

# Table of Contents

## **Editorial**

Sarah Attfield and Liz Giuffre

## **Articles**

**Refusing the Sentimental Italian Immigration Story in Denise Giardina's *Storming Heaven***

Nancy Caronia

**Middletown Lives through Middle-Class Eyes: *Hillbilly Elegy* and the Problem with the "Liberal Media"**

Sharon Zechowski

**A Study of Self-Estrangement Among Fast-Food Workers**

Bethany Haworth

Daniel Auerbach

Jennifer Tabler

**What does it mean to be working class? Exploring the definition of a social class identity through the eyes of working-class professional services and administrative staff in Russell Group universities.**

Jess Pilgrim-Brown

## **Personal Essays**

**Preparing Working-Class Academics for Success**

Kenneth Oldfield

**The Man with a Million Names: A Personal Essay on Transit Work**

Fred S. Naiden

## **Commentary/Analysis**

**Community Inequalities and Children's Life Chances in the United States**

Lawrence M. Eppard

Kayla Dalhouse

Erik Nelson, Brigham Young University

## **Poetry**

**Motorcycle on my mind**

Ian C Smith

## **Book Reviews**

**Kelley, Blair LM (2023) *Black Folk: The Roots of the Black Working Class*. Liveright.**

Review by Venise Wagner

**Zweig, Michael (2023) *Class, Race, and Gender: Challenging the Injuries and Divisions of Capitalism*. PM Press.**

Review by Jeff Crosby

**Geronimus, A. (2023) *Weathering. The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society*. Little Brown.**

Review by Jamie Daniel

**Taylor, Y. (2022) *Working-Class Queers*. Pluto Press.**

Review by Erin Heiser

**O'Sullivan, S. (2022) *Reality TV's Real Men of the Recession: White Masculinity In Crisis and the Rise of Trumpism*. Lexington Books.**

Review by Jennifer Forsberg

**Entin, J. (2023). *Living Labor: Fiction, Film, and Precarious Work*. University of Michigan Press.**

Review by Tracy Floreani

**Cowie, Jefferson (2022) *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power*. Basic Books.**

Review by Scott Henkel

**Erlich, Mark (2023) *The Way We Build: Restoring Dignity To Construction Work*. University of Illinois Press.**

Review by Richard Rowe

**Schennum, Jill (2023) *As Goes Bethlehem: Steelworkers and the Restructuring of an Industrial Working Class*. Vanderbilt University Press.**

Review by Chris Walley

**Deeren, R.S. (2023) *Enough to Lose*. Wayne State University Press.**

Review by Jim Daniels

# Volume 8 Issue 2: Editorial

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As 2023 comes to a close there are many people around the world suffering due to war and conflict. We look for some kind of hope amid the terror and despair and are drawn towards acts of solidarity and collectivism between working-class people within communities and across borders. This might be small acts of mutual aid, or larger organised collective action in the form of strikes. We see working-class people speak at rallies and protests, standing up for their rights and showing support for those who don't have a voice. It is crucial to find this hope and to be optimistic about a better future for all working-class people wherever they may be.

The Journal of Working-Class Studies (and the Working-Class Studies Association more generally) plays a small part in these networks of solidarity. We see this through the scholarship, thoughtful personal essays, creative works and the book reviews that we are lucky enough to publish. It is reassuring to know that there are people who are committed to advocating on behalf of working-class people.

In this issue we have four scholarly articles, two personal essays, one commentary piece, a poem and ten book reviews. Once again, the works included in the Journal show the variety and diversity of work within the field of working-class studies.

The issue starts with two articles focusing on working-class literature – Nancy Caronia's 'Refusing the Sentimental Italian Immigration Story in Denise Giardina's *Storming Heaven*' and Sharon Zechowski's *Middletown Lives through Middle-Class Eyes: Hillbilly Elegy and the Problem with the "Liberal Media"*. Caronia challenges the typical male focus of Italian immigration narratives and argues that Giardina's novel places the experiences of her female protagonist front and center, illustrating the hardships faced by immigrant women to the US in the early twentieth century. Zechowski offers an analysis of J.D. Vance's novel *Hillbilly Elegy* and suggests that the book contributes to a fetishisation of the white working class.

Following is an article about the alienation (in the Marxist sense of the word) experienced by fast food workers in the US. In 'A Study of Self-Estrangement Among Fast-Food Workers', Bethany Haworth, Daniel Auerbach and Jennifer Tabler measure levels of self-estrangement among different employment categories in the fast food industry and show that workers with lower wages and levels of job stability are more likely to experience self-estrangement.

Next is 'What does it mean to be working class? Exploring the definition of a social class identity through the eyes of working-class professional services and administrative staff in Russell Group universities' by Jess Pilgrim-Brown. In this article Pilgrim-Brown explores the experiences of professional services staff with working-class backgrounds in the UK Higher Education sector and considers what a working-class identity means in this setting.

Two personal essays follow. In ‘Preparing Working-Class Academics for Success’ Kenneth Oldfield offers sage advice to working-class academics based on his own experience as a ‘stranger in paradise’<sup>1</sup> and Fred S Naiden provides an historical narrative about New York transit workers in ‘The Man with a Million Names: A Personal Essay on Transit Work’.

An analysis of inequalities among children is the last article in this issue. Lawrence M. Eppard, Kayla Dalhouse, Erik Nelson and Jenna Robbins offer a discussion of the types of factors that lead to childhood inequalities in ‘Community Inequalities and Children’s Life Chances in the United States’.

A poem by Ian C Smith follows – ‘Motorcycle on my mind’ evokes a teenage boy’s memory as the narrator finds himself back in an old neighbourhood.

This issue also has ten book reviews, edited by Christie Launius. The topics of the books is extremely diverse with books on Black working-class history, the intersections of class, race and gender, public health, working-class queer experience, working-class masculinity in reality television, precarious labour on film and in fiction, the problematic history of white freedom, construction workers, steelworkers and a collection of short stories. The variety is once again impressive and very welcome.

We wish all of our readers, authors and supporters a good start to 2024 and hope that the new year brings us a step closer to a more just world.

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<sup>1</sup> With a nod here to Ryan, J. & Sackrey, C. (1984). *Strangers in paradise: Academics from the working class*. South End Press

# Refusing the Sentimental Italian Immigration Story in Denise Giardina's *Storming Heaven*<sup>1</sup>

Nancy Caronia, West Virginia University

## Abstract

This article examines how Denise Giardina's award-winning novel *Storming Heaven* offers a counterpoint to views of early twentieth-century Italian immigration to the US that rely on assimilationist conclusions. The story of Sicilian immigrant Rosa Angelelli is embedded within the fictional retelling of West Virginia labor history known as the Mine Wars. Giardina creates a female immigrant protagonist who makes plain the abuse and trauma Italian immigrant women and girls face. This point-of-view is normally obfuscated in favor of a male immigrant's perspective, but Rosa's story is neither ignored nor erased. As one of four protagonists in the novel, Rosa's fractured remembrances are told through a halting discourse, revealing her isolation and the danger that awaits her no matter the choices she makes. Taking from Loretta Baldassar and Donna Gabaccia's ideas on personal intimacy, Rosa's struggles are not an exception, but an object lesson in how immigrant women and girls are often left with no means to develop community or intimacy, endangering their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

## Keywords

Denise Giardina, *Storming Heaven*, Italian immigration narratives, Mine Wars, historical fiction, West Virginia, Italian female immigrants

In *Storming Heaven* (1987), award-winning author Denise Giardina fictionalizes the West Virginia Mine Wars of the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> The novel's narrative is shared among four protagonists who rotate point-of-view. Their differing stakes in the coalmining community and geographic region illuminate how injustice serves the profit margin. Mayor of the racially integrated and independent town of Annadel, C.J. Marcum also serves as co-editor of the *Annadel Free Press*, but he disappears from the narrative after he is shot by one of the Baldwin-Felts men assigned to remove miners and their families from their company housing.<sup>3</sup> Surrogate son to Marcum, Rondal Lloyd is a miner who becomes a strike organizer while Carrie Bishop, who receives the most narrative space in the novel, is a nurse and labor activist. The last central protagonist is Rosa

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank Ann Pancake, Anna Elfenbein, and the peer reviewers for their insightful and generous reads of previous drafts. This research was supported by a fellowship from the West Virginia Humanities Council.

<sup>2</sup> From 1912 to 1921, coalminers in West Virginia fought to unionize; collectively known as the Mine Wars, this series of strikes did not bring about fair wages and safer working conditions, but instead the US government's intervention on behalf of the coalmine owners (Blizzard, 2010; Corbin, 2011; Savage & Savage Ayers, 2018; and Lawrence, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Marcum is born on his family's land, which was stolen by the railroad in the 1890s and then sold to Lytton Davidson's American Coal Company. His narrative focuses on regaining his family's land.

Angelelli, a Sicilian immigrant and wife to one of the coal miners. While Carrie's, C.J.'s, and Rondal's perspectives drive the story of the labor strikes, Rosa's offers up an intimate portrait of how immigrant women are moved like cargo from one continent to another with little consideration given for what they want or need. Rosa experiences physical and mental violence, leaving her vulnerable. She never develops alliances or affinities with anyone in her community, endangering not only her survival, but also her sons'.<sup>4</sup> The intimacy of Rosa's story, told in short, half-remembered snippets interspersed between the more directly focused narratives on the Mine Wars history, makes clear how suffocating immigration can be for women and girls who relocate to rural environments in the US.

Before her arrival in the small southern West Virginia town of Davidson, named after the mine owner Lytton Davidson, Rosa's agency is compromised. Her father forces Rosa to marry the Sicilian immigrant Mario Angelelli for his earning potential as a coalminer. This arranged marriage will provide funds to feed Rosa's father's other seven children. He orders her to "go and send back money" since, in his worldview, a woman can be of no "help" except as a commodity (Giardina, 1988, pp. 49-50). His demand suggests that Rosa has no use beyond the financial gain her body will provide her family upon marriage. The teenager's forced immigration removes her from her community and her mother's comfort and protection.<sup>5</sup> Once married and in West Virginia, she will have no guidance or companions. Rosa's isolation is exacerbated by a husband who does not want intimacy with his wife, but only a body to cook, clean, and birth sons.

Robert Viscusi argues that Italian immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century "were entering ... a large transnational and transactional space" (2018, p. 617), but for someone like *Storming Heaven's* Rosa, the US becomes a place of conscription rather than connection and opportunity. Rosa's father's economic need usurps any choice that Rosa might make for herself. Her body becomes an object used to barter a better financial circumstance for her family in Palermo and to assist her husband in making a home in Davidson.<sup>6</sup> Rosa's husband does not see her as a partner, leaving her without any close connections in this rural environment. Personal intimacy, as sociologists Loretta Baldassar and Donna Gabaccia point out, is "central to the development of human life around the world in the twentieth ... and twenty-first centuries" (2011, p. 4); however, Rosa is denied any ties beyond her position as an object to be owned and traded. Two decades later, after her sons die in a mine collapse and her husband abandons her, none of her family in Sicily or Davidson's local community try to assist her, or even recognize that she needs help. The mine owner Davidson takes advantage of her situation and grief. He moves Rosa into his home, ostensibly as his maid, but there is an intimation that he sexually assaults her. Her forced and

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa Lowe connects intimacy to the "residual" and "emergent" forms of "alliance, affinity, and society" that those on the margins and beyond urban centers must learn to convey and to create (2015, p. 19).

<sup>5</sup> While Rosa's age is never disclosed, her memories of Palermo are that of a young girl. Rosa remembers her mother allowing her to sit on her lap while she feeds her daughter "oranges" and calling Rosa "bambina" (baby girl—my translation), a term of endearment for a child or adolescent (Giardina, 1988, p. 49). In Palermo, Rosa chases butterflies and cries when they die. These memories suggest that Rosa is no more than 18 years of age when she arrives in Davidson.

<sup>6</sup> In the early twentieth century, Sicilian immigrant men sent back millions of lire to their families. According to Linda Reeder: "Savings deposits [in Italy] rose from approximately four million to more than six million lire between 1902 and 1906" and "[i]n 1907, emigrants sent more than fifty-five million lire to Sicily through international money orders from the Banco di Napoli" (2003, p. 148).

unacknowledged work, in addition to the brutality she suffers at the hands of her father, her husband, and the mine owner, is bound up in fulfilling men's aspirations and needs.

By confronting issues of domestic violence and gender subjugation within larger events, Giardina's *Storming Heaven* reframes the Mine Wars to center an Italian female immigrant story within this US labor history. The character of Rosa illuminates how generational trauma emanates from the process of immigration and unfair labor practices in American coalmining. Like other Italian American women writers who also focus on social justice issues, including violence against women and "sex and class oppression" (Giunta, 2002, pp. 120-121), Giardina's work serves as a counterpoint to sentimental portraits of Italian immigration that privilege close-knit families and assimilation as the goal.<sup>7</sup> *Storming Heaven*'s narrative illustrates how Italian immigration to the US does not always lead to success, especially for girls and women. Rosa undergoes an isolation that endangers her emotionally, mentally, and physically. Her voice stirs the residual embers of a scorched landscape to reveal the systemic and ubiquitous abuse and betrayal that Italian immigrant women and girls often face when forced to leave their homeland.<sup>8</sup>

### Italian Unification and Southern Italian Immigration to the US

Sicilian mass migration did not begin until 1896, twenty-five years after Italian unification when the southern and northern provinces of the Italian peninsula were joined together to become the Kingdom of Italy. Between 1901-1915 over 1.1 million Sicilians—mostly men and boys—emigrated from Italy; the US was their most preferred destination (Tirabassi, 2018, p. 123). Sicilians and other Southern Italians were driven from the new nation of Italy through government policies that were made by those in the northern regions where almost 75% of the new nation's income was "generated," but only a third of the population lived (Tirabassi, 2018, p. 117). Those in the south were left without "public works programs, transportation improvements, educational reforms, and badly needed irrigation projects" (Vellon, 2014, p. 16). Taxes and mortgage rates were raised, "compulsory military service" was added to further tax the poorest of the newly formed nation-state, and the *contadini* (peasants) were forced to take on more debt to maintain subsistence-living conditions (Tirabassi, 2018, p. 117). When Italians—especially Southern Italians—immigrated, they did so without "a collective Italian consciousness," and the "social, educational, and cultural divides" that expanded after Italian unification did not magically disappear when Southern Italian immigrants arrived in another country (Vellon, 2014, p. 16). These immigrants' loyalty remained with their *paese*, the towns where generations of their families had lived. Whatever money they made, many of these migrants hoped to send it to their families or bring it home themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> Memoirs like Louise DeSalvo's *Vertigo* (1996) and *Crazy in the Kitchen* (2004), Annie Lanzillotto's *L is for Lion: A Bronx Butch Freedom Tale* (2013) as well as fictional works like Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish* (1996) center the Italian immigrant U.S. urban experience over the rural one, which echo other more romantic and sentimental portrayals focused on Italian immigrant men, including Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969) and Jerre Mangione's *Mount Allegro* (1943). Even when Italian women immigrants are centered in scholarly texts, the focus is on subjects who have relocated to urban environments (Bencivenni, 2014; Fiore, 2017; and Guglielmo, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> While Working Class and Appalachian Studies scholars acknowledge the narrative complexity of *Storming Heaven* regarding labor rights and social justice issues, especially as it relates to the Mine Wars, they minimize or ignore the centrality of Italian immigration in and to the novel (Conway, 1999; Greene Eads, 2013; Greene Eads, 2012; Easton, 2000; and Fennell, 2021).

The coalmining industry strategically recruited from Southern Italy, but men and boys often immigrated without wives, mothers, or sisters.<sup>9</sup> When women or girls immigrated, they did so as part of a family unit rather than as “wage workers,” and, according to Linda Reeder, they “played crucial roles in creating communities and shaping notions of ethnicity” (2003, p. 7). Those who immigrated to rural environments had fewer opportunities and their experiences could be more isolating. Joan Saverino argues that Italian women’s agency was compromised whenever they moved from their homelands to the US, but immigration to rural towns was more burdensome. According to Saverino, Italian immigrants who relocated to Appalachia “were not able to form mutual aid associations that existed in urban areas where large concentrations of Italians lived together” (2014, p. 296). Instead, the Italian immigrant women and girls who arrived in West Virginia found themselves alone and with little opportunity to make friends, join networks, and develop communities beyond their immediate families due to language barriers and cultural differences.

For example, the immigrant Anna Guarascio was considered an expert teacher of embroidery in San Giovanni in Fiore in the Southern Italian province of Calabria, but she lost this status when she and her two small children joined her husband in the north-central coalfields of West Virginia in 1915 (Saverino, 2014, p. 281). Guarascio was “a stranger, both socially and culturally isolated” in West Virginia and this “rural isolation” within the confines of an undeveloped coal camp was unfamiliar and harsh to someone who was used to friends and family in the well-established town of San Giovanni in Fiore (Saverino, 2014, p. 295).<sup>10</sup> Even though she desired to join her husband, Guarascio was not prepared for the loneliness or her loss of status. When she met one other Italian immigrant woman in the coal camp, her life changed for the better; the two women became lifelong friends and their families interacted as one.

*Storming Heaven*’s Rosa never finds a friend. She is a teenager who has learned how to sew, but she does not have enough life experience to be viewed as a master embroiderer or teacher. Her youth leaves her without the tools to survive in a new community and her status as a newlywed leaves her vulnerable to misunderstandings about her place in the community. Detrimentially affected by the isolation, Rosa may have had more opportunities to find and create community or ask for assistance in an urban environment like New York City or Chicago, but Rosa’s breakdown is in part due to how alone she is, not just how alone she feels. In Tina De Rosa’s *Paper Fish*, Edvige Giunta argues, the immigrant character of Sarah suffers a “cultural dislocation” that is both “disorienting” and unsettling (2002, p. 56). Although their circumstances are different—Sarah is a Lithuanian immigrant who marries an Italian immigrant—both Rosa and Sarah lack the means to change their circumstances. While Sarah lives in Chicago where the promise of community is larger, both she and Rosa are estranged from their primary communities. Additionally, Rosa has no confidants or friends within the town. She notices the “very pale” women in “faded” clothes who “turn their heads [away from her] and whisper” when Rosa passes them in her red skirt

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<sup>9</sup> According to Tirabassi, “[I]n the first decades of the Great Migration was an influx of agents and subagents who traveled throughout [Italy] recruiting young men on behalf of the shipping companies. In 1901, when a law was passed to prohibit it, there were more than 10,000 agents. From that point on the most likely source of information directing migrants toward the Americas came from the persons who wrote or returned with their stories” (2018, p. 123).

<sup>10</sup> Coal camp is the place where the coalmine and the workers’ homes occupy the same space. Towns often sprung up around coal camps to further support the coalmines. In *Storming Heaven*, the town of Davidson sprung up around the multiple coal mines that Davidson has started. The Angelellis live at the Number 6 coal camp, about a mile from Davidson’s center.



(Giardina, 1988, p. 50). This description suggests that the women could be jealous of her youth and beauty or that they are not welcoming to immigrants who do not speak English. It could also be that the women suspect something untoward since she has obtained a job as Davidson's maid; perhaps they even know what happened to his last maid. No matter what they are whispering, Rosa does not understand. She internalizes the difference as something that is wrong with the color of her skirt. She wears bright colors while their clothes are lifeless and dull. She could not know that her red skirt may signal to them that she is sexually promiscuous or, more simply, marks her as an outsider to the area.

The Appalachian women are not the only ones who talk about Rosa. School age boys yell out "dago" as she walks past them (Giardina, 1988, p. 50). In the nineteenth century, the "disparaging term" dago was used interchangeably for "Italians as well as Hispanics" and classified [an individual] as being 'in between' the Caucasian and African races" (Luconi, 2010, p. 34). An 1890 Congressional Committee on immigration heard from "the foreman of a construction company [who] stated, ... that an Italian was not a 'white man' but rather a 'dago'" (Luconi, 2010, p. 34). Immigrants are often categorized as "in-between peoples" and their statuses become ambivalent, not due to a lack of papers or citizenship, but because of racist and ethnic stereotypes that become normalized in public discourse (Roediger, 2005, p. 12; Higham, 1983; Orsi, 1992; Vellon, 2014; and Vellon, 2018). Southern Italians who immigrated to the US were seen as "racially 'other'" due not only to their darkened complexions, but also to what was viewed as their "primitive" cultural practices (Guglielmo, 2009, p. 9). Southern Italians may be of European ancestry, but in *Storming Heaven*, those of English, Irish, and Scottish descent do not see a kinship and reject any comparisons.

While it is not surprising that Rosa faces this type of racialized discrimination, her response is curious. She chooses to tell Mario, who threatens to "kill" the boys (Giardina, 1988, p. 50). During work in the coalmines, Mario has assuredly heard the word used against him and his fellow Sicilian immigrants. His response to Rosa's story is more about his honor and respect than Rosa's, but if he chose to find the boys and physically hurt them, it would leave Rosa more alone than she already is. Rosa must recognize that she is not safe anywhere in the town even if she has no real understanding of why. Her disorienting feeling of displacement emanates from her lack of positive connections. She cannot reach out to anyone for context and never comes to understand why the boys insult her and the women whisper behind her back. Those who do engage with her—her husband, her father, and the mine owner—only do so for what she provides, not for who she is.

Mario and Rosa are not brought together by this discrimination. Rather, the emotional chasm between the married couple leaves Rosa vulnerable to physical and verbal abuse. Any attempt by Rosa to form a bond with her husband is met with disdain and anger. Mario could create a real partnership with his wife since his body too is seen as a commodity. Rosa's husband is the star of Davidson's American Coal Company amateur baseball team. Mario's baseball skills eventually allow him a path out of the coalmine, but he is still beholden to Davidson for his and his family's survival. He may be lonely and frustrated, but he punishes Rosa for Davidson's chokehold on Mario as well as the coalmining industry's unfair labor practices. Rosa and Mario's relationship is based upon her ability to maintain the home he desires, but she can never meet his goals. He berates her every chance he gets. He keeps all pleasure and comfort from his wife, including the means to properly heat the house when he is not at home (Giardina, 1988, p. 50).

This lack of simple necessities forces Rosa to live in a kind of survival mode. One cold day she sneaks a sip of Mario's homemade wine to keep the chill from her bones. Mario is enraged when he discovers what she has done with his property. He views Rosa as something he owns and punishes her accordingly. He "hit[s]" her and calls her an "*ubbriaca* [drunk]" (Giardina, 1988, p. 50). The irony here is that Mario comes home most nights and drinks himself to sleep, but he holds such control over her that he marks his bottle so no one else can drink the wine without his permission. While she has no power in her home or the town of Davidson, she does possess power narratively. Even though Mario calls her a drunk, the narrative does not support this perspective. She understands the difference between "Tally wine," which is sweet, and Spanish wine, which is "sour like an olive," but Mario controls how and when she drinks this homemade wine (Giardina, 1988, p. 50). When Rosa takes some without Mario's approval, she does so as a last resort. She is cold and thinks the wine will help her cope with the bitter winter weather that she has not acclimated to since leaving Sicily. Mario rages due to his lack of control in this situation; he feels mistreated and disrespected. He also carries fear that the townspeople will believe his wife is a drunk. This view centers Mario and his reputation and gives little thought to Rosa's needs.

Even with the singularity of her perspective, Rosa does not argue or defend herself—her thoughts about what has happened remain flat and unconnected. The only clue given that she knows Mario behaves inappropriately is her shift in focus. Her perspective moves from Mario's physical and verbal abuse of her to his "whip[ping]" of their sons (Giardina, 1988, p. 50). By contextualizing Mario's behavior in this manner, Rosa reveals how her husband views both her and their sons as his property. Bereft of any sense of self, she has no way to defend herself or her sons from Mario's violent disposition.

What further complicates this construction is the house in which the Angelellis live does not belong to them; it belongs to Davidson. Mario leases a company house in the Number 6 coal camp within the town of Davidson; when Mario is no longer useful, the entire family could be forced to vacate the premises. Mario uses Rosa's presence to elevate his own position beyond that of being beholden to the mine company for everything he has, including his income and house. He views any action she takes or anyone's reaction to her as an attack on his manhood and respectability. Mario cannot fathom a partnership with his wife when he too struggles as an immigrant. He wants autonomy in a new space, but the all-encompassing control of the coalmine denies him that respect. Rosa and their children suffer for her husband's inability to see past his own needs and fears.

Mario moves within the public sphere, but Rosa has no warmth in her life literally and figuratively. The only coping mechanism she possesses is a retreat into the past. Her memories are mostly a nostalgia that embraces her mother's comfort. When Mario insults her or becomes physically abusive, and when the mine owner Davidson takes advantage of her good nature, she retreats into recollections of her abbreviated childhood. Barely more than a teenager after birthing three sons, Rosa recalls sitting on her mother's lap while the older woman "[fed her] oranges" (Giardina, 1988, p. 49). This reminiscence is one of the few that give Rosa pleasure, but memories cannot be asked for advice or provide physical support. In losing herself to the past, Rosa's singularity stands in stark relief to the rest of the Davidson community who intermingle and rely on each other for everything from basic needs to strike organizing. Rosa's life contrasts the closeness around her. She spends years talking to a woman she saw for the last time when she was barely a teenager

placed on a ship bound for the US. This woman saw Rosa more as a “sister” than a daughter (Giardina, 1988, p. 50). Rosa remembers her mother as kind and nurturing, forgetting that her mother had no power to stop her husband from sending Rosa to West Virginia. Her mother is the only one that sees Rosa off at the dock when the girl leaves for the US, ostensibly to make sure she gets on the ship. Rosa fantasizes about seeing her mother again and leaving Mario while her “hair is still black” (Giardina, 1988, p. 50). Even though Rosa becomes a mother and wife, she still desires the love a mother has for a small child—although even that relationship is problematic since her mother was more likely no more than a teenager when she gave birth to her eldest child Rosa.

Rosa’s fixation on her mother springs from, in part, the lack of connection she has with the other women in the town of Davidson. There may not be other Sicilian women immigrants in the coal camp; the Sicilian men who immigrated may have had their families remain in Sicily or they may not be married.<sup>11</sup> As a married woman, she would be forbidden to speak to the Sicilian coalminers or any male at all. Any interaction with a man or boy who is not her husband would be seen as an offense punishable however Mario saw fit. Her position as Mario’s wife limits with whom Rosa interacts. This situation is further exacerbated by the few people—man or woman—who may understand her language since she speaks dialect and has limited English.<sup>12</sup> Rosa’s lack of female companionship means she has few interactions, save for the mine owner, where she might learn standard Italian or English.

This lack of community causes Rosa to rely on the memories of her mother. Rosa turns to thoughts of her mother and Palermo whenever a new wound is inflicted, and, in this way, she maintains the connection “to the people and places [she] supposedly left behind” even if it is only in her mind (Gabaccia, 2012, p. 2). Rosa remembers her mother to keep “an all-consuming displacement” from completely overwhelming her (Giunta, 2002, p. 44). For Rosa, the nature of her location, her standing as a new wife in an unhappy marriage, and her lack of English language skills lead to the unstable and difficult position in which she finds herself. She is not embraced by a network of immigrants, nor does she become a member or even a leader of an immigrant women’s circle. Rosa is alone and abused. The suffocating spaces Rosa must move between do not become nurturing or renewing, but new sites of trauma. Her husband and the mine owner take advantage of Rosa due, in no small part, to a lack of community support.

Normally, a story like Rosa’s would supplement a dominant narrative about someone like Mario, her husband. Her strife and struggle would be subsumed by a positive immigrant story of struggle, success, and assimilation. Rather than minimize a Southern Italian immigrant woman, Giardina centers Rosa’s story within a larger narrative focused on an important historical era. Her unsuccessful immigration narrative is sewn to a larger framework focused on Appalachian workers’ rights and the largest labor uprising in the US during the twentieth century. *Storming Heaven*’s embroidered narrative illustrates how capitalistic greed affects everyone in the town no

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<sup>11</sup> According to Maddalena Tirabassi, “Emigrants were mostly young men who migrated in groups from the same town.... Migrants intended to return after having earned a decent amount of money. ... Women and children followed the man only if he decided to remain” (2018, p. 124). In this way, Rosa is an anomaly since she is married to Mario and immediately sent to the US.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Carnevale suggests, “Immigrants were not only exposed to English for the first time, but to other immigrant languages as well, including in the Italian case, different regional dialects and standard Italian” (2009, p. 11).

matter their status or proximity to the coalmines. Everyone suffers, but Rosa's plight gives voice to the least among the workers and their families. The outcome of protests and strikes for fair wages and working conditions will never be for Rosa a success or failure.

## Labor and Immigration

As Jill Fennell argues, *Storming Heaven* "is an excellent case study for looking at how labor is represented aesthetically in fiction for social justice purposes" (2021, p. 35).<sup>13</sup> Fennell notes that Rosa's subject position makes her vulnerable to the mine owner "as a sex worker," but this label is misleading (2021, p. 42).<sup>14</sup> Rosa's work history is complicated by her multiple positions as immigrant, married woman, and mother. There is no indication in the text that she is ever employed or used as a sex worker, but there is cause to believe she has been sexually assaulted. Beholden to both the mine owner and her husband, Rosa is limited in how she might defend herself. Both Davidson and Mario objectify her, but as a representation of capitalism Davidson pigeonholes Rosa as "my best maid," even better than the one he employs "in Philadelphia," where his wife lives because she refuses to live somewhere so "dirty" (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). This kind of linguistic violence sets up Rosa as a servant who is expected to be "dirty" in all the ways that the mine owner might want to use her, but it still does not make her a sex worker (Giardina, 1988, p. 68).

Like her husband Mario, Davidson is not only linguistically, but also physically violent. Rosa recalls how the mine owner "stretch[ed] out his hand and touch[ed] the cutwork" of her hand-stitched white chemise when she cleans his home (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). He states "[s]o pretty" as he touches the bodice of the blouse, but what he finds aesthetically pleasing remains obscured by Rosa's point-of-view (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). If he admires "the cutwork"—the one thing that belongs to her—there could be a passive demand for her to create something especially for him. The "[s]o pretty" could refer to the whiteness of the chemise itself. His declaration and promiscuous physicality could also be symbolic of Rosa's naiveté and his desire to "dirty" her with his body through forced sex (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). Rosa occludes the truth of the situation in which she finds herself. Her awareness of his impropriety is shown only in her deflection. She ignores his touch while acknowledging the chemise's embroidery as her own.

Rosa names the work "*punto tagliato*," which is a particular kind of Italian embroidery also known as cutwork (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). The fabric is purposefully cut and then filled or connected with other pieces of cloth. The intricate nature of this needlework requires precision and patience to complete the complex patterns that are at odds with each other. The work is labor intensive. While many Italian immigrant women used their needlework as seamstresses in factories or through piecework in tenement workshops, Rosa does not have an opportunity to take this work beyond the personal or the mine owner's need. Rosa uses her explanation of her work to deflect the mine owner's carnality. Her response prompts him to ask Rosa to "stitch [his] pillowcases," but Rosa

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<sup>13</sup> Published in 1987, *Storming Heaven* seems like a direct response to President Ronald Reagan's firing of 11,345 striking air traffic controllers on August 5, 1981, and A. T. Massey Coal Co. President E. Morgan Massey's refusal to sign the United Mine Workers agreement with the Bituminous Coal Operators Association on October 1, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Fennell offers no other context to support this claim; it is the only time Fennell mentions Rosa. William Jolliff acknowledges Rosa is "taken advantage of sexually by her (and her husband's) employer, Lytton Davidson" and that when he moves her into his house after her sons are killed, "he continues to use her sexually, then, even in her destitution and mental illness" (2020, p. 68).

has no choice (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). She is his maid, and her husband works in Davidson's coalmine. The couple lives in a company house leased to Mario. She will do what he wants. She has pride in her work, but once she leaves Sicily, she no longer has control for whom she creates these intricate works, nor can she generate a profit from her expertise.

Mary Jo Bona suggests that fictional characters such as Annunziata in Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939) and Octavia in Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964) sew in order for their families to "survive" (2014, p. 150). Rosa's position is different; Mario's work provides necessities for the family, including a home in which to live. If Rosa receives financial remuneration for her work, it is never stated how much or what these funds might provide for the family or for her. She never has access to money, including sums she might receive for the work she does for Davidson. Perhaps the Angelelli family leases the company house at a discount, receives extra scrip for the company store, or her earnings are simply turned over to Mario. No matter the circumstance, she receives no monetary recompense for the labor she does for Davidson or Mario. This lack of income places her in danger whenever she thinks for herself or attempts to enact a cultural ritual. When she wants to pay respects to the dead or the Virgin Mary by lighting a candle at the church, she is reduced to "steal[ing] a penny from Mario" (Giardina, 1988, p. 168). Her husband is viewed as the head of the household and the provider. Subsequently, when her boys are old enough, they are forced to work in the mines and for Davidson's baseball team. The male members of her family are the ones who are seen to have value. Their labor may be dangerous and suffocating, but their work elevates Mario Angelelli's status. Rosa's labor is expected and rendered invisible except when Davidson notices her for his own pleasure.

The embroidery skill Rosa has learned from her mother and other Sicilian women in her *paese* is not life-sustaining or financially rewarding, but destructive to Rosa's mental and physical health. While she may take pride in her sewing, this "marker of identity" places her in jeopardy (Giunta and Sciorra, 2014, p. 4). Her embroidery skill makes her an object of desire and puts her in the path of Davidson's "dirty" touch (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). The type of needlework in which Rosa works—*punto tagliato*—mirrors the fracturing of her mind as she recalls dangerous interludes including when Davidson touches her chemise. Her thought process and memories are shared through incomplete sentences and confusing time jumps.

As Edvige Giunta suggests, writing an Italian immigrant character within a US context means bridging gaps in memory and language. The issue is one not of translation, but of authority. For many Italian American women writers "'the master's language' has already become the 'native/mother tongue'" (Giunta, 2002, 47). In Giardina's case, the author chooses to obfuscate Rosa's dialect through the use of a halting and abbreviated English. The Italian that appears in *Storming Heaven* is mainly standard Italian, but "the cultural substratum of the ancestor's language" is being intimated, which is why Rosa barely speaks (Giunta, 2002, 47). Rosa's narrative comprises four short chapters in a 25-chapter novel and her discourse is a mixture of English, standard Italian, and silence. Rosa reveals the English used on the page is not the language she normally speaks or thinks when she says: "Baby. I say in inglese. You are my baby" (Giardina, 1988, p. 196). These sentences suggest that although her chapters are written mostly in English with some standard Italian sprinkled throughout, Rosa's memories and her conversation with others takes place in a Sicilian dialect that no one can understand except her husband. Since her

language is not represented on the page, Rosa is shown coping with any negative emotions or situations by moving quickly from one memory to another in languages that are not her own.

When Davidson reaches out to Rosa and tells her that she is his “best maid,” the young wife’s mind splits between past and present (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). Rosa recalls how “Senore Davidson” “comes to visit me here” followed by the one-word sentence “Once” (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). These two phrases—fragmented and incomplete—suggest she is not comfortable with Davidson and understands that she is in danger from his touch. The word “visit” in the first sentence is ironic (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). She is in Davidson’s house, but this word suggests that he makes time to seek her out while she is cleaning his home. Rather than completing her tasks without interruption, her labor becomes an observable and interactive public act. Davidson’s choice makes Rosa someone who is watched and an observer of the one who is watching her. Rosa recalls her conversations with Davidson from the point-of-view of someone who lacks any positive attention directed her way. There may have been a time when Rosa looked forward to Davidson’s interruptions, especially since he may seem genuinely interested in her and her work. He is also a central figure in the success or failure of the community and her family; she may feel pride that he takes time to “visit” her while she works in his house (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). The word also suggests that Davidson is ingratiating himself to Rosa even though she is his maid, another one of his many workers in the town named after him, which makes his actions suspect.

In a later remembrance, Rosa recalls how Davidson pontificates about the Latin names of the butterflies while she dusts the glass cases where his beloved collection is pinned. He patronizes her by suggesting that she should know the Latin names since Italian is a Latin derivative. Rosa shrugs ignorance, but she remembers one name he shares with her—the *Argynus* Diana—and promises herself that if she has a daughter, she will name her Diana (Giardina, 1988, p. 67).<sup>15</sup> Nancy Carnevale argues that “many immigrants experience their new worlds in translation” (Giardina, 1988, p. 80), and Rosa is no exception. Rosa’s silence and fractured sentences hint at both her inability to understand the danger she is in until it too late and why Rosa has a mental breakdown. In this scene, Davidson reveals his own ignorance about how little English Rosa speaks or understands. Rosa would not speak standard Italian. Her language would be rooted in a dialect and what little standard Italian she picked up along the way. She does not understand English well enough to explain these nuances, and she may be embarrassed or not understand or know how to discuss her *paese* and its relation to the nation of Italy. The conversation between them remains amiable if one-sided with Davidson doing most of the talking and Rosa nodding her head or imitating some of his words. Compared to how her husband and the young boys on the street yell at her and the women whisper behind her back, the mine owner seems interested in what Rosa thinks and knows. She may feel relief to be around Davidson, but he misinterprets the comfortability she exhibits in his presence.

The one-word sentence “Once” that follows the phrase “comes to visit me here” marks Rosa’s shift in understanding (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). When he touches the bodice of her blouse, his familiar stance suggests a former intimacy. Whether this contact is welcome or takes her by surprise, she knows that it places her in danger. Any interaction with a man who is not her husband would enrage Mario. Rosa’s utterance of “Once” reveals her worry that Davidson has become too informal with her (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). The word also indicates that she cannot refuse whatever

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<sup>15</sup> Rosa has four sons and never has another child.

he demands. Trapped by her need for community and conversation, the unsafe situation in which she now finds herself forces her to remain silent.

While Mario knows that his wife cleans Davidson's house, he would see any physical exchange, up to and including sexual assault as a transgression and embarrassment to himself. Her utterance of "Once" is the only indication that something occurred for which she was not prepared (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). It also reveals the precarious situation in which Rosa finds herself; she would be blamed for anything that might happen from a simple greeting to rape (Giardina, 1988, p. 68).<sup>16</sup> Davidson's crime becomes both Rosa's punishment and a secret she must keep if she wants to avoid further trauma at her husband's hands. She has no one with whom to share or to process what has happened or happens to her when she is cleaning Davidson's house. Other women in the town keep her at a distance. Their whispers suggest they are suspicious of her or her position. They may see Rosa as a threat to their own well-being and safety.

In some West Virginia coalmining towns, "the company store superintendent" issued Esau scrip so families could buy necessities on credit when husbands or sons were injured or unavailable for work in the mines (Kline, 2011, p. 80). Esau scrip, named after the brother in the bible who "sign[ed] away his birthright" for a meal, was a promissory note good for only 30 days (Kline, 2011, p. 81). What most women and certainly the men of the family did not know was that the wives and daughters were collateral on this debt. If the men were unable to go back to work within the time allotted, the debt had to be paid back by these women "submitting to the sexual depredations of the company men" (Kline, 2011, p. 82). Nowhere was this "bureaucratized rape" more apparent than at the Whipple Company Store in Fayette County (Kline, 2011, p. 81). Women renamed a room provided for trying on shoes as "the rape room" (Kline, 2011, p. 79). They would be brought to the third floor under the guise of seeing new shoes that had just arrived at the store, but once they were inside "the rape room" they were locked in until the Esau scrip was paid off in whatever way "the company men" found acceptable (Kline, 2011, p. 79). The women kept quiet about what happened to them since they did not want their husbands to retaliate and lose their jobs or their lives (Kline, 2011, p. 80). The women also did not think there could be any justice even if they spoke up.<sup>17</sup>

Their lack of agency is reflected in the position that Rosa occupies, not due to a literal representation of Esau scrip, but through Davidson's enactment of *seignoral* rights. Davidson founded the town and named it after himself. He serves as the de facto lord of the manor. He thinks he can do and does do what he wants with anyone or anything, including Rosa. Raping Rosa would not be viewed as uncommon when Mario is alive. Under this circumstance, like the women who were forced to pay back their husband's Esau scrip, Rosa would have chosen to hide from Mario a sexual assault by Davidson. Her use of the word "Once" is one indication that Davidson has done something to her beyond talking at her (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). The second is the way she shifts context quickly. After she utters the word "Once," she reminds herself that Davidson lives in

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<sup>16</sup> In *Unto the Daughters: The Legacy of Honor Killing in a Sicilian-American Family*, Karen Tintori (2007) uncovers how in 1919 two of her great-uncles killed their sister Frances at the age of 16 after she defied their wishes to marry a Mafia boss 20 years her senior. Instead, she eloped with a local barber. The brothers cut off her hands and put her feet in cement before dumping her in the Detroit River at Belle Isle for marrying a man she loved.

<sup>17</sup> There is evidence to suggest that this practice continued well into the early 1930s and it is only in the late twentieth and now twenty-first century that these stories are finally being told (Kline, 2011, p. 76).

Philadelphia “sometimes” (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). This second word suggests that she feels safer when he is gone and is a reminder that Rosa’s safety is tied to absence, not presence. As much as she craves connection, she knows there is danger in any contact with the men in her life.

Later in the narrative, when Davidson tells Rosa that her sons have died in a mine explosion, Rosa’s compromised position is exposed to the community. The mine owner gives no thought to her needs, her lack of English language skills, and her position in the town. His first thought is for his comfort and profit. Rosa recalls how Davidson “cries. He presses his face against [her] belly. The baseball, he says. My pitcher, my first base. Carmello will be in the American League” (Giardina, 1988, p. 169). Davidson reveals his familiarity with Rosa’s body by acting like a grieving parent or spouse, only he mourns his profit margin. He will not take responsibility for the explosion even though the lack of safe working conditions is his responsibility. His worry focuses on how he will replace a good ballplayer rather than the men and boys who have died in the mine explosion—an explosion due to his willful negligence.

He expects Rosa to offer him comfort. Davidson sees her as a nurturer, a caretaker, and an object of desire. He does not notice that “everyone is crying” or that “the women lean together, they sway, they do not close their mouths” (Giardina, 1988, p. 169). He does not even care that his public physical embrace has placed Rosa in a dangerous position. Rosa looks over his grasping body and infers from the images of her neighbors that what has occurred is catastrophic. Separated from her community and the other women in the town, Rosa has nowhere to turn and no one to help her. She surmises that her sons are dead from the postures of the grieving women and not from Davidson clawing at her body in front of the entire town.

When Mario sees Rosa and Davidson together, he yells at Rosa to “go home” (Giardina, 1988, p. 169). Both parents are grieving, but Rosa chooses to turn her rage at their sons’ deaths onto Mario rather than Davidson. She cannot see that Mario is mourning as well, especially when his default emotion is rage. She responds to his demand with one of her own, a shocking occurrence in the Angelelli household, most especially because it occurs in public. She yells: “Leave me .... Always you whip them. But when they are hurt, they cry for mama. They love mama” (Giardina, 1988, p. 169). Her inability to fathom his grief stems from his previous violent behavior and her response to it. While Mario berated and beat her and their sons, Rosa was not only a victim, but an enabler. Her response to Mario may be tangled to feelings of shame and guilt. When their son Francesco was 9 years old, he refused to work in the mines. Rosa watched as Mario tied the boy to a fence post and “pour[ed] the slops down his back, [and] set... the pigs on him” (Giardina, 1988, p. 51). Only after Mario left the house did Rosa ask the local doctor for help. When the physician questioned her, Rosa covered up Mario’s abuse by saying that Francesco’s back had been ripped apart after “[h]e slip and fall down the slate pile” (Giardina, 1988, p. 51). Rosa did not defend Francesco nor ask the doctor for assistance. Rosa might feel guilty that she was unable to keep Francesco and his brothers from working in the coalmine. This construction means that Rosa is telling herself a fiction that the boys loved her or went to her when they felt unsafe. There has been no safety, ever, in the Angelelli household for anyone, including Mario. Rosa lashes out at Mario who, she believes, has placed them in this situation, but she might also feel that she is at least partially responsible for their deaths by not being able to defend them and keep them out of the coalmines.



Rosa may also feel shame or fear that Mario has seen Davidson holding onto her in a stance that would be reserved for her husband in private, not in public. Rosa's emotional state compromises her ability to understand the precarity in which she and Mario stand. She takes her grief, shame, and guilt and places it on Mario, who would normally be the safest person on which to explode although even that is not certain. She cannot afford to be angry at the mine owner or anyone else in the town from which she has been ostracized, but she has acted out in public, not in private, placing both Mario and her in the spotlight. Mario understands that Davidson is responsible for the sons' deaths, but he may also be shocked to see Davidson holding onto Rosa, and even more surprised to see Rosa yell at him in public. Rosa only sees an abusive husband who still wants to tell her what to do even in the face of losing all four of her sons.

Whether Mario leaves town of his own will or is murdered by Davidson's henchmen is not clear. There is an intimation shared by another miner with Rondal that Rosa's "old man run off after the Number Six explosion," but there is no proof to this supposition (Giardina, 1988, p. 199). It is just as likely that Davidson had Mario killed. It would be simple to have one more dead miner, especially one that is angry and may cause problems due to his attractive wife. Davidson has used murder before to keep total control of the coalmine. He has had strike organizers killed to keep these workers from forming a union.<sup>18</sup> Having Mario assassinated would not be out of the question.

