes center stage, while Kristof and WuDunn largely omit detailed examples of the more ubiquitous, less severe struggles so that the urgency of the most extreme suffering resonates across the enormous scope of brittle American living. Yet Kristof and WuDunn neglect the hermeneutic relationship between their descriptions of the extreme levels of suffering and their account of the more general brittleness. To what extent does this extreme suffering capture the struggles of 150 million Americans?[7] Kristof and WuDunn take it on faith that the malaise, stress, hopelessness, loneliness, and despair that are behind the opioid addictions of the desperately poor also underpin whatever ails the rest of the bottom half.

To help explain the underlying causes of the opioid crisis, Kristof and WuDunn include part of a conversation they had with Dr. Daniel Ciccarone, a Professor in the School of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco and an expert on opioid and heroin addiction. Ciccarone is frank: "'If we don't address the root suffering of Americans, even if you took every opioid pill away, that suffering will manifest into another social and public health problem… If

7. Reminiscent of Oscar Lewis's descriptions of the culture of poverty, the underlying traits that Kristof and WuDunn stretch from the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder to its midpoint are overwhelmingly social, psychological, and difficult to pin down.

we want to end, truly end the opioid crisis, we need to understand the basic causes of suffering and pain in America'" (16–17).

In these terms, the question is simple: what are the basic causes of suffering and pain in America? Kristof and WuDunn embrace this question and dedicate much of *Tightrope* to exploring it. On the surface, it seems as fundamental as it is urgent. But it is also deceptive. In contrast to the complex chain running from the opioid crisis down to its basic causes, poverty's root cause in an affluent society is disarming in its simplicity: the uneven distribution of wealth and resources.[8] In constructing their causal chains of pain and suffering, Kristof and WuDunn sidestep the question of distribution and avoid taking a strong position. In contrast, Vance had no qualms dismissing distribution and arguing that individual behaviors, choices, and capacities had become poverty's basic causes. By focusing on suffering and not poverty, Kristof and WuDunn are able to allocate collective responsibility without disrupting the larger context of meritocratic individualism. Although, they criticize the extravagances of present levels of income and wealth inequality, they do so with the principal aim of addressing pain and suffering, not gross inequality. Their critique is not against meritocratic distribution, but against its malfunctioning. The problem with targeting pain and suffering over uneven distribution is that it invites solutions to the former that promise to sustain the latter.

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8. An important distinction remains between poverty's cause and the factors that guarantee its continuation.

Escalators and Tightropes

In one of *Tightrope*'s more devastating chapters, aptly titled "Deaths of Despair," Kristof and WuDunn describe the deaths of four of the five Knapp children. Farlan Knapp dies at 51 from cirrhosis and liver failure. Passed out drunk, Zealan Knapp burns to death in his trailer—Dee suspects that "the home caught fire from the chemicals that Zealan was using to make meth" (118). Nathan Knapp also dies in an explosion while making meth with his son. Rogena Knapp dies from "hepatitis C and liver cancer related to longtime abuse of drugs and alcohol" (119). The deaths happen within five years of each other and devastate Dee and her son Keylan, the lone survivor of his generation.

This is the narrative context leading up to the chapter's conclusion where Kristof and WuDunn ask "Why did deaths of despair claim Farlan, Zealan, Nathan, and Rogena and so many others?" They list "four important factors": first, the disappearance of good union jobs; second, an explosion in drug accessibility and use; third, "the war on drugs meant that addiction became far more difficult to reconcile with daily life than in the old days when substance abuse involved alcohol;" and fourth, the "mass incarceration of drug-related offenses broke up families" (121). While the prevalence, potency, and criminalization of drug addiction exacerbate the crisis, only one of these four factors—the disappearance of good union jobs—might be understood as a basic cause of suffering and pain, at least in Ciccarone's terms. The other three stem from widespread drug use and the self-defeating strategies the government employs to combat it. As Ciccarone points out, drug use and its criminalization are not basic causes but the result of some other, deeper suffering. Meanwhile, poverty itself is an afterthought, reduced to a consequence of plummeting wages and job loss.

Over the last century, poverty's viability as a legible cause of pain and suffering has disintegrated. For Jacob Riis it was so obvious that poverty guaranteed pain and suffering as to be hardly worth stating. The central problem of *How the Other Half Lives* was not whether poverty led to suffering, but that the degree of suffering in the tenements of late nineteenth century New York had spiraled out of control. In *La Vida*, Oscar Lewis maintained that poverty produced pain and suffering but he also attributed a great deal of causal power to the *culture of poverty*, blurring the picture by introducing an ostensibly separate phenomenon. And, confronted with a decline that resembles what Kristof and WuDunn describe in *Tightrope*, J.D. Vance believed that the suffering he saw was not caused by poverty at all, but a consequence of widespread deficiencies in character and disposition among much of the white working class of Greater Appalachia.[9]

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9. In *Evicted*, Matthew Desmond gives voice to a particularly stark formulation of suffering among the poor based in something other than poverty: "Residential stability begets a kind of psychological stability, which allows people to invest in their home and social relationships. It begets school stability, which increases the chances that children will excel and graduate. And it begets community stability, which encourages neighbors to form strong bonds and take care of their block. But poor families enjoy little of that because they are evicted at such high rates" (Desmond, *Evicted*, 296). He concludes: "Decent, affordable housing should be a basic right for everybody in this country. The reason is simple: without stable shelter, everything else falls apart" (300).

Conscious of Vance's popularity and appeal, Kristof and WuDunn try to offer an alternative account. They recognize the same kinds of suffering, but they argue that basic causes of this suffering are the result of individual as well as collective failures. "While we look unsparingly at failures of personal responsibility," they write, "let's also examine equally rigorously the failures of government, of institutions and of society" (9). Kristof and WuDunn go on to grant that, by and large, there is the same kind of individual variation among those who struggle as there is among those who do not—neither industrious poor nor lazy wealthy are anomalies—and that while poor individual choices can contribute to suffering, the lion's share of the responsibility for the pain they describe in *Tightrope* is collective. On the surface, their willingness to point to societal causes is in opposition to Vance's abiding commitment to explaining suffering through personal irresponsibility. But while Kristof and WuDunn diverge from Vance in that regard, they share a more fundamental orientation toward poverty. Namely, they see it is a consequence, not as a cause.

Kristof and WuDunn's vision of collective responsibility might blame suffering on institutions and cultures but, without poverty as a basic cause, they gear their remedies toward pulling individuals out of poverty rather than toward a more equitable distribution of wealth and resources. Within the frame of collective responsibility, Kristof and WuDunn trace the suffering they describe to the "decades of social-policy mistakes and often gratuitous cruelty" that have robbed the vast majority of Americans of the prosperity that would have come had the growth and distribution of wealth from the 1950s and 1960s stayed on track (18). The turn to neoliberal governance that gripped American policy in the 1970s and intensified during the Reagan presidency has had long-lasting effects. Kristof and WuDunn show how these policy choices

wreaked havoc on the lives of American workers and plunged the United States down global rankings measuring quality of life, such as the Social Progress Index.[10]

Ushered in by changes in the existing modes of production as well as neoliberal governance, *Tightrope* describes two particularly damning outcomes this shift produced. First is the dissolution of the American welfare state, which includes things like increasingly underfunded and austerely administered public services, and healthcare and education systems that continue to fail those who need them most. Second, this shift caused upward mobility to come to a grinding halt thanks in large part to the progressive evaporation of jobs with salaries and benefits sufficient to return a healthy, comfortable, and sustainable standard of living for Americans of lower socioeconomic status. To illustrate this second outcome, Kristof and WuDunn use the metaphor of broken and sparse escalators.[11] Here, the escalator is a surrogate

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10. See Kristof and WuDunn, "Chapter 2: 'We're Number 61!,'" 13–24.

11. Though escalators and tightropes are not entirely unrelated; they represent different fronts of the suffering that Kristof and WuDunn are trying to address. Kristof and WuDunn use a tightrope as a metaphor to illustrate the path of those with the fewest resources: achieving stability, comfort, and fulfillment demands staying on the straight and narrow, and persevering with grace and balance. Any slip and the tightrope-walker plunges downward, no safety net in sight. Meanwhile, "life's journey for affluent, well-educated American families is like a stroll along a wide, smooth path, forgiving of missteps" (10). Tightropes call attention to the thinning—or outright vanishing—social safety nets that were meant to break the fall of the most vulnerable and offer them another chance.

for upward mobility—basic American suffering flows not only from an absence of jobs and the ravages of opioid addiction but from an absence of secure, traversable paths to decent employment. Contrary to what the title suggests, the dominant metaphor in *Tightrope* is the escalator.

Kristof and WuDunn try to address both fronts. First, and in a long-overdue effort to pull the United States into line with other similarly industrialized and developed countries, they call for repairing old damage and newly expanding social safety nets and public services. Not only would these changes provide relief for widespread physical suffering, they would represent a necessary first step in restoring and rebuilding the social infrastructure that has been deteriorating for decades.[12] This front addresses the most shocking images of suffering we see among the extremely, desperately poor: people would no longer die from preventable diseases for want of accessible universal healthcare; addiction would no longer be criminalized but treated; people would no longer go hungry because they fail to qualify for food assistance; safe housing would be guaranteed to all.

Second, they see a need to address the societal causes of suffering that are not addressed by restoring and extending social safety nets on the first front, the causes that result in brittle lives as well as opioid addiction. This is the escalator front. Between reinforcing the welfare state and investing in upward mobility escalators, Kristof and WuDunn place more stock in the latter.

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12. For an extended discussion of the importance of restoring social infrastructure, see Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization and the Decline of Civic Life* (2018).

