



[Home](#) / [Archivi](#) / [N. 13 \(2018\): Borders of the Visible - I: Intersections between Literature and Photography](#) / [Percorsi | Writers and Photographers](#)

## James Agee and the Photo-Essay Book: “Cotton Tenants. Three Families” (1936\*-2013)/ “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men” (1941)

**Cinzia Scarpino**

Università degli Studi di Milano

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13135/2281-6658/3097>

### Abstract

In 1936, James Agee and Walker Evans started a documentary reportage on white tenant farming in Alabama on assignment for Henry Luce's *Fortune* magazine. The 30,000-word article that was ultimately sent to *Fortune*—“Cotton Tenants. Three Families”—was rejected by the editors. Agee decided to expand his report into what would become *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the 400-page “anti-documentary” book that was to shatter all the journalistic and literary conventions of the genre. Only in 2013, James Agee's manuscript of the original 1936 piece rejected by *Fortune* was published by Melville House, thus offering a valuable insight into the evolution of Agee's documentary aesthetics and, more generally, the short trajectory of the photo-essay book. This essay will therefore try to consider how Agee's position vis-à-vis journalistic liberal corporatism and documentary New Dealism changes in the five years separating the two texts, particularly in relation to the bourgeois bias underlying the voyeuristic nature of the genre; how these changes affect the narrative modes devised to render the voices of the tenants by adjusting or disrupting the mold of the participant-observer method; and, finally, what implications do these changes have in terms of social inclusiveness of the subjects represented.



[Open Journal Systems](#)

Lingua

[English](#)

[Italiano](#)

Informazioni

[per i lettori](#)

[Per gli autori](#)

[Per i bibliotecari](#)

Ultimo fascicolo

[ATOM 1.0](#)

[RSS 2.0](#)

[RSS 1.0](#)

CINZIA SCARPINO

## JAMES AGEЕ AND THE PHOTO-ESSAY BOOK

Cotton Tenants. Three Families (1936\*-2013)/

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941)

**ABSTRACT:** In 1936, James Agee and Walker Evans started a documentary reportage on white tenant farming in Alabama on assignment for Henry Luce's *Fortune* magazine. The 30,000-word article that was ultimately sent to *Fortune*—"Cotton Tenants. Three Families"—was rejected by the editors. Agee decided to expand his report into what would become *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the 400-page "anti-documentary" book that was to shatter all the journalistic and literary conventions of the genre. Only in 2013, James Agee's manuscript of the original 1936 piece rejected by *Fortune* was published by Melville House, thus offering a valuable insight into the evolution of Agee's documentary aesthetics and, more generally, the short trajectory of the photo-essay book. This essay will therefore try to consider how Agee's position vis-à-vis journalistic liberal corporatism and documentary New Dealism changes in the five years separating the two texts, particularly in relation to the bourgeois bias underlying the voyeuristic nature of the genre; how these changes affect the narrative modes devised to render the voices of the tenants by adjusting or disrupting the mold of the participant-observer method; and, finally, what implications do these changes have in terms of social inclusiveness of the subjects represented.

**KEYWORDS:** James Agee, Photo-Essay Book, Depression-era Documentary Journalism, Direct and Indirect Speech.

Much has been written about James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* ever since the text was reissued to great critical acclaim and commercial success in 1960, after Agee's death and the posthumous publication of the Pulitzer-winning *A Death in the Family*. The renaissance of Agee-Evans's quixotic work helped establish its canonical status within American literature at the exact moment when New Journalism and postmodern deconstruction theories were questioning, not to say eroding, the function of documentary narratives and bringing the subjective-testimonial voice of the novelist to the forefront (Denning 119; Rabinowitz 1992, 164; Reed 157, 173).

Much less has been written, at least in terms of scholarly publication, about *Cotton Tenants: Three Families* by James Agee, the manuscript of the original 1936 piece rejected by *Fortune* magazine that was to be radically rewritten over the course of five years into *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

The reasons for such critical disparities can partly be traced to the only recent publication of *Cotton Tenants*, which came out in 2013 for Melville House, largely thanks to John Summers' interest in the archive of the University of Tennessee Special Collection (Summers 2013, 9-11). One cannot help but wonder, though, whether a closer comparative look at the two texts written between 1936 and 1941, thus encompassing the short life-cycle of the photo-essay book (1937-1942),<sup>1</sup> might shed light on the trajectory of one of the most culturally specific and genuine genres and "perhaps the most prominent literary mode of the Depression era" (Allred 2010a, 8).

As the authoritative body of research on *Famous Men* and documentary fiction of the 1930's has argued extensively, the "five-year spurt of talent" of the photo-essay book (Stott 1973, 213) was both aesthetically and ethically inscribed with issues of class-dominated voyeurism and an uncertain narrative stance oscillating between the desire for social inclusiveness and the predicament of a genre devised for middle-class readership (Rabinowitz 1992, 144, 162). By the time *Famous Men* came out disrupting the rhetoric in which it was made, the photo-essay book appeared to have reached an impasse which was arguably embedded in both formal generic withering and historical and political contextual changes (Rabinowitz 1992, 153-156; Reed 157; Stott 1973, 266). The flourishing of the photo-essay book had stemmed—not unproblematically—from the combination of New Deal documentary grammar, corporate photo-journalism, and "popular front" commitment, crystallizing its tropes and modes around the rhetorical emphasis on the broken rural South and "grapes of wrath" narratives which were widely circulated through picture magazines, newsreels and the Historical Section of the FSA (Farm Security Administration). In 1941, the year of publication of *Famous Men*, the economic, political and cultural conditions that had favored the birth of the short-lived genre under the urgency of an

