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I. Still Working

In 1965, Walker Evans was still working. He was still working as the Special Photographic Editor at *Fortune* magazine. Evans had accepted this post, which was designed for him, in 1948 and he had remained at work for the magazine for the next seventeen years.¹ The editorial post was Evans's lengthiest employment, far lengthier than his work for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Resettlement Administration (RA). That post lasted less than two years. Between September 1935 and February 1937, Evans worked as an Assistant Specialist in Information in the Division of Information at the RA. He was 'entrusted', to quote from his official job description, 'with the task of bringing facts before the public ... [to make] the rural problems known through the press, the radio, motion pictures, and still photography'.² Evans's now canonical records of rural poverty—of clapboard homes, shoeless children and ruined interiors—publicised the Depression (Fig. 1). They brought facts before the public. Those facts championed Roosevelt's New Deal.

In the 1960s, Evans was not only still working. He was still working on economic recession. In March 1961, he completed 'People and Places in Trouble', an eight page portfolio on unemployment (Fig. 2). Evans took the photographs, designed the layout and penned the text. 'On these pages', he wrote, 'are pictures made this

¹ Lesley K. Baier, *Walker Evans at Fortune, 1945-1965* (Wellesley, Ma.: Wellesley College Museum, 1977). Evans worked as a staff photographer at *Fortune* for three years (1945-1948) before accepting this post..

² Quoted in Jeff L. Rosenheim, "'The Cruel Radiance of What Is': Walker Evans and the South", in *Walker Evans* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), p. 73. See as well *Walker Evans: Photographs of the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973).

winter through a wide range of the East, from Massachusetts to Tennessee, in pockets of new unemployment and old poverty lying often in the midst of prosperous regions’.

‘The people here’, Evans continued, ‘were informed, voluntary (and generous) participants in the portraiture. They are not the hundred neediest cases—or the million. Mostly, they are just laid-off citizens’. Evans closed his text with the words of his ‘volunteers’. Unattributed, italicised and set off by quotation marks, they read:

‘We have to get out of here next month...’

‘I read a lot of books now from the library...’

‘Laid off November 9. Even the 1958 cutback didn’t hit me...’

‘I was in coke. They use oxygen and gas now.’³

Evans gave his subjects a picture and a voice.

Flipping through ‘People and Places in Trouble’, turning over the magazine’s double-page spreads, is like dialling back the clock. Have we seen these people and places before? Are they the same people, the same places, Evans photographed in the 1930s? Surely, time has passed; the shoeless children have grown old. Now they have grey hair and breads. And, yet, time has stood still. The wallpaper is still ripped. The clapboard houses still repeat down the row, as they did in Evans’s photograph of the streets and graveyard of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania from 1936 (Fig. 3). Old poverty, as Evans wrote, confronted new unemployment. ‘People and Places in Trouble’ neatly folds the 1960s back on—into—the 1930s. If Evans’s photographs recorded the present, ‘this winter’, his portfolio constructed time. The magazine page assembled history.

For most historians of American photography, Evans’s work at *Fortune* is typically off-limits, out of bounds. It is—it came—too late.⁴ Simply put, it came after

³ Walker Evans, ‘People and Places in Trouble’, *Fortune*, March 1961, p. 110. (Emphasis in the original.)

the heyday of documentary and Evans's institutionalization as America's sage muse with his 1938 Museum of Modern Art retrospective 'American Photographs'. In Evans's photographs of auto junkyards and gaunt tenant farmers, which filled the museum's walls and the pages of the exhibition catalogue, we see, so we were told, missed opportunities and waste (Figs. 4 and 5). According to Lincoln Kirstein, who penned the catalogue's text, we see in Evans's photographs 'vulgarization' and the pitfalls of modernisation.⁵ Towing this line, John Szarkowski prescribed the ban on Evans's *Fortune* work in 1971, with the Museum of Modern Art second Evans retrospective. Organised around the same iconic shots of shoeless children, ruined interiors and weathered faces, the simply titled and authorial 'Walker Evans' did not in fact ignore Evans's work at *Fortune*. It ignored the portfolio and the printed page. Szarkowski made Evans's work at *Fortune* over as singular, iconic shots. Or, to be more exact, he made Evans's work at *Fortune* photography. Szarkowski justified his decision as follows: 'the environment of group journalism was not wholly a sympathetic one to an artist as stubbornly self-directed as Evans'.⁶ Evans may have compromised in his old age, after the exhilaration of the 1930s, but, at least according to Szarkowski, he was, and should be remembered as, America's muse and America's documentary photographer.

⁴ Few scholars have examined Evans's work as an editor at *Fortune*. Instead, the eighteen months he worked for the RA dominate the Evans literature. The noteworthy exception is the above-noted Baier catalogue.

⁵ See Lincoln Kirstein, 'Photographs of America: Walker Evans', *American Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938). Kirstein's essay canonized Evans as a master, a maverick, and (singular) eye.

⁶ John Szarkowski, *Walker Evans* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971), p. 18. Szarkowski, for example, included several of the photographs Evans produced for the February 1947 portfolio 'Chicago: A Camera Explosion' in the exhibition catalogue.

As David Company has argued in his extended study of Evans's extensive magazine work, this is a good story.⁷ Evans, after all, almost always worked with or for an employer—a book publisher, a museum or a magazine.⁸ Moreover, he began working freelance for *Fortune* in 1934, the year *before* he signed with the RA and showed himself to be 'stubbornly self-directed'.⁹ Historical inaccuracy aside, this account of Evans's career is ahistorical. It severs the invention of documentary work from the reinvention of journalism. To be clear, this reinvention was *not* the introduction of the photograph to the magazine page, the rise of photojournalism and the suspected demotion of the word as the source of information and knowledge in the 1930s.¹⁰ It was the transformation of the reporter, the writer, and the photographer into a cog in the 'group' machine. In short, what emerged in the 1930s on and through the pages of new illustrated magazines was not simply new type of work. It was a new type of worker. Taking stock of Evans's work for and at *Fortune*, in turn, requires more than

⁷ See David Company, *Walker Evans: The Magazine Work* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2014). Rightly challenging our assumption that Evans was a 'museum' photographer, Company offers a detailed history of *all* of Evans's magazine work, from his work for *The Architectural Record* and *Fortune* in 1930s through to his work for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Sports Illustrated* in the 1950s and 1960s.

⁸ Evans rarely worked without a commission or an assignment. The one major exception is his subway photographs, which he produced with funds from a Guggenheim Fellowship. On Evans's commissions, see Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995). The point here is not that he 'got paid', worked for money; it is that more often than not Evans was on assignment, following orders, working with and for an institution and others.

⁹ As Company's study demonstrates, Evans had been publishing his work in magazines and journals since he first started making photographs in the late 1920s. In 1930 alone, he published portfolios in *Creative Art*, *The Architectural Record*, and the literary magazine *Hound & Horn*. See Company, *Walker Evans*, pp. 8-24.

