Journal of American Studies of Turkey
44 (2016): 35-59

Repositioning *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in the Social Sciences: Ethnography, thick description, and reflexive sociology

Trevor Cunnington

Abstract:

This article is a disciplinary intervention into the academic work on James Agee's and Walker Evans' collaborative, multi-media work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (LUNPFM). While many of the published articles on LUNPFM have appeared under the auspices of literary studies and its corollaries, this article re-contextualizes it in the social sciences. Originally marketed as a sociological work, it anticipates some of the most innovative techniques and approaches in the social sciences in the latter half of the twentieth century. Although its poetic digressions make it of literary interest as well, its exhaustive description and analysis of phenomena is reminiscent of Clifford Geertz' take on "thick description," and it uses the emic technique of anthropology. As well, it resembles in some respects Pierre Bourdieu's work *Distinction*, especially in its formal presentation and in some of the aesthetic observations Agee makes. It bridges the literary and the sociological fields effectively.

Keywords:

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Aesthetics, Interdisciplinarity, Geertz, Bourdieu

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men began as an assignment for James Agee and Walker Evans for *Fortune* magazine. The magazine eventually rejected Agee's article. The reasons for this are complex; there was a change in editorial staff, and Robert Fitzgerald suggests its reputation among subscribers suffered because of a perceived drift to the left of the

political spectrum. In a memoir, published as an introduction to Agee's collected short prose, Fitzgerald describes Agee's relationship with the magazine as adversarial. Fitzgerald writes "He was visited on at least one occasion by a fantasy of shooting our employer" (4), and "At heart Agee knew his vocation to be in mortal competition, if I may put it so, with the Founder's enterprise. For *Fortune* to enlist Agee was like Germany enlisting France" (18). Another indication that Agee's place at *Fortune* was fraught with conflict is Fitzgerald's memory of "an interview with a rather knifelike *Fortune* editor who read what writing I had to show and clearly sized me up as a second but possibly even more difficult Agee, where one was already enough" (19). The still wet-behind-the-ears Agee – a Harvard graduate – was getting his legs as a journalist,[1] and in 1936 he spent several weeks in Alabama with Walker Evans and three poor, white farming families. I would call them sharecroppers, but Agee is very careful to distinguish between the Woods and the Ricketts, who are tenant farmers and at least own their tools and mules, and the Gudgers, who are sharecroppers, own almost nothing, and yet strive the hardest of all of them for outward respectability. After *Fortune* rejected his article, Agee extended the work he did with Evans into a book that became one of the wellsprings of the personal, "new journalism" of the 1960s and 1970s. The book was published in 1941, and it sold only 600 copies. However, in the 1960s it was rediscovered and posthumously turned into one of the most important literary documents of the Great Depression.

While much of the work on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has appeared in the realm of literary criticism, I would like to re-contextualize it in the realm of the social sciences as a fairly sophisticated amateur ethnography, using Geertz's (1973) strategy of "thick description" as a touchstone. This seems particularly apt, considering Geertz[2] himself likened the work of anthropology to that of the literary critic, reading culture as if it were a manuscript. Indeed, his work has found favor among some new historicists (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000:20).

1 Agee's attitudes towards journalism can lean towards the vitriolic, especially considering he was one himself. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, he writes "The very blood and semen of journalism, on the contrary, is a broad and successful form of lying. Remove that form of lying and you no longer have journalism" (207), although he does temper this attack with a qualification: "Journalism is not to be blamed for this; no more than a cow is to be blamed for not being a horse" (207). This itself resembles Bourdieu's deeply ambivalent relationship to the academy.

2 Both Geertz and Agee also wrote about cockfighting, oddly enough (Lucaites 1997:274).

Furthermore, Agee's relentless reflexivity also bears some resemblance to Pierre Bourdieu's approach to sociology, as best exemplified in *Distinction* (1984), in which the categories of analysis are themselves subjected to interrogation. Although there are crucial differences among their approaches and tones, I hope to show that their similarities are significant, as well.

R.C. Townsend (1973) used *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (hereafter referred to as LUNPFM) as a model for a course he taught on the possibilities of field work for teaching the literature of small-town America, and he cites it as one of the best examples of literature-meets-sociology. David Culbert (1978) finds a point of comparison between the Works Progress Administration's Life Histories Project and LUNPFM. Christine Frisinghelli, introducing an art exhibit of Pierre Bourdieu's photographic work in war-torn Algeria, places him squarely in the tradition of "committed, humanistic photography" and remarks that the reflexivity of Agee and Evans' work could serve as a springboard for its analysis. Clearly, the reception of LUNPFM has sprawled across disciplines, which is fitting because of its maverick style and generic hybridity. Yet no one, to my knowledge, has drawn the particular constellation I pursue here between Agee and Evans' work, the symbolic and contextual nuances of Geertz' anthropology, and the reflexivity of Bourdieu's sociology. I argue for a reconsideration of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as a prototype of some of the best work that emerged in the social sciences almost a half century later.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men as thick description

In his elaboration of the technique of "thick description," Geertz speaks on behalf of anthropologists, with at least a gesture of reservation:

> We are not, or at least I am not, seeking either to become natives (a compromised word in any case) or to mimic them. Only romantics or spies would seem to find point in that. We are seeking, in the widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them, a matter a great deal more difficult, and not only with strangers (1973:4).