"The paramount lesson of our exploration," they conclude, "was the need to fix the escalators and create more of them to spread opportunity, restore people's dignity and spark their ingenuity" (249). In many ways, *Tightrope* is among the most progressive recent books about nation-wide pain and suffering in America, arguing as it does for a broad overhaul of many of the country's foundational institutions—the healthcare system, primary, secondary, and post-secondary education, the criminal justice system, and the workforce. But Kristof and WuDunn's faith in the promise of increased opportunities for upward mobility reflects a disturbing, if widespread, blindspot. Even though Kristof and WuDunn diagnose the problem in collective terms, escalators offer a solution to individual Americans without addressing the collective nature of the pain and suffering they experience. No matter how many of them there are, escalators move individuals from one floor to the next, but the floors remain, and will never be wholly unoccupied. And, for every escalator that carries people upward, there is almost always another moving in the opposite direction. Without ever addressing whether the economy is actually capable of producing a sufficient number of decent jobs, Kristof and WuDunn build their case for more and better escalators around the idea that the current system is wasting the potential, energies, and talents of many capable Americans trapped on the ground floor. Here, they are less interested in those whose usefulness is not as evident.

Compared to the urgency of inaccessible healthcare or widespread homelessness, the suffering that stems from a shortage of escalators is intractable. To make its effects more tangible, Kristof and WuDunn often qualify descriptions of terrible individual pain with a projection of what might have been. For example, with his talent for math, Keylan Knapp could have "ended up as a successful engineer or sales executive," (121). Or, in a different world,

"self-possessed and articulate" Amber Knapp (Farlan's daughter) could have been "a lawyer or business manager" (215). At the end of the book, Keylan's health is quickly deteriorating thanks in large part to continued substance use and Amber has been arrested for failing a drug test and will be in prison for "another couple of years" (222).[13] The contrast between Amber and Farlan's lost potential and their continued struggles is striking but it is also misleading. The injustice that they represent slips from general pain and suffering to their particular failure to reach the ranks of the professional or executive classes. In this way, the sources of their pain and suffering, though collective, become tied up in individual upward mobility. By highlighting individual narratives of unfulfilled potential out of the morass of acute pain and suffering, Kristof and WuDunn distort the problem by mistaking the unrealized economic potential of the few for the basic causes of pain and suffering for the many. Confronting poverty by fixing the escalators we have and creating more of them promises to rescue people like Farlan and Amber, both of whom Kristof and WuDunn recognize as especially capable, but it has little to offer those not destined for the professional classes. When American pain and suffering are attributed to unrealized potential for upward mobility, other explanations fall out of sight.

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13. They describe their shattered hopes toward Amber: "We left Amber feeling hopeful. She was so smart and self-aware that she seemed to have a fighting chance to put her problems behind her, return to the corporate world and become the mom she aimed to be. We messaged a few times about photos and other issues, and then she stopped responding. Finally, her daughter answered our texts: Amber had been arrested for failing a drug test and was back in prison…" (222).

For Kristof and WuDunn, the choices that Farlan and Amber made do not amount to a reasonable basis for allocating all responsibility for their suffering to them but when it comes to solutions, they believe the agent of change is still an individual. While Vance would have likely found fault with the *choices* that Amber and Farlan made to use drugs and shirk responsibilities, he would in all likelihood enthusiastically endorse the idea that the best response to their pain and suffering is for Amber and Farlan to become entrepreneurs or professionals. The difference here is that Kristof and WuDunn want to foster the conditions that produce these individuals and Vance believes that the individual should have a bigger share of the responsibility when it comes to creating the conditions necessary for their own prosperity.

The similarities between Vance and Kristof and WuDunn run even deeper. Early on in the book, Kristof and WuDunn speculate that, without the decades of neoliberal mismanagement that started in the 1970s, today's average wage for a full-time non-supervisory male worker would be close to $90,000 a year, and not the $43,000 that it actually is (33–34). These figures are meant to show the wealth that working Americans might have enjoyed, had things gone a little differently. While fault might lie with cruel and gratuitous social policy, Kristof and WuDunn ultimately believe that the perpetuating cause of the $47,000 disparity is a pandemic of outclassed workers: "We have a mismatch between a labor market that is in desperate need of certain skilled workers and an education system that turns out young people who flounder and end up unemployed" (240). It's true that certain trades and professions struggle to recruit qualified practitioners and that a worker's best chance at doubling their income is often through learning new skills. But this response underestimates the problem: individual prosperity does not threaten or address poverty's durability.

In a longer discussion of America's hostility toward private labor unions since the 1970s, Kristof and WuDunn briefly mention that "almost half of American jobs pay less than $15 an hour" (49).[14] Corroborating that statistic, a 2019 report from the Brookings Institute found that 53 million people, 44% of American workers between the ages of 18 and 64, are low-wage workers with a median hourly wage of $10.22 and a median annual income of $17,950.[15] If all of the workers sought and secured the kinds of training and education Kristof and WuDunn believe would address the mismatch between the labor market and workers' skills—if all of the entrepreneurially minded Farlans and Ambers presently squandering their potential and living in poverty were to invest in themselves and claw their way into affluence—what effect would their success have on the wages of their former peers? Would low-wage jobs disappear? No. What gave the Greens and the Knapps of the 1960s some measure of stability and reason to look forward to the future wasn't prudent career planning or sterling credentials—recall that Tom

14. Kristof and WuDunn don't provide an in-text citation but they appear to be referring to a 2015 report from the National Employment Law Project that found that 42.4% of American workers earn less than $15 an hour. Irene Tung, Yannet Lathrop, and Paul Sonn, *The Growing Movement for $15*, National Employment Law Project, November 2015, accessed July 17, 2020, 1, https://www.nelp.org/wp-content/uploads/Growing-Movement-for-15-Dollars.pdf.

15. Martha Ross and Nicole Bateman, *Meet the Low-Wage Workforce*, Metropolitan Policy Program, Brookings, accessed on July 17, 2020, 5, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/201911_Brookings-Metro_low-wage-workforce_Ross-Bateman.pdf.

Green could not read—but the simple fact that jobs provided enough compensation to meet workers' basic needs and afford some small comfort.[16]

Even at the time, the modest lives that the Greens and the Knapps were able to briefly sustain were not available to everyone. Amid the prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s, identity groups at America's historical margins received at best partial access to the decent wages Tom Green and Gary Knapp earned. A cursory look at the demographics of income and wealth distribution reveals that many of these injustices remain with us, some as acute as they ever were. But the question of which identities are over-represented among the lowest economic strata—forced to disproportionately endure pain and suffering—is a different question than why the historically wealthy, along with the enterprising and gifted elite, flourish while the Greens and the Knapps forego modest comforts and, all too often, essential resources.

Kristof and WuDunn's insistence that the best way to ease the suffering of people like the Greens and the Knapps is to repair and expand the escalators that can lift them upward is at odds with the formal structure of historical and contemporary wealth distribution. And yet their faith

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16. As Kristof and WuDunn put it, "with Gary gone, the Knapp home was more tranquil, and prospects seemed better. Poverty shouldn't be romanticized, but neither is it unremitting bleakness. Other kids noticed the Knapps at times having plenty of fun. The difficulties were real, but so were the practical jokes, the joys of fishing, the warmth of a large family gathered around the table… From her meager income, Dee scraped together the cash to buy sixteen-year-old Farlan his first car, a Mustang, and the entire family marveled at the love and sacrifice the gift reflected" (114).

in the ability of these kinds of measures to address the pain of the poor remains steadfast, the incongruence especially striking given the lengths that Kristof and WuDunn go to distance themselves from accounts of poverty premised on personal irresponsibility. In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that *Tightropes*'s tendency to answer poverty's collective challenges with individualistic solutions is a result of their failure to recognize the differences between poverty and suffering in the context of an affluent society.

Poverty and Invisibility

Tightrope shares a common cause and rhetorical agenda with many other recent (and not so recent) books about American poverty and American suffering: visibility. That is, making the distress of lower socioeconomic strata legible to higher strata. Citing Michael Harrington as inspiration, Kristof and WuDunn hope to "remind fellow citizens that there is another America where people are struggling and dying unnecessarily, often invisibly. 'That the poor are invisible is one of the most important things about them,' Harrington noted, and as long as that remains true their problems simply won't be addressed" (38–39). While visibility precedes addressing the problems of the poor, Harrington freely admits that it is by no means a guarantee that relief is on the way. Nonetheless, recognizing the poor and their suffering is an essential first step. Harrington is worth quoting at length:

> The United States in the 1960s contains an affluent society within its borders. Millions and tens of millions enjoy the highest standard of life the world has ever known. This blessing is mixed. It is built upon a peculiarly distorted economy, one that often proliferates pseudo-needs rather than satisfying human needs. For some, it has resulted in a sense of spiritual emptiness, of alienation. Yet a man would be a fool to prefer hunger to satiety, and the material gains at least open up the possibility of a rich and full existence.