The last image of Mario comes from Rosa's point-of-view. The couple are in their company house after Mario sees Davidson in Rosa's arms at the mine. Mario is drunk. The wine bottles are "glowing like candles" and he asks, "Where is God?" (Giardina, 1988, p. 170). He stands before a glass "reliquary" that Rosa's mother sent from Palermo (Giardina, 1988, p. 69). When it had arrived, at great expense, Rosa told Mario, "Now God is in the House" (Giardina, 1988, p. 69). The reliquary contains the sacred objects of holy water, candles, and a small pieta—the image of the mother Mary holding her crucified son Jesus. Encased in purple glass, Rosa views these items, blessed by a priest, as holding the residue of Mary and Jesus. After Rosa sets up the reliquary in a makeshift altar, she lights candles, takes up her rosary, and prays before the sacred totem (Giardina, 1988, p. 69). Rosa's prayer contains a private plea to be healed from suffering, but she is not alone while she prayed. Her husband Mario sits in the corner like a ghost, "strok[ing]" a baseball (Giardina, 1988, p. 69). In this early scene, these two immigrants pray to their gods: Rosa focuses on the spiritual and Mario on the secular. The two are separated by not only how different their dreams are, but also their respective positions within the town.

In the married couple's last scene together, they are once again alone in their home, but Mario's question returns them full circle to their differences. He asks, "Where is God?" before smashing the reliquary (Giardina, 1988, p. 170). Mario's question is his drunken way of acknowledging how little authority he has in his own home and how far away he is from his secular American Dream. Mario is drunk for several reasons. His sons are dead. His friends in the mine have died as well.

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<sup>18</sup> Early on in *Storming Heaven*, Rondal recounts how two "gun thugs" in Davidson's employ threw the strike organizer Johnson, a black man, into a Winco furnace (Giardina, 1988, p. 82). They give Rondal 24-hours to leave the state or promise him that he will meet the same end. In fact, Giardina centers two Black characters: Johnson and Doc Booker, a Black doctor who also publishes a socialist paper. Booker is the one who tells Rondal that Johnson was sent because the job of union organizing was "too dangerous" for a white man (Giardina, 1988, p. 81). While Johnson's death is a warning to Rondal of what could happen to him if he does not stop recruiting for the union, it also reveals how little Black life matters to the coalmining company, and how courageous it was for a man like Johnson to take on the work of union organizing.

He suspects that Davidson has been sexually familiar with Rosa. All three of these circumstances reveal how little agency he has in Davidson. His frustration, anger, and sadness culminate in a question that has no answer for him and distances Rosa further from him.

Rosa's choice not to comfort Mario is a response both to years of abuse, but also to the shame she may feel when Mario sees Davidson holding onto her in public. She watches her husband cry as his hand bleeds and her lack of compassion emanates from years without real intimacy in her marriage. She distances herself from Mario and what he senses because he has never asked her to see who he is. Rosa lays everything that has happened to her sons at her husband's feet and says he "is in Purgatory" because he has "cursed God" (Giardina, 1988, p. 170). She cannot fathom that Mario grieves; he cannot reach out to the one person who knows what he is feeling. They remain separated at a time when they most need one another. This separation has a high price. Rosa will no longer have the protection of being Mario's wife. Mario's public anger has left him vulnerable in a way that places his life in jeopardy.

After this scene, Mario vanishes from the narrative. His disappearance barely registers with the citizens of Davidson. While Mario may have taken off on his own, if he was dragged away by Davidson's thugs, there is a chance Rosa saw his removal from their rental. She may blame herself for this disappearance, and that, in addition to her sons' deaths and anything Davidson does to her, may be what causes Rosa's complete breakdown. She would feel guilty for many things, including for allowing Davidson to touch her in public, for Davidson raping her, for not defending her sons from Mario, for not stopping Mario from beating her sons, for not fighting for her sons when they expressed no interest in working in the coalmines, and for not protecting Mario when he saw Davidson holding Rosa after the mine explosion.

With Mario gone, no one questions the mine owner moving Rosa into his house as his full-time maid. Like the butterflies Davidson collects, Rosa is pinned by Davidson's desire to own and control everything within his grasp. Akin to the Latin names of the butterflies he has gathered from around the world, Rosa could be called his exotic *Sicilis*. Once she had been forced to do Mario's bidding; now she must answer to Davidson. Her time in "the big house" becomes a fractured remembrance of her mother, domestic chores, and the violence Davidson perpetrates on her person (Giardina, 1988, p. 169).

Rosa obliquely reveals that Davidson has sexually assaulted her. She holds onto roses that her son Francesco had planted for her in the yard of the company house Mario leases. She remembers three things about holding these roses. The first is that the roses' thorns scratch at Davidson's arms. The second is that she has tasted Davidson's blood because she states it is "like salt" (Giardina, 1988, p. 170). And the third is that "his hands are warm like the hands of the priest when he signs the cross upon my forehead" (Giardina, 1988, p. 170). These incomplete remembrances are glimpses of Rosa's attempt to fight back against a man who takes his comfort however he chooses. In tasting the blood on Davidson's arm, she may have bit him or she may have purposefully used the roses to thwart his assault. His blood is not like the blood of Christ that she would receive at Holy Communion in Church, but instead the blood of the devil who is only satisfied by extracting the life of every person he encounters. When Davidson's warm hands squeeze her body, Rosa understands that she is just another pinned butterfly in his vast collection. Rosa has lost

everything—her sons, her husband, her family in Sicily. Like Mario, she too may be wondering where God has gone when the devil stands before her with demands for pleasure and comfort.

For Davidson's part, he tells Rosa that she "forgive[s] so easy" (Giardina, 1988, p. 170). He chooses to believe that Rosa has succumbed to his charms, but she has no choice. Rosa's mind is sacrificed to his needs and egos. She knows what is happening to her is wrong, but she has no clear language to express the overwhelming totality of his invasiveness on her person. Once Mario is gone, Davidson sees possession of her as his right. He has lost the opportunity to make a profit off her husband's and sons' labor, but he still has his "best maid" (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). There is no one to protest this move, not even the mine owner's wife since she has made it clear she has no desire to visit or live in West Virginia. Davidson imprisons Rosa in his "dirty" house to clean his clothes, dust his furniture and collections, and sexually assault her (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). Davidson possesses her by the fact that no one else can or will look out for her. She becomes one more piece in his vast collections of coalmines, houses, and butterflies. Her body—because no one is interested in her mind—belongs to him like it belonged to her father and her husband. She has no choice in how her body is used to labor. Davidson fulfills his own desires with no thought for Rosa's needs. He does not care for or about her, only for what he wants. Davidson's greed and solipsism means Rosa continues paying *seignoral* rights for a husband who disappears after the death of their children due to unsafe working conditions at Davidson's mine.

Rosa's only companions after being moved into Davidson's house are her memories and "[t]he butterflies," who, she notes, "watch" what happens to her (Giardina, 1988, p. 169). She notices them "turn[ing] their heads this way and that" (Giardina, 1988, p. 169). While what the butterflies "watch" is never articulated clearly, her mental state suggests that she has suffered numerous traumas, including on-going sexual assault, within the walls of Davidson's house (Giardina, 1988, p. 169). In grieving the loss of her sons and the disappearance of her husband, she never fully comprehends what has happened to her now that she has no familial or community ties to the area. Her work as Davidson's maid becomes a job that includes unwelcome sexual assault and hiding the evil Davidson does, including, perhaps, murdering her husband.

### **Burning Down the House**

Rosa is freed from Davidson's capture, but not due to her own choices or agency. Rondal leads a group of mineworkers in setting Davidson's house on fire to protest the mine owner's unfair labor practices. Davidson discovers their plans, and he retreats to Philadelphia before the fire occurs. Rosa is left alone to fend for herself. The men do not realize that Rosa remains in the house and as the flames lick at the walls, Rosa hallucinates. Instead of running from the house, she follows her mother's voice to the room where Davidson keeps his collections, and she sets the butterflies free. In a parallel construction to Mario's breaking of the reliquary, Rosa "break[s] the glass" in which the butterflies are housed (Giardina, 1988, p. 196). What is different for Rosa is that she believes she is setting the butterflies free, perhaps in a wish that she too could be free. When she believes she is hearing the butterflies "scream" because they "are so frightened," she soothes them by "whisper[ing]" to them (Giardina, 1988, p. 196). Rosa would have died in the fire if Rondal's prescient sense had not sent him into the house fearing someone might still be there. When Rosa sees Rondal, her mental state has so deteriorated that she believes he is her dead son Francesco come to save her and the butterflies, and she entreats him to "help [the butterflies] to fly" (Giardina,

1988, p. 196). Rondal's guilt drives him as he carries her out of the house and eventually takes her to Carrie to sort out what will happen to the Italian immigrant now that she is alone without a home.

Rosa is no more than collateral damage in the fight for control of the town and the mine. None of the men Rosa encounters—father, husband, mine owner, striker—see Rosa as a person; she is only known in relation to others she must serve or to those men who are slightly afraid of what she represents. The fire is the final injustice to Rosa, but the reason for the fire has no connection to Rosa. Her husband Mario found her wanting as a wife and mother. The mine owner only saw her as his “best maid”—of whom he could take advantage (Giardina, 1988, p. 68). And Rondal believes she is “kind of loony” (Giardina, 1988, p. 199). The men are not the only ones who cannot read Rosa's pain, even Carrie, who idealizes Rosa as “an angel,” cannot fathom the depth of Rosa's distress or the abuse she has suffered (Giardina, 1988, p. 200). The fire burns away Rosa so completely that all that is left is a blank slate upon which others write their feelings and beliefs.<sup>19</sup>

No man who witnessed or participated in the labor strikes is allowed to speak directly of Rosa.<sup>20</sup> Her narrative makes clear that the men in her life view Rosa as an object, but they are not given narrative power to claim her fully by denying them any direct point-of-view to discuss her. Even Rondal is not given the privilege of telling the story of finding Rosa in his narrative strand. Carrie is given the authority to recount Rondal's story of Rosa. Carrie recalls that Rondal said that he “can't take care of no crazy woman,” but he felt responsible for making Rosa homeless (Giardina, 1988, p. 199). To mitigate his guilt, Rondal allows Rosa to believe he is her son Francesco because he “didn't have the heart” to tell her otherwise (Giardina, 1988, p. 199). His compassion is rendered partly due to his own guilt in creating the circumstance in which she now must live; he never recognizes that he saved her from an untenable situation.

When Carrie reaches out to Francesco's widow, she tells Carrie that Davidson “had assured [me] all was well” (Giardina, 1988, p. 200). In this statement, Rosa's need is obfuscated. The daughter-in-law never attempted to speak with Rosa and Rosa never asked for the daughter-in-law's help. It could be that Francesco told his wife about the abuse he received from his father and that his mother never helped him, or it could be that the widow is overwhelmed with the responsibility of taking care of a newborn after her husband dies. She may be no older than Rosa was when Rosa

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<sup>19</sup> Conway suggests, “Rosa stands witness to the sad loss of many women to insanity, especially in the nineteenth century. They refuse to believe that the world they live in is sane and turn their pain upon themselves more than upon others” (1999, p. 153). This analysis ignores how Rosa's immigrant status affects her position in the town of Davidson and how people respond to her mental breakdown. And, like Carrie, Conway idealizes Rosa's breakdown by suggesting that Rosa's “freeing” of Davidson's butterflies “give[s] her life meaning and offer[s] us inspiration” (1999, p. 153).

<sup>20</sup> In the afterword dated 1987, written by the son of Carrie Bishop and Rondal Lloyd, Dillon Freeman discusses what happens after the Battle of Blair Mountain, including a short piece about Rosa. Rosa remains in the state hospital and during one visit with Rachel Honaker, Rosa's granddaughter-in-law, Dillon sits with Rosa and writes her story, “as I remember she told it, her mottled brown fingers gripping my arm, her long fingernails digging into my flesh as she called me by the name of her long-dead son” (Giardina, 1988, pp. 292-293). This description does not give him the privilege to share her story, but only to show what is left of a once vibrant girl. Rosa is reduced to a mentally unstable and physically deformed person who cannot remain in the present moment. Her sewing is no longer an option, and her memories are stuck in the past. Giardina originally gave this remembrance to one of Rosa's granddaughters, but the character was cut from *Storming Heaven* (WVU Libraries Collection, A&M 3740/b3/f3—MSS: *Storming Heaven*/draft ms; undated).

immigrated to the town of Davidson. Francesco's widow may still be innocent since she works at her family's store, Ricco's Italian Bakery, in the nearby town of Justice, which suggests she might not understand what it means for the mine owner to move Rosa into his home in such a rural setting.

In *Storming Heaven*, Rosa's mental decompensation creates a gap. No one will know her history, her heritage. She will not pass on family traditions nor share in the growth of her family. She cannot share her experience of abuse because her mental state cannot recover without a sustained and loving community surrounding her. While Carrie is the only character allowed to discuss Rosa in a first-person point-of-view, she does so in a way that minimizes the traumas Rosa has suffered. She notes how Rosa's "face was unlined, beautiful, and peaceful" and further equates Rosa's "white shawl" with an innocence that erases all that Rosa has endured (Giardina, 1988, p. 199). Once Rondal rescues Rosa from Davidson's house, Carrie and Francesco's widow intervene in Rosa's care and arrange for her to be admitted to "the state hospital" (Giardina, 1988, p. 292). This construction suggests that women, even immigrant women, have a place that is more than ancillary in the mining communities. She must be cared for as the laborers must be looked to, but it is women's work to recognize the pain and care for someone who is so deeply traumatized. Carrie's view of Rosa as an "angel" centers Rosa as a spiritual being—one haunted by past trauma (Giardina, 1988, p. 200). But even Carrie may only think Rosa is grieving her sons' deaths and her husband's disappearance. She may not fully understand or be able to acknowledge the extent of the physical, emotional, and spiritual damage done to Rosa. Carrie may not even have access to what happens to immigrant women who wind up alone in a coal camp or it may be that she knows she can do nothing to help except find Rosa's extended family.

### **The Haunting Presence of the Southern Italian Immigrant Woman**

Rosa's presence haunts *Storming Heaven*, and in the sequel, *The Unquiet Earth*, Rosa's story metamorphizes into a Demeter-like myth where Rosa wanders in the garden searching for her sons. The grandchildren of Rosa and Carrie, and the children of Francesco do not know any of the trauma that their grandmother has suffered. In this way, Rosa moves from the one who is haunted to the one who haunts West Virginian, Appalachian, and Italian American history. This haunting affects her grandson Tony Angelelli, the son of Francesco, who is described as "one of those damaged people who look perfectly on the outside, smiling and pleasant, but there is something missing inside" (Giardina, 1992, p. 34). As the progeny of Mario and Rosa, he is "the Italian bookkeeper" who is viewed with mistrust as an emissary for the American Coal Company (Giardina, 1992, p. 33). He may be financially successful, but he is still an outsider.

His grandmother's fractured voice continues to haunt Davidson and Southern West Virginia. Rosa cannot simply be dismissed as an illiterate immigrant. Her presence implicates both the US and capitalism in the dangers faced by Southern Italian immigrant women. The absence of a consistent narrative space or clear linear through-line is what centralizes both her immigrant and gender status. Rosa's past is many contemporary female immigrants' present. Giardina's *Storming Heaven* demands a reconsideration of Southern Italian immigration to the US as a contested site of trauma and loss rather than a place of sentimental success and assimilation.

In *Storming Heaven*, the mine owner Davidson has the right to name a town after himself, collect mines, butterflies, baseball players, and maids without anyone questioning his motives. He visits his wife in Philadelphia every few months, but he always returns to his most-prized possessions, including Rosa. He has a right to her because she lives in his town, in two of his houses—first the company home he leases to her husband and then his own large house, and he provides employment for the entire family. His touch defiles not only the pristine white clothes Rosa embroiders, but also her mind. Her trauma is magnified by having nowhere safe to turn in a coalmining town built and owned by the coalmining proprietor.

In sketching out Rosa's life, the name of the coal company—American Coal Company—places responsibility for what happens to Rosa squarely on national and capitalists' shoulders. The way the mine owner Davidson treats Rosa situates her personal tragedy within the paradigm of how the US treats its immigrants. The practices of the past haunt present national discussions regarding good coal jobs and immigrant rights, and Rosa's narrative suggests there is a steep price to pay for not remembering or misremembering through sentimentalization or erasure of the past.

If the US cannot take responsibility for its newest inhabitants, there is a further critique of capitalism since Rosa lives in Davidson, a town named after the coal company owner. All those who live in the coalmining town cannot escape the greed of capitalism embedded in the mythical and illusory fabric of the American Dream. There may be success and plentitude, but they are reserved only for those whom the immigrants and working class serve. In making profit off the backs of labor, men like Davidson do not reflect on the landscape they have colonized, or the working conditions made untenable by their greed. For Rosa, nothing she touches in Davidson belongs to her—even her sons are viewed as the property of her husband and Davidson. The usuary nature of how women's bodies are commodified through unfair immigration and labor practices are made manifest in Rosa's physical, emotional, and spiritual wounds. Without community or space, Rosa retreats inwardly with the ghostly and ghastly images of what immigration and unrewarded labor has wrought on her mind and body.

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# Middletown Lives through Middle-Class Eyes: *Hillbilly Elegy* and the Problem with the “Liberal Media”

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## Abstract

J.D. Vance does not become Senator Vance without the success of *Hillbilly Elegy*, his best-selling memoir (and later, film) about growing up in, and getting out of, rural Appalachia. Initially praised by media critics for its ability to challenge middle-class assumptions about the “white working class,” the book assuaged both liberal anxiety and conservative outrage by providing demographically appropriate explanations for the election of Donald Trump. However, the book, feature film and subsequent political campaign are also part of a much larger, lucrative culture industry built upon the commodification and fetishization of the white working class, one driven by middle-class tastes and prejudices. This was most apparent in the promotion of the book and film by the so-called liberal media establishment, represented by the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, Netflix, Imagine Entertainment, HarperCollins, and Harpo Productions, to name a few. However, the reinforcement of the false binary between liberal and conservative media obscured how the corporate media system helped elect a candidate who will work most certainly against the interests of actual working people, further alienating them from each other and a shared labor platform more generally. Examining *Hillbilly Elegy* through the five filters of the Propaganda Model will help to explain the ideological and material effects of the corporate media’s agenda upon the growing class divide.

## Keywords

Class, Propaganda Model, stereotypes, ideology, corporate media, *Hillbilly Elegy*

When J.D. Vance asked Ohio voters “Do you hate Mexicans?” in a political ad, one might have wondered what happened to the “never Trump,” mild-mannered author of *Hillbilly Elegy*. That guy, according to the *Washington Post*, had been “radicalized.” That guy, once a bi-partisan voice of reason on all matters concerning the “white working-class,” was now a “hypocrite,” a “fraud,” a “dangerous authoritarian” who suffered a “moral collapse.” Actually, J.D. Vance was never really “that guy” to begin with, but rather a middle-class conjuring of what the white working class *could* be, a cultural construction forged in ideology rather than materiality. His journey from author to senator owes much to how he was exalted by the so-called liberal media and more importantly, the middle-class biases that are embedded in corporate media more generally.

The public perception of media companies as leaning left, or right is not new. Herman and Chomsky (1988) debunk the “myth of the liberal media” through their Propaganda Model. For

them, corporate news media, under the guise of objectivity, actually marginalize dissent by providing no viable alternatives to a capitalist status quo. They demonstrate this through a comprehensive analysis of foreign policy coverage in the *New York Times*, to show how the news media support foreign policy actions that promote the economic interests of the United States. Their model contains five filters—ownership, advertising, experts, flak, and ideology—through which media content are analyzed to demonstrate that the “liberal media” are corporate media, advocating from a center to center-right political position that mostly serves the interests of economic elites.

The value of such a model in today’s heterogenous media culture may seem limited at best. Certainly, the internet and social media platforms allow for an infinite number of opinions to be expressed on any issue, for better and for worse. It has allowed movements devoted to social justice as well as hate, to proliferate. Unlike traditional television, radio and newspapers, the internet allows for continuous, unfiltered, decentralized public interaction. The Propaganda Model, under these circumstances, might be seen as reductionist or outdated. Yet, scholars continue to revisit the Propaganda Model and confirm its usefulness as a framework to evaluate corporate media, legacy and new (Pedro, 2011; Klaehn, 2018). If data are the new oil, companies like Meta and X may have even more power to shape media content in support of capitalism through their use of algorithms and surveillance.

However, the contemporary media environment has also complicated what was once understood as the “liberal media.” The decline of the mass audience and the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine established an official “conservative” media ecosystem. As such, the former “liberal media” represented by mainstream print and broadcast companies, would become categorized as such simply because they existed in contrast to those media that were now openly conservative. For example, CNN may be more liberal than FOX news, but it is merely left of FOX news, not leftist in its agenda (openly critiquing or advocating for alternatives to, capitalism). As such, when the *New York Times* blamed liberal Hollywood for electing Vance, they were only partly correct (Tracy, 2022). Conveniently, the public’s mostly blind acceptance of media outlets as liberal or conservative has helped deliver reliable, predictable demographics to advertisers in an increasingly fragmented media marketplace. The normalization of this political branding has served corporate media well.

The practice of political branding in popular culture may have other effects, such as establishing a commodity’s novelty. In the case of *Hillbilly Elegy*, it is clear that the book’s bipartisan appeal allowed it to momentarily transcend the dominant political binary and break through a crowded cottage industry of books also committed to analyzing the white working class after the election of Donald Trump. What it also achieved was an ideological effect, whereby the promotion of shared political interests over economic ones does what the Propaganda Model suggests: conceals how media reinforce capitalist values, in this case through the privileging of middle-class norms and the misrepresentation of working-class people. Although the five filters of the original Propaganda Model were used to analyze newspaper coverage of foreign policy in the *New York Times*, they may also be used to better understand how other forms of media (entertainment, social) confirm or resist those dominant ideologies in support of a “white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 2000). Examining *Hillbilly Elegy* through this framework will demonstrate

the ideological and material effects of the corporate media's political branding on the growing class divide.

## **An Agenda Setting Effect (for the Middle Class)**

### **Ownership and Advertising**

It is no secret that media conglomerates control the flow of information, even if users have the ability to create unlimited content today. In the first edition of *The Media Monopoly*, readers were alerted to the limited number of companies controlling the distribution of media content, at that time, less than fifty (Bagdikian, 1983). Diversity in ownership patterns and perspectives (and by extension, democracy) was threatened by the consolidation of media power enabled under deregulation in the 1980s. At that time, media activists were concerned that so few companies were controlling the production and distribution of information. To be sure, the arrival of the internet offered to remedy this through the promise of a more democratic and pluralistic media system. The ownership filter, used to explain how media consolidation and conglomeration resulted in a media system beholden to advertisers and government agendas produces an agenda setting function, whereby the media do not tell us what to think, but what to think about (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In this case, it was positive reviews and best seller lists from “respectable” corporate media that first put *Hillbilly Elegy* on the national agenda.

*Hillbilly Elegy* seemed to appear out of nowhere when it was released on June 28, 2016, but it had not. The corporate media's propaganda campaign began much earlier, as Vance was already a regular contributor to the *National Review* and a verified opinion leader within conservative media. By August, the book had reached number one on the *New York Times* Best Seller List. The media's preoccupation with the white working class had grown steadily since the election of Barack Obama in 2008 (remember Joe the Plumber?) but had become an obsession by the time Donald Trump arrived on the campaign trail. This demographic already dominated the corporate media agenda, so it was not a surprise to see a number of books published right before and immediately after the election of Donald Trump to provide insight and to capitalize on this unexpected event. *Educated*, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, *White Trash*, *American Rust*, *The New Minority* are but some of titles made popular during this time, yet it is *Hillbilly Elegy* that surpassed them in sales and popularity. This, even though other books were said to provide more accurate representations of the complexities of working-class life.

As mentioned previously, one explanation for the success of *Hillbilly Elegy* was its supposed bipartisan appeal. This narrative appears in book reviews from corporate media outlets, representing voices across the political spectrum, but it is the endorsement by the *New York Times* that is especially important. The role of “high status news organizations like the *New York Times*...is the most consistent and dominant” in setting the media agenda, still (McCombs 2018, p. 3). In its first review, “A Compassionate Analysis of the Poor Who Love Trump,” Vance is praised for writing “a civilized election guide for an uncivilized election and he's done so in a language intelligible to both Democrats and Republicans” (Senior, 2016). He is credited in the same review with being a conversation starter, someone who is able to bridge the divide between liberals and conservatives by explaining why the white working class voted for Donald Trump. This review cements the larger cultural role the book and author will play initially as bipartisan

bridge builder. This thread will be picked up by other corporate media and repeated by pundits reinforcing and confirming the legitimacy of the text, the author, and the stories they tell.

After it is positively reviewed by the *NYT*, the book was promoted horizontally across other “liberal” media platforms, such as the broadcast networks, PBS, NPR, CNN, and TED, continuing the propaganda campaign begun by conservative outlets years earlier. All of this original content lived on indefinitely, aggregated and then distributed online by Google, Meta and X. The book remained atop the best seller lists of the *NYT*, Amazon and *USA Today* for months. Imagine Entertainment secured the book’s rights to produce a feature film that would be released in theaters and streamed on Netflix. Millions of copies of the book were sold, and by 2022, Vance had earned over \$400,000 in royalties from HarperCollins (Hall, 2022), money which could be used to support his Senate campaign.

The promotion of the book across multiple, inter-related media platforms (HarperCollins is a subsidiary of News Corp., for example) and its movement through the corporate media ecosystem more generally, confirms how the ownership filter confers legitimacy upon cultural commodities. The more the book circulates, the more it seems to matter, but to whom?

The initial buzz around *Hillbilly Elegy* occurred almost exclusively within middle-class, corporate media culture. Positive reviews from the *NYT* and the *National Review* were written for their middle-class readers. The book told a story that propped up, rather than critiqued, their privilege. A bootstraps narrative of Vance’s life and escape from rural Appalachia is told with little consideration for the structural issues that determined most of his community’s misery. Yes, there are enough nods to the scourges of poverty--violence, drug addiction, and deindustrialization--to explain some of what happened to the white working class but ultimately, it was their learned helplessness, and his grit and determination, which enabled him to get out, and make it all the way to Yale. In American popular culture, this is one of the greatest stories ever sold.

The advertising filter addresses direct and indirect modes of selling. Indirect modes include the retelling of familiar tales through media texts, the ideological labor of cultural production. Instead of bridging the political divide, the book’s social mobility narrative actually creates distance between the middle-class reader and the actual working class. The book assuages anxiety all elites may feel toward the growing class divide, not only those living in blue states. Reassured as early as the Introduction, it lets them know that this “book is...a history of opportunity and upward mobility” (Vance, 2016), two things the middle class can get behind.

Jack Metzgar (2021) explains this another way when he identifies the values that are characteristics of professional middle-class and working-class cultures. For him, working-class culture is often associated with the values of “being and belonging,” consistent with the Marxist adage, a “class for itself.” Vance pays homage to his working-class Appalachian roots throughout the book, crediting it for instilling in him traditional values such as the necessity of hard work, the promise of education, and the strength of the nuclear family. Yet, he does not miss an opportunity to criticize those who do not live up to his moral code, often invoking degrading stereotypes about poor people as welfare cheats. His memories include recollections of neighbors who would “buy two dozen-packs of soda with food stamps and then sell them at a discount for cash” as they “went through the checkout line speaking on their cell phones” or how his “drug addict neighbor would buy T-bone steaks” paid for by the taxes taken from Vance’s meager paycheck (Vance, 2016, p.

139). This type of rhetoric goes far in encouraging resentments toward real people living in poverty.

Vance did acknowledge the devastating effects of the opioid epidemic on his childhood and on the residents of Middletown, Ohio in particular. His mother's struggle with addiction provided him with a unique opportunity to perhaps understand how structural issues and family trauma contributed to it. In response to the problems outlined in his book, and further capitalize on its success, he created a non-profit called "Our Ohio Renewal" whose mission was to help "disadvantaged children achieve their dreams." However, instead of helping Ohioans, Vance used the organization to pay a political consultant and to gain a foothold in a state he no longer lived in (Farenthold, 2022). The nonprofit shut down after two years, but by this time he was already a bipartisan media darling.

Vance's life story is told through middle-class eyes in so far as it privileges the values of "doing and becoming." He is achievement oriented, future oriented, and individualistic, values that are also likely held by many of the book's middle-class readers (even if ventures like the non-profit, fail). The middle class are socialized to have implicit biases against working-class people to be sure, regardless of political affiliation. Middle-class conservatives also showed disdain for the white working class, especially those belonging to Trump's base. A critic from the *National Review* stated that they "can be grateful that a voice as eloquent as Vance's has emerged to give a firsthand account of their world." An eloquent voice enhanced by an Ivy league education. Vance was given the authority to speak for people who are typically stereotyped as ignorant. The use of such condescending language to is not exclusive to liberal elites, as conservative elites often claim, although when the *NYT* referred to Vance as a "civilized voice" for an "uncivilized election," the same type of class-bias was invoked.

## Experts and Flak

According to the original Propaganda Model, experts consulted in the news media often have ties to government or other organizations that will support a capitalist status quo. Provided by public relations firms and/or government think tanks, the role of such experts is to limit public dissent by providing many opinions on an issue, but few actual political alternatives (Herman & Chomsky 2002, xii). The role of social media does not alter this much, as the traditional media still set the agenda and cases of reverse agenda setting are rare (Neuman et al., 2014). Vance achieved the role of bipartisan expert based on the original narrative promoted by corporate media. This made him especially appealing to organizations such as the New York Times Company who continued to struggle against charges of liberal bias and widespread mistrust. He also became a highly sought after speaker at colleges and universities, where many instructors required his book as a conversation starter during challenging political times. Pushback against the text in the form of crowd sourced reading lists, for example, was common, although a wider embrace of the text and its problematic views on rural poverty seemed to be the norm more often (Catte in Harkins & McCaroll, 2019). This is not so surprising, as the book and author were endorsed by the types of corporate media consumed by many college-educated liberals.

The falsity of the liberal/conservative media binary is further underscored when considering how Vance was intentionally repackaged as acceptable to center-leaning liberals. He was not in fact, a

new voice of moderation, but simply a non-MAGA one. Moreover, Vance's role as an established conservative pundit was mostly ignored by the propaganda campaign that promoted the book. This, although his previous contributions to the *National Review* expressed solidly conservative opinions about issues such as school choice, the marriage crisis, degree inflation, but did so in a rational, respectable (non-MAGA) tone, apropos of the publication and its target audience. An interview he gave with the *American Conservative* about the white working class even crashed the internet for a time. Vance's political affiliation was no secret, and it was not concealed in his book. He praises the work of Charles Murray in the beginning and refers to himself a "modern conservative" by the end. By what magic then, does he become a legitimate bipartisan voice?

Through, perhaps, the magic of political branding and the tendency for corporate media to move even more to the right, as conservative traditional and social media become more extreme. The inclusion of Vance as a contributor to the *NYT* and CNN is consistent with the news media's need for balance, but it undermines this same need simultaneously. The insights of the Propaganda Model again prove useful here. If the liberal media were actually liberal, leftist views would dominate. If it were truly balanced, leftist views would exist alongside others, and not be anomalies. Since the corporate media exclude actual leftist views, the center is viewed increasingly as the left. As openly conservative corporate media become tolerant of more extremist views, it becomes natural for the public to categorize mainstream corporate media as liberal.

For example, when the *NYT* and CNN actually hired Vance, they attempted to restore balance in response to a growing public concern that they have a liberal bias. Instead, though, this type of move only confirms the bias, or why else would they hire a conservative? Some of this public criticism, against the *NYT* especially, is unfair as they continue to provide consistently rigorous comprehensive, investigative reporting (and distanced themselves from Vance, eventually). However, this does not mean they are immune to this particular identity crisis stemming from the increasingly problematic role balance or "both-sideism" continues to play in journalism. A.G. Sulzberger, the publisher of the *NYT*, addresses this issue in a recent essay for the *Columbia Journalism Review*. In it, Sulzberger passionately defends the tradition of independent journalism conducted by the *NYT*, while also acknowledging the issue of its perceived bias by those on the left and right. Of particular relevance to the claims made by the Propaganda Model is his acknowledgement that today, a majority of journalists are college-educated and live in big cities. This is a commonly repeated fact, often used to prove that the *NYT* and others have a liberal bias against rural audiences who do not hold college degrees. This fact is not at issue, but it is a form of propaganda, or flak, designed to keep the liberal/conservative binary in place.

The flak filter addresses media criticism that comes from external sources, primarily the government or conservative media watchdog groups that police the media for offensive or controversial content. Today, one might add the conservative media and internet trolls that label any content they do not agree with as "fake news" to that list. When the *NYT* and CNN turned against Vance once he aligned himself with MAGA, the arguments about their bias against rural audiences who do not hold college degrees was only strengthened. However, what often gets overlooked in this type of critique is the way in which the actual working class has been ignored by corporate news media altogether, for decades.

The argument that most journalists are college educated and live in cities, ergo, the media have a liberal bias, is a distraction from the conscious choices made by the newspaper industry to cater to a more niche, upscale audience beginning in the 1960s. This shift was precipitated by the arrival of television and declining circulation, but also consolidation within the industry and the rise of newspaper “chains” with an increased responsibility to stockholders. Conservative media filled the gap left by news media that once catered to not only a mass audience, but also, a working one. Christopher Martin (2019) chronicles the disappearance of the working-class from the news and its impact:

When US newspapers deemed the working class no longer newsworthy, they helped create the situation they would eventually chronicle for an upscale audience: the increasing economic and political division of the United States. Working-class people (urban and rural, white and people of color) were left without a journalistic voice in public life, while middle-class people (and the more affluent) were treated to journalism that overstated their activities, overrepresented their numbers to the community and over-catered to their interests. (p.68)

Therefore, the argument that the liberal bias is caused by college educated, cosmopolitan, journalists works as a form of flak in so far as it also preserves the false binary.

Sometimes, this type of flak is generated internally, passing as a self-reflective or social critique. In a recent opinion piece for the *NYT*, David Brooks (2023) discusses the elitism of “anti-Trumpers” and those who belong to the privileged “educated classes.” This included journalists, who were not only “college grads” but “elite-college grads” who have “locked everyone else out” of this profession and others. This has resulted in a type of class-cluelessness among the educated classes, and justifies the rage felt by many Trump supporters. However, in acknowledging his own privileged position, and the problems with (white) male privilege more specifically, he fails to mention the poor or working class. The victims in his story are the middle class, who are losing opportunities to graduates from elite schools. The precarity associated with middle-class status is real, but this is not the focus of Brook’s essay. Instead, it is another example of elites talking to elites. Brooks uses the language of class to avoid a critique of capitalism, supporting the Propaganda Model.

## **Ideology**

In some ways, all of the filters discussed thus far work “ideologically” as they all support, for this analysis, a cultural misrepresentation of the working-class that has suppressed meaningful public discourse about them, by them. The middle-class norms that they are measured by and judged against are often invisible, until they violated. Then, it is common to see the resurrection of harmful stereotypes that normalize essentialist ideas about class, strengthening the class divide. The role that the media play in this process is significant. The filters of the Propaganda Model have shown how the promotion of *Hillbilly Elegy* by the corporate media established the credibility J.D. Vance as a trusted opinion leader. His book provided a comforting narrative of social mobility to middle-class readers who were already ideologically positioned to see poor and working-class people as others.

The ideology of anti-communism is the fifth filter in the original Propaganda Model, which makes sense for the time in which it was written (even though the communist “threat” to the United States has never really gone away). The filter works to “help mobilize the populace against an enemy” (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, 29). As such, it has been useful in demonstrating how media stereotypes are used to support the dominant systems of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Whoever the enemy is, they are most likely constructed in the popular culture as a threat to one or more of these institutions.

The success of *Hillbilly Elegy* required fitting into the dominant narrative about social class in the United States, and the stereotypes it relies upon to preserve the class divide. The most consequential were the stereotypes about Appalachia and rural poverty invoked by Vance himself. The most normalized of these ideas characterized the poor as violent, paternalistic, and ultimately responsible for their circumstances:

I believe we hillbillies are the toughest people on earth. We take an electric saw to those who insult our mother. We make young men consume cotton under garments to protect a sister’s honor. But...are we tough enough to look ourselves in the mirror and admit our conduct harms our children? Public policy can help but there is no problem that can fix these problems for us...These problems were not created by governments or corporations or anyone else. We created them, and we can fix them. (p.255-256)

The corporate media’s obsession with the white working class, as well as the classist language they used to discuss the book, only contributed to these misrepresentations. However, when the feature film was released, a different kind of class bias was exposed, one which positioned audiences against critics.

It is often typical for a movie adaptation of a popular book to be criticized if it strays too far from the original text, disrupting the expectations of the audience. Although *Hillbilly Elegy* adhered to the basic contours of Vance’s life as he depicted them in the book, official reviews were mostly negative, despite good box office numbers. Several critics cited that the movie had been “depoliticized,” some critics focused on the stereotypes and others panned the entire movie, save the two Oscar-worthy performances by Glenn Close and Amy Adams. These criticisms, while seeming to want to defend the real people being misrepresented in the film, conceal other kinds of class biases.

Much of the criticism against the film is wrapped up in its supposed middle-class bias, which is the opposite of how most critics perceived the book. Reviewers disliked the lack of a political message, the focus on family, the melodrama. It was “a rich person’s idea of what it is like to be a poor person, a tone-deaf attempt to assuage a very particular kind of liberal guilt” (Keegan, 2020). Yes, and no, as liberals do not represent all rich people. The *NYT* conveyed a similar message when it accused the film of being “too tasteful” and “respectable.” Again, this addressed a middle-class bias, but in using this particular language, also invoked the stereotype that poor and working-class people lack taste and respectability. Depicting them as such would have been more “accurate.”



*Hillbilly Elegy* belongs to a long tradition of popular culture that demeans and degrades poor and working-class people, subjecting them to a bourgeois gaze (Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 2004). This gaze works in a contradictory way when considering the amount of attention given to the appearance of Glenn Close, who played Vance's beloved, cantankerous Mamaw. Critics described her as unrecognizable, campy, in her "fright wig" and generally "deglamorized" to the point of being an offensive hillbilly stereotype. Every review seemed to contain an image of Close in it, as to emphasize her "shocking" transformation into a poor person. Other media reported specifically on her appearance, as if it were a noteworthy achievement in special effects. Mamaw memes went viral. It is perhaps her excess that people found so offensive, an excess associated with disgust and waste (Skeggs, 2004). This, despite the fact that a picture at the end of the movie revealed Close to be made to look quite like the real Mamaw. What this points to, perhaps, is the general lack of awareness about how stereotypes work.

While it is noteworthy to point out the ways in which the film stereotyped the poor and working class, but without understanding how those images are connected to real-world inequality, such a critique remains superficial. What material conditions are responsible for poor people "looking" like poor people? How do people "wear" the trauma of poverty? As the white working class continues to substitute for actual working people in the media, these questions will remain unanswered.

In speaking for the white working class, *Hillbilly Elegy* also supports their often racist and misogynistic assumptions. In the book, Vance does not address the issue of race, but for some passing comments about Michelle and Barack Obama's elitism. His misogynistic views are expressed more consistently through the hypermasculinization of Mamaw and demonization of his mother, whose moral failings include drug addiction and promiscuity. Her trauma is never acknowledged. She is portrayed as a bad mother who was loved but lacked the will to do better. These themes are addressed less frequently in official media narratives but continue to be discussed through counternarratives, including poetry, art, and social media (Harkins & McCarroll, 2019). Nevertheless, as the corporate media still set the agenda, liberal voices such as these will continue to be marginalized.

### **From Clark Kent to SuperMAGA**

If J.D. Vance really spoke for working people, he would first acknowledge that the global working class is mostly female and POC. He would remind voters that being working-class means having little control or autonomy over one's work (Zweig, 2000). He would support unions, a living wage, universal health and childcare, and the environment. He would be a true voice on the left. But he is not. By the time Vance is elected to the Senate, Clark Kent had become SuperMAGA. According to [govtrack.us](https://govtrack.us) he has already sponsored legislation that is xenophobic (The Timely Departure Act), transphobic (The Protect Children's Innocent Act) and anti-environment (The Drive American Act). Even if their chances of being enacted are slim, they represent where he stands, and echo the extremist positions currently passing for mainstream politics in the United States.

In conclusion, the Propaganda Model is intended to demonstrate how corporate media maintain the capitalist status quo. The propaganda campaign for *Hillbilly Elegy*, when examined through

its five filters, show how this process occurs. It also highlights the illusion of media diversity and the permanent limitations of a corporate media system, legacy and new. Ultimately, it demonstrates the power of the media to influence the political fate of Ohio's working class.

### Author Bio

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# A Study of Self-Estrangement Among Fast-Food Workers

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## Abstract

This study examines self-estrangement, a dimension of alienation, and its attributes among fast-food service workers, while considering participant sociodemographic characteristics. A self-administered online survey, using Amazon MTURK, deployed over two time periods (N=1,513), provides data regarding our novel 12-item self-estrangement scale by fast-food occupation type (cashier, server, cook, shift manager, and general manager) and sociodemographic covariates. Preliminary analysis shows that a salaried position and those with a postbaccalaureate education experience lower levels of self-estrangement than their colleagues. Cashiers and cooks experience higher levels of self-estrangement relative to those in other positions. This study offers unique contributions to the conceptualization and operationalization of a dimension of alienation specific to self-estrangement, facilitating greater understanding of the fast-food labor sector, its organization, and the state of its workers.

## Keywords

Alienation, self-estrangement, labor, work, well-being

## Introduction

During the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States witnessed astonishing changes in unemployment. The middle of March 2020, there were only 250,000 unemployment claims, but by March 28 there were 6 million (Bartik et al., 2020). Differences in unemployment were reflected by distinct industries. Of particular interest is the service sector of leisure and hospitality including restaurants and hotels, which experienced unemployment declines of nearly half their numbers between the months of February and April 2020 (Bartik et al., 2020). At the time of the study, this was the largest drop among all sectors.

Current trends in the service sector of the labor market, specifically within the U.S. food industry, are at the forefront of American concern due to the continued decline in employment rates. Anecdotal evidence suggests that fast-food workers are increasingly removing themselves from their positions within this industry and are opting to not return to this line of work. This trend has only increased as COVID-19 restrictions have decreased, and many fast-food restaurants are in dire need of more workers. Due to employee demand, workers who remain in these positions are

required to complete already monotonous and restrictive tasks under increasingly stressful conditions, while earning the same wages. With fewer employees, those who remain are increasingly overworked both in their ability to complete all necessary tasks and in their patience interacting with customers who are opposed to mandates, regulations, and generally upset about delayed services (Meisenzahl, 2021). Employees work under conditions in which they are asked to perform routinized, laborious, and restrictive tasks for wages that do not reflect the level of difficulty and perseverance necessary for the occupation. Moreover, this type of labor separates workers from their own creative potential (Braverman 1988). Understanding the conditions that fast-food employees are expected to work in may offer insights into the trends that are presently occurring within this industry and amongst the working-class more broadly. How work is organized is of significant concern for the working-class as it illuminates the conditions under which workers struggle for control and meaning within the capitalist mode of production.

Our research measures and analyzes the levels of and differences in self-estrangement, one dimension of alienation, among U.S. fast-food workers, using data collected via an online survey, completed by 1,513 individuals in this employment sector. We examine, via our 12-item scale, how self-estrangement in the quick-service restaurant industry affects distinct workers within this sector. In this, we recognize that the structure of labor and the specific working conditions influence reported scores of self-estrangement. This research has broader implications for the working-class by interrogating the social relations of production and its impact on self-estrangement. Before presenting the methods, results, and findings, we situate our study in relation to previous scholarship on alienation and estrangement, elaborating on how fast-food service work has been reorganized over the last several decades.

### **Alienation and Self-Estrangement**

Through an analysis of how work was organized under capitalist relations, Karl Marx (1992) outlined how various forms of alienation arose, which diminished and constrained human development. He detailed how the class system, whereby capitalists own the means of production and workers must sell their labor-power to earn wages to support themselves, and the structure of capitalism, premised on the constant pursuit of capital accumulation, produced both alienation and the conditions for exploitation. Under these conditions, as Marx indicated, workers become separated from the production process and product of their labor—two particular moments of alienation; other moments include alienation from other, self, and nature as a whole. Building from Marx's analysis, scholars have further developed this concept with a particular focus on the conditions that allow workers to become alienated in modern society. In *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm (1955) argues that alienation is nearly all encompassing in modern society as it affects the relationships that individuals have with work, consumption, the state, others, and with themselves. Fromm believed that alienation results from features of capitalism, which demand that all people and things be expressed in economic value and that human beings are viewed in an abstract manner. Most importantly, alienation was not rooted in any one individual. Rather, it was embedded in the complex relationship between the structure work and the changing relations of production (Braverman, 1974; Jonna & Foster, 2014).

Testing alienation in a more empirical context, Robert Blauner (1964) investigated how specific conditions amplified or ameliorated attributes of alienation among various factory workers. He

found that levels of alienation were highest in the textile and automobile industries. However, industries such as printing or chemical work had higher levels of freedom as opposed to alienation. As society, under capitalism, has moved from craft to machine industries, Blauner (1964) contended, worker levels of freedom have been in decline whereas feelings of alienation showed an opposite trend. The exceptions to this pattern were industries that allowed more worker autonomy. Additional studies have also shown that an array of factors influence feelings of alienation, including the hierarchical structure of work, whether there is ownership over one's own labor, insufficient wages, monotonous work and routines, and boredom (Kohn, 1976; Mills, 1956). Melvin Seeman (1959) put forward a multidimensional theoretical approach to alienation, outlining five distinct dimensions of alienation—powerlessness, meaningfulness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. Overall, he focused on developing a general work alienation index to help empirically study alienation and the social conditions that produce it (Seeman, 1959, 1967). Through survey research, Seeman (1967) found slight correlations with higher experiences of alienation between manual-labor workers and workers with lower incomes. In an additional study, using surveys, Melvin Kohn (1976) indicated that the highest correlation was between powerlessness and self-estrangement. More recent survey research has focused on alienation among employees of the quick-service restaurant industry using a seven-item work alienation scale, based on Seeman's five dimensions of alienation (DiPietro & Pizam, 2008). Results from this research revealed that employees with higher levels of alienation were younger, male, Black, hourly paid, and more educated.