To classify LUNPFM as an ethnography, we first need to make a detour to elucidate the ways in which rural populations (especially poor ones) are often considered backward, or as the anthropologist Fabian would put it, their "coevalness" is "denied" (1983). Indeed, early anthropology often consisted of the study of folklore and "the rural primitivism of the preindustrial world, marginalized in England and still flourishing on the Celtic fringe" (Stocking 1988: 213).[3] The families Agee writes about use a mule, a preindustrial mode of agricultural production, and they have not been plugged into the electric grid, either. Agee's idiosyncratic form of communism emerges when he comments on this. He writes "I cannot unqualifiedly excite myself in favor of Rural Electrification, for I am too fond of lamplight. Nor in favor of flush toilets, for I despise and deplore the middle-class American worship of sterility and worship-fear of its own excrement" (2001:185). Unlike more orthodox Marxists who insist on the importance of universal modernization, and the critique of its unevenness, Agee idealizes his informants, not unlike those who used the "noble savage" figure in the rhetoric of romanticism in the nineteenth century to lament the dire effects of modernity.[4] One could argue, however, that to counteract the ignoble esteem in which his informants are held in the social matrix of America, his idealization is a self-conscious use of hyperbole. And while it may seem strange to generically classify LUNPFM as ethnography, when Agee was studying people from the same national/cultural matrix as himself, he seems particularly prescient because the methods of anthropology have become increasingly used to examine intra- rather than inter-cultural relationships. As Geertz writes, "'Not only other peoples': anthropology can be trained on the culture of which it is itself a part, and it increasingly is. . ." (12). While Agee is a member of the same nation – and arguably, culture too – he recognizes his life is a world away from their lives.

Despite Agee's reference to himself as a spy (in the Persons and Places segment, reminiscent of a *dramatis personae*, and in a poem addressed to Walker Evans at the beginning of the book) – and indeed, in the scene where the Gudgers leave their house for the day's work, leaving him alone in the house, he rifles through their drawers as a

3 This "Celtic fringe" has been marshaled as the reason for the relative lack of class conflict in the southern US as compared with the north in the early decades of the twentieth century. Grady McWhiney (1988) argues that this is because of the cultural binding agent of a common Celtic heritage amongst the white population of the south,

4 Specific examples in the realm of visual culture include the painters Paul Kane, who painted portraits of Native Americans, and Cornelius Krieghoff, who painted Native Americans in the context of landscape painting.

spy would – he in no way wishes to become one of "them." When he says goodbye to Emma, Annie Mae Gudger's sister, he meditates on the flirtation that he, George, and Walker shared with her:

> There is tenderness and sweetness and mutual pleasure in such a 'flirtation' which one would not for the world restrain or cancel, yet there is also an essential cruelty, about which nothing can be done, and strong possibility of cruelty through misunderstanding, and inhibition, and impossibility, which can be restrained, and which one would rather die than cause any of: but it is a cruel and ridiculous and restricted situation, and everyone to some extent realizes it (55).

The "impossibility" of their coupling is ambiguous. Granted, Emma is married to a jealous brute of a man who wants to isolate her from her family, but the impossibility of their coupling may also be the class distance between them. After Agee rifles through their meager belongings, he remembers being alone in his grandfather's house and masturbating. Clearly, there is an unconscious and classed connection between his journalistic practice and his desire.

Paula Rabinowitz, in her article on LUNPFM, makes much of Agee's characterization of himself as a spy and Walker Evans as a counterspy, which is appropriate due to her examination of voyeurism as a central feature of middle class consciousness using Freud's elaboration of the scopophilic drive (1992). For Rabinowitz, the class relationship is sexualized; Agee's desire for Annie Mae Gudger's sister Emma (Agee 2001:55), and his disturbingly frank expression of desire for ten-year old Maggie Louis Gudger (*ibid.* 352-353) is symptomatic of this relationship between class, the scopophilic drive, and eroticism, which Rabinowitz explores through Freud's case study of the Rat Man, who peeks under the dress of his family's domestic servant.[5] On a similar note, Katherine Henninger (2004) uses the notion of middle class access to working class and "white trash" experience to critique the power relations developed through the middle class' insistence on this visual access. She uses LUNPRFM and a work to which it is closely related but which it attacks – Margaret Bourke-

5 Incidentally, Günter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum* opens with a folksy version of the Rat Man's case history.

White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* – as foils through which to appraise the way photography is used to control the images of Bone and her family in Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard out of Carolina*. With regards to Agee "becoming" the object of his study, of "going native" so to speak, there is no chance. Geertz relates this tendency not only to spies but to romantics as well. While Ella Zohar Ophir recognizes in Agee's text a "romantic lineage" inherited from "the poetics of Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman," especially in its "antipathy to art and its residual pastoralism" – and its transcendental elevation of Nature, I would add (Agee 2001:206) – she concludes that Agee's "ambivalence about his own romanticism" shapes LUNPFM's "distinctive modernism" (2007:127). So despite his self-identification as a spy, Agee during the fieldwork portion of his project is no romantic, and on neither account does he want to become his object of study.

Geertz asserts that the point of ethnography is to instigate a conversation. And in this conversation it is necessary to make the "maneuver, usually too casually referred to as 'seeing things from the actor's point of view,' too bookishly as 'the *verstehen* approach' or too technically as 'emic analysis,' that so often leads to the notion that anthropology is a variety of either long-distance mind reading or cannibal-isle fantasizing, and which, for someone anxious to navigate past the wrecks of a dozen sunken philosophies, must therefore be executed with a great deal of care" (1973:4). There is plenty of evidence that Agee has done exactly this, and that he is painfully aware of the care that must be taken with his subject because, as he writes, ""In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he *exists*, in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist" (9). The evidence of his awareness of his ethical obligations to his informants is alluded to in detail in the appraisal of the book from the perspective of the very prevalent theme of representational failure in the literature on LUNPFM by James Crank (2009) and by Aaron Chandler (2009:196). Chandler, however, reads Agee's guilt and self-abasement through the masochistic philosophical disposition described by Gilles Deleuze (1989: 74-75), and he claims that Agee's fragmentary textual structures (that shall become important later in the discussion of reflexivity and

Bourdieu) "gain coherence when read through this philosophical and affective symptomatology" (2009:198). On the other hand, Geertz states that "coherence cannot be the major test of validity for a cultural description" (1973:5), because the criterion of coherence is itself culturally determined. To reposition LUNPFM in the social sciences, it is important to refrain from the temptation of imposing coherence on this text with a framework from a philosopher who theorized subjective fragmentation.

