Undercover Explorations of the “Other Half,” Or the Writer as Class Transvestite

The struggle of classifications is a fundamental division of the class struggle. The power of imposing a vision of divisions, that is, the power of making visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, is the political power par excellence: it is the power to make groups, to manipulate the objective structure of society.

—Pierre Bourdieu

Strong and infinitely appealing are the basal elements of existence, and yet mysterious, evasive, receding like a specter from your craving grasp.

—Walter Wyckoff

I

On a rainy winter night, in the depression year of 1894, Stephen Crane “went forth” dressed in “rags and tatters . . . to try to eat as a tramp may eat, and sleep as the wanderers sleep.” His experiences in the Bowery that night provided the basis for his sketch “An Experiment in Misery,” which confronted readers of the New York Press with an unusual journalistic message: Much of what they thought they knew about lower-class life was invalid. “You can tell nothing of it unless you are in that condition yourself,” he wrote, “It is idle to speculate about it from . . . [a] distance.” The sketch’s fictionalized account of one middle-class youth’s disguised journey into the lower classes attempts to bridge this distance, providing Crane’s readers with a study of class subjectivity in transformation. For what Crane wishes to show is not “how the other half lives” but how “misery,” as a class-specific social force, shapes perception. Working toward this end, he carefully depicts the youth’s representative change through a gradual movement into the lower-class social body. Walking along the streets dressed in an “aged suit” (862), the youth is “completely plastered with yells of ‘bum’ and ‘hobo,’” and cast into “a state of profound dejection” (283). Later, in a lodging house, he feels the alteration deepen as “his liver turn[s] white” from the “unspeakable odors that assail him like malignant diseases with wings” (287). This “misery” does produce the desired sociological reward: During the long night, the youth stays awake watching “the forms of men . . . lying in death-like silence or heaving and snoring...
tremendous effort” (287) and then “carry[es] biographies for [them] from his meager experience” (289) in poverty. In their class now, but still not of it, he is able to distinguish “an utterance of meaning” in each “wail of a... section, a class, a people” (289). The meditator role he assumes through this ability to discern meaning and translate perception allows him to arrogate to himself the cultural power of “authentic” social knowledge. For the point of the journey, as the youth tells his elder friend, is not to actually become “a tramp,” but to “discover his point of view,” to momentarily take his guise in order to “produce a veracious narrative” (862). In this and other “veracious” narratives like it, the middle-class investigator attempts to bridge the social divide between the classes by assigning “tramps” and workers a new meaning based on assimilable cultural attributes, not on more intransient economic statuses.

I have termed such tales of temporary guise, “class-transvestite narratives,” a phrase that best describes their attempts to close epistemological gaps through cross-class impersonation. Although Crane’s experiment in class transvestism is the best known of this type, its methodology and goals were hardly unique. Between the depression of the early 1890s and the progressive reforms of the 1910s, a number of white middle-class writers, journalists, and social researchers “dressed down” in order to traverse with their bodies what they saw as a growing gulf between the middle class and the white working and lower classes.³ Like Crane, these disguised investigators recognized the inherent difficulty of social knowledge in an economically segmented society: Perceptions based on a sympathetic middle-class point of view were for them as inaccurate as those informed by the sensationalized reports in the daily press. Recognizing the impossibility of both an Archimedean point outside a classed subjectivity and what William James called the particular “blindness” of “looking at life with the eyes of a remote spectator,”⁴ these explorers attempted to move “inside” and collapse the distance between subject and object into one performative, narrational “body.”

These authors thus conceived of their own bodies both as objects of social forces and, consequently, as sites of social knowledge—the value of the experience depended, in this sense, on the very “authenticity” of the misery the experiment produced. As Mark Seltzer recently noted, notions of the malleable body were endemic to this period, classified and shaped through Naturalist narratives, medical texts, penological studies, and other discursive systems.⁵ Indeed, as Crane’s experiment makes clear, the tractable body of the class transvestite is almost preternaturally prone to such forces: “plastered” with epithets, “assailed” by “diseases,” but nevertheless still awake and able to “carve biographies” from the undifferentiated “wail” of the lower classes. It is this ability to remain observant in the midst of subjection that distinguishes these class-transvestite narrators from other classed subjects of this era’s literature, and that marks these as middle-class texts about the working and lower classes. Throughout their journeys to the realm of “misery,”
these narrators never relinquish their role as translators of experience and mediators between “knowing” and “being.” This dual identity is also what makes their consequent narratives distinct: While most middle-class documentaries of the working and lower classes produce knowledge through the distancing rhetoric of the social spectacle, these class-transvestite narratives reverse this process, producing authentic knowledge and performing authenticity itself, through the act of embodiment.

This distinction gives this corpus of texts its particular historical and literary value. During the past decade, literary and cultural critics working with the theories of Michel Foucault and Guy Debord have written a number of studies showing how the working and lower classes have been contained and distanced within a discursive structure of “the spectacle.” Their readings of Stephen Crane, Jack London, Jacob Riis, and others effectively demonstrate the extent to which sensationalized scenes of lower-class debauchery and debasement have served to define and solidify middle-class cultural authority.6 The class-transvestite narratives, on the other hand, construct cultural authority differently; control through strategic distance is replaced by control through strategic engagement. By entering into the realm of “misery” rather than casting out the miserable, these narratives set up a model of integration and social incorporation. In each narrative the presumption is both that these realms are sufficiently exotic as to require a disguise, a journey, and an “experiment” and that such difference can be effectively assimilated through sartorial means alone. Underneath the clothing and sumptuary habits of the economic “Other,” according to the class transvestite, lies an essential sameness, a common humanity that requires only recognition and understanding for an inevitable amalgamation. These presumptions of similitude derive, in no small part, from nineteenth-century ideologies of social mobility and egalitarianism. Yet in class-transvestite narratives, these vestiges of working-class republicanism are inflected and embodied in far less progressive ways. Mobility resides with the narrator alone, and egalitarianism becomes his or her ability to manipulate vestments during strategic moments of entry. The class transvestite’s journey “down” ultimately serves to echo and circumvent other journeys “up,” reducing mobility to a mere play of cultural signs.

Following this journey through its various sites of integration and its various “objects” of interest, I will examine how containment through embodiment operates and analyze the social and political changes it underwrites: After a brief history of transvestite narration, Jack London’s and Josiah Flynt’s appropriation and integration of the despised “tramp” will serve to outline the machinations of this process. The tramp, along with the itinerant worker, was the primary (though not the exclusive) object of the male transvestite’s interest. Shorn of the web of social relations maintained in stable working-class communities, he was a ripe target for such sociological study. Alvan Francis Sanborn’s incursion into the lodging house

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provides another, more semiotic version of the same paradigm. The lodging house, Sanborn informs us, is where the itinerant comes to rest, founding and relying upon a special kind of cultural community. From these examples, the discussion moves to a theoretical model, suggesting that these writers’ search for sociological authority serves, in part, to reconstruct their “manhood” or “womanhood” in the face of what Jackson Lears has called the “crisis of cultural authority.” This section of the discussion also serves to differentiate between the immediate goals of the male and female writers. Whereas men like London and Flynt searched for authenticity among the “rustic” tramps, women such as the Van Vorst sisters (Bessie and Marie) and Cornelia Stratton Parker sought their political voices in the settlement houses and the textile mills. Finally, the discussion concludes with an examination of contemporary explorations of “working-class culture,” drawing analogies between class transvestism and the “new labor history.” By looking at the discursive construction of class identity in these texts, I assert that what we call the “class struggle” is always also a struggle over the very terms of class analysis—a struggle over the meaning of “class” itself.