Both theoretical and empirical work have taken up additional considerations of alienation, including subjective emotional and cognitive experiences from a social-psychological perspective. For example, Warren TenHouten (2017) proposes there are seven distinct dimensions of alienation: active and passive normlessness, superiority and inferiority cultural estrangement, powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement which are differentiated by the affective experiences they produce in individuals (TenHouten, 2017). Building from Seeman (1959), TenHouten argues that both normlessness and cultural estrangement present in different forms, thus adding active *and* passive normlessness as well as superiority *and* inferiority cultural estrangement. His primary focus is self-estrangement, which involves feeling an absence of control over the work process and a sense of purposelessness, and can be understood as lacking meaning or a sense of direction (Blauner, 1964; TenHouten, 2017). A cross-occupational study indicated that meaninglessness and powerlessness were the strongest determinants of self-estrangement (Mottaz, 1981). In contrast, when individuals can form a purposeful relationship with work, they are more likely to feel ambitious. In other words, under such conditions, they are working toward meaningful life goals (Kohn, 1976; Tenhouten, 2017). Purposeful connection with work is more easily achieved when control over the labor process is available and a sense of meaning is present. Self-estrangement can be characterized by a lack of intrinsic reward and the seeking of extrinsic reward. The inability to find work intrinsically rewarding can transform employees' perceptions and feelings. Self-estranged workers become solely motivated by earning wages in exchange for their labor and time so that they may afford extrinsically rewarding activities outside of work (Blauner, 1964; Kohn, 1976; Seeman, 1959). Further, participating in labor out of necessity instead of desire, or viewing work as a means to an end, is characteristic of those who are self-estranged (Seeman, 1959; Blauner, 1964).

The nature of work and the environments in which employees are expected to perform tasks impacts workers greatly. For example, when workers do not control their labor or the environment, they experience a greater degree of self-estrangement (Otto & Featherman, 1975). Monotonous work is not creative or stimulating. It is repetitive and fosters boredom (Blauner, 1964). Isolating work prevents strong social bonds and support. It creates isolation and exclusion. Self-estrangement from self, labor, and others is intensified under these working conditions (Blauner, 1964; TenHouten, 2017). It negatively affects the involvement and investment of workers in productive activities. In turn, it also influences perceptions of workers. For instance, a 2018 study focused on the negative effects of self-estrangement in the workplace found that self-estranged workers were perceived as untrustworthy, inaccessible, and non-reciprocal by other coworkers, and this view had a direct negative effect on the self-estranged worker's job performance (Golden & Viega, 2018). The conditions that workers labor under not only affect their social well-being and ability to perform, but they also influence their subjective cognitive and affective experiences. Those who are more self-estranged become alien to their inner selves by engaging in work that hinders self-expression and unique personalities (Seeman, 1959). This process includes losing touch with one's authentic self, feeling like a fake, or not knowing a genuine self. It leads to an inconsistency between an individual's perceived self and authentic self (Seeman, 1983; TenHouten, 2017). In addition to obliviousness and conflict regarding the self, individuals who are self-estranged have a negative outlook. This negativity can be internalized in the form of low self-esteem or externalized by negative interpretations of broader society and the world (Seeman, 1983; TenHouten, 2017). Finally, self-estrangement is also characterized by feelings of emptiness, a void of meaninglessness and nonexistence (Blauner 1964; TenHouten, 2017).

TenHouten (2017) argues that despair is the main cognitive effect of self-estrangement and that feelings of self-estrangement and despair have the potential to lead to a variety of negative consequences. Self-estranged and despairing individuals may experience an intense need to make logical sense of the world to dispel personal doubts, the inability to understand their own emotions, and a compulsion to give into emptiness. They may also feel a need to distance oneself from a meaningful social reality and may be inclined to participate in self-harm and suicidal ideation (TenHouten, 2017). The affective and cognitive consequences of feeling self-estranged can lead to negative social behaviors. In 2001, research focused on worker alienation and drinking behavior found that low occupational status workers, those making the lowest wages and those conducting manual labor, experience more alienation than high occupational status workers. Additionally, low occupational status participants with higher alcohol consumption and drinking-related problems reported higher levels of self-estrangement and powerlessness (Yang et al., 2001).

Self-estrangement studies often focus on the social-psychological aspects of alienation among individuals and their working conditions under capitalism. This dimension of alienation holds great relevance in empirical study because of its potential to provide a better understanding of what occupational and environmental factors are self-estranging. In our study, levels of self-estrangement are examined among fast-food service industry workers in the United States. This industry is of significance to studies regarding alienation because the organization of this labor sector and the highly routinized environment include many elements that previous work has identified as factors that contribute to feelings of self-estrangement.

### **The Organization and Labor of the Fast-Food Service Sector**

In George Ritzer's (2015) *The McDonaldization of Society*, the phenomenon of McDonaldization is defined as "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world." Over the last several decades, fast-food restaurant operations have been greatly influenced by and modeled after the assembly line, so that specific tasks may be divided into their most simple elements (Ritzer, 2015). The assembly-line model inhibits worker autonomy and diminishes the need for unique worker skillsets (Braverman, 1974). This model separates workers from the production process, diminishing the level of control that workers have over their own labor and the labor process, and constrains workers to a specialized and routinized role. This role requires little of workers beyond what is specified, such as only handling monetary exchanges as cashiers, which prevent workers from cultivating a purposeful relationship with their work. In its restrictive nature, this type of occupation not only inhibits, but also discourages self-expression and use of unique skills by individual workers. Due to the predetermined role and fixed role that workers play, finding personal fulfillment in this line of work can be difficult. Given that workers do not control the means of production, they must endure this routinized and monotonous labor to make wages that allow them to purchase what they need to reproduce themselves. Workers in the fast-food sector must by default endure a type of work that offers very little control over the labor process—work that is very standardized and not creative. This work often generates negative feelings among workers regarding how their identity compares to their occupation.

The success of the fast-food industry is attributed to its ability to offer consumers and employers alike efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Ritzer, 2015). Assembly line-like techniques are pervasive throughout the fast-food industry. To achieve maximum efficiency, many places even have actual conveyor belts on which food is prepared, at least in part. Calculability refers to making many aspects of the fast-food industry quantifiable. This industry is reliant on numbers in terms of measuring time to prepare food and get it to the customer, as well as having menu items measured and prepared in a precise, controlled, and speedy manner. Predictability relies on controlling workers, and this is achieved by routinizing and heavily restricting the preparation of food, the interactions between employees and consumers via an expected script, and the overall work process in which workers become quite passive actors. Further, the implementation of technology in the fast-food industry has caused a decline in the level of skill required for positions. Computers help take orders and payments, while the products that workers provide and deliver to consumers come pre-prepared and often frozen for speedy assembly. The workplace functions as a bureaucratic institution that restricts employees to its rules and hierarchies. The fast-food industry is no different in its aim to achieve maximum efficiency in generating predictable, calculated, and controlled work environments (Franco, 2019). Ritzer (2015) describes those who are at the low end of the occupational hierarchy, working jobs that pay poorly, require little skill and training, and offer little in terms of upward mobility as highly McDonaldized workers. Conditions such as these create environments that have the potential to produce alienated or self-estranged workers.

### **Importance of Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine levels of self-estrangement among fast-food workers in the United States. Previous studies on alienation have focused on workers in a variety of



occupations, such as industrial and clerical laborers. To date, to the best of our knowledge, scholars have not investigated how self-estrangement may vary within the fast-food sector. Understanding the level to which employees of the fast-food industry are affected by self-estrangement will allow us to better understand their mental well-being and the role that their occupation, work environment, and work relationships play in that. We have designed a survey, drawing upon existing research and literature, such as Seeman (1967), with the aim of measuring levels of self-estrangement. Given previous research (i.e., DiPietro & Pizam, 2008), we expect to see higher levels of self-estrangement among those who are younger, male, Black, hourly paid, and more educated.

## METHOD

### *Procedure*

Using Seeman's self-estrangement scale to measure to alienation, we designed a survey focused solely on fast-food workers. Participants nation-wide were asked to complete a self-administered survey questionnaire, designed using Qualtrics software. The survey was administered over two time periods, in April and July of 2021. CloudResearch was used to launch this study, and the questionnaire was made available to fast-food workers through Mechanical Turk (MTURK), a crowdsourcing service that has been increasingly used to collect data among a diverse population on a wide range of topics (e.g., Aguinis et al., 2021; Tabler et al., 2022). MTURK participants have been found to be more attentive than participants from other study pools (Hauser & Schwarz 2016). Combining MTRUK with CloudResearch reduced the potential for bots participating in the survey (CloudResearch, 2023). We employed Captcha technology and attention checks to ensure data quality. Inclusion criteria included employment in the fast-food industry and being of 18 years of age or older. The questionnaire included 40-items and took approximately 5-6 minutes on average to complete; participants were compensated \$1 (via their CloudResearch payment accounts) in accordance with a pay rate of approximately \$9-12 per hour.

## Measures

### *Dependent Measure.*

In measuring *self-estrangement* among adult U.S. fast-food service industry workers we used literature based, concept-specific questions. This was done with the aim of operationalizing the concept of estrangement, as described by Seeman (1959), Blauner (1964), Kohn (1976), and TenHouten (2017), in a quantitative way. All 12-items were scored using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (range=12-60), and we utilized a moderate item-rest correlation of 0.30 for item inclusion (Piedmont, 2014). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.84, suggesting high internal consistency. Attributes of self-estrangement that were included within the scale are purposelessness, lack of intrinsic reward, experiences of boredom and monotony, desire for extrinsic reward, viewing work as a means to an end, negative coworker relations, a lacking solidified self-identity, a sense of emptiness, and a negative outlook (see Table 1 for survey items).

### *Key Independent Variables: Work Characteristics*

We also include a measure of *occupational role*, which compares those whose role is cashier (0) (reference), server (1), cook (2), or manager (inclusive of shift or general manager) (3). We also compare those who have worked in the fast-food industry for less than 5 years, to those who have been working in the industry for 5+ years (*time in industry*), whether they identify as being *paid salary* or if they are non-salary. We also compare those who report having *more than one job*, to those with one place of employment.

### *Sociodemographic Covariates*

We also include participant *racial identity*, which compares those who identify as white (0) (reference) to those who identify as Asian or Pacific Islander (1), Black (2), or another multiracial identity (3). We also compare those who identify as non-Hispanic/Latinx, to those who identify as Hispanic/Latinx. *Gender and sexual identity* compares those who identify as cisgender and heterosexual men (1) (reference) to cisgender and heterosexual women (2), and lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, transgender, gender-non-binary, or another expansive gender or sexual identity (LGBTQ+) (3). *Age* is measured continuously in years. *Household income* is an ordinal categorical measure ranging from 1-15 progressing in \$5,000 increments, from less than \$10,000 (1) to \$70,000 or more (15). We also compare those who have at least a bachelor's degree education (1) to those with less than a bachelor's degree education (0) (reference).

### **Analytic Approach**

We provide descriptive statistics on key variables stratified by occupational role. We then utilize chi-squared, two tailed independent t-tests, and Pearson's correlation to establish basic bivariate relationships across measures. Finally, for multivariate analyses, we utilize a series of nested ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses with robust standard errors to model self-estrangement as a function of occupational/work features and sociodemographic covariates. Model 1 includes occupational/work characteristics to establish baseline relationships between employment features and our outcome variable. Model 2 adds sociodemographic covariates to this baseline model. Models also adjust for wave of survey (April or July of 2021). In supplementary analyses (not shown), results were not substantively different utilizing negative binomial regression (NBREG) which is often more appropriate for "count" outcomes so we chose OLS regression for easier interpretation. All analyses were conducted using Stata 15.1.

### **RESULTS**

#### *Sample*

Our initial sample included 1,630 respondents, of which only 1,513 had complete responses on all key covariates. After listwise deletion, the analytic sample ( $N = 1,513$ ) was comprised of 49.8% cisgender men ( $n = 754$ ), 47.7% cisgender women ( $n = 722$ ), and 2.5% transgender or gender non-binary identifying respondents ( $n = 37$ ). The average age of respondents was 33.0 years ( $sd = 9.7$ ). While 83.9% of the sample identified as straight/heterosexual ( $n = 1,269$ ), 16.1% identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or another sexual identity ( $n = 244$ ). A majority (87%) of respondents ( $n = 1,323$ ) did not identify as Hispanic or Latino/a/x. Our sample is also comprised of 70.9%

white ( $n = 1,072$ ), 12% Black ( $n = 182$ ), 7.1% Asian or Pacific Islander ( $n = 07$ ), and participants with another or multiracial identity ( $n = 152$ ; 10.1%). Additionally, 36% of the sample reported having a bachelor's degree or higher ( $n = 545$ ).

In terms of occupation, 46.1% report being cashiers ( $n = 697$ ), 5.2% report being a server ( $n = 78$ ), 29.7% report being a cook ( $n = 450$ ), and 19% report being a manager ( $n = 288$ ). Also, 36.4% report having more than one job ( $n = 551$ ) and only 17.9% report being paid salary ( $n = 270$ ). Mean level of social estrangement was 35.9, with a standard deviation ( $sd$ ) of 8.8. Self-estrangement was also normally distributed within the sample. Additional sample characteristics can be found in Table 2.

### *Bivariate and Multivariate Results*

*Bivariate analyses* (based on independent two-tailed  $t$ -tests). These analyses suggest that Servers (mean = 33.4,  $sd = 8.6$ ) and Managers (mean = 32.9,  $sd = 9.1$ ) experience lower levels of self-estrangement relative to Cashiers (mean = 36.8,  $sd = 8.6$ ) ( $p < 0.001$ , respectively) (Table 2). Those who have worked in fast-food industry for less than 5 years (mean = 36.9,  $sd = 8.5$ ) experience higher levels of self-estrangement compared to those who have worked in the industry for over 5 years (mean = 33.5,  $sd = 9.2$ ) ( $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, those who report being paid salary experience lower levels of self-estrangement (mean = 32.0,  $sd = 8.4$ ) relative to those who work hourly (mean = 36.8,  $sd = 8.7$ ) ( $p < 0.001$ ) (not shown).

There are also potential sociodemographic differences in levels of self-estrangement. LGBTQ+ respondents report higher levels of self-estrangement (mean = 39.0,  $sd = 9.2$ ) relative to cisgender/heterosexual men (mean = 35.7,  $sd = 8.7$ ) or cisgender/heterosexual women (mean = 34.9,  $sd = 8.9$ ) in the sample. In addition, white-identifying respondents (mean = 36.2,  $sd = 8.8$ ) report higher levels of self-estrangement relative to Black-identifying participants (mean = 33.7,  $sd = 9.0$ ) ( $p < 0.001$ ) (not shown). Further, Pearson's correlation coefficients suggest that age in years is negatively correlated with self-estrangement (Pearson's  $r = -0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) as is ordinal household income (Pearson's  $r = -0.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (not shown).

*Multivariate Analysis.* Baseline OLS regression results (Table 3, Model 1) suggest that managers (OLS coefficient = -1.82 [95% Confidence Interval = -3.09 to -0.55],  $p = 0.006$ ) and servers (-2.36 [-4.47 to -0.29],  $p = 0.027$ ) experience lower levels of self-estrangement relative to cashiers, when adjusting for other work/occupation features. Those who have worked in the fast-food industry for over 5 years have a self-estrangement score that is 2.33 points lower (95% CI = -3.28 to -1.38) than those who have been in the industry less than 5 years ( $p < 0.001$ ), *ceteris paribus*. In addition, non-salaried employees experience 3.61 points higher (95% CI = 2.43 to 4.80) self-estrangement relative to hourly-wage fast-food workers ( $p < 0.001$ ), holding other work characteristics constant. When sociodemographic characteristics are added to the model (Table 3, model 2), results suggest that for every increase in years of age, self-estrangement declines by -0.10 (95% CI = -0.15 to -0.05,  $p < 0.001$ ), and that for a one unit increase in household income, self-estrangement declines by -0.39 (95% CI = -0.51 to -0.27,  $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, Asian/Pacific Islander-identifying fast-food industry participants report self-estrangement scores that are 1.81 points higher (95% CI = 3.18 to 0.68,  $p = 0.011$ ), and Black-identifying participants report self-estrangement scores that are 2.27 points lower (95% CI = -2.27 to -3.86,  $p = 0.011$ ) than white-identifying participants,

holding all else constant. Relatedly, LGBTQ+ fast-food industry workers report self-estrangement scores that are 3.16 points higher (95% CI = 2.09 to 4.22,  $p < 0.001$ ) relative to cisgender and heterosexual men-identifying participants, holding other sociodemographic and work characteristics constant.

Nested models suggest that, when considering sociodemographic covariates, working in the industry for over 5 years (-1.83[-2.81 to -0.85],  $p < 0.001$ ) and being non-salaried (2.98[1.70 to 4.25],  $p < 0.001$ ) are associated with self-estrangement (Table 3, model 2). While servers report 1.99 points lower self-estrangement (95% CI = -3.94 to -0.03,  $p = 0.047$ ) relative to cashiers even when sociodemographic characteristics are considered, being a manager compared to a cashier is potentially no longer independently associated with self-estrangement when participant characteristics such as household income and age are also included.

## DISCUSSION

The scores of self-estrangement found in our study were concentrated heavily around the average score of the scale, with greater concentration slightly above the exact average. Compared to our initially expected results, gender, race, and age did not show the differences in scores that we had expected. Reasons for this may be that our study focused on only one dimension of alienation rather than general alienation, like previous studies. Also, it is important to consider that trends within the fast-food industry may have simply changed since DiPietro and Pizam's (2008) study on general worker alienation in fast-food. DiPietro and Pizam's study also found that those who are more educated experience more alienation, however our study resulted in different findings. In our sample, those with a master's degree or higher experience the lowest levels of self-estrangement. Further, we found that salaried workers experience lower levels of self-estrangement than those who are paid hourly.

In the fast-food industry and amongst the broader working-class, those with no college education who are paid hourly have an increased chance of being placed at entry level positions that offer very little autonomy. This restrictive, monotonous, stressful, and dull work routine is the type of environment that generates high self-estrangement. Contrary to hourly paid workers with no education, our findings demonstrate that those holding a master's degree or higher and those paid salary experience significantly lower levels of self-estrangement. These lower scores may be partially attributed to the potential opportunity of being hired for managerial, salaried positions for workers who have attained a higher level of education. Occupying a managerial role in a workplace that is extremely routinized and focused on specialized tasks, allows for more flexibility and control over one's own labor process. Having more control over labor would decrease levels of alienation, and therefore, levels of self-estrangement. Observing that participants within the highest brackets of education and those paid salary experience lower levels of self-estrangement, may correlate for reasons such as these.

In general, our results indicate the presence of self-estrangement as a whole for workers in the fast-food industry. Significantly, our analysis highlights that not everybody experiences self-estrangement at the same rate and in the same way, indicating variations within workers in this field, providing more context to the concept of self-estrangement.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study is to better understand the concept of self-estrangement among U.S. fast-food workers, while considering sociodemographic and occupational factors. Based on previous scholarship (e.g. DiPietro & Pizam, 2008), we hypothesized that workers who were younger, male, Black, more educated, and paid hourly would experience higher levels of self-estrangement. Using a survey, we gathered nation-wide data to analyze the trends of this phenomenon in this industry. Our results demonstrated differences from our initial expectations. The demographics of race, gender, and age in our sample presented no statistically significant differences in scores of self-estrangement. Further, we found that factors such as levels of education and worker salary status impact the level of self-estrangement present within an individual. For example, those with a master's degree or higher, as well as salaried workers, experience lower levels of self-estrangement than their counterparts.

Limitations of this study include that our survey was only available online, in English, and to Mechanical Turk workers. More of the target working-class population may have been represented if the survey was available in a variety of forms, rather than only with the use of a device and accessible internet. Further, offering the survey in another language, such as Spanish may have been beneficial in reaching more fast-food workers, given stratification patterns within the United States. While the United States does not have an official language, Spanish is the second most used language. Not everyone can be expected to understand English at the level of a native speaker. Finally, making participation in this study only available to Mechanical Turk workers specifies which fast-food workers in the United States we were able to reach because they must work in fast-food while simultaneously holding a position for Mechanical Turk.

This research aims to analyze self-estrangement in the fast-food industry, which groups of people are most affected by it, and how worker well-being is impacted by occupational status. In efforts to further develop the concept of self-estrangement, this study contributes to the understanding of alienation. Using the framework of self-estrangement, this study positions the spotlight on fast-food workers in the United States and emphasizes the ways in which the organization of labor and the workplace is affecting their well-being. Examining underpaid and heavily regulated industries may reveal potential ways that labor practices and occupational roles under capitalism effect workers. Areas of study such as this will generate discussion and possibly create avenues for social, economic, or political change for the betterment of workers in this industry as well as others.

Furthermore, this study has broader implications for the working-class in general and echoes the sentiments in present efforts amongst fast-food workers to unionize. For example, Starbucks Workers United propose a number of changes to the labor process that would reduce self-estrangement amongst workers. Their wages and pay proposal recommend a base wage of at least \$20 for workers, pay based on previous experience, and cost of living adjustments each year. In addition to pay concerns, Starbucks Workers United also address more consistent schedules and guarantees for minimum hours per week. Consistent schedules can foster stability, potentially reducing self-estrangement (*Our Proposals — Starbucks Workers United*, n.d.) The Starbucks Workers Union proposals note that workers across the United States experience similar conditions. Although these propositions will not lessen the lack of autonomy and control over the labor

process, they do address some of the core concerns presented in our study to reduce levels of self-estrangement.

At a time when corporations and industries are making record profits, workers are being left behind. Workers across a variety of industries are beginning to strike, noting that companies are profiting while people are struggling. In late October 2023, Detroit casino workers went on strike demanding increases in pay to a livable wage. While the Detroit casino industry raked in record-breaking revenues of \$2.27 billion, workers were only given a 3% raise, despite inflation in Detroit creeping up to 20% (*300+ Striking Casino Workers Head to Michigan State Capitol for Support / UAW*, 2023). Similar concerns were voiced by the United Auto Workers union during their recent strike. Central to their concerns were increases in cost of living adjustments big wage increases (*UAW Auto Bargaining Resources / UAW*, n.d.). Given our findings, increases in wages and working stability are key aspects to potentially reducing self-estrangement amongst the working-class generally.

Our work indicates that, in addition to improving the wages of the working-class, demands for fair compensation also speak to questions of self-estrangement. Future research should seek to do three things branching from this study. The first step forward is to strengthen the measures used to score levels of self-estrangement. Second, the relationship between job position and levels of self-estrangement should be explored further. Finally, studying levels of self-estrangement among fast-food workers under the age of 18 might also serve as an avenue for future research.

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## Tables

**Table 1.** Measurement of Self-Estrangement Scale

Items	Average interitem covariance
“I have clear goals and aims in life”	0.48
“The work I do is very meaningful to me”	0.43
“Completing my daily tasks day in and out is a very boring experience” ( <b>reverse</b> )	0.45
“The work I am asked to do is often repetitive and tedious” ( <b>reverse</b> )	0.48
“If my financial needs and wants were suddenly taken care of, I would remain working this job” ( <b>reverse</b> )	0.47
“I have good relationships with my co-workers”	0.49
“I feel somewhat close with at least some of my coworkers”	0.50
“I sometimes feel like I do not know who I truly am” ( <b>reverse</b> )	0.46
“Right now, I am the version of myself that I aspire to be”	0.44
“I often experience feelings of emptiness” ( <b>reverse</b> )	0.43
“I often feel isolated” ( <b>reverse</b> )	0.42
“I often feel like a disappointment” ( <b>reverse</b> )	0.42
Chronbach’s alpha = 0.84	

Item Scoring: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat disagree, 5 = strongly disagree. Possible cumulative scores range from 12 to 60.

Notes. We included items “While working, I often think about activities that I look forward to doing when I am not at work” and “I believe we live in a world that disregards morals” within the original survey, but we excluded these items for failing to meet an item-rest correlation of 0.30. Results are substantively similar using this expanded self-estrangement scale.



**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of Analytic Sample Stratified by Occupational Role

	Everyone (N = 1,513)		(Reference) Cashier (n = 697)		Server (n = 78)		Cook (n = 450)		Manager (n = 153)			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	p-value	N	%	p-value		
	Mean (sd)		Mean (sd)		Mean (sd)			Mean (sd)				
Self-estrangement	35.9 (8.8)		36.8 (8.6)		33.4 (7.8)		0.001	36.9 (8.7)		0.87	32.9 (9.1)	<0.001
Gender and sexuality												
Cis het men	651	43	228	32.7	27	34.6		260	57.8		13	47.2
Cis het women	614	40.6	108	48.6	45	57.7		124	27.6		6	36.8
LGBTQ+	248	16.4	46	18.7	6	7.7	0.049	66	14.7	<0.001	46	16
Ethnicity												
Non-Hispanic	1,323	87.4	606	86.9	79	89.7		390	86.7		25	89.2
Hispanic	190	12.5	91	13.1	8	10.3	0.482	60	13.3	0.892	31	10.8
Race												
White	1,072	70.9	468	67.1	47	60.3		327	72.7		23	79.9
Black	182	12	82	11.8	15	19.2		16	3.5		25	8.7
Asian/Pacific	107	7.1	70	10	8	10.3		60	13.3		13	4.5
Islander												
Multiracial/Other	152	10.1	77	11.1	8	10.3	0.3	47	10.4	0.001	20	6.9
College Degree												
Less than Bachelor's	968	64	467	67	44	56.4		321	71.3		13	47.2
Bachelor's or higher	545	36	230	33	34	43.6	0.061	129	28.7	0.122	15	52.8
Age	33.0 (9.7)		31.9 (9.6)		31.6 (9.4)		0.829	33.1 (9.7)		0.041	36.2 (9.5)	
Household Income	8.7 (4.5)		8.4 (4.5)		8.4 (3.9)		0.915	7.7 (4.5)		0.015	10.8 (3.8)	
Pay Modality												
Salaried	270	17.9	72	10.3	23	29.4		53	11.8		12	42.4
Hourly	1,243	82.1	625	89.7	55	70.5	<0.001	397	88.2	0.442	16	57.6
Employment												
Single job	962	63.6	442	63.4	48	61.5		282	62.7		98	66
Multiple jobs	551	36.4	255	36.6	30	38.5	0.745	168	37.3	0.798	19	34
Length of time in industry												
<5 years	1,076	71.1	570	81.8	52	66.7		334	74.2		12	41.7
											0	

5+ years	437	28.9	127	18.2	26	33.3	<b>0.001</b>	116	25.8	<b>0.002</b>	16	58.3	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
											8		

Notes. Data are from a fast-food industry survey administered on Amazon MTURK in April and July of 2021. Proportion differences tested using chi-squared, and differences in means tested using two-tailed independent sample t-tests by occupational role (reference=Cashier). Comparison p-values are uncorrected for repeated comparisons (e.g., Cashiers vs. Servers, Cooks, and Managers). However, only the difference in Gender and Sexuality between Cashiers and Servers, as well as difference in age between Cashiers and Cooks may actually be non-significant after correction using the Bonferroni approach.

sd=standard deviation, cishet=cisgender and heterosexual, LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or another expansive gender or sexuality

**Table 3.** OLS Regression of Self-Estrangement among Fast Food Industry Workers

<i>Self-Estrangement</i>	<b>Model 1</b>					<b>Model 2</b>				
	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>95% CI</b>		<b>Robust SE</b>	<b>p-value</b>	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>95% CI</b>		<b>Robust SE</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<i>Occupation Role<sup>a</sup></i>										
Server	-2.36	-4.44 -0.29		1.03	<b>0.027</b>	-1.99	-3.94 -0.03		0.97	<b>0.047</b>
Cook	0.35	-0.42 1.11		0.38	0.369	0.31	-0.56 1.17		0.66	0.478
Manager	-1.82	-3.09 -0.55		0.63	<b>0.006</b>	-0.84	-2.17 0.49		0.66	0.212
<i>In industry +5 years</i>	-2.33	-3.28 -1.38		0.47	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	-1.83	-2.81 -0.85		0.49	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
<i>Non-Salaried</i>	3.61	2.43 4.80		0.59	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	2.98	1.70 4.25		0.63	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
<i>Single Job</i>	-0.40	-1.28 0.49		0.44	0.374	-0.79	-1.63 0.06		0.42	0.068
<i>Gender and Sexuality<sup>b</sup></i>										
Cishet woman						-0.63	-1.43 0.16		0.40	0.117
LGBTQ+						3.16	2.09 4.22		0.53	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
<i>Hispanic/Latino/a/x</i>						-0.64	-1.70 0.43		0.53	0.235
<i>Race<sup>c</sup></i>										
Asian/Pacific										
Islander						1.81	0.44 3.18		0.68	<b>0.011</b>
Black						-2.27	-3.86 -0.69		0.79	<b>0.006</b>
Multiracial/another										
identity						-0.91	-2.25 0.43		0.67	0.179
<i>Age</i>						-0.10	-0.15 -0.05		0.02	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
<i>Household income</i>						-0.39	-0.51 -0.27		0.06	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
<i>Bachelor's degree or higher</i>						0.01	-1.08 1.09		0.54	0.991
<i>Constant</i>	29.80	26.28 33.32		1.75	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	38.92	33.98 43.87		2.46	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
<i>AIC</i>	10782					10660				
<i>R-Squared</i>	0.07					0.16				
<i>N</i>	1,513					1,513				

Notes. Data are from a fast food industry survey administered on Amazon MTURK in April and July of 2021.

<sup>a</sup>Reference is Cashier, <sup>b</sup>Reference is cishet man, <sup>c</sup>Reference is white-identifying

Models are clustered by U.S. state ( $N = 50$  clusters), and also adjust for wave of survey (April or July)

cishet = cisgender and heterosexual, LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or another expansive gender or sexuality

# **What does it mean to be working-class? Exploring the definition of a social class identity through the eyes of working-class professional services and administrative staff in Russell Group universities.**

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## **Abstract**

What it means to have a working-class identity in the UK today is constantly under tension and debate. From socio-economic proxies used by large organisations as determinants of disadvantage, to POLAR data, self identification, and other metrics, academic literature has largely disagreed how to measure working-class as an identity over the last 20 years. This paper draws on the findings from two parts of an EdD thesis which looked to understand the experiences of working-class professional services staff in UK higher education. Here, it presents the findings of the literature review which discovered the multiple ways in which working-class identities are determined for the purposes of research recruitment in academic papers. In the subsequent part of this paper, empirical data from interviews with working-class staff in UK higher education looks at the facets which participants considered defined them as having a working-class identity. Moving away from traditional conceptualisation of a working-class identity as solely connected to the means of production, it suggests that a working-class identity is inherently connected to many factors in 2023, predominantly to economic disadvantage but also by occupation, social mobility discourse, and access to goods technology, and entertainment. Furthermore, it finds that there are implicit features of a working-class identity shared across the study which include access to facilitating networks, narratives of luck, and being underappreciated and undervalued. This interplay between the convergence of habitus and lived experience suggests that working-class people in UK universities are subject to a lamination of field, an intersection of multiple temporalities.

## **Keywords**

Working-class, class, universities, higher education

## **Introduction**

Conceptualising what it means to have a working-class identity in 2023 is complicated, complex, and consistently under debate. Previously, social class identity had been inextricably connected to type of employment, occupation and heavily associated with the means of production; working-

class families had parents who were traditionally occupied with manual labour, artisanship and in some cases, low level administration (Gildea, 2021; Rolfe, 2017). As the picture of the UK labour market has changed over the past 50 years, with a movement towards a knowledge economy and away from traditional manual labour and production, so too has the determination of a social class identity (Gildea, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2019). Blurring the lines between socio-economic status and class identity, markers exist in the UK and used by organizations to determine the intake of candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds, in turn enabling them to map the level of social mobility within their cohorts (Rolfe, 2017; Social Mobility Commission, 2021). Such markers, as those indicated by the Social Mobility Commission of access to free school meals, parental employment, parental education, and attendance at a state school have been used as a proxy to identify those from working-class backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission, 2021).

There are two fundamental issues with the use of these proxies to determine class-based identity. At the former level, the presence or absence of a state school education cannot be seen to determine socio-economic status or social class identity. High performing state schools in expensive catchment areas are dominated by families with access to advanced levels of economic capital, in turn marginalising those from traditional working-class families (Adams, 2020; Donnelly, 2015). Similarly, whilst being in receipt of free school meals does indicate a certain level of economic disadvantage, international students and immigrants do not always have a sufficient and comparative marker from their own setting with which to be able to answer this question. Further, as Skeggs suggests, the markers of a working-class identity go beyond the facets of economic determinism and further into measures of culture; holding a working-class identity comes with intrinsic relationships to different tastes, hobbies, language patterns and a sense of community (Skeggs, 2004). The concept of a working-class identity has been explored with regards to academics in the UK, who often sit in an uncomfortable position between past experiences in their biographical histories and the new environment of an ostensibly middle class, privileged, professional remit. Rather than shedding the attributes of their working-class origins, Crew (2022) and Binns (2019) explore how working-class academics carry the ‘Ghost’ of their working-class habitus with them into their professional lives in a new, middle-class field. As Crew (2022) notes, this reliance of their past serves as a way for working-class academics to utilise [their] lived experience, exerting a high degree of emotional labour on working-class individuals, whilst also exacting a re-visiting of past traumas. As yet, these experiences have been documented with reference to working-class academics and students but thus far, professional services staff have been left out of the political economy of what is known about life (from an experiential perspective), within UK universities.

This paper seeks to understand how the conceptualisation of a working-class identity is determined in 2023. To do this, it takes the findings from a literature review which assessed the ways in which class identity is determined for the purpose of research with working-class participants. Subsequently, it takes empirical evidence from data derived from an EdD thesis around the experiences of working-class professional services staff in Russell Group universities in the UK. This data sought to understand the extent to which the conceptualisation of a working-class identity has changed over time and what facets are important to holding a working-class identity in the UK today. This paper makes several key contributions. Far from being able to associate a working-class identity solely with occupation or type of labour, it finds that participants discerned their working-class identity from several critical factors, grouped as explicit associations and implicit

references. Explicitly, where participants were asked to define their working-class identity the features identified included occupation, in response to a social mobility framing, financial hardship and poverty, housing and, access to technology, goods and entertainment. Implicitly, and embedded throughout the narratives within these interviews, a working-class identity was associated with narratives of luck, a lack of facilitating networks, guilt and financial anxiety and unrecognised potential and a lack of respect. This paper hence finds symmetry with what Binns (2019) refers to as the ‘Ghosts of childhood habitus’, that an interplay between temporalities of time and space incur anxieties for working-class individuals through the consistent retellings of traumas from financial instability and growing up in environments of relative poverty.

### **The study**

Data for this paper drew on the findings from two parts of an EdD thesis. Data collection for this thesis began in July 2022 and ended in August 2022 and was conducted at Oxford Brookes University. The literature review followed a systematic approach and sought to understand where working-class people had been present in academic research in relation to UK Higher Education thus far (Page et al., 2021). Here, the review focused on methods and theories used in research, the selection criteria of working-class participants as well as the groups of people who had been included in academic research. The second data set which is used within this study draws from interview data conducted with participants who worked in professional services and administrative roles in UK Russell Group universities. The data set comprises of thirteen different interviews which took a novel methodological approach. Here, a narrative inquiry approach was embedded within traditional sociological semi-structured interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were analysed using NVivo software. These interviews were analysed using the approach of Reflexive Thematic Analysis whereby the perspective and experience of the researcher is also embedded in the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

### **Recruiting working-class participants in Higher Education research**

This paper focuses on one of the key findings from a thesis literature review which was conducted through the process outlined in appendix 1.1. Whilst the review more broadly looked at themes, topics, methods, and theoretical frameworks used; this paper focuses on the selection criteria for working-class participants. From this it is quite clear that, at least in studies of higher education, the methods employed by researchers to identify and recruit working-class participants for studies in and around higher education differently between and among different papers. Study participants were identified in multiple separate ways which were far from ubiquitous. Studies predominantly conflated socio-economic class or status with a working-class identity, something we will return to later. Studies varied considerably in their approaches; using level of education, type of schooling, receipt of free school meals, parents’ education or employment, self-identification.

Several studies in the sample use one, or more indicators of social class as recommended by the Social Mobility Commission (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). These include receipt of free school meals, state school attendance and parental occupation and education (Social Mobility Commission, 2021). Byrom et al (2013) selected students who were the first in their family to go

to university, but other studies in the sample used first generation, in combination with other metrics (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2013). Bathmaker et al (2021) use parental education status, parental occupation, type of school; area of low or high HE participation; receipt of financial grant support; self-identification to determine working-class status (Bathmaker, 2021; Byrom & Lightfoot, 2013). Reay et al (2021) use parental occupation as a key factor of working-class status. They combine parental occupation with social and cultural capital (Reay, 2021a). Thiele et al (2017) and determine working-class status through receipt of Free School Meals in conjunction with receiving Pupil Premium payments (Thiele et al., 2017).

Class status was also identified through other financial markers. The National Statistics classification 'NS-SEC 4-7' was the parameter which Crozier et al (2011) used, and the same classification process was also used by Reay et al (2010), although they used NS-SEC 7014. Other studies were less prescriptive about how these parameters were marked, Wong et al (2019), for example, use an inclusion criterion of 'low-income household'. In other areas, Education Maintenance Allowance (English, 2012) discerns class status whilst other studies use the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation instead (Findsen et al., 2011). The income of Indian mothers is determined, and participants assessed for their suitability using a level of research subjectivity by Khambhaita (2014) and in some cases, indicators are used in conjunction with one another. Reay (2021) and Bathmaker (2021) relate more than one factor (such as economic capital, education, occupation and cultural capital) to provide metrics for assess participant suitability. Devas et al (2011) also discern that participants meet one of the following criteria;

*Parental ownership or rental of home, parental occupations, parents' newspaper reading habits, students' previous qualifications, student's term time working patterns, information supplied by the student at interview, personal knowledge of the students (Devas, 2011).*

TUNDRA and POLAR data have been used as ways to assess socio-economic background in university admissions processes. Using this type of data has been criticized by Boliver et al (2022) who demonstrate that they tend to produce a high degree of 'false positives'; marking students out as being disadvantaged when objectively they have not come from these kinds of socio-economic situations (Boliver, Banerjee, et al., 2022; Boliver, Gorard, et al., 2022; Gorard et al., 2019) They instead suggest developing new metrics for assessment to include 'verified individual-level measures of socioeconomic disadvantage' to make access to higher education more equitable (Boliver et al., 2022).

Rickett et al (2021) use the approach of self-identification, outlining their intention to understand the complexities of working-class identities in greater detail (Rickett & Morris, 2021). They centre their argument on the need to disentangle class from measures of socio-economic status because, as they suggest, social class 'represents a complex interplay of a person's life experiences, family backgrounds, the social networks they are a part of, their language and speech style, lifestyle, mode of appearance and so on' (Rickett & Morris, 2021). Self-identification is used differently by Field et al (2013). Instead of using an objective measure of class, the participants were asked instead to describe their class background in their own words during data collection. This approach is different from the approaches where participants are asked to self-define as a selection criterion. Participants in this study describe their class position in relation to family background and family history, the jobs their parents did, qualifications their parents attained, work ethic, aspiration,

language and speech, and their class position in relation to those around them. One student describes their own class position in opposition to someone they see as being of a middle-class identity due to their ability to ‘go on holiday to Italy’ with an apparent ease (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2013).

Parental and familial background are an indicator of class in publications that are outside of the results of this systematic search. In 2021, Friedman et al found that participants who objectively occupied a middle-class economic position frequently described their origins as working-class, in alignment with what they saw as their family history and wider narrative (Friedman et al., 2021). In this paper, they assert that individuals occupy a false sense of belonging to a working-class identity because of their parents or grandparents’ level of deprivation, education and social position. This, they assert, is a false representation of identity among their participants. Friedman et al (2021) find that this reliance on historical narrative can enable individuals to occupy a space which is inaccurate, potentially leading to the misrepresentation of the working-class and working-class experiences (Friedman et al., 2021). As such, they advise that care is taken in studies that require participants to self-identify and recommend the use of objective indicators.

This literature review has found that there is not one standard, formalised way to determine working-class research participants, despite some recent movements towards self-identification (Crew, 2020; Rickett & Morris, 2021). It is difficult to know how to evaluate studies around working-class experiences, when the measure of being working-class is so divergent and open to interpretation. Where some studies use economic metrics such as Pupil Premium payments, these studies tend to associate social class identity solely with economic circumstance. Different measurements of working-class identity show different interpretations of social class, for example, self-identification which can capture a sense of ‘feeling, tradition and convention’, yet is littered with inconsistencies and caveats.

## **Part two: Interviews**

The results of the above literature reviewed showed that researchers have been using different metrics and methods to define working-class participants, with markers of social class being ‘difficult to quantify’ (Perale, 2022). Subsequently, the interview schedule for this study included questions formed through a narrative inquiry approach which formally asked participants to determine why they had chosen to identify as working-class. These have been categorised here in two ways; those that were explicit, in response to the question ‘What does having a working-class identity mean to you?’ and those that were implicit or referred to as a distinction of their class background in responses to other questions in the interview.

### **Explicit definitions of a working-class identity**

#### **Occupations and professions**

Several participants understood their working-class identity as having originated from the roles and occupations that their family had traditionally been involved with. Often in these scenarios, they felt they were working-class because of these professional roles. On reflection, participants identified their family members as having certain jobs; one described that his father had been a

bricklayer, another spoke about her grandfather's job 'down the pits' and a further participant explained her class identity in relation to her father's previous role as a miner. In other interviews, family occupations were mentioned to explain to a greater or less extent why the participant considered themselves to be working-class, these included family members working as decorators, shop workers, bus conductors, cleaners, at the docks, in factories and as being unemployed. The traditional distinction of a working-class identity being associated with occupations has become distorted in recent years because of a change in the labour market and a movement away from manual labour and towards a knowledge economy (Rolfe 2017). ONS data shows the dramatic decreased in manufacturing between 1960 and 2018 with a parallel rise in the services sector during the same time. (Office for National Statistics, 2019) .

Gildea discerns the 1984/5 miners' strike as a pivotal moment in the 'unmaking' of the working-class, the 'last great battle of the organised industrial class, of which the miners were the heroic vanguard', explaining that occupation and social class identity was never the same again (Gildea, 2021). The changing nature of class is recognized by the participants in this study. Annie\* understood that a change had taken place during her lifetime, a change which continued to make defining being working-class more problematic;

*I think it used to be more on my parents' certain kind of job. But for me, it's around that kind of, that limited income, free school meals. I grew up in, I grew up in a council house, or social housing, as we say now, because we don't say council house anymore.*

### **Social mobility framing**

Some participants in this study worked in roles related to widening participation, admissions and equality, diversity and inclusion. As such, three of them indicated their social class status as being working-class partly in alignment with this narrative. The Social Mobility Commission (2021) indicates the metrics of receipt of free school meals, level of parental education, parental occupation and type of school attended as proxies for socio-economic class status, to track and monitor social mobility in organisations. None of the participants described their social class status solely in alignment with these metrics, yet the participants indicated mentioned being the first in family to go to university and receipt of free school meals as factors alongside other elements.

### **Other economic factors**

#### **Financial hardship and poverty**

Other definitions relating to working-class identity were connected to economic factors. These factors included explicit reference to poverty, types of housing and housing concerns and an inability to access certain resources. Individuals reflected on the economic hardships they had felt growing up, often seeing their parents' making trade-offs between heating, eating, housing and looking after their children which formed battles of survival.

A young female professional services worker in the south of England, Penny\* described her experiences of poverty and neglect as she was growing up. She explained that this was something she didn't want to talk about with other people around her at work, because she worried about



being judged or pitied. Instead, she focussed on what she termed ‘neutral’ interests like reading, rather than seeking empathy. As a child, she told me that her family could;

*...either afford heating or food, it was very much that sort of dynamic.*

She knew that she was aware when she was a child that the things other people had were out of her reach, even when it came down to affording necessities. She drew on one memory of having holes in her school shoes and being unable to buy new ones due to the cost. In retelling these stories, she didn’t linger on the finer details in recalling the memory, perhaps because, as she had already explained, she didn’t want anyone to feel sorry for her. Nonetheless, the imagery of having cold, perhaps damp, feet explains her situation quite emphatically. Experiencing this level of financial deprivation creates a sense of trauma for people in this study which, on occasion resonates throughout their formative and adult lives, even beyond points where they became financially stable. Penny associated being working-class and this referring to economic deprivation, something which has continued to stay with her through her professional career, noting that she continued to worry about rising costs and her low wage in professional services.

## Housing

Three participants referred to their working-class identity through the scope of housing; a repossession because of the financial crisis in 2008 and other experiences relating to growing up living on council estates.

Annie\* saw her time growing up in a council house as being directly related to her working-class identity;

*I grew up in a council house, or social housing, as we say now, because we don’t say council house anymore.*

This extract helps us understand the relationship between social class identity and housing, and the state of flux that has existed over time. At the end of the second world war, most of the population of the UK lived in council-owned housing. As the historian Sandbrook details, until Right to buy was instigated in 1980, the concept of home ownership was not the norm (BBC History extra, 2020; Sandbrook, 2019). Annie\* also interestingly describes how the frame of ‘council housing’ and how it is understood has changed over time. Calling it ‘social housing’ because ‘we don’t say council house anymore’ directly describes a movement in behaviours and attitudes and reflects how the occupants of council housing have, over time, been subject to ridicule and disgust.

