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Spaces of Encounter: The Cultural Labor of Class Difference

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Abstract

This article explores the complicated relationship between narratives of working-class America and formations of national Otherness. Arguing that class, sex, and ethnicity are deeply relational, it seeks to map the symbolic terrain and emotional depth of class difference as it circulates in the American imaginary. It asks how we might think about the cultural poetics of class difference in ways that make a difference—in ways that register class narratives as participants in constructions of the Nation and the “normal,” the irregular and the queer? Attending to the kinds of emotional and conceptual services stories of class perform, it locates “class” as part of a discursive imaginary topography that structures and turns narratives of working men and women into spaces of encounter, contest, and containment.

My own feeling is that ‘identity’ is an acutely double-edged weapon—not useless, but dependent on the context, sometimes risky—and that the closeness between an identity and a derogatory identification may . . . resemble that between being a subject and the process of subjectification.

Denise Riley¹

Let me begin with two images that saturated the news media during one week in the winter of 2004. The first is the international speedway at the Daytona 500 where 180,000 racing fans (“some a few beers into the celebrations”), rev up to hear President Bush commence race week activities. Air Force One is parked on an airfield adjacent to the stands as Bush dons his snappy new Nascar jacket, rolls into the stadium and shouts the traditional, “Gentlemen, start your engines.” The other image is of hundreds of gay couples flocking to San Francisco to get married before state lawmakers can go to court to seek an injunction. On the opposite coast Massachusetts lawmakers are shown heatedly debating a constitutional ban against gay marriage as opponents, unable to get into the gallery, spill over into Boston’s angry streets where demonstrations continue for three days.²

At first glance, these images seem disconnected and worlds apart: the former a cynical nod to the rural working classes and the votes they represent, the latter a familiar reportage of the sexually deviant “acting up” and “in your face.” But in the discursive imaginary topography of American culture, these two media moments share a complicated history of encounter that has shaped modernist conceptions of national Otherness in ways that conjoin the

working classes, especially rural wage-earners, with the spectacular and the illicit—oddities of the eye their irregularities represent. In his recent examination of social thought and American literature, Michael Trask argues that “class and sex are deeply relational,” historically moving in tandem as mutual sites of social anxiety, threat, and displacement, especially during times of rapid change and wide spread dislocation. “The disobedience and lawlessness that social theorists located in the erotic realm,” Trash points out, “had a close affinity to the disobedience that contemporaries saw as the defining attribute of the class other.”³

While Trask is concerned with the first quarter of the twentieth century, the deployment of sexual illicitness in the making of working-class identity has a long genealogy rooted in a tradition of representational practices.⁴ In recent years scholars have begun to map the symbolic charge and psychological depth of such practices and the ways in which “mismatches between sex, gender, and desire” have been central to the establishment of the “unnatural” Otherness of the margins and the normalizing “us-ness” of the center.⁵ Because national unity demands the erasure or masking of class difference, moral discourses and “sex panics” have been especially effective in mobilizing a national sense of belonging, especially during moments of crisis. Anna Marie Smith shows, for example, that in the Thatcherite purge against British homosexuality “Englishness” depended upon queerness as a way to imagine spaces of national harmony and collective memories of “our” nation.

Homophobic discourse is organized not around a fear of otherness but around an obsession with otherness. This obsession is structured symptomatically; insofar as homophobic representations condensed a whole range of anxieties onto the queerness signifier, queerness began to function as a supplement to Thatcherite discourse. Queerness became one of the enemy elements which supported the phantasmatic construction of the family as the antagonism-free center of the British nation.⁶

Studies like these push labor historians to think about representational practices that weld together cultural unity in the face of economic disparities and social inequalities. The operations of Otherness underscore as well the instability of class identities and the limits of conceptualizing class difference in socioeconomic terms alone; class becomes both an emotionally charged social identity and a signifying practice always at work. And for many Americans, class resonates less as a function of economic power, than as an effect of cultural difference and social style, “a matter of embodied identity akin to the classification of erotic desire less in terms of object choice, than according to sexual types.”⁷ Picture the Nascar fan as his rural, southern, unassimilated image took hold in relation to the threatened chaos and queer desires enacted by gay marriage. Long before the death of the Nascar racing hero Dale Earnhardt, stock car fans hovered in the nooks and crannies of national culture, a vague part of the rural “toothless and couthless.” Their motto, “Guns, God and Guts,” emblazoned

on tattooed arms, bumper stickers, and T-shirts, encoded for many middle-class Americans the submerged violence and intractable nature of a trashy “out there.” Associated with the South and its moonshine-running beginnings, stock car racing in turn provided the disaffected and dissatisfied denizens of small town America an identity as fans, “pit lizards” and “primary bad boys” whose “white trashy” style circulated in the national imaginary even as their sport moved north and west and fans grew more middle-class and female.⁸ When Earnhardt died in a sensational crash in 2001, urbanized network newscasters had to scramble to find out who exactly he was while millions of rural and small-town Americans expressed their grief in public demonstrations and radio talk shows.

For Bush, the challenge was to assimilate a combative Otherness into “Middle America” by turning “primary bad boys” into “Nascar Dads.” Like their suburban counterparts, the “Soccer Mom,” Nascar Dads accrued social legitimacy as Middle Americans through their dual position as sexually reproductive family members and as consumers pursuing the national interest through undemanding participation in commercialized leisure and corporate-sponsored sports. Shaped in relation to competing images of homosexual alterity and the assault it represented on heterosexual marriage and military effectiveness (unsolved by the “don’t ask don’t tell” policies of the Pentagon) Nascar Dads assimilated into “our nation” as part of what Lizabeth Cohen describes as the “consumer/citizen/taxpayer/voter,” a form of citizenship organized around the ability of the government to service consumer needs and demands.⁹ In the dreams of the Right, the Nascar Dads marched to the beat of the Consumer Republic. “One of the things about Nascar and Nascar fans,” Mr. Bush gushed, “is they support *our* military . . . I’m the commander in chief of a great group of people, and to know that citizens who support Nascar support them makes me feel good.” *They* may be different, but Nascar Dads share “our” values, not as a threatening Other with “lower” desires or competing economic interests, but as a familiar social style and cultural type (hence the jacket). “They stand at attention when the national anthem is played,” Bill France, Jr., former President of Nascar and family friend of the Bush’s, explained. “A lot of people don’t do that anymore.”¹⁰ The primary bad boy becomes moral citizen.

