

“White Trash” in Literary History: The Social Interventions of Erskine Caldwell and James Agee

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That [Erskine] Caldwell was unshakably committed to his craft should not be questioned. . . . That he mounted, throughout his career, an uncompromising assault on social injustice should likewise not be questioned.

—Wayne Mixon, from *The People’s Writer: Erskine Caldwell and the South*

. . . Agee insisted that the connections between ethics and politics, means and ends, human compassion and social justice were always tenuous and paradoxical. For the most part he distrusted the activists and “reformers” who spoke of the sharecroppers as a problem to be solved. . . . Precisely because he was acutely sensitive to all the social, moral, and aesthetic implications of a particular experience, precisely because he wanted to alter the way his readers saw reality, precisely because he believed that the total understanding of a problem would not immobilize but liberate mankind, Agee had fashioned the most radical work of the 1930s.

—Richard H. Pells, from *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*

Knowledge and power are integrated with one another. . . . It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge; it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.

—Michel Foucault, from *Power/Knowledge*

In the twenty-first century, literary scholars and teachers have become more invested in an interdisciplinary understanding of the connection between socially interested writing and literary history. However, in spite of what may be characterized as a general critical movement away from the organic, signifying aspects of textuality, a central focus of much American literary criticism remains on the canon and authorship, even when situating texts within their historical moment in the interest of better historical/cultural understanding. In spite of a more historical orientation, we are often left with a surprisingly canonical distinction between which American texts are worth studying and which are not, and these reasons usually derive at least in part from a sense of authorial merit, literary or social or both. However, this prioritization becomes increasingly difficult to justify as contemporary American literary scholars become ever more aware of the role of literature in the workings of social power and of the active part that canonical valuations and shifts can play in these operations. It is with the intent of suggesting the benefits of a less canonically rooted, and more interdisciplinary, literary scholarship that I engage with the work of two rather “noncanonical” American writers of the thirties: Erskine Caldwell and James Agee. My purpose is to investigate the ways in which their works offered potent, if problematic, historically situated social discourses. And, while it may not provide definitive answers about writing the “truths” of poor rural whites, this comparative discussion may allow us to raise significant questions about class representations and Otherness.

Enormously popular during their own time, the central fictional works of Erskine Caldwell, specifically *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God’s Little Acre* (1933), have fallen out of fashion in literary circles these days. They are read by many critics as failed attempts to produce legitimate social intervention through art, and their failings are typically seen in terms of lack of awareness of stereotyping and the degree to which they constitute a confusing amalgam of genuine social concern and an incommensurate literary style based on gothic humor. In contrast, the work of James Agee, particularly his social intervention through art, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), not popular in its own time, has apparently come into its own in current circles of cultural, if not literary, scholarship.¹ Agee’s ethics and orientation are touted and emulated, and his book has become an academic touchstone for engagement with social otherness, particularly in the social sciences. But it is not my purpose here to take issue with the aesthetic evaluation of these works. Nor would I dispute the fact that Caldwell’s texts have spawned numerous reproductions of his version of white rural poverty in American culture at large. But perhaps it is time to examine through a historical discursive lens the disparity between Caldwell’s purpose and the effects his

work produced, and perhaps this different angle may allow us new insights into Agee’s more positive effectivity as well.

Such a strategy may also help us to understand why Agee’s work has become well regarded, if seldom read, and why such regard, though merited, might be cautiously questioned. The following discussion will thus situate the texts produced by Caldwell and Agee, considering them primarily as products of their cultural contexts and discursive milieux. It will maintain that Caldwell’s and Agee’s efforts, so similar in alleged intention, are not as different as they may at first appear in terms of their situatedness on a discursive continuum derived from social power.² In other words, this discussion will not argue that Caldwell’s work merely failed and Agee’s succeeded; rather, it will argue instead that Caldwell’s work corresponded with an earlier social discursive formation and Agee’s a somewhat later one, but both discourses existed, and still exist, in a specific network of power/knowledge that emerged during the early part of the twentieth century and has not entirely disappeared today. All of this is not, then, merely a reevaluation of the texts as literary works, or of the writers as literary authors, but rather is a reexamination of a social moment that has been crucial in telling the “truth” of poor southern whites, or “white trash,” through two key variants of socio-literary American writing as such.³

In order to appreciate and fully develop the connections that I will attempt to make between social scientific and literary discourse and between the types of social responses produced by the truth-telling channels of the thirties, it will be necessary to begin by reviewing a discursive connection that has been made before: that of Erskine Caldwell and the American eugenics movement. We should recall that by the 1930s the eugenics movement was beginning to lose some of its momentum and influence. Most of the significant “family studies,” the crude and highly prejudiced ethnographies of poor rural whites written by eugenic researchers as part of their ongoing efforts to establish and address the problem of poverty and crime (which they saw in hereditarian terms), had appeared in the years prior to 1920 and, by the mid-1920s, were drawing substantial criticism. Given its relatively short-lived apex during the early twentieth century, it may be all too easy, in retrospect, to view the eugenics movement as a set of temporary and accidental repressive and reactionary social forces, perhaps merely the hobbyhorse of the least enlightened and most brutal members of a new middle-class professional elite, or as criminologist Nicole Hahn Rafter puts it, “the fantasies of a handful of crackpots.”⁴ But it is important to remember, as Rafter also notes, that the eugenics movement partially initiated, and significantly furthered, a tendency to move conceptions of the rural poor into the realm of social humanism through scientific discourse: “[The eugenic family studies] explored issues of fundamental and enduring concern: the relationship between humans and nature, biology and society, heredity and environment, and the meaning of evolution.” Moreover, such writing took a primary interest in, and thus allow us to examine fruitfully, yet another relationship, that of “science to society.”⁵

