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## Introduction: How American Literature Understands Poverty

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Introduction:  
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**P**ublic rhetoric tends to present poverty as a static condition, often a condition of abject and total deprivation, rather than recognize it as an ongoing act of dispossession. Yet the word *poverty* itself has the potential to open up quite different connotations. Based on a somewhat uncommon etymology, *poverty* derives from the Old French *poeste*, which means power, and *poeste* gives form to *in poustie*, which means possibility.<sup>1</sup> As possibility, poverty is a dilemma for governance and, likewise, for the way poverty studies often treats the poor: as “a discrete and singular category,” as apprehensible and governable (Goldstein 2018: 83). This special issue is a call to reflect on interpretive approaches: to consider how the very attempt to govern people betrays the way poverty poses a problem not only for governance but also, by exuberant extension, for representation itself. We say *exuberant*, productively overflowing, to mark how literature gives us the elasticity to think poverty beyond the disciplinary walls that segregate thought around it and beyond the representational need to make the poor, and even impoverishment, apprehensible. We have put together this special issue because we believe literature can renovate the word *poverty* in ways that illuminate conditions it has been wielded to hide, as well as the new coalitions and forms of relationality poverty makes possible. Across two centuries, literature has unsettled the term *poverty*, and we need this disruption now more than ever. The essays in this special issue show that literature uniquely exceeds the terms of poverty’s representation. It alights our attention on our manner of attending, beyond attempts to reduce, resolve, or otherwise impoverish our understanding of these terms.

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### The Pervasiveness of Poverty

In December 2017, Australian professor Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, arrived in Los Angeles for a two-week tour of the United States to investigate the contours of economic suffering in the world's wealthiest nation. Accompanied by a reporter and photographer from the London-based newspaper *The Guardian* (but not, notably, a representative from the *New York Times*), Alston traveled from California to Alabama; Washington, DC; West Virginia; and Puerto Rico.<sup>2</sup> He found, *The Guardian* reported, “a land of extreme inequality,” and his conclusions were blunt: poverty in the United States is pervasive; “contrasts between private wealth and public squalor abound” (Pilkington 2017). Drawing on statistics provided by the US Census Bureau, Alston reported that, as of 2016, 41 million Americans, almost 13 percent of the population, lived in poverty. Forty percent of those lived in “deep” poverty, with incomes less than 50 percent of the official poverty threshold. In addition, he noted, the United States had the highest infant mortality rate in the so-called developed world; 18 percent of American children lived in poverty, comprising over 30 percent of the nation's poor (Alston 2017a).

Alston presented economic hardship and deprivation in the United States as a striking paradox: expansive poverty amid America's affluence and its foundational dedication to equality and opportunity. In the report on his findings, Alston (2017b) noted that, during his tour, “American exceptionalism was a constant theme in my conversations. But instead of realizing its founders' admirable commitments, today's United States has proved itself to be exceptional in far more problematic ways that are shockingly at odds with its immense wealth and its founding commitment to human rights.” This notion, that American poverty is a paradox of plenty, is a venerable, common framing. Noted poverty scholar Mark Robert Rank (2011: 16) likewise describes poverty as “a fundamental paradox: in America, the wealthiest country on earth, one also finds the highest rates of poverty in the developed world.” Challenging the deeply embedded notion that poverty is a product of individual faults or pathologies—a refusal to work hard, a lack of adequate skills, a psychology of dependency—Rank contends that “American poverty is largely the result of failings at the economic and political levels.” While contesting the idea that poverty constitutes an individual rather than an institutional problem is laudable, the assertion that poverty is a structural “failing” nevertheless suggests

that economic deprivation is a contradiction rather than a constitutive element, a bug and not a design feature. Such framing obscures the possibility that poverty is endemic to US capitalist society—a predictable, integral, even necessary, outcome of the way America’s profoundly racialized economy is structured.

