

# Cabinet

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## POOR LIKE ME

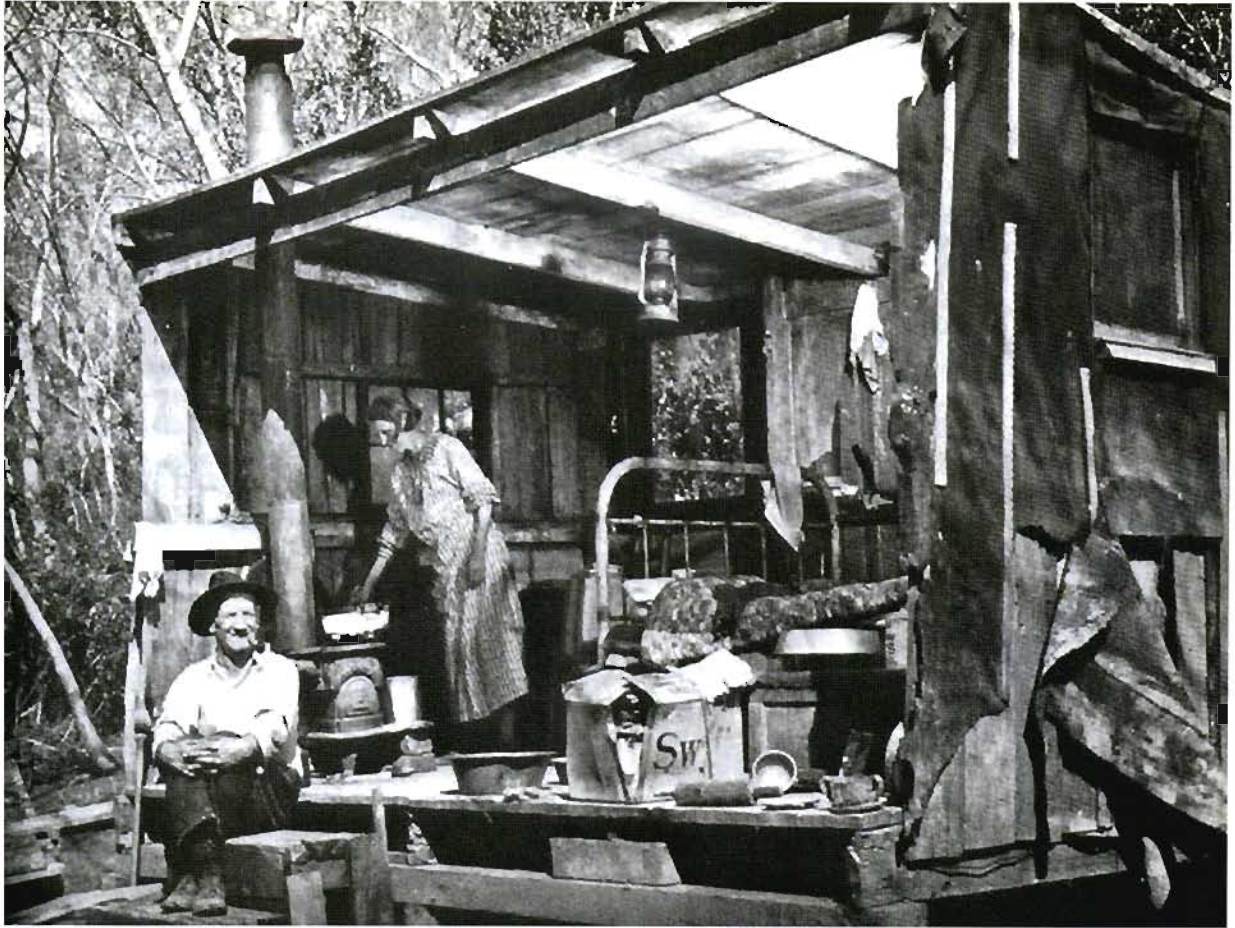
ERIC SCHOCKET

*Tonight I find the new sensation, Survivor, on CBS, where "real people" are struggling to light a fire on their desert island. Who are these nutcases who would volunteer for an artificially daunting situation in order to entertain millions of strangers with their half-assed efforts to survive? Then I remember where I am and why I am here.*