I can think of no "thicker" description than some of the passages in LUNPFM; Agee's language minutely renders his surroundings through sprawling paratactic sentences full of adjectival richness that often last more than a page.[6] But to strip all this complexity down to what Agee is most simply doing, it resembles closely what Geertz says an anthropologist does: "He observes, he records, he analyzes [sic]" (1973:5). And the evidence of the conversation to which Geertz refers is certainly apparent when Agee renders the speech of his informants in their own dialects and their own gestures. For instance, when Agee and Evans ask a landowner if they can venture on to his land to take pictures of the tenant farmers, he writes "Walker said it would be all right to make pictures, wouldn't it, and he said, Sure, of course, take all the snaps you're a mind to; that is, if you can keep the niggers from running off when they see a camera. When they saw the amount of equipment stowed in the back of our car, they showed that they felt they had been taken advantage of, but said nothing of it" (23). Agee does not bother with the more polite name for African-Americans of his time that he uses elsewhere ("negro"), instead leaving the landowner's language intact. Furthermore, there is no transition between the landowner's utterance and Agee's description of the landowner's reaction to seeing the equipment in the back of the car. The "they" changes from the landowner's reference to his African-American tenants to the landowner and his company in the next sentence. The absence of quotation marks renders the scene's totality, and the scene involves both observation and recording. His analysis is informed by an idiosyncratic mixture of mystical Catholicism and Marxism. Lionel Trilling criticized Agee for

6 Take this account of the African-Americans' song they perform for Agee and Evans at their landowner's behest as but one example among many: "They stiffened in their bodies and hesitated, several seconds, and looked at each other with eyes ruffled with worry; then the bass nodded, as abruptly as a blow, and with blank faces they struck into a fast, sassy, pelvic tune whose words were loaded almost beyond translation with comic sexual metaphor" (28).

making the suffering of his subjects a virtue in itself (1980:378). I would argue that Agee's rhetorical strategy is intentionally hyperbolic in order to offset the disrepute in which the tenant farmers are held in their own community, as shall become clear later.

It should be noted that despite the similarities of Agee's research and textual practices to that of social scientists, his panegyric tone in parts would certainly not sit well with either Geertz or Bourdieu. However, the sections of the book, such as "Money," "Shelter," "Clothing," "Education," and "Work," which, combined with the introspective and reflexive "On the Porch 2" compose "Part Two: Some Findings and Comments," are by and large an inventory of empirical data. In fact, the book was originally marketed as a work of sociology, until it was adopted by literary studies posthumously. Part Two makes up 43 percent of the entire book, so it is far from insignificant.[7] The vignettes that frame this section are not free of sociological interest, either.

Also, the notion of conversation is especially clear in Emma's speech to Agee upon their parting. Agee's rapport with his informants is impressive:

> I want you and Mr. Walker to know how much we all like you, because you make us feel easy with you; we don't have to act any different from what it comes natural to act, and we don't have to worry what you're thinking about us, it's just like you was our people and had always lived here with us, you all are so kind, and nice, and quiet, and easygoing, and we wisht you wasn't never going to go away but stay on here with us, and I just want to tell you how much we all keer about you; Annie Mae says the same, and you please tell Mr. Walker, too, if I don't see him afore I go (57-58).

The spelling of "wisht," "keer," and "afore" shows Agee's desire for phonetic verisimilitude in rendering the speech of his informants. On the other hand, the distinction in language that arises between Agee's very rich prose and the speech of his informants, despite his valorization of their use of language, remains very stark. By making such differences

7 This calculation was made simply by dividing the amount of pages in the section by the amount of pages in Agee's entire text.

clear, Agee implicitly troubles the notion of national unity in a shared culture. As Jessica Hester argues "conflicting notions of class, region, race, and gender hierarchies call into question the usefulness and possibility of a monolithic national image, southern white poverty confuses ideas of national identity further, by combining class, race, and region in a way that insists on a rethinking of how these categories exist in American culture" (2008:57). The consumerist ethos of American society that intensified in the heady days of the jazz age confronts the lack of purchasing power of these poor tenants, and in the prevalence of homemade things in their homes, displayed in the pages of this book. Certainly, in the context of the depression, there was a generalized scaling back of consumerism and an adoption of austerity measures on both micro and macro levels. But the effects of these tendencies on the poor were magnified because of their pre-existing poverty. The difference between minute changes of class increases on the continuum towards poverty. Agee shows us an example of this in the downward social mobility of the Ricketts, and he renders this both through economic data, and in a page-long monologue by Sadie Ricketts, which he transcribes (70). Thus, he gives us both the objective sociological perspective, and the very subjective, personalized perspective of Sadie. Such balance in a text should be the object of everyone's envy. Sadie says "In the years when we lived down by the river we had all the fish we wanted, and yellow milk, enough to sell, and we bought two mules:

When we moved in here I wanted to make the house pretty, I folded a lot of pattern-paper and cut it into a pretty lace pattern and hung it on the mantelpiece: but now I just don't care any longer, I don't care how anything looks:" (70). This description of decoration very closely resembles both Agee's description of the Gudgers' altar-like mantel, and Evans' photograph of the very same. This constitutes a folk-art practice of these southern tenant farmers and sharecroppers, and joins them as part of a similar culture that is not Agee's, except that the years of abject poverty have ground Sadie's will to beautify their home into a pulp. In the "Money" section, Agee writes:

> Years ago the Ricketts were, relatively speaking, almost prosperous. Besides their cotton farming they had ten cows and sold the milk, and they lived near a good stream and had all the fish they wanted. Ricketts went $400 into debt on a fine young pair of mules.

