Lennard J. Davis

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To my first-generation students and colleagues through whose eyes I have seen and through whose ears I have heard. To all writers, filmmakers, musicians, and other creative artists who grew up poor, I dedicate this book to you. I know it has been hard to tell your stories, and I am with you.

Contents

Preface

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

This book is about the genre of artistic creativity that takes as its subject poverty and poor people. While this is generally considered to be a paradoxically uplifting and depressing topic, it turns out that the best-known creators of narratives have most often come from the middle and upper classes. In fact, writers who come from poverty or who are poor make up only a minority of those who are known to the general public—and of those, few if any have been canonized. This state of affairs constitutes what I call *representational inequality*, which, like economic inequality, has had a profound effect. In addition, I suggest that those who write from outside the class they depict should be called *exo-writers*, and those who come from poverty *endo-writers*. A mediating concept would be *transclass writers*, those who have changed class positions. In the course of this work, I define these terms more precisely.

To rectify this representational inequality, which of course like other inequalities is part of a structure of social injustice based around the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality, I advocate that given the oppressive history of narratives about the poor (what I refer to as *poornography*), only endo-writers or transclass writers (those who have been poor) can and should create representations of poverty. I argue this because an analysis of these exo-works, focusing on the breeding ground of a poornographic approach in the nineteenth century, shows us a numbingly repetitive series of situations, descriptions, and tropes all focused on the revolting living conditions of the poor, violence, addiction, sexual license, crime, and lack. Meanwhile, a reading of endo-writers reveals a completely different set of issues revolving around friends, family, love, politics, and hunger sometimes but generally a plenitude of life, feelings, relationships, and aesthetic epiphanies. Such a stark contrast highlights the need for reform and backs up my call for representational equality.

There are some reasonable objections to my clarion call. First, one might argue against the notion that exo-writers can't be allies in the fight against poverty and the structural injustices that create impoverishment. To be clear, I am not saying that no exo-writer can write about the poor, but I am arguing, based on reading and viewing many instances of poornography, that exo-writers and artists tend to fall into harmful clichés that produce a demonstrably distorted vision of the lives of poor people, leading to larger political and social consequences. If I make that claim, then a second objection could be that I am hiding behind the specious and impossible-to-prove curtain of authenticity or accuracy. My response is to disclaim any assertion of those two *a*-words and instead substitute one of my own—*accountability*. By *accountability*, I mean that the group being described actually speaks back and approves or disapproves of the fictional or documentary depiction of itself. Thus, instead of appealing to some impossible-to-verify set of details or data, we look for the critical demographic response to such works. Of course, it should be clear that poor people at this point in history do not constitute a clear demographic who can respond forcefully in the cultural realm. Therefore, the response will need to be provided for the time being by transclass spokespeople.

By introducing the idea of exo- and endo-writers, as well as transclass writers, representational inequality, and accountability, I am trying to come up with a way of discussing class politics in the arts that has not yet been fully articulated. I recognize that there are preexisting discussions of this subject, and I am trying to reshape, not eliminate, these. The major counterexplanation to my take on poverty and therefore artistic works about the poor is what might be described as a structural one. From that perspective, poverty is a result of capitalism, which needs the poor for two reasons: first, poverty and poornography act as cautionary reminders to workers that they must accept the unfair labor offered by capital or face the horrors of poverty. Second, the poor are useful as a reserve labor force that can be called on during strikes and high employment to keep wages low. From this structuralist perspective, being poor is a feature of the general abuses of capitalism that needs to be corrected by progressive politics. While certainly true, that perspective shades or ignores the lived experience of poor people. Thus, according to this structural view, they can and should only be depicted as living in a disastrous world and needing remedy, lest we end up justifying the error of poverty.

In the works of many reformer artists, the daily life and lived experience of poor people is less important than their relatively simple, partial,

symbolic, and ideological function. But as I have said, endo-artists and transclass artists focus precisely on their experience of existing as a complete being in a complex world. In noting this disparity, I am not inventing an argument but rather describing a situation. In so doing, I could be, and have been, accused of replacing a genuine political critique of capitalism with a mere assertion of identity politics. In this view, poverty cannot and should not be an identity since who would be mad enough to define their identity solely through being oppressed? We come, this logic goes, not to praise poverty but to bury it. But of course, being poor is an identity that many of us have lived through. It has shaped us. It has given us insights from a subject position that the removed critic of capitalism cannot fathom. We are not symbols or algorithms but sentient beings with experience and history. To ignore that in favor of a purely structural argument is to perform a secondary cultural erasure of poor people over their primary erasure by the economy. Some have called this type of appropriation "elite capture," by which is meant that the elites capture social and political movements to reshape them in their own interests.[1]

What I am advocating, using Veena Das's idea of "dwelling with," is a nuanced and sustained attention to the lives of the poor as represented in art. As opposed to an anthropological observation, a literary reduction and stereotype, or an Olympian viewpoint, Das suggests a kind of habitation, a getting to know over time, an earned intimacy with poverty. It seems ironic that people who have never been poor should place themselves in a position to determine how poverty should be represented. The classic works of poornography written by the likes of Friedrich Engels, Elizabeth Gaskell, Nellie Bly, Charles Dickens, Émile Zola, Jack London, George Orwell, John Steinbeck, and others were based on relatively brief fieldwork and patchy research. The works are therefore incomplete at best and distorted at worst. There has been no dwelling with but rather a casual, glancing observation from a class-privileged position. In fact, these exo-accounts are made up of what I call *ideologemes*, which like Claude Lévi-Strauss's, concept of *mythemes*,[2] are basic units of knowledge or description that float through the sensorium of a culture. These ready-made units combine to form predictable descriptions and stereotypes, in this case, of poor people.

I would like to thank the many students in my courses on representing poverty who helped me think through the issues I have accumulated in this book. Also, thanks to the members of the Endo/Exo Writers Project, who collectively produced the website of the same name—these are the

professors Alex Dunst and Hannah Huber, as well as team members Carla Barger, Katie Brandt, Travis Mandell, and Justin Allen.