—Barbara Ehrenreich

In June 1998, the well-known author and social activist Barbara Ehrenreich left her home in Key West with a laptop, a couple of pairs of Bermuda shorts and some tee-shirts, and an ATM card (for emergencies) in order to begin a series of undercover experiments working entry-level jobs in the service industry and living on that income. First as a waitress and a hotel maid in Florida, then as a housekeeper in Maine, and finally as a Wal-Mart shelver in Minnesota, Ehrenreich labored to assess the declining fortunes of the "working poor" under the new regime of welfare reform. Though prompted by her political concerns, her journey was, she writes, modeled on the participatory dictates and factual objectivity of the laboratory sciences: "In that line of business you can think all you want but sooner or later you have to ... plunge into the everyday chaos of nature, where surprises lurk in the most mundane measurements."<sup>2</sup> One of the more recent surprises has been the tremendous popularity of Ehrenreich's account of her plunge. During an era when union membership and labor radicalism has been on a steady decline, *Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting by in America* held a spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list for almost a year. The book has been discussed in numerous reading groups, taught in college courses across the country, adapted into an A & E network special, and transformed into a play that has had successful runs in Seattle, Los Angeles, and Providence. It has also, perhaps needless to say, been optioned by a Hollywood production company. *Nickel and Dime* is no longer merely an isolated study of the working poor; it is, says National Public Radio's economics correspondent John Ydstie, a full-fledged "cultural phenomenon."<sup>3</sup>

As Ydstie implies, the phenomenon of its success—and particularly the success of its undercover methodology—has broad implications, revealing as much about the manner in which more affluent Americans perceive class and poverty as the book's content reveals about the lives of the working poor. It is worth noting that the most commercially successful book about the "experience" of poverty in more than a decade has been written by a member of the professional-managerial class (a term Ehrenreich herself coined some time ago). While the economic position of its author does not invalidate the book's political critique, which is sharp at moments, the popularity of Ehrenreich's cross-class passage does exemplify America's particular need to see class in a mediated fashion, to contain uncomfortable revelations within an apparatus of supposed objectivity. The layers of mediation reach an almost absurd level in the theatrical



*Natchez, Mississippi*

"I spent ten months catching planks drifting down the river to build this house, and then the flood came along and washed the side of it off. Doggone if I don't like it better the way it is now."

adaptation: Here the audience watches an actor play the narrator of a book by a writer who experienced for some three months the life of a service worker. To claim, as did Intiman Theater's Bartlett Sher, the artistic director who first commissioned the adaptation, that this play brings a middle-class audience face-to-face with people they depend upon but ignore (actors?) is to saddle this already problematic apparatus with undue irony.<sup>4</sup> It is also to claim that the very invisibility of poverty that Ehrenreich's study purports to expose can somehow be resolved within the fictive bounds of the theatrical stage. Imagine alternatively the effect of a narrative about a man posing as a woman or a white person posing as an African-American in order to "tell it like it is." The sheer condescension of the story's presumptions would mute the power of any revelations. The presumptions within cross-class narratives need to be made similarly apparent: that only someone outside of the experience of economic subjection can accurately document the physical and psychological trauma of that process, that only someone with economic privilege can call upon the sociological methodology necessary to name economic pain.

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Undercover explorations of the working class and the poor have had a long history in Europe and the United States. Their earliest conceptual antecedents were the Saturnalian festivals of ancient Rome where revelers reversed "high" and "low" social and cultural forms in a ritualistic venting of tensions, an aspect of the festival that was retained in other rituals well into the early modern period. Cross-dressed social investigation owes more, however, to the epistemological problems created by industrialism, urbanization, and immigration, which mapped high and low onto a series of static spatial relations like the factory floor and the city neighborhood. As the workplace increasingly became a site of subterfuge and the city a place of mystery, the newly forming middle class looked to periodicals and eventually to more academic texts for information about those whom they no longer felt they knew. Thus, disguised investigation began in earnest after the first period of intense industrialization and proletarianization when a British journalist, James Greenwood, published *A Night in the Work-house*, the first recorded study of this kind (1866). This was followed, in turn, by the more sociologically oriented work of Charles Booth in Britain (1887–1903) and Minna Wettstein-Adelt and Paul Göhre in Germany (1890s), who all copied Greenwood's methodological example in their attempts to bring empiricism to the newly forming study of the urban poor.<sup>5</sup>

The late 1880s and the 1890s were also the period when this mode of investigation began in the United States, where, because of a less rigid class system and an unending desire for sensational accounts of all sorts, it immediately experienced a level of popularity entirely unprecedented in Europe. Indeed, the cross-class transmutations within these journeys were uniquely capable of conveying the guilt, denial, and fascination with which Americans greeted the class system endemic to industrial wage labor.

