Innocent of Any Time: Modern Temporality and the Problem of Southern Poverty

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In 1936, James Agee and Walker Evans spent several weeks on special assignment for *Fortune* magazine observing three white sharecropping families in Alabama for an intended article about poverty in modern America. They exhaustively, intimately detailed the sharecroppers' lives, homes, and material possessions in text and pictures, developing a nuanced representation of how poverty affected the families. Their study was eventually published as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, an experimental documentary that attempts to represent their perception of the sharecropping families. The original version of the sprawling 30,000-word article about the families was published as *Cotton Tenants: Three Families* in 2003, and this earlier draft of the text contains a footnote that illuminates the relationship between time as a force of modern capitalism and temporality as a component of the sharecroppers' lived experience. The comment reads, "Though each family has a lowprice alarmclock and as a rule keeps it wound and is respectful of it, the clock is almost invariably an hour or two fast or slow, and they are innocent of any time except the sun's."[1] This note reveals layers of variable temporal experience, juxtaposing the families' seemingly anachronistic cyclical temporality with modern linear temporality. It suggests that the families experience time differently from most other Americans, which invites us to wonder how and why their experience may be different and what the clock means to them.

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In the decades after the Civil War, advancing technologies of transportation, communication, production, finance, electrification, media, and timekeeping rapidly changed the conditions of daily life in the United States, compressing time and space and causing people to experience temporality in divergent ways. Agricultural communities tended to experience time according to organic celestial and seasonal rhythms, measuring work and life according to units of days and harvest cycles. Industries measured production according to discrete units of hours, minutes, and seconds, which required precise, mechanical measurements of time. By 1920, the majority of Americans lived in urban areas, and the majority of America's domestic product came from manufacturing, so most Americans shared an experience of time as mechanically measured, commodified, and detached from organic rhythms. This linear experience of time became normative in the United States by the first part of the twentieth century, because most Americans used clocks and watches, rather than the sun and moon, to organize their daily lives. Modern, mechanical temporality had a totalizing effect, and the traditional, agricultural experience of time, which had previously been normal, became deviant, signifying poverty and backwardness.

In literary representations of poor Southern farmers, cyclical temporality is one of many markers of the farmers' deviation from the American mainstream, along with other signs of primitivism, such as privies, mule-drawn plows, and kerosene lanterns. This essay explores two works of literature that illustrate poor Southern farmers' perception of time to draw some conclusions about temporal heterogeneity in modern America. These literary works dramatize the tension between diverging perceptions of temporality, which offers readers an opportunity to understand both the theoretical operation of time and the material experience of time. The representation of clocks and time in Evans and Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Richard Wright's short story "Long Black Song" demonstrates that the processes of modernization advanced unevenly, that differences in socially constructed temporality led modernist writers to emphasize the apartness of their subjects, and that poor Southerners had a complicated, commodity-based relationship with modern capitalism.

The Uneven Progress of Time

The notion of multiple competing experiences of time predates the emergence of temporal mechanization. Michael O'Malley explains in *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time* that in the American imagination, cyclical patterns of seasons and days, which suggest infinity, often contend with linear patterns of beginning and ending, which suggest finitude. Linear time aligns with ideas of progress, moving forward into an inevitable future, but cyclical time resists progress, maintaining repetitive stasis. These alternate concepts of time have created ideological tension historically. Thomas Jefferson, for example, valorized cyclical time as the natural rhythm of agriculture, but Alexander Hamilton advocated linear time as the measure of progress in manufacturing.[2]

Their competing visions reflect a running conflict regarding the ideology of progress through much of the nation's early history. Agrarians tend to regard linear time contemptuously, extolling cyclical time as God's ordained time, while industrialists view linear time as the measure of business and progress.[3] Clocks can signify both cyclical time, because of their circular faces, and linear time, because of their mechanical movements. However, they became strongly associated with linear time, because as mechanisms they required manufacturing and as tools they regulated the processes of industrialization.[4] Alexis McCrossen documents in *Marking Modern Times* that as the United States industrialized, mechanical linear time took precedence over organic cyclical time, and by the early twentieth century, clocks had become common symbols of modernity.[5]

Mechanical time governed the processes of modernization: factory workers made hourly wages, railroads ran on timetables, telegraphs and telephones sent messages over vast distances instantly, and watches and clocks became virtually ubiquitous. By the 1930s in America, the word *time* practically meant linear clock time. That does not mean, however, that technologies of modernization and linear temporality became universal in all places simultaneously. Agricultural regions of the United States, particularly the Southern United States, continued to adhere to cyclical time, measuring time's passage more often in seasons with almanacs than in hours with clocks. The normalization of linear time, which was part and parcel of America's rapid urbanization and industrialization, made most of the nation's rural, agricultural areas—most of the nation's physical geography—anachronistic.[6] Farmers were not unaffected by mechanical time, but the task-oriented methods of harvesting and planting required significantly less concern about hours and minutes than the process-oriented methods of manufacturing. Clocks did play an important role in the Southern United States in the early twentieth century, particularly in those sectors of the rural social structure that interfaced with manufacturing and finance. Bankers, merchants, cotton factors, and large planters needed to be keenly aware of linear time, but small farmers, particularly sharecroppers and laborers, who made up the majority of the region's agricultural workforce, were less dependent on linear time. Farmers followed the seasons, sharecroppers signed annual contracts based on crop cycles, and day laborers were paid based on production, not hours. They worked, as the expression goes, "from can see to can't."