> One of the mules died before it had made its first crop; the other died the year after; against his fear, amounting to full horror, of sinking to the half-crop level where nothing is owned, Ricketts went into debt for other, inferior mules; his cows went one by one into debts and desperate exchanges and by sickness; he got congestive chills; his wife got pellagra; a number of his children died; he got appendicitis and lay for days on end under the ice cap; his wife's pellagra got into her brain; for ten consecutive years now, though they have lived on so little rations money, and have turned nearly all their cottonseed money toward their debts, they have not cleared or had any hope of clearing a cent at the end of the year (104).[8]

Because "years ago" is vague, I cannot precisely render the equivalent of $400 in today's currency, but if I estimate that the time the Ricketts' relative prosperity started to decline in 1928 (8 years before Agee's visit), then the equivalent in 2010 currency would be $5090 (Officer and Williamson 2011). Considering that the Woods' family "has more often cleared $50 and less" per year "During the depression years," and that the Ricketts' family is the same type of tenant farmer working under similar conditions in the same area, this debt is enormous. Yet it is necessary because the mule is an integral part of their mode of production. Fifty dollars per year is the equivalent of $814/yr in 2010 (*ibid.*). This transcription of Sadie's reflections very much exemplifies Geertz's view of the necessity of the "maneuver" of emic analysis.

Furthermore, this inclusion of the (classed/cultural) interlocutor's point of view is also engendered by Agee's incorporation of his informants' attitudes towards their own situations:

> Since I have talked of 'esthetics' the least I can do is to add a note *on it in their terms* [italics mine]: they live in a steady shame and insult of discomforts, insecurities, and inferiorities, piecing these together into whatever

8 This mini-narrative clearly supports Vollman's contention that one of the characteristics of poverty-stricken people is accident-proneness (2007).

> semblance of comfortable living they can, and the whole of it is a stark nakedness of makeshifts and the lack of means: yet they are also, of course, profoundly anesthetized. The only direct opinion I got on the houses as such was from Mrs. Gudger, and it was, with the tears coming to her eyes, 'Oh, I do *hate* this house *so bad*! Seems like they ain't nothing in the whole world I can do to make it pretty.' As for the anesthesia: it seems to me a little more unfortunate, if possible, to be unconscious of an ill than to be conscious of it; though the deepest and most honest and incontrovertible rationalization of the middle-class southerner is that they are 'used' to it" (185).

Whereas Agee writes paeans about the beauty inherent in the spare asymmetry of their homes, Annie Mae Gudger passionately expresses her dissatisfaction. As a visitor, Agee has the luxury of recognizing beauty, whereas Annie Mae finds in the compulsion of her circumstances the profoundest ugliness. As Crank (2009), has noted, one of the few occasions in the book when Agee seems happy is the night his car gets stuck on the back road on which the Gudgers live. Staying the night with them, he "gradually feels like a member of the tenant farmer's family. He takes great pleasure at the pain he derives from having the small insects crawling on the bed bite him, just as they would the children of the house" (Crank 2009:170). Lying in their bed and having vermin torment him, he experiences firsthand some of the "discomforts" of their poverty. After Agee sleeps in the Gudger house, and after a thick description of the odors of his informants' houses in the "Shelter" section, he reveals the experience of "Waking, feeling on your face the almost slimy softness of loose cotton lint and of fragile, much washed, torn cotton cloth, and immediately remembering your fear of the vermin it might be harboring, your first reactions were of light disgust and fear, for your face, which was swollen and damp with sleep and skimmed with lint, felt fouled, secretly and dirtily bitten and drawn of blood, insulted" (198). This is the epitome of the emic technique, although it could be argued that the difference between Agee and an anthropologist is the issue of intention. Even then, however, Agee's attempt to render the families in their wholeness continues to resemble

an ethnographic act. Furthermore, he notes that they are anesthetized, and William Vollman identified "numbness" as one of the dimensions of poverty in his 2007 project of recording poor people's reasons for why they are poor (101).[9] In the introduction to his book, Vollman makes an explicit link between his book and LUNPFM, and he writes "He [Agee] wants us to feel and smell everything that his subjects have to, and comes as close to accomplishing this as it is possible to do using the sole means of the alphabet" (2007:xiii). Indeed, there are passages in LUNPFM where the "thick description" delves into sensory realms often neglected in work in the social sciences: the olfactory, the tactile, and the gustatory. He has realized the emic technique of anthropology – without the credentials of an anthropologist – in a very impressive manner. Agee has not, however, accounted for how anesthetization and numbness are survival mechanisms for life under duress.

Walker Evans, who would at one point become part *Fortune*'s staff (1945-65), was in 1936 employed by the Historical Section of the Information Division of the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration (RA/FSA) as a documentary photographer. Indeed, social documentary was an emergent genre that encompassed multiple media forms "from the Federal Writers' Project's *American Guides Series* to the 'Living Newspapers' produced by the Federal Theater Project" (Lucaites 1997:273). The scale of these projects did not, however, approach that of the photographic project, which included photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Russell Lee and produced over 277,000 photos that depicted the plight of the impoverished rural areas of America, which were intended from the outset to be of historical value. Lucaites argues that this photographic evidence of the depression and the hardships it produced contradicted Hoover's claim in June, 1930 that the depression was over, and shook the public faith in Hoover to Roosevelt's favour (*ibid*. 272). However, the aforementioned photographic project's first year was 1935 (*ibid*. 273), so his argument does not make sense according to the chronology of the historical record. To his credit, Lucaites cites the work of Maren Stange to delineate the pervasiveness of these images during the depression: they appeared in government documents; popular magazines such as *Time*, *Fortune*, *Nation's Business*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *New York Times*, *Junior Scholastic*, *Life*, and *Look*; the Museum of Modern Art; and at the 1936 Democratic National Convention (*ibid.* 273-4;). In short, these

9 While Agee confines his study to the rural south, Vollman's study of poverty has an international dimension.

photographs were everywhere and functioned as a constant reminder of the class heterogeneity of the nation. And while class is in no way, shape, or form a social category homologous to culture, Agee's treatment of his impoverished subjects in a quasi-anthropological manner (especially the use of the emic technique) is a deft rhetorical move that implicitly highlights and troubles the middle class' tendency to narrate American history from their own point of view.