Annie\* further described the experiences of living in council housing accommodation during her childhood;

*I remember when I was a kid, we had a TV that you put 50 pence’s in, and the person would come to collect the money and we would hide. So it’s just, I think it’s those experiences of kind of being aware of money, being aware of financial limitations, being aware of the fact that the household income can change. Like, my parents had part time jobs, sometimes we were on benefits, sometimes*

*those benefits were stopped, because there might have been a little bit of work on the side that someone did at some point.*

Michael\* was one of the few participants who spoke about financial hardship as a teenager and as an adult rather than as a child. Whilst Michael\* pointed to occupation and deprivation as indicative of his working-class identity, he predominantly centred his description on being made homeless as a young adult. As someone who had grown up in difficult family circumstances with parents who were not happily married and in relative poverty, he had managed to rapidly ascend a professional career ladder. He described at length the struggled he had faced to fit in to these settings culturally, even when he had adopted the connections, knowledge and dress codes of those around him.

### **Access to goods, technologies, and entertainment**

Participants referenced their economic hardship through the mechanisms of things that were unaffordable to them growing up, which included things like emerging technologies, new or expensive hobbies, holidays and the latest fashions. For David\* and Penny\*, not having the same access to these goods and resources as others around them made them feel a pronounced sense of disadvantage. This was not true for all participants and David\* and Penny\* speak specifically about how this lack of material goods left them unable to belong within their local and immediate communities. Penny\* spoke about the things in people's houses that she saw around her, viewing the materials within them as delineating a space between these people and herself;

*Seeing almost like these grand design houses, there's glass everywhere, and everything's very minimalist. And it just kind of it just really blew me away that people kind of live like that, and don't recognize what they have.*

David\*, who was slightly older and working predominantly in the Northwest described this lack of access to goods in the frame of new and emerging technologies. As he was growing up in the 1990s, he could see how the new technologies other children had available to them were giving them new tools and advantages;

*If you're at school with middle class people, they would always have videotapes before, you know, your family had them or DVDs or computers or the internet. You're always a bit behind and you're left at a bit of a disadvantage.*

David\* understood having to work towards accessing these technologies (such as videotapes and the internet) as a broader metaphor to describe working-class experiences; that thing other took for granted had to be worked hard for. David\* had grown up in a household with his grandparents after his parents, who had had a 'complicated relationship' had broken up and he had been kidnapped by his mum and taken to a different country. He noted that his Dad had been absent in his childhood, being not 'really capable' of raising a child. His care was therefore provided for by his grandparents, one of which had been incredibly unwell during his childhood. Whilst he described being 'very lucky' and his grandparents 'very caring,' financial resources were few and far between (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024). Coupled with this, the small village he grew up in had started to become a destination for people moving out of the city, looking for places from where they could commute to work. As such, he became incredibly aware over time that those around him

who had moved from the city out to his village had different mannerisms and different access to materials, opportunities, and networks (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024).

Having contrasting experiences to those around them helped participants to define their own tastes, cultures and pursuits, which relates Bourdieu's concepts of hierarchies of tastes and social class. Participants in this study framed their own tastes in antithesis to those of their middle-class peers

*People had horse riding lessons and all these extra-curricular things.*

Participants used examples of hobbies and holidays to then contrast their own experiences. David\* explained in detail at how his holiday experiences were related to his working-class background;

*We would go to Butlins, that was our kind of family thing, and this one time we went to one down in Bognor Regis or somewhere. If we'd had a car it would have been you know, maybe a couple of stops wherever, but we had to make for train journey swap overs train and all these things, there's a lot of stuff that you have to plan around to make the cheapest journey you can to get somewhere.*

In other interviews, leisure time and holidays were completely absent and yet examples of the middle-class holidays they saw around them still featured and were directly referenced as exotic holidays and skiing trips. David's excerpt also highlights a concern of mobility and the inaccessibility of transport as being geographically restrictive, something which often underscores working-class realities; difficult complicated bus journeys and long walks to commute.

An individualised narrative has developed during the last 40 years around working-class people to explain poverty and economic disadvantage as being their own fault through their fecklessness and inability to succeed (Bloodworth, 2016; Jones, 2012; McKenzie, 2017). However, I found this narrative to be at odds with the experiences of growing up in working-class communities that my participants described (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024). Annie\* described how her mum would walk her to a ballet lesson, sit and wait then walk her home again, despite being tired after work and simultaneously shouldering complaints from her daughter who did not want to walk;

*My mum took me to ballet lessons. And where I grew up, I grew up in a council estate in a village. And there were no buses after four or five at night. So, we would have to walk to the ballet classes. And my mum would have to bring my dinner with me that she would have made for me. And she would sit there with me when I did my ballet class and then walk home. And in [redacted] it wasn't that far. But for kids, it must have been about a 40-minute walk. And you just think she gave it like, three, four hours of her time just so I could go and do ballet classes. You know, it's a really loving thing to do. I probably moaned the whole way there and the whole way back.*

These kinds of excerpts which were abundant in my interviews were discussed by participants at length and demonstrated the level of care and regard for learning, hobbies and education that they believed to be facets of their working-class identities.

### **Implicit definitions of a working-class identity**

Throughout the rest of the interview questions with participants in this study, collaborators referred to several other things which defined their working-class identity in relation to other things. These ‘implicit’ definitions cut through different questions within the interview at different points for different participants, but form mechanisms of working-class identities not yet considered.

### **Narratives of luck**

There was an underlying thread throughout the interviews in this study where participants discussed how lucky they had been in their lifetimes. Running a text-based query through all the transcripts shows that the word ‘luck’ as used explicitly twenty-seven times and featured in all but three of the interview transcripts. Within this study, ‘luck’ or being ‘lucky’ is explained within three contexts. Primarily, participants explained their career pathways and trajectories to date as having been ‘extremely lucky’. On these occasions they refer to chance meetings with people who could help them to gain different experiences or opportunities, or that they had been fortunate or ‘lucky’ to gain entry to different types of education. Here, two participants mention getting scholarships to local grammar schools, which they frame as ‘lucky’ by comparing their educational opportunities to those who they had grown up with, and subsequently witnessed their educational outcomes. Two participants felt they had been lucky in receiving expert help in completing job applications, either by way of chance meetings with mutual acquaintances or reconnecting to extended family who were able to offer more precise advice and insight on how best to display their abilities. Feeling lucky within the institution that they worked in was expressed in two different ways. Whilst some participants felt fortunate and lucky to be placed in the department they were working in because it was a ‘rich department’ or because they had supportive line managers, some also expressed how luck was used outwardly by the institution itself. In this sense, one participant in particular Lizzie\* explained how her institution promulgated an attitude *towards* staff that they should feel lucky or grateful to work at a prestigious Russell Group university, and that this should be treated as a kind of remuneration.

The narrative of luck within this study is cross cutting and under tension at times. Luck plays a significant role in participants explaining their career journeys, successes and how they have come to achieve a role in a middle class, prestigious institution, often in comparison to the quite different career trajectories of people they had left behind at home. This is interesting when considered alongside the narrative of meritocracy which has been perpetuated throughout the political rhetoric of the UK in the last 30 years. As Friedman et al (2020) describe post war fortunes place emphasis on technical capital in the UK, which young men from poorer backgrounds took advantage of. Utilising technical capital these individuals became the ‘new men’, socially mobile individuals who could ascend classed hierarchies. Subsequent governments under Thatcher, New Labour and the subsequent 12 years of conservative party governments have tirelessly rallied around this ‘pull yourself up by the bootstraps’ narrative. This narrative individualises success and further, moves the responsibility for inequality away from the structures that reproduce privilege. Individualizing success also individualises failure and therefore establishes a derogatory rhetoric towards those from typically working-class and less privileged backgrounds. Although decades of political rhetoric have tried to make success or failure the remit of the individual, participants here still felt that their relative stability was a result of chance, happenstance and random fortune.

There is a broader political and societal question here; if middle class or privileged individuals tend to adopt the rhetoric of meritocracy more readily than their working-class counterparts, has

the pervasive political rhetoric achieved its goal? We might ask whether the rhetoric of meritocracy is only ever intended to enable the middle class to solidify the positions of themselves, and in consequence the position of those from less privileged backgrounds (Bloodworth, 2016; Reay, 2021). The use of meritocracy as a political tool has been much discussed by scholars in sociology, philosophy, and political science (Bloodworth, 2016; Frank, 2016; Reay, 2021; Sandel, 2020). As Sandel (2020) argues, the use of merit in modern democracies fosters hubris, encouraging resentment and the maintenance of the status quo, ensuring that inequalities persist (Sandel, 2020). His argument is that refocusing on elements such as luck and privilege reinstate human values such as humility within society (Sandel, 2020). It is interesting, therefore, to note how participants consider their ascension to their current position as being heavily intertwined with notions of luck, rather than their own ‘talent’ (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024).

### **‘Facilitating’ Networks**

The importance and presence of advantageous social networks was reiterated in nearly every interview in this study and was often in comparison to the networks which had been available to the participants when they were growing up in working-class communities. Networks were understood as ‘facilitating’ and as a tool to ascend the hierarchy of dominant cultures in UK society.

Rachel\*, A high-ranked professional services employee working at a university in the north explained that she had had no access to networks or connections who could facilitate her moving into a professional career as a child and young adult. She was one of the first interviewees for this project and demonstrated on many occasions that she felt a tension between growing up in a working-class community and her professional position which, on the face of it, seemed to be financially stable and extremely comfortable. She still believed, though, that she had lacked what she saw as critical influences and skills which would have helped her to ascend her professional career pathway with greater ease. She explained that part of her working-class identity was forged in response to an absence of facilitating networks, people and connections who could help her to navigate middle class spaces, institutions, and environments. I asked her to explain to me what she meant when she used the word ‘networks’ in our meeting. She described how she interpreted ‘networks’ as;

*....knowing how to navigate university. I had no networks... my mam and dad don't know lawyers or people who work in universities or doctors or, you know, people in those level of professional service...internships were just not a thing I could even consider. I worked throughout my whole degree...knowing how to navigate university and knowing how to play the game as such, I think that inevitably affects your confidence.*

On multiple occasions, networks that could help to facilitate progression or the development of experience or confidence were evident as having been absent throughout the interviews I conducted. Michael\* reflected on his journey to professional services which had first involved starting a career in finance in the City of London. He made a connection between having ‘good connections’ and ‘more well off’, particularly in the realm of the graduate job market;

*I guess it kind of kicked home for me when I came to graduate from university and lots of my friends, all of a sudden had jobs, and I didn't. And they all had these other networks they were*

*tapping into to get other jobs, whereas I didn't have that. It was a really difficult gap to me at graduating and then going into the working world.*

He explained that it had been by chance that a relationship at university had given him personal connections to people with 'important' jobs in the city;

*I started going out with a girl whose parents were quite affluent...and they started like, introducing me to people in the city. Then, all of a sudden, I had access to the owner of an asset management company in the city of London. He met with me, we had a chat and it turned out...all these doors were open to me all of a sudden.*

Michael\* had been an active recipient of the benefits of these kinds of networks but on using these networks and starting work in these different environments he explained at length how the culture, type of work, and people around him were not aligned with his own interests and sensibilities, he didn't seem to feel that he had fully fitted into the environment the network had given him access to.

In the above excerpt Michael\* referenced the presence of networks which were clear to him but were assumed and unrecognised by his middle-class peers. A similar sentiment was also repeated by Peter\* who had come from a different career trajectory, and originally from working within an academic context. Peter\* had achieved a PhD in a STEM related subject but had chosen to avoid working as an academic. He identified that networks were noticed by those who did not have them and underappreciated by those that did;

*...don't necessarily appreciate...[they don't} understand things like 'oh, I can get you an internship with someone I know that's in the area you want to go into'....it doesn't matter that it's unpaid, because you can spare six weeks of your time in the summer when a lot of other people would have to go and work so they've got the money to keep them going.*

Molly\* had also come from a previous career to working in professional services, believing that professional services could offer her a level of stability she was not able to access in her previous, precarious form of work. She explained that facilitating networks around her had assisted other people with gaining more prestigious roles on television and in the media. She noted that it was also these kinds of networks which had made navigating university life much easier for other people, where she had had no frame of reference for starting a degree or navigating university life from her family;

*You read a lot about people who got a TV show or have got an agent and that's because they've got an Uncle who works in the BBC, or they've got a family friend here and there. And then I didn't have any of that...I didn't really know what to do or what to expect, and my mum didn't know how to like to fill in the forms or navigate that process.*

Molly\* believed that one of the associated central considerations from having come from a working-class background was that she had to create and manage her own networks to explore any other additional opportunities;

*I've created my own networks and then that has made it easier for me to go into different roles in the university and sort of understand my potential here, and what I can offer from my perspective. Sometimes what you can perceive as limitations previously, can really work in your favour.*

Comparing the experiences of people to the findings of the literature review helps us to reflect on the social inequalities which are embedded in UK society (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024). The experience of some of the participants in this study suggests that even when they are helped to develop better, facilitating, networks to achieve higher social and professional status that when they get there, these people often feel more isolated. These people report being in-between home and contemporary life and unable to bring their previous life experiences to work with them. The question here is how far the social mobility narrative, facilitated by enabling access to things like better social networks, causes harm. We might question how far adopting some of these facilitating tools results in individuals having to ignore facets of their own ingrained identity, to assimilate with a dominant sense of culture (Pilgrim-Brown, 2024).

### **Guilt & Financial anxiety**

A sense of financial anxiety is a common thread between and among the interviews in this study. Feelings around money were depicted in this setting as a fear of debt and an inherited fear around poverty, which was visceral and actively remembered by participants in relation to experiences they had had as a child. Asking one participant about how she felt to now be more financially secure, she explained that being more secure had left her feeling divided;

*It is the strangest feeling in the world. It's like, I don't know, as long as I can remember, it's always been in the back of my mind, it's something you can't forget about. I'm sure you've kind of experienced the same of like, it's just always there, it's always in the back of your mind that I can't afford this, or I can't do that. Or, you know, I've got to be really careful this month, and all those little things, they never go away. So having that now is a bit of a shock and really comforting. And I don't think me worrying about money is ever gonna go away. Because that's kind of how I've been programmed to go through life. So, yeah, I still, I still worry about it. But I have to keep reminding myself that I know exactly how much I'm going to be paid every single month... Yeah, it might not be much, but like, it's just a safety net that I've never really had. So, it means a lot to me.*

These financial anxieties had been exacerbated over the course of the preceding year and the impact of the contemporary cost-of-living crisis. This participant emphasized how her previous experiences of financial trauma as a child had continued to influence her day-to-day life as an adult and she clarified her position;

*You know, with the few increases and stuff, the cost-of-living crisis, I'm really worried about it. I thought actually, it's, it's not okay that it's going up. But we'll still be okay. But I still feel really worried about, like, really worried about it. So, it's that kind of like, there's like a balance between like, I feel happy that I'm now secure. But I still have this kind of in the back of my head. Like, I'm still worried about it, if that makes sense. Like, irrationally.*

Financial anxiety had informed how Peter\* had decided what to pursue following receiving his PhD, providing a clear pathway out of academia and towards professional services which was

equated, at least for him, with relative security rather than abject precarity. He spoke explicitly about avoiding academia on achieving his PhD due to an unavailability of funding and research allocation. He told me how he had seen how an academic career trajectory often meant that people around him had had to take on extreme workloads, ‘slogging their guts out in the office until 2 o’clock in the morning’, vying for research funding and struggling to produce research papers. He clarified that he had still chosen to pursue his PhD to avoid the chances of finding himself back in poverty;

*It's remembering a situation that I don't want to find myself in again. And making sure that I don't...that's to an extent why I made sure that I was as educated as I could be, to make sure to try and rule out the possibility of finding myself in those situations again.*

Debt aversion and aversion to financial risk also played a part in the financial anxieties that participants described, and this was best exemplified by the two participants in this study who had not gone to pursue an undergraduate degree at 18. Instead, both participants had chosen to go straight into a professional environment for fear of the debt that would be accumulated by attending university. Not wanting to put themselves in financial debt was a crucial and often deciding factor in choosing not to attend university earlier on. Not wanting to attend university for these two professional services employees also came with other elements not described here; feeling like they wouldn’t fit in and feeling like the dominant culture at universities was not theirs. Nevertheless, debt aversion and financial risk still played a dominant part in the decision-making process to accessing a university education at 18.

### **Unrecognised potential and a lack of respect**

Some respondents in this study felt that they possessed a degree of capability that often meant their potential or work was unrecognized, or that they felt more capable than some of the work they were allocated. Crucially, this wasn’t the case for all participants in this study and several also felt that they were able to participate in the working environment to their fullest potential, without fear of repercussion. Interestingly, for the men in this study this seemed to be largely the case and they each described feeling comfortable within their job role and the expectations they had placed on them. These individuals also were more likely to be involved in technical roles than others in this study with them occupying positions in IT and development. Whether or not there is a gendered or role-oriented relationship between worth or not is undecipherable at this stage. This might well form the basis of some future, richer research.

### **Conclusion**

The way that a working-class is defined is open to interpretation, oscillating between traditional understandings of class as associated with occupation and an underlining economic disadvantage. Using the findings from a literature review which was conducted systematically, this paper has identified that even in the realms of research around working-class people’s experiences, the parameters of what it means to be working-class are fluid and open to interpretation. The second part of this study therefore went further, to understand how self-defining working-class research participants defined their own working-class identity and through which parameters. Here, this study finds that the working-class participants who took part in this research defined their working-



class identity explicitly through the metrics of profession but more routinely through economic considerations; housing, poverty and economic deprivation and access to technology, goods, and entertainment. Moreover, implicitly through responses to other questions, participants also referred to their social class identity by underlining their lack of ‘facilitating’ networks, a feeling of not belonging or being ‘in between,’ guilt and financial anxiety and feeling disrespected and undervalued. The repeated association between past historical lives and present anxieties demonstrate a lamination of field. Rather than disregarding their working-class upbringings the implications of maintaining a working-class identity exacerbated a visceral tension for individuals in this study.

Whilst this study has not been able to answer the greater epistemological question of ‘what does it mean to have a working-class identity?’ it has further illuminated the findings of the literature review; that being working-class in 2023 has many different interpretations, understandings and impressions than being solely linked to job roles and the means of production. If anything, the further emphasis of class as being connected to poverty and economic circumstance does suggest a certain degree of flux; working-class identity is no longer solely connected to the job role you hold but also is deeply connected to economic circumstance, poverty, and disadvantage.

### Author Bio

**Jess Pilgrim-Brown** is a research associate at the University of Bristol and a current EdD student at Oxford Brookes University. Her thesis research focuses on social class and organisational culture in higher education through the experiences of working-class professional services and administrative staff. She is interested in issues related to research ethics, equality, diversity and inclusion, and innovative ways to apply qualitative approaches in the social sciences.

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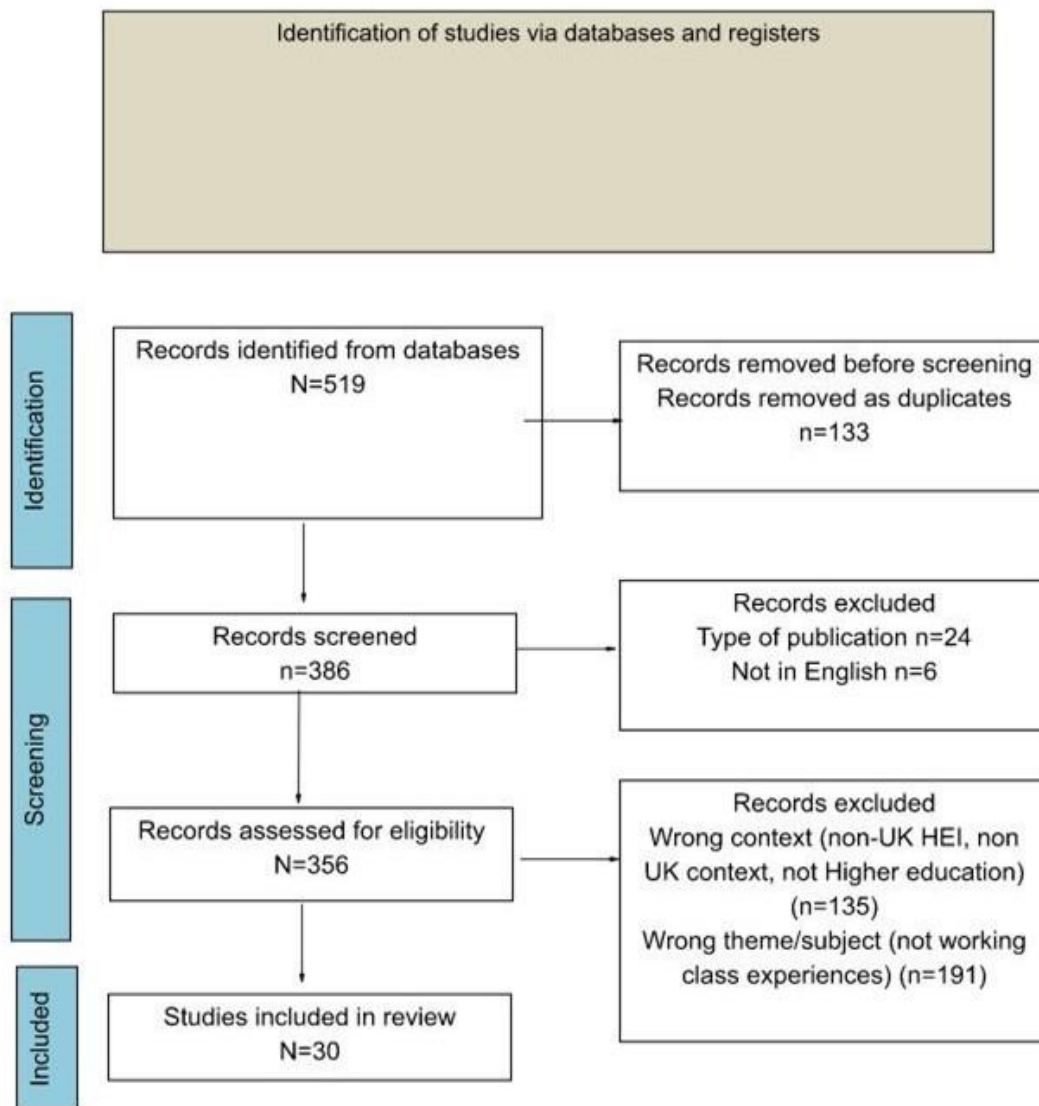
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## Appendix

### Appendix 1.1

#### Prisma flow diagram



Above shows the search process and screening process for refining the sample for this literature review. The flow diagram is produced in accordance to [PRISMA](#) protocol as per a PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021b).

## Appendix 1.2

Search strings applied to databases within the search for literature.

Database	Search term	Refinement	Results
Elsevier (Scopus)	Working class [AND] Higher Education	Titles, abstracts and keywords	83
Elsevier (Scopus)	"Working class" AND "Higher Education"	Titles, abstracts and keywords	8
Elsevier (Scopus)	"Working class" AND "Academia"	Titles, abstracts and keywords	1
Elsevier (Scopus)	"Working class" AND "University"	Titles, abstracts and keywords	9
Elsevier (Scopus)	Working class [AND] University	Titles, abstracts and keywords	126
Elsevier (Scopus)	Working class [AND] Academia	Titles, abstracts and keywords	8
EBSCO host (ERIC)	"Working class" AND "Higher Education"	Abstracts	123
EBSCO host (ERIC)	"Working class" AND "Higher Education"	Titles	14
EBSCO host (ERIC)	"Working class" AND "University"	Abstracts	120
EBSCO host (ERIC)	"Working class" AND "University"	Titles	13
EBSCO host (ERIC)	Working class AND academia	Titles	1
EBSCO host (ERIC)	Working class AND academia	Abstracts	13
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>519</b>

# Preparing Working-Class Academics for Success

**Kenneth Oldfield**, University of Illinois Springfield

## Abstract

I was one of Ryan and Sackrey's *Strangers in Paradise*, an academic raised in a working-class family. After becoming a professor, I slowly grew to understand that being a successful faculty member requires learning a different set of survival techniques than those I needed to succeed in my undergraduate and graduate studies. As it was during my student years, nobody in my family or anyone they knew could counsel me on what it takes to earn tenure, promotion, sabbatical leave, or any of the other rewards the academy offers. Compounding this problem was a counterproductive belief, one frequently held by others from backgrounds like mine. Namely, the fear that asking for help shows weakness, prima facie evidence that I was unqualified to be an academic. Beyond the questions I was afraid to ask were the many questions I did not know to ask, questions with answers that would have saved me from countless headaches. In hopes of smoothing the way for recently hired working-class academics, this article presents seven lessons I wish I had learned before becoming a university professor, knowledge that had I acquired early on would have made my travels through the university labyrinth far easier – infinitely less trying.

## Keywords

Working-class academics, diversity, first-generation college, *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, working-class professors, social class affirmative action

In an article published in *Nature Human Behaviour*, Allison C. Morgan and her colleagues reported the results of a survey they distributed between summer 2017 and autumn 2020 among 46,692 tenure-track professors at “1,360 Ph.D. granting departments...in Computer Science, Business, History, Psychology, Physics and Astronomy, Sociology, Anthropology and Biology” (Morgan et al., 2022, p. 1626). The researchers selected these academic subjects “for their diversity of scholarship and [because they] represent a broad sample of tenure-track faculty at research intensive institutions in the United States” (Ibid., p. 1626).

Morgan and her coauthors found that professors at these schools were “between 12 and 25 times more likely to have a parent with a Ph.D.” than the general population (Ibid., 1626). They also noted that this disparity almost doubles at the nation’s premier universities and has remained steady over the last half century (Ibid, p. 1625). The authors attribute this lack of diversity to the many social, financial, and cultural benefits accruing to the “socioeconomically privileged,” the children of well-educated parents, caretakers who not only serve as role models but understand how education works...the written and unwritten rules commonly associated with academic success, including finding jobs as professors (Ibid., p. 1625; see also, Clotfelter, Chapter 9, 2017). Morgan

and her colleagues reasoned that what they call “micro-class advantages” help explain not only why the nation’s professoriate is drawn from a small segment of the population but also the self-perpetuating nature of this system, like choosing like (Morgan et al., 2022, p. 1625; Michels, 1919, 1962).

Morgan and her peers proposed that this lack of “representational diversity” risks limiting the sweep of topics today’s professors and their students, who later become professors, address in their teaching, writings, and other activities (Morgan, et al, p. 1625). This narrowing of interests harms the overall intellectual climate of higher education for students and faculty alike. One illustration of this problem is the failure of American universities to list statistics on their websites showing the social class backgrounds of their professors, data they provide about other traditionally marginalized groups and the perspectives they can bring to our attention. This lack of transparency about faculty origins sends an important message. While universities acknowledge that socioeconomic diversity among students improves the overall intellectual climate of higher education, schools do not apply the same logic to those who teach these students. This unwillingness to gather these background data makes it all but impossible to hold school officials accountable for their outcomes regarding the representation of professors not raised in what Morgan and her coauthors described as “socioeconomically privileged” circumstances (Ibid, p. 1626).

## LESSONS LEARNED

My parents and grandparents never finished high school and all of them worked in blue collar occupations until retiring. In two previously published articles, I discussed lessons I wish I had learned before starting college, insights that would have made my journey through undergraduate school much easier (Oldfield, 2007, 2012). Unfortunately, it was advice my family members could not provide, given that they had no experience to draw on nor did they know anyone who could offer me the guidance I needed.

In one of the just cited articles I mentioned that I had never heard of a PhD until my first day in college when the woman teaching my required language course introduced herself as “Doctor” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 4). I was confused. I could not understand why the school would hire a physician to teach German. Another lesson I wish I had learned, really unlearned, beforehand was the belief that only smart people finish college; either you have enough horsepower to make it through or you do not (Ibid., p. 6). Simple as that. Midway through my first semester I realized that academic success has more to do with self-discipline, persistence, and good study habits, skills I lacked, as shown by my lousy high school grades.

I recounted the lessons I wish I had known as a first-generation college student, or first gen, hoping my insights would reduce the number of rules and expectations of the academic game others from backgrounds like mine would have to learn the hard way, through trial and error. Forewarned is forearmed.

After becoming one of Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey’s *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class* (1984), I slowly grew to understand that being a successful professor requires learning a different collection of survival techniques, lessons that, again, nobody in my family or

anyone they knew could help me with before or during my years as a faculty member. My lack of such knowledge was compounded by a counterproductive belief shared by too many first gens who grew up working class. Armfield and Armfield described our problem this way:

Coupled with not understanding the system, not having the community literacy skills to effectively navigate the system, [sic] and having to change the fundamentals of their communication styles, students from working class families often don't ask for help. They may not ask for help because they aren't sure they need it, they aren't sure what to ask for, or that the “student may need help dissociating the need for support from notions of personal weakness” (citing Casey, 2005, p. 33). Students from working class backgrounds are...used to obeying rules without asking questions. Not knowing what to ask, if they can ask, or who [sic] to ask are barriers to a student's growth within the academic setting (Armfield and Armfield, 2017, p. 24).

I carried these first-gen beliefs throughout my time as a college instructor. I assumed that I alone was responsible for deciphering the academic maze...asking for help was a sign of weakness, embarrassing proof of my ignorance, the same reason I did not ask why my undergraduate college hired a medical doctor to teach German. Equally troublesome for me as a professor were the questions I did not know to ask. Eventually I came to see that so much of higher education is akin to a chess game, where first gens are expected to learn the rules as they go, while the opposing players know much of what they need to know beforehand and if they hit a bump, need advice about which piece to move where, they can call home for pointers.

### **Seven Lessons I Wish I Had Learned Before Becoming a Professor**

Weighing the writings of Ryan and Sackrey (1984) and Morgan et al. (2022), among others, prompted me to consider some of the many lessons I wish had learned about being a working-class academic, or WCA for present purposes, before I became one. Knowing then what I know now would have made my travels through the university labyrinth far easier – much less trying. Given the significant underrepresentation of WCAs Morgan and her coauthors noted in their research, and surely not a problem confined to the Ph.D.-granting institutions they studied, it is imperative that higher education begin actively recruiting and retaining more WCAs. Lacking such efforts, American universities can never achieve the demographic diversity and the resulting multiplicity of perspectives they proclaim as the hallmarks of quality learning (Clotfelter, 2017).

In hopes of smoothing the way for other WCAs, I offer the following lessons I wish I had understood about the culture of higher education before becoming a university instructor. These personal recommendations derive from the many questions I did not know to ask. (A note about style: I use the word university henceforth to include the term college.)

#### **LESSON 1: Avoid distractions.**

All academic departments, universities, and their surrounding communities offer a wide array of inviting diversions, situations not directly connected to what you must do to gain retention, tenure, or promotions. The ready availability of these experiences can be tempting to a fledgling professor, especially to someone new to the geographical area. Joining in too many of these activities can

detract from the time needed to develop a convincing personnel file, one with qualifications sufficient for advancement. Focus most of your efforts on pursuing what your university's review committees emphasize when deciding your fate.

## **LESSON 2: University operations depend on formal rules.**

There are four important documents you should download, or otherwise request, and study as a newly hired WCA. The first of these publications is your school's *Personnel Manual*. Read this booklet closely paying special attention to the standards and expectations relating to tenure, promotions, performance reviews, and sabbatical leave. Center your efforts on meeting each of these measures depending on where you are in your career.

The second and third documents, assuming they are separate publications, to examine are your school's graduate and undergraduate catalogues. Competent academic advisors can answer most questions their advisees ask. Competent advisors who do not know the answer will know the names of people who do. Having deep knowledge of your university's catalogues will help you and your students avoid unnecessary problems: You do not want any of your advisees to receive last-minute notice that they have not fulfilled all their graduation requirements.

Fourth, download or request a copy of your new employer's standard student teaching evaluation form. Keep each survey question in mind while planning your courses. Scores on these individual items are what personnel committees consider when judging your pedagogical talents.

## **LESSON 3: Understand that students grade you.**

Even WCAs hired at one of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Tier 1 (schools with very heavy research requirements), Tier 2 (schools with heavy research requirements), or Tier R3 (schools with moderate research requirements) universities, where faculty members' chances of tenure and promotion usually depend, in whole or in part, on the number and quality of their publications – the smaller the tier number the greater the expected number of publications – and less on teaching scores, still it is safer to have high rather than low marks on these measures (Cairns, 2022). While the other thirty Carnegie Foundation classified schools depend less on research and publication and more on teaching scores when judging faculty performance, no matter the school's level, having respectable teaching scores is inevitably a point of pride among those in the profession.

Here are three steps you can take to increase your chances of students giving you favorable marks on these end-of-term surveys.

### *Step 1:*

It is important to understand that there can be a close connection between a substantive syllabus and favorable teaching scores. Devising a strong syllabus is worth your time and effort. If, for example, your school's evaluation form asks students whether your class is well organized, a syllabus detailing your grading scale, reading assignments, and the topics you will cover at each meeting should bring you favorable results on this item.



Perhaps the most efficient way to build a comprehensive syllabus is to start by seeing if your employer provides newly hired professors with a sample syllabus containing items that are commonplace to your campus, such as your school's academic and honor system statement. If your university provides you with a generic syllabus, you can build on this document by adding facts and considerations unique to each of your classes.

Next, search online for syllabi other professors have posted with course titles identical to or much like the classes you will be instructing. Naturally, this recommendation includes, if possible, requesting syllabi from your predecessor, the person who held the job before you were appointed. If you cannot find relevant syllabi online, search for college catalogues that list course titles that, again, are the same or much like the classes you will be covering. Contact the instructors who teach these classes and ask for copies of their syllabi.

Aside from fashioning the initial syllabi this way, go online periodically and search for recent and relevant syllabi. This strategy will help you stay current by introducing you to new ideas about technologies, topics, texts, audiovisual materials, and various instructional resources and techniques other professors are using in their courses.

At the end of each class meeting if you notice something in your syllabus that needs improvement, make the change immediately, while the idea is fresh in your mind.

A well-crafted syllabus has a final and often neglected benefit. Students value instructors who show their respect by having invested substantial effort organizing each course.

#### *Step 2:*

Another secret to achieving favorable results on your teaching evaluations is to be on the listen and lookout for information about which professors at your school are considered good instructors. Administrators and faculty who have been on campus for several years can be an invaluable source of advice about the most skilled teachers. A large majority, if not all, of these senior instructors or administrators, whether inside or outside your department, will have served on personnel committees where they reviewed teaching scores for professors seeking retention, tenure, or promotion.

Students are equally valuable in helping you learn which professors are effective teachers. Pay attention to what students say about which faculty members fit this description.

Finally, websites such as Rate My Professors, while a far from perfect gauge of teaching talents, can sometimes identify good instructors you might have overlooked.

Once you have gathered sufficient details about the professors deemed quality teachers, contact three or four of these individuals and ask each one to meet with you to discuss why they think students speak well of them. These sessions should yield critical insights into the techniques and approaches that work and, equally important, do not work for those you interview. For example, a sociology professor might mention the importance of giving frequent quizzes to ensure students are reading the assignments, using audio visuals, allowing enough time for in-class discussions, and the value of inviting a few outside speakers each term to discuss their area of expertise—

comments from practitioners can sometimes help students better understand topics covered in the course and decide whether they want, or do not want, to choose a certain academic major or career.

*Step 3:*

Studying the results of your teaching evaluations can help you identify what you did well and what needs improvement. Do not be disappointed if the first few sets of teaching scores are not strong. These results do not necessarily mean you are ill-suited for the classroom. Personnel committees typically judge teaching performance longitudinally. If your scores register steady improvement, which is often the case among the newly hired, personnel committee members will look favorably on your instructional skills. Professors are generally granted time to learn the trade, determine what works for them. Teaching is not as easy as it looks, especially when done well; it takes a lot of effort and knowledge to make something look effortless. Treat your scores as another opportunity to learn from your students.

Finally, track your end-of-term teaching statistics on a spreadsheet. If you are coachable – open to the wisdom of others and capable of recognizing where you are coming up short – you are likely to register continuous improvement on each survey item. If your school's personnel rules require that you provide written justification in your tenure or promotion applications, you can cite your rising teaching scores to support your case.

#### **LESSON 4: Futureproofing has many rewards.**

If there is an extended period between the date you finish your Ph.D. and the day you start your first job—say you defend your dissertation in early January and start teaching in late August—spend the interval preparing for the upcoming semester. In short, do not wait until the last minute to begin settling into your new surroundings. Your initial year as a professor will likely be one of if not *the* most challenging of your career. Relocating, learning about a new city, meeting new people, attending welcoming parties, and readying to teach your classes are only a few of the many activities that will consume your time during these early days on campus. Starting each term with carefully planned syllabi and other class materials, such as tests and quizzes partly or wholly prepared, will lessen your workload and stress levels during your rookie year, and all the years that follow for that matter.

The same logic about futureproofing applies to using your spring breaks, summers, holiday recesses, and the period between fall and spring terms wisely. Unless you have other pressing matters, such as teaching summer school, family commitments, or unavoidable personal demands, spend your extra time reviewing the textbooks you are considering assigning, updating syllabi, writing papers or books for publication, and deciding which if any conferences you want to attend. Breaks offer the possibility of uninterrupted blocks of time, a chance to build momentum for these and other professional endeavors.

In sum, any tasks to be completed during the semester that can be finished beforehand will save you from having to do them once classes resume, when time is at a premium.

#### **LESSON 5: Be on the lookout for confidants.**

Once on campus, allow yourself time to learn the personalities of other professors and administrators. After you have gathered sufficient information, ask one or two of these individuals to be your mentor(s). Look for professors or administrators who seem compatible with your personality, who appear wise to the many aspects of your school's culture, and who are known for maintaining confidences. Full professors and senior administrators often make good mentors. Their having met the formal and informal expectations required to gain their current rank suggests they have been on campus long enough to understand school operations; long serving faculty and administrators are more likely to know the well-kept secrets concerning some person, persons, or organization. Wisely chosen mentors can help you solve or avoid countless problems.

### **LESSON 6: Establishing a support group for people like you.**

Unlike other marginalized cohorts, your school probably lacks an advocacy association for WCAs. If this description applies to your university and you are new to campus, consider starting such an organization, preferably in your second or third year, after you have had time to settle in. If, on the other hand, you are reading this article and are a WCA who has been at your school for at least a year, you are encouraged to start a WCA support group, and the sooner the better. Whether you are a newly hired WCA or have been on campus for more than a year, here is a sampling of issues to include among your founding efforts and concerns.

*Reconnaissance:* Your first objective is identifying potential group members. Notwithstanding that universities fail to maintain statistics on the socioeconomic origins of faculty, gathering this information might not be as difficult as it sounds, given that most people welcome the opportunity to tell you about themselves. Differentiating potential members amounts to little more than asking the right questions. As you meet and exchange pleasantries with other professors, some of them will volunteer facts about their social class background either without prompting or if you ask a few casual questions such as: "What did your parents do for a living?"; or "What made you want to become a professor?"; or "Were your parents teachers?" If the situation feels right, you can go directly to the point, avoid having to pose any of the preceding questions, by asking "Where did your parents attend college?" Use your imagination in picking questions and remember that your choices will depend on each professor's personality and flow of the conversation. The potential support group members you identify will likely know of other WCA professors on your campus.

*Invitations:* When you reach the point of asking people to join you at the first WCA Advocacy Association, or WCAAA for short, meeting, do not be surprised if your question triggers an immediate and enthusiastic "Yes!" Your invitation is probably the first time these instructors will have been asked to view their working-class origins as an asset worthy of interest group representation, instead of something to downplay.

*Size:* Limit the number of people you invite to the first WCAAA meeting to maybe six or seven professors. Your choice of invitees should include a mix of ongoing and first year WCAs. Because it usually takes time for people in emerging organizations to finalize the rules and norms, keeping the number of participants small prevents the initial sessions from becoming unwieldy...the problem of having too many chefs in the kitchen. A mix of fledgling and continuing professors guarantees a mingling of minds, a time-tested way of establishing sound procedures and reasonable objectives.

*In the Beginning:* During the initial WCAAA meetings members should focus on the essentials, such as who qualifies to join, how often and where to get together, bylaws, and a constitution identifying the group's principles, among other necessary concerns. When deciding where to meet, if it is possible for everyone to gather at a local diner or a member's home, the informality of either setting should foster a more relaxed atmosphere versus the stressors associated with getting together at the workplace.

The founding members should end the first meeting by formally acknowledging the importance of allowing time for their efforts to mature, say a year or two, or three, to work out the inevitable challenges, the startup costs, that accompany the birthing of any organization. It is important that everyone recognizes, and keeps reminding themselves and each other of the virtues of patience and persistence.

### **LESSON 7: The next steps to take after your support group is up and running.**

There is a wide range of topics WCAAA members should address after having established the group's ground rules. Here is a sampling of issues to cover during the early meetings, topics that will get the organization moving and raise still other concerns to address at future gatherings.

*Agenda Item 1:* Professors who have been at the university for several years should review and discuss the fundamentals required to earn retention, tenure, and promotion. If publishing is the primary focus with teaching a close second, knowing this fact early on can help first year WCAs decide how to budget their time, and remind the more experienced members how to do this as well.

*Agenda Item 2:* Even at universities the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education identifies as Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3, schools that stress publications in personnel decisions, all WCAAA members should appreciate the many benefits of publishing books, journal articles, monographs, or other professional writings. These plusses include, among others, improving one's: 1) writing competency, 2) knowledge of the discipline, 3) critical and linear thinking skills, 4) research capabilities, 5) stash of materials for use in class and during conference presentations, 6) awareness and use of newly available computer hardware and software, 7) number of professional contacts, and 8) chances of having one or more publications lead to offers from other researchers to collaborate on future projects.

WCAAA members with publications to their credit should discuss the just mentioned benefits along with their own thoughts on this topic. If nobody in the group has published, faculty members, WCA or otherwise, who have done so should be invited to speak to WCAAA members about the many rewards of having one's ideas in print and how to make this happen.

*Agenda Item 3:* WCAAA members who have presented a paper or simply attended a local, regional, or national conference should explain to members who have not done so the rewards of participating in these professional meetings. Such discussions should begin by having seasoned WCAAA members explain that the primary purpose of these venues is for students, academics, and practitioners to gather and share concerns about their respective fields.

WCAs who have never been to a professional conference and have research papers in progress should be urged to submit proposals to present some or all their findings at one or more upcoming conferences. These novice WCAs, or NWCAs for present purposes, should understand that if the person or persons organizing the individual panel sessions accepts their proposal, they, the NWCA author or authors, are thus invited to attend the conference and present a draft of their work to the audience members. These NWCA presenters can then integrate any constructive suggestions they receive from audience members or assigned readers into the manuscript they eventually submit for possible publication.

WCAAs who have been to one or more local, regional, or national conferences should identify some of the other bonuses beyond presenting a paper, if they did that, of attending professional meetings. Notably, these gatherings offer important learning opportunities, including, for instance, attending others' presentations, meeting new people at the swimming pool, in a pub, or over meals to share viewpoints. The formal and informal aspects of conferences can be a rich source of new research ideas and insights into effective teaching techniques. Casual conversations among attendees can be as instructive as the formal presentations, sometimes more so, given how the former lack prescribed time limits, other than the self-imposed.

NWCAs should be encouraged to attend a few panels that address topics seemingly beyond their specialties. These sessions can inspire works that connect disparate topics, relationships that make for future conference proposals, class presentations, and publications.

NWCAs should be warned against spending all or most of their free time in their hotel rooms grading papers, preparing lectures, or researching their next publication. These tasks can wait. Instead, NWCAs should attend as many activities, both conference-related and informal, as possible. Conferences are for conferencing, not treating the hotel room as another workspace. These meetings are intended to enrich the attendees' perspectives. If a WCA, NWCA or otherwise, arrives home with only one new idea, the trip will have been worthwhile. A single new perspective or personal connection, or both, can change a career for the (even) better.

Finally, veteran WCAAA members should provide a few seemingly mundane suggestions about presenting research at a panel session. This means, for instance, practicing the presentation several times to stay within the allotted time, using audiovisuals, not being shy about gathering business cards from conference goers, even big names in the field, having copies of the paper and the author's own business cards at the ready, and emailing oneself the manuscript in case something happens making the original file unavailable when needed. The airline might have mistakenly delivered the luggage or laptop, or both, to the wrong destination. One cannot be too prepared. Conferences goers are not immune to Murphy's Law.

*Agenda Item 4: In Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*, Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005, p. 176) proposed that students of modest beginnings need "vocal champions." The same logic applies to WCAs. Support group members should discuss tactics for recruiting and hiring more WCAs. There are many ways to achieve this goal. One approach is for WCAAA members to serve on their university's personnel selection committees. Working in this capacity these members can identify candidates who are or appear to be WCAs by looking for class indicators in each applicant's cover letter, resume, and recommendation letters. Potential clues

include whether the person ever worked in a traditionally blue- or pink-collar occupation. Other signs suggesting an applicant is a WCA include having graduated from a community college, or a small public college versus Harvard, Northwestern, Dartmouth, Duke, Stanford, or another prestigious academy (Clotfelter, 2017). Periodically, support group members should devote a few minutes of meeting time to discussing still other class markers they have found helpful in identifying WCAs, such as an applicant with a degree from Berea College in Kentucky, a school with a longstanding commitment to enrolling students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

When recruiting efforts reach the telephone interviewing stage, WCAAA members involved in the faculty selection process should inquire of each applicant's socioeconomic origins in the spirit of the earlier-suggested questions. The same logic applies once candidates with still-to-be discovered class origins are interviewed on campus.