Fueled in part by the growing public concern over labor unrest and the fragile state of the economy, this strategy began when reporters such as Annie Laurie and Nellie Bly went undercover to investigate working conditions in fruit canneries, factories, and urban hospitals. Inspired by their example, Stephen Crane wrote a series of Bowery sketches in the early 1890s based on his experiences in disguise. By the time he wrote "An Experiment in Misery" (1894), which documented his night in a rooming house in order to capture the homeless man's "point of view," most of the principles of this technique had been set in place. The economic division between the classes appeared to be fundamentally, or at least most explicitly, an epistemological division that could best be remedied by authentic knowledge gained through a conscious "experiment" in subjection. Given this understanding, the author's own body was the greatest source of new information. In Crane's tale, he is, for instance, "plastered" with epithets and "assailed" by "diseases," but consequentially able to "carv[e] biographies for" the homeless men "from his meager experience" in poverty.<sup>6</sup> Crane could, in other words, draw on his ability to remain observant in the midst of "misery" in order to serve as a mediator between the classes. Remapping the economic disjunctions between poverty and affluence onto his own corporeality, he could use his experience of subjugation to bridge the class divide.

Encouraged by these early examples, a series of subsequent experimenters undertook more sustained undercover journeys during the Progressive Era (from the 1890s until World War I).<sup>7</sup> Walter Wyckoff spent two years as a "manual proletaire," working his way from New Jersey to the Pacific. His expedition resulted in the two-volume work *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 biases 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 focuses 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 undercover experiments tended to be practiced by women. Many of the muckraking magazines competed for female 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,

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opposite: A plate from the 1937 book *You Have Seen Their Faces*, with text by Erskine Caldwell and photographs by Margaret Bourke-White. The first-person caption was in fact made up by Bourke-White and Caldwell.

like Bessie and Marie Van Vorst's *Women Who Toil* (1903), a personal favorite of Teddy Roosevelt, became grist for political debate. Regardless of their variation, each of these experiments was, in some fundamental way, inspired by the mood of social reform that characterized the Progressive Era. Though they articulated their positions differently, most of these practitioners worked for legislative change. Nevertheless, their methods most often delimited rather than facilitated more radical forms of political action. Comprehending the working class and the poor as a culture apart whose pain could best be relieved by middle-class knowledge may have aided efforts to legislate public hygiene and less crowded tenement houses, but it did nothing to make these human objects of social investigation agents in their own history.

What's more, while these more sustained experiments appear to merely repeat the discoveries made by Crane and others and to echo their call for cross-class understanding, their more expansive focus and extended narrative range clarify the personal investments these writers had in their journeys. For not only did they "venture forth," like Crane, to discover the mysteries of what Jacob Riis had recently called "the other half," they undertook their missions hoping to be revitalized by the experience. The same conditions of proletarianization and urbanization that immiserated the working class and poor created an affluent class who not only suffered from a "crisis of cultural authority" brought about by their lack of social knowledge, but, as Jackson Lears explains, also felt that their lack of connection to manual labor made life "curiously unreal."<sup>8</sup> Authority and reality might be regained, then, from a pilgrimage through something like authenticity. These machinations of middle-class revitalization are most obvious in the highly gendered operations of these narratives. If the middle-class man suffered from a lack of vitality given the largely managerial duties of his career, then as Crane, London, and Wyckoff would have it, a brief "experiment in reality" would restore his vivacity. If the middle-class "New Woman" longed for a socially acceptable realm in which to practice her newly gained education, then as Parker and the Van Vorsts understood, nothing could be more useful than bringing the "domestic" values of piety, morality, and frugality onto the factory floor. The impulse to go undercover was, in other words, personal as well as social, and responded largely to the shifting concerns of the middle class whose perceived lacks and projected recompenses fundamentally affected what they discovered in their experiments. Indeed, this became even more apparent when this mode of investigation briefly recurred in the 1930s, at the impetus of another economic downturn. At this juncture, similar journeys carried the palpable weight of middle-class self-consciousness, apparent both in the anguished reflexivity of texts like James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and in parodies like Preston Sturges's film *Sullivan's Travels*.<sup>9</sup> The naive assumptions of Crane and his contemporaries—perhaps even the belief that one could personally mediate between classes—no longer enjoyed such unequivocal popularity. The unveiling of poverty had