These studies, then, shaped more popular versions of social knowledge, as well as a general set of popular attitudes, which manifested both scientific objectivity and social concern toward the rural poor. Eugenics-based thought, if only secondhand through other sources, impacted writers of government studies, journalism, and fiction. Not merely the family studies themselves, but also the various, more generalized “bad family/better family” discourses that permeated American notions of identity, then, influenced in ways both crude and subtle the manner in which people understood class, family, and society. Caldwell, like other literary authors of his time, was not merely influenced by eugenics discourse: his writing actually emerged directly from it. Caldwell’s novels displayed some of the standard imagery of the family studies, and his consciousness-raising photographic text *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) relied on similar assumptions. This was the case even when his writing seemed to set itself against some of the eugenics movement’s more simplistic biologically based premises.

Erskine Caldwell and Eugenics

Caldwell’s literary engagement with, and use of, the concepts and imagery of eugenics has been well documented, and it is not terribly surprising given the fact that his father, Ira Caldwell, a Presbyterian minister, actually published a series of articles about poor white southerners in the journal *Eugenics*, the mouthpiece of the American Eugenics Society.⁶ Of particular interest in terms of his son’s subsequent fiction writing is his 1930 five-part family study of poor whites in his area in Georgia, to whom he gave the derisive pseudonym “the Bunglers.” As American Studies scholar Karen Keely notes,

[t]he senior Caldwell aimed to rehabilitate a family of poor whites back into respectable society. He brought a farming family, marked by poverty, illiteracy, hookworm, and some mental “slowness,” from the edges of Burke County into the town of Wrens. He arranged a job for the father at the local mill, enrolled the children in school, orchestrated donations of clothes and food from the community, and encouraged the entire family to attend services at his church. . . . From Ira’s point of view, the experiment failed completely. Within a few months, the father had quit his job, the children had dropped out of school, the family had voluntarily moved back into their former home, and they all apparently resented Ira. They were simply not interested in being “improved” according to Ira’s plan. The elder Caldwell never quit working on behalf of the rural poor, but after this sociological experiment he lost faith in any ultimate solution to the problem of poverty. . . . In his series Ira does not make any mention of his social experiment or give any hint about his personal involvement with the Bun-

gler family. Instead, he presents himself as an objective social scientist studying a current cultural phenomenon.⁷

Ira Caldwell’s somewhat disenchanting family study is actually a fairly representative example of the genre in the sense that eugenic social scientists often downplayed the degree of personal involvement that drove their work and developed narrative essays about hopelessly deviant poor rural families that sometimes eventually reached the conclusion that such families, while clearly calling for documentation, were most likely beyond actual help (except, perhaps, in the form of institutionalization or sterilization).⁸

In *The People’s Writer: Erskine Caldwell and the South*, literary scholar Wayne Mixon attempts to downplay the role of eugenics discourse in both Ira Caldwell’s writing and that of his son, placing heavy emphasis on the fact that Ira Caldwell was genuinely concerned for his poor white neighbors and decried the derogating label “white trash.”⁹ But such high-mindedness is hardly incompatible with the social reformism that, partly through its very dismissal of the slur in favor of more authentically scientific terminology (but without disavowing much of the slur’s ideological underpinning), actually succeeded in suturing the concept “white trash” to the social scientific discourse of the time. And although, as Mixon points out, Ira Caldwell based his argument regarding the degeneracy of the family largely on environmental factors, he nevertheless came to the conclusion in the end that “the truth is that people can be so poor that they cannot be decent.”¹⁰ Of course, as Keely suggests, the notion that “white trash” degeneracy might be partly environmental was not new in eugenics circles and was something with which the readers of *Eugenics* in the thirties might be familiar and would be likely to accept, as it allowed a degree of recognition of the damaging widespread poverty of the time.

In spite of Mixon’s, and even Keely’s, somewhat charitable recognition, then, of Ira Caldwell’s emphasis on environment in his eugenics essay, it is important to recall that many eugenicists, particularly those of the Lamarckian variety, held that outside factors could be partly responsible for the proliferation of degenerates: poor environment was thought to cause irrevocable hereditary damage.¹¹ For a critic/historian like Mixon, who was heavily invested in the notion of the humanitarianism of both Caldwells, the distinction between hard-line biological eugenics and partly environmental eugenics seems important, and in keeping with this, Mixon attempts to suggest that Ira Caldwell’s family study was somehow misplaced in the journal *Eugenics*. But the fact that Ira Caldwell’s work partly stressed environmental factors or that it can be characterized, as Mixon claims, as “much more than a disinterested scientific discourse,” but rather “an impassioned indictment of a callous society,” hardly separates it from, or makes it inappropriate to, the eugenics forum in which it appeared.¹²

