

Encountering Poverty: Space, Class, and Poverty Politics

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Abstract: Our paper focuses on moments and spaces of encounter in which middle class people come into contact with “poor others”. Much critical poverty work focuses on the re-inscription of difference across class, race and gender lines. We explore where, when and how middle class actors engage with “poor others” in ways that (sometimes) lead to shifts in neoliberal and individualized understandings of poverty. Our paper explores boundary-breaking transformative moments that arise through spatial encounters. Drawing on Valentine’s “zones of encounter” we explore how middle class encounters with poverty are mediated by two sets of spatial processes: processes of (self)government and of radical contact. We draw illustrative examples from two projects: on rural poverty in the Pacific Northwest and on community development in Chicago. In each case we trace the ways in which these spaces of encounter foster governance and/or contact processes that reproduce or disrupt dominant discourses about poverty.

Keywords: relational poverty, middle class, zones of encounter, sites of governance, contact zones

A spoof called “Occupy Wall Street Divided” draws ironic attention to class segregation within Occupy in the space of Zucotti Park in fall of 2011.¹ Amidst drum circles and bicycle-powered espresso machines, *Daily Show* comic Samantha Bee interviews the “hobos” and “moochers” from the “downtown” end of the occupation and then goes “uptown” to mingle with “college hipsters”, “elites” and “aristocrats”. Even within a space produced by “the 99%”, Bee’s interviews delineate how each “class” of protesters frames the contrasts they perceive at the other end of the park. Bee’s comedic treatment of stark class performance is deliberately overdrawn but the parody poses key questions for poverty research. How do spatial encounters across social difference (even explicitly anti-inequality movements) challenge or reproduce poverty? We explore this question for middle class actors to understand how and where class difference is troubled and reworked (rather than always hardened) through zones of encounter.

Much critical poverty research focuses on the re-inscription of difference and defensiveness along class, race and gender lines (Green 2009; Puwar 2004; Schram 2000; Watkins 1993). Bourdieu (1984:479) avers that “social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat”. By contrast, our paper focuses on moments and spaces of encounter in which middle class people come into close contact with “poor others”, but in ways that do not necessarily reproduce neoliberal accounts that frame poverty as a result of individual deficiencies, immoral behavior or poor choices (see Lawson with Middle Class Poverty Politics Research Group 2012). Middle classes have been the focus of much social

research² and we build on this to focus on how middle class encounters with “poor others” challenge hegemonic, neoliberal, individualized understandings of poverty. Grounded in relational poverty research, which draws attention to the involvement of non-poor actors in the reproduction of poverty, our project explores whether boundary-breaking, transformative moments arise through spatial encounters: moments that might constitute a first step for middle class actors to politicize poverty in counter-hegemonic ways.

We focus on middle class actors because in the US they “exert cultural dominance and drive political change” (Roy 2012:25). Middle class actors often shore up dominant, neoliberal renditions of poverty and yet they are a heterogeneous group, comprised of contentious subjects who are not fully formed and resolved, but rather are in process (Cruikshank 1999; Hodgetts et al. 2011; Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds 2008). Research conducted in Argentina (Adamovsky 2009; Kanai 2010), India (Baviskar and Ray 2011; Fernandes and Heller 2006) and South Africa (Ballard 2004; Dixon and Durrheim 2004) reveals that the poverty politics of middle class actors are not a foregone conclusion and argues for locally embedded, less universalist readings of middle class responses to poverty.

We contribute to this project through a conceptual and empirical analysis of middle class encounters with poor subjects in the USA. We attend to already-existing, everyday encounters between middle class and poorer actors to explore what is present, but is often obscured from (theoretical) view. In contrast to a predominant focus (in much social theory) on the production of difference and distinction, our work draws on Gibson-Graham’s (2006:xxvii) challenge to engage an “... ontology of a politics of possibility ...”. This is an ontology of openness and curiosity about what is empirically present, but what often remains theoretically unseen: middle class actors who engage with “poor others” in ways that lead to shifts in normative understandings of poverty and enacted poverty politics.

We do not romanticize small moments of connection or self-realization as simple answers to the politically hegemonic neoliberal project of demonizing the poor. Clearly, broad structural forces reproduce both material and discursive difference in the USA. However, we see this research as instructive of the kinds of spaces and practices through which alternative understandings *can emerge* among relatively privileged groups. To the extent that privileged actors are explicitly engaging with, and naming, structures of class, race and poverty, these moments can teach us about how, when and where alternative understandings, identities and politics may emerge. Our larger goals are to push beyond thinking of US poverty as an intractable structural challenge that is impervious to everyday politics, and to posit a spatial conceptualization of how class difference and poverty are reworked.

The making of class difference is a fundamentally spatial process and we explore how “zones of encounter” (Valentine 2008) operate as grounds for different engagements between class subjects. Our primary contribution is conceptual. Situating our work within relational poverty analysis, we argue for more theoretical attention to the role of space in the making of class difference. We draw on Valentine’s “zones of encounter” to explore how particular forms of spatial interaction between middle class and poorer actors can challenge dominant representations of poverty and their politically constraining performativity (Gibson-Graham 2008). We examine how

middle class interactions with, and understandings of poverty are mediated by two sets of spatial processes: processes of (self)-government where interactions around poverty are framed by moral and cultural norms, rules and programs (McCann and Miewald 2011; Rose and Miller 1992), and “contact zones” which are mutable sites/moments of interaction in which differences are made explicit and can lead to new negotiations of identity, privilege, political responsibility and alliance (Pratt 1991). We draw illustrative examples from two recent research projects: one on rural poverty in the Pacific Northwest and the other on community development in Chicago. In each case, we trace the ways in which these spaces of encounter foster governance and/or contact processes that reproduce or disrupt dominant discourses about poverty.