¹⁰ For a study that historicises the transformations in journalism in the early part of the twentieth century, see Marianne Salcetti, 'The Emergence of the Reporter: Mechanization and the Devaluation of Editorial Work', in *News Workers: Toward a History of the Rank and File*, eds. Hanno Hardt and Nonnie Brennen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 48-74. On the demotion of the word, see Christopher Phillips, 'From Word to Image: International Photographically Illustrated Magazines Between the Wars,' in *Künstlerischer Austausch/Artistic Exchange*, ed. Thomas W. Gaetgens (Berlin : Akademie Verlag, 1993), pp. 117-126.

the adjustment of a few biographical facts. It requires historicising photography. It requires, that is, accounting for the ways in which new means of working—on the page, with others—simultaneously redefined both photography and the news. Evans did this throughout his career, and nowhere more so than on the pages of *Fortune*. As in ‘People and Places in Trouble’, his record of the present editorialised photographs in order to produce the news as history.

By all accounts, Evans’s *Fortune* portfolios are late work. Typically or conventionally understood as the work an artist produces at the end of their career and after their most ‘important’ or ‘seminal’ work, the concept, as Theodor Adorno has taught us, is far from neutral. The designation ‘late work’ suggests much more than a biological passing of time. As Adorno argued in his 1937 essay ‘Late Style in Beethoven’, the concept conveniently abdicates work and ‘the work’ in ‘favor of reality’. To quote Adorno:

The usual view explains [late work] with arguments that they are products of an uninhabited subjectivity, or, better yet, “personality,” which breaks through the envelope of form to better express itself ... late works are relegated to the outer reaches of art, in the vicinity of document. It is as if, confronted with the dignity of human death, the theory of art were to divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favor of reality.¹¹

Late work, typically speaking, Adorno argued, becomes a document *of* the life of the artist. Challenging this assumption, as well as the assumption that there is ‘a life’ as such, Adorno read Beethoven’s late work otherwise, arguing for a historical analysis of

¹¹ Theodor Adorno, ‘Late Style in Beethoven’, in *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 2002), p. 564. On Adorno and lateness, see Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990); Shierry Weber Nicholson, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno’s Aesthetic* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1997). See also Edward Said, ‘Thoughts on Late Style’, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n15/edward-said/thoughts-on-late-style> (Accessed 20 February 2014.) Said’s essay was first published on 5 August 2004.

the artist's break with convention. Late work is work that is historical. It is work that recognises its place in time.

Following Adorno, this essay calls for an expanded definition of 'late work', for a severing of art from life and the artist from their biography. This aesthetic—or lack of aesthetic, as Adorno would have it—is problematic, especially when addressing the invention of photographic work circumscribed by collaboration, serialisation and reworking. In turn, this reading of Evans's *Fortune* work is not, or not merely, a methodological exercise designed to displace the subject from the centre of our analysis of the work. It is an attempt to historicise photography's role in that displacement as well as to consider that displacement and late work historically. Lateness is not an attribute of a career or the biographical subject. Nor is it a matter of looking back. It is an attribute, at least for Evans, of documentary. *All of Evans's work is late*—reworked, arranged, constructed (for and on the page) and historical. Evans's late work not only came early, began in the 1930s. It defined his practice.

II. Working Late

'People and Places in Trouble' appeared a year after the publication of the new or second edition of Evans's first collaboration with the writer James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. First published in 1941, the book was already late. The project began in 1936 when *Fortune* commissioned Agee, then a staff writer, to contribute to the magazine's 'Life and Circumstances' column, its short-lived monthly exposé on the daily lives of 'average' working-class families.¹² Agee's subject was the southern tenant farmer, 'those eight and half million men, women, and children' who, as he recounted

¹² The details of the commission have been the subject of much of the literature on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. See, in particular, William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 261-266.

in the opening pages of the recently recovered manuscript of his report, ‘own no land’, ‘no home’.¹³ Agee requested Evans as his photographer and the duo spent several weeks in the summer of 1936 living and working with three tenant farming families.¹⁴ Agee’s report, entitled ‘Cotton Tenants: Three Families’, reached close to 30,000 words (about 20,000 more than called for) and baldly addressed the brutalities of tenancy. It described, in fine detail, the daily lives of those men who ‘furnish’ their labour and the labour of their families.¹⁵ Significantly, despite the fine details—what the tenants wore, what they ate, how they washed, how they spent their leisure time and how they died—Agee’s report was not shaped by what he found *in* Alabama. It was shaped by the bureaucratic organisation of life into discreet, quantifiable, categories: business, shelter, food, clothing, work, education, etc. This report contained none of the personal musing that would come to define *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, such as Agee’s troubled reflection on the activity of making a record of the deliberate misuse of life. Instead, Agee editorialised the facts. The tenant farmer, he concluded, was not simply poor, impoverished. Nor was the South simply underdeveloped, ‘backwards’. These ‘people and places in trouble’ were nothing more, nothing less, than cogs in a ‘machine’ run on a ‘dizzying mixture of feudalism and capitalism’.¹⁶ The tenants exchanged their labour for a home, not a wage, on someone else’s land.

As is well known, the editors at *Fortune* rejected Agee’s lengthy and visceral report. With no records detailing the reasoning behind their decision, many simply

¹³ James Agee, *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*, ed. John Summers (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2013), p. 30.

¹⁴ Agee spent more time in Alabama than Evans and more time living with the tenant farming families. Evans favoured the local hotel.

¹⁵ Agee, *Cotton Tenants*, p. 38.

¹⁶ Agee, *Cotton Tenants*, p. 222. Notably, Agee’s reference to the ‘dizzying mixture’ comes at the close of the text, in his appendix on the ‘Landowners.’ This was one of two appendices. The second took stock of the other subject left out of Agee’s report, the ‘Negros’. The latter, Agee noted, were the ‘worst off,’ the ‘enemy’ of both white tenants and landlords. (pp. 205-212)

assumed that Agee's report was simply too critical—too critical, that is, of American business for America's newest business magazine. Former *Fortune* employee, Dwight Macdonald, explored, and complicated, this explanation in his three-part exposé on editorial practice at Time Inc. Writing in 1937, and for the *Nation*, Macdonald insisted that 'Cotton Tenants' could not be tamed. It could not be 'strained', as he put it, of opinion or bias. Time Inc., Macdonald argued, was 'an enormous mechanism designed to give America the Real Dope, straight from the shoulder ... neither corrupted by radical dogma nor distorted by pressure from interested parties'. 'Like all machines', he concluded, the Time Inc. machine was 'vastly impersonal'.¹⁷ Following Macdonald, we can imagine that having been feed through the editorial machine, 'the lingering odor of partisanship' in Agee's report remained.¹⁸ The 'odor' of Agee's opinion would certainly have troubled the business magazine's editorial agenda. By the time Agee submitted his manuscript, the magazine's new managing editor, Russell Davenport, had begun to respond to complaints, mostly from advertisers, that *Fortune* was 'going left', and discontinued the 'Life and Circumstances' column.¹⁹

The question of whether or not *Fortune* was 'Left' or 'went left' has been subject to much debate, and much of that debate has been framed around the politics of the writers.²⁰ The media mogul behind *Fortune* (as well as *Time* and *Life*), Henry Luce, hired a cadre of left-leaning writers to pen his business magazine, including Agee,

¹⁷ Dwight Macdonald, "'Time' and Henry Luce', *The Nation*, 1 May 1937, pp. 500-503. The other two instalments of the editorial appeared on 8 May and 22 May 1937. Notably, Macdonald left *Fortune* after the editor's killed his contentious report on US Steel. Agee, on the other hand, remained on staff and continued to work on editorials and with Evans.