But more to the point is the manner in which the discourse of degeneracy is evident in the younger Caldwell’s literary works. Erskine Caldwell’s description of, and largely implicit explanation for, the plight of the Lesters in *Tobacco Road*

takes the form of a familiar eugenics paradigm: it has taken three generations for the Lester family to degenerate from the owners of a plantation to the poverty-stricken sharecroppers who squat on the same land. In that time, the family has developed not one, or even a few, but many of the familiar characteristics of the “feeble-minded” clan so familiar in eugenics family studies. Dude, the son who repeatedly throws a lopsided baseball against the shack, carelessly runs over a black man on the highway, and ignorantly destroys a new automobile, is described, along with “one or two of the other children” in the family, as not having “very much sense.”¹³ The elder daughter, Ellie May, arguably the central figure in the novel in terms of the imagery of eugenics, is harelippped and morbidly sexually promiscuous:

Ellie May was edging closer and closer to Lov. She was moving across the yard by raising her weight on her hands and feet and sliding herself over the hard white sand. She was smiling at Lov, and trying to make him take more notice of her. She could not wait any longer for him to come to her, so she was going to him. Her harelip was spread open across her upper teeth, making her mouth appear as though she had no upper lip at all. Men usually would have nothing to do with Ellie May; but she was eighteen now, and she was beginning to discover that it should be possible for her to get a man in spite of her appearance. . . .

“Ellie May’s acting like your old hound used to when he got the itch,” Dude said to Jeeter. “Look at her scrape her bottom on the sand. That old hound used to make the same kind of sound Ellie May’s making, too. It sounds just like a little pig squealing, don’t it?”¹⁴

Sexuality in eugenics discourses tended to highlight young female members of the family owing to the belief that they, through their capacity for prolific reproduction, represented the primary threat to the social order. Animal imagery, such as the above dog and pig references, attributed to poor white sexuality was also a common staple, as Nicole Hahn Rafter points out in *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies*: “Animal and insect imagery pervades the family studies. The cacogenic ‘mate’ and ‘migrate,’ ‘nesting’ with their ‘broods’ in caves and ‘hotbeds where human maggots are spawned’. . . a Hill wife looks ‘more like an animal than a woman.’”¹⁵ Such attributes as animalistic sexual promiscuity, though secondary or complementary in the case of older family members or males, however, were still important in presenting a consistent, unified family study that offered the young female body as the focal point.

I would further suggest that, as the perverse “white trash” patriarch, Jeeter Lester corresponds to a significant figure in several of the family studies, such as Mary Kostir’s 1916 Appalachian study “The Family of Sam Sixty,” in which

the “white trash” father figure, Abner Sixty, is described as “always poor and shiftless,” and his son Sam is described as “a sex pervert of extreme type, and utterly irresponsible.”¹⁶ In the case of the family patriarch, then, eugenicists often combined sexual perversity, particularly suggestions of incest, with descriptors of laziness, in a move that handily linked the newer social scientific views of “the feeble-minded” with older, male-centered southern discourses of “white trash.”¹⁷ Laziness, that old core tenet of Southwest humorists’ “white trash” discourse in the South since A. B. Longstreet’s day, the element that, along with petty violence and alcoholism, allowed the popular discourse of the disdainfully comedic to attach to poor white representation, now became linked with deviant sexuality through the figure of the male head of the “white trash” household. Cartoon depictions of shiftless hillbillies and crackers, like those of Paul Webb, Al Capp, and others, a part of American culture since the nineteenth century, circulated widely during the twentieth century, reinforcing and reproducing the humor of “white trash,” in a social climate that had set the existence of poor white families up as a timely social issue.

That Caldwell taps into, and partially reproduces in his novels, an older tradition of “white trash” humor, along with his newer sexualized discourse of social concern, is perhaps not surprising, in spite of his ostensible purpose of furthering objective social awareness of white rural poverty in the South. What is interesting here is the degree of efficacy in reaching audiences through this linkage of traditional thought and newer social scientific conceptions of poor white sexuality. It is within a comic “white trash” literary tradition that Caldwell’s work most often has been read, but perhaps the text’s most useful reading does not lie within such a tradition because it does not allow for an appreciation of its simultaneous, and to some degree purposeful, provocation of class-based horror through eugenics discourse. It was actually through its use of humor that *Tobacco Road* was successful in producing a more marketable and consumable version of the social horror that was the more stern eugenics movement’s clearest achievement.

Creating ridiculous horror-inducing characters may be inconsistent with some of our own more current notions of social awareness, but this simply was not the case in much American social welfare discourse of the early twentieth century, nor has it entirely faded away in the popular culture of our own time. And while it is true that the eugenics movement attempted to separate itself from the elements of humor and ridicule in older discourses of “white trash,” the movement still managed to take what it needed from them, primarily in the form of a distanced, middle-class revulsion, which it controlled through a performative scientific objectivity and then intensified and justified through its projects of social welfare. Similarly, Caldwell’s literary discourse, while able to channel the humor of the classist southern literary tradition within which it, perhaps, could not help but find itself, nonetheless managed to shift the mode from simple ridicule to a variety of troubled derision, successfully melding together the elements from both eugenic social science’s high-minded documentary and

the southern humorist tradition of blatant, humorous contempt. Understanding how southern humor and eugenics-derived thought work together in Caldwell's novels can also help to explain the processes by which these books first became highly popular as creative consciousness-raising efforts and then subsequently fell into greater and greater disfavor as later twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars began to point to elements of stereotype and dehumanization.¹⁸

