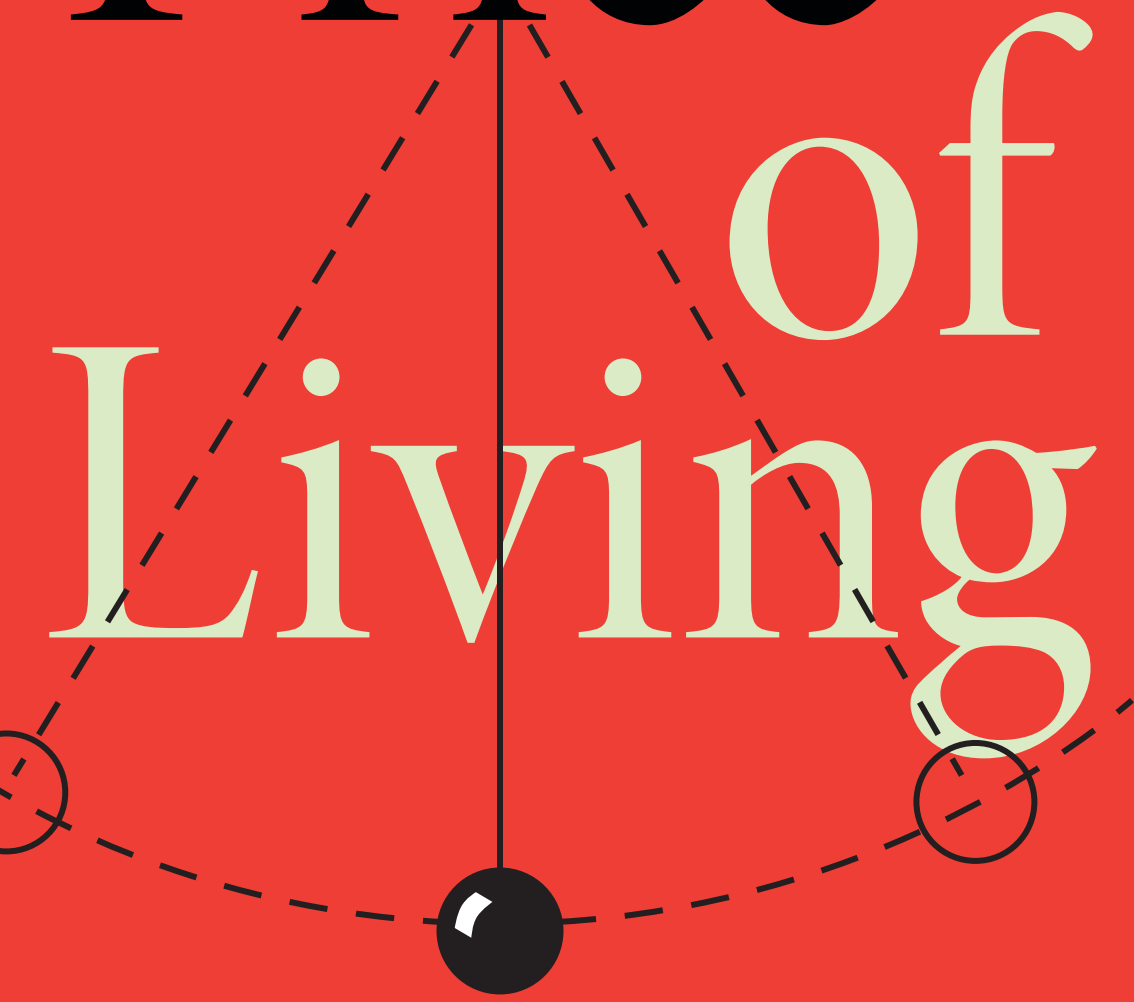


The Price of Living

**The Stories
We Tell About
the Poor**

S. SHANKAR



The Price of Living

BUY

The Price of Living

**The Stories We Tell
About the Poor**

S. SHANKAR

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2027

© 2027 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson
Typeset in Minion by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Shankar, Subramanian, [date] author

Title: The price of living : the stories we tell about the poor /
S. Shankar.

Other titles: Stories we tell about the poor

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2027. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026018497 (print)

LCCN 2026018498 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478039662 paperback

ISBN 9781478034759 hardcover

ISBN 9781478063377 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Poverty in literature | Literature and society |

Social classes in literature | Poverty—Public opinion |

Poverty—Social aspects | Poor—Public opinion | Poor in literature |
Poor in motion pictures

Classification: LCC PN56.P56 S53 2027 (print) | LCC PN56.P56
(ebook) | DDC 809/.933556—dc23/eng/20260903

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2026018497>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2026018498>

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Contents

Preface	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
Cultural Fictions of the Modern Poor	
ONE	41
Destitution	
TWO	95
Release	
THREE	135
Insurgence	
CONCLUSION	191
Poverty Abolitionism	
Acknowledgments	215
Notes	219
Bibliography	231
Index	245

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Preface

I had an uncle whom I met only a handful of times in my life. My uncle lived in Tirunelveli in South India. We (my parents, siblings, and I) did not live there, but it is where we are from. When he was not jobless, this uncle was a coolie in the market in Tirunelveli carrying loads on his back between warehouses and trucks. Or else he was an errand boy, or a kitchen help. The best job he ever held was as a bus conductor. The job required him to stand for hours on end in a lurching bus, sun-seared summer or rain-drenched monsoon, giving out tickets for coins and notes. My mother says when he was in this job he would shout at his daytime passengers in his nighttime sleep. He would wake up in the dark moaning and groaning from his body aches. After a while, he could do it no more. And so, he quit the best job he ever had.

My uncle was poor. I am not, and nor for the most part is my extended family, stretched out across the globe. There are members of my extended family who are close to poverty but not destitute. There are others who are quite affluent, though not filthy rich. Most of us fall somewhere in between. I myself have never really feared destitution; but there have been times, before I got a proper job and once after I lost a proper job that I had, when adequate disposable income seemed something not to be taken for granted. Those times passed, as much from luck as from anything I achieved by merit (in the end, merit has nothing to do with poverty).

When he died of poverty, my uncle was hardly more than fifty. He was, I'm told, an angry and bitter man. Was he a good man? Perhaps not. But he was poor by any measure, and when it comes to his struggles with poverty, the question of his goodness is irrelevant. I remember him so well because in my family he is lore for the calamities of poverty. I expect every family

D

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

that is not poor, perhaps even the richest in the whole wide world, has an uncle like my uncle—or if not an uncle, then an ancestor. Every such family has a rumored intimate stranger who stands as warning to those of us more fortunate, even if only barely.

Of course, for billions of people on this sad and precious planet of ours—people like my uncle—poverty is not lore or rumor. It is existential fact. Let's leave it at that for now. To say more in the condensed manner appropriate to a preface would be to fall back on platitudes. What the fact of poverty means, as well as all that it does not and cannot, will become clear enough in what follows.

Enough for now to say that the purpose of this book is to get beyond platitudes, lore, and even facts. This book began thirty years ago in my observation that by and large poverty was not a significant topic of discussion within postcolonial studies. I was bemused by this absence, which largely persists until today. Poverty would seem to be an obvious topic for postcolonial studies. After all, poverty has been deemed to be one of the definitional features of the postcolonial world, a.k.a. the Third World or the Global South. Even if postcolonial studies objected to the rote association of poverty with the postcolonial world, how could the field (despite a few exceptional individuals, discussed later) not take note of the overwhelming power of the association in contemporary discourse?

The thinking that led to this book began in that question but does not—cannot—rest there. From the beginning, the problems with the rote association of poverty with the Third World were just as evident to me as the conundrum of the exclusion of the topic from the central preoccupations of the transdisciplinary field of postcolonial studies. I resisted reducing my thinking about poverty discourse, as I began calling it, to a subtopic of the postcolonial study of Africa and India, about which I was writing regularly. Since I also have an interest in the literatures of the United States, I began researching and gathering notes on filmic and literary representations of the poor in that very different space. The resulting book is now a comparative inquiry, ranging across Africa, India, and the United States, into global poverty discourse.

More particularly, the inquiry is focused on this global poverty discourse as manifested in narrative films and novels—that is, poverty in its global dimensions as revealed in key fictional forms. The inquiry is fundamentally into the powerful stories we tell about the poor and why and how they matter. The arrival at this focus was also the result of a process of thinking and rethinking over decades. In the process of my research, after running

after the mirage of authenticity in nonfictional genres, I came gradually to realize the merits of focusing my study on fictional forms. I came to perceive that the readily acknowledged artifice of fictional forms (in comparison to nonfictional forms like memoir or biography) could be advantageous for an inquiry into the ideological work done by global poverty discourse—a different kind of inquiry than relying uncritically on lore and facts.

Accordingly, I refer to the fictional forms in this study as cultural fictions, thereby signaling a method of reading designed to expose their public potency—which is to say, designed to engage both the clues these fictional forms provide to deep-seated social tendencies and the power these forms have to shape public discourse. In brief, my method of reading films and novels—cinematic and literary stories about the poor—as cultural fictions is meant to recognize their ideological power, and then out of that recognition to plumb ideological depths. Perhaps this method of reading is widely applicable. I have a thought, for example, that there might be a book inquiring into “cultural fictions of democracy.” Be that as it may, in the present study I take the force of this reading strategy to poverty discourse. And at the end of the journeying through the ideological murk of global poverty discourse, I arrive at what seems to me the sole tenable position on poverty: poverty abolitionism.

I write this book as a committed poverty abolitionist. In an abolitionist spirit (merit is of no relevance when it comes to poverty), I dedicate this book to my uncle, and to others like him who struggle with poverty. My uncle remains unnamed out of respect, but he is remembered.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Introduction

Cultural Fictions of the Modern Poor

Fiction is the original poor theory.
—NGŪGĪ WA THIONG’O, *Globalectics*

Prologue to an Argument

I begin with a story about poverty—a story like the many others at the heart of this book. It is the story in *A Handful of Rice* (1966), the novel by Kamala Markandaya.

Roughly during the 1950s, Ravi, the protagonist of Markandaya’s novel set in India, struggles desperately with poverty in Madras (now Chennai). When we first encounter Ravi, he is a scoundrel at the fringes of the criminal underground. He is a crony of Damodar, a petty criminal. This Damodar is Ravi’s foil. Not long into the story, Ravi leaves Damodar’s side in a half-hearted attempt to escape poverty in a respectable way. Alas, he fails utterly. Damodar the criminal, on the other hand, rises to wealth and power. Damodar’s ascent is an index of the novel’s thoroughgoing indictment of the corruption of society at large, for he is the only success in the novel. In comparison to Damodar, Ravi at the end of the novel is ruined, purposeless, lost. Even in the midst of famine, Ravi chooses neither Damodar’s criminal world nor the side of the desperate hungry poor rioting in opposition to both Damodar and the world of respectability.

What does Ravi represent with regard to the world of the poor? How are we to *interpret* Markandaya’s story?

We get a bit of an answer from Damodar’s words to Ravi toward the end of the novel: “I see nothing. . . . You’re empty. No heart, no spleen, no lights, no guts. Something’s been at them.’ He began to laugh, a high sharp

D

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ugly laughter. ‘What was it, termites?’”¹ The dismissal is devastating to Ravi. He flees, but Markandaya leaves him hanging, nowhere, even at the very end of the novel. When he runs into a rioter, in response to an exhortation to fling a brick at a posh shop he can only say, “But tomorrow, yes, tomorrow. . . .”² The rioter calls him *brother*, but Ravi cannot acknowledge his comradeship, cannot enter the community the rioter offers. He remains at the end, as he was at the beginning, a man who cannot commit. Through him, the ethics of rioting aside, Markandaya suggests the bankruptcy of not taking a side.