Relational Poverty and Middle Classes

Relational analyses of poverty focus on how non-poor actors (including middle classes) are implicated in the material and cultural production of poverty (Hickey 2009; Hickey and Du Toit 2007; Lawson 2012; Mosse 2010). This work challenges neoliberal accounts of poverty as a self-contained problem that can only be managed through the reform of flawed individuals. By contrast, relational poverty analysis foregrounds the dialectical roles played by political-economic relations and productions and contestations of class identity in the regulation of poor subjects.

Relational analyses of poverty were pioneered by Marxist and feminist geographers tracing how material forces dispossess, exploit and exclude certain class fragments that are also fractured by gender, race, caste and nationality (Hart 2002; Harvey 2005; Mosse 2010; Watts 1983). This work focuses attention on working classes, peasantries and elites, but pays less attention to middle class actors. Research in the global South has explored smallholder land dispossession and adverse incorporation into developing capitalist space economies (Davis 2006; Goodman and Watts 1997; Hickey and Du Toit 2007). In the global North research has focused on the working poor under deindustrialization and globalized spatial divisions of labor (England and Lawson 2005; Fox-Piven 2001; Massey 1985; Peck 2001). Political-economy work also focuses on global elites who are privileged players across (what they experience as) a borderless world (Friedman 2005; Ong 2006; Sparke 2009). In this paper we focus on middle class actors as they negotiate material differences that consolidate (or challenge) their understandings of poverty.

Relational poverty research also focuses on the ways in which middle class identities strengthen (or less commonly challenge) socially constructed boundaries around “the poor” (Green 2009; Mosse 2010; Tilly 1998). Middle class actors are theorized as complex subjects constituted through multiple processes of gender, race, caste and citizenship in particular places (Fernandes and Heller 2006; Harris-White 2003; hooks 2000). Puwar (2004), for example, traces the ways that norms and cultural codings frame “appropriate class behavior” and signal who “belongs” in which spaces. Of course, these are fragile cultural performances that are open to renegotiation in certain spaces and circumstances (Butler 1989; Willis 1977). Our

work engages this openness, theorizing “middle class” not solely as a discrete position within income strata or labor markets (although surely related to such positions), but also as a social relation or subjective orientation arising from identities, practices, representations, and discourses that unite and divide people, in fluid ways across time and space (Bourdieu 1984; Cresswell 1996).

Encountering Poverty

We focus on zones of encounter as spaces in which class (and other) differences are (re)negotiated in the context of “... history, material conditions and power ...” (Valentine 2008:333). The idea of spatial encounter builds on a long tradition of research on “contact theory” pioneered by Allport (1954) who argued that increased contact between social groups, under certain conditions, may reduce prejudice. Spatial applications of contact theory have explored encounters across race and ethnic differences; between migrant, refugee and long-term resident groups; and in classrooms (Askins and Pain 2011; Canagarajah 1997; Dixon and Durrheim 2004; Pratt 1991). This research finds that no spaces are simply neutral and equally open to everyone; people’s presence in any space is always coded. Lefebvre (1991) argues that it is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived and produced. He argues that bodies do not just take up space, but rather they actively make spaces and are produced by the spaces that they inhabit. Certain bodies are designated as “natural” occupants of relatively privileged spaces in the US; with naturalness framed through a ‘somatic norm’ of masculinity, whiteness and middle class-ness (Puwar 2004). People are deemed “out of place” as a result of cultural or political struggles by privileged others that exclude them (Hodgetts et al. 2011; Jarosz and Lawson 2002). The arrival of “space invaders” (deemed outsiders by their classed, racialized or gendered identities and bodies) into spaces not reserved for them (universities, upper class neighborhoods, boardrooms, legislatures) brings into sharp relief what has passed as the norm and as such can (theoretically) renegotiate normative understandings of the other (Puwar 2004:8).

We argue that particular zones of encounter can enable diverse social interactions around poverty through two sets of spatial processes: “processes of governance” and “contact zones”. Beginning from the insight that bodies and interactions are scripted by the spaces in which they occur, we explore how certain spaces activate these sets of processes: governance and contact. We trace the ways in which particular spaces (in this study a welfare office and a community task force) situate and/or rescript class actors as authoritative, powerful, equal, relatively vulnerable and so on. That is, within particular spatial encounters, specific actors may be situated as “insiders” or ‘space invaders’ (in terms of class, race, gender or other markers of difference) in relation to that setting and its interactions, with implications for the attitudes, understandings and propositions they advance around poverty and class difference. We explore how these socially and spatially situated encounters may activate governance processes that reinscribe hegemonic scripts about poor others and processes of transformative contact that rework dominant understandings of middle class selves and their class others.

Governance Processes

Class actors are constituted through neoliberal rationalities and projects of government in the contemporary US (Brown 2003; Cruikshank 1999; Rose and Miller 1992). We theorize government as relations of power, practices, technologies and rationalities that regulate subjectivities involved in both the government of others and self-government (Foucault 1980; Rygiel 2010). Notwithstanding its heterogeneity, middle class-ness is also a technique of government that exerts cultural and political dominance by representing somatic and behavioral norms of whiteness, educational achievement and upward mobility (Cruikshank 1999; Puwar 2004). This middle-class ideal stands in sharp contrast to neoliberal renditions of poor people in the USA who are framed as lacking, flawed and personally responsible for their poverty (Schram 2000). This representation of middle class-ness articulates poverty as a deviation from national norms and as threatening to cultural and political narratives of upward social mobility and modernity (Goode and Maskovsky 2001; O'Connor 2001). As such, “flawed poor others” become sites of governmental reform.