This temporal discontinuity demonstrates the central point that Barbara Adam makes in *Timewatch:* "There is no single time, only a multitude of times which interpenetrate and permeate our daily lives."[7] Temporality, as Valerie Rohy explains in her entry "Time" in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, is a social construction that is subject to political and economic considerations, and it intersects with other forms of social construction that influence identity, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and geography.[8] In effect, each person has a distinct experience of time that reflects that person's social positionality.

These individual perceptions mesh together to form a collective experience of temporality to establish what Homi Bhabha describes as nation time. He notes, however, that within the constituent elements are numerous points of conflict. "The problematic boundaries of modernity are enacted in these ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space," he writes. "The language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past."[9] Southern rural poverty, I argue, creates one of these temporal fissures where we can examine the dynamics of temporality. Poverty appears to foreclose the figures in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and "Long Black Song" from participating in the same experience of temporality as their modern observers, which suggests that they are a spatial anachronism. However, as we will see, the sense of anachronism is a function of the modern observer projecting normative temporality onto the poor subject. What appears to be an anachronism proves to be a function of economic privilege.

The inconsistent usage of mechanical time in the South reflects the uneven process of modernization. In *Mastered by the Clock*, Mark Smith explains that antebellum plantation owners embraced industrial capitalism by adopting mechanical clock time to manage slave labor and increase production.[10] Emancipation effectively ended the use of industrial-style work gangs, however, and the plantation system devolved into sharecropping, or the leasing of small plots of land to families in exploitive labor arrangements, which slowed the region's economic progress for the next several decades, so most Southerners adhered to cyclical time. "The emergence of new forms of cotton-growing labor in the United States was, in the wake of the emancipation of the world's preeminent cotton growers, the single most important change within the empire of cotton," Sven Beckert writes.[11] As the mode of cotton-growing labor adapted to postemancipation conditions with new means of exploitation, other elements of the cotton economy continued to modernize. In the absence of large-scale industrial systems, the South's most significant engagement with modern temporality involved railroads, which transported cotton and other commodities, and textile mills, which had their own impacts on temporality. Before railroads connected distant cities, every community set its time arbitrarily, so noon in one place might be 11:30 a.m. in the neighboring community. On November 18, 1883, the day of two noons, times were functionally standardized nationwide, illustrating one of the obvious examples of capitalist time-space compression.[12] Meanwhile, textile mills developed in the Southern piedmont near the end of the nineteenth century, and they operated as self-contained factory villages regulated with whistles to mark the beginning and end of the workday and paid with subsistence wages based on hours worked. Beyond these interventions, however, the South remained mostly rural and agricultural well into the twentieth century, so Southerners had less need to conform to linear time. The region's delayed development led President Franklin D. Roosevelt to label the South "America's number one economic problem" in 1938.[13]

That same year, Wright published *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of stories about black life in the South that includes the story "Long Black Song." In the story, a white salesman visits the cabin of Silas and Sarah, intending to sell them a graphophone with a clock built into the case. They already have a clock, a broken eight-day clock that their small daughter uses as a plaything—her banging on the clock punctuates the story—but they do not use mechanical time, which confounds the salesman. He asks how they keep time, how they know when to get up in the morning and when it's night. Sarah answers him, "Mistah, we don need no clock," and he responds, "Well, this beats everything! I don't see how in the world anybody can live without time."[14] Sarah and Silas use cyclical time; they work by the sun and sleep by the moon. Their broken clock demonstrates that they are not ignorant of mechanical time, but it has no utility for them, so they are unwilling to invest in having the clock repaired. Silas has been a frugal and comparatively successful farmer, and they own their own farm in a time when and place where the majority of farmers are sharecroppers, so they could probably afford to own a simple clock if it were necessary. The clock lacks economic utility, however, because Sarah and Silas live agricultural lives without direct contact with industrialization. Still, the traveling salesman's presence indicates that commercialism has penetrated the rural South. His surprise that they function without mechanical time indicates the pervasive normativity of modernity, which marks poor Southerners as deviant, even when they are functional participants in capitalist production.

Agee also portrays poor Southerners' perception of time as cyclical and deviant in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* Writing late at night in one of the families' cabin, he describes his encounter with cyclical time:

> It is the middle and pure height and whole of summer and a summer night, the held breath, of a planet's year; high shored sleeps the crested tide: what day of the month I do not know, which day of the week I am not sure, far less what hour of the night. The dollar watch I bought a few days ago, as also from time to time I buy a ten cent automatic pencil, and use it little before I lose all track of it, ran out at seventeen minutes past ten the day before yesterday morning, and time by machine measure was over for me at that hour, and is a monument.[15]

Agee describes losing the perception of linear time as a disorienting sensation, and he feels disconnected from modern temporality, which has receded into a memory. In the sharecroppers' cabin, mechanical time, as he has become accustomed to it, is reduced to a mere trapping of capitalist materialism, and the dollar watch that determined how he spent his time in the city is a superfluous affectation. His feeling of disorientation illustrates his connection to modern normativity, which has been ingrained into his consciousness. An alternate experience of time for him is unsettling.

Like Silas and Sarah in Wright's story, the sharecropping families Agee observed are not ignorant of mechanical time. For example, he lists a broken clock in his obsessive catalog of the Gudgers' home. In "the room beneath the house," the packed, bare dirt among the pilings underneath the house where random bits of trash and detritus have accumulated, he finds, "bent nails, withered and knobbed with rust; a bone button, its two eyes torn to one; the pierced back of an alarm clock, greasy to the touch; a torn fragment of a pictured print; an emptied and flattened twenty-gauge shotgun shell . . . and thinly scattered, the desiccated and the still soft excrement of hens."[16] The Gudgers, or some family who lived in the cabin before them, owned a clock once, but as the clock parts embedded in the abject waste that has filtered from between the floorboards of their home onto the ground indicate, it is not essential to their daily lives.