II

In the first years of the 1890s, Annie Laurie and Nellie Bly popularized this class-transvestite mode of reporting in the large circulation dailies. Their articles on the working conditions in fruit canneries, factories, and urban hospitals enthralled readers of San Francisco’s Examiner and New York’s World. During the same period, Walter Wyckoff undertook a more sustained exercise in undercover “political economy.” His two-year journey as a “manual proletaire” took him from New Jersey to the Pacific and resulted in the two-volume The Workers: An Experiment in Reality (1897, 1898), and a professorship at Princeton. Though less academically inclined, Josiah Flynt, author of the enormously popular Tramping with Tramps (1893), also had intellectual leanings. In his study, he tried to rectify the positivist leanings of contemporary penology by interpreting the “psychological” dimension of vagrant criminality. Making good use of his own material, he later worked as a railroad detective and a crime reporter. Like Flynt, Jack London initially employed this methodology in his “hobo writings,” though he later expanded his purview to include the industrial proletariat. In all of his accounts, London focused on the tensions between intellectual and manual labor, perhaps most passionately in The People of the Abyss (1902), his disguised journey through London’s East End. Finally, after the turn of the century, these class-transvestite “experiments” tended, once more, to be practiced by women. Many of the muckraking magazines competed for readers by offering documents—sociological, confessional, and fictional—of middle-class women who briefly lived “working-class” lives. A number
of these were later published in book form. Some, like Cornelia Stratton Parker’s *Working with the Working Women* (1922), garnered national attention. Others, like Bessie and Marie Van Vorst’s *The Woman Who Toils* (1903, a personal favorite of Teddy Roosevelt), became grist for political debate.

Of course, this type of undercover investigation did not grind to a halt with the close of the Progressive Era. Writers such as Whiting Williams continued to draw upon their proletarian journeys well into midcentury. Additionally, the recent discovery of Frederick C. Mills’s account of his tenure as an undercover investigator for the California Commission of Immigration and Housing demonstrates a (largely undocumented) governmental use of this tactic. Before becoming an economist at Columbia University, Mills spent two months in “the world of the submerged” in order “to investigate” and record “the activities of the Industrial Workers of the World.” Yet such occasional and institutional accounts aside, class-transvestite investigations in the popular press greatly decreased in the 1920s with what Paul Boyer has termed a move toward “secularism” and “professionalism” in “the urban moral-control movement.” Within this broad ideological shift, not only were such individual efforts at mediation displaced by government-sponsored institutions, but the once problematic economic and ethnic “heterogeneity” of the city was increasingly “treated as a positive social gain, adding to the richness and creative diversity of American life.” When class transvestism reappeared in the 1930s, accompanying another economic downturn, similar journeys through the lower classes carried the weight of a new middle-class self-consciousness. The specific and vocal articulations of labor and leftist organizations provoked hypersensitive apologias like James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and politically evasive parodies like Preston Sturges’s film, *Sullivan’s Travels.* The naive assumptions of Crane and his contemporaries—perhaps even the belief that one could personally mediate between classes—would never again enjoy such unequivocal popularity.

The historicity of such attempts at integration is, however, integrally linked to their complex cultural work. The events that initiated this mode of representation suggested the need for socially redemptive models of engagement and assimilation. Though the participant/observer had occasionally visited the pages of the urban gothic novel and the detective story earlier in the nineteenth century, the cross-dressed investigator did not appear with regularity until around the 1893 depression. The five-year economic collapse, which instigated this mediational ploy, followed two decades of reoccurring strike waves, labor militancy, and sustained immigration, producing a set of social and economic forces that changed the dimensions and perceptions of urban poverty. As Paul Ringenbach documents in *Tramps and Reformers,* during the renewed “discovery of unemployment” in this depression, the lines between “tramps” and workers, between skilled American craftspeople and recent immigrants, blurred under the pressure of penury’s

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seemingly indiscriminate mobility.\textsuperscript{19} The once secure native working class and the emergent middle class seemed suddenly at risk from the rising tide of massive unemployment.\textsuperscript{20}

As one might expect, under the pressure of these conditions the tramp arose as a leading emblem of the promiscuous effects of the industrial downturn. “To many observers the hobo seemed the most obvious manifestation of the economic dislocations and social maladjustments of the times. He was ubiquitous and easily identifiable—the least common denominator of unemployment, parasitism, crime, and vice.”\textsuperscript{21} All of these factors made him an obvious choice for undercover examination. Tramps had, of course, previously haunted America’s political unconscious: along with slaves, Native Americans, and the Irish, they sporadically stood in for the mythic barbarians at the gate of the Protestant work ethic. Francis Wayland, the normally sober Dean of Yale Law School, made just such a synecdochic leap in 1877 (appropriately enough, the year of the great railroad strike): “As we utter the word Tramp, there arises straightaway before us the spectacle of a lazy, incorrigible, cowardly, utterly depraved savage.”\textsuperscript{22} By the mid-nineties, however, such rants had reached a new level, as the “spectacle” grew to unprecedented numbers and began collectively to make organized political demands. In 1894, “General” Jacob Sechler Coxeys and his “industrial army” marched across the country planning to present Congress with a “petition in boots.” Though their specific petition was for the enactment of Coxeys’s Good Roads Bill and Non-Interest-Bearing Bonds Bill, their implicit appeal was for general political recognition. Such recognition was not forthcoming, and their demands were answered instead by police action and political derision.\textsuperscript{23} As C. S. Denny, the Mayor of Indianapolis, commented some months later, vagabonds, like “wife-beaters,” had “no right to claim an existence in this country” and therefore “should have no legal protection.” If existing vagrancy laws failed to stop the flow of tramps into urban centers, then municipalities should “substitute the whipping-post for the prison.”\textsuperscript{24}

In the face of such blatant hostility, Jack London’s exploration, appropriation, and subsequent depiction of these abject figures is particularly relevant—both for what he achieves and for how he does so. One of the less disciplined of Coxeys’s cadre (he left the “army” long before it reached Washington), he had other less collectivist ways of soliciting public recognition for the unemployed.\textsuperscript{25} According to the young London who wrote “The Road,” the tramp suffers most from a lack of understanding and appreciation. Labeled a vagrant by the “law,” and a “Vag” for short, just “three letters . . . stand between him and the negation of being. He is on the ragged edge of nonentity.”\textsuperscript{26} Pulling him in off that edge requires, not unexpectedly, a certain amount of authentic information, supplied in this instance by London’s firsthand experience traveling with the tramps. Though “we have met him everywhere,” London reports, “we are less conversant with his habits and thoughts than with those of the inhabitants of the Cannibal Islands” (70). The tramp’s sumptuary habits, London assures us, are actually much less exotic (and
parasitic). Unlike the “stationary Negro population . . . of the South” (another synecdochic leap), the “tramp population” is “full of the indomitability of the Teuton” (71). Like other Teutons, tramps labor diligently, according to the dictates of their particular vocation. Those who might presume a lazy egalitarianism are, in this respect, greatly misinformed: “In this outcast world the sharp lines of caste are as rigorously drawn as in the world from which it has evolved” (71). London demonstrates this last point in his narrative by categorizing tramps into “classes” and “subclasses,” charting “the tramp problem” in terms that would have been comfortably drawn as in the world from which it has evolved. Once they are categorized according to relative skill level (“efficiency” is the word he would come to use), these previously ostracized figures seem only to be slightly degraded copies of factory workers, as indeed they are for London. For the “tramp problem” should be studied, he concludes, as an integral part of the relationship between capital and labor—not as a “surplus labor army” (as he would later assert), but as an unavoidable and generally harmless result of economic cycles of expansion and contraction.27