For historians of labor history who have long shared with anthropologists, sociologists, regionalists, and professional observers of all sorts, an affinity for translating and representing working-class life and culture, questions of alterity and otherness provide a timely opportunity to explore the cultural operations of class difference and the kinds of politics (and poetics) such differences enact.¹¹ Who gets othered and who gets to belong in America? Where is the ordinary located and how do stories of working-class life and culture become the troubling and troubled route that gets “us” there? If as Trinh T. Minh-ha has argued, “the silent common people” have become the “fundamental referent of the social,” how and under what circumstances is their difference—their unfamiliarity and queerness—summoned to locate and organize the normal and all that subverts it?¹² How, in other words, might we think about the cultural

poetics of class difference in ways that make a difference—in ways that register class narratives as participants in constructions and violations of the Nation and the normal, the irregular and the queer? Paying attention to the narrative operations of difference also opens to review the erasures and maskings they perform as typologies of otherness elide economic disparities and hierarchies of power. Such an analysis allows us to attend as well to the kinds of emotional and conceptual services these stories perform and the kinds of publics they bring into being. From this perspective class takes on shape and meaning as part of a discursive imaginary topography where “difference” crackles with the anxieties it structures and turns narratives of working men and women into spaces of social encounter and political engagement.¹³

Spaces, we might argue, like those enacted in the narrative performances and cultural poetics of the “bottom up.”¹⁴ Labor historians know this site as a domain where ordinary people (often read male) dwell. Intensely local, it defines the parameters of a working-class culture both “inarticulate” and conceptually out of the way, on the gritty or “rough” margins of American society and culture. But it is also a representational strategy that opens up for discussion the modernist urge to see “workers” as culturally contained, their lives essentially “different,” their bodies (as image, display, and performance) signs of authenticity, and their communities, essentialized topographies of strangeness.

Consider for a moment the “urban jungles” of the turn-of-the-century as they gathered into an imaginary terrain of “ex-centricity,” “genuine experience,” and “mystified space.”¹⁵ In-filled with “life new and strange,” the quotidian neighborhoods of America’s laboring classes engendered a zone of difference that was continually discovered, explored, investigated, and documented but which retained nonetheless their obdurate status as unassimilated Home to the Nation’s others. Here was a world of social encounter and visual trespass where every glance, look, or gesture became first an act of imagination and only later of translation and representation. The “world of the worker” grew highly productive as an extra-ordinary subject for debate, analysis, celebration, and as an ex-centric space of leisure, rumination, fantasy, and self-invention. All was constant surprise at street level. Faces, clothes, possessions, even the streets themselves shook off the familiar and generated a flood of explanatory excitement that never quite explained the intense longing that lingered just beyond the flow of raw data and scientific survey. Outsiders watched with fascination as either their worst nightmares or secret hopes unfolded in the luminous spaces somewhere “down-and-out.”¹⁶

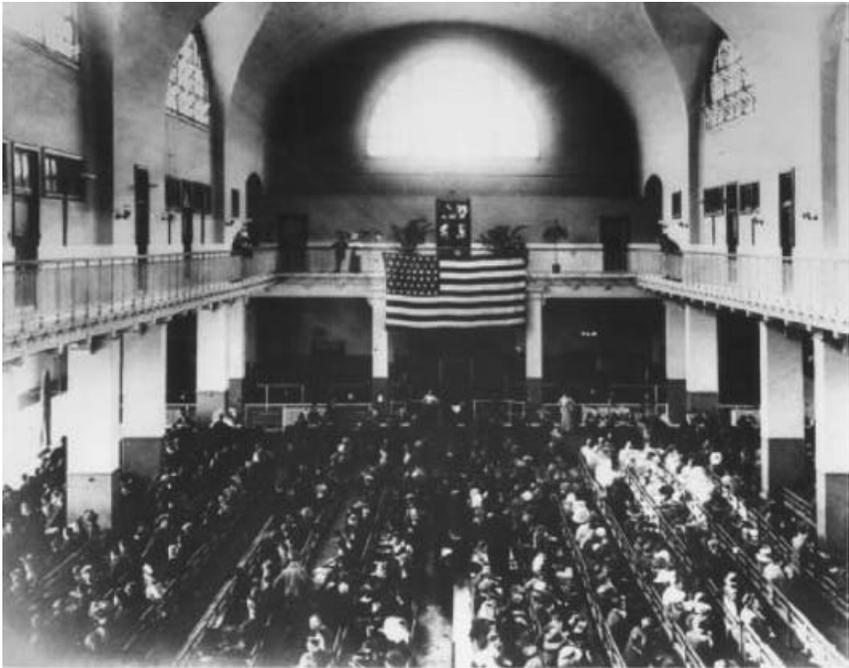
Recall too the fierce looking about that gave to immigrants and wage earners a situatedness that conflated socioeconomic difference with the urban spectacle and the pleasures and privileges of traveling through and looking about. Picture the “poet-observer” Jack Reed as he boarded the ferry that would take him from his Greenwich Village apartment to the silk city across the Hudson River. Described by one visitor as a “Mecca for magazine writers, photographers, and settlement workers,” Paterson, New Jersey’s pedestrian traffic from lower Manhattan was so thick on Sundays that extra ferries were

put into service to accommodate weekly excursionists. Like many others keen to observe a place so “strange and compelling,” Reed went to the city to see for himself the immigrant strikers of 1913 and record “the wretchedness of their lives and the glory of their revolt.” “I went to Paterson,” he later explained, “to watch it.”¹⁷ Stirred by what he saw in the silk city, Reed quit his job and dedicated himself to bringing the story of industrial workers to the attention of a public he believed to be both indifferent and ill-informed.