itself become a ritual act (a fact that some writers and artists began to realize), an act that was performed by a member of the middle class to an audience drawn from the middle class in order to dramatize the plight of the poor in a comfortably mediated manner.

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Though it emerges from more than a century of undercover exploration, *Nickel and Dimed* continues this tradition seemingly unaware of the problems inherent in its methodology. Ehrenreich is not a “blue-collar wannabe,” she proclaims in the book, distancing herself from the 1960s radicals who went into the factories in order to organize the working class. She feels sorry for the parents of the radicals and “sorry, too, for the people they intended to uplift.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike this and previous philanthropic journeys, her experiment, she claims, is science, pure and simple, structured around “rules and parameters.”<sup>11</sup> The strictures of objectivity similarly defend her against any accusations of slumming or class minstrelsy: “There is no way . . . to pretend to be a waitress: the food either gets there or not. People knew me as a waitress . . . not because I acted like one . . . but because that’s what I was.”<sup>12</sup> Like Stephen Crane who gained the homeless “point of view” after one night in a lodging house or like Walter Wyckoff who took it upon himself to speak for the “working man” after one week of physical labor, Ehrenreich’s brief experience gives her, she feels, full license to take on the mantle of the authentic subject. Two weeks into her first stint, she has lost all contact with her previous life: emails and phone messages come from “a distant race of people.”<sup>13</sup> And when Ehrenreich, the waitress, fails to act on behalf of a fellow worker who may have been unjustly fired, she interprets this inaction as evidence that “something loathing and servile” had already “infected” her.<sup>14</sup> The lessons from nearly 40 years of political activism seemingly dissipate after 4 weeks of waiting tables in a diner.

The trouble here is not merely that Ehrenreich fails to acknowledge the problems inherent within her methodology, nor just that she slips, like her predecessors, into the working class with disturbing ease; the trouble is also that such easy transitions flatten and distort the experience of poverty she aims to expose. Given a strict Marxist definition of class, where one’s class position is solely determined by one’s relation to the means of production, Ehrenreich is correct: She did not merely “act” like a worker, she “was” a worker. Yet all but the most unreconstructed purist would see class as both an economic position and a more complex set of social relations. If being a member of the working class also entails a particular family history, a geographic experience of specific neighborhoods and towns, and an education in relatively distinct class ways, then even though Ehrenreich “was” a waitress, her access to the full experience of that life was limited. She, for instance, always lived alone, preserving for herself a private realm for writing and reflection. Whatever its purpose, this private space perpetuated a middle-class mode of being that circumscribed what she could learn about the life of the working poor. As overextended and undervalued as that life may be, it entails more than workplace

exploitation. If, as she writes in her volume, her experiment tried—and failed—to discover the “hidden economies” that helped the low-wage worker make ends meet, Ehrenreich needed to examine (without romanticizing) the networks of family and friends that make rents, mortgages, and childcare (narrowly) possible and that bring joy, recreation, and a sense of community to people who clearly do not get this from their labor.<sup>15</sup>

But even given the narrow slice of working-class life that Ehrenreich sets out to infiltrate, the stance of objectivity and her transition into the working class are neither as easy nor as complete as she claims. Long after she has confronted the indignities of low-wage labor and the difficulties of supporting herself on her meager pay, she continues to write from the naive perspective of the middle-class social investigator who is shocked anew at every hurdle placed in the path of the American Dream. While there is certainly reason for shock and indignation, its repetitious quality begs deeper analysis. Ehrenreich’s perpetual naiveté is evidently a rhetorical strategy—as a long-time activist she knows all too well about current economic conditions. But as a cipher for the (presumed) middle-class reader, she must continually perform the experience of disillusionment she hopes to bring to her audience.