> At the same time, the United States contains an underdeveloped nation, a culture of poverty. Its inhabitants do not suffer the extreme privation of the peasants of Asia or the tribesmen of Africa, yet the mechanism of the misery is similar. They are beyond history, beyond progress, sunk in a paralyzing, maiming routine…
>
> But this country seems to be caught in a paradox. Because its poverty is not so deadly, because so many are enjoying a decent standard of life, there are indifference and blindness to the plight of the poor. There are even those who deny that the culture of poverty exists. It is as if Disraeli's famous remark about the two nations of the rich and the poor had come true in a fantastic fashion. At precisely that moment in history where for the first time a people have the material ability to end poverty, they lack the will to do so. They cannot see; they cannot act. The consciences of the well-off are the victims of affluence; the lives of the poor are the victims of a physical and spiritual misery.
>
> The problem, then, is to a great extent one of vision. The nation of the well-off must be able to see through the wall of affluence and recognize the alien citizens on the other side. And there must be vision in the sense of purpose, of aspiration: if the word does not grate upon the ears of a gentile America, there must be a passion to end poverty for nothing else will do.[17]

Writing against the conventional wisdom of the time, Harrington insisted that the nation of the other America was massive, numbering between forty and fifty million people—approximately a third of the country's population. He believed that "familiar America" (his shorthand for the more affluent two-thirds) had not only lost sight of the bottom third but had lost its very capacity to recognize it. Although Harrington made important distinctions between American poverty and the desperate privation in what he called "the new countries," his descriptions of suffering within the other America remained largely undifferentiated. America's poorest forty to fifty million citizens were, according Harrington, "denied the minimal levels of health, housing, food, and education that our present stage of scientific knowledge specifies as

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17. Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Touchstone, 1962), 158–59.

necessary for life as it is now lived in the United States."[18] Although Harrington divided the kinds of poor people that make up the bottom third into further subcategories—among others, dispossessed workers, the farm poor, minorities (namely, black people), and the elderly—he failed to recognize any more than minor differences in the quality and degree of suffering within and between each subset.[19] The stark disparity between the bottom third and top-two thirds made any uneven distribution of wealth and resources within the bottom third seem less severe and less pressing. With this limited internal variation and clear separation between the two Americas, the burden of visibility is relatively straightforward: Harrington had only to mark the other America's social and economic borders and then describe its typical citizens.

In *Tightrope*, the problem of poverty's visibility is considerably more complicated. Regardless of material realities, Harrington's representation of the other America is internally coherent—poverty's numerical, physical, and relative dimensions all refer to the same group of people, the bottom third. Any description of life within the bottom third that Harrington offers bears the representative weight of, he believes, fifty odd million Americans.

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18. Harrington, *The Other America*, 179.

19. The uniformity that Harrington relies on is an invention. The lives of impoverished families at the top of the bottom third were markedly different from the lives of impoverished families at the very bottom. Of course, ongoing racial discrimination exacerbated the economic strain poor people of color endured; vastly over-represented, as they were, on the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.

Meanwhile, Kristof and WuDunn do not describe a singular group at all. Instead, they build their analysis around two dimensions of American suffering. First, assuming that the most extreme suffering takes place beyond widespread public recognition, they try to make it visible through the lives and stories of people like the Knapps and the Greens. In hopes that *seeing* will lead to *acting*, Kristof and WuDunn detail horrific suffering, suffering that extends well beyond anything that any empathic person would find acceptable. Out of sight, they fear, suffering cascades out of control. Second, assuming that "Familiar America" remains largely unaware of the scope of the suffering that is at its most acute in places like Yamhill but that reverberates to some degree across nearly half of the population, they try to make it visible through statistics.[20] Whereas Harrington drew a line between the bottom third of the population and familiar America, Kristof and WuDunn don't demarcate a discrete group. The pain in *Tightrope* doesn't emerge from uneven economic distribution or from an enduring antagonism between rich and poor but from things like cruel public policy—a crucial consequence of their prioritizing suffering over poverty.

Seeking to represent a unified plight that begins with the Greens and the Knapps and stretches upward, Kristof and WuDunn run up against the limitations of understanding poverty in

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20. For instance, the suffering might extend to the nearly half of American workers who earn under $15 an hour (Kristof and WuDunn, *Tightrope*, 49); or, in an equally troubling vein, to the "71 percent of young Americans [who] would not be eligible to join the military even if they wanted to, because of felony convictions, drug use, obesity, failure to graduate from high school and other reasons" (257).

physical terms. *Tightrope* dwells within the lower end of suffering's spectrum while loosely suggesting its upper limit. While Kristof and WuDunn present the suffering of the Greens and Knapps in affecting detail, the question of how far this degree of pain extends is unclear. How many other Americans lead lives similar to the Greens and the Knapps? Far too many, to be sure. But the size of the minority that the Greens and the Knapps realistically represent matters a great deal for any general understanding of twenty-first century American poverty. While Kristof and WuDunn describe poverty's outer limits—150 million Americans, almost half of workers, etc.—the physical experience of less extreme suffering remains opaque. Kristof and WuDunn leverage extreme physical suffering alongside striking evidence of numerical breadth. Although the physical conditions and the numbers are both jarring, they are overlapping problems, not one and the same. But we confuse the two, contorting the pain of the Greens and the Knapps in blind hope that a diluted version of their suffering can expose the more pervasive rot at the core of the socioeconomic order.

Unlike poverty, suffering is not so easily contained by a threshold. To reconcile suffering's imprecisions with the inescapable evidence of stark income and wealth inequality, Kristof and WuDunn focus on the very bottom and the very top of the socioeconomic order:

> America's proudest boast throughout history has been that we have no class system, and that opportunity is available to all. Yet a starting point in an exploration of our nation must be to acknowledge that today we do have a class hierarchy, and the Greens and the Knapps are on the bottom tier. Billionaires like Jeff Bezos are the new American aristocrats, while people like the Kristofs and WuDunns, and probably you if you're reading this book, constitute a new privileged class. This twenty-first-century version of feudalism rests not only on money but also on access to education and the ability to pass down inherited benefits and values to one's children. Children from the richest 1 percent of households are seventy-seven times more likely to attend an Ivy League college than children from the bottom 20 percent. (42)

By framing the problem in terms of access to education, Kristof and WuDunn again put their cards on the table and reassert their faith in the transformative power of a more equitable distribution of economic opportunities. The difference between the richest one percent and the bottom twenty drives their point home but it does so without any regard for the numerical majority that lies between the new privileged class and the bottom strata that the Greens and the Knapps represent. A comparison with feudalism might be useful analogy for understanding some aspects of our present-day class hierarchy—at the very least, it evokes a degree of inequality that seems to reflect the contrast between the Greens, the Knapps, and the Bezoses—but it's also misleading.[21] One of the essential aspects of feudalism is its stark line separating lords from vassals. Under feudalism, with minor exceptions for merchants and bourgeoisie, people were either powerful or poor. In Kristof and WuDunn's framing, some are powerful (the new aristocrats and, to a lesser extent, the new privileged class), some are desperately poor (the Greens and the Knapps, the bottom twenty percent) but most people are neither. Instead of

21. While feudalism describes an order in which property owners relentlessly exploit peasants, in his essay "The Notion of Expenditure," George Bataille reminds us that the moneyed also provided for the peasants, albeit *very* modestly. Writing in the early twentieth century, Bataille's point is not to romanticize feudalism but to show how, while the exploitation of workers has persisted, any obligation that older ruling classes felt toward the wellbeing of those they exploited has vanished among the new elite.

retaining feudalism's hard and fast dividing line between wealthy and poor—between elite and non-elite, worker and owner, success and failure—Kristof and WuDunn obscure it.[22]

Without a sense of where poverty gives way to affluence (or, at least poverty's absence), Kristof and WuDunn cannot recognize how the suffering they describe is the result of socioeconomic inequality. At the same time, they remain resolutely aware of the myriad ways that life at the bottom exacerbates suffering and punishes mistakes with exceptional brutality. While that no doubt remains all too true, Kristof and WuDunn do not engage with the complexities of socioeconomic stratification. As it traverses the class hierarchy, their concept of

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22. Reducing class hierarchy to its poles and evacuating the middle is not unique to *Tightrope* but a common way of framing desperate poverty's persistence within a highly stratified affluent society. In *$2.00 A Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* (2015), Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer employ this framing self-consciously. More often, however, ethnographies that aim to show how the poor suffer tend to pair poverty with a supplement, explore the latter, and default to a simplified version of socioeconomic stratification. This structure tends to repeat regardless of whether the supplement is a kind of individual, institutional, or collective failure. As we saw in the last chapter, the desperately poor were front and center while J.D. Vance explored lapses in personal responsibility, morality, and character. Along the same lines as *Tightrope*, this framing is particularly common in other books about poverty and addiction including Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg's *Righteous Dopefiend* (2009) and Beth Macy's *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company That Addicted America* (2019).

suffering varies only in degree, not in kind. In this way, suffering mutes divisions between socioeconomic strata and disavows the possibility that, through uneven distribution or exploitation, higher strata enjoy comforts at the expense of the poor.

Conclusion

Like *Hillbilly Elegy*, *Tightrope*'s core resides within the collection of dynamic individuals Kristof and WuDunn describe, engage, and eulogize. But *Tightrope*'s ambitions extend beyond detached portraiture. It lays bare the struggles of people like the Greens and the Knapps in order to unmask the scale and degree of American suffering. More than the description of individual people and families, this larger mission hinges on the relationship between these accounts of subjective experience and an explanatory register that includes sociological, cultural, and historical context. In *Tightrope*, the aporetic tension between description and explanation—between suffering's collective shape and its individual expressions—has two important features. First, the less frequent extremes of suffering and privation Kristof and WuDunn's subjects endure undermine the numerical scale that their statistics about widespread suffering invoke. Ultimately, *Tightrope* fails to bridge its descriptions of individual lives with the sociological context it lays out. Second, in step with a much broader trend, Kristof and WuDunn's depictions of individual lives are deeply sentimental. This drama unfolds over emotionally laden sites and stories: squandered potential and heroic flourishing, heart-rending funerals and implausible graduations, destructive and restoring relationships. Pulled into the gravitational logic of the portraiture of failed individuals, scrutinizing the purchase of sociological and historical explanations no longer seems so urgent.