In a broad Foucauldian sense, poor subjects are governed and disciplined in myriad, even banal ways in all sorts of everyday interactions. However, poverty governance has historically, and continues to be, explicitly enacted through performances of expertise and authority in sites such as welfare offices, prisons, health clinics and shelters. These spaces crystallize the governmentalization of social life through specific projects and practices (including legal, religious, moral, economic and cultural aspects) as state or non-governmental actors aspire to shape the lives of poor others. These sites bring middle-class staff into everyday contact with poverty as they enact laws, rules, policies and programs designed to reform the poor into “normal, healthy and virtuous” subjects (McCann and Miewald 2010; Rose and Miller 1992).³

We explore below a welfare office as a zone of encounter between poor and middle-class actors. Research has largely focused on welfare offices as sites in which poverty is governed through regulation, surveillance and sanctions design to shape the conduct of poor clients (Morgen, Acker and Weigt 2010; Soss 1999; Watkins-Hayes 2009). Theorizing the welfare office as a zone of encounter as we do here reveals the extent to which this governance of poverty depends deeply upon the roles, relationships and interactions scripted through this space—the terms of encounter set in play through particular spaces. As a zone of encounter, a welfare office is a site of bureaucratic procedures and situated social relations (staff, client) that script staff members as powerful insiders who exemplify norms of responsible, educated, authoritative middle class ideals. By contrast, clients are framed as in need of reform and in this sense as vulnerable outsiders (Cruikshank 1999; Mead 2004). In the USA, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, a centerpiece of neoliberal poverty governance, is administered in such spaces. Assistance is contingent upon adherence to strict rules that make substantial demands on clients and entail close supervision by welfare office staff to ensure that a range of obligations are fulfilled. As such, the welfare office not only scripts roles with deeply asymmetrical poverty relations, it frames interactions between middle-class and impoverished actors in ways that are fundamentally predicated upon particular poverty governance practices (in this case, surveilling, monitoring, reforming, and so on).

Yet our reading of the welfare office as a zone of encounter is attentive not only to governance processes but also the potential for contact zones between middle-class

staff and poor community members. We trace how the very kinds of encounters between staff and clients that are demanded by contemporary US welfare policy may trigger encounters that lead to more complex understandings of poverty for middle class actors. Class (material and identity) projects are always mutable, fluid and contextual and we argue that class is (re)invented through myriad localized practices that may have transformative micro-political effects. We investigate whether spaces such as the welfare office may also operate as contact zones.

Contact Zones

Contact zones are specific sites/moments “where cultures meet, clash and grapple with one another in the context of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 1991:34). Contact zones can be virtual or concrete and can occur in almost any space, such as classrooms, community meetings, protest movements, cultural events among others (Askins and Pain 2011; Bayat 2010; Canagarajah 1997; Jeffrey 2012; Sparke 2013). Within a contact zone, rather than just being in physical proximity, class actors are engaged in critical learning about the links between privilege and injustice (Dixon and Durheim 2004; Reddy 2011; Valentine 2008).

Our conceptualization of contact zones aims for more nuanced accounts than other recent research. Engagements with cities as cosmopolitan sites of difference have primarily celebrated contact with different others, suggesting that such interactions enhance democratic engagement and identification of commonality or shared interest across difference (Massey 2004; Sandercock 1998; Young 1991). At the opposite pole, other research speaks to disciplining and exclusion of social difference (especially along lines of class and race) in urban development processes (Del Casino and Jocoy 2008; Lemanski 2006; Wilson and Grammenos 2005). For us, contact zones are interactions in which people grapple with social difference in ways that are neither a celebratory appreciation of difference (presumably without implications for one's own actions or identifications), nor a disciplining and defensive position that seeks to exclude or assimilate difference. Rather, interactions within contact zones are the difficult, often halting or tentative work of relating across difference to reach new insights about one's own class/race positions, as well as troubling widely held assumptions about poverty, class, race and place.

Contact zones can occur in many settings and are spaces/moments in which actors actively engage with difference in ways that may bring to light shared vulnerabilities, or trouble dominant characterizations of the differences between poor or middle-class subjects. We explore below a neighborhood redevelopment “task force”, convened by a Chicago community organization to bring together low-income residents, business owners, neighborhood social service agency staff and prospective developers/investors. This community forum served as a venue to discuss proposed initiatives aimed at improving quality of life in a neighborhood with a long history of deep structural poverty. As a zone of encounter, such community meetings hold at least the potential to work as contact zones because they do not a priori set up hierarchical roles/relationships between participants on the basis of class status. That is, because of the very purposes for which this zone of encounter comes into being, actors from different

race and class positions encounter one another through the common purpose of acting to ameliorate the effects of poverty, which may lead middle-class actors to new understandings about the root causes of poverty. We trace the transformations that may occur when participants question one another's assumptions about poverty or poorer people or when participants articulate counter positions. Yet, of course, not all actors will experience such encounters as contact zones. The positioning of different class subjects within a particular space of encounter, by virtue of their class, race, gender or other markers of difference, may render them more or less open to being challenged or to reflecting on questioning from others. Thus, even in a zone of encounter that has strong potential for transformative contact, some actors may continue to reproduce attitudes and practices that reinscribe dominant and disciplinary governance of poverty and class difference.

