In 1902, Bessie and Marie Van Vorst—sisters-in-law, writers, and avowed “gentlewomen”—changed their clothes and took up factory work, promising to reveal to readers the world of the “unknown class,” for whom they intended to serve as a “mouthpiece” in the struggle to inaugurate a more just and egalitarian society. In undertaking this project, they joined an American tradition of undercover investigation that had begun to take shape in the late Gilded Age, flourished from the Progressive Era through the 1930s, shifted in focus and method during the postwar decades, and persists to the present, constituting a distinctive ongoing commentary on the development of class society in the age of industrial capitalism. The Van Vorsts shared a conviction with other journalists, social scientists, novelists, and intellectuals who went “down and out,” to use the term later coined by George Orwell: The only way to understand life across the class line was to live it. Over more than a century, a mass of such investigators fanned out through American steel mills, coal mines, construction sites, hotels, department stores, paper-box factories, taxi-dance halls, restaurants, hobo jungles, hop fields, and lumber camps. They hoped to learn what it meant to work hard and to be poor. They wanted to know what it meant not to be—and perhaps by extension, what it did mean to be—“middle class.” Most writers shared with the Van Vorsts a suspicion of grand theory, favoring instead a homespun epistemology of experience. Their books and articles characteristically foregrounded two perspectives: a sometimes shrewd critique of the official knowledge obtainable from self-interested employers, sentimental philanthropists, and abstractly minded economists; and an often naive and condescending conviction that, through class masquerade, they might “discover and adopt” their subjects’ viewpoint, and thereby contribute to resolving “the social problem.” For most, going undercover was both an empirical task and an existential dare—a mission, and an adventure. This book tells their story.

The Van Vorsts’ coinage of the “unknown class” implies two things about the undercover tradition. First, these investigators went beyond tourism or slumming to immerse themselves in what the restaurant investigator Frances Donovan called “a new world” replete with “life, new and strange”: a world...
of difference. In that world, they worked and lived among people who shared
groups and practices (later sometimes called “cultures”) that were strikingly
different from their own. Their task as writers became especially to repren-
sent difference, if also to seek commonalities that might foster cross-class
solidarity. In describing from the inside how “the other half” lived, they
often revealed why and how they believed class differences had arisen, and
to what extent they seemed fixed and permanent. Second, “unknown class” implied how class, as a category applicable to U.S. society, remained vague
and troublesome to investigators and to their audiences. When most down-
and-outers described the working-class other, they tended to emphasize
appearance, behavior, language, and social practices, while paying less atten-
tion to the structural factors and power relations that produced harsh working
conditions, unemployment, and poverty. Many echoed the American narrative of social mobility, fluidity, and classlessness; indeed, their stories of
class switching suggested such fluidity, as could their well-meaning efforts to
make the poor seem less alien than their readers might expect.

This is a multigenerational story, but not one in which the same gestures
were endlessly repeated. Writers’ perspectives on class, labor, and working-
class people shifted in concert with particular historical contexts, as will be
evident in the chapters that follow. I will track the tradition from its Progressive Era origins and proliferation (chapter 1) through a sequence of distinct-
tive stages: into a “New Era” of postwar labor militancy and 1920s industrial
psychology, personnel management, and romantic vagabondage (chapter 2);
through numbing defeats and redemptive struggles in the wastelands of the
Great Depression (chapter 3); across wartime renegotiations of gender and
national identity in a reborn industrial economy, and onward to celebrations
of postwar affluence that merged with Cold War fears of communism to
cast class into the shadows (chapter 4). The story’s contours and key themes
change markedly in the later 1940s and 1950s, with the increasing promi-
ience accorded to race in social thought and public discourse during the rise
of the civil rights movement (chapter 5). John Howard Griffin’s undercover
classic *Black Like Me* (1961) serves as a marker for those shifts, and it signifies
a turning point in the nature of the tradition and its discourses. The final
chapter briefly charts the undercover tradition’s persistence in postmodern
America, when the very definitions of borders and identities underwent
seemingly constant reconsideration.

