On the Weird Nostalgia of Whiteness: Poor Whites, White Death, and Black Suffering

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> "I am afraid that most of the white people I have ever known impressed me as being in the grip of a weird nostalgia, dreaming of a vanished state of security and order, against which dream, unfailingly and unconsciously, they tested and very often lost their lives"
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> —James Baldwin (1985)[1]

> "Black workers suffer because it was and is our lot. But when white workers suffer, something in nature has gone awry."
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> —Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017)[2]

James Baldwin probably would have found Donald Trump's campaign slogan—Make America Great Again—quite familiar, but less for its bombastic claim of American greatness than for the way it expressed what Baldwin called a *weird nostalgia*. Revealed in the slogan's *Again*, this weird nostalgia constitutes the present as a fallen state from a former glory and promises its return in the future. Of course, all nostalgia is idealistic. It selects, ignores, and often completely fabricates elements of the past in order to imbue it with a halcyon glow that outshines the present. What makes the slogan's nostalgia so *weird* is not so much its idealistic rendering of the past but the peculiar relationship that its idealization of the past has to suffering. As Baldwin claims, those caught in nostalgia's grips come to suffer much as they "test…[themselves] and very often lo[se] their lives" to nostalgia's dream.[3] Yet, this dream of the past is not a vision

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of heroics but a "vanished state of security and order."[4] Surely, this is a sad and unheroic dream that indexes a miserable underlying state of affairs. The desire to be rid of suffering is what pushes the dreamer, yet the pursuit of that desire, ironically, leads to more suffering. Thus, what makes this nostalgia so weird and truly tragic is how this cycle of suffering—alleviation of suffering leading to more suffering—is propelled by a fantasy of the past.

This article explores an earlier instance of this weird nostalgia in order to unpack its articulations of suffering, temporality, whiteness, and race. Through a comparative analysis of the figures of poor whites in Erskine Caldwell's and Margaret Bourke-White's (1975) *You Have Seen Their Faces* (*Faces*) and James Agee's and Walker Evans's (2001) *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (*Famous Men*), I argue these figures function as narrative tropes of white death to render suffering as a transcendent event that intimates a redemptive future and a return to pastoral origins.[5] However, white death is undermined by whiteness's contradictory relation to embodiment.[6] As a result, *Face*'s and *Famous Men*'s lapsarian drama of white death relies upon the spectacle of black suffering to provide both the necessary enfleshment of white death and the libidinal charge for its emancipatory dream of redemption.[7] Thus, blackness forms the internal contradiction of whiteness's weird nostalgia, exposing what makes it truly weird—its paradoxical refusal to attend to suffering while simultaneously addressing it. To address suffering, one must move away from the drama of white death to examine the seeming permanence of black suffering. Even though *Faces* and *Famous Men* are not such a project, they disclose the narrative underpinnings of whiteness as an "undesirable historical form to which suffering, and action, have been relegated" both past and present.[8]

On the Representations of Poor Whites and Time

Criticism on *Faces* and *Famous Men* has often positioned them antagonistically to one another on aesthetic, moral, and political terms.[9] There are good reasons for such readings. On the one hand, Caldwell's omniscient narrator and plain reportage style offers readers an 'objective' account of Southern tenant life and history. Bourke-White's photography draws on a host of visual traditions, particularly sentimentality, to emotionally draw in *Faces*'s middle class readership.[10] On the other hand, Agee's highly self-conscious narrator, fragmented narrative structure, scrambled temporal order, complex intertextual references, and dizzying linguistic strategies refuse any possibility to detached objective reporting.[11] Unlike Bourke-White, Evans's photography offers a quiet and detached treatment of its subjects that closes off easy identification with *Famous Men*'s similar middle class readership.[12] These aesthetic differences have led critics to judge them as harboring different cultural politics as they represented the problem of Southern tenant life. Indeed, *Famous Men* itself offers such oppositional reading when it not so subtly criticizes Bourke-White through an inserted article on her extravagant lifestyle in its appendix.

Notwithstanding these important differences, I treat these books less as opposed to one another than as "coinhabitants of the same historical and cultural space."[13] This is, of course, an obvious point due to their shared concern over the plight of the Southern tenant farmer. Indeed, they are two of many Depression-era cultural projects that sought to document their lives and conditions. But, for my purposes, it is important to understand that part of what made them "coinhabitants of the same historical and cultural space" was the way their rendering of the white tenant farmer was part of a genealogy of US poor whites.[14]

Representations of poor whites have ranged from the threatening to the pitiable to the comical to the honored.[15] Indeed, *Faces*'s photographs span across most of these categories with a number of photographs sympathetically featuring white mothers and her children to a humorous sequence of photographs of a white toddler eating a watermelon to a few photographs dignifying white women and men as they work the land. Across these representations, whiteness studies scholars have noted that the more stigmatized *white trash* representations position poor rural whites as boundary figures whose liminality conjoins a series of social categories.[16] With race, white trash marks the outer limits of white belonging, the point where the boundary of whiteness blurs. Furthermore, white trash articulates race and class together through its focus on the racialized bodily and linguistic markers and practices of class. As such, the term also foregrounds the politics of gender and sexuality, marking the boundary where admissible and inadmissible sexual contact is policed by the state. Indeed, the sexual and gendered dimensions of white trash are most glaringly on display with the involuntary sterilization campaigns of poor rural white families during the height of eugenics in the early 20th century. Such campaigns were the policy practices that reified racial and class boundaries via the state regulation of reproduction.

The discursive formation of these white trash representations positioned poor whites relationally to racialized populations to mediate political and economic conflicts. The epithet itself dates back as a southern regionalism to the mid-19th century that then entered into national vernacular through northern reporting of poor rural whites in the South.[17] But, as Matt Wray notes, its antecedents date back to the colonial period with formerly indentured and runaway white servants who were cast as *lubbers* and *crackers* by white colonial elites.[18] They were seen to "either [have] fail[ed] to achieve or resist[ed] the cultural mold planters sought to establish and refused to respect dominant moral boundaries regarding property, work, gender arrangements, and color lines."[19] During moments of stability, these lubbers and crackers were humorous oddities; but, during moments of crisis, they were viewed as threatening with their potential alliances with native tribes and insurrectionist slaves.

During the antebellum period, discourses of white trash mediated debates on slavery between abolitionists and apologists. Abolitionists saw white trash people as the immoral byproducts of the slave economy and slave society. According to them, the slave economy pushed respectable white people to the margins of society and corrupted them. On the other hand, apologists saw

white trash people as having a hereditary defect of bad blood.[20] With the rise of the eugenics movement in the post-Reconstruction and early 20th century, the hereditary explanation took on the full force of so-called race science: white trash became racial degenerates in need of sterilization.[21] Indeed, Caldwell himself was sympathetic to such theories.[22] Yet, this biological explanation was contested by other middle class professionals who understood white trash to be a product of environmental degradation and thus were in need of public health interventions.[23] By the 1920s, the public health professionals won the battle of ideas. Specifically, in conjunction with the rise of nativist sentiment and politics, they were able to shift public perceptions of poor whites, securing their status as truly white in contrast to African Americans and newly arriving immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.[24]

If, by the 1920s, poor whites became unquestionably white but in need of reform, then, by the 1930s, their representation took on another valence. Less stigmatized as white trash, poor whites were elevated as an Anglo-Saxon *folk people* who were disappearing under the forces of capitalism.[25] Indeed, as Sonnet Retman explains, representations of poor whites mediated conflicts between labor and corporate capital and debates on race, immigration, and nativism.[26] In right wing discourses, white folks were seen as a group that was threatened by immigrants, African Americans, and women. Liberals positioned white folks as the legion of dispossessed agricultural workers who were victims of mechanization, greedy lenders, and natural disaster. That is to say, they were fast becoming a "disposable people."[27] Radicals took a more racially inclusive position, viewing white and black folks together for potential anti-racist labor movements.