Zones of Class Encounters

We explore the agency of middle-class actors in rethinking or challenging poverty through two empirical examples drawn from separate projects focused on poverty dynamics: a welfare office in rural Montana and a neighborhood redevelopment task force organized by a non-profit community organization in Chicago's West Humboldt Park. Both cases offer insights into everyday interactions in different zones of encounter between middle-class and poorer people. At first blush, each of these zones of encounter appears to primarily activate processes of poverty governance (welfare office) or contact to challenge poverty politics (community task force). Actors involved in each space seemingly enter with specific, scripted identities by virtue of their role in that particular space (as staffer, client, as organizer, resident, developer). However, encounters across class difference involve a complex micro-politics that is given shape, but not determined, by the spatial encounter (Dixon and Durrheim, 2004). Even as certain spaces appear to entail a particular poverty politics—of governance or of contact—we theorize encounters as always also places of "... 'dislocation' with respect to familiar structures and narratives. [Place] is a disruptive materiality ... Place, like the subject, is the site of becoming, the opening for politics" (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxxiii). Interactions occur in sites that are made up of dynamic social relations and so can be transformed through interactions. It is this dynamic openness of encounters that interests us because it can reveal how class difference is maintained, but also how middle-class actors may come to see poverty differently as a starting place for alternative poverty politics (see Hodgetts et al. 2011). We trace the ways in which governance and transformative contact co-exist in each instance to understand how middle class actors' understandings of poverty are (re)produced.

Rural Montana Welfare Office

In this section we offer an in-depth reading of an interview with two staff members at the public assistance office in Riverside,⁴ a small town in eastern Montana. The excerpts reveal how the welfare office as a zone of encounter enrolls middle-class actors in the governance of poverty, but how these encounters may also enable

alternative understandings and a more inclusive poverty politics. This interview was conducted as part of a 5-year project on rural poverty, carried out by Victoria Lawson, Lucy Jarosz, and Anne Bonds in eight rural communities in the Pacific Northwest.⁵ Riverside's largely white population was experiencing a decades-long decline in the mid 2000s. An extended drought was punishing ranching households who had been on the land for 100 years; reliance on coal mining and oil extraction, neither of which meet new clean air laws, had gone offline for lack of markets. The result was widespread suffering, business closures, deep economic recession, an average per capita income of \$18,013 in 2009 and an individual poverty rate of 23%, compared with 13 % in Montana as a whole (Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds 2010).

In 2004, the researchers interviewed two staff members at the Riverside office of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Service, where residents apply for and receive welfare benefits. In contrast to their clients, these two women are comparatively secure members of the middle class. They hold federally funded jobs with full benefits in a region in the grip of a deep recession, and one is college educated, positioning them at the upper end of the income and achievement spectrum in Riverside. Their work brings them into daily and often intense contact with people in need of assistance, within the stringent regulations of contemporary US welfare provision. Aid recipients must disclose tremendous detail about themselves and their needs, submit to pervasive monitoring of their daily lives, and meet intensive work/job search requirements to maintain benefits eligibility. The staff members must administer these rules (explicitly designed to encourage people to exit the welfare system) and act as the gatekeepers monitoring who will remain eligible for benefits or be sanctioned.

Against this backdrop, the welfare office is a zone of encounter in which middle class actors come into contact with those named as poor, in ways that are framed by the asymmetrical relationships and governmentalizing power embedded in the space itself. Staff members' jobs require them to participate in the neoliberal governance of poverty. By following procedures and rules, staffers reproduce neoliberal rationalities: that people are personally responsible for addressing their poverty and in need of reform. These everyday interactions script and differentiate the staffers' class position from their impoverished clients. For example:

- INT** [So] there aren't many families with children looking for help?
- ST#2** Exactly. Because the option that is offered is many times a disincentive.
- ST#1** Because they have to do activities ... when TANF first started, we had a lot of them, but they never had to do a darn thing for it. Other than fill out the child support papers, you know.
- INT** Your sense is that they left TANF because of the ...
- ST#2** Exactly, they will say "no thank you", because of the work requirements and this is what it involves, and you know, basically, you know, it's too much work ... They are cyclers. Meaning, you cycle on, you know.

They interpret TANF requirements as literally too much bother for "lazy people". Characterizing clients as "cyclers" unwilling to put forth the effort to meet requirements

effectively questions whether these individuals have legitimate needs. One staffer described her clients' deficiencies:

ST#1 And part of it is that our folks in poverty, they don't have the skill levels ... And then, I guess the other thing that I really wanted to hone in on is ... that so many of our folks can talk so well, they can get their foot in the door for a job, they cannot keep it.

Her colleague continued, pointing to the clients' need to be reformed:

ST#2 Yes, they have to be able to maintain a job. They can get the job, many many times ... and can do well with that. But the mundane task of getting up every morning, being there by 8 o'clock—you know, those are real issues that they're not maintaining. So ... it's not just educational skills, it's job skills. You know as far as how to act appropriately, how to say things appropriately ... and again, being on time ... So much of today's society has almost given instant gratification. So some jobs, there is not instant gratification, and how do you do the same repetitive task over and over and over again, without someone telling you every hour, "You're doing a good job." You know, "Great, keep it up."