I owe a great debt of thanks to Ken Wissoker of Duke University Press, whose persistence allowed this book to see the light of day. Ken originally signed me on with a very different book, which, to his appropriate exasperation, I never produced. But after many lunches and a few awkward moments, I managed to find a topic agreeable to us both and, more amazingly, managed to write this book. Thanks to Gerald Graff, who read the entire manuscript and asked me repeatedly, "What's your argument?!" Also, thanks to Alex Dunst and Joseph Entin, who both gave me some important reactions to think about. Thanks to Justin Torres and Maggie Anderson for letting me interview them. I want to thank those people who heard me present some material from the book or vetted parts of the manuscript and provided feedback. These include Ato Quayson, Bruce Robbins, Sally Stein, Dierdre Lynch, Ewa Luczak, Dominika Ferens, Nicole Anderson, David Bolt, William Maxell, Walter Benn Michaels, and many more whose names I may have forgotten or never knew.

Introduction
Scenes from a Life and from Lives

I grew up poor, as did my father and his father.

My grandfather, Shlomo (Solomon) Melandovitz, immigrated to London around 1880 from Ariogola, a small town filled with two-room green wooden shacks near Kaunas, Lithuania (which the Jews called Kovno). It was said that he had heard about an upcoming attempt to recruit Jewish young men into the tsar's army, so he hid in a rain barrel overnight and took off in the morning. Arriving in England, he changed his family name to Davis, making a near homophone with the ending of his former name. He loved fish and fishing, and so it was logical that he sold fish from a cart in the Whitechapel slums as Jack the Ripper was plying his trade. He had no education to speak of. He could barely write. His wife, Bella Esther Moskovich, who also came from Lithuania, hawked fabrics door to door. In his spare time, Solomon fought in the boxing ring in the days before padded gloves. He killed a man in a match and fled to New York, never returning and never seeing his wife again. Or so the story goes. In New York he did sweated work in the garment industry. Eventually, he went to Los Angeles, where he finished his life as a barker at Sea World encouraging other people to love fish as much as he did.

My father, Moishe (aka Morris), was born in Whitechapel in 1898. He was discovered to be deaf before he began to speak. Living with his father, mother, and three siblings in a one-room tenement apartment, he numbered among the throngs of poor Jewish, Irish, and South Asian immigrants who made up the district. He was a kind of wild child without much language until he was sent to the London Asylum for the Jewish Deaf and Dumb, where he learned to read, write, and draw and unofficially picked up sign language, since the school was an oralist one. The asylum may have saved his life, as he received proper nutrition and vaccinations.

He could have been a talented artist, but because of his social class and deafness, he had only two trade choices—carpenter or tailor. He chose the former, tried it out, didn't like it, and then opted for the latter. He also took up sports. Initially, it was boxing, like his father, but he settled on race-walking and became a very accomplished athlete. He followed his father to New York, where he also worked in a sweatshop and did so for his entire life. No fish for him.

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The parents of my mother, Eva, immigrated to Liverpool from a small town in Poland called Nowogrud, not too far from Lomza. They were also poor. My grandfather, Eli Weintrobe (his family name had been Chmielewski, but his father also changed it), was a carpenter. His wife raised their five children and sold household goods. My mother became deaf at seven when she contracted spinal meningitis. Like my father, she also attended the London asylum, where she learned to be a seamstress; she spent her life altering women's clothing. Morris and Eva met in England but were married in New York City.[1] They spent their lives together in the Bronx in a one-bedroom apartment, and both were seasonally employed.

Although I was part of three generations (most probably many more) of poverty, I never heard anyone in my family lament this state of affairs. If anything, I got a positive message about working hard and valuing one's life and place in the world. In my own life, and in the memoirs I have written about it, you won't find the kind of descriptions that are rife in the history of writing about the poor by those who are not poor. Starting with Friedrich Engels and working up to the present, in literature, film, and art, the poor are too often depicted as living abject, violent lives in filthy, degrading conditions. They themselves are seen as unintelligent, unkempt beings who live in thriftlessness, intoxication, and sexual license. Stunted, underfed (or now obese), and feeble-minded, they are a blot on humanity's view of itself.

My father and mother were none of the above. They did not drink or smoke. Our 550-square-foot apartment was clean and tidy. My father's piecework salary in the 1950s when he was employed was $38 a week. When he was laid off, his unemployment insurance was much less. Yet, like many people who grew up poor, he was abstemious with his money. His favorite phrase was "Willful waste makes woeful want." He didn't waste, and we were not woefully wanting. We had food on the table, albeit of poor quality and limited variety, as well as being badly cooked. All vegetables came

out of a can, as did much of the fruit. Being thrifty for my father meant rarely doing anything or going anywhere. We didn't eat out. We didn't go on family trips. Having no car, we only took public transportation. Life was lived within a very small, simple compass, and we lived uncomplaining within those boundaries. Of course, not all poor people live tolerable lives, and we were among the fortunate poor, if you want to call us that.

Our lives contrasted vividly with the views of poor people that were and are written mainly by middle- and upper-class people. These canonical works by writers like Charles Dickens, Jack London, George Orwell, Émile Zola, and others are often the only remaining traces of those who for the most part, at least in the past, could rarely if ever represent themselves. As with all prejudicial views of people, the accepted and wanted perspectives (wanted by those who are not poor) are often a series of clichés that satisfy a public deprived of intimate direct knowledge. As with genres like the western, the viewers of the product know what to expect. In the western we expect to see one main unpaved street with the saloon that doubles as a bawdy house, the general store, the bank, the sheriff's office, the good guy, the bad guys, and the rest of the predictable characters. So it is with the poor. We expect violence, drugs, alcohol, prostitution, sexuality, crime, filth, and the rest of the limited possibilities envisioned by the creative nonobserver. Poor dwellings in movies always look a certain way—cracked, peeling walls with dirty windows and a soundtrack revealing crying babies and spatting couples. Apparently, richer people have neither fights nor babies that cry. I want to make clear that in general this kind of writing about the poor isn't about reproducing reality. Rather, it is genre writing first and foremost—what I am calling *poornography*.[2] Revising *poverty porn*, my term focuses more on writing rather than exclusively visual and audio media but shares a general definition of depicting poor people for various kinds of gain—financial, cultural, and otherwise. Just as you would not expect to learn about the actual West from the oater, it would be a deep mistake to think that you can learn very much about the lived experience of the poor from this kind of writing.