Given this brief genealogy, it is important to underscore the accretion of temporal meaning to the representation of poor whites. At times, they are comically backward such as the *Beverly Hillbillies* from the 1960s to the more recent *Saturday Night Live* skit "Appalachian Emergency Room." At other moments, they were degenerates such the mountain men from *Deliverance*.[28] And still at other times, they were an honored but vanishing folk people such is the way that white coal miners are often figured in popular discourse on the decline of the industry. As different as these variously stigmatized and valorized representations of poor whites, they developed out of and came to mediate economic and political conflicts that questioned US modernity. At the same time, they did not form in a racial vacuum; they emerged relationally to representations of racialized populations. Thus, as much as poor whites were positioned at the limits of white identity, they did not suffer a complete break from whiteness; instead, they were marshalled to shore up whiteness as a way to rationalize the social, economic, and political contradictions of US modernity.

White Death as Exception to Modernity

Faces draws upon both the nostalgic and atavistic construction of poor whites in its representation of the white tenant farmer. This dualism creates *Face*'s

drama of fallenness and redemption. Fundamentally, the atavistic tenant farmer operates as a synecdoche of the South, what Caldwell describes as a "retarded and thwarted civilization."[29] This grand civilizational discourse reinforces long standing notions of the South as a regionally backward culture and society. Yet, this civilizational discourse is less evolutionary than may be assumed. It does not position the South at an early stage in a linear evolutionary model of human societies—from primitive to barbarous to civilized. This is not to say, however, that evolutionary discourse is completely absent. Rather, the South is couched in the rhythmic rise and fall of empires, or a "worn-out agricultural empire."[30] In other words, the South is not the Cherokee nation; it is late ancient Rome.

For Caldwell, the South was decidedly in the late stages of that cycle, a period characterized by decay and decadence. With the former, Caldwell repeatedly points to the erosive effects of cotton farming on the soil. Cotton plants sap the nutrients from the ground, leaving it exhausted and worn out. Thus, the decline is gradual, an almost glacial material decay of the cotton empire during which the very ground of the South dies bit by bit as time passes. With the latter, this material decay is a sign of the cotton empire's decadence. Caldwell's disdain and ire toward the sharecropping system signals this decadence: "What has happened is that the plantation system has been wringing the blood and marrow from the South for two hundred years and, as fast as that is accomplished, the institution of sharecropping is being set up as a means of extracting the last juice of life from its prostrate body."[31] Here, the institution of sharecropping is more than an anachronism, a simple hold over from the past. It is undead. Like the plantation system, it vampirically "wring[s] the blood and marrow from the South."[32] But more profoundly, sharecropping should no longer exist. The two hundred-year-long plantation period has passed. But the inability and shear stubbornness of plantation elites to let go of antebellum glory have zombified the plantation, sustaining it well beyond its natural life. In so doing, sharecropping ratchets up the plantation's extractive cruelty to such an excessive degree that it desiccates the "prostrate body" of the South.[33]

If the sharecropping system signals the undead existence of a decaying and decedent cotton empire, then it does so by, at the same time, pointing to a living social order. In keeping with the cycle of the rise and fall of empires, the fall of the empire of cotton is in contrast to the rise and dominance of the empire of industry. Here, modernity's progressive temporal arc is brought into play: The sharecropping system "is an antiquated method of agricultural production that has no place in a social order where, notably in industry, labor demands and receives compensation for services rendered."[34] Of course, the reference to modernity via industry is done to bring into greater relief the antiquated character of sharecropping, and thus, by extension, the South. Notably, other documentaries, such as *American Exodus,* explain the penetration of industrial techniques and technologies into farming. Again, as I noted, the antiquarian character is understood not as an accident of nature but as a cruel design of decadent Southern elite culture.

As a decaying and decadent empire, the deadening of the land is but one dimension of a larger process of decay. Like the early Christian writers asserted about the fall of Rome, its decline was not just material destruction but spiritual and moral corruption as well. As Caldwell explicitly states, "the institution of sharecropping does things to men as well as to land."[35] Significantly, Caldwell is not that interested in locating this moral decline in the decadence of plantation elites, though he does morally condemn them for their racially divisive labor tactics. Rather, it's to be found in the white sharecroppers themselves. Whereat this point, a discourse of degeneration returns as the thing that "the institution of sharecropping does [. . .] to [white] men."[36] To realize this point, Caldwell first posits a prelapsarian ideal of white men:

> As a young man he began life with hope and confidence and the will to work and succeed. He was strong physically and mentally alert. He had been raised on a farm and had grown to feel a closeness to nature from which no vision beyond the horizon could alienate him. Ever since the day when, as a boy, he had planted watermelon seed in the earth and had watched the seed swell and burst and send a tender shoot into the sunlight above, he had known that planting and cultivating and harvesting were to be his life.[37]

Pastoralism abounds in the passage.[38] It poses an unalienated harmony of man and nature in which the youth and vigor of man is matched by the swelling fecundity of nature. This pastoral ideal underscores the fallenness ushered in by the sharecropping system. The physical grind and hyper-exploitation of the tenant system wears out white mens' character to the point where it transforms their nature from industrious, physically strong, and intelligent to indolent, feeble, and dumb.

Of course, this declension is the result of sharecropping, what Caldwell calls its "occupational disease."[39] Yet, this account takes on a strong racializing edge as Caldwell sees this declension as both reversion into primitiveness and racial degeneration. With the former, *Faces*'s discussion of religion illustrates the primitive culture of the white tenant farmer. As Caldwell writes, "The more primitive the ritual, the more exciting the prospect to primitive people. The Foot Washers, the Shouters, and the Holy Rollers are people who not only get excited over the prospect of living a second time, but who also want to celebrate their second life before dying in this one."[40] Clearly, for Caldwell, these religious practices function as a simple illusion, deluding the white tenant farmer from reckoning with the oppressive nature of sharecropping. For the latter, nowhere is this devolution made more apparent than in white men's anti-black violence, which indexes white mens' reduction to beasts:

> In a land that has long gloried in the supremacy of the white race, [the white tenant farmer] directed his resentment against

> the black man. His normal instincts became perverted. He became wasteful and careless. He became bestial. He released his pent-up emotions by lynching the black man in order to witness the mental and physical suffering of another human being.[41]

This assessment is posed as a structural problem—a problem of sharecropping. Yet, it draws upon and reinforces the notion of lynching as an atavistic and primitive practice that is out of step with modernity.[42]

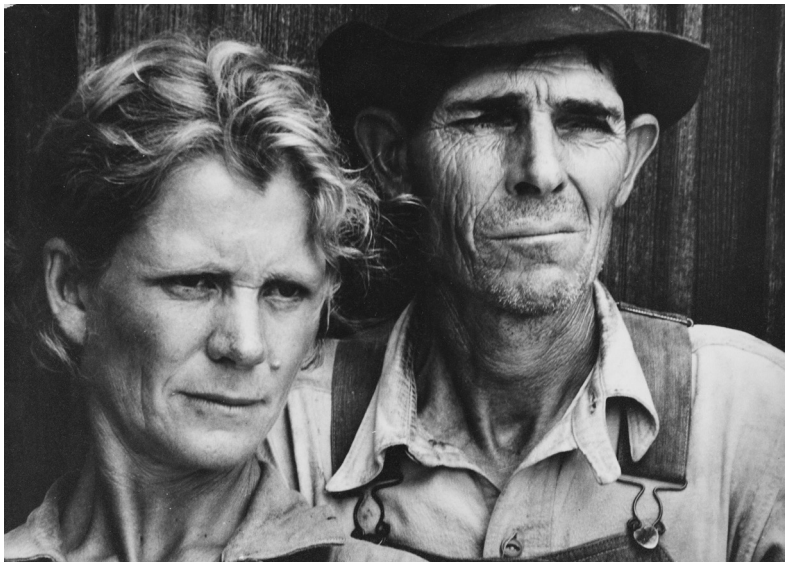
If the written text forwards a dualistic temporal order, *Faces*'s photographs provide a similar account. As Retman notes, Bourke-White's photos draw upon various traditions of visual culture from sentimentality to melodrama to stereotypes.[43] At times, such photographs reinforce the pathologizing of poor white tenant farmers. Indeed, the completely fictionalized quotes that caption the photographs often conform to Caldwell's narrative aims. However, a pronounced pattern in the photographs is to stage white bodies in Christian and American visual iconography—iconic Jeffersonian yeomans, sympathetic Madonna-like white mothers, and powerful stoic white patriarchs and matriarchs. Such visual staging does more than elicit sympathy. It foregrounds the prelapsarian ideal briefly discussed within Caldwell's writing. In lieu of being the racial degenerates of a cruel sharecropping system, the sign of corruption in a decadent and decaying empire, they are the bearers of US national spirit, the embodiment of its pioneering origins, and its unfortunate decline by industry.

