

## CONCLUSION

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RICHARD WRIGHT'S autobiography highlights the crucial point of my study as a whole. The exploration of poverty as a critical category is not necessarily an argument that cultural definitions of identity are simply "displacements" of class issues.<sup>1</sup> Poverty is such a powerful tool of inquiry—in the hands of certain writers, at least—because of its "in between-ness" as a category of social being. We saw this demonstrated in the work of Herman Melville, for whom poverty comes to fuel something like minority consciousness. Conditions of restricted agency and a material lack of resources lead to a decodable and relatively consistent pattern of behavioral values, Melville implies—values that come to seem particularly intransigent and devastating in an American context. There may be a divergence in current critical discourse between sociological approaches to social structure and a multicultural concern with identities and representations, as we saw in the introduction. For Melville, however, there is little opposition between the socioeconomic and the cultural because he uncovers poverty as a category that links them. And we can think of Melville as virtually inaugurating a certain kind of poverty writing by recognizing the literary and linguistic significance of this social category. The representational problems that have made *Pierre*, for example, such a rich site for critical investigation result, to a significant and largely unnoticed degree, from the specific problems of interpreting socioeconomic suffering, not from a general sense of epistemological crisis, or even from an engagement with social class,

broadly construed. Melville's work combines creative technique and social reference in ways that make abnormal material deprivation the foundation of a sophisticated mode of cultural analysis. Within this analysis, the concept of poverty rarely escapes the dynamic of its perceptive crisis and interpretive dilemmas, its power to taunt social observation with abysmal inaccessibility and with an inability to be seen fully within the national culture.

In Melville's work, the ethical and literary implications of poverty are, in a sense, aligned. Progressive social politics merges with complex formal experimentation. Yet the nature of poverty, as a literary and social category, has tended to make this alignment somewhat shifty. Hence the parallels and the contrasts between Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. The narrative movement of both novels is powered by a similar engagement with historically contextual notions of pauperism and poverty. Lily Bart and George Hurstwood reveal the same collapse of time, desire for momentary pleasure, breakdown of agency, and irrational disordering of thought. For Dreiser, pauperism becomes a class in itself. The rhetorical forces of his book work toward a self-reflexive logic whereby the economic dependence of purportedly mobile white men seems conditional on whether the individual suffers from this disease of character to begin with. For Wharton, however, the problem of being poor is never reduced solely to a trait of individual being, just as the proclivity toward pauperism is not individualized but universalized across an entire sex. If Dreiser's heroine has few qualms about being financially dependent, dreading poverty alone, then Lily dreads poverty *and* pauperism, with the inevitable relation between these two states constituting Wharton's polemic and dissent. There is thus a double level of criticism in *The House of Mirth*—first of pauperism itself, which is deconstructed by its partial removal from the realms of class. A state typically seen as a disease of manhood becomes, ironically, an inherent problematic of womanhood. And second, Wharton levels criticism at the sexist social conditions that condemn women to these alternatives of striving misery or abysmal dependence. Pauperism as a concept is broken down at the same time as it is used, not to explain away persistent poverty but to critique the socioeconomic foundations of gender inequity—its origins in the absolute denial of certain types of social mobility and economic freedom for women.

To make poverty our organizing frame, rather than race, gender, or even class in the most general sense, inevitably provides new perspectives on literary texts and new connections between writers. These are the very perspectives and connections to which we have been partially blinded by all the difficulties raised by poverty as a category of critical analysis. In this regard, Wharton and Wright develop surprisingly similar theories of poverty as an underlying social condition from which crucial elements of cultural identity are generated. For both writers, poverty presents a fusion of cultural and sociological perspectives, wherein the class as-

pects of material deprivation and the cultural aspects of gender and race—as well as the politics of sexism and racism—naturally merge.<sup>2</sup> The links between these two writers suggest how difficult it is to form assumptions about the representation of poverty based on the class background of the writer, or to found treatments of social marginalization solely on a writer's cultural background. Such approaches leave us poorly equipped to acknowledge a social category that has always failed to behave within neat boundaries of class or cultural affiliation. If scholars in feminist and women's studies have emphasized, to a degree, literary representations of the disproportionate burden of poverty that has fallen on the shoulders of women, then they have often done so by prioritizing the subjective experience of poverty by lower-class women, and have thus missed exactly what Wharton acknowledges—a sense of poverty whose gender specificity makes it cross-class in kind.<sup>3</sup> As we have seen throughout this book, poverty is a dynamic state that people transition into and out of from many social and cultural positions, a state that even working-class writing can deemphasize by defining class as more than just exploitation and deprivation. For this reason, although a number of our texts have illustrated middle-class reactions to the poor, class itself has not been an adequate category to contain a discourse that broadly engages gender and race, and that disengages from the identity of any single class, in such textually productive ways.