Josiah Flynt’s appropriation of these “human parasites,” as he calls them, moves along similarly systematic lines.28 But whereas London embraces economic and social means of integration, Flynt works from a “psychological” and criminological perspective. In Tramping with the Tramps, he draws upon his “intimate” acquaintance with “notorious members” (3) of this class in order to challenge, and indeed deconstruct, the predominately phrenological foundations of contemporary penology: “We have volumes . . . about the criminal’s body, skull, and face, his whimsical and obscene writings on the prison-walls, the effect of various kinds of diet on his deportment, the workings of delicate instruments placed on his wrists” (1). But “we” still do not understand the mental workings of these outcast characters. In order to comprehend their “criminal” status—that is, in order to rationalize what seems ethically and socially illegible—we need to augment this type of knowledge with more intimate data. In short, we need the authentic knowledge gained by studying them from “different points of view” (7). Yet, from inside the tramp’s “point of view,” Flynt, like Crane and London, becomes a good deal more sympathetic. The tramp’s phrenological difference, Flynt immediately notices, derives from environmental rather than biological forces. Those tramps who have never been to prison, who are successful in their vocation, “if well dressed, could pass muster in almost any class of society . . . [A]n uninitiated observer would be unable to pick them out for what they are” (8). And what they are, in turn, seems also to be now in question. As Flynt’s own narrative moves from “Studies” to “Travels” to “Sketches,” these parasites lose a good deal of their once onerous status, and (again) assume the characteristics of the society at large. Like London, Flynt finds that “vagabonds specialize nowadays quite as much as other people” (113), and that “success in vagabondage depends largely on distinct and indispensable traits of character—diligence, patience, nerve and politeness” (138). As he concludes his study, Flynt’s sociological tone turns frankly nostalgic, an indication that assimila-
tion is, from his new point of view, already inevitable. For like “the Indian,” the tramp is becoming part of the civilized norm: “The secrets of Hoboland are becoming common property, and the hobo is being deprived of a picturesque isolation which formerly few disturbed” (391). Criminological reforms are almost unnecessary, Flynt decides; ethnographic incursions like his will integrate these marginal characters without the overt efforts of policy reformers.

But as Ringenbach documents in *Tramps and Reformers*, the discovery of the tramp and of his destructive mobility did indeed precipitate an escalation of urban reform efforts. And such reforms were, in a slightly different manner, also related to the inception of class-transvestite reportage. If mobility arose as a new trope for the nation’s fear of impoverishment, then recently inaugurated sites of reform like the settlement house and the lodging house operated as compensatory locations of temporary repose. Following the 1893 depression, reform ideology shifted from moralism to environmentalism, a move that highlighted the importance of these contained residential spaces. The goal was to rehabilitate by example: “By ‘settling’ among the less fortunate, [reformers] would practice a true charity, sharing the day-to-day existence of the poor while showing them better standards of life and culture.” Yet despite these communitarian efforts, the settlement house and particularly the less-monitored lodging house often functioned quite differently, both for the residents and for social investigators. Within these newly demarcated spaces of repose, anonymity and transience were more often the norm—a norm upon which undercover investigation depended for its existence. Before the large-scale poverty, urban migration, and immigration of the 1890s, journalists and writers would not have been able to “pass” with such apparent ease, since many of the unemployed and most workers lived in “knowable communities” where impersonation would have been difficult. Though reformers tried to avoid just this sort of institutional anonymity, the atomized clientele of the lodging house constituted, in contrast, a class-specific realm that was of interest to middle-class readers and eminently penetrable by these proto-ethnographers.

III

At the same time that these anonymous realms provided the opportunity for class-passing, they also helped to supply the material for such performances. Though settlement workers and other reformers may have tried to inculcate residents with middle-class cultural values, many boardinghouse patrons developed, out of resistance or perhaps out of felt necessity, their own systems of signs, codes, and sumptuary signifiers. To the naive class transvestite, like Crane’s “youth,” these appear to be mere disguises, sartorial rituals of the begging trade: The “men of brawn” when “dressed in their ungainly garments... showed bumps and deficiencies of all kinds” (289–90). The fuller descriptions offered in a book like Alvan
Francis Sanborn’s *Moody’s Lodging House and Other Tenement Sketches* reveal, however, a different level of symbolic functioning. To the “gang” at Moody’s, clothing and manners signify their social place, both with respect to each other and within the larger Boston community: Gus, “a gentleman bum,” prides himself on “urbanity,” and always “pretends to be adjusting a nonexistent garter or suspender, when he is goaded to scratching by an uncommonly virulent bite.”

Affecting similar reminiscences, “Barney” draws “money and sympathy” from fellow Irish immigrants with his “rich Irish brogue” (10), just as “Shorty,” “a genuine workingman originally” (10), turns his biography into his pitch and persona. The disguise is, as Sanborn explains, both a way to secure one’s living and a way of communicating within this space of transience, a means of vesting one’s self with a history in an institutional realm that operates to deny it.

However, as Sanborn likewise demonstrates, the danger inherent in such a compensatory system of signs is that it offers a considerably heightened opportunity for adoption, inhabitation, and integration. To enter a community of people in costume, where one’s history is so blatantly worn on the body, all that is needed is a “mien extraordinary eloquent of roguery or misery”—short of this “a disguise is helpful” (1):

> When the time for going out came, I thoroughly grimed face, hands, and neck, donned several suits of worn, soiled underclothes . . . , a pair of disreputable pantaloons, a jacket out at elbows, clumsy, discolored shoes, and a hat that was almost a disguise in itself. In certain finishing touches I took a genuine artistic pride; these were a dingy red flannel fastened around the neck with a safety-pin, a clay pipe filled with vile-smelling tobacco, a cheap-whiskey breath, a shambling gait, and a drooping head. (2)

This verbal minstrelsy is obviously meant as parody: From begrimed skin to soiled clothes to absurd accessorizing, it is played as much for Sanborn’s middle-class readers as for Moody’s residents. The point is, however, that it effectively fulfills both roles. At least from Sanborn’s point of view, his affectation mimics the gang’s assumption of some discredited notion of the “authentic.” Within this institutional setting, the organic community has been entirely replaced by a nexus of cultural signs. Paradoxically enough, this new system of cultural affiliation resurrects a different mode of “authenticity” at the very moment of its discreditation. For given the strictly superficial definition of the lower class, Sanborn can claim that after one night he has for all intents and purposes become a “cheap lodger.” “Living does away with the necessity of playing at living” (3). The sequential experience of “playing” the lower-class life and “living” the lower-class life, we might also note, provides the class transvestite with a certain amount of comfort in economically troubled times: “Bums are, by general consent, the dregs of society. Is it not, then, worth a bit of suffering to feel certain that the very worst that can befall you (in the world’s view) is not so very bad after all?” (4).