The Price of Living takes a side. I choose for my title a deceptively simple but troublingly resonant phrase. Read literally, the phrase forces us to think of the price of life itself: What is living? And what is the price to be paid by a human being for living? In prompting such questions, “price of living” echoes “cost of living,” a more common phrase. *Cost* and *price* are often treated as synonyms in everyday parlance; however, they are not the same. Strictly speaking, *cost* is the expenditure to produce something and *price* is what the seller charges. It is worth pondering the distinction. In the familiar terminology of COLA, or cost-of-living adjustment, the cost associated with living at a minimum beyond poverty has been reduced to obfuscating bureaucratic jargon for the calculability of a good life for a narrow segment of humanity: those with jobs and access to things like COLA. In this context, to speak of *the price of living* rather than *the cost of living* is to undo jargon and to point to the need for new perspectives and language. In my abolitionist way of thinking (about which, more in what follows), I want to shift the question from what living costs to how—indeed, whether—we can in good conscience charge a human being anything at all for simply living. It is incontestable that there is and always will be a cost, no matter how this cost is calculated, to producing what any human being needs for living (potatoes don’t fall from the sky!); but the proper ethical question concerns price, not cost. What are the ethics of imposing a price on a human being for merely living a life without destitution (clothed, housed, nourished; that is, not impoverished)? This is the simple question, also troublingly resonant, pursued in this book.

Conceived in the gap between the deceptively simple and the troublingly resonant, *The Price of Living* is—I’d like it to be—a brick flung at the posh world’s slumbering conscience. There have only been tomorrows when it comes to addressing poverty. *The Price of Living* declares it is way past time to say *there are no more tomorrows*. It is time to say *brother, sister, comrade*. It is time to render the basic, which is to say, destitution-free, price of living

zero for every human being. And that is the same as saying it is time to abolish poverty by placing it beyond the economics of pricing and selling.

But a whole book? you ask. A whole book about poverty? Who would want to read at such length about such a depressing subject?

In reality, a book is not enough. I have but made a beginning for myself with this book, which explores what ending poverty means via stories, fictional narratives about poverty. Certainly, poverty is not a topic designed to bring a gleam of eager anticipation to a reader's eye. It is not uplifting stuff. On the other hand, poverty is powerful. It carries an emotional charge from which few of us are immune. Some of us have experienced or are experiencing poverty. Others of us fear it, or else suffer guilt because we feel implicated in the poverty of others, or else are righteously angry at its continued existence. Still others of us—let us speak frankly—feel ourselves rightfully, forcefully exempt from thinking or feeling anything at all about poverty because we *deserve* not to be poor. In the last case, we get resentful when forced to think about poverty (if we think about it, for a book can always be put down). Poverty is complicated for all of us. At the same time, poverty is complicated in itself. There is nothing elementary about it. The joylessness of poverty as a subject is not to be equated with the simplicity or obviousness of the subject. On the contrary, poverty is challenging, not just as a social phenomenon deserving attention from anyone with a conscience but as a problem for theoretical inquiry.

The world has routinely held the most contradictory—even counterintuitive—ideas about poverty. Take for example M. K. (“Mahatma”) Gandhi, surely one of the most influential modern thinkers on poverty. He provides a fitting illustration of the complexity of poverty discourse. Not only through his writing but indeed through his lifestyle, Gandhi advanced and explored ideas about poverty and the poor that had wide circulation both inside India and across the world. Despite the joylessness I think most readers would associate with poverty, Gandhi found a kind of joy or virtue in it. He shed his suit and tie, clad himself in the simple dhoti of the Indian peasant, and chose to live a Spartan life of few needs, all as a way of signaling his rejection of material desire and his identification with the indigent. He remarked in 1908 in *Hind Swaraj*, the book that perhaps sets out his ideas most systematically: “We notice the mind is a restless bird; the more it gets the more it wants, and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions, the more unbridled they become. Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgences. They saw that happiness was largely a mental condition. A man is not necessarily happy because he is rich, or unhappy

because he is poor. The rich are often seem [*sic*] to be unhappy, the poor to be happy. Millions will always remain poor. Observing all this, our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures.”³ Still, Gandhi was not himself poor; and despite his deliberate echoing of the garb and lifestyle of the poor, and his dubious declaration that they were often happy, he did not intend people to live in hunger and illness. “But how am I to talk of God to the millions who have to go without two meals a day?” he once famously asked. “To them God can only appear as bread and butter.”⁴ Gandhi was a complex and sometimes contradictory thinker, and it is surely the case that his ideas evolved through his long career. However, it would generally be true to note that Gandhi idealized the poor while also acknowledging the harm inherent in poverty as destitution. Of course, as the quotation shows, he naturalized poverty too by expecting the poor to be always with us. Safe to say he was no abolitionist when it came to poverty.

Attitudes to poverty can be vexingly complex, as even this cursory engagement with Gandhi on poverty should be enough to alert us. Some of this complexity—for what argument can do everything?—will be engaged in what follows in this book on cultural fictions, as I call them, of the modern poor. The argument I am initiating will tread gingerly through a veritable intellectual and moral minefield. I undertake the argument with the hope that, despite the joylessness of poverty as condition, the reader will recognize the urgency of it as a topic for serious consideration. Dutifulness—a sense of responsibility for a world shared with the poor (brother, sister, comrade)—might rightly motivate such recognition; and so might the thrill of wrestling with difficult ideas with ethical import.

It should be acknowledged right at the outset that instead of cultural fictions—what I term the stories at the heart of this study, for reasons made clear below—we more commonly approach the topic of the poor through statistics produced by social scientists. According to the World Bank, 8.5 percent of the world’s population (692 million) lived in extreme poverty in 2024.⁵ Alternatively, the World Poverty Clock, using different methodologies, measures 615 million (7.7 percent) as living in extreme poverty on September 27, 2024.⁶ As of my writing (in September 2024), the World Bank extreme poverty measure I have listed is based on a global poverty line of \$2.15 per capita per day, reflective of appropriate adjustments for countries in different income categories. Accordingly, 8.5 percent—the figure would be lower as per the World Poverty Clock—may seem like a solidly exact statistic for those unable to afford the price of living. However, I can vouch from personal experience that the same organizations provide different

estimates of poverty at different times, no doubt both because poverty itself is changing and because the well-meaning social scientists who produce such figures are continually refining their methodologies.

Neither these statistics nor statistics in general, therefore, should be viewed as solid and exact. Firstly, statistical descriptions are notoriously unreliable. In a World Bank blog post, Francisco Ferreira et al. note the methodological difficulties of ascertaining poverty lines based on daily per capita income.⁷ Not only is counting itself hard (as Ferreira et al. testify), but a tweak of the “description” of poverty—here in my writing \$2.15 per capita per day—can cause poverty to disappear (or appear). Writing about India, for example, Jonathan Parry has noted that the percentage of poor in postcolonial India has changed depending on how governments have defined poverty, thus clouding our ability to perceive true incidence.⁸ Additionally, it is worth asking which poverty is indicated by the statistic and why. The 8.5 percent according to the World Bank refers to “extreme” poverty. But why should extreme poverty be the proper target of our concern? What are the moral costs of this focus? The same World Bank report notes that at \$6.85, “a poverty line more typical of upper-middle-income countries,” the percentage of the world population living in poverty increases to 43.6 percent.⁹ In a *New York Times* article, Max Roser has argued for an even higher poverty line of \$30 per day, which would direct attention to the wide prevalence of poverty in countries like the United States (16 percent, according to Roser), otherwise seen to have close to zero (less than 1 percent at \$2.15 per capita per day, according to the World Bank).¹⁰ Finally, the quicksand of statistical descriptions aside, the poor as an empirically verifiable category are also dependent on the vagaries of quick-moving historical events such as pandemics and weather catastrophes. What is true today may not be true a year later. The years 2020 and 2021, in which some of this work was written, are of course COVID-19 years, and the World Bank itself, in the report cited above, noted the increase in poverty during this period.¹¹ While the World Bank and the World Poverty Clock note a return to a decline in poverty after the pandemic, in 2024 Oxfam released a report in which it noted that “since the start of the decade . . . 60% of the world’s population has grown poorer” and “4.8 billion people are poorer than they were in 2019.”¹²

Despite all this uncertainty, however, we can state with depressing confidence that the poor remain a significant segment of humanity today. Depictions of this substantial segment of humanity (“the poor”) are the urgent subject of this book. The urgency is not temporal, for little has changed

since I got the idea for *The Price of Living* twenty-five years ago (yes, it has taken me that long to find an effective way to write about the topic). The “poor” are still with us as they have been for a very long time. Urgency here is moral and political rather than temporal. The depictions at the heart of this book—cultural fictions of the modern poor—remain as morally and politically unavoidable now as they were then. In a (paradoxical) sense this book has remained unfinished for such a long time precisely because of its urgency—because of the daunting, if necessary, nature of the task. The challenges (of empirical precision and political contestation) and risks (of sentimentalism, condescension, and plain ignorance) have continually demanded an abundance of caution. I can only hope I am able to honor such caution while also setting it aside in the pursuit of a task that seems to me still quite vital.

In what follows, I take what might be termed a *public humanities approach* to my material—an approach that moves humanities-based arguments out from the academy into public spaces in multiple ways. The humanities can elucidate and record abiding aspects of being human in a changing world shaped by, at the same time that it exceeds, the human. Poverty, for reasons and with effects I explore at length, is surely one such abiding aspect. Through disciplines such as film and literature, both central to this work, but also history, language study, art, music, philosophy, and religion, the humanities engage varied aspects of the human experience. Ideas, stories, representations in digital, audio-visual, pictorial, and musical forms—all these and more remain at the heart of a twenty-first-century humanities exploration of human relevance within a world at large. The way I understand it, a public humanities approach is as much interested in careful textual analysis as in making a particular text the occasion for the exploration of a larger world of concrete action and consequence. In the context of this book, for example, I rely on a public humanities approach to get beyond, perhaps get beside, statistical truths (8.5 percent) about poverty. “There can be no perfect democracy curtailed by color, race, or *poverty*,” W. E. B. Du Bois noted in writing about Africa on the cusp of decolonization in the middle of the twentieth century.¹³ All too often the humanities have neglected the last of the three terms. I take Du Bois’s observation as inspiration for my wide-ranging—Africa, India, and the United States—public humanities enterprise. If we care about the promise of democracy, we should care about poverty.

It should not be surprising that out of the diverse materials available to the public humanities I turn to stories (novels and fictional narrative films).

I am a storyteller and a student of stories, and so I ask: What stories do we tell about “the poor”? What kinds of responses are elicited by the broadly circulating stories (the *cultural fictions*) that we do tell? How are “the poor” represented in these powerful cultural fictions that shape our public imagination and thus our economic policies and social arrangements? Motivated by such questions, and by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s proposition that fiction is in itself unembellished theory (see epigraph), I respond to a relative gap left in popular and academic engagements with poverty and “the poor” by the absence of humanities perspectives. I bring humanities perspectives to a popular domain dominated by policy and advocacy. Briefly put, I aim to make a humanities-based intervention in the vast and ever-growing body of knowledge about poverty and “the poor”; and in so doing, hope to spark not only a concerted engagement with this subject in the humanities—certainly, more concerted than has been the case thus far—but also to impact the world of policy and advocacy.

When it comes to poverty, it can feel as if there have been nothing but tomorrows. I want us, finally, to take seriously the proposition that *there will be no more tomorrows*, which is just another way to articulate the poverty abolitionism to which this book is committed. Poverty abolitionism is the goal toward which my arguments and readings tend. It is at the heart of what I attempt in this book.

The Modern “Poor”

The difficulties with who and what is meant by “the poor” are right away evident. At the very least, not everyone is poor in the same way. I put “the poor” in quotation marks in acknowledgment of these difficulties, though having now made this acknowledgment will for reasons of readability take recourse to the scare quotes only rarely. My relationship to the term throughout is investigative. Some designated poor are so always (chronic poverty); others only for some time (transient poverty). Some experience extraordinarily dire poverty, to the extent of being undernourished and unhoused (absolute poverty); others (in relative poverty) are poor mainly in a comparative way to others in their society (rather than being unable to eat or house themselves, they eat cheap bad food and live in cheap bad shelters). David Hulme and Andrew Shepherd describe chronic poverty as “the poverty that persists for many years or a lifecourse and that may be transmitted across generations.”¹⁴ In comparison, transient poverty might last only for a few years (because of, say, ill health) and then cease. Chronic

and absolute poverty are not the same though they may be closely related and share the quality of being resistant to easy resolution.