Despite the undeniable statistical evidence for economic privation and suffering in the United States, poverty continues to be “poorly understood” and too-little discussed, especially in the humanities and certainly in literary studies (Rank, Eppard, and Bullock 2021). Poverty presents not only a policy problem but also a conceptual problem of seeing and representation; if and how poverty can be addressed as a collective social and political concern depends on how it is depicted and understood. Historian Alice O’Connor (2001) contends that the institutionalized study of poverty, which she calls “poverty knowledge,” has privileged the expertise of professional researchers and academics while largely excluding poor people themselves as sources of insight. In the twentieth century, poverty emerged as an object of intense public interest and debate in key moments: the Progressive era, when muckrakers and reformers set out to uncover and remedy the contradictions roiling an emerging industrial modernity; the 1930s, when writers, artists, and documentarians, many employed by the US government, surveyed economic hardship across the country and forged support for New Deal policies; and the 1960s, when the federal government launched a “war” on poverty. But the public’s attention to poverty has waned over the past fifty years, under neoliberalism. In the 1980s and 1990s, the war on poverty became a *de facto* war on the poor, as liberals and conservatives alike breathed new life into long-standing ideas about the “unworthy” poor to focus policy on individual pathology and dependency, infamously personified in President Ronald Reagan’s spurious image of the “welfare queen.” Mobilizing the “culture of poverty” thesis to blame the poor—especially poor people of color—for the poverty they faced, this line of thinking was weaponized to justify the 1996 passage, under President Bill Clinton, of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which aimed to “end welfare as we know it.” In the ensuing neoliberal era, US social policy, under the guise of promoting “hard work” and “healthy marriages,” has functioned effectively to punish, humiliate, and control the poor, especially those who are Black, Latinx, and Indigenous.<sup>3</sup>

Propped up by corporate and academic interests, the neoliberal consensus on economic inequality has shown significant cracks since the turn of the century. Over the last decade in particular, economic

inequality and extreme wealth have emerged as prominent topics of American political and public discourse, from Occupy Wall Street and its framing of the 1 percent versus the 99 percent; to Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign, which openly criticized corporate greed and the consolidation of wealth in the hands of a few billionaires; to the swelling membership of the Democratic Socialists of America. All of these developments raised spiking economic disparity to national prominence. Yet such attention to the growing inequality of our society seems to go hand in hand with relative silence on poverty, whether from voices of the poor or voices for the poor.<sup>4</sup> We may be living in a second Gilded Age, but it seems that our capacity for critique has not kept up with the intensified, and ubiquitous, realities of economic hardship in the United States. The fact that images of dependency, poor choices, and individual and communal pathology continue to represent the most readily available ways to understand poverty suggests that our contemporary political and media cultures are suffering a poverty of the imagination.

The same might be said of our literary culture. In a 2009 *Inside Higher Ed* op-ed, Keith Gandall predicted that the economic crisis would lead to literary studies finally putting “poverty near the top of the agenda and the center of the field.” More than a decade later, poverty remains stubbornly marginal to literary studies. While poverty constitutes an enduring topic of research in the social sciences, with numerous efforts to correct for the biases embedded in the shockingly durable “culture of poverty” thesis devised originally by Columbia University-trained anthropologist Oscar Lewis in the late 1950s,<sup>5</sup> literary studies and the humanities more broadly have had little to say about it. To be sure, there is a growing, and important, focus in criticism and theory on wealth inequality, precarity, dispossession, racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and other forms of domination and subordination. Yet poverty is not reducible to the dynamics named by these keywords, even as it is connected to them. There is a lacuna in humanistic inquiry around not so much the conditions that create poverty as the very recognition of impoverishment as such.

This special issue of *American Literature* addresses that blind spot by asking what literary culture distinctively has to offer an understanding of poverty in the United States. What theories and methods of reading does literature about poverty demand? What language for talking about poverty does literature provide? In turn, what kinds of demands and pressures do efforts to address poverty, dispossession, and extreme economic inequality place on literary form and language?

If the social sciences have claimed this area of inquiry for decades, what can literary studies do to help complicate and challenge dominant forms of poverty knowledge? Might literature offer a poverty knowledge of its own?