Agee's and Wright's representations of cyclical temporality depict poverty and a material lack that mark the families as outside the mainstream of modern commercial capitalism. Wright and Agee both address the issue of time in the context of commercialization, and they use it to demonstrate the effects of poverty. These families do not use clocks; they also lack electricity, sanitation, nutrition, media, education, healthcare, and automobiles, so they seem detached from American modernity. They exist in an alternate form of modernity, but their rural, agricultural existence is not a simpler, idyllic, pastoral way of life, as writers such as the Southern agrarians might portray it to be.[17] It is a difficult way of life that many advances of modernity could potentially simplify and improve if they were made accessible to the poor Southerners. In effect, although these Southerners coexist with modernity, their everyday existence is more consistent with an earlier, superseded way of life, which makes them appear anachronistic. Their persistent poverty challenges the advance of modernity, demonstrating that it is contingent upon geography, mode of production, wealth, and other factors.

In *The Assault on Progress*, Adam Johns analyzes "the teleological understanding of the relationship between time and technology."[18] He contends that in the United States since the middle of the nineteenth century, the advance of progress in the form of mechanization has developed a totalizing ideological overtone. Politicians, reformers, religious leaders, and technocrats have systematically invoked technological progress as a means of solving social problems until the advance of technological progress has become synonymous with social progress and delayed technological progress—such as the digital divide that isolates poor Americans from the Internet—has been deplored as a social and political problem. The poor Southerners' use of cyclical time, which some intellectuals once touted as God's time or natural time, by the middle of the twentieth century had become an indicator of abject poverty, and the federal government set out to correct the South's developmental delay through an elaborate bureaucratic government system based primarily on technological development. The New Deal programs that created jobs for poor Southerners during the Great Depression, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Rural

Electrification Administration, implemented poverty alleviation through modern technology. These programs were in place when Wright and Agee wrote their depictions of poor Southerners, so the language of poverty, progress, and technology resonates in their work.[19]

When the salesman expresses surprise that Silas and Sarah live without a clock and when Agee describes his disorientation at being without a watch, they are manifesting their anxiety with alternate perceptions of temporality. They, like other mainstream Americans, are conditioned to a linear perception of temporality. Anthony Giddens offers an explanation for why an alternate perception of temporality creates anxiety. He writes, "The commodification of time . . . holds the key to the deepest transformations of day-to-day social life that are brought about by the emergence of capitalism. These relate both to the central phenomenon of the organization of production processes, and to the 'work-place,' and also the intimate textures of how daily social life is experienced."[20] He suggests that the same temporal processes used to measure units of production in a factory setting carry over to determine how people experience every other aspect of their daily lives, governing when people eat, sleep, socialize, and carry out all of their other functions. At the root of this process is the capitalist system of exchange that assigns production value to a linear unit of time, but the Southerners' poverty fundamentally contradicts the capitalist construction of temporality.

For poor Southerners, the shift to linear time in wage labor settings caused anxiety. In *Red Hills and Cotton*, for example, Ben Robertson discusses the development of textile mills in upcountry South Carolina. He describes the replacement of cotton fields with mill villages and factories, and he focuses on the time whistle as the most disruptive impact of industrialization. "I would sometimes wake up and hear the whistles blowing—long before day—and I still remember how uneasy I would feel," he writes. "We ourselves got up before daylight, but there was something alarming in being ordered to rise by a factory whistle. It was the command that frightened, the imperative in the note. It was a sound that we had never heard before in our valley."[21] The textile mills attracted poor farmers, offering them consistent hourly wages processing cotton into finished goods, but their poverty in the mill villages was almost as profound as their poverty in sharecroppers' cabins.[22] The whistle plays an important role here in that it adds a coercive element to the clock, one that regulates the workers' time, making them virtually parts of the machinery. The whistle, which textile factories began using in the 1300s, enforces time discipline, to use E. P. Thompson's term, and conditions the workers to abandon cyclical time and conform to the normative experience of modern linear temporality.[23]

The tenant families in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* live at the margins of time discipline. Two of the men work at a nearby sawmill "on condition that they stay with it until the mill [is] moved and subject entirely to their landlords' permission," which is contingent on them hiring hands to replace their labor on the farms.[24] At the end of the book, Agee recounts an anecdote in which he

drives Gudger to the sawmill, a distance that he usually walks. He remarks to Agee that "we got here in good time" and takes out a watch to check the time: "twenty-three past six."[25] The pocket watch indicates that Gudger works within a wage labor system, but he is encapsulated in an agricultural system, and his role within the wage system is temporary and conditional. His precarious position between systems and his usage of two timescales limns the inevitable obliteration of rural agricultural labor by new forms of industrialization, contingent labor, and technology.[26]

Southern poverty did not constitute a national social problem until the technological lag between poor Southerners and mainstream Americans became so great that poor Southerners impinged on America's social and economic development. The relative absence of functional clocks, which Lewis Mumford called "the key-machine of the modern industrial age," in the homes of poor Southerners and their lack of reliance on linear time signified the semipermeable boundary between modern Americans and people living in a coeval nonmodern state.[27] Poor Southerners' persistent use of cyclical time marked them as America's national other, because they deviated from modern mainstream temporality. They illustrate Bhabha's point that a nation is an inherently fabricated construction, stitched together from mismatched constituent parts to produce an incoherent yet distinct whole. He writes,

> "The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation."[28]

The variable experience of time demonstrates that temporal perception is a social construction and subject to the same vectors of deviance and normalization as other identity categories. Once the majority of Americans adopted linear, mechanical time, those who experienced time differently were considered deviant, problematic, and backward.