The other staff member expanded on this notion of the irresponsible employee:

ST#1 And then there's also the idea that, you know folks, besides they can't go to work, they don't worry about calling in. Just don't show up, and they're gone for two, three days and then they think they should have their job ... Well, they're not always replaced, but the people think, "Well, why mess with that? We need them and they're not here".

In this exchange, the staffers construct deficient poor subjects who must change themselves in order to get out of poverty. They must become more skilled, timely, confident and responsible to their employers, and as such more like the staff themselves. While there is nothing inherently wrong with inculcating job skills in clients, these interactions produce a strong sense of judging distance between the staff and those in need of assistance who are seen as flawed. They also shore up normative understandings of what it means to be middle class. Their discussion re-inscribes cultural framings that bind imaginaries of middle class identity to certain behaviors such as education, speech, dress or work habits (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Molnár 2002). These judgments, differentiations, and distancing are enabled by the space in which they are enunciated. Interactions between welfare office staff and clients are mediated by the practices required in this site of governance. Staff must follow bureaucratic procedures, and they become frustrated and judging when clients are non-compliant. In their role as welfare administrators (the very position that secures their own middle-class status), if clients do not do what is required, the staff will fail to move them off the TANF rolls, reflecting negatively on their own job performance. Through this zone of encounter, with its governmentalizing procedures, rules and relations of authority, middle class actors solidify class boundaries, in ways that reproduce hegemonic narratives about poverty, poorer groups, and norms of middle class-ness.

However, the staff are ambivalent about purely individualistic interpretations of poverty. Interwoven with portrayals of their clients as lazy, as unwilling to exert the effort needed to meet requirements for aid; the staff also understood poverty in terms of structural conditions of economic instability such as cyclical layoffs at the mine and hospital and business closures. For example, when asked if the level of need in Riverside has changed over time they explained:

ST#2 I think sometimes the folks that we see are um, to me they are more urgent. Meaning that by the time they finally come in, they are on their last nickel ... Where it's different in other communities, is that they have a program called "ABOB" Able Bodied Working Adults, meaning that they have no children, no disabilities, and so with that particular program, they can only get three months worth of food stamps out of three years. *We are exempt. Because our unemployment rate is so high and because job service is so far away.*

The staff also recognized that their clients face additional challenges of discrimination because they are on welfare:

ST#2 ... *our people have so many barriers*, or, the other thing is they have done something that will not allow them through the door as far as employment, um, whether you know reputation, or something has happened that the employer is not ... It's a small community and so if you work for one place of employment and you do something wrong, or you leave or you quit, um that reputation will follow you because it's a small community and people know then that you are quote "*not a good employee*" and *they will not hire you and they will not even give you a chance*, and so, and I would say caseload wise, you know it's relatively low, but um, you know *in a small community that follows you*.

ST#1 We probably got a lot of older folks that that would fit into our programs but they are a little too proud to ... there is a stigma about coming in here.

ST#2 Oh yeah, I think so ... You know, [recipients of public assistance are] still sometimes referred to as "those people" or "those folks", and they're not. They're our friends and our neighbors and they could be our mother and our brother and our grandmother and you know, they're us.

Here the staff members acknowledge a stigma around receiving assistance, even as their earlier discussion of the "cyclers" contributes to this stigma and reinforces the idea of flawed clients. This acknowledgement that some who need assistance do not ask for help leads to a powerful and inclusive framing of who is poor, and generates a moment of social boundary-breaking, as one of the staffers answered a question about who is poor in the community, who is hurting:

ST#2 Who's poor and who's hurting, I want to say my friends and neighbors. You know it's not. It's not, I mean these are people that we know and love, these are, these are our community folks, I guess we call them ours ... they are us ... they are us ... poverty can happen ... [choked up].

This moment of strong emotion says out loud that the poor are us—not other. It suggests that in this zone of encounter, there is more going on than only a governing of poverty. To some extent, the staff renegotiate dominant ideas about poverty and express solidarity across class difference. Because they are insiders in the welfare office, they know (more than others in the community) who does, and does not, access assistance. Despite their earlier denigration of welfare recipients, these staffers are *also* able to recognize (some people's) need as genuine, discern complex reasons why they might not seek aid, and frame these individuals not as "other" but as "us".

Throughout the arc of the entire interview, the staff expressed contradictory sentiments about their poor clients and poverty in the community. Their complex understandings of poverty emerge from a micro-politics of this space of encounter in relation to contacts taking place in the larger community. They explained that their welfare office is situated in a small and tight-knit community and that they as staff are intimately familiar with the lives of those who are poor in their midst, through encounters in church, at the grocery store and in social networks. While their encounters with clients at the welfare office are scripted by the bureaucratic surveillance they are required to perform; these middle-class staff also articulate a structural narrative of persistent poverty that is not the fault of individuals. Even as they are deeply implicated in the welfare office's modes of governance and production of poverty, the staff members' in-depth knowledge of community members serve to complicate their understandings of poverty and produce slippage in understandings of class difference.

Their complex understanding of poverty is not trivial because it translates into a poverty politics that is distinctly out of step with dominant narratives in Riverside. Throughout our fieldwork we repeatedly encountered negative characterizations of poor people expressed by middle-class actors and we witnessed oppressive practices of governance that abandoned the poor in the name of economic development (Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds 2008, 2010). In one sense, the welfare office produces just such moments of governance. Given this larger context it was noteworthy that one staff member spoke up strongly at public community development meetings about how poverty was being ignored in Riverside. She framed poverty as the responsibility of everyone saying:

ST#1 ... until we are addressing maybe the lowest person on the totem pole here in Riverside, then until they can bring that person even up one notch as far as employment, or housing ... until that person is moved up, the whole community, then ... we're not meeting the need.