---

<sup>1</sup> The short season of Depression-era documentary books (no more than a dozen over a five-year arch) began with the publication in 1937 of *You Have Seen Their Faces* by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, and continued with *Land of the Free* (1938) by Archibald MacLeish (FSA photos selected by Edwin Rosskam), H.C. Nixon's *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (FSA photos selected by E. Rosskam, 1938); *Washington, Nerve Center* (1939) and *San Francisco, West Coast Metropolis* (1939), both by Edwin Rosskam (belonging to "Face of America" series, with FSA photos), *American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939) by Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange, *Home Town* (1940) by Sherwood Anderson (FSA photos selected by E. Rosskam), and Oliver La Farge and Helen Post's *As Long As the Grass Shall Grow* (1940), *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) by Richard Wright (FSA photos selected by E. Rosskam); *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) by James Agee and Walker Evans; *Say, Is this the U.S.A.?* by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White (1941), and *This is America* (1942) by Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances MacGregor (see Stott 1973, 212-231; Allred 2010a, 7).

unprecedented agricultural and climatological crisis lost ground to the war in Europe. The public's demand for images and information on poor white tenancy to which the photo-essay books and New Deal documentary reformism had catered was now absorbed into other emergency scenarios (Allred 2010a, 93; McDannell 2011, 56; Stott 1973, 264).

Given these very brief prefatory remarks about the wider cultural and generic context in which “documentary expression” gained momentum in the 1930's, I should like now to turn more specifically to *Cotton Tenants* and *Famous Men* in order to address some of the issues which have been raised only cursorily here. By looking at some of the formal and figurative strategies at work in both texts, I shall attempt to see how their different narrative choices operate to question and challenge some of the tenets of the genre at the two opposite ends of its trajectory. Namely, I shall try to consider how Agee's position vis-à-vis journalistic liberal corporatism and documentary New Dealism changes in the five years separating the two texts, particularly in relation to the bourgeois bias underlying the voyeuristic nature of the genre; how these changes affect the narrative modes devised to render the voices of the tenants by adjusting or disrupting the mold of the participant-observer method; and, finally, what kind of implications do these changes have in terms of social inclusiveness of the subjects represented.

#### Composition, Editorial and Publishing History of *Cotton Tenants* and *Famous Men*

The composition history of *Famous Men* presents many of the often conflictual aspects that contributed to the blooming of documentary expression in the 1930's. As the leading academic literary critics in this field of studies have consistently shown (Allred, Denning, Rabinowitz, Staub, Stott, Szalay), Depression-era documentary form was shaped by the equivocal and ambiguous merging of, at least, three different broadly literary discourses. First, the protest realist mode celebrated by American Marxist critics who acclaimed the allegedly direct mimesis of the genre as attuned to the need of proletarian literature; second, the “institutionalization” of a reformist grammar advocated by New Deal agencies such as the FWP (Federal Writers Project) and the Historical Section of the FSA and made possible through the federal patronage of left-leaning artists and writers; and, finally, photojournalistic reporting as developed by both weekly-based picture magazines such as Henry Luce's *Fortune* (1929) and *Life* (1936), and Mike Cowles' *Look* (1937), and, less prominently, by local newspapers like the *San Francisco News* (which commissioned and published John

Steinbeck's *Harvest Gypsies*, six articles with photographs by Dorothea Lange). It was exactly by the second half of the decade, when American Marxism started to fade and a mass social movement of independent leftists and non-communist socialists aligned with both the cultural apparatuses of the New Deal and the media industries (contributing to what Michael Denning has notably called "The Cultural Front"), that documentary expression reached unprecedented popularity.

As Michael Szalay and Jeff Allred have argued, both New Deal agencies (FWP, and partly FSA) and Time Inc. photo-journalism combined to redefine writing as a salaried job/performance rather than a creative/leisured activity, with the "performative writer" (hired either by the Federal government or by Henry Luce) emancipating himself/herself from economic need at the cost of losing, albeit often only temporarily, his/her political and artistic independence (Szalay 2000, 24-26; Allred 2010b, 42).

Operating in a number of juxtaposed sociological, cultural, and aesthetic spheres, documentary reportage "seemed," as Paula Rabinowitz has argued, "to provide the seamless melding of culture and politics, intellectual and proletarian, observer and participant, art and ideology" (Rabinowitz 1992, 154), thus offering a viable solution to the conundrum inherent to both the tenets of Marxist criticism advocating the revolutionary role of "the masses" (finally engaged in the making of their own literature), and socialist reformists and thinkers concerned with the need to give voice to "the people." Documentary reportage purportedly promised to combine cultural and political representations, intellectual and proletarian agency, as well as observer and participant methodological stances. Yet, far from being seamless, the melding of these conflicting terms was inscribed with textual lacunae, discontinuities, interruptions, contradictions mainly originated by the ethic and aesthetic pre-coding about the subjects as knowable and reformable objects.