To explain the suffering they witness, Kristof and WuDunn trace a historical and sociological context that dates to the post-war boom and includes policy decisions that caused the welfare state to wither as well as the loss of decent working-class jobs. Vance, by contrast, explains the suffering he witnesses through *cultural* deficiencies. But *Hillbilly Elegy*'s individual portraits line up with its explanations in a way that *Tightrope*'s do not. In Vance's narrative, his descriptions and explanations are not so much complements as reflections. The cultural traits that he spurns are no more than blown up versions of the individual failings he sees elsewhere. Where his account falters is not in the relationship between description and explanation but in the contradictions that appear throughout his descriptions—paramount among them, the poverty of a household income of one hundred thousand dollars a year—only to be quickly swept under the rug and left unexplained. For those who are already convinced that poverty is the result of irresponsible spending, compromised judgment, and laziness, the contradictions and inconsistencies in Vance's individual portraits do not register. Instead, individual failings seamlessly confirm a broken culture. Since poverty here is a cultural/individual problem and not a collective problem, the only way out of this closed loop is for individuals to pick themselves up and stay on the straight and narrow. There is no collective suffering, only the suffering of individuals who deserve their lot since they refuse to escape it.

Unlike Vance, Kristof and WuDunn embrace sociological explanations, citing ill-advised economic policy as well as enduring historical imbalances in wealth and power. Whereas *Hillbilly Elegy*'s cultural explanations repeat a sanitized version of its individual descriptions, *Tightrope*'s portraits of individuals seem to unfold almost independently of its sociological and historical accounts. In this chapter, I have discussed some of the ways that Kristof and

WuDunn's sociological explanations suggest a socioeconomic order that is not borne out in the lives of their subjects. But regardless of whether their explanations can keep pace, it is the descriptions of the Greens, the Knapps, and the other struggling individuals Kristof and WuDunn write about that dominate *Tightrope*. The portraits are as intimate as they are dramatic—recall, in many cases, these people were among Kristof's childhood friends—and none more so than the life and death of their friend, Clayton Green:

> He was taken to the McMinnville hospital and died on January 29, 2019, at the age of fifty-seven. The official cause of death was congestive heart failure, but that medical term misses so much: his expulsion from school in ninth grade, his loss of good jobs as factories closed, his genius for mechanics, his failed marriage, his loyalty to friends including us, his five grandchildren all taken into care by the state, his loneliness, his desolation. This was another death of despair, and Clayton was a casualty of America's social great depression. (246–47)

Faced with the tragedy of another death in the Green family, we also see Kristof and WuDunn's grief at the loss of a friend for whom they obviously cared a great deal.[23] But in their telling, what does Clayton's death show us about American poverty and suffering? Ultimately, the rich portraiture of desperately poor individuals drowns-out more abstract sociological explanations about suffering's foundations.

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23. This recounting comes in *Tightrope*'s final chapter and anticipates Kristof and WuDunn's closing appeal to "shore up the American dream so that the children today climbing aboard the Number 6 school bus—and skipping into schools all across the country—achieve more of the dreams that animate them" (262).

Chapter 5

A Maid's Long Journey Through Poverty

Stephanie Land's *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive* ends with Land and her then four-year old daughter, Mia, hiking to the top of Sentinel Mountain and looking out on the University of Montana and Missoula: "Immediately below us was the campus where I went to school and the auditorium where, in two years, Mia would watch me walk across a stage to accept my diploma for a bachelor's degree in English and creative writing." Over the course of the book, Missoula and the University of Montana's creative writing program are Land's north star, guiding and grounding her as she negotiates unstable housing, miserable low-paying jobs, and social hostilities from strangers and family alike. Their ascension of the mountain symbolizes not only Land and Mia's survival but their ultimate triumph. On the hike down, Mia walking ahead looks back at her mom: "'We made it,' she seemed to be saying with her eyes. Not just up the mountain but to a better life."[1]

Like *Hillbilly Elegy* and *Tightrope*, *Maid*'s political ambition is to make poverty visible to a more affluent and powerful readership.[2] At the level of description, Land lays bare working

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1. Stephanie Land, *Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive* (New York: Hachette Books, 2019), 268.

2. Although Land is not explicit about this function in the text, two aspects of the book's publishing and marketing leave little doubt. First, *Maid* came to fruition with the support of the "Economic Hardship Reporting Project." Founded by none other than Barbara Ehrenreich in

and housing conditions reminiscent of not only Yamhill and Middletown, but of century-old tenement life in New York. As we have seen in the previous chapters, cultural and sociological explanations in *Hillbilly Elegy* and *Tightrope* imply a collective experience that extends beyond the narrative portrait of any individual person. Neither text clarifies the parameters around how common the experience of poverty they portray is nor offers a coherent collective image of the poor. Moreover, the dynamism of Mamaw, Papaw, Clayton Green, Farlan Knapp, and many others pull the texts out of their explanatory registers and into the register of interpersonal relationships and individual interiority.

But even if *Hillbilly Elegy* and *Tightrope* relegate cultural and sociological explanations to the background and unfold through engaging descriptions of colorful individuals, in both

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2012, the project "funds and co-publishes reportage at the most renowned and popular media outlets," "puts a human face on financial instability," and aims "to change the national conversation around poverty and economic insecurity" (https://economichardship.org/about-ehrp/). Second, Land has launched a campaign she calls "#Maid2Reps," a "grassroots campaign to help bring awareness about the plight of America's working poor." Visitors to her website are invited to purchase a copy of the book and have it sent to their state representative. "These lawmakers," Land says, "need a dose of empathy. If they're going to be the ones making the decisions that rule 60 million Americans, they need to walk around in their shoes and gain a better understanding for what it's like to live in poverty in America." "Maids to Reps," on Stephanie Land's official website, accessed on June 17, 2020, https://stepville.com/maid2reps/ (site discontinued).

cases, the project of making poverty visible is still a project of making the poor visible. Vance and Kristof and WuDunn undertake this objective by marrying descriptions of poverty and suffering with cultural and sociological explanations—unsatisfying though they may be. *Maid*, in contrast, does not present poverty as a phenomenon in need of explanation at all, but as a set of circumstances to be overcome. In the absence of explanation, it bears asking what exactly Land is making visible.

Maid follows Land's struggle with poverty and her seemingly inevitable triumph over it. The narrative begins and ends with two parallel decisions. The first comes when Land is living in a camper trailer with her boyfriend Jamie, a line-cook who moonlights at cafés and with a friend's catering business. While both are working as much as possible to save money, Land for college and Jamie for a bike trip, Land finds out that she is pregnant. When Land decides to carry the pregnancy to term, she also decides to abandon, at least temporarily, her plans to pursue a college education: "I was a mother now. I would honor that responsibility for the rest of my life. I got up, and on my way out, I ripped up my college application and went to work" (22). Before the pregnancy, Land had been working in a café, serving Port Townsend's aging bourgeoisie and "relishing the youth and freedom" that the work and lifestyle afforded and biding her time before committing to becoming a writer (19). Her choice to raise a child and put her education on hold causes her to abandon a career trajectory that had promised to lift her from young café-worker to creative professional. This decision introduces *Maid*'s narrative structure and sets the stage for the struggles that Land faces in the following chapters.

The second decision comes some four years later and effectively resolves the tensions caused by the first. After years of a grueling work schedule, once her "exhaustion had reached a

point of impossibility" (234), Land decides that she has had enough. She quits her job with the maid service she had been working for, takes out the maximum amount of student loans (she had been slowly earning college credits online, working toward a paralegal degree), and refocuses on building a better future for Mia and for herself:

> Taking on debt and losing a job seemed an enormous risk, but I also had grown to understand something else: it would be extremely difficult to see a different future if all I could think about was making it through to the next paycheck.
> As a poor person, I was not accustomed to looking past the month, week, or sometimes hour. I compartmentalized my life the same way I cleaned every house—left to right, top to bottom. Whether on paper or in my mind, the problems I had to deal with first—the car repair, the court date, the empty cupboards—went at the top, on the left. The next pressing issue went next to it, on the right. I'd focus on one problem at a time, working left to right, top to bottom. (241–42)

Crushed by a relentless present, Land realizes that poverty had arrested her capacity to think and plan beyond her daily survival. The decision to reorient herself catalyzes the rapid chain of events that would transport Land and Mia to Missoula and the promise of prosperity. Looking to the future, Land and Mia move out of their studio—"a grimy room above a freeway" (112)—and into a newly renovated apartment with a dishwasher and a view. Land receives a scholarship for survivors of domestic violence that gives her the means to visit Missoula and permanently relocate there shortly thereafter to enroll at the university. Between Land ripping up her college applications and quitting her cleaning job to prioritize school lie painful descriptions of the cruel circumstances she endured cleaning houses and struggling to make ends meet as well as the explanation of how she was able to survive and overcome them.

The hermeneutic force behind any individual account of enduring poverty hinges on both the degree to which that individual account can be seen as representative of others as well as the number of people that might be reasonably represented. The poverty Land describes in *Maid*

doesn't call for an explanation. While her work as a maid or the gauntlet of "affordable" housing to which she is subjected might resonate with many working and poor Americans, the narrative of Land's individual ascension is so powerful that the near complete absence of the poor as a collective subject is barely noticeable. Not only are the collective poor invisible, the fact of their invisibility is itself obscured.