¹⁸ Macdonald, "'Time' and Henry Luce,' p. 501.

¹⁹ For an overview of the magazine's shifting editorial policy, see Robert Vanderlan, *Intellectual Incorporated* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 188-191.

²⁰ This issue frames much of the recent scholarship on *Fortune* and Time Inc. In addition to Vanderlan's intellectual history, which is noted above, see Michael Augspurger, *An Economy of Abundant Beauty: Fortune Magazine & the American Depression* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2004).

Macdonald and Archibald MacLeish. The question of the magazine's politics, or, for that matter, the writers', is a red herring. Like most popular newspapers and magazines of the period, *Fortune* did not follow, it defined, the times. Pitched in 1929, as the magazine ready to reinvent boring, stodgy, statistics-laden business magazine, *Fortune* hit newsstands in February 1930, in the immediate wake of the Wall Street crash. Luce did not falter. Instead, he offered the weighty, expensive, illustrated volume as the nation's elixir. *Fortune*, like *Time*, promised a fixed, ordered, digestible arrangement of the news; an assembly-line structure to match the incorporation of the new business professional featured on the magazine's pages and representative of its subscription base. Instead of 'the captains of industry', *Fortune* supported, cultivated, the corporation and the new managerial class.²¹ Yet, in 1932, after two years instructing men that with *Fortune* in hand they would have the tools and the know-how to organise the nation's recovery, the magazine adjusted its liberal mantra. It acknowledged, even supported, Roosevelt's New Deal and the government's relief efforts.²² Records of emaciated cattle and fallow land replaced records of gleaming machines, engines churning in mills and mines (Fig. 6).²³ Both were equally sensational, eye-catching. The

²¹ On Luce's prospectus and the magazine's status as a product of the Depression, see Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 162-167. Smith convincingly argues that the magazine was not late, a hold over from the boom days of the 1920s. Rather, as he put it, *Fortune* was 'born from the spasmodic contradictions of the moment of the Depression itself'. (p. 167)

²² Between 1932 and 1936, *Fortune* took stock of the government's relief efforts. Exemplary here is 'No One Has Starved', which ran in the September 1932 issue. This editorial was a direct response to President Herbert Hoover's failure to acknowledge the severity of the economic crisis—namely, his audacious claim that 'No one starved'. Along with these stories the magazine ran the work of known left leaning artists, including Reginald Marsh and Diego Rivera. See Augspurger, *An Economy of Abundant Beauty*, pp. 93-116. Augspurger argues that the editorial move does not reflect a 'real' change in the magazine's policy; it was simply part of the negotiation of corporate liberalism's original bid to protect and provide 'facts' to the public.

²³ Compare, for example, two portfolios by the photographer Margaret Bourke-White: 'Copper in the Mill', *Fortune*, July 1932 and 'Drought', *Fortune*, October 1934. The

retrenchment lasted a short five years. In 1937, in the wake of the Second New Deal and what economists had begun to call the ‘Roosevelt recession’, it was time for *Fortune* readers, Davenport argued, to be reminded of the magazine’s original platform and purpose—its dedication to ‘Private Capitalism’.²⁴ *Fortune* sold itself as the distributor of ‘facts’, not opinion.²⁵ Appropriately, it used this sells pitch to produce the news.

Agee did not leave the magazine in 1936. He did not cry censorship. Nor did he abandon his record of those with no land.²⁶ He spent the next five years transforming his already lengthy report into over five hundred pages of prose. His visceral descriptions of the brutalities of tenancy remained, though now they were framed by a warning to the reader about the inadequacy of all modes of representation, even, or especially, those produced by the camera and framing the text. A portfolio of thirty-one photographs by Evans opened the volume (Figs. 7 and 8). Compiled of his now signature frontal shots of the tenants and their homes, the portfolio carried no dates, no captions, and no names. Evans offered readers none of the words of his ‘generous volunteers’, as he would in 1961. Instead, readers were confronted with straight shots, the random blank page and a disclaimer that the photographs were the property of the United States Department of Agriculture. When Evans left for Alabama in 1936, he was on loan from the RA. He was still a government employee. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* remained ‘unstrained’. The text is subjective, poetic, and apologetic; the photographs are cool, frank, and arranged. ‘The viewer’, as William Stott put it in his

latter portfolio carried Agee’s unsigned report on the drought and government relief efforts.

²⁴ Russell Davenport, quoted in Augspurger, *An Economy of Abundant Beauty*, pp. 124-125.

²⁵ It is worth comparing this editorial model with the one developed by Ralph Steiner at *PM*, the magazine began by the former *Fortune* editor, Ralph Ingersoll. See Jason Hill’s contribution to this special issue.

²⁶ Agee continued to work at Time Inc. until 1948, when he stopped writing film reviews for *Time*. Notably, he left the corporation the same year Evans took on his post as Special Photographic Editor at *Fortune*.

groundbreaking 1973 study of the book, ‘can turn the page as he likes, Evans’ technique will not grab at his sleeve’.²⁷ There was no titillation. There is only the off kilter rhythm of a selection of blank pages and composed shots.

When *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* finally appeared in 1941, it flopped. Most major-market newspapers ignored it. Though several of Agee’s fellow editors at Time Inc. bothered to review it, their opinions were typically mixed. For example, *Time* magazine editor T.S. Matthews solicitously praised the book as ‘the most distinguished failure of the season’.²⁸ The first edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* sold less than two hundred copies, and within two years of its publication it was remaindered at nineteen cents. Explanations for this rejection also abound. Most insist that the book was late. By 1941, rural poverty and the brutalities of tenancy, to put it bluntly, were yesterday’s news. That year the fight against poverty was eclipsed by the fight against fascism as the US government geared up for the Second World War and Luce announced the inauguration of a new time, ‘The American Century’.

Rightly, much has been made of Luce’s editorial, which ran in the pages of the 17 February 1941 issue of *Life*. For most, the text, which both addressed and bated its public, marked the beginning of the Cold War and the unofficial end of America’s commitment to isolationism. It was imperial, as David Harvey has noted, without using that word.²⁹ Luce engineered this imperial outlook rhetorically by admonishing readers to wake up to the fact that the new order had already begun—that America was already *in* the world. In other words, they were late. American goods, American culture, Luce

²⁷ Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, p. 271.

²⁸ Quoted in John Stomberg, ‘A Genealogy of Orthodox Documentary’, in *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, eds. Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, Erina Dugganne (Williamstown, Ma.: Williams College Museum, 2007), p. 51.