In addressing these questions, we build on critical work that has attended to the vexing dilemmas of literary and cultural representation raised by poverty as a category of analysis. Gavin Jones's *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840–1945* (2007) suggests that poverty has generated “a sophisticated literary strain” (Jones 2007: xv) that has not been adequately examined because the focus in literary studies “on oppressed subject positions has tended to evade the problems of economic inequality by centering social marginalization on the cultural identity of the marginalized” (7). Gandal, author of *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane and the Spectacle of the Slum* (1997) and *Class Representation in Modern Fiction and Film* (2007), and Walter Benn Michaels, author of *The Trouble with Diversity* (2007), agree with Jones that the problem of economic privation in US literature has been subsumed by the language of identity. Elsewhere, Michael Denning (2007; 2010) argues for reassessing the categories of labor and class to account for global poverty, precarity, and unemployment. This special issue contributes to these reassessments. Yet rather than juxtapose identity and economics, marginalization and class, subjectivity and structural power, we aim to explore the literary interplay of these categories.

As an economic and social condition, poverty is often perceived as a static state of lack, exclusion, and invisibility rather than, more actively, as a process, a relation, and a matter of “predatory inclusion” or “organized abandonment” (Taylor 2019; Gilmore 2015). As a form of structured economic deprivation, poverty is always contextual, defined by and against specific social and national norms and expectations; the poor are always conceived against the well-to-do, although individuals often move across those economic categories over time. (In fact, Rank [2011: 18] and his colleagues have found that *most* Americans will spend at least one year below the poverty line during the course of their lives.) Where to draw the “poverty line” is a subject of debate and struggle. In this special issue, we are concerned with poverty not only as a material condition but also as an object and source of knowledge and art; poverty presents an epistemological and representational problem as well as an economic and social one. To be sure, a great deal of American writing has tended to reinforce the abject incapacity of the poor and the seemingly intractable boundary between the poor and

well off. By contrast, this special issue turns primarily to the work of writers who expose the damaging incapacity of those very literary frameworks, suggesting both the failures of top-down efforts to render the poor legible and the possibilities that literature can render poverty otherwise, beyond the conventional liberal categories and conceptualizing lenses that have come to dominate representations of poverty in the United States.

### Reading Poverty Otherwise

Several critics have turned to literature as a wellspring for thinking through such alternatives. Asking, after Jones's *American Hungers*, why scholarship in the United States has so far failed to produce "a theoretical discourse that describes the contemporary experience of poverty," Gayle Salamon (2010: 176) calls for a theory that would enable thinking about the lives of the poor in terms of "their conditions of possibility otherwise," suggesting that literary scholars are in a position to produce such a theory. The relentless present that seems to organize the experience of poverty and beyond which Salamon calls on literary theory to think is, we suggest, not only a temporal but also an ontological problem, one that has often encouraged the bare life conception of poverty that this special issue seeks to contest.<sup>6</sup>

In an effort to understand poverty in terms of power and potentiality, Patrick Greaney takes up this ontological problem by turning to literature. "The thematic representation of the poor," Greaney (2007: xv–xvi) writes, "as an actual individual or group characterized by socioeconomic misery alternates with the non-representative moments in which literary language . . . reduces itself to the potential for representation." Greaney turns to literary language, then, precisely because it does not seek to capture and negate the agential aspects of poverty that seem otherwise to evade representation. "Literary language," he continues, "acknowledges in moments when it becomes poor that poverty creates not an identity but a capacity, even if it appears," through the lens of deprivation, "as an incapacity." In other words, for Greaney, literature, in its juxtaposition of theme and form, understands the ontological contingency of poverty as both less and more than the possessive individualism of the neoliberal subject. This special issue calls for literary scholars to take up the work of navigating this persistent conflict between the ongoing ontological dispossession that denies the poor the right to exist—even as they perform productive social and material labor that is critical to society and the economy—and the ongoing emotional, psychological, and physical labor by impoverished

people of ontological repossession in the form of covert capacities and potentiality. By *ontological repossession*, we mean the ways in which poor people are continually reclaiming their status as social and human subjects despite sociopolitical systems that would deny them such status.