If Sanborn’s comforting slip from “playing” to “living” is underwritten by an understanding of class as a system of cultural signs, then this move had its own

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historical genealogy. In 1890 Jacob Riis had initiated this shift, opening the way for imitators like Sanborn and setting a precedent for the way in which Progressive Era social scientists and reporters would understand the urban lower classes. In Riis’s enormously popular *How the Other Half Lives*, the lower classes appeared, for the first time, in explicitly cultural terms. The moral typology of mid-nineteenth-century studies and the racial taxonomy that had haunted “sociology” since the antebellum era turned with Riis into a clear sociocultural lexicon. In this text he created a classification based on neighborhoods and ethnicities, but more pointedly on bodily signifiers and sumptuary habits. His use of photographs was, as Keith Leland Gandal notes, crucial in this lexiconic transformation. Until Riis’s book was published, photographs of the city universally depicted broad topographical visions, celebratory panoramas free of poverty and urban crowds. Riis’s photographic focus on the lower classes’ visual properties inverted this paradigm, representing the city as a bricolage of “scenes” that emphasized the visible, sartorial differences between the classes. In *How the Other Half Lives*, the denizens of “the Bend” and “Hell’s Kitchen” wear their class identities in easily discernible and subsequently simulatable fashion. Riis’s invitation to “go into any of the ‘respectable’ tenement neighborhoods . . ., be with and among its people until you understand their ways,” thus reconfigures the urban topography in a new and important manner. He not only aligned “neighborhoods” with corresponding “ways” but also depicted these ways as singularly perceptible and thus available for middle-class “understanding.”

Of course, the class-transvestite practitioners took him a bit more literally than he intended, actively incorporating what he had only categorized. In their texts Riis’s steady sociological gaze gives way to highly ambivalent narrative postures. Unlike Riis’s study, which retains the pose of objectivity until its histrionic conclusion, texts like Wyckoff’s *Experiment in Reality* and London’s *People of the Abyss* are rife with conflicting dispositions toward their subjects. Workers and the dispossessed appear to be alternately appealing in their seeming freedom and camaraderie and horrifying in their lack of self-regulation. Wyckoff, for instance, seems to have spent a good deal of his tenure as a “proletaire” anguishing between these two extremes. On Clark, his temporary “partner,” he notes: “It is strange . . . the closeness of the intimacy between Clark and me. . . . Perhaps men come to know one another quickest and best on a plane of life, where in the fellowship of destitution they struggle for the primal needs and feel the keen sympathies which attest the basal kinship of our common humanity.” More typically, however, he finds himself rebelling against the physical urgencies of these same “primal needs,” especially when they include an “instinct” for “liquor and lust.” London, alternately, seems almost to find pleasure in inhabiting this ambivalence. He opens his study, for example, with a chapter entitled “The Descent,” which describes his initial horrified reaction to the population of the East End: “The miserable multitudes” who walk the
“screaming streets” are like “so many waves of vast and malodorous sea, lapping about me and threatening to well up and over me.” Once in “costume,” however, both he and his narrative tone change remarkably:

All servility vanished from the demeanor of the common people with whom I came in contact. Presto! in the twinkling of an eye, so to say, I had become one of them. My frayed and out-at-elbows jacket was the badge and advertisement of my class which was their class. It made me of the like kind, and in place of the fawning and too-respectful attention I had hitherto received, I now shared with them a comradeship.37

A comradeship, one would have to add, borne not out of shared labor or a common history, but out of a vestigial simulation. For like Sanborn, London’s painless metamorphosis belies an unstable notion of class identity that rests, at least in this moment, upon superficial vestments.

Yet even here, during such instantaneous transvestite operations, ambivalence is evident. For if the aim of the middle-class investigator is to map, and thus to contain rhetorically, the mysterious realm of the working and lower classes, then such an easy transition from observer to participant exposes, rather, the fragile border between the two. Or to put it differently, the act of vesting oneself with class-specific apparel involves a structural contradiction, since one presumes both a social dichotomy (the need to cross-dress) and a countervailing semiotic slippage (the ability to cross-dress convincingly). The presumption of difference is in part, certainly, a historical inheritance, renewed in the 1890s by the increasing social pressure of poverty and economic stratification. The semiotic slippage reflects, however, a comparatively new shift in the discourse of dress and fashion. Although sartorial signs had historically functioned to indicate social difference, the wide dissemination of ready-made clothing for men in the 1890s provided a site for contesting articulations of egalitarianism. (The “ready-made revolution” in women’s fashion would not take place until the 1910s.) “In the nineties,” according to Claudia Kidwell, the “suit arrived” as an emblem of the industrial “democratization of clothing in America.” Marketed widely and with explicit appeals to egalitarian sentiments, the suit became “a uniform which knew no class or economic group.”38 In coming years, the well-dressed gentleman, the worker, and even the “tramp” would favor the new “sack suit” as a normative statement of masculine fashion. Of course, as London’s testimony indicates, class signs persisted at the same time that a superficial display of individual history replaced more traditional dress styles as “the badge and advertisement” of class status. The fit, the material, and the degree of wear of one’s “frayed and out-at-elbows jacket” gained greater, if less codified, significance.

While the discursive shifts brought about by the development of a mass-market clothing industry help explain the language of class-passing, the ambivalences, contradictions, and slippages in these texts need also to be theorized in more general, structural terms. As Marjorie Garber demonstrates in her book on cross-
dressing. “One of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture” is to repeatedly expose such dissonant moments, “to indicate the place of . . . ‘category crisis,’ disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances.” The figure of the transvestite marks, then, “a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, master/servant, master/slave.”

Though her study is broadly conceived, Garber is most interested in the category of gender. And in her estimation, within this category, the “crisis” works toward progressive ends—denaturalizing the dichotomous and oppressive relations between socially constituted men and socially constituted women. The category placed in ontological crisis in the texts currently at issue is, however, not gender but class, which appears to be both explicit and somehow mobile, constructed now through the production and replication of cultural signs rather than through the shared experience of economic exploitation. Such a homologous reconstruction does not function toward similarly progressive ends. For what is erased here is not the socially constructed relations between bodily signifiers and political referents, which are in fact reinforced, but the systemic relations between lived experience and historically specific economic exploitation. In short, what Garber calls a “transvestite logic” deconstructs class as an economic referent and reconstructs it, in turn, as a function of cultural position.