Time and the Other

In *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian formulates a theory about how anthropologists differentiate between their own perceived temporality and the temporality their subjects are perceived to inhabit.[29] He argues that anthropologists emphasize the apartness of their subjects, denying their spatial and temporal coevality and creating allochronic discourse, a language that presupposes

the asynchronous relationship between the anthropologist and the interlocutors. He identifies three concepts of time: physical time, the linear sequence of time measured with clocks; typological type, the arbitrary naming of vast epochs such as Neolithic; and intersubjective time, the projected temporal difference between speakers. These temporal concepts allow anthropologists to experience other cultures in synchronous physical time, sharing precisely the same time and space, but to represent other cultures as experiencing delayed temporal development in intersubjective time. Thus, an anthropologist could describe a tribe that exists in the present day as being Neolithic or use the term *primitive* to describe contemporary people.[30]

Allochronic discourse allows the observer to represent the observed culture in terms of the observing culture's development. This relegates the observed culture to a nonparticipant role in the discourse, in which the modern anthropologist tells the modern reader about the observed culture's state of development through its practices and structures. This hermeneutic relationship forecloses the observer's opportunity to consider the state of his own cultural development and reduces the observed culture to a static, discrete system of signs. Fabian, however, advocates turning to materialist anthropology, conceptualizing the observed culture as taking place in a synchronic relationship with the observer. *To other* the subject implies that it exists in a detached sphere of reality, but the materialist perspective raises complicated questions about the discontinuity between the observer's experience and the subject's experience, which both makes the observer more self-aware about the circumstances of his or her own social development and endows the subject with the complexity of a dynamic and responsive social system.

Fabian's theory matters here because poor Southerners are often subjects of allochronic discourse. Agee and Wright are not anthropologists per se, but their works portray a prevailing attitude that the poor Southerners exist in an alternate temporal state that diverges from modernity.[31] Although linear clock-measured time moves in one direction at a consistent rate, time can be experienced in multiple ways. "The experience of time is integral to human experience," Adam explains in *Timewatch*, "[but] the way we perceive and conceptualize that experience varies with cultures and historical periods."[32] Thus, she argues, studies tend to divide temporalities between "our time" and "other time," yet multiple times are experienced simultaneously, and the notion of our time tends to foreclose the sense of cyclical time, privileging linear temporality. "Having lost touch with our own cyclicality, we project it on to our objects of investigation: we construct it as 'other time.'"[33] The poor Southerners occupy precisely the same physical time as modernity, but according to the authors, they do not share in the same temporal experience as modernity. They are portrayed as the other, which implies that they not only use time differently but also exist on a different timescale. Both the writers and the poor Southerners, however, are experiencing multiple forms of temporality at the same time.

Several critics have commented on the peculiar qualities of temporality in literary modernism. In *The Culture of Time and Space*, Stephen Kern introduces the concept of simultaneity, which describes the public intrusion of personal experience across time and space through the means of technology, such as the vicarious global experience of the Titanic sinking or the Hindenburg exploding.[34] In *Mapping Literary Modernism*, Ricardo Quinones describes the paradox of time, a "phenomenon whereby time by virtue of uniformity becomes transformed into space," so the standardized measurement of time is detached from the experience of it.[35] Bryony Randall introduces the term "dailiness" in *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* to describe the repetition and spatialization of time in modernist texts, particularly those that use the day as an organizing structure, such as *Ulysses* or *Mrs. Dalloway.*[36] Lloyd Pratt counters in *Archives of American Time* that "despite the often well articulated wish that the nation share a consistent experience of time around which its members might unite, the available evidence contradicts the idea that this experience of national simultaneity actually came to pass."[37] He proposes, instead, a pluralistic experience of modern time that complicates the notion of linear temporality. In *The Nation's Region*, Leigh Anne Duck discusses the ways that Southern writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, and Wright represent the South's allotemporal chronotope, in which the region's temporality appears to exist "outside that of the nation and its economy."[38] I suggest that modern temporality—the mechanized time that standardized human experience and distinguished premodern from modern societies—was unstable, recursive, and contingent on utility, poverty, and spatialization. Mechanical technology in the form of uniformly set clocks made time appear linear, but the experience of time challenged the appearance of linearity.

Poor Southerners contradicted the linear perception of modern temporality, and Agee and Wright both use allochronic discourse to deny their coevality. Agee does this directly and self-consciously, describing his role as a spy while observing the sharecropping families—that is, as an outsider intending to relay the most intimate and humiliating details of their living conditions to the public.[39] "I am being made witness," he writes, "to matters no human being may see."[40] He attempts to respect their dignity, so he conducts an obsessively detailed inventory of the Gudger family's house (Gudger is the pseudonym Agee uses for the family of Floyd Burroughs) after they have gone to the fields for the day, treading gently, illicitly, among their belongings.[41] "They have gone," he states as he moves through the house, "and it is now my chance to perceive this, their home, as it is, in whose hollow heart resounds the loud zinc flickering heartbeat of the cheap alarm two hours advanced upon false time."[42] Agee's term "false time" raises several questions. Is the false time he mentions linear time or cyclical time? Does the clock's ticking increase his self-consciousness, making him aware of time's passing, as well as his trespassing? Does his heightened awareness amplify the sense of temporal multiplicity, the allochronic divergence between his own sense of time and the sharecroppers'

sense of time? Does the clock belong to the family, or did he bring it to mark their probable return from the fields? The passage is sufficiently ambiguous to raise more questions than it answers, but his evident awareness of time passing in a peculiar context in which linear time has no utility makes him simultaneously experience at least two temporalities, one mechanical and one not, one the same and one the other.