Chronic and *transient*, *absolute* and *relative*: These terms signal only a few of the difficulties with understanding poverty encountered in this study. Such distinctions—and others—will appear in the argument I undertake; but they will also be taken apart to be comprehended in fuller ways. After all, my main concern is with popular *cultural* constructions of the poor—which is to say a more inchoate, though undoubtedly potent, form of representation that lacks, indeed sometimes actively resists, the aimed-for precision of social scientific treatises. Sometimes we will encounter absolute poverty, at other times chronic or relative. We will find the poor in a wide variety of circumstances. However, rather than refining this terminology further, I am interested in scrutinizing the cultural fictions I engage as powerful narrative representations of social values. Through them, I aim to wrestle with broadly held convictions associated with poverty and the poor rather than participate in a fine-tuning of terminology best left to social scientists.

While the poor may be readily regarded as a social category (chronic or otherwise), or a specific discernible demographic (8.5 percent globally, according to the World Bank), I emphasize an interrogative approach that does not take this status of the poor (as an easily definable social entity) for granted. In *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*, Mary Poovey has already demonstrated to the satisfaction of many the link between the emergence of the statistical “fact” in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and a particular *modern* form of knowing that separates description from interpretation in knowledge production. In Poovey’s argument, the value-free statistical “fact” of the “sciences of wealth and society” is really not value-free at all. It is not surprising then that social scientists of poverty, such as Mary Durfee and James N. Rosenau, have themselves referred to “the tangled web of definitional and measurement formulations that has plagued those engaged in empirical inquiries” into poverty.¹⁵ Rather than an empirically verifiable social group that can be represented in a statistic, “the poor” are for me a socially and ideologically constructed term. What I mean by this is that I am interested more in how the poor are depicted than in empirically verifying how they really are—or, rather, to put it more precisely, I am interested in how the poor are depicted *in order to* understand, as best we can discover, how they really are, in a political rather than empirical sense. My intention plainly is to underscore the interdependence of *depiction* and *reality*, rather than regard them as antagonistic.

In adopting this approach, I do not—despite Poovey’s demonstration of the ideological nature of the “fact”—airily discount the attempts to define “the poor” in empirical ways through quantitative measures such as caloric intake or income thresholds (to cite two commonly used criteria in social science research and policy advocacy). Poovey’s insight that “even the numbers are interpretive,” that is, not purely descriptive, should not obstruct us from recognizing that the drive to precision in *objectively* defining “the poor” results often from a desire to devise practical poverty-alleviation measures.¹⁶ Even as a mode of interpretation, focusing on daily per capita intake of nutrition measured in calories is compelling if you wish to target hunger among the poor or if you believe that access to calories is a reliable core indicator of the condition of poverty in all its extensiveness. So too with income thresholds typically measured in dollars, based when applied globally on “purchasing power parity,” and resulting in the language of “poverty lines” that we have already encountered.

Such approaches aim to delimit a target population that is to be reached through practical programs of poverty alleviation or eradication. Because of the metrics associated with such approaches (caloric intake, income thresholds) the efficacy of programs can be tested and refinements instituted—that is, all the pragmatic power of an empirical method becomes available, though not without complications. Despite the questions I have raised, the utility of such approaches—the ability of statistical numbers, for example, to communicate concisely and powerfully—is already evident in my citation of the World Bank and Oxfam statistics on poverty. It should be clear, then, that my redirection of the study of poverty away from empiricism is not an outright dismissal of all things empirical.

My reorientation draws on a long academic tradition of deconstructing social and identity categories. I aspire to maintain a balance between an acknowledgment of reality (there are real bodies in the world, aspects of whose existence are captured by naming them poor) and an accommodation of nuance (“poor” is not all these bodies are, nor are bodies marked *poor* at one moment in time to be marked so always). An ongoing refinement of argument is entailed in striking this balance. *The Price of Living* in its entirety is in one sense nothing more than this series of adjustments and readjustments of argument in the pursuit of useful conclusions. In what follows, as we will see, a body marked *poor* does not necessarily remain so throughout the film or the novel; and nor does a text’s marking of a body as poor exclude its simultaneous marking as *woman* (or *man*), *Black* (or *Asian* or *white*), “*lower*” *caste* (or “*upper*” *caste*), *developed* (or

underdeveloped), and so on. I make no claim to comprehensiveness; but I believe the exemplary range of the material I have selected allows me to explore in the pursuit of poverty abolitionist goals the nuanced reality of bodies marked *poor*.

As a socially constructed category, *the poor* is similar to as well as different from other such categories as *women*, *queer*, *colonized*, or *Dalit* (the preferred name for those formerly known as “untouchables” within India’s caste or *varna-jati* system). Like these other categories, it is socially produced or constructed rather than natural or essential, in the sense of being fixed *a priori*. Like them, it names a marginalized identity. Unlike *women*, however, its relationship to biology, or at least the body, is more tenuous (but not, as we will have occasion to see, nonexistent). Where *women*, even in its constructedness, continues to struggle with, often enough against, biology and the body as a material entity (hence the pioneering work on both within feminism), *the poor* has no such privileged relationship to biology and the body in its constitution as a social category. *The poor* is a multilayered—an intersectional—category (like any social category is), and it is a category given to us by contemporary culture (as we see in the cultural fictions that follow). I analyze it in all its *given-ness*, while remaining always attentive to its intersectional manifestation.

Unlike *women* or *queer*, or indeed *Dalit*, *the poor* is not an identity to be proudly reclaimed. In this regard it is like *the colonized*, a category to be abolished in an ideal world. Just as the colonized do not wish to remain colonized, so too the poor do not wish to remain poor. Indeed, neither the poor nor the nonpoor truly aspire to the status of the poor. Certainly, historical figures like Gandhi often donned the symbols of poverty (loincloth, frugality) in a show of virtue or solidarity with the poor. Still, their actions were symbolic interventions in public discourse—akin to a freedom-of-expression activist protesting the silencing of a journalist or a filmmaker with masking tape across the mouth—rather than attempts to perpetuate the actual condition of poverty. Many thinkers have found the existence of the poor inevitable, some have romanticized them as victims, but no one regards as desirable the actual condition of starving or being without a roof over one’s head in the cold or the heat. In this regard, *the poor* is unlike other marginalized identities that have been the subject of concerted reclamation (such as *queer*).

The temporal arena of inquiry opened up by *the poor* as a social or identity category is extensive, though my own interest is in one corner of this

arena. Historically, it would seem the poor have always been with us. The Bible speaks of the poor, as does the centuries-old West African cycle of stories about Son-Jara. The *Srimad Bhagavatam*, an ancient compilation of stories about Krishna, speaks of Krishna's impoverished friend Sudama. In entering this vast terrain, I make a pragmatic and necessary demarcation by speaking of the *modern* poor. Through this demarcation, I suggest that as a social category the poor in recent times are thoroughly marked by the philosophical presuppositions of modernity. How could this not be? So powerful a notion as modernity, pervasive in its global influence at least since the eighteenth century, would hardly leave the category of the poor alone untouched. The intimate link between modernity and "the poor" is readily evident in two widely known works—one British, the other US—roughly from the period leading up to when this study begins.

In the preface to the multivolume *London Labour and the London Poor*, Henry Mayhew, nineteenth-century compiler extraordinaire of the lives and accounts of the London poor in the middle of the nineteenth century, regarded his task as "executing [their] modern history."¹⁷ Mayhew's celebrated work, completed in its final form in 1861–62, endeavored to provide a view of "the Street-Folk," as he called them, to those more privileged: "My earnest hope is that the book may serve to give the rich a more intimate knowledge of the suffering, and the frequent heroism under those sufferings, of the poor."¹⁸ Mayhew's work is contemporary with the novels of Charles Dickens, also famous for his sustained attention to poverty and the poor, though outside the scope of my study.

In a later but similar work devoted to New York City, Jacob Riis regarded "the 'system'" of deplorable tenement housing he studied "a storm-centre forever of our civilization."¹⁹ As celebrated as Mayhew's work, *How the Other Half Lives*, which Riis published in 1901, presumes the symptomatic nature of his exploration of the lives of the poor in New York, "the youngest of the world's great cities"—presumes, that is, that his subject provides visible evidence of aspects of his contemporary civilization.²⁰ Riis's articulation, with its statistics, photographs, journalistic reportage, and policy recommendations, is if anything even more evocative of a modern conception of "the poor" than Mayhew's.

Both of these works attest to the gradual emergence during the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States of a modern way of knowing poverty and the poor, which then undergoes a decisive formulation at the end of the century.

D

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Poverty Knowledge and Poverty Discourse

To know the poor in the modern period is to know them in a modern way. I will endeavor throughout to keep in view this elementary but crucial notion, whose ramifications are anything but elementary. We will see that a modern way of knowing touches every aspect of the category of “the poor,” for better and for worse. Poverty becomes a problem to be solved. At the same time, a problem sometimes comes to be invented where there is none. Conditions and modes of living that may very well not be indicative of poverty, such as subsistence living, come to be recharacterized as poverty because they lack features of commodity consumption and capitalist production associated with modernity—not being modern, they become poverty. The poverty abolitionism animating my argument emerges out of this bewilderingly contradictory modern way of knowing even as it moves beyond it.

The modern way of knowing poverty is usefully historicized in *The Economics of Poverty*, a recent admirably comprehensive textbook by Martin Ravallion. Ravallion notes, “By the turn of the twentieth century, the long-standing model of poverty as being caused by moral failings appears to have receded (though it was never to vanish) in favor of a model that identified shocks and impersonal economic forces interacting with initial inequalities as the main causes of poverty. This change in popular thinking was informed by the new social research on the dimensions and causes of poverty, helped by greater public exposure to that research through the mass media, now reaching a more literate population.”²¹ Ravallion identifies several preceding and succeeding moments of transformation in thinking about poverty. What marks the moment at the turn of the twentieth century as particularly significant for my purposes is the extent to which the conjuncture of social research, popular dissemination, and a changed model of poverty remains ours.

Alice O'Connor is more pointed than Ravallion in *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History*. Naming “poverty knowledge” a distinctly modern knowledge system in her important study, she highlights the crucial role played by turn-of-the-twentieth-century Progressive-era social investigators in the United States “to de-pauperize thinking about poverty—to make it a matter of social rather than individual morality.”²² O'Connor’s main point: The modern poor are not paupers; that is, their modernity is indicated by the gradual replacement of a nineteenth-century discourse of pauperism, which itself had evolved

out of older antecedents, by a more systematic form of knowledge focused on social processes. The shift away from pauperism—and from pauperism's moralistic focus on personal rather than social failing—was accompanied by a turn to state action and the emergence and development of academic disciplines of study (economics and sociology, above all) as well as philanthropic, policy, and activist organizations deeply committed to engaging poverty.

O'Connor confines herself to the United States, but it cannot be controversial to note that a similar systematic attempt to construct "the poor" as a target for study and action gets underway globally. Indeed, one of the distinctive features of the modern poverty knowledge that emerges at the end of the nineteenth century is its global nature. This global knowledge is already evident in the poverty statistics I have cited from the World Bank, Oxfam, and the World Poverty Clock. What follows in this study will amply concur at a global level with what O'Connor shows in the US context: There is a distinctive global twentieth-century "poverty knowledge" based on the social sciences.