Yet, if the category of class is here put in crisis, the exposed ambivalences and contradictions are not sufficient to impair the function of the transvestite narratives. Rather, what Garber calls their “dissonances” structurally enable their cultural work. As we have seen with Crane, the dynamic movement of subjective identity through the symbolically figured lower classes avails an “authoritative” voice. Or put differently, sociological authority emerges out of the ability to have an “authentic” lower-class experience while retaining a supposedly middle-class ability for “objective” assessment. On this and other matters, Bessie Van Vorst is characteristically unambiguous: “My desire is to act as a mouthpiece for the woman labourer. I assumed her mode of existence with the hope that I might put into words her cry for help.” Like the lodgers who “wail” in Crane’s sketch, Van Vorst’s “woman labourer” has no unmediated, intelligible means of communicating her “material” and “spiritual needs.” The degenerative environment of the factory has left her reliant on narrational mediation. “It was probable my comrades felt at no time the discomfort I did,” remarks Van Vorst; “As our bodies accustom themselves to luxury and cleanliness, theirs grow hardened to deprivation and filth. As our souls develop the advantages of all that constitutes an ideal . . . their souls diminish under the oppression of a constant physical effort to meet material demands.”

Lacking Van Vorst’s ability to straddle class identities—to draw on a distinction between inner sensibility and outer degradation—the “woman labourer” is not only unable to articulate her cries for “help,” she is, in Van Vorst’s estimation, unable even to
understand the dimension of her need. It is left to Walter Wyckoff, however, to take this specific operation to its logical conclusion, revealing its discursively integrative function. For if Van Vorst uses mediation to promote “understanding,” then Wyckoff resorts to blatant ventriloquism to enact a scene of social cooperation, as in this remarkable address, given after his first week of physical labor:

We are unskilled laborers. We are grown men, and are without a trade. In the labor market we stand ready to sell to the highest bidder our mere muscular strength. . . . We are here and not higher in the scale, by reason of a variety of causes. Some of us were thrown upon our own resources in childhood, and have earned our living ever since, and by the line of least resistance we have simply grown to be unskilled workmen.42

In the next dramatic turn, Wyckoff alternately speaks as a capitalist, eventually dissolving the so-called labor problem into a closet drama.

Such acts of ventriloquism are, however, only the most obvious textual function of these narratives. The construction of sociological authority is part of a more integral objective of reestablishing and reinvigorating middle-class cultural authority. If working-class impersonation seems to serve such a goal obscurely, then we must keep in mind the particularly transient and unidirectional characteristics of these “experiments.” The emergence of middle-class identity in the United States occurred in a profoundly relational process, a crystallization of that broad “middle” segment by means of constant reference to “aristocrats” and laborers.43 More typically, such relations were of the differentiating sort; they tended to distance and marginalize the lower-class “other” (and less frequently the aristocratic “other”) in an attempt to establish and solidify the moral territory of a bourgeois center. Strict rules of “social conduct,” writes Karen Halttunen, helped the middle class solve “the problem of establishing and recognizing social identity in a republic based theoretically on the boundless potential of each individual.”44 Yet again, I think that these class-transvestite narratives offer another model of class relations, one of embodiment and integration rather than invidious distinction. With remarkable unanimity, they tell an alternative tale of a middle-class “lack” fulfilled through lower-class “experience,” bourgeois ennui cured by way of proletarian pain. Facing a new industrial order, argues Jackson Lears, the middle class suffered a “crisis of cultural authority,” compounded by a feeling that “life had become . . . curiously unreal.” Reality and authority might be recaptured, then, by a “pilgrimage” through something like the “authentic.”45

To put this sort of exercise in perspective, it might be useful to note that such models of reinvigoration through cross-identity inhabitation were not new in American culture. By the 1890s, a succession of “marginal” figures had already been appropriated as symbols of what was feared lost to an emergent nation. During the antebellum period some members of the working class negotiated their “whiteness” and their masculinity through theatrical appropriations of the black body.46 And throughout this country’s history, various authors have projected their anxieties over rampant industrialism onto the figure of the “vanishing native.”47 Yet by the

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turn of the century, these fetishized receptacles of identity had already begun to disappear—new, abstract models of corporate identity replaced older individualist embodiments. As Frederick Jackson Turner noted in 1893, after the closing of the frontier one could no longer “strip off the garments of civilization and array . . . [oneself] in the hunting shirt and moccasin.” One could no longer, that is, become an American by way of becoming a savage. Yet during the Progressive Era, one could still gain a semblance of such rustic vivacity through a journey into the urban frontier, arraying oneself, temporarily, in the garments of poverty’s corporeal immediacy.

IV

These machinations of middle-class revitalization are most obvious in the highly gendered operations of class-transvestite narratives. Teddy Roosevelt’s call for a “strenuous life” echoes through the men’s narratives, haunting the authors with fears of bookish effeminacy and overcivilization. As Melissa Dabakis writes, a “crisis of masculinity” provoked middle-class men in the 1890s to fear that “manliness was no longer an inevitable product of middle-class life and that the ideals of independence, self-reliance, competitiveness, and risk taking (essentially mythic constructions of an agrarian frontier) were becoming lost to middle-class men in an industrialized culture.”

London, Wyckoff, Crane, and others go forth, then, partly in search of a deferred masculinity, which is dressed in the guise of an experiential authority and Arcadian authenticity. Wyckoff prefaces his two-volume work, for instance, with a description of an apocryphal meeting with Channing F. Meek, a man outstanding in his “familiarity with practical affairs.” “In our talk,” Wyckoff writes, “. . . I could but feel increasingly the difference between my slender, book-learned lore and his vital knowledge of men and the principles by which they live and work.” This barely euphemistic panegyrical to vital manhood stands, then, in place of a more formal, or informative, introduction. We are now to assume that we are fully apprised of the rationale for Wyckoff’s two-year journey.

Much of London’s oeuvre might also be cited as evidence of this regeneration through adventure. Though London came from a working-class background (and claimed it repeatedly with pride), this did not prevent a considerable amount of anxiety over the “feminizing” effects of his subsequent literary success. In his fiction this anxiety was manifested in continual attempts to incorporate the atavistic strengths of the wild dog or the Teutonic superman with the philosophical acuity of the cultured classes. About Sea-Wolf, one of London’s more overt syncretic exercises, one critic writes: “The still-young man evidently feared that as Jack London, author’ he was in danger of losing the manhood which he had laboriously earned by sweat, danger, and struggle. It is clear from various remarks he made that
Jack identified both with Wolf Larson, the male ‘brute,’ and with the ‘sissy’ Van Weyden, the sexless and bloodless ‘scholar and dilettante.’”

London’s investment in a vital manhood looms similarly throughout his depiction of the lower classes in The People of the Abyss, though the East End slums prove, in contrast, hostile to the type of “stalwart men” he had envied in the “West.” Of one blue-eyed acquaintance destined to a “wretched, inevitable future,” he notes:

I was not surprised by his body that night when he stripped for bed. I have seen many men strip, in gymnasium and training quarters, men of good blood and upbringing, but I have never seen one who stripped to better advantage than this young sort of two and twenty, this young god doomed to rack and ruin in four or five short years, and to pass hence without posterity to receive the splendid heritage it was his to bequeath.

The amazing conflation of eugenics and erotics is not, of course, incidental. In London’s disguised journey through London (a pun that unavoidably suggests a search for personal Anglo-Saxon origins), he repeatedly remarks on the bodily degeneration of the men “who are left” while England colonizes the world: “The strong men, the men of pluck, initiative, and ambition, have been faring forth to the fresher and freer portions of the globe, to make new lands and nations. Those who are lacking, the weak of heart and head and hand, as well as the rotten and hopeless, have remained to carry on the breed.” In order to avoid a similar degeneration of race and masculinity, London pointedly advises his readers in the “new lands” (who he repeatedly addresses as “dear soft people”) to attend to their own lower classes, the biological foundations of national progress.

