

# Introduction

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The purpose of this special volume in the LISAA *Mémoire et Territoires* series is to envision representations of poverty in the Anglo-American world and beyond, in their global context. A primary focus is on Great Britain, Ireland and the United States, but the essays are not restricted to these three countries. The volume establishes a dialogue between academic perspectives on the subject (from such fields as sociology, history, literary and cultural criticism, urban studies, and visual studies) and works by writers, playwrights, historians, photographers, and urban artists. Pluridisciplinary in perspective, *Envisioning Poverty* will suggest an expansive approach to poverty and its framings. Furthermore, this volume will confront the various discourses and representations of literature and art in relation to those from the hard sciences, objective histories, and sociological studies.

## Poverty and literary studies

What, for example, might be the role of imaginative literature and literary and cultural criticism in contributing to our understanding of poverty in ways that the theories of sociology or the representations of the poor in our present digital culture cannot? As the critical work on poverty and fiction implies, inequality and poverty can be represented through imaginative literature in ways that no other forms, narrative or otherwise, can approximate. Although poverty is a material condition, a position in a social hierarchy, there is much more to the inner life and psychology of being poor than can be represented through social or ethnographical studies. Like other national literatures, American literature has remained obsessed with the problems and perils of the poor and the extremes of social inequality.

Robert Sayre's chapter in this volume takes us to a study of the figure of the poor white in the American South. Working out of an American literary tradition of portraying this socio-racial category, William Faulkner's novels and short stories specialized in such renditions. As Sayre remarks, "Faulkner not only transcends stereotypes of the poor white but offers important insights into his situation, mentality, and relation to the other social groups with which he interacts." In the two short stories that Sayre examines, "Wash" (1934) and "Barn Burning" (1939), Faulkner suggests some of the problems that emerge when "the poor" are defined as a class in themselves, when poverty is treated as something like an ethnic affiliation – and identity is based on an alleged cultural and psychological pathology. While arguing that Faulkner at his best transcends the stereotypes of fictional portrayals of poor whites, Sayre uncovers some of Faulkner's persistent narrative interests in "the harsh reality of class". Like many other nineteenth – and twentieth – century writers, Faulkner gives credence to the idea that literary language – its paradoxes, contradictions, and ambiguities is an apt vehicle for representing and understanding poverty as a social and critical category. Amidst competing political ideologies, Faulkner suggests, poverty creates moments of formal and ethical shock that contravenes conventional ways of viewing the social world.

As Sayre's essay suggests, poverty should be a critical key word in literary studies, and a category in its own right. The critic Gavin Jones argues, "To interpret class as a cultural or social identity that operates beyond poverty only leaves questions of 'need,' 'deprivation,' and 'social necessity' untheorized

and excluded.”<sup>1</sup> But Jones and other literary critics studying poverty in their discipline are concerned less with actual impoverished people than with how poverty is represented in literary discourse: poverty is a social and historical phenomenon but its aesthetic and ethical dimensions must equally be recognized.

N. Dubois’s “Poverty and Its ‘Many Folds’ in *King Lear*”, in this collection, argues for a reading of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* through an ethical construct of poverty: in the play, “poverty functions as a touchstone of worth, as a catalyst of moral growth and almost as a mode of revelation”. Some of the characters – Edgar, Gloucester, and Lear – must submit themselves to poverty as a kind of trial or testing ground, a state to go through, while others – Cordelia, Kent, and the Fool – are defined in part because they don’t follow a similar path into poverty. As Dubois argues, Shakespeare, responding to Queen Elizabeth’s Poor Relief Act in 1601, reveals in *King Lear* “two contemporary issues or types of disruption: the first with the archetypal character of Poor Tom, the Bedlamite, the second...[that] idealistic feudal values...are challenged by the ascent of a more mobile social class and of emerging individualism”. The end result, in Dubois’s reading, is that the focus of the play ultimately shifts from “a concern with material poverty and injustice to identifying the greater crime, barrenness, or ‘hardness,’ of heart”. Poverty is the conduit that Shakespeare uses for such a shift.

As Dubois’s essay demonstrates, more than a matter of measurable economic deprivation, poverty is inseparable from individual emotions and perceptions. It can be a transitory phenomenon, inevitably effecting its own disintegration; it can involve non-material concerns of “spiritual poverty” and “voluntary poverty”; and, it can be seen “in its own light”, related to but not fully dependent on discursive constructions.

## Poverty: social and historical analyses

Both defining and assessing poverty is as relevant to medieval England as it is to Renaissance England and the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Increasingly historians wish not only to account for the intricacies of attitudes towards the poor, but also for changes in cultural understandings in poverty which gradually transformed, for example, medieval literary and historical accounts of poverty and its victims. Now almost a critical commonplace, poverty is as much epistemological as economic in the perspectives it presents to interpreters and historians.