Wright also depicts multiple temporal forms in "Long Black Song." The clock graphophone plays music from a wax cylinder,[43] and when the salesman demonstrates it for Sarah, it plays the first verse of "When the Roll Is Called up Yonder:" "When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound / and time shall be no more / And the morning breaks / eternal, bright and fair // When the saved of earth shall gather / over on the other shore / And when the roll is called up yonder, / I'll be there."[44] The song articulates a millennial Christian vision of finitude, specifically the revelation or ending of time, and as the only song in the story, it comments—apocalyptically—on the story's title. Hearing the song, Sarah has a vision of cyclical, organic time: "She leaned back against a post, trembling, feeling the rise and fall of days and nights, of summer and winter; surging, ebbing, leaping about her, beyond her, far out over the fields to where earth and sky folded in darkness."[45] Wright juxtaposes her visceral, emotional sensation of time with the salesman's preoccupation with mechanical time.[46] He wants to know what time her husband will be home, because he has "to be in Lilydale at six o'clock in the morning."[47] The salesman, who looks like a little boy to Sarah, is selling the clock graphophones to pay for school in Chicago, and his perspective on the poor Southerners reflects modernist sensibilities. He regards them as other, and Wright complicates his perspective by using multiple temporalities in the story.

The multiple temporalities that Agee and Wright use are examples of intersubjective time, and they are part of a process in which the reader participates to recognize the apartness of the poor Southerners. The texts invite the reader to deny the poor Southerners coevality, to imagine them existing in an alternate, more primitive typological time. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in addition to its extensive narrative documentary, includes photographs taken by Evans that force the reader to gaze upon the poor Southerners' primitivism, seeing their squalid homes, meager possessions, and filthy children directly.[48] The photographs enhance the readers' sense of participating in the observation, asking the viewer to recognize the apartness of the subject. One of the photographs in the collection led to a telling controversy. The picture shows a clock on a mantel, and Errol Morris and James Curtis, author of *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*—a book that argues some documentary photographers deliberately, artfully manipulated images—discussed this photograph as part of a series of interviews on Depression-era documentary photography in the *New York Times* in 2009.[49] Curtis claimed that Evans may have deliberately planted the photograph in the picture, noting that it is not mentioned in Agee's exhaustive catalog of the home's contents, which casts doubt on the project's

Figure 1: Walker Evans, Fireplace in bedroom of Floyd Burroughs' cabin in Hale County, Alabama, 1936. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

veracity.[50] In light of the comment about each family owning a low-price alarm clock, the omission was most likely an oversight on Agee's part, but the conversation between Morris and Curtis highlights the reader's position as voyeur in the text. The photographs in the book are part of a broader political agenda designed to cultivate political support for the New Deal by publicizing the living conditions of poor Americans, the mission of an agency called the Farm

Security Administration (FSA).[51] The photographs focused the nation's gaze on poverty, specifically on Americans whose lives lagged behind the normative conditions of modernity because they lacked electricity, sanitation, nutrition, education, transportation, and temporality.

Allochronic discourse tends to privilege linear experiences of temporality over cyclical temporality, which normalizes linear temporality. In the South of the 1930s, however, cyclical temporality was still normal; poverty and ruralism were still normal. Millions of Southern farmers were sharecroppers, only a small percentage had access to electricity and running water, and many lived in destitution.[52] For them, the trappings of modernity were abnormal, remarkable, and different, such as the airplane that Sarah watches cross the sky.[53] Poor Southerners were part of modern capitalism despite their poverty, but they used a different timescale from that of mainstream America, which made them appear different and hampered their involvement with modern consumerism. In *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, Moishe Postone analyzes the dialectic of labor and time, offering a theory that helps to explain the issue of allochronic discourse in relation to poor Southerners. He distinguishes between abstract time—a socially constructed, consistent framework for measuring outputs of labor and production within a capitalist system—and historical time, "a form of concrete time that is socially constituted and expresses an ongoing qualitative transformation of work and production, of social life more generally, and of forms of consciousness, values, and needs."[54] Historical time measures the Marxist materialist movement of history, and abstract time, which is similar to linear time, is the capitalist means of using time to measure production. To the extent that production can be increased within a segment of time, abstract time is a crucial component of the means of production.