Of course, you could make the counterargument that poverty demands to be written about and that literature about the poor is an important part of the literary tradition. Further, it could be said that we can learn about the poor and ameliorate the conditions of poverty through awakening a knowledge and understanding of the plight of the poor. Gavin Jones writes, "Literature reveals how poverty is established, defined, and understood in discourse, as a psychological and cultural problem that

depends fundamentally on the language used to describe it. This is why creative writers have responded so productively to poverty."[3] While Jones is by no means ratifying the genre of poornography, he is allowing for a complex polemic between the emotional and psychological side of poverty, to which many writers are drawn, and the material realities of poverty, which may or may not be articulated in any given literary work. The argument for the benefits of middle-class writers laying out the dialectics of poverty for middle-class readers can indeed be made but is not without serious problems.

It matters how the poor are represented—not simply because of notions of accuracy and fairness, but because when we say *the poor*, we have, at various times, been talking about a large plurality of humans on earth. Until the 1950s about half the people in the world lived in "extreme poverty" (defined now as living on less than $2 a day). By the 1980s 44 percent of the world lived in that kind of destitution. Even today, half of the world's population lives on less than $5.50 per day.[4] And these statistics do not include the COVID pandemic's devastating effects. In 2021 the average incomes of people in the bottom 40 percent of the global income distribution were 6.7 percent lower than prepandemic.[5] Further, global poverty increased even more as a result of the war in Ukraine in 2022 than as a result of COVID.[6]

We can assume that when Dickens wrote of poverty or Zola described starvation and want, they were writing about the vast sweep of humanity for a very small slice of that humanity that was literate and lived in relative comfort.[7] That vast sweep of impoverished humanity in the century before Dickens wrote made up about 70 percent of the population of London if you include those who were on poor relief (about 10 percent) and those who experienced significant poverty at some point during their lives (60 percent).[8]

One of the striking consequences of how the poor are represented is the false dichotomy inaccurate representation creates between haves and have-nots. Like disability, poverty presents us in reality with a malleable and shifting category. Able-bodied people like to think that there is a firewall between being disabled and not being disabled. This mind-forged barrier seemingly reassures the "normal" that they will not become disabled. Likewise, if we think of the poor as a distinct, monolithic group, those with some financial security can hold on to a seemingly firm (but actually quite shaky) belief that there is a protective barrier between financial security and insecurity. We are reassured that in general the trend is moving away

from a world of mainly poor people to a largely middle-class one. But the reality is quite different. For example, according to one study of people "between the ages of 20 and 75, nearly 60 percent of Americans will experience at least one year below the official poverty line, while three quarters of Americans will encounter poverty or near poverty."[9] When novelists and filmmakers present us with the world of the poor, they contribute to this sense of the poor as separate and distinct from the majority of citizens. But when we look at the statistics, we see that the poorest people in the US economy are single recent mothers. This is not exactly a distinct socioeconomic group.[10] Rather, it is a portion of the population that any female may join.

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Poornography according to my definition encompasses narratives about the poor by and for people who are not poor. This genre of storytelling is a kind of engine for generating conscious and unconscious bias against the poor. And the resonance with *pornography* is not accidental. This writing about and visual representation of the poor has historically had an almost salacious slant. As one historian wrote, such work "appealed to prurience behind a mask of respectability."[11] Linked to this desire is a kind of scopophilia that is focused on and obsessed with paintings, engravings, and photographic images of the poor. In art history, depictions of the poor start with painters like Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Jacques Callot, and, from the second half of the seventeenth century into the eighteenth century, northern Italian painters like Monsù Bernardo and Giacomo Ceruti, whose works were popular among wealthy patrons who collected this genre art.[12] The latter's work, while depicting the poor with compassion, dignity, and humanity, was nevertheless commissioned by the rich to "decorate their luxurious residences."[13] We recognize these impulses as parallel to an activity like slumming, which was considered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries an appropriate entertainment for wealthy people, who organized trips to see how the more-than-other-half lived. Barring actually going to the slums, one could visit art exhibits that dramatized poverty. An 1884 Juvenile Fine Art Exhibition at Portland Hall in London's posh Regent Street featured toys, games, and a "Visit of 'Horrible London' to the West End. Illustrating 'How the Poor Live.'" What viewers could see were "children and other of the East-end of London engaged in their regular occupation" of sweated work.[14] Magic lantern shows entitled "How the Poor Live" were shown in many locations around the United Kingdom.

In addition to these activities, slumming had its literary correlate. Books were written about poor people and the slums for wealthier readers. For example, in 1903 George Sims edited and lavishly illustrated a book called *Living London: Its Work and Its Play, Its Humor and Its Pathos, Its Sights and Its Scenes*, which included articles about the slums. The book cost a pricey twelve shillings in cloth and sixteen shillings in half-leather—clearly not for any but middle-class and upper-class readers.[15] Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold's *London: A Pilgrimage* had Doré's ornate illustrations of slums and doss-houses accompanied by Jerrold's text. Luxuriously bound with tissues protecting the engravings, the book was an expensive collector's item advertised as a "handsome Christmas present . . . and an elegant addition to the drawing-room table."[16] The notion of an expensive book for Christmas depicting the poor was not a one-off whim of a publisher. John Thomson and Adolphe Smith's *Street Life in London* was also sold as a Christmas book and reviewed in "gift and Christmas books sections of London newspapers."[17] And then of course there was the actual prurience of middle-class men engaging in sexual activity with lower-class women for pay. In the current moment, one still finds poverty tourism or "poorism," in which middle- and upper-class travelers visit the favelas of Rio de Janeiro or the slums of Delhi or Mumbai.[18] While the impulse now might be linked to some notion of helping the benighted denizens, the scopophilic pleasures linked to repulsion and disgust might equally be drivers of this lucrative activity.[19] Evangelical groups in California have gone so far as to construct an Epcot Center of poverty. Poverty Encounter is an immersive environment in which people can pay to experience what it is like to be poor, take a "ride" to a poor country, and then pack food and supplies for poor people while bringing the word of Jesus Christ to them at the same time.[20]