Greaney's reading calls to mind the writer Dorothy Allison's (1992) observation, in the context of her coming out as a lesbian when she was a young girl in a poor and working-class churchgoing community, that being an "endangerment to society . . . gives you a lot of power." Along these lines, this special issue suggests that the literature of poverty does not merely represent poverty but in effect offers a theory of reading poverty otherwise—a theory that might help us to recognize the forms of social, epistemological, and even material power the poor possess despite their active dispossession. The United States has an especially rich tradition of literature by and about the poor, from its inception and extending into our contemporary moment.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary texts that surpass the paradigm of representation as a mode of objectification, pathologization, or surveillance, or of imagining a futurity for the poor only by way of uplift, include fiction by Allison, Gloria Naylor, Jesmyn Ward, Bonnie Jo Campbell, Junot Díaz, and Tommy Orange, as well as poetry by Rafael Campo and C. D. Wright, to name only a few. Analyses of these authors' writing has focused primarily on issues of race and gender and only secondarily on poverty. This trend has had the perhaps inadvertent effect of treating poverty as a socioeconomic condition or circumstance in which more organic forms of identity are grounded. In such readings, poverty becomes background rather than an active subject, process, or relation.

Together with the contributors to this special issue, we want to ask how an academic conversation around such a set of texts might be transformed if the question of poverty became a primary critical framework through which they were read. One challenge this possibility poses is that, while writers and scholars have sought to recuperate minoritized racial and gender identities through affirmative and celebratory narratives, a similarly recuperative approach to understanding poverty seems to run a greater risk of romanticizing material deprivation; at the same time, lamenting these material realities of poverty risks framing the poor as abject.<sup>8</sup> Extending poverty studies to include literary studies, or vice versa, offers the opportunity to reflect on how the literary as a unique mode of representation can elucidate the ways in which scarcity is manufactured in order to disinherit targeted populations, while also valuing the alternative epistemologies, forms of sociality, and aesthetic and cultural practices that communities produce in response to disinheritance.



Literature and literary studies can, moreover, shape an understanding of poverty by theorizing a mode of address that can resist forms of representation that have historically enabled, for example, criminalization of the means of survival among the poor; at the same time, literature can navigate the critical representational structures through which the poor demand resources necessary for more durable, less provisional, modes of living. That the literary as a form of representation grapples with its own conditions of possibility situates it as having a privileged relationship to modes of being, like poverty, that have historically and methodologically posed a problem of representation. Consider, for instance, the scene from Jacob A. Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) in which the early flash technology of Riis's camera causes him to set fire to one of the tenement buildings he's touring and attempting to document. *How the Other Half Lives* depicts a city riven between genteel society and the tenements. Riis's (1997: 38) voyeuristic tour through the tenements' "dark bedrooms" frequently followed the police, who at times burst into apartments and room houses at night to expose the dangers lurking within. In the cited scene, Riis acknowledges that "once, in taking a flash-light picture of a group of blind beggars . . . I managed to set fire to the house" (30). Riis's incendiary mode of expression here betrays the violence that underlies certain forms of representation: in attempting to bring to light—to expose and enclose—the dark spaces of the tenements, he nearly burns one down. Only the thickness of dirt on the walls, a violation of standards of hygiene, keeps it from burning (30). What Riis ultimately illuminates, then, is the capacity of impoverished spaces themselves to interfere in their negation. In this way, literary language, as a reflexive form that mediates what escapes or resists representation, speaks to the mechanics of this interference. This scene acts as a reminder that *poverty*, in its etymological relation to *aporia*, suggests both a without and also a kind of exuberance, what we have evoked here as the "sociality" and "potentiality" and what might also be called the threatening alterity or "collective living otherwise" of the poor (Goldstein 2021: 117). If certain literary, photographic, and journalistic texts and traditions have variously sought to enclose the poor through exposure, then the work of literary criticism in poverty studies today is twofold: to identify contemporary rhetorical practices of such enclosure and to recognize in—and generate in collaboration with—the literary texts we study narrative countermovements and alternative vocabularies to the terms of enclosure.