Poor Southern farms occupied precisely the same historical time as mainstream Americans, but their system of production functioned on an abstract timescale, which made them appear to be deviant. Mainstream American capitalism measured labor in hours and days, but poor Southerners in an agricultural economy measured production in seasons and harvests, laboring each day "from can see to can't."[55] Although linear time did not govern their units of labor in a way that made clocks necessary, they were still capitalist producers functioning in the same economic system. The crops that they produced were among America's leading exports and a key driver of the nation's gross domestic product. The crucial difference is that poor Southerners were paid according to a model that deviated from the norm of wage-hour compensation. The sharecropping families that Agee and Evans observed worked on seasonal contracts with their landowner. In a typical sharecropping contract, the landowner provided a cabin, seed, fertilizer, a mule, and tools, and the family provided labor to raise a crop. At settlement, they divided the proceeds, but the system was rife with labor exploitation. Most sharecroppers took on a crop lien with either their landowner or a local merchant to buy their food and other necessities on credit until settlement. Crop liens often carried usurious interest, and sharecropping

families frequently found themselves earning little, or sometimes in debt, after settlement. Silas, meanwhile, owns his own land, and the story takes place on the day that he has taken his crop to market to sell. As a small farmer in a cash-crop system, he would only have access to money immediately after selling his crop, and that capital based on last year's production would be necessary to finance next year's production. Poor Southerners were subject to what Noel Castree calls "the temporal fix:" the use of credit in place of wages to finance a prolonged capitalist mode of production.[56] The temporal fix limited their access to wages and impeded their engagement with the consumer economy, which had ramifications for their everyday life, because they only had access to funds during specific parts of the year. Poor Southerners, nonetheless, were active participants in modern capitalism, and they inhabited the same temporality as mainstream Americans except with a longer timescale, which made their relationship between work and wages obscure.

Buying Time

Poor Southerners did not necessarily need a clock to measure their labor, but they might have wanted to own one. Although the families in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* were destitute and their living conditions were crude by modern standards, they were not immune to commodity fetishism or precluded from desiring or purchasing a clock. The old eight-day clock that Sarah's baby beats in "Long Black Song" is a similar vestige of commodity fetishism, and the desire for a new clock suggests a yearning for consumer trappings of modernity to disrupt the family's squalor. Ted Ownby explains in *American Dreams in Mississippi* that the modern technologies of infrastructure, advertising, and distribution made material fetishism possible in America's poorest and most remote communities.[57] Movies and mail-order catalogs brought commodity fetishism into the poor Southerners' homes; even if they could not afford something, they could see it, and when they could afford it, they bought it. Modern capitalism simultaneously isolated poor Southerners from modernity and connected them to networks of consumption.

Even if poor Southerners did not need a clock for its use value as a timepiece, they may have desired it for its material value—its thingness. In *A Sense of Things,* Bill Brown argues that "objects captivate us, fascinate us, and compel us to have a relationship with them," and the desire for things "is a social relationship neither between men nor between things, but between something like a social relation between human subject and inanimate object, wherein modernity's ontological distinction between human beings and nonhumans makes no sense."[58] The desire for things is an often irrational desire that can override financial imperatives. Viviana A. Zelizer explains in *The Social Meaning of Money* that people have a complicated, often irrational relationship with money, and expenditure is a means of expressing desire.[59] The clock is the point where materialism, temporality, capital fetish, and aesthetics coalesce in one particular

thing. It clearly has a symbolic resonance that is greater than its functional or exchange value. Clock fetishism may be a useful indicator of the progress of modernization, because these devices synthesize industrial development with capitalist commodification.[60]

The Gudgers were not immune to object desire, and they may have wanted a clock, but the economic realities of tenant farming during the Depression would have made it a luxury item. Although a timepiece would be a necessity for a factory worker, it was an unnecessary expense for a farmer. According to Agee, "The best that Gudger ever cleared is $125," as his share of the crop after settlement, and "that was in the plow-under year," when the Agricultural Adjustment Act paid farmers to reduce the size of their crops in 1933.[61] "Most years he has not made more than $25 to $30; and about one year in three he has ended in debt. Year before last [1934] he wound up $80 in debt; last year, $12; of Boles, his new landlord, the first thing he had to do was borrow $15 to get through the winter until rations advances should begin."[62] The Gudgers were destitute and dependent, $117 dollars in debt before the crop was planted, and entirely unlikely to clear that debt when the crop was harvested. The clock on the mantel in Evans's picture of their home, though, was inexpensive, a model ironically called "fortune" that was manufactured by Westclox between 1933 and 1937 and that retailed for $1.45.[63] Since the clock appeared a bit worn and not brand new, the Gudgers could have purchased it in their flush year, 1933; they could have purchased it used for less than its original price; or they could have purchased it on credit. Sharecroppers were subject to commodity desire, and as Rupert Vance documents in *Human Factors in Cotton Culture*, they were not famous for fiscal restraint and would often purchase unnecessary items, such as "automobiles, nostrums, horse doctor books, enlarged family portraits, expensive family Bibles, and large wall maps of the state and the nation," sometimes before buying necessary foodstuffs or farming implements.[64]

The salesman in "Long Black Song" deliberately appeals to Sarah's commodity fetishism. He shows her the clock, and she has an emotional reaction: "Lawd, but it was pretty! She saw the face of the clock under the horn of the graphophones. The gilt on the corners sparkled. The color in the wood glowed softly. It reminded her of the light she saw sometimes in the baby's eyes. Slowly she slid a finger over a beveled edge; she wanted to take the box into her arms and kiss it."[65] She desires the clock in a mixture of maternal and sexual overtones, but the clock costs $50, which the salesman offers as installments, "five dollars down and five dollars a month;" after he has sex with Sarah, he reduces the price to "forty instead of fifty."[66] Silas, meanwhile, makes a good price on his cotton crop for that year, clearing $250, of which he spends $150 to buy ten additional acres of land, leaving $100 to make the next year's crop and provide for the family. His land purchase is a rational economic act, because it will allow him to increase the family's earning potential.[67] The purchase of a clock would be highly impractical, but the story makes it clear that the cost is only part of a more complex system of racial and sexual dynamics. The salesman

Figure 2: Gary Biolchini, Westclox: An Identification and Pricing Guide (Altgen, PA: Schiffer, 2003). Reprinted with permission from the author.

takes Sarah as if she is available to him, using the clock as a means of seduction through materialism, and Silas reacts to the clock as a sign of betrayal, smashing it, aggressively evicting Sarah from their home, and killing the salesman when he returns to collect the money.