In sum, *Faces* articulates multiple temporal orders. The desiccate land condenses a fallen cotton empire, caught within the throws of decay and decadence. This empire mindlessly trudges along beyond its natural life. As a result, its people—the white sharecropper—is caught within its miasma of corruption. The crushing labor of sharecropping grinds the bodies and twists the souls of white men. They devolve into primitive and beastly people. This undead and fallen world contrasts with a prelapsarian time, a bucolic time when man was in harmony with the order of nature. These are twinned times disconnected from the plantation order to another pastoral ideal. Both are caught in another time from modernity. The former is the monstrous past that lives on, zombie-like, in the present. The latter is the prelapsarian time that is lost to not just the South, but to all. Thus, it can only exist nostalgically. In different ways, both shore up the progressive arch of modernity.

Exceptional White Death as Redemption of Modernity

While *Faces*'s story of the fallenness of the white tenant family and its redemption generates a temporal imaginary that unambiguously celebrates modern technological progress, *Famous Men*'s story offers a far more ambiguous stance. Unlike Caldwell, Agee condemns tenantry not as an historical aberration of modernity but as part and parcel to it. And yet, while the tenant farmers are certainly caught *in* the modern world, subjected to modernity's cruel hyper-exploitation,

Figure 1: © 2020 Estate of Margaret Bourke-White/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Margaret Bourke-White Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.



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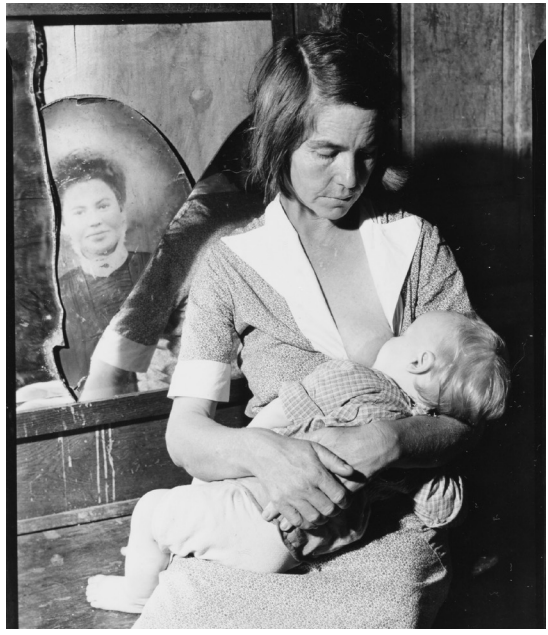

Figure 3: © 2020 Estate of Margaret Bourke-White/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Margaret Bourke-White Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

they are not quite *of* it in a peculiar way. Agee makes their unique existence clear in the Preface when he announces that, though the nominal subject is tenantry via the reportage of representative white tenant families, the actual "effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence" and more essentially to "inquir[e] into certain normal predicaments of human divinity."[44] By unimagined existence and human divinity, Agee is referring to an ecstatic mode of existence and experience that encompasses what he calls *actuality*.[45] Actuality is a divine human reality that vibrates with sensuous intensity. One does not perceive or cognize actuality; one experiences it directly without conceptual mediation. It is thus an ecstatic experience whereby the ontological barriers between both mind and body and world and self dissolve. The body does not disappear for the primacy of the mind but instead it folds into what Merleu-Ponty calls the flesh of the world.[46] In part, what makes this ecstatic mode of existence unimaginable is the inadequacy of language to incarnate such a vibrant embodied experience. Hence, throughout *Famous Men*, Agee philosophizes on the inadequacy of language in the artistic and journalistic production and deploys a series of aesthetic and rhetorical strategies to incarnate this embodied ideal.[47] Indeed, music becomes the leitmotif of *Famous Men* as it figures the bodily intensity that mystically connects Agee with this divine plane of human existence.[48]

For Agee, the white tenant family has a unique relationship to the actuality of human divinity that makes it a divine creature on earth. Yet, what makes the white tenant family so special is not that it has an exclusive claim to human divinity; indeed, it has normal predicaments. Rather, these families are exceptional because their beauty allows Agee to experience human divinity's unimagined existence. Hence, Agee "neglect[s] function in favor of esthetics" [sic] when he catalogues the material objects of the white tenant families in Part II.[49] These items are the holy relics through which he can make contact and experience their human divinity. Thus, he waxes endlessly about the classicism of their homes and the fine details of their garments. But those details are not the marks of craftsmanship—not the quality of wood, not the genius of design, not the precision of stitching. They are the weathered marks of use that index the material life of things in the lifeworld of the white tenant farmer. They are "'blind' work[s] of 'nature,' of the world and of the human race."[50] Hence, Agee fawns over the rips and tears, worn out spots of Gudger's overalls as they index the actuality of his laboring existence as human divinity.

What prevents experiencing the actuality of human divinity as a normal predicament is the malignant consciousness generated out of capitalist society: "The prime generic inescapable stage of this disease is being. A special complication is life. A malignant variant of this complication is consciousness. The most complex and malignant form of it known to us is human consciousness."[51] This malignant consciousness is more so the target of Agee's social criticism than is the political economy of tenantry. Of course, this is not to suggest that Agee is some sort of apologist of tenantry. He deeply loathes it. Instead, he pursues a critique of tenantry by way of its cultural effect, which he finds lacking

in social reform discourse. Hence, he reserves so much ire for those so-called social reformers and journalists who seek to represent the white tenant family. The journalists do not simply exploit the white tenant farmer for their own gain à la Margret Bourke-White. They cannot comprehend the human divinity of the tenant due to the prevalence of this malignant consciousness and thus cannot represent its actuality.[52]

Hence, by asserting the prevalence of this malignant consciousness, Agee understands the present as a spiritually fallen world. And yet, the white tenant family has a paradoxical position in this fallen world. It is not simply that they are materially poor but spiritually wealthy. They are spiritually wealthy because they are materially poor. Agee explains this logic in a quasi-emergence myth that just preceded his discussion of the malignancy of human consciousness. In this myth, the first human being, with the aid of mules, ekes out a mere existence through his "indignant strength not to perish."[53] In doing so, he creates a civilization that protects his "essential human frailty" but comes to also create a "scab" on the earth.[54] Thus, with the development of civilization from "the fields, the houses, the town, the cities," the human being becomes further alienated from his "essential human frailty" and falls further into the malignant disease of human consciousness.[55] The white tenant family is ironically saved from this fate while Agee and the rest of his liberal elite ilk are caught in the disease. Hence, he craves them both spiritually and even sexually.[56] Indeed, as Alan Spiegel convincingly shows, *Famous Men*'s narrative is an epic story of Agee's return home.[57] Nominally, it is a return of Agee as a prodigal son who is lost in the North to his childhood home in the South. Yet, his homecoming is far more spiritual as his induction into the home of the Gudger's is a return to human divinity. The irony thus comes from the way that the white tenant family's spiritual bounty comes from their secular poverty. The lack of material comforts (i.e. the stuff of civilization) keeps them closer to an essential human frailty and shields them from the corrupting effects of civilization's malignant consciousness. In other words, in the parlance of Agee, it makes them "pure."[58]