In his enthusiasm and fascination with the working classes, Reed revealed himself to be very much a man of his own class and time. As he watched Paterson, the artist John Sloan “peeped” at his rear-view neighbors on Manhattan’s Twenty-Third Street. “I am in the habit of *watching every bit* of human life I can see about my windows,” wrote Sloan in his diary. “I peep,” he explained, “through real interest, not being observed myself.”¹⁸ Others, like Progressive reformers Marie Van Vorst and her sister-in-law Mrs. John Van Vorst cloaked their peeping in the new garb of social science: participant observation and social documentation. They went underground by going undercover. Exchanging their sealskin coats and kid gloves for gray serge and wool, these two “gentlewomen,” disguised themselves and entered the ranks of working women as Bell Ballard and Esther Kelly.¹⁹ “I hoped,” wrote Marie, “to be a mirror that should reflect the woman who toils.”²⁰ Still others simply strolled into the working-class districts of nearby towns or on special occasions took the ferry to Ellis island to promenade along the upper balconies and to see for themselves America’s exotic new arrivals from eastern and southern Europe (Figure 1).

To be certain, there were profound differences in both the construction and deployment of these visions of working-class life. Conservatives, reformers, and intellectuals, as well as trade unionists, radicals, and reporters, fashioned their imaginations to legitimate different stories and to support sharply divergent social agenda. By definition “watchers” privileged themselves as narrators, but the distance between the observer and the observed varied significantly among each group. Allying themselves with the workers they sought to help, often living in their neighborhoods and on their blocks, reformers, radicals, and labor leaders claimed special knowledge of working-class and immigrant life positioning themselves at the forefront of class struggle and movements for social change. Conservatives on the other hand, saw in their sharp separation from the “hordes” they depicted the very Americanness they labored to guard and protect. But in their ability to watch—to view as their own the spaces of others and to represent even the most casual observations as knowledge of social—the bohemian and bourgeoisie were brothers, and occasionally sisters, under the skin. Here, it has been argued, were the real magicians of the modern age.

Peeping through real interest, outsiders saw the working classes in pictorial ways that they themselves had helped to create. Located at the “bottom,” in the “underbrush,” on “skid row,” and down in the “urban jungle,” proletarian culture dug in and took root as an encompassed “world of difference.”²¹ Enacted as part of the “vicarious excitements” found in the urban spectacle,



1. "Great Hall Number Three" Ellis Island. Reprinted courtesy of the Statue of Liberty National Monument.

the poetic dwelling places of immigrants, wage laborers, and the working poor, conjured a visual economy that spilled into popular and academic formulations of class.²² Not unlike the "folk" culture uncovered by turn-of-the-century regionalists, urban wage-earners and the poor offered new staging grounds that extended authorship not only to those "traditionally distanced from literary lives," but to those long kept on the margins of academic respectability and professional legitimacy. Female journalists, women visitors, social workers, religious reformers, radical artists, and muckrakers of various stripes collectively turned "down and out" and discovered, as Richard Brodhead put it, the "opportunity it offered."²³ Caught up in the localizing strategies of these social cartographers and the graphic knowledges their stories produced, wage-earners conceptually traveled "from the bottom up" and into a shadow archive of still recognizable cultural types and peculiar or heroic traits.²⁴

Here we might argue is where Culture finds a home in motion fruitfully leading historians not simply to the "gist of things" (and the certainties of social science analysis) but to shifting spaces of engagement and encounter where class difference gets real even as it gets made up. To write labor or working-class history from such a perspective is to recognize that "culture," as the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart argues, is not a thing that can ever be gotten "right." "It is not an end, or a blueprint for thinking and acting,"

Stewart writes, “but a constant beginning again—a search, an argument, an unfinished longing. The very effort to imagine it then, is itself a continuous effort to reopen stories, and spaces of cultural critique that are just as continuously being slammed shut with every new “solution” to the problem of culture and theory.”²⁵ For Stewart, the challenge is how to fashion interpretation into a “productive gap” that “gives pause to consider the density and force of cultural politics,”—a gap she calls “a space on the side of the road.”

To think of culture from this perspective is to think less about where “it” resides (in material conditions as “resource” or, as Stewart Hall rightly argues as well, “threaded through all social practices”) and more about how it travels in the context of unequal social relations and asymmetrical relations of power. In the terms of anthropologist James Clifford, such a perspective means turning away from the *roots* of things and towards the *routes* things take. In his influential and controversial essay, “Traveling Cultures,” Clifford calls attention to the ways in which ethnographic practices in general, and cultural analysis in particular, constitute its objects in spatial terms that center *the culture* within a bounded locus such as the community, the village, or the field. Hoping to “shake things up a bit,” he challenges researchers to conjure more fluid localizations—a boat, train, or hotel—as a way to bring into focus the kinds of encounters and exchanges cultural translation tends to eclipse. Not unlike the kind of borderland studies called forth by Chicano scholars and activists, Clifford hopes that by “tipping the balance towards travel,” what will come into the center of analysis is neither a new margin nor the intercultural figure of the “traveler,” but rather new representational strategies that would allow for a more fluid, comparative, and multipositional conceptions of culture.