²⁹ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 50-51. See as well Neil Smith, *America’s Empire: Roosevelt’s Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

noted, were already circulating around the world, from, as he put it, Hamburg to Zanzibar.³⁰ And, yet, recognition of America's place in the world was not enough. American's needed, Luce urged, to boldly take hold of 'their' Century. No more missed opportunities; no more waste. With the public's support, President Roosevelt would not, Luce argued, repeat the mistakes of President Wilson. He would not fail 'to assume the leadership of the world'.³¹

Luce, though, did not simply look out, beyond the nation's borders and into the world. He also looked across time. 'And as we come now to the great test, it may turn out', Luce wrote,

that in all our trials and tribulations of spirit during the first part of this century we as a people have been painfully apprehending the meaning of our time and now in this moment of testing there may come clear at last the vision which will guide us to the authentic creation of the 20th century—our Century.³²

Luce announced a new time in order to announce, triumphantly, that 'the past was past'. The Depression was behind us, and now, in this hour of testing, Americans, Luce insisted, must take hold of what was always or already rightly theirs—the future. The tautology of Luce's mantra, that the future was always already written and America's, found support in one of the text's key rhetorical flourishes. Luce addressed his editorial to 'the people'. The text begins with 'we' and its closes with a vision of how the 'we' that is already being called upon will be created. 'It must be', Luce insisted, 'an internationalism of the people, by the people, and for the people.' For Luce, everyone, everywhere, was and will be American.

Luce was far from alone in his effort to simultaneously recall and reimagine the famous lines of the US Constitution. As Michael Denning had noted in his study of the

³⁰ Henry Luce, 'The American Century', *Life* 17 February 1914, p. 65.

³¹ Luce, 'The American Century', p. 64.

³² Luce, 'The American Century', p. 65.

Popular Front, ‘We, the people’ was the mantra of late 1930s American culture.³³ We read it on the pages of Archibald MacLeish’s *Land of the Free* (1938), the poem MacLeish penned ‘to illustrate’ a selection of photographs from the RA archives and the press.³⁴ The former *Fortune* employee began his examination of the great migrations out west and off the land with a doubtful ‘We don’t know’. Without free land, the poet asked, can ‘we’ still hold the promises of the Constitution to be ‘self evident’? The poem closes by washing away the doubt. ‘We, the people’ resounded as well in both the opening and closing scenes of the final Frontier Film production *Native Land* (1942).³⁵ Directed by Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz, the film also framed the contemporary economic crisis through the process of taming ‘free land’. We see no work. Instead, Paul Robeson’s voice booms the refrain as the camera glides above mountain ranges and grassland, up the tallest trees and over the surface of the nation’s monuments (Fig. 9). The re-emergence of ‘we’ signified the re-emergence of a collective, the American nation. It signalled, that is, a return to a past before the nation was divided between

³³ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996). See, in particular, ‘Ballads for Americans: Aesthetic Ideologies’, pp. 115-159.

³⁴ Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938). Like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, MacLeish’s book was one of many in the era experimenting with, even reversing, the conventional relationship between words and pictures. MacLeish insisted that his words, his poem, ‘illustrated’ the photographs. On MacLeish’s volume, see Louis Kaplan, *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 27-54.

³⁵ *Native Land*, dir. Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand, 1942. On voice in *Native Land*, see Charles Wolfe, ‘Modes of Discourse in Thirties Social Documentary: The Shifting “I” of *Native Land*’, *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 36, no. 4, Fall 1984, pp. 13-20, 61. It is worth noting that Frontier Film was interested in a film Evans produced with Ben Shan for the Resettlement Administration. See Walker Evans to Roy Stryker, 25 January 1938, Roy Stryker Papers, University of Louisville, Kentucky. Though Evans does not discuss the details of the film in his letter to Stryker, we can surmise he was referring to a film he made about unemployment using, as he told Jay Leyda, ‘an employment office interviewer and questionnaire blank as a device to into various backgrounds’. Evans to Jay Leyda, 21 February 1934, Jay Leyda Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, Tam.083, Box 6.

‘them’ and ‘us’, between ‘labour’ and ‘capital’. In the future, as in the past, the enemy would be outside, not inside, suggesting that in order to win the fight against fascism, homogeneity, not division, must rule.

If ‘the people’ ruled on the page, the screen and the stage by the close of the 1930s, their voice was hardly homogenous or singular. The ‘we’ voiced in *Native Land* and *Land of the Free* was both national and classed. Robeson’s sonorous refrain bookended a series of acted vignettes pulled from the pages of the press and the findings of the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee (The Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee Investigating Violations of Free Speech and the Rights of Labor), which investigated industrial espionage and other methods of union busting and strike breaking. MacLeish’s conjunction of the people as both American and classed was more rhetorical. Halfway through the poem, the poet adopts a new voice. The ‘we’ becomes ‘you’ and ‘them’.³⁶ The protagonist and the reader of the poem are both or simultaneously the public and not. Moreover, ‘we’ learn that the nation’s elixir is *not* more free land. It is the ‘men’ pictured in the news photographs marching and striking.³⁷ (Fig. 10) Taken out of the flow of the news—historicised—these men are neither heroes nor victims. They are not, to borrow Evans’s late refrain, ‘the hundred neediest cases’. Rather, they are, like many recorded in Depression era documentaries, the unemployed.

³⁶ The shift comes in the book’s fortieth spread, which reads as follows: ‘All we know for sure is—we’re not telling them’. The ‘them’ eventually confronts ‘you’. The fifty-second spread reads as follows: ‘Tell the sonsofbitches where to head/You need your heel-hold on a country stead’. The next stanza continues: ‘You need a continent against your feet’.

³⁷ Notably, *Land of the Free* and *Native Land* use the same selection of press photographs from Pictures Inc. of the strikebreakers and from Acme Newspictures of the May Day Massacre.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men offered no ‘we’. There was only ‘them’ and ‘us’—tenants and landlords, the ‘human’ and ‘inhumane’.³⁸ For Agee, the latter opposition was not based on an ethical distinction. It was an economic one. As he already noted in his unpublished *Fortune* manuscript:

...[tenancy] can be called a life at all only by biological courtesy: this fact should not confuse and indeed can only sharpen our discernment. We would be dishonest for instance to cheer ourselves with the thought that ameliorating the status of the cotton tenant alone, any essential problem whatever would be solved: and we would be merely fools to comfort ourselves with the reflection that the South is a “backward” country.³⁹

New Deals, relief measures, or reforms will not make life—the nation—whole, again. They too are part of the ‘dizzying machine’ deliberating abusing life and writing the past into the future. Thus, if *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was late, it was not because it *still* publicised poverty and the Depression after the threat of fascism had taken hold of the public’s imagination and the news. It was because along with MacLeish and the members of the Frontier Film collective, Agee and Evans denaturalised the national mythology linking freedom to free land. They entered time. In short, it could be argued that by the late 1930s most of the media eclipsed the Depression. For some, such as Luce, it was simply over, pictured and past; for others, for much of Luce’s staff, it had to be historicised as the latest crisis of capitalism.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men was late—until the 1960s. That year, the new edition of the book, which included a new preface by Evans about the now deceased

³⁸ On voice in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, see John Louis Lucaites, ‘Visualizing “the people”: Individualism vs. collectivism in *Let Us Now Praise Men*’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83, no. 3 (August 1997): 269-288. Lucaites sets Agee’s focus on three specific families against Roosevelt’s ‘we’ and the president’s desire to ‘visualize’ ‘the people’ through RA/FSA photography and film. In short, he opposes the government’s ‘the people’ to Agee’s ‘individuals.’ This is a peculiar reading of Agee’s text, since Agee stated over and over again in the book and his notes that he was not concerned with *these* tenants. They were simply representative types. To be sure, this is *not* a misreading. It neatly drains Agee’s book of its class politics. The individual is championed against the collective—of both the nation and labour.