No matter a job interviewee's background, WCAAA members should emphasize that it is better to hire a non-WCA if the on-campus interview reveals that a WCA candidate will not be, for whatever reason, a good fit for the job. Hiring an unworthy WCA will only harm the campaign to have school officials consider socioeconomic background as a diversity criterion.

Finally, in "Why We Need Better Data on Faculty Diversity," an essay she wrote for *Inside Higher Education*, Laura W. Perna proposed that "An excellent and diverse faculty is vital to individual colleges and universities and to our communities, states, nation and globe" (2023, p. 1). She continued, "A diverse faculty brings diverse perspectives, and these diverse perspectives enhance teaching and advising, research and scholarship, clinical practice, and engagement with the community and world" (Ibid., p. 1). Without the ready availability of data about the social class origins of faculty, it is impossible to hold individual schools responsible for their integrative outcomes. Moreover, expanding the definition of diversity to include socioeconomic background will inspire academics everywhere to recognize the strong connection between social class heritage and educational attainment, thereby raising awareness of the problem. A similar thing happened when universities began including race, ethnicity, and gender among their diversity considerations. WCAAA members should heed Perna's advice and insist that their school's leaders formally acknowledge social class background as a diversity standard. WCAAA members should not stop there. They should explain that this new policy must include having university officials survey current faculty and future job applicants about their socioeconomic backgrounds. Once collected, a summary of these statistics should be included on the university's website along with the other demographic information commonly listed there. Transparency. These reforms will enable WCAAA members and others committed to social class diversity to hold school officials responsible for their democratizing effects. While the US Supreme Court (*Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023)) has ruled that universities cannot weigh race when deciding student admissions, as Kahlenberg demonstrated in *The Remedy* (1996), the Justices have never rejected the use of social class as a policy measure. Taylor (1991, p. 23) calls class-based diversity "legally unassailable," a description that still applies.

## CONCLUSION

The gradual recognition of sexism and racism has caused universities to provide metrics on their websites showing the racial and gender composition of their respective faculties. These actions

have raised consciousness about the need and justification for nurturing a more representative professoriate according to race and gender; higher education is no longer willing to ignore the various forms of prejudice and discrimination that have curtailed academic opportunities for members of these two groups. The same level of awareness about the limiting effects of social class origins for first gens raised in poverty or working-class circumstances has yet to be formally acknowledged as a legitimate diversity consideration among university faculty. Given the findings Morgan and her colleagues provided in their *Nature Human Behaviour* paper (2022) about the disproportionate number of faculty raised with class privilege, along with other studies showing the rising costs of attending college, the number of years required to complete a Ph.D. or a professional degree, and the ongoing upward redistribution of wealth, universities must, if they are indeed sincere about their commitment to diversity, begin inviting more WCAs into their ranks and once hired, provide these faculty with the resources and support services necessary to flourish (Clotfelter, 2017). Without these welcoming efforts, Perna's promise of "[a]n excellent and diverse faculty" will remain unfilled (2023, p. 1).

### Author Bio

**Kenneth Oldfield** is emeritus professor of public administration at the University of Illinois Springfield. He has published articles on various subjects including how structural changes in the environment can affect public health outcomes, property tax uniformity, tax increment financing, queer professors from the working class, community college funding, the Volunteers in Service to America program, GRE predictive validity, the human genome project, and using class-based diversity criteria to democratize higher education by recruiting and placing more college students, professors, and administrators who were raised in poverty or working class surroundings by parents or guardians who never went beyond high school, if that far.

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# The Man with a Million Names: A Personal Essay on Transit Work

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## Abstract

This essay is a scholarly personal narrative about transit work, especially the operation of omnibuses, horse cars, trolleys, and trams in New York City in the nineteenth century. The culminating event is the trolley strike of 1895, the longest in New York history, and the theme is the need for solidarity between transit workers and the riding public, and thus for what is now called union “Bargaining for the Public Good.” In this essay, the author speaks as both a transit worker and an historian.

## Keywords

Railroad regulation, the exploitation of animals, the Knights of Labor, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Eugene Debs

If train tracks run through or past your neighborhood you were there the day the first train ran. You ran it or someone like you did. Someone like you died running it on the day of a fatal accident. You or someone like you—a neighbor, an ancestor, a neighbor’s ancestor—or me. I am the man with a million names—a railroad man. Was at work the first day a train ran on the streets in a big American city. The biggest city—New York.

We all were there—the Indians who used paths and canoes, not tracks, tunnels, and trains, the fare-payers hoping for a safer ride than in an omnibus, and the investors, who had dragooned the government into letting them hire some of us and charge the rest.

One of my names was Jehu, the omnibus driver. Yes, I’d been the charioteer in the Book of *Kings*. Carried away fleeing soldiers, then joined the battle and threw Queen Jezebel out a palace window. New York crews handled coaches and teams as though they were battling, too. Riders battled back as horse-drawn railroad cars spread through nineteenth-century New York.

As a newspaper complained:

From the beginning to the end of the journey, Jehu quarrels with the passengers, the passengers with Jehu. There are quarrels about getting out and quarrels about getting in, quarrels about change and about shinplasters. Clergymen in white chokers are obliged to listen to unholy oaths, ladies are disgusted, frightened, and insulted, alarmed children raise their voices and weep. Indignant gentlemen rise to remonstrate with Jehu and are suddenly bumped back into their seats, twice as indignant as before, besides being involved in

supplementary quarrels with those upon whose corns they have trodden. Thus the omnibus rolls along, a perfect Bedlam on wheels.<sup>1</sup>

More passengers rode on the roof, sharing the wind, rain, and sleet with Jehu. His four- or six-horse buses rattled over Bowery cobblestones and floundered in Broadway mudholes at the rate of two or three per minute.<sup>2</sup>

Then again, I was a bus cleaner paid a few of the 6¼¢ fares for sweeping the carpet and scrubbing the clerestory. Most of the fare money went to the owner of the bus and horses, so Jehu increased our earnings by short-changing passengers, giving them 5¢ against a piece of eight worth 12½. If customers complained, Jehu “put them through” by moving ahead as they alighted. They’d land in a mud puddle after exiting at the rear door that distinguished a bus from a stage. After wiping their brows, they could read who to blame. The first word on the door was always “General,” the second, “Washington,” “Jackson,” or “Lafayette.”<sup>3</sup>

The trip up Broadway or the Bowery had been better for the Indians. They took Broadway only as far as the Collect Pond behind City Hall. To leave town, they’d switch to a path along the Bowery and head up the East Side to Harlem. (At high tide, brackish water from the Hudson River seeped into the pond and made West-Side travel flagitious.) Downtown was already a destination. It had wigwams and a cornfield, and the main business was trade in wampum. Most traders lived elsewhere, bringing their money or goods by canoes arriving from the foot of Fulton Street, Brooklyn. Brooklyn’s main Indian path followed hard, dry ground up Fulton Street and Flatbush Avenue to the entrepot of the Long Island tribes, their City Hall or Midtown, near Gerritsen Beach in Flatlands facing Jamaica Bay (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

Animals had started this network, and the Canarsie, as the Dutch called them, had monetized it. The ride was free and no one ran late or was tossed in the mud. Every able-bodied man was his own Jehu. Greater New York Canoe and Carry, as it might have been called, was a communal, not corporate, enterprise.

The nineteenth century would catch up, thanks to rails. A horse-drawn rail car could carry twice as many as Jehu’s coach and no one would have to listen to Jehu. The roadbed would give Dobbin sure footing and the granite rails would give a smooth surface to the wheels. The inventor George Stephenson would furnish this equipment. Bronx landlord Gouverneur Morris, Junior, would soon become the Chairman of the Board of the New York and Harlem Rail-Road, the world’s first urban passenger railway. It was a corporate, not communal, enterprise.<sup>5</sup>

Gouverneur Morris, Senior, had inserted several clauses benefiting corporations into the U.S. Constitution, for which he was the chief draftsman, and had done the same for the New York Constitution of 1777. These laws let corporations receive big grants. The corporation known as the

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Herald*, 10/2/1864.

<sup>2</sup> Early conditions: Greene (1926).

<sup>3</sup> As in n. 1 above.

<sup>4</sup> Bolton (1922), Map I.

<sup>5</sup> Moore (1833), 4, 9, 20-22. A boosterish “Statement of Facts”: S. Durst et al. (1833).

City of New York received one for Manhattan Island and railroads received rights of way. Dislike the terms of your grant? Go to the capital in Albany and sue, vote, or lobby. In this off-stage melodrama, Albany was King. A location or a right of way was Albany's to give, and his alone. Never mind how he got it. The Dutch East India Company had bought it from the Canarsie, who did not think it was vendible. The Dutch told the King of England it was and in 1674 they sold it to him in exchange for rent-free fishing off the English coast. In 1776, Albany became sovereign and glommed on to it.

The New York & Harlem received a Bowery and Fourth Avenue right of way for 30 years. Albany set the speed limit, five miles per hour below Fourteenth Street, but the City could set the fare, which would be only half a piece of eight. One spring day in 1832, the Mayor joined Messrs. Stephenson et al. for a trial run from Fourteenth to Prince Street. Paintings adorned the side of the car, named "Accommodation." (The company had meant to lead with their other car, "Sociable," but its paintings were not finished, so it ran a ways behind, in case of trouble). Curtains, shades, and dividers turned the 30-person car into side-by-side parlors. The side doors and brake pedal were novelties, as was the conductor who rode along a sideboard.<sup>6</sup>

Take a ride! Children and milch cows will keep down the speed below and the car will hold steady on curves thanks to having eight wheels, not four. To demonstrate the brakes, Jehu stopped suddenly and the "Sociable" should have, too, but my nineteenth-century self was in the driver's seat, on informal probation. Shouted "Whoa!" rather than floor the pedal. Only horses suffered in the collision. The passengers adjusted their linen dusters and reached Prince Street in ten minutes. No police assisted or interfered. In 1832, New York had no police.

A banquet after the ride praised coaches on rails, engines on boats, and horse dung carried away by plumbing and sewers rather than streams and tides. Mr. Morris's home—a replica of a French chateau—featured New York's first flush toilet. The City lacked any toilets for riders or pedestrians.

Morris wanted more than plumbing. Run the railroad up the East Side, then across the Harlem River into Morrisania, the family manor. That would draw rural passengers and freight. Then extend the road to Albany. The NY & Harlem could make contact with the Erie Canal and monopolize access to upstate. Next, the railroad could run alongside the canal and steal canal traffic by being ten times as fast as barges. Profits, fame, prosperity, and power—but Morris wanted to reach St. Louis. San Francisco next. That should take only 30 more years.<sup>7</sup>

First, build a viaduct through the hill at Twenty-Eighth Street (And they did. The viaduct is still there.) The horses would be spared the climb and for the first time Jehu and I would work in the dark while more conductors fell beneath the wheels. Next, get an amendment to extend the road past the Thirty-Second Street limit of the grant. Morris owned Morrisania, of course, and his relatives owned much of the rest of the Bronx, so the right of way would be free of charge.

Yes, the chateau would have to go. It stood athwart the right of way, as did a nearby Indian burial ground. Morrisania had been an Indian station, reached by canoe from a branch of the path that

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<sup>6</sup> *The Morning Courier and Enquirer*, 11/14/1832, and Stratton (1878), ch. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Hyatt (1898); New York and Harlem Railroad Company (1840).

began at the Bowery. Oysters, mink, and muskrat were the stock in trade, with bullfrogs for lunch. Fresh water came from Wigwam Brook. Now the station would be on the NY & Harlem, selling chicory coffee and ginger nuts. The Morrisses had already built the needed bridge. (All pedestrians would now be obliged to buy a train ticket.).<sup>8</sup>

In 1846, Albany made a West-Side grant to the New York & Hudson Railway. This corporation came under the control of a Staten Island ferryman, Cornelius Vanderbilt, who was using steam engines in his riverboats. Soon both roads put steam engines into railway service, so Dobbin and locomotives shared the viaduct. Horses gagged, we did, too, and the City asked Albany for a ban on steam engines, but Albany granted it only up to Forty-Second Street and the NY & Harlem violated the ban for 15 years. After that, Harlem passengers would have to alight at Forty-Second in order to board steam trains. Two-fare zones had begun. Albany let the company dispense with costly, granite railroad ties when it extended the road's grant for 30 years. The era of creosote and cheap, wooden ties had begun, too. Railroads were as expensive to build as they were profitable to operate.

The 1850s brought a wave of roads on both sides of town. This time, Albany insisted that the companies pave the streets beneath the rails and let the City set a lower fare, 5¢, and even let the City repossess the roads. Yet the grants were perpetual and the only fees were vehicle licenses. By 1875, cross-town routes included little Bleecker Street. The Bleecker Street road ran from Fulton Ferry to the West Side via the Bowery and a path to the foot of Gansevoort Street, where Hoboken and Manhattan Indians had fished and traded. Now a trickle of commuters came and went just a block and a half north, at the Fourteenth Street ferry, and made Bleecker the smallest of about 100 New York railroad companies carrying 38 million passengers a year.<sup>9</sup>

I could walk from my tenement home to the Bleecker Street yard in a few minutes. Ideal, except Bleecker Street was the narrowest right-of-way. Dung piled as high as the stoops and caused tetanus. Tetanus fatalities were even worse in stables and near-by slums—maybe as frequent as in military camps during the Civil War, when the rate was one person in 125 every year. In New York today, that would be some 34,000 deaths, about the same as the number as due to Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021. In the car barns, equine influenza was periodic. Every company had a veterinarian, an animal hospital, and that incomprehensible stuff, disinfectant.

Horses counted as two-fifths of railroad investments as well as three-quarters of operating costs. They worked only five to six hours a day, six days a week. We worked seven days a week from dawn until dark for a dollar a day, and that was four times what Mr. Morris was paying another of us to lay track. A work gang cost him less than the horses needed for the work.

Breaks were fleeting. At the stable, the crew dawdled for a few minutes as the hostler fetched the horses, the head changer assigned a car, and someone like me fetched it. At the terminal, they alighted, took a drink, brushed their clothes, and let the horses drink from the same pail. Horses

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<sup>8</sup> Gouverneur Morris II and other managers: Stern (1935) and the *Papers of the New York & Harlem Railway*. His Bronx lands in the nineteenth century: Wells et al. (1927), *passim*. The house: *Papers of Gouverneur Morris II*.

<sup>9</sup> The ever-growing tangle of railway franchises, leases, and acquisitions: Carman (1919), 1-215. Horses: Tarr and McShane (2008).

had four of the six eyes that would foresee an accident and at night they had the best eyes. The driver would tell them to walk, trot, or canter, but otherwise speed was up to them. The conductor made change and collected fares while dangling over the street on the sideboard. He faced the wind, sun, sleet, and rain, like the driver. Sooner or later he took one fall too many, died, or quit.

Brooklynites fared better. One day on strike won them hourly pay, including 9- or 10-hour workdays. Motivating the strike was fear of the new Brooklyn Bridge. There had been no rush hours before it opened in 1883. Now there were rush hours to and from Manhattan. The lines began sending men home after the morning rush and recalling them in the late afternoon. They also kept the barns and shops open at night. So many cars ran late that they began clocking them—an issue that set off more strikes.

The Brooklyn Knights forced the Atlantic Avenue line and other roads to limit the idle time in the middle of the day to a two-hour unpaid swing and fixed the number of round trips. Some drivers and conductors would still work extra and be paid by the trip, but the contract limited the extra men on each route. Unskilled workers in the stables, barns, and shops would work only 10 hours, and youngsters like me would have specialties—cleaners in the barns, grooms in the stables and the hospital, greasers in the shops, messengers in the shack.

Copies of the contract went up in every workplace, telling everyone from smiths to tow-boys what they were worth:

Smiths \$2.75 a day  
Smiths' strikers \$2  
Smiths' firemen \$2  
Carpenters \$2  
Drivers \$2  
Conductors \$1.75  
Hostlers \$1.75 (no more than 20 horses a day)  
Hitchers \$1.75  
Switchmen \$1.50  
Car cleaners \$1.50  
Stable-boys \$1.25  
Tow-boys \$1.25 (That should have been me)  
Office-boys \$1 (That shouldn't)  
Extra men 15¢ a trip

An office boy didn't have to post this kind of list. Union leaders did. They were reminding us we were underpaid. The rungs of the ladder were so many that they became bars in a cell.<sup>10</sup>

The big win was seniority. Veterans had their pick of swings and depots, while those in the barns, stables, and shops had their pick of locations and assignments. It became easier to be a family man and have a long career. Since there were senior boys, too, seniority harmonized the workforce and strengthened the Knights, who could not compel workers to cooperate or even join. Senior men collected alms for retired members and their widows. Since carmen were poor, accident-prone,

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<sup>10</sup> *Report of the Select Committee* (1895), Exhibits A-K. Other views: Henry (1991), Zarrillo (2014).

and short-lived, no one would insure them.

Seniority and solidarity kept the Knights strong enough to enforce annual contracts, but several features of their organization undermined them. Streetcar men all belonged to the same assembly, but other assemblies included workers of all sorts, even business and professional people. The Knights' Grand Master, Terence Powderly, had never been a transit worker. The Knights eschewed political causes, even laws to provide drivers seats and vestibules, and railroad finance lay beyond their ken. They ignored small matters like the lack of free transfers and big ones like the failure of railroads to pay the City anything but license fees. Hardly any knew that the City could repossess the roads.

That would mean municipal ownership and operation. The labor upsurge of 1886 put these phrases and the word "socialism" in the American political vocabulary, but the Knights had no isms. Strong on the shop floor, they were weak at City Hall and in Albany. Every driver grasped the link between the Brooklyn Bridge and the unpaid swings, but not the Grand Master Workman, who preferred the omnibus. During the Civil War, he had purchased a substitute rather than fight, but most carmen were veterans still fighting draft dodgers, bosses, dudes, strays, and civilians. His policy was for members to resign rather than go on strike.

When the Grand Master invited them to meet some railroad telegraphers, a big group who did not work at barns and yards, the occasion ended in a tiff. The Brooklyn crewmen thought the telegraphers were wearing their Sunday best to a union meeting. They smoked cigars, not pipes; the female telegraphers smoked cigarettes. The males were dudes and the females were not ladies. The Brooklynites did not respect them and would not admit they were jealous. The telegraphers went unrecruited.<sup>11</sup>

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New Yorkers wanted faster, roomier trains, the City wanted more of the profits, and the railroads wanted bigger monopolies. The answer was electric power and a kind of financial piggybacking. Piggybacking may have started in Brooklyn.<sup>12</sup> The big Atlantic Avenue line, which ran from Fulton Ferry to East New York, leased right of way from a toll road on the main Canarsie path, but then it did what no toll keeper or Canarsie ever did, and sublet the right of way for 999 years to another company, the Long Island Railroad. The long term let the LIRR do anything an owner might, except pay taxes. Atlantic received a hunk of LIRR's receipts as rent.

Electric power was just beginning. A handful of roads drew power from a live rail along the right of way, but this kind of service was much more dangerous than horses. Only 60-odd miles of electric railroad were in service in 1880. A former Edison engineer, Captain Frank Sprague, used poles to draw power from overhead wires down to a motor put in the trucks of railroad cars. No one would go near the power except those raising and lowering the poles. In Manhattan, already a forest of telegraph and telephone wires, Sprague delivered power to the cars through conduits in the middle of the street. These trams would need more repair but otherwise matched trolleys.

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<sup>11</sup> The incident and background: Gabler (1886), 259-388, "Kid-Gloved Laborers."

<sup>12</sup> Smith (1958), esp. 2-4, 42, followed by Cudahy (2009), dealing mostly with the Brooklyn Els but describing new technology; Cunningham and de Hart (1977), providing a visual record in their chs. 1-2.

Sprague also invented a controller that let a driver operate all the motors in a consist of several cars. Electric trains would be longer as well as faster than horse cars.

Initial costs would rise, but later costs would fall since electric cars were a third cheaper to run. Horsecars could be converted and enlarged, switches and barns left as they were. Drivers would become motormen, conductors would raise and lower trolley poles, and electricians would join smiths in the shops. Hostlers would move cars, not animals. Investors such as Morris and Vanderbilt would not ask what became of the tow-boys. For me, the nineteenth century would change for the worse. I'd have to scrub crewroom toilets.

All railroad companies feared that others would electrify first, so some tried to buy out competitors. The company being bought would demand that buyers pay it rent or dividends—not a few years' worth, but every year in a 999-year lease, like the LIRR's. Rent receipts appealed to company managers, while dividends appealed to stockholders. Dividends that were guaranteed, as though they were mortgage payments, appealed to the New York and London bankers who were lending to railroads.<sup>13</sup>

To raise these sums, Brooklyn roads watered their stock, a trick devised by Daniel Drew and other financiers who had been cattle drovers. Before they brought their cattle to market at Tompkins Square, drovers watered them, increasing their weight. Wall Street stock was inflated, too, but on paper. The promoters touted the prospects of a new, electrified monopoly, found buyers at high prices, and pocketed the difference. Electrification plus piggybacking made street railroads the most overcapitalized American industry—twice as overcapitalized as steam lines, which were second.

Soon Brooklyn's two dozen street railroads were only four, which formed a Virginia holding company to avoid New York taxes. This combine became the world's largest urban railway, but physically was the smallest. A post office box of a railroad, nicknamed the Virginian, leased another road, the Brooklyn Heights, which had only a half mile of track on Montague Street. The Heights company leased the Atlantic and three other companies, including the Brooklyn City & Newtown, the first to electrify (10% dividends guaranteed). Riders thought the two dozen original companies named after Brooklyn streets and neighborhoods were still taking them to work or church.<sup>14</sup>

Brooklyn Knights found themselves mounting training cars called "skeletons." They took power by rotating a controller, as motormen do today. Putting the controller on the post would attain 20 mph, almost half as fast as today. To save money, the Combine opted for handbrakes, not airbrakes, so a brakeman had to scamper through the train, yanking a brake wheel at the end of each car. In that respect, electric trains resembled modern yard service—cumbersome, chancy, and tiring. When brakes failed, the motorman turned a key and put his engine in reverse. That blew out the motors, so every emergency stop was a cannon shot as passengers went flying against the partition behind the motorman.

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<sup>13</sup> See Poor (1868-1924) for references to works on railroad mortgages, lawsuits, and equipment. The financial nexus: Pierce (1953) and Salisbury (1967).

<sup>14</sup> *Report of the Special Committee* (1895), Exhibit S.

Has the trolley wire fallen to the ground? Pick it up with your cap or coat. When the metal entryway is “hot,” make sure to apply power only after all passengers have boarded and stepped inside. A burnt-out lamp in the car? Hey, Switch! Put a copper penny in the lamp socket.

Yes, that was me, still doing odd jobs. Just doing them under the trolley wires.

Trolley wires replaced the haylofts in the barns. Five-foot concrete pits under every track turned the barn floor into a hazard. Switchmen and motormen in a hurry might fall into it. Motormen could knock the heads off the electricians and mechanics working there. What happened to the veterinarian who always had spare splints for an injured man?<sup>15</sup> In 1893, the Combine built a barn for a thousand cars at Third Avenue and Fifty-Eighth Street in Sunset Park. A flag, lamp, or hand moving up and down meant “go,” moving sideways meant “stop,” and a circle meant “reverse.” Old barns such as the NY & Harlem buildings on Fourth Avenue could not compete. Men conversed there, horses listened, and cars moved more slowly. The Fourth Avenue site soon became the first Madison Square Garden.

Losing Dobbin hurt most. Instead of relying on his team to stop during an accident, a driver had to shut off his overhead power switch and cut out his motor. Instead of tugging reins, he had to know how many turns of the brake would stop the car. Instead of three pairs of eyes, he had one. Every motorman and conductor had favorite horses and could often select them, but no motorman had a favorite car. Fenian, Tory, and Skewbald often knew when and where to stop, but General Electric, Thomson-Houston, and Curtis didn’t.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike Fenian, GE tired around supper time, when all cars were on the road and the company’s dynamos were overtaxed. The crew lost their meal break. Schedule changes cut into meals, too. The Atlantic Avenue run from the Ferry to East New York fell from 38 minutes out and 36 back to 32 both ways, so the company increased daily runs from 5 to 7. No one had time to stop between blocks, as the horses regularly did. Pay shrank because crews had to buy blue uniforms, not just headgear, and clothes wore out faster. Another sartorial worry: man and coat would be scorched if cracked insulation on the trolley pole let current reach the controller by way of the car’s metal frame. The shock could throw the driver from the car.<sup>17</sup>

The right of way was lethal, too. In the first two years of electric operation, Brooklyn passenger deaths rose fivefold and fans renamed the city’s baseball team, the Superbas, the Trolley Dodgers. New York was no better, but Boston was, whereas Philadelphia and Chicago were worse, death rates that socialists said ran parallel to political corruption. An eight-year-old Philadelphia girl, teddy bear in hand, lost her balance as she darted away from an approaching car. She got clear of the wheels but touched the motor and a rail, dying with a scream and a shudder. A mob formed and attacked the motorman. Mounted police charged to the rescue and sent dozens fleeing to a near-by pharmacy for bandages and other medical supplies.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Dangers of switching or hosteling: Del French (1938), 21-22. Motorman’s vs. engineer’s work: as implied by Gamst (1980).

<sup>16</sup> *Report of the Special Committee* (1895), 260.

<sup>17</sup> *Report of the Select Committee* (1895), 97.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfinger (2016), chs. 1-3, dealing with conditions.



The motorman attended the girl's funeral and explained the accident as a priest stood beside him. A box should have insulated the motor, he said, but the railroad refused to install boxes. They would hamper airflow and make the motors overheat. Better dead motors, he said, than dead girls. The priest gave him communion with the rest.

A young motorman on the Third Avenue Lines—an ex-Philadelphian who knew the roads in both cities—summarized the job:

The motorman's work was nerve-wracking. Slow-moving, horse-drawn trucks jammed New York streets and to pilot a streetcar through this maze and not fall behind, was a struggle. We had no seats, airbrakes, or cabs and had to stand up all day twisting heavy hand brakes and being fully exposed to the weather. Many's the time I was soaked with driving rain and half frozen from cold. On fair days I went home trembling from all the hours holding the power handle in one hand and the brake in the other, foot jabbing the gong all the while to warn people I was coming. It was a man-killing job.

The motormen thoroughly hated the company. As for the conductors, many of them helped themselves freely, with no twinges of conscience, to the fares they took in. There were no pay-as-you-enter cars, and with conductors collecting in the densely packed cars even the army of company "spotters" could not keep tabs on them. The "nickelers" and "short-arm artists," as they were called, were located mostly by bookkeeping. When a run failed to bring in the regular average of receipts the conductor was fired forthwith for "nickeling."

We motormen deeply resented our unnecessarily hard work and exposure to severe weather. We demanded seats, airbrakes, and cabs. The company bosses and engineers assured us that these things were impossible in New York traffic: The seats would make us less alert, the airbrakes would speedily wear out from incessant use, the cabs would obscure our vision, and all three together would make for more accidents.<sup>19</sup>

The Third Avenue Company caught this rookie trying to organize the barns on Eleventh Street and uptown and fired him and his fellows. Ex-motormen were becoming as common as ex-horsecar drivers or teamsters.

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Brooklyn's drivers and motormen did not choose the time, place, or issue of the streetcar strike of 1895. The trolley Combine chose the time by announcing that it was about to default. It could no longer pay its creditors, even after cutting dividends in half during the nine years of union contracts. It had already cut steady work, added swings, and violated a new Albany law setting 10-hour days. The Knights sued and the railroads told the court that the clock ran only when wheels were rolling. The judge seconded this piece of metaphysics and the Knights appealed to Albany in vain.

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<sup>19</sup> Foster (1939), 27-8. Man-killing work: Aldrich (2006). "Nickeling": *Report of the Special Committee* (1895), 502.

The Knights' leader was James Connelly, a Myrtle Avenue coachman serving as Master Workman of an Assembly of many thousands. Under him were leaders of Coachmen's locals at all the roads belonging to the Combine. Two top labor leaders warned him to halt the wildcat. Powderly's successor, James Sovereign, said try more judges, and America's top railroad leader, Eugene Debs, said wait. First elect Knights to city offices and recruit the pitmen. These leaders thought the Knights needed allies.

That February, Connelly asked to see the books and the Combine said no. He and the local leaders made an offer of fewer swings and a raise of a quarter a day. Executives had all taken pay cuts, the Combine answered, and so should workmen.

Eliminate dividends, said the Knights. The Combine did not reply. The Knights withdrew the demand for a raise but would not accept more swings.

The few independent companies chose the place by compromising on swings. That made the Combine the target.

The Atlantic road chose the issue. It had laid off half its shopmen in the last few months.

When negotiations broke off, Connelly called for a mass meeting in the morning. Just hours earlier, the Atlantic barn chief dismissed the electricians working at Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Eighth Street. He said he feared lest they sabotage the cars. The motorman assigned to the late-night mail saw the lock-out, abandoned his train, and walked home through Greenwood Cemetery. The conductor, who had much farther to go, laid out a mattress of mail sacks and went to sleep. That gave me an excuse to lie down beside him.

The conductor awoke that morning to a sunny, motionless yard. Trains were moving only on a Coney Island excursion line that ran alongside the property. All the cars were nearly empty. The Assistant Superintendent on duty at Atlantic headquarters began to wonder why he had not received his mail, but a telegram to Fifth Avenue produced neither mail, men, nor mules.

The Assistant Superintendent reported to his superior, and the General Superintendent strode into City Hall and interrupted the Mayor's tardy breakfast. Were no crews operating? asked his Honor. A few, but when they took their teams or trolleys down the road the switches were unmanned. I was one of a hundred switchmen who refused to work. (Nobody else was working. Why me?)

Some crews improvised. One went back to a barn in East New York, found the gate locked, and left the car at the conductor's house, a few blocks away. The driver rode the team of horses to his home in Ridgewood, Queens and put them in the back yard. Stable boys gave their animals the run of the yards in front of the barns and shops—dangerous places to find a tussock of grass on a workday.

Soon superintendents from other lines were sharing breakfast and news: When they ordered their electricians to man cars, the men refused. The engineers in the power plants needed to stay at their posts, and the tow-boys were untrained. The companies had kept their highest and lowest paid at the price of losing their operatives.

The Mayor summoned the Chief of Police, who did not yet know what to do, but the Atlantic General Superintendent did: The roads would recruit scabs by messenger, telegraph, and the occasional phone. Railroad counsel arrived, too, to remind the Mayor of the section of the penal code imposing a three-year sentence for throwing stones at railroad cars. Would the Mayor allow car conductors to carry pistols and make citizen's arrests? No, said the Mayor, who termed this "egregious," but decided to hire 500 special officers to supplement his police department of a thousand. They would all come from the civil service lists for police and fireman. When the lists provided only 117 recruits, he shook his head. Hundreds of others on the lists had neighbors who were motormen. The pay was only 2¢ an hour higher than a motorman's and the weather was turning snowy.<sup>20</sup>

For two days, the Combine ran only one of their lines, the route from Red Hook to Fulton Ferry. They ran about five lines for the rest of the first week. Traffic and clashes increased after that as pickets outside the companies' downtown offices roused some scabs, dragooned others, and, the lawyers complained, even bribed some. Police alone were riding the cars. Housewives stepped outside to curse them and boys threw ice balls with rocks in the middle. Soon every car had a patrolman, so men on the beat ended up with too many blocks to cover. That made it easy to reach the tracks undetected and wreck switches or pile debris. Switchmen helped.<sup>21</sup>

Cars heading for the barn near the Gowanus Canal seldom reached it. Horses cut loose by the attackers trotted down to the Canal, drank their fill, and plodded back to the stables, hungry, only to be turned away. The companies needed fewer of them now. They made their next stop in Red Hook's glue factories.

When the weather improved, strikers took to the rooftops to hurl stones demolishing trolley poles and their wives threw china from the second story to demolish car windows and frames. Boys on the street taunted the crews, "Dead scabs tell no tales." Efforts to rifle the donation cans put on street corners by the Knights all failed. The union put locks on the cans and opened them only at headquarters.

The Knights' leaders called for peace but could not calm big working-class neighborhoods such as Ridgewood, Brownsville, and Greenpoint. Men threw cobblestones at the police guarding a barn or depot, the police gave chase, and the assailants mostly outran them. There were seldom enough paddy wagons for all those being caught, and the few who were transported were not worth the trouble it took to arraign them—cops taken off the street, witnesses in hiding, judges disinclined to jail voters. The stand-off frustrated both sides, partly because a few independent lines were running better than normal (as were the steam railroads), and partly because the leaders of the Knights prevented arson and looting. Poor neighborhoods were partly helping the strikers, partly trying to help themselves, often ignoring the strike, and seldom scabbing.

Railroad receipts were down three quarters and the Knights, who had no strike fund—or rather, no resignation fund—were running out of nickels and dimes to disburse to their neediest members. The police were tired, the newspapers were bored, and the two sides resigned themselves to a

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<sup>20</sup> *Brooklyn Citizen*, 1/23/1895.

<sup>21</sup> *Harper's Weekly*, 2/2/1895.

snowy stalemate. Then the police chased a sympathizer into a Ridgewood home where the Knights were meeting and arrested dozens. The German-American press compelled the downtown papers to report the story, and the Mayor took the trouble to explain that the frontdoor to the house had not been locked. His men had not broken in.

Connelly pressed the Mayor for arbitration. Members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers told the press that they recommended this procedure, and so did Sovereign. The Mayor contacted the companies and told them the union would accept some unpaid swings. In return, the arbitrators should condemn the companies for violating their Albany grants, which obliged them to serve the public.<sup>22</sup> That would pressure the companies to make concessions. The companies rebuffed the Mayor. Swings were theirs to determine, the Brotherhood was a mere observer, and besides, Vanderbilt had never let a union control swings.

A blizzard killed horses and kept the strike alive.

Then another headline: The police raided the Knights' East New York headquarters at Odd Fellows Hall. Many Knights belonged to this fraternal society for helping the poor and burying the dead. The police captain interrogated them; the Knights displayed embossed credentials in faith, hope, and charity; and the captain found only one militant, a Patriarch Militant who was a Republican. The captain withdrew but returned two days later in plain clothes and clubbed Fellows. They fled, credentials in hand, and the police gave chase, only to be pelted from upper windows. Several officers drew their pistols, but the detective in charge ordered them to stop. The witnesses would be too many and too tearful in court.

Just one officer fired, wounding a man recognized as a stone-thrower. The victim began to fall out of a second-story window but a woman in an apron retrieved him. The witnesses were many, and when the weather changed again Brooklynites stepped outside and stoned the lone policemen riding the horsecars. Cops and scabs both fled. The horses would take the car to the next turn-out, where a switchman was waiting. These animals ended up at the independent lines or at the glue factories. Either way, the switchman earned a dollar. I'll help you, Switch, and take two bits.

Even the Mayor's backers were besieging him. They wanted action, and so did the Combine. It was summoning hundreds of new scabs from New Jersey, Philadelphia, and even Boston, and wanted these men protected. Send the militia! The Mayor concurred, but hundreds more scabs came first, in Jersey-City furniture vans that lighters brought to the Fulton Ferry. After tumbling out, they bullied their way through the downtown pickets and rode empty cars headed to barns throughout Brooklyn. The pickets in East New York greeted them by breaking their noses and blackening their eyes. Some retreated to company headquarters downtown and demanded what may be the first New York instance of hazardous duty pay. Others reached the barns, slept in cars, and waited for troops to arrive. Days later, a brigade did. The commander dispatched his infantry to 40 barns, depots, and powerhouses.

This General, a Brooklynite and a veteran of Bull Run, had organized much-admired reunions of Northern and Southern veterans. Now he would reconcile capital and labor. First, appeal to the

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<sup>22</sup> Loughran (2016), dealing with torts as well as breaches of contract.

patriotism of veteran strikers by shouldering arms and waving the flag. Next, secure arbitrators who might be trusted and must be heeded. To placate the companies, protect as well as occupy their property. His plan was heart-felt. He hated civil strife among Kings County voters.

The companies declined his offer and enjoined him to protect the scabs as well as the barns and yards.

The General did not despair. There was much good will, even around Brooklyn's biggest yard, on the edge of Weeksville, the only Black neighborhood. For days, the troops played tit for tat with the pickets that gathered next door on the playing fields of the St. John's Home for Boys. The foe gathered at dusk, distributed ladders and wire cutters, and dispersed to cut the power lines leading out of the yard. They reassembled in the morning and marched up and down the fields, singing, as boys watched from the Home. (The clerestory of the home's church was a likely coign of vantage.) The troops would march out, disperse them, and go to lunch. The worst of it was the Superintendent's moving the cars at night while soldiers were sleeping in them. The commanding officer arrested the Superintendent and after that the cars stayed put. There were fewer and fewer fit to sleep in.

Brownsville was less decorous. At first, women in the crowds stuck lemons on the soldiers' bayonets or cut brass buttons off their coats. Lowered bayonets dispersed them, but when they returned a few days later, a lieutenant ordered his sentries to aim at the males. The marchers kept coming, some sentries fired in a panic, and a marcher fell dead. Fog rolled in and bayonets thrusting out of the murk terrified passers-by. The General prevented the troops from stabbing anyone to death, but warning shots fired in the fog wounded passers-by as well as protestors.

Headlines, headlines: Traffic declined and the companies asked the Mayor for another brigade. He hesitated. Total troops would number 7,500, more than the 5,000-odd strikers. Then the Knights announced that imported scabs had fled to the Odd Fellows for help. The companies were holding others hostage. The Knights requested writs of habeas corpus for these men, the police failed to find them, and the newspapers ridiculed the Mayor. He yielded to the demand for more troops, this time cavalry.

As the reinforcements paraded down Fulton Street, stone-throwers hit more horses than men, then retreated before the troopers could draw their swords. There was no such burlesque in Greenpoint, then a slum comparable to New York's worst, which was in Manhattan at the undeveloped north end of Central Park. The cavalry were protecting wagons carrying rails when upstairs windows flew open and women flung bricks. There was no china to spare, but the women poured boiling oil on troopers who rode up to the windows to remonstrate. The cavalry reformed and trotted down the center of the street, out of range, while cursing these Italian and German foreigners. When a few pedestrians appeared, the troops drew their sabers and charged. Greenpoint's ruts and alleys let the pedestrians escape.<sup>23</sup>

The Knights thought poorly of the enemy's horsemanship. Troopers earned \$1.25, the same as tow-boys and greasers, but sympathized less with the strikers than police.

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<sup>23</sup> *Report of the Special Committee* (1895), 363.

By now, the authorities had arrested and released hundreds and killed a dozen or two. The strikers had not killed any police or soldiers, but dozens of troopers had fallen from their mounts to the cobblestones. More harmful was the advent of spring weather. Scabs aplenty brought service halfway back, and the electricians and pitmen, who had never stopped working, restored more of the fleet. The strike collapsed in April.

One of the last casualties was a union motorman's wife. He had been on strike for weeks and then returned to work on the Flatbush Avenue line. She was bringing him supper when some women accosted her, shouting "Scab's wife!" A rock struck her in the temple and knocked her senseless. When she awoke, she had lost her shoes as well as her dinner. She walked a mile through the slush to a hospital and nearly died there. Her husband quit for good, after 18 years with the Atlantic Company.<sup>24</sup>

The Grand Master Workman declared that the Brooklyn assembly should never have gone on strike. The Brooklyn Board of Aldermen announced that the railways had violated their grants. Albany would decide what next.

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Albany convened a committee, the Combine declared bankruptcy, and a federal judge ordered it to cut labor costs. All crews became extra and all shopmen returned to the ten-hour day. The Extra Board was the only timetable men were to consult. The Combine agreed to the Mayor's request to keep scabs from replacing any Brooklyn man who had stayed on the job, and also agreed to rehire any strikers who were not union officers. Perhaps 10% of the strikers returned permanently. Connelly was one and he fought in vain to increase the total.<sup>25</sup>

Labor costs, the committee learned, caused the strike. The President of the Atlantic explained it this way: One day he and Vanderbilt went to the store to buy tea for their wives. They paid the same price. Vanderbilt did not have to pay more because he ran the biggest road in New York. The Atlantic should not have to pay more for drivers because it was part of the biggest road in Brooklyn. There was one price for tea, and there should be one price for men.

Why not prevent unions? asked a state senator. A company lawyer answered that all employees would soon sign a contract of a new and better kind. First, they must submit to an examination showing they were not short-sighted or fitful and to an investigation showing they had never been discharged for cause or convicted of a crime. Then they must agree to resign, "if dissatisfied with his wages or with the services required of him."<sup>26</sup>

Legislators who thought of "coarse, incompetent" crews told company officials that hooliganism, not unionism, was the trouble. Why not oblige motormen to obtain licenses, the same as electricians or pilots? A license would not only prohibit strikes but foster sobriety. Boston had begun licensing motormen. Government instructors trained, tested, and observed them. New York should not go too far, the lawmakers said, and turn motormen into civil servants, as though they

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<sup>24</sup> *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 2/1/1895.

<sup>25</sup> *Brooklyn Standard Union*, 8/8/1895.

<sup>26</sup> *Brooklyn Citizen*, 2/10/1895.

were municipal firemen or letter carriers employed by the federal government.

The companies demurred. One official said, “Why not license the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker?” Could illiterate teamsters make good motormen? asked a State Senator.<sup>27</sup>

The President of the North Second Street Line answered that most motormen had been horsecar drivers. Poor drivers became poor motormen, but some good drivers did, too. The mental effort required by the new equipment overtaxed them. The employers’ desideratum was a man capable of this effort, not a licensee. The President was right: A century later, college grads did not make better motormen or more likely scabs.

One lawmaker hit on the answer to scabbing—compulsory arbitration. No, said company officials. The arbitrators would not understand the exigencies of the railroad business, unless, of course, the arbitrators were former railroad lawyers, accountants, or executives.

No one asked Connelly his opinion. Some of the Knights’ leaders were in hiding and Sovereign was not subpoenaed.

Brooklyn’s trouble was not contracts, unions, hooligans, or arbitrators. The Knights failed to mobilize riders. Many sympathized. Women and children did more for the strike than men did, and neighbors did more than the public. Police did less against it than troopers from upstate. Prejudiced though it was, the Brooklyn press did more than the press in New York, and the Brooklyn Board of Aldermen had been the only public body to urge Albany to revoke the railroad grants. The Knights did not enroll or lead these potential supporters. For example, they did not correct the aldermen who said the grants did not allow motors to replace horses. The chief issue was safe, uninterrupted service, not motive power. Failure to provide good service was a tort—an actionable wrong.

The union had not expected the strike to become an uprising led by wives plus children, crews without switchmen, police deserting one side without joining the other, and politicians doing the same, but in reverse. Part of the public had unwittingly decided to treat the railroad as their property, to use or despoil as they liked. The arrival of the militia nullified but confirmed this decision.

The law and the courts were weak but working people and the railroad companies were both strong. The people knew how to use sabotage because the railroad was a parade of damaged and ill-repaired equipment. They knew how to use stealth because avoiding supervisors was second-nature. They knew the lay of the land and the infrastructure because they traveled it. Crowds made them anonymous and they were glad to be because many needed to be incognito. Then they were bold. No horse turned traitor and no man should.

A century later, we can envy these qualities, but feel dissatisfied. Communal spirit accompanied organizational weakness and spontaneity tended to exclude planning. Extralegal action lacked any legal counterpart and self-defense was inchoate. Even the anonymity of the strike was unsatisfying.

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<sup>27</sup> *Report of the Special Committee* (1895), 249; so also 437.

Some kind of celebrity would have helped. Yet I liked this melee and so do New Yorkers who have never heard of it. Eighteen Ninety-Five became part of their subconscious. The people had taken command. Damage had been slight and deaths few, save for the operations of the cavalry and the provocations of the police. Such an eruption had never happened in Brooklyn. It could never be undone. Something like it happened again, in the summer of 2020.

The rails belonged to the people and so did I. I have a million names. So do you. It's 1832 today or 2020, so we can start over. We can follow Debs' advice and stop traffic when the time is right.

### Author Bio

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Image credit: Bolton, Reginald Pelham. 1922. *Indian Paths in the Great Metropolis*. Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.

# Community Inequalities and Children's Life Chances in the United States

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## Abstract

This piece discusses the growing empirical evidence that the communities where American children spend their formative years—not just the households they are raised in but where those households are located—matter for their prospects of success in subsequent stages of their lives. The authors explore the various community characteristics—including social capital, family structure, school quality, and income—associated with educational attainment, health, teen pregnancy, social mobility, violence, crime victimization, and more.

## Keywords

Americans, Chetty, children, communities, concentrated disadvantage, educational attainment, environment, family structure, GIS, gun homicides, health, incarceration, income, inequality, intergenerational, IRS, life chances, MTO, neighborhoods, New York City, opportunity, Opportunity Insights, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, place, poverty, Putnam, racial inequality, Sampson, segregation, Sharkey, single parenthood, social capital, social mobility, stratification, teen pregnancy, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, United States, violence, wealth, Wilson, working class

“The influence of individuals’ residential environments does not disappear when they enter adulthood and form their own households, but lingers on to affect various dimensions of their adult lives, with consequences that extend to the next generation.”

—Patrick Sharkey & Jacob W. Faber<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 2014, p. 569.



**FIGURE 1.** Scene From a Struggling American Community.

Camden, NJ. Courtesy of Wikipedia (2023).

## Introduction

Many poor and working-class American children face challenges that more-advantaged youths do not, increasing the probability that these different groups of children will have unequal outcomes in adulthood across a variety of measures.