### Beats per Minute

In many respects, centering poverty in literary studies is work that remains to be done. We consider this introduction, as well as the essays assembled here, a collective step toward that work. In taking that step, we believe a broad range of criticism may begin to find common ground where it is otherwise siloed into disciplinary knowledge formations. Literary poverty studies might bring together scholarship on financialization and debt; settler colonialism and dispossession; racial capitalism and the carceral state; foreclosure and homelessness; class and proletarianism; and the psychic lives of precarity. It also has the potential to bridge period studies on the Gilded Age, the Great Depression, the War on Poverty era, and our present moment. But in order to do these things, critics must be willing to name, address, and engage poverty *in* literary and cultural representation, even and especially when it refuses to identify itself as such. For why should it not be the case that, given the trajectory of poverty discourse over the past century, literature would struggle to represent an alternately pathologized and obscured life experience? As critics delve into the literary and historical archives of forgotten or buried experience, perhaps we ought to train our senses on a population whose very existence challenges the norms by which we assign value to social and political identities.

As we worked on this project, we considered how we might convene a special issue in which much of the editorial work involves bringing that field into critical discourse. Our method of curating the articles and review essays that appear here identifies poverty as a critical keyword in literary studies. This process of identification is open-ended, carried out *with* contributors as they present and revise their work. The articles represent original research across two centuries of American literary history, drawing on sundry subfields. Likewise, the review essays reflect on recent monographs that address questions of poverty and dispossession in literature and criticism even if not all are explicitly about those topics. In bringing these pieces together, neither we nor the authors proceeded from a predetermined set of disciplinary or even interdisciplinary moves. The task was to think together about what it means to center poverty in literary studies at all. A welcome result of that work is five articles that do much to expand the critical imagination. In their own ways, they approach poverty not only as a socioeconomic condition but also as a mode of experience that exceeds racialized and capitalist taxonomies.

Jean Franzino's "Tales Told by Empty Sleeves: Disability, Mendicancy, and Civil War Life Writing" begins the issue. Drawing on a wide range of archival materials, from street-corner ephemera to federal pension files, Franzino analyzes the textual forms and reception contexts of printed media sold by disabled Civil War veterans for their economic support. These so-called mendicant texts, whose first-person literary accounts lent support to face-to-face financial transactions, highlight traits of authenticity, individuality, and agency in a process Franzino theorizes as a scene of "prosthetic narrative." Not coincidentally, such traits lie at the heart of how scholars value life writing as both validating and informing the critical orientation of disability studies and poverty studies alike. Yet the powerful connection between material impoverishment and literary creation in mendicant texts means that these traits cannot be taken at face value: some disabled people had to invent the truth they knew people wanted to hear. Thus mendicant texts are, in Franzino's terms, canny performances of need to a public that risks becoming indifferent to disabled veterans' plight. In a remarkable critical turn, she contends that approaching mendicant texts precisely for their fictionality and serial or generic authorship allows us to apprehend the actual deprivation from which these people suffered. Moving beyond the need to find "proof" of intersectional oppression, Franzino suggests that mendicant performativity outlines the social dynamics that produce disabled, impoverished subjects in the first instance.

In her article, "Picturing Poverty in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," Lori Merish similarly enlists the archive; here, she uses the photographic archive of the same era in order to trace a correspondence between the emerging conception of poverty as a social problem, rather than as an inevitable condition, and the emergence of the modern conception of childhood as a state of dependency. Tracing this correspondence in philanthropic photographic images of poor children, Merish shows that the modern appreciation for childhood innocence surfaced simultaneously and dovetails with the perceived innocence, which is to say, the representational authority, of the photographic medium. In this way, philanthropic photography of poor children in the mid-nineteenth century seeks to void what we have already described here as the threatening alterity of the poor. Merish, considering the work of pioneering urban reformer Samuel B. Halliday and his collaborator, the photographer Richard A. Lewis, before she turns to an examination of "the literary afterlife" of Halliday's images in Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* (1868), argues that mid-nineteenth-century visual and