³⁹ Agee, *Cotton Tenants*, p. 36.

Agee and thirty-one additional photographs, finally garnered an audience. We have been told that its appeal was broad. It galvanised rebellious youth seeking to give form to JFK's call for the new individual as well as those engaged by the civil rights movement and the escalating Cold War.⁴⁰ The book, though, did not simply garner an audience; it became, after the fact, a 1930s classic. It was now deemed of its time and old. Perhaps then it is no surprise that the 1960s also saw the remaking of Evans as 'the great American photographer of the 1930s'. In 1962, the Museum of Modern Art published a new edition of the catalogue to Evans's 1938 retrospective, and in 1966 Evans finally published his candid subway photographs in his penultimate book *Many Are Called*.⁴¹ Evans caught these men and women with his hidden camera between 1938 and 1941. Again, the 1930s peeks through, is framed by and frames, the 1960s.

Likewise, in 1966, with his final book, *Message from the Interior*, Evans historicised his own work. The volume contains twelve photographs of domestic and

⁴⁰ Little work has been done on the book's popularity in the 1960s. Not surprisingly, Lucaites notes the book's appeal to 'individuals'. For a different history, one paying attention to the micro-politics of the 1960s, see Jorge Ribalta's discussion of the book in, Stephanie Schwartz, 'Documentary's Future Past: A Conversation with Jorge Ribalta,' *Photoworks*, vol. 18, May 2012, p. 19. See as well Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, 'The Work of Art: Irony and Identification in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"' *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 34, no 3, Summer 2001, p. 262. Quinn addresses the book's appeal as a primer to men and women seeking to engage the civil rights movement.

⁴¹ In conjunction with the re-edition of the 1938 book, the Museum also exhibited a version of the original exhibition. See 'Photographs-Walker Evans Special Exhibition,' at http://www.moma.org/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3007/releases/MOMA_1962_0066.pdf ?2010 (Accessed April 2013). As well, that same year, Edward Steichen installed his final blockbuster exhibition, 'The Bitter Years', his homage to Roy Stryker, the Head of the Historical Section of the Information Division of the RA/FSA. Like Luce, Steichen looked back at the 1930s in order to set up the promise of a bright future. His curatorial note in the exhibition's slim catalogue begins as follows: 'I believe it is good at this time to be reminded of those "Bitter Years" and to bring them into the consciousness of a new generation which has problems of its own, but is largely unaware of the endurance and fortitude that made the emergence from the Great Depression America's finest moment'. Edward Steichen, *The Bitter Years, 1935-1941: Rural America as Seen by the Photographs of the Farm Security Administration* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1962), p. iii.

public interiors spanning the length of Evans's career (Figs. 11 and 12). Its title also offers readers a play on words. *Message from the Interior* showcased one of Evans's most favoured subjects, the spaces in which life both moves and settles, the walls, the floors, the mantles and the bookcases that accrue stuff and time. Flipping the pages of this book, we travel through salons and bedrooms, kitchens and churches, over the pots and pans, the calendars and the checkerboard floors. We also travel back and forth in time, between the 1930s and the 1960s. We move inside and through time. And, as in almost all of Evans's books, nothing is revealed, if it is revealed at all, until the end—or after. In *Message from the Interior*, as in the first edition of *American Photographs*, Evans removed the dates and titles from his photographs, supplying them in an index at the back of the book. Perhaps, like Roland Barthes who published 'The Photographic Message' in 1961, Evans was testing out photography's paradox—its status as cultural sign that is a *message* without a code.⁴²

Was documentary alive again in the 1960s? Or was it only recognisable as history? This second question also plays on words—and work, the work of documentary. Was documentary over, historicised? Or do you need a past and a present, the movement of time, comparisons and series, the printed page or projected screen for documentary work? Perhaps instead of a history of breaks and ruptures, of the invention of documentary and its (many) returns, we need to think history as a multiplicity of times, when 'we', 'them', and 'you' all simultaneously take the stage?⁴³

⁴² Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 3-20. Significantly, Barthes defined photography as 'a message without a code' through the semiotics of the printed page.

⁴³ Perhaps this is why Allan Sekula used the word 'reinvention' in his 1978 essay on the relationship between modernism and documentary. This word, as opposed to return or 'post', has all the connotations of revolution in the Marxist sense of the term as something that is permanent and on-going as opposed to punctual. See Allan Sekula, 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinvention Documentary (Notes on the Politics of

III. Journalism

Was ‘People and Places in Trouble’ Evans response to the way in which the 1930s was both back in fashion and history in the 1960s? Answering this question requires further analysis of the March 1961 issue. Evans’s portfolio was not a standalone piece. Like many of the portfolios he produced for the magazine between 1945 and 1965, ‘People and Places in Trouble’ was produced in dialogue with *Fortune* editors and the magazine’s promise to revolutionise business journalism. Evans often included witty and humorous retorts to *Fortune* staff and the magazine’s editorial policy in his copy, underscoring his engagement with the ‘group’ dynamic and the page.⁴⁴ The lead story in the March 1961 issue, which opened with another photograph by Evans, and prefaced his portfolio, was ‘In the Midst of Plenty’ (Fig. 13). The seasoned *Fortune* staffer John Davenport, one of the many old boys from Yale on the magazine’s payroll, penned the piece, which took a tough look at those Americans living in poverty ‘in the midst of plenty’. Poverty may have ‘shrunk’, Davenport announced, but ‘32 million people are still below the poverty line’.⁴⁵ Perhaps not surprisingly, Davenport’s exposé of the discord between poverty and plenty recalled the 1930s. An abstract of the article, which appeared in the issue’s table of contents, began as follows: ‘A famous phrase marker a generation ago described one-third of our nation as ‘ill housed, ill clad, and ill

Representation,’ in *Photography/Politics: One*, eds. Terry Dennett and Jo Spence (London: Photography Workshop, 1979), pp. 171-185. See also Martha Rosler’s study of our histories of documentary in her ‘In, Around and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography), in *Martha Rosler: 3 Works* (Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981). In this light, see as well Jorge Riblata’s discussion of the closing line of Rosler’s essay, her insistence that ‘our common acceptance’ of documentary indicates that ‘we do not yet have a real documentary’, in this special issue.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Campamy’s discussion of Evans’s portfolio ‘Labor Anonymous’, which appeared in the November 1946 issue of *Fortune*. Campamy, *Walker Evans*, p. 32.