Some of these disadvantages are experienced at the household level.<sup>6</sup> As an example, University of Maryland economist Melissa Kearney estimates that 9% of White children and 34% of Black children live with unpartnered mothers (mothers who are neither married nor cohabiting) if their mother is college educated, numbers that jump to 20% and 60%, respectively, if their mother has only a high school degree (2023, p. 33). And as Kearney's research demonstrates, these differences contribute to the more limited life chances of poor and working-class children (see Table 1).

This paper is not about disadvantages at the *household* level, however, but about the growing empirical evidence that the *communities* where poor and working-class children spend their formative years—not just the households they are raised in but *where those households are located*—also matter for their prospects of success in subsequent stages of their lives.

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<sup>6</sup> Such as having only one parent instead of two, or being in a family with fewer important resources like money, social connections, cultural/educational capital, etc.

**TABLE 1.** Children’s Long-Term Outcomes by Mother’s Education and Marital Status.

Mother’s Education	Mother Married	Mother Not Married
	% of children over 400% poverty level at age 25	
High School Degree	37.4	16.5
College Degree	54.1	29.1
	% of children with college degree by age 25	
High School Degree	18.0	4.8
College Degree	57.0	28.6

*Note:* “High School Degree” does not include HS graduates who have some college experience.

*Source:* Kearney & Levine (2017, p. 35).

Research into the impact of communities has existed for some time—for instance, a seminal book by William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, was released all the way back in 1987. In the past decade or so, however, there have been particularly important developments in this literature, such as the innovative big data efforts of researchers like Harvard University economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues (see Chetty et. al., 2014, 2022a, & 2022b).<sup>7</sup>

This large and growing body of evidence suggests that, irrespective of individual- and household-level characteristics, place<sup>8</sup> seems to matter for children’s life chances:

“Where a child grows up shapes their future. . . Research across social science disciplines concurs that social contexts outside of the family or the home—neighborhoods and schools in particular—shape children’s educational outcomes and the distribution of inequality in their chances of upward mobility” (Rich & Owens, 2023, p. 297).

Princeton University’s Patrick Sharkey, distinguished scholar on this topic and author of *Stuck in Place* (2013), explains that “Taken together, the empirical evidence strongly suggests that children’s life chances are heavily influenced by the communities where they grow up” (personal

<sup>7</sup> Chetty summarizing the main findings from his groundbreaking 2014 study where he and his colleagues used big data to document the geography of upward mobility across the U.S.: “[S]egregation [is] the first of five major factors that are strongly correlated with [upward social] mobility. The second factor we explore is inequality. . . [Communities] with larger Gini coefficients have less upward mobility, consistent with the ‘Great Gatsby curve’ documented across countries. . . Third, proxies for the quality of the K-12 school system are also correlated with mobility. . . Fourth, social capital indices—which are proxies for the strength of social networks and community involvement in an area—are very strongly correlated with mobility. . . Finally, the strongest predictors of upward mobility are measures of family structure such as the fraction of single parents in the area. . . Children of married parents also have higher rates of upward mobility if they live in communities with fewer single parents” (2014, pp. 5-6).

<sup>8</sup> Scholars have used a variety of geographic units of analysis when investigating the importance of place, including neighborhoods, Census tracts, ZIP codes, counties, and commuting zones. When referring broadly to the fact that place plays a role in Americans’ life chances, we will often use the words “community” and “place” in this paper. When precision is required, we will refer to the specific unit of analysis in question.

communication, March 1, 2022).<sup>9</sup> Emeritus Harvard University scholar Robert Putnam, author of *Our Kids* (2015), notes that evidence of the importance of communities has been growing in recent years: “[R]esearchers have steadily piled up evidence of how important social context, social institutions, and social networks—in short, our communities—remain for our well-being and our kids’ opportunities” (2015, p. 206). And as University of Michigan economist Justin Wolfers explains “[T]he relentless accumulation of evidence is now so compelling that I believe it will sustain a new consensus. That consensus, simply stated, is that place matters” (2015).

Communities impact various aspects of children’s lives—both while they live in those communities and long after they leave them behind—including cognitive and behavioral development, academic performance, educational attainment,<sup>10</sup> employment, economic productivity, social mobility, physical and mental health, substance abuse, sexual behavior, teen fertility, crime victimization, aggression and violence, and involvement in crime (Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Eppard et. al., 2021; Eppard & Nelson, 2022; Rich & Owens, 2023).

How do communities impact children’s likelihood of later adult success? Various community characteristics have been recognized as exerting influence, including the economic (such as income and wealth), social (such as social networks), and cultural (such as educational attainment) resources of residents. Other important community factors include predominant family structures, institutions (such as schools, police departments, social service providers, childcare centers, and churches), peer networks, prevalence of violence/gangs/drugs, availability of adult role models/mentors/supervision,<sup>11</sup> local labor markets, degree of income inequality, degree of racial segregation, social norms, social cohesion (such as levels of trust and support), stability of neighborhood populations, local marriage markets, environmental burdens,<sup>12</sup> and features of nearby neighborhoods (Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Eppard et. al., 2021; Eppard & Nelson, 2022).

The extent of the negative impact of growing up in a disadvantaged community seems to hinge on a variety of factors, including the severity of community disadvantage, the stage of childhood in which one is exposed,<sup>13</sup> the duration of exposure, which specific community characteristics the

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<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere Sharkey argues that the “American system of stratification is organized, in part, along spatial lines” and “the spatial dimension of American inequality plays an important role in the maintenance and reproduction of inequality across multiple dimensions” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 572).

<sup>10</sup> A notable 2011 study found that “exposure to concentrated disadvantage over the course of childhood reduces the probability of high school graduation by 20 percentage points for black youth, and 10 percentage points for all other youth” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 568).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Sampson explains that “Seemingly banal acts such as the collective supervision of children and adult mentorship add up to make a difference” (2019, p. 12).

<sup>12</sup> Sharkey and Faber note that “[A]n expanding literature provides persuasive evidence that exposure to air, water, and noise pollution may have substantively large effects on children’s health, cognitive development, and academic achievement” (2014, pp. 563-564). Robert Sampson explains the empirical connection between the racial composition of Chicago neighborhoods and exposure to lead: “Drawing on comprehensive data from over one million blood tests administered to Chicago children from 1995 to 2013 and matched to over 2,300 geographic block groups, we found that black and Hispanic neighbourhoods exhibited extraordinarily high rates of lead toxicity compared with white neighbourhoods, in some cases with prevalence rates topping 90% of the child population” (2019, p. 14).

<sup>13</sup> “[D]ifferent neighborhood processes may become more or less relevant to an individual across stages of the life course. Infants and preschool children, for example, are likely to be most affected through parents, whereas schools become the more influential setting for elementary school children. The residential setting may become more salient in the adolescent years through processes related to peer influence, along with growing engagement with institutions

child is exposed to, as well as the individual child's degree of vulnerability (Sharkey & Faber, 2014).<sup>14</sup>

Living in communities struggling on particular measures appears to be detrimental to children's life chances even if their own individual household is not particularly disadvantaged on those measures. Raj Chetty and his colleagues, for instance, found that not only were community single parenthood rates strongly associated with upward mobility for all 25th income percentile children ( $r = -0.76$ ), but also for those who *themselves* had married parents ( $r = -0.66$ ) (2014, Online Appendix Figure XII). This suggests that a working-class child living with his/her *own* two parents could be disadvantaged by living in a *community* with many single parents, despite the child's own family structure.

As another example, Patrick Sharkey found that even for children in nonpoor families (incomes in the top three quintiles), spending one's childhood in a high-poverty versus low-poverty neighborhood increases one's chances of downward mobility by 52% (2009, p. 2).

### Community Inequalities in Close Proximity

The inequalities between communities can be jarring, even communities which are located near to each other. As we have written elsewhere about such inequalities:

“Large differences [in life chances] exist whether one uses census tracts, counties, or commuting zones as the unit of analysis. We can use the states where we teach as examples. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, not far from Shippensburg University where Lawrence Eppard teaches, a 5-to-10-minute car ride will take you from a census tract with a 49 percent upward mobility rate for low-income men to a tract with less than 1 percent upward mobility. . . In Salt Lake City, not far from Brigham Young University where Erik Nelson teaches, there are similar inequalities (38 percent vs. less than 2 percent)—just as there are in cities across the country” (Eppard & Nelson, 2022).

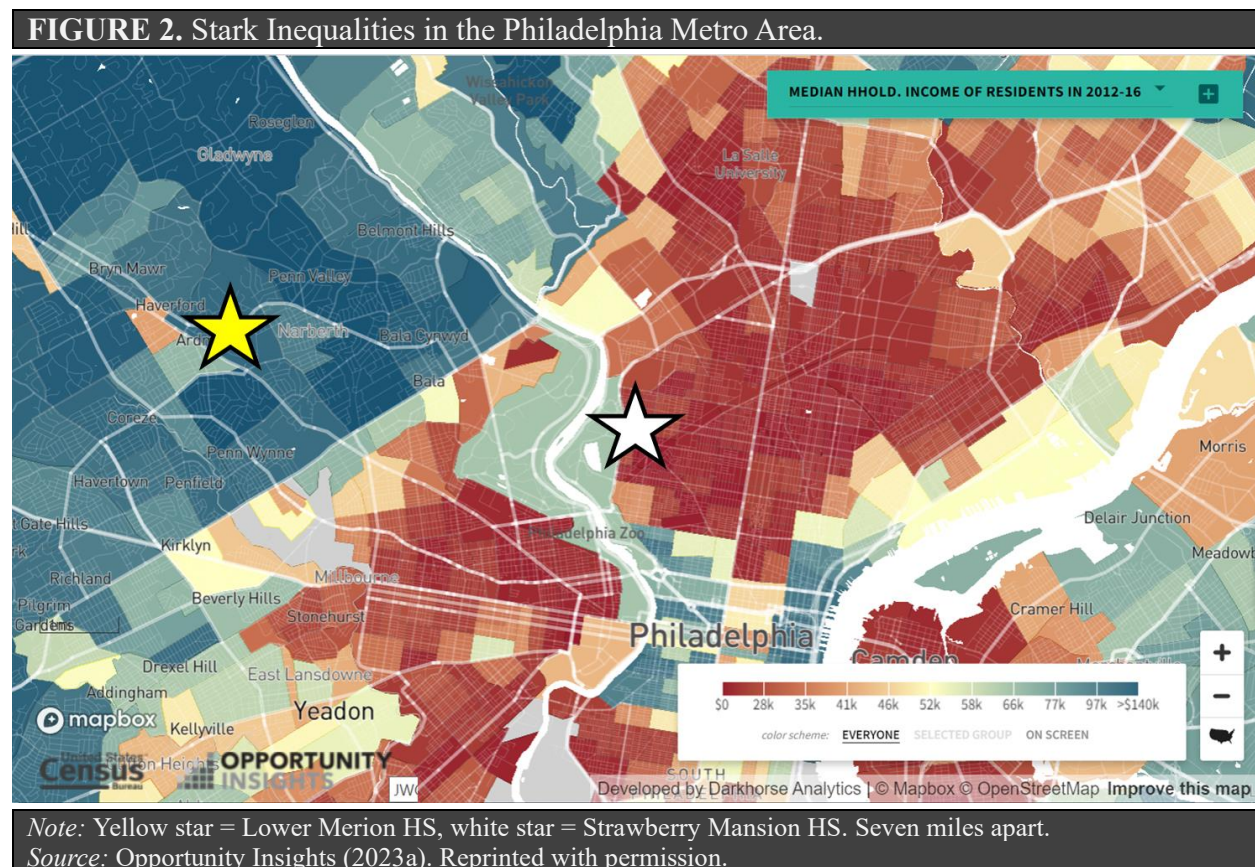
As another example, consider Philadelphia, also not far from where Lawrence Eppard lives and teaches. Let us compare the struggling neighborhood near Strawberry Mansion High School (the

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such as schools and the police. For adults, neighborhood effects likely operate most directly through access to institutions providing services and information” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 569).

<sup>14</sup> “[C]hildren who have lived in the same community throughout their lives and who have become enmeshed in the social life of the neighborhood are likely to be most deeply affected by the set of peers, institutions, risks, and opportunities in the immediate environment that surrounds them. Children who live within a given community but attend school in a different part of town, children who are required to come home immediately after school and remain inside, and children who spend summers with relatives are less likely to be affected by what happens on the residential block on which they live. . . [I]n order to understand how residential environments affect the lives of youth, researchers have to conceptualize and analyze which features of the environment are most salient for different aspects of children's lives, how individuals interact with their environments over different periods of time, and how these patterns of interaction vary for subsets of the population. The neighborhood, from this perspective, is not a static feature of individuals' lives that is experienced in a uniform manner by everyone within it. Rather, a single neighborhood is experienced in different ways by groups of individuals who have lived there for varying lengths of time, and who spend their time within the neighborhood in different ways and in their own spaces, carving out unique social worlds from the common environment that surrounds them” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, pp. 561-562).

white star in Figure 2 below) with its much more advantaged counterpart, a neighborhood near Lower Merion High School, located a mere seven miles away (yellow star in Figure 2).



These neighborhoods are incredibly unequal across a variety of measures, including median household income (\$24k near Strawberry Mansion versus \$110k near Lower Merion), poverty (36% vs 4.5%), proportion of children who have single parents (90% vs 18%), and proportion of residents who are non-White (100% vs 18%) (Opportunity Insights, 2023a).<sup>15</sup>

For high schoolers in these neighborhoods, there are huge gaps in five-year graduation (63.3% in Strawberry Mansion versus 97.4% in Lower Merion), regular attendance (20.2% vs 82.7%),<sup>16</sup> average SAT scores (740 vs 1246), English proficiency (26.9% vs 90.8%), math proficiency (4.2% vs 74.2%), science proficiency (7.7% vs 83.9%), and proportion gifted (0% vs 14.8%). At Strawberry Mansion HS, no students are advanced in math or science and only 3.8% in English (vs 41.3%, 48.4%, and 27.5% at Lower Merion HS). Strawberry Mansion is more than 99% non-

<sup>15</sup> Data come from the years 2012-2016 for household income, poverty, and single parenthood, and 2010 for fraction non-White.

<sup>16</sup> The “regular attendance” indicator used here comes from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and is the percentage of students enrolled in a school for 90 or more school days who are present 90% or more of those school days (PA Dept. of Education, 2023a).



White and 92.1% of students are economically disadvantaged, compared with 36.2% and 18.0% at Lower Merion (PA Dept. of Education, 2023a & 2023b).<sup>17</sup>

Children who grow up in these areas have very different outcomes on measures like life expectancy (69.1 years near Strawberry Mansion HS versus 85.7 years near Lower Merion HS), household income (\$19k avg. vs \$73k), upward mobility rates (3.4% vs 52%), incarceration rates (9.5% vs <1%), marriage rates (11% vs 57%), and teen birth rates (48% vs. 1.1%) (CDC, 2023; Opportunity Insights, 2023a).<sup>18</sup>

## The Claw Machine

The inequalities discussed in the previous section were for all children in those neighborhoods, regardless of any differences between them at the household level. But large disparities are evident even when comparing children who grew up with similar family incomes but in dissimilar communities.

Figure 3, for instance, displays the variation in average household income of adult males born between 1978-1983 who were raised in families at the 25th income percentile (henceforth “lower income”)<sup>19</sup> across New York City neighborhoods, regardless of where these men ended up living in adulthood. You can see that in one area of the city, lower-income male children grow up to earn an average household income around \$79,000 in adulthood, while elsewhere they earn only around \$13,000.

We use cities like New York City and Philadelphia as examples in this paper because they are recognizable American cities. While they serve as our examples, they are not unique—these vast differences are apparent throughout the United States.

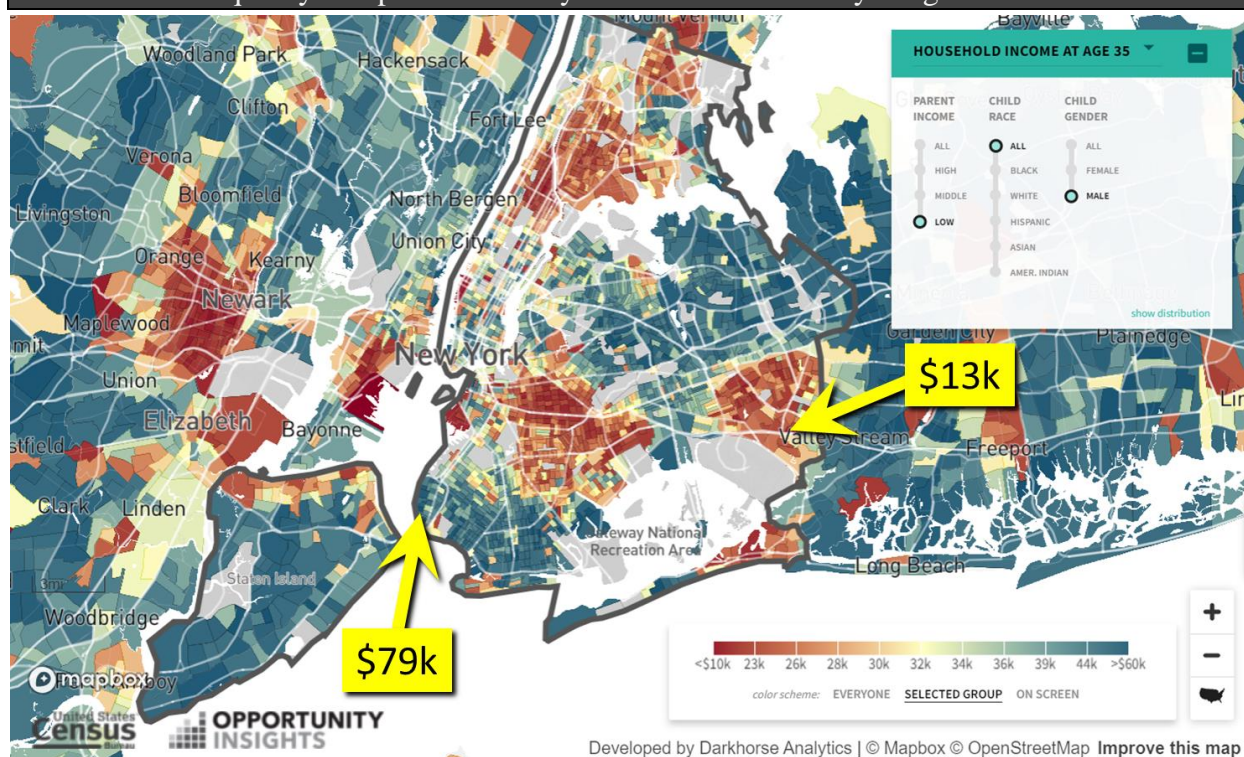
Table 2 is another vivid example. In this table we have listed all counties from high-mobility North Dakota and low-mobility South Carolina together in descending order, from the highest average adult household income to the lowest for males who were raised in lower-income families in these counties. We color-coded the counties in the table to make a county’s state easy to identify: green for North Dakota and light orange for South Carolina.

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<sup>17</sup> All data most recent available from these sources.

<sup>18</sup> All measures except life expectancy are for children born between 1978-1983 who grew up in these tracts and regardless of where they live now, measured when they reach their mid-30s. For life expectancy, see the CDC (2023) for details on their methodology.

<sup>19</sup> For the purposes of our discussion, we will consider the American working class to be the proportion of the U.S. population without a four-year college degree (Draught, 2018). The Opportunity Insights database (2023a) we use allows for analyses of children from families at the 1st, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 100th income percentiles. The median annual earnings of Americans with only a high school degree/GED and no college in 2021 was around \$40,000 (NCES, 2023a). The 25th income percentile in the U.S. in the same year was around \$33,000 (DQYDJ, 2023). To identify whether families at the 25th income percentile should be considered “working class” or “poor” would largely depend upon family size. As an example, a single mother of one child with no college degree working as a receptionist might expect to earn around \$32,000 in 2021 (BLS, 2023a & 2023b), which is around the 25th income percentile for that year. This would be considered working class in 2021, as the poverty threshold for that family size was less than \$19,000 in that year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

**FIGURE 3. Inequality in Upward Mobility Across New York City Neighborhoods.**

Source: Opportunity Insights (2023c). Reprinted with permission.

As you can see, there is virtually no comingling of ND and SC counties. When we rank them this way, they separate like oil and water: all North Dakota counties except one outperform the best-performing South Carolina county. The one ND outlier, Sioux County, is notable because it lies entirely within the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which (like many Native American reservations) is burdened with high rates of poverty, unemployment, and other social problems. The next-lowest performing county in North Dakota, Benson County, boasts a better average household income for males from lower-income backgrounds (\$28,344) than the best-performing South Carolina county, Dorchester County (\$27,952).

You'll note that our analysis does not include the outcomes of *all* children who grow up in these communities but is limited to those raised in households at the 25th income percentile. The logic of this analysis is that if you compare all children, you could be comparing children of wealthy parents to those of poor parents. How can you be sure that any differences in outcomes that you observe are due to features of the unequal communities and not of the unequal household environments? By comparing children who grew up in households with similar incomes, our aim is to establish more of an apples-to-apples comparison.

For an apt metaphor, envision the “claw machine” game frequently encountered in U.S. arcades. In this game, players manipulate a crane-like claw with a joystick, guiding it over a sea of toys until it aligns with the one they desire. Players press a button and hope they positioned the claw correctly so that it drops down and extracts their toy and brings it back to them without losing grip and dropping it back into the heap.

Now picture a similar claw, but of colossal proportions—bigger than a house. It descends from the sky, seizes a house from its foundation, and relocates it to a completely different neighborhood several miles away. Notably, nothing about the internal household environment or its occupants has changed, only the community that surrounds the home is different. If all the sudden the children living in that household are faring much better or much worse after the move—educationally, physically/mentally, socially, or otherwise—with nothing having been altered inside of the home, one might conclude that the neighborhood produced this change in fortunes.<sup>20</sup>

This is the logic of our analysis. While this method is not perfect—households can have similar economic resources but nonetheless vary in many other ways—it does provide important insights.

**FIGURE 4.** The “Claw Machine” Arcade Game.



Traditional “claw machine” arcade games. Images courtesy of Pexels and Wikipedia.<sup>21</sup>

An example of how this plays out in the real world—children of similar household circumstances who are exposed to different community characteristics—comes from a study by RAND Corporation policy researcher Heather Schwartz. In her 2010 study:

“[Schwartz] analyzed the educational outcomes of children living in public housing within Montgomery County, MD, which features a nationally renowned public school system and a large-scale inclusionary housing program. Schwartz exploited the fact that families eligible for public housing were randomly assigned to subsidized apartments that were dispersed across the county, creating an exogenous source of variation in the quality of the zoned elementary schools to which children were assigned based on where they live. Analyzing a sample of 850 children over

<sup>20</sup> In an interesting study from the 1990s, researchers found that “changes in air pollution due to the closing and reopening of an integrated steel mill in Utah had a substantial effect on school attendance rates” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 564).

<sup>21</sup> Middle image by MichalPL (2023) under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license. Far left and far right images courtesy of Pexels.com (Pexels, 2023). All pictures have been cropped and changed to black-and-white.

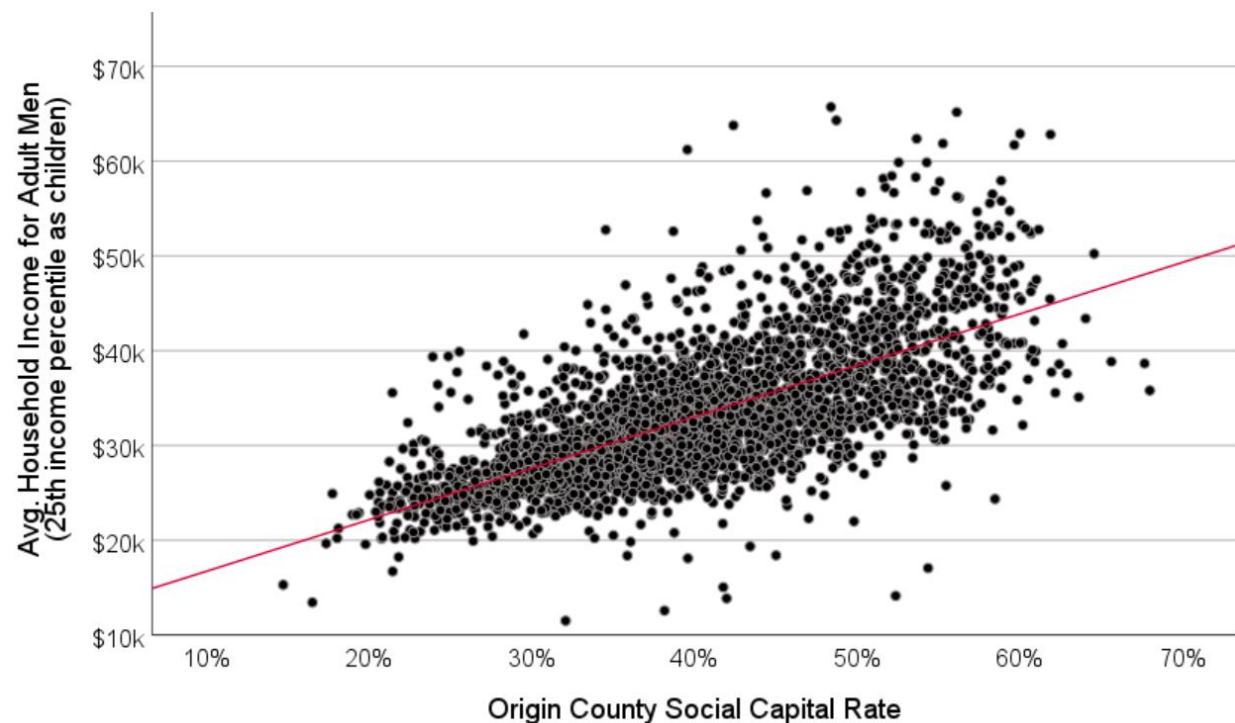
time, Schwartz found that children assigned to advantaged schools performed much better in reading and in math compared to peers who were assigned to less-advantaged schools with higher levels of student poverty. By the end of elementary school, the baseline math achievement gap between low-income students and their nonpoor peers within advantaged schools was cut in half. Low-income students assigned to less-advantaged schools did not experience the same relative improvements in academic performance over time” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 565).

**TABLE 2.** Upward Mobility Across North Dakota and South Carolina Counties.

County Name	Avg. HH Income	County Name	Avg. HH Income	County Name	Avg. HH Income
Dunn	\$65,713	Ransom	\$48,812	Greenville	\$25,669
Bowman	\$65,169	Sheridan	\$48,393	Spartanburg	\$25,420
Slope	\$63,845	Morton	\$46,716	Clarendon	\$25,371
McKenzie	\$63,775	Griggs	\$46,624	Colleton	\$25,213
Burke	\$62,888	Divide	\$46,556	Williamsburg	\$25,142
LaMoure	\$62,819	Sargent	\$46,492	York	\$25,142
Grant	\$61,860	Foster	\$45,775	Anderson	\$25,054
Golden Valley	\$61,718	Walsh	\$45,443	Laurens	\$24,827
Mountrail	\$61,210	Barnes	\$44,776	Charleston	\$24,807
Oliver	\$59,870	Richland	\$44,607	Chesterfield	\$24,678
Billings	\$59,329	Burleigh	\$43,657	Orangeburg	\$24,514
Steele	\$58,997	Stutsman	\$43,446	Edgefield	\$24,488
Stark	\$58,441	Ward	\$43,373	Union	\$24,472
Kidder	\$57,940	Eddy	\$43,186	Georgetown	\$24,447
Bottineau	\$56,853	Cass	\$40,207	Sumter	\$24,269
Nelson	\$56,136	Grand Forks	\$39,972	Florence	\$24,091
McHenry	\$55,805	Ramsey	\$37,811	Greenwood	\$23,728
Hettinger	\$55,566	Rolette	\$30,967	Lee	\$23,550
Cavalier	\$54,748	Benson	\$28,344	Marion	\$23,530
Towner	\$53,420	Dorchester	\$27,952	Chester	\$23,432
Adams	\$53,198	Lexington	\$27,732	Lancaster	\$23,395
Renville	\$53,164	Berkeley	\$27,614	Fairfield	\$23,265
Traill	\$52,891	Oconee	\$27,204	Barnwell	\$23,175
McIntosh	\$52,644	Newberry	\$27,138	Dillon	\$23,011
Emmons	\$52,450	Calhoun	\$26,821	Darlington	\$23,001
Wells	\$52,178	Kershaw	\$26,487	Cherokee	\$22,861
Dickey	\$52,017	Horry	\$26,433	Marlboro	\$22,705
Williams	\$51,693	Beaufort	\$26,275	Sioux	\$22,615
Logan	\$50,065	McCormick	\$26,162	Richland	\$22,561
McLean	\$49,938	Abbeville	\$26,158	Hampton	\$22,257
Pierce	\$49,602	Saluda	\$26,148	Jasper	\$21,961
Mercer	\$49,474	Aiken	\$25,973	Bamberg	\$21,879
Pembina	\$49,248	Pickens	\$25,849	Allendale	\$20,218

*Note:* Green indicates county is in North Dakota, light orange indicates South Carolina.

*Source:* Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2023a) data.

**FIGURE 5. Social Capital and Upward Mobility.**

*Note:*  $r = 0.68^{***}$ ,  $*p \leq .05$ ,  $**p \leq .01$ , and  $***p \leq .001$ . Average household income for males in their mid-30s born between 1978-1983 and raised in these counties in families at the 25<sup>th</sup> income percentile. Social capital rates indicate the average percentage of friends of below-median-SES residents in these counties who are above-median-SES (see Chetty et. al., 2022a & 2022b for more on this measure). Social capital remains associated with household income even when controlling for other community characteristics like household income, family structure, economic growth, educational attainment, race, school quality, and religiosity, among others.

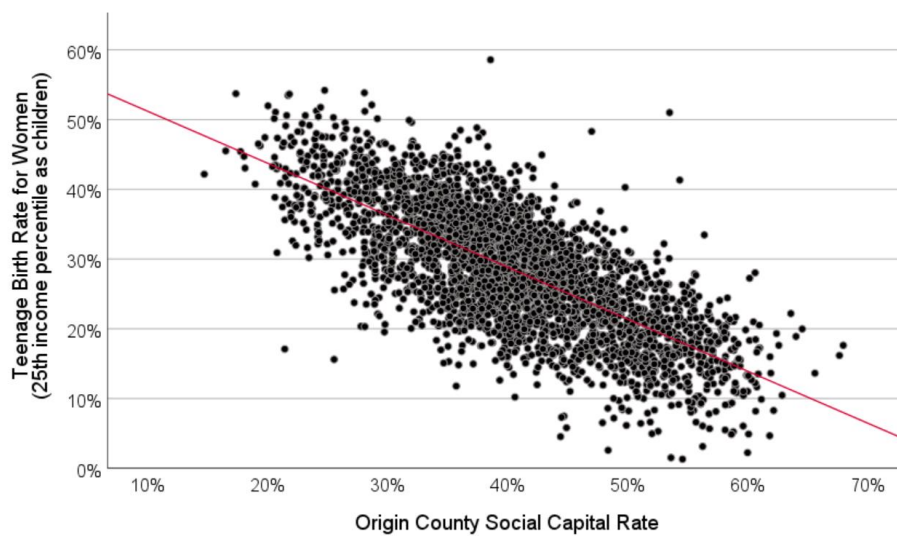
*Source:* Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2023a & 2023b) data.

Figures 5-7 suggest some of the community characteristics that might contribute to disparate outcomes for children of similar family backgrounds who grow up in unequal U.S. communities.

Figure 5 shows the correlation between a community's social capital and upward mobility in adulthood for males raised in lower-income families in them. In the social sciences, when we refer to "social capital," we are referring to the people that you know and the resources and support that they can make available to you. Social capital is thus resources embedded in your social network that you can leverage when needed.<sup>22</sup> The measure of social capital used here is the average percentage of below-median-SES residents' friends who are above-median-SES. The upward

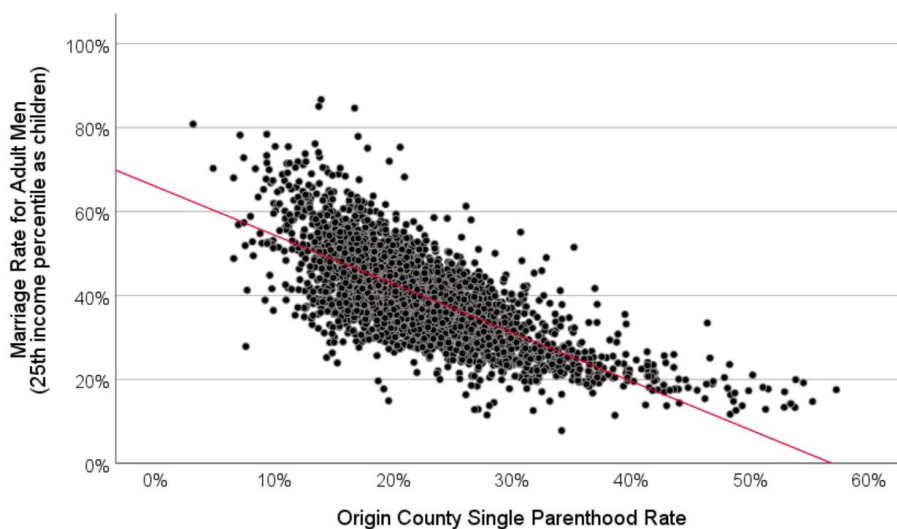
<sup>22</sup> Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital." He goes on to say that "The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21).



**FIGURE 6.** Social Capital and Teen Birth Rates.

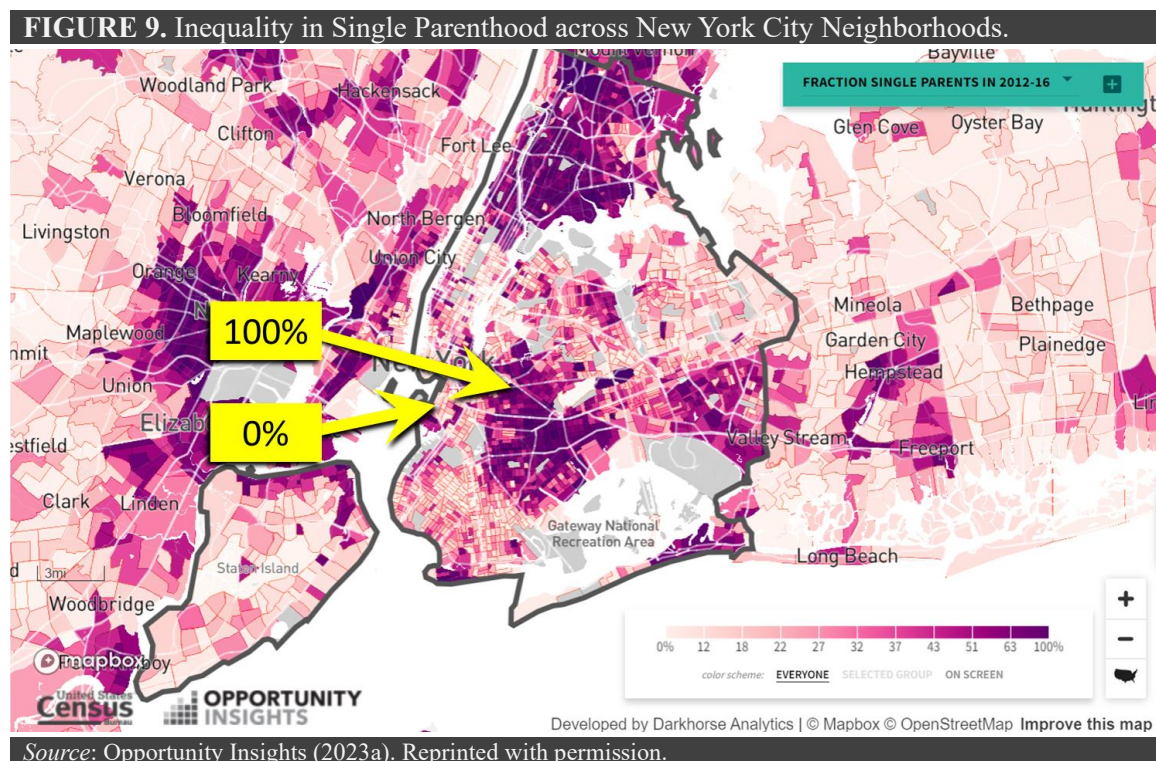
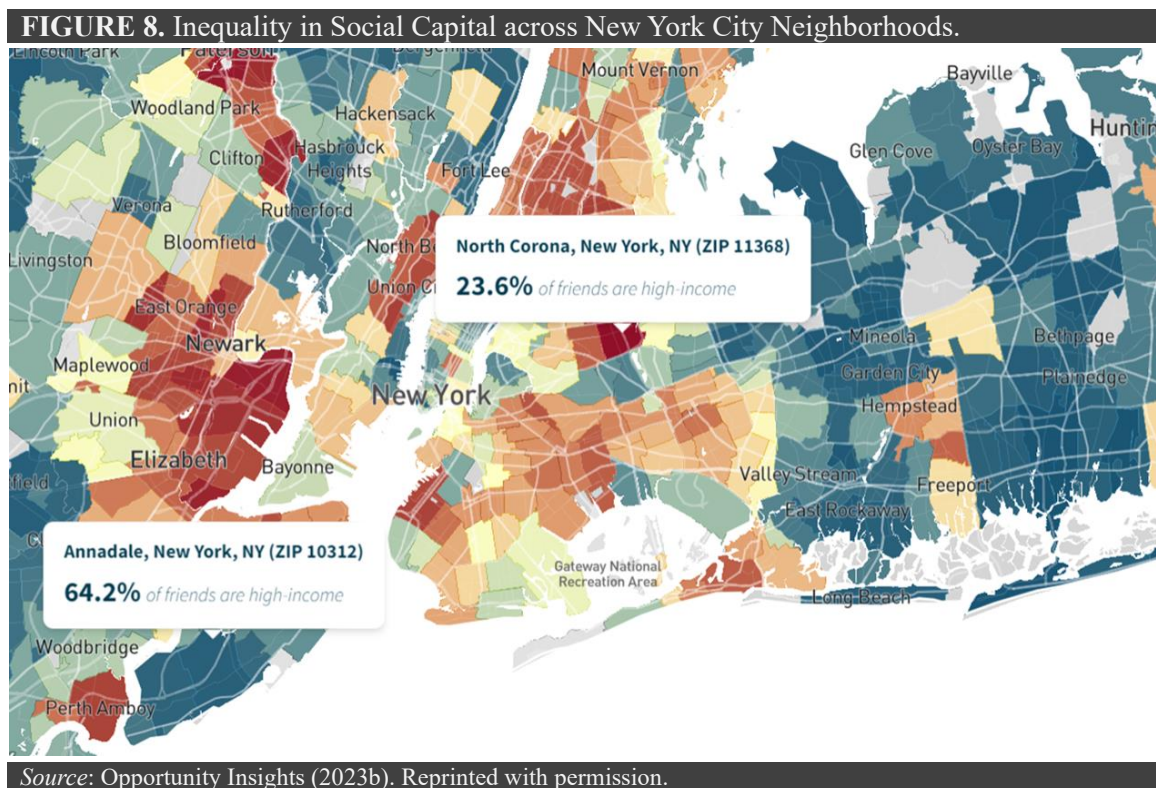
*Note:*  $r = -.072^{***}$ ,  $*p \leq .05$ ,  $**p \leq .01$ , and  $***p \leq .001$ . Teenage birth rates for females born between 1978–1983 who were raised in these counties in families at the 25<sup>th</sup> income percentile and who ever had a child between 13 and 19 years of age. Social capital rates indicate the average percentage of friends of below-median-SES residents in these counties who are above-median-SES (see Chetty et. al., 2022a & 2022b for more on this measure). Community social capital remains associated with lower-income females' teenage birth rates even when controlling for other community characteristics like household income, family structure, economic growth, educational attainment, race, school quality, and religiosity, among others.

*Source:* Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2023a & 2023b) data.

**FIGURE 7.** Family Structure and Marriage Rates.

*Note:*  $r = -.072^{***}$ ,  $*p \leq .05$ ,  $**p \leq .01$ , and  $***p \leq .001$ . Marriage rates for males in their mid-30s who were born between 1978–1983 and who were raised in these counties in families at the 25<sup>th</sup> income percentile. Single parenthood rates are an average of the 1990 and 2000 rates from these counties. Community single parenthood rates and community average household income remain associated with lower-income males' marriage rates even when controlling for other community characteristics like economic growth, educational attainment, social capital, race, school quality, and religiosity, among others.

*Source:* Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2023a) data.



mobility measure is the average household income of males born between 1978-1983, once they reach their mid-30s and irrespective of where they live at that point, raised in families at the 25th income percentile in these communities.

The correlation between community social capital and lower-income male children's eventual adult household income is strong<sup>23</sup> ( $r = 0.68$ )—you can see in Figure 5 that as social capital increases (as you move from left-to-right on the horizontal axis), average household income increases significantly (plotted on the vertical axis). Social capital and household income remain associated even when we use different, multivariate statistical methods to control for other community characteristics like income, economic growth, educational attainment, family structure, race, religiosity, school quality, and violent crime—in fact, social capital had the strongest association in our model (model explained 67% of the variance in the dependent variable).

Figure 6 shows the relationship between community social capital and teen birth rates ( $r = -0.72$ ), while Figure 7 illustrates how community family structure influences marriage rates ( $r = -0.72$ ). Both correlations are very strong, and both associations remain when we use multivariate statistical methods to control for a variety of other variables.

Beyond the outcomes featured here—upward mobility, teen birth, and marriage—we have undertaken various analyses of other life outcomes like educational attainment and incarceration. Across all of these analyses, the life chances of children are associated with community characteristics, with community social capital, family structure, school quality, and income proving particularly influential.

Many of the associations we find are strong. In our teen birth multivariate model—which, like our other models, included the independent variables community economic growth, educational attainment, family structure, income, race, religiosity, school quality, social capital, and violent crime—we found that every 10 percentage point increase in community social capital was associated with a 5.5 percentage point decrease in teen birth rates for females from lower-income backgrounds raised there.<sup>24</sup>

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate how much characteristics can differ between communities within close proximity to each other. Figure 8 displays inequalities in social capital. In one community in New York City, you see that only around 24% of the friends of below-median-SES New Yorkers are above-median-SES. In other areas that number jumps to 64%.

Figure 9 shows the extent to which single parenthood varies across the city. In one neighborhood, all children are raised by single parents. In another nearby, no children are raised by single parents. That is an eye-popping difference.

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<sup>23</sup> In the social sciences, we generally consider bivariate correlations of 0.50 or higher (regardless of whether they are positive or negative) to be strong. We consider them to be “statistically significant” if their  $p$  value is 0.05 or lower. We only report findings in this paper that are statistically significant.

<sup>24</sup> The teen birth multivariate model ( $p < .001$ ) explained 63% of the variance in the dependent variable. Race, educational attainment, and household income were also associated, although not nearly as strongly as social capital. All multivariate models discussed in this paper were significant at the .001 level.



**TABLE 3.** Adult Outcomes Across Census Tracts for Americans Raised in Households at the 25<sup>th</sup> Income Percentile.

Adult Outcome	Top Tract Decile	Bottom Tract Decile
Avg. Male Household Income	\$49,340	\$19,033
Avg. Male Incarceration Rate	0%	13.4%
Avg. Male Marriage Rate	55.7%	13.2%
Avg. Male Upward Mobility Rate	29.2%	1.6%
Avg. Female Teen Birth Rate	5.2%	48.7%

*Note:* Adult outcomes for Americans born between 1978-1983 and raised in these tracts in families at the 25<sup>th</sup> income percentile (outcomes measured when they are in their mid-30s and regardless of whether they remained in these tracts as adults). All outcomes for males except for teen birth rates, which are for females raised in these tracts in households at the 25<sup>th</sup> income percentile who ever had a child between the ages of 13 and 19. Upward mobility refers to climbing to the top 20% income group by a person's mid-30s.

*Source:* Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2023a) data.

Considering how strongly associated community characteristics are with children's life chances, the inequalities in these characteristics across American communities are concerning. Social capital, single parenthood, school quality, and household income have proven particularly powerful throughout the numerous analyses we have conducted—and there are wide gaps across American communities on these measures.

In the top decile of American communities, the average social capital rate is 64%, while it is only 26% in the bottom decile (Opportunity Insights, 2023b).<sup>25</sup> Single parenthood gaps are even more pronounced, with an average rate of 7% in the top decile but 76% in the bottom decile (Opportunity Insights, 2023a).<sup>26</sup> For household income, there is a whopping \$99,778 gap between the top and bottom deciles (Opportunity Insights, 2023a).<sup>27</sup> And a number of scholars (see Chetty et. al., 2014) have demonstrated large gaps in school quality across the U.S.—as an example from Pennsylvania, the top-performing high schools have an average of 89% of students regularly attending, compared with the bottom-performing high schools where only around 35% do (we are using regular attendance as a proxy for the quality of the school environment) (PA Dept. of Education, 2023a).<sup>28</sup>

Table 3 shows some of the reasons why these inequalities matter: children's eventual outcomes in adulthood. There are huge differences between the top and bottom deciles in lower-income children's outcomes, including income (\$30,307 gap), teen birth (43.5 percentage point gap), marriage (42.5 percentage point gap), upward mobility (27.6 percentage point gap), and incarceration (13.4 percentage point gap) (Opportunity Insights, 2023a).

<sup>25</sup> Authors' calculations using 2022 data from Opportunity Insights (2023b).

<sup>26</sup> Authors' calculations using 2012-2016 data from Opportunity Insights (2023a).