Of course, this irony is not lost on Agee. He recognizes that the beauty of the white tenant family is born out of their miserable conditions. Worse still, they lack the education (i.e. consciousness) that would allow them to recognize and appreciate their beauty. In this regard, the white tenant family signals a double tragedy of the modern world. Agee and his modern others have lost this divine beauty whose remnant is intimated by the purity of the white tenant family. On the other hand, the white tenant family lacks resourcefulness to protect itself from the predations of modern life. Some have argued that Agee's stress on the beauty of the white tenant family counteracts the sentimentality offered up by other documentary texts on the tenantry (e.g. *You Have Seen Their Faces* and *American Exodus*). Indeed, *Faces*'s photographs of domesticity and maternity offer sympathetic images of gendered identification between the tenants and the white middle class readers who were supposed to galvanize social reforms.[59]

This sympathetic identification may certainly be the case, but it does not mean that Agee does not seek some form of social reform, notwithstanding his disdain toward reformers. Rather, it suggests a different kind of reform. This agenda is most clearly elaborated when Agee unpacks the peculiar dilemma of beauty and the white tenant family:

> These classicisms are created of economic need, of local availability, and of local-primitive tradition: and in their purity they are the exclusive property and privilege of the people at the bottom of that world. To those who own and create it this 'beauty' is, however, irrelevant and undiscernible. It is best discernible to those who by economic advantages of training have only a shameful and thief's right to it: and it might be said that they have any 'rights' whatever only in proportion as they recognize the ugliness and disgrace implicit in their privilege of perception. The usual solution, non-perception, or apologetic perception, or contempt for those who perceive and value it, seems to me at least unwise. In fact it seems to me necessary to insist that the beauty of a house, inextricably shaped as it is in an economic and human abomination, is at least as important a part of the fact as the abomination itself: but that one is qualified to insist on this only in proportion as faces the brunt of his 'sin' in so doing and the brunt of the meanings, against beings, of the abomination itself.[60]

Here, Agee diagnoses a peculiar class contradiction of the beauty of the farmer. On the one hand, this beauty is the "exclusive property and privilege" of the white tenant family, but, on the other hand, this beauty is "irrelevant and undiscernible" to the same white tenant family who owns it.[61] Instead, this beauty exists only to those bourgeois subjects that have the "economic advantages of training" to recognize it.[62] Following this logic of ownership, the bourgeois subject's consumption of the white tenant family's beauty is a form of theft, since he is not the proper owner of that beauty, even though he is the only potential consumer. At this point, Agee's property language shifts into religious and moralistic language. Thus, rather than have the bourgeois subject be prosecuted by the law for his theft of the rightful property of the tenant farmer, the bourgeois subject must be expiated of his own sins by recognizing the degree to which the conditions of possibility of beauty hinges on "economic and human abomination."[63]

The point here is that the white tenant is not the proper object of reform. Instead, reform's object is society. In Agee's shift from a secular language of law and property to a religious language of sin and abomination, Agee seeks social purification. In this regard, it is primarily a cultural project that seeks a return of consciousness back to its proper divine origins. Such a project is not opposed to political economic reform. In fact, it pursues the same end but through cultural

means. This is what is at stake in the aesthetic of *Famous Men*. It is not for the sake of accuracy that Agee seeks to recreate the actuality of the white tenant family but for the soul of society.

Famous Men renders the white tenant family and their deaths as icons of essential human existence and divine presence, which curbs the potential misunderstanding of them as somehow backwards, whether in cultural or racial terms, as white trash. This is not to say that the book makes no mention of how the white tenant family lives in a way reminiscent to a prior historical period. Rather, *Famous Men* establishes a drama of fallenness and redemption to unite both religious and secular temporalities (i.e. human divinity). The white tenant family and their conditions of living intimate a temporal order outside of secular historical time. They exist in pure being in the secular sense that they *merely* exist and in the religious sense that their divinity is perfection in no need of change. This temporality, however, is tied to Agee's "scramble to become."[64] Agee seeks to become them in their purity. His contact with their beauty allows Agee to touch human divinity and returns him to the prelapsarian origins of human existence, lost through the development of human civilization. In so doing, the white tenant family galvanizes Agee's redemptive artistic project to expiate the sins of society.

White Death and the Seeming Permanence of Black Suffering

As poor whites in *Faces* and *Famous Men* generate a drama of fallenness and redemption, it is notable how death becomes its central motif. *Faces* thematizes death not only by employing Southern Gothic discourse of decay and decadence (i.e. the dying and desiccating land and undead imagery), but also by announcing the inevitable and necessary death of early generations of tenant farmers for the new revitalized South. Hence, Caldwell laments that the early generation is the "wasted human beings whose blood made the cotton leaves green and the blossoms red."[65] *Famous Men*, on the other hand, far more subtly thematizes death. Mick Gidley notes how a "metaphorical and associative chain of sleep, sex, and death recurs" both visually and textually throughout *Famous Men*.[66] Perhaps *Famous Men*'s most explicit thematization of death can be found in the title itself. It is taken from "Ecclesiastes," which Agee reveals at the end of the book when he inserts the entire verse after the "Two Image" section. When read in the context of the entire verse, the title announces the book to be an elegy, one that seeks to remember those who "have no memorial; who perished, as though they had never been; and [have] become as though they had never been born."[67] Hence, the white tenant family is the dead that *Famous Men* seeks to memorialize.

The centrality of death in *Faces* and *Famous Men* can been understood through Richard Dyer's insight on whiteness and death. In "White Death," the final chapter of *White*, Dyer asserts that white death takes on two formulations: 1) whiteness as death itself and 2) whiteness as a harbinger of death. His chapter explores the latter more thoroughly, but the former is most pertinent here.[68] In

this iteration, death is figured as a kind of transcendence, an event that ushers the white subject to its proper transcendent plane of whiteness. As a form of transcendence, white death becomes the organizing narrative trope of *Faces*' and *Famous Men*'s drama of fallenness and redemption. It crystalizes the suffering in the fallen world, the sign that the order of things is off kilter. As an event, it signifies a temporal endpoint and thus establishes the boundary between one duration of time over another. Hence, when both of these dimensions are taken together, white death simultaneously signifies the fallenness of the world in the present and intimates its end in the future. This simultaneity is evident in that the death of old white tenant families precipitates Caldwell's vision of a post-tenantry South as a "living paradise;"[69] or, the deathly purity of the white tenant farmer instigates Agee's imagination of divine creation and inspires Agee's liberatory social project of the artist.

Yet, if the death of the white tenant family organizes and animates the drama of fallenness and redemption, then what is to be made of the presence of African American bodies in this drama? In *Faces*, they textually and photographically occupy a meaningful amount of space. An entire chapter is devoted to them, and a substantial set of photographs depict them. *Famous Men*, on the other hand, positions African Americans at the very margins. Indeed, only a couple of photographs capture them as a part of local town scenes, and a couple of vignettes of African American life are dotted throughout. As James A. Crank notes, this silence on African American lives is endemic to Agee's published work, which is at odds with his private sympathies for them.[70] Yet, if race occupies a minimal presence at the level of character and explicit prose, it ironically looms large at the level of narrative. As Alan Spiegel persuasively points out, Agee's story is actually a very common colonial narrative in the way that he comes from an alienated modern society and visits a primitive people (e.g. white tenant families) to become spiritual rejuvenated.[71] Agee is more Gauguin than Kurtz.

Yet, if African Americans occupy a large space explicitly or implicitly in these books, they never enter into the drama of fallenness and redemption. In *Faces*, temporally speaking, they occupy a fundamentally static position. This sentiment is best captured when Caldwell writes, "the Negro tenant farmer on a plantation is still a slave."[72] Of course, Caldwell's point here is to criticize the sharecropping system, especially when he demonstrates the fundamental imprisonment of the sharecropper to the plantation, not by legal decree but by a system of debt. Thus, for African Americans, the development of the sharecropping system is not the sign of a fallen world but more of the same.[73] But this insight is bracketed, its disruptive potential cordoned off since the emotional core of the text is the fallen state of white men. Thus, the tragedy of white men is how the system corrupted them. The tragedy for the African American farmer is that there is no place to fall and no place to rise. It is just their lot in life.