At the same time, my study will go beyond poverty knowledge and speak of a *poverty discourse* as a more expansive term inclusive of a parallel *cultural* approach to the poor, also global in nature, as made evident by the novels and films covered in this study. My archive of cultural fictions from Africa, the United States, and India covers the twentieth century and beyond. Of course, the parallel cultural representations contained in this archive should not be regarded as simply a superstructure resting on the foundation of firmer sociological and economic knowledges. Culture is not merely derivative of economic and social structures. The cultural domain, as I will both assume and demonstrate, is every bit as consequential as the economic and sociological in the construction of the modern poor. This domain plays a vital role in circulating representations of "the poor," and through such circulation shapes how society acts on those designated as such. Undeniably, cultural fictions of the poor too are a powerful form of poverty knowledge, though the cultural domain suggests more readily than the social scientific that such knowledge can often be a species of non- or misknowledge and thus alerts us to the need for a more supple and expansive label. *Poverty discourse*, thought of in parallel to *colonial discourse* after Edward Said or *gender discourse* after Judith Butler, is that label. It makes room more easily for the systematic as well as nonsystematic misapprehensions that are often covered up by the designation "knowledge."

Central to modern poverty knowledge are three notions: *welfare*, *development*, and *growth*, the last two closely associated with each other. *Welfare*,

in the context of poverty, suggests a recognition of social obligations for human well-being, while *development* is a social and economic idea indicating a progressive improvement in the human condition. Economic *growth*, the expansion of economic activity, is often posited as both the instrument and the goal of development. So important are these terms in the constitution of a *modern* poverty knowledge that it is worth reviewing them, with appropriate attention to the contradictions they conceal, the kinds of misapprehensions they can be, at the very outset.

Welfare is in some sense the broader idea, capable of encompassing diverse modes of relating to poverty. It is also perhaps deeper, more derivative of premodern antecedents, at least according to Ravallion, though, as we will see, it acquires distinctive meanings in the modern period.²³ In comparison, development and growth have sharper delineations. They are more quintessentially modern ideas—even *modernist* ones in that they emerge out of and are suffused by values that we associate with modernity. They are, more than *welfare*, technical (social scientific) terms, and in that sense more influential globally. All three terms are difficult, though their difficulties are of different kinds. By the end of the book, I hope, our understanding of all of them in the context of a “poverty discourse” will have been considerably enhanced.

Welfare, via Georg Simmel’s “The Poor”

German sociologist Georg Simmel’s “The Poor,” a fascinating 1906 work written even as modern “poverty knowledge” was beginning to take shape is, despite its weaknesses, valuable to the critical study of the modern poor. In it we find notions (intended as well as unintended) useful to an understanding of welfare. The essay is especially important for the way it bridges the social sciences and the humanities, the world of policy and cultural fictions. Engaging this text, on the poor in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, allows us to diagram paradigmatic situations of the modern poor in relationship to welfare. Welfare here can be of the poor or, alternatively, of society as a whole. Engaging Simmel allows us to recognize, which is not to say accept wholly, one possible deep structural model for the poor as a social category.

Simmel remarks in his essay on the difficulty of defining poverty in an absolute manner. He admits that an inadequacy of means with respect to specific ends may be said to exist at all social levels—that is, that every individual, rich and poor, might potentially find it impossible to achieve certain

ends with the specific means available. Nevertheless, Simmel goes on to note, every society locates a “zero point” below which “poverty” socially defined is said to begin: “The relativity of poverty does not refer to the relations between individual means and actual ends, but to the status-related ends of the individual, to a social *a priori* which varies from status to status. . . . It is a very significant socio-historical difference *which* level of needs each group considers as a zero point above which or below which wealth or poverty begins.”²⁴ The location of the “zero point” is connected, Simmel argues, to the granting of assistance by the community as a whole to the person defined as poor. He remarks in concluding: “What makes one poor is not the lack of means. The poor person, sociologically speaking, is the individual who receives assistance because of this lack of means.”²⁵ Indeed, the receiving of assistance may even be seen as definitive of the poor person.

Simmel regards the poor person as a version of what he calls the stranger. He notes,

The poor are approximately in the situation of the stranger to the group who finds himself, so to speak, materially outside the group in which he resides. But precisely in this case a large total structure emerges which comprises the autochthonous parts of the group as well as the stranger; and the peculiar interactions between them create the group in a wider sense and characterize the true historical circle. Thus, the poor are located in a way outside the group; but this is no more than a peculiar mode of interaction which binds them into a unity with the whole in its widest sense.²⁶

The point Simmel is driving to may be clarified by reference to “The Stranger,” a companion essay written in 1908: “The stranger is an element of the group itself, not unlike the poor and sundry ‘inner enemies’—an element whose membership within the group involves both being outside it and confronting it.”²⁷ In other words, the poor exist in an ambiguous and contradictory state with regard to the social collectivity of which they are a part. The relationship, which at first glimpse is based on assistance, can be a congealing of the poor into a status much less benign to them. Such congealing is also a form of concealing. The recognition of the need for assistance for the poor may also render them strange.

Simmel’s reflections on the poor offer useful ways to enter into explorations of notions of welfare. The takeaways from his work in this regard are fivefold. *Firstly*, his remarks suggestively bridge the empirical and the cultural, because they reveal that the constitution of the poor is ideological

rather than natural (what Simmel calls the “zero point” is not preordained). *Secondly*, they rip away the moralistic veil behind which welfare notions reside. *Thirdly*, they point out that the definition of “the poor” as a social category is separate from the intrinsic relationship of means to ends. Those already familiar with the academic languages of poverty research will recognize here the seeds of the distinction between absolute poverty (defined with reference to what some economists have called “basic needs,” such as food and shelter) and relative poverty (which recognizes the fungibility of poverty categories).²⁸ Simmel hints at the difficult and moving line distinguishing absolute and relative poverty. Instead of something intrinsic, *fourthly*, Simmel’s definition depends on the poor receiving assistance from the social group, thus proposing that a certain notion of “welfare,” which ambiguously might be more to the benefit of society as a whole rather than the poor, is pivotal, unavoidable, to the constitution of the poor. *Fifthly*, in treating the poor as a manifestation of the stranger, assistance notwithstanding, Simmel directs attention to the internal contradictions of the social group. By regarding the poor as a version of the stranger, even perhaps an “inner enemy,” Simmel is able to indicate the ways in which poverty is a crisis for the poor, of course, but also for the social group at large. In sum, Simmel’s argument usefully reveals the flexible and ideological nature of the construction of “the poor” and shows that this construction is intrinsic to our social preconceptions regarding their/our “welfare,” a notion which paradoxically can sometimes work to conceal the humanity of the poor.

Nevertheless, Simmel’s argument provokes questions. The *first* question concerns the perceived unity of the social group: Is it indeed the case that social groups can be demarcated as clearly as Simmel seems to imply? Despite his admission of a “confrontation” between the poor person and the social group, Simmel presents the construction of the social group of which the poor are a part as a totality. How, we might ask, does this totality relate to confrontation, contradiction, and demarcation of boundaries? A *second* question concerns the unity not of the social group but of the very category of the poor. Simmel observes “confrontation” between the poor and the social group to which they belong. What about the contradictions *internal* to the category of the poor? Simmel’s presentation of the category of “the poor” as seamless is worth questioning. The same might also be said of his presentation of the nonpoor (those who are not deemed as needing the assistance that defines the poor). What are the contradictions within the nonpoor?

Consequently, the very “assistance” Simmel says is definitive of the poor raises a *third* question worth asking: Surely, the relationship between the social category of the poor and the social function of assistance is nowhere as straightforward as Simmel implies? In most modern societies, the nonpersonal obligation for assistance to the poor—that is, assistance not provided by friends or family—is largely assumed by the state and nongovernmental organizations. Welfare, charity, and even economic development (routinely justified as a process of lifting the poor out of poverty), all so important in poverty discourse, are often presented as assistance rendered to the poor by the state, global agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. Just the same, a recognition of the need for assistance may not result in actual delivery. Modern US history—a similar point could be made about other countries—is replete with arguments for *not* rendering assistance to the poor. Consider, for example, widespread depictions of the poor as “welfare queens,” who scam the system, or “illegal immigrants,” who are alien freeloaders.

A little reflection suggests that the ideological construction of “the poor” often encompasses not only those who need assistance but also those who, despite needing it, do not deserve it. As *The Idea of Poverty*, Gertrude Himmelfarb’s conservative-minded review of poverty discourse in early industrial England, makes clear, “the undeserving poor” have been with us a long time. Simultaneously, it is quite evident that even in the apparently more scientific twentieth-century poverty knowledge, morality is never far below the surface. Even *welfare*, at first sight the benign rendering of assistance to the needy, can prove a site of moral judgement and management for the benefit of society rather than the poor.

Development and Growth

Just as extensively as *welfare*, during the modern period poverty has been engaged via the notion of *development*. Understood as a global process, development ostensibly, in its own view, successfully tackles the problem of poverty through elevated production and consumption (hence its close association in most usages with *growth*). “Development” in this sense was most lucidly articulated post–World War II by Harry S. Truman in his 1949 inaugural presidential address. In this address, Truman declared, “More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both

to them and to more prosperous areas.”²⁹ He set out a vision of the United States’ role in the world during a period of rivalry with communism and continued, “Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace” and promised “a program of development” for this purpose.³⁰ Rightly, Arturo Escobar views this address, expressive of the Truman Doctrine of containing communism, a crucial document of developmentalism and refers to it at the very beginning of his study *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*.³¹ In a complementary way, Peter Worsley has reviewed just how much these ideas of development are intimately connected to theories of modernization.³² Globally speaking, a constellation of ideas with great power—that there is a *modern poverty* that theories of *modernization* and *development* can illuminate—comes to be formed. In recognition of the effects generated by these ideas, Ravallion dubs the period immediately after World War II the Second Poverty Enlightenment (the first was in the late eighteenth century in Europe).³³

So powerful are these ideas that in 1986 the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization adopted a Declaration on the Right to Development. The declaration established development as a human right and linked it in the preamble to “the complete fulfillment of human beings and of peoples.”³⁴ To be sure, this declaration, and the philosophy enshrined in it, departs significantly from the Truman Doctrine (with its focus on growth)—so much so that the United States was the only country to cast a negative vote against the declaration.³⁵ The declaration recognizes at various points the histories of colonialism and gender inequality and “that the human person is the central subject of the development process and that development policy should therefore make the human being the main participant and beneficiary of development,” thus offering some qualification of a purely technocratic and economic growth-oriented rendering of development.³⁶ At the same time, the very existence of the declaration conveys the overall triumph of the development idea.

In its most influential forms, the development idea is advocacy for economic growth, pure and simple. One might regard this expression of growth-oriented development as quintessentially capitalist (as in the Truman Doctrine), but as the widely cited work of Paul Baran suggests, Marxists too have been seduced by the notion of growth as the solution to the problem of poverty. As early as the 1950s, soon after Truman’s inaugural address, Baran offered a Marxist perspective in *The Political Economy of Growth*. While quarreling with capitalism, Baran nevertheless declared, “Let economic growth (or development) be defined as increase over time in

per capita output of material goods,” thus endorsing the notion of growth as beneficial expansion of the economy.³⁷ Indeed, in the preface to the 1962 reprinting of his book, Baran unambiguously restates the need for (socialist) growth to solve the problems of “misery, starvation, and disease” in “underdeveloped countries.”³⁸

We continue to live in an era dominated by *development* and *growth*, though neither lacks for critics. I engage with many positions on development in what follows. What seems to make development discourse especially hard to undo—should one want to undo it—is its progressivism. As Escobar has noted, “Even those who opposed the prevailing capitalist strategies were obliged to couch their critique in terms of the need for development, through concepts such as ‘another development,’ ‘participatory development,’ ‘socialist development,’ and the like.”³⁹ Nevertheless, alternative voices exist. For example, Kohei Saito in *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto* has recently offered a far-reaching Marxist critique of development and, especially, growth (based on previously little-known documents from the Marx archive). The ramifications of the teleology—the progressivism—of development will return to our attention more than once in this book, as will the false promises of growthism, till a kind of summation on them, not unrelated to poverty abolitionism, is reached in the conclusion.