My goals are twofold. First, I will reconstruct the story of a little-known
mode of producing social knowledge that proved influential in both popular
and academic realms. By “social knowledge,” I mean not what Americans
today would acknowledge as verifiable truth statements, but I refer to ideas
and images that earlier historical actors took to be accurate when explaining their society. Bearing an authority that seemed undeniable, undercover investigators worked to establish knowledge about the unknown class in a nation that largely denied the very relevance of class to its historical experience. These investigative accounts tell us much about how earlier Americans thought about work, poverty, and class, and about how modern understandings of those categories were created. I will also consider how class passers' personal, professional, gender, and class identities were at stake in this enterprise. Because their truth-telling method relied on sustained deception and masquerade, their stories illuminate how less-flexible Victorian understandings of identity gave way to modernist conceptions of malleable selfhood. In attempting to do this story justice, I will range beyond conventional nonfiction print sources to interweave discussions of short stories, novels, plays, and movies that drew from and commented on the undercover tradition.

Second, I wish to demonstrate the role of cross-class passing in the genesis and development of something much larger: the common view of the poor that was once associated with terms such as “dangerous classes,” and more recently with debates about a “culture of poverty” and an “underclass.” Labels in this lineage have typically connoted a social stratum whose members’ values and practices are believed to be entirely separate from those of people in mainstream society, and whose undesirable traits appear to result from a vague congeries of environmental and hereditary influences. Because undercover investigators claimed a unique authority to speak of and for the poor, and because they often portrayed their subjects as beings of a radically different order, we must ask about their contribution to this genealogy. How did such essentialist representations comport with the emphasis on environmental causation that was supposedly ascendant from the Progressive Era onward? What role did undercover writers play in advancing an alternative view that conflated class with race and culture—a conflation often understood to have degenerative or devolutionary implications—which can be identified in popular and academic discourse throughout the same period? I believe that this tradition of conflating categories coexisted with, and even infiltrated, the better-known countertradition associated with the anthropologist Franz Boas and his students, who stressed cultural and historical factors over biological explanations of difference. Variants on the Boasian culture concept that emerged in the social sciences could prove just as deterministic as biology had proven in older formulations about human development. Such determinism often reflected the persistent legacy of Lamarckian biology, which had long linked environment with heredity through its emphasis on the inheritance of acquired traits. Down-and-outers usually
saw themselves as friends of the poor, but many did meld class, race, and culture to articulate degenerationist, quasi-Lamarckian theories of poverty. Yet their texts often proved internally contradictory, because many of the same investigators also emphasized the positive ways in which poor people sought work, struggled to survive, and found meaning in those endeavors. Thus, down-and-outers intended to serve as tribunes of the poor, even as they also helped to lay the foundations for the concept of an underclass—a concept later attacked by critics for similarly conflating race with class and culture.8

This study is marked by some anomalous features. First, although what I call a “tradition” was demonstrably continuous and productive, it was not always overtly self-conscious. Writers and reviewers did sometimes allude to previous undercover texts. But perhaps to underscore the audacity of their approach, authors often ritualistically described achieving the supposedly unprecedented realization that they must live a working-class life in order to write authentically about it. “Why not be a waitress,” Frances Donovan asked herself in 1917, as if such a thought had never struck anyone before—when it obviously had, as anyone with Donovan’s graduate training in sociology should have known.9 Comparable declarations of originality remained common at the twentieth century’s end.