A different kind of bracketing occurs in *Famous Men*'s positioning of African Americans outside of its narrative of fallenness and redemption. Like the white tenant family, they are appreciated for their beauty and purity.[74] And yet, such

claims do not yield the divine speculation of the white tenant family because their existence is a threshold that can never be crossed, even imaginatively. Hence, it is notable how the two opening vignettes of the "July 1936" section that center on Agee's encounter with African Americans, is distinct from the one in which he encounters a poor white family. This section is often read to illustrate Agee's outsider status and as a narrative preamble for Agee's climactic inclusion in "Part Three: Induction."[75] However, the vignette of the white family—"At the Fork"—offers a fleeting moment of recognition for Agee: "The woman, in a voice that somehow, though contemptuous (it implied, You are more stupid than he is), yielded me for the first time her friendship and that of her husband, so that happiness burst open inside of me like a flooding of sweet water…"[76] Hence, blackness, in *Famous Men*, is an imaginative black box, a fundamental barrier, a set of experiences that Agee can neither inhabit imaginatively nor elevate beyond his tortured moral anxiety. It marks a communicative divide that no aesthetic practice can communicate, and thus, black experience does not merit modernist experimentation toward such an end. Thus, even though the white tenant family is rendered alien from Agee, and their divine status is unapproachable and only indirectly contacted through the beautiful relics that they create, Agee makes the imaginative leap into their subjectivity in the "A Country Letter" by focalizing the narrative through Annie Mae. In so doing, he communicates their alienation and suffering as a basis of their divinity.[77]

Yet, if African American historical experience and interior life cannot enter into the poor white drama of fallenness and redemption, their suffering seems to take spectacular center stage. As African American studies scholars have long noted, spectacular displays of black suffering have yielded forms of pleasure for their captor. Such pleasure satiates the desire of slaveholder as well as those who seek to liberate the slave. Saidiya Hartman eloquently questions: "[D]oes the scene of the tyrannized slave at the bloodstained gate delight the loathsome master and provide wholesome pleasures to the upright and the virtuous? Is the act of 'witnessing' a kind of looking no less entangled with the wielding of power and the extraction of enjoyment?"[78] Hartman answers in the affirmative. It is thus these wholesome pleasures that are activated by the fungibility of black suffering in *Faces*'s and *Famous Men*'s drama of fallenness and redemption. Though African American historical experience cannot enter into this white drama, black suffering becomes necessary to it through what African American studies scholar Dennis Childs calls "identificatory self-augmentation."[79] If white death functions to both evidence the fallenness of the world and intimate a redemptive return, then white death, like whiteness itself, is internally contradictory. The fungibility of black suffering helps to alleviate that tension by embodying a permanent suffering that can augment poor white death and "inspire[s] White emancipatory dreams."[80]

Faces most clearly generates this identificatory self-augmentation through its photos and fictionalized captions that express the sentiments of the subjects of the photos. Hence, *Faces*'s photographs are organized by a racial division of

ideological labor. As noted before, photos of white tenant families offer a kind of hagiography, sentimentality, or lampoonish comedy. The African American tenants, on the other hand, have the distinct role of embodying anguish and suffering (though not at the exclusion of these other modes). Take Figure 4. It centers on a black man lying languidly on his back on a floor full of rubbish. He is facing away from the viewer, his head cocked to the left with his left hand propping it in place. His eyes are closed and his knees are bent. Is he asleep? Has the camera just captured a moment when he blinked? Regardless, the caption is clear; this is a moment of anguish: "The auction-boss talks so fast a colored man can't hardly ever tell how much his tobacco crop sells for."[81] The caption suggests that the viewer is witnessing the moment when the black man has realized that he has been swindled and is now reeling from his losses. And yet, when situated in the context of the book, he becomes the icon of the anguish and humiliation of the tenantry system as a whole, pain that all can partake in.

If black suffering can stand in as white death as shown in Figure 4, it also can be transmogrified as a vision of liberation in the legs of the chain gang (Figure 5). This photograph is a close up of two pairs of bent legs wearing striped, baggy prison pants. Leg shackles cinch them up and link all the legs together. Thus, we are given an icon of black bondage, the manacled legs that are a synecdoche of the captured black body. Yet, rather than speak of such bondage, the caption reads: "They can whip my hide and shackle my bones, but they can't touch what

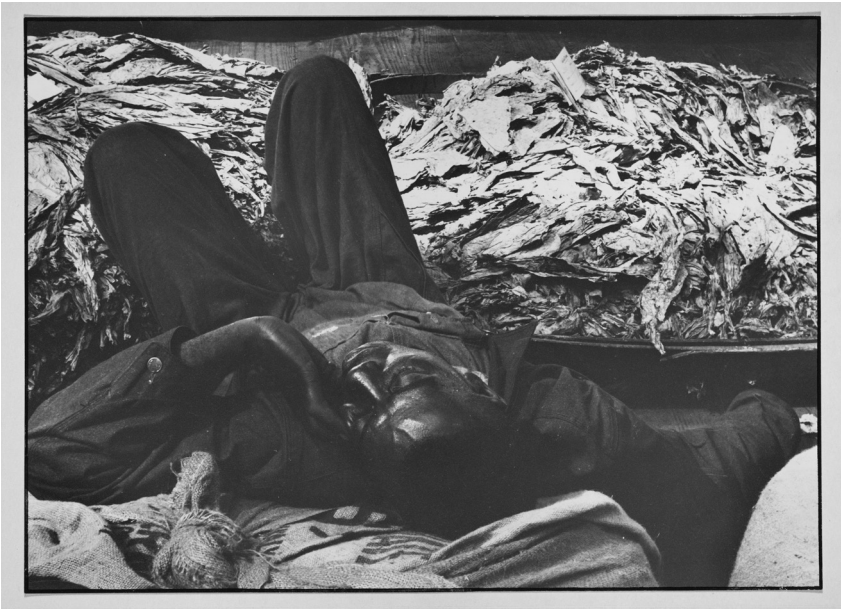

Figure 4: © 2020 Estate of Margaret Bourke-White/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Margaret Bourke-White Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries

Figure 5: © 2020 Estate of Margaret Bourke-White/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Margaret Bourke-White Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries

I think in my head."[82] Here, a white voice can speak of a true freedom of the mind via the invocation of the captured black body.

Neither can *Famous Men* help but partake in the fungibility of black suffering since the death and suffering of the white tenant family is so central to its vision of human divinity. Yet, it has a far more tortured relation the spectacle of black suffering than does *Faces*. Unlike *Faces,* which directly appropriates black suffering, *Famous Men* does so indirectly through tropological slides. A telling moment occurs in the "Recessional and Vortex" section where Agee describes the host of animals that populate the Gudger, Woods, and Rickett plots. When Agee comes to the mules, he notes that they are subjected to "the gratuitous sort of toughness an American policeman uses against anyone (except the right people) who happens to fall into his power."[83] The parenthetical clause begs the question: who are the right people who are exempted from such gratuitous sort of toughness? Clearly, the right people are white folks, or perhaps better stated, non-black folks. Yet, although Agee's sentiments reach the edge of this point, he must disavow it, since truly pursuing this analogy would acknowledge that black folks are like the mule. Instead, Agee explains:

> It should be added, in further suggestion, that the mule stands readier victim than any other animal because he is used in the main and most hopeless work, because he is an immediate symbol of this work, and because by transference he is the farmer himself, and in the long tandem harness wherein members and forces of a whole world beat and use and drive and force each other, if they are to live at all, is the one creature in front of this farmer.[84]

Here, the figure of the mule becomes the tropological means by which Agee can partake in the fungibility of black suffering and, according to Hartman, "increas[e] the likelihood of the captive's disappearance."[85] In Agee's sympathetic read, poor white violence against the mule is but the displaced anger and frustration against poor white deprivation by the world. Hence, via the figure of the mule, black suffering is transmogrified into white suffering. Yet, even Agee cannot completely sustain this thought. Later in the same passage, Agee drops the analogy and acknowledges the kinship between "extra-human life and […] negroes" in relation to the "sadism in the South."[86] But, of course, Agee cannot directly address this issue, as terrible as it is, claiming that it would "require more space, time, and understand than [he] has at present," though he does have sufficient space to "reckon them as 'innocent' even of the worst of this; and must realize that it is at least unlikely that enough of the causes can ever be altered, or pressures withdrawn, to make much difference."[87] To do so would entail not only acknowledging poor whites' enjoyment of black suffering as part of their compensatory public "wages of whiteness," but also his own "wholesome pleasures [as] the upright and the virtuous."[88]