One of the main points of this book is that the depictions of the poor that we have are distorted at best and prurient, in the sense I am talking about, at worst. In other words, while many writers present a world they claim to be an objective description and copy of the squalor of the poor, it would be a mistake to think that no selection of details came into play. While we discuss the function of this genre throughout the book, it might make sense to provide at least one rationale for this type of depiction. Eric Schocket has noted of certain writings about the poor, "With remarkable unanimity, they tell an alternative tale of a middle-class 'lack' fulfilled through lower-class 'experience,' bourgeois ennui cured by way of proletarian pain."[21] Keith Gandal adds that writings about the slum "offer a tonic

for a tired middle-class society."[22] Erotic desire for the poor, whether expressed through prurience or disgust, drives the engine of poornography. And in many cases the poor provide comic relief. Author Mary Elizabeth Braddon mocks a theater writer whose play includes "fifteen murders and four low-comedy servants."[23]

In some sense, the whole concept behind writing about the poor was to give middle-class people a feel for "the real." Paula Rabinowitz, discussing documentary photography, adds tellingly that "images of poverty are a staple of liberal society's guilt."[24] And Lionel Trilling, who grew up in the Bronx near me, wrote that such works evoke "a pity which wonderfully served the needs of the pitier."[25] An entire genre of writing—realism—was characterized by its focus on poverty. While a motivational use of cultural objects and subjects may seem appealing, it is ultimately problematic. This notion of "real experience" is recorded by Howard Marshall, who, in writing about the East End slums, noted that when a poor person he knew went to the wealthy West End "to see what lay behind all the glitter and noise . . . he said, 'Once was enough—there's nothing in it—it isn't real.'" Marshall adds, "And that's the point: the people of the slum are real. They have to be real, and when you talk to them . . . you become conscious of your own artificiality."[26] Whether to make the middle class satisfied with their lives in comparison to the squalor of the poor or to make the middle class feel that their lives are superficial compared to the real of poverty, the goal of poornography is certainly not to provide an accurate view of the lives of the poor. Charles Booth, the nineteenth-century author of *Life and Labour of the People of London*, noted that in most writing about the East End of London, the actual place "lay hidden behind a curtain upon which were painted terrible pictures: Starving children, suffering women, overworked men, horrors of drunkenness and vice; monsters and demons of humanity; giants of disease and despair." He goes on to wonder, "Do these pictures truly represent what lay behind?"[27] While it may be ultimately impossible to determine the reality behind the curtain of poornography, it is possible to trace the fantasies of this genre of writing.

In a significant sense, this work is inspired by Edward Said's foundational book *Orientalism*, which presented us with the idea that the West had created a series of powerful and influential imaginings of the East and in so doing had influenced knowledge, policy, politics, and social and cultural life in relation to that imagined world. Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities fits in with such an analysis as well. In regard to the poor, then, we have a coordinated imagining of the poor by an imagined

community of those who are not poor. The imagined communities are both the poor, so overrepresented in literature, the arts, and culture in general, and the unpoor, equally imagined since this group is the binary opposite to the poor.

To illustrate how these two imagined worlds work, let me introduce you to Dorothy Tennant, who later in life married the famous explorer Henry Morton Stanley and became Lady Stanley. She was a Victorian painter whose book *London Street Arabs* became popular enough that its illustrations were used in advertisements for soap. The illustrations for her book are of lovely street children at play. One picture shows a poor boy giving a rich boy his hoop and stick for the game of hoop rolling (figure I.1). The rich boy is shown, uncharacteristically, holding out his hand as if begging.

One's initial reaction to her book is to think that Tennant is romanticizing the gritty world she simply does not want to see. Obviously, soap manufacturers liked the idea that dirty children could be cleaned up through art. Many critics prefer, if you like, the grim realities of Jacob Riis's photographs of the Lower East Side in New York City, which seem to stare poverty in its cruel and dirty face (figure I.2).

But let's consider what Tennant has to say: "Most of the pictures I had seen of ragged life appeared to me false and made up. They were all so deplorably piteous—pale, whining children with sunken eyes, holding up bunches of violets to heedless passers-by; dying match-girls, sorrowful watercress girls, emaciated mothers clasping weeping babies. How was it, I asked myself, that the other side is so seldom represented?"[28] We would be well within our rights to consider Tennant an abysmally deluded upper-class optimist who refused to consider the legitimate plight of the poor. Yet as she points out, she was born in London and was "fond of walking through its streets, parks, and squares."[29] She knows these locations and wonders, Where are "the merry, reckless, happy-go-lucky urchin; the tomboy girl; the plump, untidy mother dancing and tossing her ragged baby [and] who had given this side of London life"?[30] Again, we might protest that she is longing for a romantic London that doesn't exist and in so doing is covering over the hidden and not-so-hidden injuries of class exploitation.

We might also say that she is not the only one who is covering up but also the writers, photographers, painters, and poets who deliberately choose the gritty side because it makes more sense to them and their vision—because these fit into the genre that they and their readers already know. When we add to this the detail that Jacob Riis's harder-seeming

I.1
Untitled photo. Dorothy Tennant [Mrs. H. M. Stanley]. *London Street Arabs* (London: Cassell, 1890).