She recognizes poorer residents as members of the community who have legitimate structural needs (employment, housing, child care). The staffer argues for a more inclusive politics saying that the town bears collective responsibility for dealing with poverty in the context of economic crisis and shared suffering. Her encounters in the welfare office and the town have led to complex and ambivalent understandings of poverty that prompted her to act. Yet it is important not to overstate the case—the staffers' sentiments about poverty, social assistance and poorer people are ambivalent. Despite their understanding of structural unemployment, discrimination and

the lack of housing and child care, they reproduce class difference through their judgments about “cycling” on and off benefits and their insistence on client self-improvement.

Nonetheless, the small tentative moments of inclusion, recognition and rethinking that emerge through these spaces of encounter matter because they enable the possibility of a more inclusive poverty politics. The welfare office brings middle class actors into contact with people in need through spatial processes of encounter that can be both boundary-making and boundary-breaking. While much research has focused on the ways in which welfare rules and procedures reproduce the poor other, our emphasis on encounters and interactions in this site of governance reveals a more complex relational production of poverty and middle class understandings of poverty.

Chicago Community Development Task Force

Our second set of examples is drawn from community discussions of inner-city urban redevelopment, convened by a Chicago neighborhood organization. Taken against the case of the welfare office, these examples highlight how spatial processes of contact and governance are shaped by the differently situated zones of encounter in which they occur. Through comparison of two middle-class actors in the space of the community meeting, we show how they each experience and respond to a particular zone of encounter in different ways, with implications for the kinds of poverty politics they produce.

Chicago’s West Humboldt Park neighborhood was historically home to working and middle class residents (largely European immigrants), then became largely African American in parallel with white flight in the 1960s and 1970s. The area experienced massive disinvestment, decline, and heightened race/class segregation through the 1980s and 1990s. By the 2000s, change was afoot, in the form of public/private “reinvestment” programs, homeownership and small business incentives, which Wilson and Grammenos (2005) have termed a “gentrification-based” urban revitalization strategy. The neighborhood began to experience increasing competition for rental and owner-occupied housing from lower-income Latinos fleeing rising costs to the east, impoverished African Americans displaced by tear-down of Chicago’s public housing complexes, and a multi-racial group of middle-class homebuyers outbid by skyrocketing prices in other neighborhoods. Property developers clamored to buy vacant, city-owned or tax-delinquent properties and small-business owners from outside the neighborhood began to occupy vacant storefronts along the neighborhood’s commercial corridor. Seeking greater community control over these transformations, a West Humboldt Park community development organization convened a monthly “task force” to review proposals for business or housing development and serve as a forum for issues on the minds of residents. The Task Force meetings brought together longtime African-American residents, newer homeowners or business owners (African American, Latino, Asian and white), and included lower- and middle-income residents. Sarah Elwood conducted research over 7 years that involved regular participant observation at these meetings.⁶

The Task Force (TF) meetings sometimes operated as contact zones that worked through productive tensions and challenges to conventional understandings of race, poverty and belonging; appearing at times to open up new understandings of racialized poverty and privilege among non-poor subjects. As a zone of encounter, the TF meetings also included moments of governance in which individuals' statements, or even the organization's proposed programs, reinforced neoliberal narratives about poorer people and places. But on the whole these encounters tended to function much more as contact zones than the Montana welfare office profiled previously. This difference, we contend, stems from the socio-spatial context of the encounter. In contrast to a welfare office, the community development organization is not a direct service provider, and hence does not position participants *a priori* in deeply unequal client/provider relationships (though, of course, staff/resident differences are present). The TF meetings were explicitly articulated as a space in which residents, developers, government officials and non-governmental organization (NGO) staff from a range of race and class positions engage together in creating a better future for the neighborhood. Whereas in the welfare office, individuals are automatically channeled into particular roles and governed by particular rules on the basis of their class status, this space of community deliberation does not explicitly pre-code a hierarchy along lines of class/poverty. The space of the TF is of course not a completely level playing field—unequal power relations of race, class, gender and housing tenure were still common in its deliberations. Nonetheless, the context of the TF as a zone of encounter affords a greater potential for contact zones to emerge, in which normative understandings of poverty and class difference are challenged, and in which we might see transformations in understandings of poverty among middle class actors.

One example of such a transformation is the case of Dan, an active participant in the TF for at least 5 years. Dan is white and middle class, he does not live in the neighborhood, and he owns a for-profit development company. He began attending TF meetings only for the purpose of gaining community approval of his proposal to develop affordable condominiums in the neighborhood, but over time, he became much more broadly involved in the neighborhood and in the TF. As evident in the narrative below, Dan's initial presumptions clearly reproduce racialized class narratives about people in impoverished inner city neighborhoods. After a presentation about an affordable housing project about to open in West Humboldt Park, Dan grilled the project director: "What sort of systems do you have in place to make sure people really act like owners? Is there selection in the process? Do people have to show evidence that they're responsible?" These questions reveal Dan's preconceptions that poor African-American residents will need to be regulated in order to become reliable homeowners. His reinforcement of middle class boundaries and identities demonstrates how little he understood about WHP residents or about the vast network of local NGOs and supportive housing agencies. At another TF meeting, the community discussed a proposal for a weekly flea market intended to increase interest in and activity along its main commercial corridor. Dan responded enthusiastically about the need for community residents to improve their business skills through the flea market: "... if people can learn how to sell in a flea market, it can generate into real economic activity. A vendor can make \$800 in a weekend." Max, an African-American resident and board member for the West Humboldt non-profit immediately