In the past, a dissevering of these elements has been accomplished primarily by a continuing focus on the *author*, Caldwell himself, because it ostensibly makes a great deal of sense to say that Caldwell's intentions were not realized or that Caldwell was at odds with himself; such observations lay the matter nicely to rest without further investigation of the social forces and discourses that helped shape Caldwell's texts.¹⁹ The process of constructing the particular variety of hillbilly humor and social concern in the film *Tobacco Road*, long-running plays, television shows, popular films, and cartoons it later engendered, relied not only on the combination of older treatments of "white trash" as comically violent and shiftless and the newer conceptions of the hypersexual "white trash" female, but also upon a related combination of attributes in the author presenting them (the reception of Caldwell's texts depended largely upon an understanding of his own positioning of himself as social observer). The author's name produces canonical and/or social recognitions and offers up (and limits) the ways in which we are to understand a text. And we, especially as literary critics, cite the author's name and oeuvre again and again in order to tap into such recognitions, even during attempts to move away from familiar literary interpretations. Failure to recognize such operations is dangerous indeed. Citing Caldwell's name as either author of socially interested fiction or socially retrogressive fiction places the bulk of originaive power with him and thus fails to account for the ways in which his discourse was socially and historically situated and for the ways in which discourses foundational to his (and derived from his) work may still act to form popular knowledge about class in our own social world. In other words, not studying Caldwell merely because he is not "literary" enough or "politically correct" enough robs us of studying a surprisingly powerful mode of popular social discourse about class in the early part of the twentieth century.

Contrasting Documentary Engagements: *You Have Seen Their Faces* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

The qualities of their eyes did not in the least alter, nor anything visible or audible about them, and their speaking was as if I was almost certainly a spy sent to betray them through trust, whom they would show they had neither trust nor fear of. They were the clients of Rehabilitation.

—James Agee, from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

In contrast to Caldwell, James Agee’s work was arguably on the cutting edge of a movement away from the simple representations that emerged from eugenic social science, those that merely classified and institutionalized, and toward those of a more efficiently diffuse humanizing discourse of white poverty that would later emerge from academic participations, taking a greater interest in documenting human similitude rather than difference. Both of the contrasting artistic engagements with poor whites that Caldwell and Agee produced during the 1930s and early 1940s depended for their reception on a version of middle-class intellectual “authorship” as an ethical/aesthetic touchstone. But it was partly an attempt to move directly away from stale social “truths” about “white trash” as an Other, and the limited social welfare responses they provoked, that prompted the form and tone of leftist writer James Agee’s journalistic engagements with southern sharecropping families during the 1930s.

Following on the heels of government investigation and documentation of tenant farming initiated by the Roosevelt administration, journalistic interest in the lives of sharecroppers was at an unusually high point. Agee’s documentation of the lives of three white Alabama sharecropper families, originally a shorter project for *Fortune* magazine undertaken during the late 1930s, was later to become the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, published in 1941 as a collaborative textual/pictorial project with the photographer Walker Evans.²⁰ Agee’s text attempted to detail with a mixture of journalistic objectivity and empathetic leftist artistry the day-to-day existence of the Gudgers, the Ricketts, and the Woodses (Agee’s pseudonyms), three white families living in crushing poverty.

As part of a self-critical characterization during his opening remarks, Agee claims that the project consisted of

pry[ing] intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of “honest journalism” (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbiased which, when skillfully enough qualified, is exchangeable at any bank for money . . . , in the virtual certitude of almost unanimous public approval.²¹

As Agee was aware, this public approval would take one of two forms: the first a sort of reflexive understanding and acceptance of the documentation of poor white lives, a reception guaranteed by the recognition of the project on social scientific/welfare grounds, and the second a more genuine approval of the new Marxist-inflected artistic perspective from which Agee and Evans attempted to present this familiar subject matter. It was this second form of approval for which Agee fervently hoped, as the project was, in some ways, a response to previous

“family studies” done by the eugenics researchers and a movement away from the eugenics-inflected photographic documentations of poor whites like those done by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, whose collaborative textual/pictorial effort *You Have Seen Their Faces* had appeared, a few years earlier, in 1937.²²

You Have Seen Their Faces, which presented the rural poor of the South, both black and white, as its defining social problem, solidified both Bourke-White and Caldwell’s reputations as social activists. As historian Patrick Cox remarks of Bourke-White in an online biographical sketch, “In addition to her professional contributions, her activism on behalf of the poor and underprivileged throughout the world places her among the foremost humanitarians of the century.”²³ Similar statements have been made about Caldwell, of course, of whom Wayne Mixon writes: “Throughout [*You Have Seen Their Faces*], it is clear that Caldwell writes out of love for the South, out of desire that it be made a better place, and out of hope that a decent life can be fashioned for the millions of rural poor who languish there.”²⁴ But we should also consider Carol Shloss’s appraisal, which claims that Bourke-White’s “purposeful rearrangement” of her poor white subjects, along with Caldwell’s contrived captions, resulted in “making the poor seem consistently worn, repugnant, alien and stupid.”²⁵ The menacing quality that Bourke-White and Caldwell were able to depict through their collaboration in this text, of course, hinges on the images, the faces of poor rural whites.²⁶ But Caldwell’s text, and particularly his captions, which often appear to be presenting the words of the poor whites themselves, conveys a subtextual threat and enables the proper contextualization of Bourke-White’s images.²⁷

Of course, the use of visual media in the documentation of poor white identity as a social problem had been, for several years, a significant element in the rhetoric of early twentieth-century social science that took up the issue. Bourke-White and Caldwell’s use of such media, therefore, was hardly new. The social scientific tradition of capturing and fixing the face of rural white poverty had begun just after the turn of the century. Eugenics researchers had used photographs of poor whites as part of their argumentation in an overall program of scientifically humanized dehumanization of the “feeble-minded.” Such photos were sometimes retouched before publication to make the faces of the subjects appear more sinister. In his book *Minds Made Feeble*, J. David Smith includes some of the doctored pictures that appeared with eugenicist Henry Goddard’s infamous study of the “Kallikak” family. In these somewhat blurred images of 1912, the eyes and mouths of the children were altered to present a visual image of the face of “feeble-mindedness” more in keeping with the eugenic vision of the social threat that poor whites posed.