The focus of this large-scale photographic project shifted from rural poverty to the small town "as representative of the quintessential American community that John Dewey had first described as being in 'eclipse' in 1927" (*ibid.* 273). According to Michael Augspurger (2004), *Fortune* magazine competed with the New Deal (who "focused on the small town as the center of American life") and the leftist Popular Front for control over the definitive portrait of American culture, and it maintained "the necessity of establishing a broad consensus in support of the principles of capitalism" and "celebrated the business-driven culture of modernity" (12). Augspurger also details the importance of the emergent professional-managerial class, in whose ranks artists and scientists acclaimed the purity of their goals in distinction from the vulgarities of the business world, in the evolution of *Fortune*. He uses James Agee as an example of the adversarial relationship some of the members of this emergent class had with business. *Fortune* in a period of capitalist crisis wanted to pair its commercial success with socio-cultural respectability, which was the bulwark of the professional-managerial class. It is tempting to consider *Fortune*'s employment of the irascibly communist Agee as a form of recuperation or co-option, perhaps not unlike Rockefeller's commission of Diego Rivera's murals in his headquarters. However, these artists also managed to carve out spaces of resistance in the landscape of America, even though LUNPFM initially failed to attract much of an audience.

Let Us Now Praise Distinction

In this section I will focus on the content of LUNPFM and *Distinction*, especially the attention paid in LUNPFM to aesthetic distinctions made by his informants, however I will also briefly discuss one formal idiosyncrasy common to both books. When Sadie Ricketts expresses her lack of desire to beautify her home, a desire she once had, she affirms Bourdieu's contention that the "aesthetic disposition"

depends upon freedom from economic necessity. He asserts "Objective distance from [economic] necessity and from those trapped within it combines with a conscious distance which doubles freedom by exhibiting it" (1984:55). The wretched state of poverty Sadie finds herself in crushes her concern for beauty; her freedom is halved. At another point in his book, Bourdieu could almost be discussing LUNPFM itself: "Like the photographic recording of the social picturesque, whose populist objectivism distances the lower classes by constituting them as an object of contemplation or even commiseration or indignation, the spectacle of the 'people' making a spectacle of itself, as in folk dancing, is an opportunity to experience the relationship of distant proximity, in the form of the idealized vision purveyed by aesthetic realism and populist nostalgia" (1984:58). However, in a passage marked by acerbic sarcasm, Agee explains that his book "is written for all those who have a soft place in their hearts for the laughter and tears inherent in poverty viewed at a distance, and especially for those who can afford the retail price; in the hope that the reader will be edified, and may feel kindly disposed toward any well-thought-out liberal efforts to rectify the unpleasant situation down South, and will somewhat better and more guiltily appreciate the next good meal he eats" (12). This sarcasm becomes clear later when he attacks both liberalism and new deal bureaucrats. The "laughter and tears" also encompasses the tragic/comic dichotomy in representations of poor whites; those who win our sympathy with their stoic characters constitute the tragic mode, while we laugh at or revel in the misfortune of those we find repugnant in a form of schadenfreude. Like most dichotomies, however, this is a simplification.[10] The sarcasm of this passage implicitly critiques the "distance" Agee discusses in a form of reflexivity that anticipated Bourdieu's notion of "distant proximity."

Agee tells us that among the tenant farmers and sharecroppers "The use of enamel ware is a small yet sharp distinction and symptom in 'good taste,' and in 'class,' and in a sort of semi-esthetic awareness, choice and will. The use of gray as against white is still another discriminative. That they bought small sizes, which are a very few cents cheaper, speaks for itself. So does the fact that they have afforded still another basin, not quite big enough for its use, to wash their feet in" (133). Using gray instead of white might be a strategy to minimize the appearance of dirtiness. This concern for cleanliness (having separate

10 It is important, however, to register how moral worthiness is constructed in representations of poor whites.

wash basins for hands and feet), after Agee has just commented on how some of the rural poor have given up using soap at all, shows how some try to distinguish themselves from the rest of their social group. This seems especially true of the Gudgers', who have the least amount of property of Agee's informants, and he details how Annie Mae Gudger is much more concerned about how her family appears (and smells) to others than the Woods or the Ricketts. While the explanation of this could reside in the realm of class, it could also be a function of age. The Gudgers are much younger than the other two sets of parents.[11] The implication available here is that the residual energy of youth allows the Gudgers to "keep up appearances" or even to care much about it. The very desire to "keep up appearances" reflects the practice of social climbers or those that wish to distance themselves from being perceived as the bottom of the social hierarchy, whether they are or not. As such, it is indicative of class struggle. Bourdieu writes "The pure disposition is so universally recognized as legitimate that no voice is heard pointing out that the definition of art, and through it the art of living [such as the consumption of household goods and clothing], is an object of struggle among the classes" (1984:48). In many cases, the struggle is to distance oneself from the bottom, from which upward mobility is if not impossible, extremely unlikely.

In discussing the efforts of Annie Mae Gudger to distinguish her family, and comparing her to his other informants in terms of norms of the social class to which they belong, Agee writes:

> . . . Mrs. Woods, dressing herself and her family in so little that was ever intended for human beings to wear, is 'below normal,' and Mrs. Ricketts 'below' and far aside from it. On the other hand, by the almost complete absence of such adapted materials [those that are not intended to be incorporated into clothing] in her family's outfitting, I am sure that Mrs. Gudger feels intense social and perhaps 'spiritual' distinctions between the kinds of cloth in their meanings: and that with as little money as Mrs. Woods and hardly more than

11 George and Annie Mae Gudger are 31 and 27 years old; Thomas Woods is 59, and his second wife Ivy is in her mid twenties; and Fred and Sadie Ricketts are 54 and 49 years old.