The complex confluence of such diverse yet complementary aesthetic and professional commitments is significantly mirrored in Agee and Evans's documentary collaboration on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In 1936, when James Agee was commissioned an article on Southern sharecroppers by *Fortune*, he was a relatively unknown talented writer who had joined Henry Luce's magazine staff in 1932, shortly after his Harvard years. When he was asked to write a piece on cotton tenant families for the Life and Circumstances section, he persuaded Walker Evans to produce the photographic set of his article. In 1936 Walker Evans was, in turn, hired as Information Specialist by the Resettlement Administration (RA, that would become the FSA in 1937) under the guidance of director Roy Stryker, a job he would maintain, working only now and then, until March 1937. Stryker

granted Evans a furlough from his RA/FSA work provided his photographs of the tenants project with Agee would become property of the FSA (McDannell 2011, 53-56). Both Agee and Evans shared some broad leftist sympathies but none of them was ideologically aligned with either Marxist claims of working-class solidarity, the politically instrumental project of the New Deal agencies, or the “bizarre mix of business advocacy and leftwing sympathy” (Larson 2013) of *Fortune* editors. In the summer of 1936, at the outset of their landmark collaboration, Evans and Agee were hardly satisfied with their jobs for the RA and *Fortune* magazine: whereas the former did not see his photographs as means to promote social change (McDannell 2011, 54), the latter was getting increasingly skeptical about the possibility of carrying out his assignment at *Fortune*, where the “relentless Fordization of the writing process employed to render everyday life spectacular and untroubled” (Allred 2010b, 45), made him growingly estranged (Haslett 16).

As the story goes, when Agee returned to New York after living for eight weeks with the three families from Hale County, Alabama, they had picked as subjects of their research and essay, he was disheartened by the aesthetic protocols of the magazine format, and unwilling to cut his 30,000 words manuscript (Rabinowitz 1992, 164). Unsuitably sized, unconcerned with conventional standard reporting (Allred 2010a, 93; Larson 2013), at odds with “the sharper turn to the right” *Fortune* had taken by then (Szalay 2000, 26), Agee’s text grew longer and longer and was radically revised and thoroughly rewritten. At stake were a disturbing critique of “the undemocratic structure of mass media corporations [...] and the degraded reading practices they inspire” (Allred 2010a, 93), and a disquieting awareness of the ethical and aesthetic limits of the documentary field-work vogue. Five years later, and after being rejected by Harper’s, Evans and Agee’s book was published with the biblical title *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (over 400 pages) by Houghton Mifflin, sold 1.025 copies between 1941 and 1948 and went out of print and critical sight for twenty years (Follansbee Quinn 351; Rabinowitz 1994, 164). As for the original *Fortune* typescript, it “wasted away in [Agee’s] Greenwich Village home for nearly twenty years,” until Agee’s daughter eventually “cleared it out” (Summers 2013, 10). The collection then relocated to the University of Tennessee Special Collections Library, where *Cotton Tenants* was found among other unread manuscripts. John Summers, the scholar who edited and printed an excerpt from the article in the literary journal “The Baffler,” edited the book of the same name that was published by Melville House in 2013. As Summers explains in his Editor’s Note, the photographs and captions of the volume “were selected from Walker Evans’s two-volume album, *Photographs of Cotton Sharecropper Families*” (Summers 2013, 11), presenting photographs that had not been included in

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. As for the 1936 original layout of Walker Evans's photographs, no trace is left or kept in Agee's typescript.<sup>2</sup>

### Agee and Documentary Journalism: from "Honest" to "Obscene"

Adam Haslett defines Agee's *Cotton Tenants* as "morally indignant anthropology," and "a poet's account for the prosecution of economic and social injustice" (Haslett 14, 19). The tone of the exposé is epitomized by Agee's "Introduction" placed before the nine chapters that make up the main body of the essay ("Business," "Shelter," "Food," "Clothing," "Work," "Picking Season," "Education," "Leisure," "Health"), and counterpointed by the two Appendices ("On Negroes," "Landowners") which function as a textual coda.

After presenting the synecdochic principle that guided the author in the selection of three families as representative—or, better, "suggestive"—of the general conditions of cotton tenancy in the South (Agee-Evans CT, 30-31), Agee admits to the necessary incompleteness of his account by mentioning "the landlord" and "the Negro" as the two conspicuously absent agents therein (hence the two Appendices, to which I shall return). He then proceeds to copy a full-page excerpt from "a third grade geography textbook belonging to Lucille Burroughs, aged ten, daughter of a cotton tenant" (33), which attests to the human necessities of "Food, Shelter, and Clothing"—the same inalienable rights Franklin D. Roosevelt will invoke in his Second Inaugural Speech (1937), while addressing the "one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished" (Roosevelt, Second Inaugural). In the following paragraph a relation is set between the gravity of the subject matter—"human life at disadvantage"—and the "seriousness of attention" it commands:

A civilization which for any reason puts a human life at a *disadvantage*; or a *civilization* which can exist only by putting human life at a disadvantage, is worthy neither of the name nor of continuance. [...] *Only if we hold such truths to be self-evident, and inescapable [...] may we in any honesty and appropriateness proceed to our story*: which is a brief account of what happens to human life, and of what human life can in no essential way escape; under *certain unfavorable circumstances* (CT, 34-36, emphasis added).

A key passage of the Introduction, this paragraph unfolds the way in which Agee builds up an argument for reforms rooted in the historical and

---

<sup>2</sup> The decision of not tackling the analysis of Evans's visual contribution in this essay is therefore to be traced to the impossibility of comparing the two authorized photographic sections of the two texts.

rhetorical conjunctures of his time. It starts with the assumption that a civilization worthy of its “name and continuance” cannot exist by putting “human life at a disadvantage,” because to do so would mean betraying the highest moral standards of American democracy as affirmed in the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence (“We hold such truths to be self-evident”). “Civilization,” “human necessities,” a semi-wrong quote from the Declaration of Independence: at work here are some recurring images and phrases typical of the 1930’s *Zeitgeist*, as shown by the affinity with two diverse but chronologically contiguous texts dealing with the same subject (the national economic crisis at large) and addressing the same audience (middle-class and lower-middle-class electorate and readers). In the already mentioned Second Inaugural Address of January 20, 1937, Roosevelt spoke of the challenges yet to come by evoking “the very lowest standard of today call the necessities of life,” “conditions labeled indecent,” and the need to hark back to the principles established by the Founding Fathers (“today we consecrate our country to long-cherished ideals in a suddenly changed civilization,” Roosevelt, Second Inaugural). In the summer of 1937, even more suggestively, Archibald MacLeish, who was then a contributing editor to *Fortune*, composed *Land of the Free*, the photo-poetic book that would be published the following year with a selection of FSA photographs. The whole poem is measured against the metaphorical and rhetorical depletion of the principle framed by the Declaration of Independence:

We don’t know/We aren’t sure/For a hundred and fifty years we’ve been telling ourselves/We cut our brag in the bark of the big tree— / *We hold these truths to be self-evident*:/that all men are created equal;/ that they are endowed by their creator with *certain inalienable rights*; that among them are life, liberty.../We told ourselves we had liberty (MacLeish 1977 [1938], 2-4, emphasis added).

According to William Stott, *Land of the Free* “was praised when it appeared for the way it caught the sentiment of the time [...]” (Stott 1973, 225) winning the favor of readers and of many intellectuals still attuned to the redemptive rhetoric of the early 1930’s and its narratives of forced migration and displacement. *Land of the Free* combined an experimental quality with a militant tone, still trying to adjust intellectual honesty to a reformist agenda not untainted by “the tendentious possibilities of propaganda” (Kaplan 2005, 30). The fact that MacLeish worked both for *Fortune* and the RA/FSA photographic section archive, makes the comparative perspective with Agee-Evans’s original article even more engaging.

Whereas *Land of the Free* speaks “with a stammering collective voice (which does not know)” that expresses “epistemological doubt and



uncertainty” (Kaplan 2005, 32), and seems to originate in the ambiguous underpinnings of an inclusive “we” merging the observer/narrator (“I”), the observed/subject (“They”), and the spectator/reader (“You”), Agee’s use of the first-person plural in the Introduction to *Cotton Tenants* derives from a precise attitude toward intellectual and moral agency. As an intellectual and a documentary journalist, Agee belongs to a “we” whose responsibility is it to tell the story of “human life” “under certain unfavorable circumstances” in “honesty” and “appropriateness.”

Five years later, the commitment to writing an “appropriate” piece of “honest” journalism is completely subverted and discredited. In the “Preamble” to *Famous Men*, the concerned “we” of *Cotton Tenants* is taken over by a berating “I,” and the very possibility of “a literature of interdependence” reconciling “conflicting impulses toward individual agency and collective affiliation” (Szalay 2000, 2) denounced as paradoxical and predatory:

It seems to me curious, not to say *obscene* and *thoroughly terrifying*, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and *chance for profit* into a company, and organ of journalism, *to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings*, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purposes of *parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation* of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of “*honest journalism*” (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity [...] (*FM*, 5, emphasis added).

“Honest journalism” is unmasked as a profitable business whose intrusive methods are aimed at displaying and exploiting “the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation” of the subaltern subjects who are evoked as “an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings.” As for Agee’s unrelenting questions to his addressee, a “group of human beings” separated from the tenants along lines of class, they cannot help circling back to the process of bourgeois self-recognition of both writer/observer and reader/spectator identified by Rabinowitz as the inescapable rhetorical charge of documentary expression:<sup>3</sup>

Who are *you* who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it; and the question, Why we make this book, and set it large, and by what right, and for what purpose, and to what good end, or none [...] (*FM*, 7, emphasis added).

---

<sup>3</sup> “[...] no matter what its political intentions, the documentary invariably returns to the middle class, enlisting the reader in a process of self-recognition” (Rabinowitz 1992, 162).

Here, the definition of the reader's prerogatives is subsumed under those of the writer, with the "you" switching to Agee's first-person plural, a "we" that links the complacent liberal reader and the consciously complicit liberal writer (Retman 2014, 497). Toward the end of the Preamble, the address to the reader is construed as a parody of the conventions of the photo-essay genre ("those who have a soft place in the hearts," "poverty viewed at a distance," *FM*, 11) unveiling the classed privilege of such readership ("those who can afford the retail price"). The addresses to the reader intensify in the last page of the Preamble, reaching a climax with the belligerent yet unsurprising "You won't hear it nicely" (13).

By positing the ultimate and insuperable separateness of the middle-class writer and reader on the one hand and the subaltern subject on the other, Agee's *Famous Men* distances itself from documentary expression in three aesthetically related ways: first by reframing the tropes of the observer-participant method (namely the collection of evidence of the subjects' lives) into the descriptive eccentricities of a "taxonomic scheme gone mad" (Retman 2014, 497); second by representing its subjects as historically and socially static, almost fixed "into a transcendent realm" (Allred 2010a, 103, 112); and third by refiguring the dominant third-person narrative of the writer-documentarian ruptured by the first-person informant narratives of the subjects (Allred 2010a, 78) as a monologic first-person confession that devours up the possibility of letting those very subaltern subjects "speak."

### Unspeakable Subalterns: from Rosenfelt to Franklin D. Roosevelt

The performative and arbitrary nature of all documentary work has been subjected to the meticulous scrutiny of theoretical and cultural analyses concerned with the epistemologically ambiguous status of the "spontaneous witness critical mode" (Allred 2010a, 72). The main problems with Depression-era documentary realism were, in fact, ingrained in the efforts to come to grips with the contrast between the doubly masterful, all-knowing positioning of the photographic survey and the dominant third-person narrative (generally aligned with normative consensus) on the one hand, and the first-person informant narrative, endowed with limited cognitive resources and intermittently resisting both forms of representation, on the other.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Or, in Jeff Allred's effective argumentation, center v. periphery, "New Deal civic nationalism" v. "local structures of feelings" (Allred 2010a, 77).