There is a paradox at the heart of the developmentalist conception of the poor. The particular developmentalist way in which the modern poor are imagined—as targets, perhaps even rights-bearing subjects, of a developmentalist agenda—makes the modern poor modern. At the same time, modernist thought struggles to regard the poor as modern at all; for, are not the poor an abomination to modern society? Would the poor not be a stain on modernity at the moment of its apotheosis? For this reason, are they not meant to progressively disappear with the unfolding of history? Riis considered tenements “a storm-centre forever” of his civilization. The *forever* notwithstanding, modern civilization cannot abide poverty, will not abide the poor. This lack of abiding does not, as we will see, always lead to an actual rejection of poverty, as opposed to the poor. There is a difference between not tolerating poverty and not tolerating the poor.

At bottom, *development* is a historicist idea. It is unthinkable outside the notion that history is a progressive unfolding in stages. As a term, *development* takes this unfolding and applies it to economics and society, most often in association with the idea of *growth*. In this regard it might be placed comparatively next to *welfare*, which injects an element of synchrony into the analysis where development infuses diachrony. While the former

suggests a scrutiny of the poor at one point of time, the latter opens the door to the temporality within which the notion of a *modern* poor is embedded. As such, *welfare* and *development/growth* signal the synchronic and diachronic axes, respectively, of my plane of inquiry into poverty discourse.

Every journey must begin by taking reference to visible landmarks that help in mapping the terrain immediately ahead. In due course, the landmarks might be passed, indeed surpassed, but they can nevertheless be useful at the outset. It is in this spirit that I approach *welfare* and *development/growth*. It is hard to overstate their dominant roles in poverty discourse today. The challenge for a study such as this is to recognize, describe, and analyze patterns of thought about the modern poor that reward careful reading, but without recourse to cliché or unnuanced assertions. Neither *welfare* nor *development/growth* is to be viewed as fixed, as poles of orientation usually are. Indeed, rather than poles of orientation, better perhaps to regard them as goads to generative disorientations and reorientations. Knotted contradictions, that will vex and drive the analysis to follow, lie concealed between these synchronic and diachronic axes as I call them, for the modern poor are truly the familiar strangers of our contemporary world.

Cultural Fictions

The modernity of the poor in this study is matched by the modernity of the cultural fictions through which they are studied. Films and novels are quintessentially modern genres, for reasons of technology as well as narrative innovation. They have a special if often conflicted relationship to ideologies of the modern. Films from the beginning have been impossible without many modern technologies (cameras, electric lights, celluloid, projectors, more recently digital editing software, etc.). Equally, though perhaps less evidently, the same is true of the novel (the mass printing press being the most important technology in this regard). The relationship between modernity and the narrative innovations of films and novels is harder to describe but no less real. Both novels and films have also played a significant role in the spread of stories in that modern world of which they are such a quintessential part technologically and narratively. Even more than the novel, film is a mass art, that is, an art form oriented toward mass audiences. Nevertheless, the influence of novels on mass opinion has often matched and sometimes eclipsed that of films. Thus, through dissemination across culture at large, the fictions manifested in novels and films have done the ideological work

of modernity as well as against modernity—that is, they have reflected as well as shaped social values and debates associated with modernity.

The cultural fictions of novels and films, then, are well suited to a study of the modern poor because of their close association with modernity. As subtle a critic as Mikhail Bakhtin, attuned to the presence of novelistic discourse and form throughout history, attested to the modernity of the novel in the early twentieth century: “The novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it.”⁴⁰ Bakhtin’s evocative descriptions of novelistic genre, as a polyphonous, future-oriented textual manifestation of becoming, seem often to be renditions of modernity itself. What Bakhtin says of the novel might equally be said of film, whose narrative borrowing from novels is well-known.⁴¹ Thus, the fictions of novels and films fit well an examination of so extensive a modern phenomenon as poverty.

As might be already evident, I use fiction in a somewhat unusual way. I write *fictions*; I speak of *cultural fictions*. Fiction in my usage here is something like made-up story; but it is not the same as untruth. Fiction in the sense I mean it may be distinct from fact—itself not free of interpretation, as we have seen—and yet be truthful. It is different than nonfictional narratives such as the (literary) autobiography and memoir or the (cinematic) documentary. In different ways, Cynthia G. Franklin in *Narrating Humanity* and Sujatha Fernandes in *Curated Stories* have persuasively demonstrated the ideological work, problematic as well as positive, that the nonfictional story does in public culture. In a complementary way, I focus on fiction. Fiction may rush in where facts and nonfiction fear to tread—sometimes foolishly no doubt, but also, at other times, with boldness and grace. Fiction is invention but as per a truth not easily subsumed under the banner of fact. The patterns and observed repetitions of human action, historical norms, social types—fiction invents by reference to these and similar aggregates of human behavior. Released from bondage to fact, fiction is able to pursue truths in complex ways. Certainly, its inventions are often highly particular, highly individualized, but they acquire force and meaning by their ability to refer to the aggregate.

Such reference to the aggregate need not be representative, in the sense of (mimetically) “depicting faithfully” or (politically) “standing in for” (as a recent theoretical literature, too vast and too well-known to need review, has discussed). Fiction may be aspirational, not only in challenging fact but

in referring to the aggregate. In this aspirational mode, it might even refuse to represent. It may be bold in its pursuit of the abnormal, the atypical, and the individual because it can *refer* to aggregates of human behavior without being bound to them—which is to say it can refer in order to explore, even to exceed and transgress. Ruth Ronen notes, “Fictional worlds are related to the actual world, but they are not necessarily possible alternatives to this world. They can include impossible situations, impossible entities, and be subject to different laws of probability.”⁴² If less spectacularly, at its most potent, at its most meaningful and consequential, fiction expresses representative as well as aspirational truths of a kind different than fact. Accordingly, fiction may confirm such statistics about poverty as those cited above as well as ignore or challenge them in the pursuit of its own truths.

The ideas about fiction I am sketching out here are well-known. In his entry for *fiction* in *Keywords*, Raymond Williams echoes most of them, noting “the interesting double sense of a kind of IMAGINATIVE (q.v.) LITERATURE (q.v.) and of pure (sometimes deliberately deceptive) invention”; how fiction is now “nearly synonymous” with the novel; and the contrast between fiction and fact.⁴³ A similar echo is to be found in Barbara Foley’s *Telling the Truth*: “Fictional representation is, among other things, an activity of persuasion, for it undertakes the representation of people and events that do not exist or have not existed in order to propose evaluative attitudes toward people and events that do exist or have existed. The invention of characters and events possessing differential ontological status thus engages the text in representational procedures that are simultaneously referential and judgmental. . . . A truth is being told, with ‘facts’ to back it up, but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts.”⁴⁴ Implicit in Foley’s parsing of what she calls the “activity of persuasion” is the productively indeterminate semantic terrain of “fiction”—a terrain between invention and reference where a particular kind of meaning lives and thrives.

Narrative film too partakes of this ontological quality of fiction, indeed in the eyes of some compounding the issues at stake because of its very material form. A long time ago, André Bazin was seduced by the apparently nonsubjective record of nature produced by the camera to advance an understanding of film as an intrinsically realistic art. Later critics, however, have rightly been less beguiled by the notion that the photographic image has an exalted capacity to refer faithfully to reality. They have read the material form of cinema (whatever that has meant through its long history) rather differently than Bazin. For example, with regard to realism and the plausibility of the diegetic world of the film, Jacques Aumont et al.

note in *Aesthetics of Film*, “It is because the image oscillates between a ‘full’ representation (representing something in a realistic manner) and the extreme transience of its material (shadows and flashes) that it fascinates and holds the audience.”⁴⁵ In this fashion, they ground in cinematic materiality the diverse possibilities beyond referentiality pursued by cinematic fiction. The shadows and flashes of cinema can both represent reality with a degree of aimed-for fidelity and manipulate and bend it in pursuit of other truths. As in literature so in film, fiction offers its own complex truths that cannot be reduced to fact or referent.

Fiction, as I am outlining it here, becomes *cultural* when it refers to widely held social values—by representing and challenging them, by instigating and producing them, or else indeed by doing some or all of these. That is to say, cultural fictions are *modes* and *nodes* of public discourse—they are modes in that they are in themselves examples of public discourse; they are nodes in that they are texts at the intersection of different strands of public discourse and around which a vigorous public debate swirls.

As cultural fictions, the novels and films engaged in this book, mostly famous, are modes and nodes in these senses. Sometimes they codify and capture an energetic public debate already in progress; sometimes they instigate such a public discourse—in most cases they do both, to varying degrees. The label *fiction* applied to them by me is deliberately layered. On the one hand, it is a preferred term for the literary genre (the novel) I engage and is certainly applicable to the cinematic genre (the scripted narrative film) that too is at the heart of my intellectual enterprise. On the other hand, I rely on fiction’s tense relationship with fact to explore the ways in which it may articulate an ideology of truth as well as untruth. If fiction often expresses a truth other than factual, it can also be dishonest—that is, fictional, in that other equally common sense.

By cultural fiction, then, I mean a multilayered idea that refers to stories with investments in widely shared values having a broad purchase in a culture at large, such that the text is able to draw on, shape, and otherwise activate a rich world of extratextual meanings. Cultural fiction is both text and context—it is text flowing into context and context flowing into text. In approaching narratives as cultural fictions, I am foregrounding their exceptional status as repositories of broadly held values. We might think of them as representational mechanisms in which we can observe the play of ideology—in the case of this study, the ideology of poverty, not poverty as such (whatever that might be). In the cultural fictions in this study we encounter poverty as an epistemological category, as the target of a kind

of value-laden knowing. The notion of fictionality bridges the intentionality of the author/auteur (as expressed in a particular text, written or cinematic) and the givenness of the cultural narrative (that is, the wellspring of culturally pervasive narrative forms and values from which the text draws). Thus, the fuzzy and shifting boundary between a discrete textual node and a related amorphous cultural mode is made evident. In this rich and murky terrain, ideological expressions are born, thrive, and die.⁴⁶

The Humanities Contra the Social Sciences

The Price of Living is an illustration of the relevance of the humanities. As Alice O'Connor's work shows, contemporary "poverty knowledge" is dominated by the social sciences. The boldest and broadest arguments about poverty are to be found in social scientific and policy fields. In what follows, I recognize the importance of this knowledge and draw on a large body of social scientific and policy studies of poverty, global and local, old and new. However, my aspiration is to fill a gap in the humanities. Compared to the social sciences, engagements with poverty in the humanities are relatively few. Within the humanities, the disciplines most likely to engage poverty are history and philosophy. Only a handful of works in literary and cultural studies (by Rob Nixon, Gavin Jones, Patrick Greaney, Barbara Korte, and Lennard Davis, alongside a few others) have engaged with the topic seriously. I concur with Gavin Jones that "despite its prominence as a subject in the social sciences, poverty has remained unfocused in literary studies that privilege the cultural identity of the marginalized."⁴⁷ I would go further and say what has been especially missing is the sustained exertion of the *interpretive* powers of the humanities—found particularly in fields like literary and cultural studies—on what I term *poverty discourse*. *The Price of Living* aspires to begin—to be a catalyst for—this sustained exertion.

Need I also point out that social scientific studies and policy recommendations, no matter how well thought out, are not produced far from the influence of stories? Stories enter in surreptitious ways into such studies and recommendations as well as journalistic reporting. And when published, such studies, recommendations, and reporting go into a context overflowing with stories, which then determine their reception and constrain their effectiveness. Neither social scientific studies nor policy recommendations are produced separately from the shaping power of what I call cultural fictions. In other words, to put the matter succinctly—the stories we tell have real force. This is so even when, in the stories, the poor—quotation marks

always around the term—emerge with a paradoxical, multidimensional, confusing variety. It is my simple and, I hope, self-evident contention that the world of policy, advocacy, and more generally public discourse will benefit enormously from an acknowledgment of the great variety in which the humanity of “the poor” stands sometimes revealed and at other times obscured in stories.