As a concluding analysis of the present state of the broken hermeneutics of American poverty, this chapter takes a step back from uncovering competing visions of what constitutes poverty to examine how narratives like Land's operate.[3] In what follows, I argue that the sentimental narrative of Land's heroic ascension not only obscures her descriptions of poverty, but severs the already frayed hermeneutic ties between the representation of a poor individual and the poor as a collective subject. To make this case, I examine how Land presents the

3. To varying degrees, the gravitational logic of the portrait of an individual surmounting or succumbing to poverty operates within virtually all twenty-first century ethnographic accounts of the poor. In *Hillbilly Elegy* and *Tightrope*—and in many other works, including *Slim's Table* (1992) and *Sidewalk* (2000) by Mitchell Duneier; *All Our Kin* (1975) by Carol B. Stack; *Tally's Corner* by Elliot Liebow—this logic competes against others. In *Maid*, it saturates the text. Nonetheless, *Maid* is far from alone. Other examples include *This Is All I Got* (2020) by Lauren Sandler, *Educated* (2018) by Tara Westover, *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls (2005), *Hand to Mouth* (2014) by Linda Tirado, *There Are No Children Here* (1991) by Alex Kotlowitz, and *Rachel and Her Children* (1988) by Jonathan Kozol.

inequalities between herself and those whose homes she cleans before showing how the narrative of her maturing perspective and growing confidence neutralizes poverty's collective dimension.

Inequality at Work and Home

Maid is set principally in two spheres: at work and at home.[4] Because Land's work involves spending time in houses that belong to other people—people who can afford to hire someone to clean—these two spheres collide. Whereas work and home in Riis's tenements were one and the same, the kinds of homes Land cleans are very different from the kinds of places she lives. Most of *Maid*'s chapters are named for the homes and houses where they take place, mixing Land's work and home lives. "Henry's House," "The Plant House," and "The Sad House" are places she cleans and "The Cabin," "Transitional Housing," and "The Studio" are places she lives. The topical parity highlights the contrast between the two kinds of home: one poor, one not. This contrast illustrates an inherent inequality between those who clean houses for money and those who can afford to hire someone to clean for them. This inequality gets expressed in different ways: first, through the obvious material disparities between the housing and furnishing Land and her clients can afford; second, through the wide variety of maid-

4. There are, of course, other spheres in the book. Scenes at the doctor's office, in long highway commutes, and in line at the grocery store all recur. But the most consequential sites outside of work and home are Land's various encounters with the bureaucratic machinery of the welfare state. Under the threat of suspended public assistance, Land is regularly forced to spend hours she does not have convincing government administrators that she is in fact poor.

employer relationships Land has with the people whose houses she cleans; and third, through the conditions of her work.

Material Inequality

Before leaving for Missoula, Land and Mia cycle through ten different homes over the course of four years, including a homeless shelter and a transitional housing facility.[5] Most of the narrative, however, unfolds while Land and Mia are living in a studio apartment in Mt. Vernon, Washington. The studio had once been the living room and sunroom of a single-family home but was now one of three subdivided units. When Land and Mia move in, the studio included "a bathroom with a tub, a tiny kitchen with a full-sized fridge, and a view of the whole city through a wall of windows" (111). While the studio offered elements that Land and Mia had been missing—a tub, independence—it posed its own challenges. It was uncomfortable: "At home, I battled a relentless black mold. Our sleeping area, with its walls made up of large windows, became a sauna in the evening sun. If it had rained recently, it was more like a greenhouse" (128). And, when Land would close the doors to the sleeping area to guard against cold seeping through the frost covered wall of windows, the living space shrunk to the kitchen and living area, roughly, she says, "the size of most of the guest bedrooms or offices" she dusted (210). In scale and comfort, the houses she cleans seem to be part of a different world.

5. Evidence of this can be found in the beginning of the book, where Land states: "My daughter learned to walk in a homeless shelter" (3).

Over the course of the book, Land also cleans for two different maid services as well as independently. Among the many unpleasant jobs on Land's rotation at Classic Clean, the second and better organized of her two employers, is what she calls the "Chef's House." By no means the most extravagant house on her schedule, the Chef's House exemplifies the kind of middle-class ease to which she aspires: "The Chef's House was one I envied, with its view, yard, trees that dropped apples to rot in the grass before the landscapers mowed over them. I wanted their back porch with its matching polished wooden furniture and maroon cushions" (143). The only time that Land meets the owner of the Chef's House, he is standing behind his gigantic stovetop—the inspiration, we assume, for Land's shorthand. His prized possession, the chef caresses it while he brags about having to take out a personal loan to cover the expense. To drive the point home, and before insisting that she only use the soft side of the sponge so as not to scratch the surface, he tells Land that the stovetop is "'probably worth twice as much as your car'" (86).[6] Where the studio is constricting, the Chef's House is expansive, a curated interior opening onto a manicured lawn. Inviting cushions complement matching furniture in sharp contrast to the single duffel bag that held all of Land and Mia's possessions when they moved

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6. Land, of course, does not need the Chef to remind her that she cannot afford the things that he can:

> I began to pay attention to the items that cluttered their kitchen counters: the receipts for rugs that were as expensive as my car, the bill for the dry cleaner that could replace half my wardrobe. In contrast, I divided my hourly wages into fifteen-minute increments to add up how much of my physical work paid for my gas. Most days I spent at least an hour just making the money it took in gas to get to work in the first place. But my clients worked long hours to pay for lavish cars, boats, sofas that they kept covered with a sheet. (141–42)

out of the homeless shelter.[7] But more than a difference of degree, the Chef's House represents a completely separate orientation to the material world. The claustrophobic confines of the studio antagonize Land, she struggles to manage the studio's humidity and temperature; takes Mia to get treated for infections that she believes are the product of the poor air quality; and spends some of the scant leisure time she has navigating the limitations of living in such a small, storage-less space. In contrast, the Chef uses his house as a gallery for his considered acquisitions; the house is a playground, not a liability.[8]

Relational Inequality

Condescending and insensitive, lording his relative wealth over Land, the Chef is easy to dislike. But he is not entirely representative. The clients Land writes about more often either treat her with basic civility or ignore her. In both cases, each relationship hinges on the fact of Land's lower status as a cleaner. At first, Land is struck by how many of the owners of the houses she

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7. Land describes how "William seemed surprised to see that there was only one duffel bag to move us out" (6).

8. To varying degrees, Land's clients, the Chef foremost among them, are members of Thorstein Veblen's "leisure class." In fact, Veblen's analysis of conspicuous consumption still resonates with Land's descriptions of her clients' acquisitiveness. But, while it is perfectly clear that Land is not among their ranks, she is far from legible as a member of what Veblen called "the base, industrious class." Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 50.

cleans with Classic Clean prefer to keep their relationship completely anonymous. She recognizes the toll that the isolation and invisibility take and quickly begins to resent the clients who prefer to let a stranger into their homes to clean up after them than deal with their maid in person. She comes to see the imposed invisibility as deeply disrespectful, holding herself to different professional standards in houses where she is anonymous.[9]

As her resentment builds, the invisibility merges with other slights and she is increasingly worn down by a broader disregard for her well-being and work. One day cleaning the "Porn House," she walks into the bedroom to find "a bottle of lube sitting on the nightstand in front of a digital clock… illuminated by the bright red numbers" (78). A step closer and she sees a pornography magazine in the open nightstand drawer and a pair of dirty socks next to the bed. Confronted with this scene, Land is careful to point out that the issue is not her client's sex lives, but the fact that they did not consider that their maid, like most people, might not want to touch any of this particular mess: "Though I'd never fault someone for masturbating while looking at porn mags, I would fault them for leaving it out in the open for the cleaning girl to see" (79). Dutifully, Land picks up the laundry, changes the sheets, and resigns herself to dusting the nightstand—though she leaves it for last. The owners of the Porn House would presumably have taken steps to prevent friends, acquaintances, or even strangers from seeing their lube, pornography, and dirty sheets. The invisible maid, however, does not warrant the courtesy.

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9. Land discloses the following: "I never snooped in houses where I wasn't invisible, where my name was 'Stephanie' instead of 'cleaning service' or even 'MAID' on their calendar" (176).

Even in the houses of kinder, more present clients, Land's lower status remains inescapable. Donna, one of her private clients (i.e., a client that Land secured outside of Classic Clean's auspices), is home around half the time that Land is there to clean, confides in Land as she would "a good friend," pays Land twenty-dollars an hour for her time, and always leaves a ten-dollar tip (149–55). One day, on her way out the door to buy ingredients for her special new blender, Donna explains to Land why she is switching to the co-op grocery store: "'Last time I went to the big store, I got in line behind a Mexican family… They used food stamps to pay for their food. And those kids were dressed to the *nines*'" (151). Land, who depends on food stamps to feed herself and Mia, is mortified while Donna detects neither the fact of Land's poverty nor the impact of her prejudice. In this interaction, Donna asserts a presumptive social equality between her and Land—assuming that they shared a common sense that would begrudge any family that includes both well-clothed children and food stamps. Donna's views are distressing, but so is Land's inability to confront them for fear of losing her job.

While we imagine Donna applauding herself for treating Land like a friend rather than the help, the conditions of Land's employment are such that the imbalance between the two women colors every aspect of their relationship. Land writes: "Donna enjoyed Mary Kay oils, which left a film that stuck to the side of the bathtub like Velcro, collecting every hair, every dead skin cell that came off her. It was hard to have conversations with her without seeing flashes of it. I never knew if she expected me to stop and talk or continue cleaning while having a conversation with the person whose pubic hairs and leg hair stubble I'd have to scrub from the ring of the jetted tub" (150–51). Land's association between a glimpse of Mary Kay oil mid-conversation and dislodging body-hair and grime is not reducible to the disgust engendered by

the difficulty of the task. The *jetted* tub recalls the disparity between Donna's resources and Land's studio and that Land considers herself not only obligated to clean but to feign interest when Donna speaks, discloses an uneven social terrain. On both these counts, Donna takes some action to balance the scales: paying a relatively high wage and, as best she can, conversing with Land as if they were social peers. But Donna's vision of equality has its limits. Any kindness Donna shows Land, any offer of social connection, takes place in the context of the unspoken expectation that Land routinely touch and scrub away the oily hairy mess that clings to the bathtub. The point is not to demonize Donna—who treats Land relatively well—but to recognize the fundamental inequality between the two women. Land faces constant reminders of her subservience, endures physical strain, and carries the emotional burden of shoring up Donna's performance of social equality, all in service of Donna's comfort.