If photo-essay books such as *You Have Seen Their Faces*, *Land of the Free*, *An American Exodus* and *Famous Men* are accounts of the economic, social and environmental hardships of rural America during the 1930's, then their main subjects, the "faces" of FSA photographs, are mainly those of the white sharecroppers. Questions arise as to whether, and *how*, the voices emanating from these faces can be represented within the narrative mode of the genre. It is a trademark of photo-journalism and photo-essay books to "authenticate" photographs through a surplus of mimetic verisimilitude, that is by adding captions reporting the words actually or fictitiously spoken by the subaltern subjects of both the visual and written texts. The most controversial use of such captions is to be found in Caldwell and Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, in which the legends reporting the illusion of direct speech "express the authors' own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed" (Caldwell, Bourke White 1995, 6). In Jeff Allred's insightful examination of the narrative structure of *Their Faces*, the authors' choice to bracket each of the chapters' third-person (Caldwell's) within very short first-person informant narratives (the tenants') unearths "important points of rupture" and ironic distancing of the latter from the dominant, "clinical and factual" narrative. For all its contradictory rhetorical strategies, Caldwell's use of "ventriloquizing captions" (Allred 2010a, 78) and reported first-person informant narratives can be considered as a particularly close reference point—either by way of analogy or by way of negation—for both *Cotton Tenants* and *Famous Men*.

Sonnet Retman has defined *Famous Men* as a "documentary novel" (Retman 2014, 495). On a stylistic level, as a novel it has been praised and studied for its modernist and/or "quintessentially postmodern" sprawling text (Rabinowitz 1992, 156): eccentric proportions, a plethora of paratextual apparatuses, chronological shifts, discursive and generic juxtapositions. Agee's use of interminable inventories and catalogs of the tenants' possessions, the most distinctive feature of his prose style, has been the focus of William Stott's analysis of *Famous Men* in his breakthrough study *Documentary Expression in Thirties America* (1986). In the impressive corpus of criticism however, only Michael Staub, in *Voices of Persuasion* (1994), has examined Agee's representational practices of the tenant speech, providing a textual analysis of *Famous Men* illocutionary strategies. It is mainly by following Staub's lead that I shall attempt to consider Agee's use of narrative techniques such as direct speech and free indirect speech in both *Famous Men* and *Cotton Tenants*.

Given Agee's confessional monologism, his idiosyncratic celebration of the tenants' sublime ability "to listen and articulate" (Staub 47), and his fear to betray or diminish their humanity by actually reporting their words, the

reader of *Famous Men* is hardly familiar with the reported voices of the subaltern *other*. Agee's first-person narration, alternatively a paean to lyricism or to invectives, is a perpetual invitation to hear but never to talk. In the very few cases when the narrator attempts to do so, he avoids free indirect speech—which would entail a “dual voice” merging his perspective and narrative stance with that of the subalterns (Jameson 2013, 177)—and uses a form of direct speech without quotation marks that includes what Ann Banfield calls “indications of pronunciation” (Banfield 2015 [1982], 247) recording regional as well as class traits. It does not come as a surprise that in *Famous Men* reported speech is used only sporadically, often occasioned by the very first encounter of the observer-narrator with the inhabitants of Hale County (be them landlords, townspeople, tenants, or more marginally, “negroes”). Likewise, the fact that the narration of the specific encounter with tenants bookends the entire work, virtually opening and closing Agee's anti-documentary account of it throughout chronological displacement, seems calculated to convey the aesthetic constraints of the whole genre, its ultimate surrender to a self-conscious, omniscient monologic first-person narrative that acknowledges its failure to truthfully represent *their* voices.

The first time the reader finds an example of direct speech in *Famous Men* is in “Late Sunday Morning,” the first of the three prefatory sketches introducing him/her to Hale County. The narrative frame of this vignette seems to share some formal feature with Southern local-color tales, with the story about poor whites often retold to an outside listener. The narrator reports bits of conversation between a landlord, his foreman and his “negroes”:

The landlord began to ask of them through the foreman. How's So-and-So doing, all laid by? Did he do that extra sweeping I told you?—and the foreman would answer, Yes sir, yes sir, he do what you say to do, he doin all right; and So-and-So shifted on his feet and smiled uneasily while, uneasily, one of his companions laughed and the others held their faces in the blank safety of deafness. And you, you ben doin much coltn lately, you horny old bastard?—and the crinkled, old, almost gray-mustached negro who came up tucked his head to one side looking cute, and showed what was left of his teeth, and whined, tittering, Now Mist So-and-So, you know I'm settled down, married-mad, you wouldn't—and the brutal negro of forty split his face in a villainous grin and said, He too *ole* [...] (*FM*, 25).

In lieu of traditional quotation marks (inverted commas), Agee employs dashes which seem to function as snapshot captions intended to frame the reported sketch by signaling the presence of the observer-narrator as witness to the scene. More than resembling “quick jottings by the reporter in his notebook” (Staub 1994, 47), the use of such a device operates almost photographically, the work of a cutting-room experience. If one were to find

any caption for Walker Evans's notoriously uncaptioned section of photographs, and their iconically silent subjects, it would be here, in Agee's use of snapshot dashes.<sup>5</sup>

Another significant example of such technique comes towards the end of the book, when Agee reports a conversation with George Gudger about his wife's difficulties in providing their guest with clean sheets for the night. Agee is here observer *and* participant, the recipient of Annie Mae's words via his husband:

All right in year hain't you?—Ah, sure, fine. Sure am.—Annie Mae telled me to say, she's sorry she ain't got no clean sheet, but just have to (*oh, no!*) make out best way you can —Oh, no. No. You tell her I certainly do thank her, but no, I'll be fine like this, *fine* like this—She just don't got none tell she does a warshin.—Sure, sure; I wouldn't want to dirty up a clean sheet for you, one night. Thanks a lot. Door, right head a yer bed, if you want to git out. [...] (*FM*, 369).