⁴⁵ John Davenport, ‘In the Midst of Plenty’, *Fortune*, March 1961, p. 107.

nourished’’.⁴⁶ That famous phrase marker was Roosevelt and the by then famous phrase came from his second inaugural address of 1937. It brilliantly encapsulated his poetic first-person account of a ravaged America. Playing on radios in many American homes, those interiors that Evans loved to photograph, the speech communicated the facts over the airways. ‘In this nation’, Roosevelt stated, ‘I see tens of millions of its citizens—a substantial part of its whole population—who at this very moment are denied the greater part of what the very lowest standards of today call the necessities of life’.⁴⁷ Roosevelt used ‘I’, repeatedly, not ‘we’. He was teetering, Luce may have thought, on the cusp of the Century.⁴⁸

Davenport’s account of poverty in America opened with the facts, the numbers of those living (still living) on the edge, without work. He did not leave it there. He followed the human tale, moving into specific examples of those unable to share in the nation’s prosperity, including the moonshiners in the Appalachian Mountains and the miners in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He recounted the layoffs and the changes taking place in American industry, from mining and coal to chemicals and electronics. His narrative reverberates through ‘I was in coke. They use oxygen and gas now’, as Evans’s ‘generous’ subjects put it. Men were not only out of work in the early 1960s; they were, once again, moved off the land, out of the mines, and into factories. Davenport presented the ‘facts’ and a solution. Let the individual grow. ‘The businessman’, Davenport wrote, ‘no less than the labor leader, is a citizen, and it is

⁴⁶ ‘Fortune’s Wheel’, *Fortune*, March 1961, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, ‘Second Inaugural Address’, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres50.html>.

⁴⁸ It is worth noting as well that Luce publicised the fact that Americans were impoverished in ‘the midst of plenty’ in ‘The American Century’. For Luce, this was something that could be overcome if Americans accepted their destined path. To quote Luce, ‘It is a baffling and difficult and paradoxical century. ... We have poverty and starvation—but only in the midst of plenty’. (64)

through a reawakened sense of citizenship that many a distressed people today may achieve a brighter outlook tomorrow'. He continued:

This is not to underrate the role of government in the conquest of poverty and distress. ... But in the long run, government's most important function is to maintain the framework wherein millions of individuals can help themselves, and within which the creative forces of a free society—economic, social and religious—can continue to work.⁴⁹

On the pages of *Fortune*, 'I', the individual, now certainly trumped 'we', the nation.

Davenport's message is eerily familiar. This is not because it is the same message that was promoted on the pages of *Fortune* in the late 1930s when the magazine veered to the 'centre' and promoted 'consensus pluralism'.⁵⁰ It is because it is same message we hear today: small government, the homestead, individuals equipped (with guns) to protect their rights and their land. The returns, the relays and the continuities abound. In the 1960s, and today, the 1930s was far from over, pictured and past. Perhaps this is what the writer Louis 'Studs' Terkel was alluding to when he commented, in the 1980s, that listening to and looking at records of the 1930s, was an 'experience of déjà vu in reverse'.⁵¹ His oral history of the Great Depression, *Hard Times*, first published in 1970, sought to remind a new generation of 'people in trouble' that the past does not just or simply haunt the present. It is still with us. It is still news. After all, haunting, as the introduction to this issue argued, often mitigates political work. It divides the present from the past, established history from popular history.

⁴⁹ Davenport, 'In The Midst of Plenty', pp. 238-240.

⁵⁰ Notably, it was also around this time, in 1938, that MacLeish left the magazine, believing that it overstressed capitalism as the root of American freedom. See Augspurger, *An Abundant Economy*, pp. 156-166.

⁵¹ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: New Press, 1986), p. xiii.

Alternatively, making the past present, reworking it *in* the present, enacts, belatedly, history's dialectic.⁵²

The question remains: How do we assess Evans's record of poverty in the land of plenty? What is the relationship between his photographs and Davenport's text? Did Evans picture the power of the individual, with his own voice, his own will, his own right to live, work and be photographed? Any attempt to make sense of the relationship between Davenport's text and Evans's photographs must return to the 1930s, and Evans's collaboration with Agee. It was there that the question of the relationship between text and photographs became a contested site. It was there as well that Agee took up the question of the ethics of liberal journalism—of prying into the lives of the disadvantaged for the purposes of white middle-class readers. These issues need to be taken in turn, as they not only ask us to redress why *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was panned, but also how we can begin to further dissect the lateness of this documentary work.

For the many who have tried—and failed—to read *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the book's initial reception is hardly surprising. To call Agee's prose exhaustive is an understatement. He spent pages and pages and pages describing the grain of a piece of wood as well as pages and pages and pages on the minutia of the domestic interiors, which he and Evans surveyed when the tenants were sleeping or no one was home. Yet, it was not Agee's extended descriptions of the contents of tenant farming homes, plank-by-plank and garment-by-garment, many written without conventional punctuation, which repelled his readers. Nor was it his detailed account of his sexual fantasies about Louise Grudger, the young daughter of one of his subjects. *Let Us Now Praise Famous*

⁵² See the introduction to this issue as well Massimiliano Tomba's compelling discussion spectres and ghosts in *Marx's Temporalities*, trans. Peter D. Thomas and Sara R. Ferris (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), pp. 35-60.

Men not only alternatively bored or shocked its readers. It confused them. The book followed no conventional codes. It was not sociology, like the famous *Middletown* study of 1929, which collected data on typical Americans, living in a typical American town.⁵³ Nor was it journalism, news. Agee was emphatic about his rejection of the latter genre or category. In one of the many drafts of the book, Agee reminded his readers that the three families discussed in the book ‘represent the nine million other human beings, black or white, who are cotton tenants in similar houses, wearing similar clothes, eating similar food ... dying similar deaths’, adding, ‘They are therefore not News; unless the poverty and the deprivation and the distortion which makes up human life itself is News’.⁵⁴ News, for Agee, was sensational, not typical and ordinary. And, as he noted in his manuscript, he preferred the ‘steady dripping of daily details’, which ‘effaces’ the lives of even the ‘well-treated’, to the horror stories of the worst off.⁵⁵

Agee’s distaste for news has over-determined much of the critical discourse to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, both the text and the photographs. Most scholars, though, do not focus on Agee’s distinction between the singularity of the news, the shock and scandal of the worst off, and his interest in the typical, the typicality of the steady ‘drip’ of details. Rather, they assess Agee’s inability to stomach the ethics—or the lack of ethics—of journalism.⁵⁶ Agee, after all, did frame *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* against crass journalism, noting in the preamble,

⁵³ See Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1929) and the *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1937).