The clock in Wright's story leads to a tragic racial confrontation, which invites us to speculate about the fundamental relationship between poor Southerners and modernity. Allochronic discourse allows writers and readers to imagine that poor Southerners occupied an alternate temporal realm because they used and experienced time differently, but poor Southerners were actively engaged in the capitalist processes of modernity in precisely the same ways as wage laborers in factories, albeit without the necessity for time discipline. Jack Temple Kirby argues in *Rural Worlds Lost* that the South's apparent delayed development was a consequence of its engagement with modernity.[68] The Southern plantation economy that endured well into the twentieth century and that is the setting for both *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and "Long Black Song" provided cheap labor and raw materials for the developing global capitalist system. "Plantation societies," he writes, "had little need for cities, local manufacturing, or technology. They were underdeveloped, in present-day parlance, by their very modern design."[69] One could thus argue that modernity delayed the South's development. At the same time that poverty impeded the South's modernization, modernization required the impoverishment of Southerners. Southern poverty became a problem, however, when northern industries looked to expand into the South as a consumer marketplace, at which point poor Southerners' reduced buying power made them an economic liability. Thus, we see the preposterousness of companies selling $50 clock graphophones to poor Southern farmers who earn only a few hundred dollars in a good year.

As material objects, the clocks demonstrate the encroachment of modern technology into the rural South. Spreading infrastructures of electrification, communication, and distribution compressed time and space in the South too. Giddens marks the conversion from premodern societies into modernity with the detachment of time from space that, through the intervention of technologies of transportation and communication, allows the phantasmagoric penetration of the social conditions of one place by another place distant from it, a precursor to globalization.[70] Southern farm communities were often distant from the metropolitan centers that they served, but modern infrastructures collapsed the spatiotemporal distance between poor Southerners and mainstream, modern Americans. A clock in a Southern farmer's cabin, even a broken clock, visibly indicates the pervasive extent of capitalist consumerism in America.

The clocks in these texts illustrate poor Southerners' complicated relationship with modernity. The irony is that they are depicted as other from the perspective of mainstream America because of their poverty, but their poverty is a result of their particular role in the modern system of capitalism. They produce commodity crops that will be the raw materials for textile mills. Most theories of capitalism and temporality, such as David Harvey's theory of time–space compression and Thompson's theory of time discipline, focus on time and the factory worker. Agricultural workers were part of precisely the same system, but their longer timescale limited their access to wages and hampered their

participation in consumerism. For these poor, rural farmers, modernity is poverty, and the same processes that made linear time normative in industrialized, urbanized areas reinforced their adherence to cyclical time, making them appear anachronistic. Their commodity fetishism makes clear that they were as modern as mainstream Americans, only with less need to schedule their time and less money to buy goods. Modernity spread unevenly, creating gaps in living conditions and discontinuities in perception, but poor Southerners were part of the same system of capitalist production that made linear temporality normal and made clocks necessary.

Notes

1. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*, ed. John Summers (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2003), 89.

2. Michael O'Malley, *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time* (New York: Viking, 1990), 28.

3. Early American writers joined in the controversy regarding mechanical time. In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Old Clock on the Stairs," the timepiece measures out mortality, and in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Devil in the Belfry," a clock dominates a small community to the point of replacing the residents' free will with automation. Images of time—sun, moon, sundials, and shadows—have long been symbols for time, but the clock adds an additional resonance of time as a manmade entity.

4. O'Malley, *Keeping Watch,* 30. As G. J. Whitrow accounts in *Time in History: The Evolution of Our General Awareness of Time and Temporal Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), the association between clocks and both cities and factories began as soon as clocks came into use. In the early 1300s, clocks were most often found in town squares, and as early as 1335, a clock was used to summon textile workers to a factory in Artois (108).

5. Alexis McCrossen, *Marking Modern Times: A History of Clocks, Watches, and Other Timekeepers in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

6. The social gulf between urban America and rural America in the early twentieth century was enormous. For illustrations of how life differed in the areas, see Ronald Kline's excellent book *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), which describes the infiltration of electricity and transportation infrastructure into rural areas; Jane Becker's *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998),which describes the transition of subsistence farming communities into avatars of primitive culture; and Douglas Reichert Powell's *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), which describes the emergence and persistence of the rural–urban divide in American culture.

7. Barbara Adam, *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 12.

8. Valerie Rohy, "Time," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies,* 2nd edition, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glen Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 242–45.

9. Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 142.

10. Mark Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

11. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 292.

12. Aaron Marrs describe the effects of temporal standardization on the South in "Railroads and Time Consciousness in the Antebellum South," *Enterprise & Society* 9, no. 3 (September 2008): 433–56.

13. The full text of "The Report on Economic Conditions of the South" can be found in David Carlton and Peter Coclanis, eds., *Confronting Southern Poverty in the Great Depression* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996).

14. Richard Wright, "Long Black Song," in *Early Works* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 334.

15. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 51.

16. Ibid., 147–48.

17. In the essay collection *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton

Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), twelve self-identified Southern agrarians made a case for the idealism of the rural Southern way of life against the advance of industrialism. Their ideas have influenced a trend in American political conservatism that continues to idealize the American heartland as an embodiment of traditional social values.