I.2 Photograph. *Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters* [areaway, Mulberry Street]. Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*. New York: Scribner's, 1890.

photographs were not impromptu street photography at all but were often prearranged tableaux staged for effect, we see that the illusion of presenting the gritty reality can often be just that.[31] Riis himself detailed his agenda, which was "showing . . . misery and vice."[32] He "knowingly manipulated his photographic images by exaggerating the effects of the flash, arranging the dirt and chaos of the domestic interiors, and using 'jagged-edge' framing to convey a sense of reporting."[33] Riis's own newspaper writing shows us that he was staging an event. Take, for example, the following description in one of his articles: "We stand upon the domain of the tenement. . . . Suppose we look into one. . . . Be a little careful, please! The hall is dark and you might stumble over the children pitching pennies there. . . . You can feel your way, if you cannot see it."[34] The illustrations for Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* were touted as being true to life because they were drawn from actual photographs of the people involved. However, those photographs were taken in a studio to which the "real" poor people were transported. Then the backgrounds and settings were invented by the artists who did the illustrations.[35] Realism, which was the larger genre of this kind of representation was never about the actual real but rather about the effect of the real. Realism is a technique that allows pigment (or words) to create the illusion of a three-dimensional world. Realism, according to its founding ideology, was meant to convey the sensorium of the seamy side of life. But accuracy and authenticity were never its aims.

As we think about Tennant's sunny view of the beauty of street children, we might consider the words of Norman Douglass, who grew up in the slums of London at the beginning of the twentieth century. While the poornographers often focus on the negative aspects of filth in slum streets, Douglass recalls one of his favorite childhood pleasures—mud. That mud is what many nineteenth-century writers never fail to mention when they talk about the degraded living conditions of the poor. But Douglass puts the muck in a more positive light. "Of mud you make pies, and bridges, and sticking brick (against a wall), and mud-carts (played with a tin can) and wells, and tunnels, and flowerpots, and castles—in fact Anything you please. There's nothing like mud, when all is said and done, and it's a perfect shame there isn't more mud about, nowadays; or sand, at least. You should see them go for it, when the streets are up."[36] These are the ludic pleasures of mud, which we might want to recall in London was composed of a mixture of what was found on the streets—horse manure and urine, gravel, coal, earth, and other organic materials. This filth might have been execrated by upper-class writers, but here it turns out to be a fundamental

building block of childhood fantasies. Douglass gives us the perfect taking-off point for seeing poverty writing as a genre very distantly related to the constitutive and lived experience of poor people.

Or we could look at Michael Gold's paean to a dirt lot on the Lower East Side of New York: "Shabby old ground, ripped like a battlefield by workers' picks and shovels, little garbage dump lying forgotten in the midst of tall tenements, O home of all the twisted junk, rusty baby carriages, lumber, bottles, boxes, moldy pants and dead cats of the neighborhood—everyone spat and held the nostrils when passing you. But in my mind you still blaze in a halo of childish romance. No place will ever seem as wonderful again."[37] That Gold, author of *Jews without Money*, should remember this abandoned lot with dead cats and moldy pants in terms reminiscent of Marcel Proust's madeleine or Walt Whitman's catalogs is telling. From within a certain sensibility the foul can seem fabulous, and yet the same sight would turn the stomach of a middle-class writer. Context is all.

Or we should pay attention to Gold's assessment of his Jewish immigrant mother: "How can I ever forget this dark little woman with bright eyes, who hobbled about all day in bare feet, cursing in Elizabethan Yiddish, using the forbidden words 'ladies' do not use, smacking us, beating us, fighting with her neighbors, helping her neighbors, busy from morn to midnight in the tenement struggle for life."[38] These are not the qualities one would expect a middle-class writer to praise in a maternal figure. An entirely different aesthetic is available to Gold than to Jane Austen or Virginia Woolf. Likewise, Justin Torres described his main character's working-class mother as "this confused goose of a woman, this stumbler, this gusher, with her backaches and headaches and her tired, tired ways, this uprooted Brooklyn creature, this tough talker, always with tears when she told us she loved us, her mixed up love, her needy love, her warmth."[39]

Another viewpoint is that of Agnes Smedley, who grew up poor in rural Missouri. Unlike the middle-class writer, she takes great pleasure in what others might see as the defects of her ramshackle home. "You could stand in the room and look straight up to the roof where there were holes that let the sky in. That I liked. Outside the house the earth was packed hard, as if baked, and no grass, trees or flowers grew there. That also I liked, for it was different."[40] A protective roof, clean plaster walls, a lawn, and decorative flowers would have been noted by middle-class writers as necessities that were painfully absent, but to the eyes of the small child, these are exciting details in an otherwise unremarkable environment.

Richard Wright in his memoir *Black Boy* has a similar joy in remembering a sewage ditch that ran in front of his grandmother's Natchez, Mississippi, home. "The greatest fun came from wading in the sewage ditch where we found old bottles, tin cans that held tiny crawfish, rusty spoons, bits of metal, old toothbrushes, dead cats and dogs, and occasional pennies." As also described by other writers, the effluvia of a wealthier society drift down into the lives of children who relish the panoply of detritus and use bricoleur skills to re-create them into playthings. "We made wooden boats out of cigar boxes, devised wooden paddles to which we twisted pieces of rubber and sent the cigar-box boats sailing down the ditch under their own power."[41] Saidiya Hartman cautions us to remember the "terrible beauty" of the African American slum. "The outsiders and uplifters fail to capture it, to get it right. All they see is a typical Negro alley. . . . They fail to discern the beauty and they see only the disorder, missing all the ways black folks create life and make bare need into an arena of elaboration."[42]

And when Israel Zangwill wrote one of the few books about Jews in London's East End (which was approximately 50 percent Jewish at the end of the nineteenth century), he noted, "This London Ghetto of ours is a region where, amid uncleanness and squalor, the rose of romance blows yet a little longer in the raw air of English reality; a world which hides beneath its stony and unlovely surface an inner world of dreams, fantastic and poetic as the mirage of the Orient."[43]

Add to the litany of praise for one's impoverished childhood poorscape Piri Thomas's description of the pleasures of Spanish Harlem gutters where he played with marbles: "We stretched to the limit skinny fingers with dirty gutter water caked between them, completely oblivious to the islands of dog filth, people filth, and street filth that lined the gutter."[44]

Even I could tell you about the abandoned lot across the street from my apartment house in the Bronx. It took up a quarter of the block and was a weedy, junk-strewn plot of land that rose up from the street like a sleeping giant. To us it was a mountain to sled down in the winter, and in the summer it was overgrown with plants we could not identify. We would dig in the soil to find ants and worms. The former I would collect and bring into my apartment, where I'd feed the Venus fly traps that I had gotten from a mail-order catalog. Often people in the neighborhood would dump their old linoleum flooring and other detritus there. We loved to make impromptu Frisbees from the broken linoleum and send them flying with the flick of a wrist. In the winter we would gather all the discarded Christmas trees and burn them in a triumphant bonfire. "The lot," as we

called it, served as many functions as there were children to imagine its uses. It never got old.