It is not Clifford’s intention in other words, to create a new binary between dwelling and travel, but rather as he puts it, “to sketch a comparative cultural studies approach to specific histories, tactics, everyday practices of dwelling and traveling: traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-traveling.” Questioning the logics of rootedness, “native” and the assumptions of the “local,” this “new” ethnography joins feminists, postcolonial theorists, and other poststructuralists in an effort to reset the analytic compass towards sites of “displacement, interference, and interaction.”²⁶

Like Stewart then, Clifford reminds us that stories of working-class life and culture share some of the narrative predicaments recently addressed by critics of traditional ethnographic writing, namely “the habit while purporting to grasp an alien cultural system of covertly lifting it out of history, constituting it as a self-contained form belonging to the past rather an interactive force still adapting in the present.”²⁷ In recent years, of course, “botanizing the asphalt” has come to represent an older model of class slumming and cultural representation. Feminist historians of women, art, ethnicity, literature, and the documentary arts have been especially helpful in illuminating the tainted history and politics of cross class looking—and of how “class represents,” especially during the decades when “photography and fiction became central mechanisms for class

representation.”²⁸ Scholars today are more apt to conjure working-class culture as internally diverse, more a borderland than as a contained and fixed culture.

Still, it is difficult to talk about the working classes without traversing and organizing places of alterity and cultural Otherness. Thick with ethnographic description and the kinds of graphic knowledge caught up with them, stories of working-class life tend to work in ways much like the spatial stories studied by Michel de Certeau as “narrative actions” tense with “performative force.”²⁹ They move “us” in other words, because they *go* not just somewhere, but to places where Place still seems to matter: the gritty neighborhoods pictured in *Good Will Hunting*’s South Boston, the haunted backwaters of *Mystic River*, the heroic “hollers” of Appalachian coalfields, the isolated pockets of Frederick Wiseman’s *Belfast, Maine*. Stories of working-class America, in other words, tend to “do what they say”: they locate a geographical “elsewhere” and an imaginary “beyond” that tends to enact a poetics of unfamiliarity and queerness where, as Stewart argues, “difference itself marks the space of culture.”³⁰ They are interesting, as George Orwell noted in his classic account of the *Down and Out in Paris and London*, “in the same way as a travel diary is interesting.”³¹ They delimit and exoticize. And because proletarian narratives are spatial as well as literary tales, they don’t merely map a zone of difference, they “create a field” that makes difference subject to intervention. They precede, explains de Certeau, “ahead of social practices in order to open a field for them.” They are not content to simply tell adventures or narrate journeys, “they make the journey before or during the time the feet perform it.”³² Stories of class are always tales with a political consequence.

The work of cultural historians has been especially helpful here. In his study of “down and out” literature during the Progressive era, Mark Pittenger points to the constructed nature of America’s urban “underclass.”³³ He perceptively shows that for many social investigators, cultural difference acquired enormous new explanatory power for an emerging middle class unwilling to abandon the fiction of a classless America. Laboring people and the poor collectively rose into national view “primarily as the product of fixed behavioral and cultural traits, and only secondarily as the spawn of socioeconomic factors.”³⁴ “Culture” announced itself in the local and peculiar and became a way to read working-class “types” whose closeness to nature and heritable physiology helped explain life’s failures within a narrative of capitalist success and American progress. “A world of difference” snapped into explanatory view in the straight story of classless society and cultural deficiency.

Mass-produced narratives of working-class realism slowly but significantly conflated class difference and cultural otherness. This was true even among Progressive reformers who sought to distance themselves from the Lamarckian view of biology. Loosely formulated around a set of beliefs that gave to the environment a major role in shaping class-specific traits, Lamarckism embraced the notion that such traits, once acquired, would pass down to one’s progeny marking the children of the working classes as indelibly as any physical disease. While many writers and reformers explicitly rejected

this view of things, they nevertheless represented it in graphic stories that recorded the “downward spiral” of the unemployed, the “vicious cycle” of poverty, and more recently, the “cultural deficiency” of the working poor. In the 1960s, poverty itself would become a particularized and stigmatized “culture” that trapped a new “underclass” conceptually decentered and uncoupled from economic fluctuations, unemployment, or any other social forces. As Laura Browder astutely notes, poverty became in many ways “as much an ethnic condition as a social one.”³⁵

Gathered into signs that marked the “space of ex-centricity and marginalia,” the working class grew “real” as a semiological system of collective difference that became immediately visible on the surface of the self. Their particularity as “types” expanded as their individuation contracted and emptied of meaning. “They ain’t folks,” explained a Yankee observer of New England mill hands, “they’re just a parcel of images.” Social investigators like John and Marie Van Vorst provided readers with the visual codes and markers that made it possible to see *The Woman Who Toils* most clearly as a social style and cultural type and only dimly as a function of socioeconomic systems and policy. It was a modernist taxonomy of low, odd, irregular, and curious images that authenticated the differences it authored and provided moral certainty to those who would contain them.

What I have attempted to do here is merely sketch in a somewhat general way the narrative routes working-class difference takes as it circulates in the national imaginary as both a subject of history and as an object emptied of history and put to social use. Imagining class itself becomes a socially constitutive act as narratives of working-class life service the psychic and emotional needs of readers and viewers they historically call into being. The consumption of working-class culture, for example, as fiction, as art, as social science, as aesthetic style—is always conjoined with needs other than those specified as acts of readerly or visual pleasure. To a certain extent, this is familiar story about identity formation and the totalizing strategies of cross class representation. But there is another story here as well and it begins with the slippages of representation and the kinds of gaps queerness enacts as class otherness insinuates itself in relations of looking.