literary imagery of poverty configured the poor as morally legible by picturing their deprivation; in this sense, she advances Franzino's reading, with regard to Civil War writing, of the fraught deprivation narratives of mendicant texts. "Picturing Poverty" thus also contributes to this special issue's taking issue with historical and ongoing efforts to render the poor and poverty itself apprehensible through narratives of incapacity and privation. Merish builds on our critique not only in showing how philanthropic photographs of poor children act as a form of capture but also by further arguing that this body of photography and the literature it haunts, as seen in Alger, signifies a willingness on the part of the subject to be captured, to be made visible, a willingness that renders its subject worthy of philanthropic resources.

In "There 'Ain't Any Chance to Rise in the Paper Business: Horatio Alger, Newsboys, and the Racialization of Poverty," Emily Gowen picks up where Merish left off, with a resonant study of what, she argues, is literature's historical dependence on—rather than transcendence of—a mass print culture supported by the economic exploitation of another group of urban minors: newsboys. Like Merish, Gowen contends that Alger valorizes the impoverished adolescent who surrenders to surveillance, a willing capitulation that Alger associates with Anglo-Saxon whiteness. But in her readings of *Ragged Dick* and *Rough and Ready* (1869), Gowen takes a different tack, seeing in these novels a challenge to the nineteenth-century notion that cultural literacy could be a source of upward mobility for the newsboy. She thus interrogates and departs from the dominant reading of Alger as an apologist for philanthropic paternalism. Alger's imagining of "a workable path up and out of poverty" through self-making, Gowen claims, actually functions to expose the impossibility of any class or individual transcending social and economic forces. In this way, Gowen's reading of Alger's novels treats literature as a reflexive mode capable of autocriticism in its laying bare the bankruptcy of the liberal notions of progress and the self on which literary value has historically been predicated. In this treatment of literature, Gowen does the work for which this special issue calls, that of identifying rhetorical practices of enclosure within a set of texts and recognizing narrative countermovements within the same set of texts.

Such reflexivity is expertly on display in Cody C. St. Clair's "The Scene of Eviction: Reification and Resistance in Depression-Era Narratives of Dispossession." St. Clair locates the problems of housing and homelessness at the center of modernism during the 1930s. Against the backdrop of newspaper reports on proliferating evictions (such

reportage was a genre growing popular by the day with its pathologization of the poor), St. Clair compares eviction scenes in H. T. Tsiang's *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), with passing but perceptive treatment of works by Langston Hughes, Jacob Lawrence, and others. This comparison produces both a material and aesthetic intersectionality: according to St. Clair, Tsiang uses a "flat" Cubist aesthetic, Ellison a "thick" collagist one, and together these horizontal and vertical approaches reflect the entanglements of racial and class mechanisms. St. Clair ultimately shows how these authors exploit the internal contradictions of dispossession. Forms of reification, St. Clair argues, are both marks of structural violence and means for being otherwise, for practicing alternative and potentiating ways of relating to housing and of building coalitions.

Continuing this vein of transfiguration, Crystal S. Rudds explores the manner in which literary representations bring to light individual and collective capacities that are typically rendered invisible by dominant discourses of urban poverty as a form of pathological failure. Rudds's essay, "On Perspective and Value: Black Urbanism, Black Interiors, and Public Housing Fiction," examines literary representations of one of the most recognizable, highly charged, and racialized spaces of poverty in US society—public housing, which prevailing depictions tend to render as a realm of abject Blackness, crime, and human incapacity that is effectively beyond repair or redemption. To exceed these reifying frames, Rudds contends, is a matter of both literary history and literary critical method; it requires knowing not only where to look—in this case, Frank London Brown's novel *Trumbull Park* (1959) and Jasmon Drain's short story collection *Stateway's Garden* (2020), both part of a larger tradition of public housing fiction—but also how to read, in this instance, phenomenologically, through the grounded, subjective perspectives of public housing residents themselves, rather than through an exterior perspective that sees "the ghetto" as a symbol of material and cultural impoverishment. Reading public housing fiction phenomenologically, Rudds contends, makes visible what Elizabeth Alexander calls "the Black interior," interior spaces of relation and sociality that lie beyond, and implicitly refuse and refute, the often condescending or castigating disciplinary gaze of the social and behavioral sciences. Thus, writing the social life of physical spaces—apartments, hallways, kitchens, and bedrooms—produces "a countercultural value system that speaks back to outsider rhetorical claims." Public housing fiction offers an encounter with and an understanding of poverty, but it does so through the place- and