18. Adam Johns, *The Assault on Progress: Technology and Time in American Literature* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 206.

19. For a fuller sense of the cultural context of Southern poverty before World War II, see Richard Godden and Martin Crawford, eds., *Reading Southern Poverty between the Wars, 1918–1939* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), and Suzanne Jones and Mark Newman, eds., *Poverty and Progress in the U.S. South since 1920* (Amsterdam: Vu University Press, 2006).

20. Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (New York: Palgrave, 1995), 131.

21. Ben Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1960), 274.

22. Life in the textile mill villages was difficult, and employers frequently exploited entire families of workers, using young children for tedious and dangerous jobs and evicting families who caused problems. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James L. Leloudis, Robert R. Korstad, Mary Murphy, and Lu Ann Jones, eds., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), documents the hardships mill workers endured.

23. E. P. Thompson's classic essay, "Time, Work–Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56–97, describes the process of habituating workers to time discipline, an element of capitalism that transformed people from autonomous agents into laboring entities.

24. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, 121.

25. Ibid., 430.

26. According to Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson in *And Their Children after Them* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), advancing modernity had disastrous consequences on the families Agee interviewed. As the cotton economy declined, the families scattered, many of them struggled with unemployment, disabilities, and homelessness, and at least one person committed suicide. The development of the Tennessee Valley Authority, which generated electricity and provided flood control for much of the South, also displaced thousands of families. Even when delayed modernization finally reached the rural South, its effects were not always beneficial.

27. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1934), 14.

28. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 145.

29. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

30. Fabian is responding in particular to the work of structuralist anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, but his theory has application in many instances in which one entity conceptualizes another entity based on its perceived differences.

31. In the 1930s, anthropologists were conducting ethnographic studies in the South. Two prime examples are *Class and Caste in a Southern Town* by John Dollard and *After Freedom* by Hortense Powdermaker.

32. Adam, *Timewatch*, 29.

33. Ibid., 41.

34. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 314.

35. Ricardo Quinones, *Mapping Literary Modernism: Time and Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 68.

36. Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 20.

37. Lloyd Pratt, *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 5.

38. Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 133.

39. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, 7.

40. Ibid., 136.

41. In *The Making of James Agee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), Hugh Davis describes *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as a "surrealist ethnography," because it collapses Agee's fascination with avant-garde art and Marxist political ideals.

42. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, 137.

43. The wax cylinders were obsolete by the time Wright published the story, which adds an interesting interpretive feature to the story. In *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), Mark Goble writes, "to have his fiction turn on an outmoded technology was one way for Wright to register the uneven development of the black South" (223).

44. Wright, "Long Black Song," 335.

45. Ibid., 335.

46. In *Mama Learned Us How to Work: Farm Women in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), LuAnn Jones describes the economic agency of Southern farm women. Women like Sarah typically performed essential domestic labor—cooking, cleaning, laundry, and child labor—but they were also involved with agricultural labor and, in many cases, they had access to their own money. Peddlers often traveled with rolling stores to farm housing selling domestic products, such as kitchen tools and sewing supplies. The salesman in this scene builds on this same dynamic, but the impractical product he sells is highly unusual.

47. Ibid., 336.

48. Wright collaborated with Edwin Rosskam on a textual and pictorial documentary of black life in America, similar to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, titled *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

49. James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photographs Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), and quoted in Errol Morris, "The Case of the Inappropriate Alarm Clock," *New York Times* (October 20, 2009), http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/the-case-of-the-inappropriate-alarm-clock-part-3/.

50. See the detailed list of items on the mantel, including a spool of thread, a cracked shaving mug, a pink comb, and a calendar, in *Let Us Now Praise*, 172–73.

51. This collection of photographs is influential for its complex interrelation of social, political, and cultural objectives. For analyses of the photographs, see William Stott, *Documentary Expression in Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented* (New York: Verso, 1994); Cara Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003); and Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). The collection can be found online at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html.

52. Howard Odum documents the demographic and material composition of the Depression-era South in *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936).

53. Wright, "Long Black Song," 332.

54. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 294.

55. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise,* 340.

56. Noel Castree, "The Spatio-temporality of Capitalism," *Time & Society* 18, no. 1 (2009): 46.

57. Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture, 1830–1998* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

58. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 29.

59. Viviana A. Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

60. Clocks have long been signs of conspicuous consumption. David Landes gives a thorough history of clocks, focusing both on their technological development and their aesthetic functions, in *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1983), and David Jaffee discusses clocks as items of commerce in early America in *New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

61. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, 118.

62. Ibid., 118.

63. Quoted in Morris, "Inappropriate Alarm Clock."

64. Rupert Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929), 240.

65. Wright, "Long Black Song," 334.

66. Ibid., 334 and 339.

67. In *The Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), Charles S. Johnson writes, "the appearance of success, together with an uncertain appreciation of his proper social status, may provide annoyances, which take on serious nature and in the end deprive the too successful Negro of his holdings" (121). To a great extent, Wright's story is an illustration of this principle. Silas is already exceptional in that he owns his land and has cleared a profit, but the salesman appears to assume that he would waste his earning on an expensive, superfluous object. Wright, instead, portrays Silas as an effective economic agent, yet the commodity fetish initiates a series of unfortunate events that result in the loss of not only the farm but also his life. This depiction suggests that materialism is an inherently destructive force.

68. Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920–1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 25.

69. Ibid., 25.

70. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 18.