<sup>27</sup> Authors' calculations using 2012-2016 data from Opportunity Insights (2023a).

<sup>28</sup> The "regular attendance" indicator used here comes from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and is the percentage of students enrolled in a school for 90 or more school days who are present 90% or more of those school days (PA Dept. of Education, 2023a).

It is worth mentioning, however briefly, how the incredibly useful Opportunity Insights (2023a) data we utilize, which allows us to examine the links between Americans' adult outcomes and their childhood families and communities, came to be.<sup>29</sup>

All the way back in 1987, the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) began requiring taxpayers to list the Social Security numbers of any dependents that they claimed on their tax returns. The rule change was enacted in order to cut down on the number of taxpayers attempting to make fraudulent dependent claims in order to lower their tax burden (and, not surprisingly, Americans claimed fewer dependents the year after the law was changed) (Mervis, 2014).

Two researchers—Raj Chetty and Emmanuel Saez—recognized that this change held the promise of vastly expanding researchers' understanding of the determinants of social mobility. If Chetty and Saez could get access to these tax data, they could link adults' outcomes (via IRS data) back to the family (also via IRS data) and community (via U.S. Census data) environments in which they were raised and examine the factors responsible for their success (or lack thereof) (Mervis, 2014).

In 2011, Chetty and Saez responded to a call for research proposals from the IRS and were able to get the Treasury Department's Office of Tax Policy to allow them this access. They analyzed the data in Washington, D.C. under the supervision of a Treasury Department employee (Mervis, 2014). Chetty and his colleagues have not only published a number of important studies using these data, but they have generously made it publicly available for free to researchers like us to use in projects like this one. You can access the data yourself at [OpportunityAtlas.org](https://www.opportunityatlas.org). There you will find a user-friendly point-and-click webpage interface for the general public, and if you are so inclined, you can download their datasets in order to conduct more intricate statistical analyses.

These data allow researchers to examine how children in households with the same income level (you can choose either the 1st, 25th, 50th, 75th, or 100th income percentile) fare when those households are located in different communities. All of the adult outcome variables that we use in our analyses—household income, upward mobility, college graduation, incarceration, marriage, and teen birth for Americans who grew up in these communities in households at the 25th income percentile and regardless of where they live as adults—come from the Opportunity Insights (2023a) database of aggregated IRS data. The characteristics of the communities where these adults spent their childhoods—such as measures of community college graduation, economic growth, family structure, household income, race/ethnicity, religious participation, school quality, and violent crime—come from the same database.

There is one exception—social capital—which is housed in a second Opportunity Insights database at [SocialCapital.org](https://www.socialcapital.org) (2023b). These data come from Chetty and his team as well and constitute the world's largest data set on social connections. Analyzing 21 billion Facebook friendships from over 72 million users between the ages of 25 and 44, Chetty and his colleagues calculated the average percentage of Facebook friends of below-median-SES Americans in each community (both ZIP code and county data are available) that are above-median-SES. They call

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<sup>29</sup> As economist Gary Solon explains, "For the purposes of measuring intergenerational mobility in the United States, [Opportunity Insights is] an amazing data set" (Mervis, 2014).

this measure “economic connectedness,” a proxy for social capital. Just like OpportunityAtlas.org, the SocialCapital.org website has a user-friendly point-and-click webpage interface for the general public and free downloadable databases for researchers. We would encourage everyone to check out both websites, they are fantastic and informative.

**FIGURE 10.** Social Capital.



Social capital has proven particularly influential in our analyses. Image courtesy of Pexels (2023).

## Communities and Violence

Place also matters when it comes to crime involvement and victimization. Violent crime tends to be geographically concentrated in the most desperate American communities, areas which are struggling with not just one but multiple dimensions of disadvantage—not just poverty, but also things like high levels of unemployment, public assistance, single parenthood, and racial segregation. Scholars often refer to this as “concentrated disadvantage.”

As Harvard University scholar Robert Sampson, author of *The Great American City* (2012), notes, “[C]oncentrated disadvantage remains a strong predictor of violent crime” (2019, p. 13). Chase Sackett writes that “Concentrated disadvantage, crime, and imprisonment appear to interact in a continually destabilizing feedback loop” (2016).<sup>30</sup> When Patrick Sharkey mapped homicides

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<sup>30</sup> Sackett goes on to explain that “Neighborhoods with more concentrated disadvantage tend to experience higher levels of violent crime. Numerous studies, for instance, show that neighborhoods with higher poverty rates tend to have higher rates of violent crime. Greater overall income inequality within a neighborhood is associated with higher rates of crime, especially violent crime. Sampson notes that even though the city of Stockholm has far less violence, segregation, and inequality than the city of Chicago, in both cities a disproportionate number of homicides occur in a very small number of very disadvantaged neighborhoods” (2016).

across the city of Chicago, he found a “strikingly visible” (2013, p. 30) overlap between concentrated disadvantage and homicide:

“[T]he concentration of violence goes hand in hand with the concentration of poverty. There is a remarkable spatial clustering of homicides in and around neighborhoods with high levels of poverty. . . there are entire sections of this violent city where the most extreme form of violence, a local homicide, is an unknown occurrence. There are other neighborhoods where homicides are a common feature of life. . . these maps provide perhaps the most vivid portrait of what living in areas of concentrated poverty can mean in America’s cities” (p. 30).

Studies show that violent crime tends to be concentrated not just within specific disadvantaged neighborhoods but in even smaller geographic “hot spots” or “micro places” within these struggling neighborhoods. It also tends to be concentrated within small, high-risk social networks (Braga et. al., 2010).

In one study of Boston data from an almost thirty-year period (1980-2008), more than half of all incidents of gun violence could be attributed to fewer than 5% of micro places in the city:

“Our analyses suggest that city-level gun violence trends may best be understood by the analyses of trends at a very small number of micro places, such as street segments and intersections, rather than analyses of trends at larger areal units such as neighborhoods, arbitrarily-defined policing districts, or Census tracts. These levels of aggregation may obscure important place-based dynamics that vary within larger geographic boundaries. . . Urban gun violence trends may be best understood as generated by a very small number of high-risk individuals who participate in high-risk social networks and perpetrate their shootings at a very small number of high-risk micro places. . . In this analysis, almost 89% of Boston street segments and intersections never experienced a single [gun] incident between 1980 and 2008. . . Boston gun violence trends were largely generated by repeated incidents at less than 5% of its street segments and intersections” (Braga et. al., 2010, p. 48).

The authors go on to note that:

“[T]hese findings strongly support the perspective that a city’s portfolio of gun violence prevention programs should include interventions that are explicitly place-based; that is, certain prevention efforts should be focused in very specific locations rather than diffused across larger neighborhoods” (p. 50).

Another study, this time in Oakland, found that 0.3% of the city’s population was responsible for up to 85% of Oakland homicides (McLively & Nieto, 2019, p. 38). Similar patterns are found across the U.S. (Papachristos et. al., 2014; Weisburd, 2015; Aufrichtig et. al., 2017). As criminal justice scholar David Kennedy notes: “In what we think of as the ‘most dangerous places,’ very, very few people are actually at any meaningful risk for violent offending. . . Most of the folks in those places are in no way a part of the problem” (Aufrichtig et. al., 2017).

Over the years we have conducted several analyses also showing a strong relationship between areas of concentrated disadvantage and the geographic location of violence in the U.S. We include a few examples from this work in Figure 11. These maps show the clear clustering of homicides within areas of concentrated disadvantage across multiple U.S. cities. Even in cities that are considered dangerous, there are many neighborhoods where gun homicides *never* occur. Instead, homicides are heavily clustered in neighborhoods burdened with multiple dimensions of disadvantage.

Living in violent communities impacts outcomes beyond one's likelihood of being involved in or victimized by crime, as Patrick Sharkey's research has shown:

“[C]hildren perform substantially worse on cognitive skills assessments if they are given the assessments in the immediate period of four to seven days following a local homicide that occurred near the home. The effect was strongest when the homicide occurred in the block group in which the child lived, weaker if it occurred in the census tract, and weaker still if it occurred in the larger neighborhood cluster, which was measured as a cluster of contiguous tracts. The pattern showing decaying effects of local violence suggests that the mechanism leading to impaired cognitive functioning likely involves the stress, shock, trauma, or fear experienced by individual children who are exposed to or made aware of extreme violence close to home” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 564).

### **Communities and Racial Inequality**

Several researchers have collected compelling evidence that community inequalities are an important factor driving racial inequality in America. As Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in *The Atlantic*, “An unsegregated America might see poverty, and all its effects, spread across the country with no particular bias toward skin color. Instead, the concentration of poverty has been paired with a concentration of melanin. The resulting conflagration has been devastating” (2014).

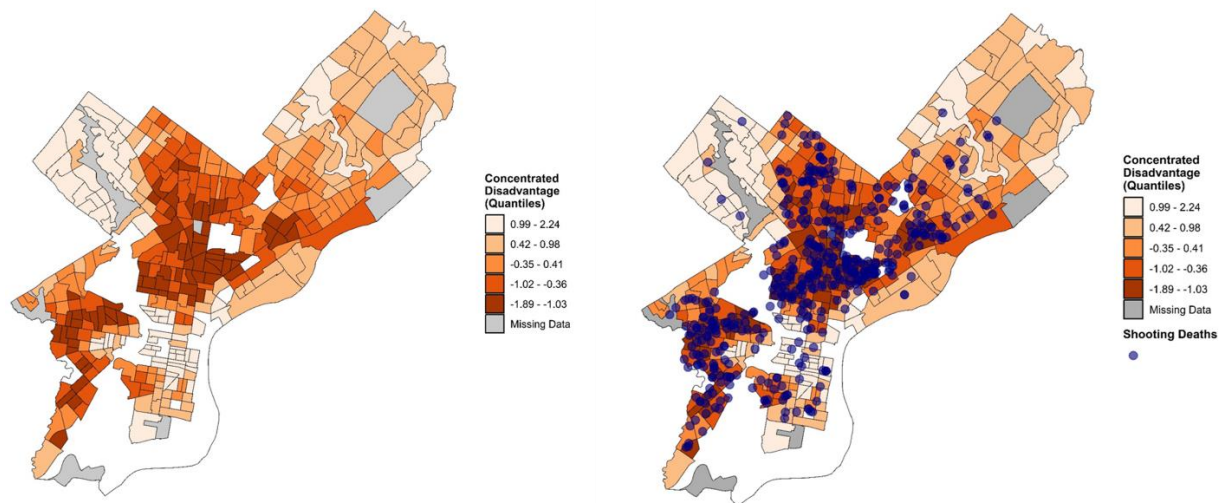
Several studies and data sources underscore Coates's point. Patrick Sharkey, for instance, found that almost a third of Black children (31%) in America grow up in neighborhoods that are at least 30% poor, something that is exceedingly rare for White children (only 1%). Additionally, Sharkey found that while only 10% of Black children are raised in neighborhoods with less than 10% poverty, that is the norm (61%) for White children (2009, p. 9).<sup>31</sup> And according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023b), 63% of Black, 65% of Hispanic, and 56% of Native American students attended schools where a majority of students qualified for free or reduced lunch in fall 2021, compared with only 25% of White and 31% of Asian American students.

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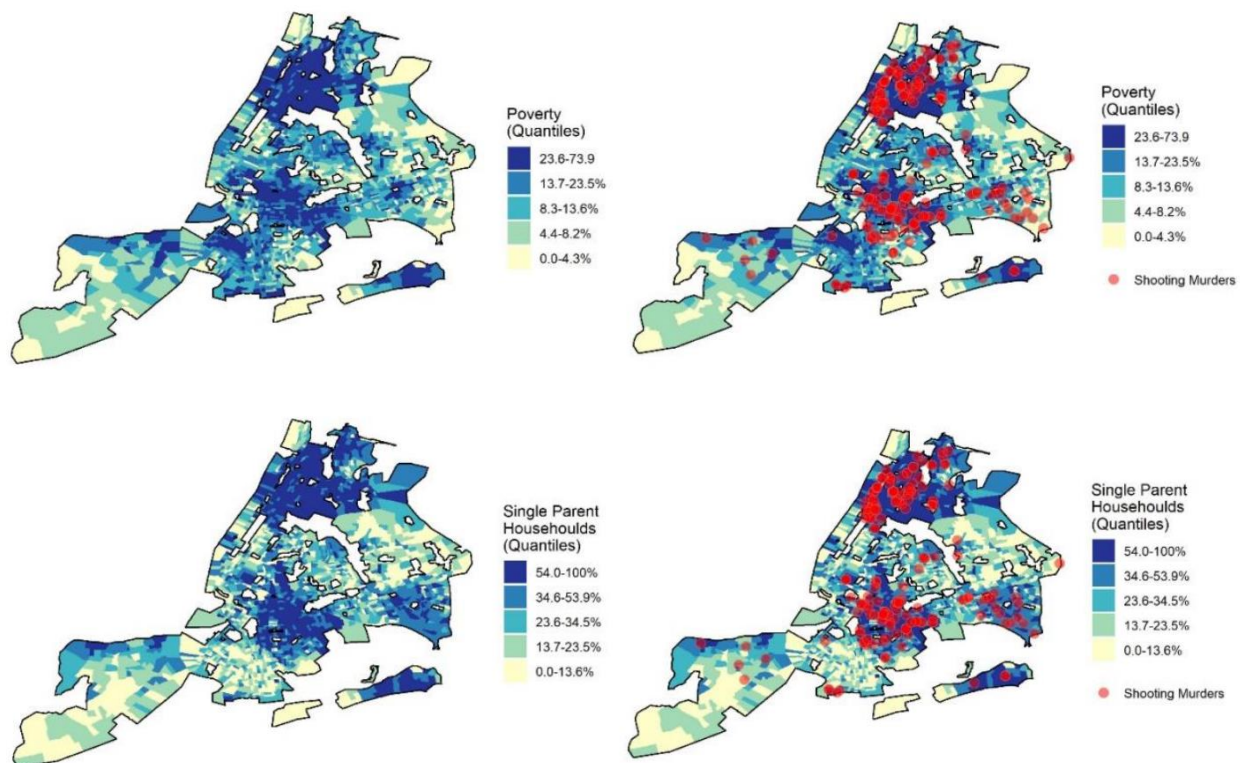
<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, Sharkey notes that “[W]hite families may experience spells of residence in high-poverty communities, but these spells are typically temporary. For black American families, residence in poor or disadvantaged communities is much more stable, and persistent exposure to such communities is common. Racial gaps in long-term exposure to neighborhood disadvantage are amplified when families are observed over multiple generations. . . [M]ore than half of black American families have lived in the poorest quarter of American neighborhoods over the past two consecutive generations, compared to only 7% of white families” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 567).

**FIGURE 11.** Mapping Concentrated Disadvantage and Violence Across the U.S.

## PHILADELPHIA, PA



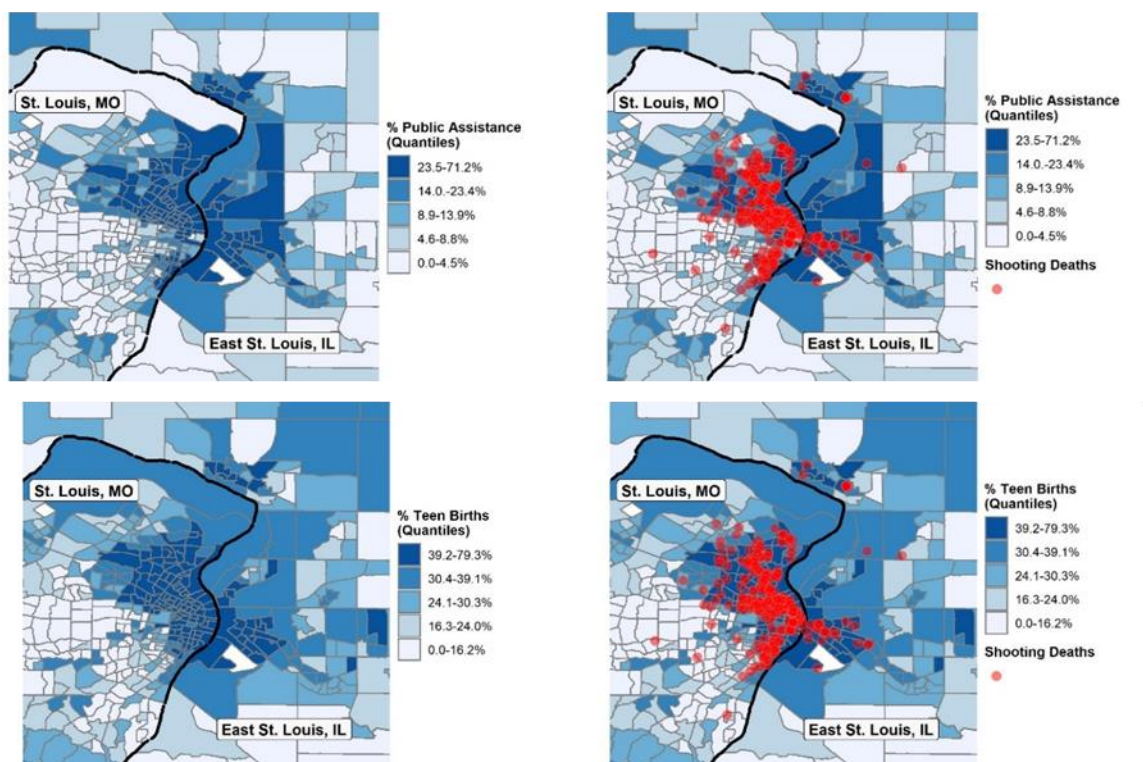
## NEW YORK CITY, NY



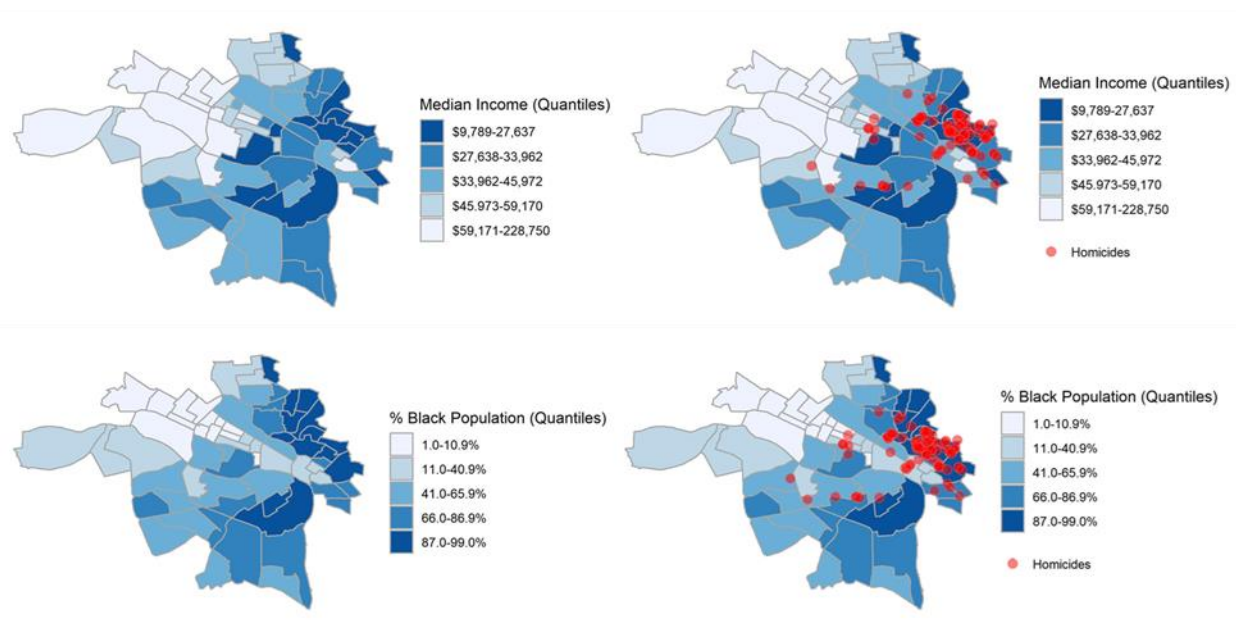


**FIGURE 11 (continued).**

## ST. LOUIS, MO and EAST ST. LOUIS, IL



## RICHMOND, VA



*Source:* PA analysis conducted by authors using Office of the Controller (2023) and U.S. Census Bureau (IPUMS, 2023) data. NY: Eppard et. al. (2020); MO/IL: Eppard & Nelson (2022); VA: Eppard et. al. (2021).

Sharkey notes that:

“[B]lacks and whites of similar economic status live in dramatically different residential environments, with blacks living in areas with higher crime rates, lower quality schools, higher poverty rates, lower property values, and severe racial segregation” (2009, p. 6).

Robert Sampson writes that “The spatial isolation of African Americans produces exposure to concentrated, cumulative, and compounded disadvantage, constituting a powerful form of racial disparity” (2019, p. 8). Rutgers University emerita professor Lauren Krivo explains that “[F]ew predominantly white communities have conditions that are anywhere near the levels of disadvantage that are common in non-white communities, and particularly black communities” (Aufrichtig et. al., 2017).<sup>32</sup>

Considering the disproportionate racial makeup of our most disadvantaged communities in the U.S., we have argued elsewhere that “If place is as important for children’s success as the evidence indicates, then we cannot hope to truly address racial inequality in the United States without addressing the stark differences between our communities” (Eppard & Nelson, 2022).

### **What Can Be Done?**

Given that we do not choose the family we are born into nor the community in which we will be raised, it seems that our life chances—at least in part—come down to the lottery of our birth:

“We do not choose to exist. We do not choose the environment we will grow up in. We do not choose to be born Hindu, Christian or Muslim, into a war-zone or peaceful middle-class suburb, into starvation or luxury. We do not choose our parents, nor whether they’ll be happy or miserable, knowledgeable or ignorant, healthy or sickly, attentive or neglectful. The knowledge we possess, the beliefs we hold, the tastes we develop, the traditions we adopt, the opportunities we enjoy, the work we do—the very lives we lead. . . This is the lottery of birth” (Martinez, 2016, p. 3).

Luckily, it seems that there are many good ideas about how we might intervene in meaningful ways to improve many children’s communities. Richard Reeves and Allegra Pocinki (2015) argue for such things as better enforcement of fair housing rules, reforming exclusionary zoning laws, ensuring more mixed-income housing and schooling, making sure public housing is not built in high-poverty areas, investing in infrastructure, and promoting more school choice.

We could also help families who wish to move out of struggling neighborhoods to achieve that goal, and there is evidence that such moves would be beneficial for young children.

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<sup>32</sup> Studying the city of Chicago, Robert Sampson found that there was virtually no overlap between the levels of neighborhood concentrated disadvantage of Black residents compared with non-Black residents: “[I]n cities such as Chicago children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds occupy entirely different types of communities” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 570).



Between 1994 and 1998, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) ran a social experiment called the “Moving to Opportunity” experiment (MTO). It was designed to assist researchers in establishing whether helping low-income families move to better neighborhoods would improve their economic and health outcomes (Chetty et. al., 2019).

In the MTO experiment, 4,600 low-income families with children living in high-poverty public housing in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City were entered into a lottery. They were then randomly assigned into three groups: those who would stay in public housing, those who would be offered a subsidized housing voucher to move elsewhere, and those who were offered the same voucher but with the stipulation that they must move to a low-poverty neighborhood (poverty rate less than 10%). This allowed researchers to compare the life outcomes of low-income families who moved out of public housing to a control group of similarly disadvantaged families who stayed (Chetty et. al., 2019).

Okay, we can’t help ourselves. We have to say it. . . MTO was like a giant claw machine!

Early analyses of the experiment, while documenting some positive results for movers, did not reveal large gains for children, “leading some to conclude that neighborhood environments are not an important component of economic success” (Chetty et. al., 2019).

More recent analyses, however, looked more closely at subpopulations within each group, and found that there were significant improvements for children who moved as long as they (a) moved in elementary school or earlier and (b) did not move to another disadvantaged neighborhood but instead into a low-poverty area. Children who moved out of public housing when they were young and into low-poverty neighborhoods were more likely to attend college and were more economically productive as adults. Female children who moved to low-poverty neighborhoods were more likely to marry, more likely to maintain relationships with the fathers of their children, and more likely to live in better neighborhoods in adulthood (Wolfers, 2015; Chetty et. al., 2019).

Many of the children who moved in their teenage years not only saw little improvement but were perhaps even hurt by the disruption of the move—so when earlier researchers included both teenagers and young children in their analyses, the positive effects for the young were probably cancelled out by the negative effects for some teenagers (along with the less-impressive results for movers who moved but into yet another disadvantaged neighborhood) (Wolfers, 2015).

As Michigan University economist Justin Wolfers explains:

“[The MTO experiment] suggests that the next generation—the grandchildren of the winners of this lottery—are more likely to be raised by two parents, to enjoy higher family incomes and to spend their entire childhood in better neighborhoods. That is, the gains from this policy experiment are likely to persist over several generations” (2015).

Additionally, modeling voucher programs after the MTO experiment would be fiscally responsible. As Chetty and his colleagues explain “The additional tax revenue generated from these earnings increases would itself offset the incremental cost of the subsidized voucher relative

to providing public housing” (2019). Because children relocated to better neighborhoods go on to become more economically productive adults, they end up contributing more to the economy and paying more in taxes, which likely offsets the additional expenses that the government would incur by implementing a voucher program similar to MTO instead of traditional public housing.

Chetty and his coauthors who conducted the MTO reanalysis concluded that:

“[O]ffering low-income families housing vouchers and assistance in moving to lower-poverty neighborhoods has substantial benefits for the families themselves and for taxpayers. It appears important to target such housing vouchers to families with young children—perhaps even at birth—to maximize the benefits. . . More broadly, our findings suggest that efforts to integrate disadvantaged families into mixed-income communities are likely to reduce the persistence of poverty across generations” (2015, pp. 40-41).

\* \* \* \* \*

There is growing evidence of the significant impact of communities on the life chances of poor and working-class American children, revealing that place plays a pivotal role in shaping children’s future prospects. Whether it’s educational attainment, social mobility, exposure to violence, racial inequality, or other important measures, communities seem to matter a great deal irrespective of individual and household characteristics.

Studies like the aforementioned MTO, however, do offer hope. They suggest that improving struggling communities, or moving children out of them, can yield significant improvements in long-term outcomes. Such policies could pave the way for brighter futures for many American children, regardless of the lottery of their birth.

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# Motorcycle on my mind

**Ian C Smith**

The ghost of my young self dwells a boy's bike ride from a city friend's new townhouse. When she leaves for work I pat pockets, lock her door, set out on foot. Passing the old swimming pool things gone but not forgotten float to the surface. I know I shall head for the high goods rail trestle bridge, its slow trains rackety echoes, a punishing review of the past.

My newspaper delivery grid, musty archives of my mind zinging. A black dog, hackles alert, snarled through a closed gate here at scratch of day inches from my bare legs each time I stopped. The house looks different, as do many, but street names evoke the oh so long ago. Around the corner lived a boy who became a writer of mesmeric Australian landscape fiction. I shall walk this locale for years today, aching.

Disoriented, memory no longer shatterproof, I rest near a sculpted driveway of coloured concrete, trying to reconfigure the past on this landscape. Realisation erupts, raising the veil of progress to reveal the heady odour of hard-scrabble before these updated houses, this permed parkland, changed the view from scruffy to confusing. My girlfriend lived so close I am almost there. Her single mother fed me home-made cake, ruffled my hair.

With schoolmates I pedalled to the bridge glimpsed in the distance, spectral, unused now, hauled to its height bald tyres dumped below, let them go as if dropping boiling pitch from a castle's ramparts to plummet through a golden morning, swishing howls those of wild raiders scalded, delighting us before they bounced, dandelion fluff dancing on air, each bound quicker, less pronounced.

To impress that girlfriend I borrowed her big brother's Norton 500cc, a machine like Che Guevara rode, hot hands clasping my chest, breasts pressed against my back, blazing into a stun of wind towards the city that looms closer now, a dreamscape then. Because she was three years older than me I strained to appear cool, but was barely shaving. Eventually her womanly appetites scared me off, our break-up pathetic, another cliché of careless youth, into time's drift, the tunnel of my story where I thought I had left her behind.

## Author Bio

**Ian C Smith** writes in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria, and on Flinders Island. His work has appeared in *Antipodes*, *cordite*, *Eureka Street*, *Griffith Review*, *Journal of Working Class Studies*, *Meniscus*, *Shaping the Fractured Self* (UWAP), &, *So Fi Zine*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra Press.

# Kelley, Blair LM (2023) *Black Folk: The Roots of the Black Working Class*. Liveright.

## Review by Venise Wagner

It only made sense that Blair LM Kelley, the author of *Black Folk*, started with the night her great-grandfather Solicitor Duncan orchestrated his family's furtive run from an unscrupulous Georgia landowner around the time of the Depression. Duncan, who had been sharecropping a parcel for this landowner, had just been told that despite his hard work in the fields and the bountiful cotton crop from it, he owed the landlord money. Tired of another year of crushing debt, Duncan decided to execute a quiet exit with his family, heading north to North Carolina.

The Black working-class experience has always involved the search for something better, a lever of agency that Blacks exercised to improve their lives. Largely shut out from employment opportunities, Black workers have long been used to pulling up stakes when a job no longer provided them with a chance for better – better wages, better conditions, and the possibility of promotion. Kelley places this active push for better job conditions front and center of the Black working-class's unique path. This isn't to say that other working-class groups haven't historically fought for better working conditions, but the Black working-class experience embodies a pattern of especially extreme oppression and ingenious resistance to that oppression. Kelley traces this resistance back to slavery.

Academic studies and press reports of the working class primarily have examined the lives of whites, leaving the unique historical experiences of the Black working class invisible. I think of the imagery that is often used to showcase the white working class as the backbone of American manufacturing. Such imagery leaves us with the belief that whites alone built the country's physical infrastructure and economy.

But in *Black Folk*, Kelley brings to the page the experiences of Black workers whose contributions to the economy and infrastructure have been no less critical. These workers are often amongst their own group viewed as an important sector of the Black middle class. Such an examination is welcome since historically Blacks have had to find innovative ways to negotiate their labor with white bosses who were quick to dismiss the value of their potential and their actual work. They were also left to negotiate their labor because many trade unions excluded them from their ranks and others devalued their work nearly as much as the white bosses.

In Kelley's telling, Black workers found leverage to persuade employers that their labor held financial value. She makes the case that even during slavery, the act of running away was an assertion of leverage – albeit limited – to withdraw labor. For these reasons, Kelley views this as nascent negotiations of labor for Black people. The market value of slave labor indeed held great value to owners. The slave system cultivated white working-class buy-in with jobs such as overseers and patrollers and with social privileges as whites, even though the system undercut their labor value, too. Kelley also blasts the notion that slave labor was primarily unskilled labor. She



touts as an example the many artisans and craftsmen whom Thomas Jefferson enslaved and who built the Academical Village, the University of Virginia. She also traces pieces of her ancestor's story, Henry, who was a blacksmith in Elbert County, Georgia.

She describes the work of field slaves as skilled labor, pointing out that Blacks transported to the Americas brought agricultural knowledge from their motherland. And later in the book she does the same with her descriptions of washerwomen's labor, whose work was more than just scrubbing clothes in large tubs of hot water. These women knew how to formulate and mix chemicals to brighten white clothing, knew how to use the wind to dry clothes on the line, knew how to iron clothes without burning them. This knowledge was passed down through generations.

In highlighting these examples of Black skilled work, Kelley reframes Black labor – from slavery and on – as valued commodities. This rendering recalibrates the role of Black labor over time. While most Black workers were relegated to cultivate resistance within the confines of policies that often excluded them or ignored their experiences and contributions, these workers, though invisible, made inroads at making themselves and their experiences seen. They also developed rich cultural and social lives that allowed them to thrive within their communities despite oppressive policies and laws that contained them.

The two chapters on washerwomen are particularly satisfying as Kelley juxtaposes two images. The first one emerges from the lens of a white observer tasked with recording the washerwomen's experience. Unable to move past the stereotypical imagery of washerwomen, this observer honed her sights on what washerwomen lacked – whiteness, status, education, and social class. Then Kelley, however, contrasted that with the reality of washerwomen's lives. We see how washerwomen asserted their independence, working hours that were convenient for them and their families and in or near their backyards. We see them working together, collaborating, and supporting each other and their communities. For this, they held status within the community, even though whites saw them as poor pitiable women.

Kelley places the Black working-class at the heart of community engagement and activism. She establishes the organizing efforts of domestic workers and Pullman porters as the antecedents to the civil rights movement.

All of these narratives correctly realign the historical record of Black workers in the United States, challenging the stereotypical image from unskilled grunts living as victims of an exploitative system, to worker heroes who contributed to industry and economic growth of the country, while also providing for their families and resisting employer abuses.

Kelley's emphasis on Black worker agency is inspiring and offers an important vantage point. But it also risks simplifying the real complicated impact of institutional, political and social laws and practices on the kind of agency Black workers could exert. For example, Kelley explores the laws that shaped opportunity or the lack of opportunity for domestic workers, but her stories of domestic worker resistance against employer abuses quickly subvert the focus away from policies toward worker choice and worker's individual actions. It's a difficult balance to strike. Kelley comes within a hair of doing so.

Racial segregation and policies with racialized outcomes – including those during the Depression that excluded domestic workers from Social Security benefits – created barriers for Black workers. Their choices of resistance in the workplace could do little to change that.

Kelley provides compelling narratives that belong in the canon of working-class studies. I would encourage other researchers to incorporate this scholarship and other ethnic-specific experiences like it into explorations of the American working class. Commonalities from these experiences would emerge quickly – whether coming from white, Black, Latino, or Asian groups: discrimination, exploitation, resistance are bound to be dominant themes.

### **Reviewer Bio**

**Venise Wagner** is Professor of Journalism at San Francisco State University. A former reporter for San Francisco newspapers, she specialized in coverage of the Bay Area's African-American communities, economic development, culture, and education. She is the co-author and co-editor of *Reporting Inequality: Tools and Methods for Covering Race and Ethnicity*. She also wrote the short memoir, *Love in the Time of Pinochet*. She is currently working on a family memoir following the story of her grandfather who was a Black steelworker in Chicago during WWII.

## **Zweig, Michael (2023) *Class, Race, and Gender: Challenging the Injuries and Divisions of Capitalism*. PM Press.**

### **Review by Jeff Crosby**

This is a stunningly ambitious book. In just over 200 pages Michael Zweig takes on economic concepts like class formation, commodity production, surplus, and the labor theory of value, and also dialectical and historical materialism, religion in social movements, individualism, reform and revolution, and more. He identifies the “tension between class and ‘identity politics’” as “perhaps the most important and most difficult dynamic that progressive politics has to navigate.” (p. 52) Understanding how capitalism works “gives activists and organizers a better grounding for cooperation across what are now too often isolated issue-based campaigns.” (p. 133) As someone who has spent a lifetime in the labor movement during the period that bridges the Black Power and the Black Lives Matter uprisings, I agree with him on both counts.

He introduces what he calls “threshold concepts” and argues that we need “abstract thinking,” or theory, to understand the world and overcome capitalism. As someone who dropped out of school thinking I could learn everything on the street, and later went back to school and got a master’s degree at age 59, this certainly speaks to my experience as well.

Perhaps the biggest strength of the book is its ability to present many complex notions in clear essential language. Explaining that knowledge is a process, he says: “All knowledge is tentative and transitory, subject to elaboration or radical change depending on future turns in the process. Knowledge arises from a process that combines activity and thinking.... if the outcome is unexpected, we have to go back and adjust the theory to account for the new observations.” (p. 61) This is a Marxism fully shed of dogma, in language useful for study with people who did not get radicalized in college classes.

Those who have followed Michael Zweig’s previous work will recognize themes he revisits. He clarifies class as a social relationship, defined by power on the job and in society, and tips his hat to the cultural wing of working-class studies: “classes are produced and reproduced as well in a much more complex network of cultural and political relationships that tend to reflect relative power in production but are not directly tied to it.” We confront the capitalist class, not “the rich.” There is no separate underclass of the poor: poverty is something that happens to working-class people.

Zweig again demands that leftists take a holistic view of religion’s impact on our movements. He traces the roots and power of liberation theology in different religions (not just Catholicism). He cites the full text of Marx’s famous quote that “religion is the opium of the people.” Marx continued, religion is “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.” Religion’s power to relieve the pain of our peoples and motivate

good works is confirmed with my work with mainstream churches, temples of different faiths, as well as Evangelical and Pentecostal folks. Their beliefs and social practice do not deserve the often dismissive attitudes of the left, and can be an antidote to the fascist core of white Christian nationalism.

Young activists are often clear on issues of white privilege, which Zweig calls “a fact of life,” the systemic relative advantages enjoyed by white people, including workers. But they are less clear on the movements of oppressed peoples in the US for freedom or self-determination as a social movement both independent and intertwined with others. Critically, Zweig addresses both sides of racial and national oppression. “We cannot rightly say that one struggle is central and others subordinate or peripheral . . . Racism and male supremacy existed before capitalism. They do not require capitalism for their perpetuation . . . Each of these movements demands its autonomy.”

White supremacy will not just go away through class struggle towards common goals, and a rising tide will not lift all boats. He calls for extensive education of workers in the history of white supremacy and explicit discussion and struggle in the course of day-to-day fights to root out or at least mitigate its impact. I have seen this help in my labor council, where a small part of the monthly agenda used portions of an anti-racist curriculum Bill Fletcher prepared that not only raised the level of understanding and resistance to white supremacy, but helped position us to fight anti-gay and anti-trans hatred as well.

I am grateful to Zweig for identifying the middle-class condescension towards white working-class people. It is grating to see young white activists, especially those from elite backgrounds or universities, go on about the backwardness of white workers. The goal of the education he proposes is not to create a guilt trip, but to unify people in common struggle by lifting the veil on the exploitation of all workers. The stereotyping of white workers as uniformly backward may comfort certain middle-class or academic leftists, but it is destructive to that process. Trump and the neo-Confederates take advantage of that. You don’t hear much about the working class from the pundits of CNN and MSNBC (the “Channel of Smug”). To hear the words “working class,” sadly, you have to turn to Fox.

His description of the racial bias of the National Labor Relations Act is accurate, as far as it goes. But the racist elements of the Act – the exclusion of organizing rights for domestic and agricultural workers and ceding implementation of the Act to the (Jim Crow and lynch-rule) states--was not simply an accommodation of the Southern Democratic racists whose votes were needed to pass the bill. The American Federation of Labor, dominated by the explicitly white supremacist building trades and rail unions, threatened Senator Wagner to defeat the bill entirely if he did not remove the anti-discrimination language that did not become law until the 1964 Civil Rights Act, 30 years later.

The analysis of the impact of gender in *Race, Class and Gender* seems inadequate. While there is consistent mention of the woman’s movement and LBGQT rights throughout, the analysis of gender in Chapter 9 is largely limited to the exploitation of women workers and their fight for inclusion in the labor movement. And Chapter 9’s “Race and Gender in Class Society” becomes “Navigating Race and Class” in Chapter 10.

The criticism here is of what is omitted, not what is presented. In fairness, there is only so much ground you can cover in 200 pages. But issues of race are dealt with in a complex and thorough way. No clear-headed person can claim to understand where the current new analyses and social practice of organizing around gender will end up. But leaving out discussion of the “Me Too” movement or the impact of anti-trans organizing by the Right is a weakness. There are practical contradictions within our movements in responding to economic and gender oppression. As one older organizer grumbled, “I want to organize a union, and all they want to do is talk about pronouns.” Or as a progressive working-class guy complained. “This pronoun stuff is just another way to make us feel stupid.” The visceral fury with which the New Confederacy will defend patriarchy and their laser focus on anti-trans hatred is an indicator of where they see a weakness in our front, and dictates this cannot be underemphasized. As Trump advisor Steve Bannon put it, “The path to save the nation is simple. It is going to go through the school boards.”

That said, this is a very useful book. I have used Zweig’s classic *Working-Class Majority* with the communities where I have lived and worked for 45 years. *Class, Race and Gender* will find its place there as well. It stretches successfully to fulfill its ambitious goals, with a methodological approach that eschews dogma. Zweig is unsparing in his evaluation of countries ruled by Communist Parties, citing Bertrand Russell’s observation that true science “enables [us] to live without the delusive support of subjective certainty”. At several points Zweig criticizes the formulation of “scientific socialism,” a phrase that has always bothered me since it implied a precision and certainty that are not achievable and can be dangerous. For Zweig “social knowledge can only loosely be called scientific.” (p. 64) A Marxist necessarily lives with a significant degree of ambiguity.

As Zweig points out, “Marxist theory is still quite undeveloped...without the deepening and greater sophistication that would come from unrestricted intellectual and practical work along Marxist lines.” (p. 72) Yes. But not quite as undeveloped as it was before *Class, Race, and Gender* attempted to put it all together in 200 pages.

### Reviewer Bio

**Jeff Crosby** worked at the General Electric aviation plant in Lynn, Massachusetts, as a grinder and elected union official for 33 years, serving as president of his local and of the North Shore Labor Council. He has written for *Labor Notes*, *New Labor Forum*, *Working USA*, *Monthly Review* and *The Nation*, and taught at the UMass Boston labor studies program and the Harvard Trade Union Program.

# **Geronimus, A. (2023) *Weathering. The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society*. Little Brown.**

**Review by Jamie Daniel**

This complicated book is a provocative contribution to the field of social justice-focused public health. It intends to counter the pernicious narratives about lack of individual responsibility and a supposed collective pathology in minoritized communities that have dominated our public discourse and public policy, usually to the detriment of those communities.

Geronimus is a public health faculty member and researcher at the University of Michigan. Her primary area of focus for some 30 years has been the health issues faced by racialized constituencies, especially African Americans, and developing research-based counternarratives to those that pathologize their communities and thereby blame them for their health challenges.

The dominant narrative promoted by “experts” was that poor health outcomes and especially chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart trouble, and hypertension in Black communities were due to either genetics, i.e., factors they couldn’t control, or “bad behaviors” that they could. We may recall the numerous “black family pathology” stories of the 1980s and 1990s that claimed that Black communities brought these sorts of chronic health problems on themselves because of poor eating habits, too many teen pregnancies and unwed mothers, fathers not in the home, “welfare queens,” etc.

Geronimus began building her case against these assumptions in 1992, when she first published her research on Black teen mothers. She took on the myth that these young parents, who were sometimes referred to in the media and in Congress as a Black urban “reproductive underclass” or as “babies having babies,” represented a “crisis” that required state intervention, what she refers to as “the harsh branding of teen mothers as a new class of social deviant.”

What she found instead was that these young Black mothers were hardly deviants, and that they more often experienced better health outcomes than Black women who had borne children in their 20s and 30s. Why, she wondered?

The older Black women, she asserted, were more likely to have had their overall health already negatively impacted by what she termed “weathering” in response to the chronic stress caused by racism. This stress is not merely the sort of everyday stress we all might experience because of financial or family problems, but rather a deep, persistent “biopsychosocial” pressure exerted on the bodies and psyches of those who experience it by the racism that is structured into American political, legal, and cultural institutions, including our medical institutions.

She argues throughout the book via more recent examples that this pressure, which she defined in an interview as “general health vulnerability” caused by factors over which an individual has little

if any control, increases the longer a person has to experience it, and thus results in earlier deaths, and higher rates of chronic illness in Black communities. And, importantly, she found that this vulnerability existed regardless of class, in that being or becoming middle class did not prevent negative chronic impacts in Black communities, especially as they age. Of course, these usually have greater access to health care, but the discrepancies between them and comparable White communities persist.

One of the recent studies she discusses is especially interesting in light of our recent struggles to defend affirmative action mandates for students of color. Geronimus observes that one of the chronic social stressors that contribute to weathering is “a fear of seeming to confirm a negative stereotype” and the self-muting or silencing that can result, as well as the assumption that however one presents oneself in a public situation will reflect on the whole of a racialized group. I would expect that many of us who teach have experienced this in our classrooms, especially when the majority of students are white and the issue of “race” comes up. Too often, as one of my Black graduate students put it, she felt the pressure of what she called “white out” that prevented her from feeling she could respond in the discussion as an individual without the other students thinking she was speaking for all Black people. So, she often stayed silent in these discussions.

Geronimus conducted research on what she calls “the weathering effect of integration” among Black college students, and found that students who studied at majority Black institutions (HBCUs) experienced fewer health issues (i.e., less “weathering”) and were also more likely to complete their degree programs because they didn’t have the added pressure of “white out”—they were less likely “to be subjected to the biopsychosocial stress arousal response that triggers weathering” when able to “spend time only with members of their own group.” After also discussing the troubling health challenges faced by several Black students at majority-white Princeton, she concludes that “racialized social identity ... becomes central to students of color when they attend a PWI [predominantly white institution]...A strong argument could be made that *in the current racialized environment*, high-achieving Black students should give serious consideration to attending an HBCU even if they have access to a top PWI like Princeton.” (my emphasis) Here again, students from middle-class backgrounds are not spared from the mental and physical health consequences of structural racism.

This is a provocative and likely controversial assertion, of course, but it is typical of the author’s willingness to challenge common assumptions, even those cherished by progressives. Her initial claims about Black teen mothers in 1992 were initially met with derision, but her concept of weathering, and the physiological impact of structural racism, are increasingly taken seriously by public health professionals.