The true poornographer does not want to admit there are pleasures in the grittiness of poverty; rather, they need the ideological perspective of the middle-class readers to show either the degradation or the triumph of the human spirit. Poverty is purely a subject for reform, and therefore poornographers cannot report on ludic pleasures. For them and their readers, these pleasures, paradoxically, can only be obtained through reading about poverty. But if you have grown up poor, you know your life was not an unmitigated nightmare designed by a Marxist to illustrate the abuses of capitalism. Like any other subject position, it has its pleasures and pains. Often it is the sense memory, as with any other class existence, that remains for the writer. Peter Hitchcock notes that "sense perception [is] an aesthetic category of working-class representation."[45]

Another way of thinking about this litany of the pleasures of the poorscape is proposed to us by Veena Das, taking off from Elizabeth Povinelli who is interested in understanding suffering that is "ordinary, chronic and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden and sublime." In paying attention to the mundane, Das wants us to "dwell" with these details. "I want my reader to enter that doorway [of the poor household] and not turn away after a first impression."[46] The problem with poornography, especially that written by those I am calling *exo-writers*, is that it proposes as a norm a quick look through the door, catastrophizes that vision, and then allows readers to turn the page and proceed. Exo-writers are writing about a world they live outside of, while *endo-writers* write from within. Exo-writers want us to observe and react; endo-writers want us to dwell.[47]

I am suggesting that instead of the poornographic view, which is exterior and draws preformed conclusions, we consider this idea of dwelling as a form of living with what Clifford Geertz has called "local knowledge." Geertz, as an anthropologist critiquing an earlier, more imperialistic view of the exo-ethnologist, suggests explaining social phenomena "by placing them in local frames of awareness . . . and then draw[ing] from those accounts . . . some conclusions about expression, power, identity, or justice."[48] The advantage of dwelling with local knowledges is that this action "welds the processes of self-knowledge, self-perception, self-understanding to those of other-knowledge, other-perception, other-understanding." Further, it sorts "out who we are and sort[s] out whom we are among. And as such it can free us from misleading representations of our own way of rendering matters."[49] While literature, art, and film are not exactly the same thing as a

study of culture and people, works about the poor have an anthropological aura about them as they introduce one group of people to another. And although we are talking about imaginative works rather than factual studies, the reality is that such works of the imagination are never passed off as simply dreams or reveries. When poor people appear in literary works, they very often are there to illustrate what poverty looks and feels like. So there is a validity to insisting that we dwell with mud, for example, or my garbage-strewn lot and accept it as something a local needs to explain to an exo-novelist rather than the other way around.

I initially decided in writing this book to focus on the East End of London around 1900. I did so because I wanted to better understand my father, who was born there in 1898, several years after the last Jack the Ripper murder. As I began to do my research, I found the usual descriptions of the desperation and degradation of the people living in the East End. Was that the abject world my father lived in? If so, was it strange that he had never described his life to me in those terms? He did say that they were very poor. He described the tiny flat he lived in and noted that he had to sleep on two chairs pushed together. He told me about how the children in his family didn't eat very well, and on Friday night, when his mother made the Sabbath meal, she gave them each a drop of schnapps from a thimble that she wore around her neck so they could keep this richer repast down in their starving stomachs. A poor person's aperitif or *digestivo*. He told me how they had to insert coins in a gas meter to make the gas flow so they could have light for a few minutes until the next coin was required. Yes, this isn't living comfortably, but the absence of self-pity or anger made me wonder how accurate the accounts of others were. And in the midst of all this, my father found the time and energy to be an artist when he was just a young teenager, using pen, ink, and watercolors to create a very different world.

It is so interesting to me that he chose to illustrate both the lives of ultrarich white people hunting (figure I.3) and the lives of poor, Black, enslaved people on the eve of emancipation (figure I.4). As a poor, Deaf kid, he must have recognized the vast gap between himself and these upper-class men, on the one hand, and possibly felt some imagined solidarity with the abused but hopeful enslaved people on the other. One can only imagine that a Victorian or Edwardian novelist would hesitate a long time before deciding to assign artistic status to a poor, Deaf Jewish child. More likely, the novelist would have had the disabled character draw meaningless circles, as Joseph Conrad did with Stevie in *The Secret Agent*.

I.3 Morris Davis, *They Leave Danger Behind* (May 12, 1912). Pen and ink drawing from the author's family archive.

I.4 Pen and ink drawing *Slaves on the Eve of Freedom* (July, 14, 1912) by Morris Davis. Davis family archive.

Given that, as Pierre Bourdieu notes, the conditions of the poor and working class are such that they reproduce themselves, my parents were the successful reproduction of their parents' class as it echoed back down the ancestral line. My brother and I were the first in our family to leave our class, to nonreproduce, to be transclass.[50]

In trying to find out about the lives of the poor at the time, I immediately hit the archivist's problem that so many of the descriptions of the poor were written by the middle and upper classes. When one considers the works of novelists, clergymen, social reformers, police, early sociologists, and the like, what is apparent is the dearth of first-person accounts. Much harder to find were accounts by poor people of color, of non-Christian religions, and of various nondominant nationalities. In doing the research for this book, I have managed to find some first-person accounts that are not derived from criminal records or do-gooder interviewers—but these first-person works are few. I have come to think of this magic act of revealing the poor by hiding their real voices, artistic work, and narratives as what I call *representational inequality*. With economic inequality, the capital of society is concentrated in the hands of a few, and with representational inequality, the cultural capital required to become a writer whose work can use the technology of print and the distribution machinery of publishing to reach the consciousness of millions is limited to the economically privileged. The rank and file of poor people have been the victims, if you like, of this very representational inequality.[51]

