

Davis, L. (2024) *Poor Things: How Those with Money Depict Those Without It*. Duke University Press.

Review by Matt Brim

Lennard Davis's *Poor Things: How Those with Money Depict Those without It* (Duke UP, 2024) traces a broad pattern of "poornography," or distorted and often salacious representations of poverty and poor people in the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century novel and, briefly, photography in the U.K. and the U.S. Davis uses the term "representational inequality" to identify the key imaginative problem causing these distortions: novels about people living in poverty are written by authors who do not come from poverty and who rely on a fairly small and negative set of received tropes to depict a class of people whom they fail to understand and portray with accountability. Chief among these are "biocultural myths of the poor body" and the composite figure of "female sex workers," each of which gets their own chapter. How, then, to address representational inequality?

The answer provides the most powerful and contentious claim of the book, which is that "writers who come from poverty, those I am calling *endo-writers*, are essentially the only ones who have the platform and credentials to write about the poor" (p. 17). And later: "it is the poor who must speak their truth whether or not that truth is acceptable to the middle-class reader" (p. 169). Middle-class novelists, or "exo-writers," having proven themselves for centuries unable to write about the poor from the inside-out perspective that would allow them to see something other than stereotype and to feel something other than disgust, pity, guilt, or moral superiority. Elizabeth Gaskell in *Mary Barton* (1848) may desire to represent the abuses heaped on the poor, but she is unable to break that habit. Charles Dickens, Émile Zola, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norton speak poverty through the voice of omniscient narrators who sound authentic to middle-class audiences. Others, including Nellie Bly, Jack London, and George Orwell, "do[n] a costume of poverty" (85) to write pornography. Friedrich Engels, who lived with working-class Mary Burns and her sister Lizzie yet kept quarters in a better part of Manchester, is notable on the list of "passing" exo-writers. In a key move, rather than focus solely on the inaccuracy of these portrayals, Davis routes the usual discussion about authenticity through his preferred metric of accountability, or "actively...being responsible to the group being depicted" (p. 49).

When Davis brings the weight of the long history of unaccountability to bear in arguing that exo-writers should stop writing about poor people, he is most concerned with the consequences representation has on poor people. In an extended comparison to the voting public that chooses its representatives, Davis envisions the poor and working-class reading public as disenfranchised, allowed no voice in the matter of how they are portrayed in literature and art because they do not control the means of artistic production. But if endo-writers (preferred to the imprecise and loaded

term “the poor”) usually do not have access to the means of production to write and publish their own novels, and if exo-writers fail to write poverty with complexity and should therefore stop, who will do the work of representational equality for people in poverty? Davis’s response is that “transclass” writers, those who were raised poor but are no longer poor, and to some extent those writers who became poor after having not been, have a special perspective as go-betweens or cross-class interpreters. Transclass writers, “waxing and waning” in relation to poverty, can and must stand in until such a time as people who were raised and are currently poor control their own narratives.

The importance of *the Poor Things* has to do with the urgency and starkness of its intervention. Unlike other studies that, with some degree of hopefulness or perhaps equivocation, take up the question of whether someone in a more privileged identity group can represent someone in a more marginalized identity group, *Poor Things* has little to no faith in the viability of class crossover in writing about poor people, certainly not from a stable middle-class (or higher) position. The experience of poverty alone gives one access to the specific ideas, such as underclass pride, and sensations, such as hunger, that constitute reality for the poor. The chief qualification or exception here comes as Davis theorizes a transclass perspective, but even there he is as likely to draw the reader’s attention to the inequalities sustained by transclass novels as the equalities produced by them. By revealing the limitations of the transclass exception even as he puts some stock in it, Davis is all the more able to set the stakes of his argument: that novels have the power to do meaningful cultural work, and representational equality—literature written by people in poverty—can act as a cultural brake on the social dynamics by which the moneyed and the impoverished are, right now, pulled so violently apart.

One real strength of the book is that Davis comes at this project as someone raised poor. He explicitly situates his initial interest in the topic by saying he wanted to better understand his father, who was raised poor in London’s East End. The memoir-esque thread of the book (e.g., the details about getting an Ivy league education as a poor person and then making his way through academia without the cultural savvy that surely would have made the journey smoother) provides a compelling throughline at the same time as it gives Davis something of an intellectual high ground from which to make his case. Another key here is that using the personal narrative, so important to working-class academic writing, allows Davis to convincingly argue that a purely structural class critique is insufficient because such critique typically overlooks the realities of the lived experience of poverty. Counterintuitively, liberal minded middle-class academics can engage in structural critique as a way of shielding themselves from their own implicated-ness not simply within a system of class oppression but within a process of psychological detachment from people actually living in poverty.

Poor Things is compelling, yet some readers will argue with it—and the nature of that argument is likely revealing. They will not question with the evidence of the misrepresentation of the poor by middle class / exo- writers. Rather they may find it difficult to stop thinking of exceptions to the “no-exo” rule that Davis is proposing. His final argument puts this work of exception-making into perspective: “Where a kind of clarity has emerged around how to combat racism, homophobia,

transphobia, sexism, disability, and the like, much more work needs to be done to create the same clarifying vision around the lived experience of poverty and its representation” (p. 230).

Reviewer Bio:

Matt Brim is Professor of Queer Studies at the College of Staten Island and the CUNY Graduate Center, where he is Executive Director of CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies. He is author of the award-winning *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* and *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*. Brim is currently writing a material history of queer studies that envisions ways of redistributing resources around the queer academy.