The shortcomings of this strategy are numerous. Not only does it make the middle-class experience of subjugation the fundamental focus of the book’s “plot,” it creates a narrative structure of repetitious debasements which, regardless of their literal accuracy, make the book into a proletarian picaresque. Joan Holden discovered this when she adapted the book for the stage in a play that is considerably more problematic—but only insofar as it exacerbates the weaknesses already inherent in Ehrenreich’s text. *Nickel and Dimed* is, Holden says, “an adventure story.”<sup>16</sup> In order to sustain the audience’s interest in Ehrenreich’s adventure, “I had to dumb her down.”<sup>17</sup> Holden’s Ehrenreich (“Barb”) is dumb indeed. Setting off on her adventure in low-wage work she ridiculously plans for all her leisure time: “I brought every book I want to read.” Aping the scientific language that infuses Ehrenreich’s book, Barb also says things like, “You are about to observe in a natural setting the low-wage worker’s natural predator: the manager.” Far from being a member of the working class, instantly integrated by the factuality of physical labor, Barb becomes a tour guide—our trusted escort in what she calls the “strange planet” of the working class.<sup>18</sup>

Obviously these rhetorical strategies have significant political implications, blunting what there is of Ehrenreich’s radical critique of exploitation and turning Holden’s adaptation into a politically tinged farce. One of the more arresting moments of radical foreclosure in both the book and the play comes when the owner of a million-dollar condo tells Ehrenreich to scrub the walls in a bathroom because the marble has been “bleeding.”

*That’s not your marble bleeding. I want to tell her, it’s the world-wide working class—the people who quarried the marble, wove your Persian rugs until they went blind, harvested the apples in your lovely fall-themed dining room centerpiece,*

*smelted the steel for the nails, drove the trucks, put up this building, and now bend and squat and sweat to clean it.*

Immediately after this vigorous critique, Ehrenreich adds a pair of modifications: Despite the invective, she has never imagined that she is “a member of that oppressed working class.” But, alternately, she has “never employed a cleaning person or service.” “This is just not the kind of relationship I want to have with another human being.”<sup>19</sup> The thrust and parry of this ideological critique bothered Holden, however, and prompted her to rewrite the scene substantially: “I bridled because I’ve found it necessary to sustain my sanity to hire a cleaning lady and to pay her very well. And I knew that if I had this reaction that members of the audience would have the same reaction and that women in the audience—they would feel suddenly guilt-tripped in a way [that] ... would distance them from Barbara—the character. ... I thought ‘That’s going to create a tension that we need to let out.’”<sup>20</sup> Borrowing a technique from agit-prop theater (which is more often employed to *heighten* the tension and the audience’s sense of culpability), Holden has several cast members positioned in the audience to draw theatergoers into a denunciation of Barb’s absolutism. The actors step out of character (or rather, they cease playing their former roles to play a different sort of part) and call for a show of hands to reflect how many audience members employ household help. Then they ask how much these employers pay, until they determine who pays the most. Depending upon the performance, the audience eventually concludes that between 25 and 30 dollars an hour is a “fair wage.”

The message of this rewritten scene is clear; its baroque theatrical machinations work to preserve the fantasy of middle-class innocence. One must discover the working class but not one’s participation in their exploitation. If Holden’s revision is extraordinary in the lengths that it goes to guard against “guilt” and “tension,” it is not, however, an inaccurate translation of the book’s (and the genre’s) insistence on mediation, objectivity, and innocence. Ehrenreich’s own rush to deny her status as exploited worker or exploiting boss conveys the same meaning. Having never employed a cleaning person, Ehrenreich can imagine herself removed from the drama of global capitalism that she has so ably just denounced. The cross-class social investigator achieves, in sum, the exact opposite of the easy integration she or he persistently claims. The stance necessitated by the methodology solidifies the investigator’s status as a member of the middle class—here imagined as a liminal character, one set apart from the world historical struggle of capital and labor.