Though seldom so pronounced, the gender dynamic in the women’s class-transvestite narratives operates in an analogous manner. As I noted, these texts tend to come later in the progressive period, often deriving from reformist political activity and (at least implicitly) responding to the preceding narratives by men. Participation in Settlement House projects and other reform efforts seems to have given more than one author the idea to undergo a more extensive entry into working-class life—journeys they undertook both out of a desire for social restitution and in an attempt to battle the “sense of futility” that faced this generation of middle-class women. Perhaps because of this agenda, the narrative tone of their resulting accounts is different from the tone of the men’s texts: The fetishistic descriptions of the burly proletariat are missing, and in their place we find images of an endangered womanhood plagued by the mental and physical demands of manual labor. Yet such narrators as Bessie Van Vorst, Rheta Childe Dorr, and Cornelia Stratton Parker come to these images with their own particular investments. If we can reductively characterize the male paradigm as regeneration through incorporation, then we might characterize the corresponding female paradigm as legitimacy through redemption. This early generation of female college graduates found validation for their new status as “working women” through reform activities that created gender consciousness but preserved class distinctions. This much is indi-
cated in Parker’s brilliantly punning title, *Working with the Working Woman.* Whatever solidarity emerges from the shared work activity is circumscribed by Parker’s propensitvity to work “with” the malleable subjectivities of the “working women”—to work them, that is, into some semblance of middle-class morality.

To stress both the active and the descriptive connotation of this title is, I think, altogether appropriate; for with remarkable unanimity, the female class transvestites foregrounded their participatory roles in the scenes they witnessed. Unlike their male counterparts, their goal was to reform, not merely pass through, the lives of “the unknown class.” As Bessie Van Vorst states after coining this term, bridging the epistemological distance with authentic knowledge is not enough. One must supplement knowledge with moral commitment: “We must discover and adopt their point of view, put ourselves in their surroundings, assume their burdens, unite with them in their daily effort. In this way alone, . . . can we do them real good, can we help them to find a moral, spiritual, esthetic standard suited to their condition in life.” While for someone like Walter Wyckoff becoming a worker was already tantamount to becoming a man, women like Bessie Van Vorst faced a more difficult negotiation of gender and class ideologies. Proving their status as New Women—as middle-class women who nonetheless worked outside the home—required them to articulate their identities as professional reformers within a traditional discourse of domestic ideology. Helping working-class women “to find a . . . standard suited to their conditions” was thus a way to move the structures of the bourgeois home into the social sphere, to assume, in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s words, “the role of public mothers.”

And as Van Vorst reports, such public mothers were badly needed: “The American woman is restless, dissatisfied. Society . . . has driven her toward a destiny that is not normal. The factories are full of old maids. . . . For natural obligations are substituted the fictitious duties of clubs, meetings, committees, organizations, professions, a thousand unwomanly occupations.” To more progressive middle-class observers, this “substitution” would belie changing economic conditions, the effects of a rapid industrial proletarianization of traditional women’s work. Such an analysis is, however, clearly not Van Vorst’s goal. Rather, her narrative fixates on the endangered status of working-class womanhood, relentlessly transferring economic pressures into moral shortcomings, political problems into physical decadence. Even the bodily “degeneracy” of the woman worker, she concludes, is the result of “moral and not physical” causes. Her “increasing sterility” derives from “the triumph of individualism” and “the love of luxury.” Yet since these “two enemies” were previously fought from the woman’s vantage-point within the home, they should be now fought from without, according to Van Vorst, by more public maternalistic incursions.

Of course, not all female class transvestites wrote with the same moralistic fervor, but an anxious investment in the female working-class body did consistently function as a unifying focus for their investigations. Unlike Bessie Van Vorst, Rheta
Childe Dorr (and her collaborator William Hard) saw women’s “industrial emancipation” as a progressive development—a movement that ran “parallel” to the “intellectual emancipation” that “took women of the ‘middle class’ from their homes to colleges and universities to study.” According to their report, this linked departure did not relieve women from their duty as women. Rather, it called for “the establishment of the principle that the home itself must be socially developed and expanded.” Recasting historical development as a sentimental romance plot, Dorr and Hard proceeded to push this domestic conceit to the limit, calling for social restitution in obviously charged language: For “women, entering industry, are still women, with bodies that can easily be wrecked.” “Industry,” which “is still . . . temperamentally a bachelor, with energetic, exhausting, short-sighted, irresponsible, bachelor ways,” must be taught to “marr[y] and settle down” so that “we shall see some housekeeping.” After all, this housekeeping “is necessary for the preservation of the physical health of the woman workers” and “necessary for the perpetuation of an undebilitated human race.”58

V

Though the calls for a return to “natural obligations” and a shotgun marriage between industry and labor may at first glance seem distinct from the male class transvestite’s more blatant libidinal investments, they serve a similar representational function. In all of these accounts, the authors recast the discourse of class and class difference in new and more accommodating terms. From the abject to the integral, from community to signifying system, from shared work to shared morality, from economy to culture, the transvestite’s recorded journey through the lower class produces a translation that creates the discursive space for a fictitious resolution of material class conflicts. As Cornelia Stratton Parker asserts, these illusory “conflicts” derive principally from a limited perspective, the lack (echoing Crane) of an expanded point of view: “A certain type of labor agitator, or ‘parlor laborite,’ prefers to see only the gloomy side of the worker’s life. They are as dishonest as the employer who would see only the contentment. The picture must be viewed in its entirety—and that means considering the workers not as a labor problem, but as a social problem.”59 Considered as such—which is to say, considered apart from their relation to the mode of production—the workers as “social problem” are finally not all that problematic. For underneath their different clothing, different habits, and different idioms (underneath “class” as it is here conceived) lies a certain sameness, a common “humanity” that can be reconstituted and resurrected within a renewed, more harmonic notion of American culture.

To be sure, these class transvestites were not the only, nor even the principal, protagonists in this larger ideological transformation. Rather, the recognition, revaluation, and accommodation of “difference” within American culture—what
we might now call “cultural pluralism”—progressed slowly and unevenly at the turn of the century through the popular press, academic departments of social science, and legislative bodies. With regard to the categories of race and ethnicity (its main targets), the discourse of pluralism was a qualified success; it gave some legitimacy to those struggling against nativist and racist policies, and it opened the way to broader movements for civil rights.60 Yet the specific ideological variant of class pluralism or “industrial pluralism” underwrote other, less progressive structural and institutional changes. The price of a place at the table, a role within the new industrial regime, was a circumscription of working-class action within the dominant forms of political representation. “Out of the nadir of the 1890s depression,” writes Leon Fink, “labor unions had revived, not on the basis of the inclusive, antimonopoly platform of the Knights of Labor but through the self-protective and politically conservative craft unionism of the AFL.” Following this conservative trend, “industrial pluralists” connected such traditionally progressive actions as collective bargaining “not to the destruction of the capitalist order but to its reinvigoration,” pressing “for legally sanctioned mechanisms of managed conflict between employers and workers.”61 The most popular mechanisms of management, we might add here, affected the lives of the unorganized and the unemployed as well. As Martha Banta has recently demonstrated, the mode of “scientific management” initiated by Frederick Winslow Taylor in the 1890s had a wide sphere of influence, structuring and rationalizing both the workplace relations and the cultural experiences of the working and lower classes during this era.62