This “in between-ness” of poverty defines its complexity and utility yet it is also what makes poverty such a hazardous critical category to approach, just as writers such as Rebecca Harding Davis, Henry David Thoreau, Dreiser, and James Agee become tempted by what the sociologist Kenneth Clarke calls the “cult of cultural deprivation.”<sup>4</sup> Social pressures of individualism can flip the effects into the causes of poverty, provoking conceptions of the poor as victims of their own personal inadequacy, behavioral pathology, or even physiological disease. At times we have witnessed relativistic and progressive motivations being overwhelmed by an approach in which poverty becomes less a description of social situation than a construction of behavioral causation that reveals most about the ideological assumptions underpinning the act of representation itself. As much as this study seeks to reevaluate an emphasis on cultural identity in an unreflective, affirmative sense, it also helps us appreciate the reasons *why* a critical discourse of poverty has stumbled, particularly at moments when cultural exploration turns into pejorative rationalization. Even if writers such as Dreiser and Agee slide into essentialized views of the poor, however, they still reveal an ethical *struggle* with poverty as a polemical category, a struggle that actively structures their aesthetic theories and representational techniques. A close reading of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, for example, may upset the critical framework within which Agee has been placed by revealing a vision of poverty, sprung loose from alterable socioeconomic factors, that verges on eugenic theories of dependency. Yet Agee's refiguring of the

blessed-degenerate, beautiful-horrific binaries within broader conventions of poverty writing remains a fascinating maneuver from a literary perspective—the way it plays with and revises the moral and formal assumptions of the kinds of writing to which it is heir. To offer another example: *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth* may move in different ethical directions but they remain two of their era's most intricate and interesting examples of poverty writing both thematically and structurally. Their plots of decline respond not to predetermined generic patterns but to dynamic and contentious political debates over the causes and effects of economic dependence at the turn of the century.

The benefit of a literary approach to poverty is a capacity to illuminate the elusive (and frequently controversial) nonmaterial effects of material situations, the cultural and psychological experiences of want amid wealth—the subjective patterns that necessarily fall beneath the radar of sociological efforts to isolate structural causes and to quantify levels of need. Poverty may lie substantially outside the discourse of identity, in the realms of social structure, institutional organization, and material conditions, but literary analysis shows its clear connections to the cultural questions of power, difference, and signifying practice that animate any discussion of social marginalization in the most basic and universal sense.<sup>5</sup> The writing I have analyzed remains ultimately crucial not because of the issues it acknowledges but because of the forms this acknowledgment takes. Herbert Gans and Michael Katz both argue that the language used to describe the poor has a pronounced effect on how they are viewed, and hence on how the problem of poverty is dealt with in the public sphere. Literature plays an essential part in a poverty discourse that highlights the social construction of difference; it has a social effect because it helps determine, just as it can undermine, the reigning mechanisms by which a reading public understands the root causes of, and the appropriate responses to, endemic social problems such as the persistence and widening of inequality.<sup>6</sup> Literary awareness of poverty as a diverse, dynamic, yet substantial category can place needed emphasis on the infrastructural forces of marginalization and exclusion that transcend identity borders, that expose divisions within “whiteness,” and that simultaneously strengthen discussion of the minority and gender groups that have, throughout history, unfairly carried burdens of need.

I hope to have convinced the reader of the peculiarity of poverty as a subject of social and literary discourse. It is a subject that requires close textual attention to appreciate the complex ideological contradictions it exposes, while it needs historical contextualization to understand the social embeddedness of these literary forms. Poverty discourse changes over time, hence *Sister Carrie* reflects the conflict between environmentalist and biological reasoning in the Progressive period, just as *Black Boy* illustrates how the developing racial awareness of its era, and the “psychologizing” of poverty during the Depression, moved poverty to the center of minority consciousness. Yet there are also ways that poverty discourse

resists historical development, just as the work of Agee revisits the aesthetic dilemmas of approaching the poor explored by antebellum writers such as Melville and Thoreau. Parallels between, say, Agee and Melville raise questions about the generic consistency and the national distinctiveness of the kind of poverty writing treated in this book.<sup>7</sup> Again, the literature of poverty is complex in both of these respects. The diversity of poverty writing, in terms of the political opinions it contains and the economic and cultural backgrounds of its writers, tends to pressure any easy claims for a distinct genre of writing. Yet consistent stylistic practices and formal perspectives, as well as common sets of ideas and ethical debates, do seem to emerge transhistorically from the special dynamics of poverty in an American context—the powerful clash, for example, between ideologies of universal equality and the persistence of unequal socioeconomic barriers. Claims for the national uniqueness of this writing are inevitably complicated by the transatlantic nature of thinking about the poor. But I would contend, along with other critics, that reading Agee on poverty is substantially different from reading George Orwell on the same subject, just as Melville’s approach to the poor differs profoundly from that of Charles Dickens.<sup>8</sup> Both Agee and Melville view poverty as a psychological, ideological, and ethical problem that shapes a profound and sustained crisis of representation—a crisis resulting from political pressures that these two writers perceive as peculiarly national in kind.