In her ethnographic study of southwestern West Virginia, Stewart argues that stories of Appalachia provide an “other” (story of) America that stands as a kind of “back talk” to “America’s mythic claims to realism, progress, and order.” Defined in relation to the “empty list that is America,” Appalachia holds out a poetics of “otherness” historically overstuffed with desire and dread where “difference itself marks the space of culture.” Stewart’s goal is not to police “the errors or crimes of representation,” nor is it to “disprove” “debunk” or “counter romance with realism.” Rather she seeks (among other things) to explore the cultural poetics of Otherness as a haunted space of encounter—a space shoved in the margins but which lingers at the center of things like an ache on the national consciousness and a reminder “of something it cannot quite grasp.”³⁶

Consider, for example, the rural wage-earner. In highly storied places like eastern Kentucky and northern New England, rural labor was conceptually positioned by the antimodernist legacies of “local color” where “native” marked the parameters of regional authenticity and the polar opposite of middle-class experience and bourgeois regimes of order, rationality, sexual propriety, logic, and reasoned critique. Unlike the threatening tableau of urban “types,” rural populations historically stretched across the social imaginary in a cavalcade of eccentric and quaint characters whose “queer” insular lives directed image-makers (and image consumers) towards the bounded terrain of the “local” and its encompassed folklore. Conceptually situated in the hidden pockets and rural backwaters of America, rural men and women who criss-crossed the geographic and spatial boundaries of their homes to juggle wage jobs in fishing boats, canneries, factories, mines, fields, and stores, with the non-paid demands of the family economy, entered the national imaginary through a series of repetitive mimetic devices that sought to establish their status either as picturesque natives unsullied by modernity, or as eccentricities of modernity—odd, queer types—“red necks” rather than blue collars. Here, sociality is texted in irregular speech patterns, oddball behaviors, suspicious kinship relations, physical deformities, rough music, or alternately in hand craftsmanship, family loyalty, and a fierce sense of Place.³⁷

This is the kind of “faulty” representation widely critiqued in recent years, and as a number of cultural historians have shown, not without good reason. David Whisnet’s work shows, for example, that the social identity of Kentucky “natives” and the musically inclined “mountain folk” was simultaneously a zone of difference and a displacement within powerful discourses on American progress and civilization.³⁸ Whether in regionalist writings, documentary photography, journalists’ accounts, or through the ministrations of cultural workers and settlement schools, distinct social audiences colluded in the discovery of a rural “out there” seemingly abandoned by time and occupied by “all things native and fine.”

Both backwoods people and backwater places, of course, proved enormously valuable as a way to ease the cultural transition to modern forms of capitalism. As a place of scenery, pastoral contemplation, retreat, and promised renewal, the rural hinterlands offered both a real and imaginary escape from the frenzied pace of corporate life, wage labor, and suburban dullness. In New England, as in Appalachia, the lore of the local and native could be both marketable and highly profitable. As Dona Brown perceptively argues, “the society that separated home from work, women from men, and aesthetic experience from work and daily life,” also created a “separate sphere for tourist experiences” that converted decaying villages, closed factories, and declining farmland, into marketable images for a newly “invented New England.”³⁹ The crippling effects of capitalism receded from view as processes of commodification (re)presented rural decline and poverty as an aesthetic experience, a nostalgic sign of pastoral, preindustrial, “colonial” Americana. Emptied of explanatory power, the old wharves, smokeless mill stacks, and grubby farms

floated in a present Michael Frisch describes in a different context, as “unencumbered, unconstrained, and uninstructed by any sense of how it came to be.” Otherness lost its edge in the sigh of nostalgia and in a visual economy of lost childhood and sentimental journeys back to the bucolic “highways and byways” of olden days. The queer turned quaint while the landscape grew ruminative and elegiac. “The barnacles and eel-grass cling to the piles of the crumbling wharves, where the sunshine lies lovingly, bringing out the faint spicy odor that haunts the place—the ghost of the old dead West India trade!”⁴⁰

Located outside of time and relations of production, wage-earners in regions like Kentucky and northern New England collapsed into a frozen ethnographic space of eccentric “ways” in need of journalistic excavation and anthropological explication. Conflict took a vacation, time warped, things got stuck. Even Harlan County, well known for its history of industrial unionism, carries with it a shadow archive of victimized and passive otherness made famous by the poverty tours of the 1960s. As politicians and journalists of every political persuasion, went “on the road” and into eastern Kentucky, the failures of Second World War capitalism morphed into a visual narrative of geographic insularity and cultural intractability that spawned, as Charles Karult put it, a “permanent poor.” These were the faces (once again) of cultural victims not social insurgents or union activists. How then to explain labor militancy except as the result of heroic and spontaneous efforts by traditional forces in the throes of modernization, or, alternatively, as the result of the ubiquitous outside agitator?

“I began to wonder,” explained the Italian labor historian Alessandro Portelli, “why these two places—the Appalachia coalfields and the rural backyards of the Terni steelworks—held such a grip on my imagination.”⁴¹ For Portelli, like many labor historians, Harlan County excited because it represented “a thriving traditional, rural culture . . . suddenly brought face to face with full-blown industrial development.” There is the easy assumption that workers in this part of the country confront modern industrial forces with “the integrity of traditional forms of expression” that “overlap, conflict, or mix” with working-class culture. While Portelli uses this insight to self-reflexively map patterns of paternalism in the “literally and figuratively fenced in” company towns and union shops of Kentucky, Appalachian Otherness has long provided a visual repertoire of queerness and unassimilated difference that historically oriented practices of looking for image makers who labored in its orbit.⁴²

In no way has this been more evident than in the so-called “new realism” that has self-consciously sought in recent years to reposition the rural working classes in representations of northern New England and, especially, in mythical Maine. Fueled by the regionalist impulse that has made the cultural “out there” a key aesthetic for urban consumers of outsider art, “insider” portraits of “the other Maine” have grown enormously popular in the past two decades. For the “outsiders-who-make-insiders-insiders,” as Foucault put it, the search for

the “real Maine” has meant exposing “the largely unseen social reality of the majority of the inhabitants of ‘vacationland,’” a reference to the tourist-inspired motto that adorns Maine’s automobile license plates and which has come to define for many critics the polar opposite of “realness” in Maine (Figure 2).⁴³