Such crude visual distortions in the service of the eugenics movement’s scare tactics, though not constantly employed, were certainly not inconsistent with the movement’s rhetoric. And while they were perhaps not circulated widely enough to embed specific images in the minds of the American public, the contribution of such images to the overall picture of poor whites in the public imagination was

nonetheless significant, particularly through their operation as part of a highly influential social scientific discourse. Although Bourke-White and Caldwell did not alter the photos in their text, they did present the material in such a way as to remain consistent with past social scientific discourse that had taken up poor whites. In *You Have Seen Their Faces*, Caldwell, more so than in his fictional works, attempts to establish his authenticity as a concerned moderate-liberal thinker and objective social observer. A southerner himself, he does not hesitate to characterize the South as "a retarded and thwarted civilization," strongly advancing the notion that one of the most pressing symptoms of its retardation are the sharecroppers who, though they have "no other choice" than to do as they do, are nonetheless likely to end up lazy, bestial, and resentful as part of their exploitation under the tenancy system.²⁸ Such a view mirrors his portrayal of the rural poor in his novels, although he blames the economic system more directly than the degeneration of the tenants.

But just as in Caldwell's novels, the visualization of the people in question here belies the potential for any real change except that which is imposed from the outside in order to manage this irrevocably damaged group of people. This is largely because Margaret Bourke-White's images of the rural poor in the text (along with his captions) provide an oddly inconsistent counterpoint to Caldwell's final, disjunctive assertion that the bodies and wills of "the young people" are strong and contain the potential for change. The faces of the elderly, those living in "degradation and defeat," for whom, Caldwell asserts, little can be done, provide a plenitude of both affective and signficatory force to show the "real" horror of the people in the rural South. Often shot with eyes squinting or in partial shadow, and nearly always looking away off camera, the faces in Bourke-White's photos never directly engage the observer, and they sometimes possess a contrived sinister quality reminiscent of the retouched eugenics photos in Goddard's Kallikak family study.

Bourke-White claims in a notation at the end of the book that she waited for just the right moment to capture what she wanted on film and relied on a pattern of such images to convey her whole meaning. She was not unaware of the negative emotional impact of her images. Her understanding of what was most "true" about her photos of the rural poor actually depended upon such force:

One photograph might lie, but a group of pictures can't. I could have taken one picture of share-croppers, for example, showing them toasting their toes and playing their banjos and being pretty happy. In a group of pictures, however, you would have seen the cracks on the wall and the expressions on their faces. In the last analysis, photographs really have to tell the truth; the sum total is a true interpretation.²⁹

Apart from Bourke-White's comments highlighting her stress upon the misery of the sharecroppers, one can see here that she allows no room for other

versions of such misery. Such a naïve conception of socially conscious representation was appalling to Agee, who, as Carol Shloss puts it, “saw the transaction in a much larger context, a context that seemed to elude both Bourke-White and Caldwell even though they had made their Southern journey with a definite social purpose.”³⁰

According to both Carol Shloss and Jeffrey Folks, Agee and Evans’s project was an overt attempt to move away from the type of documentation that Caldwell and Bourke-White were doing: “‘Through [Bourke-White], [Agee] understood that institutions around him were involved in creating self-serving concepts of poverty’. . . . He wisely saw that no ‘client’ relationship would alleviate the sharecroppers’ condition, because all institutions purporting to relieve their suffering served the interests of those already in control.”³¹ Agee found *You Have Seen Their Faces* “sensational, condescending, and brutal . . . an example of journalism’s ‘own complacent delusion, and its enormous power to poison the public with the same delusion, that it is telling the truth.’”³² It was partly, then, a realization of the complicity of Caldwell and Bourke-White’s reformist documentary with what he saw as a sinister power structure, the “authentic” knowledge production of which depended upon a false objectivity, that prompted Agee’s vigilance against such complicity in his own work.

Part of this vigilance took the form of a shift in the methods of representation, and part of it took the form of a shift in the way he situated himself as an observer. Both shifts operated together to place a new emphasis on affect through aesthetics. As Agee rejected the stance of an objective social scientist in favor of that of an overtly sympathetic, artistic mediator, he also stressed a concomitant rejection of the popular version of naturalized poor white identity, emphasizing the need for recognizing the danger of both concepts. Descriptively, it was not the standard distanced involvement but rather a new infixed blend of pity and admiration that Agee saw as the proper formula for representing the families in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a formula that Jeffrey Folks calls “a most passionate defense.”³³ As Agee states, “Description is a word to suspect. . . . George Gudger is a man, et cetera. But obviously, in the effort to tell of him (by example) as truthfully as I can, I am limited. I know him only so far as I know him, and only in those terms in which I know him; and all of that depends as fully on who I am as on who he is.”³⁴ Agee’s distrust of traditional modes of objective description, based on his awareness of the social positioning of subjects (and of their observers), prompted his movement toward a “possible ‘art’” that would “be an art and a way of seeing existence based . . . on an intersection of astronomical physics, geology, biology, and (including psychology) anthropology, known and spoken of not in scientific but in human terms.”³⁵