I hope to have established that our major texts warrant special attention because of the complex, sustained, and historically revealing ways they open up questions of poverty that often get overlooked or downgraded, even in works depicting the poor. Hence, I would argue, *Pierre* exceeds Ned Buntline’s *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, *Sister Carrie* outstrips Stephen Crane’s *Maggie*, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* moves far beyond Erskine Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* in the ways that ideologies of poverty impact narrative form. This literary engagement with poverty moves across periods and unsettles literary categories. And it certainly continues to feature, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, in texts emerging from the cultural politics and movements of the 1960s and 1970s—texts that critics have often fallen into relatively comfortable ways of reading. Take, for instance, Tomás Rivera’s novel about migrant Chicano laborers in the 1940s and 1950s, . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra* / . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971; hereafter abbreviated to *Tierra*). For good reason, perhaps, critics have tended to place *Tierra* within a specifically Chicano cultural and historical context, or else they have viewed Rivera’s focus on class as an affirmative and counter-hegemonic depiction of emergent class consciousness.<sup>9</sup> As with all of the major works analyzed thus far, however, a full appreciation of Rivera’s novel only arises when we realize the pressures it places on poverty as a specific state of socioeconomic suffering that relates to ethnic culture and to working-class consciousness but is not completely reducible to either.

Echoing writers ranging from Melville to Wright, Rivera's understanding of poverty is material, ideological, and psychological too, as he charts the ways that children in particular become traumatized by the suffering and stigma of growing up poor.<sup>10</sup> Reminding us of key episodes in Wright's *Black Boy* and Melville's *Pierre*, poverty registers as both a physical and a psychological sickness, an existential nausea that compromises vision and consciousness in its extreme social dislocation.<sup>11</sup> If the obscurity of Melville's *Pierre* and the polemical plot movements of Wharton's *House of Mirth* both emerge directly from the recognition of poverty as a special psychosocial state, then the fractured narrative form of *Tierra* mirrors the migrancy that describes the fundamental social instability of Rivera's workers. Their vast seasonal journeys in search of agricultural labor absorb any surplus income gained from the work itself, thus keeping the migrant laborers in a state of bare subsistence and constant anxiety. This cyclical, spiraling condition, in which migrancy keeps them poor while poverty keeps them migrant, provides the philosophical denouement of the narrative—the belief, expressed in an appropriately unfinished clause, that “[a]rriving and leaving, it's the same thing because we no sooner arrive and . . .” (145). Related on one level to the theoretical tendency that Ramón Saldívar has attributed to Chicano narrative more broadly—its tendency to undermine fixed ethical conclusions and categorical definitions, particularly of polar oppositions—this “dialectics of difference” is rooted in the particular socioeconomic and geopolitical forces that shape the lives of these migrant laborers, particularly their inability to escape from the paradoxical situation in which the fruits of work can never transcend the costs of the commute.<sup>12</sup>

Rivera's novel makes special sense in light of the poverty discourse highlighted in this study. The novel's stress on the psychological trauma of poverty, for example, emerges from the pressures of national ideology that remain remarkably consistent over time. And the epistemological crises emerging from this confrontation with American poverty get played out—once again—in a self-conscious experimentation with literary representation. With particular conciseness and power, *Tierra* illustrates the complex contradictions and paradoxes that emerge when poverty is targeted as an autonomous and central category of social experience. On one level, *Tierra* demonstrates how impoverished conditions bring moments of class-conscious resistance and unity. Yet coherent class consciousness cannot withstand the power of socioeconomic injustice to damage subjectivity, to limit social agency, and to entrap individuals within cycles of deprivation.<sup>13</sup> By recognizing these rigid barriers to social mobility, *Tierra* thus explores how poverty becomes intimately associated with a particular sociocultural group of Chicano laborers, whose economic vulnerability is tied to the long history of race, colonization, and the U.S. seizure of Mexican territory. Yet poverty is also a dynamic and situational state that relates to individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Beneath the surface of *Tierra* glimmers the poverty of lower-class whites

who view the spectacular poverty of Chicanos with both reassurance (it demonstrates white cultural superiority) and anxiety (it illustrates the potential for their own downward mobility within a fluid society).<sup>14</sup>

If recent critical debates over the categorical difference of race and class tend to oppose the inherent nature of racial identity to the situational and contingent qualities of class,<sup>15</sup> then Rivera's novel shows how such absolute distinctions fail to hold when poverty becomes the center of attention. The marginalized status of Rivera's characters does not arrive preformed as a Chicano identity that is autonomous and collective. It is described by Rivera as emerging in large part from a poverty that is socioeconomic and cross-cultural. Yet the social status of the characters is not solely reducible to their class position either: they are poor in part because of their identities as Mexican Americans, their place in a racialized situation of global displacement.<sup>16</sup> By positioning poverty at the intersection of discrimination and exploitation, Rivera's novel about transnational migrants returns us to larger questions of citizenship. Poverty seems to cripple, once again, the free social agency of certain individuals and groups within the nation, limiting their access to cultural opportunity and devaluing their political liberty. Rivera's subterranean kinship, through poverty discourse, with the other authors considered here, also returns us to questions about the practice of literary criticism itself. By recognizing poverty as a critical category that effects the works of disparate writers over time, I hope to have opened a space for scholars to rethink connections between material and cultural phenomena, to envision *shared* problems of social being that cut across yet inform concerns with cultural identity, and, finally, to recover a social and ethical function within a literary debate that can seem so trapped in cycles of pity and blame.