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Especially difficult to find were the voices of ordinary female sex workers; impossible to find were writings by sex workers of color, whose trade constituted a viable and varied portion of the lives of the poor. There is almost nothing published by a female sex worker about the trade until the 1960s. As one can imagine, inauthentic ventriloquizing of those voices was the work of middle- and upper-class white men. Likely this paradigm should be our model in talking about poornography. A class of poor people become interesting for a variety of reasons centered on the erotic or the disgusting and in a variety of times to novelists, artists, poets, librettists, filmmakers, and others involved in creating narratives and aesthetic objects. For hundreds of years the constitutive lives of female sex workers, then, were filtered through the eyes of the very people who either had caused women to be underpaid in the first place or actually paid them to have sex. As with so many other narrative creations, the bosses describe the workers,

the enslavers describe the enslaved, the men write the women, the nationals describe the immigrants, white people depict Black and brown people, the colonialist tells us about the indigenous, hetero writers describe LGBTQ+ people, or the victor triumphantly paints the portrait of the defeated.

And in the case of female sex workers, as with poor people in general, we see the kind of exploitative prurience I am describing that drives the creators and the consumers of the creation. *Pornography* derives etymologically from the Latin for "prostitute" combined with the word for "writing." Through writing and art, the prostitute was made into an aesthetic object on the one hand and a cautionary warning about female vulnerability, seductiveness, disease, and immorality on the other hand. The object of fascination is also the object reviled. This paradigm applies to the sex worker as well as the factory worker. Readers and writers are both inured to the oppressed beings in real life and at the same time curious about and even titillated by the representations of them in art and culture. Poornography is the guidebook for the faint of heart who want to know the territory but are afraid to ask the inhabitant.

This book takes a deeper dive into these issues. In chapter 1, I look at the complexities of writing about the poor in a world whose experts are largely not drawn from that group. In chapter 2, I examine the whole issue of representation as it applies to the poor. I argue that representational inequality is a manifestation of the unequal distribution of capital—cultural or otherwise. I also look into the historical circumstances surrounding the concept of representation in the eighteenth century with the rise of the novel and of representative democracy. I investigate how various authors' visions become popular and necessary and how these visions relate to the way they depict various experiences that readers have come to expect from genre writing. Authors become representors elected by readers to present visions of the poor that coincide with reader expectations, which were, of course, shaped by those authors and the developing genre requirements.

Chapter 3 explores the idea of being transclass, based on the theoretical work of Chantal Jaquet and Pierre Bourdieu. I contend that writers who come from poverty, those I am calling *endo-writers*, are essentially the only ones who have the platform and credentials to write about the poor. Such an assumption requires an understanding of what goes into the nature of being a transclass person who was born poor but moves (somewhat) out of the class into which they were born. In addition, the chapter examines the role of allies, many of whom fall into the category of undercover reporters like Nellie Bly, Jack London, Émile Zola, George Gissing, and George

Orwell, among others. Friedrich Engels lived with poor people in Manchester and had a lifelong relationship with a working-class woman and then with her sister. One of the questions posed is, Can a non-transclass ally bridge the gap between endo- and exo-writers? Another category of transclass writer comprises those who come from the middle class but lose their money and become poor. Foremost among these writers is George Gissing, whose novels deal with poverty—but with a waning transclass perspective of pessimism and revulsion.

Chapter 4 looks at the biocultural underpinnings of the way poor bodies are conceptualized, described, and inscribed into a narrative structure. Looking at the intersection of science, technology, medicine, and culture, I go through a series of false constructions of the poor body. Eugenics provided a playbook for assumptions about poor people and their inherited traits. In addition, the ascription of a tendency toward drunkenness was a part of the biocultural assumptions about the poor. Likewise, a biological prejudice against shortness, seen as an attribute of a degenerate and weakened inherited stock, is explored in the chapter. The constant refrain of filth and personal hygiene is one of the biggest myths projected onto the poor. I look at what living conditions were like and how public health standards were out of alignment with the way most people lived. Likewise, living with animals like pigs and chickens was seen as an aspect of filthy living, although such animals were common and even necessary for the life of the urban poor. Disease joins the assemblage of poor living, although the poor have no special claim to be ill, to be disease carriers, or the like. And of course crime, often seen as the purview of the poor, is no more likely to be a characteristic of poverty than it is a feature of middle-class life. The key in this, as in other areas, is the kind of crime and the mechanisms of incarceration and penalty. Likewise, the areas of disability, laziness, and sexuality are specially carved out as qualities of the poor body, when in fact they are well distributed over the various classes.

Chapter 5 deals with the complex problem of representing female sex workers. As one of the viable, and even preferable, ways of making a living for very poor women, sex work is also an area in which the protagonists rarely get to tell their story. The nineteenth century abounds with narratives about fallen women that moralize their fate but rarely pay attention to the economic conditions surrounding them. The sharp line between poor women in general and prostitutes in particular was largely illusionary. Rather, there was a shifting border between poor women who married for security, those who exchanged sex for security, those who ex-

changed money for goods and services, and those who exchanged sex for money. In eighteenth-century Philadelphia, sex commerce was "part of a continuum of illicit sex, and it was not always easy to distinguish which encounters crossed its fluid boundaries," notes Clare Lyons. She adds that "prostitution operated in many of the same social spaces as other forms of nonmarital sex."[52] Indeed, it is possible to argue that with the advent of factory work and wage labor, women who refused to do such work and saw prostitution as a better alternative were in fact taking a stand against the system. The chapter contrasts the novelistic accounts almost universally written by men with a narrative *Madeleine*, by an anonymous writer in 1919 who wrote what is probably the first modern novel/memoir by a female sex worker.

Chapter 6 examines the moment of encounter between the middle-class observer and the poor subject. This meeting carries a lot of social and cultural baggage, but often it is portrayed as a simple brush between two equals. That chapter focuses on the iconic photograph *Migrant Mother*, by Dorothea Lange. The dynamics in the relationship between the poor woman and the female photographer are examined as exemplary of the uneven encounter between exo-observer and endo-subject. But in addition to the moment of encounter, the chapter considers how the object can talk back. As it turns out, the woman photographed had an opportunity to respond later in life. In addition, the poet Maggie Anderson responds to Walker Evans's photographs of her Appalachian hometown. The power dynamic can transform when the object talks back. And this is true for the encounter between James Agee and the white southern sharecroppers he wrote about in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.[53]

The final chapter asks whether it is possible to write about the poor and which strategies have worked. In it I bring forth what I call a "manifesto" that advocates some directions such writing might take and provokes some further discussion on the possibility and impossibility of this task.