Certainly, Agee’s attempt to provide a positive, ennobling artistic engagement does a lot of work toward re-envisioning southern poor whites. For one thing, it moved away from the “objective” social-scientific truths that had documented and defined poor white subjectivity up to that point, and in so doing, allowed for both a questioning of this past discourse and an embracing of a newer version

of “white trash” truth, whose force lay in positive affect. Agee’s sympathetic sharecroppers stand in stark contrast to Caldwell’s repugnant and alien ones. Likewise far removed from Caldwell’s approach is Agee’s understanding of himself as one whose very presence in the households of the sharecroppers must be questioned as potentially exploitive. His attitude of self-abnegation and even shame at exposing them through an alien gaze has among its effects a partial denormalizing of the type of engagements that he sets out to undermine.

As Paula Rabinowitz notes, “Agee continually reminds us of his position as outsider. Listing himself and Evans as spy and counterspy respectively in ‘Persons and Places,’ he wonders what his intrusive presence looks like to the people whose ‘living’ he has come ‘to reproduce and communicate as nearly exactly as possible.’”³⁶ Unlike Caldwell and Bourke-White, who seldom questioned the validity of their position as objective observers and commentators, Agee builds such a distrust of this position into his study from the beginning. That he could not and would not be “objective” was a central assumption of the text, one that, by virtue of its centrality, called into question any study that did not acknowledge from the outset the dubious validity of the outside observer’s gaze.

Starting from this perspective of admitted appropriation, Agee set out to accomplish nothing less than a redefinition of “white trash” through a new mode of truth production, largely as a discourse of advocacy with a middle-class audience. His almost celebratory representation of the people whose lives he documents involves a multivalent process by which he includes many voices. In Part I he includes the voices of the people of the community that marginalizes the sharecroppers, his own voice mediating—referencing at times literary and mythic voices of the past to give his voice the weight of justice rather than objectivity (as when he includes the biblical beatitudes after a group of quotes from townspeople reviling the poor white families), and the voices of the poor themselves, for whom, most times, Agee himself speaks. Agee thus attempts to lend the sharecroppers his subjectivity, his voice, at times in order to provide them with a dignity and force that he feels is unavailable to them otherwise.

Unfortunately, one of the effects of such a mediating discourse is the reconstitution of poor white subjectivity as a sort of thwarted middle-class subjectivity. The tragedy of the sharecroppers’ lives, then, is that they both are and are not subjects like Agee himself. Reader sympathy depends upon that which is recognizably the same in the other, and the tragedy of difference is presented as the degree of lack of sameness. This is not to say that Agee takes on an overt attitude of this sort. On the contrary, shaped as a direct response to, and oppositional force against, eugenics-based thinking, Agee’s overt attempt is to glorify squalor, to beatify suffering in order to place poor white otherness in a different social register. But the otherness is still presented as a set of lacks, bound to be understood by a middle-class audience as a catalogue of depletion, not merely as a symptomatic material depletion, but as a subjectivity of lack.

During her discussion of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Rabinowitz aptly remarks, “no matter what its political intentions, the documentary narra-

tive invariably returns to the middle class, enlisting the reader in a process of self-recognition. We read ourselves into the people. . . . Their collection reveals the ways differences can be organized and contained."³⁷ This effacement of difference occurs not inadvertently, but rather as a direct result of Agee's admittedly revolutionary insistence on the necessity of positive affective bias through artistic representation. Agee redefines himself as a different type of concerned intellectual, one who approaches the Other with the acknowledged goal of sympathy and an awareness of the troubling nature of representation, one who questions himself and his own shifting modes of engagement with "white trash" even more than he attempts to redefine the poor white subject.

Small wonder that current concerned middle-class intellectual cultural theorists find in Agee a pattern of the "right way" of doing classed cultural critique. In *A Space on the Side of the Road*, cultural anthropologist Kathleen Stewart praises Agee's book as a "a political allegory about relations between Us who represent them and Them represented," a text whose power lies in its "interweaving of aesthetic and political impulses" that enable it to become "both a utopian critique of politics and an aesthetic critique of the imaginative poverty of quick explanation and facile codes."³⁸ For Stewart, Agee's engagement with the rural poor, through its very acknowledgement of its own failure (of realism, of accuracy, of truth), successfully explodes "the dreamy documentary bubble that would contain an 'Other,' subjected life world in the prefabricated good intentions of the order of things."³⁹

But Stewart's emphasis on Agee's intensification of meanings in order to create a "surreal" space of interpretive engagement fails to acknowledge the way in which mediation between meanings, those deconstructed and/or those intensified through radically shifting narrative modes, cannot constitute a lever by which to understand effects if we consider that the very basis of these meanings has already been carefully produced and set in motion by the circulations of power/knowledge. Both Stewart's and Agee's elaborate understandings of social signification offer a highly complex middle-class interpretive apologetics, one that enables a set of more positive effects, yes, but one that also does not avoid the trap of the question "what does it mean?" The "dialogue" between the middle-class intellectual and the "white trash" Other still exists in a classed system of signification that goes on producing the effects of subjectification. A humane, complicated, and nervous middle-class knowledge production is still a production of middle-class "truth." It is, perhaps, a much more efficient and workable knowledge production at that.