If *The Price of Living* represents an intervention into an area of knowledge dominated by the social sciences, forays from the other side into the sphere of cultural criticism exist too. The real power of stories has been occasionally acknowledged within the social sciences, sometimes in ways that seem inadequate from a humanities perspective. A recent example of such inadequacy is the book *Narrative Economics*, in which economist Robert Shiller sets out to define a new field of economic study. He acknowledges that narratives play a crucial and understudied role in the emergence, spread, and decline of economic phenomena such as depressions, booms, and recessions; at the same time, his book illustrates the dangers of interdisciplinary adventuring. What Shiller means by *narrative* is vague, failing to keep the term distinct from “a song, joke, theory, explanation, or plan that has emotional resonance.”⁴⁸ What can we say in the face of such a baggy definition? Little beyond noting that these “narratives”—we cannot avoid the scare quotes—are of interest to Shiller because of their relationship to economics as a discipline. His designation of them as narratives is to constitute—to gather—“qualitative data” through which to challenge the quantitative bias of economics. In asserting the rationale for his proposed field of narrative economics, Shiller draws heavily on medical epidemiology, repeatedly asserting that narratives spread like disease epidemics and can be fruitfully analyzed through epidemiological models created to understand contagious diseases. It is not surprising, then, that central to Shiller’s argument is “the viral narrative,” that is, a narrative that spreads in epidemic fashion, that infects and has contagion and recovery rates.⁴⁹

Shiller notes more than once that narrative economics is an interdisciplinary field and should include the humanities.⁵⁰ These observations notwithstanding, his methods remain data driven and social scientific, rather than of the humanities. Mathematical models of epidemiology are presented in an appendix, and it is clearly evident that the main purpose of narrative economics is the accumulation of data for these mathematical models through the deployment of digital searches on historical archives and through multidecade collection of data via questionnaires and focus groups. Shiller’s references to truly humanities-based methods of study are

virtually nonexistent. Literary studies, film studies, and narratology find the briefest of mentions. It is hardly surprising then that there is no recognition of the relevance of a *formal* study of narrative, that is, a study of narrative forms, a subject on which humanities scholars have had so much to say.

Most crucially, Shiller's enterprise betrays its limitations in the nonappearance of a key term that would seem to be unavoidable in any humanities approach to narratives about phenomena such as poverty: ideology. It is baffling that Shiller has written a book about the stories that human beings tell about economic behavior, their own and others', without considering how these stories might emerge out of as well as contribute to *ideologies*. The result is a curiously superficial depiction of the power of stories (even as Shiller begins by acknowledging that storytelling might be definitive of human beings, that humans might very well be defined as storytelling beings).⁵¹ Shiller speaks of "a constellation of narratives" and regularly opines that narratives may ebb and flow over time.⁵² Yet, an engagement with narratives in all their formal and historical complexity is aborted. Accordingly, there is no sense of the deep structure of narratives. There is no sense, in brief, of the ideological work that narratives do.

I dwell at length on Shiller and narrative economics to cast into sharper relief my own project. If Shiller portrays his work as the study of narrative epidemics, I am tempted to describe my enterprise as the study of endemic narratives of poverty—that is, of narratives that persist with a low-level intensity quite different from Shiller's viral narratives that rise, peak, and decline spectacularly. Ultimately, however, there is no point in succumbing to this temptation. After all, rather than borrow from the social sciences or from mathematical models of epidemiology, my purpose is to reiterate the relevance of humanities methods on the very terrain claimed so successfully in modern times by the social sciences.

Ideology Critique, Hegemony, and Authenticity

Enter ideology critique as a method honed within the disciplines of the humanities. An ideological terrain is made available for critique by cultural fiction's semantically fertile and socially expansive manifestation of truths and untruths. Jorge Larraín remarks that ideology *may* refer—*may* because what follows is not the only meaning for a word that has had an adventurous life both within and outside Marxism—to "the totality of forms of social consciousness."⁵³ This "neutral" meaning I mostly deploy in this study, rather than a negative understanding of ideology as false consciousness

(not used at all) or a narrow understanding of it as a kind of consciously held belief system (used rarely). My project is based on an approach to ideology as a term useful to analyze forms of socially expressed values, expressed unconsciously or otherwise, in novels and films read as cultural fictions, that is, broadly resonant texts.

In this regard, I understand ideology critique as a method to explore cultural material that is founded largely on this “neutral” notion of ideology. E. San Juan’s approach to reading texts by attending to “both aesthetic qualities and their historical grounding” is one way to understand ideology critique; San Juan goes on to remark, “‘Ideology’ . . . designates not a set of ideas, false consciousness, or *Weltanschauung*, but rather an unconscious system of ‘representations,’ practices and institutions, whereby humans live their relations to their historical circumstances by way of phantasy.”⁵⁴ Something like fiction as I deploy it here, phantasy connotes imaginative work rather than falseness. The phantasy (of ideology) is as real, as basic, as the economic and the political. Ideology for San Juan, and for me despite some differences, is not subordinate or subsequent to an alternative domain perceived as the economic base or the political reality. Ideology critique is a plausible method of research and analysis because ideology routinely becomes available to us in textualized forms that emerge from the historical circumstances of which they are a part and which they equally play a role in shaping.

The stories read in this study as cultural fictions, however, should not be regarded as expressions of the poor. Far from it. A cultural fiction—a mode as well as a node, as I have noted—is precisely that which manifests the contradictory, not always seamless, workings of ideology broadly, rather than in a manner that is an authentic expression of any one segment of society. Though it cannot be said that the voices and opinions of the poor are necessarily absent from the cultural fictions I study, by and large these fictions are the products, sometimes sympathetic and sometimes not, of those (writers and filmmakers) who are not poor. In other words, I make no claim of authenticity of experience on behalf of the cultural fictions I scrutinize.

Experience might very well enter into these constructions; but it cannot be assumed, its essential quality remains unavailable, and it is not at the end the target of my analysis. Rather, I foreground and offer for scrutiny the artifice of cultural fictions (films and novels). Barbara Foley notes (she focuses on literature, but her point applies to all fictions, including filmic):

The notion that fiction contains truths of a general nature . . . enables the critic to argue that the relative freedom of many literary

texts from the obligation to refer directly to actually existing persons and situations need not mean that these works possess a diminished relationship to reality. Indeed, because of its broad powers of reference, the literary work can, in this light, be seen as a source of knowledge. . . . What the literary work will help us understand, of course, is not just the world, but the various perspectives from which various people have seen, and attempted to understand, the world. Representation is re-presentation, rendering a portrait of reality as it has been processed in the mind of the writer, who has herself been shaped by the historically conditioned categories of perception and comprehension available to her as well as the literary genres familiar to her audience. That these categories are mediated by ideologies of various kinds goes without saying.⁵⁵

To this cogent statement of the worth of fiction in relationship to experience and the world I need only add—as Foley herself might—that as much as the writer or filmmaker is shaped by the world she lives in, she also shapes this world by her creations. The analyses of the powerful representations of the poor in films and novels that follow will take quite seriously this dialectical codetermination of work and world.

If freedom from fact renders fiction powerful in new ways, so does its (relative) freedom from experience. A great deal of the writing about the poor has taken the form of nonfiction—academic studies, life writing, journalism, polemics, and so on. Both Mayhew and Riis fit this category of nonfiction, as do two other classic works that have played an important role in my thinking on the poor, P. Sainath's extraordinary journalistic *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* and Ali Mazrui's documentary polemic "Tools of Exploitation" (an episode in his brilliant nine-part series *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*).⁵⁶ These nonfictional works have been invigorating provocations to my own study of cultural fictions. In contrast to these works, my insight is that the truth of fiction, released from the impulse to be sincere in nonfictional accounts dealing ostensibly with real people, can in many ways be more socially resonant—or at least differently, and equally powerfully, resonant. Accordingly, I set out here to complement as well as challenge journalism, social scientific work, and policy analysis by attending to cultural fictions.

Ultimately, my goal is to bring to our attention hegemonic ideas about the modern poor shared across the globe. Hegemony has been commonly read as the creation of consensual values by socially dominant groups—in

other words, the name for a process by which dominant groups produce ideas and values that are then spread to dominated groups in such a manner that they become theirs too. The point of hegemony is to replace coercion by eliciting the consent of the dominated, though of course, as Perry Anderson points out in *The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony*, by definition hegemony can never make coercion totally unnecessary (for then hegemony would not be a force of oppression at all): “If hegemony were either just cultural authority or coercive power, the concept would be superfluous: there are many clearer names for each. Its persistence as a term is due to its combining of them, and the range of possible ways it can do so.”⁵⁷

Let me assert right here, right at the outset, that the purpose of hegemonic ideas of poverty is quite simply the forestalling of poverty abolitionism, the belief that poverty can and should be abolished. This hegemonic forestalling—ideological manipulation aimed at making naked coercion as superfluous as possible—will be engaged directly in what follows, but engaged in order to overcome.

More on Method

In the pursuit of poverty abolitionism, I aim in this study to explore what Julian Saurin has referred to as “[the poor’s] common experience of a global modernity.”⁵⁸ Accordingly, my project is necessarily a comparative effort, grounded in the global and modern discursive constructions—and reconstructions—of “the poor.” My wide-ranging exploration covers stories in film and prose from Africa, India, and the United States. The turn of the twentieth century—roughly the period of emergence of a modern poverty discourse (as well as of film as a widely disseminated cultural form)—marks the historical beginning of my study. The earliest cultural fictions I examine are Charlie Chaplin films. The latest are from the twenty-first century. These dates are not the typical temporal markers for modernity; but they do indicate a period within which a particular recognizably modern sociological understanding of poverty—“poverty knowledge,” as discussed above—begins increasingly to frame the diverse discursive constructions of the poor.

My study demonstrates the remarkable stability of poverty discourse, transformations and transmutations notwithstanding. Choice phrases and themes culled from a vigorous global debate about the poor—basic needs, absolute vs. relative poverty, culture of poverty, poverty trap, development, economic migration, lumpen populations, poor people’s movements,

eco-poverty, to name a few—play a role in my study. These phrases and themes are clues to the conceptual categories, narrative elements, and affective biases constituting modern poverty discourse. This is not to say, however, that these phrases and themes do not evolve over history and as they travel back and forth across the globe. Discrete catalytic events, longitudinal social processes, deep-seated cultural differences—all these play consequential roles in the local manifestations of a global poverty discourse.

Stability, then, should not be mistaken for discursive coherence or consensus. I set out to identify illustrative persistent elements in representations of the poor across Africa, India, and the United States but in a way that remains respectful of differences. The exercise is comparative, and the grounds for the comparison are those already articulated: (novelistic and filmic) *cultural fictions* and *a global experience of modernity*. However, “a major goal of comparison,” A. K. Ramanujan has noted, “is contrast.”⁵⁹ A rigorous, well-grounded comparative project should also be a contrastive one, mindful of differences as well as similarities. Accordingly, in this study the specificity of each textual case, geographical location, and cultural context is engaged even as shared and persistent features are explored. Judicious room is made for depth even as breadth is pursued. A comparative project such as *The Price of Living* must balance the disadvantages of a (relative) lack of depth with the advantages of breadth. My study is formulated to find this balance, which is manifested in the overarching architecture of the book. Ultimately, if my comparative mode of proceeding sacrifices some depth of analysis, it does so in the interests of gaining a breadth that enables its own rewards in sharply exposing to the clear light of day some of our most powerful, globally shared tropes of poverty.

The inclusion of three spaces of such diversity as Africa, India, and the United States should be understood within this context of comparison and contrast. In one sense, the inclusion simply reflects my areas of expertise, for I have studied in and written on all three spaces regularly; but there are also methodological reasons for the inclusion. The United States—coextensive with that symbolic space named “America,” to which I will refer only when it seems appropriate to invoke that fraught symbolism—is routinely described as the richest nation in the world where, to quote Clare Callahan et al., the “notion, that American poverty is a paradox of plenty, is a venerable, common framing.”⁶⁰ Unlike the United States, neither Africa nor India can make claims to staggering levels of wealth—indeed, both have, if not now, then until recently, been virtually synonymous with poverty in popular opinion.

If I draw all three spaces into a single argument, it is precisely to explore both commonalities and differences within a global poverty discourse.