Closely identified with the writings of Carolyn Chute, Ernest Hebert, Russel Banks, and Cathy Pellitier, the “new realism” has penetrated almost every cultural realm in an effort to highlight the social world of northern New England’s wage-earning others. As “art” it has found expression in the culture industry of galleries and museums that stretch from New York City to mid-coast Maine, where images of hardscrabble toilers, impoverished woodsmen, peculiar “hermits,” chainsaw carvers, illiterate artists, and folksy fishermen fetch both tourist dollars and critical praise. As social documentary, it has procured a profitable outlet in videos, craft schools, films, and magazines eager to represent and display what the Portland-based documentary field school Salt calls, “the really important people of Maine.” Featuring rough handed and unshaven faces of the region’s poorest, Salt posters entreat college students from outside the region to spend a term recording the “real” Maine. Most recently this turn towards social realism has produced Frederick Wiseman’s internationally acclaimed documentary film, *Belfast, Maine*, a four-hour cinema verité internationally praised for its ethnographic portrayal of “the other Maine tourists pass by.”⁴⁴



2. “*Belfast ME, The Movie*,” cartoon by Darryl Smith. Reprinted with permission.

At first glance, stories like these seem appropriate and politically useful responses to the economic devastation deindustrialization and free-trade policies wrought on northern New England in general, and to Maine in particular. In 1980, manufacturing was Maine's greatest source of income. Today it accounts for just below sixteen percent of the state's economy. Shoe manufacturing, sardine canning, fish processing, and textile manufacturing have rapidly given away to tourism and the low-paid service jobs it generates. Stories of the "other Maine" thus seem particularly well-poised to open up the kind of critical gaps Stewart locates in the narrative space "on the side of the road." Yet as Carolyn Chute discovered, the cultural poetics of Otherness are not inherently disruptive and transgressive acts of art are not always capable of reimagining what will free it.

Since the publication of her first book, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, Chute has tried to position herself as the underground voice for the region's rural working classes, especially for those on the margins of the industrial economy. Her novels are self-consciously crafted to disrupt representational regimes that enact a mythic Maine of preindustrial coastal beauty that erase "her people" from it. But when *The Beans* made their literary debut in 1985, reader reaction was not what Chute had expected. She found herself attending promotional functions with well-scrubbed men and women confessing to their own outrage over the habits of "white trash," especially the incest they read into a father's napping with his daughter. "We enjoyed your book," they would say and then sympathetically confide, "We've had neighbors just like that."⁴⁵ Chute was furious. "As I created the Bean people, I never dreamed how condemning many people of the middle class can be of the working class, that every action of a working-class person is seen to have a naughty intent, even as the same action in a pastel-shirt middle-class professional is seen as okay."⁴⁶ Many readers assumed the book was autobiographical, influenced no doubt by the notation on an early dust jacket that "this book was involuntarily researched," a charge Chute fiercely denies. "I go over and over these scenes in my mind wondering, wondering, wondering. How much of this misinterpretation is due to poor writing? How much . . . is due to the deep chasm between the classes?"⁴⁷ But for most readers *The Beans* provided a critique, not of capitalism, but of the social behavior of what one critic called, "these damaged, the self-injuring workers."⁴⁸

When it appeared in the mid-1980s, *The Beans* circulated amidst rising concerns over domestic violence and mounting alarms over child abuse, especially incest and child sexual assault. Chute was quick to blame feminists and "meddling social workers" for the sexualized readings of her novel. But *Egypt, Maine* rang true for readers not because it overturned normative conceptualizations of the rural working classes and confronted relations of production, but because it built upon a representational legacy that purposefully or not, reinscribed them. *The Beans* were familiar cultural types, the "phenomenally fertile" products not of capitalism run amuck, but of genes gone bad, a point the publishers would not have missed, and perhaps Chute didn't either. "I often

wonder,” the author noted years after later, “if so many reviewers hadn’t misinterpreted *Beans* as a book on incest, would anybody have bothered to pick it up at all? Aren’t the lives of ordinary people, stressed to the breaking point by the crumbling of America’s big dream, interesting enough?”⁴⁹

For Chute, the hand of feminists and social workers drew readers “titillated by something nasty.” But the new realism that Chute embraced was in many ways an artifact of the so-called new regionalism that sought in the vernacular and the local a temporary stay against the agglomerations of the transnational and global. Egypt, Maine was an antidote to multiculturalism as class difference became a useful way to talk about encompassed places. If the new realism sought to illuminate the other New England and expose the underside of the tourist economy, it became nonetheless a cultural wake-up call for those in search of places where Place still makes a difference: those embodied spaces where the “conundrum of class” elides into an imaginary topography of quirky characters, perverse desire, and oddball behavior. As part of an aesthetic encounter with rural otherness, *The Beans* helped situate interior Maine onto the consumerist map as “outsider art.”

For social historians, rural activists, local teachers, and social service agencies who struggled in the 1970s and early eighties to overturn popular fictions that totalized the working poor as immoral, lazy, overly fertile, and their families as dysfunctional, violent, and prone to genetic as well as social breakdown, Chute’s novel seemed less a voice of authenticity and Place than part of the decade’s regressive social agenda. Aware of this reading and determined to alter these perceptions, Chute sought to rewrite her book and in 1995, a new edition, published by Harcourt Brace, presented what Chute called, “the new and improved finished version.” No one noticed. *The Beans* were too familiar. They had their audience before they had their author.