Arguably, it is neither Agee's repositioning of himself as mediator, nor his repositioning of "white trash" subjects as sympathetic objects for study, that accomplishes a new engagement with poor white subjectivity, but rather Walker Evans's photography that does so. It is perhaps better able to do it through its repositioning of the middle-class audience, which places them directly in confrontation with the faces of the rural poor, effectively producing an affective engagement. With the eyes of his subjects frequently looking directly into the

camera, and thus into the eyes of their middle-class observers, Evans's photos offer the middle-class viewer not a specimen to be observed, nor a mirror in which to see themselves, but a real encounter with the Other. Evans's photos perform an entirely different operation from *You Have Seen Their Faces* and give *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* its singular emotional force.

This is not to say that Agee's text does not provide, as Caldwell's had done previously, a way to "read" the photographs that was/is consistent with what Agee saw as a discursive adjustment to "white trash" truth. More than willing to relinquish his own claim to objectivity, or even to a justification of his project on middle-class normative moral grounds, in order to accomplish his goal, Agee nonetheless hoped that redefining "white trash" subjects as more comprehensible (perhaps more palatable) to a middle-class audience constituted a movement toward changing social reality. He felt that the faces of the rural poor in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* offered readers "white trash" as an issue, both of study and of identification: "Who are they (we?) that got caught?" Redefining "white trash" subjectivity more positively, with reference to liberal middle-class individuality, he hoped to produce a humanist social project of some significance.

Small wonder that such cultural studies or anthropological projects today often take the similar form of dismantling negative stereotypes, a process of socially responsible redefinition that depends on a discovery of the untruth of negative attributes of otherness and the truth of positive attributes of sameness. But, as I have argued above, the effectiveness of Agee's text and the way in which it contains Evans's images is problematic. As Rabinowitz suggests, Agee's project relied, despite his goals and best efforts, perhaps inevitably, on precisely such an effacement of the differences between himself as middle-class intellectual and the rural poor as social others. This problem of social advocacy and difference has, of course, been noted before with regard to Agee and also noted as a problem of some importance generally in the contemporary humanities.

In "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Linda Alcoff defines the issue of advocacy in terms of authenticity versus advantage, placing the issue upon much the same footing as Agee himself, as a problem related to the perspective of the outsider and his privileged position:

[T]he practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. And the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies. . . . But this development should not be taken as an absolute disauthorization of all practices of speaking for. It is not always the case that when others unlike me speak for me I have ended up worse off. . . . The source of a claim or discursive practice in suspect motives

or maneuvers or in privileged locations . . . though it is always relevant, cannot be sufficient to repudiate it.⁴⁰

Alcoff, with her emphasis here on practical necessity and potential positive effects sees her analysis of the problem as refuting a poststructuralist prohibition of social advocacy, which she attempts to establish by referring to a phrase of Deleuze in “Intellectuals and Power”: “. . . absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others.”⁴¹

Alcoff’s understanding of advocacy here, and the poststructuralist response to the problem it poses, may help us to understand the differences between Kathleen Stewart’s understanding of Agee’s work and an understanding that thinks of subjects and signification in a different way. During the discussion in which Deleuze makes this remark, Deleuze and Foucault place such difficulties on somewhat different theoretical ground. When Deleuze speaks of “the indignity of speaking for others,” it is not as a prohibition of discourse that takes up social others, but as a realization that discourses of advocacy, as Foucault puts it, “exist in a system of power which blocks, prohibits, and invalidates” discourses of self-expression (of social others) through a power that “profoundly and subtly penetrates the entire societal network. Intellectuals are themselves agents in this system of power—the idea of their responsibility for ‘consciousness’ and discourse forms part of this system.”⁴² The issue, then, is not merely the social position of the speaking intellectual, nor is it her impetus to speak-on-behalf in the first place; rather, it is the inevitability of speaking-on-behalf and what its cost will be in any given set of circumstances. Speaking-for will occur—that is a given, and may be a necessity; but for Deleuze and Foucault, it is always costly and requires analysis. The fact that these subjects speak and no one is able to hear them does not mean that we need to interpret their speech, but rather that we must try to make it possible to hear what they say.⁴³

As scholars of literary history, it is our responsibility to examine the role of literature as social discourse and to engage with the historical legacies of socially interested texts, not only those that have a following in the academy like Agee’s, but also those that have been largely repudiated or regarded with unease, like Caldwell’s. And the historical questions we ask should have everything to do with the present, with how these books, whose titles are perhaps fading in the collective memory, have shaped the cultural perceptions with which we live daily, even in the twenty-first century. The ways in which the rural poor are portrayed in literature and media today, both popular and scholarly, owe a lot to these texts, and our academic methods of engagement with cultural and class Others owe a lot to the modes, according to which they’ve been received, then and now.

Notes

1. Agee’s work, committed to the self-consciously nondiagnostic, face-to-face engagement with the rural poor, has provoked positive emulative engagements with white rural poverty, includ-

ing Kathleen Stewart’s *A Space on the Side of the Road* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

2. Social power, as I discuss it here, may be understood in the broadest terms in which Foucault elaborates it, encompassing on the one hand discipline as delineated in *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1995), as well as the more affirmative “biopower” and its associated webs of power/knowledge as discussed in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I: “. . . two poles of development linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations.” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I (New York, Vintage: 1978), 139. For an excellent discussion of how these forms of power may be understood, see Jeffrey T. Nealon’s *Foucault Beyond Foucault* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

3. This term, its origins and entanglements with racism in the antebellum South, its uses and social evocations, has been well studied by scholars such as Matt Wray. See Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). While certainly not denying the racial resonance, I use the term here because it evokes well certain early twentieth century perceptions and elements of social class stigma that both writers were attempting to address in their works.