Unlike the United States and India, Africa is a continent, not a country. Nevertheless, it makes an intuitive sense to include it here. Poverty discourse speaks commonly of African poverty even as it also identifies Senegalese or Nigerian or South African poverty. The justification for such usage—should one be needed—is to be found in the existence of an extensive discourse of Pan-Africanism among African intellectuals. Julius Nyerere, whose Tanzanian developmentalist manifesto is well-known, was one such Pan-Africanist. He referred to his development philosophy as “African socialism,” implying thereby shared continental features. The great Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene, whose films provide an indispensable skeletal structure for this book, too was a Pan-Africanist who declared the intent to live “in an African way.”⁶¹ Nyerere and Sembene are hardly a minority. A wide range of African intellectuals—the South African Neville Alexander might also be named here—have routinely taken Black Africa as the naturally unified space for their allegiances and articulations. The world at large has followed, sometimes more problematically when exerting (neo)colonialist discourses of a unified African identity. In invoking Africa as a space of analysis, then, I follow the lead of Pan-Africanist intellectuals, while guarding against the pitfalls of a reductive—(neo)colonialist—recourse to “Africa.” It is in this context that Africa is *comparable* to the United States and India.

It is worth noting in this regard that India too has its anomalies when inserted into a comparison with Africa and the United States. It too has its own specificities as a continental nation of great linguistic and cultural diversity. This study, for example, engages in depth with three Indian languages—Tamil, Hindi, and English. It is often said that India is most like a (hypothetical) United States of Europe. India and the United States, unlike Africa, might each be a nation under a single flag, but this nominal though incontrovertible truth does not necessarily make them more similar to each other than India is to Africa. After all, India’s diversity is in many respects more like Africa’s than that of the United States. Such distinctions are an unavoidable part of a comparative project in which one can speak of US, Indian, and African poverty, even as culturally these designations are not primarily national. Differences here do not make comparison impossible as much as impose appropriate care.

But why compare at all? one might ask. Ultimately, in making Africa, India, and the United States the locations for my study I am guided by my

intuition—borne out, I believe, by what follows—that the global discourse of modern poverty touches in complementary and overlapping ways all three spaces. Several features of this global poverty discourse are made visible precisely because of our reference to these three spaces. For example, such reference exposes with sharpness the distinctions made within development discourse around developed (United States) and developing and underdeveloped (Africa and India) spaces. Development discourse remains, even at this late stage, replete with such language, which it will be my task to question and critique. If a certain custom within the global discourse of poverty makes the juxtaposing of the United States, India, and Africa possible, the point of my exercise will be to explore rather than accept, to express skepticism as well as acceptance (depending on the case). Global comparison and contrast constitute only the first steps in the analytical exercise, but they are important ones—without them the insights into global poverty discourse that follow would not be possible.

Simultaneously, this study involves a comparative exercise with regard to novels and films. Novels and films are comparable as *fictional* narratives—powerful storytelling genres that have exerted considerable influence during my chosen historical period. They are also genres functioning in close proximity to each other. Films have borrowed heavily from novels, while novels have themselves undergone change with the development of film, for example by ceding realistic ground to advance experimental modernist and postmodernist techniques. Both novels and films can function as cultural fictions; but in recognizing this ground for comparison, contrast cannot be neglected. The myriad material and social differences between films and novels ranging from technologies of production through aesthetic and material form to cultures of consumption must be kept as much in mind as similarities and affinities.

The tradition of thinking comparatively about novels and films, no doubt precisely because of their power in advancing modern fictional narratives, is long and distinguished, too well-known to require extended review. George Bluestone, in *Novels into Film*, an early study of adaptation, attempted to analyze systematically the distinctions between novels and films as narrative art forms. The details of his analysis do not always hold up to interrogation, but he is persuasive when he notes that “the conceptual process [of the novel as a language art], though allied to and often taking its point of departure from the percept [which is at the core of cinema as a sensory art of the image], represents a different mode of experience, a different way of apprehending the universe.”⁶² Bluestone’s early insight that there are

differences in the way in which the two rival narrative art forms make an apprehension of the universe possible is not really contestable. Although my purpose in this study is to focus narrowly on the way films and novels narrate the modern poor, I intend to remain sensitive to the notion that such representation is not simply a matter of “narration” and “story,” that the poor are also “apprehended”—to use Bluestone’s word—in rather different ways in films and novels because of those art forms’ different formal and material features, the “different mode of experience” each offers.

I have endeavored throughout this book to resist the tendency in cultural criticism to treat primary texts as simply grist for the analytical mill. The Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o epigraph for this chapter states: “Fiction is the original poor theory.” By “poor theory” Ngũgĩ meant a commonsensical theory not enamored of the flourishes and embellishments common in “theory” as a transdisciplinary phenomenon of the Western academy. He wished to suggest that fiction, such as dramas and novels, offered a kind of theory in its own right. Accordingly, I regard each cultural fiction I engage as not only narrative but also theoretical. This should not be taken to mean I necessarily agree with the theory offered, any more than I necessarily regard a narrative as compelling in the values it articulates. The theory immanent in a cultural fiction is to be wrestled with as critically as its narrative.

In the pursuit of my goal of engaging cultural fictions as more than “raw material,” I take recourse to the not uncommon method—it used to be more common in the time before *theory* in its worst aspects, the kind of theory Ngũgĩ distances himself from, reduced literature to *symptom*—I dub here *interpretive renarration*. By this phrase I mean the retelling of a film or a novel with appropriate attention to form and medium to bring out (interpretively) its own critical perspective, without the erasure of interpretation-enabling context. At its best, interpretive renarration is a way to release a text’s own immanent ideological commitments. (At its worst, the method devolves into belletrist plot summary.) When juxtaposed with insights derived from secondary materials outside the text, such renarration has been important to me in developing and advancing the argument in this book for poverty abolitionism.

My primary (cultural fictional) texts and secondary (often social scientific) texts together constitute what I call *poverty discourse*. Since Michel Foucault, *discourse* has been a critical term of great power for the analysis of cultural material. Edward Said drew partly on this power to examine “the [Orientalist] field’s shape and internal organization” in *Orientalism*, his ground-shifting study.⁶³ Now, decades later, a looser and more capacious

understanding of *discourse* is in operation, the result of the passage of the term into a kind of critical common sense that owes as much to Foucault and Said as to later and alternative elaborations. *Discourse* in this usage is a critical term aiming to draw out for analysis a field's conventions, tropes, institutions, procedures, genealogies, canons, and relationships to power. My notion of *poverty discourse* relies on this commonsensical usage, compatible with a variety of theoretical preconceptions, rather than an authentic and unadulterated Foucauldian or Saidian (or any other) methodological apparatus for reading discourse.

Finally, a note about the architecture of the book as it pertains to my method: The emancipation of literature from the fate of being symptomatic is abetted by the organization of the argument. The design of the book is simple but purposeful. The book moves—I choose the word advisedly—in three chapters. Each of the three chapters is written to be read as a long essay comprised largely of several mini-essays each devoted to a cultural fiction or cultural fictions—a story or constellation of stories. Mostly, each mini-essay within a chapter is an interpretive renarration of a story or constellation of stories. The work of the interpretive renarrations is supported by the sequence in which they are presented. There is intentionality in this sequence; it has been arrived at through rewriting, rethinking, and excision as well as expansion. The poverty abolitionism that is the endpoint of this exercise in presentation—and that was arrived at only after a considerable period of thinking and rethinking—is now also the framework within which the interpretive renarrations are located and find their resonance.

The aim of the presentation of the interpretive renarrations is to release the theoretical insights immanent in the novels and films. Thus, the interpretive renarrations are ordered in an organizational logic that synthesizes the forays into a variety of texts into an argument that finds its culmination in the concluding section of each chapter. Of course, the developing argument includes theoretical and contextual texts, which sometimes buttress the interpretive renarrations and sometimes challenge them or are challenged by them. The goal of accumulating insights through such an argument architecture is a polemic regarding global poverty that can advantageously draw on a variety of discursive resources (fictional, theoretical, contextual) with equal facility.

Through both the reading practice of interpretive renarration and the architecture of the argument, I endeavor to dehypostatize not only the story but also the contextual material (theoretical and other) next to which I read the story—the first in its identity as “primary work” and the second

as “secondary work.” Interpretive renarration is a reading practice that rubs abstraction, generalization, theory, and context, on the one hand, against immersion (in the primary text), particularity, expressive detail, and textuality, on the other. The design of the book—resistant to the “application” of theory even as it does not shirk the theoretical—is meant to maximize as well as direct the vigor of this rubbing together of readings and arguments. With the ensuing friction, I hope to spark a critical fire of indignation about the condition of those familiar strangers—or is it strange familiars?—of our contemporary world: the poor.

Designing for Poverty Abolition

The Price of Living is designed for poverty abolition, the fullest treatment of which is to be found in the conclusion, where my comments on it are able to draw on everything that remains to be read between here and there. However, I provide now a brief summary of what I mean by poverty abolition to orient the argument that follows.

As should be readily evident, poverty abolition envisages, indeed demands, the complete cessation of poverty. Just as slavery abolition in the nineteenth-century United States imagined the end of slavery, and Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar in early twentieth-century India imagined the end of caste (the “annihilation of caste,” in an essay of that title), poverty abolition imagines the very end of poverty by regarding it as a humanly ordained phenomenon capable of elimination. Just as slavery and caste are humanly ordained and not natural or supernatural, so is poverty. Poverty amelioration and poverty eradication are both common topics in poverty discourse. Unlike the former, poverty abolition eschews a simple reduction in the harms of poverty; and unlike the latter, it rejects an attitude that makes of poverty a natural, ageless phenomenon.

Abolition underscores that poverty is humanly ordained and that it can be humanly abolished. Poverty abolition is as simple as that. As such, poverty abolition refuses the capture of poverty discourse by economics. When we turn from the rational calculation of contemporary economics to representations of the poor in stories, the inevitability of poverty is blown up and the ethical inevitability of poverty abolitionism becomes easier to recognize. This ethical inevitability is also practical in a world careening toward environmental catastrophe, as I will argue. The yo-yoing between victimization and agency in cultural fictional representations (which we will review in detail in the conclusion) is a clue to the ethics as well as politics

of the deep-seated stratagems of containment and misdirection in poverty discourse. For this reason, the cultural domain is essential to a poverty abolitionist argument.

In the pursuit of poverty abolitionism through the domain of culture, *The Price of Living* is designed as a multilayered and multidirectional study. The subject of each of the three central chapters, each a long essay, as noted, explores one aspect of the ideology of modern poverty as narrated in powerful fictional forms: poverty as abjection and destitution; as a condition to be escaped through aspiration and striving, even sometimes criminal; as a condition to be engaged and resisted with insurgent intent. In a sense, each of the three chapters is an essayistic exercise in ideology critique of a central feature of representations of the modern poor. The three chapters taken together, then, amount to a broader ideology critique of global representational practices. Poverty abolition is the result of this extended ideology critique; the argument throughout the three chapters preceding the conclusion tends steadily toward poverty abolition.

Chapter 1 of the book—the first essay, entitled “Destitution”—is an extended exploration of the kind of ruin we call poverty. It focuses on the figure, or character type, of the destitute. The texts it explores are Charlie Chaplin’s US films *The Tramp*, *City Lights*, and *Modern Times*; an early short film by Ousmane Sembene, *Borom Sarret* (The cart driver); Kamala Markandaya’s novel of rural Indian poverty *Nectar in a Sieve*; Buchi Emecheta’s Nigerian novel *The Joys of Motherhood*; Rohinton Mistry’s Bombay novel of urban poverty *A Fine Balance*; and Benh Zeitlin’s *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, a speculative film about poverty and environmental disaster in the US South. The ideology critique progresses from a global, white icon of poverty, through racialized, colonized, and gendered figures of destitution, through representations of rural and urban poor, to return to a US figure of destitution. A panoramic view of the “welfare” of the modern global poor is thus generated, and through this view important presuppositions as well as incoherences we harbor in defining their destitution—the condition to be abolished—become available for critique.