> Mrs. Ricketts has, her success in keeping to one side of this line is the result of an effort and strain as intense as her feeling. In this she differs from and is 'above' the 'normal,' as she is too in the designing of the clothes, and in various symbolic reaches into the materials of a 'higher' class (243).[12]

Ivy Woods and Sadie Ricketts use materials like feed, flour, or fertilizer sacks to make clothing for their families, however, Annie Mae Gudger restricts herself to using cloth that she buys. Especially in matters of clothing, ready-made is a significant sign of distinction. Agee notes this especially in the case of hats: "In any case an absolute minimum social and egoistic requirement of a man's hat in this class and country is that it be ready-made and store bought. And so the fact that Ricketts is willing to work and to appear in public in a home-made hat is significant of his abandonment 'beneath' the requirements of these symbologies, both toward himself and toward his world" (240-241). And because "it [aesthetic taste, which includes not only taste in literature, theater, painting, film, music, but furniture, clothing, interior design as well] distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has – people and things – and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others" (Bourdieu 1984:56), Agee shows how Ricketts abandons himself to others' classifications. He also records the small but significant acts of resistance to the stereotyping implicit in classification:

> It happens that not one of the three men uses any form of the farmer's straw which is popularly thought of as the routine hat; and this may well be, in part (and in many other men), in reaction against a rural-identifying label too glibly applied to them. It is certain of Gudger, anyhow, that his head-covering, like his sunday belt and the pullover sweater he wants, are city symbols against a rural tradition: indeed, it is industrial, or is the symbol almost of a skilled trade: a handsome twenty-five cent machinist's cap made of ticking in bold

12 For a bracing and astute account of African-American quilt-making practices, that incorporate similar "adapted materials," see Prokopow (2003).

> stripes of blue-white and dark blue, drawing all possible elements of his square-chopped, goodlooking, and ineradicably rural face into city and machine suggestions (240).

Thus, Agee registers how the poorest among the three – in terms of property – takes the most care in appearances, and he anticipates Bourdieu's rigorous analysis of distinction: the relationship between class and aesthetic consumption.

Later, in the "first meetings" sections, which positions the introduction of Evans and Agee to their informants near the end of the book in a very modernist gesture of inverted chronology, Ricketts is characterized as "so insecure, before the eyes of any human being" that he "did the talking, and the loudest laughing at your own hyperboles, stripping to the roots of the lips your shattered teeth, and your vermilion gums; and watching me with fear from behind the glittering of laughter in your eyes, a fear that was saying, 'o lord god please for once, just for once, don't let this man laugh at me up his sleeve, or do me any meanness or harm'(I think you never got over this, I suppose you never will)" (320). Ricketts' insecurity is linked to his hopelessness; he has given up on any means of distinguishing himself, and appears to Agee and through him to the reader, as a nervous, broken man. It also is a testament to Ricketts' experience; clearly he has endured a lot of derision because of his class position to appear so wary. Bourdieu notes the opposite characteristic to insecurity in the bourgeois: "It [childhood acquaintance with "legitimate" aesthetic excellence] confers the self-certainty which accompanies the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy, and the ease which is the touchstone of excellence; it produces the paradoxical relationship to culture made up of self-confidence amid (relative) ignorance and of casualness amid familiarity, which bourgeois families hand down to their offspring as if it were an heirloom" (1984:66). There is a certain relationship drawn in the work of both men between economic status on the one hand, and confidence on the other. It should be remembered that the trajectory of Ricketts' economic status was characterized by downward mobility, and this might be a significant factor in his insecurity.

While Bourdieu does cite freedom from necessity as a precondition for the "pure" aesthetic disposition, and "the class of worked-upon objects, themselves defined in opposition to natural

objects, the class of art objects would be defined by the fact that it demands to be perceived aesthetically, i.e., in terms of form rather than function (29), this does not mean that Agee's informants have no sense of aesthetics whatsoever. Certainly Annie Mae's efforts to decorate the fireplace and her stupendous efforts on her family's clothes offer evidence to the contrary. Moreover, Agee reveals that among the tenants and sharecroppers, "Many men, by no means all, like to cut holes through the uppers [of their shoes] for footspread and for ventilation: and in this they differ a good deal between utility and art. You seldom see purely utilitarian slashes: even the bluntest of these are liable to be patterned a little more than mere use requires: on the other hand, some shoes have been worked on with a wonderful amount of patience and studiousness toward a kind of beauty, taking the memory of an ordinary sandal for a model, and greatly elaborating and improving it" (232). Thus, the men try to distinguish themselves from each other by an artisanal attention to the ventilating cuts in their shoes. And despite the houses of his informants, which fail not only the "daylight test" [whether they let daylight pierce the walls and roof], but do not protect them completely from the rain either, Agee asserts his "belief that such houses as these approximate, or at times by chance achieve, an extraordinary 'beauty'" (177). Shane Gunster, in his excellent book on critical theory for cultural studies, notes that Benjamin describes "the plush, crowded *interior* of middle- and upper-class homes of this period [the nineteenth century] as part of a futile struggle by those with means to wall themselves off from the unfathomable chaos that lay outside" where they can feel a "radical separation from the exterior . . . undisturbed by the noise, activity, and threats of the street, the space of the masses and of production, a private individual divorced from the community" (2004:73). That the homes of the poor farmers in LUNPFM are so permeable is also a material manifestation of their classed existence.