Diatopic and diastratic indications of pronunciation in Gudger's speech, dashes to frame Agee's reply ("Ah, sure, fine. Sure am."), and an authorial intrusion in the italics placed in brackets to interrupt the voice of the tenants. There is still another case of direct speech using unconventional punctuation marks. A short report of George Gudger's words bracketed in colons, whose use is perhaps *the* signature style of *Famous Men*:

Gudger says, Well:  
Well; I reckon tomorrow we'd better start to picking:  
(*FM*, 298).

Another example of the use of direct discourse to represent tenant speech in *Famous Men* comes with a full-page length reported exchange between Agee and the Ricketts boys. The single longest attempt to represent the tenants' voices in the book is introduced by the narrator's admission of the impossibility of helping the children (and their parents, for that matter) out of their poor living conditions—"(*Jesus, what could I ever do for you that would be enough*)"—followed by his, temporary, retreat to silence:

For a second I was unable to say anything, and just looked back at them. Then I said, taking care to say it to all three, Is your daddy around? They said nawsuh he was still to meetnen so was mama but ParLee was yer they would git her fir me. I told them, No, thanks, I didn't want to make any bother because I couldn't stay any time today; I just wanted to ask their Daddy would he tell me where Mr. George Gudger lived. They said he didn't live fur, he lived jist a piece down over the heel I could walk it easy. Not

---

<sup>5</sup> In *Famous Men*, Evans's photographs are placed together, as a single section, before the title and copyright pages, and they are uninterrupted by any typographical signs: no captions, no names, no dates.

wanting to leave the car here to have to come back for, I asked if I could be sure of the path. They told me, You go awn daown the heel twhur Tip Foster's haouse is ncut in in thew his barn nfolger the foot paff awn aout thew corn [...] (*FM*, 341).

Temporary indeed. The reader is not permitted to hear the tenant voices for long. Having let the Ricketts children speak for one page, the narrator resumes his retrospective first-person narration. The narrative differences with *Cotton Tenants* could not be more pronounced.

The dominant narrative mode of *Cotton Tenants* is the third-person voice of New Deal documentary reportage, very close to Caldwell's *Their Faces* and generally uninterrupted by first-person informant narratives. Unlike the intrusive and rambling first-person narrator of *Famous Men*, *Cotton Tenants*' third-person narrator engages with a factual account that avoids long-winded descriptions and polemical excesses while retaining a sharply critical stance towards the urgency to improve the "unfavorable circumstances" under which southern tenants live. Not unlike the reader of *Famous Men*, though, the reader of *Cotton Tenants* has limited access to the tenants' voices. The use of reported speech is sparse and in quotation marks, it clearly signals the idiolectic variations of the speakers. But even more interestingly, idiolectic markers are to be easily detected in a couple of sentences that apparently read like free indirect speech:

He [Frank Tingle] reads pulps, when he gets them, *from kiver to kiver*. (*CT*, 170, emphasis added).

The contamination of the narrator's and the subject's words implied here seems to suggest the dialogic, double-voiced perspective of free indirect speech. In *Cotton Tenants*, the use of such technique is unsystematic, almost accidental. Yet it recurs in one of the most overtly polemical, and ironic, paragraphs of the text:

But you get up into the poorest levels of the middle class before you run into anyone who will insist that Rowsavelt has done a lot for the poor man. [...] Fields does, though, knows who the President is. The name is *Rosenfelt*. He has nothing *agin* him but he wouldn't talk to him, because he is a highfalutin man. (*CT*, 50, emphasis added).

A reference to Roosevelt in a journalistic article about cotton tenancy sounds quite conventional of the Great-Depression documentary protocol. A prominent part of Roosevelt's rhetorical discourse in his first term (1933-37) was intended to support the work of the AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Administration), RA and WPA (Works Progress Administration) and therefore informed by a call on American taxpayers to help relieve the plight

of the poverty-stricken Southern tenant farmers.<sup>6</sup> Still, as Agee clearly explains in the first chapter of his article (“Business”), federal relief was not an affordable option for the majority of the economically depressed tenants (*CT*, 48), as exemplified by the stories of three breadwinners of the Fields, Gudger, Tingle’s families. After highlighting the irredeemable distance separating the government—both on a state and federal level—and Hale County tenants, and the social, cultural and political remoteness of the latter (“They are oblivious of country and state as of national politics,” 49), Agee proceeds to explain that the name of Roosevelt is rarely known, heard and spoken in the lower strata of the American population, and only by approaching the lower-middle class will one hear some echo of the reformist measures of the New Deal. The argument is made more compelling and immediately conspicuous by the deliberate use of two diastratic variants of the pronunciation of the name of the President: the generally accepted and received “Rowsavelt”—whose phonetics is quite close to the Merriam-Webster standard pronunciation of Roosevelt /ˈrō-zə-vəlt/—and the regionally and socially marked variant “Rosenfelt” associated to the speech of the uneducated Bud Fields and his distrust of the President’s pompous and affected style. By appropriating Bud Fields’ words and thoughts and by juxtaposing them to New Dealist reformist grammar through free indirect discourse, Agee manages to reproduce the shock of unrecognition he must have felt, as a Harvard-educated journalist and reform-spirited writer, upon realizing how distant and unreconciled the rhetorical design of relief national policies and the narrow understanding by their effective recipients were.<sup>7</sup>

In *Famous Men* both the authorial perspective on such a gap and its ensuing narrative rendition must be read in light of the overtly anti-New Deal position maintained throughout the book. The above-mentioned passage of *Cotton Tenants* is thus written off and replaced by an epigraph quoting Roosevelt in the chapter “Money”:

“You are farmers; I am a farmer myself”  
Franklin Delano Roosevelt (*FM*, 101).