One can only hope they will someday be taken seriously by policy makers, given that so many of the policies enacted over the last decades to “end welfare as we know it” or fight the “war on poverty” have only exacerbated and reinforced weathering trends. Geronimus devotes a fiercely angry section on “Social Policy and the Assault on Black Family Life” to the catastrophic impact of policies like the 1996 “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.” This policy, which claimed that “urban decay was the result of the moral decay of Black families,” making Black poverty inevitable. All of the stereotypes of teen motherhood and absent fathers first popularized by Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 “The Negro Family: The Case for National

Action” were dragged out again, as they were with Hillary Clinton’s crack about “super predators” and Barack Obama’s embrace of the absent-Black-father-as-a-problem. As the poet Crystal Williams put it in her fine poem, “Year after Year We Visited Alabama,” “the past has long legs, and is heavy.”

There is much to admire in this book. There are also some structural problems that could have been avoided. As other reviewers have also noted, Geronimus too often undercuts the impact of her solid research data by following it with anecdotal references to individual health situations that only “might,” “could possibly,” or “maybe” illustrate the conclusions of her data. These merely speculative examples jar the reader away from the continuity of the research findings. But they don’t negate the social value of those findings.

### **Reviewer Bio**

**Jamie Owen Daniel**, a former assistant professor of English at the University of Illinois-Chicago, is also a retired union organizer and contract negotiator for the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). She recently taught a Working-Class Studies undergraduate course at Roosevelt University.



# Taylor, Y. (2022) *Working-Class Queers*. Pluto Press.

## Review by Erin Heiser

Yvette Taylor's *Working-Class Queers* uses an original and unique methodology: she blends discussion of her own history and identity with archival material she collected, likely at first without knowing exactly what she would do with it, over the span of 20 years, from 2001 to 2021. Alongside interviews with working-class LGBTQ+ folks, Taylor presents twenty years of ephemera appearing in the form of posters and flyers from various lesbian feminist conferences throughout the UK, and snippets of drawings, writings, and photos collected in various working-class queer spaces. She uses all of this "data" as she situates herself as a researcher within the context of a particular geographical and ideological time and place -- the context of the UK (focusing mainly on Scotland and England) in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, up to and including the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Taking her cues from Adrienne Rich's "The Politics of Location," Taylor begins by "starting with the geography closest in – the body." That is to say, early on in the book, she locates herself: "I can say I'm the first person in my family to go to university, and I can say that I am a university professor, a lesbian, a feminist, a queer (p. 4). And she asks "What happens when these backgrounds are put to work in foregrounding queer intersectional thinking?"

The book takes two marginalized identities—queer and working-class—and tries to see where they intersect in order to find out if we might create an overlap into a more cohesive political movement for queer-left futures in the UK. The Left presumably being folks who care about the labor movement and share a working-class consciousness of some sort, though Taylor never quite gives us a clear definition of what she means by the queer Left. Overall, the aspects of her discussion that center on queer identities feels more fleshed out than her discussion of class.

In Chapter 1, Taylor sketches out a map of the book and lays out some of her most pertinent questions: "What can we learn by using class as a lens to understand queer sexuality in the context of the nation state over the past two decades? If life really has "got better" for queers in the UK, what kinds of queers have been rewarded as good citizens? Who has been left behind? What happens when we lose class critique in queer politics and social analysis?" (p. 4).

As she traces out her "own research positionality and queer-class methods" in Chapter 2, Taylor offers a thoughtful discussion of how social researchers tend to conceptualize "data," noting that her approach is unique:

the meanings, selections, edits, and returns to and through the data surpass any straightforward count or static archive: I count data as mattering in the context of social, cultural, and policy shifts, while also querying the categories invested in, reproduced, and shaken off (as 'working class and queer) (p. 21).

In bringing together data from different fieldwork contexts and across time and place, Taylor takes a radically different and novel approach to research and conceptualizes the process as “*doing* data rather than just *being* data” (p. 21). This, she says, is something the queer Left can reactivate, and throughout the rest of the book she shows us how.

Taylor acknowledges the ways that certain groups of people – white, middle-class, cis gay men – tend to be overrepresented in research on sexuality. To contrast that, she says she has tried to make space for more under-represented groups -in very specific ways – such as pushing response deadlines back to make space for the folks who are not typically the first ones to respond in spaces like these... “The move to ‘think intersectionally,’ she reminds us, “means more than adding in a “Q” and “+,” (p. 22).

Indeed, Taylor’s analysis takes into account the ways that racism and whiteness play parts in the story of class and sexuality, signaling the ways all of her interviewees identify and noting the fact that people of color and white people often have different experiences, not just in the world, but also in the manner that sociological research is conducted. The experiences of people of color are all too often ignored, misunderstood, mishandled during field work and throughout other facets of sociological study, and Taylor rightly seeks to be aware of her own whiteness in the process of her research. “Naming the whiteness of queer-class presences and projects,” is essential throughout Taylor’s book as she considers the reality that “whiteness is fundamental to Britishness and Scottishness, and the incorporation of Black and Brown bodies has not significantly altered the white ‘face of the nation’ even as it has been obscured by ‘the cloak of the ‘post-racial’ or the rhetoric of the all-inclusive state” (p. 61, p. 81).

Throughout the book, Taylor’s tactic is to look, not necessarily at the UK’s history of policy change over the decades, but to represent the lives of individual working-class queer people living within the contexts of these circumstances. The questions laid out in Chapter 1 are explored most clearly in Chapters 4 and 5 which deal with post-Brexit UK and “Queers and Austerity,” respectively. Here specifically is where we see Taylor getting at her question from the introductory chapter: if things truly have gotten better for LGBTQ+ folks in the UK, what kinds of queers have been most rewarded? Spoiler alert: the answer is not working-class queer people of color. Nor is it immigrants or people who are trans. But the picture is not entirely grim. Taylor does acknowledge that in certain respects working-class queer life has become more “liveable... in and against the everyday scenes of... family life, religious practices,” and expanding LGBTQ+ spaces (p.107).

Much of the book will be unfamiliar to those not acquainted with the politics, activism, and daily living of folks in the UK or the finer distinctions between English and Scottish politics of the time, which is to say probably most readers in the U.S. But the book will be an interesting juxtaposition for folks paying attention to parallel spaces in the U.S. over the past two decades, and for those who care about the intersections in the fight for queer and class liberation.

The final chapter, “Towards a Queer Working-Class Reading List,” may be of particular interest to university instructors who are concerned with creating classrooms that are intersectional in their feminism and looking for foundational texts that remain relevant and useful for forming and informing a movement of today’s queer Left. As Taylor acknowledges her enthusiasm for the “politics of citation as ‘epistemic reparation,” this last chapter references many classic texts by

working-class women of color such as the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) and Cherie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua's (1984) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, as well as more contemporary texts, like Anne Balay's (2018) *Semi Queer: Inside the world of Gay, Trans, and Black Truck Drivers*.

This is a dense book that covers a lot of ground. And Taylor's mission is, in part, to create work that flies in the face of standard, pretentious academic "middle class propriety" (p. 109). Excerpts of the interviews are interspersed throughout the early chapters in ways that feel almost random, possibly meant to break up the flow of the academic conversation she's engaging in in order to remind the reader that amidst the social science analysis of the geopolitical landscape, there is a lived material reality, real people with real experiences. But as the chapters go on, Taylor gives more in-depth analysis on what her interviewee's stories tell us, only occasionally veering into language that feels like inaccessible theory-talk, as in the chapter on "Queer Anachronisms." The bits of the book that include Taylor's own lived experiences of class and sexuality stand out as incisive and telling. And she makes invaluable connections between the individual lives of the folks she interviews and the national politics and policies that shape them.

### **Reviewer Bio**

**Erin Heiser** is a doctoral candidate in English at the CUNY Graduate Center and a long-time adjunct professor at CUNY and NYU. Her forthcoming dissertation looks at class and sexuality in the autobiographical fragments of Audre Lorde, Dorothy Allison, and Eileen Myles, and her own identity as a working-class queer.

# **O’Sullivan, S. (2022) *Reality TV’s Real Men of the Recession: White Masculinity In Crisis and the Rise of Trumpism*. Lexington Books.**

**Review by Jennifer Forsberg**

*Reality TV’s Real Men of the Recession: White Masculinity in Crisis and the Rise of Trumpism* explores the popularity and persistent appeal of blue-collar frontier shows such as *Ax Men*, *Deadliest Catch*, and *Ice Truckers* alongside Trump’s presidency and media presence. The book’s author, independent media studies scholar Shannon O’Sullivan, interrogates reality television from networks such as Discovery and History to identify a cultural trend within American media that presents white, working-class masculinity as a hegemonic model with foundations in frontier violence, white supremacism, and settler colonialism. The book shows how American media conflates gender, class, and race to present audiences with monolithic symbols of power: a troubling circulation of blue-collar, frontier-laden white masculinity.

O’Sullivan tactically mixes methodologies, drawing on literary criticism, sociology, media studies, and cultural studies to parse out the complicated genealogy and representational politics of the blue-collar frontier phenomenon. The study triangulates this phenomenon using three provocative areas of focus: hegemonic masculinity, the historical and ideological conceptions of the frontier, and performativity.

*Reality TV’s Real Men of the Recession* dedicates the most time to defining hegemonic masculinity. As a status-quo gender performative, several chapters address how hegemonic masculinity informs media presentations of white, working men who thrive on danger, violence, and homo-social competition. While attention to this topic often feels more like a literature review than an intervention, the author does work to make the discussion more contemporary by applying an intersectional lens that calls upon both black feminist critics and indigenous critical theorists for perspective. Doing so helps to identify not only *what* constitutes the *real men* offered in the title, but provides *how* hegemonic masculinity becomes the social currency that maintains positions of power in 21st century America.

O’Sullivan reveals how the physical and cultural geography of blue-collar frontier television, including *Ice Road Truckers* and *Deadliest Catch*, among others, dramatize men employed in industries that attempt to control “remote, unindustrialized, and sparsely populated natural landscapes, including forests, swamps, and large bodies of water” through violent competition (p. 84). O’Sullivan equates this phenomenon to the symbolism of the United States frontier through historical figures like Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner’s presence helps to articulate the pervasiveness of a white supremacist hetero-patriarchy that grants privilege to highly individualized white, working men from the late 18th century onward. This historical analysis hypothesizes how white, working-class men maintain individuation by drawing on the concept of frontier ideology (Richard Slotkin) and the frontier’s cultural imaginary (George Lipsitz). Ultimately, O’Sullivan argues that white men of all class positions can draw upon and present

Teddy Roosevelt-like personae to exemplify their masculine resilience –whether danger or economic precarity– and command over nature within settler colonialism. The author stresses that the same is not true for women and people of color who are precluded from individualization, and who cannot transform danger or precarity into social capital.

The book consistently returns to the performative practice of hegemonic masculinity within blue-collar frontier shows, drawing upon scholars like Judith Butler and Bev Skeggs to envision "the stylized *performance* of white, rural, working-class masculinity" (p. 118), often equated to "redneck drag" (p. 127). In the book's most compelling close-reading, O'Sullivan illustrates how the cast of *Duck Dynasty* performs working-class authenticity for social capital. Despite the professional and economic success of the *Duck Dynasty* family, CEO Willie Robertson and his father, brothers, sons, and nephews are presented through symbols of white, working-class, hegemonic masculinity to secure dominant positions in the media. These symbolic presentations are especially remarkable since they tend to be performed by "highly visible and (mostly) politically conservative wealthy, white males, such as Willie Robertson at present, and Theodore Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush in the past" (p. 118). This performativity is also extended to Donald Trump's campaign and election, which touted both everyman and business elite simultaneously. Furthermore, O'Sullivan maps a similar performativity in the frontier-specific imagery in the media coverage of the January 6th Insurrection.

While the concept of performativity corresponds clearly with hegemonic masculinity, the study could benefit from further elaboration on how race, class, and gender are performed in concert, especially with regard to a differentiation between rhetorical performativity and embodied performativity. But perhaps Trump's media coverage alone is a satisfactory yet triggering exemplar of the complex personal politics surrounding performativity. This is one of the book's greatest strengths, as O'Sullivan masterfully blends the academic discourse of high theory and cultural criticism with mass media, utilizing topical and time-sensitive articles from *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *USA Today*. This approach allows O'Sullivan to introduce ideas strategically, placing the close readings of television programs in context with contemporary media circulations and current events. O'Sullivan's ability to provide an example for each concept of the study makes the book accessible, offering a bridge for academic and non-academic readers alike, unpacking high theory with practiced or lived behavior.

The robust source material that O'Sullivan draws upon provides ample support for a methodical extrication of white masculinity in crisis, with the most attention paid to conceptions of masculinity. And while this is a compelling site for interrogating the study's commitment to identifying, examining, and challenging white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal thinking, the coverage could still be more comprehensive given the gravity of the concerns raised. For example, any substantial theorization of whiteness is suspiciously absent. This is particularly concerning given that the author suggests that "classism manifests itself within whiteness" (p. 119). To these ends, the book only recognizes working-class identity as a cultural and economic diagnostic, presented and represented through white, masculine performances of gender. The study overwhelmingly ignores the "white" and "working-class" in the goal of dis-imbricating white, working-class masculinity.

This oversight is especially concerning given the argument's central goal: to deploy intersectional analysis to reveal how "affluent white males...take up white, working-class rhetorical performances...to increase their power" (p. 155). While the book does provide ample evidence of this phenomenon within socio-cultural historical contexts, O'Sullivan could do more to unearth the mono-mythologizing she observes in the contemporary media, which "conflat[es] the white working class, especially white male workers" as "*the* working class even though women and people of color occupy most of its ranks" (p. 155).

*Reality TV's Real Men of the Recession* offers an insightful and compelling study of 21st-century media practices as they circulate and perpetuate performances of hegemonic masculinity in the Trump era. The trajectory of the book's argument is steadfast, and chapters are organized to build upon complex concepts incrementally. But still, the cohesive significance of the study feels more observational than a challenge to the status quo. While witnessing and documenting how white, working-class masculinity is –and has– been deployed in the United States is itself a form of resistance, the book's lasting impact is that of musing potential rather than directive or decisive action.

### Reviewer Bio

**Jennifer Forsberg** is a Senior Lecturer in the English department at Clemson University. Her research in American literature and American Studies explores the performance of gender, class, and American identity across literature, popular culture, and art. She has been published in *Persona Studies* (2015), the *Journal of Popular Culture* (2017), the *Journal of Working-Class Studies* (2017), and *The Routledge International Handbook of Working-Class Studies* (2020).

# Entin, J. (2023). *Living Labor: Fiction, Film, and Precarious Work*. University of Michigan Press.

## Review by Tracy Floreani

Drawing its title from Marx's concept of "living labor" as existing in opposition to the vampiric, mechanistic "dead labor" that results from the unchecked growth of capitalism, Joe Entin's new book focuses on stories of lived experiences of laborers in the post-industrial U.S. With theory-inflected but very readable prose, he posits the concept of living labor as a useful means by which to "think about class beyond the conventional parameters," to consider the reciprocal shaping of economic systems and individual lives informed by "experiences, vectors of identification, histories, and cultures outside the workplace, beyond the realm of production" (p. 17). It's fitting that this title appears in the context of increasing success in the campaigns for a "living wage" for workers in the service sector. The rhetorical savvy of that campaign displaces the "minimum" that an employer must pay a worker and brings to the foreground the needs of the person receiving the wage, connoting all that one does with a paycheck to *live*—to secure consistent nutrition, clothing, safe housing, and health care for themselves and dependents. Similarly, this book examines a collection of stories that reveal all aspects of the living of modern laborers. Beyond the workplace setting, this study brings together stories of "food, health, housing, and incarceration" as narratives of worker and class struggle in the "post-imperial" global economy. In so doing the book offers four main chapters—two on literature and two on film—as case studies that outline an emerging narrative subgenre Entin has termed "precarious realism." The "precarious" of "precarious realism" has double meaning, referring not only to the situation of the workers depicted in these narratives, but also to narrative realism itself, which, Entin argues, is "interrupted and interwoven with other modes, including magical realism, surrealism, and neorealism, in an effort to show the often volatile and perilous state of social life for itinerant workers and the refusal of their stories to resolve into stable forms of class consciousness or composition" (p. 9).

One of the book's strengths is its attempts to be inclusive in exploring representations of class in contemporary narrative. Entin echoes the years-long sentiments of those in our field who insist that we get past the nostalgic view of labor: "The landscape of work and workers was always vaster and more variegated than suggested by the association of the U.S. working class with a white guy laboring in a steel or auto plant" (p. 2). While the study is focused on U.S. narratives, the author's perspective is global in scope in that he regularly reminds readers of the ways in which global economies have created a migrant work force across the western service sector, the "postindustrial vision of the working class as 'essential workers,' composed in large part of immigrant, BIPOC, and women workers laboring across a wide array of fields, from health care and goods delivery to retail and meatpacking" (p. 3). To that end, he focuses on books and films of the past forty years or so—in registers ranging from neo-realist to fantastical—that "are emerging to narrate the tumultuous remaking of the U.S. and world working classes in the global present" (p. 3). It's a bit of a surprise, then, that the first chapter forefronts the Anglo-American perspective with a focus on Russell Banks's novel *Continental Drift* (1985), a narrative set primarily in New England that

centers the experiences of an Anglo-American man in the evolving, post-industrial economy. In doing so, however, Entin establishes a kind of foundational chronology for the rest of the book through the question of how narratives address the “dynamics of economic restructuring” and engage the consequent social effects. With a case study on Banks’s “understudied” novel, he marks an evolutionary shift from traditional proletariat literature toward a post-Fordist narrative mode beginning in the 1980s as an outgrowth of Reaganomics. As in several of the narratives discussed within this book, *Continental Drift* centers in part on the interactions between the dispossessed white male, industrial worker and the racialized or ethnic groups by whom he feels either “displaced” or forced to engage for economic survival. Not surprisingly, when the study turns to filmic narrative, this trope returns in an analysis of Clint Eastwood’s 2009 film *Gran Torino*.

Titles that represent the more diverse content appear in the book’s second chapter, “Maps of Labor’: Globalization, Migration, and Contemporary Working-Class Literature.” Three works of literary fiction from the nineties receive close readings here: Karen Tei Yamashita’s playful, magical realist gem of NAFTA commentary *The Tropic of Orange*; Helena Maria Viramontes’s migrant farmworker tragedy *Under the Feet of Jesus*; and Francisco Goldman’s lyrical story of migrant placelessness, *The Ordinary Seaman*. Among the many borderlands narratives of the 1980s and ‘90s, for Entin these stories focused on Latin American migrant laborers in the U.S. borderlands serve as some of the best examples of the new precarious realism, as novelists of that decade worked to document the frustrations and growing activism of migrant laborers in response to the rapid growth of transnational, neo-liberal capitalism.

The analysis moves to the northern border in the next chapter with a discussion of the 2008 feature film *Frozen River*, among others, in which a working-class, Anglo, single mother engages in cross-border smuggling with a Mohawk woman who sees the U.S.-Canadian border as arbitrary in its position on indigenous land. Other themes and diverse representations of the precariat class’s lived experiences in the chapters focused on film include police violence against African Americans (*Fruitvale Station*), precarious day labor and sweatshop solidarity (*La Ciudad*), the vulnerabilities of pushcart entrepreneurship for South Asian migrants in New York (*Man Push Cart*), and underground economies (*Chop Shop*). Each of the detailed readings of the novels and films includes insightful interpretations of the plots, characters, and aesthetics as well as relevant details—particularly for the films—about critical and commercial success in circulating the stories of precarious realism in recent decades.

While the book’s overall argument for this emerging subgenre is persuasive, the chapters stand as strong articles on their own and read equally well as individual class-based readings of the specific novels and films. The book’s availability as an open-access e-book makes use of the individual chapters quite convenient (<https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/z316q3876#toc>). And while the focus on U.S.-based narratives makes sense for the purposes of limiting the scope of the book, the texts chosen also highlight the transnational reality of labor and the arbitrariness of borders in such a way that one sees room for non U.S.-based narratives in future study of “precarious realism” as a globalized genre, which might include novels like Pakistan-based Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* or the works of British filmmakers Ken Loach and Mike Leigh.

All the texts chosen for *Living Labor*, with perhaps the exception of the Clint Eastwood film, could be described as “high literary” rather than popular narrative. This choice makes sense in many



ways, given the depth of implicit argument in these texts and their sometimes non-mainstream subject matter. They perhaps undermine, however, Entin's argument for the primacy of novels and films as "crucial modes of contemporary storytelling" (p. 6). While he acknowledges that other print and visual media do successfully represent the global working classes, he argues for the "power of fiction and film to juxtapose and combine continuities and discontinuities, to allow for intense and deep characterization as well as sweeping stories," with the unique ability to track "contemporary stories of American and global labor's long restructuring" (p. 6). It's a valid argument, but the book's focus on the self-contained narratives of film and novels (and, notably, few narratives dated after 2010) misses a great opportunity to engage with some of the high-quality narratives of what media critic David Bianculli is calling the "platinum age" of streaming, serial television. (Arguably, more people were exposed to an in-depth narrative of precarious realism in something like the 2021 Netflix series *Maid* than saw some of the independent films included in this study.) Nonetheless, *Living Labor* brings lesser-known or forgotten narratives to the forefront and demonstrates effectively how they build upon the proletarian narratives of the past and contribute to a nascent, working-class narrative mode—one we should all keep our eyes on as it continues to evolve in an age of enduring precarity.

### Reviewer Bio

**Tracy Floreani** is professor of English at Oklahoma City University where she teaches American literature and academic writing. She also serves as Director of the Jeanne Hoffman Smith Center for Film and Literature, OCU's public humanities initiative, and as president of MELUS. She is the author of *Fifties Ethnicities: The Ethnic Novel and Mass Culture at Midcentury* (2013), editor of the MLA *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ralph Ellison* (2024), and is currently working on a biography of Fanny McConnell Ellison.

# Cowie, Jefferson (2022) *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power*. Basic Books.

## Review by Scott Henkel

I think that most people are accustomed to hearing dangerous ideas packaged in the language of idealism. In living memory, we've seen imperialist wars fought in the name of liberty, prohibitions on life-saving medical care justified in the name of saving life, and so on. In U.S. political discourse, one of the most common of these is framing freedom as the right to do and say whatever one wishes, regardless of how those acts and speech limit other people's freedom. It's a cynical and self-interested move, but it's common because it's so often successful.

Three cheers, then, for Jefferson Cowie and his new book *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power*. In beautiful and courageous prose, Cowie charts a careful history of freedom as domination or, as he calls it, "white freedom" (p. 4, 79, 85, 101, for example), by which we might understand how white people, time and again, have used the concept as a cudgel.

Cowie focuses on Barbour County, Alabama, through four eras: early 19th century settler aggression against Indigenous peoples, Reconstruction, the New Deal, and the backlash against the Civil Rights movement. Cowie reveals a consistent use of "freedom" as a tool of repression even if, in each era, the strategy gets adapted by its users to fit new situations.

In Cowie's history, it's not so much that freedom *as a concept* has a throughline in U.S. politics, although that's the case, of course. Like any important concept, freedom's interpretation has been and still is contested. On this point, Cowie cites Orlando Patterson, Aziz Rana, Hannah Arendt, Eric Foner, and others who show the struggle over the term and emancipatory possibilities for it—more on that below. But those contests over freedom's meaning aren't Cowie's primary concern. Cowie's book doesn't so much show that freedom has a debatable meaning over time, but rather that cynical and self-interested definitions of freedom have been consistently useful—in fact, central—for people interested in gaining, keeping, or regaining their power over others.

In that struggle to get, hold, or regain the power to rule or exploit others, the federal government is both a much-maligned monster and the citizen's best protector. If that seems like a contradiction, it is. But imagine a perspective where keeping your power over others is your primary concern. In that perspective, your relationship to the federal government becomes context-dependent. When it limits your power over others, say, by passing civil rights legislation, you say it's tyrannical. When you need it to enforce your power over others, you say that defense of your rights, violently if necessary, is the government's proper function. Telling that story is Cowie's primary concern, and it is a story worth reading. One of Cowie's conclusions is to hope for a different understanding of freedom and how the federal government could consistently enforce the rights of all people within its jurisdiction. That would be a considerable change indeed from the history his book shows.

Cowie brings the receipts, as they say these days, to show how successful framing dominion as freedom has been for white settlers, proslavery planters, bosses, and politicians opposed to civil rights. Cowie brings to light some remarkable moments in this history, including his introduction's example: in George Wallace's infamous inaugural speech after election to Alabama's governorship, after paying respects to his native Barbour County, Alabama, Wallace worked his way up to the sentence for which people remember him: "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever!" In that speech, Wallace mentions segregation by name only one additional time, but mentions "freedom" twenty-five times. Cowie suggests we'd do well to notice the importance Wallace puts on freedom. As upside down as it seems, Wallace's interpretation of freedom does not contradict his understanding of segregation, but rather is central to it. Of course, Wallace—and many others, as Cowie shows—means freedom for whites, and domination and exploitation for everyone else.

In this review, I've called that interpretation of freedom cynical and self-interested. These are my terms, not Cowie's. He dedicates his book "to those who have kept faith in a better freedom," but it is not his task to theorize what that better freedom could be, even though, as I noted above, he cites a range of scholars who have charted how the meaning of freedom has been contested. Cowie keeps hinting at an emancipatory meaning of freedom, but he never more than hints at it. That Cowie includes these references, but does so quickly, is one of the book's strengths—*Freedom's Dominion* says clearly that its task is to show "the paradox of those claiming freedom for themselves by oppressing others" (p. 5). I'm glad that Cowie sticks to his stated task.

Others have been less impressed by *Freedom's Dominion*, and I hope that these other views are the opening moves to a wide-ranging debate about Cowie's ideas. George Packer, writing a review in *The Atlantic*, criticizes the book as a type of scholarship that makes resistance to oppression seem hopeless. Packer is right about the general trend—too much scholarship peddles a defeatism that makes everything seem irrevocably lost—but he is not correct that *Freedom's Dominion* is that kind of scholarship. Critique sometimes gets a bad reputation for not posing any viable alternatives, but when the object of critique is erroneous or dangerous, critique is the path beyond that error or danger.

I would like to see debates about Cowie's ideas take a different direction. In the service of writing a clear-eyed history, consistent with the conventions in the discipline, Cowie gives too much credence to people who have too dim a view of the concept they cast about with such recklessness. "By the terms of their world" (p. 120), to use Cowie's phrase, I can see how privilege could feel like freedom. Losing the privilege to dominate and exploit others would feel like an infringement if a person had never known any other way to relate to other human beings, but that is no excuse for the injustices that follow in the wake of using a concept of freedom to make others less free. The history that Cowie shows is not merely a history of violent repression, but a history of violent repression masked in idealism. This is violence plus deception, injustice packaged as freedom. My difficulty stems from my sense that the concept Cowie so carefully traces does not deserve the name freedom.

The debate I would like to see now, equipped with the receipts Cowie brings for his readers, would challenge the still-active use of freedom as dominion. As Cowie so persuasively shows, using

freedom to cover for domination and exploitation has confused, and still confuses, many sincere people. I would like to see that confusion dissipated.

Overall, *Freedom's Dominion* is an impressive book, and beautifully written. We need books that show how important political concepts get manipulated for cynical and self-interested ends--they can be a kind of intellectual self-defense against bosses who believe in the so-called freedom to exploit, and white supremacists who trample on others with the premise that they are somehow victims. Bravo for *Freedom's Dominion*, which makes an exemplary case for why we need a better meaning of freedom.

### **Reviewer Bio**

**Scott Henkel** is the Wyoming Excellence Chair in the Humanities, associate professor in the departments of English and African American and Diaspora Studies, and director of the Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research at the University of Wyoming. The author of *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas*, he is a past president of the Working-Class Studies Association.

# **Erlich, Mark (2023) *The Way We Build: Restoring Dignity To Construction Work*. University of Illinois Press.**

## **Review by Richard Rowe**

Mark Erlich offers up an insider's view of the state of the American building trades today. In an honest, straightforward manner, he explains where we are today and how we got here. He also has some ideas on how the conditions of labor for American construction workers can be improved in the future.

Erlich joined the Carpenters union in 1975. He put on his boots, hard hat, and tool belt and went to work as an apprentice, then journeyman, foreman and eventually superintendent. In 1988 Mark started working full-time for the union in various capacities, including as Organizing Director and then Secretary-Treasurer of the New England Regional Council of Carpenters, where he stayed until his retirement in 2017. He knows his subject.

Mark became a carpenter during an era when union building tradesmen were still considered the aristocrats of the American labor movement. Union construction workers enjoyed higher wages than most blue-collar workers, with benefit packages that included health care and retirement plans. They also generally had more autonomy in their workplaces. In 1947, 87% of the construction industry was union. Some trades were even higher than that. By 1985 union density had dropped to 23.5%. Today it stands at 13.4%. What happened in such a relatively brief period of time?

Erlich explains that one of the main factors was that the major users of construction services, America's large industries, wanted to cut their construction costs to increase their profits. They felt general contractors that were signatory to union contracts did little to contain costs and just passed them on to the end user. In 1969 these large corporations formed a group called the Construction Users Anti-Inflation Roundtable, later renamed the Business Roundtable in 1972. Their goal was to reduce inflationary building costs and rein in what they felt was excessive union power. Namely, the power to elevate wages and control the day-to-day culture on the job site. They felt that the contractors had too cozy of a relationship with the unions, and they wanted to realign those loyalties to put the construction user first. While the Business Roundtable often stated that they wanted to introduce modern labor-saving technologies to the construction sites, they were more often content with merely lowering wages.

Members of the Business Roundtable pledged to use only non-union contractors on their projects. They supported the expansion of the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) as a counterweight to the Associated General Contractors or AGC that represented contractors that were usually signatory to a collective bargaining agreement.

When President Ronald Reagan fired the PATCO workers in 1981, it sent a signal that unions couldn't expect much help from Washington. Employers saw this as an opportunity to drastically cut their labor costs. As more major projects were being let to non-union contractors, many construction unions felt that they had to resort to concessionary bargaining to compete. The non-union contractors merely lowered their wage, and in a downward spiral the wage floor was lowered for all construction workers. Non-union contractors gained strength, became larger and made inroads in areas where union construction had been the norm.

Federal and state prevailing wage laws protect union jobs on publicly funded projects. But the repeal of many state laws beginning in the late 1970's and early 80's further eroded union density in the industry. Perhaps the most serious blow was the misclassification of workers due in part to the enactment of Section 530 of the Revenue Act. This presented non-union contractors with the opportunity to re-classify their employees as independent contractors. By luring their workforce with a slightly higher wage to be independent contractors they were able to pass the responsibility of paying taxes, workers' comp insurance, liability insurance etc. on to the workers. Needless to say, taxes and insurance premiums were rarely paid. The advantage to non-union contractors was becoming insurmountable, and union contractors became the exception, especially in the south and west.

Erlich does not place all the blame for the building trades' current condition solely on the Business Roundtable. The building trades unions themselves must share some of the responsibility. Long viewed as the conservative wing of the American labor movement, the building trades tenaciously clung to the model of craft unionism. If any organizing did take place, it was usually top-down, signing up the contractor but not taking in any new members outside the apprenticeship system. Admission to apprenticeship programs was usually restricted to members' sons, relatives or friends, meaning people of color and women were denied opportunities to learn the craft through the union. During booms in the industry, additional workers were given temporary work permits but denied membership in the local. These permit workers were the first to be laid off regardless of how productive they were on the job site in favor of local union members. We taught these temporary workers a craft and then denied them union membership, creating a skilled, potentially non-union work force.

Most building trades union members were reluctant to organize new members, viewing apprenticeship as the only path to union membership. With the growing influence of the Business Roundtable and newfound strength of ABC contractors, the light bulb started to go on in the early 1990's. COMET (Construction Organizing Membership Education Training) was a three-hour training program aimed at local union membership in an attempt to reverse local unions' aversion to organizing. COMET resulted in some modest gains in organizing new members, but it did not reverse the basic trajectory of the decline.

Exploitation of undocumented workers by unscrupulous contractors was another serious problem for organizers. These workers, who were misclassified as independent contractors were also quite often victims of wage theft. They were reluctant to communicate with organizers under fear of being reported to I.C.E. and deported. The author argues that state and federal regulatory agencies need to do their part in creating a safe and fair work site and level playing field for honest, legitimate contractors.

Erlich points out that the building trades unions must be honest with themselves to rebuild a better future. Craft pride, a commitment to training with the effectiveness of sectoral multi-employer collective bargaining are all good but this must be coupled with a renewed commitment to organizing the un-organized. A diverse membership that better represents the communities in which they work and an educated, politically active membership are the keys to a better future. This short book is most relevant for building trades workers (union or not), but it will be rewarding for anyone interested in the US labor movement and this vital and changing part of the American working class.

### **Reviewer Bio**

**Richard Rowe** is a 53-year member of the Architectural and Ornamental Iron Workers Local 63 in Chicago. He served 25 years as an officer, organizer and Business Agent for his local. Rich is also a labor historian and author of *The History of the Architectural Iron Workers Union of Chicago Local 63*.

# **Schennum, Jill (2023) *As Goes Bethlehem: Steelworkers and the Restructuring of an Industrial Working Class*. Vanderbilt University Press.**

**Review by Chris Walley**

Some might ask whether we need another book on deindustrialization and whether we need one on the steel industry in particular? Twenty years ago, Jeff Cowie and Joseph Heathcott in their edited volume *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* suggested the need to move past what they described as “creeping industrial nostalgia.” However, when working-class studies scholars at a conference in 2014 debated whether it was time to “get past” the fixation on deindustrialization, the collective answer proved to be a resounding “no.” The conference debate over *why* that is so proved to be highly stimulating, helping lay the groundwork for Sherry Lee Linkon’s *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization* and the edited volume *The Deindustrialized World* among others, as well as the consolidation of “deindustrialization studies” as an emergent sub-field in its own right.

As Linkon’s work suggests, the effects of deindustrialization are long-term, inter-generational, and not always evident on the surface (even for those affected). Just as analysis of deindustrialization has expanded its temporal focus to include a more multigenerational perspective, the geographic range of such studies has also expanded. Deindustrialization has affected the former Soviet realm even more profoundly than avowedly capitalist countries, resulting in ongoing socioeconomic fissures that shape contemporary politics in both. Regions beyond Europe and the United States are increasingly central to accounts of deindustrialization. China, the epicenter of contemporary global industrial production, for example, has itself been grappling with deindustrialization. And, as anthropologists Andrea Muchlebach and Nitzan Shoshan argue, “post-Fordist affect” – or the loss of modernist dreams associated with Fordist imaginaries of industrial work -- has had powerful effects throughout the world, even in countries with no direct experience of Fordist/Keynesian welfare states or state socialist industrial planning.

Jill A. Schennum’s wonderful book, *As Goes Bethlehem*, which documents the slow demise of Bethlehem Steel in its namesake Pennsylvania town, gives us another reason to offer a resounding “no” to the question of whether it is time to move past our collective fixation on deindustrialization. In some ways, Schennum’s book harkens back to an earlier literature that explored factory closures in quintessential mill towns – in this case, honing in on the last generational cohorts to work at “The Steel,” as Bethlehem workers called it.

In Bethlehem, deindustrialization did not happen suddenly, but through a long, painfully drawn-out process of downsizings and corporate restructurings that extended from the late 1970s well into the new millennium. Schennum uses this long temporal span to underscore connections between deindustrialization and contemporary finance capitalism and the growing “flexibility” of



neoliberal labor models. This makes the book an invaluable bridge between older and newer literatures on work, class identity, precarity, unions, finance capitalism, and the relationship between industrial and service sectors.

The richness of Schennum's account stems from the striking number and depth of her interviews (conducted with 120 steelworkers and family members over a ten-year span) combined with an impressive command of a wide variety of literatures that provide key context for understanding industrial work and its loss, including sociology, working-class studies, labor and industrial history, anthropology, and geography. *As Goes Bethlehem* never romanticizes mill work or workers, and Schennum captures the perspectives of a wide variety of steelworkers, both men and women, from a range of ethnic, racial, and other backgrounds, capturing the divisions and exclusions found within "the Steel." What she does do is make relatable the social worlds that workers created in response to mill (and external) hierarchies in both their beauty and ugliness. In doing so, she offers a remarkably nuanced and empathetic understanding of those social worlds, the variety of ways workers conceptualized their work, and the "moral economy" by which they judged their relationships with each other and with management.

Schennum's account builds directly upon Kate Dudley's 1994 ethnography *End of the Line*, which examined how autoworkers in Wisconsin navigated auto assembly work. Like Dudley, Schennum is interested in how workers carved spaces of limited autonomy out of the hierarchical and dangerous world of industrial work. Like Dudley, she is also interested in the ways in which "skill" was understood, not as based on individualized paper credentials, but for steelworkers on a union-generated moral order based on seniority as well as experience among generational cohorts in which individuals were trained, mentored, and kept safe by co-workers. Although Schennum underscores that steelworkers held a range of views on steel work, she provides insightful discussion of how and why many were able to find meaning, pride, and, sometimes, even pleasure, in the work and social relations forged in the mills (social relations that workers repeatedly referred to as "like family").

By making this prior mill world a fully human and complex one, Schennum is able to contrast its moral economy with the one engendered by neoliberal models as mill work was transformed during Bethlehem's long-downsizing on the road to strategic bankruptcy and private equity buy-out. The "lucky" ones, those who were able to retain their jobs in the cohorts that Schennum followed, shared their difficulties in trying to "hang on" as the mill downsized. This included older workers experiencing revamped job assignments that challenged them physically, or the process of being transferred to other mills in distant geographic locations, profoundly disrupting family and social networks. For many, the pleasures that were to be found in prior mill work – buttressed by its union-grounded moral economy – now disappeared. Increasingly, workers sought to "hang on" simply for the benefits – desperately trying to maintain access to pensions and healthcare that they had contractually earned and put in decades of mill work for, but which most would ultimately lose.

With deindustrialization, the devil is in the details, and Schennum does a spectacular job of plumbing and making sense of those details in a way that helps us understand how deindustrialization in the United States has been what she calls an act of "accumulation by dispossession." In other words, the corporate restructuring associated with downsizing of steel

companies and the strategic bankruptcies of firms like Bethlehem were designed to deny workers what they had contractually earned – now renamed “legacy costs” – thereby “restructuring” the U.S. industrial working class in the process. In a chilling detail, Schennum notes that CEO Wilbur Ross’s profit on selling Bethlehem a year and a half after buying and “restructuring” it was \$267 million, roughly equivalent to the pensions and health care monies taken from steelworkers in the process. In short, CEOs and financial elites have accumulated massive sums – not from financial magic or Wall Street wizardry that creates money out of thin air – but from tawdry old-fashioned expropriation from those they deliberately marginalized.

Schennum’s final chapter explores the steelworker cohorts’ current lives in contemporary Bethlehem, a town that is an apparent deindustrialization success story with a “revitalized” economy that boasts a casino and arts complex in old mill buildings as well as a gentrifying professional middle class living in the historic part of town. Unlike other accounts of post-industrial sites that have “transitioned,” Schennum’s account is exemplary in sticking with the steelworkers and their families, tracing *their* fates, not simply the location’s. In reality, Bethlehem has been “revitalized” not because of a natural progression to a promised new economy but because it has been geographically integrated as a remote low-rent exurb for a New York City metropolitan economy. In contrast to boosters’ unfounded assertions, those who, after Bethlehem’s demise, lost most of what they spent their work lives striving for are not the ones who benefitted from the town’s post-industrial transformation.

Schennum ends by referencing the Steelworkers Archive Project and the remaining aging steelworkers who keep telling their stories. She recounts how a group of retired steelworkers protested a restricted land covenant created at the behest of billionaire casino owner Sheldon Adelson that explicitly prohibits speech about unions on the old Bethlehem site – a sacrilege given its prior moral economy.

In an odd quirk (presumably that of the publisher), the book has no acknowledgements, making it difficult to situate Schennum within a scholarly lineage, to know more about her research methods, or her own relationship to the Steelworker’s Archive Project (which is mentioned in passing in an endnote). However, the power of the voices in this account – both Schennum’s and those she interviewed – and what they convey for those trying to understand contemporary finance capitalism and its attendant labor regimes is starkly apparent throughout. A must-read for working class studies scholars, *As Goes Bethlehem* is a vitally important book in trying to understand on the ground what finance capitalism has wrought.

## Reviewer Bio

**Christine Walley** is a Professor of Anthropology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is the author of *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* and co-creator (with Chris Boebel) of a documentary film [Exit Zero](#). She also is one of the creators of the [Southeast Chicago Archive & Storytelling Project](#) and is currently writing a book about historical objects saved by residents of a former steel mill community and the stories they tell about them.

# Deeren, R.S. (2023) *Enough to Lose*. Wayne State University Press.

## Review by Jim Daniels

*Enough to Lose*, RS Deeren's debut collection of stories, offers a vivid snapshot of a time and place, a deep dive into life in Caro, a small, rural working-class town in the thumb of Michigan. From story to story, the book builds into a biography of place—physical place, economic place, emotional place—as Caro becomes the central character that unifies this collection. While zeroing in on one place, he offers a wide range of voices and characters, each with their own individual grit, that help complete the portrait of Caro.

The economic place for these stories is the great recession of 2008-2009. The hard times create an undercurrent of violence in this community, where Bucky's Bridge gets its name from someone who jumped off it to commit suicide, and a time-honored tradition is doing "The Run," a cross-county bar crawl. Drinking seems like the local sport, given the lack of other viable pursuits, and it fuels both of the major tragedies in this collection that hover over Caro like a haze that never clears—a car accident, violence in a bar, and, always, collateral damage.

Certain recurring places like Bucky's Bridge, the Cass River, the Pioneer Sugar Beet processing plant offer continuity to the larger narrative, but the bars are the true anchors here—anchoring the characters in place, or pulling them down with their weight. In "The Run," he writes that bars "...were everywhere, like screws in drywall..."

As we're transported into these places, during these years, our familiarity grows, and our understanding of the complexity of these interwoven lives intensifies. The characters, who call themselves "thumbodies," live on the margins, where the daily pressure to find a steady job and a place to live strips them down to their primal, survival instincts, and we see the extremes they go to in order to protect what is theirs, whether that be tangible or intangible. The recession eliminated the narrow margin many of these characters were living on and dropped them into cracks from which they might never emerge. In "Enough to Lose," the narrator refers frankly to "the stained vinyl siding of my life." "The Mirror," the opening story, features a young couple who are in the process of fixing up their newly purchased home when a torrential flood arrives and literally carries it away. In another story, a homeowner gets arrested for breaking into his own house.

Deeren does not sentimentalize his world—nobody here has a heart of gold. And if they did, they'd probably pawn it to pay the rent. Pyramid schemes, house painting, mowing lawns of repossessed properties in order to help sell them, collecting deposit bottles and cans, selling chocolate bars door to door, scouring garage and estate sales, maxing out credit cards. Whatever it takes.

In "Her, Guts and All," deer hunting for food to get through winter involves fighting against those concerned only with counting points on antlers. The visceral description of tracking down a shot deer, dragging it to the river and gutting it, is both shocking and lyrical: "His footprints dotted the

snow behind him like brown exclamation points signaling his arrival.” When a freezer fails, the main characters, a widow and her son, resort to keeping deer meat outside, and the harsh winter briefly turns into an ally. In Caro, where they give an award for the best deer blind, the stakes are high, and, as is a recurring theme in the book, neighbors turning against neighbors. The residents fight the rich, and, with misdirected anger, they fight each other, since it’s hard to even find the rich.

Wind turbines also become a focus of local controversy—large visible structures that these characters can direct their anger towards when so many of the forces stacked against them are invisible and insidious. Like many small communities, intolerance for anything new or different gets a foothold here. There’s love here, but that love is tough and wary.

Stylistically, Deeren’s lyricism and imagery are first-rate, often counterpointing brutality or offering insight into it. The vividness of the sensory detail here is impressive—I can smell these places, and their whiffs of despair—and conjures up the soul of the Michigan Thumb, and places like it across the country. For example, in “Bridgework,” he writes, “...a lie is a hand tool you keep in the bottom of your toolbox just in case, like a star head screwdriver. Not good for most things but sure as shit handy when you need it.” Or, in “The Run,” “Owendale Draught was one of those places where the walls were more interesting than the people and that was saying a lot.”

While these characters are often sharp and educated in the ways of the world, they also sometimes make decisions not in their best interests due to misplaced loyalties or a drunken haze. In “About the Lies,” the narrator, Jamaica, a bartender, is smart enough to get the facts about wind turbines, but vulnerable enough to spend a night with a man whose name she doesn’t know, so he becomes “Maybe-Jeff-or-Cal.” She has a wicked sense of humor, even at her own expense: “We hugged the kind of goodbye hug you give a second cousin when they come to your high school graduation.” She’s also clear-eyed enough to see her own past: “By the time I would have been graduating with a bachelor’s degree, all I had was a divorce and the need to pay a full rent check every month.” A kiss from her golf coach when she’s in high school sends her life down a small-town path where everybody is a judge and subtlety and nuance get lost. The community metes out its own judgments, legal or otherwise.

Deeren, a Michigan native, writes with authority, heart, and a deep understanding of these people and places that goes far beyond offering up local landmarks. These characters know how to change their own wiper blades and gut their own deer, and so does he, and he recognizes the small moments where things come together or fall apart.

He knows this place, and his love for it—the tough love for it—comes through in every sentence. It’s like he’s holding a magnifying glass over it on a hot sunny day, heating it up just enough to keep the place from going up in flames. A fine debut and a bright future for this young writer.

### Reviewer Bio

**Jim Daniels’** latest book, *The Luck of the Fall*, fiction, was published in 2023. Recent poetry books include *The Human Engine at Dawn* and *Gun/Shy*. His chapbook, *Comment Card*, will be

published in 2024. A native of Detroit, he lives in Pittsburgh and teaches in the Alma College MFA program.