As both “a people apart” and as “true natives,” differences between and among rural wage workers flatten out and freeze into a generic, undifferentiated, visual typography of cultural difference. Specific histories, divergent stories, and multiple interactions between and among white and black, male and female, industrial and agrarian labor, home and factory, “those who stayed behind” and those who come and go, blur under the contradictory signs of “local,” “native,” “rednecks,” and “white trash.” The images gather momentum and add up: “white, poor, rural, male, racist, illiterate, fundamentalist, inbred, alcoholic, violent, and given to all forms of excess, degradation, and decay.”⁵⁰ Like their urban counterparts, the rural working classes migrated into view a world and breed apart, a dysfunctional type unto themselves, what Chute calls, “a people of the tribal class.” Class becomes ethnicity, even as Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz argue, “a white form of hip authenticity.”⁵¹

And yet, still, there is about images of otherness an eeriness that unsettles even the most persuasive critiques. Drive through Maine and you’ll see the *Beans* insinuated into the landscape. The junk cars and trashed trailers heaped up along the roads bring the *Beans* into view and with them, the threatened return of their look. Postcolonial critics like Homi Bhabha find this

characteristic of colonial-looking relations “simultaneously alienating and hence potentially confrontational,” as viewers struggle to deny what they have recognized in the other as themselves.⁵² Amidst the scenic views and commodified encounters of American Places, the Beans haunt the traveler, their unquiet images part of a familiar postindustrial archive that does not look away as American progress passes it by. It is strange the way “out there” invades the “in here.”

It is strange too the way otherness lingers on the fringes of American labor history. But it is not only the jarring gazes and visual skirmishes of representation that effect the making and remaking of the working class. Class happens too in the elusive and haunting encounters of cultural otherness enacted in the cracks and fissures of official discourse and glimpsed in the conceptual spaces between here and there, home and away, “us” and “them.” It is this emotional signature of otherness that chaffs nicely against the tidiness of cultural criticism and, under certain circumstances, kicks dust in the totalizing vision of *the* mind’s eye. Here the social “field” is at best a trajectory of visual comings and goings where power relations are multiple and mobile and where culture “gets real” through hundreds of individual and collective mediations that slip in and out of historical focus. In the hidden crevices of the mind’s eye, peeping can be a subversive activity.

Working-class culture then is never one thing or another but a constant movement towards “something more” in the real and imagined margins of America. It is a fabulation that insists on the necessity of ruptures and its own historical excess.⁵³ Things happen, in other words, when the empirically elusive but ever-present image of working-class otherness invades a text.⁵⁴ Writing about the often maudlin and at times commercially exploitative image-makers of the 1930s, Paula Rabinowitz notes that, “Even in their most arrogant and sentimental appropriations the silences and invisible objects of capitalist and patriarchal oppression could be heard, their faces could be seen.”⁵⁵ Images of exclusion slip into spaces of exchange and write their own silent histories. And as Chute’s story reminds us, queerness is never far from the representative center of regionalist aesthetic practice so that class differences created in the rural “out there” have always spilled onto the normative “in here” as troubling signs of sexual, if not always economic, disruption and disavowal.⁵⁶ In the labile Home of heteronormativity, images of a sweating “out there” underscore the chronic stresses that linger between the cultural aims of unity and order, and the cultural “facts” of difference and multiplicity.⁵⁷ Spaces like these have tales to tell, and how we do so will always make a difference.

NOTES

1. Denise Riley, “A Short History of Some Preoccupations,” in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds. *Feminists Theorize The Political* (New York, 1992), 122.

2. For example, see front page color photos: “As All Think of the Big Race Ahead,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2004; “Gay Couples Line Up to Get Married,” *New York Times*,

February 17, 2004; "Bush Gets Star Treatment at Daytona," Associated Press, February 16, 2004; "Bay State Lawmakers Still Stymied," Associated Press, February 13, 2004; "Gay Couples Wed in San Francisco," Associated Press, February 13, 2004.

3. Michael Trask, *Cruising Modernity: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought* (Ithaca, 2003), 14, 11.

4. Sonya Rose, "Cultural Analysis and Moral Discourses: Episodes, Continuities, and Transformations," in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds. *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Berkeley, 1999), 233.

5. Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York, 1996), 2. See also, Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. (Minneapolis, 1993).

6. Anna Marie Smith, quoted in Rose, "Cultural Analysis," 233. The relationship between Queer theory and Regionalist writing is perceptively explored in Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana, 2003), 316–338.

7. Trash, *Cruising Modernism*, 13–14.

8. It is estimated that about forty percent of today's fans are female. David Sanger, "At Speedway, Bush Counts Race Fans, Dads Included," *New York Times*, February 16, 2004.

9. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003), 9.

10. David Sanger, "At Speedway," *New York Times*, February 16, 2004.

11. On the construction of difference, see Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991), 773–97.

12. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning," in Michael Renov, ed., *Theorizing Documentary* (New York, 1993), 96–97.

13. An excellent study that historicized ordinary families and resists the temptation to totalize the working classes is Judith Smith's, *Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940–1960* (New York, 2004).

14. The term "bottom up" is often identified with the "new labor history," especially with the work of Jessie Lemisch, whose pathbreaking article on New England seamen and the revolution signaled renewed concern for the history of ordinary people. See Michael Katz, "The Urban 'Underclass,' as a Metaphor of Social Transformation," in Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History* (Princeton, 1993), 4–12. For an excellent study on the origins of this term in relation to the literature of the down and out, see Mark Pittenger, "A World of Difference: Constructing the 'Underclass' in Progressive America," *American Quarterly* 49.1 (March 1997), 26–65; On class passing and "slumming," see the perceptive study by Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill, 2000), esp. chapter 6. See also Stephen Steinberg, "The Underclass: A Case of Color and Blindness," *New Politics* 7 (Summer 1989), 41–60; Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclass from the Civil War to the Present* (New York, 1992), Bill E. Lawson, ed., *The Underclass Question* (Philadelphia, 1992).

15. Stephen Crane, quoted in Pittenger, "A World of Difference," 33. For a discussion of Crane's relationship to the posture of the tourist and his operations in a different world, see Alan Trachtenberg, "Experiments in Another Country: Stephen Crane's City Sketches," in *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. Eric Sundquist (Baltimore, 1982), 138–54.