Implied in the choice of this epigraph is not just the implicit derision of FDR’s self-explanatory rhetorical hazard and propaganda but the narrator’s

<sup>6</sup> Fireside Chat 8 “On Farmers and Laborers,” which was broadcast on September 6, 1936, is a case in point.

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the ideological implications of free indirect discourse as a sign of socio-economic and ideological conditions and confrontation of the author’s word and that of the *other*, see the essay by Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* (1972), and Fredric Jameson’s *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013).

abdication of a dialogical representation of the tenant voices. In *Cotton Tenants* the distance between the educated voices speaking flawless English (the authoritative speech of Roosevelt and his New Deal technicians) and the uneducated voices speaking in idiomatic English (poor white tenants) is, so to say, mediated by the presence of a third-person narrator that, even at the cost of some inconsistencies, accommodates a synthesis between the two worlds, positioning the radicals' otherness of the tenants as still knowable and "transcribable." In *Famous Men*, quite the reverse, with the monologic all-embracing "I" occupying the entire space of narration, and simultaneously containing and exploding conflicting perspectives and voices.

Roosevelt's quote is reported in traditional quotation marks. Interestingly enough, the only other case in which reported speech does not carry any regional or social connotation in *Famous Men* is Agee's rendering of the vilifying attacks of the landlords and townspeople on the three tenant families. A full-page of reported sentences outside of quotation marks:

George Gudger? Where'd you dig *him* up? I haven't been back out that road in twenty-five year.

Fred Ricketts? Why, that dirty son-of-a-bitch, he brags that he hasn't bought his family a bar of soap in five year. [...] (*FM*, 71).

The twofold significance of this passage lies in the narrator's decision to leave any regional trait of a presumable Southern dialect unrecorded, apparently adjusting to a narrative strategy perfected, nearly contemporarily, by William Faulkner in his novels where "only black and 'poor white' speech is specially marked for pronunciation" (Banfield 2015 [1982], 250) and regional traits are seldom used "unless they also signal class differences" (Portelli 1994, 168). By accent and dialect levelling the spoken language of Alabama landlords and townspeople, Agee makes it coterminous with Roosevelt's authoritative and educated speech, disclosing the "debilitating" nature of both (Staub 1994, 50).

### From Can't to Can't: the Textual Liminality of "the Negro"

While writing his account of Alabama white cotton tenants in the summer of 1936, Agee is highly aware that his endeavor will not be thorough and accurate as long as it does not address the county and country's racial divide:



No serious study of any aspect of cotton tenancy would be complete without mention at least of the landlord and of the Negro: one tenant in three is a Negro. But this is not their story. Any honest consideration of the Negro would crosslight and distort the issue with the problems not of a tenant but of a race [...]. (*CT*, 31).

Having acknowledged the necessary incompleteness of his narrative at the very outset of the essay (that is, in the Introduction), Agee then proceeds to tell the story of white tenant farmers in Hale County, a story articulated within nine chapters, the main body of the text. However, the urgency to tackle the plight of black tenants resurfaces in the first of the two Appendices at the end of *Cotton Tenants*:

But one tenant in three is a Negro. There is no space here to do him justice, nor shall that be attempted. In lieu of that, here are a few notes, almost at random. (*CT*, 205).

If on a mere sociological and factual level, The Appendix “On Negroes” is accurate despite its astringency, the most remarkable aspect of Agee’s account is its compassionate tone and the way it is stylistically designed and delivered. The argument is structured into four parts, all intended to resist the race prejudice and stereotyping that have historically inscribed African Americans as inherently inferior. The first part sets the tone and presents the reader with a lapidary list of reasons for “Negro-hating” from a poor white’s perspective:

The Negro is hated because he is a nigger, he is hated because it is believed that no unguarded white woman is safe within a mile of him; he is hated because he will work for wages a white man would spit on and will take treatment a white man would kill for; he is worst hated, of course, by whites who by the force of circumstance are anywhere near as low in the social scale as he is. (*CT*, 205-206).

The second part focuses on the political responsibility of “Southern New Dealers and liberals” for addressing the “Race problem” (207) ineffectually and for propaganda purposes.

Agee’s scathing critique of the inadequacy of institutional leadership results in his absolution of both Southern whites and blacks, who are held not responsible for their discordant relations:

No white Southerner is responsible for his ideas of the Negro [...] And no Negro is responsible for the gigantic weight of physical and spiritual brutality he has borne and is bearing. (*CT*, 207).

Agee turns then to a survey of the living conditions of black tenants through an impressive list of deprivations and mistreatments. The rhetorical pattern is again anaphoric, almost a jeremiad, constructed as a parody of a

double-entry bookkeeping of minus (“take away”) and plus (“add”). Under the minus sign, a list of (material) things black tenants do not have if compared to the already deprived white tenants; under the plus sign, a list of the additional pains and injustices the former have to suffer in a white supremacist context, building up to the final statement:

Keep on adding in one detail after another, and you get a creature so certified for disease, so lacking in possibilities of self-respect, so starved, and so abysmally ignorant, that you can scarcely wonder how few Southern whites are capable of thinking of the Negro as a human being. (210).