value-making practices, relations, and struggles of residents rather than the pity, contempt, or fear of external commentators.

Together, these essays stage what is at stake in how literature understands poverty, elucidating not only the problem of poverty but also, and especially, the problem of how we see it. To see poverty differently, they might conclude, is not only a matter of *what* we see. It is a matter of reflecting on *how* we see. This work of reflection brings us to the art that graces this issue's cover: Kevin Lane's "Beats per Minute." Lane's painting mimics a mirror. It is an abstraction sensitively grounded in the material conditions of poverty, which have everything to do with the conditions of perspective. His inkblot technique, a paper fold (hold) that becomes a kaleidoscope, brings looking into crisis: color under duress should not be able to do that. The sheer visual force of it, its exuberance, its use of brown that fades with surprise into purple, pink, yellow, and green, all figured as a heart—to enter these pages this way is to disrupt all of poverty's knee-jerk associations: darkness, deprivation, and so on. It is to look at vibrant forms of life and living hidden behind structures of confinement. We see wings that are more than wings, hence a heart that is more than a heart, more than what a body bears behind a cage. With Lane, as with everyone else in this volume, we mean not only to look again. We mean to look differently.

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**Joseph Entin** is professor of English and American Studies at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. He is coeditor of three books and the author of *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America* (2007) and *Living Labor: Fiction, Film, and Precarious Work*, which is forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press in its Class: Culture series.

**Irvin Hunt** is associate professor of English and African American Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His first book is *Dreaming the Present: Time, Aesthetics, and the Black Cooperative Movement* (2022). His articles have appeared in *American Literature*, *American Literary History*, *Public Books*, *Contemporaries at Post45*, *American Quarterly*, and elsewhere. His work has received awards from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the John W. Kluge Foundation, and the NAACP. As a 2022–23 Helen Corley Petit Scholar, he is completing his second book, *Edgelands: A Journey through Black Communes in the US and Beyond*.

**Kinohi Nishikawa** is associate professor of English and African American Studies at Princeton University. He is the author of *Street Players: Black Pulp Fiction and the Making of a Literary Underground* (2018). His writing on class and gender politics in African American print culture has been published in *American Literary History*, the *Edinburgh History of Reading*, and in the collection *Are You Entertained? Black Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (2020).

## Notes

- 1 *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Poverty,” <https://www.oed-com.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/149126?redirectedFrom=poverty#eid> (accessed April 14, 2022).
- 2 A search of the *New York Times* reveals no coverage of Alston’s American sojourn, although the paper did cover Alston’s ensuing trip to the United Kingdom.
- 3 See Wacquant 2009 and Goldstein 2021.
- 4 A notable exception here is the contemporary Poor People’s Campaign, which aims “to build a broad, fusion movement that could unite poor and impacted communities across the country.” <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/>.
- 5 See Lewis 1959, 1966.
- 6 Salamon (2010: 175) argues that poverty works to force the poor “relentlessly into the present.”
- 7 John Marsh (2011: 606) notes that “American literature itself could be said to begin with the problem of poverty and inequality,” while “countless American writers . . . have at one point or another turned their thinking or their art toward the question of poverty.”
- 8 John Allen (2004: 11) similarly notes that criticism on themes of homelessness has largely taken up literary romanticism or realism, categories, he argues, that should be questioned.

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