⁵⁴ Agee, ‘J 1.10 LUNPFM Draft: Introduction’, in *Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Other new Manuscripts*, eds. Michael A. Lofaro and Hugh Davis (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), p. 25.

⁵⁵ Agee, ‘Cotton Tenants: Three Families’, 32.

⁵⁶ This description of the book is widespread. See, in particular, Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London: Verso, 1994), 35-55. The same could be said for those who insist that Evans’s despised journalism. The assumption here is not that Evans compromised or sold out. It is that he was interested

It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together by need and chance, for profit into a company, and organ of journalism pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appalling damaged group of human beings ... for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage, and humiliation of their lives before another group of human beings, in the name ... of “honest journalism” (whatever that paradox may mean) ...⁵⁷

Agee did not mince his words. No longer beholden to the editors, to the group of men hired to strain his prose, he reinforced his account of the tenants’ status as a cog in the machine. They too, not only the writer, were subject to the machinery of journalism. ‘The editorial “we” is not somebody with convictions, purposes, principles, ardour,’ as one newspaper editor noted already in 1893, ‘the “we” is an association that invests in a machine that grinds the work’.⁵⁸ Tenancy and journalism both, simultaneously, grind on—and grind us.

Agee made plain his disgust for journalism throughout the book, in numerous parenthetical asides about news as entertainment and lies. His critique culminates, though, in the book’s closing pages with his mention of the work of the photojournalist who garnered an extended readership for her photo-book of southern tenant farmers, Margaret Bourke-White. In 1937, Bourke-White took leave from *Fortune* and *Life* to publish, with the novelist Erskine Caldwell, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (Fig. 14). The book was hailed—by most. Agee did not exactly discuss the book. He reprinted a sobering review, which ran in the ‘liberal newspaper’, the *New York Post*.⁵⁹

in upholding the difference between crass journalism, hackwork or sensationalism, and serious documentary. See Douglas Eklund, “‘The Harassed Man’s Haven of Detachment’”: Walker Evans and the *Fortune* Portfolio’, in *Walker Evans*, pp. 121-129.

⁵⁷ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 7.

⁵⁸ Murat Halstead, quoted in Salcetti, ‘The Emergence of the Reporter’, p. 53.

⁵⁹ The designation ‘a liberal newspaper’ is Agee’s and should most likely be read, like most of his footnotes, facetiously to suggest the relatively or uselessness of such designations. The previous entry in the appendix, which was pulled from the *New York Sun*, carried ‘a conservative paper. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, pp. 410-414. It points as well to impotence of the claim that *Fortune* ‘went left’.

Announcing Bourke-White as a pioneer of photojournalism, the review described her work as follows:

[T]his young lady spent two months of her own time in the last two years traveling in the back roads of the deep south bribing, cajoling, and sometimes browbeating her way in to photograph Negroes, share-croppers and tenant farmers in their own environments.⁶⁰

For those readers who made it to end of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, through Agee's lengthy and detailed descriptions of the back roads of his deep south, the juxtaposition between the two approaches to tenant life, and Agee's criticism, was clear. Bourke-White remained an outsider. She cajoled and pried. She did not try to get to know her subjects. She simply took pictures.

That said, the book's worst offense, for most, was not the photographer's cajoling and browbeating. It was the duo's experimentation with the juxtaposition of words and pictures. Bourke-White and Caldwell did not let their tenant farmers speak. 'The legends under the pictures', the book's opening note revealed, 'are intended to express the author's own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed: they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of the person'.⁶¹ These tenants were not generous volunteers, like Evans's people in trouble. They were to be looked at, not heard. Agee and Evans's criticism has stuck. Historians of American documentary photography continuously point to the differences between the two books—point to the 'horrors' of Bourke-White's approach.⁶² They pile up, it seems, when we flip through the pages of *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Bourke-White shot America's tenants in the

⁶⁰ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 411.

⁶¹ Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Modern Age Books, Inc., 1938), n.p.

⁶² Stott established this dichotomy in his *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, pp. 270-271.

same manner she shot smoke stacks, turbines, and factories for *Fortune* and *Life*.⁶³ She shot them from below and at oblique angles (Fig. 15). Like industrial forms, tenant farmers are both monumentalised and made strange. They are surface and form—crooked teeth, a deeply furrowed brow, chapped lips, uncombed hair and so forth. The women from McDaniel Georgia associated with ‘snuff’ and a ‘tooth ache’ is no Allie Mae Burroughs. She does not stare back. She is not tight-lipped; she is not posed, stoic and evenly lit.

Yet, for all his criticism, Agee and Evans too, no doubt pried. They snooped around the interiors; they monumentalised and patronised the tenants. Agee, in fact, continuously admitted that this could not be avoided. He even referred to himself as ‘a spy, traveling as a journalist’, and Evans as a ‘counter-spy, travelling as a photographer’.⁶⁴ Why, then, do we champion Agee and Evans over and against Bourke-White and Caldwell?⁶⁵ Is it simply because Evans and Agee let their subjects pose and speak? If so, we are writing a history of the 1960s, not the 1930s. We are upholding a model of autonomy—of the photograph and the photographer—nowhere at play in either collaboration. Photojournalism is easily panned; it is easily deemed no different than advertising. However, this history maintains a false, ahistorical, binary between

⁶³ On the relationship between Bourke-White’s commercial work and her book projects, see Sharon Corwin, ‘Constructed Documentary: Margaret Bourke-White from the Steel Mill to the South’, in *American Modern: Documentary Photography by Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 108-132. See as well Barnaby Haran in this issue.

⁶⁴ In light of *Native Land*, this doubling is significant. The film as well as the book upon which it is based, Leo Huberman’s *The Labor Spy Racket* (New York: Modern Age Books, Inc., 1937), explored the phenomenon of the counter-spy and of spies hired to spy on the spies who might become persuaded to join the Union.

⁶⁵ This is the standard discussion of the two volumes, that Agee and Evans were less crass, more serious, more engaged in the practice and pitfalls of photojournalism. William Stott codified this in his *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. See as well John Stomberg, ‘A Genealogy of Orthodox Documentary’, pp. 44-46; John Tagg’s extended chapter on journalism and realism, Bourke-White and Evans, in his *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 95-178.

documentary and journalism. We assume that, in the 1930s, the public cherished authenticity and truth, despite the fact that neither project promised nor praised objectivity. After all, Bourke-White and Caldwell also interrogated the limits of journalism. As they explained in their book's opening note, they decided to speak for the tenants in order to 'avoid unnecessary individualization'.⁶⁶ This is exactly what was happening on the pages of *Fortune*, specifically in the 'Life and Circumstances' column. It was also exactly what Agee and Evans railed against. Instead of asking which duo got it right or did it better, was less crass, more 'true', shouldn't we assess our own histories, our own ahistorical bias of the printed page? The division between 'them' and 'us' is not ethical—or unethical, crass—it was the only way to make evident the relationship between autonomy and representation producing photography and the news. It is the only way to engage—produce an opinion from and through—the public.