Agee continues to write of their homes: "In part because this is ordinarily neglected or even misrepresented in favor of their shortcomings as shelters; and in part because their esthetic success seems to me even more important than their functional failure; and finally out of the uncontrollable effort to be faithful to my personal predilections, I have neglected function in favor of esthetics. I will try after a little to rectify this (not by denial); but at present, a few more remarks on the 'beauty' itself, and on the moral problems involved

in evaluating it" (177). Agee's self-abasing rhetoric shows on his part recognition that his privilege relative to his informants permits him such a "pure" aesthetic disposition to find beauty in a house that Annie Mae hates. He is an interloper; she has to live with the difficulties of her home's "functional failure" all the time, with no choice of an alternative. I would also argue that his desire to find beauty in their homes also shows the compassion to which he aspires; he does not want only to pity their wretchedness but to celebrate the way they make do with what they have.

Another reference to the idea of distinction arises when Agee offers Ricketts and Gudger a cigarette, when they are all stuck at Gudger's house during a thunderstorm on the day Agee first meets them. Ricketts refuses the cigarette, trying to be polite within the norms of the behavior of his class. Gudger takes one, and Agee remarks "I realize later that he likes machine-made cigarettes less well than those he rolls for himself, but he is fond of the meaning and distinction which is in their price, and would probably always use them if he could afford them." (352).[13] One of Bourdieu's observations, derived from the collection of data via survey, was that "Explicit aesthetic choices are in fact often constituted in opposition to the choices of the groups closest in social space, with whom the competition is most direct and most immediate, and more precisely, no doubt, in relation to those choices most clearly marked by the intention (perceived as pretension) of marking distinction vis-à-vis lower groups" (1984:60). This both supports and contradicts Agee's findings. The Gudgers try to distinguish themselves by dressing above their class, but technically they are of a slightly lower group – sharecroppers as opposed to tenants. However, it *is* an attempt to distinguish themselves to the groups closest to them in social space; the relationship is inverted. Bourdieu's insight about competition among those closest in social space is echoed by Theodore Allen: "the system of racial oppression is not characterized by the distinction maintained between one of the common run of laboring people and the 'best of his neighbors,' i.e., the gentlefolk of the leisure class. Rather, its hallmark is the insistence on the social distinction between the *poorest* member of the oppressor group and any member, however propertied, of the oppressed group" (1991:243). In the vignettes that frame LUNPFM, the small-holding farmers, whose homesteads he passes, seem likewise infected by decrepitude.

13 This is directly reminiscent of Adorno's famous quip "The consumer is really worshiping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert" (1991, 38).

They distinguish themselves even unconsciously through such subtle means as posture, gestures, and social bearing. Likewise, the landowner Agee speaks to at the beginning, who arranges for two of his African-American tenants to sing for Agee and Evans, would likely be considered lowly in comparison to metropolitan elites. However, he is authoritative almost to the point of being domineering in that vignette. He does not even address his African-American tenants directly, though they are in his company; he speaks to them through his foreman and says "How's So-and-So doing, all laid by? Did he do that extra sweeping I told you?" (25). In front of a stranger, he shows that he delegates his delegator, and in the "Work" section, this chore is revealed by sociological context to be the work that landowners save up for tenants and sharecroppers for the periods during which they earn no income. Agee notes that they get paid far below the regular rates for these chores, and he damns the whole system of tenantry and sharecropping as the most brutal of exploitation and oppression.

Lastly, I would like to compare Bourdieu's tactics of presentation to Agee's. Agee's transcription of Sadie Ricketts' monologue – discussed above – is followed by a section of double-spaced statements. These present themselves as "the talk of the town" – that is, what the people in town (especially the landowners) say about Agee's informants. Through their speech, Agee gives us a relatively unmediated glance into the class system in the south in its contradictory ideologies and into the dialectic of town and country, owner and worker. It is worth quoting this whole section:

> 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.
>
> Ricketts? They're a bad lot. They've got Miller blood mixed up in them. The children are a bad problem in school.
>
> Why, Ivy Pritchert [Woods' wife] was one of the worst whores in this whole part of the country: only one that was worse was her own mother. They're about the lowest trash you can find.
>
> Why, she had her a man back in the woods for years before *he* married her; had two children by him.

> Gudger? He's a fair farmer. Fair cotton farmer, but he hain't got a mite a sense.
>
> None of these people has any sense, nor any initiative. If they did, they wouldn't be farming on shares.
>
> Give them money and all they'll do with it is throw it away.
>
> Why, times when I envy them. No risk, we take all the risk; all the clothes they need to cover them; food coming up right out of their land.
>
> So you're staying out at Gudgers', are you? And how do you like the food they give you? Yeah, aheh-heh-heh-heh, how do you like that fine home cookin'; how do you like that good wholesome country food?
>
> Tell you the honest truth, they owe us a big debt. Now you just tell me, if you can, what would all those folks be doing if it wasn't for us? (71).

Here, the familiar motifs of the filth, moral unworthiness, and the cacogenic origins of "white trash" appear, all of which Wray (2006) discusses in his book on "white trash." According to Wray, cacogenesis was one explanatory framework for the lowly existence of poor whites in the south. He writes "in southern secessionists' eyes, [it was] not bad environment but 'bad blood' that tainted the poor white trash" (18). This practice of rendering his sociological interlocutors in their own words is one that Bourdieu uses not only in *Distinction* (which adds a qualitative dimension to his quantitative survey research and improves its rigor), but in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1984:108) as well. On the level of content, the one comment about Fred Ricketts bragging about not buying soap suggests something fascinating about the misinterpretations inherent in the relationship between the owners and the workers. The owner reads as choice what Ricketts probably views as necessity: that he chooses not to wash as opposed to making rational decisions in prioritizing elements in his budget. Furthermore, after Agee's characterization of Ricketts' insecurity, the owner's description

of Ricketts' statement as a brag strikes the reader as incongruous. By setting the transcription of Sadie Ricketts' despairing monologue next to the discourse of the landowners to whom her family is beholden, Agee inscribes the relationship between class and ideology. Sadie wonders how her family got trapped, and the landowners chastise their tenants' incompetence.