16. For a discussion of the modern city as middle-class spectacle, see Deborah Epstein Nord, "The Social Explorer as Anthropologist: Victorian Travelers Among the Urban Poor," in William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, eds. *Visions of the Modern City* (New York, 1983), 118–30; Sylvia L. Yount, "Consuming Drama: Everett Shinn and the Spectacular City," *American Art* (Fall, 1992), 87–109; Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New Haven, 1992).

17. On Reed's experiences in Paterson see, David Goldberg, *A Tale of Three cities: Labor Organization and Protest in Paterson, Passaic, and Lawrence, 1916–1921* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1989), 26–31; Testimony of Andrew J. McBride, US Commission on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony on Industrial Relations, 64th Congress, 1st Session, Senate Document #451, (Washington, 1916) Vol. 3, pp. 2559–2560; John Reed, "Sheriff Radcliff's Hotel," *Metropolitan Magazine*, 38 (September, 1913) Reed, "War in Paterson," *The Masses* 4 (June 1913), 14–17; Reed, "Almost Thirty," *The New Republic* (April 29, 1936), 335.

18. John Sloan, quoted in Patricia Hills, "John Sloan's Images of Working-Class Women: A Case Study of the Roles and Interrelationships of Politics, Personality, and Patrons in the Development of Sloan's art, 1905–16," 178. Hills sees Sloan as part of a generation of intellectuals fascinated with working-class women but situates this interest in the context of voyeurism and slumming on the one hand, and "the collective recognition" among intellectuals that "the working classes represented the future," on the other. For examples of studies that link the discovery of the urban immigrant with representations of the exotic and non-European see, Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, (Chicago, 1988); Peter Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839–1915* (Philadelphia, 1984); Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Culture* (Washington, 1971); Nord, "The Social Explorer as Anthropologist: Victorian Travelers Among the Urban Poor," in William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, eds. *Visions of the Modern City* (New York, 1983). On the urban artist and representations of workers see also Marianne Doezema, *George Bellows and Urban America*, (New Haven, 1992) and Ellen Wily Todd, *The New Women Revisited: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street* (Berkeley, 1993), Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York, 1987).

19. Mrs John Van Vorst and Marie Van Vorst, *The Woman Who Toils: Being the Experiences of Two Gentlewomen as Factory Girls*, (New York, 1903), 168.

20. *Woman Who Toils*, 7.

21. The term is from Mark Pittenger, "A World of Difference," 26–65.

22. Pittenger, "A World of Difference," see especially pp. 55–63.

23. Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Chicago, 1993), 116, 119; Pittenger, "A World of Difference," note 32.

24. Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 347.

25. Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), 6.

26. Clifford, 24–25. A number of scholars have taken umbrage with Clifford's use of the "historical tainted" term travel, a word made meaningful through its very distance from constructions of "women" and femininity. Still more difficult is to conceive of poor people as travelers. For critiques along these lines see; Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, 1992), 173; Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodernist Discourses of Displacement* (Durham, NC, 1996); Ardis Cameron, "Women on the Move: Migration and Immigration," in Nancy Hewitt, *Companion to Women's History* (Boston, 2002).

27. Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 121.

28. Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London, 1994), 194.

29. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* Translated by Steven Rendall, (Berkeley, 1984), 123.

30. Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road*, 5.

31. George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, (New York, 1961), 213.

32. *Ibid.*, 125, 116.

33. Fern Babcock, "Higher Education: A college Student Studies Labor Problems at First Hand," *Survey* 57 (Dec. 15, 1926), 384.

34. Mark Pittenger, "A World of Difference," 27.

35. Browder, 3. As Pittenger explains, "while the early-twentieth-century social sciences were gradually rejecting Lamarckism and embraced culture as a determinative category, Lamarckian-derived essentialism, with its inner histories of conflating environment with heredity and of variously conflating class, race, ethnicity and nationality, could simply migrate from biology to culture." Pittenger, 54).

36. Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road*, 5–8.

37. As a common documentary practice, see Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning," 96–97.

38. David Whisnant, *All that Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1983), 9.

39. Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC, 1995), 6.

40. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, quoted in Brown, *Inventing*, 179.

41. Allesandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli: and Other Stories of Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, 1991), pxiii.
42. For a more detailed discussion of image making and constructions of rural workers, see Ardis Cameron, "When Strangers Bring Cameras: The Poetics and Politics of Othered Places," *American Quarterly* 54.3 (September 2002): 411–435.
43. The quote is by Anthony Walton, "A Life in the Other Maine," *New York Times*, August 20, 2000.
44. See Cameron, "When Strangers Bring Cameras," 411–435, and Cameron, *Looking For America: The Visual Production of Nation and People* (Oxford, 2004).
45. "New Beans on the Block," Book Review, *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1995, 10.
46. Carolyn Chute, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine: The Finished Version* (New York, 1995), 273.
47. Chute, *Beans, The Finished Version*, 276.
48. Stuart Klawans, "As Maine Goes, So Goe . . ." *The Nation*, February 14, 2000, 34.
49. Chute, *Beans*, 275.
50. Stewart, *Space*, 119.
51. Chute, *Salt Magazine*, March, 1992. Cynthia M. Duncan, *Worlds Apart: Why Poverty Persists in Rural America* (New Haven, 1999); Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, eds., *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York, 1997), 6.
52. Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago, 1993), 192.
53. Stewart, *Side of the Road*, 210.
54. See especially Jacquelyn Dowd Hall "Private Eyes, Public Women: Images of Class and Sex in the Urban South, Atlanta, Georgia, 1913–1915," Ardis Cameron, *Looking For America*, 118–148.
55. Paula Rabinowitz, in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930's Culture*, ed. Bill Mullen and Sherry Linkon (Urbana, 1996), 202.
56. See Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana, IL, 2003), pp. 315–338.
57. Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women*, xxxi.