interrupted: “We don’t have a problem here with people knowing how to sell things—the problem is getting them to sell things that are *legal!*” Everyone laughed. Notably, the laughing included Dan, who held up his palms and said, “okay, okay, I get it”. In this moment, we see the TF functioning as a contact zone, a space in which Dan’s condescending discourse of “improving the skills of the poor” was challenged. Yet the challenge to Dan’s presuppositions about the deficiencies of impoverished residents and potential solutions to their poverty came in a humorous form, rather than a hostile one, allowing him to remain engaged and to learn—as he continued to do for at least 5 years.

During Dan’s multi-year interaction with diverse institutions and constituencies of the TF, his activities, priorities, and attitudes appeared to transform through his engagements across difference in this contact zone. The productive challenges articulated by other TF participants reworked Dan’s assumptions about impoverished people and places, transforming his poverty politics. He gradually learned that the loss of “good” jobs (ie with living wages and benefits) was a more significant employment challenge for West Humboldt residents than his initial blanket assumption that residents lacked sufficient skills for employment. Whereas he at first complained vociferously at TF meetings that City of Chicago rules for contracting with minority/women owned businesses limited the neighborhood’s competitiveness for development; several years later he was working to help neighborhood contractors become certified in this program. Early on, Dan stereotyped neighborhood youth as delinquent “bad kids” and gang members and argued for punitive efforts to restrict their presence in public space. Several years later he helped create opportunities for teens’ meaningful involvement in the community, participating in a youth leadership and community advisory group. Dan’s transformations show how the contact zone constituted by the TF (and Dan’s own engagement with this forum) allowed him to rework his views about impoverished people and places, and the causes of poverty and class difference. Middle class, white, and not from West Humboldt Park, Dan was in many ways deeply “out of place” in the TF, yet the encounters across difference that occurred in this contact zone shifted his normative understandings of poverty and his enacted poverty politics.

Yet not all actors are positioned a zone of encounter in precisely the same way, and hence, may be more and less likely to experience these spaces and interactions in ways that transform their understandings and poverty politics. The example of James, a staff member at the West Humboldt community organization, is illustrative. James is African American, middle class, holds an advanced degree in urban planning and did not live in the neighborhood. Though he participated in the TF for as long, or longer, than Dan, he did not experience this space as a transformative contact zone. He continued to forward narratives framing poverty as, for instance, a problem of individual choices and behaviors. For example, in one gathering he explained the organization’s economic development programs as: “... helping enhance community members’ capacities to make better choices about livelihood and procurement ... our programs are basically focused on individual human development, on helping people develop the values they need to improve themselves.” Several years later, James’ understandings of poverty remained largely unchanged and he continued to frame his organization’s activities as projects of governance intended to regulate

poor subjects. For example, the organization was working to create a land trust, intended to secure vacant/abandoned land for homes to be sold to lower-income residents under terms that prevent “flipping” the property for a profit and mandate future sales at affordable rates. But rather than presenting the land trust as an effort to fundamentally alter political-economic relations around property that are deeply implicated in the (re)production of poverty in the neighborhood, James framed it as a strategy to force residents to change their behavior:

[the land trust] will force our folks to think about their own household savings plans and where they are now and especially how they will be able to reach those goals 10 to 15 years from now. So it's about budgeting and household planning and sending children to college in 15 years and that kind of stuff.

Notably these statements from James, and the assumptions about poverty and impoverished residents that underlie them, went largely unchallenged by other members of the TF. In contrast, when Dan expressed similar assumptions, he was challenged (though in a way that allowed for further engagement). The difference, we contend, is rooted in how Dan and James fit (or do not) in this zone of encounter. Dan, as a white middle-class developer not from West Humboldt Park is clearly a “space” invader” (Puwar 2004:7) in a way that renders his assertions open for challenge by other TF participants. James, a middle-class staff member also not from the neighborhood, is on some levels also an outsider whose views might be open for challenge. Yet his status as a paid staff member for the organization convening the TF situates him as an insider within this zone of encounter, as does his being African American in this predominantly African-American neighborhood. These dimensions of James’ insider status, together with his university-based expertise in urban development, may also lend authority to his statements in this particular zone of encounter. From this position, James’ statements that individualize and governmentalize poverty go unchallenged. He continues to re-inscribe his pre-existing understandings of poverty and class difference, and notably, his enacted poverty politics continue to produce governance processes through the space of the TF. While the TF is a zone of encounter that in many ways is coded toward interactions likely to foster transformative processes of contact, not all actors experience these engagements in the same manner, with implications for the kinds of insight or transformation that might stem from these encounters.

While we emphasize contact zones as spaces of engagement and critical learning across difference, as sites for transformation of normative understandings of social difference and privilege, they may also operate to govern and manage poverty. Dan and some other TF participants experienced the TF as a contact zone, while James and other participants engaged this forum in ways that reinforced dominant, neoliberal narratives of poverty as the fault of deficient people and places. Many of the initiatives brought before the TF serve to manage poverty in ways that echo some of the expressions of personal responsibility for poverty articulated by the Montana case workers in the previous section. For instance, at one point the TF supported a proposal to found an “investment club” and their discussion suggested that if neighborhood residents could be taught to budget and save properly, poverty would decline. The co-presences of governance *and* critical learning in any dynamic spatial encounter is

unsurprising. Yet theorizing these spaces as sites of governance and contact zones, and theorizing how particular middle-class subjects act and think through these spaces, allows us to more clearly discern how relational poverty processes play out in a complicated world, and their implications for identities and subjectivities, social divisions *and* alliances.