Work Inequality

In *Maid*, Donna's bathroom is one of many. While there is nothing inherently degrading about cleaning a bathroom, the bathrooms Land cleans are where the indignities of her work are most visible. In particular, the bathrooms are where Land's meagre wage and absent benefits seem most out of tune with the intimate and demanding labor she performs. In her early days at Classic Clean, Land agrees to work a "move-out" clean. Expecting something like the affluent houses of her regular clients, she arrives to find a double-wide trailer, caked in years of accumulated filth. Pam, Land's boss and Classic Clean's owner, advises her to take the master bathroom in fits and starts, alternating between it and other parts of the house. Land goes through two bottles of mold-remover spray scrubbing the ceiling and upper walls above the shower, and

has to steel herself after managing to scrub the pink mildew off of a small spot, realizing that every other square inch of the shower will take the same effort. The worst of the bathroom, though, is the toilet: "pools of crystalized piss;" "speckled brown spots;" "yellow and orange flecks;" and "dark blue tracks at the water line and under the rim" (92–93). Armed with only Comet, dish gloves, and a pumice stone, the idea of reaching into the toilet is more than Land can bear: "When I kneeled at the toilet and saw up close the condition it was in, I abruptly got up and went outside" (92). She goes on: "On the porch, I went through a slew of emotions. There was anger, of course, over getting paid near minimum wage to hand-scrub shit off toilets. Triple the pay still wouldn't be enough to do what I did" (92). In the end, Land knows that this job is the only thing standing between her and a return to the shelter. With thoughts of homelessness and her wage at the front of her mind, she takes a deep breath, turns around, and walks back inside.[10]

On one level, Land remains acutely aware of the distance between her station and that of her clients. Saying goodbye to the owner of the "Farm House" for the last time before her move to Missoula, Land writes: "she looked like she might hug me, but then she reached out to shake my hand. Even though we had a relationship of trust, there was still a divide. She was still a homeowner. I was still a maid" (244). In the farewell handshake, we see the inescapable inequality between Land and the homeowners she works for. They pay to have their large houses professionally cleaned and Land cannot afford to miss a day of work. They enjoy "concerts,

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10. At Classic Clean, Land makes nine dollars an hour, but she only takes home six dollars after taxes and other expenses like gas (118).

takeout, trips, all without losing a night's sleep" while, for Land, even "time lounging to read a book felt overly indulgent; almost as though such leisure was reserved for another class" (157–58). When Land's clients anonymize her labor or pretend that she is a socioeconomic peer, Land has no choice but to sustain the illusion. Amid these differences, the invisibility Land's clients impose on her becomes a way to avoid asking what an ethical relationship between homeowner and maid might look like; Donna's kindness too begins to sound hollow. And yet, despite years spent living the desperate side of this inequality—as well as enduring the brunt of her clients' denial of it—Land, too, believes that bridging the socioeconomic chasm between homeowner and maid is a question of interpersonal generosity. She states: "I found myself wondering what it would be like to have enough money to be able to hire someone to clean my house. I'd never been in that position before, and I honestly doubted I ever would be. If I ever had to, I thought, I'd give them a big tip and probably offer them food or leave them good-smelling candles, too. I'd treat them like a guest, not a ghost. An equal" (155). In Land's case, the occasional tip, candle, or snack did very little to sustain her and Mia, let alone deliver equality.

Land's Struggle

In Barbara Ehrenreich's foreword to the first edition of *Maid*, she writes: "Perhaps the most hurtful feature of Stephanie's world is the antagonism beamed out toward her by the more fortunate. This is class prejudice, and it is inflicted especially on manual laborers, who are often judged to be morally and intellectually inferior to those who wear suits or sit at desks."[11]

11. Barbara Ehrenreich, "Foreword: Welcome to Stephanie Land's World," in *Maid*, xii.

Ehrenreich is right to point out the loaded difference in social capital between manual and white-collar labor. But the question of whether the prejudice Land faces as a poor person is more *hurtful* than the material conditions of her studio, the fact of her lower social status in her relationships with her clients, or the nature of her work is complicated. On the one hand, it seems absurd to suggest that the way other people react to Land's use of food stamps, for instance, is more damaging than the broader deprivation that the need for food stamps represents. But on the other hand, from the vantage of the text, interpersonal prejudice devastates Land. The cruelty of a judgmental cashier, resentful of the extra steps necessary to process Land's benefits, or the callous impatience of more affluent people in line behind her, behaving as if Land was somehow exploiting their generosity, come across as more hurtful than poverty's less personal harms. *Maid* shows the hurtful injuries of class prejudice, but it does so by foregrounding them over other brutal injuries of poverty.

Material differences between the studio and her clients' houses, the inescapable inequality in the relationship between homeowner and maid, and Land's working conditions show the ugly imbalance between the comforts of the affluent and Land's struggle as a poor working single mother. Against this backdrop, *Maid* unfolds in such a way that Land's resilience, her heroic determination, and her triumphs over the devastating institutional and interpersonal obstacles she faces capture the narrative.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, making the poor visible to other socioeconomic strata begins with descriptions of poverty, an essential component of which is the description of the lives of individual poor people. The residents of Blind Man's Alley, the Walmart folders, the Ríos family, the Vance family, the Greens and the Knapps, and Land and

Mia—they all promise a glimpse of the poor. And, indeed, descriptions of poverty fill the space between Land's decisions to abandon college and, years later, to rededicate herself to pursuing a degree in creative writing. But in *Maid*, what holds the descriptions together, what translates them from a collection of scenes into a coherent whole, is not an over-arching conception of poverty—it's the narrative of Land's personal growth. Over the course of the book, we see Land learn and change in two main ways. First, we see her come to the realization that, despite their comfortable houses and financial resources, her clients struggle too; affluence does not guarantee happiness. Second, we see her confidence and self-assurance grow. Slowly but surely, Land learns to believe in herself, to seize control of her future, and to stop catering to other people's expectations. It is these changes that pave the path from Land's first decision to her second. She overcomes the inequalities discussed above—material, relational, and working conditions—by, essentially, recognizing that there are more important things than money and believing in herself. The more compelling Land's internal struggles and triumphs, the less capacity her descriptions of poverty have to speak independent of them.[12]

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12. Apart from her personal growth, Land's descriptions of poverty are limited by the conspicuous relative absence of poor people in *Maid*. There are only a handful of poor people who appear throughout her narrative: the other cleaners with whom Land occasionally works, her father and his second wife, and Land's maternal grandfather. The poor also appear briefly when Land is forced to spend a day in a government office to prove her need and prevent her childcare benefit from being revoked. But, overwhelmingly, Land is alone in her poverty. Embarrassed by her "daily life," she lets older friendships lapse (50) without building any new ones. At a social

Shame

The antagonist to Land's expanding perspective and growing confidence is not the poverty that surrounds her but the shame that inhabits her. This shame erupts periodically throughout Land's narrative—at work, at home, at the grocery store—not scrubbing socioeconomic inequality from the text but reorganizing it. Her clients are all legible as members of a more affluent class but *Maid*'s narrative tension stems more from Land's personal exclusion from their ranks than from any collective social conflict. An episode from the beginning of the book captures shame's capacity to contain poverty within individuals. While "homeless and fighting for custody" against Mia's biological father, Jamie, Land takes personal responsibility for her poverty:

> My failure seemed to shroud me. It was like Jamie's lawyer and the judge thought I preferred it this way, like I thought raising a child without a stable home was okay. Like I didn't think every single second about how I needed to improve our situation, if I had the ability to… Somewhere, I found an almost primal strength, and I won the custody case. I got my own space, a place for Mia to be with me. Still, most nights I wrapped myself in guilt for what we lacked. Some days, the guilt was so heavy that I couldn't be totally present with Mia. I'd muster reading her books before bed, rocking her gently in the same chair where my mom had read me stories. I'd tell myself that tomorrow would be better; I'd be a better mother. (26–27)

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event for parents at Mia's daycare, Land labors through a conversation with other moms, unable to contribute to discussions about the difficulties of parenting *with* a spouse and the financial strains of middle-class families (214–15). The sociality of the poor, meanwhile, is nonexistent. In Land's world, poverty is individual and isolated, not social.

With Land's shame revolving around what she sees as her failures as a mother, the reader can recognize what the narrator cannot: caring deeply for her child, fighting tooth and nail for her best interests, mustering limited resources to read to her and gently rock her to sleep, Land is already a good mother. This fact, however, does not make Land's shame any less real. A key feature of her shame is the way that it combines her guilt around what they lack with her inability to be totally present with Mia. Land's guilt does not distinguish between her emotional distance from Mia and their material situation. Instead, her shame collapses these two kinds of perceived failure. Then, because Land is already—and obviously—a good mother, her guilt, and her inability to be present come across as primarily problems of perception. Despite the fact that material lack is, in this case, not a problem of perception at all, it is seamlessly integrated into Land's guilt and severed from explanations that would cast her poverty as something other than a result of her personal failings.