Yet, if the figure of the mule allows Agee to partake in and disavow black suffering, it also becomes the vehicle for the most redemptive imagining. In an under discussed scene that exclusively features black people, *Famous Men* again links the mule with blackness. In section IV of "Part One: A Country Letter," Agee describes the beginning of the workday at a sawmill. It is a scene with workers arriving and preparing to work and sunlight refracting kaleidoscope-like through the trees. Significantly, Agee explicitly identifies all the workers as black: "a negro waiting, glancing frequently at his watch," "there is among these negroes a scarred yet pure white mule, whose presence among them in this magic light is that of an enslaved unicorn," "a negro, harnessing his mules, lifts forth wet-throated," and "the negro stands with one hand hung in a triangle wire."[89] The scene's central action is of black sawmill workers harnessing the mules and coaxing them to work. Some mules are compliant; others acquiesce with mild prodding. A couple resist, and they are "kicked in the belly and slashed along the jaws and across the eyes" into submission.[90] The mules and their drivers slowly begin to move while work at the sawmill fully commences with the "chopping, sawing, snaking, hauling, and the shearing surflike shriek of the saw" after a whistle is sounded by the foreman.[91]

Unlike the earlier meditation that links the mule and black people via their subjection to gratuitous violence, here they are united through acts of labor. The scene thus presents an idealized vision of collective black labor. However, the scene cannot be that alone; it must be available to all when the scene ends with Agee noting "among these men are George Gudger and—."[92] The partaking in blackness occurs not simply with the sudden and dramatic insertion of George Gudger into the scene but, as Paula Rabinowitz (2010, 126) notes, with the conjunction *and* and the em dash that "leaves [the reader] hanging in suspension as we are meant to fill in the blank space with Agee's name, or with our own or with any of the two billion then alive on planet earth."[93] In so doing, the black body again disappears as the scene of black labor gets abstracted into an allegory of human labor, which prefigures Agee's mythological musing on "Human beings, with the assistance of mules, worked this land so that they might live."[94]

Conclusion

Ultimately, at stake in my critique of this white temporal imaginary is the way that white death monopolizes how US culture understands and relates to suffering in the present. In *Liberalism and Human Suffering,* Asma Abbas distinguishes between what she calls "dead suffering" and "living suffering."[95] Drawing explicitly on Marx's critique of the commodity-form, Abbas understands suffering not as a state of being but as a form of labor. In this sense, suffering is a social activity whose experience, expression, and understanding to oneself and others is mediated by "categories that limit what can be said and heard (a problem of structures of power and of their impact on our sensuous capacities)."[96] Dead suffering is thus, for Abbas, an alienated form of suffering whose labor has

been captured and reified by a liberal epistemology of injury. Under this liberal epistemology, suffering must fit into proscribed idealist forms of speech, identity (e.g. victims and injury), and performance in order to find redress in liberal institutions of justice and then to be ultimately forgotten. Lost in liberalism's drive to expel suffering is the labor of living suffering, who Abbas characterizes as "those who suffer, in body and in spirit, in neuroses and in wars, in speech and in silence, in humiliations and in patronage, in efforted graces and respectabilities, in announced consoling self-overcomings, at work and at home, ordinarily and heroically, in laughters and forgivenesses."[97] In other words, living suffering are those innumerable social activities bound to suffering that are ignored by liberalism's proscribed forms or exceed and evade their grasp.[98]

White death is thus dead suffering par excellence. Its temporal imaginary not only proscribes suffering as a determinate event, but moreover, by linking such death in a story of fallenness and redemption, the imaginary renders such suffering exceptional of modernity. In the case of *Faces,* the death of the white tenant family is explicitly exceptional to the technological progress of modernity. Though critical of the excesses of modernity, *Famous Men*, on the other hand, posits the death of the white tenant family as an exceptional sign of modernity's cultural decline (i.e. loss or obscuring of human divinity). Notwithstanding their differences, both see the death of the white tenant family as a kind of fallenness, whether regarding the family alone or society as whole; as such, this white death motivates political-cultural projects that would redeem modernity. Furthermore, akin to the way that Marx likens capital to a vampire who sucks on living labor, white death draws upon the spectacle of black suffering. This suggests, then, that to address suffering, one must move away from the drama of white death to examine not the spectacle but seeming permanence of black suffering. To think about the persistence of black suffering is not to abandon the suffering of white people but to dislodge the rarified frames and idealized fantasies that render such suffering exceptional. Or, as Abbas (2010, 120) writes, it is to hear "a desire not for an escape from [suffering's] materiality *as* suffering (that liberalism wants to readily put forth) but for *materially* undoing the undesirable historical forms to which suffering, and action, have been relegated." *Faces* and *Famous Men* are not the materials to hear such a desire. One would have to look elsewhere.[99]

With that said, the value of *Faces* and *Famous Men* is far more modest, namely as a cultural site to glean whiteness as an "undesirable historical form to which suffering, and action, have been relegated."[100] Indeed, in the contemporary moment, they have much to say about the way that the suffering of poor whites has again taken center stage in political discourse via the figure of the 'white working class.' Perhaps no text more potently exemplifies this discourse than J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis* (*Elegy*).[101] A *New York Times* bestseller, its popularity helped to launch Vance's political career as the so-called authentic public face of the white working class.[102] Through the prism of *Faces* and *Famous Men*, the memoir is shown to be recycling the same narrative tropes of white death. Clearly thematized by the title's reference to

the elegy, many of *Elegy*'s cast of secondary characters are temporally figured in decline, which narratively functions to position JD as their redeemer.[103] Furthermore, like *Faces* and *Famous Men*, *Elegy* draws upon blackness to embody decline and motivate redemption but with a twist. Even more so than *Famous Men*, *Elegy* constructs a practically white narrative world.[104] In the process, however, it ends up 'blackening' its secondary characters, specifically JD's mother, Bev.[105] By situating *Elegy* (and, by extension, the contemporary discourse of the white working class) alongside *Faces and Famous Men*, it helps to show that what sociologist and physician Jonathan Metzl calls "dying of whiteness" today is not animated exclusively by a politics of resentment toward non-white people but also by a weird nostalgia that directs the deep desire to alleviate suffering towards those practices and policies that make all people more disposable.[106]

Notes

1. James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*, ed. James Baldwin (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985), 290.

2. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President." *The Atlantic*, July 22, 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/.

3. Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy", 290.

4. Ibid., 290.

5. Erskin Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Arno Press, 1975). James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001).

6. My approach to whiteness draws explicitly from two key texts in Critical Whiteness studies. The first is Richard Dyer's foundational book, *White* (New York: Routledge, 2017). Perhaps best known for positing whiteness as an unmarked social identity, *White* offers more than this proposition by identifying what he calls the "cultural register of whiteness," the intellectual history and cultural forms and structures that articulates whiteness in discourse and thus enables it to be known and felt as an unmarked social identity. Underpinning this capacity is whiteness's contradictory relation to embodiment, namely the way whiteness is "in but not of" the body (Dyer 2017, 14). The cultural register of whiteness manages whiteness's contradictory embodiment by spinning theoretical discourse (religious, pseudo-scientific, or imperialistic) and generating common sense stories and visual tropes that naturalize it. Even though Dyer focuses primarily on visual mediums, particularly cinema, he points to narrative as a central cultural technology of the cultural register of whiteness.