Notes

PREFACE

1. Táíwò, *Elite Capture*, 14–17.
2. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 211.

INTRODUCTION

1. Their letters and stories are published in a book I edited called *Shall I Say a Kiss?*
2. H. L. Mencken, in an attack on proletarian literature that contains an anti-Semitic sideswipe, describes such work as "pornography of the lowly." Mencken, "Illuminators of the Abyss," 156.
3. Jones, *American Hungers*, 4.
4. Tompkins, "Extreme Poverty."
5. Sanchez-Paramo et al., "COVID-19 Leaves a Legacy."
6. Lynch, "Casualties from War."
7. Kristof, "Why 2018."
8. T. Hitchcock and Shoemaker, *London Lives*, 5.
9. Confronting Poverty, "Poverty Facts and Myths."
10. Sauter, "Faces of Poverty."
11. Bremner, *From the Depths*, 68.
12. Frangi and Morandotti, "Giacomo Ceruti," 7.
13. Bayer, *Painters of Reality*, 219.
14. Advertisement, *Morning Post*, December 15, 1883, quoted in Jakobs, *Pictures of Poverty*, 132.
15. Jakobs, *Pictures of Poverty*, 45.
16. Jakobs, *Pictures of Poverty*, 56.
17. Jakobs, *Pictures of Poverty*, 63.
18. Bednarz, "Slum Tourism."
19. The link between sexuality and disgust was carefully detailed by Sigmund Freud, but recent work with brain mapping has also made that connection apparent. See, for example, Bourg, De Jong, and Georgiadis, "Subcortical Bold Responses."

20. Children's Hunger Fund, "Poverty Encounter," https://childrenshungerfund.org/poverty-encounter/.
21. Schocket, "Undercover Explorations," 121.
22. Gandal, *Virtues of the Vicious*, 21.
23. Braddon, *Trail of the Serpent*, 228.
24. Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 4.
25. Trilling, "Greatness with One Fault," 99.
26. Marshall, *Slum*, 20–21.
27. Quoted in Abbott, "Charles Booth," 197–98.
28. Tennant, *London Street Arabs*, 5.
29. Tennant, *London Street Arabs*, 4.
30. Tennant, *London Street Arabs*, 4.
31. Roberts, "Jacob Riis Photographs."
32. Riis, "Flashes from the Slums."
33. Bertellini, *Italy*, 156.
34. Riis, *How the Other Half*, 29, 43.
35. Jakobs, *Pictures of Poverty*, 53.
36. Quoted in Davin, *Growing Up Poor*, 64.
37. Gold, *Jews without Money*, 46.
38. Gold, *Jews without Money*, 158.
39. Torres, *We the Animals*, 3.
40. Smedley, *Daughter of Earth*, 41.
41. Wright, *Black Boy*, 60.
42. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 5–6.
43. Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto*, ix.
44. P. Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*, 14.
45. P. Hitchcock, "They Must Be Represented?," 26.
46. Das, *Affliction*, 12, 16.
47. One might see a relationship between the idea of exo-writers and Mikhail Bakhtin's early formulation of "exotropy," which posits a more philosophical idea that a writer must identify with the subject being written about but then pull back to an inner self that is outside of the subject in order to "form and consummate the material." That viewpoint is more about the dialectic between subject and object, while the concept of the exo-writer is vastly simpler, pertaining to the social class of the author in relationship to the subject of the writing. See Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, 26.
48. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 6.
49. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 181–82.
50. The term I use in this book for that phenomenon—*transclass*—is taken from Chantal Jaquet's work *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction* (*Transclasses: A Theory of Social Non-reproduction*).
51. Obviously, this was true for all oppressed groups, from women to people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and the like. Various struggles have permitted

many of these groups to represent themselves by now. The poor are still challenged in many areas of publishing and distribution.

52. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble*, 281.
53. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*.

INTERCHAPTER 1. WHY ME?

1. Dickens, *Hard Times*.
2. Arner, "Degrees of Separation."

CHAPTER 1. HOW TO READ THIS BOOK AND HOW THE LIVES OF THE POOR HAVE BEEN READ, OR, WHY YOU?

1. I do recognize that adjuncts who work in academia occupy a liminal status in this pecking order. If they are unionized, their lot may be somewhat better than nonunionized non-tenure track faculty. Overall, their labor is exploited and they may see themselves as allies or even part of the working poor. Their precarious position may be offset by future job security but that is by no means certain. Nevertheless, if they come from middle-class or upper-class backgrounds, their perspective will be most certainly be different from the multigenerational poor I am discussing in this book.
2. Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets*, 51.
3. Baldwin, "Creative Process," n.p.
4. Harris and Fiske, "Dehumanized Perception"; and Fiske, "Look Twice."
5. Kraus, Park, and Tan, "Signs of Social Class."
6. Kraus, Park, and Tan, "Signs of Social Class," 427.
7. Cuddy, "Psychology of Antisemitism."
8. See my *Obsession: A History* for a more detailed explanation of the limits of brain science.
9. There is also some neuroimaging work that shows that poverty affects the brains of poor people. Mathewson, "How Poverty Changes the Brain."
10. Cohen, "Southerners, Facing Big Odds."
11. Cohen, "Southerners, Facing Big Odds."
12. N. Smith, "Stop Blaming America's Poor."
13. Davis and Morris, "Biocultures Manifesto."
14. Davis, *Obsession*.
15. P. Hitchcock, "They Must Be Represented?," 21.
16. Oldfield and Johnson, "Introduction." 1.
17. Rothberg, *Implicated Subject*, 11.
18. Berlant, "Without Exception"; and Nixon, *Slow Violence*.
19. Arner, "Working-Class Women."