A sociological chain runs backward from Land's material poverty to her struggle to find a job that pays a living wage, to the grim employment prospects of the lowest quintile and, ultimately, to the socioeconomic factors that continue to reproduce extreme wealth inequality. Rather than follow the sociological chain from effect to cause, Land's guilt moves from material poverty to the guilt of not being able to provide for Mia, to emotional unavailability, then to more guilt about her emotional unavailability, and, ultimately, to her conclusions about the kind of mother she is. In Land's shame, emotional unavailability and guilt over her failure to provide are not links in an explanatory chain but the depths out of which she must climb. Facing sociological and historical realities, Land's pledge to "be a better mother" forecloses any jump from the personal to the collective; from Land's struggle to find a decent job, to the shared

horizon of so-called low or unskilled workers and the poor. The individualized logic of Land's perceived failures overpowers more collective explanations of what it means to be poor.

Perspective

Over the course of the book, the material inequalities between Land's studio and her clients' houses fade. The conditions of Land's studio do not magically (or even gradually) improve and the houses she cleans do not suddenly become less affluent. Instead, Land's perspective shifts: "My clients' lives, the homes they worked so hard to afford, were no longer my dream. Even though I had long since let that dream go, I still, in my most honest moments, while dusting rooms covered in pink, flowers, and dolls, admitted that I desperately wanted the same for my kid. I couldn't help but wonder if the families who lived in the houses I cleaned somehow lost one another in the rooms full of video games, computers and televisions" (209). Though Land appears to have not, in fact, entirely let the dream go, the affluent houses she cleans are no longer transparent reminders of her failures. She begins to see signs—medications for pain, anxiety, and depression; "self-help books for hope" (176); evidence of a carefully concealed cigarette habit—that her clients are not living the happy and carefree lives she had assumed affluence guaranteed. As Land puts it, "Living with illness or pain was part of my daily life. Part of the exhaustion. But why did my clients have these problems? It seemed like access to healthy foods, gym memberships, doctors, and all of that would keep a person fit and well. Maybe the stress of keeping up a two-story house, a bad marriage, and maintaining the illusion of grandeur overwhelmed their systems in similar ways to how poverty did mine" (145–46). In

her clients' pain and despair, Land recognizes the reflection of her own struggle; the material inequality between Land and her clients gives way to a shared affinity.

Through this new understanding, Land comes to see her studio in a different light: "This studio apartment we lived in, despite all its downsides, was our home. I didn't need two-point-five baths and a garage. Anyway, I saw how hard it was to keep them clean. Despite our surroundings, I woke up in the morning encased in love. I was there. In that small room. I was present, witnessing Mia's dance routines and silly faces, fiercely loving every second. Our space was a home because we loved each other in it" (209). Without any meaningful change in her resources, Land is no longer paralyzed with the shame wrought by her inability to provide for Mia, the guilt no longer burdening the precious time the two spend together. Land's fierce, loving presence provides closure to the narrative arc that began with her emotional distance from Mia. Laden with familiar lessons about the importance of being grateful for what one has—"even though we didn't have nice cars or a house on a bluff above the beach, we had each other" (172)—the resolution marks Land's personal growth. But, unable to address resilient material inequalities, the elision of Land's material circumstances in favor of her outlook also serves to obscure poverty.[13]

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13. We never find out whether personal growth and the right perspective alone are enough to sustain Land through life in her studio and at work as a maid. Soon after she fully internalizes the appropriate values and lessons, Land makes the decision to quit Classic Clean, finds a new apartment with a view, and starts striding toward Missoula.

Confidence

Along with developing a new perspective, Land grows in confidence. At work, she goes from doubting her ability to clean a house in the allotted time to admitting that she cleans almost too fast, like a "ninja" (175). And in her ambitions, the dream of one day becoming a professional writer seems increasingly possible. But the primary scenes of Land's steadily mounting confidence are her relationships with men. Put crudely, the three men that Land dates in *Maid* seem like increasingly better people. The first, Mia's father Jamie, is abusive. The second, Travis, has some redeeming qualities—Land calls him "a wonderful father figure, more than making up for what Jamie lacked" (75)—but takes Land's domestic labor for granted, withholds money she earns, and is emotionally withdrawn, offering neither support nor connection. And the third, Todd, who appears only briefly, lends Land a car when she is in dire need and, at the very least, does not seem to possess the crueler traits of the other two men. Over this stretch, Land also becomes more certain of her capacity to care for Mia on her own. Because of his biological claim to parenthood, Jamie is the only persistent presence of the three. From the moment he reacts to the news of Land's pregnancy with frightening rage, his behavior and character are consistent across every subsequent interaction Land has with him. While the way that Jamie treats Land does not change, Land does.

On the phone with Jamie, in the middle of cleaning a house, he accuses her of never wishing him a happy Father's Day or calling him a good father. Land replies: "'Jamie, that's because you aren't one… You blame everyone around you for everything. You never take responsibility. Everything is always someone else's fault. What's that going to teach Mia? What are you going to teach her?'" (166). In response, Jamie insists that he is a good father, and begins

a verbal attack. He belittles Land's writing, says she does not have any friends, and has just started making fun of her body when she hangs up. This is a more confident Land then in any previous exchange with Jamie. Forced by circumstance to talk with him, Land is unapologetic, refuses to accept his aggrandizing vision of himself, and hangs up when she has had enough. She admits: "It was odd for me to speak this way to him. Working full-time, doing everything on my own, had empowered me. I no longer chose to allow him to make me feel bad about myself" (166).

In the context of the narrative, Land standing up for herself and then recognizing the accomplishment is heroic; wresting power back from Jamie and continuing to lay the foundations for her forthcoming decision to pursue creative writing. Land's burgeoning confidence and her newfound assertiveness are triumphs. But in relishing the satisfying way that Land takes control of the exchange with Jamie and ends the call on her own terms, it is easy to miss how deeply entrenched the rhetoric of the individual has become. In Land's eyes, Jamie's failings as a father are his refusal to accept responsibility and his inability to impart anything of value unto their daughter. Meanwhile, Land credits her assertiveness to the empowerment that stems from working long and hard (which, if the previous pages are any indication, can also be degrading, isolating, and agonizing as much as empowering), and the personal choice to no longer accept Jamie's verbal abuse. Whatever the degrading conditions of her work, Land has undergone a shift in perspective. With so much revolving around the individual, poverty's materiality evaporates and its hermeneutic function disintegrates.

Throughout the exchange, Land keeps cleaning. Jamie makes his first accusation as she is polishing grease off the stovetop. When she responds, she is dusting "the chandelier above the

dining room table" (166). As Land listens to Jamie claim that he is a good father, she is "walking between the living room and the bedroom, duster in hand" (167). And after she hangs up, she finishes the shower in "record time," thanks to her "angry scrubbing" (167). The fight with Jamie seeps out of the conversation and into Land's work: in the immediate aftermath, Land unleashes her rage on the shower; longer term, she writes, "being in that house reminded me of [Jamie], no matter how hard I tried to sever the association" (165).

Meanwhile, the world of Land's work and poverty is little more than the incidental setting. The snapshots of Land cleaning contend with much longer exposition about her history with Jamie: his constant and vocal resentment at having to make child support payments; his mom's opinions about Mia's daycare; his refusal to allow Land to have Mia's last name changed; his vain efforts to make the nickname "Mee-lah" stick; his empty ambitions, from earning his GED to learning to swim. During the fight, Land's cleaning is mundane while Jamie's history of abuse is both enraging and devastating. The effect of this narrative imbalance is that Jamie—not poverty—appears as the key impediment to Land's flourishing. Sure enough, once Land gains the confidence and strength to conquer her personal demons, she starts making all the right choices. The point is neither to diminish the extent to which Jamie is irresponsible nor to disavow the important relationship between Land's independence and her burgeoning confidence, but to show how the gripping narrative of her personal growth deftly marginalizes and defers the question of poverty.

The Hoarder House

With the decision to take a chance on herself and invest in a creative writing degree, Land leaves the poverty of *Maid*'s preceding chapters behind.[14] With her star on the rise but before she and Mia disembark for Missoula, Land describes a final, one-off cleaning job. Cramped and dirty, what she calls the "Hoarder House" is unlike the homes of her affluent clients, bearing a closer resemblance to the double-wide of her first move-out clean. But where the double-wide was uninhabited, the Hoarder House is home to an expecting mother, a father, and their five children. With a nervous look inside, the mother opens the front door for Land and apologizes: "'This is my little secret'" (248). Aside from the bare spot that accommodates the door's path, "clothes, dishes, papers, backpacks, shoes, books," and a layer of dust cover the floor (248). "Every available surface in the kitchen and dining room," Land recalls, "contained piles of dirty dishes" (249). Once she starts cleaning, Land finds expired boxed and canned food in the kitchen cupboards; old, dripping produce in the fridge; and, under a pile of laundry and dust mites in the garage that had been converted to a master bedroom, a large spider, mouse droppings, and what she believes is a snakeskin (250).

To make matters worse, the family was also under considerable financial strain. Exasperated, the mother tells Land that the family could not afford to pay their bills, had stopped making payments on their house, and were going to be moving into a rental. With her hands on her belly, she admits, "'we can't really afford to have you help me…. But I'm losing my mind.

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14. While the narrative resolution in *Maid* is neat and tidy, Land's blog documents additional years of poverty and struggle following the period documented in the book.

The new house will be a fresh start. I don't want to move all this'" (249). In response, Land insists that the mother pay only half of her usual rate and offers to also do laundry for five dollars per garbage bag. Seeing Land clean the house and care for its inhabitants illustrates her generosity as it confirms that she is no longer on society's bottom rung. Moreover, cleaning the house clarifies something else for Land. At home, after the first day of cleaning, while Land and Mia are folding some of the family's laundry Mia asks Land why she is washing other people's clothes: "'Because I'm helping them, Mia… That's my job. To help people.' Only then, when I heard myself say it, did I believe it was true" (251). With this realization, Land's confidence and perspective come together and provide the final push toward Missoula.