Agee's forays into the "emic technique" and his exhaustive, "thick" descriptions that delve into all realms of sensory experience have much in common with Geertz' approach to the interpretation of culture. That he performed such "anthropological" moves on peripheral members of his own culture was undoubtedly prescient of the shifts of anthropological practice in the latter half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, his self-interrogation (reflexivity), his strategies of representation, and the way he fleshes out the aesthetics of the tenant farmers – objectively and subjectively – anticipates some of Pierre Bourdieu's most important contributions to sociology and theory. To clarify, I view "anticipation" as the emergence of methods, techniques, and insights *before their time*. This notion of time being somehow out of joint is an explanatory maneuver for a perceived failure of adequate diffusion of an idea or a method. History, as an objective manifestation of aggregated memory, moves in such a way that involves forgetting as much as, or even more than, remembering. It must bias itself towards the recorded. The process of recording is of course embedded; it has a perspective; there is no privileged point of all-perception to which we have direct access. LUNPFM is a recorded work that anticipates a moment later in the century, a decade from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties, when its *modus operandi* hits the ground running and percolates through a large field of knowledge, the social sciences. Anticipatory moments are doomed to and blessed by recoverable obscurity. The question of direct influence is still open, however, I find this question less interesting in the context of the dialectic between the recorded and the unrecorded. We can only imagine the lines of influence and the trails of diffusion in the realm of the unrecorded; we must not pretend that this realm does not exist. Therefore, Agee anticipated some of the most important and influential developments in the social sciences by some forty years.

By way of conclusion, I will share with the reader the difficulty I had in writing this article because Agee's text is so rich. There are so many aspects of it that I could not discuss here because of time and space restrictions, such as an exploration of the politics of the

representation of race in it (such as the metaphors of bestiality applied to the poor whites and the African-Americans alike), the queer shades of sexuality in the one landowner's interactions with his African-American tenants (and for that matter, in Agee's own transcribed thoughts and real life), the rhetorical strategies (especially parataxis, in ventio, apostrophe, aposiopepsis, and visual/textual pleonasm) Agee uses, the strange digressions into aesthetic theory and memoir, and the interaction between image and text. I would like to point out the shifts in the modes of address throughout the book, though. LUNPFM starts with an *a posteriori* reflection on the work Agee and Evans did, during which Agee directly addresses the reader with an almost accusing finger, indicating the universality of complicity in the evil system of exploitative agriculture. In the properly sociological sections, his mode of writing tends to the objective, and towards the end, like in other consciousness-raising works of literature in the 1930s, the pronouns shift to the collective "we." This movement of address from almost antagonism between author and reader to a removed perspective to a collective one is a very subtle and effective means of persuasion, although it is a shame it did not have a broader reach when it was published. While the end of the book depicts the beginning of their work, the very last section is an impressionistic rendering of one of the evenings he and Evans stayed at the Gudger house, listening to two foxes communicate in the night. This becomes an almost allegorical account of communication and love that embodies the relationship between Evans' photos and Agee's text themselves.

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodore. 1991[1976]. On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening. In *The Culture Industry*, 30-60. London and New York: Routledge.

Agee, James, and Walker Evans. 2001 [1941]. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. New York and Boston: Mariner Books.

Allen, Theodore. 1997. *The Invention of the White Race (Vol. 2)*. London: Verso.

Augspurger, Michael. 2004. *An economy of abundant beauty:* Fortune *magazine and Depression America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Chandler, Aaron. 2009. "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*. *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 20(3), 196-214.

Crank, James Andrew. 2009. "A Piece of the Body Torn Out by the Roots": Failure and Fragmentation in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 62(1), 163-178.

Culbert, David. 1978. The Infinite Variety of Mass Experience: The Great Depression, W.P.A. Interviews, and Student Family History Projects. *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 19(1), 43-63.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1989[1967]. Coldness and Cruelty. In *Masochism,* Transl. Jean McNeil. New York: Zone.

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

Fitzgerald, Robert. 1968. A Memoir. *James Agee: The Collected Short Prose*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Frisinghelli, Christine. 2014. Comments on the photographic documentations of Pierre Bourdieu. *Camera Austria*. www.camera-austria.at/camera/uploads/2014/07/Text_Frisinghelli_EN.pdf. *Accessed March 31, 2015.*

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 3-30. New York: Basic Books.

Gunster, Shane. 2004. *Capitalizing on Culture: Critical Theory for Cultural Studies*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Henninger, Katherine. 2004. Claiming Access: Controlling Images in Dorothy Allison. *The Arizona Quarterly*, 60(3), 83-108.

Hester, Jessica. 2008. Progressivism, Suffragists and Constructions of Race: Evelyn Greenleaf Southerland's *Po' White Trash*. *Women's Writing*, 15(1), 55-68.

Lucaites, John Louis. 1997. Visualizing 'The People': Individualism vs. Collectivism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 83(3), 269-288.

McWhiney, Grady. 1988. *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Officer, Lawrence H., and Samuel H. Williamson. 2011. Purchasing Power of Money in the United States from 1774 to 2010. *Measuring Worth*. http:www.measuringworth.com/ppowerus. Accessed July 26, 2011.

Ophir, Ella Zohar. 2007. Romantic Reverence and Modernist Representation: Vision, Power, and the Shattered Form of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53 (2), 125-152.

Rabinowitz, Paula. 1992. Voyeurism and Class Consciousness: James Agee and Walker Evans, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." *Cultural Critique*, 21 (Spring), 143-170.

Townsend, R.C. 1973. The Possibilities of Field Work. *College English*, 34(4), 481-499.

Vollman, William. 2007. *Poor People*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Wray, Matt. 2006. *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press