Ehrenreich’s relationship to the middle class, described in her terms as the professional-managerial class, is, as some readers may know, long and involved. One of her earliest important publications, entitled simply “The Professional-Managerial Class” (1976), defined this sector in relation to the New Left and argued for the radical potential of its mediatorial role between capital and labor. Politicized middle-class students, not (or not only) the working class, would be the new bearers of socialism in advanced capitalism.<sup>21</sup> In

professional-managerial affinity for neo-conservatism. Ehrenreich published *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* which blamed the middle class's new timidity on built-up anxieties about economic and social achievement in a technological era. *Nickel and Dimed* is, in some way, the latest installment in this long chronicle of the middle class's retreat from its rightful role as the agent of change. Here, however, the terms are personal as well as sociological; Ehrenreich's confrontation with the working class makes her advantages palpable. "Take away the career and the higher education," she writes, contemplating some more basic version of herself, "and maybe what you're left with is this original Barb, the one who might have ended up working at Wal-Mart for real if her father hadn't managed to climb out of the mines."<sup>22</sup> There is more than a little guilt in this statement; but the guilt emanates from a fear about the lack of authenticity, of neither deserving nor really permanently achieving the station she inhabits (a fear of falling). The guilt is not the guilt of deception or of complicity, the sort of guilt that might take the reader beyond middle-class fear to the more basic realization of the brutality inherent in that economic position.

Perhaps, on the other hand, even that sort of guilt invites only individual acts of emotive catharsis, liberal mortifications, the sort of anxious hand-wringing that has long characterized one type of American response to the specter of exploitation. Guilt is a symptom of disavowal; it seems to measure one's newfound dedication to change, but as long as it holds sway, it acts instead as an impediment to change. In part, this is because guilt, especially American guilt, transfers broad systemic problems like the exploitation of labor under capital onto a moral ground where it can be felt deeply, but with the sort of introspective anguish that befits a nation founded on the shared, but individual, quest to be pure from sin. Within this psycho-spiritual *zeitgeist*, guilt is a sign of one's personal failure and calls adamantly for personal acts of contrition. These acts, like Ehrenreich's fantasy of liminality, are hardly adequate to the tasks at hand.

Moreover, guilt acts as an alibi, as a screen upon which to project an exquisite fantasy of previous innocence before we of affluence "knew" of our complicity, before we realized the "hidden" histories of the commodities we consume, the services we enjoy, and the workers we exploit. This is where the endless circulation of these cross-class investigations does the most harm: not in "discovering" the poverty of the working poor, but in allowing us to pretend we did not already see it and choose (for convenience? out of avarice? out of fear?) to ignore it. No one can read a newspaper, walk down a city street, or watch even our television news without quickly learning the basics about the relation between affluence and poverty. However they are articulated, pleas of ignorance are simply unconvincing. Put differently, one must conclude that after more than a century of cross-class investigation and nearly two centuries of unveiling poverty, the problem is simply not epistemological. If the solution involved revealing poverty, we would already be living without it.

- 1 Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), p. 160.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 3 "All Things Considered," National Public Radio, 27 September 2002.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Mark Pittenger, "A World of Difference: Constructing the 'Underclass' in Progressive America," *American Quarterly* 49:1 (March 1997), pp. 30-31.
- 6 Stephen Crane, "An Experiment in Misery," in Fredson Bowers, ed., *Stephen Crane: Tales, Sketches, and Reports* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1973) p. 287 and p. 289.
- 7 Mark Pittenger has identified 49 such investigations during the Progressive period. See also, Eric Schocket, "Undercover Explorations of the 'Other Half,' Or the Writer as Class Transvestite," *Representations* no. 64, Fall 1998.
- 8 T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 5.
- 9 Agee's and Evans's 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 down-trodden need most is laughter."
- 10 *Nickel and Dimed*, p. 2.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 16 "From Page to Stage: Playwright Joan Holden on Adapting *Nickel and Dimed*," in *InSider* published by the Intiman Theatre, Seattle WA and available at <[www.intiman.org/community/guides.htm](http://www.intiman.org/community/guides.htm)>.
- 17 Channing Gray, "Nickel and Dimed—Sees a Lot of Changes," *Providence Sunday Journal*, 26 January 2003, p. B 1.
- 18 Joan Holden adaptation of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*.
- 19 *Nickel and Dimed*, pp. 90-91.
- 20 "All Things Considered," National Public Radio, 27 September 2002.
- 21 Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," *Radical America*, March/April 1977, pp. 7-3.
- 22 *Nickel and Dimed*, p. 169.