Within such a framework, the next two essays offer a subtle epistemological analysis of how medieval writers and thinkers conceived of poverty. Both essays assess shifting understandings of the concepts of “need” and “claim” and argue that poverty made demands of society but also occupied different traditions within early – and late – medieval culture. Marie-Françoise Alamichel’s “La Pauvreté dans l’Angleterre anglo-saxonne (VI<sup>e</sup>-XI<sup>e</sup> siècles)” [“Poverty in Anglo-Saxon England (5<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries)”] stresses the historical acceptance of poverty during the Middle Ages as normative – i.e., poverty was *not* considered as a cultural aberration or “social problem”. Alamichel points out that most writers on poverty, as it is represented in the histories, poems, homilies, letters, testaments and chronicles of the medieval period, recognize that the subject calls for differentiation. She thus interrogates various distinctions between interpretations of poverty both within individual texts (e.g., *Apollonius of Tyre*) and among the various contemporary accounts in order to explore poverty’s subtexts in this “pre-social conscience” period. The spiritual significance and beliefs surrounding poverty, as Alamichel argues, complicates interpretations of the epistemologies and social codes of the time. It is only toward the end

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<sup>1</sup> Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 11.

of the Middle Ages that a certain social awareness of poverty begins to appear, launching some of the late medieval debates on the subject.<sup>2</sup>

Continuing this epistemological thread, Philippa Woodcock's contribution to this volume discusses poverty in late medieval England by comparing the imposed – and self-imposed – experiences of penury of Queen Elizabeth Woodville, spouse to Edward IV, and those of the first wife of Henry VIII, Catherine of Aragon. She shows how the textual evidence of their impoverishment – ranging from diplomatic and personal correspondence to personal chronicles, eyewitness reports, and historical accounts – forms a complex body of writing which reveals poverty as a crucial political, economic, and religious force. Poverty is at once, for Elizabeth Woodville and Catherine of Aragon, a sacred imitation of Christ and a social stigma; a “voluntary” form of life and an unwelcome hardship; an economic reality and a spiritual disposition. In an historically informed discussion, Woodcock explores how those who caused the dramatic destitution of these Queens judged them and how these women represented and responded to their difficult existences. Ultimately, she suggests how such textual representations can significantly influence any cultural conversation about poverty, deepening our understanding of its urgency as a political, economic, and religious issue.

As underlined in both essays, early and late medieval writers were less worried about poor people per se than about politics: they understood their world in terms that were fundamentally political, moral, and religious, rather than social. What these two essays make clear is that poverty is by no means a simple phenomenon. It can vary according to gender, age and geographical location; and the way it is portrayed in speech, writing and visual images can as much affect how the poor experience their poverty as how others see and assess them.

## Poverty: community art projects, sociology, and the working poor

The combination of poverty studies with those of community art projects, sociology, and the working poor can lead to some startling conclusions. Poverty has frequently been naturalized as an inevitable social condition, and the blame for any shortcomings in community programs and governmental welfare policies is often placed on the failings of individuals, markets, and demography.<sup>3</sup> Responding to such claims, H  l  ne Alfaro's “Les Arts et le d  veloppement communautaire    Belfast (fin des ann  es 1970 milieu des ann  es 1980)” [“The Arts and Community Development in Belfast (end of the 1970s to the middle of the 1980s)"] shows how some of the poorest neighborhoods in Belfast during the 1970s and 1980s developed forms of community art to fight against poverty. In the context of the social, urban, and political history of this period in Belfast, Alfaro examines the shift from an *Art Council*-oriented art (classical music, ballet, repertory theatre, and figurative paintings), cut off from local realities, to the self-representing art directives of Lord Melchett, Northern Ireland's Minister of Education at the time. Unlike those of the Art Council, these directives were tied to the lives and experiences of local people who often lived in the most deprived and isolated areas of Northern Ireland. Alfaro demonstrates how this community-based art influenced government strategies concerning the fight against social exclusion and the first European program for peace (Peace 1).<sup>4</sup> The inner-city urban and rural poor in the Ireland of the 1970s and 1980s were more adept at devising resistant mechanisms to poverty than has been previously suggested. Congruent to this fact, modern Irish and British

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<sup>2</sup> For some of these debates and critical approaches to poverty in late-medieval culture, see Kate Crassons, *The Claims of Poverty: Literature, Culture, and Ideology in Late Medieval England*, Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> See D. Brady, *Rich Democracies, Poor People: How Politicians Explain Poverty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of community-based art and art as social practice, see Randy Kennedy, “Outside the Citadel, Social Practice Art is intended to Nurture”, *The New York Times*, March 24, 2013.

sociologists have proposed *relative* definitions of poverty, which place an emphasis on the limits which poverty imposes on participation in society.<sup>5</sup>

The last essay in the collection, Sieglinde Lemke's exploration of the American investigative journalist, Barbara Ehrenreich, brings us to a working-poor landscape at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Providing an up-to-date reflection of Ehrenreich's sociological findings, the data from a 2014 Stanford University report, "State of the Union: The Poverty and Inequality Report 2014", suggest "a broadly deteriorating poverty and inequality landscape". "Since mid-2009", according to the Stanford report, "all measures show that inequality is rising. For example, the share of income of the top 1% had rebounded by 2012... it nearly returned to the high levels from before the Great Recession. The latest, but still early evidence on the recovery from the Great Recession also points to a very slow rebound of median incomes."<sup>6</sup>