4. Nicole Hahn Rafter, *The Eugenic Family Studies* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985), 30.

5. *Ibid.*, 31.

6. Karen Keely, “Poverty, Sterilization, and Eugenics in Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*,” *The Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 1 (2002): 23, 35.

7. *Ibid.*, 35.

8. As Karen Keely points out, Henry Goddard’s personal involvement with Deborah Kallikak (the Kallikaks were subjects of a well-known eugenic family study) is just one example of such tainted “scientific” inquiry.

9. Wayne Mixon, *The People’s Writer: Erskine Caldwell and the South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 16.

10. Quoted in Keely, “Poverty, Sterilization, and Eugenics,” 35.

11. See Diane B. Paul’s discussion of Lamarckian thought (and its impact on early eugenicists like Dugdale) in her *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995), 42–45.

12. Mixon, *The People’s Writer*, 16.

13. Caldwell uses Dude’s behavior partially to enact the codes of a culturally familiar, mindless “white trash” racism. This is revealed partly through dialogue. To Dude’s killing of the black man, Jeeter responds, “Niggers will get killed. Looks like there ain’t no way to stop it.” Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 123.

14. *Ibid.*, 18.

15. Rafter, *The Eugenic Family Studies*, 26.

16. *Ibid.*, 191.

17. The text hints toward incest with his daughters, as when Sister Bessie tells Jeeter that God made Ellie May harelippped to save her from being “ruined” by Jeeter, a notion with which Jeeter himself seems perfectly comfortable (Caldwell, *Tobacco Road*, 54–55).

18. Sylvia J. Cook remarks that the literary critical tendency to see Caldwell as “a writer with a comic vision of human absurdity, and then to puzzle over, or regret, the disjunction between the modes of naturalist sociology and grotesque comedy in his work” fails to take into account the fact that “it appears to be just this connection that Caldwell seeks to explore—between the comic futility of the human predicament, reaching for the spirit but mocked by the flesh, and the injustices of society that produce needless and correctable suffering.” See Sylvia J. Cook, *Erskine Caldwell and the Fiction of Poverty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 103.

19. In “What is an Author?,” Michel Foucault takes up the problematic issue of how to understand an author in relation to social discourse and characteristically concludes that one must understand the reality of an author as a set of social functions. The author function, he tells us, serves various purposes related to the reception of texts, it partly determines “our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we assign, or the exclusions we practice. In addition all these operations vary according to the period and the form of discourse concerned.” See Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 127.

20. The year 1941 was also when John Ford’s film adaptation of *Tobacco Road* was released.

21. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 7.

22. Agee had worked with Bourke-White but disliked her work and had requested Walker Evans, rather than her, as the photographer for his project. John Hersey, introduction to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by Agee and Evans, xiv–xv.

23. Patrick Cox, “Margaret Bourke-White: History-Making Photojournalist and Social Activist,” *The Digital Journalist* (January 2003), <http://www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0301/pcox.html>.

24. Mixon, *The People’s Writer*, 111.

25. Carol Shloss, "The Privilege of Perception," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 56, no. 4 (1980): 602–63.

26. While *You Have Seen Their Faces* contains images of both rural southern blacks and whites, the portrayals of African-Americans overall operate differently and specify a direct historical link with slavery and direct racial victimization: "The Negro tenant farmer is the descendant of the slave. For generations, he has lived in mortal fear of the white boss in the cotton country. He has seen his women violated and his children humiliated. He himself has been discriminated against, cheated, whipped, and held forcibly in an inferior position. Every white face he sees is a reminder of his brother's mutilation, burning, and death at the stake. He has no recourse at law, because he is denied the right of trial by his peers. The Negro tenant farmer on a plantation is still a slave." Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 11. In contrast, images of poor whites arguably work more frequently according to the conventions of social welfare efforts that were intermeshed with eugenics discourse.

27. According to Carol Shloss, who quotes Margaret Bourke-White, the captions were meant to "express the author's own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed." Shloss, "The Privilege of Perception," 603.

28. Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, 26, 75–76, 81.

29. Bourke-White quoted in Shloss, "The Privilege of Perception," 598.

30. Shloss, "The Privilege of Perception," 601.

31. Jeffrey J. Folks, "James Agee's Quest for Forgiveness in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *The Southern Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1996): 43.

32. James Agee quoted in Shloss, "The Privilege of Perception," 600.

33. Folks, "James Agee's Quest for Forgiveness," 43.

34. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 238–39.

35. *Ibid.*, 245.

36. Paula Rabinowitz, "Voyeurism and Class Consciousness: James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Cultural Critique* 21 (Spring 1992): 156.

37. *Ibid.*, 162, 163.

38. Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 22.

39. *Ibid.*, 23.

40. Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991–92): 29.

41. Deleuze quoted in Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," 11–12.

42. Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 207–209.

43. Here I refer to not only nonidentification with such speakers but also to an academic mode of reception for issues of class. As bell hooks says in *Outlaw Culture*: "When contemporary Left intellectuals talk about capitalism, few if any attempts are made to relate that discourse to the reality of being poor in America." See bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge Classics, 1994; repr., 2008), Kindle edition, Chapter 15 "Seeing and Making Culture."