Conclusions

We explore spatial sites, moments and processes through which middle-class actors trouble hegemonic understandings of poverty. In so doing, we extend relational poverty analysis both by focusing on middle-class actors and by attending to distinct zones of encounter. We argue that specific zones of encounter around poverty activate processes of governance and contact depending upon particular configurations of power relations and identities that take on meaning in that space/moment. We illustrate our conceptual approach with suggestive examples of cross-class encounters drawn from qualitative fieldwork in a welfare office in rural Montana and in community revitalization meetings in inner-city Chicago neighborhood. We trace the ways in which processes of governance and transformative contact are enacted in zones of encounter in relation to the subject positions of particular middle-class actors.

We focus on the agency of middle-class actors because dominant discourse positions “middle class-ness” as the antithesis of poverty: an aspirational subject position achieved through “good choices” and performances of educational and cultural achievement. This imaginary of the idealized middle-class subject circulates widely to shape and legitimate contemporary disciplining of “poor” bodies in the USA. And at the same time, middle-class identities are often produced through fear of, or distance from, poor and threatening others. We argue that this is not uniformly nor necessarily the case. We push beyond a widespread focus on the production of social difference to see (theoretically and empirically) the presence of boundary-breaking, transformative moments in which middle-class actors politicize poverty through social contacts and alliances. We illustrate the (often halting) agency of middle-class actors who contest hegemonic poverty discourses and are capable of learning from their encounters with others to become subjects who can enact a new class politics. In this way relational poverty analysis is a disruptive project that not only explains poverty in terms of capital logics and dominant discourses, but that explores what is emergent and relatively un-theorized on the left.

Spatial analyses of governance have focused on organizations and everyday interactions that manage poverty. Our work diverges, exploring instead the ways in which particular zones of encounter may activate processes of governance, but also contact zones that begin to trouble dominant understandings of poverty. Our exploration of the Montana welfare office and the Chicago community task force reveals each to be a zone of encounter that more prominently activates processes of poverty governance or transformative contact across class difference. Yet the boundary-making and boundary-breaking tendencies of these zones of encounter are neither singular nor absolute. The terms of encounter mobilized through the welfare office manage and govern poverty in ways that reproduce social distance and lead the staff to judge their

clients. Yet through their deep knowledge of clients' lives and the everyday lives of others in their small town, the staffers encounter the complexities of poverty and could also recognize the injustice of inequality and vulnerability. However ambivalent their reading of poverty, this recognition prompted them to articulate a politics of connection and shared community responsibility for poverty.

Geographical work on contact zones has tended to either celebrate cosmopolitan contact as reducing social distance or emphasized the hardening of social boundaries in struggles over urban space. Our approach holds these poles in creative tension to explore how, when and where contact emerges in very different poverty encounters. The Chicago task force has greater potential to mobilize processes of contact, because its encounters are brought about with the intended purpose of engaging (differently positioned) class subjects around a common purpose of bringing positive change to an impoverished neighborhood. These terms of encounter set the stage for processes of contact that build new understandings of poverty, through interactions that challenge narratives of individual failings and work toward more progressive politics. We see such transformations in the case of Dan, a middle-class property developer who engages in critical learning through this zone of encounter. Yet other actors may be situated in potential contact zones in ways that render their ideas about poorer people less accessible for challenge, and may go right on reinforcing problematic assumptions that enable poverty governance—as in the case of James, a middle-class staff member in the community organization.

Reading these spaces for difference rather than dominance reveals moments of ambiguity, openness, understanding and collaboration. Both sets of spatial encounters, albeit to different degrees, trouble social boundaries and allow for alternatives to continuing defensiveness and division. These examples are provocative because they suggest that boundary crossing is already happening, that the potential for cross class/race alliances between middle classes and those marked as poor are indeed possible. This project is suggestive and asks us to do the theoretical and empirical work of uncovering a poverty politics that is already in motion, but that we do not adequately understand.

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Endnotes

¹ <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-november-16-2011/occupy-wall-street-divided>

² Middle classes are theorized through materialist and/or culturalist approaches. Materialist work focuses on social relations of production and position within occupational hierarchies (Goldthorpe 1996; Jeffrey 2008; Portes 1985; Wright 1985). Culturalist approaches foreground processes of identity formation, dispositions and differences in economic, cultural, educational and linguistic forms of capital in framing middle classes (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Sayer 2005; Schram 2000).

- ³ We are indebted to Eugene McCann and Christiana Miewald (2011) for making this connection between middle-class poverty politics and sites of poverty governance.
- ⁴ Riverside is a pseudonym.
- ⁵ Interpretation of this interview is informed by the larger project involving extensive archival research on the political-economic history of the area and public policies, media coverage of poverty issues and over 50 in-depth interviews with religious and political leaders as well as with social service providers, including 10 conducted in Riverside. The research collaboration with Lucy Jarosz and Anne Bonds contributed enormously to our thinking (NSF BCS 0136703).
- ⁶ All names are pseudonyms. All quotes are from interviews and participant observation conducted from 2003 to 2005. This project was supported by NSF BCS 0652141. For further detail see Elwood (2006).

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