Agee did not pan journalism; he bullied the public and his reader. Towing no generic line, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* followed no traditional structure. The text begins with Book Two, which Agee simply called 'Words', and these words do not flow chronologically. Agee starts in the middle of his journey and ends at the beginning. There is no development, no coherent passage of time. The end is the beginning and the end; characters have not developed, nor has Agee grown. Moreover, there was no direct correlation between these words and the photographs (Fig. 16). Book One, 'Photographs', which begins before the front matter—the book's title page, table of contents and epigraphs—contained Evans's portfolio. This part has no words, aside from the disclaimer that the photographs belong to the US Department of Agriculture. The two graphic systems, photography and writing, Agee noted in his preface, which

⁶⁶ Bourke-White and Caldwell, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, n.p.

also came after Book Two, were ‘mutually independent.’ And in what is probably the most quoted passage of the book, Agee continued:

By their fewness, and by the impotence of the reader’s eye, this will be misunderstood by most of that minority which does not wholly ignore it. In the interests, however of the history of photography, that risk seems irrelevant, and this flat statement necessary.⁶⁷

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men did not just manage to bore, shock and confuse its readers; it taunted them. They will not get it. They will not be able to ignore their habits and ingrained assumptions about journalism and photography. They will disregard Agee’s directive and call on the photographs to illustrate—explain or refer to—the text and history. And, for the most part, Agee was right. Evans’s stead portraits of people and interiors have been read through the text. They have been used to give Agee’s open ended, unwieldy text some closure.⁶⁸ They have been used as evidence of Agee’s—and Evans’s—distaste for journalism.

Yet, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, as in most of his work, Evans never sought the closure of the iconic shot. He never simply recorded the present. He produced the past as present and future. The very same principles queried in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* also organise Henry Luce’s media empire. Luce and his picture editors, including Evans, invented much more than a platform for ‘seeing’ the world *through* pictures. They invented a new media and a new profession. It was no longer the singular photograph or even the photographer that mattered. It was the page. It was media and the public. The reader can chose either to be run through the machine or they can chose to work. It is the reader, not the publisher or the photographer, who is on trial in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. They can’t go back, mourn the past; they

⁶⁷ Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. xii.

⁶⁸ This aspect of the book has received extended examination. See the collection of essays in Caroline Blinder, ed., *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

must try to keep time. To situate Evans and Agee's work outside—or against—this maelstrom of the photographic media in the 1930s is to mourn America's 'vulgarization'. It is a late reading, not déjà vu in reverse.

IV. At Work, Still

In the preface of *Let Us Now Praise Men*, Agee warned his readers that the volume before them was only a 'book by necessity'.⁶⁹ If he could have, he explained in the preface, he would have done no writing at all. The efforts at communication would consist of photographs and ephemera—'bits of cotton', 'pieces of wood', 'phials of odors', 'plates of food', 'excrement', and so forth.⁷⁰ Agee's musings about his work, the product of his endeavours, could be taken as evidence that he desired to get beyond representation, to present life as it is—as it was. The fact that he didn't or couldn't, that he had to make a book, suggests that his goal was unattainable, that there is no beyond representation to get to. This is also a late reading. It is Agee read through the 1960s, through Pop and Andy Warhol, through the simulacra and the mass production of the American vernacular.

Agee's statement emphasised book, not necessity. Did it need to be a book or did we need to make it so? Again, Agee taunts his readers. We make it book. We take it as a book because we ignore Agee's suggestions that we handle it otherwise, as something closer to a film or music. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was written, Agee tells us in the preface, to be read aloud, heard, like oral histories or radio programmes. Likewise, it was written to be consumed like a film, continuously and publically.⁷¹ Though given the length of the book and its lack of conventional codes, Agee's

⁶⁹ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. xv.

⁷⁰ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 12.

⁷¹ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. xv.

suggestions may seem absurd, they do remind us that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is something more than a novel combination of words and pictures. The 1930s saw more than an entirely new approach to the picture—or the demotion of the written word, as the conventional tale goes. It saw the reimagining of communication as media, as something produced through radio, photographs, films, portfolios and pages for the public. The problem with our histories of documentary—and photojournalism—is that we privilege the photograph, the picture. In doing so we separate it from the making of the news, from the machine, the media, the story, the group. Continuously recounting the ethics of the news, the picture-maker and the pictures, kills time. It reifies mediation—between the word and the photograph, voice and speech, them and us. When Evans joined *Fortune*, he did not sell out. Nor did he find a way to voice his discontent for the news—take the moral high ground. He simply worked as a journalist.

Captions

NOTE: I AM STILL WAITING ON FINAL PERMISSIONS FROM THE MET AS WELL AS TIME INC. FOR THE PAGES OF *FORTUNE*. OTHERWISE, ALL RIGHTS, PRINT AND DIGITAL, HAVE BEEN CLEARED WHERE NEEDED.

Figure 1: Walker Evans, *A Miner's Home, Vicinity Morgantown, West Virginia*, 1935
Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (½ page)

Figure. 2: Walker Evans, 'People and Places in Trouble', *Fortune* March 1961. Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Time Inc. (¼ each)

Figure 3: Walker Evans, *Street and Graveyard in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*, 1936.
Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (½ page)

Figure 4: Walker Evans, *Joe's Auto Junkyard, Pennsylvania*, 1936, from *American Photographs*, 1938. Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (½ page)

Figure 5: Walker Evans, *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife*, 1936, from *American Photographs*, 1938. Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (½ page)

Figure 6: First four pages from 'Drought', *Fortune*, October 1934 (Text by James Agee and Photos by Margaret Bourke-White) Photo © Estate of Margaret Bourke-White/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY/Margaret Bourke-White Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library. (¼ each)

Figure 7: Walker Evans, from James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1941. Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (½ page)

Figure 8: Walker Evans, from James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1941. Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (½ page)

Figure 9: *Native Land*, dirs. Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz with Frontier Film, 1942. Frames. (¼ each)

Figure 10: From Archibald MacLeish, *Land of The Free*, 1938 (Photo: Pictures, Inc.) (Caption: Celebrating the end of a steel strike in Pennsylvania) Copyright © 1938 and renewed 1966 by Archibald MacLeish. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved. (½ page)

Figure 11: From Walker Evans, *Message from the Interior*, 1966. (Caption: 4. The Farmer of Somerstown Road, Near Ossining, New York, 1931). Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (½ page)

Figure 12: From Walker Evans, *Message from the Interior*, 1966. (Caption: 7. East 120th Street, New York City, 1961). Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (½ page)

Figure 13: John Davenport, 'In the Midst of Plenty', *Fortune* (March 1961) (Photo by Walker Evans) Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Time Inc. (¼ page)

Figure 14: Margaret Bourke-White, from Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, 1937. Photo © Estate of Margaret Bourke-White/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY/Margaret Bourke-White Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library. (½ page)

Figure 15: Margaret Bourke-White, from 'Soviet Panorama', *Fortune* (February 1931) Photo © Estate of Margaret Bourke-White/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY/Margaret Bourke-White Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library/Time Inc.

Figure 16: Walker Evans, from James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1941. Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (½ page)