Banta’s recent intervention notwithstanding, the trend in much of the “new” labor history of recent years has been to find resistance to these newly codified structural changes within an autonomous realm of “working-class culture.” Following such British labor historians as E. P. Thompson, and writing against older historiographic models of industrial consent, a generation of American historians has looked outside of the managed labor process for resistant pockets of “preindustrial cultural values.” For Herbert Gutman, who first charted this theory in his seminal essay “Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America,” the preindustrial was more than simply a romantic past, necessarily abandoned at the factory gates. It was, rather, an alternate system of working-class values, continually reasserted by the successive waves of immigrants and migrants to these industrial centers. This complex tapestry of political republicanism, ethnic communitarianism, and producer ideology formed a residual discourse (to borrow from Raymond Williams) that could and did create the basis for actions against the modernizing dictates of industrial capitalism. To the extent that this “culture” stood outside of economic and industrial dictates, it was unencumbered by the pervasive effects of workplace rationalization and corporatist management, free of the “pluralist” recognition, celebration, and accommodation of working-class difference.63

Yet, I think that as a corpus these class-transvestite texts offer a contrasting view to such “culturalist” approaches. Long before Gutman and others identified
and explored working- and lower-class culture, these class transvestites had already found a particular use for such realms of “autonomy.” And though this nefarious precedent can hardly serve as a counter-argument to the new labor history’s reliance on “culture” as resistance, it might at least operate as a methodological warning, that one should continually be aware of the contextual and ideological implications of such a paradigmatic move. For in the class transvestites’ journeys through working- and lower-class communities in search of authentic cultural forms, we hear more than an echo of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s own cross-dressed travels on the factory floor in order to discover, catalogue, and colonize the workers’ “mass of traditional knowledge.” Much like Taylor, the class transvestites believed that such cultural knowledge might be successfully colonized and utilized within the production and vitalization of new forms of middle-class authority.

The point of such an abrupt analogy is not, finally, that workers and the lower class lacked a culture of their own, even a culture based on anti-industrial values, but rather that this “culture,” however formulated, was no more inherently resistant to appropriation than was the considerable skill-base of industrial craft-workers. Indeed, it was precisely the aura of authenticity and resistance surrounding working- and lower-class culture that assured its fetishistic attraction to the class transvestite. Its sociological and journalistic value derived specifically from its supposed position of autonomy outside of the homogenized realm of the new industrial order. Once it was identified, mapped, and to various degrees appropriated, it could serve as part of a newly expanded “point of view.” The result of these discursive acts of imperialism was, furthermore, not simply the co-optation of working- and lower-class culture, but the co-optation of “class” as “culture”—an analytic sleight of hand, constantly reiterated, which underwrote the translation of class conflict into class difference and then into cultural difference.55 Once understood as a culture among many, the working and lower classes could be contained within a rhetoric of pluralism that celebrated difference even as it denied revolutionary visions of transcendence.

Notes

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2. From the original text of Stephen Crane, “An Experiment in Misery,” printed in the New York Press, 22 April 1894. 2. A copy of this opening is reprinted in Stephen Crane: Tales, Sketches, and Reports, ed. Fredson Bowers (Charlottesville, Va., 1973), 862. All subse-
quent quotations from Crane’s sketch will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. There is little scholarly agreement about the veracity of this sketch. Yet it matters little whether Crane actually ever spent a night in a lodging house dressed as a “tramp.” Certainly the revisions he made in the anthologized version distance the sketch from any such implications. This particular instance aside, one should note that during this period Crane consistently lived a sort of cross-dressed life, retreating repeatedly to his brother Edmund’s Lake View (now Paterson) home where he “could count on a meal, a bed, and a writing table after his forays in the New York slums”; see Christopher Benley, The Double Life of Stephen Crane (New York, 1992), 58. Class-transvestite tales such as his seem always to inhabit a thin border between factual account and fictive projection—veracity continually claimed even as “literary” stylistics are baldly flaunted. What interests me most is not discernment, but rather the tenacious attempt to construct factual “authority” out of the figures of literary document.

3. Although there are numerous instances of cross-racial passing and nonwhite undercover reportage in the United States, for clarity and precision I have focused exclusively on white class transvestites. Cross-racial passing is obviously motivated by very different social forces, and I have found no instances of nonwhite class transvestism during the period in question.

4. William James, “What Makes Life Significant,” in The Writings of William James, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago, 1977), 649. James’s essay (originally published in 1899) is itself an interesting addition to this paradigm. For James, the “blindness” and “mediocrity” of “middle-class paradise” (647) can only be punctured by the heroic “daily lives of the laboring classes.” Such heroism is, of course, not allowed to stand unaltered, but must be recapitulated within a middle-class “ideal” of “depth . . . of character” (657).


8. As Christopher Wilson notes, by the 1890s, “reporting had become a pressurized and unstable world; rather than an objective social laboratory, reporters now witness events in which their own presence and craft were implicated: events that were preplanned, promoted, or, in extreme cases, even fabricated”; The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era (Athens, Ga., 1985), 39. There is no biography of Annie Laurie (the pseudonym of Winifred Sweet Black Bonfils), but see W. A. Swandberg, Citizen Hearst: A Biography of W. R. Hearst (New York, 1961), 59–60, 74–5, and Ishbel Ross, Ladies of the Press (New York, 1936), 60–73. On Nellie Bly’s transvestite reporting see Brooke Kroeger, Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist (New York, 1994), 79–136.


14. Whiting Williams published a number of works that drew upon his early proletarian journeys. See, for example, Whiting Williams, *What’s on the Worker’s Mind* (New York, 1920), and Whiting Williams, *America’s Mainspring and the Great Society* (New York, 1967).


17. James Agee and Walker Evans’ text is, I trust, well enough known. This is Paramount’s summary of *Sullivan’s Travels* (written without irony): “A successful Hollywood director disguises himself as a bum and sets off to see America from the bottom up. In the midst of the brutality and despair, he makes a valuable discovery—that what the downtrodden need most is laughter.” A recent newspaper article provides an interesting contemporary manifestation of this cross-dressing technique. In Jane H. Lii, “Week in Sweatshop Reveals Grim Conspiracy of the Poor,” *New York Times*, 12 March 1995, A1, the author goes undercover to expose the “complicity” of immigrant sweatshop workers with immigrant sweatshop owners. Reactionary politics aside, the absence of the usual account of sartorial dissimulation raises an interesting point. In our period of so-called deindustrialization, the proletariat (both inside and outside the U.S.) becomes increasingly recognized by its racial characteristics. The author’s race and ability to speak Cantonese are now, at least from her point of view, sufficient prerequisites to passing.

18. Michael Denning has documented a number of such instances. See his *Mechanic Accents: Divine Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York, 1987), 85–148. Carolyn Porter has also examined the “plight of the participant observer” in *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner* (Middletown, Conn., 1981). Though her focus is on more canonical figures and less literal participation, I have found her discussions of alienation and reification highly productive.