Further, most participants in this tradition had no set name for their method. Reviewers sometimes called it “slumming”—an appellation that down-and-outers routinely rejected because it implied sensationalism and exploitation—and sometimes it was referred to as the more academically respectable “participant observation.” But neither label precisely describes the practice of purposefully deceiving others about one’s class standing in order to write about the resulting experiences. Therefore, I have used the terms “down-and-outers,” “undercover investigators,” and “class passers” more or less interchangeably. The last term, suggesting an analogy with racial passing, is the trickiest. Racial passing in the United States has usually meant moving upward on the scale of societal power and privilege. But class passing, in which downwardly mobile writers proclaimed themselves uniquely qualified to represent those below them on that scale, was itself an exercise of power. It could also lead to further accretions of power through professional advancement, public notoriety, and book sales. But if the analogy is not exact, the term still seems appropriately descriptive. Clearly, the makers of this tradition will not solve the problem of nomenclature for us. Some simply called it spying, or worried that it might be seen that way.10 Reviewers have always been of mixed mind about the practice’s legitimacy, regarding its results either as uniquely valuable and insightful, or as inauthentic, unscientific, and redolent of undemocratic attitudes. However warranted such praise
and blame may have been, I believe that this tradition's history is uniquely revealing about the construction of social knowledge of work and poverty in modern American history.

I should also emphasize that I have not attempted to write social history. I will not argue that these writers' narratives did or did not match up with some verifiable social reality, that they can or cannot show us “how it was” to be a hop picker or a hobo. Rather, I have tried to reconstruct how investigators entered a world that was not their own, and why they represented that world and its inhabitants as they did. To accomplish this, I have sought to establish connections among these individuals, and to link them to the contexts—intellectual, cultural, social, economic, political—in which they operated. Drawing on the evidence of their texts and on available biographical information, I have put those texts in dialogue with each other to ask certain basic questions about each generation of investigators. Why did they go undercover, and what were they looking for? What intellectual equipment and cultural preconceptions did they bring to their tasks? How did their often-contradictory mix of motives and emotions—idealism, daring, desire, fear, voyeurism, revulsion—shape their efforts to forge experience into ideas and images? How did their class, gender, and racial identities affect their representations of the other? How did they change, or not change? How did their texts fit within, challenge, or just ruffle the surface of ongoing discourses about class, work, and poverty?

Finally, assessing this tradition is not a simple matter. Other scholars who have touched on it tend to highlight the investigators’ elitism and self-delusion. In a thoughtful analysis of the subject, the literary scholar Peter Hitchcock concludes that undercover texts arise out of writers’ class-based “reflex or duty” to understand the conditions of their own class’s superior position, and that they always reaffirm the permanency of class distinctions and shrink from suggesting any effort to abolish them. This perspective has not been limited to the academy, because class passing has also been a popular journalistic genre. Reviewing the stage version of Barbara Ehrenreich’s undercover study *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), a critic complains that the play is mainly about the middle-class narrator’s “liberal guilt” and offers no “authentic voice” for the poor.

This approach bears a certain sort of fruit, but such readings strike me as unduly limited. Undercover texts are only inconsistently egalitarian and cannot offer a transparent window on reality, but they are not reducible to exercises in middle-class condescension. In highlighting the complex interplay between democratic aspiration and elitist objectification in these works, I will argue against Hitchcock’s contention that a “cultural logic of slumming”
operated to consistently confirm an invidious sense of difference and to reinscribe the class line. While most down-and-out texts were not avowedly revolutionary, they were produced because middle-class authors situated themselves amid some of the worst ravages of the emergent capitalist order, struggled to grasp the origins and nature of class difference, and groped toward a critical, independent, modern consciousness of self and society. They are better understood, as Hitchcock also suggests, in terms of "position" and "identification." Beginning from my best understanding of each writer’s consciousness of self and class, I ask how class passers positioned themselves with regard to their subjects, to their imagined audience, and to structures of power and authority; and I ask to what extent they identified themselves with their subjects, and sought to represent—however imperfectly—their points of view. It is too easily asserted that describing the working-class other serves solely to define the middle-class self and that crossing a border serves only to reinscribe it. We should also recognize that neither the border nor those on either side of it will necessarily look the same to a writer or an audience after the crossing has occurred. This was what set undercover investigations apart from more conventional modes of studying American work and poverty. Whatever their blindesses and limitations—and I will not understate them—down-and-outs from the Progressive Era to our own time have repeatedly demanded that Americans open their eyes to the willfully unseen and that they confront the persistent, pressing, and still-unanswered question of the unknown class.