Chapter 2—the second essay, “Release”—explores representations in which the poor flee poverty, that is, attempt to become unpoor. It does so primarily through three figures: the aspiring, the criminal, and the migrant. The figure of the aspiring poor, often presented in the context of “development,” is an aperture into representations in which the poor chart their path out of poverty in conformity with society, that is, by playing the game according to the rules given to them. The criminal poor do not conform

to society, but nor do they engage in insurgence or collective resistance against existing social regimes in order to overcome poverty itself. The migrant poor are the economic refugees of news reports. The cultural fictions engaged in chapter 2 are Yash Chopra's Hindi-language Bombay film of aspiration and criminality *Deewaar* (The wall); Gaston Kaboré's film *Zan Boko* (The place where the placenta is buried), set in Burkina Faso, and Abderrahmane Sissako's film *Bamako*, set in Mali, both films about development; a film about migration, Sembene's *Black Girl* (widely known both by its English title and by its French title, *La Noire de . . .*); Nadine Gordimer's South African novel *The Pickup*; and Bharati Mukherjee's US novel *Jasmine*. The last two are novels about migration. Figures of poverty who struggle to be released from destitute conditions without becoming insurgents are many; the aspiring, the criminal, and the migrant are, as we will see, three such figures that are particularly instructive. These figures, in their shared qualities as well as differences, allow us to begin exploring (the exercise is continued in the next chapter) representations of the agency of the poor. The agency of the poor in this chapter is not abolitionist; on the contrary, their agency lies very much outside an abolitionist framework, and because it does, it teaches us about poverty abolitionism.

Chapter 3—"Insurgence"—develops an alternative argument about agency by focusing on narratives of countering poverty as such, both by the poor (mostly) and the nonpoor who are sympathetic to them. Insurgence here is understood as something more than simply rebellion, which the migrant and the criminal too might be seen to express. It is seen as a collective and public form of resistance, even if inchoate, aimed at abolishing or fundamentally transforming the conditions that allow poverty to exist. The insurgent rejects the very rules of the game in a political way. The texts engaged here are Sembene's film *Xala* (The curse); John Steinbeck's US novel *The Grapes of Wrath*; K. Balachander's Tamil film *Thaneer Thaneer* (Water!); Pa Ranjith's *Madras*, also a Tamil film; and Octavia Butler's US novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. The interpretive renarrations in this chapter begin with an engagement with a brilliant reflection on the very conditions of possibility for destitute agency (*Xala*). Subsequently, I engage cultural fictions of labor organizing, autonomous self-help, armed rebellion, alternative education, and movement politics. These five forms of resistance, instructive in their variety, are inevitably crosshatched by other considerations of race, caste, class, gender, electoral politics, and more. The interpretive renarrations in chapter 3, contrapuntally as well as progressively, suggest the possibilities and limitations of widely manifested modes

of resisting social structures of poverty. In the conclusion to chapter 3, this challenging range is assessed conceptually via the useful summarization of political action in the slogan “Educate, Agitate, Organize” (now associated with Ambedkar). By the end of this chapter, the ideological paradoxes of destitute insurgency, first sketched in *Xala*, are thoroughly explored.

The figures, or character types, around whom the three parts are organized provide openings for analysis. However, I would not like to leave the impression that distinctions among the figures are inviolable—that the lines demarcating destitute from aspirant, or migrant from insurgent, are sharply etched. I believe in the heuristic utility of these distinctions, for they allow us to map ideological differences in cultural fictions of the poor. These ideological differences have important political consequences. At the same time, a great deal is to be learned in attending to the messiness at the borders of these distinctions. Accordingly, the narrative arc in the book embraces nuance while moving broadly from representations of abjection and destitution through aspiration and release to resistance and insurgency. In this way, I hope to keep consequential differences in clear view while engaging ambiguities.

As I hope is easily evident, the organization of the book is progressive as well as thematic. The movement from destitution through release to insurgency represents an arc that is part of a deliberate exercise of explication. There are reasons why a text is placed in one chapter of the book rather than the other. However, this placement should not be taken to mean that the way I choose to read a text is the *only* way it can be read. A text being explored, for example, for its thematization of destitution might, in another analytical moment, be read as a text thematizing insurgency. The location of a text in one chapter of the book is not arbitrary; but, in each case, the placement finds its justification in analysis rather than inevitability. What is true of the book as a whole is true also of each chapter. Each chapter is organized thematically rather than chronologically. In the ordering of texts within a chapter, I have preferred to enable the elucidation of themes and subthemes. When an opportunity for thematic analysis has presented itself in the juxtaposition of texts, I have felt free to disregard historical chronology.

The conclusion—titled “Poverty Abolitionism”—draws out lessons and presents my most pointed interventions. The chief intervention is the need to adopt an abolitionist stance on poverty. The scrutiny of the cultural fictions of the modern poor leads us to the conundrum of the humanity of the poor, and thence (in ways I detail) to an abolitionist stance, that is, a

stance that regards the existence of poverty in itself, without qualification, unacceptable, in the way in which slavery and torture are. I end the book by drawing out the most important implications of my abolitionist position, which recognizes the cost of living—the cost of providing the necessities for a life of health, security, and opportunity—while refusing to treat the associated price as a matter of pure economic calculation, that is, of quantification in terms of money or other measures of material resources (any more than recourse to slaves or caste hierarchies can be the matter of such calculation). Put simply, while the cost of living cannot be calculated as zero, the price of living can and must be.

In a world that all too often regards poverty as natural and inevitable, abolitionism represents a counterposition. The lesson I draw from my study of the stories we make up about the modern poor—for myself and hopefully for readers—is that poverty is unnatural and anything but inevitable.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Markandaya, *Handful of Rice*, 274.
2. Markandaya, *Handful of Rice*, 280.
3. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 54.
4. Gandhi, *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, 194.
5. Aron et al., *September 2024 Update*, 2–3.
6. See the “World Poverty Clock,” World Data Lab, accessed September 27, 2024, <https://worldpoverty.io/headline>.
7. Francisco Ferreira et al., “The International Poverty Line Has Just Been Raised to \$1.90 a Day, but Global Poverty Is Basically Unchanged. How Is That Even Possible?,” *World Bank Blogs*, October 4, 2015, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/international-poverty-line-has-just-been-raised-190-day-global-poverty-basically-unchanged-how-even>.
8. Parry, “Introduction,” especially 4–5.
9. Aron et al., *September 2024 Update*, 3.
10. Max Roser, “We Need a New Measure for Poverty,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/09/24/opinion/global-poverty-rates.html>. For the Aron et al. World Bank report citation, go to page 3.
11. Aron et al., *September 2024 Update*, 2.
12. *Inequality, Inc*, 8–9.
13. Du Bois, *World and Africa*, 165 (emphasis added).
14. Hulme and Shepherd, *Conceptualizing Chronic Poverty*, 34–35.
15. Durfee and Rosenau, “Playing Catch-Up,” 523.
16. Poovey, *History of the Modern Fact*, xii.
17. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, xvi.
18. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, xvi.
19. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 6.
20. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 5.
21. Ravallion, *Economics of Poverty*, 73.

D

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

22. O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 8.
23. Ravallion, *Economics of Poverty*, 3–6, 13–16.
24. Simmel, “The Poor,” 173.
25. Simmel, “The Poor,” 178.
26. Simmel, “The Poor,” 158.
27. Simmel, “The Stranger,” 144.
28. The basic needs approach, and the debate around it, dates at least to the 1970s. See the influential International Labour Organization document *Employment, Growth and Basic Needs: A OneWorld Problem* (1976).
29. Harry S. Truman, “Inaugural Address” (Speech, Washington DC, January 20, 1949), accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/19/inaugural-address>.
30. Truman, “Inaugural Address.”
31. Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 3–4.
32. Worsley, *Three Worlds*, 18–20.
33. Ravallion, *Economics of Poverty*, 80–82.
34. UN General Assembly, Resolution 41/128A, Declaration on the Right to Development, A/RES/41/128 (December 4, 1986), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-right-development>.
35. Marks, *Right to Development: A Primer*, 29.
36. UN General Assembly, Declaration, in the preamble to the articles.
37. Baran, *Political Economy of Growth*, 18 (italics in original).
38. Baran, *Political Economy of Growth*, xxx.
39. Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 5.
40. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 7.
41. Robert Stam, for example, has shown in *Subversive Pleasures* how Bakhtin’s theories of the novel may be applied to films.
42. Ronen, “Are Fictional Worlds Possible?,” 356.
43. Williams, *Keywords*, 134–35.
44. Foley, *Telling the Truth*, 65–67.
45. Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, 125.
46. The way I use the term, *cultural fiction* shares ground with James Phelan’s notion of *cultural narratives*, which are broadly produced and held “formulas, that underlie specific narratives whose authors we can identify” (*Living to Tell About It*, 8). Unlike Phelan, for me cultural fictions are discrete texts at the center of public and ideological contestation rather than formulae.
47. Jones, *American Hungers*, xiii.
48. Shiller, *Narrative Economics*, xi.
49. The term *viral narrative* or references to narratives going viral appear throughout Shiller’s *Narrative Economics*. See, for example, the section “Why Do Some Narratives Go Viral?”
50. Shiller, *Narrative Economics*, 12.
51. Shiller, *Narrative Economics*, 33–34.
52. Shiller, *Narrative Economics*, 92.
53. Larrain, “Ideology,” 221.

54. San Juan, *Hegemony and Strategies of Transgression*, 91–92.
55. Foley, *Marxist Literary Criticism Today*, 96–97.
56. The entire series is available on YouTube. Ali Mazrui, “The Africans: A Triple Heritage—Program 4: Tools of Exploitation,” posted February 9, 2017, by 3.14159 empty set productions, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNnN63hXLfo> (accessed November 23, 2025).
57. Anderson, *H-Word*, 180.
58. Saurin, “Globalisation,” 660.
59. Ramanujan, “Varieties of Bhakti,” 331.
60. Callahan et al., “Introduction,” 384.
61. In an interview in the documentary *Sembene: The Making of African Cinema*, directed by Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o and Manthia Diawara.
62. Bluestone, *Novels into Film*, 20.
63. Said, *Orientalism*, 22.

1. DESTITUTION

1. Escobar, “Planning.”
2. In the subtitle of Howe et al., *Refocusing Chaplin: A Screen Icon Through Critical Lenses*.
3. Adorno, “Chaplin Times Two,” 59.
4. Chaplin, *Autobiography*, 144.
5. Truffaut, “Chaplin and Bazin,” xxii.
6. Dyer, *Stars*, 161.
7. Korte, “New World Poor,” 138–39; Maland, “Introduction,” xvii.
8. Robinson, *Chaplin*, 113–15.
9. Arnheim, “Chaplin’s Early Films,” 311.
10. Robinson, *Chaplin*, 389.
11. Korte, “New World Poor,” 137.
12. Woll, “Russian Connection,” 226–27.
13. Loftus, “Appeal of Hybrid Documentary Forms in West Africa,” 37–38.
14. Lukacs, *Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, 122–23.
15. Pfaff, “African Cities as Cinematic Texts,” 93, 101–2.
16. Yousaf, “Sembene Ousmane and ‘Rhetorical Film Form,’” 51.
17. Yousaf, “Sembene Ousmane and ‘Rhetorical Film Form,’” 51.
18. Gabriel, “Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films,” 31.
19. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World*, 2.
20. Gann, “Deconstruction and the Tramp,” 109–11.
21. Fofana, “Sembene’s *Borom Sarret*,” 259.
22. Fofana, “Sembene’s *Borom Sarret*,” 264.
23. Emecheta, *Head Above Water*, 60.
24. The first novel Emecheta ever wrote was set in Nigeria but was, infamously, burned by her husband while in manuscript; it was later published as *The Bride Price* (*Head Above Water*, 31–32).
25. Emecheta, *Head Above Water*, 3.
26. Davies, “Motherhood,” 254.