The second text is Tiffany Willoughby-Herard's essay "South Africa's Poor Whites and Whiteness Studies: Afrikaner Ethnicity, Scientific Racism, and White Misery," *New Political Science* 29, no. 4 (2007): 479-500, which is later expanded in *Waste of a White Skin: The Carnegie Corporation and the Racial Logic of White Vulnerability* (Oakland: Univ. of California Press, 2015). In both texts, Willoughby-Herard pushes Critical Whiteness Studies towards what she terms "whiteness as misery" (Willoughby-Herard 2007: 483). Such an approach explores the "inculcating [of] shame, guilt, and self-denigration in the white mind through practices of highly scripted body modification and surveillances of the body" (Willoughby-Herard 2007: 485). She does so, in the context of the US and South Africa, however, to show the way that the racializing and stigmatizing of poor whites operate ideologically for the continuation and execution of institutionalized forms of antiblackness. One of Willoughby-Herard's central theoretical contributions has been to address an overcorrection in Critical Whiteness studies. That is, since at least Dyer, Critical Whiteness studies has sought to visibilize the historical and geographic multiplicity and internal relations of white identity in order to complicate simplistic notions of white identity that formulate it through a binary opposition between whiteness and a racial Other. As valuable and intellectually necessary as such an approach may be, it carries a tendency to obscure the way that whiteness is relationally constructed with and through other racial categories. Hence, Willoughby-Herard's focus on "whiteness as misery" elucidates the co-constructedness of whiteness with other racial categories through transnational regimes of white supremacy and antiblackness vis-à-vis the disciplining of poor whites.

My approach brings together Dyer's cultural analytic on whiteness and narrative with Willoughby-Herard's relational approach on "whiteness as misery." More specifically, my analysis of the lapsarian and redemptive narratives generated around the figure of poor whites (i.e. narrative trope of white death) is not only an example of the way narrative 'reconciles' the contradiction

of white embodiment but more importantly, does so, to "entice [. . .] those inside [whiteness] to aspire ever upward within it" (Dyer 2017, 40). However, I want to suggest that narrative alone is not sufficient to the task but, following Willoughby-Herard, must draw upon and disavow the black body, implicitly and/or explicitly, to motivate "aspir[ations] ever upward within [whiteness.]" (Dyer 2017, 40).

7. By "spectacle of black suffering," I am directly referring to a line of theorization and inquiry on "the fungibility of blackness" in Afro-pessimist thought and broader currents of black studies (Wilderson 2010, 89). Even though she does not use the exact term, theorization of fungibility of blackness is often credited to Hortense Spillers's seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In this respect, "fungibility" describes the appropriability of blackness for the pleasure of the captor due to the reduction of West African peoples to "flesh" in the Middle Passage. This notion is further developed in Saidiya V. Hartman's essential *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997) in which she identifies empathy as caught up in the cycle of fungibility, power, and pleasure. Frank B. Wilderson III's *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonism* (Durham, Duke Univ. Press, 2010) explicitly elevates this notion as a central feature of the political ontology of black positionality. More recent scholarship reflects on the persistence of black life in the face of antiblackness in a non-redemptive sense. That is to say, the proximity of black life to institutionalized social death and the conflation of blackness to non-being in the wake of slavery. For more see, Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). As will become clear in the rest of the article, such a concept deeply informs my analysis of black bodies in *Faces* and *Famous Men*. It is perhaps necessary then to elaborate my own relation to Wilderson's Afro-pessimism. It has been much debated. For example, see Fred Moten's "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 177-218, Jared Sexton's response "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthought" *Lateral* 1 (2012): https://doi.org/10.25158/L1.1.16, and Christina Sharpe's response "Response to 'Ante-Anti-Blackness,'" *Lateral* 1 (2012): https://doi.org/10.25158/L1.1.17. One common line of criticism focuses on "political ontology" as the structural level to understand race. Such criticism finds in political ontology an ahistorical construction of race and thus immune to change and, by extension, political resistance. To be sure, by using the term *ontology*, the notion lends itself to be construed as the building blocks of reality. Yet, Wilderson does locate a history, the history of slavery as a world-historical system in the construction of modernity (Wilderson 2010: 35-53). In this regard, political ontology is not an ahistorical descriptor of building blocks of reality but instead an historical analytic that operates at a high level of abstraction, conceptually akin to mode of production. For more, see Jared Sexton "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear World," *Rhizome: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016): https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02. One can certainly disagree on and make arguments against its critical value in light of its historical and analytical scope. Yet, for my purposes, I find its account of fungibility and antiblackness helpful to unpack the racial underpinning of *Faces* and *Famous Men* that, at the very least with *Famous Men*, seems doggedly uninterested in the matter when documenting the suffering wrought by the sharecropping system in the South.

8. Asma Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 120.

9. For such antagonistic pairing of *Faces* and *Famous Men*, see William Stott *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), WJT Mitchell *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), Jeanne Follansbee Quinn "The Work of Art: Irony and Identification in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*" *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 3 (2001): 338-368, Janet Holtman "'White Trash' in Literary History: The Social Intervention of Erskine Caldwell and James Agee" *American Studies* 2 (2014): 31-48, James Goodwin "The Depression Era in Black and White: Four American Photo-Texts" *Criticism* 2 (1998): 273-307.

10. For explicit analysis on the use of sentimentality as a strategy of middle class identification, see Quinn, "The Work of Art"

11. Much scholarship on *Famous Men* has been devoted to the way that it self-consciously undermines the formal pretensions of documentary objectivity to foreground the artifice of documentary expression itself and the positionality of the documentarian. For a class analysis of this reading, see Paul Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (New York: Verso, 1994). For an ethical/political analysis of this reading, see Mitchell, *Picture Theory* and T.V. Reed, "Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodernist Realism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous,*" *Representation*, No. 24 (1988): 156-176. For a psychoanalytic/affective analysis of this reading, see Aaron Chandler, "'Mutual Wounding Shall Have Been Won and Heal': Deleuzean Masochism and the Anxiety of Representation in James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*." *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 20, no. 3 (2009): 196-214.

12. For extended analysis of Evans's photographs themselves, see Stott, *Documentary Expression*; Mitchell, *Picture Theory*; Alan Trachtenberg, "Walker Evans's Contrapuntal Design: The Sequences of Photographs in the First and Second Edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," in

New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, ed. Caroline Blinder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 71-78;

13. Alan Trachtenburg, "Forward" in *You Have Seen Their Faces*, by Caldwell and Bourke-White (New York: Arno Press, 1975) viii. For relational pairing of *Faces* and *Famous Men*, see Adam Sonstegard "Rivals in Photo-Realism: James Agee Vs. Margaret Bourke-White" *Southern Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the South* 18, no. 1 (2011): 58-73.
14. Ibid., viii.
15. As Matt Wray (2006) and Anthony Harkins (2004) note, the genealogy of US poor whites stems from regional histories and traditions that construct a cultural geography of poor white like the rustic yokel of colonial New England, the mountain people of Appalachia, and poor whites of the southern backcountry. But, as Harkins (2004) notes, by the 1920s, the regional differences have blended together. For more, see Matt Wray *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2006) and Anthony Harkins *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).
16. On the liminality of white trash, see Wray *Not Quite White* and John Hartigan Jr. *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2005).
17. Ibid.
18. Wray, *Not Quite White*.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. For more on Caldwell and eugenics, see Karen Keely "Poverty, Sterilization, and Eugenics in Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*" *Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 1 (2002): 23-42. and Holtman, "'White Trash' in Literary History"
23. Wray, *Not Quite White.*
24. For an account of the way the history of immigration transformed notions of whiteness, see Matthew Frye Jacobson *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998).
25. Much scholarship has noted how the figure of the folk had negotiated the contradictions of modernity. For scholarship that focuses on the figure of white folk, see Jane S. Becker *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1998) and James S Miller "Inventing the 'Found' Object: Artifactuality, Folk History, and the Rise of Capitalist Ethnography in 1930s America," *Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 466 (2004): 373-393. Of course, the figure of the folk is not exclusively white. The figure of black folk was also central in African American negotiations with modernity. For more, see David Nicholls *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000).
26. Sonnet Retman *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2011).
27. I borrow this phrase from James Guimond. For more, see James Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).
28. At this moment, a view of poor whites as unrepentant racists codes them as unenlightened cultural degenerates. For a brilliant account on the historical formation of this degenerate representation of poor whites, see Kristine Taylor, "Untimely Subjects: White Trash and the Making of Racial Innocence in the Postwar South." (*American Quarterly* 67, no. 1, March 2015), 55-79.
29. Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, 1.
30. Ibid., 1.
31. Ibid., 18.
32. Ibid., 18.
33. Ibid., 18.
34. Ibid., 15.
35. Ibid., 20.
36. Ibid., 20.
37. Ibid., 28.
38. Pastoralism is quite literally ancient, dating back to the Greek poet Theocritus and later codified as a genre in the works of Virgil and becoming a full-blown and relative consistent tradition of poetry at least to Romanticism. As a form of poetry, it expresses a nostalgic longing for a peaceful and simplistic life embodied in the figure of the shepherd who is set in an idealized natural landscape. For a basic account of the pastoral, see M.H. Abrams, "Pastoral," in *A Glossary of Literary Terms Seventh Edition*, ed. M.H. Abrams (Fort Worth, TX: Hartcout Brace College Publishers, 1999): 202-203. Perhaps more relevant is the extent to which Caldwell's pastoral longing and excitement of technological modernity is paradigmatic of the ambivalence of technology in US culture. For more, see Leo Marx, *Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
39. Ibid., 19.