23. Ringenbach, Tramps and Reformers, 43–47. See also Carlos A. Schwantes, Coxey’s Army (Lincoln, Nebr., 1985).
24. Denny’s comparison between tramps and wife-beaters is one of a number of seemingly incidental comments that align tramps with other miscreants who do violence to bourgeois gender norms. By visibly and violently enacting the repressive power that was supposed to remain hidden and normalized within the domestic sphere, the wife-beater exceeded the limits of social control. The tramp’s vagrancy similarly enacted and displayed a male right to freedom and mobility that was supposed to be bounded by familial obligations. In short, what Denny objects to is not the exercise of male privilege, but its moments of exaggeration and visibility. Calling for the whipping post rather than the prison matches visible crime with visible punishment; C. S. Denny, “The Whipping-Post for Tramps,” Century 49 (March 1895): 794. On the legal rights of tramps → Amy Dru Stanley, “Beggars Can’t Be Choosers: Compulsion and Contract in Postbellum America,” Journal of American History 78 (March 1992): 1265–93.
25. There is little specific information on Jack London’s time in Coxey’s Army, but see Joan London, Jack London and His Times: An Unconventional Biography (New York, 1939), 71–72, and Etulain, introduction to Jack London on the Road, 1–27.
26. Though written in 1897, Jack London’s “The Road” was not published until Jack London Reports published it in 1970. It is also included in Etulain, Jack London on the Road, 70. All subsequent quotations from London’s sketch will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
27. As I indicate, London’s treatment of the tramp changes after his radicalization. As a socialist, his economic analysis gains a certain economic rigor at the expense of his previous sympathy. London’s fear of the abject poor is, perhaps, never more evident than in this remarkable passage from the 1907 novel, The Iron Heel (London, 1990):

I had seen the people of the abyss before, gone through its ghettos, and thought I knew it; but I found that I was now looking on it for the first time. Dumb apathy had vanished. It was now dynamic—a fascinating spectacle of dread. It surged past my vision in concrete waves of wrath, snarling and growing carnivorous, drunk with hatred, drunk with lust for blood—men, women, and children, in rags and tatters, dim ferocious intelligences with all the godlike blotted from their features and all the fiendlike stamped in, apes, and tigers, anaemic consumptives and great hairy beasts of burden, wan faces from which vampire society had sucked the juice of life, bloated forms swollen with physical grossness and corruption, withered legs and death’s heads bearded like patriarchs, festering youth and festering age, faces of fiends, crooked, twisted, misshapen monsters blasted with the ravages of disease and all the horrors of chronic innutrition—the refuse and the scum of life, a raging, screaming, screeching, demoniacal horde. (207)
28. Flynt, Tramping, ix. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.
31. For a critical reading of the mixed success of communitarian efforts to create community within the institutional setting see Jean B. Quandt, From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of Progressive Intellectuals (New Brunswick, N.J., 1970), 79–157.
32. Alvan Francis Sanborn, *Moody’s Lodging House and Other Tenement Sketches* (Boston, 1895), 8. All subsequent quotations from Sanborn’s sketches will be cited parenthetically in the text.

33. Moralistic mid-nineteenth-century studies are numerous. For some more notable examples see Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (New York, 1848); Edwin H. Chapin, *Moral Aspects of City Life* (New York, 1853); and John Todd, *Moral Influence, Dangers, and Duties, Connected with Great Cities* (New York, 1841). One can, of course, find racial taxonomies in the “sociological” studies of such proslavery writers as George Fitzhugh and John C. Calhoun. Scholars more seldom acknowledge the profound influence of racist ethnography and phrenology on later nineteenth-century social scientists. The current critical re-evaluation of Charles Loring Brace (author of *The Dangerous Classes of New York* [New York, 1872]) manages to effectively sidestep his earlier work. See particularly his *The Races of the Old World: A Manual of Ethnology* (New York, 1870).

34. Keith Leland Gandal, “The Spectacle of the Poor: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Representation of Slum Life” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1990), 139–42.

35. Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York, 1890), 121. The critical literature on Riis is large and rapidly growing. Along with Gandal’s fine study see Lewis Fried, *Makers of the City* (Amherst, Mass., 1990), and James B. Lane, *Jacob A. Riis and the American City* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1974).


38. Claudia B. Kidwell and Margaret C. Christman, *Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America* (Washington, D.C., 1974), 115. Kidwell and Christman’s study is still the classic treatment of ready-made clothing, but see also Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (New York, 1981), 140–46. Lurie sharpens Kidwell and Christman’s laudatory analysis by arguing that the “sack suit . . . not only flatters the inactive, it deforms the laborious. It was designed for men who did little or no physical work and were therefore tall in relation to their breadth; it accommodated and emphasized the gestures of walking, sitting, speaking and pointing, but not those of running, lifting, carrying, hauling and digging. In addition, since it rumpled and soiled easily, it demanded to be worn indoors or on city streets. When physically active men with broad shoulders, deep chests and well-developed muscles put on cheap versions of the sack suit they looked misshapen, even deformed” (141).


40. For Garber, the transvestite “marks a place of possibility” (11) because s/he functions as a “third term,” reconfiguring (disfiguring) the original dyadic relations. To study the transvestite is to understand “natural” hierarchies as innately “cultural.” The transvestite is thus “inextricable” (13) from Lacan’s Symbolic Order, the site of “immersion in the codes and constraints of culture” (12). Yet, by making transvestism always already about culture (she divides her study into an exploration of “the way transvestism creates culture” and “the way in which culture creates transvestites” [16]), she avoids an analysis of the ways in which such bodily acts of acculturation can underwrite regressive ideologies. In other words, the move from an embodied “nature” to an embodied “culture” only ensures that disciplinary structures must be iterated in new terms. To assume that such terms will be liberating is to vastly underestimate both the flexibility of disciplinary discourses and regressive capabilities of cultural modes of figuration.
42. Wyckoff, The East, 61.
45. Lears, No Place of Grace, 5.
52. London, Abyss, 55, 39, 221.
54. On this point see Mari Jo Buhle, Women and American Socialism (Urbana, 1981), 49–103. “The Gilded Age woman’s movement,” she argues, “named women’s own institutions a motive force for social change; for the hallowed class consciousness they substituted an alternative sensibility, gender consciousness or faith in a collective sisterhood” (53). Such a substitution, she notes, did not always facilitate their larger political goals: “Class differences often proved insuperable, and many dreams of universal sisterhood went unfulfilled. . . . Sisterly cooperation alone could not overcome the larger obstacles to women’s advancement” (59). While less critical of these reformers’ class politics, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg is also good on this point. See her Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York, 1985), 174–75.
56. Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct, 263.
59. Parker, Working, ix.
60. The critical literature on cultural pluralism is, as one might imagine, vast and largely unsynthesized. A good starting point is Crawford Young, The Politics of Cultural Pluralism (Madison, Wisc., 1976).

62. Martha Banta, *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen, and Ford* (Chicago, 1993). Indeed, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward argued some time ago that relief efforts and reform campaigns aimed at the poor were nothing if not complicitous with contemporaneous managerial movements to cut wages and “de-skill” workers in the traditional industries. In both cases, the goal was to increase industrial productivity and profit by limiting the possibilities for wages or other forms of subsistence outside of a well regulated political and industrial system; Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York, 1971).