The growing income gap is directly related to increasing poverty rates and suggests that the United States is now one of the world's most rigidly stratified industrial democracies. This state, it can be argued, has become the new American *exceptionalism*. While often compared to well off European countries, the United States, as a recent proposal on severe deprivation in America makes clear, "may more closely resemble Latin American and African nations with respect to the extent and depth of its poverty"<sup>7</sup>. Severe deprivation in the United States is unlike that of Europe and other parts of the developed world – which can explain the growing interest in poverty studies in America.<sup>8</sup> Quite simply, there is an urgency to understand and confront acute poverty, "poverty of those far below the poverty line characterized by scarcity of critical resources and material hardship"<sup>9</sup>, especially prevalent in the U.S. relative to its Western homologues. In fact, America, particularly in the past twenty years, has structured extreme social inequality into an acceptable way of viewing the world.<sup>10</sup>

Lemke's study of Ehrenreich's social documentary, *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), examines Ehrenreich's narrative strategies in the context of this growing income gap, material hardships, and the plight of low-wage workers. Ehrenreich's "investigative undercover journalism" in relation to the book's commercial and critical success, reveals how she links the "inner workings of capitalism" to the "psychological deprivations" of the working poor. As a lifelong political activist and member of "the living wage movement", Ehrenreich, in *Nickel and Dimed*, creates a present-day version of protest literature in which compassion and sympathy co-exist with revulsion and disapproval. Her undercover reportage follows the literary and reportage traditions of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Jack London's *People of the Abyss* (1903), and George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). At the same

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<sup>5</sup> See A. Mayne and T. Murray, *The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes: Exploration in Slumland*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> "U. S poverty and inequality: 2014 overview and research trends", [www.journalistsresources.org](http://www.journalistsresources.org) Web 24 Feb., 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Russell Sage Foundation, Proposal for RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences Issue and Conference on Severe Deprivation in America. [www.russellsage.org](http://www.russellsage.org). p. 2. Web 24 Feb., 2014.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the growing number of Graduate Programs in Poverty Studies at American universities: e.g., Brandeis University, [Master of Public Policy in Social Policy](#); University of California at Berkeley, [Goldman School of Public Policy](#); Duke University, [Sanford School of Public Policy](#); George Mason University, [School of Public Policy](#); University of Michigan, [Gerald R. Ford School](#); University of Notre Dame, [Master of Nonprofit Administration](#); University of Pennsylvania, [The Annenberg Public Policy Center](#); Texas A&M University, [Bush School of Government and Public Service](#); Stanford University, [The Stanford Center for the study of Poverty and Inequality](#); and the University of Washington, [Evans School of Public Affairs](#).

<sup>9</sup> Russell Sage Foundation, "Proposal for RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences Issue and Conference on Severe Deprivation in America." [www.russellsage.org](http://www.russellsage.org). p. 1. Web 24 Feb., 2014.

<sup>10</sup> For increases in the overall poverty rate in the last twenty years, see Heidi Shierholz and Elise Gould, *Already More than a Lost Decade: Poverty and Income Trends Continue to Paint a Bleak Picture*, Washington, D.C., Economic Policy Institute, 2012.

time, it belongs to the political ideology of the 1960s counterculture movement, especially the counterculture's emphasis on social justice and egalitarianism, and its experimentation with other lifestyles including "slumming".

Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* is a persuasive argument on how the idea of poverty is socially constructed. In essentially a memoir of her time in poverty, she discredits the assumed benefits of mass consumption and the power of individualism. In Ehrenreich's view, any hopes for social change lie in grass roots efforts – feminist cooperatives, trade unions, the Economic Hardship Project – rather than in government reforms and policies. Much like Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861), *Nickel and Dimed* wants to shock readers and to shame them into recognizing social wrongs and sufferings.

Poverty has always been a tenacious element of the human experience. All of the essays in this volume explore, in various ways, how prevailing protocols of envisioning poverty can be disrupted, challenged, contradicted, and subverted. Several of the arguments presented here (Alamichel, Alfaro, Woodcock) not only encourage us to rethink some significant critical categories and questions involving poverty but also suggest how poverty, by definition, can resist representation in implicitly middle-class (narrative, literary) forms. Other arguments (Sayre, Lemke) suggest that there are qualities within poverty that de-authorize the articulating (literary, documentary, journalistic) voice itself, thus preventing the impoverished world from ever being made fully intelligible to outsiders. Our racial, literary, and cultural knowledge about people living in poverty might very well be less secure than we have imagined. In other words, poverty frequently challenges all forms of linguistic and narrative competence. Taken together, the essays in this collection assert that poverty, as a topic of inquiry, is much more likely to contravene social conventions and hierarchies rather than to confirm them. At the same time, as these essays emphasize, the materiality of poverty can easily open into the nonmaterial realms of psychology, emotion, and aesthetics.