Land's journey comes to a neat resolution, but it does so against the suffocating background of the Hoarder House. If Land's ascension out of homelessness, joblessness, and single parenthood made the poor visible, how is the poverty we see in the Hoarder House reflected in Land's own experiences? In *Maid*, Land represents poverty through interpersonal conflict and the narrative of individual struggle and achievement. Neither of which resonate within the walls of the Hoarder House. Although oppressive, Land's poverty lacked the permanence of the poverty of the Hoarder House; even at her most desperate, Land was always moving toward Missoula. In contrast, the mother of the Hoarding House is not moving upward but rooted in her immediate circumstances. Land would wash all the dishes and clear all the counters one day only to return to "pots and dishes with dried red sauce on them all over the counters and stove the next" (252). Unlike Land, whose individuality and ascension drown out the material inequalities and sociological context that surround her, the family living in the Hoarder House are inseparable from their living conditions.

As Land and Mia move to the promise of better lives in Missoula, the poverty of the Hoarder House remains unresolved and unexplained. We might suggest, with Oscar Lewis, that the family who lives there are part of a larger, self-perpetuating culture. Or, alongside Vance, we might argue that the parents (but especially the father) need to take responsibility for their family, get jobs, work hard, invest wisely, and undo the mess that they have made. Or, with Kristof and WuDunn, we might bemoan all the economic opportunities for working class people that the federal government failed to protect. And yet none of these explanations capture the contradictions or answer the questions the Hoarder House poses. What is the relationship between poverty's historical ties to hunger and privation and the piles of clothes, toys, books, and food that cover every available surface in the Hoarder House? What poverty do Land and Mia share with the family living in the Hoarder House? Among the poor, how prevalent are the conditions Land sees in the Hoarder House? How far can economic inequality go in explaining the desperation of the family who lives in the Hoarder House? And, finally, what constitutes poverty within an affluent society?

Conclusion

Requiem for Poverty

The appeal of books like *Hillbilly Elegy*, *Tightrope*, and *Maid* is that they promise to help us understand the inequality that surrounds us. In this dissertation, I have explored why that promise remains unfulfilled. Running through the books I have analyzed, there are three primary reasons: the tension between description and explanation, the sentimental idiom and a focus on inner life, and the inadequately recognized context of the affluent society.

Description and Explanation

From Jacob Riis to Stephanie Land, all of the authors I write about represent poverty by describing the poor. There are two kinds of description available to an ethnographer when writing about the poor: objective description, which includes descriptions of the lives of the poor, where they live, where they work, and their various relationships; and subjective description, which includes descriptions about their inner lives, captured by the ethnographer through conversation or by observation and inference.[1] Between *How the Other Half Lives* and twenty-first century poverty ethnographies, the dominant descriptive mode drifts from objective to subjective. Riis does not describe the interior lives of his tenement dwellers whereas Nicholas

1. I use the term "objective" to emphasize the superficiality of the description, not to suggest that the ethnographers are somehow providing unbiased, completely neutral accounts of the poor.

Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn go to great lengths to show the personalities and inner turmoil of the Greens and the Knapps in Yamhill. In both cases, description is central to representation.

Whether objective or subjective, descriptions of the poor in these accounts tend to be vivid and gripping. In the course of such powerful descriptive representation, the project of explaining poverty gets deferred. Riis takes the explanation for poverty for granted since poverty in the New York tenements at the end of the nineteenth century was so immediate and physical as to seem an inevitable and axiomatic constituent of city life. Oscar Lewis, who weaves objective description together with subjective description, deferred an explanation of poverty's persistence by aggregating many of his subjective observations into a list, under the banner of the "culture of poverty." His description became his explanation. More recently, Kristof and WuDunn offer both descriptions of and explanations for poverty but the phenomenon that emerges through their descriptions—a desperate, hopeless poverty of addiction, incarceration, and abuse—is not reflected in their explanations. The discrepancy between the two registers is rendered all the more opaque given the sway that their vivid descriptions hold over the text.

The Sentimental Idiom

Both objective and subjective descriptions have come to increasingly draw on a sentimental idiom. According to Lauren Berlant, sentimentalists "talk about the emotional costs of injustice, not the material ones; the personal impacts of *not* changing, not the structural

benefits of continuity."[2] Her broader argument is that sentimental texts foster a particular kind of intimate public that remains structurally separate from the political sphere.[3] Most of all, sentimental rhetoric is seductive. It translates social anxieties into "a generic wish for an unconflicted world" and offers a sense of belonging, emotional recognition, and hope.[4] Riis draws on this kind of sentimental idiom but only in a detached mode; he remains focused on the objective conditions surrounding the poor—the grime on the tenement's wall in Blind Man's Alley, the suffocating attic rooms on Crosby Street where the young immigrant couple committed suicide, his characterization of the Bend as a "vast human pig-sty."

The sentimental idiom that was faint in Riis and legible in Lewis, takes off with J.D. Vance and Land. In first person narration that weaves between their own experiences and memories and accounts of their emotions, intentions, opinions, and calculations, their descriptions become simultaneously objective and subjective. Where Vance and Land diverge on

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2. Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 21.

3. For Berlant, receiving the benefits of sentimental attachment requires first accepting the political status quo. "This very general sense of confidence in the critical intelligence of affect, emotion, and good intention produces an orientation toward agency that is focused on ongoing adaptation, adjustment, improvisation, and developing wiles for surviving, thriving, and transcending the world as it presents itself. It is not usually expressed in or addressed to the political register" (Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 2).

4. Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 21.

ideology, they are unified in the sentimental idiom. *Hillbilly Elegy* is built around Vance's sentimental relationship with Mamaw, a relationship that resonates not only because of Mamaw's colorful habits and expressions, but because of the reciprocal love between her and Vance. The narrative of their relationship is so dominant that Mamaw's death functions as the book's climax, everything that comes after—that is to say, most of Vance's path up the socioeconomic ladder, from the Marine Corps to the Ivy League—is hurried denouement. With such a strong focus on Vance's emotional bond with Mamaw, the narrative provides emotional substance while sidestepping any engagement with the material costs of injustice.

Maid, meanwhile, is built around Land's own sentimental journey—her personal growth and emotional healing; an individual navigating an unkind and impersonal society. Through her job, she cleans a succession of affluent houses, without ever coming to know the people who inhabit them. Her self-discovery comes through imagining and evaluating the lives implicit in each house she cleans. As she compares her studio apartment with the expansive homes of her clients, she comes to also compare her life with theirs. Through this process, Land learns about what she values and what she does not, which allows her to imagine—and then realize—a good life for herself and her daughter. *Maid*'s narrative, Land's inner life, and her sentimental journey are harmoniously conjoined, and safely cut off from the political register. Through the interiority afforded by free access to their own inner selves, and cemented by the immediacy of their emotional lives, Land and Vance are both first and foremost sentimental protagonists. The sentimental idiom, bolstered by strong narrative emplotment, further accentuates the gap between description and explanation, thereby occluding the question of general poverty altogether.

The Affluent Society

The problem of identifying twenty-first century American poverty is the problem of understanding the poor within an affluent society. In a society where all but those on the very lowest rungs are free from chronic hunger and privation, and as wealth continues to grow, questions of basic needs become increasingly complicated. In *La Vida*, Lewis's examples of culture-of-poverty kitchens in New York are brimming with acquisitions and include pantries stocked with staples and indulgences. Without ever calling Soledad, Simplicio, and Flora's status as poor into question, Lewis's ethnographic descriptions show traces of the desperate poverty of old—crowded living quarters, worn down housing, and an unstoppable cockroach infestation—alongside evidence of new heights of domestic comfort and disposable income. Over six decades have passed since John Kenneth Galbraith spelled out his thesis in *The Affluent Society* and yet Vance, Kristof and WuDunn, and Land don't recognize this vital context, let alone examine the complexities and contradictions it carries. Since Galbraith's thesis, composed at the pinnacle of industrial capitalism, the shape and substance of poverty has continued to erode under post-industrialism and its cultural contradictions.[5] It may be that the cultural contradictions of the affluent society are the precondition for the emergence of the current version of the sentimental idiom.

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5. See Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (1973) and *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976).

Vance's impoverished childhood includes, at least briefly, a household income of over one hundred thousand dollars. Confronted with the brutal lives and early deaths of their friends in Yamhill, Kristof and WuDunn try to describe the scale of American suffering by explaining its basic causes: a neoliberal policy agenda and the erosion of society's social foundations. In so doing, they divide society into those who suffer and those who do not and collapse all the gradations of socioeconomic difference between the very bottom and those insecurely situated on the border of middle class comfort and stability. And, while Land undertakes to represent the plight of the working poor, the last image of poverty she offers—the Hoarder House—bears little resemblance to the portrait of poor life that she had already painted, let alone Riis's tenements or Soledad and Simplicio's kitchens. Land's depiction of the Hoarder House captures the contradictions of the affluent society across different floors of socioeconomic stratification. While she treats the mother of the Hoarder House with kindness and compassion, Land cannot identify with her.

The tension between description and explanation and our fascination with sentimental narratives facilitate the constant deferral of the problems of poverty's identification and meaning. What these books fail to recognize is that the affluent society has already shifted the foundations on which poverty, inequality, and the division between elites and non-elites can be understood. As poverty becomes increasingly unrecognizable, its deferral continues.

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