After the fourth part that provides a short account of the most widespread diseases and illnesses affecting the black community in Hale County, the Appendix reaches its conclusion and climax with a strenuously poetic reversal of the historically and socially constructed “inferiority” of the “Negro race”:

That they are rich in emotion and grace and almost supernaturally powerful as beings, is hard not to see. They dress in a sense of beauty no other American people approaches; they are creating perhaps the most distinguished American lyric art of their time; the “non-creative” are sympathetic to art and to delicacies of feeling and conduct as the general white people have not been for three centuries [...] *In short it is somewhat difficult to believe*, in the course of watching a few thousand of them going through alienated motions of their living, that *they are not* in several important respects *not merely* an equal but a superior race: and that what they have gone through during the past few generations has not contributed so much to that superiority as nature ever did, and as much as intelligence ever can. (211, emphasis added).

The use of the double negative introduced by the otherwise negative phrase (“It is somewhat difficult to believe”)—“they are not,” “not merely”—operates at two levels. If the two negative elements cancel each other out to give a positive meaning, they also create a nuanced meaning, almost betraying the semantic slippery ground of the argument. In *Cotton Tenants* African Americans occupy a liminal but somewhat strategic position, reminding the reader that no matter how appalling the living conditions of white tenants may sound, those of “the Negroes” are much worse and deserve a serious and thorough study.

Five years later, Agee’s *Famous Men* recasts the representation of “Negroes” to fit an even greater textual liminality. The presence of black tenants is contained within the July 1936 vignettes “Late Sunday Morning” and “Near a Church.” The first one is the story of Agee and Evans’s first encounter with black tenants in Hale County and it is framed by the mediation of an overbearing landlord who summons his “Negroes” to sing for the northern journalists. Facing the embarrassment of such a situation—

the hateful script of the “token nigger” singing for his white master—Agee cannot help “playing his part,” and ends up flipping a coin to the black men. The second sketch is even more disturbing in terms of Agee’s frustration with his failed attempts at reciprocity towards “the Negroes.” While standing near a church with Evans he sees a black couple passing by and decides to run after them to ask them permission to enter the church. The couple is terrified, and Agee’s self-loathing abysmal:

[...] The least I could have done was to throw myself flat on my face and embrace, and kiss their feet. (*FM*, 37).

As Paula Rabinowitz has argued, Agee’s “awkward moves towards reciprocity will always backfire, further alienating and embarrassing those he seeks to comfort” (Rabinowitz 1994, 17). It will take an African American author to tell the story of “the Negro” in another documentary book that, to paraphrase Alfred Kazin’s words on *Famous Men*, “will end all documentary books” (Kazin 1942, 495) by appropriating a communal “we” emanating from below. But that is another story.

## REFERENCES

- AGEE, J., EVANS, W. 2006 [1941]. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. London: Penguin.
- , —. 2013. *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*. Brooklyn: Melville House.
- ALLRED, J. 2010a. *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2010b. "Boring from Within: James Agee and Walker Evans at Time Inc." *Criticism* 52/1 (Winter): 41-70.
- BANFIELD, A. 2015 [1982]. *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*. New York: Routledge.
- CALDWELL, E., BOURKE-WHITE, M. 1995 [1937]. *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- DENNING, M. 1997. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. London: Verso.
- FOLLANSBEE QUINN, J. 2001. "The Work of Art: Irony and Identification in 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.'" *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 34/3: 338-368.
- HASLETT, A. 2013. "A Poet's Brief." In J. Agee, W. Evans. *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*, 13-26. Brooklyn: Melville Press.
- JAMESON, F. 2013. *The Antinomies of Realism*. London-New York: Verso.
- KAPLAN, L. 2005. *American Exposure: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century*. Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press.
- KAZIN, A. 1942. *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock.
- LARSON, T. 2013. "Lives Nurtured in Disadvantage: James Agee and Walker Evans's 'Cotton Tenants.'" *Los Angeles Review of Books* June 2.
- MACLEISH, A. 1977 [1938]. *Land of the Free*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- MCDANNELL, C. 2011. *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression*. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press.
- PASOLINI, P.P. 1988 [1972]. *Heretical Empiricism*. Ed. L.K. Barnett. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- PORTELLI, A. 1994. *The Text and the Voice: Writing, Speaking, Democracy, and American Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- RABINOWITZ, P. 1992. "Voyeurism and Class Consciousness: James Agee and Walker Evans, 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.'" *Cultural Critique* 21 (Spring): 143-170.
- . 1994. *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*. London-New York: Verso.
- REED, T.V. 1988. "Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real Postmodernist Realism in 'Let US Now Praise Famous Men.'" *Representations* 24: 156-176.
- RETMAN, S. 2014. "The Depression and the Novel." In P. Wald, M.E. Elliott (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, vol. 6, *The American Novel, 1879-1940*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- ROOSEVELT, F.D. 1937. "Second Inaugural Address." 20 Jan. 1937 *Presidential Speech Archive (PSA)*. Miller Center, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches#fdRoosevelt>
- STAUB, M.E. 1994. *Voices of Persuasion: Politics of Representation in 1930s America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- STOTT, W. 1973. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

SUMMERS, J. 2013. "Editor's Note." In J. Agee. *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*, 9-11. Brooklyn: Melville House.

SZALAY, M. 2000. *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*. Durham: Duke University Press.

WRIGHT, R. 2008 [1941]. *12 Million Black Voices*. New York: Basic Books.