40. Ibid., 40.
41. Ibid., 19.
42. As scholars of lynching have shown, lynching is fundamentally a modern practice whose reach and influence extend well beyond the South. For such scholarship, see Jacqueline Denise Goldsby *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006).
43. Retman, *Real Folk*, 17.
44. Agee and Evans, *Let US Now Praise Famous Men*, X.
45. For a thoroughgoing explanation of actuality in *Famous Men,* see Alan Spiegel, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself: A Critical Study* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1998)
46. For an elaboration on the concept of "flesh of the world," see Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1968). For an excellent elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's work in relation to contemporary human rights discourse, see Elizabeth Anker *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2012).
47. For an elaboration on Agee's aesthetic and rhetorical strategies in *Famous Men*, see Spiegel, *Legend of Himself* and James Crank, "'A Piece of the Body Torn Out by the Roots': Failure and Fragmentation in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 163-178.
48. For an account of music in *Famous Men*, see Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
49. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 117.
50. Ibid., 179.
51. Ibid., 202.
52. Agee, himself, is perhaps the worst offender. Agee identifies himself and Walker as "spies" and endlessly berates himself for harming the tenant farmers. But, more importantly, he deploys an aesthetic and rhetoric of failure in order to apprehend the human divinity of the white tenant families. This tension between aspiration and failure underpins the defining aesthetic strategies of *Famous Men* and becomes the organizing principle of Agee's meditations on art, language, and journalism. For more, see Spiegel, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*.
53. Ibid., 202.
54. Ibid., 202.
55. Ibid., 202.
56. For an elaboration on the role of women and sexuality in *Famous Men*, see Linda Wagner-Martin "*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—And Women: Agee's Absorption in the Sexual," *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* 180 (2007): 39-45.
57. Speigel, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*.
58. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 278.
59. For an elaboration on the role of gender and domesticity in the visual rhetoric of *Faces*, see Quinn, "The Work of Art."
60. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 178.
61. Ibid., 178.
62. Ibid., 178.
63. Ibid., 178.
64. Spiegel, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself,* 122.
65. Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces,* 48.
66. Mick Gidley, "Ontological Aspects of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: Death, Irony, Faulkner," in *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, ed. Caroline Blinder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 31.
67. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 393.
68. Dyer asserts that the decline of the first iteration of whiteness as death is due to the decline of strains of Christian thought. For more, see Dyer, *White*, especially Chapter 6.
69. Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces,* 48.
70. For an elaboration on Agee's vexed relation to race, see James A. Crank "Racial Violence, Receding Bodies: James Agee's Anatomy of Guilt" in *Agee at 100: Centennial Essays on the Work of James Agee*, ed. Michael Lofaro (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2012) 53-74.
71. It is important to highlight that the story of Agee's journey south is not plotted in a linear, chronological manner in *Famous Men*. Instead, as others have argued, its sequencing is to dramatize Agee's transformation from an outsider to an insider. For such a reading, see Spiegel, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself* and James Dorst "On the Porch and in the Room: Threshold Moments and other Ethnographic Tropes in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*" in *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, ed. Caroline Blinder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 41-69.
72. Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces,* 11.
73. It is notable that Caldwell asserts that African Americans were treated better than whites.

74. As Agee explains, “There will be no time, though, to go into these variants beyond their mention, nor any time at all to talk of negro work and sunday clothing, which in every respect seems to me, as few other things in this country do, an expression of a genius distributed among almost the whole of a race, so powerful and of such purity that even in its imitations of and plagiarisms on the white race, it is all but incapable of sterility” (Agee 2001, 233).

75. For such readings, see Spiegel, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself* and Dorst, “On the Porch and in the Room.”

76. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 33.

77. For an elaboration on the relation between suffering and divinity, see Brent Walter Cline “Agee, Dostoevsky, and the Anatomy of Suffering” in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men at 75*, ed. Michael Lofaro (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2017).

78. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 22

79. Dennis Childs *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2015) 16.

80. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black,* 11.

81. Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*.

82. Ibid.

83. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 189.

84. Ibid.,190.

85. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 22.

86. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 190.

87. Ibid., 190.

88. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 22. The phrase *wages of whiteness* comes from WEB Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Free Press, 1962). The phrase has become a central framework for understanding the role of whiteness in splitting working class solidarity. For additional work, see David Roediger *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007).

89. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 82-84.

90. Ibid., 84.

91. Ibid., 84.

92. Ibid., 84.

93. Paula Rabinowitz “‘Two Prickes’: The Colon as Practice” in *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, ed. Caroline Blinder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 126.

94. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 202.

95. Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering,* 150.

96. Ibid., 150.

97. Ibid., 10.

98. To a large extent, *Famous Men* is devoted to articulating the ‘living suffering’ of the white tenant family. It is precisely such considerations that Agee had so much disdain toward liberal social reformers. Their language of the sharecropper flattens and erases their social experience of suffering in order to expunge its fullness under the machinery of modernist social reform. However, as considerate as Agee may be, *Famous Men* is hemmed in by the narrative trope of white death. In so doing, it fundamentally delimits the scope of living suffering by reproducing rarified racial categories to apprehend it.

99. One such place may be found in the work of Gordon Parks. A contemporary of Bourke-White and Evans, Parks was the most prominent black photographer of the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration. His photographic work in both government and commercial industries like *Life* magazine was devoted to capturing black life and suffering. For an introduction to his work, see Gordon Parks, *Gordon Parks: Collective Works*, ed. Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr. and Paul Roth. (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl Publishers, 2012). For a brilliant examination of Parks’s photography for the way it explores and challenges the connection between race and fashion as linked expressions of bourgeois thought on personhood, appearance, and essences, see Jesús Costantino, “Harlem in Furs: Race and Fashion in the Photography of Gordon Parks.” *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 4 (November 2016): 789-811.

100. Ibid., 120.

101. J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. (New York: Harper Press, 2018).

102. Of course, Vance’s public profile has been highly contested by the very people who he is understood to represent. For a critical regional response to *Hillbilly Elegy*, see Anthony Harkins and Maredith McCarroll, eds., *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2019).

103. For a more thorough-going critique of whiteness and narrative in *Hillbilly Elegy*, see Christian Ravela, “Becoming White Again: The Bildungsroman, Whiteness, and the Culture of Poverty.” *Cultural Critique* (Forthcoming).

104. For an excellent critique of *Elegy*'s misrepresentation of Appalachia, see Elizabeth Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*. (Cleveland, OH: Belt Publishing, 2018).

105. I borrow the term 'blacken" from Christina Sharpe. To be clear, in the case of *Elegy*, 'blackening' does not mean that Bev become black but rather names the narrative association and construction of certain characters to blackness. Specifically, *Elegy* graphically details the shame and violence of her drug addiction in the opening scene of its penultimate chapter. She is perhaps the central figure upon which JD positions himself against morally. For more, see Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

106. Jonathan Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland*. (New York: Basic Books, 2019).